

From Classical Texts to Content: Habitus Change in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

Digital transformation has significantly altered the learning system and religious culture in Islamic boarding schools. This study examines the shift in the thinking and behavior of santri from a tradition of learning based on classical Islamic texts toward a culture of creating digital content in new media. To analyze this, the study employs Medium Theory, developed by Marshall McLuhan and Joshua Meyrowitz. This theory explores how digital media not only function as communication tools but also influence ways of thinking, social relationships, and the structure of knowledge authority within Islamic boarding schools. The method used in this study is qualitative, involving interviews with students as well as analysis of various digital documents and prior literature related to online religious activities. The results indicate that the presence of digital media has transformed the nature of religious authority, positioning students not merely as recipients of knowledge but also as content creators. They are now active on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. This change reflects the emergence of digital habits of thinking and behavior among students that are more participatory, visual, and flexible. Nevertheless, they continue to strive to uphold traditional values such as etiquette, politeness, and simplicity.

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Introduction

Digital transformation has changed the way people communicate and convey knowledge in various aspects of life, including in the world of traditional Islamic education. Pesantren, as the oldest educational institution in Indonesia that relies on a learning system based on classical Islamic texts, must now adapt to this new reality. The emergence of digital media as the primary tool in the processes of learning, preaching, and social interaction. This shift signifies a transition from the tradition of learning through texts toward a culture of content creation, where students not only receive religious knowledge but also actively contribute to religious discussions across various digital spaces.

This phenomenon indicates a change in the behavior of students specifically in their mindset, values, and actions which are shaped by their experiences and the social structure within the pesantren. In the past, santri behavior was shaped by close relationships with kyai, the routine of studying the Quran, and the internalization of values of politeness. Today, this is also influenced by new media that emphasize speed, visuals, and interaction. These changes impact how santri understand scholarly authority, form their self-identity, and interpret da'wah in the digital age.

To understand this phenomenon, we can examine the Medium Theory introduced by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 and later developed by Joshua Meyrowitz in 1985. This theory



emphasizes that a medium is not merely a tool for conveying messages but also actively shapes ways of thinking, social structures, and power dynamics within society. Therefore, the shift from books to digital content not only reflects changes in communication technology but also mirrors cultural shifts and changes in ways of thinking within the pesantren world.

Consequently, research on changes in santri habitus within the new media environment is crucial to understanding how pesantren navigate and reconcile traditional values amidst the growing influence of digital media. This study seeks to answer how new media shapes and alters students' ways of thinking, as well as how these changes impact the relationship between knowledge, authority, and identity within the pesantren tradition. By employing the Medium Theory approach, this journal explains that the shift from religious texts to digital content is not merely a technological matter but also a cultural and intellectual one, reflecting the evolving mindset of the pesantren world in the digital age.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach because its primary focus is to deeply understand the experiences, ways of thinking, and changes in the santri's habitus within the context of new media. This approach allows for the exploration of meanings, social processes, and cultural dynamics that cannot be fully explained through data alone, but rather through narratives, interpretations, and direct insights from the participants involved.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: literature review, observation of pesantren social media, and interviews. The literature review was used to establish a theoretical foundation and conceptual framework regarding pesantren, santri habitus, digital transformation, and Medium Theory the primary analytical framework of this study. Sources included academic journals, books, research reports, and other relevant academic references.

Additionally, this study conducted observations on various pesantren social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. These observations aimed to directly examine how students produce, distribute, and represent religious values in the form of digital content. Through these observations, the researcher was able to identify communication patterns, styles of delivering religious preaching, forms of religious visualization, as well as the interactions occurring between students and their audience in the digital space.

Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with students who are directly involved in religious activities and actively participate in the production of digital content. These interviews explored the students' personal experiences, changes in how they perceive religious authority, motivations for using digital media, and how they balance traditional pesantren values with the fast-paced, visual nature of digital culture. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in both religious practices and digital activities to ensure they could provide information relevant to the research focus.

Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from various supporting documents such as pesantren policies regarding the use of digital media, archives of da'wah content produced by students, documentation of online religious activities, as well as information sources from

relevant online media. All collected data was then processed through several stages of analysis: transcription of interview data, data reduction to filter out key information, classification based on thematic categories, and interpretation to uncover deeper meanings regarding changes in students' habitus in the new media era.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants and documents, while methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentary studies. Thus, the validity and reliability of the findings are maintained, ensuring that the research results truly reflect the reality of changes in santri habitus within the digital media landscape.

Results and Discussion

In Indonesia, pesantren are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions and play a crucial role in shaping the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of the Muslim community. Here, a pesantren is not merely a boarding school for religious education but also a social and cultural arena where Islamic values, traditions, and power dynamics are embedded and reproduced across generations. Individuals or groups studying at pesantren (santri) are not only educated to master religious knowledge but are also given the tools to shape their habitus through a disciplined way of life, respect for teachers, upholding simplicity, and obedience to the authority of the kiai as a central figure. And the relationship between the kiai, the ustadz, and the santri forms a distinctive social structure, where the transmission of knowledge occurs spontaneously, personally, and is grounded in both oral tradition and classical texts.

Students studying at the pesantren are the primary subjects in this arena, as they live in a space relatively isolated from the dynamics of the outside world. This is due to the educational model they follow, which tends to be hierarchical and oriented toward reinforcing classical Islamic scholarly traditions. Thus, in this context, the pesantren functions as a cultural bastion for students, preserving the continuity of existing Islamic values while shaping their identities as individuals firmly grounded in tradition.

However, the development of communication technology and the emergence of new media are gradually penetrating these boundaries. In today's modern world, new communication spaces have emerged through the internet, social media, and digital platforms, leading to a faster and more open flow of information. Consequently, pesantren can no longer simply remain static, clinging solely to past customs and classical traditions. The entry of new media into the pesantren environment is not a force that immediately replaces existing traditions, but rather a new medium that interacts with the deeply rooted old value systems and traditions. Many pesantren today have embraced new media and actively promote pesantren values through their social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube, X, and others where these platforms serve as a bridge connecting the public with the pesantren itself. Through this medium, pesantren can also maintain their image, expand their relationships and networks, and create new spaces for communication that also involve the public beyond the pesantren walls. From this point, the transformation of the pesantren as a social arena in the era of new media begins to emerge, simultaneously opening up discussions regarding changes in the santri's habitus, religious authority, and value challenges within the digital communication ecosystem.

Pesantren as a Transforming Social Arena

Bourdieu (1990) explains that habitus cannot be separated from *the field* in which individuals interact and the types of *capital* that operate within it. Traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) essentially have a hierarchical social structure. The authority of the kiai is central, and knowledge is transmitted vertically from teacher to student. Within this arena, we can observe that cultural capital in the pesantren in the form of religious knowledge and its symbolic capital the charisma of the kiai are dominant. However, the emergence of new media in this era has caused this arena to open up and undergo a shift in logic. In this context, the transformation of communication from traditional spaces to digital spaces is not merely a matter of changing tools, but also a transformation of the existing cultural structure and the patterns of Islamic scholarly communication within the pesantren.

Currently, pesantren are no longer closed off from the outside world. Many pesantren are now developing websites, social media accounts, and even official YouTube channels all aimed at spreading da'wah and promoting the pesantren itself through its activities, achievements, or curriculum. The social sphere of Islamic boarding schools has also expanded due to the digital space, where metrics such as follower counts, interactions, and *engagement* now serve as key indicators of symbolic value within the boarding school. Consequently, students and teachers not only convey the knowledge they have acquired but also foster a new communication ecosystem that engages a broad public audience. Thus, in line with McLuhan's perspective, the digital medium has now transformed the learning experience and relationships within Islamic boarding schools, making them more open and increasingly connected to the outside world.

The Transformation of Students' Habitus in the New Media Era

Students today are growing up in a digital world, which has given them a more fluid, flexible, and open habitus toward the changes taking place. In *Medium Theory*, every medium possesses a "logic" or distinctive way of thinking that shapes its communication culture. Within the pesantren, the old logic based on text and memorization is now shifting toward a visual and participatory logic. This explains how digital media transforms communication from *a one-way flow* to *a multi-way flow*, and enables interpersonal communication across space and time.

Students who once internalized Islamic values through activities such as *sorongan* (one-on-one), *bandongan* (group study), and direct lessons with the kiai now acquire knowledge through digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. This phenomenon indicates a shift from one-way communication patterns toward more participatory communication. As explained by Farid et al. (2024), social media has become an effective tool for disseminating information, da'wah, and promoting pesantren activities. This means that this shift in medium directly reshapes the santri's habitus in understanding and representing cultural and religious values.

Da'wah from the Pulpit to the Screen: The Reproduction of Religious Authority

In this new media era, religious authority undergoes a transformation in form without losing its substance. Rachmadhani's (2021) study on Gus Mus's da'wah demonstrates that social media does not replace traditional religious authority but rather strengthens it and expands its influence. A similar phenomenon occurs among students in modern Islamic boarding schools. They utilize digital media as an extension of the da'wah space that previously took place only in classrooms or mosques. An example of this can be found at the Al-Mashduqiah Islamic Boarding School, located in Patokan, Kraksaan, Probolinggo. There, students are not only given access to Islamic values but are also empowered to disseminate these values by utilizing digital platforms such as during a formal address by KH. Dr. Mukhlisin Sa'ad, M.A., or while studying religious texts with him the students who are members of the boarding school's media team participate in documenting these moments and disseminating them through social media (YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram).

This shift illustrates McLuhan's logic that every new medium gives rise to a new *environment of communication*. Students are no longer merely recipients of teachings but also active producers of religious meaning who shape public perception through digital media. This content-based da'wah practice demonstrates that religious messages can be communicated in a more contextual, creative, and adaptive manner in line with the developments of our time (Zuhri, 2025).

Balance Between Tradition and Modernity

Despite the modernization brought about by digital technology, the pesantren continues to uphold and cherish its traditional values. Observing how the Al-Mashduqiah Islamic boarding school was established and transformed into a digital platform, it can be concluded that this transformation aligns with the principle of *al-muhafadzatu 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bil jadid al-aslah* preserving good old traditions while adopting beneficial innovations. This principle serves as a crucial foundation for modern Islamic boarding schools in navigating the digital era without losing their cultural and spiritual identity.

With this modernization, these digitally literate students are expected not only to be technologically skilled but also to maintain proper learning ethics, respectful manners toward teachers, and the values of simplicity characteristic of the pesantren (Muid et al., 2024). Thus, it can be concluded that the habitus of digital santri is not a break from tradition, but rather a process of adaptation that places old values within a newer context of how pesantren have operated in the past.

The New Communication Ecology and the Challenges of Digital Habitus

The emergence of new media has created a new communication ecology that is transforming the social, cultural, and religious landscape within the pesantren environment. McLuhan (1964) argued that every new medium not only conveys a message but also shapes the structure of human consciousness. In this context, the presence of the internet and social media has shifted how they interact with knowledge, teachers, and fellow students. This digital communication ecosystem is characterized by the speed of information, its

instantaneous nature, and the dominance of visual content. Students now live amidst a massive and fast-moving flow of information, which often demands spontaneous responses rather than deep reflection. This situation implies the emergence of a digital habitus that is, patterns of thought and behavior among students that are gradually becoming accustomed to a “*snippet culture*” of knowledge consumption.

McLuhan referred to this phenomenon as “*The Global Village*,” where the boundaries of space and time dissolve due to technological connectivity. Students residing in regional boarding schools can now directly access scholarly works from national to international scholars via technology, attend lectures or study sessions online, and even discuss with students from different boarding schools or across national borders through digital forums. This has a positive impact on Islamic boarding schools, as they can broaden the students’ horizons and foster the formation of a global intellectual network that strengthens the role of Islamic boarding schools in the modern Islamic world. In this way, Islamic boarding schools can actively participate in global discourse without losing their identity as traditional Islamic and religious institutions.

On the other hand, however, new media can also have negative impacts on both the students and the pesantren themselves. Many pesantren face the new challenge of the commodification of religion, wherein the values of da’wah are reduced to viral content that craves *engagement* or recognition of popularity in the digital sphere (Hakim & Harapandi Dahri, 2025). Dakwah, which should be oriented toward spiritual development, risks turning into a performative activity that emphasizes image over the true essence of the pesantren itself. In such conditions, the santri’s habitus may experience a disorientation of values, where the measure of dakwah’s success begins to shift from how beneficial or influential it is for one’s spirituality to how many viewers or followers it has on social media.

Conclusion

Digital transformation has brought fundamental changes to the world of Islamic boarding schools. The shift from a learning tradition based on classical Islamic texts toward a digital content culture not only reflects changes in how knowledge is conveyed but also signifies cultural and epistemological shifts in the lives of students. Drawing on McLuhan’s *Medium Theory*, the digital medium is not merely a new communication tool but a social environment that shapes how people think, interact, and understand the world.

With the emergence of new media and the digitalization of Islamic boarding schools, students are no longer merely seekers or recipients of knowledge but have also become producers of knowledge through digital media. The learning and da’wah processes, which were once hierarchical, have shifted toward a more participatory and horizontal model. This creates a new habitus for students, enabling them to adapt to the demands of modernity without completely abandoning the traditional Islamic values of the boarding school. However, this development and change also present new challenges for students and the pesantren itself. The emergence of new media has led to consequences where da’wah which was previously a platform for individuals or groups to expand spiritual understanding has become a platform for seeking followers and likes on social media, the spread of religious disinformation, and a shift in traditional and spiritual values due to the dominant culture of instant gratification and visual content in the digital space.

As Islamic educational institutions, pesantren play a crucial role in guiding this transformation to ensure it remains grounded in the ethics and values of the pesantren as advocated by our predecessors. Digital literacy grounded in morality and policy is needed to ensure that students’ creativity in the digital realm and the ethics required of them are

balanced, so that they are not only able to produce content but can also take responsibility for the ethical implications of their content creation. Thus, the shift from texts to content can be interpreted not merely as the loss of tradition but as a process of adaptation or recontextualization of pesantren values amidst the current of media globalization.

Ultimately, this phenomenon serves as evidence that Islamic boarding schools have now entered a new era, where the realms of spirituality and technology interact and coexist, shaping the students' habits in the digital age as a reflection of the boarding school's dynamic spirit in accordance with the principle they uphold: preserving the good of the past while embracing the new that is more beneficial (*al-muafadzatu 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bil-jadid al-aslah*). With a wise and adaptive approach from both the students and the pesantren itself toward new media and digital media, the pesantren has the potential to become a place or center for the moral, intellectual, and cultural formation of the community amidst the rapid development of digital media in this modern era.

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