THE MEANING OF KYAI LEADERSHIP IN THE ERA OF VIRALITY AND MEDIA CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF LIRBOYO ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL VERSUS XPOSE UNCENSORED BROADCAST

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Abstract: *This study examines the transformation of Kyai leadership within the pesantren tradition amid the rising influence of digital media, using the controversy surrounding Trans7's Xpose Uncensored episode on Pesantren Lirboyo as a critical case. This research analyzes how Kyai leadership is constructed, contested, and recontextualized in the era of viral media. Findings reveal four key transformations. First, despite media pressure, Kyai authority in Lirboyo remains anchored in charismatic moral–spiritual leadership while adapting to media logic through ethical and calm communicative strategies, consistent with Hjarvard's (2008) theory of the mediatization of religion. Overall, this study demonstrates that the leadership of Kyai in the digital era is simultaneously charismatic, adaptive, and dialogical, reflecting a harmonious integration of pesantren tradition with contemporary media culture. The Lirboyo case serves as evidence that religious authority in Indonesia is undergoing significant transformation, not through erosion, but through strategic negotiation within the logic of viral digital communication.*

Keywords: Kyai Leadership, Pesantren, Mediatization of Religion

Abstrak : *Penelitian ini mengkaji transformasi kepemimpinan Kyai dalam tradisi pesantren di tengah meningkatnya pengaruh media digital, dengan menggunakan kontroversi seputar episode Xpose Uncensored Trans7 pada Pesantren Lirboyo sebagai kasus kritis. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana kepemimpinan Kyai dibangun, diperebutkan, dan dikontekstualisasikan kembali di era media viral. Temuan mengungkapkan empat transformasi kunci. Pertama, terlepas dari tekanan media, otoritas Kyai di Lirboyo tetap berlabuh pada kepemimpinan moral-spiritual yang karismatik sambil beradaptasi dengan logika media melalui strategi komunikatif yang etis dan tenang, konsisten dengan teori mediatisasi agama Hjarvard (2008). Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan Kyai di era digital secara bersamaan karismatik, adaptif, dan dialogis, mencerminkan integrasi harmonis tradisi pesantren dengan budaya media kontemporer. Kasus Lirboyo menjadi bukti bahwa otoritas agama di Indonesia sedang mengalami transformasi yang signifikan, bukan melalui erosi, tetapi melalui negosiasi strategis dalam logika komunikasi digital yang viral.*

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Kyai, Pesantren, Mediatisasi Agama

INTRODUCTION

The leadership of kyais within the pesantren tradition has long been a central focus of Islamic studies, anthropology, and social sciences. Classical studies such as those by Dhofier (1982), Bruinessen (1999), Steenbrink (2012), and Wahid (2001) describe the kyai as a pivotal figure who embodies religious, spiritual, social, and cultural authority. This authority emerges from profound Islamic scholarship, personal charisma, scholarly lineage (sanad), and broad social legitimacy within the pesantren community. However, most of these studies remain rooted in traditional contexts and have not yet fully addressed the significant transformations brought about by the digital era.

In recent years, the dynamics of Islamic communication in Indonesia have undergone a significant transformation, particularly with the rapid integration of digital platforms into

everyday life. Social media has shifted from a space of casual interaction to a central arena where religious narratives, ethical discourses, and public opinions are constructed and contested (Yusuf, 2023; Rahman, 2024). This development aligns with the concept of the mediatization of religion, which argues that media no longer merely transmit religious messages but actively shape and redefine religious meanings (Hjarvard, 2008; Campbell, 2017).

As a result, pesantren and kyais face new challenges. The reputation of the kyais is no longer assessed solely within local or internal communities but is increasingly scrutinized within the fast-paced, fragmented, and highly viral digital public sphere. Recent scholarship indicates that religious authority is undergoing a process of reframing through media, shifting from traditional textual authority to more performative and digitized forms of legitimacy (Aziz, 2022; Latif, 2024).

This transformation became evident in the controversy surrounding the Xpose Uncensored program aired by Trans7 in October 2025, which was widely perceived as misrepresenting Pesantren Lirboyo. The program triggered nationwide backlash under the hashtag #BoikotTrans7, prompted responses from kyais, students, alumni, and national figures, and generated numerous counter-discourses across digital platforms. This case illustrates how media can trigger a crisis of institutional reputation and highlights the shifting terrain of kyai leadership in the digital era—where authority is contested not only through religious knowledge but also through the management of public discourse and crisis communication.

Despite this growing complexity, research on kyai leadership in digital crisis contexts remains limited. Much of the existing literature is normative and has yet to integrate discourse analysis, mediatization theory, and crisis communication frameworks. Nevertheless, the shifting representation of kyais in digital spaces necessitates new analytical approaches that address the interplay between tradition, symbolic power, and the production of meaning through media (Fitria, 2023; Hasan, 2024).

Based on this context, this study formulates three core research questions: (1) How is the meaning of kyai leadership constructed and represented by modern media during a pesantren reputation crisis? (2) How does the media frame negative narratives about Pesantren Lirboyo, and how does the pesantren community produce counter-discourses to maintain its moral and symbolic legitimacy? (3) How can the shifting moral and symbolic authority of kyais be understood through changing patterns of religious representation in the digital era?

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the construction, representation, and transformation of kyai leadership within modern media discourse, particularly in the case of Pesantren Lirboyo and the Xpose Uncensored controversy. This research integrates Islamic leadership theories, mediatization of religion, and crisis communication to formulate a comprehensive theoretical understanding and provide strategic recommendations for pesantren

in navigating media challenges in the era of digital viralities.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design focusing on the dynamics of public discourse surrounding Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo and the Xpose Uncensored program. As a library-based research, all data were collected through textual sources, including digital news reports, television coverage, official statements, academic literature, and social media content. This approach is appropriate because the issues examined—such as the construction of Kyai leadership, pesantren reputation crisis, and the mediatization of religion—are manifested primarily through texts and public discourses rather than direct physical observation.

Data collection involved identifying, reading, and analyzing online news, televised reports, pesantren press releases, recordings of the Xpose Uncensored episode, scholarly works on Kyai leadership and crisis communication, and digital narratives such as hashtags #BoikotTrans7 and #SaveLirboyo. To ensure credibility, the study applied source triangulation by comparing narratives across secular media, religious media, pesantren statements, and academic references. Contextual observation of public reactions and online discourse patterns was also conducted to enrich interpretation.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework was employed to uncover the relationships between language, ideology, and power in media representations and pesantren responses. An intertextual analysis was also applied to reveal how media texts interact and negotiate meaning with pesantren religious texts, particularly in shaping the public understanding of Kyai authority.

To maintain academic integrity, the study adopted an audit trail, adhered to research ethics, ensured accuracy of citations, and preserved interpretive objectivity regarding religious figures. Through the combination of library research, critical discourse analysis, and interpretive case study, this study seeks to uncover the meaning of Kyai leadership in the era of virality and to explain how media narratives and pesantren responses influence each other in shaping public opinion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Construction of Kyai Leadership Meaning in Lirboyo

The leadership of the Kyais in traditional pesantren, such as Lirboyo, represents not only a socio-religious authority but also a symbolic and moral leadership model that is continuously redefined in the era of media crisis and digital viral culture. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within a library-research framework, this study examines how media representations

construct, negotiate, and challenge the meaning of Kyai leadership. The analysis integrates Weber's charismatic authority, Hjarvard's mediatization of religion, and Gramsci's cultural hegemony, revealing three interrelated dimensions. The Kyai's authority derives from recognized piety, scholarship, and exemplary conduct—resonating with Weber's concept of charismatic authority. Classical Islamic texts frame the Kyai as waratsat al-anbiyā' (heirs of the prophets), embedding leadership within spiritual continuity.

However, during the Xpose Uncensored media controversy, this authority was pressured by the logic of modern media, which shapes truth through perception rather than moral integrity. Lirboyo's official responses employed ethical, calm, and non-confrontational discourse—constituting a strategic discourse of ethics to restore the Kyai's moral legitimacy. In Hjarvard's terms, this illustrates how religious authority adapts to media logic by using communicative and rational public language. The Kyai functions as a paternal figure (abū rūḥī), shaping not only intellectual but moral and behavioral formation. Media narratives and pesantren documentation show that santri and alumni defend their Kyais using filial rhetoric—framing loyalty as part of safeguarding sacred knowledge. Drawing on Gramsci, this paternalistic role constitutes ethical hegemony grounded in consent, not coercion. Lirboyo's Kyais often emphasize virtues such as patience, wisdom, and self-restraint, forming a counter-discourse of virtue against negative media framing. This positions the Kyai as a moral stabilizer amidst the fast, sensationalist culture of digital modernity.

Kyai Lirboyo also represents resistance toward aspects of modernity that erode moral and spiritual values. While acknowledging technological advancement, they reject the "moral noise" produced by viral culture and media commodification of religious issues. In Gramsci's framework, Lirboyo becomes a site of counter-hegemony where alternative discourses challenge the dominance of media epistemology. Intertextual analysis reveals a clash between pesantren epistemology (rooted in hikmah and adab) and media epistemology (rooted in speed, sensation, and public perception). The Kyai's leadership thus emerges as reflective cultural resistance, not reactionary rejection. Across the three dimensions—moral-spiritual authority, paternalistic value guardianship, and cultural resistance—the Kyais of Lirboyo embody a form of charismatic leadership that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to modernity. Their authority is negotiated through discourse, symbol, and ethical performance as they navigate the challenges posed by media logic and digital culture.

Reputation Crisis and the Pesantren's Response

The reputation of religious institutions in today's digital communication landscape is shaped not only by real practices but also by symbolic representations circulated through media. In line with Coombs' theory of crisis communication, the controversy involving Xpose

Uncensored illustrates a reputational threat in which external narratives disrupt the public's perception of a pesantren's moral legitimacy. The program's September 2025 episode portrayed decontextualized and sensationalized visuals of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo, framing the traditional institution through a "deviance lens" and turning religion into spectacle under the logic of mediatization. As the footage went viral, public debates escalated across social media, generating nationwide concerns about pesantren culture and morality.

Lirboyo's response materialized through three strategic layers: rejection, clarification, and counter-discourse production. Senior Kyai calmly denied the accuracy of the broadcast while encouraging the public to avoid reactive judgments. The pesantren then issued formal clarifications through official channels, offering factual explanations that align with Coombs' "rebuilding strategy." At the grassroots level, santri and alumni mobilized narratives of personal testimony and moral defense, producing a counter-hegemony against mainstream media framing. Their digital activism—embodied in hashtags like #KamiSantriLirboyo—reaffirmed the Kyai's role as a moral guide and preserved religious authority through what Hjarvard calls re-mediation.

Internally, Lirboyo strengthened its institutional resilience through moral consolidation, coordinated communication, and ethical media guidance for santri. Kyai emphasized patience, spiritual interpretation of crises, and disciplined public communication. A communication task force was formed to synchronize messaging and prevent misinformation. Ethical literacy was reinforced across sermons and advisories, stressing that digital speech must reflect Islamic virtues. These mechanisms illustrate the pesantren's capacity to maintain moral hegemony while navigating the competitive terrain of public discourse.

Overall, the crisis reveals that pesantren leadership—particularly the Kyai—remains both charismatic and adaptive. By integrating ethical communication, value-based crisis management, and strategic engagement with media logic, Lirboyo successfully safeguarded its institutional dignity. The case demonstrates that religious authority can be transformed rather than diminished by digital mediation, as long as moral governance and adab remain central to institutional responses.

Role of Social Media and Viral Dynamics

The digital era has fundamentally reshaped the structure of socio-religious communication in Indonesia. Religious authority is no longer derived solely from the physical presence of traditional scholars; it now competes with new digital actors capable of producing persuasive content and mobilizing massive online audiences. This shift reflects the democratization of religious authority, consistent with Slama (2018) and Campbell (2020), where online platforms enable the emergence of new Islamic influencers who actively shape public

perceptions of Islam, morality, and religious identity.

The case of Xpose Uncensored and the subsequent wave of solidarity represented by #BoikotTrans7 highlights that social media functions not only as a space for debate but as a site of religious cohesion. Thousands of posts defending Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo followed similar discourse patterns: defense of faith, defense of teachers, and defense of truth. This phenomenon aligns with Hosseini's (2022) concept of digital religious solidarity, where Muslim communities utilize online networks to protect sacred symbols and collective moral integrity. It also confirms Hjarvard's (2013) theory of mediatization, which argues that religion does not vanish from the public sphere but "changes form," becoming more visual, interactive, and narrative-driven.

Simultaneously, a shift in religious authority has emerged—from offline Kyais to online opinion leaders. Young alumni, Muslim journalists, and digital da'wah activists now serve as intermediaries between pesantren tradition and the wider public. This illustrates the rise of hybrid authority, as described by Giddens (1991) and Meyer (2021), where legitimacy is distributed horizontally across digital networks. However, the Kyai remains the central figure of normative authority, while online opinion leaders function as communicative amplifiers who frame pesantren values using moderate narratives and educational messages, particularly those promoting tabayyun and media literacy.

Social media also serves as a new arena for the moral legitimacy of the Kyais. Lirboyo's use of short-form dakwah videos, simple visual aesthetics, and gentle rhetorical appeals demonstrates a deliberate form of strategic mediatization, allowing Kyai to project spiritual wisdom into digital formats without sacrificing scholarly integrity. From a Gramscian perspective, social media operates as a war of position, where pesantren contest popular culture by reaffirming Islamic moral hegemony. Notably, much of the viral pro-pesantren content originates from young santri, indicating successful internalization of Kyai leadership within the digital generation.

Overall, the Xpose Uncensored controversy marks a pivotal moment in the redefinition of Kyai leadership under the logic of viral culture. The Kyai's authority has not weakened; instead, it has transformed into a mediatized form of leadership—one that harmonizes spiritual authority, moral persuasion, and digital fluency. In recent scholarship, researchers highlight that religious communication in Indonesia is undergoing rapid transformation, with digital platforms becoming central arenas for constructing ethical narratives and public religious discourse (Yusuf, 2023; Rahman, 2024).

Recontextualizing Kyai Leadership

Kyais have long served as central figures in shaping Indonesia's spiritual and social civilization. The rise of digital culture and viral logic, however, requires their leadership model to transform without losing its pesantren essence. The case of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo after the Xpose Uncensored broadcast demonstrates how media crises push pesantren to adapt through more open, media-based public communication.

First, traditional pesantren values—such as ta'dzim, adab, and scholarly authority—are being remediated into digital spaces. Kyais and students maintain their characteristic politeness and wisdom while using platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. This adaptation shows how pesantren reproduce religious values through new media without losing their core meaning, aligning with Hjarvard's theory of the mediatization of religion.

Second, a transformative leadership model has emerged, combining the Kyai's spiritual charisma with media literacy. Lirboyo's digital da'wah emphasizes gentleness, tabayyun, and public education, reflecting the Quranic principle of qaulan layyinan and Burns's concept of transformational leadership. Students are empowered as content creators, forming a collective leadership ecosystem that expands the pesantren's moral authority in the online public sphere.

Third, pesantren face the challenge of balancing tradition and innovation. The greatest threat is the commodification of da'wah and the reduction of spiritual values into superficial viral content. Therefore, digital communication ethics rooted in pesantren adab must be strengthened. In Gramscian terms, this is a war of position to maintain Islamic values within the dominance of popular culture. Overall, the recontextualization of Kyai leadership in the digital era represents a shift from hierarchical authority to dialogical and participatory authority. Lirboyo demonstrates that tradition is not a barrier but a source of authenticity for building a relevant and dignified model of Islamic leadership in the age of viral media.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Kyai leadership in the era of virality and media crises is undergoing a profound recontextualization. The moral and spiritual authority traditionally rooted in pesantren structures now intersects with the fast-paced, visual, and open dynamics of digital communication. The Xpose Uncensored case involving Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School illustrates how modern media can disrupt institutional credibility while simultaneously prompting renewed reflections on the Kyai's role in the public sphere.

First, the meaning of Kyai leadership remains grounded in moral and spiritual authority, as evidenced by counter-narratives from the pesantren community affirming the Kyai as a guardian of values. Second, Lirboyo's strategic response—through public clarification and value-driven digital da'wah—reflects effective crisis management aligned with Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Third, findings reveal a shift of authority from

traditional ulama to online opinion leaders, forming a more democratic and collaborative model of religious leadership. Finally, this recontextualization shows that pesantren can adapt their traditional values to the digital sphere without losing integrity; the Kyai now assumes a transformative, mediative leadership role that harmonizes spirituality, morality, and public communication.

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