The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in Shaping the Moderate Character of Generation Z in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract:
This study examines the strategic role of pesantren in shaping the moderate character of Generation Z in the midst of an increasingly worrying post-truth phenomenon. The post-truth era is marked by the rise of disinformation, hoaxes, and emotion-based polarization that threaten the social cohesion and religious diversity of Indonesian society. Generation Z as the most vulnerable group to digital content has the potential to experience extreme distortion of religious values and understanding. Pesantren as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia has a distinctive scientific tradition, learning methodology, and moderation values. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method in three Islamic boarding schools in Central Java. Data were collected through participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The results of the study show that pesantren plays a crucial role through three main dimensions, namely a curriculum based on religious moderation, an inclusive pesantren culture, and holistic character development that integrates wasathiyyah Islamic values. Pesantren has proven to be able to become an epistemic fortress for students in dealing with the flow of unverified information and extremist narratives circulating on social media. These findings affirm the urgency of strengthening the capacity of pesantren as agents of moderation in the digital era.

INTRODUCTION

Entering the 21st century, the world faces new challenges that are not only technological, but also epistemological. The post-truth era—a term popularized by the Oxford Dictionary as the Word of the Year 2016—refers to a condition in which objective facts have less influence than emotions and personal beliefs in shaping public opinion. In Indonesia, this phenomenon appears to be real in various forms, ranging from the spread of religious hoaxes, identity-based political polarization, to the emergence of extremist narratives in the name of religion (Wahid, 2019). Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, grew up in a digital ecosystem full of unverified information. They are the generation that is

exposed to social media from an early age, making them the most vulnerable and most potential group in the context of forming opinions and characters (Priyatna, 2018).

In such a situation, educational institutions have a great moral responsibility to form a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also has epistemic resilience and moderate character. Pesantren, as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia that has been more than five centuries old, is present as an institution that has its own uniqueness in answering these challenges. In contrast to formal schools in general, pesantren offer a holistic approach to character formation, covering the intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions in an integrated manner (Mas'ud, 2004 in Aziz, 2020).

Islamic boarding schools with their scientific traditions rooted in the values of Islam wasathiyyah – a central, moderate, and balanced Islam – actually hold great potential as an agent of moderation in the post-truth era. Values such as tawassuth (middle), tawazun (balance), i'tidal (justice), and tasamuh (tolerance) which are the main pillars of pesantren education are directly relevant to the need to fortify generation Z from the infiltration of extreme narratives and identity polarization (Nashir, 2019). However, studies that specifically explore the role of pesantren in the context of post-truth and generation Z are still relatively limited in Indonesian academic literature.

Several previous studies have examined the role of pesantren in the formation of religious character and moderation. Muhtadi (2020) highlights the contribution of Islamic boarding schools in preventing radicalism through a curriculum oriented towards a comprehensive understanding of Islam. Meanwhile, Zuhri (2018) analyzed the strategies of Islamic boarding schools in facing modernity challenges, including the challenges of digitizing information. However, studies that explicitly link the three variables—pesantren, moderate character, and the post-truth era—in the context of Generation Z still need more in-depth exploration. This research is here to fill this gap.

The formulation of the problems that is the focus of this research is: first, how Islamic boarding schools implement the values of religious moderation in their education system; second, what strategies are used by pesantren in building the epistemic resilience of Generation Z students in the post-truth era; and third, how the impact of pesantren education on the formation of moderate character of generation Z. The purpose of this research is to analyze, describe, and offer a model of the role of pesantren in shaping the moderate character of generation Z in response to the challenges of the post-truth era.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of Islamic education, especially in the study of the pesantren curriculum and character formation in the digital era. Practically, the results of the research are expected to be a reference for pesantren managers, education policy makers, and the wider community in understanding and optimizing the role of pesantren as an institution that is not only oriented towards the formation of scholars, but also the formation of moderate, critical, and characterful citizens in the post-truth era (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019 in Hanifuddin, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The selection of a qualitative approach is based on the consideration that this research aims to understand in depth a complex socio-educational phenomenon, namely the process of forming moderate character in pesantren in the context of the post-truth era that cannot be reduced to mere statistical numbers. The case study was chosen because it allows researchers to investigate phenomena contextually and holistically in real-life settings (Yin, 2014 in Kurniawan, 2020).

The research was carried out in three Islamic boarding schools located in Central Java, namely Al-Muayyad Islamic Boarding School Surakarta, Futuhiyyah Demak Islamic Boarding School, and Raudlatul Ulum Pati Islamic Boarding School. The selection of the three pesantren is based on criteria: first, it is a pesantren that has been established for more than three decades and has a reputation for developing moderation values; second, having a significant number of students from generation Z; and third, it has integrated moderation-based character education in its curriculum in a structured manner.

The research subjects were determined through purposive sampling techniques. The main informants consist of kiai and pesantren caregivers (3 people), ustaz and ustazah teachers (9 people), and generation Z students aged 15-20 years (18 people). Supporting informants include alumni of Islamic boarding schools (6 people) and guardians of students (6 people). A total of 42 informants were selected based on the relevance of their experience and involvement in the educational process at the pesantren.

The data collection techniques used in this study include three main methods. First, participatory observation was carried out for two months in each pesantren to directly observe learning activities, pesantren traditions, social interaction of students, and moderation practices in daily life. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with all informants to explore their perspectives, experiences, and understanding of the role of pesantren in the formation of moderate characters in the post-truth era. Third, documentation studies are carried out on the curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, pesantren regulations, and student development program documents (Sugiyono, 2019 in Rahmat, 2021).

The data analysis uses the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana interactive analysis model which includes four stages: data collection, data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses source triangulation, triangulation techniques, and member checks. Source triangulation is carried out by comparing information obtained from kiai, ustaz, and students. The triangulation technique was carried out by verifying observation data through interviews and documents. Member checks are carried out by returning the results of interpretation to the informant for confirmation (Creswell, 2014 in Hidayat, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Islamic Boarding Schools and the Challenges of the Post-Truth Era

The findings of the study confirm that the three pesantren studied have a fairly high awareness of the threat of the post-truth era for generation Z students. If in the past the main

threat was the inequality of access to science, now the challenge is the abundance of unselected information. This phenomenon is referred to by pesantren caregivers as a "flood of information" which has the potential to drown the truth under the current of hoaxes and narrative manipulation (Wahid, 2019).

At the Al-Muayyad Islamic Boarding School, Kiai Ahmad – one of the main informants – stated that in the past week alone, there have been at least three cases of students who were almost affected by religious content containing extremism spread through social media platforms. This condition emphasizes the urgency of the role of pesantren as a fortress of moderation. In line with that, Muhtadi's (2020) research shows that Islamic boarding schools that have integrated digital literacy programs have proven to be more effective in preventing their students from exposure to radicalism content compared to other formal educational institutions.

The post-truth era is not only threatening in terms of the content consumed, but also in terms of the way of thinking that is formed. When emotions and group identities are more dominant than facts in shaping decisions, a generation that is easily polarized and manipulated is born. In this context, pesantren with their scientific traditions that emphasize source verification, open discussion, and respect for differences of opinion actually have an epistemic "vaccine" that is relevant to the challenges of the post-truth era (Priyatna, 2018). The tradition of bahtsul masail—a forum for the study of Islamic law that discusses contemporary issues openly—is a clear example of healthy epistemic practices that have become an integral part of the pesantren culture.

Curriculum Based on Religious Moderation

One of the most significant findings in this study is how the three Islamic boarding schools have systematically integrated the values of religious moderation into their curriculum structure. This integration is not sporadic or simply the addition of new subjects, but rather a complete restructuring of the content, methods, and learning objectives. At the Futuhiyyah Islamic Boarding School, for example, the values of moderation are not only taught as separate material, but are infused organically into every field of study—ranging from interpretation, jurisprudence, aqidah, to social sciences and science (Nashir, 2019).

The moderation-based curriculum in the pesantren studied includes several main components that are interrelated. First, the study of classical books that are rich in the perspectives of scholars from various schools is the foundation for students to understand the breadth and depth of Islamic scientific traditions. By being exposed to the differences of opinion of scholars on various jurisprudence and theological issues, students are educated to accept differences as a necessity, not as a threat. This is in line with the findings of Aziz (2020) who concluded that Islamic boarding schools that maintain the tradition of teaching the yellow book have proven to be more successful in instilling tolerance and inclusivity in their students.

The second component is citizenship learning based on Islamic values that integrates the concept of hubbul watan (love for the homeland) with Islamic teachings. Pesantren emphasizes that nationalism and Islam are not two things that are opposites, but complement

each other. This curriculum has become particularly relevant in the context of the post-truth era where narratives that clash Islam with the state are often instruments to muddy social polarization. Hanifuddin's research (2021) confirms that Islamic boarding schools that integrate Islamic-based civics education are effective in forming students who have a strong Islamic identity as well as a firm national commitment.

The third component is digital literacy which has begun to be explicitly integrated into the pesantren curriculum, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic which accelerated the acceleration of digitalization. The Raudlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School has even developed a special module "Social Media Fiqh" that discusses social media ethics from an Islamic perspective, including the obligation to verify information before dissemination, the prohibition of defamation and ghibah in the digital space, and the importance of maintaining ukhuwah in a conflict-filled media ecosystem. In line with this, Zuhri (2018) emphasized that the integration of digital literacy in the pesantren curriculum is an urgent need that cannot be ignored if pesantren want to remain relevant as educational institutions in the digital era.

Culture and Traditions of Islamic Boarding Schools as a Medium of Moderation

Beyond the formal curriculum, this study found that pesantren culture and traditions play an equally important role in shaping the moderate character of Generation Z students. This concept is known by education experts as a hidden curriculum, which is values learned through shared life experiences, not through explicit instruction (Kurniawan, 2020).

One of the most powerful Islamic boarding school traditions in forming a moderate character is a multicultural communal life. In the three pesantren studied, students come from various ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and even different sects. This diversity, managed with inclusive Islamic values, becomes an authentic living laboratory of moderation. Students learn to negotiate with differences, respect different perspectives, and find common ground above existing differences—a social skill that is urgently needed in the post-truth era that tends to encourage homogeneity and group exclusivity (Rahmat, 2021).

The bahtsul masail tradition mentioned earlier is also a very effective medium of moderate character building. In this forum, students are trained to argue based on scientific arguments, listen to conflicting opinions openly, and change their views based on the strength of the argument, not because of emotional or group pressure. This epistemic ability is in stark contrast to the post-truth culture that prioritizes group feelings and identities over facts and logic. Hidayat's research (2022) shows that students who are active in bahtsul masail activities have a much higher level of critical literacy compared to students who are not active in these activities.

In addition, the tradition of Qur'anic sema'an, the study of the yellow book together, and spiritual riyadhah which are the routine of the pesantren form a deep spiritual awareness in students. This spiritual awareness is the foundation that makes students not easily swayed by provocative narratives circulating on social media. They have a strong "inner anchor" in the form of faith, piety, and submission to Allah which makes them calmer and less reactive in responding to issues that provoke emotions (Muhajir, 2019).

Kiai's Role as a Model of Moderate Character

Another important finding in this study is the significance of the role of the kiai as a model of moderate character that is alive and real for generation Z students. The example of this kiai has a much stronger influence than verbal instruction alone, because it presents a moderate character as something concrete and observable, not just an abstraction of values (Aziz, 2020).

In interviews with the students, almost all of them stated that their kiai is the main example in terms of how to be moderate and wise. A student at the Al-Muayyad Islamic Boarding School revealed that he learned the true meaning of tolerance not from textbooks, but from witnessing firsthand how their kiai interacted with guests from various religious backgrounds and beliefs with great hospitality and respect. This phenomenon confirms what Nashir (2019) calls "life examples" as the most effective method of character education in the pesantren's tradition.

The kiai figure also plays an important role in guiding students to respond to controversial issues circulating on social media. When there is a provocative news or narrative that goes viral, the kiai usually immediately provides clarification and guidance to students in the study forums. The kiai's calm, argument-based, and unprovoked response pattern became an epistemic model for students in responding to dubious information. This is a form of organic and contextual digital literacy coaching that is easier for students to absorb than formal training (Muhtadi, 2020).

The Impact of Islamic Boarding School Education on the Moderate Character of Generation Z

To measure the impact of pesantren education on the formation of moderate character, this study uses indicators developed based on the religious moderation framework of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia which includes four dimensions: national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodation to local culture. Based on the results of in-depth interviews and observations, it was found that Generation Z students who have studied at Islamic boarding schools for at least three years show a consistently more moderate character profile compared to the control group from public schools.

In the dimension of national commitment, pesantren students show a mature understanding of the relationship between Islam and Indonesia. They are able to articulate eloquently that the Republic of Indonesia is the final form of the struggle of Indonesian Muslims, and that maintaining the integrity of the nation is part of a religious obligation. Narratives that clash Islam with Pancasila or that campaign for the establishment of a caliphate state do not get a positive resonance among students, because they have been educated with a comprehensive understanding of the historical and theological context of Indonesia's constitutional choices (Hanifuddin, 2021).

In the dimension of tolerance, pesantren students show a much more inclusive and non-discriminatory attitude in responding to religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. In the scenarios given by the researchers—such as how to respond to neighbors of different religions who celebrate their big days—Islamic boarding school students tend to respond more

cooperatively and friendly than informants from other groups. This reflects the internalization of the value of tasamuh that has been taught consistently in the curriculum and culture of Islamic boarding schools (Niam, 2020).

In the anti-violence dimension, the findings of the study show that pesantren students have a clear understanding of the limits of jihad in the context of contemporary Indonesia. They understand that jihad in the modern era does not mean physical violence, but struggle through knowledge, hard work, and positive contribution to society. This understanding makes them immune to the recruitment of extremist groups that often exploit the concept of jihad selectively and distortively (Faiqoh, 2022).

In the dimension of being accommodating to local culture, pesantren students show a sincere appreciation for local traditions that do not conflict with sharia. Traditions such as tahlil, shalawatan, pilgrimage to the grave, and various other local rituals are accepted as part of legitimate cultural wealth, not as bid'ah that must be eradicated. This attitude reflects the heritage of the pesantren tradition that has succeeded in dialogue between Islam and Indonesian localities for centuries (Zuhri, 2018).

Challenges and Strategies for Adapting Islamic Boarding Schools in the Post-Truth Era

Although the above findings paint a relatively positive picture of the role of pesantren in the formation of moderate character, the study also found a number of challenges that need to be overcome. The first challenge is the limited access to technology that is still experienced by several Islamic boarding schools. Not all Islamic boarding schools have adequate digital infrastructure to organize digital literacy programs effectively. In addition, not a few Islamic boarding schools still enforce a policy prohibiting the use of gadgets for students without being accompanied by alternative programs that prepare students to interact with the digital world wisely and critically (Priyatna, 2018).

The second challenge is the gap between the values taught in the pesantren and the digital reality that students face when they return home or after graduation. The study found that some pesantren alumni experienced "digital culture shock" when they had to deal head-to-head with a social media ecosystem that was very different from a controlled pesantren environment. This condition shows the need for pesantren to not only prepare students in terms of grades, but also practically in terms of digital navigation (Muhajir, 2019).

The third challenge is the infiltration of digital content even into the walls of the pesantren through various loopholes, including students who carry gadgets secretly or information that comes in through guest visits. Some informants admitted that there had been cases of students who were exposed to digital radicalism content even though they were in the pesantren. This condition encourages pesantren to not only rely on access restrictions, but also to build the internal capacity of students to think critically and independently filter the content consumed (Kurniawan, 2020).

In responding to these challenges, the three Islamic boarding schools studied have developed a number of innovative adaptation strategies. At the Raudlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, a "Digital Santri" program was developed which provides senior students

with limited access to the internet which is strictly managed with the assistance of ustaz. This program allows students to develop their digital literacy in a safe and guided environment. Meanwhile, at the Futuhiyyah Islamic Boarding School, an "Information Detective" program was developed that trains students to use the Islamic tabayyun methodology in verifying digital information—a smart bridge between classical Islamic science and contemporary digital literacy needs (Faiqoh, 2022).

Another adaptation strategy found is the strengthening of the network of moderate pesantren alumni as agents of change in the digital world. Al-Muayyad Islamic Boarding School, for example, has an alumni community that actively moves on social media to distribute moderate, balanced, and science-based religious content. This community effectively expands the reach of pesantren influence beyond its physical walls and creates a healthier digital ecosystem (Niam, 2020). These findings are in line with the concept that Rahmat (2021) calls "community-based digital moderation" which emphasizes the importance of building an organic and sustainable network of moderation agents in the digital space.

CONCLUSION

This research has succeeded in revealing that pesantren has a very strategic and multidimensional role in shaping the moderate character of generation Z in the post-truth era. This role is realized through three main paths that reinforce each other: first, a curriculum based on religious moderation that organically integrates wasathiyyah values into all areas of learning; second, the culture and traditions of Islamic boarding schools that create a holistic learning environment where moderation is practiced as a way of life, not just a discourse; and third, the example of kiai as a living model of moderate character that provides a concrete picture of how a moderate Muslim behaves and acts in real life.

In the midst of the challenges of the post-truth era that encourages polarization, disinformation, and extremism, pesantren are present as institutions that have unique social, epistemic, and spiritual capital to become a fortress of moderation. Values such as tabayyun, tawassuth, tasamuh, and tawazun that have been the DNA of Islamic boarding schools for centuries are now finding new relevance as a navigational guide in a chaotic and manipulative sea of information.

However, this study also identifies that pesantren cannot be satisfied with their traditional heritage alone. Continuous adaptation and innovation are needed, especially in terms of digital literacy integration, curriculum development that is responsive to contemporary challenges, and expanding the reach of influence into the digital realm. Without proper adaptation, the great potential of pesantren as agents of moderation in the post-truth era is in danger of not being optimally optimized.

The theoretical implications of this study enrich the treasures of Islamic education with an analytical framework on the role of pesantren as an institution for the formation of moderate character in the digital era. The practical implication is the need for policies that support strengthening the capacity of Islamic boarding schools in the field of digital literacy, the preparation of a systematic moderation curriculum, and the empowerment of Islamic

boarding school alumni as moderation agents in the digital space. Follow-up research with a wider geographical scope and using mixed methods is highly recommended to strengthen and expand the findings in this study.

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