

## PESANTREN FEUDALISM OR TA'DZIM ? CONTESTING WESTERN AND ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGIES IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

The digital era has intensified discursive contestations surrounding the kiai–santri relationship in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). This study aims to map the dialectic between Western paradigms of feudalism and the Islamic tradition of ta'dhim (traditional reverence and obedience) within the digital public sphere. Employing a descriptive qualitative method and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this study examines a limited empirical scope consisting of four viral social media contents and in-depth interviews with two key participants. The findings suggest that participants and pesantren-based narratives tend to frame ta'dhim not as a form of structural oppression, but rather as a mechanism of respect, identity formation, and a means of sustaining traditional values amid contemporary social change. Ultimately, this



discursive interplay highlights how pesantren communities navigate traditional authority while adapting to modern decentralized digital spaces, suggesting a need for broader empirical exploration to fully capture these evolving dynamics.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Dialectics; Western Feudalism; Pesantren; Ta'dhim; Modernization; Digital Discourse.*

### **Abstrak**

*Era digital telah mengintensifkan kontestasi diskursif seputar hubungan kiai–santri di pesantren (sekolah berasrama Islam). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memetakan dialektika antara paradigma feodalisme Barat dan tradisi Islam ta'dzim (penghormatan dan kepatuhan tradisional) di dalam ruang publik digital. Menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan analisis wacana kritis model Fairclough, penelitian ini mengkaji ruang lingkup empiris yang terbatas, terdiri dari empat konten media sosial yang viral dan wawancara mendalam dengan dua partisipan kunci. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa para partisipan dan narasi berbasis pesantren cenderung membingkai ta'dzim bukan sebagai bentuk penindasan struktural, melainkan sebagai mekanisme penghormatan, pembentukan identitas, dan sarana untuk mempertahankan nilai-nilai tradisional di tengah perubahan sosial kontemporer. Pada akhirnya, interaksi diskursif ini menyoroti bagaimana komunitas pesantren menavigasi otoritas tradisional sekaligus beradaptasi dengan ruang digital modern yang terdesentralisasi, yang mengindikasikan perlunya eksplorasi empiris yang lebih luas untuk memahami dinamika yang terus berkembang ini secara utuh.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Dialektika Islam; Feodalisme Barat; Pesantren; Ta'dzim; Modernisasi; Wacana Digital.*

## INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to the ways in which society constructs, disseminates, and negotiates social meanings. Social media with its fast-paced, massive, and often simplificative nature has become a new arena for forming public opinion about various traditional institutions, including Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Fikri, 2023). In contemporary digital discourses, a structural narrative has emerged that conceptualizes the *kiai*–*santri* hierarchy through critical-structural paradigms, often framing it under the theme of 'pesantren feudalism.' This perspective, frequently generated in digital spaces, utilizes structural power-relation frameworks to evaluate traditional hierarchies as potential mechanisms of social inequality or symbolic domination (Harracá et al., 2023). Rather than dismissing these views, this study positions them alongside traditional perspectives to analyze how these competing discourses contest and negotiate meaning in the digital public sphere. Through this lens, the practice of students (*santri*) showing respect to their teachers (*kiai*), as seen in social media content is often reduced to a form of structural subservience deemed incompatible with modern values of freedom and egalitarianism.

Such interpretations do not always align with the intellectual tradition of Islam, as debates for and against the issue of "feudalism" in *pesantren* often arise within the sphere of social media. In the epistemology of Islamic education, the *kiai*–*santri* relationship is rooted in the concept of *ta'dzim*—a profound respect for knowledge, teachers, and scholarly authority as an integral part of the ethics of seeking truth. This concept does not stand alone; it is closely interrelated with the principles of *adab* (Islamic manners and ethics) and *barakah* (spiritual blessings), which have served as foundational pillars of Islamic knowledge transmission for centuries (Mardiah, 2024). Therefore, what is often regarded as "hierarchy" from a Western perspective is, in fact, an

epistemic structure imbued with spiritual, pedagogical, and moral significance within the Islamic tradition. Here lies an epistemological dialectic: a meeting between the Western paradigm that emphasizes individual freedom and structural equality, and the Islamic paradigm that upholds *adab*, scholarly authority, and spiritual reciprocity.

The digital era has further intensified this epistemic tension. Social media has become not only a space for the production and reproduction of meaning but also a site for the emergence of new configurations of authority where validity is no longer determined by knowledge, experience, or scholarly lineage (*sanad al-'ilm*), but by popularity, virality, and algorithms (Nabila et al., 2026). Social media discussions often simplify the concept of *ta'dhim* by focusing primarily on its visible hierarchical structure, which frequently leaves its pedagogical and spiritual dimensions unexamined, leading to a simplification that shifts the original meaning of *ta'dzim*—as an ethical expression of scholarship—into a pejorative image of feudalism. This condition raises important epistemological questions: how is the discourse of “pesantren feudalism” actually constructed, in what ways does it differ from the concept of *ta'dzim*, and what are its implications for the transformation of pesantren education amid the currents of digitalization?

Based on this phenomenon, the present study is designed to address three main questions: (1) how social media discourse constructs and disseminates the image of “pesantren feudalism”; (2) how this discursive construction differs epistemologically from the concept of *ta'dzim* in Islamic education; and (3) what the implications of this semantic tension are for the direction of pesantren educational transformation in the digital era. The objectives of this research include describing and analyzing the discourse of “pesantren feudalism,” revealing the epistemic differences between the concepts of feudalism (Western)

and *ta'dzim* (Islamic), and explaining the epistemological and cultural impacts of this tension on the future of Islamic education.

A number of previous studies have examined hierarchical structures within *pesantren* through social and political approaches. Afandi and Jailani highlight how *kiai* leadership shapes power relations that some perceive as a form of feudalism (Jailani & Jambi, 2013). Similarly, Ilahi emphasizes the position of *kiai* as elite figures within the *pesantren* who possess strong symbolic capital (Ilahi, 2014). Meanwhile, Sari's study clarifies that *kiai* authority is often perceived by the public as a form of domination, especially when viewed through a Western epistemological lens that tends to interpret hierarchy as oppression (Sari et al., 2025). These studies provide important insights into the structure of power, yet they have not explored how the construction of "*pesantren* feudalism" is formed and reproduced massively on social media as a new discursive arena (Hafidh, 2023). On the other hand, research on *ta'dzim* emphasizes that the *kiai*–*santri* relationship cannot be separated from the epistemology of *adab* and the transmission of *barakah*. Suryanto explains that *ta'dzim* constitutes an ethical framework of scholarship that serves to maintain the legitimacy of *pesantren* tradition (Suryanto, 2022). Afandi and Ulum assert that the obedience of *santri* to their *kiai* is not a coercive structure but a pedagogical value that supports the internalization of knowledge (Ulum, 2020). Furthermore, Mushthofa and Aminah show that programs of *khidmah* (service), obedience, and learning ethics function as mechanisms of character formation (Mushthofa & Aminah, 2023). However, all of these studies remain within the context of direct (offline) relationships and have not yet examined how *ta'dzim* is perceived, questioned, or transformed when entering the digital sphere, which is saturated with competing narratives.

Based on these various studies, it appears that research on *pesantren* feudalism and *ta'dzim* has developed along two

separate trajectories: socio-political studies tend to focus on power relations, while Islamic pedagogical studies emphasize *adab* and *barakah*. To date, few studies have explored these two discourses within the framework of a dialectical epistemology between Western and Islamic thought, nor has their reconstruction through social media in the digital era been fully examined (Borges et al., 2024). Given the expansive nature of digital transformation, this study purposely narrows its empirical scope to a micro-level critical discourse analysis. The corpus, consisting of four specifically selected viral social media contents and in-depth interviews with two key participants (a kiai and a santri), is not intended for statistical generalization. Rather, following Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this limited yet highly concentrated data selection serves as a focal point to deeply deconstruct the textual, discursive, and socio-cultural practices underlying the 'pesantren feudalism' narrative (Fairclough, 2013). This specific empirical scope allows for a rigorous, dense, and qualitative exploration of how deeply rooted traditional authority is contested and negotiated in a single, high-impact digital momentum. Beyond merely juxtaposing the Western sociology of power relations with the Islamic tradition of *ta'dhim*, this study moves past a descriptive gap to offer a distinct theoretical and analytical contribution. Dynamically, it demonstrates that these two seemingly contradictory frameworks do not merely collide; rather, they form a digital epistemic dialectic where traditional authority adapts and re-legitimizes itself through the very modern mediums meant to critique it. Methodologically, by applying critical discourse analysis to indigenous Islamic constructs within digital spheres, this research provides an analytical model for evaluating how traditional religious values survive, transform, and withstand structural criticism in the decentralized digital age. This study focuses on integrating these two epistemic domains by analyzing how the narrative of "feudalism" intersects with, and even conflicts against, the concept

of *ta'dzim* within digital spaces. Thus, this research not only fills a gap in the existing literature but also offers a new analytical framework for understanding the transformation of *pesantren* education and Islamic scholarly authority in the era of information disruption.

## METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design and employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main analytical approach. This model is used because it conceptualizes language not merely as a neutral medium of communication, but as a form of social practice embedded in relations of power and ideology (Pešić, 2023). In this research, Fairclough's CDA is applied to move beyond surface-level textual description and to trace how discourses of feudalism and *ta'dzim* in *pesantren* reflect, reproduce, and negotiate systems of knowledge (epistemologies) related to the transformation of Islamic education in the digital era. Rather than claiming complete methodological objectivity, the CDA framework provides a systematic and critical lens for examining how discourses are constructed and contested within specific socio-cultural contexts (McCartan et al., 2022).

The primary data for this study consist of four digital contents that were purposively selected as case studies of competing discourses on feudalism and *ta'dzim* in *pesantren*. Two contents originate from mass media and social media platforms that critically portray the *kiai*–*santri* relationship within the frame of “*pesantren* feudalism”, while the other two are TikTok posts that narrate *ta'dzim* as a tradition of reverence within *pesantren*. All four contents were produced and circulated during 2025, explicitly address the *kiai*–*santri* relationship either in a critical or legitimizing (counter-narrative) manner, and display significant levels of interaction (views, comments, or shares). For these

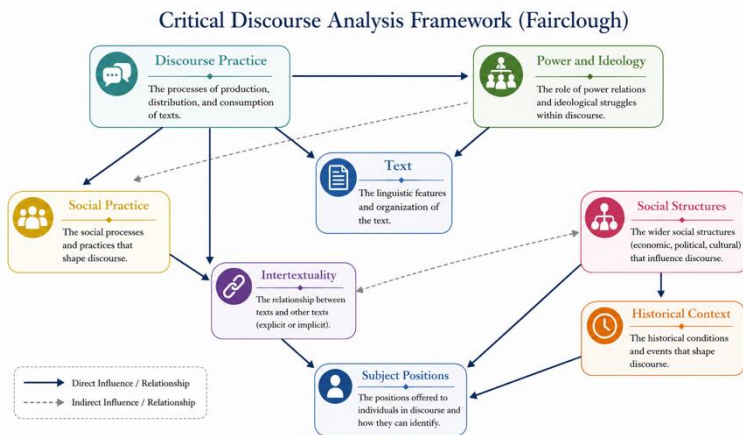
reasons, they are considered sufficiently illustrative of the ongoing discursive struggle surrounding pesantren in the Indonesian digital public sphere. The unit of analysis in this study is the main textual component of each content—namely the news article, video transcript, and/or caption—while comment threads and user reactions are treated as supporting materials for interpreting reception and circulation, rather than as independent units of analysis.

The main research instrument is a discourse analysis worksheet (checklist) developed on the basis of Fairclough's CDA categories. This worksheet contains several dimensions and indicators, including: (1) lexical choices (key terms related to feudalism, *ta'dzim*, authority, equality); (2) grammatical structures (activation or passivation of actors, use of modality, nominalization); (3) representation of social actors (positions of *kiai*, *santri*, and external commentators); (4) intertextuality and interdiscursivity (explicit or implicit references to other texts, ideological traditions, or public debates); and (5) markers of power relations and ideology implied in the text. The checklist functions as a systematic guide for identifying linguistic features and for grouping data into thematic categories relevant to issues of power, legitimacy, and resistance within pesantren discourse.

Secondary data are obtained through in-depth interviews with two key informants: a *kiai* who serves as the caretaker of a pesantren and a *santri/alumnus* who actively engages with religious content and pesantren issues in digital media. The informants are selected purposively on the basis of their involvement in pesantren life and their experience in encountering pesantren-related discourses on social media. The *kiai's* narrative is used to enrich the analysis of authority structures, *ta'dzim* traditions, and ethical-spiritual values in pesantren, whereas the *santri/alumnus* narrative sheds light on how pesantren discourses are received, negotiated, and potentially resisted by those who

inhabit both pesantren and digital spaces. These interviews are not designed to impose predetermined ideological roles (such as “dominant authority” or “resistance”) from the outset; rather, such positionalities emerge inductively from the analysis of their narratives.

Data collection is carried out through documentation of the selected digital contents (downloading texts, transcribing videos, and capturing screenshots of key interactions) and through audio-recorded in-depth interviews, which are subsequently transcribed verbatim. The credibility and trustworthiness of the data are enhanced through source triangulation (comparing insights from digital texts and interview narratives), prolonged engagement with the context of discourse production and circulation, and peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with discourse analysis and pesantren studies. The researcher also maintains field notes and an audit trail to document analytical decisions and reflections throughout the research process.



*Figure 1. The main framework of Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis*

Data analysis follows the three-dimensional CDA model proposed by Fairclough and is conducted in an integrated, iterative manner (Morchid, 2025). At the micro level (textual description), the researcher conducts initial coding of the texts by identifying key words, metaphors, grammatical patterns, and actor representations related to feudalism and *ta'dzim*. Codes are then grouped into broader thematic categories such as "hierarchy and power", "reverence and adab", "exploitation/injustice", and "tradition and legitimacy". At the meso level (interpretation of discursive practice), the analysis examines how the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed in mass and social media, including forms of intertextuality (references to Western theories of feudalism, *pesantren* traditions, or other contemporary debates) and patterns of user interaction (supportive, oppositional, or ambivalent responses). At the macro level (explanation of socio-cultural practice), the findings from the previous stages are connected to wider social contexts, such as the historical position of *pesantren* in Indonesian society, the circulation of Western egalitarian and critical paradigms, and current discussions on the direction of Islamic education in the digital age. Within this design, the study explicitly focuses on the construction of discourse and its epistemological implications for understanding *pesantren* and Islamic education, rather than attempting to generalize about all forms of Islamic educational transformation in Indonesia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fairclough discusses the concept of "language as a social practice" and the idealism of the media as conveyed through news and its representation in written texts (Fiveable, 2024). The data consist of four pieces of content: three from social media platforms (TikTok and Instagram) and one from the online media outlet *omongomong.com*, all of which explicitly discuss *pesantren* feudalism and *ta'dzim* toward the *kiai*. There are noticeable differences in the presentation of information between

these two categories of online media. The data used in this study are as follows:

Table 1. Coding of CDA Data for Social Media Content 1

| ID                   | M1                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Platform             | Instagram/Konde.co                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Date                 | 2025-10-16                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Type                 | Post/Quote/Illustration                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Text / Quotation     | <i>"Feodalisme spiritualistik ini kokoh karena adanya kebergantungan ekonomi-spiritual masyarakat pada figur. Narasi 'ngalap berkah' adalah eksploitasi. Pesantren harus ajarkan cara berpikir kritis."</i> |
| Main Keywords        | Spiritual feudalism; exploitation; <i>ngalap berkah</i> ; critical reason                                                                                                                                   |
| Metaphors            | Sacral power; veil / exploitation                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Modality             | High                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Agen (Subjek)        | Yuniyanti Chuzaifah/Aktivis                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Public Reaction      | Many likes and shares, but with one comment responding in antithesis to the statement about pesantren feudalism                                                                                             |
| Discursive Practice  | Structural and ethical critique                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Brief Interpretation | Critique: feudalism is wrapped in spiritual/economics; urges critical reasoning to counter symbolic domination.                                                                                             |

Table 2. Coding of CDA Data for Social Media Content 2

| ID               | M2                                                                                      |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Platform         | Article/omongomong.com                                                                  |
| Date             | 2025-10-16                                                                              |
| Type             | Critical essay                                                                          |
| Text / Quotation | <i>"Feodalisme dibalut atas nama adab, dibumbui agama... Ini pendisiplinan pikiran"</i> |

|                      |                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                      | <i>dan tubuh. Santri melakukan kerja tanpa bayaran tanpa merasa dieksploitasi."</i>                                                 |
| Main Keywords        | Symbolic feudalism; adab; Foucauldian disciplining; Panopticon; culture of silence                                                  |
| Metaphors            | Veil of power; docile body; transcendent Panopticon                                                                                 |
| Modality             | High                                                                                                                                |
| Agen (Subjek)        | Critical / academic writer                                                                                                          |
| Public Reaction      | Many likes and shares, but with one comment responding in antithesis to the statement about pesantren feudalism                     |
| Discursive Practice  | Foucauldian analysis and critique of the genealogy of power                                                                         |
| Brief Interpretation | Adab is framed as a cultural mechanism for maintaining the kiai's absolute authority; the santri's body is disciplined voluntarily. |

Table 3. Coding of CDA Data for Social Media Content 3

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ID               | M3                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Platform         | Tiktok                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Date             | 2024-11-10                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Type             | Video (ulama quotation)                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Text / Quotation | <i>"Santri harus mempunyai ketawadhu'an dan ta'dzim yang tinggi terhadap guru. Hal ini tidak bisa dibantah, karena kemanfaatan ilmu tergantung pada ta'dzim dan hormat santri kepada gurunya."</i> –KH. Masbuhin Faqih |
| Main Keywords    | Ta'dzim; humility; respect for teacher; benefit of knowledge                                                                                                                                                           |
| Metaphors        | Teacher–student relationship as a source of the blessedness of knowledge                                                                                                                                               |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Modality             | High                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Agen (Subjek)        | Santri as those obliged to show respect; teacher as holder of scholarly authority                                                                                           |
| Discursive Practice  | Da'wah and spiritual education on santri adab                                                                                                                               |
| Public Reaction      | Strong support from santri and pesantren alumni                                                                                                                             |
| Brief Interpretation | Strengthens the discourse of pesantren as an institution that makes adab an epistemic foundation; legitimizes teacherly authority on the basis of spirituality and barakah. |

Table 4. Coding of CDA Data for Social Media Content 4

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ID                  | M13                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Platform            | Tiktok                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Date                | 2024-04-14                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Type                | Ustadz video (sermon)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Text / Quotation    | <i>“Bahkan Ali bin Abi Thalib berkata: Siapa pun guru yang mengajarkan saya satu huruf Al-Qur’an dan saya paham, maka saya siap menjadi budaknya. Artinya ta’dzim kepada guru yang telah mengajar kita sampai paham, pahalanya luar biasa dan penuh barokah.”</i> |
| Main Keywords       | Ta’dzim; teacher; barakah; Ta’lim al-Muta’allim; Ali ibn Abi Talib                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Metaphors           | Teacher as holder of spiritual authority and source of the barakah of knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Modality            | High                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Agent (Subject)     | Santri as recipients of knowledge; teacher as holder of authority                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Discursive Practice | Da’wah and epistemic legitimization of teacherly authority in pesantren                                                                                                                                                                                           |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Public Reaction      | Strong support from the pesantren community                                                                                                                                    |
| Brief Interpretation | Reinforces the belief that the blessedness of knowledge is tied to respect for the teacher, framing scholarly hierarchy as a spiritual relation rather than social domination. |

Norman Fairclough’s discourse analysis is one of the analytical approaches that can be used to examine speech or text, whether on a small or large scale (Fairclough, 2001). The discourse analysis in this study focuses on the emerging texts. This discourse is discussed in detail through both micro and macro perspectives based on the conflicts reported by the media. Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis method is employed to examine how the media construct the discourse surrounding *pesantren* feudalism and its counter-narratives (Khoirunnisa & Effendi, 2025). The stages of discourse analysis are as follows:

Microstructural Analysis

The analysis of text production practices (microstructural analysis) is carried out in several stages. Fairclough discusses coherence, cohesion, and how words and sentences generate meaning. The text is examined through three main components: representation, relations, and identity (Pešić, 2022). In the representation component, the text functions to describe a person, situation, or condition, as well as social relations and the identity of individuals or figures (Pitkin, 2023). In the relations component, the text serves to analyze the relationship between the audience depicted in the text and the individuals represented within it.

The coding of data M1 and M2 indicates that adab and ta’dzim within pesantren culture are discursively reframed as part of an ideological framework that sustains a vertical power

structure, so that pesantren is explicitly associated with “feudalism” as a symbolic and cultural narrative. This discourse carries a high level of modality, indicating a strong certainty and urgency to dismantle the idealization of the *guru–santri* (teacher–student) relationship and to demand institutional accountability. In the M1 data, the author defines the *pesantren* phenomenon as a form of “structural feudalism,” exploiting two dimensions—economic dependence and spiritual dependence of the community on the *kiai* figure. In this context, the practice of *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings), which traditionally serves as a means of spiritual transmission, is rearticulated as a form of hidden “exploitation” of children (*santri*). This reinterpretation situates these practices within a discursive frame that links such reverence to asymmetrical power relations, as the *kiai* is regarded as the “center of knowledge” or the “heir of the Prophet,” while simultaneously affirming that the *kiai*’s authority fundamentally derives from an unquestionable power relation.

In M2, the author explicitly draws on Foucauldian terminology to describe how subordination is produced internally within the pesantren. The text characterizes *adab* as a “disciplining mechanism” and refers to *santri* as “accustomed to serving without payment” and as subjects who “do not feel exploited”, thereby framing their unpaid service as a product of internalized norms rather than voluntary charity. Phrases that depict *santri* as “accustomed to obeying without questioning” resonate with Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies”, as they suggest a process by which obedience is inscribed into everyday practice, rendering them unconsciously complicit in feudalistic practices according to this discourse. Furthermore, the concept of *barakah* is interpreted as a mechanism of control functioning like a transcendent panopticon (Ujiyanto, 2025). Within this discourse, *santri* are compelled to discipline themselves out of fear that their knowledge will not be *blessed* (*barakah*) if they fail to serve or show devotion to their *kiai*.

This creates a form of spiritual threat that enforces continuous internal surveillance and self-discipline among the *santri*.

On the other hand, the discourse on ta'dzim toward teachers that emerges in data M3 and M4 constructs respect for teachers as a fundamental foundation of *pesantren* education, including in its digital representation. In a statement by KH. Masbuhin Faqih, for example, it is emphasized that “the benefit of knowledge depends on the *santri*’s reverence and respect for their teacher.” This assertion situates the teacher–student (*guru–santri*) relationship not merely as a pedagogical one but as a spiritual bond believed to have a direct impact on the blessings (*barakah*) of knowledge. The epistemology of the *pesantren* indeed integrates rationality with a transcendent dimension, where knowledge is valued not only by the mastery of material content but also by its benefit and blessedness. Within this discourse, the epistemic value of knowledge is articulated not only through the mastery of material content but also through its perceived benefit and blessedness. Within this discourse, ta'dzim is positioned as a moral prerequisite for the *santri*’s intellectual and spiritual success, so that respect and humility toward the teacher are constructed as integral conditions for attaining both knowledge and its blessedness (Zahroh, 2025).

This discourse is reinforced in data M4 through a popular quotation attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, who stated that he was willing to become a “servant” to anyone who taught him a single letter of the Qur’an. This quotation functions as a historical–theological legitimization that elevates the status of the teacher as a central figure within the hierarchy of Islamic scholarship. Through this narrative, *ustadz* or *pesantren* content creators reaffirm that respect for teachers has deep roots in the scholarly tradition of the *ulama* and is not merely a local *pesantren* custom. Within Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this practice demonstrates processes of *intertextuality* and *recontextualization*, wherein classical texts are reused to reinforce the traditional

ideology of the *pesantren* amid the onslaught of modern values such as egalitarianism and rationality (Widodo et al., 2025). In this discourse, the teacher plays not only the role of an instructor but also that of a guardian of *barakah*, a spiritual intermediary, and a holder of epistemic authority—one that cannot be reduced to the role of a mere learning facilitator (Silaswati, 2019).

#### *a. Representation*

In the data presented above, the text published on the *omongomong.com* page entitled “Unveiling Feudalism Behind the Veil of Pesantren” represents a phenomenon that illustrates the claims and framing of feudal practices within the *pesantren* environment. In this case, these practices encompass the processes through which the *kiai* as a figure holds relations of power over the actions and thoughts of the *santri*. This phenomenon, in discourse M1, depicts the group of *santri* or students in the *pesantren* institution as a group disciplined through the autonomy of power and rationality. The *santri* are enclosed within a veil of reverence that involves the *kiai*’s power relations, compelling them to submit to practices referred to as “*adab*”. This phenomenon is also a consequence of an educational pattern in *pesantren* that is grounded in Islamic values regarded as absolute (Safitri et al., 2026).

However, this phenomenon is not merely about a group of *santri* obeying commands, but is also related to the values held by the *santri*, namely in terms of *adab*, respect for knowledge, and also the sense of *ta'dzim* (Syihabuddin et al., 2023). The critical discourse (M1 and M2) intentionally employs a lexicon rooted in political theory and critical social theory to desacralize the *kiai*–*santri* relationship. M1 uses the diction “feudal”, “king”, and “commoners” to represent the structure of the *pesantren* through the metaphor of a monarchy, which implicitly accuses the *kiai*’s authority of being an absolute political and class domination. M1 further extends its critique by using the terms “spiritual feudalism” and “exploitation” to portray the practice of *ngalap berkah* as a

material transaction that is detrimental. M2 continues this deconstructive effort by specifically targeting the ritual of ta'dzim, representing it as a "feudal practice!" and employing the metaphor of a "ritual of power" to assert that acts of reverence, which are claimed to be ethical conduct (adab), are in fact instruments for reinforcing hierarchical status.

In data M3, the discourse constructed represents the teacher–santri relationship as a sacred spiritual relation rather than a relation of power. Through the quotation of KH. Masbuhin Faqih, santri are depicted as subjects who obtain the benefits of knowledge only if they possess a high degree of ta'dzim and humility toward their teacher. The teacher is represented as a figure who holds epistemic authority and serves as a conduit of barakah, so that reverence toward the teacher is positioned as an epistemic prerequisite for successful learning. This representation situates the hierarchical structure of the pesantren as an ethical and moral mechanism, rather than a form of social domination. Thus, M3 constructs the image of pesantren as an institution that evaluates knowledge not only in cognitive terms, but also through the depth of adab and spirituality.

In data M4, the representation of the teacher–santri hierarchy is reinforced through a historical reference to Ali ibn Abi Talib, who is constructed as an ideal symbol of a student's reverence toward the teacher. The teacher is portrayed as a figure possessing high spiritual authority and therefore deserving of total reverence from the santri, even described with the metaphor of "becoming a slave" as a form of spiritual, rather than socio-economic, submission. The santri are represented as recipients of knowledge who require adab in order to obtain barakah, while the teacher appears as the guardian of sanad and epistemic authority (Tamjidnor et al., 2025). Through this representation, M4 seeks to affirm that hierarchy within the pesantren is part of a legitimate and

noble Islamic scholarly tradition, and therefore cannot be equated with feudal structures as understood in Western social theory.

### ***b. Relations***

The relationship between kiai and santri is constructed at the micro level as a vertical relation of subordination and absolute control (Alwi, 2025). Critical discourse collectively employs high modality, with high modality in M1 and medium modality in M2, in order to assert the claim that this hierarchy is an undeniable social fact. M1 constructs the relationship on the basis of class inequality, in which the kiai is the ruler and the santri the subordinate. Meanwhile, M2 focuses on the mechanisms of everyday control, where the practice of hand-kissing is positioned as a “tool of control”. This critique emphasizes that such structural domination is concealed because feudalism is “wrapped in the name of adab, seasoned with religion”, making adab an ideological veil for power.

In the digital sphere, the discourse of ta'dzim also functions as a counter-discourse to critiques that equate pesantren hierarchy with feudalism (Firdausiyah et al., 2025). Many modern critiques view absolute reverence for teachers as a form of uncritical submission (Chien et al., 2024). However, through content such as M3 and M4, pesantren reframe this meaning by emphasizing that hierarchical relations in pesantren are part of the ethics of thalabul 'ilmi, not social domination. The digital narratives produced by santri and ustadz seek to shift the frame from power relations toward ethical-spiritual relations. This constitutes a form of discursive practice that serves to maintain the legitimacy of pesantren ideology, in line with Fairclough's explanation that discourse can become an arena for reproducing social structures through language, symbols, and narratives that are accepted as cultural truths. Thus, digital discourse on platforms such as TikTok is not merely a medium of da'wah, but also a battleground of

meaning to preserve the authority of teachers within the traditional Islamic education system.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the emergence of ta'dzim discourse on social media demonstrates the capacity of pesantren to adapt to digital culture without sacrificing its traditional values (Mustofa et al., 2023). Short videos, casual delivery styles, and visual adjustments become new strategies for disseminating classical pesantren values to younger generations living in a fast-paced culture (Nisa, 2025). Positive responses from santri and alumni, visible in comments, likes, and public support, serve as evidence that this discourse is not only accepted but also reproduced by the pesantren community itself (Yasin et al., 2025). This shows that ta'dzim is not merely a norm, but a collective identity that is continually maintained as a distinctive marker of pesantren amid modernization. Through digital platforms, values that previously existed only within the physical environment of the pesantren are now projected as part of the digital identity of the Muslim community.

Ultimately, the analysis of M3 and M4 shows that the discourse of ta'dzim toward teachers in pesantren social media functions not only as an ethical guideline but also as a strategic mechanism for preserving traditional Islamic epistemology. Social media becomes an important means for pesantren to revitalize the values of adab, barakah, and teacher authority in the midst of an educational world that increasingly emphasizes technical competence and rationality. By asserting that the success of knowledge depends on reverence for the teacher, pesantren construct a counter-narrative to modern educational paradigms while simultaneously re-projecting traditional values into the digital landscape. This discourse not only maintains the continuity of pesantren values, but also illustrates how traditional institutions are able to employ technology to safeguard their epistemic and spiritual identity amid rapid social change.

### c. *Identity*

Critical discourse polarizes the identities of subjects in order to support its thesis of feudalism. The identity of the *kiai* is reduced from a spiritual figure to one who is excessively sacralized (M3 in the feudalism context: “regarded as sacred”), functioning as a source of domination. The *kiai* is identified as a “king” (M1), acting as a “figure of absolute authority who is often beyond contestation”. Conversely, the identity of the *santri* is constructed as subordinate—“commoners” (M1) or passive subjects. The use of “personal testimonies” in M2 is a crucial strategy that transforms the identity of *santri* from silent recipients of tradition into critical voices that provide empirical legitimacy to the claim that they are subjects trapped in a feudalistic system.

In data M3, the identity of *santri* is shaped as that of subjects who ideally possess high levels of humility and *ta'dzim* as prerequisites for gaining the benefit of knowledge. *Santri* are positioned as students whose moral and intellectual identities depend on the quality of *adab* they cultivate toward their teachers. The identity of *santri* here is not merely that of learners, but of seekers of knowledge who submit spiritually and ethically to the traditional structure of the *pesantren*. Meanwhile, the teacher is represented as a figure endowed with strong epistemic and spiritual legitimacy, whose authority is grounded in mastery of knowledge, moral example, and spiritual charisma rather than formal position alone (Fowler et al., 2025). The teacher appears as a source of *barakah* and a holder of scholarly authority, so that this identity construction places the teacher as a guardian of the transmission of knowledge, respected primarily because of perceived moral depth, expertise, and the role in preserving *sanad*, even though the possibility of critique is not made explicit within the discourse.

In data M4, the identity of *santri* is shaped through the metaphor of “becoming a slave” in the context of Ali ibn Abi Talib’s

statement, which underscores that the ideal santri is portrayed as a person who wholeheartedly honours the teacher as a form of spiritual commitment. The identity of santri is not built solely on intellectual aspects, but also on the depth of respect and the awareness that knowledge is considered truly beneficial only when accompanied by adab. The teacher in M4 is constructed as a figure who not only imparts knowledge but also acts as a mediator of blessing and scholarly legitimacy with deep historical roots in the Islamic tradition. Thus, the teacher's identity emerges as noble, spiritually authoritative, and a central point of moral orientation for the santri. In this discourse, the relationship between teacher and santri is foregrounded as a mutual-spiritual bond, even though such a bond can simultaneously carry pedagogical and power dimensions; what is emphasized in the text, however, is the ethical and spiritual significance of hierarchy rather than its potential for structural domination.

### *Mesostructural analysis*

The analysis at the mesostructural level shows how these two opposing discourses are produced, distributed, and brought into interaction in the public sphere, which is key to shaping forms of social perception (Olsen, 2022). In this case, both sets of texts make use of digital spaces to circulate and respond to competing interpretations of pesantren authority. Debates that might previously have taken place in more internal settings now appear in a wider public arena through non-hierarchical digital media (TikTok, Instagram, writing platforms) (Li et al., 2025). The discourse criticizing pesantren feudalism is produced by agents who draw on external forms of legitimacy and critical reasoning. In data M1, which comes from omongomong.com, the genre is a semi-academic popular essay informed by Foucauldian analysis, while M2 is distributed through the Instagram account of Konde.co in the form of carousels or infographics by activist Yuniyanti Chuzaifah. These platforms are known for hosting discussions on social and

gender issues, so that the kiai–santri relationship is positioned within broader debates on public accountability and critical reflection.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, the use of such platforms and genres can be read as an attempt to address audiences beyond the pesantren community. This is an effort to push for public accountability over internal pesantren practices, rather than confining discussion to internal spaces (such as study sessions or mudzakah). Both discourses interact in open social media. The critiques (M1, M2) are distributed through online media known as platforms for social and gender discussions (Konde.co) and critical essays (omongomong.com), which strategically bring the issue of kiai–santri relations into the domain of public accountability.

At the mesostructural level, data M3 and M4 show that the legitimizing discourse is produced by internal authorities of the pesantren, namely kiai or ustadz who possess scholarly and spiritual legitimacy. This content is disseminated through TikTok, a platform characterized by speed, simplicity, and strong visuality, enabling pesantren traditions to be adapted into formats easily consumed by younger generations (Fauzi et al., 2025). The genre in the form of sermon clips and quotations from ulama figures reinforces an impression of authenticity as well as authority, because it relies on individuals who are highly respected in the Islamic tradition. In this way, TikTok functions as a medium for da'wah and spiritual education that extends the reach of pesantren messages in the contemporary media landscape.

In this context, the legitimizing discourse (M3, M4) makes use of TikTok as a tool for rearticulating traditional values and distributing the narrative of ta'dzim to young audiences in an easily digestible format. The discursive practice employed takes the form of da'wah/spiritual education through short video formats, which

operates as a mechanism of ideological reproduction by transmitting values of ta'dzim and humility to digital audiences.

The critiques (M1, M2) operate as discourses that explicitly carry out ideological re-semanticization: they transform the meanings of adab and barakah into mechanisms of control and symbolic exploitation, urging that hierarchy be read as a feudal power relation. By contrast, the legitimizing discourse (M3, M4) can be interpreted as a discursive response to these accusations of feudalism, as it repeatedly frames ta'dzim as an ethic of thalabul 'ilmi and a spiritual relation rather than as social domination

### *Macrostructural analysis*

At the ideological level, data M1 and M2 jointly challenge the hegemony of traditional spiritual authority by drawing on egalitarian and critical rationalist perspectives that are often associated with certain strands of Western social and political thought. Their critique focuses on the figure of the kiai as an unquestionable authority and exposes the symbolic domination of teachers who use adab as an instrument of feudal practice. In data M2, a Foucauldian framework is explicitly employed to explain how this ideology operates as a disciplining force upon mind and body, so that the internalization of power discourse results in santri performing services (working without pay) without feeling exploited. Thus, the macrostructural discourse aims to dismantle the subjectivation that compels santri to submit voluntarily and reproduce that power.

On this basis, there are socio-structural implications perceived as harmful, including: a culture of absolute obedience that creates the taboo of su'ul al-adab, thereby obstructing critical reasoning and making santri afraid to ask questions or even express opinions. As a result, the system becomes oriented merely toward content-knowledge and obscures the construction of knowledge. On this basis, the critiques in M1 and M2 highlight socio-structural

implications perceived as harmful, including a culture of absolute obedience that creates the taboo of *su'ul al-adab*, which is described as obstructing critical reasoning and making *santri* afraid to ask questions or express opinions. As a result, the educational system is portrayed as being oriented primarily toward content-knowledge while obscuring reflection on how knowledge is constructed. In addition, the discourse points to a “culture of silence” that is presented as an obstacle to justice, because *santri* are depicted as reluctant to voice experiences of unfair treatment or symbolic harm for fear of being labelled disobedient or losing *barakah* (Wisnu et al., 2024). Therefore, the critiques in M1 and M2 constitute an ideological project aimed at forcing structural transformation, demanding that *pesantren* integrate principles of accountability, equality, and human rights into their practices.

At the macrostructural level, the discourse in M3 and M4 is rooted in a value system of traditional Islamic education that places *ta'dzim* as the foundation of scholarly ethics. In the socio-cultural context articulated by these texts, the teacher–*santri* hierarchy is framed less as a product of material power relations—of the kind often foregrounded in certain Western accounts of feudalism—and more as a moral and spiritual structure that governs how knowledge is understood, received, and practiced, but rather a moral and spiritual structure that governs how knowledge is understood, received, and practiced (Warsah et al., 2025). This discourse operates within the ideology of *adab* and *barakah*, which emphasizes that intellectual success is determined by the purity of heart, intention, and the *santri*’s reverence for the teacher as guardian of the chain of transmission of knowledge (*sanad*) (Toguslu, 2007). Hence, M3 and M4 are not merely ethical exhortations, but a reproduction of an ideology deeply rooted in Islamic education, intended to preserve the continuity of scholarly tradition and the collective identity of *pesantren*.

At a broader social level, M3 and M4 form part of a contestation of meaning in the digital age, in which *pesantren* seek

to maintain their epistemic authority amidst currents of modern criticism that frequently construe religious hierarchy as a form of feudalism. Through the narrative of ta'dzim reproduced on social media, pesantren both respond to and challenge such negative representations by demonstrating that the teacher–santri relationship is spiritual rather than structurally dominant. At the macro level, these two discourses reveal the dynamics of pesantren transformation in responding to contemporary demands: how traditional institutions adapt to digital platforms in order to maintain their social legitimacy. Thus, M3 and M4 not only reflect the internal values of pesantren but also show how pesantren negotiate with global discourses on freedom, egalitarianism, and authority in education.

### *Western and Islamic Dialectics in the Discourse of Pesantren Feudalism*

In Karl Marx's view, feudalism is one stage in the historical development of society, marked by the domination of the landlord class over the peasantry through ownership of the principal means of production, namely land (Putri, 2023). Feudalism, according to Marx, is not merely an economic system, but also a socio-political structure that sustains class inequality and preserves the power of the feudal class (Feng, 2023). Within the framework of historical materialism, this phase is understood as a transitional form toward capitalism, when ownership of land shifts into ownership of capital and relations of production are transformed into relations between capital owners (the bourgeoisie) and wage labourers (the proletariat) (Historical Materialism, 2025). Thus, feudalism reflects the dynamics of class struggle that, for Marx, constitute the driving motor of human history.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Engels, 1884), Friedrich Engels explains feudalism as a historical socio-economic formation that emerges after the development of private ownership of land and other means of production, when the

nobility and landlords monopolize economic resources and subjugate the peasantry through relations of personal dependence. Engels emphasizes that social relations in feudalism centre on land-based class domination, in which the surplus labour of peasants is exploited through systems of tribute and forced service institutionalized within traditional and religious structures of power (Perwitasari, 2009).

The relevance of these theories can be seen in social media discourses that stigmatize pesantren as closed, hierarchical, and anti-critical institutions because they place the kiai in the position of highest authority. These discourses resonate with certain Western-oriented feudal paradigms in which vertical authority is frequently associated with exploitative power relations and obedience is framed as a form of “irrational submission”.

From the perspective of Islamic scholarship, Imam al-Ghazali understands *adab* as a set of behavioural norms arising from purity of heart and spiritual orientation in the pursuit of knowledge, in which knowledge is not merely intellectual information but a means of purifying the soul and drawing closer to God (Layalia, 2025). In al-Ghazali's view, *adab* is a body of moral rules, interactional ethics, and inner discipline that must be upheld by teacher and student so that the knowledge acquired becomes blessed and brings guidance, rather than mere intellectual pride (Aryanti et al., 2022). Accordingly, *adab* has two dimensions: first, internal *adab* relating to sincerity, humility, and orienting knowledge toward the hereafter; and second, external *adab* in the form of reverence for the teacher, discipline in study, and obedience to scholarly norms. For al-Ghazali, knowledge without *adab* will give rise to arrogance and moral corruption; thus *adab* functions as the guardian of the authority of knowledge, ensuring that it is transmitted through an authentic *sanad* and with the right intention (Sabariah et al., 2024). In this way, *adab* becomes the foundation of scholarly authority, the blessedness of knowledge,

and the authentic transmission of learning within the Islamic educational tradition.

In the thought of Imam al-Ghazali as articulated in *Ayyuha al-Walad*, *barakah* is understood as a divine, unseen energy: a gift from God that brings goodness, ease of life, and happiness to a person even when it is not materially visible. Al-Ghazali stresses that *barakah* is part of a metaphysical reality that can only be experienced, not fully described, so its presence is measured by the enduring beneficial effects generated by righteous deeds and the sincerity of the actor (Widura et al., 2021). Etymologically, *barakah* signifies “an increase in goodness”, such that knowledge or deeds accompanied by *barakah* produce multiplied and sustained benefits that far exceed their physical measure. Thus, in al-Ghazali’s perspective, *barakah* is the spiritual foundation that animates knowledge and action, making them valuable in the sight of God and bringing welfare in this world as well as salvation in the hereafter.

The discourse of *ta’dzim* toward teachers in data M3 and M4 becomes particularly interesting when placed within the framework of Western feudal theory and Islamic epistemology. Both data sets affirm the importance of a student’s *adab* toward the teacher as a prerequisite for the blessedness of knowledge, but this is often misunderstood when read through Western social theory. In M3, KH Masbuhin Faqih emphasizes that “the benefit of knowledge depends on *ta’dzim* and respect for the teacher”, which aligns with al-Ghazali’s epistemology that views *adab* as purification of the soul prior to receiving knowledge (Aryanti et al., 2022). The quotation in M4 from Ali ibn Abi Talib further reinforces that reverence for the teacher is an ethic of scholarship, not structural subjugation, consistent with the concept of *sanad* as spiritual legitimacy in the *pesantren* tradition (Abdullah, 2023).

Within Western feudal theory, Marx, Engels, and Hegel analyse hierarchy as a structure of domination grounded in

relations of property, labour, and class inequality, while later Marxist and neo-Marxist discussions also attend to ideological and symbolic forms of power (Parlan & Bahar, 2024). However, the narratives in M3 and M4 show that the teacher–santri hierarchy does not arise from economic logic, but from the structure of Islamic knowledge. Through Fairclough’s discourse analysis, this hierarchy of ta’dzim functions to disarticulate accusations of feudalism and to rearticulate teacherly authority as epistemic rather than dominative. Even from a Hegelian perspective, the teacher–santri relation is not a form of alienation comparable to that of serf to lord, but an attitude of humility believed to be a condition for attaining wisdom. Likewise, Engels’s analysis of class domination focuses on the extraction of surplus value through control of the means of production (Sen, 2020), whereas the texts M3 and M4 represent the teacher–santri relationship primarily in non-economic terms, emphasizing the transmission of knowledge, adab, and barakah rather than material surplus

The concept of barakah in al-Ghazali is clearly foregrounded in M3–M4, where both link the benefits of knowledge to the attitude of ta’dzim. In these narratives, ta’dzim is not constructed as a mechanism of teacher domination but as a spiritual condition for knowledge to function optimally. As an ethic of scholarship, ta’dzim is represented as cultivating intellectual humility, because the teacher is positioned as a mediator toward truth and as a conduit of barakah (Wardi & Ismail, 2018). Thus, the content in M3–M4 functions as a counter-discourse against the stigma of pesantren feudalism. At a time when modern media foregrounds egalitarianism that often rejects any form of hierarchy, pesantren employ short video formats—such as TikTok—to clarify the meaning of ta’dzim and highlight the fundamental difference between spiritual hierarchy and oppressive hierarchy characteristic of Western feudalism.

Conversely, the Critical Discourse of Feudalism (M1, M2) rejects this distinction. It operates on the assumption of

egalitarianism, explicitly reducing spiritual claims to the political language of power. For these critics, the kiai's authority, construed as "sacred" (M3 in the feudalism context), is inherently a form of domination. M2 sophisticatedly employs Foucault rather than Marx/Engels to show that barakah and adab in fact function as disciplinary mechanisms that lead santri to accept labour exploitation voluntarily (without coercion). This critique demands that pesantren abandon such ethical structures if they close off spaces for critique and reason that are central to modern education.

Through this comparison, three key points emerge that distinguish pesantren structures from the Western concept of feudalism:

- a. Power structure vs. epistemic structure: The ta'dzim narratives in both contents (M3 and M4) are discursive practices that disarticulate accusations of feudalism and rearticulate the teacher-student hierarchy as an epistemic, not dominative, structure. This hierarchy is normative and theological rather than material. Here, an epistemological clash occurs, as described in (Khofifah, 2019), when Western concepts are used to interpret structures grounded in Islamic epistemology, resulting in dislocation of meaning and misunderstanding. This stands in contrast to M1 and M2, which explicitly reject this epistemic framing, reducing hierarchy to feudal power relations: M1 through monarchical metaphor, and M2 by focusing on rituals of reverence (hand-kissing) as legitimations of feudal practice and rituals of power that equate sacrality with domination that must be resisted through critical reason.
- b. Ethical function vs. dialectic of history: From a Hegelian standpoint, feudalism is a stage that has not yet attained universal rationality. However, pesantren hierarchy does not operate within a Hegelian dialectic of history; it is not a "delayed" phase on the way to modern freedom, but an ethical structure with a spiritual telos. This is reflected in M3-M4,

which portray the teacher as a guardian of knowledge rather than a ruler who suppresses the autonomy of santri. The student's submission is not "self-alienation" as in Hegelian feudalism, but an expression of humility believed to be a prerequisite for attaining wisdom (Rahman et al., 2025). Meanwhile, in the critical discourses M1 and M2, ta'dzim is read as a practice that narrates irrational and dogmatic submission.

- c. Barakah vs. surplus value: Engels's theory of class domination in feudalism cannot be applied to pesantren because the teacher-santri relationship does not involve control of the means of production or exploitation of labour. No surplus value is transferred from santri to teacher. Instead, what is transmitted is knowledge, adab, and barakah. In this context, M3–M4 show that the teacher's authority is spiritual, grounded not in economic ownership but in scholarly legitimacy and moral depth. This aligns with al-Ghazali's notion of barakah, which emphasizes that blessedness arises only when the teacher-student relationship is framed by proper adab. The Critical Discourse (M1 and M2) directly attacks this concept of barakah, labelling ngalap berkah as "spiritual and economic exploitation" (M1). M2 details a subtler mechanism, drawing on Foucault, in which barakah is transformed into a transcendent Panopticon: fear that one's knowledge will lack barakah compels santri to perform work (such as driving, farming) "without pay and without feeling exploited", demonstrating that barakah has been instrumentalized to reproduce power and secure voluntary service rather than mere spirituality.

Accordingly, an analysis that links the M3–M4 discourse with Western feudal theory and Islamic epistemology suggests that the allegation of "pesantren feudalism" can be understood as closely related to an epistemological dislocation. While Western feudalism is theorized as rooted in economic-political domination,

the pesantren structure is framed in these texts as rooted in adab, barakah, and the chain of transmission of knowledge (sanad). The narratives in M3–M4 articulate hierarchy in pesantren not as a constraint on freedom, but as a prerequisite for the blessedness of knowledge in the Islamic tradition. Ultimately, this comparison indicates that epistemological dislocation is a key source of tension: the Critical Discourse (M1, M2) reads pesantren hierarchy through the lens of economic–political domination, whereas the Legitimizing Discourse (M3, M4) situates it within an Islamic epistemological framework of adab, barakah, and sanad.

The narratives in M3–M4 demonstrate that hierarchy in pesantren is not a constraint on freedom, but a prerequisite for the blessedness of knowledge in the Islamic tradition. Ultimately, this comparison concludes that epistemological dislocation is the root of the conflict: the Critical Discourse (M1, M2) views pesantren hierarchy through the lens of economic–political domination (Western feudalism), whereas the Legitimizing Discourse (M3, M4) views it through the lens of adab, barakah, and sanad (Islamic epistemology). The success of pesantren in disseminating this counter-discourse through digital media (such as TikTok) indicates an adaptive effort to reproduce ideology and maintain the symbolic authority of teachers in the face of modern rationality, while simultaneously strengthening collective identity in an era dominated by cross-interpretations.

### *Epistemological Implications for the Transformation of Islamic Education in the Digital Era*

The discourse of “pesantren feudalism” that has developed on social media and in the digital public sphere often adopts a Western paradigm, in which the hierarchical relationship between kiai and santri is reduced to a form of domination or symbolic oppression (Rohanita et al., 2025). In such critiques and framings, visible in digital contents M1 and M2, the reverence of santri is narrated as a form of spiritual as well as economic exploitation.

Within this logic, the authority of the kiai is viewed as a source of power that must be resisted through critical reason, so that rituals such as ngalap barokah or ta'dzim are recast as instruments for reproducing social power. In the dynamics of “pesantren feudalism” discourse on social media, the kiai–santri hierarchy is frequently constructed reductively as domination and symbolic violence. Yet the fragmented narratives in these digital spaces in fact reveal a sharp polarization between a Western paradigm that foregrounds egalitarianism and scepticism and the pesantren tradition that places ta'dzim as the basis of respect and the transmission of spiritual values.

Findings from interviews with pesantren leaders in Purwokerto affirm that feudal terminology and characteristics are not relevant for assessing social relations in pesantren. According to the kiai, accusations of feudalism often come from outsiders who have never experienced or understood pesantren culture and are more influenced by viral trends or social sentiments about pesantren. Media framings that problematize traditions such as walking in a crouched position or carrying food with lowered hands are, from the kiai's perspective, manifestations of ta'dzim—sincere reverence rooted in tasawuf and pesantren adab, not relations of power—and the kiai's authority itself, he stresses, is neither absolute nor coercive, but grounded in adab, morality, and spirituality (Interview with M. Roqib, 13 November 2025). The kiai applies adab in treating santri with respect; the santri's respectful attitude emerges from adab and esteem toward the kiai, not from coercion by the kiai. In other words, from the perspectives of these interview participants, the feudal label imposed by netizens on social media reflects an epistemological dislocation and does not adequately capture the lived social relations within their pesantren (Wibowo, 2021).

Santri likewise stress that ta'dzim is an obligation and a foundational character trait shaping their behaviour and spirituality. Their respect and obedience toward the kiai are not

driven by coercion or oppression, but serve as a medium for instilling adab, loyalty, and life lessons (Lutfi & Anwar, 2026). Santri firmly reject stereotypes that portray kiai as luxurious figures or santri as slaves; in their view, many negative comments on social media come from individuals who, they believe, have no lived experience in pesantren. Another implication is that digital sources of knowledge such as YouTube and social media are regarded as complementary, not as substitutes for kiai authority, because “the tradition of receiving knowledge from the kiai remains central and irreplaceable,” as one santri stated (Interview with M. Nabil Abdullah, 13 November 2025).

According to both kiai and santri, negative framings on social media are often interpreted as reflecting misunderstanding and, in some cases, what they perceive as ulterior motives, including social jealousy toward the growing structural role of pesantren in Indonesia. This is further countered by examples of the simple lifestyles of many kiai—even when serving as officials or rectors, they continue to live close to santri, engage in mutual assistance, and reject luxurious treatment that is often projected from outside the pesantren (Interview with M. Roqib, 13 November 2025). The value of *al-musawah* (equality) is an important context, in which a kiai may personally drive santri, repair a mosque roof, and mingle without absolute hierarchy. From a reflective standpoint, the empirical accounts of kiai and santri suggest that certain feudalism claims can be misleading and potentially harmful when used to discredit a distinctive educational system that has been passed down for generations. At the same time, the criticism that emerges offers pesantren an opportunity for internal evaluation so that traditional practices do not give rise to abuses. The kiai even underscores the need for checking and re-checking prospective pesantren leaders to safeguard continuity of original values. Authoritative pesantren figures and religious elites more broadly must embody the values they deem good, rather than

exploiting santri's reverence to act arbitrarily or in ways that depart from those values.

Epistemic tensions in the post-truth digital era underscore that the validity of narratives about pesantren is highly vulnerable to popular perception and framing, rather than being the result of rigorous empirical evaluation. Pesantren are therefore confronted with the challenge of value adaptation—not only preserving adab, but also filtering and selecting potential innovations in digital-based education. A major implication of this synthesis, as expressed in several interviews and supported by critical discourse analysis, is that the dialectic of feudalism and ta'dzim is shaping a new collective identity within the digital pesantren environment. The transformation of education in pesantren demands integration between sensitivity to tradition, prudence in responding to social media, and technological adaptability, without losing grounding in adab, barokah, and spiritual relations that have long served as the epistemological foundation of pesantren. In this way, the continuity of Islamic education in the digital era can be secured not merely through technological sophistication, but above all through a re-interpretation of traditional values in ways that are contextual and meaningful for today's and future generations of santri (Interview with M. Roqib, 13 November 2025; Interview with M. Nabil Abdullah, 13 November 2025).

These findings affirm that the dialectic between Western epistemology (which emphasizes power relations and criticality) and Islamic epistemology (which emphasizes adab, barokah, and spiritual reciprocity) within the discourse of pesantren feudalism has generated a new configuration in the transformation of Islamic education in the digital era. Rather than losing meaning, pesantren are in fact adapting and strengthening their epistemic and spiritual identity in the digital arena, demonstrating that educational transformation is grounded not only in technology, but also in the revitalization of traditional educational values and meanings in a contextual manner (Borges et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the dialectic between narratives of feudalism and ta'dzim in pesantren discourse in the digital era can be understood as a tension between different epistemological paradigms. On the one hand, certain critical voices drawing on egalitarian and rationalist perspectives tend to interpret hierarchy primarily as power domination; on the other hand, the pesantren tradition, as reflected in the texts and interviews analysed, frames hierarchy as part of an ethical–spiritual structure oriented toward adab, barakah, and the transmission of scholarly authority. Within this configuration, accusations of “pesantren feudalism” in digital spaces appear to be closely related to an epistemological dislocation, namely the tendency to interpret pesantren structures through politico-economic categories that do not fully correspond to how the teacher–santri relationship is articulated by internal actors. The critical discourse analysis and in-depth interviews conducted in this study indicate that, in the narratives examined, ta'dzim is represented not as an explicit practice of structural oppression, but as an ethical–spiritual mechanism embedded in the Islamic educational tradition; however, the data do not allow for definitive claims about all pesantren contexts, nor do they exclude the possibility that power and hierarchy may function differently in other settings.

The study also points to emerging patterns in how pesantren-related actors engage with social media, using digital spaces to circulate narratives that reaffirm symbolic authority, transmit the values of adab, and articulate a shared identity between santri and kiai in the midst of modernization. These patterns cannot be generalized to all pesantren, but they illustrate how, in the specific cases analysed, digital media are employed as a site for negotiating meaning and responding to public criticism. The scholarly implications of this research highlight the importance

of further exploring how traditional spiritual values and technological innovation are brought into dialogue in Islamic education, so that attempts to “transform” pesantren take seriously both epistemic authenticity and contemporary social realities. The dialectic mapped in this study offers an initial conceptual contribution to discussions of pesantren educational transformation and invites subsequent research with broader and more diverse data to examine value transfer, digital adaptation processes, and the multiple ways in which hierarchy, authority, and criticality are negotiated within Islamic educational institutions..

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