

# Reconstruction of Islamic Education Based on Social Capital: A Sociological Analysis of The Transformation of The Relationship Between Kyai and Santri in the Digital Era

Mohammad Muchlis Solichin\*<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Hasan,<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Nadif Muhlisin<sup>3</sup>, Tsaqif Fiqhan Muhammad<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Doctoral Islamic Studies Universitas Islam Negeri Madura, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Department of of Psychology Universitas Islam Negeri Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Department of Islamic Family Law, Universitas Hasyim Asy'ari, Jombang, Indonesia

Received: 05-06-2026 Accepted: 10-06-2026 Published: 11-06-2026

## Abstract

The traditional relationship between kyai (Islamic scholars) and santri (students) in the pesantren institution has long been the cornerstone of Islamic educational culture in Indonesia. However, the rapid penetration of digital technology has disrupted the conventional boundaries of this relationship, prompting a re-examination of authority, trust, and reciprocity as core dimensions of social capital. Drawing on a qualitative sociological approach with data sourced from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis across selected pesantren in East Java, this article argues that the kyai-santri relationship is undergoing a dual process of erosion and reinvention. While digitalization has weakened traditional forms of hierarchical bonding social capital, it has simultaneously opened new avenues for bridging and linking social capital that expand the educational reach and relevance of the pesantren. The findings suggest that Islamic education can be meaningfully reconstructed by integrating digital literacy into pesantren pedagogy without abandoning the ethical and spiritual foundations of the kyai-santri relationship. Theoretical and practical implications for Islamic educational policy are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Education; Social Capital; Kyai-Santri Relationship; Digital Era; Sociological Analysis*

**How to Cite:** Solichin, M. M., Hasan, M., Muhlisin, A. N., & Muhammad, T. F. (2026). Reconstruction of Islamic Education Based on Social Capital: A Sociological Analysis of the Transformation of the Relationship Between Kyai and Santri in the Digital Era. *IHSAN: Jurnal Penelitian dan Pendidikan Islam*, 2(1), 101–110. <https://doi.org/10.66031/ihsan.v2i1.437>

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## INTRODUCTION

The pesantren the oldest indigenous Islamic educational institution in Indonesia has for centuries served as the epicenter of religious, moral, and intellectual formation for millions of Muslims. At its heart lies the relationship between the kyai, the charismatic religious scholar who leads the institution, and the santri, the students who live and learn under the kyai's spiritual guidance. This relationship is not merely pedagogical; it is deeply relational, embedded in webs of trust, loyalty, obligation, and mutual respect that constitute a rich form of social capital unique to Islamic educational culture (Rohani, 2024; Khusnan et al., 2022).

In recent decades, however, the pesantren landscape has been dramatically reshaped by the forces of modernization and, most acutely, by the digital revolution. The proliferation of smartphones, social media platforms, and online learning technologies has radically altered how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed. For the pesantren, this transformation raises urgent questions: What happens to the authority of the kyai when a santri can access

Islamic knowledge from a global network of scholars with a few taps on a screen? How does the spiritual and moral intimacy of the kyai–santri relationship survive or adapt when mediated by digital screens and algorithmic feeds? (Hidayat, A. 2023; Suryadi, M. 2022).

Scholars of Islamic education and Indonesian social science have begun to grapple with these questions (Wahid, 2001; Dhofier, 2011; Bruinessen, 2013; Azra, 2019). Yet the theoretical framing of these transformations remains underdeveloped. This article proposes that the concept of social capital as elaborated by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000) offers a powerful analytical lens for understanding both what is being lost and what might be gained in the digital reconfiguration of Islamic education.

The central argument of this article is twofold. First, digitalization is disrupting the forms of bonding social capital that have historically constituted the kyai–santri relationship, specifically the dense networks of trust, deference, and face-to-face interaction that anchor traditional pesantren life. Second, and more constructively, this disruption also creates conditions for the emergence of new forms of bridging and linking social capital, enabling pesantren communities to connect across geographic, social, and institutional boundaries in ways that were previously impossible. The reconstruction of Islamic education, we argue, lies in the thoughtful integration of these new social capital formations while preserving the ethical and spiritual core of the kyai–santri tradition.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, locating social capital theory within the sociology of education and applying it to the pesantren context. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 presents findings from field research, organized around three thematic dimensions: authority and trust, pedagogical practice, and community formation. Section 5 discusses the implications for the reconstruction of Islamic education. Section 6 concludes with reflections on theoretical contributions and directions for future research.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Social Capital Theory and Its Sociological Foundations**

Social capital, in its most foundational formulation, refers to the resource material and symbolic that individuals and groups can access by virtue of their participation in social networks. Unlike economic capital, which is objectified in material assets, or cultural capital, which is embodied in knowledge and credentials, social capital is inherently relational: it inheres not in individuals per se but in the connections between them (Rozuli et al., 2024; Prasetyo et al., 2026; Herjawan et al., 2024).

James Coleman (1988) extended this concept to education, arguing that social capital manifested in norms, trust, and information flows within social structures is a critical resource for educational achievement. Coleman's research demonstrated that students embedded in dense, high-closure networks of family and community produced superior academic outcomes, precisely because such networks facilitated the enforcement of norms and the mutual monitoring of behavior that supports learning.

Robert Putnam (2000) introduced the now-canonical distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties within homogeneous groups the glue that holds tight-knit communities together. Bridging social capital refers to the weaker but wider ties that connect different social groups, enabling the flow of diverse information and resources. Linking social capital refers to vertical connections across

power differentials relationships between ordinary citizens and institutions of authority and governance.

This trichotomy is particularly productive for analyzing the pesantren. The traditional kyai–santri relationship is paradigmatically a form of bonding social capital: intense, enclosed, and built on vertical trust and spiritual solidarity. The digital era, as we shall argue, is simultaneously weakening this bonding capital and generating new possibilities for bridging and linking capital.

### **Social Capital in the Pesantren: The Kyai–Santri Nexus**

The pesantren has long been theorized as a social institution organized around the charismatic authority of the kyai. The kyai's authority is not bureaucratic or legal-rational in the Weberian sense; it is fundamentally charismatic and traditional, grounded in genealogical claims to Islamic scholarship, demonstrated piety, and the baraka (*divine blessing*) believed to flow through authentic chains of Islamic transmission (*silsila*).

For the santri, enrollment in a pesantren is not merely an educational choice but a form of total social investment. The santri surrenders considerable personal autonomy submitting to the kyai's guidance in matters of religious interpretation, daily discipline, and life decisions in exchange for access to the kyai's knowledge, spiritual blessings, and social networks. This exchange is the quintessential expression of bonding social capital: it creates strong solidarity within the pesantren community but simultaneously erects boundaries against the outside world.

Sociologically, the pesantren functions as what Goffman (1961) would recognize as a "*total institution*" a bounded social world with its own norms, roles, and rhythms. The kyai–santri relationship is the organizing axis of this world, generating the trust, reciprocity, and shared norms that Coleman (1988) identified as the constitutive elements of educational social capital. Crucially, this relationship has historically been reproduced through embodied, face-to-face practices: the ngaji (*Quranic recitation*) circle, the sorogan (*individualized textual instruction*), and the bandongan (*collective lecture*) all premised on the physical co-presence of kyai and santri.

### **Digitalization and the Transformation of Social Capital in Education**

The sociology of digital technology has increasingly focused on how digital mediation reshapes social capital formation. Ellison et al. (2007) found that platforms such as Facebook can support the maintenance of weak ties and the accumulation of bridging social capital, though they may be less effective at generating the strong bonds associated with bonding capital. More recent scholarship has examined how algorithmic platforms restructure educational authority by democratizing access to expertise while simultaneously fragmenting epistemic communities (Turkle, 2015; Selwyn, 2019).

In the context of Islamic education, digitalization introduces a structural paradox. On one hand, it democratizes access to Islamic knowledge any santri with a smartphone can now watch lectures by global Islamic scholars, access digitized classical texts (*kitab kuning*), and participate in online religious communities far beyond the boundaries of the pesantren. On the other hand, this democratization potentially undermines the monopoly of the kyai over Islamic interpretation and, by extension, the hierarchical structure of bonding social capital on which the pesantren is built.

This paradox what we term the "*digital social capital dilemma*" of Islamic education is the central problematic that this article seeks to analyze and, ultimately, to resolve through a reconceptualization of Islamic educational reconstruction.

## **METHOD**

This article employs a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive sociological tradition (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The choice of qualitative methodology is epistemologically motivated: the object of study the transformation of the kyai–santri relationship is a dynamic social process whose meanings are constituted by participants and can only be adequately grasped through interpretive engagement with their lived experiences.

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of twelve months across five pesantren in East Java, selected through purposive sampling to represent variation in institutional size, level of modernity orientation, and degree of digital integration. East Java was chosen as the field site because it is home to the largest concentration of pesantren in Indonesia and represents the heartland of the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition, the largest Islamic organization in the world.

Data were generated through three primary methods. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-two participants, including twelve kyai, twenty santri, and ten ustadz (junior teachers), as well as eight alumni and family members. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Second, participant observation was conducted during regular pesantren activities, including pengajian (religious study circles), digital learning sessions, and informal social interactions. Field notes were maintained systematically. Third, documentary analysis was applied to pesantren curricula, WhatsApp group conversations (with participant consent), YouTube channels maintained by kyai, and official pesantren communications.

Data analysis followed the procedures of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), proceeding through iterative cycles of coding, categorization, and theoretical synthesis. The analytical process was guided by the social capital framework elaborated in the previous section, while remaining attentive to emergent themes that extended beyond the initial theoretical lens. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation across data sources and methods.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Disruption of Bonding Social Capital: Authority, Trust, and the Crisis of Charisma**

The most salient finding of this research concerns the disruption of the bonding social capital that has historically constituted the kyai–santri relationship. Across all five research sites, both kyai and santri described a perceptible shift in the nature of religious authority. As one senior kyai at a large traditional pesantren in Jombang observed during an interview: "Before, the santri only knew what I taught them. Now they come to me with questions they have already found answers to on YouTube sometimes answers I disagree with. It is not disrespect, but it changes everything."

This observation captures a fundamental sociological shift: the digital era has introduced what Giddens (1990) termed "expert system disembedding" into the pesantren. Where the kyai's authority once derived from his position as the sole, or at least primary, legitimate intermediary between the santri and the corpus of Islamic knowledge, digital platforms have created

alternative pathways to religious expertise. The monopoly of the kyai has been broken, not by explicit challenge but by structural transformation.

The consequences for trust the foundational currency of bonding social capital are complex. Several santri expressed that their trust in the kyai remained strong, but its character had changed. One male santri at a modernist pesantren in Malang stated: "I still trust Pak kyai deeply, but now I trust him because I have checked his views against others and found them sound. Before, I trusted him simply because he was Pak kyai." This shift from ascriptive to achieved trust represents a profound sociological transformation: the relationship is becoming more reflexive and less traditional in the Weberian sense (Rofiq, 2025; Kutsiyah & Tianah, 2025; Yenuri & Nurseha, 2025).

At the same time, several kyai had actively adapted to this transformation by creating their own digital presence. Three of the twelve kyai interviewed maintained active YouTube channels with subscriber bases ranging from several thousand to over half a million viewers. For these kyai, digital media had become a new arena for the exercise and extension of charismatic authority what we term "*digital charisma*". Rather than undermining the kyai's authority, their digital presence sometimes amplified it, extending their reach far beyond the physical boundaries of the pesantren.

### **Emergence of Bridging Social Capital: Expanding Educational Networks**

The disruption of bonding social capital is accompanied by the emergence of new forms of bridging social capital that are expanding the social and epistemic horizons of pesantren communities. The most vivid manifestation of this is the formation of inter-pesantren and inter-community networks through digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and dedicated Islamic learning applications.

Several pesantren in our sample had created structured digital learning ecosystems that connected santri with scholars, alumni networks, and Islamic educational resources beyond the institution. One innovative pesantren had developed an integrated platform linking its santri with alumni working in diverse professional fields medicine, law, technology, and business creating a form of linking social capital that provided career mentorship and professional networking opportunities unavailable in the traditional pesantren model.

Importantly, the formation of these bridging networks did not necessarily weaken loyalty to the home pesantren. Several santri described how exposure to a wider community of Islamic discourse actually deepened their appreciation of their kyai's distinctive approach. As one female santri noted: "Seeing how different ustadz teach online makes me realize how special our kyai's method is. I appreciate it more, not less, because I can now compare". This finding resonates with Putnam's (2000) observation that bridging and bonding social capital are not necessarily in tension; under certain conditions, bridging capital can reinforce bonding commitments by providing comparative contexts of appreciation (Ahmad, 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2026; Bashori et al., 2026).

### **Pedagogical Transformation: Between Tradition and Digital Innovation**

The third dimension of transformation concerns the pedagogical practices of the pesantren. The classical pedagogical methods of the pesantren; sorogan, bandongan, and musyawarah (*collective deliberation*) are all premised on face-to-face encounter and the embodied co-presence of teacher and student. Digital mediation fundamentally alters these

practices, raising questions about what is preserved and what is lost in the translation from physical to digital pedagogical space.

Our research found that pesantren are adopting digital pedagogical tools along a spectrum from superficial digitization (*recording existing practices for online distribution*) to deeper integration (redesigning pedagogical approaches around digital affordances). The most successful integrations maintained the relational essence of the kyai–santri dynamic while expanding its reach. One kyai described his approach to online bandongan: "The students can watch the recording, but the relationship happens in the follow-up discussion in the group, in the individual messages they send me. Technology is the vehicle; the relationship is still the destination" (Huda et al., 2017; Rahman & Yusuf, 2020; Zainuddin & Perera, 2019).

This insight that digital tools are most productively understood as vehicles for, rather than replacements of, the relational dynamics of Islamic education emerges as a central thread in our data. The reconstruction of Islamic education in the digital era cannot be reduced to the question of what technologies to adopt; it must fundamentally address the question of how to design digital environments that sustain and extend the social capital formations that have made pesantren education educationally and spiritually generative.

### **Implications for The Reconstruction of Islamic Education**

The findings presented above have significant implications for how we conceptualize the reconstruction of Islamic education in the digital era. We organize these implications around three interrelated dimensions: theoretical, institutional, and policy.

Theoretically, our analysis calls for a dynamic, multi-dimensional understanding of social capital in Islamic educational settings. The dominant theoretical frameworks in Islamic educational scholarship have tended to treat social capital as a static attribute of communities either present or absent, strong or weak. Our findings suggest the need for a more processual approach that attends to the ongoing, contested, and technologically mediated production and reproduction of social capital in pesantren contexts. Specifically, we propose the concept of "reconstructive social capital" to describe the deliberate, reflexive process by which educational communities rebuild forms of trust, reciprocity, and network solidarity appropriate to changed social conditions (Azra & Afrianty, 2020; Hefner, 2021; Bashori et al., 2026).

Institutionally, our research suggests that pesantren that navigate the digital transformation most successfully are those that approach it as a process of selective integration rather than wholesale adoption or resistance. The most educationally productive pesantren in our sample were those in which kyai exercised what we term "digital pedagogical leadership" using digital tools not merely as delivery mechanisms but as extensions of their relational authority, maintaining the essence of the kyai–santri relationship while adapting its forms to digital realities.

For educational policy, these findings carry implications that extend beyond the pesantren to the broader landscape of Islamic education in Indonesia. The government's existing frameworks for pesantren development (notably the Pesantren Law of 2019) have addressed questions of curriculum standardization and institutional recognition, but have given insufficient attention to the social capital dimensions of pesantren education and to the policy supports needed to enable productive digital integration. Our research suggests the need for policy initiatives that support digital capacity building in pesantren while explicitly protecting

the relational and social capital foundations of the kyai–santri relationship (Nadiyah et al., 2023; Sutrisno & Hidayat, 2023; Fauzi & Nurhayati, 2025; Nilan & Parker, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the transformation of the kyai–santri relationship in the digital era through the analytical lens of social capital theory. Drawing on twelve months of qualitative field research across five pesantren in East Java, we have argued that digitalization is producing a dual transformation: disrupting the bonding social capital that has historically constituted pesantren community while simultaneously creating new possibilities for bridging and linking social capital that expand the educational reach and social relevance of Islamic education.

The reconstruction of Islamic education based on social capital, we have argued, is not a choice between tradition and modernity, between the kyai's authority and the santri's access to global Islamic knowledge networks. It is, rather, a challenge of synthesis of finding ways to sustain the relational, ethical, and spiritual foundations of the kyai–santri relationship while opening that relationship to the new social capital formations made possible by digital connectivity.

This challenge is simultaneously theoretical, institutional, and political. Theoretically, it demands more dynamic and processual models of social capital formation in educational settings. Institutionally, it requires kyai and pesantren leaders who can exercise reflective, adaptive leadership in navigating digital transformation. Politically, it demands educational policies that recognize the social capital dimensions of pesantren education as a national resource deserving of deliberate protection and cultivation.

The kyai–santri relationship, at its best, has always been about the transmission not merely of knowledge but of character, wisdom, and spiritual orientation what the Islamic tradition calls *tarbiyah*. The digital era challenges us to ask anew: what forms of relationship, what architectures of social capital, are needed to sustain *tarbiyah* in a digitally mediated world? The reconstruction of Islamic education depends on our collective ability to answer this question with both intellectual rigor and moral seriousness.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the completion of this research entitled *“Reconstruction of Islamic Education Based on Social Capital: A Sociological Analysis of the Transformation of the Relationship Between kyai and Santri in the Digital Era.”* Special appreciation is extended to Islamic education scholars, pesantren leaders, and academic colleagues whose insights, discussions, and constructive feedback enriched the development of this study. The authors are also grateful to the institutions that provided academic support and access to relevant resources, enabling a deeper exploration of the transformation of social relations within contemporary Islamic educational settings. Finally, the authors acknowledge the invaluable role of all participants and reviewers whose contributions helped improve the quality and rigor of this work.

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