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## Dating Practices: A Moral Negotiation in Pesantren

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## DATING PRACTICES: A MORAL NEGOTIATION IN PESANTREN

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### Abstract

*The main aim of this article was to see the public space of Pesantren as an arena for negotiating Islamic moral ideas and modernity. The practice of dating in Islamic literature is linked to immoral action because it is contrary to Islamic teachings that prohibit relationships outside marriage. It has become an important part of Islamic moral education. Dating in Pesantren is prohibited, and it is a relationship outside marriage. However, there are still many students who develop romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex in the public spaces of Pesantren. Through ethnographic studies, researchers observed Santriwati's dating practices and interviewed them to determine the moral basis for these actions. Based on these observations at the Pesantren Madrasah Ulumul Qur'an (MUQ) Langsa, the practice of dating was carried out by santriwati by hiding behind buildings and rooms in the Islamic boarding school. This secretive and tactical action was carried out not to confront the rules made by the ustadz but as part of a negotiation between obeying the rules and the choice to continue dating. The researcher concluded that, even though the Islamic boarding school public space is filled with moral values produced by kyai and ustadz, the students still can carry out actions outside the Islamic boarding school's ideas of morality.*

**Keywords:** Dating Practice; Pesantren; Negotiation; Moral Education.



## A. Introduction

The practice of dating in public school spaces is still controversial in Muslim communities. Even though this practice is often found in modern Muslim society, Muslim society still views this practice as an act against religious morality (Nisa, 2021; Smith-Hefner, 2021; Wood, 2012; Yahya & Boag, 2014). Indonesia is the largest Muslim country, and relationships between women and men outside marriage are seen as a bad influence of modernity brought by the Western world (Akmaliah, 2020; Asyari & Abid, 2016; Asman & Muda, 2023; Fauzan et al., 2023; Rajafi et al., 2024; Nisa, 2021). In Islamic literature, interactions between women and men are taboo and need to be limited by religious law (Bennett & Tamale, 2017; Berthold, 2019; Eltantawi, 2017; Harvey, 2018; Reda & Amin, 2020).

In the education setting, this view affects the state of the public space in Indonesian boarding school, herein after called *pesantren* that separates men and women (Azra, 2015; Lukens-Bull, 2006; Srimulyani, 2013). The separation of the public spaces in *pesantren* cannot stop the students from meeting and dating. This article focuses on the practical discussion of a dating practice by Muslim youth in the Islamic public education area. How is a dating practice in *pesantren*? How are the agencies' views on this practice facing the hegemony of religious norms in *pesantren*?

Nancy-Hefner (2021) explains that modernity has shifted the way young Muslims in Indonesia view the relationship between men and women (Madrah, 2022). As shown in popular culture products in Indonesia that have featured the theme of *santri* love in novels such as *Pesantren Undercover*, *Cinta di Pesantren Alaswangi* by AS Chamidi (2013) and movies, for example *Cahaya Cinta di Pesantren* (2016).

However, discussions regarding *Pesantren* public spaces so far have not discussed much about the dating practices carried out by Islamic boarding school students. Studies related to *Pesantren* often discuss modernization (Suyatno, 2013; Hefner, 2008; Lukens-Bull, 2006; Lukens-Bull, 2001; Tayeb, 2018), deradicalization (Arianti, 2018; Vlieger, 2011) and traditions of thought (Azra, 2015; Pohl, 2006). The literature on *Pesantren* in

Aceh focuses more on the *Dayah* (Pesantren) tradition as a traditional Islamic educational institution in Aceh (Buto & Hafifuddin, 2020; Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020; Nur, 2019; Basri et al., 2023; Agustina & Ismah, 2024).

These articles highlight many things related to the changes experienced by Islamic educational institutions in Aceh. Discussions about dating in the *Pesantren* do not receive much attention from scholars, which then influences knowledge related to Islamic education and sexuality in Indonesian Muslim literature (Danial et al., 2023). Discussions regarding the condition of Islamic education in Indonesia need to look at issues that are considered taboo and controversial. By observing dating practices at MUQ Langsa, the researcher shows debates related to sexuality and Islamic education to enrich knowledge regarding the shift in the world of Islamic education in Indonesia.

In general, anything related to intimacy (romance) is prohibited in Islamic boarding school public spaces (Srimulyani, 2013). MUQ Langsa, which is the research location, has rules limiting interaction between female students (hereinafter referred to as *Santriwati*) and male students (hereinafter referred to as *Santriwan*). The division of space in *Pesantren* is carried out based on the aim of minimizing meetings between men and women. MUQ also strictly prohibits students from having romantic relationships. There is a Pamong (supervisor) whose job is to monitor the movements of each student in the *Pesantren* (hereinafter referred to as *santri*). In study classes, *Santriwati* and *Santriwan* are separated and do not meet while they are in the *Pesantren*. All this is done by *Pesantren* to prevent romantic relationships between *santriwan* and *santriwati* at *Pesantren*. However, from the data we found in the field, the efforts made by the *Pesantren* did not prevent *Santri* from having romantic relationships in the *Pesantren's* public spaces.

The researcher uses agency morality theory (Lacelle, 2018), which shows that the practice of dating is a form of morality choice that is constructed by *Santri* by negotiating the desires of modern life and religious teachings. This effort is not made by clashing the hopes of modernity with religious values, but rather by negotiating the hopes of modernity with



religious values. The public space of *Pesantren* is an interesting place to see these efforts to select morality. This then shows the diversity of views regarding intimacy in Muslim society.

This article looks at the practice of dating as a sign that regulations related to morality are not only hegemonized by ustadz (Islamic teachers). Morality and the public space of *Pesantren* are an arena for the struggle for meaning between *Pesantren* and *Santri* agencies. *Santri* can express resistance to these normative standards, so they remain obedient to *Pesantren's* rules. However, on the other hand, they still channel their desire for intimacy.

## **B. Method**

This article is based on an ethnographic approach used to observe the dating culture of *Santri* in *Pesantren*. Delamont (2014) states that ethnography in education focuses on everyday lives and interaction patterns in educational institutions. According to this, the research pivot was to confirm and discuss how *santriwati* dating at *pesantren*. Thus, the data were collected through interviews and observations. Throughout our research, we were fortunate to acquaint ourselves with the students and Islamic educators who took part. Rather than solely conducting interviews, we dedicated time to observing their daily routines at the boarding school. Our ethnography was made feasible by our proximity to the study site as researchers. Moreover, our familiarity with the *pesantren* administrators allowed our ease of movement and facilitated data collection.

To ensure reliable research findings, we employed data triangulation. We cross-checked and validated our results by gathering data from various sources, such as relevant *santri* and documents. By analyzing our data from different theoretical perspectives, we aimed to produce dependable findings that consider various angles. The research that we have done used observation as an analytical consideration when writing this article. For six months, we frequently visited MUQ Langsa to observe the locations where *Santri* used to meet their partners. We interviewed four *Santriwati* at MUQ Langsa to find out how they met their boyfriends in the

*pesantren* area. In addition, we asked them to share their feelings about the act of dating from the perspective of Islamic morality. The primary aim of the question is to determine whether the subjects have attempted to reconstruct the moral standards established by *pesantren*. We also met with several *ustadz* (Islamic teachers) to learn about the reactions made by the *pesantren* to reduce the number of *Santri* violating the rules of dating.

The analysis involved not only interpreting the subjects' stories but also examining the way the researcher constructed those stories. To analyze the interview data, the researcher employed narrative analysis, identifying recurring themes and patterns, such as "pacar (partner)" and "*sembunyi-sembunyi* (secretly)". The information gathered through interviews and observations was meticulously analyzed using descriptive-narrative techniques, emphasizing the subjects' construction of their own stories and narratives from their personal experiences.

## **C. Result and Discussion**

### **1. Result**

#### *a. Moral and Space in MUQ Langsa*

MUQ Langsa is the first institution in Aceh to combine the concepts of Islamic traditionalism and modern education. This institution's early origins can be traced back to the National MTQ (*Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran*) held in Aceh in 1981. Since its inception, MUQ has had the vision to be able to incorporate Islamic educational values into a modern curriculum. The founders of MUQ (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, or Indonesian Council of Ulama) comprised not only religious scholars but also bureaucrats from Aceh. Distinguished individuals such as Drs. Zainuddin Mard (the East Aceh Regent), Abu H. Ismail Ibrahim, Abu H. Hasan ZZ., BA. (the Head of the East Aceh Religious Affairs Department), and Abu Tgk. H. Ibrahim Daud, BA (the Office of the Ministry of Religion of East Aceh Regency) played a significant role in establishing MUQ. These respected figures brought a modern perspective to the formation of the institution, combining their expertise in religious and administrative matters to create a strong



foundation for MUQ's activities. Their contributions were crucial in shaping the organization into what it is today, and their legacy continues to be felt in the important work that MUQ carries out in promoting and protecting the interests of the Indonesian Muslim community.

However, the strong influence of Islamic traditionalism is also deeply rooted in this institution; this can be seen from the class system, and the curriculum still uses the *dayah* (traditional Islamic boarding school of Aceh) system. This influence persists because MUQ was originally a Dayah Bustanul Ulum established in 1967.

MUQ Langsa heavily adopted the system developed by Islamic education in Aceh by uniting Dayah (Acehnese local Islamic boarding school) and madrasah education (national Islamic education) in one institution. At present, MUQ Langsa oversees three institutions: Dayah Bustanul Ulum, Madrasah Tsanawiyah, and Madrasah Aliyah. Madrasah Tsanawiyah is the initial level of education offered at MUQ Langsa, equivalent to junior high school in the national education system. Once students have completed their studies at Madrasah Tsanawiyah, they can progress to the Madrasah Aliyah level, which is equivalent to senior high school. Both levels of education are integrated into the state education system and fall under the purview of the Ministry of Religion.

The presence of these institutions under MUQ Langsa has played a crucial role in providing accessible and high-quality Islamic education to students in the Langsa region. Meanwhile, Dayah Bustanul Ulum is not under the national education system, so this level is a non-formal education at MUQ Langsa. At every level of education, *santri* must follow two education systems. Almost every *pesantren* in Aceh uses a similar system to maintain formal recognition from the state and uphold Islamic traditionalism in Aceh (Buto & Hafifuddin, 2020).

According to Jubba et al., (2021), the purpose of Islamic schools in Indonesia is to educate religious knowledge and instill Islamic morality. Following Jubba et al., (2021), we found that applying morality to the *santri* requires a comprehensive arrangement of all public spaces in the *pesantren*.

In MUQ Langsa, the strong influence of moral lessons is visible in every aspect in the *pesantren*. The first is the dormitory area, located at the back, which includes the *ustadz* dormitory, the male dormitory, and the female dormitory. This area serves as the residence for both *santri* and *ustadz*, and MUQ Langsa mandates all students and teachers to occupy the dormitories provided by the institution.

Currently, MUQ Langsa has 831 students, with 402 *santriwan* and 429 *santriwati*. As such, the institution has two main dormitories, which are separated by a large wall: one for *santriwan* and another for *santriwati*. Each dormitory has dedicated caregivers who are responsible for the student's well-being. In total, there are 37 caregivers, with 17 caring for *Santriwan*, 20 caring for *santriwati*, and 16 others specializing in improving Arabic and English language skills. Additionally, 96 *ustadz*, consisting of 33 men and 63 women who graduated from *pesantren*, care for the students in the Madrasah.

The second area is the education area, where classrooms, administrative offices, and educational service buildings are located. The administrative division at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Ulumul Qur'an Langsa is staffed by 30 personnel, including six administrative staff, seven financial staff (foundation managers), six library staff, and one laboratory staff. There are 30 units of classrooms for *santri* at the Tsanawiyah level, which are divided for each level. The classrooms are also separated for *santriwan* and *santriwati*. The *santriwan* classrooms are in the male dormitory complex, while the *santriwati'* are in the female dormitory. Other areas serve as neutral spaces, typically used for sports and activities separate from education. These areas serve as gray zones and meeting places for *santriwan* and *santriwati*. Those areas are a basketball court, badminton court, and a prayer room situated in the center of the Langsa MUQ area. Many of these neutral areas are in the central region and are directly connected to the front gate. This arrangement ensures that these areas remain under the supervision of the *ustadz* and *pesantren* security, given that the security post is located at the front gate and overlooks all parts of the central area.





Figure 1. Male class



Figure 2. Female class

Apart from dormitories, the classrooms at MUQ Langsa are also segregated for *santriwan* and *santriwati*. This separation is carried out at each level of education. As per the teachers, the separation of classrooms is implemented to avoid interactions between males and *santriwati*. According to Ustadz Fathurrahman (...), the segregation of classrooms is a crucial aspect of character-building for students in Islamic boarding schools. The formation of the students' character starts with education that emphasizes the boundaries of relationships between males and females (Nasution et al., 2019). During all student activities, a clear separation is maintained between males and females, with violations of these boundaries resulting in penalties ranging from a warning to dismissal from MUQ Langsa.

To uphold a high level of discipline, the supervision at MUQ Langsa is not the sole responsibility of the *ustadz*. The dormitory supervisor also plays a crucial role in monitoring the situation within the dormitory, while each dormitory has a designated tutor responsible for ensuring that every student follows the rules and regulations. In addition, security guards oversee all activities outside the dormitory and classroom, conducting patrols to prevent any potential unauthorized gatherings. Students who violate the rules are subject to strict penalties, ranging from warnings to expulsion. The supervision process is carried out strictly and consistently, with students under constant surveillance.

b. *Dating practices in public pesantren*

In this section, we explore the dating practices and strategies carried out by *santriwati* in pesantren. Smith-Hefner (2021) asserts that dating practices are not only related to delinquency but also to the social environment. Based on the observation results, there are two types of dating that occur at MUQ Langsa, namely dating among *santri* and dating with non-*santri*. Dating among *santri* refers to the practice of dating fellow *santri* in the pesantren environment. Although it is kept secret, this practice is quite common among *santri*. They often take advantage of internal student organization meetings and extracurricular activities to meet and exchange gifts with their partners. On the other hand, dating with non-*santri* involves a relationship with someone outside of MUQ Langsa. Dating with non-*santri* typically involves communication through mobile phones to arrange meetings, which can occur either inside or outside the *pesantren* environment. Both types of dating are done discreetly, involving strategic planning to avoid detection by the disciplinary authorities of the pesantren.

Our research also found that social interactions influence dating practices in pesantren. For example, Putri revealed that she started dating in pesantren after seeing a senior dating someone secretly. She learned a lot about how her seniors arranged the meetings with their boyfriends in pesantren. Many other *santri*, not only Putri, started dating after seeing their friends dating at the pesantren. According to Putri, mobile phones have made the dating process easier.

Through cell phones, *santriwati* can arrange meetings with their boyfriends. Moreover, they take advantage of family visit schedules to meet their beloved. The family visit schedule at MUQ Langsa is not so strict and can be done every week.

One of the *santriwati* talked about the phenomenon of dating through a cell phone which was conducted by her senior.

*“One time a senior gave her mobile to her boyfriend. She hid the mobile beneath her Mukenah (ladies’ prayer gown), so nobody knew she had brought a mobile phone. They met at the red stage (a particular place) and then she passed the mobile to her boyfriend. There was also an incident*



*where a senior and her boyfriend made phone calls using voice recordings, and the recorded voices were adult conversations. She was not aware of the surroundings because she was busy calling. Finally, the Ustadz caught her. The ustadz seized the mobile phone, then the Ustadz checked the contents of her mobile phone, in which there was an intimate recording of their flirting conversation. In that case, ustadz dismissed her, which means that person dropped out of MUQ”.*

The white stage is the first stage encountered when someone enters MUQ. This stage is in front of the office, just a short distance from the security guard post. The white stage is named so because its floor is white. On this white stage, the santriwati often meet their boyfriend. Typically, they are accompanied by a close friend or classmate. In addition to the white stage, there is a red stage in the same area. The red stage is used as a meeting place for *santri* and their families at the family visit time. During this stage, Putri saw her senior being visited by her lover. She mentioned that it was from her seniors that she learned how to bring her boyfriend into the *pesantren*.

Friday is the family visit day, and this stage is primarily used by parents or other family members of the *santri* to meet their children or sisters who study in the *pesantren*. Both Putri and Mika mentioned that in this place, Mika’s boyfriend often brings certain foods and drinks that are hard to find in the *pesantren*. Mika's boyfriend is a young man from Takengon who comes to MUQ Langsa every Friday. To the *pesantren* staff, Mika admitted that her boyfriend was a cousin living in Langsa. Mika often goes out with her boyfriend with permission from the *pesantren*.

*“When the boyfriend visited us in pesantren, we shook hands pretending that as if he was our relative, then we had a meal at Yahwan, love garden. When having a meal, we used to invite some friends to avoid the suspicion of ustadz or security guards. That is how the santriwati dates the outsider. In case they cannot pass the security, we climb the fence. The advantage of dating the outsiders, I often get gifts delivered, and sometimes he asks if I still have money. I replied that I still had. However, he kept giving me 50.000 for snacking”.*



Figure 3. The building in the back yard

On the other hand, when it comes to dating among fellow *santri*, meetings can be arranged more easily since there are many locations and times available. Despite the strict supervision from the *ustadz* and security guards, *santri* has already found locations where they can meet. Usually, these meetings are held at night when monitoring is more relaxed. For example, Vero shared that she often meets with her boyfriend at the mosque before the Fajr prayer. Since every *santri* is required to attend the Fajr prayer in congregation, Vero uses the time before the prayer to meet with her boyfriend. They usually arrive early at the mosque and use the time to chat. Sometimes, Vero even uses the mosque microphone to call her boyfriend to meet in a secret place, using the code 'I call my sister Adelia'. Vero believes that this is the safest code, given that English is a required language at the pesantren, and the *ustadz* may assume that the *santri* are practicing their English skills.

c. *Moral agency against dating ban*

Islamic conservatives restrict interactions between women and men, considering them to be against religious morality (Wood, 2012; Rohman et al., 2023; Saidah & Fahmi, 2023; Hasanudin et al., 2023; Nuriman et al., 2024). However, views vary, with some prohibiting and others tolerating the practice (Rahman et al., 2014; Szakács, 2014). In general, extra-marital relationships are prohibited in all traditional Muslim societies (Hoel & Shaikh, 2014). When we conducted our field research, none of the *santri* we met objected to this view.



However, they believe that dating, if there is no physical contact, does not violate Islamic rules. Like the findings of Smith-Hefner (2021), our research also found that many santri view dating as a trend that is no longer considered taboo in pesantren. As a result, many santri dare to violate the prohibition of dating in pesantren. Young people have different cultural values, understandings, and needs, so they often encounter dominant practices (Nasir, 2018; (Setyawan et al., 2023; Fakhyadi & Samsudin, 2024).

We found that the santri chose a discursive path instead of directly confronting the rules of the prohibition of dating in MUQ Langsa. Although santri do not directly reject the prohibition of dating in pesantren, santri still show efforts to interpret the boundaries of the prohibition, such as Vero who said that she did not want to meet her boyfriend at night or in a quiet place. Vero always invites her boyfriend to meet at the red stage. According to Vero, meeting men in a quiet place has the potential to cause physical touch.

*“In my opinion, dating is not a practice that violates Islamic teachings. In fact, I see dating as an appropriate way to get to know and find a suitable life partner. Of course, while dating, I always try to maintain my faith. My fellow santri and I who share similar views often limit physical contact and avoid situations that can lead to temptation or impropriety. We also know the limits that we should not cross and the sins that we will receive if we violate them, especially if we get caught by our ustadzah, we will surely be expelled from the pesantren. However, I am also aware that not all santri have the same views as me. Some prefer to follow the rules and avoid dating practices”.*

The moral construction practiced by the *santri* can also be understood as a form of adaptation to the context of Islamic morality (Bermudez, 2012; Sadiani et al., 2023). In this view, *santri* who rationalize their dating practices may argue that their relationships are in line with Islamic moral teachings, as their relationships are built on values of love, affection, and respect for others. They express their feelings to their partners in a relationship based on mutual understanding. In our interviews, they still avoid behaviors considered immoral or unethical, such as engaging in premarital sex or cuddling. We see that santri carefully rationalize their dating practices, balancing their desire for personal happiness and

satisfaction with their obligation to uphold the moral teachings of Islam. Ultimately, the santri's rationalization of their dating practices reflects the complex interplay between agency, structure, and morality, and requires careful consideration of various applicable ethical and religious principles (Rismayanti et al., 2022; Huda & Salem, 2022).

Quoting Nancy-Hefner (2021), young people express love in various ways. Some express it verbally by saying sweet things that reflect care and sincerity. Others express it through actions such as giving gifts, flowers, or helping in problem solving; still others are in love but dare not express it. Based on Marsden's (2007) research, the expression of love among young people in Pakistan has become a driving force against cultural conservatism. This includes expressing romantic love through poetry in public spaces and even eloping. These expressions that manifest in social actions reflect discursive competence (Jamal Al-deen, 2018). In the view of educational psychology, this competence is referred to as the ability to understand and apply that understanding (Laceulle, 2018; Asy'ari & Fisa, 2022; Sugitanata et al., 2023).

The character of the pesantren public space, which is strongly influenced by religious morality, becomes a battleground for santri to express their love desires. For this reason, santri resistance to the prohibition of dating in pesantren will appear, although not in an aggressive form. This expression can be seen from the statement that dating is a common thing in pesantren because in the past the ustadz also dated. This statement was issued by the santri we met at MUQ Langsa. With this reason, students who are dating cannot be prohibited because it has become a common thing. Although there is a prohibition from the pesantren, the ustadz also know who is dating in the pesantren. According to the santri, the raids that are usually carried out by ustadz are done only to prevent excessive dating from crossing the line.

The theory of moral agency and public space posits that social action is driven by morality (Laceulle, 2018). The results of the conducted interviews show the efforts of santriwati in proposing different understandings



regarding the relationship between women and men through various moral constructions. The santriwati have the belief that actions taken are based on moral considerations that can also be accounted for. For example, as stated by Putri and Vero, dating is still at a reasonable stage because they avoid physical contact, which is prohibited in Islam. When deciding whether to meet with the opposite sex, students also take into account the restrictions made by *pesantren*, which prohibit men and women from meeting without a companion.

Through this article, it is evident that the *santri* are not abiding by the regulations that forbid them from engaging in romantic relationships and clandestinely meeting with their partners within the school premises. Based on the author's meeting with the santriwati, there is an attempt to rebuild the boundaries between men's and women's relationships. Vero, Putri, and other santriwati believe that the dating they conducted is still within 'reasonable' limits. The term 'reasonable' has become a moral reason used by santriwati to defend the practice of dating in *pesantren*.

## 2. Discussion

The *pesantren* public space, as stated by Dhofier (1980), revolves around the figure of the kyai (leader of the *pesantren*). Thus, the kyai's rules are the rules of the *pesantren*. This tradition remains largely the same in many recent writings on *pesantren*. Although the modernization of Islamic education gave rise to many contemporary *pesantren*, such as MUQ Langsa, the regulations on morality remain largely unchanged. *Pesantren* still restrict activities in the public sphere based on gender. Kyai or ustadz still hold moral authority and determine what can and cannot be done in *pesantren*.

Ansor & Intan (2016) mentioned that there is a significant dominance of Islamic norms in the public space of schools. Ansor & Intan (2016) showed that the public space of schools in Aceh is strongly influenced by Islamic narratives, forcing women to wear the hijab. In contrast to our fieldwork, even though there are rules against dating in Islamic boarding schools, some *santri* quietly oppose these rules. Using

Laceulle's (2018) theory, our study found that students in Islamic schools may allow dating practices despite strict moral regulations. This finding triggers an interesting discussion about the challenges of enforcing moral guidelines in public schools and raises questions about the feelings of santri and Islamic values.



*Figure 4. The red stage*

Although many writings describe a shift in tradition within *pesantren*, only a few discuss shifts in moral authority. This research examines changes within *pesantren*, specifically about morals, by looking at dating practices in Islamic boarding schools. The research argues that dating is a way for students to challenge the authority of *ustadz* who enforce moral standards. Through engaging in dating, students resist the strict control exerted by *ustadz* over the imposition of morals in these institutions. This perspective suggests that dating serves as a channel for confronting the authority of *ustadz*.

During our field research at MUQ Langsa, we met students who are aware of the prohibition of dating. However, they still found ways to meet with their partners, defying the ban on interaction between men and women. Based on these findings, we argue that the public space of *pesantren* can never really be taken over and controlled by *ustadz* or *kyai*. Santriwati at MUQ Langsa were able to find a balance between the expectations of the *pesantren* and their desire for romantic relationships. They skillfully handle this negotiation by reconciling their obligations to the *pesantren* with their need for companionship.



Therefore, the pesantren public space, as stated by Murphy & O'Driscoll (2021), is where “two dynamic tensions” face each other. These tensions are not always seen to collide with each other to develop contestation (Hayati & Mujib, 2022). The statement ‘dating has its limits’, as mentioned by Vero and other respondents, exemplifies the reconciliation of the two tensions the authors are referring to. The sentence did not emerge without a haphazardly chosen moral basis. Rather, it came about through a measured process of determining the ideas of morality present in her experience. These ideas of morality are not only rooted in the Islamic teachings they learned in pesantren, but also outside of pesantren.

This article demonstrates that even though teachers have the authority to regulate students’ actions in *pesantren*, this authority is only sometimes voluntarily accepted. As demonstrated by the attitudes of Putri and other santriwati, subversive actions serve as a sign of ideas that are considered unacceptable in the public space. Such subversive actions can be seen from the actions taken in the regulatory space and as the defense actions. Santriwati takes advantage of and manipulates places where supervision is conducted by *ustadz* as a meeting place with lovers. The codes created to mark the place and time for meetings are part of a creative action to utilize space according to the autonomous wishes of the *santri*.

Despite efforts to regulate the public space of Islamic boarding schools through the rules and authority of the kyai or *ustadz*, the *santri* can act outside these rules. The contestation space is not confrontational but through a negotiation process. Based on our observations at the MUQ Langsa, *santri* arranges meetings with their lovers at times when the *ustadz*'s supervision begins to loosen. It is not uncommon for *santri* to deceive *ustadz* into meeting their boyfriends at *pesantren*. The negotiation process seen in this article is a process of morality agency built to sort out social actions. This condition shows that even though the value battle does not appear radically and frontally, the subjects still present an attempt to show different moral choices. For this reason, the public space of *pesantren*

is not static, hegemonic, or centralized. In the end, this paper argues that the public space of *pesantren* is a place where subjects contest ideas, values, and actions.

#### D. Conclusion

This article concludes that the practice of dating by *santri* shows that the pesantren public space is not static, but full of battles of ideas. Dating is one example that shows the battle of ideas between *santri* and *ustadz*. Although dating is prohibited, and this practice is closely monitored, *santri* still performs subversive actions. They can find ways to maintain relationships with the opposite sex in the pesantren environment. This action is not built by fighting the values of Islamic teachings that prohibit extramarital relationships. By continuing to accept these values, *santri* negotiate with the moral foundation they have built themselves to form new ideas.

As a result, *santri* can build an autonomous moral foundation to limit the actions that can and cannot be done in dealing with the opposite sex. This can be seen from the statement 'dating but with boundaries according to Islam', which this article sees as a creative form of negotiating Islamic morality and social action. From this, the subjects believe that they are not really contradicting the rules of the pesantren, but still abide by them. The relationship between men and women is not contradictory because it does not morally cross the boundaries set by the pesantren. The contribution of this article is to examine the reasons why *santri* engage in romantic relationships while living in pesantren, despite strict moral rules. We have explained why such relationships persist, and the factors that motivate *santri* to navigate and sometimes challenge existing moral norms.

This paper then implicates views that suggest the dominant authority of *kyai* or *ustadz* in pesantren. This article shows that the authority of the *kyai* or *ustadz* is not always accepted by the *santri*. Therefore, further development is needed in looking at the dynamics of *kyai* authority and *santri* resistance to enrich studies related to pesantren in Indonesia.



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