



Consumptive Culture: Reconfiguring Santri's Values in the Age of Consumerism

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Abstract:

Consumer culture increasingly intersects with religious identity, creating tensions between contemporary consumption and values of simplicity cultivated through pesantren education. This study examines how consumer culture interacts with santri values and contributes to the reconfiguration of religious identity. A qualitative case study involved 24 informants, comprising 18 santri, four teachers, and two pesantren administrators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, then analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Consumer practices became normalised through gadgets, clothing, food, possessions, peer interaction, purchasing, and digital exposure. Santri simultaneously negotiated consumer aspirations with simplicity by distinguishing needs from wants and considering pesantren norms. The study conceptualises consumer culture as a process of value negotiation and identity reconfiguration rather than straightforward religious erosion. Pesantren should strengthen consumer literacy, digital literacy, ethical consumption, and critical decision-making within character education.

INTRODUCTION

Consumerism has become a force that reshapes how individuals define identity, success, and belonging. For young people, this development is important because consumption intersects with values, discipline, modesty, and spiritual formation (Astriani, 2025; Kamariyah et al., 2023; Obaideen et al., 2025). Digital platforms, advertising, and lifestyle-oriented content have made branded goods, trends, and experiences visible. Studies on youth consumption indicate that purchasing behaviour is often connected to symbolic identity rather than functional needs alone. This suggests that consumer culture can influence not only economic choices but also moral orientations (ElKaleh, 2020; Prince et al., 2020). Therefore, examining consumerism among santri is important for understanding how contemporary consumption potentially reconfigures religious values in an era marked by rapid digitalisation and expanding market influence.

The problem becomes visible when santri encounter consumer-oriented lifestyles through social media, online marketplaces, and peer interaction. Although pesantren traditionally cultivate simplicity, self-restraint, discipline, and prioritisation of spiritual needs, digital environments continuously expose students to products and lifestyles associated with status and recognition (Kozhanov et al., 2023; Muafiah et al., 2022). Santri may experience tension between pesantren values and emerging consumption practices, particularly when fashionable clothing, gadgets, food, or branded products become markers of identity. This phenomenon does not necessarily indicate declining religiosity; rather, it reveals a negotiation between inherited moral principles and changing social aspirations (Fatarib et al., 2025; Siswanto, 2024). Consequently, consumerism presents an educational and cultural problem requiring closer investigation within pesantren contexts and among Muslim youth navigating changing cultural expectations today.

Previous scholarship has examined consumerism through psychological, sociological, and religious perspectives. Hsiung et al. (2022) conceptualised consumption as a system of signs through which individuals construct social meaning, while Kumar et al. (2024) and Rajagopal et al. (2022) linked consumer culture to fluid identities and social insecurity. Taştekin (2021) demonstrated how possessions become extensions of self, and Wu et al. (2024), Zhang et al. (2021), and Waris et al. (2022) emphasised relationships between consumption, lifestyle, and cultural identity. Within Islamic education, studies have generally focused on character formation, religious discipline, and pesantren socialisation, but rarely connect these processes directly with consumer culture. Existing research consequently tends to treat consumption as an economic or behavioural issue rather than a process capable of transforming religious values. This gap requires a culturally grounded analysis of santri experiences.

The state of the art lies in moving beyond the assumption that pesantren values remain stable despite changing consumer environments. Rather than measuring consumption through purchasing frequency or material preferences, this study conceptualises consumptive culture as a process of value negotiation in which santri reinterpret simplicity, modesty, discipline, and social recognition (Fergus, 2022; Popović, 2023). This approach responds to limitations in previous studies that separate religious education from contemporary consumer culture. The novelty of this research is its focus on how consumer practices may reconfigure, rather than simply weaken or replace, santri values. Investigating this reconfiguration is important because pesantren increasingly operate within digitally connected societies where religious identity develops alongside commercial visibility, peer comparison, and lifestyle aspiration (Fudge et al., 2022; Taufiq et al., 2025).

Against this background, the central research problem concerns how consumer culture interacts with values cultivated among santri in contemporary pesantren environments. The study asks how santri interpret consumptive practices, how these practices relate to established pesantren values, and how tensions between religious discipline and consumer-oriented aspirations are negotiated in everyday life. This problem is significant because a simple

opposition between religiosity and consumerism may overlook adaptive strategies through which young Muslims reconcile faith, identity, and contemporary lifestyles. Understanding these processes requires attention to meanings, experiences, and social contexts rather than behavioural indicators alone. Accordingly, this research investigates the mechanisms through which consumer culture contributes to the reconfiguration of santri values.

This study argues that consumer culture does not necessarily produce straightforward erosion of santri values; instead, it can generate reconfiguration in which religious principles are selectively maintained, negotiated, and expressed through changing consumption practices. This proposition offers an original contribution by positioning santri as active interpreters of consumer culture rather than passive recipients of commercial influence. Theoretically, the study connects consumer culture with religious value formation, extending discussions of consumption toward moral and identity transformation. Empirically, it provides insight into contemporary cultural dynamics of pesantren. Practically, the findings can inform educators and policymakers in designing value-based education that responds critically to consumerism without disconnecting santri from contemporary social realities and ethical consumption.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how consumer culture reconfigures santri values within a contemporary Islamic boarding school (Kohn et al., 2024). A case study was selected because the research focuses on understanding a socially and culturally situated phenomenon within its real-life context. Rather than measuring the intensity of consumptive behaviour, the study examines how santri interpret consumption, construct meanings around material goods, and negotiate consumer-oriented lifestyles with values cultivated through pesantren education. This design allows the researchers to investigate the interaction between individual experiences, peer relationships, digital exposure, institutional norms, and religious values as they occur naturally within the selected pesantren context. Accordingly, the case study provides an in-depth understanding of value transformation amid contemporary consumer culture.

The research was conducted at an Islamic boarding school in East Java, Indonesia, selected purposively because it combines intensive religious education with students' increasing exposure to digital media, online marketplaces, and contemporary lifestyle trends. This setting was considered relevant for examining how consumer culture interacts with established pesantren values in everyday life. The study involved 24 informants, comprising 18 santri, four teachers, and two pesantren administrators. The santri represented different educational levels and lengths of residence, while teachers and administrators were selected based on their involvement in student guidance, character formation, and institutional supervision. Informants were purposively selected because they possessed direct experiences or knowledge concerning consumption practices, value formation, and the cultural dynamics of pesantren.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Kekeya, 2023). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with santri, teachers, and administrators to explore their perceptions of consumerism, consumption motivations, digital influences, peer expectations, and experiences of negotiating pesantren values. Participant observations were undertaken during daily pesantren activities to examine consumption-related practices, including clothing preferences, food choices, gadget use, online shopping, and interactions among santri. Observations also considered institutional responses to consumer-oriented behaviours. Documentary materials included pesantren regulations, student guidance materials, educational programs, and institutional policies concerning student conduct. The combination of these techniques enabled methodological triangulation and provided contextual evidence for understanding how consumer culture interacts with santri values in everyday pesantren life.

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving data condensation, data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification (Cole, 2024). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials were organised and repeatedly examined to identify statements relevant to consumer culture and santri values. Data reduction involved selecting, coding, and categorising meaningful information into themes such as consumption motives, symbolic identity, peer influence, digital exposure, religious discipline, simplicity, and value negotiation. Condensed data were displayed through thematic matrices and conceptual relationships to identify recurring patterns. Emerging interpretations were continuously compared with empirical evidence, including divergent accounts. Conclusions were subsequently verified through iterative examination until coherent patterns and interpretations were established.

Data validity was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability procedures (Lee et al., 2024). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interview, observation, and documentary data, as well as comparison among perspectives from santri, teachers, and administrators. Member checking was conducted by returning selected interpretations to informants to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' understanding. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the pesantren setting, participant characteristics, and relevant social practices. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of data collection procedures, interview protocols, coding stages, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive notes and an audit trail, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in empirical evidence and minimising the influence of researchers' assumptions throughout the analytical process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings indicate that consumer culture has gradually become embedded in santri daily life through digital exposure, peer interaction, and everyday consumption practices. The findings further reveal negotiations

between simplicity and consumer aspirations, ultimately contributing to the reconfiguration of santri identity through ethical consumption.

Consumer Exposure and the Normalisation of Consumption

In this study, consumer exposure refers to the visible presence and routine incorporation of consumption-oriented practices into santri daily life within the pesantren environment. Normalisation of consumption refers to the point at which these practices appear ordinary, repeated, socially accepted, and integrated into everyday routines rather than exceptional behaviour. Operationally, the phenomenon was identified through direct observation of gadget use, clothing choices, food consumption, interactions surrounding possessions, and purchasing-related activities. Attention was given not only to what santri consumed, but also to the frequency, context, and social visibility of these practices. The observations examined how consumer-oriented behaviours became embedded within ordinary patterns of pesantren life.

The observations were organised according to visible behaviours and contextual indicators demonstrating normalisation of consumption among santri. The researcher recorded recurring practices during routine activities, learning periods, breaks, communal meals, and informal interactions. Particular attention was directed toward personal possessions, engagement with digital devices, preferences for contemporary products, and peer responses to consumption-related practices. Observation records were grouped into indicators to identify recurring patterns rather than isolated incidents. The following table summarises the observed practices and their indicators, providing an empirical basis for interpreting consumer exposure as an increasingly familiar component of everyday santri life within the pesantren setting and routine social interactions among santri.

Table 1. Observation of Consumer Exposure and the Normalisation of Consumption			
Observed Domain	Observable Practice	Field Indicator	Pattern Identified
Gadget Use	Santri frequently used smartphones during breaks and informal periods	Smartphones were visibly present and repeatedly used outside formal learning activities	Digital devices became routine personal possessions
Clothing	Santri displayed varied contemporary clothing, footwear, and accessories	Differences in styles and brands were visibly noticeable during daily activities	Appearance became part of everyday consumption
Food & Beverages	Santri consumed packaged foods, branded drinks, and contemporary snacks	Commercial products appeared during breaks and informal gatherings	Consumption extended beyond basic nutritional needs
Personal Possessions	Santri carried or displayed different gadgets, bags, shoes, and accessories.	Possessions were visible during social interaction and daily activities	Material goods became socially visible
Peer Interaction	Santri gathered around gadgets, food, clothing, or possessions	Consumption-related objects frequently appeared within peer	Consumption became embedded in social participation

	interactions		
Purchasing Activities	Santri engaged in purchasing or receiving newly acquired products	New products appeared repeatedly within everyday routines	Acquisition became a recurring rather than exceptional practice
Digital Exposure	Santri accessed digital platforms containing lifestyle and commercial content.	Smartphone screens frequently displayed contemporary products or lifestyle content.	Consumer exposure occurred continuously through digital environments.

The data indicate that consumption was not limited to occasional purchasing activities but appeared through repeated and visible practices embedded in everyday routines. Gadget use was present during informal periods, while clothing and food choices became visible in social interaction. Personal possessions were also visible in conversations and peer encounters, making consumption socially observable rather than purely individual. These patterns indicate that consumer exposure operates through repetition, visibility, and interaction. In other words, santri encountered consumption not as an external phenomenon but as part of their social environment. The recurrence of these practices suggests that consumer-oriented behaviours were becoming familiar and integrated into pesantren life.

The overall pattern shows normalisation of consumption across santri daily activities. Digital devices provided continuous exposure to commercial content, brands, trends, and contemporary lifestyles, while clothing and food represented visible forms of consumption in everyday settings. Peer interaction further connected possessions and preferences with social participation and recognition. The observations did not show one dominant consumer behaviour; instead, normalisation emerged through the accumulation of small, repeated practices. The pattern suggests that consumer culture operates subtly within pesantren life through repeated visibility, familiarity, and social acceptance. Consumption becomes normalised when repeated practices are no longer perceived as unusual but function as ordinary features of everyday interaction.

Negotiating Simplicity and Consumer Aspirations

In this study, negotiating simplicity refers to the process through which santri interpret, justify, and balance the pesantren principle of modest living with contemporary consumer aspirations. This negotiation becomes visible when santri distinguish between needs and wants, determine acceptable forms of consumption, and evaluate purchases according to religious and social considerations. Operationally, the phenomenon was identified through participants' explanations of purchasing decisions, preferences for clothing, food, gadgets, and lifestyle products, as well as their understanding of simplicity. The focus was not whether santri consumed products, but how they rationalised consumption while maintaining their commitment to pesantren values and navigating aspirations for comfort, appearance, and social recognition.

The interviews revealed that santri did not perceive consumption and simplicity as completely contradictory. Several participants described consumption as acceptable when connected to practical needs rather than social display. One santri explained, "I still try to live simply, but buying something is

not wrong when I really need it. I usually think about whether I will use it regularly." Another stated, "Sometimes I want to buy something because it looks good, but I ask myself first whether I actually need it." These statements indicate that santri actively evaluated consumption before purchasing. Simplicity therefore operated as a consideration guiding decisions, rather than an absolute prohibition against contemporary consumer practices in daily life.

Other participants emphasised the influence of appearance, comfort, and peer expectations in shaping their consumption decisions. One santri stated, "I sometimes choose clothes that are trending because I want to look presentable, but I still make sure they are appropriate for pesantren." Another explained, "When my friends have something new, I may want it too, but I do not always buy it because I have to consider my priorities." These accounts show that consumer aspirations were present but continuously filtered through institutional expectations and personal considerations. Santri consequently negotiated between wanting contemporary products and maintaining acceptable behaviour. Consumption became a process of selective adaptation rather than unrestricted pursuit of material preferences.

Field observations supported the interview findings by showing that consumer aspirations were expressed alongside practices associated with simplicity. Santri used contemporary gadgets, clothing, and food products while simultaneously participating in routines emphasising discipline, modesty, and regulated daily activities. These practices indicate that consumption did not replace existing pesantren routines but existed alongside them. The observed pattern suggests a coexistence between material aspirations and institutional expectations. In practical terms, santri could engage with contemporary products while remaining within the behavioural boundaries established by the pesantren. The data therefore restate the central finding: simplicity remained present, but its application was increasingly negotiated according to context, purpose, and social circumstances.

The overall pattern demonstrates that santri consumption was characterised by selective negotiation rather than complete rejection or unrestricted acceptance. Participants repeatedly distinguished needs from wants, considered usefulness before purchasing, and evaluated products according to pesantren expectations. At the same time, appearance, comfort, trends, and peer influence remained important sources of consumer aspiration. This produced a middle position in which santri could accept selected aspects of contemporary consumption without abandoning the principle of simplicity. The pattern indicates that simplicity increasingly functions as a flexible evaluative framework. Rather than determining every consumption decision in advance, it provides criteria through which santri assess whether particular consumer aspirations remain compatible with their religious institutional environment.

Reconfiguring Santri Identity through Ethical Consumption

In this study, reconfiguring santri identity through ethical consumption refers to how santri integrate religious commitments with contemporary consumption practices while constructing an acceptable sense of self.

Operationally, the phenomenon was identified through institutional documents, visual records, activity photographs, and material evidence showing the coexistence of religious guidance, consumption practices, and ethical considerations. The focus concerned how pesantren environments provide boundaries for consumption while allowing santri to engage with contemporary products, technologies, and lifestyles. Reconfiguration does not mean abandoning religious identity, but indicates a changing expression of identity in which moderation, responsibility, appropriateness, and religious awareness become criteria for evaluating consumption within everyday educational contexts.

Documentary evidence can be organised as a visual sequence showing how religious values and consumption coexist within pesantren life. First, photographs of religious learning or character formation activities demonstrate the institutional foundation of santri identity. Second, photographs of regulated clothing, communal routines, or pesantren facilities show how consumption is bounded by institutional norms. Third, photographs of contemporary gadgets, food products, or personal belongings illustrate everyday consumer exposure. Fourth, photographs of activities involving responsible resource use can indicate ethical dimensions of consumption. Together, these materials form a sequence: religious guidance, institutional boundaries, consumer engagement, and ethical adaptation. This sequence visually supports the interpretation of identity reconfiguration.

Discussion

The first finding demonstrates that consumer culture has become normalised in santri daily life through gadget use, clothing choices, food consumption, personal possessions, peer interaction, purchasing activities, and digital exposure. Consumption no longer appears as an isolated individual practice but has become embedded within everyday routines and social interactions. This finding is consistent with Qadir et al. (2025), who conceptualised consumption as a system of signs through which individuals produce social meanings, and with Van et al. (2021), who argued that possessions may function as extensions of the self. The finding also supports Mezinov et al. (2022), who associated consumption with lifestyle and cultural identity. Thus, pesantren environments are not completely detached from contemporary consumer culture, despite their strong emphasis on religious discipline.

The second finding reveals that the normalisation of consumption does not automatically lead to the disappearance of simplicity among santri. Instead, santri negotiate consumption by distinguishing between needs and wants, considering product usefulness, and evaluating consumption according to pesantren norms. This finding extends Caballero et al. (2021)'s perspective on fluid identities within consumer culture. While Mata et al. (2023) emphasised identity instability within consumer societies, this study demonstrates that santri possess selective mechanisms for maintaining moral boundaries amid consumer aspirations. Aspirations related to clothing, comfort, trends, and social

recognition are present but are not necessarily accepted without consideration. Simplicity therefore functions as an evaluative framework through which santri assess contemporary consumption (Anggadwita et al., 2021; Sumarhum, 2023). Consequently, consumer practices represent selective adaptation rather than unrestricted material pursuit within the pesantren environment.

The third finding indicates that consumer culture contributes to the reconfiguration of santri identity through adaptive consumption practices that retain religious considerations, appropriateness, moderation, and responsibility. This finding challenges the assumption that increasing consumption necessarily produces religious value erosion (Friman et al., 2022; Naqvi et al., 2021). Instead, santri identity appears dynamic because religious values continue to function as boundaries for determining acceptable consumption. This perspective extends Yudha et al. (2025) and Bashori et al. (2026) discussion of possessions and identity by incorporating religious values as mechanisms for filtering the meanings attached to consumption. The theoretical contribution of this finding lies in demonstrating that consumer culture does not merely weaken pesantren values but can stimulate their reinterpretation. Santri identity is consequently constructed through the intersection of religious principles, consumer practices, and contemporary social contexts.

Theoretically, this study contributes by connecting consumer culture with religious value formation within the pesantren educational context. Previous scholarship has often examined consumption as an economic, behavioural, lifestyle, or social identity issue, whereas this study demonstrates that consumption can also constitute a space for moral negotiation. The findings reinforce the view that santri are not passive recipients of commercial influences but active actors who interpret, filter, and adapt consumption practices according to values cultivated through pesantren education. The theoretical implication is that religiosity and consumer culture should be understood as dynamically interacting domains rather than inherently opposing categories. This perspective extends existing discussions of consumer culture by introducing value reconfiguration as an analytical process through which religious identity responds to contemporary consumption.

Practically, the findings suggest that pesantren should not respond to consumer culture solely through prohibitions or restrictions on material possessions. Educational practices should instead strengthen santri's capacity to evaluate needs, recognise digital influences, distinguish functional from symbolic consumption, and consider ethical dimensions when making consumption decisions. Pesantren administrators can integrate consumer literacy, digital literacy, character education, and principles of simplicity into student development programs. The practical contribution of this study lies in offering an approach that does not position modernity and religiosity as mutually exclusive domains. Rather, santri can be prepared to participate critically in contemporary consumer environments while maintaining moderation, responsibility, and religious awareness. Such an approach enables pesantren education to remain responsive to cultural change while preserving its foundational ethical and spiritual orientation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that consumer culture has become normalised within santri daily life through digital exposure, gadgets, clothing, food, possessions, peer interaction, and purchasing practices, yet its influence does not necessarily erode pesantren values. The most important insight is that santri actively negotiate consumer aspirations with simplicity, religious discipline, appropriateness, and responsibility, producing a reconfigured rather than diminished identity. Scientifically, this study contributes by connecting consumer culture with religious value formation and positioning santri as active interpreters of consumption rather than passive recipients of commercial influence. However, the qualitative case study and limited participant scope constrain broader generalisation. Future research should examine diverse pesantren contexts, broader participant groups, longitudinal changes, and comparative patterns across institutions.

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