



Pesantren and Scholarly Works: A Literacy Ethos as the Brand Culture of Pesantren

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Abstract

This study examines *pesantren* branding as a cultural strategy for building a brand culture rooted in Islamic scholarly traditions, an area that remains relatively underexplored in the educational branding literature. This study aims to analyze how branding practices are constructed, interpreted, and institutionalized in the context of *pesantren*. The research uses a qualitative case study design at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and then analyzed inductively and thematically. The results show that *pesantren* branding is developed through the practice of scientific writing, which serves as an institutional identity and collective culture. This branding is built through three main aspects: the scientific leadership initiative initiated by the (late) KH. Yasin Asmuni, institutional marketing support, and the formation of cadres based on mastery of scientific works. This study also identifies three models of *pesantren* branding: brand communication grounded in scientific narratives, brand expression through academic content, and brand management that adapts to cultural changes. These findings enrich educational branding studies by offering a branding model grounded in the intellectual traditions and scientific culture of *pesantren*.

Keywords: Brand Culture; Islamic Boarding School; *Pesantren* Branding.

Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti branding pesantren sebagai strategi budaya untuk membangun budaya merek yang berakar pada tradisi keilmuan Islam, suatu bidang yang masih relatif kurang dieksplorasi dalam literatur branding pendidikan. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana praktik branding dibangun, diinterpretasikan, dan diinstitutionalisasi dalam konteks pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif di Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen, kemudian dianalisis secara induktif dan tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa branding pesantren dikembangkan melalui praktik penulisan ilmiah, yang berfungsi sebagai identitas institusional dan budaya kolektif. Branding ini dibangun melalui tiga aspek utama: inisiatif kepemimpinan ilmiah yang diprakarsai oleh (almarhum) KH. Yasin Asmuni, dukungan pemasaran institusional, dan pembentukan kader berdasarkan penguasaan karya ilmiah. Studi ini juga mengidentifikasi tiga model branding pesantren: komunikasi merek berdasarkan narasi ilmiah, ekspresi merek melalui konten akademik, dan manajemen merek yang adaptif terhadap perubahan budaya. Temuan ini memperkaya kajian branding pendidikan dengan menawarkan model pencitraan merek yang berlandaskan tradisi intelektual dan budaya ilmiah pesantren.

Kata Kunci: Branding Pesantren; Budaya Branding, Pondok Pesantren.

INTRODUCTION

To date, Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) remain widely regarded as educational institutions capable of shaping society's Islamic character. Rahimi et al. describe *pesantren* as a microcosm of an ideal Islamic society.¹ Therefore, when *pesantren* can exert broader

¹ Hermanto Halil, "Islamic Boarding Schools as Learning Organizations: Integrating Tradition and Digital Innovation in Student Leadership Development," *Fikri: Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 10, no. 2 (November <https://ejournal.lppdjatim.org/index.php/jpds>)

social influence, a comprehensive Islamic society can be realized.² Public perceptions and societal needs regarding *pesantren* have consequently become key factors underlying the establishment of new *pesantren* institutions. As reported by *Kompas.com* on October 14, 2025, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Nasaruddin Umar, stated that the number of *pesantren* nationwide had increased to 42,369, reflecting a 3,202-institution increase over two years.³ While this increase represents a positive development, it simultaneously presents distinct challenges for *pesantren* administrators. These challenges are closely linked to shifting public perceptions of *pesantren*, in which society increasingly views *pesantren* not merely as providers of educational services, but also as service providers operating in a competitive environment.⁴

One consequence of the rapid growth in the number of *pesantren* and the accompanying shift in public perception is the emergence of diverse and strategically designed forms of public communication intended to attract societal attention. For *pesantren*, publication and promotion are widely perceived as effective means of articulating institutional identity and distinctiveness, with the objectives of building public trust, attracting interest, and, most importantly, sustaining institutional existence.⁵ This process is commonly referred to as branding, namely, deliberate efforts to introduce a product or institution to the public so that it is widely recognized and understood. Branding is also understood as an effective tool for conveying messages, building trust, connecting with more specific target audiences, and motivating and fostering commitment among prospective service users.⁶

In this context, *pesantren* branding has become increasingly important -not only as a strategy to attract prospective users of educational services, but also as a momentum for highlighting distinctive characteristics that differentiate one *pesantren* from others. One *pesantren* notable for its distinctive branding is Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab. Located in Petuk Hamlet, Puhrubuh Village, Semen District, Kediri Regency, this *pesantren* was led by the highly respected scholar (the late) KH. Yasin Asmuni. He was a cleric renowned for his prolific writing of Arabic-language Islamic texts across diverse fields of Islamic scholarship. This practice became deeply embedded and ultimately emerged as a defining characteristic of the *pesantren* under his leadership. Indirectly, his habit of authoring scholarly works evolved into a form of branding that, according to the American Marketing Association (AMA), as cited in Kevin, functions as a marker that distinguishes one institution from others. This tradition of scholarly

2025): 604–17, <https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v10i2.6661>; Asep Sopian et al., “Arabic Language Learning in a Multicultural Context at Pesantren,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 1 (June 2025): 77–89, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v11i1.44104>; Azmil Tayeb, “Pondok Education, Public Discourse, and Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia and Indonesia,” in *Southeast Asian Islam* (Routledge India, 2024).

² Suwendi Suwendi et al., “Roles and Challenges of Pesantren Intellectual Networks,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 24, no. 2 (August 2024): 453–70, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v24i2.23134>.

³ Rikhul Jannah, “Santri di Pesantren adalah Anak Bangsa yang Harus Dapat Perhatian Negara,” NU Online, NU Online, Oktober 2025, <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/santri-di-pesantren-adalah-anak-bangsa-yang-harus-dapat-perhatian-negara-CSghX>; Firda Janati, “Menag Sebut Ponpes di Indonesia Capai 42.369, Semua Dikelola Swasta,” KOMPAS.com, October 14, 2025, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2025/10/14/13182941/menag-sebut-ponpes-di-indonesia-capai-42369-semua-dikelola-swasta>.

⁴ Ziyadul Idfhal Ghazali and Nasrullah Nasrullah, “Strategi Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Banyuwangi Dalam Membangun Image Branding Di Media Sosial,” *Re-JIEM (Research Journal of Islamic Education Management)* 7, no. 1 (June 2024): 70–82, <https://doi.org/10.19105/re-jiem.v7i1.12823>.

⁵ Hasan Baharan and Intania Intania, “Interaksi Simbolik Dan Imaji Religius Dalam Membangun Citra Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid,” *Atthulab: Islamic Religion Teaching and Learning Journal* 5, no. 1 (April 2020): 71–85, <https://doi.org/10.15575/ath.v5i1.7317>.

⁶ Muhamad Fadhool Tamimy, *Sharing-mu, Personal Branding-mu: Menampilkan Image Diri dan Karakter di Media Sosial* (Jakarta Selatan: VisiMedia, 2017), 3.

writing has since been continued by his eldest son, Kiai Ahmad Rikza Muqtafa, who currently serves as the caretaker (*pengasub*) of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri. Owing to this sustained practice, he received recognition at the “Peak Event of World Intellectual Property Day” in 2023 in the category of “Individual with the Highest Number of Registered Intellectual Properties.”

The culture of writing demonstrated by the leadership of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri is particularly noteworthy when examined through the lens of branding theory. The *pesantren* has not only succeeded in constructing a positive institutional image, but has gone further by cultivating a brand culture that permeates even the smallest organizational units within the institution. According to Douglas B. Holt, brand culture refers to activities that project an organization’s distinctive culture outward as a defining identity.⁷ Brand culture thus functions as a communicative medium of branding, significantly influencing service users’ decision-making processes. Decision-making is understood as a component of service user behavior, which is the study of how individuals, groups, and organizations select, use, and evaluate goods, services, or experiences to satisfy their needs, desires, or expectations.⁸

Branding through a cultural approach, as practiced at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab, is the primary motivation for this article. This study aims to analyze how the branding strategies implemented by the caretaker (*pengasub*) of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri build a brand culture while simultaneously reaffirming the *pesantren*’s essential nature (*fitrah*) as an institution deeply rooted in scholarly traditions, including the production of academic works. This research is considered particularly significant, as to date there has been no comparable study focusing on *pesantren* branding through scholarly writing using Douglas B. Holt’s brand culture framework.

Several previous studies addressing related themes have been identified. Research conducted by Mohammad Halili and Ach. Rizquha demonstrates that pesantren branding has tangible implications, including increased student enrollment at Pesantren Nurul Qarnain through the application of a “*Pesantren Preneur*” branding strategy.⁹ Another study by Ulul Aedi indicates that branding can also be utilized to enhance brand equity (added value) at Pesantren Ath-Thohiriyah Purwokerto through social media, thereby contributing to institutional stability and sustained existence.¹⁰ Furthermore, research by Hakiki reveals that a *kiai*’s personal branding plays a crucial role in maintaining the reputation and public image of Pondok Pesantren Nahdlatul Ulum through the *kiai*’s authority as a religious scholar, educator, preacher, and community leader, thereby enabling effective public relations practices.¹¹ The present study clearly distinguishes itself from these prior works, as it specifically focuses on branding through scholarly writing, intending to cultivate brand culture as conceptualized by Holt. Consequently,

⁷ Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (United States of America: Harvard Business Press, 2004).

⁸ Philip Kotler and Gary M. Armstrong, *Principles of Marketing* (Essex, England: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2012).

⁹ Mohammad Halili, Ach Rizquha, and Hefniy Hefniy, “Branding Pesantren Preuner Dalam Memperkuat Identitas Kelembagaan,” *Jumpa: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan* 1, no. 2 (December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.33650/jumpa.v1i2.5376>.

¹⁰ Ulul Aedi, “Strategi Branding Pondok Pesantren Ath-Thohiriyah Purwokerto Dalam Membangun Ekuitas Brand Di Era Digital,” *Ulumuddin: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 15, no. 2 (August 2025): 623–42, <https://doi.org/10.47200/ulumuddin.v15i2.3045>.

¹¹ Siti Nur Hakiki, “Kepemimpinan Kiai Sebagai Personal Branding Pesantren Dalam Perspektif Public Relation (Humas),” *Fikrotuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Manajemen Islam* 7, no. 2 (December 2018): 891–903, <https://doi.org/10.32806/jf.v8i2.3287>.

the findings of this study are expected to differ substantively from previous research. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine in depth the implementation of branding strategies at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri and their implications for the development of a sustained brand culture within the institution.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. The research design adopted in this study is a case study approach, selected for its capacity to reveal phenomena in depth. Data were collected in a natural setting using three techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. According to Bogdan and Biklen, these techniques are intended to yield holistic, integrative data.¹² Data collection was conducted directly at the research site, namely Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri, East Java, utilizing the three aforementioned techniques. The key informant selected for this study was the *pesantren* caretaker, who was deemed to possess a comprehensive understanding of the research theme.

Primary data were collected using a snowball sampling technique to obtain broad, in-depth information. At this stage, additional informants were involved to complement the information provided until data saturation was achieved. Secondary data were also collected through documentation and direct observation to support and triangulate the primary data. Data analysis was conducted inductively, meaning that the process did not begin with theoretical deduction but rather with empirical facts. The researcher engaged directly in the field to observe, analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions from the observed phenomena.

The data analysis technique applied in this study followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which involves a continuous and iterative process until data saturation is reached. The stages of data analysis included data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.¹³ In the final stage, measures were taken to ensure data trustworthiness. Verification of data validity is intended to address concerns about scientific rigor and is an integral component of qualitative research. Data trustworthiness was established to confirm that the research met scholarly standards and to assess the reliability of the findings. The criteria employed included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Building *Pesantren* Branding through Scholarly Works

Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab is located in Petuk Hamlet, Puhрубuh Village, Semen District, Kediri Regency, and has long been recognized for the scholarly works authored by its caretaker. Although these works were not initially intended as a promotional strategy for the *pesantren*, they emerged purely from the caretaker's profound devotion to knowledge and religious propagation (*da'wah*). He was the late KH. Yasin Asmuni successfully introduced the *pesantren* to a wider audience beyond the *pesantren* community, positioning it as a center of accessible yet substantively rich Islamic texts. His earliest published works, *Tashib al-Mudki* and *Tashib al-'Awam*, were written and published when he was only 17 years old.

¹² Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (Pearson A & B, 2007), 119.

¹³ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (USA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 31–33.

Indirectly, the caretaker’s sustained practice of writing became an embedded value and defining identity of *Pesantren*. This value-based identity subsequently functioned as a medium through which the institution introduced itself to the public. Such efforts exemplify what is commonly called branding. According to Kotler et al., branding is a strategic approach to promoting an organization’s values or identity, typically expressed through a brand. A brand may take the form of a name, symbol, or design intended to distinguish one organization from another.¹⁴ The guiding principle consistently conveyed by Kiai Asmuni to all his students was rooted in the Qur’anic verse An-Nahl (16:125), which states: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner.”

Based on his interpretation, as conveyed in his *mau’izhah hasanah*, the term *ud’u* in this verse signifies da’wah, which can be carried out through three primary modes: *bil lisan* (oral communication), *bil kitabah* (written communication), and *bil hal* (exemplary action). All three methods were consistently practiced by him in his role as *pesantren* caretaker, through teaching religious texts, providing moral exemplars in daily conduct, and, most distinctively, through *da’wah bil kitabah* (propagation through writing). It is this practice of *da’wah bil kitabah* that has served as a central medium of branding up to the present. Through this approach, Kiai Asmuni produced an extensive body of scholarly works in the form of Islamic texts. From the beginning of his scholarly career until his passing, his oeuvre reached a total of 233 titles, encompassing a wide range of Islamic disciplines, including jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism (*tasawuf*), Hadith studies, religious narratives (*hikayat*), and other related fields, as summarized in the following table.

Table 1: Scholarly Works Authored by KH. Yasin Asmuni

No.	Field of Science	Quantity
1	Adab	12
2	Aqidah	29
3	Fadhail	28
4	Fiqh	33
5	Hadith	4
6	Hikayat	21
7	Lughat	1
8	Mawaid/Nasihah	21
9	Sirah	5
10	Tafsir	11
11	Tafsir Mimpi (dream interpretation)	3
12	Tarikh (history)	6
13	Tasawuf	57
14	Thib	2
	Total	233

The production of scholarly works of this nature constitutes a form of personal branding, in which individuals build their reputations on tangible, sustained intellectual output. Personal branding theory posits that an individual’s self-image is shaped by their contributions, including written works that demonstrate expertise, authority, and academic credibility.¹⁵ Writing scholarly works, to borrow Qomar’s term, represents a high-class culture (high culture), one that demands

¹⁴ Kotler, Philip dan Kevin Lane Keller, *Manajemen Pemasaran*, Edisi 13, (Jakarta: Penerbit Erlangga, 2009), 258.

¹⁵ Peter Montoya and Tim Vandehey, *The Brand Called You: Make Your Business Stand Out in a Crowded Marketplace* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 45.

perseverance, meticulousness, and a high degree of idealism, as well as a lengthy, demanding process. The products of such scholarly endeavors possess remarkable durability, often enduring for decades or even centuries. Beyond reinforcing personal branding, sustained scholarly production accompanied by academic and social contributions contributes to the formation of an individual's reputation. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as reputational branding, in which reputation is achieved not solely through intellectual output, but also through consistent contributions to scholarly and social traditions.¹⁶

Introducing such products, understood here as the values or identity of an organization, is undoubtedly challenging. Nevertheless, these values must be communicated to the broader public, particularly to other *pesantren* institutions. In the early period, before the widespread use of social media, the dissemination and marketing of these texts were conducted through conventional means, such as visiting other *pesantren* in person to offer them, a process that often took several months. This was because the target audience extended beyond *pesantren* in East Java to include those in Central Java and surrounding regions. Over time, numerous *pesantren* began to study the works of the late Kiai Asmuni, who adopted his texts as materials for intensive short-term study (*pengajian kilatan* or *pasaran*) during the month of Ramadan.

The dissemination of the late Kiai Asmuni's scholarly works extended beyond the national level to the international level. Mr Yakiti, from the United Kingdom, was conferred the title of professor as a form of international recognition of his scholarly contributions. Such third-party recognition, as Cialdini emphasizes through the concept of social proof, plays a critical role in enhancing an individual's or a brand's credibility. In this context, the conferment of a professorial title and recognition as one of the 100 most influential figures in the United Kingdom strengthened Kiai Asmuni's reputation in the eyes of the wider public.¹⁷

Following Kiai Asmuni's passing in 2020, leadership of the *pesantren* was assumed by his eldest son, Kiai Ahmad Rikza Muqtafa. In addition to serving as the caretaker of the *pesantren*, he continued his father's intellectual legacy by authoring and transmitting scholarly works. His first publication was the Arabic text *Muqāranat al-Madhāhib fī al-Wuḍūʿ*. This sustained commitment to scholarly writing subsequently led Kiai Muqtafa to receive an award from the Indonesian government in 2023 in the "Individual with the Highest Number of Registered Intellectual Properties" category, presented at the Shangri-La Hotel in Jakarta.

Leadership succession and the continuation of scholarly production are therefore essential practices. Beyond fulfilling the filial responsibility of leading an institution founded by one's predecessor, these practices serve to preserve and reinforce the *pesantren's* established authority and branding. Within the framework of brand ownership theory, mastery and control over existing intellectual products or works enhance an individual's value and public reputation.¹⁸ Numerous institutions decline or even cease to exist due to an overreliance on the charismatic authority of former figures, without sustaining their intellectual legacies. In this regard, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab has successfully maintained control over and the continuity of the scholarly works inherited from its former leadership.

Notably, scholarly production at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri is not limited to the caretakers alone. *Santris* of the *pesantren* have also authored several scholarly works.

¹⁶ Gareth R. Jones, *Organizational Theory, Design and Change*, 5th ed. (New Jersey: Pearsons, 2007), 33.

¹⁷ Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 92.

¹⁸ John M. T. Balmer, "Corporate Branding and Connoisseurship," *Journal of General Management* 21, no. 1 (September 1995): 24–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030630709502100102>.

Among them is Muhammad Ma'ruf, who authored an Arabic-language scholarly text entitled *Tuhfat al-Mubdi'*, a hadith compilation comprising hundreds of *musalsal* hadith.

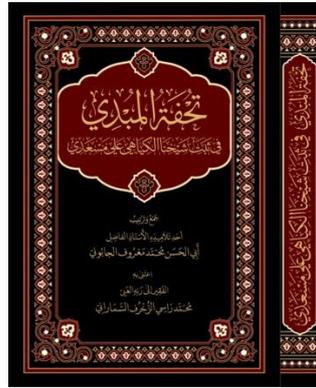


Figure 1: *Scholarly Works Authored by Santri of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab*

Broadly speaking, the branding strategy implemented by Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab through scholarly works encompasses several key dimensions. First, building personal and reputational branding. The scholarly works produced by the *pesantren* caretaker serve as the initial foundation for the branding strategy developed by Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri. This sustained practice of writing has created a strong personal image of the late Kiai Asmuni as a highly productive author of Islamic texts. Beyond personal image formation, scholarly productivity accompanied by academic and social contributions contributes to the development of reputation. Reputation, in this sense, is not achieved solely through intellectual output but also through sustained engagement with scholarly and social traditions.

Second is the marketing of scholarly works. In the early stages, when social media had not yet become widely accessible, the dissemination and marketing of these texts were conducted through conventional means, such as direct visits and promotion to other *pesantren*. This process often required several months, as the target audience extended beyond *pesantren* in East Java to include institutions in Central Java and surrounding regions. The dissemination of these scholarly works was not limited to the national level but also reached international audiences. Mr Yakiti, from the United Kingdom, conferred upon Kiai Asmuni the title of professor as a form of international recognition of his intellectual contributions. This academic title, along with recognition as one of the 100 most influential figures in the United Kingdom, served as a significant catalyst for enhancing KH. Yasin Asmuni's reputation among the wider public.

Third is brand reinforcement and control through cadre development. Kiai Asmuni clearly envisioned a process of cadre development to ensure the continuity of leadership and the preservation of the *pesantren's* intellectual identity, particularly in relation to scholarly production. This process was not limited to his son but also extended to several of his students, including Muhammad Ma'ruf, Ustaz Habib, and others. Such efforts functioned as mechanisms of control and ownership over existing intellectual products, which, in turn, contributed to increasing individual and institutional value and reputation in the public sphere.

Efforts to Build the Brand Culture of *Pesantren*

Former Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs, Syaifuddin Zuhri, once emphasized the importance of cultivating a tradition of scholarly writing as an extension of the practice of engaging with classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) through contextual understanding. This

tradition represents a significant component of Islamic intellectual heritage that, in many *pesantren*, has yet to develop optimally. By way of comparison, earlier generations of *pesantren* scholars demonstrated a profound commitment to scholarly production, including figures such as Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, Shaykh Mahfudz al-Tarmizi, Kiai Ihsan Jampes Kediri, Kiai Sholeh Darat Semarang, Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari Tebuireng Jombang, Kiai Bisri Mustofa of Rembang (Central Java), Kiai Abul Fadhol Senori Tuban, among others.

A similar commitment to scholarly writing, as exemplified by these earlier *pesantren* scholars, is evident at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri. Scholarly works produced within this *pesantren* are not only positioned as institutional values or markers of identity. Still, they are also intended to evolve into a sustained cultural practice that reinforces branding, commonly referred to as brand culture. Holt explains that brand culture consists of activities that project the distinctive culture of a society or organization as an identity to the broader public.¹⁹ Candraningrum further argues that brand culture functions as a marketing instrument that shapes a brand within consumers' cognitive frameworks, enabling it to compete with other brands.²⁰ Brand culture typically emerges from popular narratives that circulate within the surrounding community. Holt further elaborates on a model of brand culture that is highly relevant to the practices of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri, comprising the following elements:

1. *Brand Communication* is rooted in historical narratives that serve as the core values for consumers. Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab is widely recognized through narratives closely associated with the scholarly works of its caretakers and students. These narratives become deeply embedded and effectively communicated through consumers or service users.
2. *Brand Components* relate to the expression of brand values or identity as manifested in narratives or content that shape the brand's historical trajectory. Over time, the continuous expansion of these narratives has produced a dominant thematic identity, namely, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab as an institution closely associated with the production of Islamic texts and scholarly works.
3. *Brand Management*, which focuses on aligning and adapting historical narratives to ongoing cultural changes while maintaining relevance. In this context, the initial intention of the *pesantren* caretaker to conduct *da'wah bil kitabah* (propagation through writing) has ultimately given rise to a writing culture transmitted to his descendants and students, remaining culturally relevant across generations.

Accordingly, Holt argues that a strong brand or culture is one that successfully integrates all stakeholders, including the institution itself, its leadership, influential actors, and the cultural practices that are cultivated and disseminated. This integration is sustained through narratives that articulate and reinforce brand culture. Brand culture constitutes a strategic objective of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri, reflecting its commitment to establishing a distinctive position among other *pesantren* while simultaneously strengthening the promotion of the institutional image and identity that has been constructed. To clarify, several key benefits of brand culture include:

¹⁹ Holt, *How Brands Become Icons*.

²⁰ Diah Ayu Candraningrum, "Culture of Drinking Coffee as a Brand Culture Communication on Belitung Island," *Proceedings of the 1st Aceh Global Conference (AGC 2018)*, ASSEHR, vol. 292 (January 2019): 120–28, <https://doi.org/10.2991/agc-18.2019.19>.

1. First, *enhancing motivation*. Brand culture can foster greater motivation among members of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab to engage more actively in learning activities, even when such efforts initially take the form of simple practices, such as summarizing lesson materials or classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), or producing concise notes on taught subjects. When carried out consistently, even on a modest scale, these practices gradually become embedded cultural habits.
2. Second, *reinforcing originality*. When Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri is associated with a distinct value or identity as a *pesantren* characterized by a scholarly brand culture and can continuously develop this identity, its originality becomes increasingly consolidated. This is evidenced by its scholarly works, which have been utilized not only locally but also internationally, including in the United Kingdom.
3. Third, *cultivating brand loyalty*. A strong brand culture increases the likelihood of attracting service users or institutional inputs who demonstrate high levels of commitment and dedication. The stronger the brand culture, the greater the interest among prospective users. The intellectual legacy of the late Kiai Asmuni has generated sustained public interest, encouraging families to entrust their children to the *pesantren*. This phenomenon reflects brand loyalty, whereby the community not only recognizes the late Kiai Asmuni, a respected Islamic scholar, but also feels a deep sense of trust and emotional attachment to the institution he led. Notably, this loyalty has been maintained through the successful efforts of his successor in preserving the established brand culture.²¹

Pesantren are intrinsically linked to scholarly works. The essential nature (*fitrah*) of *pesantren* lies in their role as institutions deeply rooted in knowledge and academic culture. The intellectual enthusiasm and commitment of earlier *pesantren* scholars, such as Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, Shaykh Mahfudz al-Tarmizi, Kiai Ihsan Jampes Kediri, Kiai Sholeh Darat Semarang, Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari Tebuireng Jombang, Kiai Bisri Mustofa of Rembang (Central Java), Kiai Abul Fadhol Senori Tuban, and others, constitute a valuable legacy worthy of preservation. This legacy cannot be sustained without first reinforcing commitment and building the image of *pesantren* as centers of Islamic scholarship through academic work, even when such work initially takes its simplest form.

Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab, through the intellectual leadership of the late Kiai Asmuni, stands out among the *pesantrens* distinguished by a strong tradition of scholarly production. Scholarly works that originated from his passion for knowledge and writing eventually evolved into a distinctive form of branding. The implementation of branding through scholarly works encompasses several key components:

1. Positioning scholarly works as instruments of personal branding and reputational branding for the *pesantren* leadership;
2. Marketing scholarly products as a means of strengthening personal and reputational branding, thereby enhancing the *pesantren's* institutional value proposition; and
3. Conducting cadre development by transmitting the legacy of scholarly writing to subsequent caretakers and students as a mechanism of brand control and reinforcement.

Efforts to build the *pesantren's* brand culture began with the late Kiai Asmuni establishing core values and identity. The dissemination of these values created a distinctive uniqueness for

²¹ David A. Aaker, *Building Strong Brands* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 92.

Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri that is not commonly found among *pesantren* in general. Three models of brand culture can be identified:

1. A communication model, operating simultaneously through conversations and narratives circulated by service users.
2. Brand components, referring to the content and substance of narratives conveyed by service users regarding the success of the *pesantren's* caretakers and students in producing scholarly works; and
3. Brand management, which involves aligning the *pesantren's* identity with cultural changes to ensure continued relevance in meeting service users' expectations.

Several tangible benefits have emerged from implementing brand culture at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab. These include: 1) increased motivation among all members of the *pesantren* to engage more enthusiastically in learning, particularly through practices such as summarizing instructional materials or classical texts; 2) strengthened originality as a *pesantren* grounded in scholarly production, whose works have been widely utilized at local, national, and international levels; and 3) enhanced service user loyalty, which increases the likelihood of attracting individuals with strong commitment and dedication.

The scholarly works of the *pesantren's* caretaker have been widely used as references in Ramadan intensive study programs (*pasanan*) by *pesantren* in East Java and even in the United Kingdom. According to various users, these works possess a notable advantage in terms of accessibility and clarity, owing to their relatively simple linguistic style compared to scholarly texts produced by other *pesantren*. Following the passing of the late Kiai Asmuni, his son, Kiai Muqtafa, has continued his father's scholarly tradition. His consistency in producing academic works, in continuity with his father's legacy, led to his receipt of a national award from the Government of Indonesia in 2023 in the category of "Individual with the Highest Number of Registered Intellectual Properties," presented at the Shangri-La Hotel in Jakarta. This achievement reflects the effectiveness of the cadre development process initiated by the late Kiai Asmuni in maintaining control over and strengthening the values and identity of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab as a *pesantren* distinguished by a scholarly brand culture.

CONCLUSION

Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri, Indonesia, has established itself as a *pesantren* with a strong scholarly orientation. This trajectory began with the late KH. Yasin Asmuni, who authored approximately 233 scholarly works across diverse fields of Islamic knowledge. These works were actively disseminated across various regions in Indonesia and even reached the United Kingdom, giving rise to both personal branding and reputational branding. He successfully cultivated the image of a kiai who was highly productive in scholarly writing. However, personal and reputational branding require systematic cadre development to be sustained and strengthened over time; accordingly, following KH. Yasin Asmuni's passing, leadership was assumed by his son, who continued the branding tradition by remaining actively engaged in scholarly writing. This continuity serves as a mechanism for controlling and owning existing intellectual products, enabling sustained enhancement of individual and institutional value and reputation in the public sphere. Reliance on personal branding alone, without effective cadre development, is unlikely to ensure long-term sustainability.

Efforts to build brand culture at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatut Thullab Kediri have been implemented through Holt's three models, namely: brand communication based on narrative

constructions of the *pesantren's* image; brand components expressed through positive narrative content associated with the institution; and brand management focused on aligning these narratives with evolving cultural contexts while maintaining relevance. The resulting benefits of this brand culture include increased motivation among *pesantren* members to engage in scholarly writing, even in simple forms such as summarizing lessons or classical texts, reinforcement of the *pesantren's* originality as an institution actively engaged in scholarly production, and the cultivation of brand loyalty, enabling the institution to attract highly dedicated and committed individuals.

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