

Discourse Analysis Of Nahdlatul Ulama Identity Construction On Instagram In 2024 East Java Gubernatorial Election

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ABSTRACT

East Java is a highly significant political arena for Nahdlatul Ulama due to its pesantren ecology, networks of kiai, and affiliate organizations which possess strong social proximity and influence. As a base for nahdliyin citizens, East Java becomes a contested arena for gubernatorial candidate pairs to gain public sympathy. In fact, during the process, all candidate pairs claim to represent the nahdliyin community in East Java. Meanwhile, Instagram as a social media platform has become an intensive visual political campaign medium to win over the wider public. This research aims to explain how Nahdlatul Ulama identity is constructed, contested, and disseminated through Instagram during the 2024 East Java Gubernatorial Election. Therefore, this study examines the phenomenon of NU identity being contested by East Java gubernatorial and vice-gubernatorial candidates using a qualitative approach with critical discourse analysis. The theoretical framework combines Stuart Hall's representation theory and Michel Foucault's reading of power relations to analyze meaning production, symbolic legitimation, and truth regimes in digital space. The findings show three main patterns in the construction of NU identity on Instagram: an authoritative-institutional pattern, a hybrid nationalist-santri pattern, and a nahdliyin-populist authenticity pattern. Across these patterns, all three utilize symbolic meanings such as pesantren, kiai, songkok, the color green, sowan, and santri symbols as capital to gain legitimacy from the nahdliyin community. However, these symbols render the contestation of ideas, substantive policies, and concepts superficial. Thus, Instagram not only functions as a campaign medium but also as an arena for simplifying NU identity into electoral symbols

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1. Introduction

The 2024 East Java gubernatorial election took place within a political landscape that brought together electoral competition, socio-religious networks, and digital campaigning. The East Java General Election Commission (KPU) designated three candidate pairs: Khofifah Indar Parawansa-Emil Elestianto Dardak, Tri Rismaharini-Zahrul Azhar Asumta (Gus Hans), and Luluk Nur Hamidah-Lukmanul Khakim (KPU Jatim, 2024a). The final voter list (DPT) for the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election reached 31,280,418 voters, while voter turnout stood at 70.06%, with 21,937,202 voters exercising their right to vote (KPU Jatim, 2024b; 2024c). In the final results, Khofifah-Emil received 12,192,165 votes, Risma-Gus Hans received 6,743,095 votes, and Luluk-Lukman received 1,797,332 votes (KPU Jatim, 2024d). These figures show that the East Java gubernatorial election was not only a large-scale contest, but also an important arena for examining how political legitimacy is built through socio-religious symbols.

East Java has a historical proximity to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. In the East Java context, pesantren networks as educational institutions within the NU environment, the authority of kiai as pesantren leaders, Muslimat NU as a women's organization under the auspices of NU, NU autonomous bodies, and nahdliyin culture as a representation of NU followers constitute sources of legitimacy that are frequently contested in local politics. Recent studies show that NU is present not only as a religious organization, but also as a producer of legitimacy, an arena for representational claims, and an important actor in Indonesia's national and local politics. (Safiudin & Jannah, 2024; Qodir & Hefner, 2024; Rahman, 2025; Wadipalapa & Budiatri, 2025).

In this article, NU Islamic identity is understood as a set of religious, cultural, and socio-political meanings attached to symbols, practices, and figures associated with the nahdliyin tradition. Symbolic capital refers to the power of recognition, trust, and legitimacy that emerges when candidates are associated with pesantren, kiai, Muslimat NU, or santri vocabulary. Meanwhile, digital discourse is understood as a sequence of meaning production that occurs through text, images, hashtags, reposts, links, and inter-account amplification on Instagram.

This contestation of representation has intensified because political campaigns are conducted on social media, particularly Instagram. DataReportal (2024) shows that in early 2024 Instagram had a potential advertising reach of 100.9 million users in Indonesia, equivalent to 54.5% of the national internet-user base. Instagram's visual, fast-moving, personal, and easily replicable character through reposting makes the platform relevant for the dissemination of political identity. Recent literature emphasizes that Instagram functions not only as a promotional medium, but also as a space for identity formation, personal branding, opinion polarization, and the negotiation of political legitimacy (Lubis et al., 2023; Aulia et al., 2024; Sitorus et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Setiawan et al., 2024).

Previous research can be mapped into three clusters. First, studies on NU and electoral politics show that nahdliyin identity was contested through representational claims, elite support, and religious brokerage in the 2024 election (Marijan et al., 2025; Rahman, 2025;

Wadipalapa & Budiatri, 2025). Second, studies on NU in digital spaces highlight digital literacy and the construction of religious moderation in NU media (Ridho et al., 2023; Mashuri et al., 2023). Third, studies on Instagram and politics examine campaign promotion, candidate image-making, polarization, and discourse analysis of posts by officials or political actors (Aulia et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Sitorus et al., 2024; Setiawan et al., 2024; Azmah et al., 2025). Thus, earlier studies have shown that NU, social media, and digital campaigns are important fields in contemporary Indonesian politics.

However, there remains a gap that has not been sufficiently explained. Previous studies have not specifically examined how NU Islamic identity was constructed in the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election through Instagram as a visual campaign arena that combines images, captions, hashtags, reposts, and endorsements. This gap is important because the East Java gubernatorial election differs from the presidential election: the competition took place in a geographical space historically close to NU, involved candidates who all sought to build proximity to pesantren culture, and positioned Instagram as a symbolically dense medium of representation. Therefore, the central question is not only who is close to NU, but how such closeness is formed, displayed, and normalized through visual and textual signs.

This article offers a new perspective by combining critical discourse analysis, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, and Michel Foucault's concept of discourse-power. Hall helps read how pesantren, kiai, kopiah, sarong, Muslimat NU, the color green, and santri vocabulary operate as a system of signs that produces meaning about candidates' proximity to NU (Hall, 1997). Foucault helps read how these signs not only represent identity but also produce political truth claims: who is considered legitimate to speak on behalf of nahdliyin, who is positioned as having cultural blessing, and which symbols are normalized as evidence of legitimacy (Foucault, 1972; 1980). This combination expands digital campaign studies because it does not merely assess the frequency of symbols, but also examines the relationship among signs, power, and legitimacy.

The novelty of this article lies in shifting the analytical focus from NU contestation at the presidential-election level to the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election as a local arena marked by the density of pesantren and nahdliyin symbols. In addition, this article does not only read caption content, but also connects visual evidence, hashtags, reposts, and supporting news coverage as one digital-discourse ecosystem. Through a comparison of the three candidate pairs, the article shows that NU identity does not appear in a single form; rather, it is constructed through authoritative-institutional, hybrid nationalist-santri, and nahdliyin-populist authenticity patterns.

Based on this background, the article addresses two questions. First, how was the Islamic identity of Nahdlatul Ulama constructed and contested through Instagram during the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election? Second, how did the symbolic representation of NU on Instagram shift attention from substantive policy agendas toward electoral symbolic capital? This article argues that Instagram became an important arena for condensing NU identity into visual signs that are easy to market. However, this argument is limited to

discourse analysis of a corpus of posts and does not claim direct influence on voter choice or audience perception.

2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with critical discourse analysis of 2024 East Java gubernatorial campaign content on Instagram. The research focuses on how the Islamic identity of Nahdlatul Ulama is represented through visuals, captions, hashtags, inter-content relations, and intertextual reinforcement through supporter accounts and media reporting. A qualitative approach was chosen because the object of analysis is not merely the frequency with which symbols appear, but the way these symbols are articulated, repeated, combined, and given meaning within the context of local politics.

Theoretically, Stuart Hall's theory of representation is used to identify how campaign visual signs and language produce meanings about NU Islamic identity. Meanwhile, Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power are used to examine how claims of closeness to NU, kiai support, pesantren symbols, and repeated hashtags establish the authority of political truth on Instagram. Thus, the analysis does not stop at what appears in the posts, but moves toward how meaning and legitimacy are produced, circulated, and normalized.

The units of analysis include feed posts, carousels, digital posters, Reels covers, captions, hashtags, reposted content, and documentation of prominent interactions on official candidate-pair accounts, candidate accounts, campaign-team accounts, and supporter accounts that consistently circulated nahdliyin-style Islamic discourse. The Instagram accounts observed were @khofifah.ip, @emildardak, and @khofifahemilae for Khofifah-Emil; @trirismahaarini, @gushans_official, and @pdiperjuanganjatim for Risma-Gus Hans; and @luluknurhamidah, @lukmanology, and @dpwpkbjatim for Luluk-Lukman. The main observation period focused on the official campaign period from 25 September to 23 November 2024. Limited contextual tracing during the period of candidate-pair designation and the post-voting period was conducted only when necessary to explain narrative continuity.

The sampling strategy used purposive sampling with a balanced corpus based on candidate pairs and the Instagram accounts observed. Posts on the nine accounts were traced during the observation period and then selected based on their relevance to the construction of NU/Islamic identity. The selection criteria included the presence of one or more markers such as references to santri, nahdliyin, pesantren, kiai/kyai, nyai, Muslimat NU, Aswaja, sowan, istighotsah, shalawat, pilgrimage, religious attire, sarong, kopiah, the color green, or visualization of pesantren masses. Posts that merely contained calls to vote without NU identity markers, were purely personal, promoted non-campaign activities, or were not directly related to the formation of political identity were excluded from the main corpus. Based on these criteria, the final research corpus comprised 90 Instagram posts: 30 posts from Khofifah-Emil, 30 posts from Risma-Gus Hans, and 30 posts from Luluk-Lukman. Each candidate pair was represented by three accounts, with 10 posts per account. This

number is positioned as a purposively selected and balanced qualitative corpus, not as a claim about the total population of all Instagram posts during the campaign period.

Table 1. Initial constellation of the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election and entry points of identity discourse

Candidate Pair	Basis of Identity Representation	Instagram Discourse Notes
Khofifah-Emil	Authoritative-institutional Islam; proximity to Muslimat NU, pesantren networks, and experienced leadership figures.	Emphasizes leadership continuity, closeness to kiai/nyai, socio-religious khidmah, and Muslimat NU forums.
Risma-Gus Hans	Hybrid nationalist-santri framing; bureaucratic nationalism combined with the legitimacy of young santri.	Builds a bridge between Risma's image of concrete work and santri/intellectual representation through Gus Hans.
Luluk-Lukman	Claim of nahdliyin-populist authenticity from the PKB ecosystem and cadre formation.	Emphasizes structural-cultural proximity to the nahdliyin base and a more progressive alternative image.

Table 2. Instagram accounts as research objects

Candidate Pair	Instagram Accounts Observed
Khofifah-Emil	@khofifah.ip; @emildardak; @khofifahemilae
Risma-Gus Hans	@trismahaarini; @gushans_official; @pdiperjuanganjatim
Luluk-Lukman	@luluknurhamidah1; @lukmanology; @dpwpcbhatim

Table 3. Summary of the balanced purposive corpus

Candidate Pair	Instagram Accounts Observed	Posts Per Account	Total Posts Analyzed	Description
Khofifah-Emil	@khofifah.ip; @emildardak; @khofifahemilae	10 posts per account	30 posts	Selected purposively from posts containing NU/Islamic identity markers during the campaign period.
Risma-Gus Hans	@trismahaarini; @gushans_official; @pdiperjuanganjatim	10 posts per account	30 posts	Selected purposively from posts containing NU/Islamic identity markers during the campaign period.

Luluk-Lukman	@luluknurhamidah1; @lukmanology; @dpwpkbjatim	10 posts per account	30 posts	Selected purposively from posts containing NU/Islamic identity markers during the campaign period.
Total	9 Instagram accounts	30 posts per candidate pair	90 posts	Balanced qualitative corpus; not a claim about the total population of Instagram posts.

Each post included in the corpus was recorded in a worksheet containing account metadata, upload date, link, access date, content type, caption, hashtag, main visual elements, and analytical codes. Instagram screenshots were treated as primary visual data. To increase transparency, the manuscript presents examples of visual evidence and summary tables showing the relationship between Instagram data and analytical inference. The research claims are limited to representational patterns within the corpus; this study does not infer audience attitudes, perceptions, or changes in voter choice because it does not use audience surveys, voter interviews, or systematic comment analysis.

Coding was conducted in three stages. The first stage involved initial coding of textual and visual markers, such as references to NU, nahdliyin, pesantren, kiai/nyai, Muslimat NU, santri, kopiah, sarong, the color green, shalawat, sowan, pilgrimage, and party symbols. The second stage grouped codes into representational categories: religious authority, cultural proximity, organizational legitimacy, religious performativity, and policy articulation. The third stage involved discourse interpretation by connecting these categories to Hall's framework of meaning production and Foucault's framework of power relations, truth claims, and the normalization of political legitimacy.

Data validity was maintained through digital-source triangulation, data-trail auditing, and repeated reading. Triangulation was carried out by comparing screenshots, captions, hashtags, post links, access dates, posting accounts, reposts, and media reports that amplified Instagram content. The data-trail audit was conducted by storing the metadata of each post in a worksheet so that the relationship among visual evidence, text, codes, and analytical inference could be traced. Repeated reading ensured that emerging categories did not derive from a single post but appeared as representational patterns within the balanced corpus.

Table 4. Matrix for Instagram discourse analysis

Reading Level	Indicators Examined	Analytical Question
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Textual	Captions, slogans, forms of address, hashtags, religious keywords, emotional diction, pronouns, and friend-enemy framing.	How does the text name NU identity, and who is declared to represent it?
Visual	Attire, color, body position, pesantren setting, proximity to kiai/nyai, supporter crowds, mass-organization symbols, and party symbols.	What visual symbols are used to build Islamic legitimacy and closeness to nahdliyin?
Discourse practice	Reposts, endorsements, inter-account synchronization, upload timing, event packaging, and media amplification.	How are posts produced, circulated, and reinforced within the digital campaign ecosystem?
Social practice	The East Java gubernatorial context, structures of political support, NU history in East Java, and policy issues raised.	What is the relationship among identity symbols, configurations of power, and the policy agenda offered?

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Instagram as an Arena for Articulating Nahdliyin Identity in the East Java Gubernatorial Election

The 2024 East Java gubernatorial election demonstrates that proximity to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) became a contested source of legitimacy among the three candidate pairs. This can be understood because East Java is not only a province with a large number of voters, but also a region with a high concentration of Islamic boarding schools and socio-religious networks that influence how political legitimacy is interpreted. In the Instagram corpus, proximity to NU is not always explained through lengthy arguments, but rather through easily recognizable signs: the presence of kiai or nyai, pesantren spaces, religious attire, peci, Muslimat NU forums, the use of green, and santri-related vocabulary.

Based on the corpus analyzed, three patterns of identity construction can be identified. In the Khofifah-Emil pair, NU identity is represented as an established and institutionalized authority. In the Risma-Gus Hans pair, this identity is articulated as a bridge between nationalist pragmatism and santri legitimacy. In the Luluk-Lukman pair, nahdliyin identity is positioned as a claim of more authentic proximity to the PKB ecosystem and the cultural roots of NU communities. These differences indicate that the central issue is not merely whether a candidate has a relationship with NU, but how that relationship is packaged as evidence of political legitimacy.

Read through Hall's perspective, these three patterns represent three ways of producing the meaning of NU through different signs: institutional authority, a nationalist-santri bridge, and grassroots authenticity. Read through Foucault's perspective, they reveal a power competition to shape an electoral regime of truth concerning who is most legitimate to be called close to NU. Thus, the differences in Instagram strategies among the candidate pairs are not merely differences in

communication style, but also differences in their positions within the struggle over meaning and symbolic authority.

Authoritative-Institutional Islam in Khofifah-Emil

The construction of NU identity in the Khofifah-Emil pair is most strongly understood as an authoritative-institutional pattern. Sociologically, Khofifah occupies a relatively strong position because her relationship with Muslimat NU has long been institutionalized and publicly recognized. ANTARA (2024) describes Muslimat NU as Khofifah’s strong political capital in the 2024 regional election. In the Instagram corpus, this position allows the campaign narrative not always to prove proximity from the beginning, but to display the continuity of relations through religious activities, Muslimat NU forums, meetings with kiai and nyai, and visuals that affirm religious and experienced female leadership.

In this pattern, NU Islam is represented as an orderly, calm, and morally authoritative network connected to formal leadership. Posts highlighting togetherness with Muslimat, pesantren figures, or religious forums function as visual evidence that the candidate possesses strong social roots. Emil appears as a partner who connects religious symbolic capital with an administrative-technocratic image. Thus, Instagram does not merely display personal piety, but also packages leadership as stable, experienced, and continuous.



Figure 1. Visual evidence of the authoritative-institutional pattern of Khofifah-Emil: Khofifah in a Muslimat NU forum

Table 5. Examples of Instagram Data Evidence in the Khofifah-Emil Pattern

Instagram	Visible Evidence	Limited Analytical Reading
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Data Element		
Main visual	Khofifah stands at a podium in a religious forum dominated by a crowd dressed in white, symbolizing Islam.	The visual directs the reading that Khofifah is positioned as a Muslim female leader close to the women's Islamic organization within NU, a construction built through the placement of attributes, settings, and visual elements that reinforce her affiliation with the mass organization. Within this frame, Khofifah's figure appears not only as a bureaucrat or public official, but also as a representation of feminine leadership deeply imbued with cultural and religious legitimacy from the grassroots, so that the audience captures the message that she has strong access to and influence over the Muslimat or Fatayat networks. This reading implies the formation of a perception that Khofifah's position serves as a strategic bridge between state power and the moderate Islamic tradition, which subtly but effectively solidifies her credibility as an inclusive female figure, rooted in the Islamic values of the Nusantara (archipelago), and possessing high political bargaining power on the national stage.
Caption/hashtag	Thousands of Muslimat NU cadres echo the spirit of "Continue" for Khofifah-Emil and are ready to directly serve as polling station witnesses to safeguard the victory of the people of East Java. Thank you for all the inner and outer efforts of the extended family of Muslimat NU East Java. May they be accompanied by Allah's approval and blessings. Amen. Surabaya, Thursday (8/11).	The visual directs the reading that Khofifah is positioned as a Muslim female leader close to the women's Islamic organization within NU, and the text caption complements this construction by explicitly stating that Khofifah claims to be supported by all Muslimat NU cadres across East Java to continue serving as Governor. The claim of "all cadres" is not merely factual information, but rather a discursive strategy to build an illusion of homogeneous and massive support from the largest women's grassroots organization in NU, while simultaneously legitimizing her political ambition as an incumbent to seek re-election. By combining visual closeness to the organization and the textual claim of full support, the constructed discourse directs the public to interpret the continuity of her leadership as a collective will and mandate from the grassroots, so that criticism or alternative candidates can be symbolically deflected. The geographical emphasis on "across East Java" further

		strengthens regional emotional ties while concretizing her territorial power base, positioning her as an irreplaceable figure on the local political stage, because she appears not only as a bureaucrat, but also as a collective representation of the traditional Islamic women's networks spread across the entire province.
Metadata	Account: khofifah.ip; upload date: 8 November 2024; link: https://www.instagram.com/p/DCF25eHBzgl/?igsh=MTZqe_jg5YTVscDM00A==	The post was uploaded through Khofifah's personal Instagram account.

From Hall's perspective, the visual elements in Figure 1 operate as a system of signs. The hijab and podium signify Islamic identity as well as a position of speaking authority; the Muslimat NU forum connects Khofifah's figure with NU's socio-religious tradition. The meaning produced is not merely that Khofifah attended a religious event, but that she is represented as a figure accepted within the collective space of nahdliyin.

Within Foucault's framework, the religious forum in this type of post can be read as a space for producing political legitimacy. The authority of NU's women's organization, religious symbols, the congregation, and the candidate's position as the main speaker form a claim that proximity to NU is organic and continuous. However, this conclusion must be understood as a reading of signs within the post, not as evidence that the entire audience accepted the claim.

Nationalist-Santri Hybridity in Risma-Gus Hans

Unlike the incumbent pair, the construction of NU identity in Risma-Gus Hans tends to take the form of nationalist-santri hybridity. When PDI-P nominated this pair, Said Abdullah stated that Risma represented a nationalist symbol, while Gus Hans represented the santri. Risma was also positioned as an experienced female leader, while Gus Hans was presented as a representation of youth, intellectuality, and santri identity (Kompas.com, 2024a). This statement indicates a strategy of identity articulation: the santri element is placed as a component that strengthens religious legitimacy for a pair led by a nationalist-bureaucratic figure.

In the Instagram ecosystem, this hybrid model appears through a division of signs. Risma is portrayed as a figure of concrete work, firmness, and closeness to social issues. Gus Hans functions as a connector to pesantren culture, the santri world, and young religious authority. Visits to Islamic boarding schools, sowan to ulama, the use of peci, and captions about trustworthiness and honesty work to convey the message that this pair is not foreign to the nahdliyin social space. In other words, NU identity here is not positioned as an origin that is automatically attached, but as a symbolic coalition assembled through the combination of nationalism and santri identity.



Figure 2. Visual evidence of the nationalist-santri hybrid pattern of Risma-Gus Hans: a candidate-pair poster dominated by red and green, with Gus Hans wearing a peci.

Table 6. Examples of Instagram Data Evidence in the Risma-Gus Hans Pattern

Instagram Data Element	Visible Evidence	Limited Analytical Reading
Main visual	The poster places Risma and Gus Hans in a red-green composition; Gus Hans wears a peci and green attire; the text "RISMA GUS HANS" marks the candidate pair.	The campaign poster featuring Risma and Gus Hans employs a deliberate red-green compositional strategy that functions as a powerful system of political signification. Gus Hans is visually coded through his green attire and peci, while the typographic marker "RISMA GUS HANS" explicitly formalizes their identity as a unified electoral ticket. This juxtaposition of red and green serves as an effective visual shorthand,

where red conventionally signifies the nationalist-bureaucratic tradition and, more specifically, Risma's political affiliation and administrative leadership, whereas green is widely recognized within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tradition as a symbol of Islamic piety, pesantren culture, and santri identity. Through these visual cues, Gus Hans is positioned within the religious-santri sphere, while Risma embodies bureaucratic competence, executive experience, and populist appeal derived from her political career. The pairing of "Risma" and "Gus Hans" therefore brings together two distinct symbolic universes within a single electoral frame. Similar to Khofifah's campaign imagery, which integrated nationalist-bureaucratic and santri-religious codes to construct a hybrid model of leadership, this poster distributes these symbolic functions across two complementary figures. Risma represents the efficiency and authority of the modern state, whereas Gus Hans represents moral legitimacy and the grassroots credibility of the pesantren network. Consequently, the green attire and peci function not merely as sartorial elements but as calculated semiotic signs that activate the collective memory of NU constituents, positioning Gus Hans as a trustworthy religious figure whose presence legitimizes and morally reinforces Risma's secular authority. At the same time, the prominent textual pairing "RISMA GUS HANS" transforms this visual duality into a coherent political identity, suggesting that the ticket offers a comprehensive model of leadership capable of reconciling effective governance with Islamic values and tradition. Unlike Khofifah's visual representation, which constructs a single individual as the bridge between nationalist and religious constituencies, the Risma-Gus Hans poster distributes these symbolic codes across two complementary actors. This compositional strategy advances a visual argument that political leadership in East Java is most effectively represented through a harmonious coalition between bureaucratic governance and religious

		legitimacy, thereby reaffirming the continuing electoral significance of integrating nationalist and santri identities within the contemporary political landscape of East Java.
Caption/hashtag	May the spirit always be granted the best.	The caption "May the spirit always be granted the best" conveys a message of encouragement, hope, and moral support. It frames the campaign message in a positive and prayerful tone, suggesting that the candidate pair is associated with optimism, sincerity, and collective aspiration. The use of hopeful language also strengthens emotional appeal by inviting the audience to view the campaign not only as a political contest but as a shared effort toward a better future.
Metadata	Account: @trirismahaarini; upload date: 30 September 2024; link: https://www.instagram.com/p/DAhfsWYyOEN/?igsh=MXhudjB5MmlkemR4ag==	The post was uploaded through the candidate's personal account.

From Hall's perspective, the combination of red and green in Figure 2 is not merely an aesthetic element, but a representational code. Red directs interpretation toward nationalism and proximity to the political tradition of PDI Perjuangan, while green, the peci, and the figure of Gus Hans direct interpretation toward religiosity, pesantren, and santri identity. The two are combined to produce the meaning that this pair offers administrative capacity as well as socio-religious legitimacy.

From Foucault's perspective, this type of post becomes a discursive practice that constructs a political truth: a nationalist base can still obtain religious authority when articulated together with a pesantren figure. Thus, the symbols of the peci, the color green, and Gus Hans's santri image are not merely personal attributes, but discursive devices that connect the pair with the nahdliyin space. At the same time, this analysis does not conclude whether audiences accepted or rejected the claim, because audience reception data are not part of the research design.

The Claim of Nahdliyin-Populist Authenticity in Luluk-Lukman

The Luluk-Lukman pair presents a third pattern that can be called a claim of nahdliyin-populist authenticity. Detik Jatim (2024) notes that both candidates were directly nominated by PKB as an independent political axis in the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election. Because PKB is historically often read by the public as a party close to nahdliyin culture, this pair possesses capital to present itself as a representation that comes from within, rather than merely approaching from the outside.

In Instagram discourse, this position is translated through narratives of proximity to party cadres, populism, youthfulness, and the courage to become an alternative. The claim of authenticity does not rely solely on major figures, but also on the image of

cadres, ordinary citizens, and grassroots politics. NU identity is not only built through formal religious symbols, but also through populist language such as partisanship, change, closeness to the people, and the political representation of santri.



Figure 3. Visual evidence of the nahdliyin-populist authenticity pattern of Luluk-Lukman: Luluk with K.H. Ma’ruf Amin as a kiai figure and member of PKB’s Syuro Council.

Table 7. Examples of Instagram Data Evidence in the Luluk-Lukman Pattern

Instagram Data Element	Visible Evidence	Limited Analytical Reading
Main visual	Luluk appears with K.H. Ma’ruf Amin and other accompanying figures; Ma’ruf Amin wears a peci and is positioned as the central figure in the photo composition.	The main visual shows Luluk standing with K.H. Ma’ruf Amin and other accompanying figures, while Ma’ruf Amin appears in a peci and occupies a central position in the photo composition. This visual arrangement is not neutral. It places Luluk close to a senior religious authority who is strongly associated with pesantren culture, NU tradition, and Islamic political legitimacy. Ma’ruf Amin’s central placement strengthens the symbolic weight of the image because his presence functions as a marker of religious endorsement and moral authority. By appearing beside him, Luluk is visually connected to the kiai network, santri identity, and the broader PKB political base. The composition therefore constructs Luluk not only as an individual political actor, but also as a candidate supported by religious authority and embedded within established Islamic grassroots networks.
Caption/hashtag	The Chair of the Syuro Council of the DPP PKB, K.H. Ma’ruf Amin, ignited the	The caption and hashtags strengthen the religious-political framing of Luluk Nur Hamidah’s candidacy by

spirit of kiai politics at the event “Strengthening Kiai Politics with PKB” in Surabaya, on Thursday (14/11/2024). In the event, Kiai Ma’ruf delivered an important message about the need for PKB members’ loyalty in supporting candidates nominated by the party, including East Java gubernatorial candidate Luluk Nur Hamidah. “Why do I support Mbak Luluk? Because Mbak Luluk is a candidate nominated by PKB,” Kiai Ma’ruf firmly stated as the reason for his support for Luluk. “I am the Chair of PKB’s Syuro Council, so it is my obligation to support candidates nominated by the party,” said Kiai Ma’ruf before the kiai, community figures, and PKB cadres in attendance. Furthermore, Kiai Ma’ruf explained that loyalty to the party is a form of responsibility for all cadres. This statement became a clear message for all party members and sympathizers to unite in ensuring the success of PKB’s nominated candidate. “And that must become the obligation of all PKB members,” he continued. In his remarks, Kiai Ma’ruf also reminded cadres not to struggle half-heartedly. This statement was greeted with enthusiastic applause from the audience, who appeared inspired by the kiai’s guidance. “Do not look first at who the person is. Once someone has been nominated by PKB, whoever they are, even if they were a black servant, support them,” he declared with conviction. #PKB #PKBjatim

foregrounding the explicit support of K.H. Ma’ruf Amin, a senior PKB figure and former Vice President of Indonesia. His statement of support does not only function as a personal endorsement, but also as an institutional command rooted in party loyalty and kiai authority. By emphasizing his position as Chair of the Syuro Council of the DPP PKB, the caption presents Ma’ruf Amin as a legitimate religious and political authority whose instruction carries symbolic weight among PKB cadres, kiai networks, and NU-based voters. The repeated emphasis on loyalty to PKB frames support for Luluk as a collective obligation rather than an individual political preference. This creates a strong link between Luluk’s candidacy, PKB’s institutional identity, and the broader claim that PKB represents the political home of NU followers. The hashtags further reinforce this message by combining party solidarity, electoral mobilization, kiai politics, and Luluk’s name in one digital campaign frame. As a result, the caption constructs Luluk as a candidate whose legitimacy comes not only from party nomination, but also from religious endorsement, organizational discipline, and the moral authority of the kiai tradition.

	#PKBbangkit #PKBsolid #PKBmenang #politikkyai #bersamaPKB #LulukNurHamidah #LukmanulKhakim	
Metadata	Account: dpwpkbjatim; upload date: 14 November 2024; link: https://www.instagram.com/p/DCWcpn-TCzl/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ==	Metadata are necessary so readers can trace the data source.

Within Hall's framework, the presence of K.H. Ma'ruf Amin in Figure 3 functions as a sign connecting Luluk with pesantren tradition, kiai, santri, and nahdliyin political identity. Ma'ruf Amin appears not only as an individual, but also carries associations with religious authority, kiai wisdom, and traditional Islamic political networks. Therefore, this visual directs the reading that Luluk is not merely a female politician or party cadre, but a candidate constructed as having proximity to the kiai environment and the santri community.

From Foucault's perspective, the visual constitutes a practice of producing political truth. Proximity to a kiai figure and PKB's Syuro Council constructs a discourse that Luluk-Lukman represents a political formation emerging from the nahdliyin ecosystem. This claim is not only stated through slogans, but also through the presence of a figure who possesses moral and symbolic authority. However, as in the previous two patterns, the analysis is limited to the representational strategy visible in the data; public reception of this authenticity claim would require data from comments, engagement, or audience interviews.

3.2. Discussion

Symbolic Politics: From Pesantren, Kiai, to Hashtags

The most prominent finding from the discourse reading of Instagram is the dominance of a relatively uniform symbolic repertoire. Despite the different strategies of each candidate pair, the circulating symbols overlap: pesantren, kiai, nyai, santri masses, Muslim attire, sarong, peci, religious greetings, pilgrimage, shalawat, and the color green. These symbols function as signs that are immediately recognizable within the NU ecology of East Java. In the context of a visual platform, the repetition of these signs is more concise than lengthy explanations about candidates' historical or ideological relations with NU.

Hashtags and captions reinforce the work of these symbols. Terms such as santri, nahdliyin, pesantren, amanah, berkah, khidmah, and collective prayer do not merely provide labels, but also shape collective affect. Because this study does not employ a reception design, the term "shaping affect" here is limited to textual and visual tendencies within posts, not as empirical evidence of audience emotions. Within this framework, kiai and pesantren figures function as symbolic brokers. Their presence in posts, endorsements, or photos together produces a discursive legitimacy effect more quickly than policy explanations. This is in line with Rahman's (2025) argument

on claim-making and Wadipalapa and Budiatri's (2025) discussion of religious brokerage.

Table 8. Hashtags Used by Candidates' and Supporters' Instagram Accounts

Candidate Pair/Account	Priority Hashtags
Khofifah-Emil @khofifah.ip, @emildardak, @khofifahemilae	#KhofifahEmil, #KhofifahEmil2024, #MuslimatNU, #PPMuslimatNU, #NahdlatulUlama, #HariSantriNasional, #HSN2024, #Santri, #Pesantren, #PondokPesantren, #OPOP, #OnePesantrenOneProduct, #Santripreneur, #Pesantrenpreneur
Risma-Gus Hans @trismahaarini, @gushans_official, @pdiperjuanganjatim	#RismaGusHans, #RismaGusHans2024, #GusHans, #HariSantriNasional, #HSN2024, #SafariPondokPesantren, #PonpesTremas, #PondokPesantren, #Ponpes, #Pesantren, #Kiai, #Kyai, #Santri, #JatimResik, #PDIPJatim, #PDIPerjuanganJatim
Luluk-Lukman @luluknurhamidah1, @lukmanology, @dpwplibjatim	#LulukLukman, #LulukLukman2024, #LUMAN, #PKBJatim, #DPWPKBJatim, #NU, #NahdlatulUlama, #Nahdliyin, #Kiai, #Kyai, #BuNyai, #Santri, #PondokPesantren, #Ponpes, #PesantrenJatim, #MatholiulAnwar

Instagram and the Simplification of NU Identity

The symbolic mechanism above shows that Instagram is effective in packaging NU identity, yet this effectiveness also carries reductionist consequences. NU, which historically constitutes an intellectual tradition, educational network, social force, and national ethical framework, is often condensed into a package of quickly recognizable signs. In Instagram posts, proximity to NU may appear through pesantren backgrounds, religious greetings, photos with ulama, or the use of Islamic hashtags. Such representation is not wrong in itself, but it becomes limited when it is not followed by policy elaboration on pesantren education, the economy of the congregation, Muslim women, rural health, youth employment, and regional governance.

This simplification is related to the logic of the platform. Instagram prioritizes visibility, shareability, and emotional reach. Therefore, complex identities tend to be condensed into images that are quickly understood. Azmah et al. (2025) show that social media discourse in the 2024 election tended to highlight symbolic and controversial issues that could easily direct public opinion. In the context of the East Java gubernatorial election, what appears is not merely polarization among candidate pairs, but a competition to package NU into the most convincing visual format.

The claim that Instagram simplifies NU identity in this article is based on a comparison between the intensity of symbols in the corpus and the limited substantive programmatic explanations accompanying those symbols. Thus, this argument is not speculation about candidates' motivations or audience perceptions, but rather a reading of the representational structure within the analyzed data.

From Identity Representation to the Thinness of Substantive Agendas

One of the conceptual findings of this article is that the more intense the competition over NU symbols on Instagram becomes, the thinner the space available for discussing substantive policies in the posts analyzed. This can be seen from the tendency of narratives to emphasize proximity to kiai, presence in pesantren, support

from religious figures, and claims of closeness to santri or nahdliyin. Conversely, issues closely related to the NU social base in East Java, such as pesantren financing, the improvement of madrasahs and regional schools, decent work for rural youth, the strengthening of women's economic capacity, food security, and social services in the Horseshoe region and Madura, more often appear as general slogans than as in-depth debates.

This tendency affirms the findings of Marijan et al. (2025), who argue that nahdliyin identity in digital spaces is easily treated as a political object rather than an ideological subject. At the gubernatorial election level, the problem becomes even more interesting because geographical proximity actually provides a significant opportunity to discuss the real needs of citizens. However, Instagram's logic more often encourages the performativity of identity: candidates need to appear familiar, religious, and accepted by local culture. As a result, identity representation often outweighs discussion about how candidates will manage bureaucracy, budgets, education, and the welfare of nahdliyin communities.

Thus, Instagram operates in two directions. On the one hand, it opens a broad space for identity articulation and allows religious symbols to appear directly in the political arena. On the other hand, it encourages the compression of meaning, causing identity to remain at the visual surface. The main challenge for NU politics in the future is to transform symbolic energy on social media into more substantive discussions about programs, policy directions, and the socio-political position of nahdliyin communities within regional government.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article shows that the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election was an arena for contesting meaning, authority, and political truth about Nahdlatul Ulama Islam in digital space, especially Instagram. By combining Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Michel Foucault's concept of discourse-power, this study shows that NU identity is not only displayed as a campaign attribute, but is produced through the relationship among visual signs, captions, hashtags, kiai figures, pesantren networks, and digital amplification.

The main contribution of this article lies in three points. First, it maps three patterns of NU identity construction in the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election: authoritative-institutional in Khofifah-Emil, nationalist-santri hybrid in Risma-Gus Hans, and nahdliyin-populist authenticity in Luluk-Lukman. Second, it shows that Instagram condenses NU identity into easily recognized symbolic repertoires, such as pesantren, kiai, Muslimat NU, kopiah, sarong, shalawat, sowan, and santri vocabulary. Third, it affirms that the dominance of these symbols can shift attention from substantive policy discussion toward electoral symbolic capital.

Theoretically, these findings extend the study of Islamic digital politics by showing that visual platforms do not only disseminate campaign messages, but also form regimes of representation about who is legitimate to speak on behalf of religious communities. Hall helps explain how NU meaning is produced through signs, while Foucault helps explain how those signs become part of power relations and electoral truth claims. Practically, these findings remind us that campaigns claiming closeness to NU should not stop at symbolic visualization, but need to move toward articulating concrete programs for pesantren, women, youth, and nahdliyin residents.

This study has limitations because it does not analyze audience perceptions directly. Therefore, its claims are limited to patterns of representation in the Instagram-post corpus. Future research can deepen these findings through comment analysis, engagement measurement, audience surveys, or interviews with campaign account managers to see how these representation strategies are designed, circulated, and received by the public.

5. Declarations

6.1. Ethical considerations

Not applicable

6.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that the generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatgpt was used exclusively for language editing and/or grammatical improvement. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, study design, data analysis, data interpretation, results, or conclusions of the manuscript. Full responsibility for the content remains with the authors

6.3. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

6.4. Funding

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6.5 Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request

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