

Utilization of Digital Media Among Students at International Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract	International Islamic boarding schools (IIBS) are updating their educational curriculum by utilizing digital media in the learning process as a solution to the lag of students in the global era, especially in accessing information literacy during college selection. This study examines the use of digital media using the Uses and Gratifications theory with a descriptive qualitative approach, conducted in IIBS, which has international networks and a curriculum. Informants consist of students, teaching teams, and information technology managers. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and participatory observations. The data analysis technique uses an interactive model that includes data reduction, presentation, and concluding. The results show that the literacy level of students of IIBS is quite good compared to other Islamic boarding schools, because the administrators of international Islamic boarding schools understand the importance of digital media in the globalization era. Digital utilization is limited so as not to disrupt the activities of Islamic boarding schools. In addition, international-standard Islamic boarding schools can change the bad stereotypes of students, proven by alums of Islamic boarding schools being able to compete with the community, especially in the best university competitions and scholarships.		
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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools are traditionally known for their communal learning environment, where students live in dormitories and study under the guidance of a kiai. These schools typically provide integrated facilities, such as mosques, classrooms, and spaces for religious activities, designed to support students' daily needs without requiring them to leave the school compound. Some Islamic boarding schools also restrict themselves from non-Islamic boarding school environments. This is necessary so that the Kyai can monitor the student's routines from foreign influences (Hendrastuty, 2021). The development of boarding school education experienced a resurgence in the Reformation Era, because at that time, boarding schools had been recognized as the official institution of the national education system, which was recorded in the Law on the National Education System or the National Education System. Mr. H Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, the Minister of Religion for the 2022 period, stated that 26,975 Islamic boarding schools are spread throughout Indonesia (Arifiah, 2021).

Islamic boarding schools have many unique features in running their systems, such as having their learning curriculum and a closed environment model. Islamic boarding schools, as Islamic educational



institutions, are considered far behind compared to non-Islamic boarding schools educational institutions. So, there is a need for innovations in the concept of Islamic boarding school management, one of which is by creating an international standard Islamic boarding school concept that is expected to be able to compete at national and international levels. International Islamic boarding schools implement a strict system, students receive skills not only according to the school curriculum, but also the development of science competencies in Indonesia. Students are accustomed to speaking Arabic and English every day, especially in the learning process (Amirudin, 2019). The development of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia is divided into three main categories: traditional, modern, and radical Islamic boarding schools. First, traditional Islamic boarding schools are known as traditional Islamic boarding schools that still emphasize the teaching of classical yellow books without including a general curriculum. Second, modern Islamic boarding schools have begun to experience significant changes by integrating general subjects, teaching Arabic and English, and implementing a more professional management system. This transformation reflects Islamic boarding schools' response to contemporary education dynamics. Third, radical Islamic boarding schools are interpreted as institutions that adhere to conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings, tend to be ideologically exclusive, and in some cases are associated with the spread of extreme ideologies to involvement in intelligence actions (Fathoni, 2023). From the third typology, a new form of Islamic boarding school has emerged that is more open to the global education system. These international standard Islamic boarding schools adopt a modern and cross-cultural learning approach.

International Islamic boarding schools stand out for adopting open digital learning models, challenging the stereotype of pesantren as outdated and disconnected from technology (Surip, 2022). These institutions are reforming their curricula to compete globally to align with modern education standards. This shift is also vital in countering associations with radical ideologies, which are sometimes linked to traditional curricula (Rahmat et al., 2023). Integrating digital media helps students access broader knowledge, including counter-radicalism resources, and supports their development as critical, informed individuals (A'yuni & Muhammad, 2023). Additionally, digital platforms enhance media literacy, essential for discerning reliable information and avoiding misinformation. As a result, students are better equipped to explore diverse university options, not limited to Islamic institutions, including those recognized as world-class (Mutiah, 2023). Islamic boarding school graduates often struggle to access higher education and formal employment due to the lack of official diploma recognition. The government has yet to fully align pesantren graduate competencies with those of formal institutions like Madrasah Aliyah, limiting their opportunities in competitive university admissions and the job market (Karimah et al., 2023). This challenge is critical, especially for students in their late teens who begin exploring career paths and university options (Yusuf, 2021). International Islamic boarding schools can support students' career readiness through programs like academic counseling and learning assessments (Alim & Rahman, 2023). Integrating digital literacy into the pesantren curriculum is essential to address these gaps. Digital platforms provide access to university rankings and academic resources, including World Class University (WCU) indicators such as infrastructure quality and institutional reputation (Pramana & Rachmaniyah, 2023). Therefore, equipping students with digital literacy skills is key to helping them make informed decisions about their higher education pathways.

Achieving a position in the QS World University Rankings is highly competitive. Managed by Quacquarelli Symonds, a UK-based firm specializing in global higher education analysis, the rankings are based on six key indicators: Academic Reputation (40%), Employer Reputation (10%), Faculty/Student Ratio (20%), Citations per Faculty (20%), and the proportions of International Faculty and International Students (each 5%) (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2024). These metrics evaluate academic quality, research impact, and global engagement. (Triwiyanto et al., 2021).

Research on the use of digital media among students of international Islamic boarding schools is important in the context of the transformation of Islamic education in the digital era. Islamic boarding schools, as traditional educational institutions, are often considered conservative and less adaptive to

the development of information technology. However, along with the increasing need for digital literacy and access to global information, it is important to examine how Islamic boarding schools can integrate digital media in the teaching and learning process and preaching. Data shows that there is still a gap in the adoption of digital technology in Islamic boarding schools. Many Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia still face challenges in improving digital literacy among students, especially because they still maintain traditional Islamic boarding school culture (Fadli & Dwiningrum, 2021). This impact on limited access for students to digital learning resources and participation in global discussions that are relevant to contemporary Islamic developments. Meanwhile, at the higher education level, digital media integration has become a major focus in improving the quality of learning and research. However, implementing digital technology in Islamic boarding schools still requires special attention so that students are not left behind in the era of information globalization.

Several initiatives have been carried out to overcome the digital divide in Islamic boarding schools. For example, the "*Smart Pesantren*" program, which focuses on digitizing the teaching and learning process in Islamic boarding schools (Lintang Budiyantri Prameswari, 2025). In addition, the use of tablet devices and digital ecosystems such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) has been proven to be able to increase interaction between students and kiai more dynamically (KEMENKO PMK, 2025). However, data from the study shows that of the 28,961 Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, around 52% still have the status of traditional Islamic boarding schools, most of which have not adopted information and communication technology (ICT) in learning (In'amurrohman, 2019). This shows that many Islamic boarding schools still need to be encouraged to integrate digital technology into their educational process.

The purpose of this study is to analyze in depth how students in international Islamic boarding schools utilize digital media and to identify factors that support and inhibit the integration of digital technology in the Islamic boarding school environment. This study also aims to provide strategic recommendations for the development of Islamic boarding school curriculum and education policies that are responsive to the development of information technology, so that students can be better prepared to face challenges and opportunities in the digital era.

2. METHODS

The research method used is a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The research design applied is a case study, focusing on one or several international Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. This study attempts to describe students' use of digital media in the context of learning and preparation for higher education. The main location of the study is the International Islamic Boarding School (IIBS), which has different characteristics from conventional Islamic boarding schools, both *Salafiyah* and modern. The main characteristics of international Islamic boarding schools lie in integrating national and international curricula (such as Cambridge/IB) and Islamic content developed based on digital technology.

Data was collected through three main techniques: participant observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews. At the observation and documentation stage, researchers conducted a direct survey in the Islamic boarding school environment to observe the use of digital media in teaching and learning activities, available digital facilities, and the activities of students in accessing higher education information through digital media. Researchers also observed the role of educators (teachers/*ustaz*) in guiding students to use digital media effectively and critically.

The research informants consisted of final year students (high school/equivalent), teaching team, Islamic boarding school information technology managers, and madrasah principals or Islamic boarding school administrators. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on active involvement in digital-based learning activities and understanding curriculum policies and

practices in the Islamic boarding school environment. To strengthen the research results, researchers will also conduct limited comparisons with one or two non-international Islamic boarding schools as a comparison, to identify significant differences in the use of digital technology.

Literature study was conducted to enrich field data by reviewing journal articles, research reports, and curriculum documents related to international Islamic boarding schools and digital literacy in Islamic education environments. The data analysis technique used was thematic analysis, which includes data reduction, data presentation, thematic coding, and concluding. This technique is used to identify patterns, trends, and important issues related to students' use of digital media in the context of global education and literacy. The validity of the data was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as confirmation of the results with key informants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Identification of an International Boarding School in Indonesia

Islamic boarding school teaching methods have changed from year to year. It can be grouped into two parts: (1) traditional learning methods (original Islamic boarding schools), namely traditional Islamic boarding schools or *salaf* Islamic boarding schools which still maintain the teaching of classical books as the core of their education using traditional learning methods. On the other hand, (2) learning methods that are renewal or modern Islamic boarding schools, with learning methods that already use more varied methods, with learning methods that have been updated by following the era of globalization (Arifiah, 2021).

International Islamic boarding schools adopt a more advanced curriculum than typical modern *pesantren*. While all international schools are modern, not all modern schools meet international standards. Key features of IIBS include global curricula, foreign language instruction, diverse extracurriculars, and students from various countries. Despite modernization, religious studies—such as Quranic reading, memorization, and understanding—remain central, alongside faith, morals, and worship practices. These schools also follow the national education standards to develop students' intellectual, emotional, and practical competencies. What distinguishes them is the use of internationally recognized curricula to prepare students for global academic pathways through proficiency in English, confidence building, and standardized exams (IIBS, n.d.). They also emphasize media literacy by integrating technology into learning. Partnerships with global Islamic universities further ease students' transition to international higher education. For example, schools in Central Java provide digital learning tools under the "Learning with Gadgets" initiative, helping students develop strong tech skills and access academic resources more effectively (*Facilities – Al Azhar IIBS*, n.d.).

The level of digital literacy of students in international Islamic boarding schools shows a significant difference compared to traditional or Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools. Based on the results of a field survey conducted on 60 respondents from three types of Islamic boarding schools (international, modern, and traditional), it was found that 87% of students in international Islamic boarding schools admitted to routinely using digital devices (laptops, tablets, smartphones) for learning activities, either in the form of accessing online teaching materials, participating in LMS-based learning, or searching for information on higher education. In contrast, only 54% of students in modern Islamic boarding schools and 26% in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools had similar experiences. In addition, 72% of international Islamic boarding school students said they could search for, evaluate, and compare information from various digital sources well. In comparison, it was only 41% in modern Islamic boarding schools, and in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools, it dropped drastically to 18%. These findings indicate a real digital divide between types of Islamic boarding schools, especially in mastering critical digital skills.

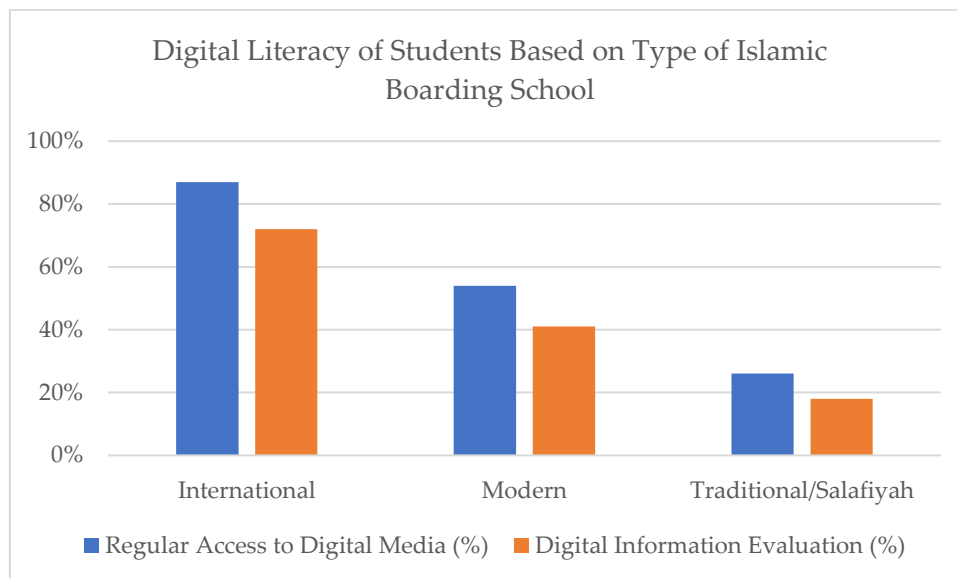


Figure 1. Digital Literacy of Students Based on Type of Islamic Boarding School

Percentage of Digital Literacy of Students Based on Type of Islamic Boarding School

The data shows that digitalization integrated into the curriculum and learning management in international Islamic boarding schools has a positive impact on students' digital skills, as well as being an indicator of their readiness to face technology-based global challenges.

Discussion

Models of media literacy in an international Islamic boarding school

Islamic boarding schools are generally at the middle and high levels (although several are established for elementary and university students). To continue their education, students will prepare to enroll, starting with studying college exam questions and choosing which university to attend. Intense competition to enter tertiary institutions, many Islamic boarding schools have prepared several school curricula so that students can adjust to exams. One of the programs carried out is learning to use English and Arabic, as well as a cycle program, namely the study and re-learning of national exam (in Indonesia named UN- *Ujian Nasional*) material and New Student Admissions (in Indonesia named PMB – *Penerimaan Mahasiswa Baru*) at various domestic and foreign universities (Amirudin, 2019).

In this preparation, there is a need for higher education media literacy in an international boarding school. Based on the description of international Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, media literacy applied by boarding schools can be studied using the Livingstone model. Sonia Livingstone (2003) explains that media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in various forms of media. Through media education, it is hoped that a person can reflect on their values, master various information technologies, encourage critical thinking skills, solve problems, be creative, and encourage democratization (Livingstone, 2003). For this reason, the following details media literacy in the Livingstone Model International Islamic Boarding School

a. Access

Access to digital media is shaped by ongoing social dynamics rather than one-time actions. In this study, access refers to students' ability to search for, retrieve, and utilize information. At international Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, students show strong digital literacy skills, actively using the internet and media services provided by the school. This challenges the outdated stereotype of pesantren as technologically backward, especially since many students are tech-savvy millennials.

Facilities like computer labs and gadget-integrated learning programs support digital access.

"Learning with gadgets" has become a core part of the curriculum, allowing students to use devices during class to enhance their education. This initiative helps students stay connected with global information and technological developments. However, gadget use remains regulated—students are allowed access only at specific times and cannot own personal devices on campus. These rules aim to maintain discipline while still promoting digital competence. According to national statistics, tech use is highest among the productive age group (15–64), reflecting broader societal shifts that pesantren are beginning to adapt to (Marta et al., 2023)

b. Analysis

Analysis is understanding and evaluating media messages, including their structure and impact, and selecting information according to needs. In the Uses and Gratifications theory, individuals are considered active because they consciously choose media to fulfill certain goals. However, interview results showed that some informants, especially children, did not understand the risks of mass media content and did not realize that economic and political interests shaped information media. In addition, the ability of the community to utilize digital media opportunities is still limited (Sitompul et al., 2021). There are three assumptions used in the Uses and Gratification Theory, namely (1) users are faced with many choices of media that can be used. Various media options have sprung up to meet the user's need for information from psychological and social aspects. (2) from a variety of user needs, where media utilization identifies the needs of each user. (3) There is competition between media to meet the information needs of their users (Karunia H et al., 2021).

Based on this phenomenon, students use digital media to benefit higher education literacy. In practice, students are quite flexible in accessing digital media, because international Islamic boarding schools have implemented learning using gadgets. This media educates students to be more active in the digital world. Student ability is also seen when students can translate information related to higher education. Students can explain the criteria by which tertiary institutions have superior accreditation and are worth fighting for. The management of the international boarding school also explained that the information accessed by students is information that is suitable for consumption. This is because accompanying teachers are allowed to limit the use of digital media accessed by students. Information literacy in tertiary institutions is not only accessed by students, but students can also access tips and tricks to pass university competitions. This activity helps students prepare themselves to qualify for the desired campus.

Even though international boarding schools have learning programs with gadgets, international boarding schools also limit their use. In Islamic boarding schools, gadgets are only used during class hours. Students can access digital media for learning purposes under the supervision of accompanying teachers. Not only that, but digital sites accessed by Santri are also limited. This activity is limited so students can focus more on learning and avoid false information (hoax). Restrictions on access to digital media in Islamic boarding schools mean that students do not have many choices of media to use. This is a gap in students' skills in processing data. Students are less thorough and critical of the information obtained. Therefore, supporting teachers have full rights over the activities of their students.

c. Evaluation

Evaluation involves connecting media messages with personal experience and assessing them based on truth, relevance, and intent. Despite receiving information, audiences retain the ability to interpret messages independently. According to a source, digital media supports students' media literacy by helping them access and assess information about higher education. Students learn to filter useful data for selecting universities. To guide this process, the school foundation enforces time limits on gadget use to prevent distractions and ensure digital tools are used for educational purposes. Using gadgets in the campus environment is necessary so students can understand their use. Several international Islamic boarding schools have implemented "learning with gadgets" in all classes, meaning that students will use gadgets in class. Another reason for doing this program is to uphold the

environmental care movement by minimizing paper use.

Subsequent evaluations also proved that the foundation provides additional classes, such as media literacy seminars at international Islamic boarding schools. This activity is carried out to increase students' knowledge so that they are wiser in accessing digital media. This is also why technological advances can be utilized for da'wah. Apart from that, this literacy seminar also appealed to students to be more careful and wise in using digital, to avoid digital crime, because digital traces will be difficult to remove (Putra, n.d.). This literacy seminar was also held because of an evaluation from management regarding students' low knowledge of digital literacy.

d. Content Creation

The ability to effectively produce messages that reflect creativity in composing ideas using text, sound, or visuals by following communication rules. This process includes creating and distributing content media and the communication skills that support it. Based on the results of interviews, international Islamic boarding schools limit media coverage in the Islamic boarding school environment. This media restriction determines what information can enter the international Islamic boarding school environment. For example, false information (hoax) spreads quickly. Besides that, the large amount of incoming information will disturb students' concentration while learning. Based on these negative impacts, international Islamic boarding schools provide freedom to access digital information with certain restrictions. Even so, the students in the boarding school environment will not miss news because teachers are required always to update the news and make it an example of learning problems that can be conveyed to the students. Actual issues can be received and translated properly because of the supervision of the supervising teacher. This will also minimize news misunderstandings.

Based on this role, the teacher can be called a human actor in managing the news obtained and conveyed to the students in the boarding school environment. The tasks of human actors are adapted to the multiplatform management system, namely, carrying out the structure by developing basic reporting competencies, including discursive awareness, practical and cognitive motivation, and online media soft competencies, namely, the attitude of fast work, multitasking, and socializing. The meaning is that the teacher plays a role in processing the news, then spreading it to the students in the boarding school environment using the media they have (Rusadi, 2013). Based on the research results above, the use of digital media in international Islamic boarding schools shows good collaboration between students and teachers in accessing digital news, so that students are quite active and skilled in accessing digital media literacy, especially in searching for university information.

Career Maturity of International Islamic Boarding School Students

Curriculum renewal at the IIBS Islamic Boarding School using learning through digital media supports students' maturity in determining their future careers, especially in determining their dream campus. Donald Super explained several aspects of career development, including career planning, career exploration, information, decision making, and orientation. Super career planning is what we will do to determine future targets (Super, 1983). Career maturity is an individual's success in completing certain career development tasks for a certain stage of development. Career maturity is characterized by the ability to plan a career with the right specific actions to achieve it. Individuals with mature careers can benefit from the guidance and advice services available at school, so that if the knowledge needed to make career decisions is more easily obtained, they will make career decisions. It is assumed that individuals can or are willing to do so (Jabbar et al., 2019).

The era of globalization demands a lot of development in the industrial world, including the higher education industry. Many tertiary institutions optimize quality and improve campus facilities to achieve World Class University status. The emergence of the modern university was the development of large knowledge-producing institutions. However, ranking is a relatively new phenomenon in university governance and politics (Benner, 2020). University rankings have become a global trend to

increase transparency and encourage competition in higher education. The system influences an institution's reputation, policy direction, and academic development, while also being a reference in setting standards for world-class universities (Nixon, 2020).

The university development process is always shared openly to gain public attention. One strategy that can be used to increase a university's popularity is to enrich the information on its website. With sufficient university information, the website is easy to index by search engines. A website has performance against search engines. Campus websites certainly need popularity to increase trust in the activities on the website. The campus website is a website that operates in the education sector. Campus websites must be popularized because they impact public trust (Ardhianto et al., 2020). Not only the website, but the university is also active in using social media as a medium for communication and promotion of higher education. Promotion facilities via social media make it easier to disseminate higher education information to prospective new students (Marwa Ulfa et al., 2023). The use of digital and modern information and communication technology (ICT) can optimize the development and management of university information, making it easier for users (data seekers) to communicate, send text messages, process data, and connect to the Internet (Burhan, 2023).

Prospective students, especially students from international Islamic boarding schools, need media literacy. On the other hand, Islamic boarding school students are known for lacking access to media literacy, especially in internet use. This stigma encourages policy owners to create international standard Islamic boarding schools with modern educational concepts so that the students in them can maximize their religious learning and also always keep abreast of developments on global issues (Boarding school, Info, 2021).

Based on the results of interviews with international Islamic boarding school students, they were able to collect data on university rankings for both domestic and foreign universities. Santri can explain that good higher education must have several criteria, such as the level of (1) academic reputation which measures the overall academic element (2) Employer reputation (3) faculty/student ratio which measures the supporting components of teaching and learning activities in higher education such as the number of staff educators compared to the number of students (4) Citations per Faculty which measures the number of citations, number of scientific publications and the impact of research produced by university academics on society; (5) and finally the International Faculty and International Student indicators which measure the number of international students in faculties/universities. In sum, students are quite active in using media in collecting data related to higher education. This proves that students understand media exposure related to higher education information, which means that students have a level of intensity in receiving messages through one or several media, which shows the extent to which someone has received information (Wenas & Stefany, 2023). Indonesian universities are striving to enhance their quality as part of the nation's strategy to strengthen human resources amid demographic and economic shifts in the era of the fourth industrial revolution (Suyantiningsih et al., 2023). This effort also aims to attract both local and international students while reducing brain drain, where skilled individuals migrate due to low wages or limited opportunities (Aytac, 2019). Skilled labor is an important asset for the country in its development process. Emigration of skilled workers poses a "brain drain" threat that can affect a country's growth, development, and quality of education (Zulfiu Alili et al., 2023). In this context, digital media use in international Islamic boarding schools is crucial in guiding students to select reputable universities and better understand higher education pathways, helping them avoid misaligned academic choices.

The results of this study can be analyzed using the Uses and Gratifications theory developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, where media users are viewed as active individuals who consciously choose media to meet their needs (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of international Islamic boarding schools, students utilize digital media to meet various educational needs that are cognitive, affective, and socially integrative. Cognitively, students access digital devices to obtain academic information, such as lecture materials, college entrance exams, and university information at home and abroad. This

finding is supported by evidence that students utilize digital media to find learning resources and increase their knowledge to meet their educational needs independently (Karunia H et al., 2021).

Students feel an increase in learning motivation when learning is packaged interactively using digital media such as learning videos, online quiz applications, or material simulations. This need reflects the search for a more enjoyable and relevant learning experience with the learning style of the digital generation. Regarding social integration, students also utilize digital media to connect with the wider academic community, such as attending international webinars or communicating with students from Islamic boarding school partner universities. This shows that digital media plays a role in expanding social networks and supporting the formation of identity among global students (Livingstone, 2004).

The positive impact of utilizing digital media has been confirmed in various previous studies, that the integration of technology in Islamic boarding school education can increase active participation and critical thinking skills of students (Nugroho & Astutik, 2024). In addition, Islamic boarding schools that digitize their curriculum tend to have graduates more adaptive to changing times and the demands of globalization. On the other hand, the results of interviews with teachers at international Islamic boarding schools show that the use of digital media not only acts as a learning tool but also as a medium for forming digital character, namely getting students used to being wiser in filtering information and avoiding misuse of technology.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that students in international Islamic boarding schools have a relatively high level of digital media literacy awareness, supported by integrating an international curriculum that is adaptive to technological developments. Although modernization is carried out, Islamic values remain the main foundation of education. Digital media is used selectively through a protectionist approach, such as limiting access to risky content, to maintain the integrity of Islamic boarding school values and prevent students from exposure to hoaxes and radical content. In addition, digital media has proven effective in helping students access higher education information independently, broaden global horizons, and increase readiness to face the academic world outside Islamic boarding schools.

The researcher suggests that Islamic boarding school educational institutions, including traditional Islamic boarding schools, should be open to digital-based learning innovations without ignoring traditional values. Digitalization can be a tool to increase teacher and student creativity, as well as strengthen competitiveness in a global context. For further research, it is suggested that the focus be directed at the curriculum and learning adaptation strategies in classical Islamic boarding schools, to see how they maintain their existence and produce influential graduates amidst the challenges of globalization. Comparative research between classical and international Islamic boarding schools in the use of digital media can also provide a more comprehensive picture of the transformation of Islamic boarding school education in the digital era.

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