Digital Identity and Moral Negotiation among Salafiyah Students in the Social Media Spaces

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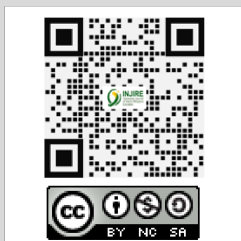[3]Deakin University, Australia

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the digital identity of Salafiyah santri (Islamic boarding school students) amidst the pervasive use of social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Initially regarded as a space for entertainment and information, social media has now become an arena for self-expression and Islamic proselytization (dakwah) for some santri. However, these digital activities often come into tension with the core values of the pesantren (Islamic boarding school), particularly zuhud (asceticism or simplicity) and tawadhu' (humility), which reject excessiveness and self-promotion. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing Giddens' theory of reflexive identity and Goffman's dramaturgical theory to understand how santri form and negotiate their self-image in the digital realm. Preliminary findings indicate that the santri experience moral ambivalence: on one hand, they strive to spread Islamic values through digital dakwah content, yet on the other hand, they grapple with the pressure to appear popular and appealing in the eyes of the online public. The study is expected to contribute to the development of a digital ethic for santri as part of the broader transformation of pesantren culture in the digital era.

Keywords:
Digital Identity, Santri Salafiyah, Social Media, Zuhud, Tawadhu', Self-Image

Abstrak

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis identitas digital santri Salafiyah di tengah arus penggunaan media sosial seperti TikTok, Instagram, dan YouTube. Media sosial yang awalnya dianggap sebagai ruang hiburan dan informasi kini menjadi arena ekspresi diri dan dakwah bagi sebagian santri. Namun, aktivitas digital tersebut sering kali berhadapan dengan nilai-nilai dasar pesantren, terutama zuhud (kesederhanaan) dan tawadhu' (kerendahan hati), yang menolak sikap berlebihan dan pencitraan diri. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teori identitas refleksifnya Giddens dan teori dramaturgi nya Goffman untuk memahami bagaimana santri membentuk dan menegosiasikan citra diri di dunia maya. Temuan awal menunjukkan bahwa santri mengalami ambivalensi moral: di satu sisi mereka berupaya menyebarkan nilai-nilai Islam melalui konten dakwah digital, namun di sisi lain mereka berhadapan dengan dorongan untuk tampil populer dan menarik di mata publik daring. Hasil penelitian diharapkan memberikan kontribusi terhadap pengembangan etika digital santri sebagai bagian dari transformasi budaya pesantren di era digital.

Kata Kunci:
Identitas Digital, Santri Salafiyah, Media Sosial, Zuhud, Tawadhu', Citra Diri.

Introduction

The development of digital technology has brought about profound transformations in patterns of communication, social interaction, and the formation of modern human identity. Amidst this transformation, the world of Islamic boarding schools, particularly Salafiyah pesantren, which are deeply rooted in classical Islamic traditions faces new challenges(Bustomi, Saiban, Rozikin, Suadi, & Armiah, 2025). For centuries, pesantren have been recognized as spaces of moral, spiritual, and intellectual education in Islam. Today, however, they must confront the realities of digital culture, in which individual existence is often measured by online presence and social media popularity (Turkle, 2012; Hjarvard, 2008).

Santri, as the primary subjects of pesantren education, now inhabit not only a physical environment imbued with values of simplicity and spiritual discipline but also a digital environment that is open, interactive, and highly competitive. The emergence of platforms such as *TikTok*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube* offers new opportunities for santri to engage in *dakwah* (religious outreach), learning, and cross-community interaction. However, on the other hand, this digital sphere also serves as a testing ground for the core values of the pesantren tradition, such as *zuhud* (asceticism) and *tawadhu'* (humility), two principles that *Riya* (reject ostentation) and emphasize modesty before both humanity and *Allah* (God). In this context, a digital identity dilemma emerges for the santri: how do they position themselves as religious individuals living in a technological era where every activity can become a public spectacle? How do they manage their digital self-image without losing the spirit of simplicity and sincerity? These questions become increasingly relevant upon realizing that social media is not merely a tool of communication but also an arena for the construction of identity and social legitimacy(Giddens, 2003).

Salafiyah pesantren are known for their educational system that emphasizes *tafaqquh fi al-din* (the deep understanding of religious knowledge) through intensive study of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), the cultivation of virtuous character, and the control of worldly desires through the practice of *zuhud* (ascetic discipline). Santri in Salafiyah institutions are taught to live simply, humbly, and to avoid luxury, as these values are believed to be the path toward sincerity in worship and closeness to *Allah* (God) (Al-Ghazali, 2005). However, as santri become increasingly active on social media emerging as content creators, *dakwah* influencers, or young digital preachers, a shift in orientation begins to occur. Popularity, follower counts, and online engagement gradually become new measures of success, replacing the foundational principle of *ikhlas lillahi ta'ala* (sincerity solely for the sake of Allah) that lies at the heart of pesantren education.

This phenomenon raises both ethical and sociological questions. Does the expression of religiosity through digital media represent a form of cultural *ijtihad* in *dakwah* (religious propagation), or does it instead signal an adaptation that dilutes the purity of pesantren values? Several studies suggest that the presence of santri in digital spaces has generated a new, more performative mode of religiosity one in which religion is not only practiced but also displayed (Muzakki, 2020; Hidayat, 2022). It has even given rise to what Mandaville describes as a pluralization of knowledge production characterized by functionality, spatiality, and mediatization. (Mandaville, 2007). Within this framework, santri assume a dual role: as spiritual subjects and, simultaneously, as social actors who must carefully manage public impressions.

Several relevant studies have highlighted the relationship between religion and digital media. For instance, Feher proposes a universal pattern regarding strategies and individual engagement in digital media, which is largely based on conscious decisions that allow individuals to maintain approximately 70% control over their digital footprint. However, the remaining 30% of online activities occur unconsciously, drifting along with digital dynamics and producing various unintended consequences (Feher, 2021). Similarly, Granic argues that the presence of digital media can influence adolescent development and mental health (Granic et al., 2020) Consequently, social media has become an effective medium for shaping digital ethic (Mailita & Maisarah, 2025) and religious identity through concise and visual content that conveys messages of moderation, promoting tolerance and inclusivity (Faizah & Tuhah, 2025; Saumantri, 2023). Nevertheless,

Hidayat, in his observation of "digital piety" among Indonesian Muslim youth, concludes that religious practices on social media are often performative and centered on self-image (Hidayat, 2022). In this context, Zaki Arrobi's research draws attention to issues and trends in religious studies in the era of new media, which has given rise to new actors in the "religious marketplace," such as celebrity preachers and micro-celebrity clerics. (Isbah, 2021). On the other hand, Badi'ah notes that in responding to digital media, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) have strengthened digital literacy to support learning and filter positive content (Badi'ah et al., 2021). Ihsan further adds that pesantren have creatively adapted their preaching through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (Ihsan, 2020)

Based on a review of existing studies, most previous research on pesantren and digital culture has focused on issues such as digital literacy, online da'wah, religious authority in cyberspace, or the adaptation of pesantren institutions to technological change. However, studies that specifically explore the digital identity of Salafiyah students through the lens of core pesantren ethical values—particularly *zuhud* (asceticism) and *tawadhu'* (humility)—remain relatively scarce. As a result, the moral and existential tensions experienced by students when navigating digital spaces have not been sufficiently examined in depth which moves beyond institutional or technological perspectives to offer a sociological and psychological analysis of students' lived experiences. By focusing on how Salafiyah students negotiate ideals of simplicity, self-restraint, and humility within the logic of digital visibility, self-presentation, and online recognition, this research uncovers the subtle moral dilemmas that arise in their everyday digital practices. In doing so, the study reveals that digital engagement is not merely a technical adaptation but a value-laden process that reshapes students' self-understanding, moral reflexivity, and religious identity.

Based on the above context, this study focuses on three central issues: How do Salafiyah santri utilize social media in their daily lives, particularly for purposes of *dakwah* (religious outreach) and self-expression? How do the values of *zuhud* and *tawadhu'* interact with or come into conflict with these digital practices of expression? And how can pesantren formulate a framework of digital ethics that aligns with the moral traditions of Islam?

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using phenomenological methods. This approach is chosen to understand the meanings embedded in the santri's subjective experiences as they construct their digital identities within the framework of pesantren values. Phenomenology enables the researcher to explore the dimensions of consciousness, motivation, and meaning that underlie the santri's digital behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted among alumni of *Salafiyah*-oriented pesantren in East Java by observing their digital *dakwah* content, which reflects *salaf* characteristics—namely, the use of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) as references for addressing various themes, while simultaneously promoting digital literacy as a means of educating the Muslim community. The study's subjects consist of three *santri* who are active social media users: Ning Sheila Hasina, Ning Imaz Fatimatuz Zahra, and Ning Umi Lailatul Rahmah.

The data for this study were gathered through two main approaches. First, the researcher conducted digital observations by closely examining the santri's activities on social media. This included analyzing the types of content they shared, their communication styles, the use of religious symbols, and the responses they received from audiences. Second, documentation was carried out by collecting relevant materials such as screenshots, excerpts from comments, and archived posts that aligned with the research theme.

For data analysis, the study adopted an interactive model as outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Miles et al., 2014). This process began with data reduction, where key information related to digital behaviour and value dilemmas was filtered and selected. The next stage involved displaying the data by organizing emerging patterns into thematic categories, such as digital *dakwah*, self-representation, and santri ethics. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting these

findings considering theories on reflexive identity and social dramaturgy. To deepen the analysis, an interpretative approach was applied to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in the santri's digital actions. This helped reveal how spiritual values were translated into online expressions and how the santri negotiated the delicate balance between piety and popularity. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation, comparing insights from both digital observations and documentation to maintain reliability.

Results
Social Media as a Space for *Dakwah* and Santri Existence

The results of the digital observation indicate that the three Santri *Daiyah* Digital utilize social media as a medium for light *dakwah* and Islamic education. The content they share includes videos, reflections on *akhlak* (moral conduct), worship tutorials, and simple moral messages. They refer to this activity as *dakwah kekinian* (contemporary religious outreach) —an effort to present Islamic values in a language that is accessible and appealing to the younger generation.

Table 1. Social Media Profiles of Santri Salafiyah in *Dakwah*

Instagram	TikTok	YouTube
sheilahasina ⬤ ··· سيلا حسينة زلمي 485 kiriman 727 rb pengikut 766 diikuti Motivator Lirboyo Kediri 🖤 Ahmad's wife @ahmadkafa @madpro1991 link yutub ngaji haid 🙏✋ youtube.com/@LimProduction ⓢ sheilahasina	limproduction limproduction Ikuti Pesan ↪ ··· 4 Mengikuti 40.9K Pengikut 619.5K Suka Lembaga Ittihadul Muballighin Ponpes Lirboyo Kota Kediri 🔗 lynk.id/limproduction	LIM Production 91,7 rb subscriber
imaz._ ⬤ ··· Imas fatmah zahro 532 kiriman 361 rb pengikut 637 diikuti Mama alzam & rumi💎 Khodimah @ppalihsanlirboyo A Woman behind @rifztravel_ @galleryrifztravel @nikah.sesrawungan... selengkapnya @imaz._	Don't Has	NU Online ⬤ 1,48 jt subscriber
lailaarrahmah880 ⬤ ··· umi laila 124 kiriman 1,1 jt pengikut 381 diikuti 2003 Mbak mbak biasa @eljannatain_official @banjarheromultimedia @laila_arcv 🔗 linktr.ee/ning_umilaila	lailaarrahmah88 Umilaila Ikuti Pesan ↪ ··· 379 Mengikuti 2.5M Pengikut 22.9M Suka Contact person 📞 🔗 linktr.ee/ning_umilaila	Ning Umi Laila ⬤ @NingUmiLaila · 522 rb subscriber · 55 video Channel Youtube Resmi "Ning Umi Laila" ...selengkapnya Subscribe

Based on the santri's *dakwah* social media profiles described above, the three Salafiyah santri generally use popular platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, which, according to a report by *We Are Social*, are among the world's top 11 websites. (*Digital 2025*, 2025). Furthermore, their digital *dakwah* activities—focusing specifically on Instagram accounts as representative samples from each Salafiyah santri—can be described as follows:

Table 2. Digital *Dakwah* Activities of Salafiyah Santri

Name	Activity		
Ning Sheila Hasina	Date of Release	2019	
	Account Consistency	2019-2021:	Dominated by personal content and hijab style
		2022-2023:	Significant increase in frequency and professionalism of content, coinciding with political momentum leading up to 2024. Posts became more planned and focused.
		2024:	Very active, with daily posting frequency— sometimes multiple times a day—especially via Instagram Stories, responding to current political issues.
	Themes/Topics	Politics & Socio-Politics (~60%)	This theme was dominant in the 2022. Content includes support for the current government (Jokowi, Prabowo), criticism of opposition (e.g., #2024ChangePresident), policy analysis,

			and defense of national unity and Pancasila narratives.
		Lifestyle & Family (Parenting) (~25%)	Content about daily life as a mother (mompreneur), activities with children, and family values. Often used as a "bridge" to convey moral messages aligned with her political narrative, such as character education for children.
		Hijab *Style* & Fashion (~10%)	Content about hijab styles, outfit of the day (OOTD), and occasional fashion product promotions. This was the initial content type, now significantly reduced.
		Dakwah & Inspiration (~5%)	Motivational quotes, Quranic verses, or life advice aligned with her political and social views.
	Audience Response	Politics (Pro-Government)	Estimated likes: 5,000–15,000+ Estimated comments: 500–3,000+ Sentiment: Very positive and supportive. Comments filled with praise and encouragement. Many refer to her as "a smart mother figure of the nation."
		Politics (Criticism of opposition)	Estimated likes: 7,000–20,000+ Estimated comments: 1,000–5,000+ Sentiment: Mixed—many positive comments, but also significant negative criticism from opposing views. Comment sections often feature debates.
		Parenting & Family	Estimated likes: 3,000–8,000 Estimated comments: 100–500 Sentiment: Very positive. Comments mostly include praise, prayers, and parenting questions. Peaceful comment space.
		Hijab *Style*	Estimated likes: 2,000–5,000 Estimated comments: 50–200 Sentiment: Positive. Comments praise her style and appearance. Low interaction and non-controversial.
Ning Imaz Fatimatuz Zahra	Account Release Date:	October 2021	Posting Frequency: Consistent, around 3–4 times per week. A good strategy to maintain engagement. Posting Days: Mostly on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday—targeting midweek and weekend audiences. Posting Time: Generally in the late afternoon to evening (around 4:00 PM – 9:00 PM WIB), peak Instagram activity hours.
	Themes/Topics (based on 12 posts)	Fashion & Outfit of the Day (OOTD)(~33%)	Photos showcasing clothing, style, and accessories, often taken in aesthetic locations.
		Daily Life/Personal Moments (~25%)	Snippets of daily activities like drinking coffee, walking, or self-expression.
		Travel & Tourism (~17%)	Content featuring vacation spots or destinations visited.

		Aesthetic Portraits (~17%)	Close-up or portrait photos with appealing lighting and composition.
		Collaboration/Partner (~8%)	Posts featuring other people (friends/partners).
	Audience Response:	*Likes*	250–450 consistently
		Comments	15–30, relatively low compared to likes.
		Sentiment:	98% very positive, mostly appreciative interactions
Ning Umi Laila	Posting Trends:	Days	60% of reels uploaded on Saturday and Sunday, 30% on Friday, 10% on weekdays
		Time	80% of reels uploaded between 7:00 PM – 9:00 PM WIB, prime time when audiences are relaxing
	Themes/Topics	Family & Marriage (40%)	Examples: "3 Rights of a Husband That Must Be Fulfilled by a Wife," "How to Educate Children According to the Prophet," "Signs of a Good Potential Spouse"
		Morality & Spirituality (30%)	Examples: "Avoiding Envy and Jealousy," "Virtues of Charity in Ramadan," "How to Control the Heart and Emotions"
		Social & Critique (20%)	Examples: "Modern Dating Phenomenon and Its Boundaries," "How to Choose a Leader in Islam"
		Practical Worship (10%)	Example: "Proper Way to Perform Dhuha Prayer"
	Audience Response:	Likes	Average of 15,750 per reel
		Comments	Average of 320 per reel
		Engagement Ratio (Comments/Likes):	~2%, indicating very active interaction
		Sentiment Breakdown:	Positive (Supportive & Agreeing): 75% Examples: "*Subhanallah*, ustazah. Your advice always touches the heart." "May I become a better wife, aamiin." Neutral (Questions or Topic Requests): 20% Examples: "Ustazah, please discuss the ruling on gold investment." "What if a husband doesn't fulfill his obligations?" Negative (Criticism or Disagreement): 5% Examples: "Which school of thought is this? It's different from the ustadz I follow." "Don't just burden the wife, the husband also has major responsibilities."

Based on the profiles and digital *dakwah* activities of the Salafiyah santri described above, it is evident that conducting *dakwah* through new media platforms such as social media has become a strategic choice for conveying religious messages to the public while simultaneously strengthening their self-existence.

On the other hand, the motivations behind the santri's dakwah are not always singular. Behind the intention to preach, there also emerges a desire for social recognition. One informant revealed,

"I want my dakwah to be beneficial, but honestly, when my videos get many views, it feels good—like being acknowledged."

This phenomenon indicates that the santri's digital activities are not merely expressions of religiosity but also a pursuit of identity and existence within the public sphere. They are confronted with a moral ambivalence: between the *ikhlas berdakwah* (sincere intention to preach) and the desire to be recognized.

Referring to Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the santri perform roles on the "digital stage," (Goffman, 2021) presenting piety as a socially acceptable identity before the public. At the same time, there exists a "backstage" where they grapple with inner conflicts—questioning their intentions, feeling embarrassment, and fearing being perceived as engaging in *riya'* (showing off one's piety).

Negotiating the Values of *Zuhud* dan *Tawadhu'* in Digital Culture

The values of *zuhud* and *tawadhu'* are not entirely lost in the santri's digital practices but are instead reinterpreted. Some informants believe that practicing *zuhud* in the digital era does not mean rejecting technology; rather, it means using it with the right intention and without excess. They have developed a new principle referred to as "digital *zuhud*," which entails engaging with social media without becoming attached to popularity or praise. One santri stated:

"If our intention is to preach (dakwah), we must remain humble and not show off our follower count. That is part of tawadhu' (humility)."

In everyday practice, however, the boundary between *dakwah* and self-promotion is rarely clear-cut. When santri upload religious content using carefully arranged lighting, polished speech styles, selective framing, and expressive gestures, they inevitably participate in the logic of digital platforms that reward aesthetic appeal, consistency, and audience engagement. These practices, while often justified as strategies to make *dakwah* more effective and accessible, simultaneously construct a public persona that is recognizable, appealing, and, to some extent, marketable. As a result, religious expression becomes entangled with the dynamics of attention economy, where spiritual messages compete alongside entertainment and lifestyle content.

It is within this context that a paradox emerges between *zuhud* (simplicity and self-restraint) and media aesthetics as a form of digital performance. On the one hand, *zuhud* emphasizes detachment from worldly displays and the minimization of ego, while on the other hand, digital media demands visibility, performance, and continuous self-curation. This tension does not necessarily indicate hypocrisy, but rather reveals an ongoing moral negotiation faced by santri as they attempt to translate pesantren values into digital spaces. Their digital practices thus become a site of ethical reflexivity, where intentions are constantly reassessed, and where humility must be reinterpreted in an environment that structurally encourages self-display.

This phenomenon aligns with Hidayat's findings that digital religious practices among young Muslims are often performative—where spirituality is expressed through visually appealing and even competitive formats. The *santri* thus occupy a dilemmatic position: they seek to convey moral messages without losing visual appeal. (Hidayat, 2022)

Self-Image and the Authority of Santri in the Virtual World

Historically, Salafiyah santri have derived their religious authority from the *barakah* (spiritual blessing) of their kiai and their deep mastery of the *Kitab Kuning* (classical Islamic texts) (Hadi & Anggraeni, 2021). However, in the digital era, this form of authority has begun to shift toward one based on popularity. A santri who can effectively package sermons and gain a large following can quickly acquire the status of a "young digital preacher."

This transformation has produced two major social consequences. First, the democratization of authority, in which access to *dakwah* becomes open to anyone with digital

communication skills. Second, the fragmentation of values, marked by the emergence of new criteria for piety measured through social media metrics. According to Giddens, this phenomenon reflects modern reflexivity, in which individuals build self-confidence through social recognition. (Giddens, 2003). In the case of santri, such recognition comes not only from the kiai but also from a global audience.

This situation creates a paradox: santri who were once taught to conceal their good deeds are now, in contrast, displaying them publicly as moral content in the digital space. Consequently, the digital identity of santri is not merely a reflection of pesantren values but rather the outcome of an ongoing negotiation between moral tradition and the pressures of visibility.

The Role of Pesantren in Strengthening Digital Ethics

Pesantren hold a strategic responsibility to guide the digital transformation of santri so that it remains within the ethical framework of Islam. Many pesantren recognize that social media is an unavoidable aspect of contemporary life. Some have begun integrating digital literacy into their *ta'lim* (instructional) and *halaqah* (study circle) activities—for example, through "creative *dakwah*" workshops or "digital ethics" classes (Istiqomah, Nadhiroh, Zulaichah, Kusuma, & Amnesti, 2025).

However, a few kiai emphasize that proper *adab* (moral conduct) must apply in the virtual world just as it does in the physical one. The values of *zuhud* (asceticism) and *tawadhu'* (humility) must remain the foundation of all forms of digital communication. Pesantren can therefore develop a Santri Digital Ethics Module grounded in the following principles.

The framework for digital ethics begins with the principle of sincerity in publishing content. In the digital context, *ikhlas*—or sincerity—requires a constant examination of intention. Content creators are encouraged to reflect on whether their work is truly aimed at spreading goodness and beneficial knowledge or merely driven by the pursuit of likes, followers, and popularity. This sincerity also demands consistency between values and the content produced, ensuring that every post aligns with religious principles rather than succumbing to trends or algorithmic pressures. For instance, promoting consumerist lifestyles or morally ambiguous material simply because it is viral contradicts this ethic. Furthermore, resilience in facing both criticism and praise is essential. A sincere creator views negative comments as opportunities for reflection and regards praise as a test of humility, entrusting all outcomes to Allah.

Closely related to sincerity is the awareness of intention, or *niyyah* digital. The prophetic teaching that "all actions depend on their intentions" applies equally in the online sphere. This awareness transforms ordinary digital activities into acts of worship when guided by a clear purpose. It involves guarding oneself against harmful content and cultivating the habit of silently declaring one's intention before posting, such as affirming the desire to share a reminder for fellow Muslims.

Another critical aspect is self-control in responding to praise and popularity. In the digital age, these represent significant challenges. Creators must recognize the danger of "*digital riya*"— the tendency to seek admiration and validation through likes and comments. Emotional balance is key: avoiding feelings of inferiority when engagement drops and resisting arrogance when content goes viral. Popularity should be regarded not as a goal but as an *amanah*—a trust to spread goodness more widely.

Finally, technology must be understood as a tool for *dakwah*, not as an end in itself. Its role is to serve the message, making religious teachings more accessible and appealing without overshadowing their essence. Digital preachers should avoid prioritizing aesthetics over substance, ensuring that efforts to enhance visual quality do not compromise the depth and accuracy of the message. Creativity and adaptability are encouraged, but always within the boundaries of authentic sources such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and sound legal reasoning. Vigilance is also necessary to prevent distortion, such as misleading edits or the use of inappropriate background music for aesthetic purposes.

In essence, this framework positions digital *dakwah* as an extension of Islam's intellectual and moral tradition—dynamic, reflective, and responsive to the challenges of modernity, while remaining firmly rooted in ethical and spiritual principles.

Discussion

It must be acknowledged that the advent of social media has shaped the digital identity of santri (pesantren students) through the intersection of traditional pesantren values and the logic of modern media. Although santri are accustomed to the principles of *zuhud* and *tawadhu'*, which emphasize simplicity and humility, cyberspace demands visibility and popularity—conditions that risk fostering religious narcissism. This phenomenon of religious mediatization compels individuals to continuously negotiate the sincerity of their devotional intentions with the aesthetic imperatives of media and the dictates of public algorithms(Raya, 2025). Consequently, digital *dakwah* practices become a highly challenging arena, requiring a delicate balance between disseminating moral messages and resisting the temptation to merely seek social recognition. Overall, the following discussion will highlight the ethical shifts that occur when traditional spirituality interacts with the dynamics of popular culture in the virtual sphere.

Digital Identity and Self-Representation

The concept of digital identity refers to the ways in which individuals present, negotiate, and construct their self-image within virtual spaces. According to Turkle, identity in the digital era is plural, flexible, and performative (Turkle, 2012). Individuals are constantly required to adjust their communication style, timing of content dissemination, and interactions with other actors to maintain a strong commercial image (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Social media provides a space for individuals to "create themselves" through content, comments, and online interactions, while simultaneously functioning as an echo chamber that fosters polarization, partisan effects, and centrifugal dynamics wherein identities, beliefs, and cultural references become increasingly segmented into comprehensive social divisions (Törnberg, 2022). In a religious context, digital identity is not merely a form of personal expression but also a reflection of how one interprets and embodies spirituality in the public sphere (Campbell, 2013).

Santri living within Salafiyah pesantren environments carry distinctive values such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), simplicity (*zuhud*), humility (*tawadhu'*), and obedience to the authority of the *kyai*. These values are cultivated through daily routines, disciplined religious practices, and close interpersonal relationships that prioritize moral formation over self-display. Within the pesantren context, identity is largely shaped by internal ethical commitments and communal norms rather than by external recognition or public visibility.

However, when engaging in digital spaces, they encounter media logics that prioritize visibility, aesthetics, and popularity (Couldry, 2012). Identities initially grounded in moral values are now also shaped by algorithmic mechanisms and public appreciation—manifested through likes, followers, and views. In this environment, religious expression is no longer confined to intimate or communal settings but becomes part of a broader attention economy governed by algorithms. As a result, identities that were initially grounded in moral and spiritual values are increasingly influenced by platform mechanisms and public feedback, which subtly encourage self-curation, performance, and comparison.

In this framework, the digital identity of santri can be understood as a form of reflexive identity (Giddens, 2003), continuously negotiated between spiritual ideals and social expectations. This identity is not static; rather, it emerges from ongoing interactions between pesantren values and the dynamics of digital culture. Santri are required to constantly negotiate between maintaining spiritual ideals rooted in pesantren teachings and responding to social expectations embedded in digital culture. Consequently, the digital presence of santri becomes a site of ethical reflection and moral tension, revealing how pesantren values are reinterpreted, adapted, and sometimes contested in the process of navigating contemporary digital life.

The Values of *Zuhud* and *Tawadhu'* in the Pesantren Tradition

Within the corpus of classical Islamic thought, *zuhud* (asceticism) and *tawadhu'* (humility) occupy a central position in shaping the moral character of a Muslim. According to Al-Ghazali, *zuhud* refers to distancing oneself from attachment to worldly pleasures and luxuries in order to embrace the Hereafter with serenity (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Al-Buthi further clarifies that *zuhud* does not entail a total renunciation of the world; rather, it means refraining from making it the goal, so that the heart remains unattached (Al-Buthi, 2008). In contrast, *tawadhu'* signifies humility and respect toward fellow human beings without arrogance. Ibn Ajibah describes it as an attitude arising from the awareness that everything originates from God. When one humbles oneself, one acknowledges that others deserve greater honour (*ta'dhim*) and perceives oneself as lowly and insignificant compared to the humility demonstrated (Ajibah, n.d.; Syarqawi, n.d.).

In the pesantren context, these values are not merely taught theoretically but are internalized through daily practices: wearing simple attire, respecting teachers, avoiding praise, and shunning ostentation. Thus, *zuhud* and *tawadhu'* function not only as moral concepts but as spiritual ethos embedded within the social habitus of the santri (students).

However, the digitalization of santri life introduces an epistemological shift: online activities initially intended for *dakwah* (religious outreach) often risk becoming instruments of self-promotion. From Al-Ghazali's perspective, such actions may obscure the sincerity of worship if driven by the pursuit of popularity (Al-Ghazali, 2005). As a solution, Al-Buthi emphasizes that digital *dakwah* should be understood as a *washilah* (means) rather than a *ghayah* (end), enabling individuals to live with inner peace while remaining productive in worldly affairs. A heart that relies solely on God will attain true tranquillity and freedom from materialistic constraints (Al-Buthi, 2008). Al-Aqshari also asserts that *tawadhu'* represents a stance between humility and arrogance: humility implies recognizing one's insignificance and neglected rights, whereas arrogance entails causing others' humiliation and neglecting their rights (Al-Aqshara'i, 2008). In short, within digital *dakwah*, one must continuously learn and acknowledge that what is conveyed reflects only a limited understanding derived from authentic and authoritative sources.

Mediatization of Religion and Religious Performativity

The process of religious mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008) explains how religious practices no longer stand apart from media logic but are instead integrated within it. Al-Zaman's findings reinforce this claim, showing that Islamic video content uploaded to YouTube has received positive responses and continued growth between 2011 and 2019. A strong and significant correlation was observed between comments and likes ($r = .862$; $p < .01$) compared to other variables. (Al-Zaman, 2022). According to Fadil, one contributing factor to this positive engagement is the "emotion affect," which triggers identity formation, worldview contestation, and the perception of any message—including hoaxes—as factual on an affective level. (Abdel-Fadil, 2019)

Consequently, religion is now communicated, interpreted, and consumed through digital media formats by the public. In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is evident in the rise of celebrity preachers (*ustaz seleb*), influencer *da'i*, and santri content creators who deliver *dakwah* in visually appealing and narratively accessible forms.

Muzakki notes that this trend has produced a "cult of popularity" within the realm of digital *dakwah*, (Muzakki, 2020) where truth is often measured by view counts and virality rather than substantive depth, authenticity, and scholarly competence (Media, 2025). Thus, the digital *da'wah* space becomes an ambivalent arena: on one hand, it offers opportunities for broad dissemination of Islam with strategic, tolerant, inclusive, and moderate themes (Muhammad Ihsanul Arief & Najmi Pakhruji Hidayatullah, 2025); on the other hand, it risks fostering narcissistic religiosity, which undermines *zuhud* and *tawadhu'* as core moral identities of Salafiyah santri.

For Salafiyah santri, this condition represents not merely a technical challenge, but a profound ethical and spiritual struggle. On the one hand, they are expected—both by their religious communities and wider audiences—to embody Islamic moral virtues and to serve as role

models (*uswah hasanah*) in their words, behavior, and online presence. Their digital activities are therefore closely tied to questions of intention (*niyyah*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), humility (*tawadhu'*), and modesty, which are central to the Salafiyah ethical tradition.

On the other hand, digital media impose aesthetic and performative demands that cannot be ignored if religious messages are to gain attention and reach broader audiences. Santri are encouraged, implicitly or explicitly, to produce content that is visually appealing, well-edited, emotionally engaging, and aligned with platform algorithms in order to increase visibility and virality. This creates a continuous negotiation between the need to communicate Islamic teachings effectively and the risk of transforming *dakwah* into a form of self-promotion or spiritual branding. As a result, Salafiyah santri must constantly reflect on how to remain faithful to ideals of simplicity and restraint while operating within a media environment that structurally rewards display, recognition, and popularity. This tension highlights how digital engagement becomes a space of moral reflexivity, where religious identity is shaped through ongoing ethical deliberation rather than fixed doctrinal certainty.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of digital identity among Salafiyah santri reflects a complex cultural transformation within the digital era. Social media has become a new arena for santri to express piety and engage in *dakwah*, yet it also gives rise to moral dilemmas concerning sincerity, modesty, and humility. This research finds that santri seek to negotiate the values of *zuhud* and *tawadhu'* within their digital practices. Although there is a potential risk of being trapped in self-promotional culture, many of them strive to cultivate a form of "digital *zuhud*"—a spiritual consciousness in using technology without attachment to popularity.

Pesantren institutions play a vital role in shaping a framework of digital ethics grounded in classical Islamic values. There is a need for a renewed curriculum that integrates digital literacy, *adab* (moral conduct), and spirituality, enabling santri to participate actively in online public spaces while preserving their moral integrity. This study highlights the urgency of renewing the pesantren curriculum by integrating digital literacy with ethical and spiritual formation, so that santri are not only technically proficient but also morally grounded when engaging in online public spaces. By positioning digital engagement as part of ethical self-discipline rather than mere technological adaptation, this research contributes conceptually to the discourse on Islamic education in the digital age, particularly by offering an ethical lens to understand how pesantren values are negotiated within contemporary media culture.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on specific pesantren contexts and qualitative interpretations, which may not fully capture the diversity of pesantren traditions or digital practices across regions. This research opens a pathway for further studies on the transformation of religious authority in the digital age and the development of Islamic media ethics within the pesantren environment. In doing so, pesantren can continue to serve as centers of moral and intellectual education that remain adaptive to changing times without losing their spiritual essence.

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