

# Shifting Authority, Shaping Spirituality: A Qualitative Digital Survey of Religious Practices among the Indonesian Muslim Students

## Pergeseran Otoritas, Pembentukan Spiritualitas: Survei Kualitatif Digital atas Praktik Keagamaan di Kalangan Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia

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### ABSTRAK

Transformasi digital telah membentuk ulang cara mahasiswa digital native mengalami kehidupan beragama. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana mahasiswa Muslim di Indonesia terlibat, menafsirkan, dan merundingkan praktik keberagamaan mereka di ruang digital. Menggunakan survei kualitatif digital dengan pertanyaan-pertanyaan naratif, data dikumpulkan antara 15 April dan 1 Mei 2025 melalui kuesioner daring bergaya naratif yang diisi oleh 84 mahasiswa Muslim STAI Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang, sebuah perguruan tinggi Islam yang berakar pada tradisi pesantren. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola kunci dalam transformasi spiritual, partisipasi komunitas daring, serta dinamika otoritas dan afek dalam keberagamaan digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa media digital tidak hanya memfasilitasi akses terhadap pengetahuan keIslaman, tetapi juga membentuk pola-pola baru ibadah hibrid dan keterlibatan emosional. Mahasiswa menunjukkan agensi reflektif dalam menyaring konten keagamaan daring dan membangun koneksi virtual dengan sesama Muslim dari berbagai wilayah, sekaligus menghadapi tantangan seperti kebingungan otoritas, pandangan yang terpolarisasi, dan kecemasan keagamaan yang dipicu oleh paparan daring. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa ruang digital berfungsi sebagai arena alternatif sekaligus komplementer bagi kehidupan beragama mahasiswa dan menegaskan urgensi literasi keagamaan digital yang kritis, inklusif, dan peka konteks untuk membimbing perkembangan spiritual di tengah masyarakat yang semakin termediatisasi.

**Kata Kunci :** Mahasiswa Muslim; Mediatisasi; Otoritas Keagamaan; Religiositas Digital; Survei Kualitatif Digital

### ABSTRACT

The digital transformation has reshaped how digital-native university students experience religious life. This study examines how Muslim students in Indonesia engage with, interpret, and negotiate their religious practices in digital spaces. Using a qualitative digital survey design with narrative prompts, data were collected between April 15 and May 1, 2025 through an online narrative-style questionnaire completed by 84 Muslim students from STAI Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang, an Islamic college rooted in the pesantren tradition. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns in spiritual transformation, online community participation, and the dynamics of authority and affect in digital religiosity. Findings indicate that digital media not only facilitates access to Islamic knowledge but also structures new patterns of hybrid worship and emotional engagement. Students demonstrate reflective agency in filtering online religious content and building virtual connections with fellow Muslims across diverse regions, while also facing challenges such as authority confusion, polarized viewpoints, and religious anxiety triggered by online exposure. The study concludes that the digital realm functions as an alternative and complementary arena for religious life among students and underscores the urgent need for critical, inclusive, and context-sensitive religious digital literacy to guide spiritual development in an increasingly mediatized society.

**Keywords:** Digital Religiosity; Mediatization; Muslim Students; Qualitative Digital Survey; Religious Authority

### INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has profoundly reshaped how younger generations engage with and experience religious life. University students, as digital natives, have become intimately familiar with “reciting through screens”—utilizing various online platforms to study religion, perform acts of worship, and participate in virtual communities. In Indonesia, which society marked by both deep religiosity and high levels of social media engagement, this phenomenon is particularly visible. Religious learning via YouTube, Islamic discussions on

Instagram or TikTok, and the sharing of Qur'anic verses through WhatsApp have become integral to the everyday lives of many students. In the early 2020s, disruptions to face-to-face gatherings accelerated the migration of religious activities into digital spaces, positioning online platforms as the primary alternative to on-site worship and learning. This transformation raises a fundamental question: how are students' religious experiences being reconfigured through the mediation of digital technologies?

Traditionally, students' religious activities, such as attending study circles (*forum kajian*) on campus or performing congregational prayers at the mosque, took place in physical settings marked by direct interpersonal interaction. Today, however, virtual spaces offer unprecedented accessibility, temporal flexibility, and geographic reach. Students can listen to sermons delivered by scholars from across the globe, engage in inter-*madhhab* discussions in online forums, or even join livestreamed Qur'anic studies from the privacy of their dorm rooms. Yet this convenience prompts a deeper question: does it merely substitute the medium, or does it actively reshape the very essence of their spiritual experience?

Previous research has already discussed digital religious practices among young people in many contexts. Campbell and Evolvi show that digital media is not only a tool of communication, but also a space where religious practices, symbols, and authorities are reconfigured (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). Lövheim argues that processes of religious socialization increasingly take place in and through media, especially for younger generations who grow up with the internet (Lövheim 2012). Moberg and Sjö further highlight how young adults use digital platforms to explore faith, experiment with religious identities, and build new forms of religious community (Moberg and Sjö 2020). More recently, Zaid et al. analyse "digital Islam" among Muslim millennials in the Gulf region and show how social media influencers reimagine religious authority and everyday Islamic practice through highly mediated and marketised forms of storytelling (Zaid et al. 2022). These works suggest that youth religiosity today cannot be understood without taking digital infrastructures and media logics seriously.

In Indonesia, scholars have extended these discussions by looking more closely at Muslim youth and digital natives. Fakhruroji and Rohmawati describe how religious practices during and beyond the pandemic are increasingly mediated and even hypermediated by social media (Fakhruroji 2025; Rohmawati, Zulkifli, and Hakiem 2025). Fajrie examines differences between digital natives and digital immigrants in performing digital religion (Fajrie, Muslimin, and Arianto 2025), while Nisa shows how young Muslim women creatively and lucratively engage in visual *da'wa* on Instagram (Nisa 2018). Nurfitriana analyses the hybridisation of Muslim millennial identities in the digital era (Nurfitriana 2023), and Muthohirin discusses how popular preachers shape the *hijrah* phenomenon among youth through online *da'wa* (Muthohirin 2021). Complementing these empirical studies, Ali et al offer a literature-based synthesis on the evolution of post-millennial faith, arguing that Generation Z tends to construct more personal, pragmatic, and flexible forms of religiosity while relying heavily on digital media as a primary arena of religious learning and identity formation (Ali et al. 2025). However, these studies still leave open important questions about how digital media reshapes religious authority and spirituality in the daily lives of young Muslims who are embedded in specific institutional and traditional settings.

This study addresses these gaps by using a qualitative digital survey with narrative prompts to examine how Indonesian students at an Islamic university rooted *pesantren* tradition, express and negotiate their spirituality in digital spaces. This article foregrounds the everyday online practices and reflections of digital-native students who inhabit both traditionalist milieus and algorithmically curated platforms. By grounding macro-level theories of digital religion in micro-level student narratives, it positions these young Muslims not merely as media users but as reflexive agents who both benefit from and critically interrogate their online spiritual environments.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework encompassing digital religion (Bellar and Campbell 2022) and mediatization (Couldry and Hepp 2013) to interpret the religious transformations experienced by digital-native students. The combination of these two perspectives is analytically productive because each highlights a different, yet interrelated dimension of digital religiosity. Digital religion foregrounds how religious life is reorganised through socio-technical networks and everyday media practices (Bellar and Campbell 2022); mediatization addresses the structural role of media in transforming institutions, communicative power, and the conditions of visibility; and affective spirituality draws attention to the emotional and experiential dimensions of faith (Couldry and Hepp 2013). Taken together, they enable a multi-layered reading that connects macro-level media structures, meso-level patterns of practice, and micro-level lived experience.

Campbell's notion of networked religion is used here to ask how faith practices are reconfigured through online communities, hybrid participation, and the decentralisation of authority. In operational terms, this perspective guides the analysis of students' narratives around their everyday use of religious apps, online pengajian, and social media feeds, with particular attention to themes of networked community, convergent online–offline worship, and shifting authority. Concurrently, Hepp and Couldry's theory of deep mediatization is operationalised by treating digital technologies not merely as channels of communication, but as structuring forces that shape how religious knowledge is accessed, rituals are performed, and meaning is constructed. This lens informs the interpretation of students' references to algorithms, platform affordances, and the ways in which these features configure what becomes religiously visible, credible, and repeatable in their daily lives.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative digital survey design using narrative prompts to elicit experience-near accounts of students' everyday religiosity in digital environments. Qualitative online surveys are particularly useful when the primary goal is to capture reflective self-descriptions, meanings, and routine practices that may not be directly observable in ethically or practically feasible ways, while still producing rich textual data suitable for qualitative analysis (Braun et al. 2021). In this study, the "field" is therefore approached through respondents' narrated experiences and their self-reported platform ecologies, rather than through direct observation of platform interactions. Data were collected between April 15 and May 1, 2025 through a Google Forms questionnaire distributed via institutional student groups and class-based messaging channels to Muslim students at STAI Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang who were actively engaged in, or at least familiar with, digital religious practices. In total, 84 students participated (57 male, 27 female), aged 20–25 years old (with an average of approximately 22 years). The questionnaire combined (1) open-ended narrative prompts inviting detailed written accounts of how digital media shapes worship routines, interpretive struggles, authority assessment, and emotional responses; and (2) closed-ended items that captured the most frequently used platforms and content types, enabling a descriptive mapping of the digital religious environment in which these narratives are situated.

Analytically, the dataset was examined through an iterative thematic analysis that moved from familiarisation with the full corpus to the generation of initial codes, the clustering of codes into candidate themes, the review and refinement of themes against the dataset, and the production of a final thematic account (Braun and Clarke 2006). Because the open-ended responses take narrative form (short experiential stories and justificatory reflections), theme development was guided by attention to how respondents position themselves, justify trust, and describe sequences of action, in line with narrative approaches that treat accounts as meaning-making performances rather than mere containers of information (Riessman 2008). To enhance interpretive robustness, patterns were repeatedly checked across respondents, and anonymised quotations (e.g., R1, male, 21 years old) are reported to illustrate how themes are grounded in participants' own formulations.

**Figure 1.** Screenshot of the online narrative-style questionnaire administered via Google Forms, showing that 84 responses were collected.

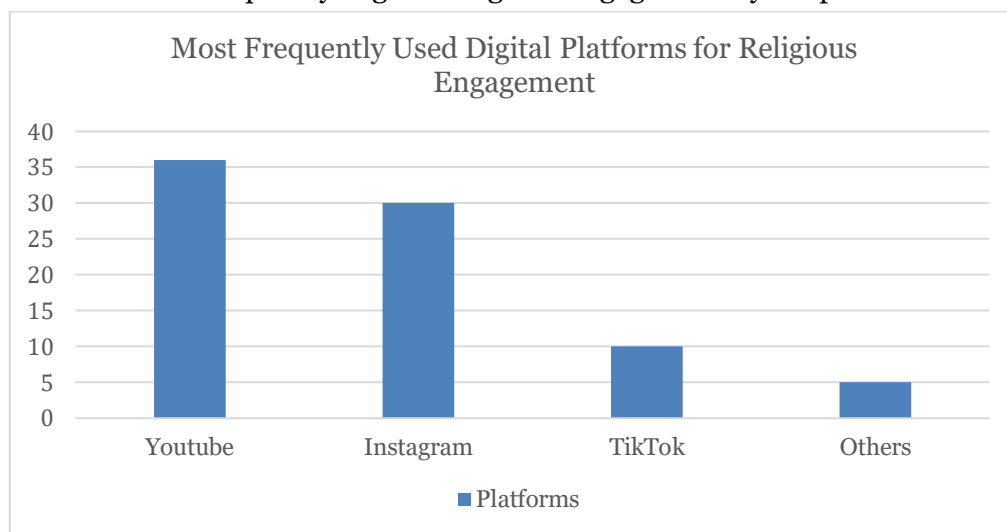
The screenshot shows a Google Form interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs: 'Pertanyaan', 'Jawaban' (with a count of 84), and 'Setelan'. The main content area has a purple header with the title 'Kuisisioner Sosiologi Agama: Praktik Keagamaan Mahasiswa di Era Digital'. Below the title is a paragraph of text: 'Kuisisioner ini merupakan refleksi belajar dari materi Sekularisasi Agama dan Konflik keagamaan pada mata kuliah Sosiologi Agama. Kuisisioner ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana platform digital mempengaruhi praktik keagamaan mahasiswa. Jawablah dengan jujur sesuai pengalaman Anda.' Below this text are two text input fields. The first is labeled 'Nama (Opsional)' and the second is labeled 'Usia \*'. Both fields have a placeholder text 'Teks jawaban singkat'.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Transformation of Students' Spiritual Experience in Digital Spaces

Digital media has significantly transformed students' spirituality. Eighty-five percent (85%) reported enhanced worship routines, supported by easy access to sermons, reminders, and interactive content. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram facilitate both religious learning and devotional habits. However, high reliance on digital platforms does not automatically translate into the recognition of digital sources as legitimate religious authorities. In students' accounts, the internet often functions first as an infrastructural gateway by offering speed and convenience, whereas questions of credibility and normative guidance are evaluated through additional criteria that are not reducible to availability. This distinction matters analytically because it allows us to read heavy digital use not as submission to online authority, but as participation in a mediated religious environment where authority is actively weighed, tested, and selectively granted. Conceptually, this pattern aligns with scholarship on negotiated authority in networked religion: digital media expand access and pluralize voices, but they also intensify the work of authentication, boundary-drawing, and trust calibration. Authority in such settings is not a stable property of the medium; it is a relational achievement produced through social cues, institutional credentials, perceived expertise, and practices of verification (Campbell 2007; Hoover 2016). For Muslim publics, the diversification of mediated voices has long been associated with a more decentralized and contested religious public sphere, where multiple actors compete for legitimacy and where lay users develop repertoires for evaluating claims (Eickelman 2005).

**Chart 1.** Most Frequently Digital Religious Engagement by Respondents



*Source: Authors' conceptualization, 2025*

The most frequently used platforms for accessing religious content were YouTube (identified as the primary platform by 36 respondents) and Instagram (30 respondents), followed by TikTok (10 respondents) and other platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and specific religious websites. On average, students reported using digital media for religious purposes for about 30 to 60 minutes per day, with approximately 83% indicating that their daily usage was under one hour.

**Table 1.** Most Frequently Accessed Content by Respondents

Type of Content	Frequently accessed by
Islamic lectures and sermons	49
Motivational religious contents	31
Illustrated Quranic/Hadith quotes	19
Religious discussions	18
Religious music	17
Religious memes	10

*Source: Authors' conceptualization, 2025*

The types of content accessed were diverse, ranging from Islamic lectures and sermons (regularly accessed by 49 respondents), spiritually themed motivational content (31 respondents), illustrated Qur’anic or Hadith quotations (19 respondents), religious debates or discussions (18 respondents), religious music (17 respondents), to religiously themed memes (10 respondents). These findings suggest that the practice of “digital recitation” among students encompasses a wide spectrum of activities—from formal learning to religiously inflected entertainment consumption.

One respondent (R17, male, 20 years old) described how he was drawn to a YouTube lecture explaining Kurt Gödel’s attempt to prove the existence of God through mathematical logic. What impressed him was not only the religious message, but the sense that faith could be articulated in rational, philosophical language; he concluded that his religion “is not merely about blind belief but has strong logical foundations.” Narratives like this illustrate a transformation on two intertwined levels. First, sources of religious learning are no longer confined to *ustadh*-led gatherings or printed books but extend to global digital materials such as scientific talks,

podcasts, and philosophy-tinged explanations. This reflects the logic of networked religion as students stitch together formal instruction from campus or *pesantren* with self-directed exploration online, producing hybrid knowledge paths that move fluidly across platforms and authorities (Bellar and Campbell 2022; Campbell 2010). Second, the texture of spiritual experience itself changes. Faith is not only intensified through emotional sermons but also through intellectual stimulation and curiosity, resonating with what Ali et al. (2025) show that Gen-Z's tendency toward pragmatic and reflective religiosity in the digital era.

Beyond expanding knowledge, digital media also reshapes how students perform daily rituals. Many respondents portrayed prayer-reminder apps and curated Instagram or WhatsApp feeds as “quiet companions” that nudge them toward *istiqamah* amid dense academic schedules. Listening to *murattal* on a phone while commuting, reading Qur'an via an app instead of carrying a *mushaf*, or following a short *dhikr* routine guided by Instagram Reels are examples of what one student summarized as “digital religious activities that simply make worship easier” (R22, male, 23 years old). Here, media is not a neutral add-on; it organizes the very timing and form of practice. In Couldry and Hepp's terms, this is an instance of deep mediatization, as digital infrastructures become part of the basic scaffolding of everyday religious life, structuring when and how devotion is remembered, repeated, and shared (Couldry and Hepp 2013).

In this context, the article uses the term “online worship” to refer to ritual practices—such as performing *salāt* via livestream, joining virtual *majelis taklim* on Zoom, following collective *dhikr* through YouTube Live—that are carried out synchronously or asynchronously through internet-connected devices. For some students, online worship enables forms of spiritual togetherness that would otherwise be impossible: praying “side by side” with family members scattered across cities or joining a weekly online *kajian* whose participants are spread across Indonesia. Around 61% of respondents considered such online worship to be as religiously valid as its offline counterpart, on the condition of sincere intention. As one put it, “what matters is maintaining the relationship between God and the believer, regardless of the medium” (R3, female, 20 years old). These voices echo broader discussions of digital religion that emphasise creative adaptation and the legitimacy of using new media as sites of worship and spiritual connection (Horst and Miller 2020; Sito Rohmawati et al. 2025).

Yet students' narratives also underscore that this transformation is not purely liberating. Several emphasized that the “feel” of worship changes when mediated by a screen. R45 (male, 22 years old) noted that studying religion online lacks the shared bodily presence, the scent of the mosque, and the collective *āmin* that ordinarily thicken the sense of sacred atmosphere. R12 (female, 20 years old) reported that when she attends online *kajian* from home, the temptation to open other apps or respond to domestic interruptions makes it harder to sustain deep attention. More than half of respondents admitted struggling with concentration during digital religious activities, citing phone notifications, background noise, or the comfort of their beds as constant distractions.

These accounts highlight the limits of digital spirituality when seen through the lens of affective spirituality. Embodied, multisensory cues such as walking to the mosque, queuing in the ablution area, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in *saf*, hearing the echo of recitation in a shared space, play a crucial role in producing feelings of reverence and communal warmth (McGuire 2016; Ulland 2012). In online worship, by contrast, much of this corporeal density is thinned out. Students often describe a paradoxical situation. Cognitively, they may gain more material than ever before, but affectively, the “spiritual ambience” feels weaker. This contrast complicates optimistic accounts of digital religion that focus solely on access and pluralization, showing that mediatization can simultaneously enrich and impoverish religious experience.

Still, students do not simply surrender to these constraints. Many actively re-craft their environments to cultivate *khushū* in digital settings by switching their phones to silent, closing unnecessary tabs, choosing a quiet corner of the house, or mentally imagining themselves sitting in a mosque. Several insist that online worship should function as a compliment, not a replacement. As R45 phrased it, digital activities can supplement but

“cannot fully replace the complete spiritual experience of in-person worship.” In theoretical terms, their strategies reveal how digital-native Muslims inhabit deep mediatization reflexively. They are aware that media shape their practice, yet they attempt to “bend” these infrastructures to safeguard what they understand as authentic affective spirituality.

These patterns resonate with and at the same time extend existing research on Indonesian Muslim digital religiosity. Rohmawati show how social media generates hybrid online–offline religious spaces and unsettles inherited authority structures (Sito Rohmawati et al. 2025). Our study traces how such hybrid spaces are inhabited by students, from reminder apps that quietly punctuate their day to TikTok *dhikr* playlists that accompany solitary study sessions. At the level of content circulation, the data partly confirm Alfi et al.’s findings about the algorithmic dominance of short, emotionally charged *da’wa* videos and the risk of fragmented understanding in the “digital *ummah*” (Alfi et al. 2025), yet here students appear less as passive targets than as selective, reflexive users who cross-check information and deliberately combine short clips with long lectures and offline classes. In terms of subjectivity, the findings speak to and complicate Ali et al.’s account of Gen-Z religiosity and personalized faith (Ali et al. 2025), while respondents do curate individual spiritual repertoires and value the inclusivity of digital spaces, they also voice strong attachment to embodied communal worship and discomfort when online practice erodes affective depth, so that digital religion emerges as a space of ongoing negotiation between networked convenience, mediatized routines, and the pursuit of thick, affective spirituality.

### **The Digital Space as an Alternative Arena for Worship and Community**

The digital sphere functions for these students as an alternative and complementary arena for worship and community, rather than a substitute for the mosque or campus *majelis taklim*. Survey data show that 84% of respondents have, at some point, replaced offline worship with its online form, but usually in due to exceptional circumstances—illness, bad weather, or deadlines—while only one person reported relying on online worship all the time and seven said they never do so. Students consistently describe offline worship as the “default” and online worship as a pragmatic backup that helps them maintain continuity of devotion when embodied gathering is temporarily impossible. This pattern resonates with mediatization accounts in which digital infrastructures reorganize when and how rituals can be performed, without fully displacing existing religious institutions (Hjarvard 2013).

Accessibility is the most frequently praised feature of this alternative arena. Students explain how, with a stable connection and a smartphone, a dorm room or village house can momentarily become part of a dispersed *jama’ah*. “The greatest strength of digital religious activities is their wide and unlimited accessibility,” wrote one student (R8, female, 21 years old). A rural respondent can join a weekly Qur’an recitation in Jakarta via YouTube Live; another follows an *ustadh* in another province through Instagram Live while commuting. These vignettes echo studies of digital religion and hypermediation that show how social media knit together online and offline religious spaces (Evolvi 2022a, 2022b).

In addition to temporal and spatial accessibility, the digital space offers students a broader and more diverse scope of community. In offline settings, students’ religious communities are often limited to campus-based organizations or local peer groups. Online, however, they can connect with Muslims from different cities, countries, and theological backgrounds. “Social media makes it easier for me to connect with fellow believers, follow religious studies, and share thoughts, even though we are far apart,” noted one respondent (R33, male, 24 years old). Platforms such as WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, Islamic discussion forums, and Instagram comment sections have emerged as new communal gathering spaces. Many respondents frame these networks as a relief from the constraints of local environments. For example, a female student like R21, 22 years old, who feels “too liberal” for her hometown can find like-minded friends in an alternative online *kajian* group. This practice closely mirrors Campbell’s notion of networked religion, where community is organized less by shared neighborhoods than by shared interests and affective affinities (Campbell 2012; Nurfitriia 2023).

However, it is important to note that the quality of relationships within virtual communities is often perceived as different from those formed through face-to-face interaction. Many respondents felt that online relationships tend to be more superficial or less emotionally warm. R33, for instance, after acknowledging the convenience of maintaining connections online, added: “These relationships still need to be balanced with offline interaction to preserve emotional and spiritual closeness. Digital media expands the reach of my social relationships, but digital interaction feels less warm than face-to-face encounters.” Similar view was expressed by R21, who noted that digital communication lacks a sense of familial intimacy due to the absence of physical contact such as handshakes, eye contact, or shared embodied experiences. Read through the lens of affective spirituality, these narratives show that while mediatized networks can sustain contact and exchange, they do not automatically reproduce the dense, multisensory atmosphere associated with mosque-based community (McGuire 2016). This nuance is largely absent from library-based discussions of post-millennial faith that emphasize flexible, personalized religiosity but pay less attention to the texture of embodied togetherness (Ali et al. 2025).

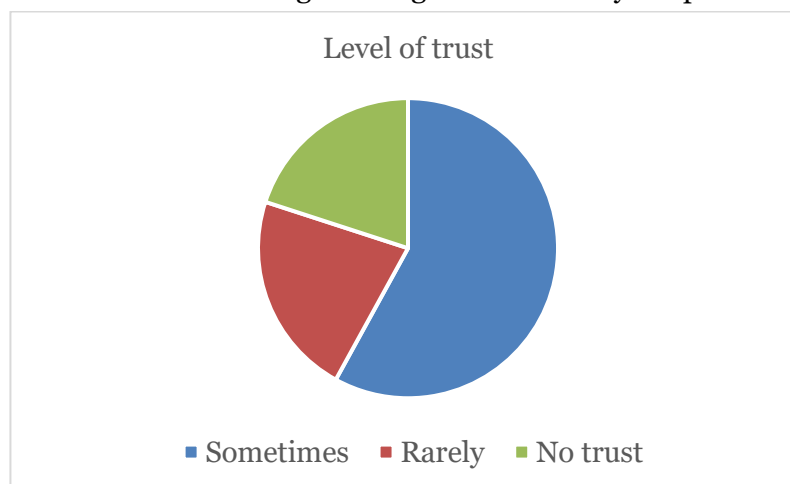
A further dimension of this alternative arena is the emergence of students as *micro-da'i*. Ninety-three percent of respondents report sharing religious content—verses, short reminders, lecture snippets, or infographics—across their social media feeds. Motivations range from the ethical imperative of *amar ma'rūf* to the desire to encourage peers or “keep my own heart reminded.” Importantly, many describe a flow of knowledge from offline to online; they attend lectures or *pesantran* classes, then repost or reframe the material for friends who lack access to similar environments. This pattern aligns with broader accounts of the democratization of *da'wa* and the rise of Muslim influencers (Alfi et al. 2025; Zaid et al. 2022), but with a crucial difference. Rather than charismatic, monetized influencers, our data foreground ordinary students who consciously position themselves as intermediaries, still deferring to *ustadh* and lecturers as primary sources of authority.

These findings suggest a more ambivalent and finely grained picture of the digital arena than many macro-level or library-based studies. Kheryadi and Chorbwhan research on Muslim digital identities in Indonesia and Thailand, and Alfi *et al's* analysis of the algorithmically shaped “digital *ummah*” underscore how social media reconfigure authority and identity at structural and discursive levels (Ali et al. 2025; Kheryadi and Chorbwhan 2025). Zaid et al. similarly highlight the growing power of professional Muslim influencers among millennials (Zaid et al. 2022). However, by following students' everyday negotiations between mosque and smartphone, local *pengajian* and Telegram groups, we reveal the limits of this transformation. Online worship is embraced as a flexible complement rather than a full replacement, networked communities are valued yet felt to lack affective depth, and *micro-da'wa* is framed as an extension of offline scholarly authority. In this sense, the digital space appears less as a self-sufficient “virtual *ummah*” and more as a mediated layer that students continuously weave into, and measure against, their embodied religious lives.

### **Tensions and the Negotiation of Religious Authority and Digital Content**

The migration of religious practice into digital spaces has brought with it significant consequences in the form of shifts and renegotiations of authority. In the physical world, students typically rely on traditional religious authorities—*ustadh*, university lecturers, or *pesantran kyai*—as their primary sources of guidance. However, on the internet, religious information comes from a wide array of sources: from credible scholars active online, to celebrity *ustadh* with thousands of followers, and even lay individuals expressing personal opinions. As a result, students are confronted with a newly decentralized landscape of authority (Raya 2025).

**Chart 2.** Level of Trust in Digital Religious Content by Respondents



Source: Authors' conceptualization, 2025

Survey data indicate that students do not simply surrender to this decentralized landscape. A majority (58%) report only occasionally trusting religious content encountered online, while 22% say they rarely or never trust it; none admit to blind trust. Meanwhile, 20% state that they always verify such content, either by consulting other sources or asking more knowledgeable figures. In their narratives, this verification work appears as a routine part of scrolling: when a provocative fatwa appears on Instagram, for instance, students look at the account's profile, check whether references are cited, search for similar opinions from established scholars, or forward the post to a *pesantren*-trained friend or lecturer for clarification. As one respondent explained, "when I come across religious content on social media that contradicts my beliefs, my first reaction is *tabayyun*; I check who is speaking, what their educational background is, and where their evidence comes from" (R7, male, 23 years old). In terms of digital religion, this illustrates negotiated authority: rather than replacing traditional authorities, students re-embed them within digital environments, using offline teachers and institutional credentials as benchmarks against which online claims are measured (Campbell 2010; Fajrie et al. 2025). Therefore, students' high levels of digital use coexist with cautious authority-recognition because "using" YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok to learn and stay motivated is not equivalent to treating what appears there as binding guidance. The same platforms that provide sermons and reminders also expose students to contradictory fatwas, polarized debates, and performative piety, prompting many to treat online content as provisional until it is cross-checked—often by triangulating sources, inspecting the speaker's background, or consulting trusted offline teachers who function as normative benchmarks. Read this way, the findings show a division of labor in religious life, where digital infrastructures facilitate access and circulation, while authority is selectively conferred through negotiated, context-sensitive practices of verification.

Compared with existing studies that foreground the rise of charismatic Muslim influencers and the algorithmically configured "digital *ummah*", these practices suggest a somewhat different pattern. Influencers and viral preachers do appear in students' feeds, but respondents rarely treat them as unqualified authorities; instead, they are evaluated, cross-checked, and selectively followed. In this sense, students' behavior is closer to what the literature on digital natives describes as emergent digital religious literacy, as an ability to filter information, examine sources, and integrate online material into pre-existing repertoires of knowledge and belief (Bellar and Campbell 2022; Kheryadi and Chorbwhan 2025). Our findings thus nuance the more pessimistic accounts of users as passive algorithmic targets, showing how deep mediatization is inhabited reflexively, with platform affordances actively "bent" to support selective consumption and *tabayyun* rather than automatic acceptance.

At the same time, students' narratives reveal an affective layer to this negotiation of authority. Many report that only after they became active online, they realize how broad the spectrum of Islamic viewpoints is—textualist vs contextualist, fiqh-centered vs *tasawwuf*-oriented, strict vs accommodating. For some, this plurality is experienced as enrichment: “I realized Muslims have many backgrounds and ways of thinking; it makes me more open-minded,” said R5 (male, 22 years old). For others, it can generate confusion and unease, as R40 (female, 21 years old) admitted that “Sometimes it makes me more open-minded, but sometimes it just confuses me about what I should believe”. Here, affective spirituality becomes visible not only in moments of devotional intensity but also in feelings of doubt, anxiety, and cognitive overload triggered by conflicting claims. This ambivalence differs from the largely literature-based picture of post-millennial faith as smoothly flexible and personalized (Aidulsyah 2023; Nisa 2018). Students in this study indeed personalize their feeds and choose whom to follow, yet they also seek anchors of certainty in trusted teachers and institutional lineages, and they experience the pluralization of authority as both an opportunity and a burden.

In summary, the data above show that in the age of networked religion and deep mediatization, authority for these digital-native students is neither simply displaced to online influencers nor fully secured in traditional institutions. Instead, it is continually renegotiated through everyday acts of scrolling, liking, doubting, cross-checking, and consulting offline mentors. This negotiated authority is at once structural and affective, as students work to stabilize their sense of religious truth amid the excitement and disorientation of an endlessly diversified digital field.

### **Authority and Religious Content in the Digital Sphere**

If the previous subsection highlighted how authority is pluralized in digital spaces, this part focuses on how students practically manage religious content and its emotional effects within that pluralized field. From the perspective of networked religion, their timelines are not neutral streams but curated arenas where authority and belonging are continuously arranged through following, muting, skipping, and engaging. Many respondents describe a selective stance toward online religious content: they unfollow accounts that frequently provoke confusion, scroll past posts that feel needlessly polemical, and prioritize channels that resonate with the *manhaj* they trust. As R7 (male, 23 years old) puts it, “not everything that contradicts my belief needs a response”—a comment that captures both selectivity and a refusal to be pulled into endless contestation. At the same time, this selectivity easily hardens into “filter bubbles,” in which students repeatedly encounter the same scholars, schools of thought, and styles of religiosity, a pattern consistent with studies on digital echo chambers in Muslim social media (Golan et al. 2017).

Alongside selectivity, respondents articulate a normative ideal of tolerant engagement. Many say they try to understand divergent views “as insight” rather than as threats, and some explicitly prefer polite, dialogical exchange over public shaming. R28 (female, 22 years old), for instance, emphasizes the importance of “constructive discussions to foster mutual understanding, not blame.” Yet in practice, students repeatedly encounter hostile debates, ridicule of *ulama* or *habaib*, and comment-thread polarization. The vignette from R11 (male, 24 years old)—who tried to defend scholars against sweeping generalizations but ended up mocked by his interlocutor's followers—illustrates how efforts at rational persuasion often break down under platform dynamics that reward provocation and partisanship. Here, deep mediatization is visible at the meso-level: social media architectures (likes, quote tweets, algorithmic amplification) shape what kind of religious speech circulates and how disagreements escalate, making confrontational content more visible than patient clarification (Couldry and Hepp 2013). In response, several students report withdrawing from public debates and redirecting their energy toward private reflection or small, trusted circles—an everyday tactic of limiting exposure to antagonistic spaces while still inhabiting the same digital infrastructures.

A further layer of negotiation concerns exposure to extreme or inaccurate religious content. Respondents recount encountering posts that “spread extremism” or “contain

inaccurate religious information,” which they experience not simply as epistemic problems, but as affective disruptions. R19 (female, 21 years old) speaks of confusion and distraction from her effort to maintain a moderate understanding; R50 (male, 20 years old) notes the uncertainty generated by conflicting online talk about the beginning of Ramadan, only clarified when the Ministry of Religious Affairs finally posted an announcement on Instagram. These examples show how, under conditions of deep mediatization, even state-backed authority must compete with rumors and speculations circulating on the same platforms, and how delays or ambiguities in official communication can unsettle students’ sense of religious order (Fakhruroji 2025; Raya 2025).

For many respondents, this dense, sometimes chaotic environment generates what they themselves describe as “religious anxiety.” Approximately 73% report that they sometimes or often feeling guilt or unease in response to digital religious content—whether from harsh moralizing posts, idealized displays of piety, or repeated exposure to warnings and threats. From an affective spirituality perspective, these are not marginal side-effects but central components of how digital religiosity is lived: the same feeds that offer comfort and inspiration also produce self-doubt, pressure, and fatigue. Students’ coping strategies, which means “digital detox” from certain accounts, focusing on personal worship rather than comparison, reminding themselves that social media presents only curated snapshots—can be read as attempts to reassert agency over affect in a mediatized environment that easily overwhelms. Offline communities and trusted mentors again function as stabilizing anchors: by discussing unsettling content with lecturers, *ustadh*, or *pesantren*-trained peers, students seek to reframe their emotions within more familiar interpretive frameworks and restore a sense of spiritual balance.

Within this landscape, respondents articulate clear expectations toward institutional and scholarly presence online. Many call for “substantial content that is relevant for Gen Z” and request that academic research or *pesantren*-based knowledge be translated into short videos, infographics, or carousel posts suitable for Instagram and TikTok. In terms of digital religion, this reveals how authority is not simply eroded but invited into new formats. Students want credible *ulama* and academics to inhabit the same platforms as influencers, but with content that is both affectively attuned and intellectually grounded (Nurfitria 2023). Rather than abandoning traditional hierarchies, they seek their re-mediation by asking institutions to engage the logics of deep mediatization in ways that can counter misinformation, soften polarization, and provide emotionally supportive guidance.

These narratives show that authority and content in the digital sphere are not merely “problems” to which students passively react. Instead, digital-native Muslims develop repertoires of selective following, cautious tolerance, strategic disengagement, and emotional self-care that allow them to inhabit a pluralized, algorithmically structured religious environment without losing their normative bearings. Their practices echo but also complicate existing discussions of negotiated authority in networked religion (Campbell 2007; Golan et al. 2017), suggesting that for this cohort, the work of deciding whom to trust and how to feel is inseparable from the everyday acts of scrolling, muting, saving, and sharing that now texture their spiritual lives.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that digital media does not simply replace offline religious practices but functions as a transformative arena in which Indonesian digital-native Muslim students reorganise worship, community, and authority. Empirically, it contributes to the development of digital religion and sociology of religion by providing thick, experience-near descriptions of how hybrid religiosity is actually lived at the micro level—how students combine mosque and smartphone, offline teachers and online *da’wa*, inspiration and anxiety in their everyday routines. Theoretically, the article refines and operationalises the concepts of networked religion and deep mediatization by tracing how macro-level media structures and platform logics are negotiated through selective following, *tabayyun*, emotional self-care, and the re-anchoring of authority in trusted offline figures. In doing so, it shifts the focus of current

debates from celebrity preachers and institutional reforms to the reflexive, affective labour of ordinary believers who actively construct and contest meaning in a mediatized environment, thereby extending existing work on negotiated authority and digital religious literacy.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research is based on a relatively small and specific sample—students at Islamic higher education institutions—and relies primarily on self-reported narratives collected via an online, narrative-style questionnaire rather than long-term, multi-sited digital observation. The cross-sectional design also captures only a particular moment in students' religious trajectories and cannot fully grasp how their practices and sensibilities evolve over time. These constraints limit the generalisability of the findings beyond similar institutional and socio-religious contexts. Future studies should address these limitations by including non-university youth, non-Muslim groups, or students from different types of campuses; and by employing longitudinal or comparative designs. Such work would deepen and test the propositions advanced here, and further clarify how diverse cohorts of young Muslim in Indonesia and beyond appropriate, resist, and reconfigure spiritual life under conditions of deep mediatization.

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