



## Exploring Digital Identity Construction Among Santri in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools

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### ABSTRACT

Digital transformation is reshaping identity formation among youth, including santri in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), where religious values shape daily life. Despite its significance, research rarely addresses how santri interpret and negotiate their digital engagement within pesantren norms. This study asks: How do santri construct and manage their digital identities in this context? Adopting a phenomenological approach with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research involved twelve santri from two modern pesantren in East Java, Indonesia. Semi-structured interviews revealed that digital platforms provide opportunities for self-expression and access to broader knowledge, yet also generate tensions as santri balance autonomy, religious authority, peer influence, and online visibility. Four themes emerged: negotiating tradition and modernity, digital platforms as social spaces, redefining authority, and balancing collective versus individual identities. The study contributes by clarifying the research gap on digital identity in pesantren, offering evidence of both opportunities and tensions in santri's digital practices. Its implications point to the urgency of developing digital literacy frameworks that integrate religious values, while also encouraging comparative studies across different pesantren contexts.



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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has reshaped how individuals present themselves and engage with their social worlds. In educational contexts, particularly within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), the integration of digital platforms is creating new intersections between tradition and modernity (Islamic et al., 2024; Muhid et al., 2020). While pesantren have historically emphasized communal rituals, religious discipline, and hierarchical educational structures, the digital era introduces personal and communal spaces that invite redefinition of identity, interaction, and meaning-making.

This phenomenon is of growing importance because it reflects a deeper shift in how individuals experience and enact their identities (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Digital contexts are no longer merely tools but have become environments where subjective experiences such as self-expression, recognition, and belonging are actively constituted. In pesantren, where religious norms and collective values traditionally shape identity, these digital encounters may produce tensions, opportunities, or hybrid forms of selfhood. Investigating this phenomenon thus offers critical insight into how cultural-religious communities negotiate evolving modes of being and relating.

Given the inherently subjective and lived nature of identity construction in digital contexts, a more nuanced understanding is necessary one that goes beyond observable behaviors to explore the meaningful essence of how santri perceive, interpret, and internalize their experiences (Jannah & Usriyah, 2023; Yusuf et al., 2021). A phenomenological approach is especially suited to such exploration, as it aims to illuminate the lived meaning behind these digital engagements, capturing the nuances of experience within their sociocultural and emotional contexts. This focus ensures that the

investigation remains anchored in the voices and perceptions of santri themselves, enabling a deeper appreciation of how identity is experienced, negotiated, and transformed.

Research on individuals' lived experiences has gained increasing attention in the social sciences, particularly in exploring phenomena situated within complex sociocultural contexts (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Within educational environments such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), scholars have begun to examine how students, or santri, construct personal and collective identities while navigating traditional religious values and contemporary societal influences. The rapid integration of digital technologies into everyday life has intensified these dynamics, creating new spaces where identity is performed, negotiated, and redefined. However, while previous studies have explored digital engagement in pesantren from pedagogical or behavioral perspectives, there remains limited understanding of the subjective meanings that santri attach to these experiences.

A significant challenge in advancing this understanding lies in methodological limitations (Muhammad et al., 2024a; Sadiyah, 2022). Many existing studies rely on quantitative surveys or structured observations, which, while useful for capturing patterns of technology usage, often fail to reveal the essence of lived experiences. Such approaches tend to focus on measurable variables and behavioral outcomes rather than the personal interpretations, emotions, and reflections that shape identity construction. Consequently, the richness and depth of santri's narratives within digital spaces are often overlooked, resulting in an incomplete representation of how these individuals experience and make sense of their identities.

These methodological constraints underscore the need for a phenomenological approach, which allows researchers to engage directly with participants' voices and uncover the meaning structures embedded within their subjective realities (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). By prioritizing experience over abstraction, phenomenology offers a framework for exploring how santri perceive, interpret, and navigate the tensions between traditional pesantren values and digital self-representation. This approach fills a critical gap in understanding the complex interplay between culture, religion, and digital transformation, providing a foundation for interpreting the phenomenon in a way that is both contextually grounded and experientially rich.

Despite the growing scholarly interest in digital identity construction among students in religious educational settings, much of the existing research has relied on practical approaches such as structured surveys, usage analytics, and behavioral observations to examine how individuals engage with digital technologies (Firmansyah et al., 2023a; Muhammad et al., 2024b). While these methods provide valuable insights into patterns of technology adoption and general trends in online participation, they fall short in capturing the subjective dimensions of experience that shape how individuals understand, negotiate, and internalize their identities.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), this limitation becomes even more pronounced. Previous studies have tended to focus on the pedagogical implications of digital tools or the behavioral outcomes associated with their use, leaving the lived realities of santri largely unexplored. The essence of how santri perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their digital interactions especially within environments grounded in strong religious norms remains insufficiently understood. Without access to participants' personal narratives and interpretative frameworks, the richness of their experiences and the tensions they navigate between traditional pesantren values and digital self-expression cannot be fully appreciated.

To address this gap, the study adopts a phenomenological approach as an alternative framework for inquiry. Phenomenology enables a holistic exploration of the meanings participants assign to their lived experiences by prioritizing individual voices, subjective realities, and the essence of experience over abstract generalizations (Ariatin et al., 2024; Firmansyah et al., 2023b). Through this lens, the research seeks to uncover how santri construct and reconstruct their identities in digital spaces while negotiating cultural and religious expectations. By moving beyond surface-level behavioral observations, this study responds to the need for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of digital identity within pesantren contexts, offering insights that are both contextually grounded and experientially rich.

Previous studies have examined the integration of digital technologies within educational settings, including Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), focusing mainly on behavioral patterns, pedagogical innovations, and the use of online platforms for learning (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Some research has explored students' adaptation to modern technologies while maintaining traditional religious values, yet these studies often remain limited to observable outcomes rather than the subjective meanings attached to digital engagement. Existing literature on digital identity construction rarely investigates the lived experiences of *santri*, leaving unanswered questions about how they interpret and negotiate their sense of self within *pesantren* environments. Theoretical perspectives on identity formation and social interaction have provided useful frameworks, but their application to digital contexts in religious settings remains underdeveloped. Consequently, this study positions itself to bridge this gap by focusing on participants' voices and the personal meanings embedded in their digital experiences.

To address these limitations, this study adopts a phenomenological approach grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Azizah et al., 2025; Puspitarini et al., 2023). This method was chosen because it emphasizes understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their lived realities within their unique sociocultural contexts. Through IPA, the study seeks to uncover how *santri* construct and reconstruct their digital identities while navigating the cultural expectations and religious norms embedded within *pesantren* life. By prioritizing participants' narratives, the research provides experiential insights that cannot be captured through purely quantitative or behavioral analyses. This methodological choice directly responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier, offering a deeper understanding of how meaning is formed and experienced.

This article is structured into several sections to provide clarity and coherence. The Introduction presents the context of digital identity construction among *santri* and outlines the significance of exploring their subjective experiences (Fawait et al., 2020; Zulkarnain & Zubaedi, 2021). The Method section explains the phenomenological framework, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures. The Results section organizes findings into key themes that represent participants' meanings and interpretations, followed by a Discussion that situates these findings within broader theoretical and cultural contexts. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the essential insights gained from the study and highlights its implications for educational practice and future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore readers' subjective experiences in engaging with representations of collective trauma and cultural memory within *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences and the meanings participants attribute to them. Within the interpretative framework inspired by Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, this design emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretive engagement. By adopting this approach, the study aimed to illuminate the essence of the phenomenon, enabling a nuanced understanding of how readers internalize, negotiate, and reconstruct cultural memory through literary encounters.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of individuals with experiences relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Daly, 2007; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). Eligibility required that participants had completed reading *Amba* in its entirety, were aged between 21 and 55 years, and possessed sufficient literacy skills to articulate personal reflections. Furthermore, participants needed to express willingness to discuss emotional and interpretive responses related to the novel's themes. Those unfamiliar with the historical context

surrounding the 1965 political events or those uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues related to collective trauma were excluded.

A total of 12 participants contributed to the study, comprising seven females and five males, with an average age of 33.6 years. Participants represented diverse academic and socio-cultural backgrounds, enabling a rich and multifaceted understanding of how literature influences cultural memory and identity formation.

### **Data Collection**

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' personal narratives and reflective interpretations of their reading experiences. The interview protocol was developed based on key themes related to trauma, identity, cultural memory, and empathic engagement, ensuring consistency across sessions while maintaining flexibility to accommodate participants' unique perspectives.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in private and comfortable settings to encourage openness and emotional safety. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. During and after each interview, field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and emotional dynamics that complemented the verbal data. To ensure accuracy, interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis. Member checking was performed by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to validate the accuracy and authenticity of the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework through a systematic, iterative, and inductive process (Longhofer et al., 2012). The analysis began with multiple readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion in the data and to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences. Significant statements were identified and segmented into meaning units, which were then coded and grouped into preliminary categories. These categories were clustered into broader themes that reflected shared patterns of experience across participants.

Following this, a cross-case analysis was conducted to compare interpretations and identify both convergences and divergences among participants. Finally, the thematic structures were synthesized to highlight the essential experiential meanings that captured the phenomenon's core essence. NVivo 14 software was utilized to manage the transcripts and organize coding efficiently, while reflexive journaling was maintained to enhance transparency and reduce interpretive bias throughout the analytic process.

## **RESULTS**

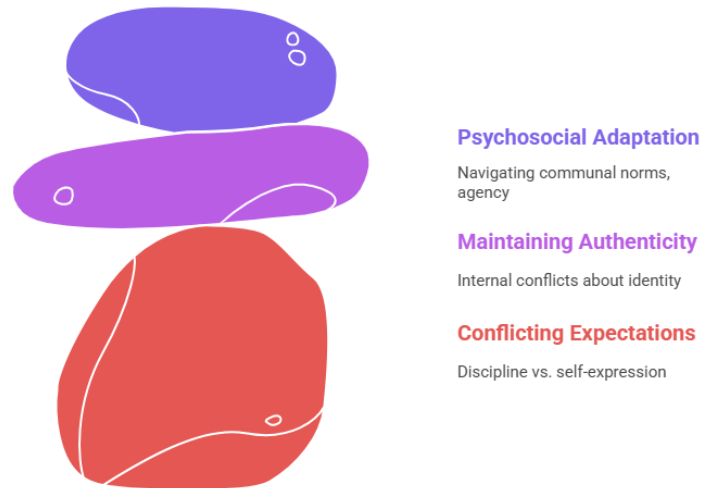
### **Negotiating Identity Between Tradition and Modernity**

Participants revealed an ongoing negotiation between traditional pesantren values and the demands of digital engagement. For many, the digital environment became a new social arena where personal expression and religious identity often intersected, sometimes harmoniously, and other times in tension.

“At the pesantren, I am expected to uphold discipline and modesty, but online I feel more freedom to express my interests. It is difficult to balance these two worlds.” (P3)

This tension shaped participants' perceptions of authenticity. Some experienced internal conflicts about maintaining religious identity while simultaneously adapting to the global digital discourse. This duality reflects the psychosocial adaptation required in navigating the overlapping spheres of communal norms and personal digital agency.

### **Navigating Tradition and Modernity**



### **Digital Platforms as New Spaces of Social Interaction**

For many participants, social media platforms functioned as alternative spaces for interaction and identity exploration. They used these platforms to form connections beyond the pesantren environment, exchanging ideas, and engaging with wider communities.

“I can connect with friends from other pesantren, discuss Islamic knowledge, and even share my thoughts with people I’ve never met before. It opens my world.” (P7)

However, participants also acknowledged the paradox of increased connectivity: while digital spaces encouraged self-expression, they simultaneously introduced risks of identity misinterpretation and social judgment. This ambivalence reveals how digital platforms influence self-perception and the construction of communal belonging.

### **Redefining Authority and Knowledge Boundaries**

The findings indicate a shift in perceptions of authority among santri. While traditional pesantren education emphasizes respect for kyai (religious leaders) as the primary source of knowledge, digital access allows santri to engage with multiple interpretations of religious and cultural issues.

“Sometimes I read articles or watch sermons online that differ from what the kyai teaches. It makes me curious but also confused about which one I should follow.” (P5)

This dynamic suggests that digital engagement challenges established hierarchies, prompting santri to re-negotiate knowledge boundaries. While some embraced these opportunities for critical thinking, others experienced anxiety when navigating conflicting sources of authority.

### **Constructing Collective and Individual Meanings of Identity**

Santri participants described their identity construction as both an individual journey and a collective process influenced by community norms. Digital platforms provided tools for self-representation, but participants often aligned their choices with group expectations to avoid social sanctions.

“Even when I post something online, I think about how my pesantren friends and teachers will see it. I don’t want them to think I’m breaking the rules.” (P9)

This illustrates the interdependence between personal autonomy and collective belonging. For many, identity formation was not an act of isolation but a dialogue between personal aspirations and communal values.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

This study was guided by the central question of how santri construct their digital identities while living within the structured environment of a pesantren (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The findings demonstrate that identity construction is not a linear process but rather a continuous interplay between individual agency and collective belonging. Digital platforms provide new spaces for self-expression and connection, enabling participants to engage with broader communities and access diverse knowledge sources. However, these spaces also introduce new challenges, as participants must reconcile their desire for autonomy with the pesantren's established moral and religious frameworks.

By uncovering these lived experiences, the study contributes a unique phenomenological understanding of digital identity construction in a religious educational setting, emphasizing the importance of subjective meaning-making. Unlike previous research that primarily examines behavioral patterns or technological adoption, this study prioritizes participants' voices and highlights the inner dialogues, emotional tensions, and personal reflections that shape their engagement with digital environments. In doing so, the research provides a more holistic and human-centered perspective on how young individuals negotiate selfhood at the intersection of tradition and modernity.

### **Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives**

The results align with prior studies suggesting that digital platforms are transforming identity formation by creating hybrid spaces where traditional cultural norms interact with modern influences. However, this study extends existing scholarship by situating these dynamics within the unique sociocultural context of pesantren communities, where religious discipline, hierarchical authority, and collective identity shape students' digital practices in distinctive ways.

Consistent with Zaki et al., (2020), the findings illustrate how santri curate their digital identities based on anticipated social perceptions, balancing expressions of individuality with the desire to maintain communal acceptance. At the same time, the study reveals tensions that are less frequently discussed in mainstream digital identity literature: participants grapple with conflicting knowledge authorities between traditional kyai teachings and alternative interpretations encountered online. This extends prior theoretical frameworks by showing that digital identity construction among santri is not only a personal process but also a relational negotiation shaped by religious hierarchies and collective expectations.

Moreover, these findings contribute to phenomenological scholarship by demonstrating the value of focusing on meaning structures rather than observable behaviors. By highlighting the depth of participants' experiences, this study complements and challenges earlier works that adopt predominantly quantitative methodologies, offering insights that are experientially grounded and contextually nuanced.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the social, cultural, and educational implications of digital identity construction among santri within pesantren environments (Arifin et al., 2023; Mujahidin et al., 2021). From a social perspective, the results highlight the emerging challenges faced by young individuals in negotiating between communal expectations and personal autonomy in digital spaces. These experiences illustrate the evolving nature of social interaction, where traditional cultural norms and hierarchical religious authority intersect with the openness and diversity of online platforms. From a cultural standpoint, the findings reveal how digital engagement can simultaneously reinforce collective belonging and enable personal exploration, suggesting that identity formation in pesantren is increasingly situated within hybrid spaces that combine traditional practices with digital realities.

Professionally, the implications extend to educational policy and practice within pesantren institutions. As digital platforms reshape learning environments, pesantren administrators, educators, and religious leaders are encouraged to develop integrated strategies that balance technological innovation with the preservation of institutional values. The findings also suggest the importance of digital literacy programs designed to guide santri in managing their online presence while navigating

cultural and religious expectations. More broadly, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of youth identity negotiation within religious educational contexts, offering insights relevant to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers across diverse sociocultural settings.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study provides meaningful contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on a qualitative phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the depth and richness of subjective experiences rather than broad generalizability. The sample size, consisting of twelve santri from two pesantren in East Java, limits the extent to which the findings can be applied to other pesantren contexts or regions. Additionally, the narratives presented are shaped by participants' willingness to share personal experiences, which may have resulted in the omission of sensitive or socially constrained perspectives.

Another limitation relates to the specific sociocultural context of the study. Pesantren vary widely in their organizational structures, educational philosophies, and approaches to digital technology; therefore, the experiences described here may not reflect those of santri in institutions with different traditions or levels of digital integration. Finally, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides a robust framework for uncovering meaning, the interpretative nature of the method may introduce researcher subjectivity, despite efforts to ensure analytic rigor through reflexivity, validation strategies, and triangulation. These limitations underscore the need for cautious interpretation of the findings and highlight opportunities for further inquiry.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research in the areas of digital identity, youth culture, and religious education (Huda et al., 2020; Irawan, 2022; Muhajir, 2022). First, future studies could adopt comparative approaches by examining identity construction across different types of pesantren or religious educational settings to explore how institutional norms influence digital engagement. Expanding the scope to include larger and more diverse samples would enable researchers to better understand variations in experiences across regions, gender, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Additionally, integrating mixed-methods approaches may enrich insights by combining phenomenological interviews with quantitative analyses of digital behavior, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how santri navigate online and offline identities. Further, investigating the role of educational leaders and policy frameworks in shaping digital literacy and identity management within pesantren would contribute to practical strategies for balancing tradition and modernity. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking changes in identity formation over time could deepen our understanding of the dynamic nature of digital identity negotiation in response to evolving technological and cultural landscapes.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how santri construct and negotiate digital identities within the sociocultural and religious framework of modern Islamic boarding schools. Beyond confirming opportunities for self-expression and knowledge exchange, it uniquely demonstrates how digital engagement reconfigures authority, reshapes peer relations, and challenges the balance between individual autonomy and communal obligations. By applying a phenomenological lens, the study contributes original insights into the lived negotiations of santri, offering perspectives that move beyond descriptive accounts of online behavior. These contributions underscore the importance of recognizing pesantren not only as sites of religious learning but also as evolving digital ecosystems. In practical terms, the study recommends that educators and policymakers develop targeted digital literacy programs that explicitly address identity tensions, integrate pesantren values into online engagement, and equip santri with skills to navigate both opportunities and risks of digital platforms. Policies should also encourage collaborations between pesantren leaders, educational stakeholders, and digital platforms to ensure culturally sensitive digital governance. Future research should test

these recommendations across pesantren with varying degrees of modernity and explore mixed-methods approaches to better link identity construction with institutional practices and policy outcomes.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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