HYBRID RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT: GENERATION Z's NEGOTIATION OF FAITH ACROSS DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL SPACES

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Abstract

This article discusses the phenomenon of hybrid religious engagement among Generation Z students at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Batanghari, East Lampung. Born and raised in the digital era, Gen Z students not only interact with traditional religious authorities in the Islamic boarding school environment, but also actively access, interpret, and distribute religious narratives from various digital platforms. This study aims to examine how students negotiate their religious beliefs, practices, and identities amidst the tension between Islamic boarding school traditions and digital religious populism. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method and data collection techniques in the form of in-depth interviews with six informants, male and female students. The results of the study indicate that the consumption patterns of digital content by students are selective, reflective, and adaptive. The tension between traditional authority (such as yellow books and kiai fatwas) and digital narratives (viral preaching, instant interpretation) gives rise to a complex dialectic, but at the same time encourages the construction of a new religious identity called "digital students." In this case, students are not merely in a passive position, but rather active as epistemological and cultural mediators who try to integrate traditional heritage with contemporary Islamic expressions. This article concludes that Gen Z religiosity in Islamic boarding schools has undergone a significant transformation towards a form of fluid, contextual, and multidimensional involvement, while also marking the importance of a new reading of the dynamics of young generation Islam in a digital context.

Keywords: *Islamic Boarding Schools; Digital Space; Religious Identity; Hybrid Engagement.*

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren have long been the foundation of Islamic education in Indonesia, significantly shaping the religious identity, moral character, and social behavior of Muslim youth (Nugraheni, 2024). Rooted in the classical traditions of *tafaqquh fi al-din*, *adab* (moral refinement), and close personal engagement with the kiai, pesantren

provide a highly structured learning environment, characterized by religious authority and a stable socio-religious hierarchy. However, the emergence of digital disruption has introduced new complexities to the religiosity of students, especially among Generation Z (Wiranata, 2019). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of Pesantren Riyadlatul Ulum, Batanghari, East Lampung. Known for its dedication to traditional Islamic pedagogy and salafiyah values, this pesantren maintains a strict parenting system. Nevertheless, Generation Z students, who grew up in the digital era, continue to interact with the online world, albeit in a limited and sometimes clandestine manner (People, 2020). In this hybrid space, students navigate competing religious discourses—between the traditional world of Islamic boarding schools and a more open, visual, and connected digital ecosystem (Taupani, 2021).

Several studies have highlighted the religious transition of young people in the context of the digital era. For example, Sauri (2024) explains the concept of digital religion as a new form of religiosity that crosses offline and online boundaries. In the Indonesian context, Saumantri (2023) and Muhammad (2021) show how Muslim communities use social media to build new authority, expand their da'wah networks, and create alternative religious practices. Meanwhile, Ummah (2020) found that students are now not only objects of education, but also active actors in seeking, disseminating, and interpreting Islamic knowledge independently through digital channels.

A study by Ulfah (2022) revealed that digital space allows for the fragmentation of religious authority, where Islamic sources are no longer monopolized by formal institutions such as Islamic boarding schools or the MUI, but also by hijrah celebgrams, virtual ustaz, and viral content. This is confirmed by Rustan (2020) in his research on "celebrity preachers", where the authenticity of preaching is often measured not from the sanad of knowledge, but from popularity and communication style.

Another study by Fanan (2023) shows that Generation Z Muslims show a high preference for a fast, visual, and emotive preaching style. This challenges the epistemic structure of Islamic boarding schools which are based on text, memorization, and critical reading of yellow books. On the other hand, Murniati (2025) notes that the tension between digital preaching and traditional authority can give rise to a new reflective awareness, where students develop their own interpretive positions in responding to various Islamic narratives.

This digital exposure, especially through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, gives rise to complex negotiation dynamics between obedience, the search for meaning, and freedom of choice. At Riyadlatul Ulum, this is manifested in informal discussions among students about the views of the kiai, the concept of hijrah, and the differences in schools of thought that they encounter online (Palah, 2024). Santri become active actors who filter and interpret Islamic teachings from two worlds that live side by side but sometimes conflict.

This phenomenon reinforces the idea of a "hybrid religious space"—a context in which digital and traditional authorities intersect and sometimes negate each other (Saputra, 2023). In this space, students are no longer just recipients of doctrine, but also active subjects who sort, re-arrange, and negotiate their religious identities situationally. This tension is increasingly challenging when the pesantren tradition emphasizes depth, continuity, and the authority of the sanad, while the digital world demands speed, visual appeal, and virality (Susamto, 2008).

This research starts from the assumption that contemporary Muslim religiosity—especially among Generation Z students—can no longer be understood solely within the boundaries of physical institutions such as pesantren. The interpenetration of digital and traditional spaces demands a theoretical framework that is able to capture the dynamics of religious hybridity: how beliefs, commitments, and identities are continuously negotiated amidst plural and competing exposures.

By focusing on the religious experiences of students at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, this study aims to explore how the younger generation of Muslims negotiate their faith in a changing ecosystem, crossing the boundaries between the sacred and the virtual, between authority and agency, and between obedience and personal meaning-making.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013). With virtual and participatory ethnographic study designs to explore in depth the dynamics of religious engagementstudentGen Z in the physical space of Islamic boarding schools and digital space. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the meaning and practice of religion from the perspective of the subject contextually and reflectively. The location of the study focused on the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Batanghari East Lampung as a representation of the Islamic boarding school environment that maintains classical Islamic traditions but is not free from the penetration of digital culture. The informants in this study were 6 students using pseudonyms as part of maintaining the privacy of the informants themselves.

Data collection techniques were carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with active students who use social media, and documentation of their online activities, especially on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Hidaayt, 2017). In addition, researchers also monitored digital content consumed and shared by students to map the types of religious narratives that shape their interactions in virtual spaces. The data obtained were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, focusing on patterns of identity negotiation, resistance to authority, and forms of religious adaptation in the context of the connection between tradition and digitality.

Furthermore, this research is based on three complementary theoretical frameworks. First, the theory of religious identity (Peek, 2011) is used to read how Gen

Z students form, maintain, or change their religious identity in the context of Islamic boarding schools and digital media. This theory helps to understand that religious identity is not something static, but rather the result of an ongoing social negotiation process in interactions with various religious authorities and representations.

Second, this study uses the theory of cross-cultural space (Appaduri, 1996) to analyze religiosity as a result of the interaction between two cultural spaces—physical space (pesantren as a traditional space) and digital space (as a dynamic and open space). These spaces do not stand separately, but rather intersect and influence the way individuals manage religious values, symbols, and practices. Third, the theory of digital communication (Campbell, 2010) provides a basis for viewing social media as an arena for the construction of meaning. In this context, digital platforms function not only as communication tools, but also as spaces for the production, consumption, and dissemination of religious discourse that influence the formation of the perspectives and practices of religious students.

With these three frameworks, this study seeks to understand the religious involvement of Gen Z students comprehensively, in the tension between tradition and modernity, between old authority and new narratives, and between local and global spaces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Media Consumption Patterns of Gen Z Students

In contextlifemodern Islamic boarding schools, the involvement of Gen Z students with digital media is an inevitable phenomenon. The results of observations and interviews at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Batanghari, East Lampung, show that students actively access various digital platforms, with the dominant use on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. These three platforms were chosen because of their ease of access, attractive visual format, and the diversity of content available. TikTok, for example, has become a popular medium among students because of its ability to present short sermons in a light yet informative style. Meanwhile, YouTube is used to access longer and more in-depth sermon content, while Instagram is a space for students to follow the daily activities of their favorite religious figures (Ghoni, 2018).

As for the typescontentThe most consumed religious content includes short lectures on spiritual motivation, Islamic preaching content wrapped in entertainment elements, and Islamic vlogs and music presented in a relaxed format. This phenomenon shows that students are not only looking for normative or textual Islamic material, but also religious narratives that are relevant to their daily lives as digital teenagers.

From the actor's side,there isthe tendency of students to follow celebrity ustaz, hijrah influencers, and young urban preachers who have a more casual, interactive, and emotional communication style. These figures are considered more relatable compared to traditional religious figures in Islamic boarding schools who tend to be more formal and normative. This also reflects a shift in preferences in religious authority, where narrative authenticity and emotional closeness are prioritized over formal scientific legitimacy.

The main motive for consuming digital media among students is to seek spiritual inspiration, obtain…entertainmentthat do not conflict with religious values, and access new knowledge that is not directly available in the pesantren curriculum (Nafi, 2018). In other words, digital space for students is not only a means of filling free time, but also an alternative space in forming their understanding and expression of religion. This finding indicates that the involvement of Gen Z students in digital space is active and selective, reflecting a new form of religious engagement (hybrid religious engagement) that is dialogical between tradition and modernity.

In-depth interviews conducted with six informants from the male and female students of Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School revealed various forms of their involvement with digital media. The informants, aged between 17 and 22 years, showed relatively uniform media consumption patterns in terms of platforms, types of content, and religious actors followed, but with variations in motivation and distinctive preferences.

Anisa (18 years old), a female student who actively participates in Islamic boarding school book studies, stated that she routinely accesses TikTok and Instagram every night after formal learning activities are finished. According to her, "on TikTok I often watch short lecture clips from Ustaz Hanan Attaki or Ustazah Oki Setiana Dewi. Sometimes the content is motivational, sometimes it's just a light reminder, but it hits home." She added that the relaxed delivery method makes it easier for her to understand and absorb the message being conveyed (Interview, Anisa). Zahra (19 years old) prefers YouTube as the main media for accessing religious content. She explained, "I prefer watching YouTube because the videos are longer. Usually I watch lectures from Buya Yahya or thematic studies from Ustaz Adi Hidayat. But sometimes I also watch Islamic vlogs that are light but have value." For her, the content of Islamic preaching that is relaxed but still substantial is the main attraction (Interview, Zahra).

Meanwhile, Wulan (17 years old), who has only been a santri for two years, admitted that she is very interested in religious entertainment content such as Islamic music, funny sketches with a pesantren theme, and short videos about the daily lives of santri. "I often follow Islamic humor accounts. Sometimes it's funny, but often there is also a moral message," she said. She said that social media makes her feel closer to the outside world without having to leave the pesantren environment (Interview, Wulan).

From the perspective of male students, Angga (20 years old) emphasized the importance of social media as a source of inspiration. He said, "Sometimes I look for motivation to maintain my spirit of studying. On TikTok or Instagram, I follow the accounts of young ustaz who discuss religion but in the language of young people, not heavy." According to Angga, down-to-earth and emotional religious narratives make him feel more spiritually connected (Interview, Angga). A different matter was conveyed by Farhan (22 years old), who is already in his final year of education, seeing digital platforms as a complement to formal learning. He said, "I study interpretation and fiqh in class, but on YouTube or Instagram I can learn views from outside the Islamic boarding school. Sometimes there are differences, but that makes me want to learn more." He considers social media as a space for exploring religious thought that opens up insights, although it is still filtered critically (Interview, Farhan).

Meanwhile, Umar (18 years old) emphasized that he actively follows religious public figures such as hijrah influencers and young preachers who share visual Islamic life content. "I follow many young ustaz, because I feel they understand the problems of today's youth. The way they talk is also not preachy," he said. Umar said that this content helps him feel "connected" to the times without having to leave the values of the pesantren.

In general, the six informants showed that their digital media consumption patterns were not merely passive, but active and selective. They chose content that suited their spiritual, psychological, and social needs as students. Their motivations included the search for religious inspiration, the need for valuable entertainment, and curiosity about broader religious discourse than what they obtained in the formal Islamic boarding school education system. This confirms that digital space has become an important part of the religious landscape of Gen Z students, forming new patterns of engagement that are hybrid and adaptive to the dynamics of the times.

Ideological Friction: Tradition vs Digital Populism

The entry of Gen Z students into the digital space has not only expanded access to sources of religious knowledge, but has also given rise to epistemological tensions between the pesantren tradition based on classical authority and digital populism that is full of instant, personal, and viral narratives. In the context of the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, this tension is apparent in the differences between the patterns of religiosity fostered through the study of yellow books, scientific sanad, and references to the fatwas of kiai, with digital content presented in the form of short videos, motivational lectures, and religious memes that are widely circulated on social media.

Turats books such as Tafsir Jalalayn, Fath al-Qarib, or Bidayatul Hidayah, for example, teach a methodology for understanding Islam comprehensively and in stages, and emphasize the importance of adab in seeking knowledge (2020). However,

in the digital space, students face much more fluid expressions of religiosity, such as interpretations of one verse in one minute, emotionally arousing lectures without a strong methodological basis, or calls to hijrah that emphasize symbols and lifestyle more than the substance of thought. This kind of content is not only visually and emotionally appealing, but also often presents implicit criticism of the traditional Islamic education system which is considered too slow or exclusive (Ummah, 2020).

The students are then in a dilemmatic yet strategic position: they become cultural mediators between two worlds that sometimes intersect. On the one hand, they continue to show loyalty to the authority of the kiai and the traditional structure of the pesantren that emphasizes epistemic caution and adabiyah submission. On the other hand, they also absorb religious narratives from digital media that are free, individualistic, and often do not pass through established scientific filters. In practice, students select and negotiate between these two sources of authority, often forming a new synthesis in their religious understanding and expression.

For example, some students are known to adopt the communication style of preaching influencers when delivering religious studies in the Islamic boarding school prayer room, but still use quotes from the yellow book as the main reference (Alexander, 2023). On the other hand, there are also students who are beginning to question the relevance of some pesantren traditions after being exposed to more liberal and populist contemporary Islamic discourse digitally. However, there has been no indication of a total rejection of the authority of the kiai; what is happening is more of a restructuring of religious authority, where traditional authority is not removed, but recontextualized in a more dynamic format.

Thus, this phenomenon indicates the existence of ideological friction that is not destructive, but rather creates a new negotiation space for Gen Z students. They do not immediately abandon tradition, but transform the way they access, interpret, and articulate their religious beliefs. In this context, digital space acts as a field of contestation as well as collaboration between the classical and the contemporary, between the normative and the viral.

The religious discourse of Gen Z students at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School cannot be separated from the latent tension between two sources of authority: the pesantren tradition based on sanad and the authority of the kiai, and digital populism that presents religious discourse in a fast, instant, and sometimes provocative format. Interviews with students show that this friction is not diametrical, but is responded to reflectively and adaptively.

Anisa said that she felt there was a fundamental difference between the kiai's lectures at Islamic boarding schools and viral preaching content on social media. "If you study at the Islamic boarding school, it's sequential, the source is clearly from the book and the meaning is explained one by one. But on TikTok or Instagram, people can immediately discuss one verse and then give a short interpretation, sometimes

with a harsh tone. Honestly, sometimes I'm confused about which one to follow." However, Anisa emphasized that she still prioritizes kiai as the main reference in understanding religion, and makes digital content only as a complement (Interview, Anisa). Meanwhile, Zahra sees this friction as an intellectual challenge. She said that after watching several digital preachings that criticized traditional religious practices such as tahlilan or grave pilgrimages, she felt compelled to seek explanations from ustaz and kiai at Islamic boarding schools. "I once watched content that said tahlilan was a bid'ah. I became doubtful. But after discussing with the ustaz, I learned that the tradition had a basis and good intentions. From there I realized the importance of asking directly, not just believing short videos," he said (Interview, Zahra).

In the same context, Wulan highlighted the delivery style as a factor that triggered her interest in digital preaching. She said, "The lectures on TikTok are more expressive and sometimes emotional. I like it because it feels close and touches the heart. But I also know that it is different from the lectures in class, which are more in-depth." Wulan acknowledged that there was a tug-of-war between the instant and impressive impression of digital preaching and the methodological depth of pesantren teaching (Interview, Wulan). Meanwhile, Angga considered himself to be in the middle of the two currents. He said, "I like watching viral ustaz because the discussion is relevant, for example about the lives of young people or Islamic dating. But I also realize that when talking about religious law, you can't just take one verse and then give your own interpretation." In his daily life, Angga tries to bridge these two worlds by maintaining pesantren etiquette, but packaging his preaching in an informal forum with a more communicative and popular style (Interview, Angga).

Furthermore, Farhan, as a santri who has studied at a pesantren for quite a long time, observed that many digital narratives tend to be simplistic in understanding religious issues. "I often see video lectures that immediately blame a religious practice without explaining the context or evidence. Whereas in pesantren, we are taught to see differences of opinion with a cool head," he said. Farhan emphasized the importance of accuracy and scientific sanad in understanding religion as a bulwark against misleading simplification (Interview, Farhan). On the other hand, Umar represents a santri who tries to embrace both sides carefully. He said, "I follow many digital ustaz, but I also note if there are any who have different views from those taught by the kiai. Usually I ask my ustaz. So I take advantage of it, but still use a filter." Umar realizes that the digital world provides wide access to religious treasures, but he still believes that a critical attitude and manners towards teachers are irreplaceable (Interview, Umar).

From the six narratives above, it appears that Gen Z students at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School are not merely passive consumers of digital content, but also active interpretive agents in navigating the tension between traditional heritage and digital religious populism. They carry out an ideological negotiation

process that is not simple, but generally leads to a model of religiosity that is inclusive, reflective, and remains rooted in the pesantren's customs.

Negotiation and Adaptation in Religious Engagement and Hybrid Religious Identity: New Constructions in the Self of Santri

The phenomenon of religious involvement of Gen Z students at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School shows a complex process of negotiating religious identity. The simultaneous interaction between the physical space of the Islamic boarding school and the digital space has created a new social space that encourages students to reinterpret their authority, values, and religious expressions. In this context, religious involvement is no longer singular and linear, but rather hybrid, namely a synthesis of two sources of influence: traditional and digital.

The students did not immediately abandon the pesantren tradition which is full of manners, sanad, and understanding of fiqh in stages. However, they also did not reject the presence of digital preaching which offers a faster, more relevant, and more expressive way of practicing religion. Between these two poles, a hybrid religious identity was formed: an identity that is flexible, contextual, and able to respond to change without having to be uprooted from its scientific roots.

This negotiation process is apparent in various forms: from how students choose religious content, filter information, to integrating digital values into their daily practices (Sholehah, 2019). Some students display a more popular communication style when giving religious lessons, but still refer to the yellow book references. There are also those who criticize instant religious narratives on social media with a critical approach learned from the pesantren tradition.

This hybrid religious involvement also reflects the ability of students to adapt culturally and spiritually. They are able to embrace technological developments as a medium for preaching and expressing faith, without losing their identity as part of the pesantren community. This is proof that the religiosity of Gen Z students is not reactive, but rather reflective and constructive, in line with the spirit of tafaqquh fi al-din in the context of an ever-changing era.

Thus, what occurs is not a binary clash between the traditional and the modern, but rather the formation of a new religious space that is fluid but still rooted. The religious identity of the students is no longer static, but dynamic, with a flexible structure and open to negotiation of meaning. This is the essence of hybrid religious engagement—an adaptive process that allows students to become active actors in the contemporary religious landscape, without being uprooted from the authority and values of the pesantren that raised them.

In the daily reality of Gen Z students at the Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, religious involvement is no longer limited to ritual activities or normative

obedience to Islamic boarding school traditions. Intense interaction with digital space has encouraged the emergence of new mechanisms in filtering religious information, forming self-identity, and expressing religiosity in a more reflective and contextual way.

Anisa explained that she has personal principles in responding to digital religious content. "I am used to filtering content. If it is in accordance with what I have learned from the ustaz, I continue. If not, I leave it. For example, regarding certain practices, if the video says it is heretical, I don't immediately believe it, because I know that the pesantren teaches the evidence and explanation," she said. For Anisa, choosing content is a form of personal responsibility in maintaining consistency between knowledge and belief (Interview, Anisa). Zahra observed that the changes in her religious practice were gradual but significant. She said, "I used to focus more on routines: studying the Koran, praying, dhikr. Now, I think more often about the meaning behind it. So it's not just following along, but also wanting to know why it's important, from a historical and social perspective." The change from ritualistic religiosity to reflective religiosity shows a deep internalization process in Zahra, which is influenced by religious discourse in digital media (Interview, Zahra).

Wulan highlighted the phenomenon of the "digital santri" identity as a form of self-actualization that grew from her involvement in social media. "Now I often upload quotes from the books I study, then I give a brief explanation on Instagram. Friends also like to discuss in DM or WhatsApp groups about the laws of fasting, zakat, or even the hijrah trend. I feel like I can be a santri but also share in a contemporary way," she explained. The identity of a santri in this case is no longer exclusive to the physical space of the pondok, but has expanded into the digital realm as a field for adaptive and communicative Islamic expression (Interview, Wulan). Meanwhile, Angga admitted that he uses social media not only to consume information, but also to interact critically. "I often join discussions on Telegram or read Twitter threads about religious and social issues. But I also realize that I have to be careful because not all sources are valid. That's why I still discuss with the ustaz at the pondok if I find sensitive issues." For Angga, digital engagement is not just entertainment, but also a learning field, although accompanied by an awareness of the challenges of the validity of religious authority (Interview, Angga) Farhan added that he often feels cognitive fatigue due to exposure to such massive content. "Every day we see short videos, quotes, religious debates. Sometimes it makes us tired. Especially if the content blames each other, or uses arguments but is cut into pieces. I learned that not everything has to be commented on. It takes a break, it takes time to digest." Farhan's statement underlines the psychological dimension of content fatigue, which is a serious challenge to the process of finding a calm and deep religious meaning.

On the other hand, Umar sees himself as part of a generation that tries to embrace both worlds wisely. He asserted, "I still respect the kiai and his ngaji. But I

also don't want to be left behind. I created a TikTok account that contains religious Q&A from the yellow book, but I simplified the language. Alhamdulillah, many people like it." Umar represents the creative adaptation of digital santri, who not only consume but also produce religious discourse in a communicative and inclusive format.

These narratives indicate that Gen Z students are not only in the midst of change, but are also active in negotiating and reconstructing their religious identities. They develop personal strategies in filtering information, adopting new forms of religious engagement, and responding to challenges to identity and authority in a reflective manner. In this process, religious engagement becomes more fluid, contextual, and multidimensional, while reflecting the typical spiritual adaptation patterns of the digital generation in the pesantren environment.

CONCLUSION

This This study reveals that the religiosity of Generation Z students at Riyadlatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Batanghari, East Lampung, is not a monolithic reproduction of traditional Islamic teachings. Instead, it reflects a hybrid form of religious engagement shaped by the interplay between the authoritative, ritual-based environment of the pesantren and the open, participatory nature of digital media. These students engage selectively with platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram—not merely as passive recipients, but as active participants who filter, reinterpret, and even produce religious content. This engagement signifies a transformation of religiosity: from a ritualistic and doctrinal model toward a more reflective, personalized, and contextually responsive orientation.

Rather than resulting in confusion or disengagement, the tension between classical pesantren values (such as sanad, adab, and kitab kuning) and the immediacy of digital religious populism becomes a site of negotiation, giving rise to a new hybrid identity—the "digital santri." While they develop critical and adaptive strategies, these students also face challenges such as authority fragmentation, identity ambiguity, and cognitive overload. This study is limited in scope due to its focus on a single pesantren and qualitative data, which may not capture the diversity of Gen Z religiosity across broader institutional and cultural contexts. Future research should employ comparative or longitudinal methods to explore how hybrid religiosity evolves over time and across different Islamic educational settings. It is also recommended that educators and digital da'i co-develop more nuanced and dialogical approaches to digital da'wah that bridge traditional authority with contemporary media logic.

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