Religious Digital Literacy among Islamic Boarding School Students through a Critical Study of the Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School Curriculum

Siti Mahmudah¹, Iwan Ridwan²
¹Universitas Islam Kadiri Kediri
²Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa

Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study examines religious digital literacy among Islamic boarding school students through a critical analysis of the Salafiyah Islamic boarding school curriculum. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected from five informants consisting of teachers, students, and curriculum administrators through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that while Salafiyah pesantren maintain a strong emphasis on traditional religious learning based on classical texts (kitab kuning), there is a growing awareness among teachers and students of the importance of digital literacy in strengthening religious understanding and critical thinking. However, the integration of digital literacy remains limited due to concerns over maintaining moral discipline, lack of digital infrastructure, and insufficient teacher training. The study identifies key challenges such as the tension between preserving traditional values and adapting to technological advancements. It also highlights opportunities for developing a contextualized digital literacy framework grounded in Islamic ethics. The results suggest that religious digital literacy in Salafiyah pesantren can serve as a bridge between faith-based education and the demands of the digital era, promoting responsible digital engagement while preserving religious authenticity.

Corresponding Author:

Name: Siti Mahmudah
Institution: Universitas Islam Kadiri Kediri
Email: sitimahmudah@uniska-kediri.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed education, communication, and religious practices. In Indonesia, where Islamic education plays a vital cultural and spiritual role, the digital era brings both opportunities and challenges for Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), especially those of the Salafiyah type. Traditionally focused on classical Islamic scholarship (kitab kuning), moral discipline, and character formation, pesantren now face the task of integrating digital technology while maintaining theological authenticity and educational philosophy. This adaptation is crucial for their relevance and effectiveness in the modern world. Digital tools offer opportunities to enhance learning and outreach, with e-learning platforms and

Islamic apps making education more accessible and personalized [1], [2]. They also foster innovation and global collaboration [2], [3]. However, challenges like the digital divide, limited infrastructure, and balancing tradition with modernity hinder progress [4], [5]. To overcome these, pesantren are developing curricula that combine religious knowledge with digital skills, ensuring students are prepared for the modern world while preserving their religious education. Visionary leadership is essential for driving innovation and managing cultural transformation [3].

In this context, the concept of religious digital literacy emerges as a crucial competency, referring to the ability to access, evaluate, interpret, and disseminate religious knowledge responsibly through digital means while maintaining adherence to Islamic values. For students of Salafiyah pesantren, traditionally trained in interpretive methods, this literacy serves as a bridge between classical knowledge and modern communication practices. It involves not just technical skills but also ethical discernment and critical thinking, ensuring students can responsibly navigate the digital space and adhere to Islamic principles. Programs such as the one at Pondok Pesantren Darut Tauhid Assalafiyah have shown significant improvements in students' abilities to identify misinformation and understand cybersecurity, with pre-test and post-test results indicating a rise from 50% to 90% in hoax identification and from 45% to 85% in cybersecurity understanding [6]. The pesantren culture itself provides a supportive environment for cultivating digital literacy, aligning digital media use with Islamic values [7]. The integration of digital literacy into Islamic education is not limited to technical skills but includes ethical and moral dimensions, helping shape a generation that is technologically adept and morally grounded [8]. Schools like SMP Plus Ulil Albab Cirebon strategically plan and integrate value-based instructional practices to enhance students' digital ethics and agency [9]. Additionally, media literacy programs in institutions like SMK YPC Tasikmalaya equip students with the skills to engage in digital religious da'wah, promoting moderation and countering radicalism through inclusive and peaceful digital content [10]

Despite its importance, many Salafiyah institutions remain cautious about digital integration due to concerns about the misinterpretation of sacred texts, exposure to misleading information, and the potential erosion of traditional authority. This cautious stance, while understandable, has limited students' capacity to engage critically with online religious discourses. Consequently, there is a gap between the traditional Salafiyah curriculum and the competencies needed to navigate digital environments responsibly. Students often encounter unverified religious claims, online debates, and sectarian narratives without sufficient tools to evaluate their authenticity or relevance to Islamic teachings.

Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the curriculum of Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools in relation to the development of religious digital literacy among their students. It explores how the existing curriculum addresses digital realities, the perceptions of educators and students toward digital engagement, and the challenges faced in integrating digital literacy within the framework of traditional Islamic education. Using a qualitative approach with five key informants—including teachers (ustadz), students (santri), and curriculum designers—the study aims to explore the relationship between traditional religious learning and the evolving demands of the digital age. The findings are expected to highlight how Salafiyah pesantren can navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity by empowering students with digital competencies grounded in ethical and theological principles, enriching their classical learning and preparing them for responsible engagement with the digital landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 *Religious Digital Literacy*

Religious digital literacy in the Islamic context is a multifaceted concept that integrates technical digital skills with faith-based discernment and moral judgment, enabling Muslims to navigate the digital landscape effectively while ensuring their engagement with online religious content aligns with Islamic ethics and values. This literacy involves recognizing credible religious sources, verifying theological interpretations, and engaging responsibly in online discussions. Its importance is underscored by the need to distinguish between authentic and fabricated religious content, particularly in the age of social media where misinformation is prevalent. Religious digital literacy acts as a safeguard, empowering believers to uphold truthfulness, wisdom, and responsibility in their digital interactions. It helps Muslims identify credible sources and verify theological interpretations, preventing the spread of misinformation and extremist narratives online [11], [12]. In Islamic boarding schools, digital literacy is fostered within a cultural context that emphasizes the integration of religious knowledge with life skills, preparing students to engage with digital media responsibly [7]. The principle of Hifz al-'Aql from Maqasid Syariah is also essential in protecting the intellect from manipulative information, ensuring digital engagement supports ethical and religious values [13]. However, the digital age presents challenges such as the dissemination of false information and the exploitation of platforms by extremists, necessitating vigilance and adherence to Islamic principles [11]. On the other hand, programs aimed at improving digital literacy among Muslim youth have shown significant improvements in their ability to critically evaluate Islamic teachings and engage with digital content in ways that align with Islamic principles [14].

2.2 The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in Religious Education

Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, in Indonesia are balancing traditional educational values with the demands of the digital era. Salafiyah pesantren, focused on classical Islamic texts, face challenges in integrating modern technology while preserving core religious teachings. Some pesantren have successfully incorporated digital tools, such as social media for da'wah and business, and practice-based learning that integrates entrepreneurial skills [15]. This integration helps bridge the gap between traditional teachings and modern educational needs, offering a comprehensive education that includes both religious and secular knowledge [5], [16]. While challenges like limited infrastructure and cultural resistance exist, they also present opportunities for innovation and developing a unique educational model that blends tradition with modernity [15]. The paradox of tradition and modernity is seen as a strength, contributing to a globally relevant yet locally rooted Islamic education system [16]. The Salafiyah model focuses

on classical Islamic scholarship, while the Khalafiyah model combines religious and general education. A comprehensive approach that merges both aims to produce well-rounded graduates [17]. Additionally, an integrative Islamic education policy is needed to accommodate both Salafiyah and modern pesantren within the national education framework [18].

2.3 Digital Transformation and Islamic Education

Digital transformation has significantly impacted Islamic education by altering how religious knowledge is accessed, shared, and practiced. This shift necessitates adaptations in teaching methodologies and curricular design to incorporate digital tools effectively. The integration of technology in Islamic education offers several advantages, such as expanding access to diverse religious materials, fostering interactive learning environments, and supporting independent learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries. However, these opportunities come with challenges, including exposure to misleading interpretations, ideological polarization, and the decline of traditional scholarly authority. To address these issues, Islamic education must adopt a critical and ethical approach to digital literacy, enabling students to filter information through both rational and theological lenses. Digital platforms and applications have democratized access to religious texts and teachings, allowing for a broader reach and inclusivity in Islamic education [2], [19]. E-learning platforms and Islamic applications facilitate global access to education, promoting inclusivity and resource sharing among institutions [2]. The use of digital tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), educational videos, and gamification in Islamic education has shifted the focus from teacher-centered to student-centered learning [19]. Interactive digital content, including Quran learning apps and educational games, enriches learning experiences and enables personalized approaches [2]. Furthermore, digital transformation supports independent learning by providing students with the resources to explore religious knowledge beyond traditional classroom settings [20], and technology facilitates global collaboration among educational institutions, promoting curriculum standardization and resource sharing [2].

2.4 Curriculum in Salafiyah Islamic Boarding Schools

The Salafiyah pesantren curriculum traditionally emphasizes memorization and deep understanding of classical Islamic texts. However, there is increasing recognition of the need to integrate modern educational elements, such as digital literacy, to address contemporary challenges. Some progressive pesantren, like Fatihul Ulum Al Mahfudz, have successfully integrated traditional methods, such as sorogan and bandongan, with modern techniques like problem-solving-based lectures, enhancing students' understanding of classical texts

while developing 21st-century skills [21]. Mixed typology pesantren, like Persis 110 Manba'ul Huda, combine Salafiyah and Khalafiyah methods, aligning with the Ministry of Religious Affairs curriculum to provide balanced education [22]. Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an Zam Zam faces challenges in adapting modern methods while preserving its traditional identity (Mutmainnah et al., 2024). While the Salafiyah system focuses on classical knowledge, the Khalafiyah system integrates both religious and general education, utilizing technology to produce well-rounded graduates [17]. Integrating modern educational elements enhances the adaptability of pesantren, but it is crucial to maintain the core values of the Salafiyah tradition [21], [23].

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the framework of Critical Religious Pedagogy [24], which combines critical pedagogy principles with religious education to encourage reflective, analytical, and socially aware learners. Within this framework, students are not passive recipients of information but active interpreters who engage critically with religious texts and contemporary contexts. Integrating digital literacy into this framework enables students to question, evaluate, and reinterpret religious messages circulating in digital spaces responsibly.

Furthermore, the study adopts the concept of Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), which emphasizes the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge in modern education [25]. Applying TPACK to Salafiyah pesantren contexts suggests that effective integration of religious digital literacy requires balancing mastery of religious content with digital teaching methods and ethical technological use.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the development of religious digital literacy among students in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools through a critical examination of the existing curriculum. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social realities, beliefs, and educational practices as perceived by participants within their natural settings. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is appropriate when the goal is to capture participants' subjective experiences, interpret meanings, and analyze complex interactions between culture, education, and technology. The research focused on how Salafiyah pesantren conceptualize and implement digital literacy in the context of religious education. By using a critical study approach, the research aimed to evaluate how traditional religious curricula respond to digital challenges and identify potential spaces for pedagogical innovation consistent with Islamic values.

3.2 Research Site and Context

The study was conducted at a Salafiyah Islamic boarding school located in Java, Indonesia. This pesantren was selected purposively because it represents a traditional institution that continues to adhere to classical Islamic education models centered on kitab kuning learning, while gradually introducing selective digital tools such as online religious materials and limited internet access. The pesantren serves as a representative case for

understanding how traditional Islamic schools respond to digital influences within the constraints of theological conservatism and cultural heritage.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study consisted of five key informants selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because it allows the researcher to choose participants who possess specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2015). The five informants included two senior teachers (ustadz) directly involved in curriculum planning and teaching religious subjects, two students (santri) who actively interact with both traditional and digital sources of religious knowledge, and one curriculum developer or administrator responsible for supervising educational innovation and aligning the pesantren's mission with contemporary developments. All participants were selected based on their familiarity with the pesantren's curriculum, their engagement with digital resources, and their willingness to share insights regarding the integration of religious and technological learning.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Perception of Digital Literacy in the Pesantren Environment

The findings indicate that perceptions of digital literacy within the Salafiyah pesantren are generally ambivalent. Most teachers (ustadz) and administrators acknowledge the growing influence of digital media on students' learning behaviors and recognize the potential of digital tools for religious education. However, they also express caution about the possible negative impacts of uncontrolled digital exposure. One senior teacher (Informant 1) stated, "We do not reject technology, but we must use it carefully. The internet contains both beneficial knowledge and misleading information. The role of the teacher is to guide the students in distinguishing between the two." This cautious acceptance reflects the pesantren's

traditional philosophy that prioritizes moral discipline (akhlaq) and spiritual purity.

Digital tools are seen as useful but potentially disruptive if not managed with ethical supervision. The pesantren leadership emphasized that technology should serve as an instrument to strengthen religious understanding rather than distract students from their studies. This finding aligns with [12], [13], [14]notion that religious communities often approach technology through a "negotiated adaptation" process—balancing innovation with the preservation of sacred authority. In the Salafiyah context, digital literacy is viewed not only as a technical ability but also as a moral responsibility grounded in Islamic ethics.

4.2 Integration of Digital Literacy in the Salafiyah Curriculum

Document analysis and interviews revealed that the Salafiyah curriculum remains largely traditional, focusing on classical Islamic sciences (tafsir, fiqh, hadith, aqidah, and akhlaq). There is no formal subject explicitly dedicated to digital literacy or media studies. However, informal initiatives by some teachers demonstrate early efforts toward integration. Informant 2 (curriculum developer) explained, "While we do not have a specific course about digital literacy, some teachers use online Islamic libraries, digital Qur'an apps, or YouTube lectures from respected scholars to complement learning." Observation data confirmed that a few classes occasionally referenced online materials, particularly when students researched modern religious debates. Yet, this integration occurs sporadically and depends heavily on individual teacher initiative rather than institutional policy.

These findings suggest that while the Salafiyah curriculum does not explicitly incorporate digital literacy, there is a grassroots movement toward digital engagement. Teachers are beginning to see digital resources as extensions of traditional learning, provided they align with the pesantren's doctrinal framework. The absence

of formal integration mirrors earlier research by [7], [11], who found that many pesantren hesitate to embed technology into their curricula due to fears of undermining authority and promoting moral laxity. Nonetheless, this gradual openness indicates a shift toward adaptive learning models that preserve authenticity while acknowledging technological relevance.

4.3 Student Attitudes and Practices Toward Digital Media

Interviews with the two student informants revealed that santri (students) are active digital users outside the pesantren's study hours. They access online religious lectures (kajian), follow Islamic social media accounts, and use mobile apps for Qur'an reading and translation. However, their ability to critically evaluate online content varies significantly. One student (Informant 4) noted, "Sometimes I listen to online preachers, but I am not sure whether their opinions are correct. I usually ask my teacher if something feels unclear." This response highlights the students' dependence on their teachers for verification and interpretation, reflecting the hierarchical authority structure typical in traditional Islamic education. Students display curiosity and eagerness to learn from digital media but often lack critical frameworks for evaluating authenticity, source reliability, and contextual accuracy.

Observation results showed that discussions about online religious topics occasionally occur informally among students, indicating a growing awareness of digital religious discourse. However, without formal training in digital literacy, these conversations risk spreading misconceptions. The findings echo [16], [17], [18], who emphasizes that developing religious digital literacy among young Muslims requires equipping them not only with access to information but also with critical reasoning skills rooted in Islamic epistemology.

4.4 Challenges in Implementing Religious Digital Literacy

From the perspectives of both teachers and administrators, several obstacles hinder the development of religious digital literacy in Salafiyah pesantren. The first challenge is limited technological infrastructure. The pesantren lacks adequate internet access, digital devices, and multimedia facilities. Teachers reported that poor connectivity and minimal equipment restrict their ability to integrate digital learning resources. Another obstacle is the lack of teacher competence in digital pedagogy. Most ustadz are well-versed in Islamic sciences but have limited experience using digital teaching tools. As Informant 1 stated, "We were not trained to use technology in teaching. Our method relies on recitation, explanation, and memorization." This aligns with [5], [15] observation that digital literacy development in pesantren is constrained by a skills gap among educators.

Cultural and theological resistance is also a significant barrier, with some teachers fearing that digital exposure could erode traditional authority or introduce bid'ah (religious innovations). Informant 3 remarked, "Too much freedom online may make students question things they do not yet understand. We must protect their faith first." This perspective illustrates the tension between intellectual openness and doctrinal preservation—a central challenge in modernizing traditional religious education. Additionally, pedagogical rigidity is evident, as traditional bandongan and sorogan methods emphasize teacher-centered instruction, leaving little room for interactive or technology-based learning. Transforming these methods requires not only technological adaptation but also a shift toward critical inquiry and independent learning. These challenges demonstrate that integrating digital literacy requires more than technical resources; it demands structural, cultural, and pedagogical transformation consistent with Islamic educational philosophy.

4.5 Emerging Initiatives and Recommendations

Despite these barriers, the research identified several promising developments within the pesantren. Some teachers have started using digital tools selectively to enhance learning—for example, showing online Qur'anic recitation videos or referencing online databases of classical Islamic texts. Informant 2 explained that these digital elements are introduced gradually to avoid disrupting the traditional rhythm of study. Additionally, a few students independently use digital note-taking applications, online dictionaries, and Islamic study groups on social media to supplement their understanding. These efforts suggest that digital adaptation is already occurring organically among both teachers and students, though in a fragmented and informal manner.

Based on the findings, three strategies are recommended for fostering religious digital literacy within the Salafiyah framework. First, curricular integration should introduce digital literacy modules focusing on ethical information use, verification of online religious content, and responsible digital behavior rooted in Islamic values. Second, teacher training should provide professional development for ustadz in digital pedagogy and the use of technology to support classical Islamic instruction. Lastly, ethical guidelines should be developed through institutional policies to guide the use of digital platforms in alignment with akhlaq al-karimah (noble character) and Islamic legal principles. These recommendations support the notion proposed by Mishra and Koehler's (2006) TPACK framework, which emphasizes the balance between technological knowledge, pedagogical skills, and religious content expertise.

Discussion

The findings reveal that religious digital literacy in Salafiyah pesantren is in its formative stage—shaped by a dynamic interplay between the preservation of tradition and adaptation to modern realities.

The pesantren's cautious approach reflects its theological commitment to maintaining santri discipline and orthodoxy, yet its gradual openness demonstrates an awareness of the inevitability of digital engagement. This balance illustrates the ongoing tension between the desire to maintain traditional values and the recognition of the digital world's pervasive influence on students' learning behaviors and religious practices.

From the lens of Critical Religious Pedagogy, the integration of digital literacy in religious education goes beyond technical skills, involving the alignment of these skills with spiritual values to strengthen faith and character. This approach is evident in Christian education, where digital tools are used to support interactive learning and spiritual reflection, balancing technology use with spiritual development [26]. In Islamic education, the integration of local wisdom and digital literacy helps students develop critical skills for the 21st century, including verifying information and engaging in ethical online interactions, which align with Islamic principles of tolerance and respect for diversity [27]. For pesantren, combining traditional methods with digital literacy enhances students' religious identity and strengthens their critical thinking and collaboration skills, making them more adaptable and competitive in the modern world [28].

However, challenges persist, such as the phenomenon of "instant hijrah," which highlights the risks of superficial religious understanding influenced by social media. Islamic education must revitalize curricula and strengthen digital religious literacy to foster a deeper, more critical understanding of faith [29]. This process can be viewed as a transformative negotiation where religious institutions critically engage with societal changes while reaffirming core spiritual values. The integration of digital literacy, therefore, does not undermine Salafiyah identity but enriches it by equipping students with the ability to navigate modern communication landscapes with wisdom (hikmah) and discernment (furqan).

Moreover, the success of religious digital literacy programs depends on teacher leadership, institutional support, and ethical framing. When guided by Islamic pedagogy, digital tools can serve as valuable extensions of traditional learning, enhancing access, comprehension, and student engagement without eroding religious authority.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religious digital literacy among students of Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools represents both a challenge and an opportunity within the context of Islamic education transformation. The findings indicate that the traditional Salafiyah curriculum, while deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship, has yet to fully embrace digital competencies necessary for navigating the modern information landscape. Teachers and students acknowledge the relevance of digital media as a tool for accessing and disseminating religious knowledge but remain cautious due to concerns about exposure to unverified information and moral degradation. The research also reveals that institutional culture and theological conservatism significantly influence the slow integration of digital literacy. Many educators view the internet as a potential source of distraction or religious deviation, creating a paradox between the desire to modernize and the need to preserve orthodoxy. However, there is a clear recognition that digital literacy—if guided by Islamic ethical principles—can enhance students' ability to critically evaluate online religious content, distinguish between credible and misleading sources, and engage constructively in digital da'wah (religious outreach).

From a curriculum perspective, reform and contextualization are urgently needed. The inclusion of modules that integrate Islamic ethics with digital skills training could strengthen students' ability to balance faith and technology. Such integration would not only improve their digital competencies but also empower them to become informed, responsible, and ethical users of digital media in promoting Islamic knowledge. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the role of teacher capacity building and institutional policy in sustaining religious digital literacy development. Teachers need continuous training to navigate online religious materials critically and incorporate digital tools meaningfully into teaching practices. Institutional leaders must design policies that balance openness to technological innovation with the preservation of moral integrity. In conclusion, Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools are at a pivotal stage in redefining the relationship between tradition and modernity. Religious digital literacy offers a promising pathway for harmonizing the sacred and the contemporary, enabling pesantren graduates to thrive as digitally competent Muslims who uphold Islamic values in the rapidly evolving digital world. Future research should explore comparative case studies across different types of pesantren to develop a more comprehensive framework for implementing religious digital literacy in Islamic education systems.

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