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The Religious Identity Crisis of *Santri* Regarding the Practice of *Pesantren* Values in a Modern Environment

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Abstract. *This study examines how santri (Islamic boarding school students) negotiate the continuity of pesantren values when they move into a modern social environment shaped by heterogeneous peer relations, changing routines, and digital media. Rather than assuming that reduced religious routines necessarily indicate a weakened religious identity, the study investigates variations in identity tension, the factors that shape religious practice, and the adaptive strategies used to maintain religious commitment. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed in RT 11/RW 03, Muneng Village, Sumberasih District, Probolinggo Regency. Three main santri informants were selected purposively and recruitment was expanded through snowball sampling to supporting informants; data were collected through semi-structured interviews, moderate participant observation, and documentation. Analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, with source and method triangulation used to strengthen credibility. The findings show heterogeneous experiences: one informant reported no significant identity crisis, while the others described uncertainty or initial value conflict. Across cases, reduced consistency in some religious routines did not amount to rejection of pesantren values. Social media functioned ambivalently as both a source of religious learning and a site of competing religious authorities, while family support, internalized values, and supportive social environments helped sustain religious commitment. The study interprets these experiences as negotiated religious continuity: pesantren identity is retained but continuously recontextualized through interaction with changing social fields and digital religious discourse. The findings support values-based, inclusive, and critically digitally literate Islamic education and contribute to the educational aims of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).*

Keywords: *Religious Identity; Santri; Pesantren Values; Identity Negotiation; Digital Religious Literacy*

1. Introduction

Educational change in contemporary Muslim communities increasingly places *santri* at the intersection of institutional religious formation and rapidly changing social and digital environments. Pesantren traditionally cultivate disciplined religious routines, moral conduct, deference to religious authority, and collective patterns of worship. After *santri* return to community life, however, these practices are no longer supported by the same institutional schedule and supervision. At the same time, social media broadens access to religious knowledge while exposing young Muslims to multiple authorities, interpretations, and identity performances. Research in Indonesia and other Muslim contexts shows that digital media can simultaneously strengthen religious learning, diversify religious authority, and reshape the public expression of Muslim identity (Prasojo et al., 2020; Najiha, 2025; Soedjiwo et al., 2025; Ikasatya & Apriliani, 2026). Therefore, changes in religious practice should not

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automatically be interpreted as a decline in faith; they may instead reflect a process of negotiating how internalized religious values are expressed in a different social field.

This issue is especially relevant in RT 11/RW 03, Muneng Village, Sumberasih District, Probolinggo Regency, where *santri* from different pesantren backgrounds live within a socially heterogeneous community and have routine access to digital technology. The local setting creates a transition space between the structured religious environment of pesantren and the more flexible rhythms of family and community life. Such a transition makes it possible to examine whether pesantren values remain internalized when institutional discipline becomes weaker, how family and peer relations influence their continuity, and how digital religious information is evaluated. Studies of Muslim youth and pesantren digital literacy similarly indicate that religious identity and practice are increasingly formed through interaction among family socialization, educational institutions, offline communities, and digital media (Abo-Zena & Hassan, 2024; Waqiyulloh & Dini, 2024; Muhja & Shahnaz, 2025; Saridudin et al., 2026).

The conceptual problem addressed in this study is therefore not simply whether *santri* become 'more' or 'less' religious after leaving pesantren, but how religious continuity is negotiated under new conditions. The study integrates three complementary perspectives. Erikson's identity-development perspective helps explain processes of exploration, uncertainty, and identity reorganization at the individual level; Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field illuminate what happens when dispositions formed through pesantren routines encounter a different social environment; and Berger and Luckmann's social-construction perspective explains how religious meaning is maintained and reconstructed through interaction with family, peers, religious teachers, and digital media. These perspectives are used as an integrated analytical lens rather than as separate explanations. The central interpretation of this article is that religious identity among the participants is socially negotiated continuity: internalized pesantren values remain important, while their practical expression is recontextualized in response to changing social and digital environments (Erikson, 1968; Bourdieu, 1990; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze variations in religious identity tension among *santri*, identify the internal and external factors that shape the continuity of pesantren values, and examine the adaptive strategies used to maintain religious commitment in a modern environment. Its contribution lies in distinguishing changes in religious routines from changes in religious identity and in conceptualizing the participants' experiences as negotiated religious continuity rather than a uniform identity crisis. Educationally, the findings support pesantren approaches that combine value internalization, family engagement, self-regulation, and critical digital religious literacy. These implications are aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly the development of inclusive, values-based learning and competencies needed to navigate contemporary information environments.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing phenomenology to examine the religious identity crisis experienced by *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) when navigating a modern environment. This approach was selected for its ability to provide an in-depth description of social phenomena within a specific context, thereby offering a

comprehensive understanding of the shifts in *santri* religious identity outside the boarding school setting.

The research was conducted in RT 11/RW 03, Muneng Village, Sumberasih District, Probolinggo Regency. This location was chosen due to its heterogeneous community and the presence of *santri*—from various Islamic boarding schools in Probolinggo Regency—who reside and engage in activities there. These conditions facilitate interaction between boarding school values and modern societal culture, making the site relevant for examining the dynamics of *8* religious identity.

The study involved three main *santri* informants who met the following inclusion criteria: having attended a pesantren for at least one year, being within the 13–35-year eligibility range, residing or routinely interacting in the research setting, and having experience of adjusting religious practices after exposure to community and digital environments. Supporting informants were drawn from parents, religious teachers (guru ngaji), and local community leaders to provide contextual and triangulating information. Main informants were selected purposively because they could articulate lived experiences relevant to the research phenomenon; snowball sampling was then used to identify supporting informants who could clarify or corroborate emerging accounts. Recruitment and interviewing continued until the analysis yielded repeated information and no substantively new theme relevant to the research questions emerged, which was treated as thematic saturation.

Data sources comprised both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, moderate participant observation, and documentation (including field notes, photographs, and supporting records). Secondary data were gathered from books, scholarly articles, previous research findings, and documents related to religious identity, Islamic boarding school education, and identity crisis theory.

Data collection involved three methods. First, moderate participant observation was used to observe religious behavior, social interaction patterns, and the students' daily activities within the community. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students and supporting informants to gather information regarding their experiences, perspectives, and the process of religious identity formation. Third, documentation served as supporting data to reinforce the findings from observations and interviews. Data analysis employed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, comprising three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved selecting, categorizing, and simplifying data in alignment with the research focus. Subsequently, the data were presented through descriptive narratives and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation. The final stage involved drawing conclusions that were continuously verified throughout the research process to ensure consistency between the findings and the field data.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from *santri* (Islamic boarding school students), parents, religious teachers, community leaders, and relevant documents. Meanwhile, method triangulation entailed comparing results from observations, interviews, and documentation to yield data that were more valid, consistent, and reliable.

The research stages comprised the pre-field phase, data collection, data analysis, and report writing. The pre-field phase included designing the research, conducting a literature

review, selecting the research site, and obtaining necessary permits. The implementation phase involved data collection through observation, interviews, and documentation. Next, the data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model to derive valid research findings. The final stage was the compilation of the research report based on the verified analysis results.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the three main informants did not experience religious identity tension in the same way. For this reason, the term 'religious identity crisis' is used cautiously in this article to refer to episodes of uncertainty, tension, or negotiation rather than to a uniform loss of religious belief. Across the cases, the analysis identified interrelated themes concerning variations in identity tension, changes in religious routines, social-media influence, changing social fields, family support, and adaptive strategies. The analysis therefore focuses on differences among participants and avoids generalizing the experiences of three informants in one neighborhood to santri as a whole.

Taken together, the cases suggest that religious identity is better understood as dynamic and context-sensitive. Some practices became less regular after the participants left the structured pesantren environment, but pesantren values generally remained important moral and religious references. The resulting pattern is not a simple movement from religiosity to non-religiosity; rather, it is a process in which continuity is maintained through reinterpretation, selective adaptation, and renewed social support.

The findings show that the religious identity crisis experienced by *santri* in a modern social environment does not primarily take the form of rejection of religion or abandonment of *pesantren* values. Rather, it appears as a process of tension, adjustment, and negotiation between values internalized during life in the *pesantren* and the realities encountered after returning to the broader community. Based on interviews with three main informants, supported by observation and information from relevant supporting informants, several interrelated themes emerged: variations in experiences of religious identity tension, changes in religious practices, the influence of social media, changes in social environments, family support, and the adaptive strategies used by *santri* to maintain their religious identity. These findings indicate that religious identity among *santri* should be understood as dynamic rather than fixed, because its expression continuously interacts with changing social and cultural contexts.

The three main informants described different levels of religious identity tension. Informant 1 did not report a significant identity crisis; when uncertainty arose, it was generally managed through discussion with parents and trusted religious figures. Informant 2 described greater uncertainty when pesantren norms encountered social situations with different expectations. Informant 3 recalled an initial conflict between personal ways of thinking and religious teachings during an earlier phase of religious formation, although this tension decreased as religious understanding became stronger. These differences are analytically important because they show that the presence of changed routines cannot be treated as uniform evidence of an identity crisis.

From an identity-development perspective, these variations can be read as different degrees of exploration and reorganization rather than as a single pathological condition. Erikson's perspective is useful at this individual level because it draws attention to how identity is reconsidered when established commitments meet new experiences. In the present

study, however, individual identity development is inseparable from social context: the participants evaluated pesantren values while moving between family, peer, community, and digital environments. Thus, Erikson explains the subjective experience of uncertainty and negotiation, while Bourdieu and Berger–Luckmann help explain why the content and direction of that negotiation are socially patterned.

The experiences of the three informants indicate different levels of religious identity tension. The first informant did not report a significant identity crisis because religious uncertainty was generally addressed through discussion with parents. The second informant experienced confusion when attempting to reconcile *pesantren* values with social situations that presented different norms and expectations. The third informant described an initial conflict between personal ways of thinking and the religious teachings encountered during the early period of *pesantren* education, although this tension gradually decreased as religious understanding became stronger. These variations demonstrate that identity crisis is not experienced uniformly among *santri*.

From an identity-development perspective, these experiences can be interpreted as part of a process in which individuals evaluate, negotiate, and reorganize existing values when confronted with new experiences. In this study, the *santri* did not necessarily abandon their religious identities; instead, they attempted to determine how the values learned in the *pesantren* could remain meaningful within different social environments. This finding supports the argument that religious identity is continuously constructed through interaction between internalized beliefs and changing social experiences. Previous research has similarly demonstrated that the religious identity of *santri* develops through encounters with changing environments rather than remaining entirely static after leaving the *pesantren*.

This distinction can be interpreted through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field. Pesantren cultivate a religious habitus through repeated worship, collective routines, supervision, and moral habituation. When santri enter a different social field, those dispositions encounter new norms, opportunities, and expectations. Reduced routine therefore does not necessarily mean that the habitus has disappeared; rather, its expression depends on whether the new field reinforces or weakens the conditions under which it was previously enacted (Bourdieu, 1990). This interpretation is consistent with research showing that religious practices and identity are sustained through continuing social and educational supports rather than through individual intention alone (Abo-Zena & Hassan, 2024; Halimah et al., 2023).

3.1. Changes in Religious Practices after Leaving the Pesantren

One of the clearest findings concerns changes in the consistency of religious practices after *santri* returned to their communities. The informants reported a decrease in the intensity of several practices, including voluntary worship, Qur'an recitation, participation in religious learning, and the regularity of particular religious routines. However, these changes were not accompanied by an explicit rejection of the values taught in the *pesantren*. The informants continued to consider *pesantren* values important references for daily behavior.

This finding suggests an important distinction between **religious commitment** and **religious practice**. A person may continue to recognize and accept religious values while experiencing reduced consistency in practicing them. In the *pesantren*, religious activities are embedded in structured schedules, collective worship, supervision, and institutional

discipline. Outside the *pesantren*, these supporting structures become weaker, and religious practice becomes more dependent on individual self-regulation.

This condition can be understood through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. The *pesantren* develops a religious *habitus* through repeated practices and continuous habituation, producing relatively stable patterns of religious behavior. Nevertheless, when *santri* move into a different social field, the *habitus* formed in the *pesantren* encounters new norms, opportunities, and behavioral expectations. The sustainability of previous practices therefore depends on the degree to which the new environment reinforces or challenges them. The present findings support the argument that religious habituation established in Islamic boarding schools can shape behavior, while changes in social context may influence its continuity.

Berger and Luckmann's social-construction perspective provides the broader interpretive frame for understanding this process because religious reality is maintained, legitimized, and reconstructed through recurring social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the digital era, these interactions extend beyond parents, teachers, kiai, and local communities to include preachers, peer networks, algorithms, and diverse online religious discourses. Digital media therefore expand both opportunities for religious learning and the number of authorities that compete to define credible religious knowledge. Similar patterns have been reported in studies of Indonesian Muslim social-media users and young Muslims' digital religious learning (Prasojo et al., 2020; Soedjiwo et al., 2025; Rusnalasari, 2025; Ikasatya & Apriliani, 2026).

The educational implication is that strengthening religious identity cannot rely solely on restricting digital access. Pesantren need to develop critical digital religious literacy: the ability to evaluate the credibility of sources, compare interpretations, recognize the difference between religious authority and online popularity, and use digital media ethically. Recent studies of pesantren and Muslim youth similarly emphasize purposeful, critical, and value-grounded digital literacy rather than technological access alone (Waqiyulloh & Dini, 2024; Muhja & Shahnaz, 2025; Saridudin et al., 2026). Such competencies also reinforce the broader aims of SDG 4 by supporting quality, inclusive, and values-based learning in rapidly changing information environments.

Social media emerged as another important factor affecting the construction of religious identity. All informants acknowledged that digital media influenced the way they accessed and understood religious knowledge. Social media provides opportunities to listen to religious sermons, access Islamic texts, participate in online religious discussions, and obtain religious information that may not be easily available in the immediate community. At the same time, the diversity of religious interpretations and authorities available online may create confusion regarding which sources should be considered credible.

This dual role makes social media an ambivalent space of religious socialization. It can strengthen religious understanding by expanding access to knowledge, but it can also expose *santri* to competing interpretations that differ from what they previously learned in the *pesantren*. Consequently, digital religious engagement introduces a new dimension into the formation of religious identity: *santri* must not only understand religious teachings but also evaluate the credibility, authority, and relevance of information encountered online.

Berger and Luckmann's social construction perspective is useful for interpreting this phenomenon because religious reality is continually reinforced and reconstructed through social interaction. In the digital era, such interaction no longer takes place exclusively through

parents, teachers, *kiai*, or the local religious community. Digital platforms have expanded the number of actors participating in religious meaning-making. As a result, religious authority becomes more dispersed, and *santri* encounter multiple religious discourses simultaneously. The original findings similarly indicate that digital media has become a significant environment through which religious understanding is constructed.

The implication is that strengthening religious identity in contemporary *pesantren* education cannot rely solely on restricting digital access. A more relevant approach is to develop the capacity of *santri* to evaluate religious information critically while retaining clear foundations for determining trustworthy sources. Previous studies on *santri* and digital transformation also emphasize the importance of ethical social-media use and digital literacy in Islamic boarding school contexts (Nurhadi et al., 2022; Sya'roni & Nisa, 2023).

3.2. Social Environment as a Major Influence on Religious Consistency

Compared with the other factors identified in the study, the social environment emerged as one of the strongest influences on the consistency of religious practices. The three informants indicated that moving from the *pesantren* to a broader social environment reduced the intensity of social control surrounding religious routines. In the *pesantren*, worship and religious activities were collectively organized and supported through disciplinary mechanisms. Outside the *pesantren*, the environment was generally more flexible, allowing individuals greater freedom in determining whether and how consistently religious practices were maintained.

This result demonstrates that religious identity cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological phenomenon. Religious behavior is also socially situated. The presence of peers, daily routines, community expectations, and institutional structures can either strengthen or weaken the translation of religious values into everyday practice.

The transition from *pesantren* to community life can therefore be interpreted as a transition between two different social fields. Within the *pesantren*, religious behavior is normalized through collective practices and continuous reinforcement. In the broader community, *santri* encounter more heterogeneous patterns of interaction and lifestyle. Religious identity must consequently be maintained through stronger personal commitment and selective engagement with the surrounding environment.

This finding also helps explain why the religious identity crisis identified in this research is situational rather than absolute. The values themselves may remain internalized, but their behavioral expression changes in response to environmental support. Thus, maintaining religious identity requires not only strong personal understanding but also social environments that provide opportunities for continued religious practice.

3.3. Family as a Protective Context for Religious Identity

The findings further demonstrate the central role of the family in maintaining religious identity. All informants viewed the family as an important source of support, particularly through communication, guidance, religious role modeling, and the reinforcement of worship habits. Families that maintained a religious atmosphere were able to reinforce values previously developed within the *pesantren*. In contrast, weaker supervision and communication increased the possibility that the influence of peers, social environments, and digital media would become more dominant.

The significance of family support is particularly evident when *santri* face religious confusion. Rather than resolving uncertainty independently, some informants returned to parents or other trusted religious figures for clarification. This suggests that the continuity of religious identity after leaving the *pesantren* depends partly on whether individuals still have access to reliable relational networks.

The family can therefore function as a bridge between *pesantren* culture and the wider social environment. While the *pesantren* provides intensive value internalization, the family helps sustain those values once the student returns to everyday community life. The effectiveness of religious education should consequently not be evaluated only through what occurs inside the institution, but also through the extent to which religious values remain supported after the student leaves the *pesantren* environment.

3.4. Adaptive Strategies in Responding to Modernity

Taken together, the findings are best explained through an integrated multi-level interpretation. Erikson helps account for the participants' subjective experiences of uncertainty, exploration, and reorganization of commitments. Bourdieu explains how those experiences are conditioned by movement between the structured field of pesantren and the more heterogeneous field of community life, where the same religious habitus is supported differently. Berger and Luckmann provide the overarching social-construction perspective: religious identity is continuously maintained and reconstructed through interactions that legitimate, challenge, or reinterpret religious meanings. These frameworks therefore converge on one central interpretation rather than functioning as separate explanations: the participants' religious identities represent negotiated continuity between internalized pesantren values and changing social contexts.

The distinct contribution of this study is the concept of negotiated religious continuity. The findings challenge a binary assumption that reduced religious routines necessarily signal either an identity crisis or religious decline. Among the three participants, pesantren identity remained an important reference even when the frequency of some practices changed. Modernity and digital media did not simply displace pesantren values; they created conditions in which those values had to be selectively interpreted, enacted, and reaffirmed. This contribution remains context-bound to the participants and setting studied and should not be generalized to all *santri*.

For pesantren education, the findings suggest that preparation for life outside the institution should receive greater attention. Alongside habituation and discipline, *santri* need reflective religious understanding, self-regulation, critical digital religious literacy, family engagement, and continuing access to trusted religious mentors. Such an approach can help sustain religious values when external structures become less intensive and supports inclusive, values-based quality education consistent with SDG 4.

3.5. Integrative Interpretation of the Findings

This study concludes that the experiences of the three *santri* are more accurately described as varying processes of religious identity negotiation than as a uniform identity crisis. One participant reported no significant crisis, whereas the others described uncertainty or initial conflict. Across cases, changes in the regularity of religious routines after leaving the structured pesantren environment did not necessarily indicate weakened religious commitment; pesantren values generally remained important moral and religious references.

These experiences were shaped by the interaction of internalized religious understanding with external conditions, particularly family support, peer relations, social environments, and digital media. The theoretical integration of Erikson, Bourdieu, and Berger–Luckmann shows that identity negotiation occurs simultaneously at individual, social-field, and meaning-construction levels. The participants responded through selective adaptation, including evaluating digital information, choosing supportive social circles, maintaining communication with parents and religious teachers, and sustaining selected religious practices.

The study's principal contribution is the concept of negotiated religious continuity: religious identity may remain meaningful even when its behavioral expression is recontextualized. This interpretation has practical implications for pesantren education, which should combine value internalization with self-regulation, family–pesantren continuity, and critical digital religious literacy. Because the study is based on three main informants within one neighborhood, its findings are context-specific and analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. Future research should examine more diverse age groups, pesantren backgrounds, and social settings, preferably with longitudinal designs, to test how negotiated religious continuity develops over time.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the religious identity crisis experienced by *santri* in modern social environments does not necessarily indicate a loss of religious commitment but reflects an ongoing process of identity negotiation and adaptation. The findings reveal that although *santri* experience changes in religious practices after leaving the structured *pesantren* environment, they generally retain the religious values acquired during their education. These changes are shaped by the interaction between internal factors, particularly religious understanding and value internalization, and external influences, including social environments, peer relationships, family support, and digital media. Among these factors, the social environment plays a particularly significant role in shaping the consistency of religious practices.

Furthermore, social media presents both opportunities and challenges for religious identity formation by expanding access to Islamic knowledge while exposing *santri* to diverse and sometimes conflicting religious interpretations. To address these challenges, *santri* employ adaptive strategies, including selective engagement with digital content, maintaining supportive social relationships, strengthening religious understanding, and sustaining communication with parents and religious teachers. These findings highlight that religious identity is not static but continuously reconstructed through interactions between established religious values and contemporary social realities.

The study contributes to understanding religious identity crises as processes of negotiated religious continuity rather than religious decline. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of strengthening religious value internalization, digital literacy, self-regulation, and collaboration between *pesantren* and families to support *santri* in navigating modern society. Given the limited number of informants and the specific research setting, future studies should involve more diverse participants and social contexts to explore variations in religious identity negotiation and the long-term sustainability of *pesantren* values.

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