

The Role of Students in Strengthening Digital Literacy in Islamic Boarding School Environments

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ABSTRACT

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Improving digital literacy remains a significant challenge in s (*Islamic boarding school*), particularly amidst the rapid pace of digital transformation. Students, as key agents of change, play a strategic role in introducing and strengthening digital competencies within these traditional educational environments. Community service initiatives carried out at s aim to increase digital awareness through structured training on the wise and productive use of technology. The program employed a three-phase approach: observation, hands-on workshops, and continuous evaluation. The findings reveal increased student understanding of digital ethics, cyber safety, and the use of digital tools such as Canva for educational content creation. Moreover, the initiative fostered a more collaborative and inclusive digital learning culture. However, challenges such as limited technological infrastructure and constrained training time were identified. It is recommended that future programs incorporate extended mentoring periods and provide infrastructure support to sustain digital literacy development. This initiative offers a replicable model for empowering digital literacy in Islamic boarding school settings and highlights the potential of university-student partnerships in bridging the digital divide within religious educational institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancements in information technology have reshaped many aspects of society, including education. In Indonesia, *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) have long played a vital role in nurturing students' religious and moral values (Athoillah et al., 2024; Mulyana et al., 2023; Zaini & Fahmi, 2023). However, with the growing reliance on digital technology, a significant gap has

emerged between the technological capabilities of Islamic boarding school and the broader society. This digital divide has implications for the effectiveness of education in these institutions (Artyukhov et al., 2024; Kainulainen et al., 2023; Zuhdi et al., 2024). While Islamic boarding school continue to focus on religious teachings, there is a pressing need to integrate digital literacy to ensure that students can navigate the digital world responsibly (Faiz et al., 2023; Purwanto et al., 2023). Digital literacy, encompassing the skills to use technology, evaluate information critically, and engage ethically with online content, is increasingly seen as a necessity for students to thrive in today's interconnected world.

In contemporary society, digital literacy has become a fundamental skill for students across various educational institutions. However, many Islamic boarding school face challenges in adopting and implementing comprehensive digital literacy programs (Al Anshori et al., 2022; Atabik et al., 2024; Haddade et al., 2024). While some Islamic boarding school have taken steps to incorporate technology into their curricula, limited access to devices and a lack of adequate training on using technology ethically are persistent issues (Arifin, 2024). The lack of digital literacy programs contributes to an inability to understand the dangers of misinformation, online harassment, and the misuse of digital tools. This gap poses a risk to students, particularly in terms of their ability to access educational content, communicate effectively, and maintain ethical standards in the digital realm. Addressing this issue requires a collaborative approach, engaging both university students and Islamic boarding school administrators to facilitate digital literacy education.

Digital literacy is defined not only by the ability to operate technological devices but also by a critical understanding of how to use these tools in a productive and ethical manner (Kim et al., 2024; Saharani & Diana, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic boarding school, digital literacy is particularly relevant as it can help students better navigate the digital age while maintaining their religious and cultural values (Abiddin et al., 2024; Asni et al., 2024). Effective digital literacy programs should emphasize media literacy, ethical use of technology, and the ability to evaluate information from a variety of sources. These skills are essential for students to engage with digital content responsibly and avoid the pitfalls of misinformation and digital harm. As such, digital literacy within Islamic boarding school is not merely a technical skill but a comprehensive framework that can shape students' attitudes and behaviors toward technology, preparing them for both academic and personal success in the digital age.

Digital literacy programs can enhance students' understanding of media ethics and online safety. Participatory training approaches, which involve hands-on learning and discussions on topics such as media ethics and information filtering, significantly improve students' awareness of the risks associated with digital content, including hoaxes and disinformation (Khalili et al., 2023; Masykuroh et al., 2024; Sungkawaningrum et al., 2022). Integrating religious

values with digital literacy training helps shape students' character, enabling them to use technology responsibly. The positive impact of student-led digital literacy programs in community-based settings (Ali & Halim, 2023). These studies collectively suggest that well-designed digital literacy initiatives can significantly improve students' engagement with technology.

While these studies offer valuable insights, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific role of university students in bridging the digital literacy gap in Islamic boarding school. Most research has focused on digital literacy programs led by external organizations or educators, yet few studies explore how university students—who are also digital natives—can act as facilitators in this process. The novelty of this research lies in examining the potential of university students, through community service programs (such as *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* or *KKN*), to deliver digital literacy training in Islamic boarding school settings. This approach provides a unique opportunity to leverage the skills and knowledge of university students to assist in enhancing the digital literacy of Islamic boarding school students, while also fostering collaboration between universities and Islamic boarding school.

This study aims to analyze the contribution of university students in supporting the enhancement of digital literacy at Alfa-Sanah. The primary focus of the research is to explore the implementation of digital literacy training methods, including the active involvement of university students, and to assess the impact of such programs on students' awareness and capacity to use technology effectively and ethically. By focusing on digital training methods, collaboration between university students and Islamic boarding school stakeholders, and the integration of digital ethics into training modules, the research seeks to understand how this collaborative model can address the digital divide in Islamic boarding school education.

As Indonesia continues to adapt to the digital era, ensuring that Islamic boarding school students are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate the digital world responsibly is crucial. The collaboration between university students and Islamic boarding school offers a promising solution to overcoming the digital divide. By focusing on ethical technology use, media literacy, and information evaluation, this research can help shape the future of Islamic education in the digital age. Furthermore, the findings may serve as a model for other Islamic boarding school and educational institutions in Indonesia and beyond, offering insights into how community-based digital literacy initiatives can enhance educational equity and prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using field study methods to analyze the contribution of university students in enhancing digital literacy within the Alfa-Sanah Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) environment.

The activity was part of the Community Service Program (Kuliah Kerja Nyata or KKN) conducted by students of the Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Ahmad Dahlan Jakarta as a form of community-based service (Miller et al., 2020). The community service was centered at the Alfa-Sanah Islamic Boarding School and the surrounding area of Kampung Desa Anamui. The target population included students (*santri*) and *pesantren* administrators who were directly involved in the implementation of the digital literacy improvement program. Participants were selected purposively, focusing on students who were actively engaged in teaching and learning activities and who showed interest in information technology.

Data collection techniques included participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted directly by the students during the training sessions to record participants' engagement and responses to the digital literacy materials. Interviews were held with *pesantren* administrators and selected students to explore their needs, challenges, and perceptions regarding the use of digital technology (Cornish et al., 2023). Documentation collected comprised photos of the activities, field notes, and snapshots of digital content published on social media.

The training materials focused on the positive use of social media, introduction to digital tools such as Microsoft Office and Canva, and strategies for utilizing online platforms as tools for independent learning and creative Islamic preaching (*dakwah*). Educational media in the form of infographics, short videos, and other informative content were published via platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and the *pesantren's* online media channels to broaden the reach of information dissemination (De Oliveira, 2023). Data analysis was conducted thematically, identifying response patterns and behavioral changes among students in their productive and ethical use of digital media. This analysis aimed to assess the impact of student involvement on improving digital literacy awareness and fostering technology-based learning transformation within the *pesantren* setting.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Identifying Digital Literacy

In the initial phase of the Community Service Program (KKN) at Alfa-Sanah Islamic Boarding School, it became evident that a significant gap existed in the students' (*santri*) digital literacy. Observations and interviews revealed that many students had limited exposure to digital devices and technology, particularly in terms of using them for educational purposes or religious outreach (*dakwah*). The low level of digital literacy was a major hindrance to utilizing digital technology in a productive manner, especially in the context of learning and promoting positive messages through social media platforms. This issue highlights the need for targeted interventions to bridge the digital divide in *pesantren* environments.

The lack of awareness and familiarity with digital tools was most apparent when the *santri* were asked to demonstrate their skills in using basic digital devices. Many were unfamiliar with common applications such as word processors or graphic design software, which are essential for creating content in today's digital world. This gap in digital skills not only affects their academic performance but also limits their potential for utilizing social media and other online platforms to engage with religious and educational materials.

The findings confirm that digital literacy is a crucial area of development for the *santri* at Alfa-Sanah Islamic Boarding School. Many students were unaware of the full potential of digital technology, and their limited experience with these tools hindered their ability to engage with the world beyond their immediate community. The lack of digital literacy also contributed to a lack of critical thinking regarding the content they consumed online, leading to potential risks related to misinformation and digital harm.

Upon further examination, it was clear that the students' limited digital skills reflected broader systemic issues. These included limited access to digital devices, unstable internet connectivity, and a lack of structured digital literacy training in the *pesantren*. This situation mirrors the findings in other research, where limited resources and infrastructure in rural or religious educational settings contribute to the digital divide. It also points to the broader challenge of integrating modern technology into traditional educational institutions, especially when there are competing priorities, such as religious teachings.

Identifying digital literacy as a key challenge within *pesantren* is an important finding. It underlines the urgency of incorporating digital literacy into the curriculum of Islamic boarding schools. Digital tools are no longer optional but are necessary for students to thrive in both academic and social spheres. The findings highlight the need for concerted efforts from both academic institutions and *pesantren* administrators to address this gap and equip students with the digital skills required for the future.

Student-Driven Training Initiatives

To address the identified gap in digital literacy, university students from the Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Ahmad Dahlan Jakarta designed and implemented a digital literacy training program. The training was developed to enhance the *santri*'s skills in using technology effectively and ethically. This initiative was part of the Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) program, a community service activity where students from the university provide assistance to local communities. The core activity of the program focused on hands-on learning, where *santri* were introduced to digital tools such as the Canva graphic design application.

The university students facilitated the training by guiding the *santri* through the process of creating digital posters with positive messages related to education, religious values, and ethical behavior on social media. The training

was designed to be interactive, with a combination of theoretical lessons followed by practical exercises. The santri were encouraged to explore their creativity while learning how to use digital platforms to communicate meaningful content. The approach was centered around developing both technical skills (e.g., using design software) and critical thinking skills (e.g., understanding the ethical implications of digital content).

The students designed and implemented a digital literacy training program as the core activity of the KKN. This training aimed to enhance the santri's skills in using information technology wisely and creatively. The training materials included an introduction to the graphic design application Canva, hands-on practice in creating educational digital posters, and education on internet ethics as well as the dissemination of positive information through social media. The training sessions were conducted interactively, beginning with theoretical explanations followed by direct practical application by the students.



Figure 1. The introduction to the Canva application

The activity took place in the main hall of the pesantren with the active participation of the students (santri). Under the direct guidance of the university students, the santri were trained to design digital posters with themes such as encouraging good deeds, promoting ethical behavior online, and emphasizing the importance of reading. Each santri took turns using the available devices to create their own designs. This process encouraged the students to explore their visual creativity while simultaneously deepening their understanding of the educational messages they intended to convey through their designs.



Figure 2. Poster Making Process by Students

After the design process was completed, the students' works were printed and displayed on the pesantren's bulletin board. The posters conveyed positive messages presented in visually appealing designs, such as "Be Wise on Social Media," "Santri Against Hoaxes," and "Learning is Worship." Displaying these works in public areas of the *pesantren* was a concrete step in cultivating a culture of visual and digital literacy within the school environment. In addition, this practice served as a form of appreciation for the students' efforts and fostered a sense of pride in their creative achievements.



Figure 3. Poster result of students' work

Program evaluation was carried out through reflective discussions with pesantren administrators and ongoing observation throughout the activity. The evaluation results indicated that the training successfully increased the santri's enthusiasm and understanding of the positive use of technology. The students began to show greater confidence in creating simple digital content and became more selective in their use of social media.

The student-driven training initiatives were an essential component of the program's success. The findings underscore the value of active learning and peer-to-peer education in the digital literacy development process. By involving students as both learners and teachers, the program created a collaborative learning environment that benefited both the santri and the university students. This approach highlights the potential for universities to contribute meaningfully to addressing the educational challenges faced by local communities.

Cultivating a Culture of Positive and Productive Technology Use

The final aspect of the digital literacy training involved cultivating a culture of positive and productive technology use among the *santri*. The training not only focused on technical skills but also emphasized the ethical use of technology and the responsible sharing of information. The *santri* were encouraged to create posters with messages such as "Be Wise on Social Media," "Santri Against Hoaxes," and "Learning is Worship," which were displayed in prominent areas of the *pesantren*. These posters conveyed messages that promoted digital literacy and the ethical use of technology, thereby reinforcing

the training's lessons.

Through this approach, the students were able to demonstrate the importance of using technology not just for personal gain but also for the benefit of the community. The posters were displayed in public spaces to serve as a visual reminder of the values the *santri* had learned during the training. This form of visual literacy was particularly effective in reinforcing the lessons learned, as it allowed the *santri* to see their creative outputs in real-world contexts. It also encouraged them to reflect on the role of digital technology in their daily lives and how it could be used to promote positive change.

The cultivation of a culture of positive and productive technology use was an essential outcome of the training program. By focusing on the ethical aspects of technology use and providing opportunities for the *santri* to engage in creative digital work, the program helped to shift attitudes toward technology from a potentially harmful tool to a force for good. The *santri's* increased confidence in using digital tools and their willingness to create content that aligns with positive values suggest that the training was successful in achieving its goal.

In interpreting these findings, it is evident that cultivating a culture of responsible technology use requires more than just teaching technical skills. It involves instilling a sense of responsibility in students and encouraging them to use their newfound skills for the greater good. The training encouraged the *santri* to think critically about the content they shared online and to consider the potential impact of their actions on others. This finding emphasizes the importance of integrating ethical considerations into digital literacy training, especially in environments where students may have limited experience with the digital world.

The cultivation of a culture of positive and productive technology use was a key result of the digital literacy training. This aspect of the program was instrumental in ensuring that the *santri* not only gained technical skills but also developed a responsible attitude toward technology. The program's success in fostering a positive digital culture underscores the importance of integrating ethical considerations into digital literacy initiatives, particularly in educational settings where students are still developing their understanding of the digital world.

Discussion

The identification of low levels of digital literacy among the *santri* aligns with prior research indicating that many religious and rural educational institutions face challenges in bridging the digital divide (Alkouatli, 2024; Indra et al., 2022; Zain & Mustofa, 2024). Digital literacy is essential for students in *pesantren*, as it enables them to engage meaningfully with modern technology. The importance of digital literacy programs in fostering critical thinking and ethical use of technology. The findings from this study confirm that addressing

the digital skills gap in *pesantren* is a necessary step to prepare students for the digital age, ensuring they are not left behind in an increasingly connected world.

The student-driven approach to digital literacy training in the KKN program was highly effective in overcoming the gap in skills identified in the preliminary observations. The importance of participatory training methods in improving students' understanding of digital ethics, and this aligns with the approach taken in this program (Nazaretsky et al., 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2020). University students served as facilitators, providing direct guidance to the *santri* and fostering an environment conducive to hands-on learning. This method not only increased the students' technical competence but also helped them develop a more ethical approach to using digital tools. By empowering students to become both learners and teachers, the program created a collaborative learning environment that benefitted both parties.

Furthermore, the program's success in fostering a culture of positive and responsible technology use highlights the importance of ethical considerations in digital literacy. Digital literacy programs should go beyond technical skills and include components on the responsible use of technology. The emphasis on creating educational and ethical digital content, such as posters with messages about social media responsibility and combating misinformation, exemplifies this approach (Islamiah & Maulidiah, 2024; Maulidia, 2023). The *santri* not only learned to use digital tools effectively but also understood their role in shaping the digital landscape responsibly. This shift in attitude toward technology reflects the potential of such programs to create a more ethical digital culture within *pesantren* settings.

The hands-on training approach used in the KKN program proved to be an effective method for engaging the *santri* and enhancing their digital literacy. The *santri's* active participation in designing posters allowed them to engage deeply with the content and apply their learning in a meaningful way (Mujahid, 2021; Nursyamsi et al., 2023). The feedback from the students showed a notable increase in confidence, with many expressing a newfound interest in using digital tools for educational and religious purposes (Ataman et al., 2024; Sadiyah, 2022). This indicates that such initiatives can have a lasting impact on students' digital skills and attitudes.

In interpreting these findings, it is clear that digital literacy programs tailored to the specific needs of *pesantren* students are essential for overcoming barriers to effective technology use. This study adds to the growing body of research that demonstrates the positive outcomes of student-led initiatives in addressing digital literacy gaps. The success of the program at Alfa-Sanah Islamic Boarding School underscores the importance of designing interventions that are not only relevant to the local context but also engage students in an interactive, hands-on manner (Rahman et al., 2024). The integration of digital tools with the *pesantren's* educational values ensures that the training is both effective and culturally appropriate.

The collaboration between university students and *pesantren* stakeholders also proved to be a key factor in the success of the program. Collaborative efforts significantly enhance the impact of digital literacy initiatives by drawing on the strengths and resources of both the educational institution and the local community (Rinaldo et al., 2024). In this case, the students' expertise in technology was complemented by the *pesantren's* understanding of its students' needs and values. This partnership allowed for the development of a tailored program that addressed both the technical and ethical aspects of digital literacy, making it highly relevant and impactful.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of university-led, student-driven digital literacy initiatives in *pesantren* settings. The positive outcomes, such as increased digital literacy, improved ethical awareness, and greater engagement with technology, demonstrate that these programs can significantly enhance the educational experience of *santri*. By integrating ethical considerations into the training and involving the students in creative, hands-on activities, the program successfully addressed the digital divide and fostered a culture of responsible technology use.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the positive impact of student-driven digital literacy programs in enhancing the digital skills and ethical awareness of *santri* at Alfa-Sanah Islamic Boarding School. The findings demonstrate that hands-on, interactive training, along with a focus on ethical technology use, can effectively bridge the digital divide in *pesantren* settings. While the program successfully increased students' digital literacy and encouraged the creation of positive digital content, several limitations were identified, including limited access to digital devices and unstable internet connectivity, which hindered the full potential of the training. Future research should explore ways to address these infrastructural challenges and examine the long-term impact of such programs on students' academic and social development. Additionally, further studies could investigate the scalability of this approach in other *pesantren* and assess its potential to foster a more widespread culture of responsible technology use within religious educational settings.

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