

Pious Simulacra: Millennial Muslim Piety on Social Media and Its Implications for Islamic Education

Khairul Rezqi Alviansyah*, Dian Mohammad Hakim, Abdul Jalil

Universitas Islam Malang, Indonesia

Email Corresponding : rezqialvianss@gmail.com

Abstract

Young Muslims increasingly present their religiosity on social media, turning piety into something displayed as much as practiced. This study examines how millennial Muslims represent piety on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, how those representations harden into simulacra under platform logic, and what the phenomenon means for Islamic education. The research uses a qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design. Data came from digital observation, in-depth interviews with a religious content creator, a millennial audience member, and an Islamic-education teacher, and documentation, then were analyzed through the interactive model of Miles and Huberman within an interpretive frame. Findings show that piety online is constructed from religious symbols, *hijrah* narratives, and aesthetic craft, and that its persuasive weight rests as much on packaging as on doctrinal content. Once reproduced, aesthetically filtered, and algorithmically distributed, the sign of piety begins to circulate independently of the devotion it once signaled, producing a condition of hyperreality that informants recognized yet could not escape. This mediated piety reaches students as decontextualized fragments, leaving them fluent in the markers of religiosity but less practiced in its substance. The study consolidates these findings into the Pious Simulacrum-to-Pedagogy model, which identifies critical digital literacy and character formation as paired responses. Its implication is that Islamic education must treat the algorithmic feed as both the source of the problem and a resource for transforming religious learning, moving students from recognizing pious signs toward grasping the substance those signs are meant to carry.

How to Cite:

Alviansyah, K. R., Hakim, D. M., & Jalil, A. (2025). Pious Simulacra: Millennial Muslim Piety on Social Media and Its Implications for Islamic Education. *Educazione: Journal of Education and Learning*, 3(1), 188–200.

Article History

Received : November 2025
Revised : November 2025
Accepted : December 2025

Keywords:

Digital Piety, Simulacra, Millennial Muslims, Islamic Education, Social Media Representation

INTRODUCTION

Religious life among young Muslims has moved onto the screen, and piety has increasingly become something to be seen rather than only practiced (Aysel, 2024; Nazam et al., 2022). On Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, millennial Muslims now encounter and display religiosity through curated images, short-form sermons, *hijrah* testimonies, and religious symbols woven into everyday aesthetics (Roberts & David, 2025). This shift is neither marginal nor temporary, since social media has become one of the primary spaces where the current generation first meets religious information, forms impressions of what a devout life looks like, and negotiates its own religious identity (Bañales et al., 2024; Ghorzang, 2025). *Content creators* produce religious material calibrated to platform logic, audiences consume it daily through algorithmic recommendation, and the line between spiritual expression and visual performance grows steadily thinner (Gallagher & Hernandez, 2025; Hödl & Myrach, 2023). The phenomenon matters because what a generation learns to recognize as piety shapes how it eventually understands and practices its faith. Studying how piety is represented online, and what that representation does, is therefore not a peripheral cultural question but one that reaches into the substance of contemporary religious formation.

Recent scholarship converges on three themes that frame this study. The first concerns the reconfiguration of religious authority: Zaid et al. (2022) argue that *Muslim influencers* can displace

established religious authority because their content is entertaining and relevant to young audiences, which relocates the source of religious guidance from traditional institutions to charismatic individuals whose credibility rests on engagement rather than scholarly lineage. This matters for the present study because it explains why the visual and affective packaging of piety carries so much weight in the first place. The second theme concerns the plurality of piety: Muthohirin (2025) shows that digital *da'wah* fragments devotion into competing typologies while simultaneously functioning as an alternative source of religious learning for millennial Muslims, a finding that positions social media as both a site of representation and a site of education. The third theme concerns mediatization, where Sito Rohmawati et al. (2025) demonstrate that Muslim religious practice in Indonesia is increasingly filtered through media logic and hypermediation, so that religious experience comes to be shaped by the visual and algorithmic conventions of the platforms that carry it. Together these strands establish that representation, authority, and learning are entangled, yet each is typically examined on its own.

The gap emerges precisely where these strands should meet but do not. The reconfiguration of authority explains why packaged piety persuades, the plurality literature notes that social media teaches religion, and the mediatization literature shows that platform logic reshapes practice, but few studies trace the full arc from how piety is represented, through its transformation into a self-referential image under platform conditions, to the concrete consequences that image carries into Islamic education. The reproduction of religious symbols has been described, and the educational potential of social media has been asserted, but the two observations rarely occupy the same analytical frame, and the theoretical bridge between them is seldom built. This study addresses that space by reading the phenomenon through Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra alongside Stuart Hall's theory of representation, then following the analysis into the classroom. Its novelty lies in that connection, since it does not describe digital piety and digital pedagogy as separate topics but explains how the simulacral logic of the feed becomes an educational problem, consolidating the explanation into a single conceptual model that names where Islamic education must intervene.

The purpose of this study is therefore threefold and deliberately sequential. It seeks, first, to describe how millennial Muslims construct the representation of piety on social media through symbols, narratives, aesthetics, and digital interaction; second, to analyze how those representations operate as simulacra once refracted through reproduction, aesthetic gatekeeping, and algorithmic distribution; and third, to examine what this phenomenon implies for Islamic education and how that field might respond. In pursuing these aims, the study extends the existing literature in two directions. It supplies the theoretical bridge that connects the representation strand to the education strand through the concept of the simulacrum, and it moves beyond diagnosis toward a pedagogical response rather than stopping at cultural critique. The result is an account relevant both to scholars of digital religion and to practitioners who must prepare students to navigate a religious mediascape they did not design and cannot avoid.

The central argument this study advances is that mediated piety, however sincerely produced, tends under platform conditions to elevate the recognizable sign of religiosity above the substance it is meant to signal, and that this displacement carries direct pedagogical stakes. The inquiry is qualitative and interpretive, aimed at understanding lived experience rather than measuring variables, and it draws on the accounts of a religious content creator, a millennial audience member, and an Islamic-education teacher in order to hold the phenomenon in view from three distinct positions. The focus is not on judging any practice as authentic or inauthentic but on understanding how meaning is produced, circulated, and learned in digital religious space. Having established the phenomenon, the scholarly conversation that surrounds it, and the conceptual lens through which it will be read, the article now turns to the methodological design through which these questions were investigated.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design in the tradition developed by Martin Heidegger, chosen because the research set out to understand and interpret how millennial Muslims experience and make sense of the representation of piety on social media rather than to measure variables (V. Berger, 2023; Vella, 2024, 2025). Where quantitative work isolates and counts, qualitative inquiry reaches for the meanings that sit beneath action, experience, and social interaction, and hermeneutic phenomenology adds a further commitment: lived experience cannot be separated from the world in which a person is situated, so understanding a phenomenon requires interpreting it within its social, cultural, and historical context, or what *Heidegger termed* being-in-the-world (Howdyshell, 2024; van der Heiden, 2022). The researcher served as the key instrument, present throughout data collection and interpretation, and maintained reflexivity through periodic notes to keep the analysis anchored in what informants actually conveyed rather than in prior assumptions. Three informants were selected purposively to capture different positions within the phenomenon: a religious content creator, a millennial audience member who actively consumes religious content, and an Islamic-education teacher, each identified in the findings by a role-based code to preserve confidentiality. Digital observation of religious content on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube situated these accounts within the platforms that shape them.

Data were gathered through three complementary techniques which allowed the phenomenon to be approached from more than one angle. Observation came first, with the researcher examining religious content across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, attending to the religious symbols in use, the way content was presented, the narratives conveyed, and the patterns of interaction that emerged in digital space; The aim was not to judge any practice as correct or mistaken but to build a fuller sense of the context in which the informants' experiences were formed. In-depth semi-structured interviews then gave the informants room to narrate their own experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of mediated piety, so that the meanings behind those experiences could be drawn out rather than presumed; every interview proceeded only after the informant's consent, was recorded with permission, and was transcribed for analysis. Documentation supplied the third layer, comprising screenshots of social media content, transcripts, and other materials relevant to the research focus, which served to corroborate and enrich the interview and observation data. Credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Closa, 2021; Martin et al., 2025).

Table 1. Research informants and their coding

Code	Role	Basis of selection	Data drawn from this informant
CC	Religious content creator	Actively produces and distributes religious content on social media	Content production process, message strategy, use of religious symbols, effect of algorithms on reach
MA	Millennial audience member	Regularly accesses and interacts with religious content on social media	Consumption experience, subjective meaning of digital piety, effect of content on religious understanding and practice
IE	Islamic-education teacher	Mentors and observes students amid the growth of digital media	Influence of mediated piety on students' religious understanding, character, and the challenges facing Islamic education

Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, operated here inside the study's hermeneutic-interpretive frame rather than as a mechanical coding routine, and proceeded through four movements that overlapped rather than ran in strict sequence (Bingham, 2023; Laari, 2025). Data collection drew together the raw material from digital observation, interviews, and documentation. Data condensation then selected, focused, and simplified that material, distilling transcripts and field notes into a denser and more workable form without stripping away the meaning the informants had expressed. Data display arranged the condensed material so that the patterns running through it became visible and open to further interpretation, allowing the

complexity of digital piety to be held in view rather than flattened. Conclusion drawing and verification closed the cycle, testing the emerging interpretation against the data and against the research questions until the findings could be stated as a reasoned, reflective account rather than an impression. Throughout, the four movements informed one another: a reading at the display stage frequently sent the analysis back to condense or recollect, which is characteristic of both the Miles and Huberman model and the hermeneutic circle in which understanding is repeatedly revised against the whole (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings are organized around the three research foci that structured this study: how millennial Muslims represent piety on social media, how those representations operate as simulacra once refracted through platform logic, and what this phenomenon implies for Islamic education. Data were drawn from digital observation of religious content on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, from in-depth interviews with three purposively selected informants, and from documentation in the form of screenshots and interview transcripts. To protect informant confidentiality, participants are identified by role-based codes rather than personal names: CC for the religious content creator, MA (*Madrasah Aliyah*, Islamic senior high school) for the millennial audience member who actively consumes religious content, and IE for the Islamic-education teacher. Where an informant referred to a specific, identifiable social-media account, that reference has been generalized to preserve anonymity. Original Indonesian quotations are retained, with English translations placed immediately below each.

The Visual and Narrative Construction of Piety

Piety on social media reaches its audience before a single word of doctrine is read. What signals religiosity first is a cluster of recognizable markers: modest *Islamic dress*, Qur'anic verses and hadith set as captions, footage of worship, and settings that carry an unmistakably religious atmosphere. These markers do the initial work of identification, telling a viewer within seconds that a piece of content belongs to the register of *dakwah*. The audience informant described this vocabulary of recognition in concrete terms, listing the visual cues he encounters most often when religious content appears on his feed.

"Yang paling sering saya lihat itu pakaian syar'i, hijab panjang, gamis, peci, narasi hijrah, atau video saat sedang beribadah. Selain itu juga sering ada caption berisi ayat Al-Qur'an, hadis, atau postingan kata-kata motivasi Islami." (MA)

"What I see most often is syar'i clothing, long hijab, gamis, peci, hijrah narratives, or videos of someone worshipping. There are also frequently captions containing Qur'anic verses, hadith, or posts with Islamic motivational words." (MA)

For the content creator, these symbols are not incidental decoration but a deliberate part of message design. CC explained that *Islamic visual* elements let an audience grasp immediately that a piece of content concerns religious guidance, so the symbols function less as ornament and more as a channel that carries the message itself. This intention on the production side, matched by the audience's fluency in reading the same cues, shows that a shared symbolic code has settled into place: creators encode piety through a recognizable visual grammar, and viewers decode it without hesitation. Symbols establish recognition, but they do not, by themselves, hold attention. That work is carried by narrative, and here the pattern that recurs most strongly is the story of *hijrah*, the personal turn toward a more observant life. CC was explicit that his choices are governed by accessibility rather than doctrinal weight, favoring plain language and everyday framing over anything that might feel like judgment.

"Saya lebih suka menyampaikan dengan bahasa yang sederhana. Saya menghindari pembahasan yang terlalu berat atau terkesan menghakimi. Saya ingin orang merasa dekat dulu dengan pesannya. Jadi

biasanya saya mengaitkan materi agama dengan pengalaman sehari-hari yang sering dialami anak muda." (CC)

"I prefer to deliver messages in simple language. I avoid discussions that are too heavy or that come across as judgmental. I want people to feel close to the message first. So I usually connect religious material to the everyday experiences that young people often go through." (CC)

The audience response confirms that this calibration lands. MA reported being drawn to content about life motivation, reminders to worship, relationships with parents, and short study clips, precisely because the lighter framing makes religious messages easier to absorb and act on. The convergence here is telling. Representation of piety is not built on doctrinal exposition alone; it is built on narratives pitched close to the lived experience of the audience, and that proximity is what gives the message its communicative force. Visual quality reinforces both symbol and narrative. CC attends to image resolution, appropriate music, subtitles, and delivery, treating production values as a communication strategy rather than an end in themselves.

"Saya tetap memperhatikan kualitas gambar, pemilihan musik yang sesuai, subtitle, sampai cara penyampaian supaya lebih nyaman ditonton. Tapi saya berusaha agar visual itu hanya sebagai media penyampaian, bukan untuk mengurangi isi pesannya." (CC)

"I still pay attention to image quality, appropriate music selection, subtitles, and delivery so that it is more comfortable to watch. But I try to keep the visuals as a medium of delivery, not something that reduces the content of the message." (CC)

Taken together, the evidence in this theme points to a single conclusion: piety on social media is a constructed representation assembled from symbols, narratives, and aesthetic craft, and its persuasive weight depends as much on how the message is packaged as on what the message contains. This distinction, between the substance of religious teaching and the form through which it circulates, sets up the tension examined in the next theme.

From Representation to Simulacrum

Once the symbolic and narrative material of piety enters the platform, it stops behaving like a straightforward reflection of religious life and begins to take on a life of its own. Three mechanisms drive this shift: the continual reproduction of religious symbols, the dominance of aesthetics in how content is judged, and the algorithmic sorting that determines which representations reach whom. Observations across multiple religious accounts showed the same visual markers recurring so consistently that they have hardened into the default signature of piety online. MA's account of what he repeatedly encounters captures the density of this repetition.

"Yang paling sering saya lihat itu pakaian syar'i, hijab panjang, gamis, peci, jenggot, latar masjid, Al-Qur'an, atau video sedang salat dan mengaji. Selain itu juga sering ada caption berisi ayat Al-Qur'an, hadis, atau kata-kata motivasi Islami." (MA)

"What I see most often is syar'i clothing, long hijab, gamis, peci, beards, mosque backgrounds, the Qur'an, or videos of praying and reciting. There are also frequently captions containing Qur'anic verses, hadith, or Islamic motivational words." (MA)

The repetition matters because it changes the status of the symbols. When the same markers appear again and again across unrelated accounts, they cease to point back to any particular person's devotion and instead become free-floating signs of piety in general, recognizable and reproducible independent of the religious experience that once gave rise to them. This is the first movement toward what Baudrillard describes as a copy without an original.

Aesthetics accelerate the movement. CC was candid that stiff delivery loses viewers, so production polish becomes a precondition for being watched at all.

"Saya merasa kalau penyampaiannya terlalu kaku, orang biasanya langsung melewati videonya. Jadi saya tetap memperhatikan kualitas gambar, pemilihan musik yang sesuai, subtitle, sampai cara berbicara supaya lebih nyaman ditonton." (CC)

"I feel that if the delivery is too stiff, people usually skip the video right away. So I still pay attention to image quality, appropriate music selection, subtitles, and even the way I speak so that it is more comfortable to watch." (CC)

When visual appeal becomes the threshold for visibility, the aesthetic surface starts to compete with, and sometimes eclipse, the doctrinal substance underneath. The algorithm then compounds the effect. CC admitted to tailoring video length, openings, and titles to the recommendation system's preferences, because conformity to that logic is what widens reach.

"Pernah. Misalnya durasi video saya buat lebih singkat, bagian pembuka dibuat lebih menarik, atau judulnya lebih mengundang rasa penasaran. Karena kalau mengikuti pola algoritma, peluang videonya menjangkau lebih banyak orang memang lebih besar." (CC)

"Yes. For example, I make the video duration shorter, the opening more engaging, or the title more curiosity-provoking. Because if you follow the algorithm's pattern, the chance of the video reaching more people really is greater." (CC)

From the receiving end, MA confirmed that most of the religious content he encounters arrives through recommendation rather than deliberate search, surfacing on his Instagram and TikTok feeds almost daily. Reproduction, aesthetics, and algorithmic distribution thus work in concert, and the representation that results is shaped at least as much by platform logic as by religious content.

What keeps this from collapsing into pure cynicism is that the informants themselves recognize the gap. Both creator and audience volunteered, without prompting, that mediated piety is partial. CC drew a firm line between what a platform can show and what it cannot.

"Media sosial hanya bisa menunjukkan representasi, sedangkan kualitas keimanan dan keikhlasan tetap menjadi urusan pribadi antara manusia dengan Allah." (CC)

"Social media can only show representation, whereas the quality of faith and sincerity remains a private matter between a person and God." (CC)

MA offered a similar perspective, describing social media as a space where individuals display a curated best version of themselves.

"Menurut saya tidak selalu. Media sosial kan memang tempat orang memilih bagian terbaik yang ingin ditampilkan. Jadi kita hanya melihat sebagian kecil dari kehidupan seseorang." (MA)

"In my view, not always. Social media is precisely the place where people choose the best parts they want to display. So we only see a small fraction of someone's life." (MA)

This shared awareness is significant. The simulacrum described by Baudrillard does not require that its consumers be deceived; it requires only that the image become the more readily recognized reality. That is exactly the condition the data describe. Viewers know the representation is partial, yet piety is still identified first through its visual signature, because reproduced symbols are simply easier to read than the interior states of faith and sincerity they claim to signal. The image has not replaced religious reality in the informants' minds, but it has become the more accessible currency of recognition, and that displacement is precisely what carries consequences for how the next generation learns its religion.

Implications for Islamic Education

The third focus turns from the phenomenon to its educational stakes, and the evidence gathered from the teacher informant reframes social media as something Islamic education can no longer treat as external to itself. Religious learning now begins, for many young people, on a feed

rather than in a classroom. MA described a daily habit of consuming religious content that reaches him without any effort to seek it out.

"Hampir setiap hari sih. Soalnya konten seperti itu sering muncul sendiri di beranda saya, apalagi di Instagram sama TikTok. Biasanya saya menonton kalau temanya tentang motivasi hidup, pengingat ibadah, atau kajian singkat yang durasinya tidak terlalu panjang." (MA)

"Almost every day, really. Because content like that often appears on my feed on its own, especially on Instagram and TikTok. I usually watch when the theme is about life motivation, reminders to worship, or short studies that are not too long in duration." (MA)

The teacher confirmed that this exposure now precedes formal instruction rather than supplementing it. IE observed that students frequently encounter religious terms, concepts, and even religious figures through social media before they study them in school, which means the classroom increasingly receives learners whose first religious impressions were formed elsewhere. That reordering is the pivot on which the educational implications turn: the school is no longer the first teacher. The difficulty is that what arrives first arrives in fragments. IE reported that students absorb clothing styles, religious vocabulary, and viral habits, and quote snippets of sermons from short-form clips, without the surrounding context that would give those fragments their meaning.

"Yang paling sering saya lihat adalah peserta didik mulai meniru cara berpakaian, istilah-istilah keagamaan, atau kebiasaan yang sedang viral di media sosial. Mereka juga sering mengutip potongan ceramah dari TikTok atau Instagram. Sayangnya, kadang mereka belum memahami konteks atau penjelasan yang lebih utuh dari materi tersebut." (IE)

"What I most often see is that students begin to imitate ways of dressing, religious terms, or habits that are going viral on social media. They also frequently quote snippets of sermons from TikTok or Instagram. Unfortunately, they sometimes do not yet understand the context or the fuller explanation behind that material." (IE)

This is where the simulacrum described in Theme 2 becomes an educational problem rather than a cultural observation. Students who learn piety first as a set of reproducible symbols are equipped to recognize the signs of religiosity long before they grasp the substance those signs are meant to carry. Notably, MA models the corrective disposition that the teacher hopes to cultivate; he reported not accepting everything he encounters at face value and looking for additional references, as not all material is presented completely. His self-correcting habit is not universal among his peers, which is precisely why it cannot be left to chance. The teacher's response locates the remedy in critical digital literacy.

"Yang perlu dilakukan adalah mengajarkan peserta didik untuk berpikir kritis, memeriksa sumber informasi, dan memahami bahwa tidak semua yang terlihat di media sosial bisa langsung dijadikan ukuran dalam beragama." (IE)

"What needs to be done is to teach students to think critically, to check the sources of information, and to understand that not everything seen on social media can be taken directly as a measure in religious practice." (IE)

Literacy addresses the cognitive side of the problem, but IE was clear that it does not reach the deeper issue, which is character. The teacher located the true measure of piety in interior and relational qualities that no symbol can display.

"Yang paling penting menurut saya adalah keikhlasan, akhlak, dan konsistensi dalam beribadah. Peserta didik perlu memahami bahwa kesalehan bukan hanya tentang apa yang tampak di depan orang lain, tetapi juga bagaimana hubungan mereka dengan Allah dan bagaimana mereka bersikap kepada sesama." (IE)

"The most important things, in my view, are sincerity, moral character, and consistency in worship. Students need to understand that piety is not only about what appears in front of others, but also about their relationship with God and how they treat others." (IE)

The educational implication that emerges is therefore twofold and mutually dependent. Islamic education must equip students to read digital religious content critically, verifying sources and restoring the context that short clips strip away, and it must simultaneously strengthen the formation of character, so that sincerity and conduct are understood as the substance of piety rather than its optional interior. Left unaddressed, the simulacral logic of the feed trains a generation to mistake the recognizable sign of faith for faith itself. Addressed well, the same media that fragments religious understanding can be turned toward it, which is the pedagogical opportunity that sits alongside the risk.

The three themes trace a single arc, from how piety is built as a representation, through its transformation into a simulacrum under platform logic, to the educational consequences that follow. To consolidate the analysis and make the correspondence between each research focus and its principal findings visible at a glance, the results are synthesized in Table 1.

Table 2. Synthesis of Research Findings Across the Three Foci

No	Research Focus	Key Findings
1	Representation of millennial Muslim piety on social media	Piety is represented through religious symbols (<i>hijab</i> , <i>gamis</i> , <i>peci</i> , Qur'anic verses, hadith, worship footage) that form the audience's first impression of religious identity; it is reinforced by <i>hijrah</i> narratives told in simple, everyday language accessible to young people; visual aesthetics operate as a communication strategy that raises the appeal of content without, in the creators' intent, displacing its substance; and consistency of theme, communicative style, and purpose builds a recognizable religious personal brand.
2	Piety as simulacrum in the digital sphere	Religious symbols undergo continual reproduction until they become the dominant marker of piety, detached from the individual devotion they once signaled; aesthetics become the threshold for visibility; the algorithm and user interaction govern reach, popularity, and the further reproduction of representations; and informants themselves recognize that mediated piety does not fully mirror religious reality, evidencing the condition of simulacrum and hyperreality in Baudrillard's sense.
3	Implications for Islamic education	Social media has become a primary source of religious learning for millennial Muslims and students, often preceding formal instruction; religious content frequently arrives as decontextualized fragments; critical digital literacy becomes an essential competence for verifying sources and restoring context; and Islamic education must strengthen the formation of moral character, sincerity, and consistent practice so that students grasp the substance of piety rather than its symbols alone.

Discussion

The first finding, that piety on social media is assembled from religious symbols, *hijrah* narratives, and aesthetic craft, is best read through Stuart Hall's account of representation as the production of meaning through language, symbols, and signs (Achfandhy & Rohmatulloh, 2025; Bagdogan, 2023). Meaning does not reside in an object; it is constructed socially and sustained through repeated use (Hansen, 2025; Strand & Leonard, 2025). The symbols that recur across the accounts observed in this study, modest dress, Qur'anic captions, footage of worship, carry religious meaning not because they are intrinsically sacred but because a community reads them collectively as markers of Islamic identity (Muttaqin, 2020; Prasojo et al., 2020). Hall's encoding and decoding model sharpens the point (Ni, 2024; Yin, 2025). The creator informant encodes a message by selecting symbols, language, and visual treatment suited to the platform, while the audience decodes it against their own knowledge and experience. The audience in this study did not receive content passively; they evaluated and filtered it before connecting it to their own practice. Piety online, then, is neither a simple broadcast nor a simple mirror. It is a negotiated

construction, and that framing matters because it locates the meaning of religious content in the relationship between producer and viewer rather than in the content alone.

What Hall's model does not fully capture is what happens once that construction is fed through the machinery of the platform, and this is where Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra becomes necessary (Herlina et al., 2025; Morris, 2021). The study found that religious symbols are reproduced so persistently across unrelated accounts that they begin to function independently of any individual's devotion. Baudrillard's insight is that a sign, copied often enough, stops referring back to a reality and starts standing in for one (Anne-Cecile Freerks, 2022; Sommerer, 2025). Three mechanisms in the data drive this movement: the continual reproduction of symbols, the elevation of aesthetic polish into a precondition for visibility, and the algorithm's role in deciding which representations circulate (Rosida et al., 2023). Together they produce a hyperreality of piety, a condition in which the image of religiosity becomes more readily recognized than the interior states it claims to signal. The evidence here is not that audiences are fooled. It is subtler and more interesting: the informants openly acknowledged that mediated piety is partial, yet symbolic recognition still runs ahead of substantive understanding. Awareness of the gap does not close it.

This reading aligns with a growing body of work on digital religiosity while extending it in a specific direction (Salerno, 2024). Studies of the same terrain have described a hyperreligiosity produced by the reproduction of religious symbols online and have shown that Muslim religious practice is increasingly shaped by mediatization, so that religious experience comes to be filtered through visual representation and media logic (Al-Zaman, 2022; Perez-Vela, 2023). Research on *Islamic influencers* has likewise found that platform algorithms and creator characteristics work together to raise users' exposure to religious content through engagement-driven recommendation (Balishyan & Kompatsiaris, 2023; Daviet & Malhotra, 2022). The present study confirms these dynamics in an *Indonesian millennial* setting, but its contribution is to trace the consequence one step further than description, from the fact of a mediated, reproduced piety to what that condition does to religious learning. Prior work establishes that the simulacrum exists; this study asks what a generation formed by it is actually learning, and what education must do in response.

That question is where the third finding earns its weight. Social media has become a primary venue of religious learning, frequently reaching young people before formal instruction does, and it delivers religious knowledge in fragments stripped of context (A. Berger & Golan, 2024; Haq & Kwok, 2024). The teacher informant described students who imitate dress, adopt vocabulary, and quote clipped sermons without the fuller explanation that would anchor them. Read against the two theories, this is the simulacrum arriving in the classroom: learners fluent in the signs of piety and comparatively unpracticed in its substance. This situates the study within the conversation about religion in cyberspace, where scholars have argued that social media now operates as a genuine space of Islamic education and identity formation, and where the culture of connectivity described in media studies has reorganized how individuals acquire information and construct identity (Pescott, 2020). The pedagogical stakes are not hypothetical; they are visible in what students bring into the room.

The study's central contribution is to convert these observations into a single explanatory model rather than leaving them as three separate findings, and that synthesis is presented in Figure 1. The model, which we term the Pious Simulacrum-to-Pedagogy (PS2P) model, traces a continuous arc: representation is built from symbol, narrative, and aesthetic; platform logic reproduces and amplifies it into a simulacrum governed by symbol reproduction, aesthetic gatekeeping, and algorithmic reach; the simulacrum then lands as an educational consequence in the form of fragmented, feed-first religious learning; and Islamic education answers with a paired response of critical digital literacy and character formation (Kahambing, 2024). The value of drawing the phenomenon as one connected sequence is that it makes the intervention points legible. *Literacy alone* addresses the cognitive fracture, the missing context, but leaves the deeper substitution of sign for substance untouched; character formation alone addresses sincerity and

conduct but leaves students defenseless against decontextualized content. The model shows why the two must operate together rather than in isolation.

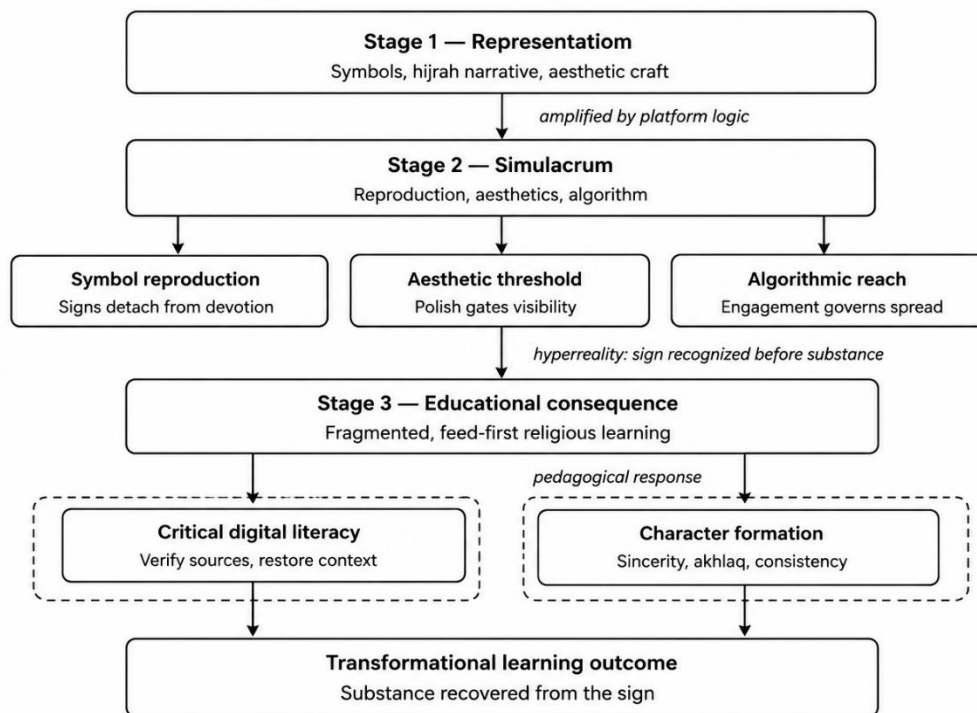


Figure 1. The Pious Simulacrum-to-Pedagogy (PS2P) model, synthesizing the study's findings across representation, simulacrum, and educational response.

Positioned this way, the study speaks directly to the project of transformational education and learning. Transformational learning, in Mezirow's tradition, begins when a learner's taken-for-granted frame of reference is disrupted and then critically reconstructed, and the PS2P model identifies precisely such a disorienting condition: a religious formation in which the sign has quietly displaced the substance it once carried. The transformation this study calls for is therefore not the addition of digital tools to religious instruction but a change in what religious learning is understood to cultivate. It asks Islamic education to move learners from the recognition of pious signs to the critical interrogation of them, and from the performance of piety to its interior formation, treating sincerity, character, and consistency as the substance that no image can supply. The same media that fragments religious understanding can, under this pedagogy, become the occasion for its critical renewal. That reframing, of the algorithmic feed as both the site of the problem and a resource for its transformation, is the specific contribution this study offers to the wider conversation on how learning must change in a digitally mediated age.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how millennial Muslims represent and make sense of piety on social media and what that phenomenon means for Islamic education, and three conclusions follow from the evidence. Piety online is constructed rather than simply displayed, assembled from religious symbols, *hijrah* narratives told in accessible language, and deliberate aesthetic craft, so that its persuasive force depends as much on packaging as on doctrinal content. Once fed through platform logic, this representation is reproduced, aesthetically gated, and algorithmically distributed until the sign of piety begins to circulate independently of the devotion it once signaled, producing the condition of hyperreality that Baudrillard describes, a condition the informants themselves recognized without being freed from it. The consequence reaches the classroom, where religious learning now often begins on a feed rather than in formal instruction and arrives as

decontextualized fragments, leaving students fluent in the signs of piety yet comparatively unpracticed in its substance. The study's contribution is to bind these findings into a single explanatory sequence, the Pious Simulacrum-to-Pedagogy (PS2P) model, which locates the two intervention points Islamic education must address together: critical digital literacy to restore the missing context, and character formation to recover sincerity and conduct as the substance that no image can supply. These conclusions rest on a small, purposively selected group of informants within a single national and cultural setting, so they are meant to illuminate the phenomenon rather than to generalize across populations, and the fast-moving nature of the platforms studied means the specific practices observed may shift. Future research could test and extend the PS2P model with larger and more varied participant groups, across different platforms and religious traditions, and through classroom-based studies that examine how a pedagogy pairing digital literacy with character formation works in practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors are grateful to the informants who generously shared their time and experiences, without which this study would not have been possible. Appreciation is also extended to all parties who offered guidance and constructive feedback during the research and writing process. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors and was conducted independently by the authors.

REFERENCES

- Achfandhy, M. I., & Rohmatulloh, D. M. (2025). Piety, Social Pressure, and Riya': Religious Practices of Yogyakarta Urban Muslim Youth in Digital Media. *Epistémé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman*, 19(02), 249–268. <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2024.19.02.249-268>
- Al-Zaman, M. S. (2022). Social Mediatization of Religion: Islamic Videos on YouTube. *Heliyon*, 8(3), e09083. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09083>
- Alsaigh, R., & Coyne, I. (2021). Doing a Hermeneutic Phenomenology Research Underpinned by Gadamer's Philosophy: A Framework to Facilitate Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211047820>
- Anne-Cecile Freerks, V. (2022). Baudrillard and Heidegger: Between Two Deaths. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39(6), 87–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211070279>
- Aysel, A. (2024). Why Do Young Muslims Study Islamic Theology? The Role of Islamic Theology in Empowering Young Muslims and Bridging Postmigration Divides. *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 25(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-bja10093>
- Bagdogan, S. (2023). Hands-On(ly) Vlogging: How Turkish Muslim Women Perform “Modesty” and “Piety” in Self-Branding on Their YouTube Cooking Channels. *Social Media + Society*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231166446>
- Balishyan, S., & Kompatsiaris, P. (2023). Platform Spiritualities: Entrepreneurial Selves and Post-Feminist Sensibilities of Russian Influencers. *Observatorio*, 75–93. <https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS17520232420>
- Bañales, J., Saleem, M., Murrar, S., Rivas-Drake, D., & Pinetta, B. J. (2024). Social Identity Development and Religious Discrimination Among Muslim American Youth. *Developmental Psychology*, 60(10), 1855–1869. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001806>

- Berger, A., & Golan, O. (2024). Online Religious Learning: Digital Epistemic Authority and Self-Socialization in Religious Communities. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 49(2), 274–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2169833>
- Berger, V. (2023). Mediatized Love: A Materialist Phenomenology of Tinder. *Social Media + Society*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231216922>
- Bingham, A. J. (2023). From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620>
- Closa, C. (2021). Planning, Implementing and Reporting: Increasing Transparency, Replicability and Credibility in Qualitative Political Science Research. *European Political Science*, 20(2), 270–280. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-020-00299-2>
- Daviet, R., & Malhotra, P. (2022). Using the Social Network Structure of Influencers to Understand and Predict User Engagement. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4214955>
- Gallagher, J. R., & Hernandez, A. P. (2025). Algorithmic Anthropomorphizing, Platform Gossip, and Backlashes: Aspirational Content Creators' Narratives About YouTube's Algorithm on Reddit. *Social Media + Society*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251331761>
- Ghorzang, S. (2025). The Impact of Social Media on the Preservation of Cultural Identity Among Afghan Youth. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2570880>
- Hansen, M. B. M. (2025). Social Meaning as Hearer's Meaning: Integrating Social Meaning into a General Theory of Meaning in Communication. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 241, 81–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2025.03.010>
- Haq, S. U., & Kwok, R. Y. keung. (2024). Encountering “the Other” in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis. *Social Media + Society*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241303363>
- Herlina, N. H., Atoillah, A. N., Sumadi, S., Selamet, S., & Husni, H. (2025). Religious Education and Jean Baudrillard: What Does Postmodernism, Simulacra, and Hyperreality Suggest? *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 106(3), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.309>
- Hödl, T., & Myrach, T. (2023). Content Creators Between Platform Control and User Autonomy: The Role of Algorithms and Revenue Sharing. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 65(5), 497–519. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12599-023-00808-9>
- Howdyshell, S. (2024). The Relationship Between Truth, Inference, and the Sciences in Hermeneutic Phenomenology. *Studia Phaenomenologica*, 24, 103–126. <https://doi.org/10.5840/studphaen2024246>
- Kahambing, J. G. (2024). What Is Metacuration? *Inscriptions*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.59391/inscriptions.v7i1.210>
- Laari, L. (2025). Inductive-Deductive Qualitative Data Analysis Logic in Health Sciences Research: A Framework for Analysing Qualitative Data. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251381706>
- Martin, É., Bergeron, D., & Gaboury, I. (2025). The Use of Vignettes to Improve the Validity of Qualitative Interviews for Realist Evaluation. *Qualitative Health Research*, 35(3), 267–274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323241237411>
- Morris, J. (2021). Simulacra in the Age of Social Media: Baudrillard as the Prophet of Fake News. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 45(4), 319–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859920977154>
- Muthohirin, N. (2025). Faith in the Digital Age: The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism and the Plurality of Young Muslims' Piety on Social Media. *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 19(2), 199–233. <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2025.19.2.199-233>

- Muttaqin, A. (2020). Women's Identity in the Digital Islam Age: Social Media, New Religious Authority, and Gender Bias. *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 8(2), 353–388. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v8i2.7095>
- Nazam, F., Husain, A., & Gull, M. (2022). Standardization of Taqwa (Piety) Scale for Muslims: An Exploratory Study. *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal*, 5(1), 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.25217/igcj.v5i1.1662>
- Ni, Y. (2024). Navigating Intercultural Communication in the Media Landscape: Challenging Stereotypes and Cultivating Critical Perspectives—Hall Model as the Framework. *Digital Society*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44206-024-00126-x>
- Perez-Vela, R. (2023). The Mediatization of Religious Practices in Urban Daily Life: The Peruvian Case. *Religions*, 14(5), 649. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050649>
- Pescott, C. K. (2020). “I Wish I Was Wearing a Filter Right Now”: An Exploration of Identity Formation and Subjectivity of 10- and 11-Year Olds’ Social Media Use. *Social Media + Society*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120965155>
- Prasojo, Z. H., Bin Haji Masri, M. S., Fauzi, A., & Rahmiani, N. (2020). Religious Identity in the Use of Social Media Within Pontianak Muslim Community. *KARSA: Journal of Social and Islamic Culture*, 28(1), 32–56. <https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v28i1.3284>
- Roberts, J. A., & David, M. E. (2025). Technology Affordances, Social Media Engagement, and Social Media Addiction: An Investigation of TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 28(5), 318–325. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2024.0338>
- Rosida, I., Az Zahra, F., Tuzzahrah, F., & Azzahra, S. (2023). Flexing Culture in the Age of Social Media: From Social Recognition to Self-Satisfaction. *Simulacra*, 6(2), 193–208. <https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v6i2.20716>
- Salerno, E. (2024). Digital Humanities: Mission Accomplished? An Analysis of Scholarly Literature. *Cultures of Science*, 7(1), 34–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20966083241234379>
- Sito Rohmawati, H., Zulkifli, & Hakiem, N. (2025). Mediatization and Hypermediation in Digital Religion and the Transformation of Indonesian Muslim Religious Practices Through Social Media Usage. *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama*, 18(2), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jsa.2024.182-01>
- Sommerer, T. (2025). Baudrillard and the Dead Internet Theory. Revisiting Baudrillard’s (Dis)trust in Artificial Intelligence. *Philosophy & Technology*, 38(2). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-025-00878-5>
- Strand, M., & Leonard, S. (2025). Performativity: Model and Meaning in a Post-Austinian Frame. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 28(1), 48–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241237965>
- van der Heiden, G. J. (2022). Witnessing and Testimony in Hermeneutic Phenomenology. *Research in Phenomenology*, 52(3), 311–332. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341503>
- Vella, J. (2024). In Pursuit of Credibility: Evaluating the Divergence Between Member-Checking and Hermeneutic Phenomenology. *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy*, 20(7), 665–669. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sapharm.2024.04.001>
- Vella, J. (2025). Reclaiming Dialogue: Focus Groups and Hermeneutic Phenomenology. *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy*, 21(10), 811–816. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sapharm.2025.05.013>
- Yin, F. Y. (2025). Encoding/Decoding in Artificial Intelligence: Global AI and Local Languages. *Media, Culture & Society*, 47(8), 1691–1701. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437251360381>
- Zaid, B., Fedtke, J., Shin, D. D., El Kadoussi, A., & Ibahrine, M. (2022). Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices. *Religions*, 13(4), 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel1304335>