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## Existence or Essence? A Qualitative Study of Islamic Lifestyle of Islamic Religious Education Students in the Era of Social Media

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Islamic Lifestyle, Social Media, PAI Students

**Abstract:** The rise of globalization and advancements in technology, particularly social media, have significantly influenced the lifestyle changes and social values among students of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This study aims to explore how PAI students interpret and embody an Islamic lifestyle amid the intensifying currents of modernization and digitalization. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research was conducted at the State Islamic University (UIN) Raden Intan Lampung, involving fourth- and sixth-semester PAI students as participants. Data were collected through social media activity observation and in-depth interviews using the snowball sampling technique. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal two main tendencies in expressing Islamic identity: first, Islamic lifestyle is used as a social symbol and personal branding on social media; second, it serves as a genuine expression of faith that is private and spiritual in nature. Furthermore, the study identifies a gap between the religious appearance presented on social media and personal religious practice. Students are also engaged in negotiating their religious identity within digital spaces, which often leads to internal conflict between the pursuit of social visibility and spiritual sincerity. This study highlights the importance of critical awareness among PAI students in managing their Islamic identity to remain authentic in the face of pervasive digital cultural influences.



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## INTRODUCTION

The novelty of the study 'Existence or Essence? A Qualitative Study on the Islamic Lifestyle of Islamic Education Students in the Era of Social Media' lies in its integration of students' Islamic identity with the influence of social media on the formation of their lifestyle. Unlike the research conducted by Mhd. Fatih Fauzan Nasution and Abdul Karim Batubara, which emphasizes students' social existence through Instagram as a means of gaining recognition and constructing self-image, this study focuses more on the efforts of Islamic Education students to preserve the essence of Islamic values amid the demands of digital existence (Fatih, Nasution, and Batubara 2024). While Baidarus and Radhiyatul Fithri examined the experiences of Muslim students in applying Islamic values in campus life more generally, this study specifically investigates the dynamics of Islamic lifestyle within the context of social media a topic that has not been widely explored (Baidarus and Fithri 2024). In contrast to the study by Chairun Nisa Safitri and M. Husnaini, which focuses on the negative impacts of hedonistic lifestyles on students' consumptive behavior, this research explores how Islamic Education students develop an Islamic lifestyle as a form of resistance against digital hedonistic culture. Thus, this study offers a new contribution by presenting a perspective that emphasizes the balance between social existence and religious essence in the lives of Islamic Education students in the era of social media (Safitri and Husnaini 2025).

Changes in social lifestyles have occurred due to the influence of globalization, technological advancements, and shifting societal values. Technological progress, particularly in the field of communication, has transformed the way we live and interact with one another. (Risti et al. 2023; Rodhiyana 2024; Siburian and Ricky 2024). Indonesia is a multicultural country with diverse cultures, and modernization has brought changes in values and social norms, fostering openness to external influences and shaping a lifestyle that is increasingly connected to the global world. The advancement of the digital era has further accelerated this transformation, with social media becoming a primary medium for information dissemination, significantly impacting social life both positively and negatively. (Hasan et al. 2024; Susanti et al. 2024).

For students of Islamic Education, modernization and the rise of social media pose unique challenges (Nitami 2023). While social media enhances access to information and communication, it simultaneously shapes students' behaviors and ways of thinking, particularly in relation to their religiosity and Islamic identity (Rahmawati et al. 2025). While social media enhances access to information and communication, it simultaneously shapes students' behaviors and ways of thinking, particularly in relation to their religiosity and Islamic identity. (Balqis 2024).

In today's rapidly advancing digital age, technology plays a vital role in daily life, particularly among university students (Nauvan et al. 2024; Putri, Nurwati, and S. 2025; Saptarianto et al. 2024). Social media and digital tools are commonly utilized for communication, accessing information, and fostering personal growth (Faidh et al. 2024). However, excessive use of social media can lead to gadget addiction, diverting attention

from more productive activities, including religious practices.(Andriyana and Andrian 2024). This phenomenon disrupts the harmony between worldly life and spiritual commitment among Islamic Education students, who are expected to ground their lives in religious principles. Gadget addiction adversely impacts not only physical and mental well-being, but also undermines the quality of religious observance and meaningful social interaction core aspects of a student's holistic development

Social media indeed offers many benefits, such as expanding social networks and providing a platform for self-expression(Damayanti, Delima, and Suseno 2023; Yusuf et al. 2023). However, for Islamic Education students, the influence of social media also brings significant negative impacts, particularly in terms of behavior and its effect on Islamic values(Auliya, Yahya, and Hurryos 2023; Nawawi and Sari 2023). Students often find themselves caught in the desire to be popular and gain attention in the virtual world, which diverts their focus from religious principles(Hidayatus, Adam, and Al 2024). The phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) exacerbates this condition, where students feel compelled to stay constantly connected to social media, regardless of time and place.

Technology, particularly social media, plays a vital role in students' lives, serving primarily as a source of entertainment and information. While it enhances social interaction, excessive usage may lead to adverse consequences, including addiction and mental health issues(Ernawati 2024; Krisnadi and Adhandayani 2022; Siburian and Ricky 2024; Wulandari and Netrawati 2020). These effects influence lifestyle choices, particularly concerning religious practices and Islamic identity, necessitating greater wisdom among students in time management and in preserving the quality of both worship and social engagement(Mugiyono and Janah 2024; Mutiarani, Karimah, and Syarafa 2024; Nawawi and Sari 2023).

When engaging with social media, students should adhere to ethical communication practices to prevent harm to themselves and others(Arivianto et al. 2023; Hamama 2024). Dependence on social media sometimes blurs the boundary between the real world and the virtual world. Students often focus more on their gadgets, even during face-to-face interactions with friends around them. This phenomenon leads to the loss of in-person communication, which is essential for building deeper social relationships. It demonstrates that although social media can facilitate communication, excessive use can diminish the quality of real-life social interactions(Pasaribu, Annisa, and Harahap 2024).

Social media serves many functions, one of which is as a platform for socializing. Through social media, students can stay connected despite physical distance and time differences, and interact with people from various parts of the world(Harahap et al. 2024; Liedfray, Waani, and Lasut 2022). However, despite facilitating communication, the use of social media can also create a negative impression, especially when students post consumptive behaviors and lifestyles that do not reflect simplicity. Such actions can damage social relationships and worsen students' self-image in the virtual world(Faisal 2024; Sariade et al. 2022; Tajuddien and Praditya 2022).

The use of social media influences students' perceptions of the ideal lifestyle, often driving them to excessively showcase their existence. In this digital era, internet

technology facilitates access to information, entertainment, education, and knowledge from around the world. However, despite these conveniences, the rise of social media also brings negative impacts, such as blurring the boundary between real life and virtual life. Students who are active on social media tend to prioritize their online presence, often without limits, which can create social pressure and shape their views on what an ideal lifestyle should be. This may lead to an imbalance between their real daily life and the persona they present online (Asmawati, Pramesty, and Afiah 2022; Fatih, Nasution, and Batubara 2024; Wiranata et al. 2022).

With the swift progress of technology, access to social media has emerged as an essential need, particularly for students engaged in acquiring information, entertainment, education, and knowledge from diverse regions globally (Damayanti, Delima, and Suseno 2023; Zuniananta 2021). The increasing sophistication of information technology has united the world more closely, enabling access to virtually everything within the reach of our hands (Balya 2023; Maritsa et al. 2021; Saputri 2024; Tamimi and Munawaroh 2024). Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore the role of social media in shaping students' lifestyles, particularly regarding their perceptions of Islamic identity amid ongoing modernization and globalization.

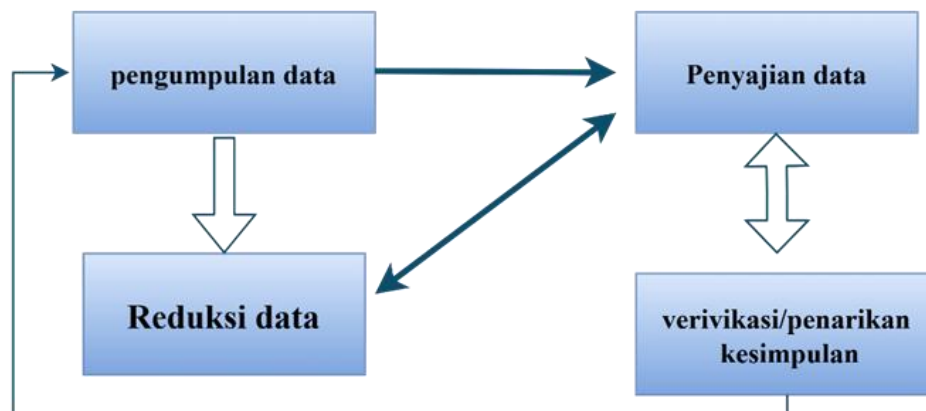
## METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative approach. As defined by Sugiyono, qualitative research is a methodology employed to study phenomena in their natural settings, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore Islamic Education students' understanding of their Islamic lifestyle in the era of social media. The research aims to describe how students interpret an Islamic lifestyle—whether it is more focused on social existence on social media or as an essence grounded in religious values.

Data collection techniques used include observation and in-depth interviews. Observation is conducted to monitor students' online activities, such as religious posts, social interactions on social media, and all social media accounts. In-depth interviews are carried out with selected students based on their ability to provide relevant information regarding their understanding of the Islamic lifestyle, the challenges they face, and the internal conflicts between social media demands and Islamic principles. Additionally, a literature review was conducted to enrich the analysis by comparing the findings of this study with existing literature.

In this research, the data analysis technique used is descriptive qualitative analysis. Data collected through in-depth interviews and observations of social media activities were then analyzed by grouping, interpreting, and understanding the meanings of students' experiences and perceptions regarding their Islamic lifestyle. This approach aims to deeply explore students' understanding and experiences related to Islamic identity in the digital space.

The number of informants interviewed was three sixth-semester Islamic Education students at Raden Intan State Islamic University Lampung. They were selected using the snowball sampling technique, where each involved informant was asked to recommend or direct the researcher to other students considered to have relevant and in-depth experiences and perceptions regarding the Islamic lifestyle and internal conflicts in expressing Islamic identity on social media. Through this approach, the researcher obtained a diversity of experiences from informants who were indirectly connected through mutual recommendations, which is expected to yield richer and deeper insights into the research topic.



**Figure 1.**  
**Flowchart of the Research Process**

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



**Figure 2.**  
**Captures the moment of an ongoing interview**

The interview results revealed that some Islamic Education students practice an Islamic lifestyle on social media by sharing religious-themed content, such as posting Quranic verses. According to the first informant (IQ), the student views an Islamic lifestyle

as a form of personal commitment that not only protects oneself from sin but also serves as a positive identity in the era of social media. He emphasized the importance of harmony between the online image presented and everyday real-life behavior, as for him, faith is a matter of the heart that must be maintained consistently. Amid exposure to negative content, he sees the importance of being wise in using social media to avoid losing direction and to uphold Islamic values as a whole and meaningful life principle. Moving to the second informant (JA), this student interprets the Islamic lifestyle as living in accordance with Sharia and Islamic law, practiced solely to obey Allah's commands to attain blessings. He believes that displaying an Islamic lifestyle on social media is not a form of showing off but rather a means to inspire others, as long as the intention remains sincere for Allah. According to him, the most important thing is personal conviction, as only Allah judges the human heart. He also emphasized that a Muslim's main focus should be to seek Allah's approval, not validation from others. For him, the Islamic lifestyle is a personal matter that can also serve as positive personal branding, while in real life, if mistakes occur, they should be corrected kindly, especially if it involves close friends. The third informant (FDL) believes that keeping up with the times does not mean abandoning Islamic teachings, because Islam is a flexible religion capable of adapting to changes, as reflected in the concept of adaptable laws. He considers that clothing and appearance are not merely external matters but can serve as a means of dawah (Islamic outreach) that motivates others and reflects one's belief and identity as a Muslim. Therefore, maintaining appearance according to Sharia is part of self-awareness as a Muslim. He also stressed the importance of consistency in living an Islamic lifestyle, as success in religion, in his view, depends on *istiqomah* (steadfastness) in every step. Based on the interviews with these three informants, it can be concluded that the Islamic lifestyle is viewed as a form of personal commitment that reflects obedience to Islamic law, while also serving as a self-identity that remains relevant with the development of the times. The students agreed that an Islamic lifestyle not only involves guarding oneself from sin but also serves as a means of dawah, whether through appearance or social media, as long as it is based on sincere intentions for Allah. They emphasized the importance of consistency and *istiqomah* in living according to Islamic teachings, as well as the awareness that true judgment comes from Allah, not from social validation. For them, the Islamic lifestyle is a path to attaining life's blessings while remaining wise and adaptable in facing the dynamics of the times

No	Theme/Subheading	Research Findings	Narrative Quotation	Participant
1	Islamic Lifestyle as a Personal Commitment	The Islamic lifestyle regarded as a form of commitment	Faith is a matter of the heart, but it must be maintained with consistency. What we present on social	(IQ)

		safeguarding oneself from sin and as a means of building a positive identity on social media. The importance of consistency between one's online image and real-life behavior is strongly emphasized.	media should align with how we live our daily lives. We must not appear Islamic online while our real-life behavior tells a different story.	
2	Displaying an Islamic Lifestyle on Social Media	Displaying an Islamic lifestyle on social media is regarded as inspiration rather than showing off, as long as the intention is sincere for the sake of Allah. The main focus is to seek Allah's approval, not social validation.	I post my Islamic lifestyle on Instagram not to show off, but to inspire others. What matters is the intention, because it's Allah who judges our hearts. The purpose of life is to seek His pleasure, not to chase likes.	(JA)
3	The Flexibility of Islam and Consistency in Faith	Islam is regarded as flexible and capable of adapting to the times, with an emphasis on the importance of consistency (istiqomah). Appearance is considered a part of dawah that reflects a	I believe Islam is flexible and can adapt to the times, but it must still follow the sharia. How we dress can also be a form of dawah, so don't underestimate it. What matters most is consistency, because success comes from istiqomah.	(FDL)

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### Muslim's identity.

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Based on the findings from the three interviews, it can be concluded that the students perceive the Islamic lifestyle as a personal commitment reflecting their Islamic identity, both in real life and on social media. They emphasize the importance of consistency between what is presented online and daily behavior as a true expression of faith. Displaying an Islamic lifestyle on social media is not seen as showing off, but rather as a means of inspiration, as long as the intention remains sincere for the sake of Allah. They also believe that Islam is flexible and capable of adapting to the times, provided that it remains grounded in the sharia. Furthermore, appearance and clothing can be part of dawah, reflecting the identity of a steadfast.

### **Islamic Lifestyle as a Social Symbol on Social Media**

This phenomenon shows that the Islamic lifestyle is not only understood as an essential part of religious practice but has also shifted functionally into a social symbol reflecting status, values, or even popularity within digital communities. These actions become a form of “identity marker” whereby a person is considered religious, both by themselves and by others who view their content.

As Herbert Blumer’s concept of symbolic interactionism suggests, individuals in society act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them. In this context, Islamic symbols displayed on social media can be interpreted as an effort to be categorized within groups such as “pious students” or “campus da’wah activists.” Social media provides a space where appearance and expressions of identity become the focal point, thus encouraging the display of an ideal and socially acceptable religious persona (Trisakti 2025).

The student informants also acknowledged feeling a sense of pride when their religious content received positive responses such as likes, praise in comments, or reposts from other da’wah accounts. This strengthens the analysis that, in some cases, the Islamic lifestyle functions more as a form of self-representation or even personal branding in the virtual world, rather than solely as an expression of private faith.

### **Islamic Lifestyle as an Expression of Essential Faith**

In the context of the social media era, the Islamic identity of PAI students is not only represented through worship practices and daily behavior but is also heavily influenced by how they build their personal branding online. This study found that some students use digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to showcase their Islamic identity through posts of religious sermons, Qur’anic quotes, religious activities, and Islamic fashion.

For some informants, these activities are part of digital da’wah an effort to spread Islamic values through modern media that is more accessible to the younger generation. They view social media as an effective means to deliver messages of

goodness in a light and relatable way to their peers. By leveraging algorithms and trends, these PAI students strive to present relevant and inspiring Islamic content while actively contributing to enriching the digital space with religious values.(Muntazori, Sunarto, and Christomy 2020).

However, on the other hand, there is a tendency that expressions of Islamic identity on social media are not solely born from a mission of da'wah, but also become part of personal branding. Some students consciously manage their Islamic image to gain social recognition, increase followers, and even create job opportunities in the field of Islamic content. In this context, Islam becomes a performative identity presented for the sake of image building, rather than purely due to deep spiritual conviction.

One informant even admitted that consistently uploading Islamic content is a strategy to build an audience and maintain interaction with followers. This shows an intersection between the intention of da'wah and personal interests, where Islamic identity is no longer private but something displayed, judged, and validated publicly.

### **The Essence of Islamic Lifestyle: Religious Practices Behind the Scenes**

The research findings indicate that the Islamic lifestyle portrayed by Islamic Education students on social media does not always reflect the genuine religious practices behind the scenes. Although social media is often used as a platform to display an Islamic identity, there is a significant gap between what is presented and the actual religious practices carried out by some students.

According to several informants, the religious practices of Islamic Education students can be described as a personal quest for closeness to Allah SWT, which is often not revealed through digital content. They acknowledge that although they actively portray an Islamic image on social media such as posting Quranic verses, hadiths, or photos of religious activities not everything they display truly reflects their genuine faith and devotion.

Some students revealed that they feel pressured to appear 'perfect' in an Islamic way on social media, which often leads them to showcase only positive aspects or things deemed appropriate for the ideal Islamic image. This causes more intimate and personal religious practices, such as night prayers, dhikr, or other private activities, to rarely be exposed in the public sphere. The Islamic lifestyle they present is often more of a social formality or symbolic gesture aimed at demonstrating that they are good Muslims, rather than stemming purely from sincerity and genuine conviction. For instance, some students admitted that although they diligently wear the hijab or modest Islamic clothing and display it on social media, in their daily lives they may not always consistently practice Islam comprehensively.

Social media often becomes a stage where students feel the need to affirm their religious identity through the image they present to the public. However, behind the scenes, many reveal that they still struggle with personal challenges in fulfilling religious obligations such as praying on time, avoiding sinful acts, or maintaining

relationships with others. In other words, the essence of this Islamic lifestyle lies not only in what people see but more in the internal struggle that is often not reflected in digital content.

### **Negotiating Religious Identity in the Digital Era**

Negotiating religious identity in the digital era involves a complex process in which Islamic Education students strive to find a balance between their religious beliefs and the increasingly strong influence of digital culture. Amid the rapid development of technology and social media, these students often face a dilemma in deciding how much of their religious identity should be exposed to the public. Frequently, they feel pressured to present an Islamic image that aligns with social expectations, while at the same time wanting to engage in the digital world filled with modern lifestyles and trends that tend to be more liberal.

In this effort, Islamic Education students negotiate by adjusting the content they share on social media, such as selecting images or words that portray a religious image without sacrificing their desire to be accepted within their social groups. For example, they may share religious activities like study groups, collective prayers, or celebrations of Islamic holidays, while still engaging in entertainment or social activities that do not always fully reflect their religious values. This illustrates the dual influence between religious identity and social expectations as reflected in the virtual world.

This phenomenon also reveals a tension between authentic religious expression and the identity shaped by social media. Some students feel the need to maintain a religious image online to gain recognition or support from certain communities, while others strive to be more honest and open about the challenges they face in maintaining that balance. In many cases, they become trapped in creating an image that conforms to social norms, often at the expense of their personal integrity or the depth of their convictions.

### **Internal Conflict: The Demands of Social Media vs. Sincerity in Religious Practice**

The internal conflict faced by Islamic Education students between the demands of social media and sincerity in religious practice reflects the inner dilemma that often arises in their lives in the digital era. On one hand, social media has become an integral part of daily life, where social interactions, self-expression, and public recognition are heavily influenced by what is shared and showcased on these platforms. Students committed to sincerely practicing Islamic teachings often feel pressured to meet social media expectations that prioritize image and popularity.

In the virtual world, many students feel compelled to showcase their religious side, for example by sharing photos or videos of religious activities such as attending study sessions, reading the Qur'an, or making donations. However, this often raises an

internal question of whether these actions are truly done with sincere intentions for Allah or merely to gain recognition and praise from others. This internal conflict arises when they feel that their religious behavior on social media is sometimes more driven by social pressure to 'appear good' rather than by a genuine desire to worship with sincerity.

For example, some students feel compelled to 'display' their piety to be seen as religious individuals in the eyes of society, even though they may not truly practice their faith wholeheartedly in daily life. This creates a tension between their personal intention to earn rewards from Allah and the social desire to be accepted by others or even to gain recognition for the piety they present. This conflict can be further exacerbated by the emergence of new standards on social media that often do not align with religious values, causing students to feel that they must continuously measure their level of religiosity based on the responses or praise they receive from their online audience.

This internal conflict is also closely related to questions of authenticity and sincerity in worship. When the intention behind worship becomes influenced by others' perceptions, the sincerity that lies at the core of Islamic teachings can be eroded. Therefore, it is crucial for students to develop self-awareness about the true purpose of practicing their faith and to always remember that worship is performed as an act of devotion to Allah, not merely to gain recognition from others.

These findings carry several important implications. Practically, they highlight the need for educators and Islamic institutions to provide guidance that helps students live a religious life in the digital world without compromising sincerity. Theoretically, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how media culture reshapes religious identity, particularly among younger generations. Methodologically, the findings underscore the importance of exploring students' lived experiences to reveal inner tensions that are not always visible in public discourse, as well as the value of qualitative approaches in religious education research.

## CONCLUSION

Islamic Education students in the digital era face significant challenges in maintaining a balance between their religious identity and the demands of social media. In this context, they are caught in a complex dynamic between the existence and the essence of the Islamic lifestyle. Students strive to uphold their Islamic image in the virtual world, yet often must navigate between deep religious values and social expectations arising from social media pressures

The phenomenon of Islamic existence on social media is often influenced by the need to conform to social standards, while the true practice of the Islamic lifestyle is often more personal and cannot always be exposed. On the other hand, a negotiation of religious identity also emerges, showing that Islamic Education students strive to balance their religious identity with the social demands around them. This often gives rise to internal conflicts, particularly concerning sincerity in faith, where many students feel trapped in

the pursuit of social recognition that sometimes compromises the true intention and purpose of worship itself.

Therefore, it is important for Islamic Education students to develop a deeper understanding of how to live an authentic religious life in the virtual world. They need to learn to maintain sincerity in every action, both in the real world and on social media. With strong self-awareness, students can manage the influence of social media without compromising the religious principles they uphold and respond more wisely to the challenges that arise in this digital era.

This study is limited to the subjective experiences of a specific group of Islamic Education students, which may not reflect broader student populations. The fast-evolving nature of digital media also presents challenges in fully capturing the shaping of religious identity online. Future research should involve more diverse demographics and institutions, and consider comparative perspectives across educational settings, religious traditions, and cultural contexts to enrich the understanding of religious sincerity in today's digital and globalized world.

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