

Mediated orthodoxy: Salafi thought and student piety at Universitas Sriwijaya

Ortodoksi termediasi: Pemikiran salafi dan kesalehan mahasiswa di Universitas Sriwijaya

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Salafi religiosity is transformed and negotiated among university students at Universitas Sriwijaya (UNSRI), South Sumatra, within a pluralistic academic environment and an expanding digital ecosystem. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach combined with digital observation, the research explores how students interpret *manhaj salaf* and enact piety in everyday campus life. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with students, lecturers, and alumni, as well as analysis of Islamic content circulated on Instagram and Telegram. The findings reveal that Salafi piety at UNSRI functions both as a moral discipline and a social boundary, manifested through selective knowledge practices, modest dress, and gender segregation. Digital platforms play a central role in mediating religious authority, enabling students to reproduce scriptural norms through visual and networked forms of *da'wah*. At the same time, digital engagement tends to reinforce ideological homogeneity and promote Arabized aesthetics as markers of religious authenticity. Although Salafi students generally maintain apolitical orientations, their presence subtly shapes moral norms and everyday conduct on campus. The study contributes to discussions on digital religion and mediated orthodoxy by demonstrating how Salafi communities adapt purist ideals to modern institutional and technological contexts. Practically, the findings highlight the need for inclusive university policies that accommodate conservative piety while sustaining civic pluralism.

Keywords: Salafism; Digital Religion; Mediatization; Youth Religiousity, Campus Piety.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana keberagamaan Salafi mengalami transformasi dan negosiasi di kalangan mahasiswa Universitas Sriwijaya (UNSRI), Sumatra Selatan, dalam lingkungan akademik yang pluralistik serta ekosistem digital yang terus berkembang. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif yang dipadukan dengan observasi digital, penelitian ini menelaah cara mahasiswa menafsirkan *manhaj salaf* dan mempraktikkan kesalehan dalam kehidupan kampus sehari-hari. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan mahasiswa, dosen, dan alumni, serta analisis konten keislaman yang beredar di Instagram dan Telegram. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kesalehan Salafi di UNSRI berfungsi sekaligus sebagai disiplin moral dan batas sosial, yang tercermin dalam praktik seleksi pengetahuan, busana kesopanan, dan pemisahan gender. Platform digital memainkan peran penting dalam memediasi otoritas keagamaan, memungkinkan mahasiswa mereproduksi norma-norma skriptural melalui bentuk dakwah visual dan berjaringan. Namun, keterlibatan digital tersebut juga cenderung memperkuat homogenitas ideologis dan mempromosikan estetika keotentikan yang terarabkan. Meskipun mahasiswa Salafi umumnya mempertahankan orientasi apolitis, kehadiran mereka secara

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halus membentuk norma moral dan perilaku keseharian di lingkungan kampus. Secara teoretis, studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian agama digital dan *mediated orthodoxy* dengan menunjukkan bagaimana komunitas Salafi mengadaptasi ideal puritan ke dalam konteks institusional dan teknologi modern. Secara praktis, temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya kebijakan kampus yang inklusif, yang mengakomodasi kesalehan konservatif sekaligus menjaga pluralisme kewargaan.

Kata kunci: Salafisme; Agama Digital; Mediatisasi; Religiositas Pemuda; Kesalehan Kampus.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Indonesia, Islam is experiencing a new phase of contestation between religious orthodoxy, digital modernity, and civic pluralism. Among various Islamic orientations, Salafism stands out for its emphasis on *tashfiyah* (purification) and *tarbiyah* (education) as pathways to return to the authentic faith of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, the pious predecessors. The movement's expansion in the last two decades reflects both its theological consistency and adaptability to modern communication channels such as YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram (Alam et al., 2025). Consequently, Salafism has become a cultural and intellectual force shaping the moral discourse of Indonesian youth, including those within state universities.

Universitas Sriwijaya (UNSRI), a major public university in South Sumatra, offers a unique context for observing the negotiation between Islamic orthodoxy and academic pluralism. As a multi-faculty institution that bridges secular knowledge and civic education, UNSRI represents the regional dynamics of Indonesia's higher-education landscape outside Java's metropolitan centers. The emergence of Salafi-oriented student communities on this campus indicates a significant shift in how young Muslims reinterpret piety, social participation, and identity in an environment that officially promotes tolerance, inclusivity, and civic nationalism.

According Afandi and Rizqullah (2025), Salafi educational institutions play a key role in disseminating literalist theology and cultivating a disciplined moral ethos among youth through *halaqah* and study circles. At UNSRI, these circles often take place in informal campus spaces such as mosques, discussion clubs, or digital forums. The emphasis on *aqidah* and *manhaj salaf* shapes not only theological understanding but also everyday social relations—defining what it means to be a “good Muslim student” in a plural university setting. Yet, this literalist approach frequently encounters friction with Indonesia's multicultural educational philosophy and civic curriculum.

The negotiation between religious orthodoxy and academic life at UNSRI mirrors a broader national trend described by Prabowo et al. (2024), who note that traditionalist Islamic institutions increasingly integrate modern pedagogical systems while maintaining their classical ethos. Within UNSRI, similar dynamics appear as Salafi students navigate between loyalty to scriptural authority and exposure to secular reasoning in social-science and health-science faculties. This duality suggests that Salafi identity is neither static nor isolated, it evolves through everyday encounters with knowledge, peers, and institutional norms.

Another distinctive dimension is the role of digital media in amplifying Salafi discourse across UNSRI's student networks. Alam et al. (2025) describe how social media transforms religious authority from clerical monopoly to networked influence, generating what they call *mediatized da'wah*. UNSRI students increasingly follow or produce Islamic content through platforms such as @rumayshocom or local Telegram channels that blend scriptural fidelity with visual aesthetics. As Triyono and Nurangga (2024) observe, digital Islam reframes religiosity as a communicative practice, an interplay between piety, emotion, and self-branding. In this sense, UNSRI reflects a regional version of digital Salafism, where students merge textual devotion with media literacy.

Nevertheless, this digital religiosity carries ambivalent consequences. While it democratizes access to religious knowledge, it also risks reinforcing ideological exclusivity and Arabized aesthetics that marginalize local expressions of Islam. Nursyabani (2024) demonstrates how Salafi Instagram accounts foster linguistic and visual conformity to Middle Eastern norms as markers of authenticity. At UNSRI, similar aesthetics, Arabic captions, *niqab*

fashion, and minimalist mosque décor, reflect a symbolic aspiration toward global Muslim identity, sometimes at the expense of Indonesia's cultural plurality.

Moreover, not all Salafi-oriented students at UNSRI are politically active. Some exhibit the tendencies of what Irwansyah and Muary (2024) term the Apolitical Salafi, a group emphasizing moral reform and educational outreach rather than political mobilization. This quietist stance aligns with Chaplin (2018) notion of political quietism, where obedience and moral discipline replace direct activism. Yet, even in the absence of formal politics, Salafi presence contributes to a subtle moral regulation of campus life-shaping gender relations, dress codes, and social behavior.

The UNSRI case must be situated within broader transnational Salafi networks that have expanded in post-Reformasi Indonesia through digital media and educational mobility. Empirical data show that UNSRI students routinely engage with sermons and study materials produced by Middle Eastern-trained Salafi scholars, accessed primarily through YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram. Several student participants reported regularly following Indonesian Salafi preachers who studied in Saudi Arabia or Yemen and who translate classical Arabic texts into Indonesian, often accompanied by Arabic terminology to maintain claims of authenticity. In Telegram study groups observed during fieldwork, references to scholars such as Ibn Bāz or al-Albānī were frequently cited to legitimize doctrinal positions discussed among students.

At the same time, these transnational influences are selectively localized. While theological references and visual aesthetics draw heavily on Middle Eastern Salafi norms such as Arabic captions, Gulf-style abayas, and minimalist mosque décor, students adapt these global scripts to fit regional campus life at UNSRI. For example, rather than advocating for formal political agendas or institutional change, students emphasized personal piety, study discipline, and peer mentoring as appropriate expressions of Salafi commitment within a provincial public university. This pattern illustrates how global Salafism is re-embedded in local academic and cultural contexts, producing a form of hybrid religious modernity that is simultaneously transnational in reference, digital in transmission, and provincial in practice.

Despite these developments, academic studies on Salafism in provincial universities such as UNSRI remain scarce. Most existing research concentrates on *pesantren*, metropolitan campuses, or digital movements in Java, leaving peripheral universities underexplored. Consequently, there is a pressing need to examine how Salafi ideology is negotiated within a state university that represents both regional diversity and civic modernity. This research gap calls for an ethnographically grounded exploration of everyday religious life among UNSRI students.

This study, therefore, investigates the trajectory of Salafi thought and practice among university students at Universitas Sriwijaya. It aims to identify the modes of Salafi engagement in academic and digital environments, to analyze how students reconcile purist ideology with civic and multicultural values, and to understand the role of digital media in mediating these negotiations. Theoretically, this research contributes to the discussion on digital religion and youth piety in non-metropolitan contexts; practically, it offers insights for university policy to foster inclusive religious life. By situating the analysis within UNSRI's sociocultural ecosystem, this study illuminates how Salafism adapts and redefines itself within Indonesia's regional higher-education landscape.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to understand how Salafi thought and practice take shape among students at Universitas Sriwijaya (UNSR). The ethnographic design provided space to observe how religious identity, ideological commitments, and patterns of piety are enacted in everyday academic life. Because Salafism at UNSRI also extends into digital spaces, elements of digital ethnography were incorporated to

capture online expressions of faith, particularly on Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, platforms widely used by students.

Fieldwork was conducted across several social arenas within the university, including the campus mosque, student religious organizations, and informal halaqah groups. These locations serve as key settings where Salafi norms, moral expectations, and peer interactions unfold. The research also observed publicly accessible online channels to examine how students engage with mediatized da'wah, visual aesthetics, and networked authority.

Participants consisted of students, lecturers, and alumni who were either directly involved in Salafi-oriented activities or familiar with them. A purposive sampling strategy was used to gather diverse perspectives, resulting in 30 participants. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and digital observation. These methods allowed the researcher to document narratives, practices, and interpretations that reflect the complexities of Salafi religiosity on campus.

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2017) general procedures, enabling the identification of recurring patterns such as purity of knowledge, moral regulation, and digital piety. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and online materials strengthened the credibility and consistency of the findings. Ethical considerations were upheld through informed consent, anonymity, and sensitivity toward personal belief and community dynamics.

As a single-site study, the findings offer contextual insights rather than broad generalizations. Nevertheless, the methodology provides a clear foundation for understanding how Salafi identity is negotiated within a regional Indonesian university and may serve as a reference for future comparative research across other campuses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Purity and Knowledge: Negotiating Orthodoxy in Academic Spaces

Findings from interviews and observations reveal that Salafi students at Universitas Sriwijaya (UNSRI) construct their identity around the principle of *tashfiyah*, purification of faith from what they perceive as *bid'ah* (innovation) and syncretic practices. For many participants, studying at a secular university represents both a challenge and a mission: to preserve doctrinal purity amid plural knowledge systems. They frequently cited verses and *hadith* to legitimize intellectual selectivity, describing non-religious disciplines as useful only when subordinated to *aqidah salimah* (sound belief).

This epistemic stance aligns with Afandi and Rizqullah's (2025) finding that Salafi education operates as a mechanism of moral discipline. At UNSRI, such discipline translates into selective social interaction and the formation of micro-communities centered on *halaqah* and mosque-based learning. These spaces function as both intellectual shelters and moral boundaries, distinguishing *ahlus sunnah* students from those labeled as "liberal" or "less committed." This dualism illustrates how Salafi piety redefines the meaning of knowledge within Indonesia's civic universities.

2. Moral Surveillance and Campus Conduct

Across faculties, the Salafi presence has subtly reshaped campus norms of piety, dress, and gender interaction. Observation of student mosques and discussion groups showed a shared emphasis on modest appearance, men wearing ankle-length trousers (*isbal*) and women adopting *niqab* or loose abayas. This moral aesthetics serves as a visible expression of internal discipline. As one respondent stated, "*Our appearance reminds others that Islam is not only theory but also obedience.*"

These bodily performances mirror Chaplin's (2018) notion of *political quietism*, where visible morality substitutes for political activism. Participants consistently rejected formal political engagement, viewing it as *fitnah* (temptation) and distraction from *da'wah*. Yet, their presence effectively produces a form of *moral politics*, a non-institutional regulation

of behavior and social space. This corresponds with Irwansyah and Muary (2024) category of the “Apolitical Salafi,” whose quiet devotion nonetheless influences campus ethics. At UNSRI, this moral influence is evident in gender segregation during mosque events, peer admonition about attire, and internal discipline in digital communication.

3. Digital Piety and Mediatized Da’wah

Digital ethnography revealed that Salafi students at Universitas Sriwijaya actively engage in what Alam et al. (2025) describe as *mediatized da’wah*, the transformation of religious authority through networked media. Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube serve as principal venues where students circulate *tazkiyah* (self-purification) messages, sermon excerpts, and short theological reflections. These posts are characterized by a distinctive visual aesthetic: Arabic calligraphy, muted beige or monochrome backgrounds, minimalist typography, and Qur’anic verses framed in geometric balance. Such imagery does not merely beautify the message, it performs *authority*. The disciplined design signals textual authenticity and spiritual credibility, aligning visual restraint with the Salafi ideal of purity.

These aesthetic strategies illustrate what Hjarvard (2008) identifies as the mediatization of religion, wherein media technologies reshape not only how religious messages are transmitted but also how legitimacy and sacredness are visually constructed. Through these mediated forms, Salafi students at UNSRI create a digital moral order that mirrors their offline discipline, curating a sense of sacred simplicity that contrasts sharply with the colorful, emotive styles of popular Islamic influencers. However, this mediated authenticity also fosters ideological homogeneity: algorithmic feeds reinforce exposure to similar doctrinal content, narrowing interpretive horizons. Many participants admitted to “unfollowing” accounts that they deemed *bid’ah* (innovation) or “too liberal.” Hence, digital media becomes both a channel of *da’wah* and a mechanism of doctrinal regulation, reproducing orthodoxy within the visual and affective logics of the online sphere.

4. Gendered Piety and the Ethics of Modesty

Female participants articulated their religiosity through the language of *iffah* (chastity) and *ta’ah* (obedience). For them, adopting the *niqab* or limiting male interaction was both a moral commitment and a spiritual identity marker. Digital spaces further amplify this identity through visual modesty and self-narration in personal posts. Yet, these acts are not merely imitative of Arab culture; they also reflect agency in claiming moral authority within a competitive academic environment. As one nursing student explained, “*We are not oppressed by the niqab; we choose it because it protects our dignity in a place that often forgets God.*”

This finding nuances the binary view of conservatism and modernity. Following Prabowo et al. (2024) Salafi women at UNSRI exemplify hybrid modernity: embracing higher education and digital literacy while maintaining theological conservatism. Their negotiation between *purity* and *participation* challenges stereotypes of passive religiosity, revealing how digital tools enable selective empowerment under the frame of submission.

5. Negotiating Pluralism and Civic Belonging

Although Salafi students tend to maintain insular circles, many still express a sense of civic belonging to UNSRI and Indonesia. Interviews reveal acknowledgment of *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood) as part of Islamic responsibility, even when rejecting pluralist theology. This echoes Tabroni and Idham (2023) finding that contemporary Salafism in urban Indonesia moves toward moderated civic engagement without diluting doctrinal rigor.

Participants often described their role as *islahiyun*, agents of moral reform within the university rather than as ideological opponents. Their interaction with non-Salafi peers in group projects, student organizations, or volunteer activities shows pragmatic tolerance

shaped by situational ethics. This indicates that quietist Salafism, while conservative, does not necessarily produce social isolation. Instead, it manifests as civic piety a synthesis of theological exclusivity and social participation mediated by institutional norms of higher education.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Salafi thought and practice evolve within the academic and digital environments of Universitas Sriwijaya (UNSRI), revealing that religious orthodoxy and modern education coexist in complex and mutually constitutive ways. Through ethnographic and digital observations, it demonstrates how Salafi students negotiate theological purity, academic rationality, and civic belonging. Their practices show both continuity with classical *manhaj salaf* and adaptation to the technological and cultural realities of contemporary Indonesia.

Salafism at UNSRI exemplifies what may be termed mediated orthodoxy, a moral project that fuses textual purity, digital literacy, and civic moderation in post-Reformasi Indonesia. This concept captures how Salafi students deploy media to translate doctrinal commitments into visual and behavioral codes of discipline, thereby constructing a digital moral order that aligns with their ethical ideals. Their selective engagement with digital tools reflects a broader transformation of piety, where authenticity is mediated through aesthetic restraint, controlled visibility, and networked authority.

Looking ahead, future research could expand this inquiry through comparative digital ethnography across regional campuses in Sumatra and Java, examining how differing sociocultural settings shape mediated expressions of Islamic orthodoxy. Such studies would deepen understanding of how young Muslims in provincial universities engage with global religious currents while negotiating pluralism and digital modernity in everyday academic life.

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