

Combating Radicalism Through Digital Literacy: Building Resilience At Al-Riyadh Cipanas

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Abstract

In the era of asymmetric warfare, radicalization no longer develops through face-to-face interaction, but rather through digital propaganda that targets Generation Z by utilizing social media. Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), as traditional Islamic educational institutions, face a fundamental challenge: how to maintain a bastion of moderation when threats come from the digital space, which is difficult to control. This study aimed to analyze how Al Riyadh Cipanas Islamic Boarding School built student resilience through digital literacy as a counter-radicalization strategy. The study used a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design, involving boarding school caregivers, teachers, and students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and field observations. Thematic analysis identified three main dimensions: the integration of digital literacy based on Wasatiyah (Islamic moderation) values; the role of teachers as digital gatekeepers and mentors who built trust and guided students through dialogue; and halaqah (discussion circles) as a space for deconstructing digital narratives and developing critical thinking. These three dimensions formed a layered defense and prepared students as agents of digital moderation.

Keywords: digital literacy, counter radicalization, pesantren resilience, asymmetric warfare



INTRODUCTION

In this digital age that moves at the speed of algorithms, cyberspace has become a new arena for the spread of radical ideology. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok now serve as channels for distributing narratives of extremism that target young Muslims, including students at Islamic boarding schools (Akbari et al., 2025). Unlike conventional recruitment methods that require face-to-face interaction and have limited reach, digital radicalism can transcend geographical boundaries, take advantage of anonymity, and reach thousands of individuals simultaneously at minimal cost. However, the disturbing irony is that Islamic boarding schools are often the target of stigmatization. Various studies show that both national and international mass media tend to frame Islamic boarding schools as hotbeds of radicalization without providing adequate space for clarification (Wazis et al., 2020).

This phenomenon is no longer just academic discourse. Data from the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) reveals that more than 198 Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have been exposed to radical ideas, with increasingly sophisticated patterns of dissemination through social media and digital content (Rahman A, 2023). The issue is not only about how many Islamic boarding schools are exposed, but more about how the narrative of extremism can now penetrate spaces that were once strictly guarded by the charisma of the religious leaders (*kyais*), classical scientific traditions, and the moderate culture of Islamic boarding schools (Hidayat et al., 2023). Generation Z, which constitutes the majority of students, is vulnerable to cyber propaganda due to their limited ability to filter information. Islamic boarding schools, which have long been bastions of moderate Islam and guardians of the *Wasatiyah* (moderation) tradition, now face a new enemy that comes not from the gate but from the screens of the cell phones in every student's pocket.

The impact of this stigma goes beyond public perception. Such stereotypes are not only false but also dangerous because they ignore the role of Islamic boarding schools as agents of religious moderation and guardians of nationality (Malik, 2019). Negative views intensified after the 2002 Bali bombings and a series of incidents involving a number of Islamic boarding school alumni. In fact, research by the Ministry of Religious Affairs showed that out of thousands of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, only two met the explicit criteria as radical institutions (Wazis et al., 2020). The question is: if Islamic boarding schools are made scapegoats, then who will defend and strengthen their resilience?

This question opens up a gap in research that has yet to be answered. Most studies on radicalism in Islamic boarding schools still focus on identifying problems, such as patterns of



dissemination (Prakasa et al., 2021). Research on counter-radicalization has explored in depth how Islamic boarding schools themselves build relatively limited internal defense mechanisms. Through research at the Al Riyadh Islamic Boarding School in Cipanas, an Islamic educational institution known for its traditional scholarship but adaptive to modernity, this study explored how digital literacy was utilized not merely as a technical skill but as a comprehensive resilience strategy. *Pesantren* not only have passive resilience but also the active capacity to filter, identify, and respond to radical ideological threats (Suslina et al., 2021). Digital literacy was part of the curriculum that reinforced the values of *Wasatiyah*, critical thinking skills, and love for the nation. Specifically, this study aimed to analyze how Al Riyadh Cipanas Islamic Boarding School built a digital literacy ecosystem as a bulwark against radicalization. The focus of the analysis covered three main dimensions, namely how digital literacy was integrated into the curriculum and teaching methods, how teachers and caregivers played a role as agents of digital moderation, and how critical discussions served as a space for shaping students' awareness of the threat of digital radicalism. Through a qualitative approach, the study not only described the phenomena in the field but also explored the logic and moral values developed by the *pesantren*.

Its contribution is twofold. Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on digital literacy and counter-radicalization in Islamic education. The results are expected to serve as a model for other Islamic boarding schools, especially those located in areas prone to radicalization, to build internal defense systems and offer a counter-narrative to the stigma of Islamic boarding schools as institutions waiting to be “saved,” but instead acting as active subjects that strengthen their own resilience. Ultimately, this effort is not about how these educational institutions survive amid threats, but rather the process of strengthening themselves in the face of the speed of digital threats—an era where radicals move at the speed of a single “click.”

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore how Al Riyadh Islamic Boarding School built resilience through digital literacy as a counter-radicalization strategy. The choice of a qualitative approach was based on research questions regarding the processes, meanings, and social dynamics that occurred (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This was intended to understand how and why a phenomenon occurred and to reveal the logic underlying the educational program at the Islamic boarding school in responding to threats (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Al Riyadh *Pesantren* provided insight into how Islamic educational institutions built internal defenses against asymmetric threats in the digital age (Stake, 1995); it possessed characteristics



relevant to preserving the Salafi scientific tradition while remaining adaptive to technological developments and maintaining the values of religious moderation.

The research questions in this study were how Al Riyadh Cipanas Islamic Boarding School integrated digital literacy into its curriculum and teaching methods, the role of teachers and caregivers as agents of digital moderation in shaping the critical awareness of students, and how discussions served as a forum for strengthening student resilience against the infiltration of radical narratives. The purpose of this study was to analyze and describe the comprehensive strategies developed by the *pesantren* through pedagogical (curriculum and methods), social (role of teachers), and cultural (discussions) dimensions. Qualitative methods with interview techniques helped explore the rationality, values, and logic underlying the resilience strategies developed by figures in the *pesantren*.

The research was conducted at the Al Riyadh Islamic Boarding School, Cipanas sub-district, Cianjur district, West Java. This location was chosen because the institution had a reputation for maintaining the Salafi tradition, which was open to modernity even though it had students from various geographical and social backgrounds. Data collection was carried out during the period from September to December 2025, with periodic field visits, interviews, and limited participatory observation.

The criteria for selecting informants included boarding school caregivers and leaders who had knowledge and experience related to the implementation of digital literacy, teachers who were actively involved in the process of teaching, and students who were willing to provide information openly. Primary data was obtained directly from informants through in-depth interviews that allowed the researcher to explore predetermined themes while giving informants the space to express their perspectives. Observations were conducted to supplement the data in understanding the context, atmosphere, and social interactions that were not obtained during the interviews.

The data collection procedure consisted of a preparation stage in which the researcher explained the purpose of the research, requested official permission, identified potential informants, and compiled interview guidelines in accordance with research ethics. During the implementation stage, interviews were conducted in an informal and conducive atmosphere, with an average duration of 45-60 minutes per informant. Before starting, the researcher explained the purpose and requested the informants' consent, guaranteeing confidentiality. All recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy, verified by listening to the recordings again, and confirmed with the informants. In addition, the researcher conducted limited observations of



teaching activities and discussions among students to obtain a contextual picture of how digital literacy was practiced in daily life at the *pesantren*.

The data analysis process was conducted inductively in stages, whereby the researcher repeatedly read all interview transcripts and grouped the narratives based on similarities in meaning and context to develop main themes. A review was conducted to ensure the suitability of the data and the theoretical framework. To ensure the validity of the findings, the research was conducted using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis of interview data and observations of learning implementation at Al Riyadh Islamic Boarding School in Cipanas, the study identified three themes: the integration of *Wasatiyah*-based digital literacy into the curriculum, the role of teachers as gatekeepers and mentors, and discussions as a space for radical deconstruction. These themes illustrated how the school built resilience through digital literacy as a counter-radicalization strategy.

Integration of Digital Literacy into the Curriculum

The first finding showed that Al Riyadh Islamic Boarding School had integrated digital literacy into its curriculum. In addition to teaching technical skills, it integrated moderation values that had become its scientific identity. This was reflected in the statement of one of the caregivers: "We do not teach digital literacy as a stand-alone subject, but we also include the study of classical Islamic texts, morals, and *fiqh*. So when students learn about the etiquette of speaking (*adabul kalam*), we relate it to the ethics of communicating on social media." This integrative approach stemmed from the awareness that students could not be isolated from the digital world; instead, they needed to be equipped with "spiritual and intellectual" filters. One of the teachers explained that since students still used cell phones, the school aimed to raise awareness that not everything on the internet was true.

Operationally, digital integration was carried out through several strategies. First, the *pesantren* included a module on "Digital Ethics and Religious Moderation" in the *diniyah* (religious education) curriculum. Second, the institution held regular workshops on "Fact Checking and Information Verification." Third, Al Riyadh formed a student media team tasked with managing social media accounts and producing educational content under the direct supervision of teachers. Interestingly, the school did not adopt digital literacy merely as a reactive response, but



prepared students to become agents of moderation. However, a challenge arose as some senior teachers were less familiar with information technology. One student noted that younger teachers were usually more knowledgeable in providing concrete examples of the dangers of radical content.

The Role of Teachers as Gatekeepers and Mentors

The second finding was that the role of teachers as gatekeepers was to filter and guide students in consuming digital content. Teachers were not only formal educators but also intellectual figures helping students understand contemporary issues. One teacher explained: "If there is a video or article in the students' WhatsApp group, we check it immediately. If the content is misleading, we clarify it. For example, when a video claimed democracy is *haram*, we addressed this in our recitation, explaining that this view was not in line with *maqasid syariah*."

The role of teachers as mentors helped students understand the complexity of contemporary issues. As conveyed by the students, teachers invited them to think about the context of arguments, such as the broad meaning of *jihad*. Since radical narratives packaged with religious arguments could be convincing, the guidance of teachers with deep religious knowledge was crucial. Teachers taught the method of *muqaranah* (comparison) to help students understand the *asbabun nuzul* (context of revelation). A limitation was that caregivers and educators could not monitor all digital activities 100% of the time, especially outside school hours. Therefore, they focused on building trust so that students would voluntarily ask their teachers when encountering confusing content.

Discussions as a Space for Deconstruction

The third finding highlighted the importance of *halaqah* (discussion circle) sessions as a space to deconstruct radical narratives. One student described the experience: "In *halaqah*, we did not just listen to lectures but also discussed. For example, on the topic of the caliphate, the teacher would ask about its history and suitability for Indonesia. We were invited to think, not just lectured."

Through this approach, students developed the ability to question underlying assumptions. This safe space was important because students who harbored doubts could obtain clarification from reliable sources rather than seeking answers on the internet. Students were able to distinguish between legitimate differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) and dangerous deviations (*inhiraf*). However, the effectiveness of these sessions depended greatly on the quality of the



facilitator. The school found that some teachers were too dominant, turning discussions into lectures. Consequently, the institution held special training for teachers on discussion facilitation methods.

DISCUSSION

The first finding showed that digital literacy at Al Riyadh Islamic Boarding School, Cipanas, was not merely the ability to use technology. Instead, the emphasis was on the ability of students to think critically about the digital content they accessed. Digital literacy includes the capacity to question digital information, understand its authorship and purpose, and recognize potential manipulation (Pangrazio, 2016).

The *pesantren* combined digital literacy with *Wasatiyah* (moderation) values, representing an adaptation of digital literacy to local culture and religion. Islamic values such as *tabayyun* (verification), *adabul kalam* (ethics of speech), and *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all) served as moral filters that helped students distinguish between beneficial and destructive content (Hidayat et al., 2025). Digital literacy based on local wisdom is often more effective against terrorist propaganda in the era of digital transformation, as ethics remains a key pillar in building public trust and institutional integrity (Adelia et al., 2025).

The institution realized that students could not be isolated from the digital world and required guidance for responsible technology use. This approach differed from *pesantrens* that completely prohibit cell phones or internet access (Krisdiyanto et al., 2019). Through this open attitude, students could build personal mental resilience rather than relying solely on strict prohibitions. However, implementation faced challenges, as some senior teachers found it difficult to integrate digital material. This is in line with recommendations that counter-radicalization should include technology training for educators (Lim et al., 2022). Additionally, awareness of privacy rights and data protection was an integral part of the learning process, teaching students to protect their personal data as a form of moral conduct in cyberspace (Tahir et al., 2025).

The second finding highlighted the importance of teachers as trusted figures in countering radical narratives. Research confirms that individuals are more likely to accept counter-narratives from respected figures (Aly et al., 2014). Teachers used an educational and dialogical approach because ideological issues cannot be forced. Their role as "gatekeepers" proved effective in filtering narratives, which is crucial given that social media tends to create dangerous echo chambers (Hayati et al., 2025). With the guidance of teachers, students were helped to escape



algorithmic traps that present only a single radical point of view. The *pesantren* tradition of moderation and balance enabled teachers to prevent radical infiltration (Kusmanto et al., 2015). Prevention based on mutual respect allows students to independently counter radical narratives (Ruslan & Luthfiyah, 2020).

The third finding showed that the *halaqah* discussions reflected democratic principles, where students could participate actively without fear of judgment. Discussions focused on logic and evidence, creating a safe space for students to express opinions and deconstruct false narratives (Pujiati et al., 2018). Through *halaqah*, students could distinguish between legitimate differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) and dangerous deviations (*inhiraf*). This is highly relevant because radicalization often begins with an inability to accept differences. The study also noted that the effectiveness of *halaqah* depended on the facilitator's quality; teachers who were too dominant could hinder the dialogical function of the space. This condition emphasizes the necessity of specialized training for teachers and caregivers.

CONCLUSION

The study found that Islamic boarding schools built digital literacy as a countermeasure to radicalization in an era of asymmetric threats. Digital literacy was understood not only as the technical ability to use digital devices but also as the cognitive and ethical capacity integrated with the values of Islamic moderation (*Wasatiyah*). The role of teachers as gatekeepers and mentors to students made counter-narratives more effective through an educational and dialogical approach.

Discussions served as a forum for training students to think critically and learn to distinguish between reasonable differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) and dangerous deviations (*inhiraf*). These three elements formed a multi-layered defense ecosystem and prepared students to become agents of change who spread the values of moderation and peace in the digital space. In an asymmetrical era where radicalization moves quickly, digital literacy was an existential necessity. Islamic boarding schools that were able to combine digital literacy with scientific traditions will not only survive but will grow stronger as a bastion of civilization that protects spirituality against modernity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pesantrens located in areas prone to radicalization can adopt a model of digital literacy integration based on *Wasatiyah* values, as developed by Al Riyadh Cipanas. Practical steps include



holding regular workshops, forming student media teams to produce educational content, and integrating discussions on current digital issues into the daily curriculum. Teacher training in digital technology is essential, especially for senior teachers who may be less familiar with the virtual world. Islamic boarding schools should collaborate with universities or civil society organizations to provide regular technical training. Furthermore, *pesantrens* need to create spaces for dialogue where students are free to express their doubts and discuss contemporary issues without fear of judgment, guided by facilitators who possess active listening skills and the ability to manage discussion dynamics effectively.

The government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, BNPT, and the Ministry of Education, should provide support through digital literacy training for educators, the provision of secure digital infrastructure, and assistance in developing educational content. Further research is needed to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of digital literacy in Islamic boarding schools by tracking alumni after they graduate. Comparative research across various types of *pesantrens* (traditional/*salaf*, modern, and integrated) and different geographical locations is also important to identify the most effective strategies. Subsequent studies could employ a psychological approach to understand the cognitive processes of students when evaluating digital information. Additionally, future research should examine the role of alumni, both male and female students, and the influence of local wisdom in strengthening internal resilience. The author hopes that this research will serve as a practical resource for Islamic boarding schools, policymakers, and all stakeholders concerned with religious harmony in Indonesia.

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