

CONSTRUCTING ISLAMIC IDENTITY AMONG UINSA STUDENTS THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTAGRAM REELS

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ABSTRACT

This study looks to understand the meaning making process and identity formation among UINSA (Sunan Ampel Islamic State University) students surrounding the phenomenon of reels on Instagram along the visual consumerism continuum. The work focuses on the phenomenological qualitative method used in the interviews and stimulated recall. The results reveal the following. For the most part, short Islamic videos and the viewers' emotional and cognitive shifts suggest varying degrees of motivational and spiritual awareness and reflection. Secondly, the platform has become an identity construction site where students have become netizens, and, in Islamic education, they intermingle education, personality, and algorithms into varying, at times, unique frameworks. Third, the platform influences behavioral tendencies, from subtle shifts in daily religious habits to increased trust in digital preachers, while also reinforcing the need for critical filtering to avoid superficiality and misinformation. The study concludes that Instagram reels are beyond serving as entertainment oriented content, playing a significant role in shaping emotional engagement, spiritual resonance, and being the dynamic formation of contemporary muslim youth identity.

Keywords: Instagram reels, Islamic identity, Muslim youth, digital da'wah, UINSA.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are created with reason and instinct, but there are different from feelings. Feelings arise from the process of wanting to understand (Hikmat et al., 2024). Humans have a strong tendency to create a space for understanding within themselves to become something desirable (Morales & Carbonell, 2021). In creating a space for thinking, a person's identity is formed. A person's identity is shaped by various factors around them. One of the factors that shapes human identity comes from the media, which has evolved into social media.

In a world that is increasingly sophisticated due to the internet and gadgets, humans tend to learn from instant sources (Persichitte & Suparman, 2016). This also applies to the emergence of a sense of identity based on a new understanding of what is seen and heard in a brief moment. The tendency to understand things instantly without selecting facts and issues can lead the blurring of credible information (Sá et al., 2020). This significant development in the media has changed human thinking patterns into two patterns, namely uniform or diverse thinking. The behaviorist theory explained by John B. Watson, states that humans learn from their environment, which can be formed from observation and imitation, when stimuli ultimately shape responses (Ulum & Fauzi, 2023). The meaning of this behaviorist theory is that human character and actions are often influenced by what they watch and hear.

The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) noted that there was an increase in the internet penetration in Indonesia, reaching 80.66% in 2025, up from 79.50% in 2024. The biggest reason for the level of internet distribution and usage in Indonesia is access to social media, which reaches 24.80% of the average percentage, which is 8.73%. Moreover,

Indonesia ranks as the fourth most populous country in the world, giving it a substantial presence in global short video viewership. Indonesia also describes as the world's largest muslim population, a demographic factor that strongly shapes how religious identity is formed and negotiated (Komala et al., 2024). These characteristics reinforce the prominence of young Indonesian who constitute the majority of active social media users as a key audience for short form digital content. The younger generation is most deeply influenced by the circulation of short religious videos, particularly those disseminated through Instagram (Emeraldien et al., 2024).

Instagram was first launched in October 2010 as a photo sharing application. The Instagram application was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, featuring square photos and unique filters (Suhaimi et al., 2023). Instagram continues to be a visually focused platform. According to (*Digital 2026: Global Overview Report*, 2025) Instagram is the third most popular social media platform after WhatsApp and TikTok. Instagram's user base is positively impacted by the user-friendly design that enables easy access to a plethora of tailored content. As technologies advanced, Instagram's layout also added feature of reels in 2020. (Situmorang & Hayati, 2023).

Instagram reels are a prime example of content designed 3 minutes or less, formatted in the 9:16 size, or portrait mode (Yuwono, 2025). Furthermore, Cotter et al., (2022) demonstrate that Instagram's For You Page (FYP) feature provides users with a randomized assortment of content, blended with a selection of global and local posts. The FYP is another example of content consumption that has been optimized by digital technology.

Changes in social media usage, particularly revolving around mega popular platforms like Instagram, have sparked the rise of different kinds of religious content. This change brought about new things people call things like "instant religiosity," "pop Islam," and "micro influencers of da'wah," as well as unequal patterns of religious interpretation among the youth (Ilham et al., 2025). These short and visual content sometimes triggers fragmented understanding where people absorb religious values in terms of visual aesthetics rather than depth (Zaid et al., 2022). Understanding is the reason this phenomenon should be studied. UINSA (Sunan Ampel Islamic University) has a unique case as a religious-based campus (Emeraldien et al., 2023).

The research Siregar et al., (2025) explores how religious content has been adapted and repackaged in such a way that it becomes visually pleasing, and/or sentimental and evokes laughter or even serves to motivate viewers, rendering religion more accessible. Over the years, the emergence of religious content on social media has dramatically altered the ways in which the identity of many young Muslims is formed, allowing them to bypass traditional socialization agents such as family and the mosque/gathering place (Nasution et al., 2025).

This research is strategically researching the students that is combine the formal religious knowledge they acquire on campus with the digital culture and pop islam they consume through reels. Furthermore, this research aims to qualitatively examine how UINSA students interpret short Islamic video content and the extent to which reels influence the formation of their daily religious identity.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to study the phenomenon of Muslim students interpreting short religious content on Instagram. The approach also seeks to grasp the internal mechanics of the phenomenon undergoes an internal process of identity (McLeod, 2024). Among the typers of qualitative methodology, interpretive phenomenology was chosen to find the meaning connection of how UINSA Students view the short religious videos (Muhammad Munir & Moh. Taufiq, 2024). The phenomenological approach opened the way to

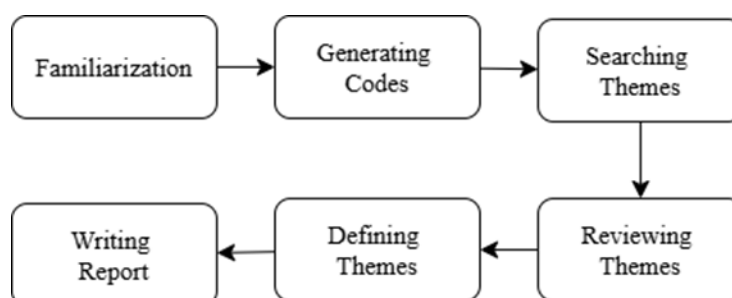
the study of reflections, the interpretive process and the dynamics of the self, in the encounter with the religious messages of the participants in the digital media (Wirman et al., 2023).

Research participants were selected through purposive sampling with specific criteria, namely active students at UINSA. The student participants are being chosen as people who regularly watch short religious content on Instagram and are willing to participate in interviews. A total of nine students were involved as participants, which is an ideal number for phenomenological research that prioritizes data depth.

Data was collected through in depth interviews to explore participants' views, experiences, emotions and reflections on the religious content they encountered. In addition, this study used the stimulated recall method, in which participants were asked to select one or two short religious videos that they often watched and explain their thought processes (Sardi, 2021). By doing that, the parts that caught their attention and the meanings they formed while watching the video is constructed their Islamic identity (Nuraeni & Kurniasih, 2021). This method helped researchers capture the process of meaning construction in greater detail and context.

After conducted interview and collecting the data, they were analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke's framework facilitated by Nvivo software (Zaid et al., 2022). There are six systematic stages of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke's, familiarization, generating codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, writing report (Braun, 2006).

Picture 1. Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Stage



Source: researcher

The first stage is familiarization, which involves reading and understanding all interview transcript repeatedly. Next, codes are generated to identify units of meaning that emerge in the data. The next stage is searching for themes by grouping these codes into initial themes, followed by reviewing themes to evaluate the consistency and suitability of the themes with the data. In the definitional and thematic naming stage, the data define each theme and explain how each theme relates to one another. The last stage is in the production of the report, which consists of integrated analytical narrative that details the research outcomes. The whole analysis process is facilitated by NVivo to guarantee the more organized arrangement of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Profile of Instagram Users Who Experience the Influence of Instagram Reels on Islamic Identity Formation

Informant's Name	How long time using Instagram	The intensity of use of Instagram	Duration of opening Instagram
Julia	5 Years	>10 times a day	2-3 hours per day
Hanna	9 Years	>10 times a day	The longest can be 3 hours
Indyra	9 Years	>10 times a day	4-6 hours per day
Risa	8 Years	>5 times a day	2-3 hours per day
Alwi	10 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be 2 hours
Zuhriya	6 Years	>10 times a day	4-6 hours per day
Fariz	7 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be one hour
Randi	3 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be one hour
Faiz	5 Years	>10 times a day	The longest can be 1-2 hours

Source: Researcher

From the information gathered from UINSA students, the profiles of the nine participants highlight various but consistently high levels of engagement with Instagram. This issue provides a solid contextual basis to understand the formation of Islamic identity from the consumption of reels. Most participants have a history as Instagram users, with a length of 3 to 10 years, showing a pattern of consistency with the Instagram application. The length of time that participants have used Instagram has formed their digital habits and ways of understanding.

In terms of usage frequency, the data shows that most of the participants used Instagram more than 10 times a day and the others used it more than 5 times a day. This indicates that Instagram is not an additional media but an essential element in their everyday life. The length of use each day also shows this where some participants used the platform for more than 2 to 6 hours a day. This level of engagement provides a suitable ground for the platform to optimize the use of reels in order to meet the users great level of engagement. The active use of the platform is likely to help develop the users of the digital platform, emotional and cognitive engagement with the messages of Islam.

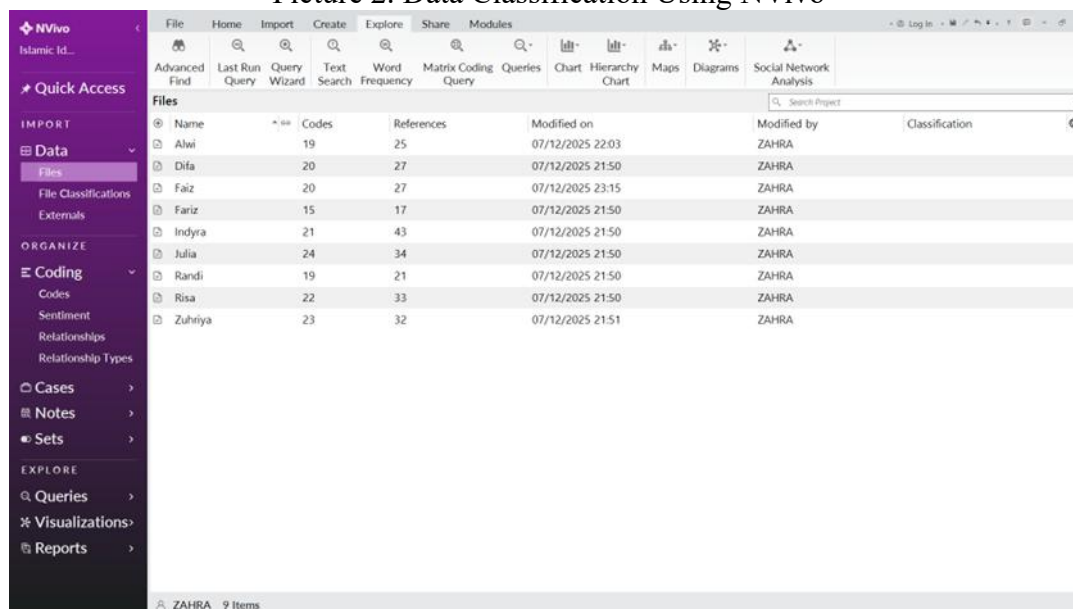
The combination of long term platform familiarity, high daily frequency, and significant screen time positions Instagram reels as a central medium that consistently mediates their encounters with Islamic values, motivational messages, and digital da'wah. As a results, the

influence of reels on their religious identity is not incidental but embedded within their everyday digital behavior and media consumption rhythms.

Data Classification Using NVivo

With the assistance of NVivo software, the researcher was able to perform asystematic and organized analysis of the interviews conducted. NVivo made it possible to perform analysis in a transparent way and identify patterns, meanings, and nuances regarding the participants (Priyatni et al., 2020). The program uses codes and references to facilitate analysis. Codes are conceptual tags attached to meaningful portions of the interview data. References are a reflection of how many of the participants expressed the same ideas (Silva et al., 2025). The integration of codes and references will allow the researcher to discern the most prevalent themes, contrasts interpretative patterns and provide a solid empirical base for analysis (Allsop et al., 2022).

Picture 2. Data Classification Using NVivo



Name	Codes	References	Modified on	Modified by	Classification
Alwi	19	25	07/12/2025 22:03	ZAHRA	
Difa	20	27	07/12/2025 21:50	ZAHRA	
Faiz	20	27	07/12/2025 23:15	ZAHRA	
Fariz	15	17	07/12/2025 21:50	ZAHRA	
Indyra	21	43	07/12/2025 21:50	ZAHRA	
Julia	24	34	07/12/2025 21:50	ZAHRA	
Randi	19	21	07/12/2025 21:50	ZAHRA	
Risa	22	33	07/12/2025 21:50	ZAHRA	
Zuhriya	23	32	07/12/2025 21:51	ZAHRA	

Source: Researcher

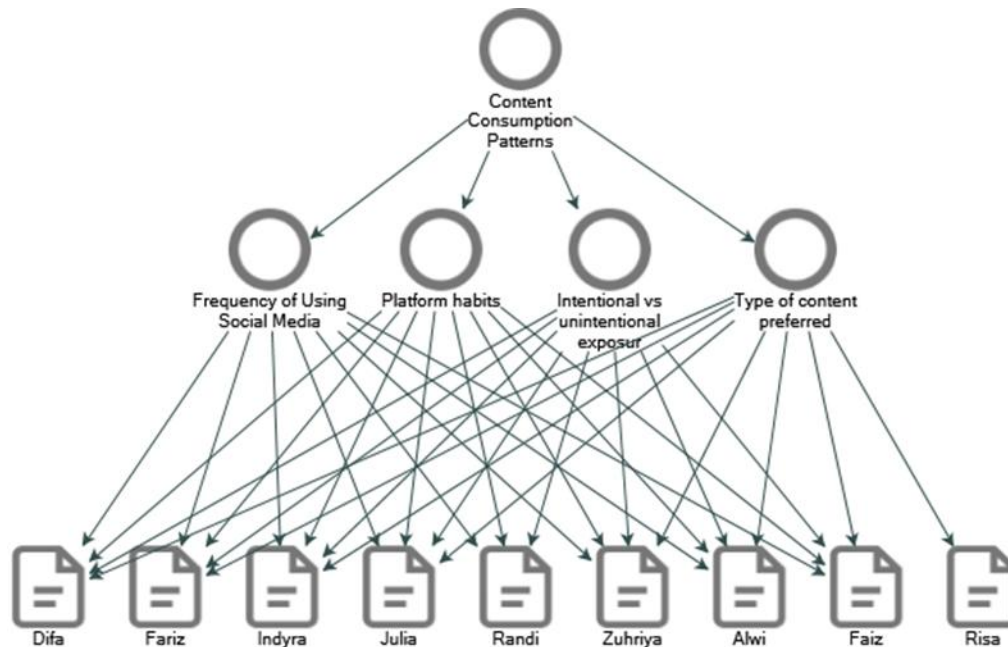
The picture shows text with codes and references. The information was organized into a few primary codes which are “content consumption pattern,” “cognitive interpretation,” “emotional interpretation,” “spiritual interpretation,” “behavioral implications,” and “identity construction”. These codes illustrate the meaning-making process and the multiplexity of student experiences with Islamic short video content. The codes not only illustrate the themes captured in the interviews but can also be used to answer the research question of how religious content in digital formats are processed in the mind, felt, spiritually embraced, and manifested in actions.

Content Consumption Patterns

The analysis conducted on the interview data allowed for the emergence of a specific and significant pattern concerning the different kinds of material that people consumed and the center around which their viewing habits revolved. These patterns were categorized into four main dimesions including “frequency of social media use,” “platform habits,” “intentional versus uintentional exposure,” and “preferred content types.” Each dimension reflects a structural aspect of participants’ interaction with digital media and reveals how certain forms of

content become cognitively and behaviorally salient. The overall pattern can be visualized into the diagram below.

Picture 3. Content Consumption Patterns



Source: Researcher

The results from the content consumption shape how Muslim youth interact with Islamic short videos on Instagram. The variety of social media is shown by how often the participants come across the content, and how deeply they involved themselves with that content. There are engagement retention attributes regarding social media, such as video aesthetics, overall visual design, voice paired with the content, and the structurization of the story. There is a direct correlation regarding the frequency of exposure and the sensitivity to nuances in production and message conveyance as a fundamental criterion for credible or legitimate religious message evaluation.

Instagram's design algorithm profoundly shapes conceptions of authenticity on the interface, as evidenced by user patterns on the application. Students at UINSA described how videos on the Islamic Content on the FYP behave “randomly” or as “acak” (Messina, 2021). They were, due to the randomness, forced to rely on quick aesthetic markers to identify Islamic videos, such as modest clips, clean cuts, and remarkably editing, Islamic recitations, or preached speakers. Originally, the randomness may contribute to perceptions of complexity, but the focus on the underlying patterns created the environments were systems of meaning could be applied by users. Different users chose to build systems of meaning through the various dynamics of the interface where patterns could be highlighted.

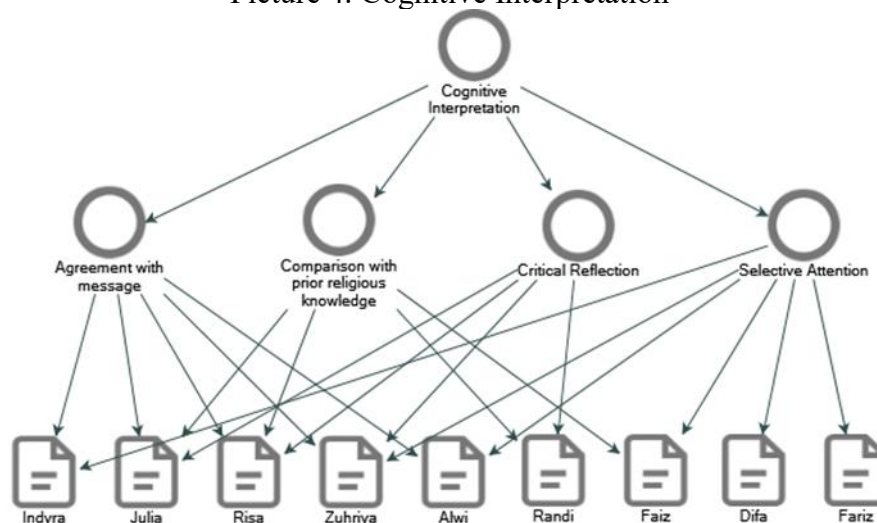
The algorithm and user emphasis on meaning creation were deliberate or random, as seen in the understanding of users as active participants in the content consumption and the focus on content engagement. Islamic content also influences the engagement by users as it creates meaning through the focus of authentic Islamic practices. Many users acknowledged that meaning creation was in response to algorithmic patterns, such as Islamic themed videos created a meaning that was directly or indirectly engaging. Challenge to perceptive authenticity was the alignment of content and the user’s available belief system, as it varied, and the

sincerity of the content creator. In this context, authenticity is seen in the interactions between both the user and the algorithm.

This pattern of consumption further reveals the specific subdivisions of Islamic content. Though some participants consumed content focused quotes, lectures, motivational speech, or quotes reminders of daily Islamic practices. Others focused content on modest fashion. These difference preferences show the different interest in the kind of aesthetic disappointment. This illustrates a range of expectations and different tolerances for the authenticity in the consumed content. The perceived authenticity of the content to a particular consumer a digress from the perceived authenticity of another consumer. This shows that the authenticity perceived in content do not solely depend on the content, but also on the identity of the consumer.

Cognitive Interpretation

Picture 4. Cognitive Interpretation



Source: Researcher

The cognitive interpretation stage shows how they assess the meaning encapsulated in the short Islamic videos. Five out of the nine participants indicated that the content enables them to grasp the ideas in the religious concepts more easily, which indicates the ease of their content from the reels, as well as their support of the visual messages. These participants used the containing words in “mempermudah” or “lebih cepat dipahami” to point out that short form religious videos might be the first step to be able to grasp the core Islamic education more closely.

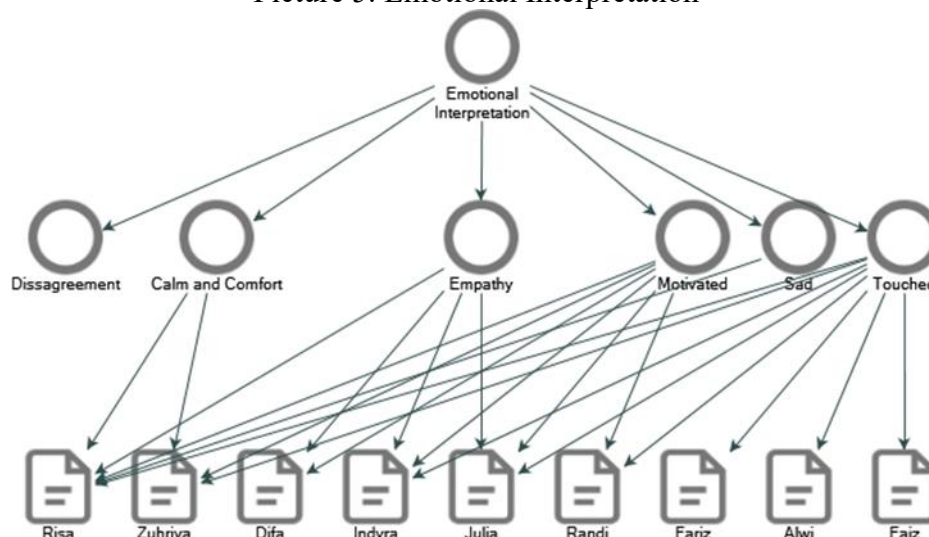
The other pattern worth noting is the comparison made by the participants between video content and their previous religious knowledge. Four participants mentioned that short videos at times present a different point of view or interpretation of the teachings that is new and different from what they have previously acquired. This, however, is not a standing alone issue, as participants appreciated the fact that there is a need of filtering and confirming to know what is and what is not the valid information to be captured. The analytical caution shows that the participants are comparatively more aware of the presence of the misleading information in religious content on the internet. This awareness had participants refer to more traditional and trusted information such as family or religious teachers, or books, to validate their ideas.

Cognitive processing also incorporates reflective analysis and distraction management. Four participants mentioned how some videos stimulated certain introspection to the point where they had to reassess some personal practices and beliefs. Simultaneously, participants described focusing their attention on the speaker, the significant presence or absence of evidence, the visuals, the emotional appeal, and how they felt they were able to manage

emotionally to decide what they felt was worth their time. Such selective attention demonstrates that interaction with Islamic videos is an evaluative, not passive process.

Emotional Interpretation

Picture 5. Emotional Interpretation



Source: Researcher

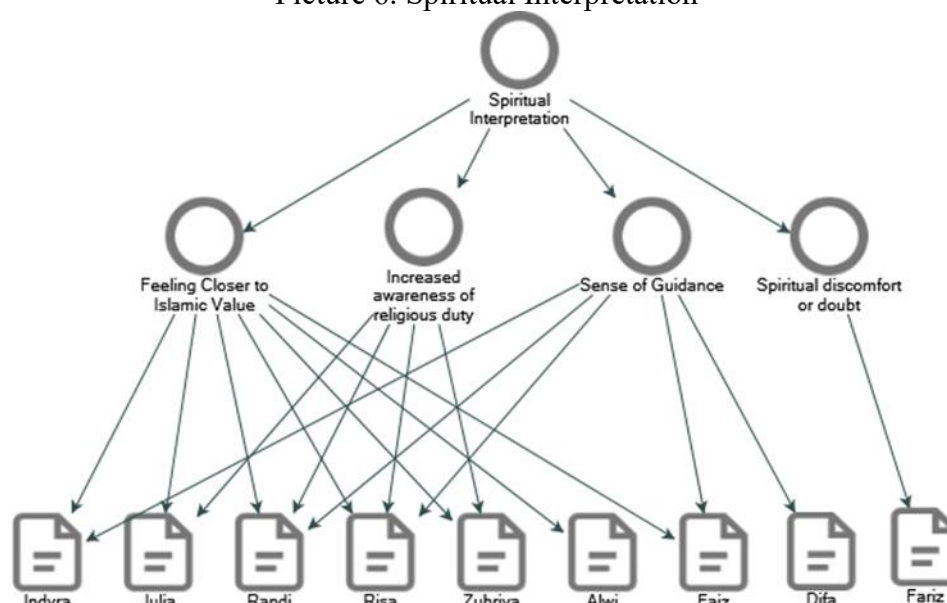
Analysis of Instagram reels through the lens of Islamic Emotionality indicates that, in general, participants are likely to encounter a positive emotional response on an affective continuum. Derived from the codes “disagreement,” “calm and comfort,” “empathy,” “sad” and “touched,” the data suggest that of the nine participants, there was uniform emotional concordance with the absence of all participants of emotional discontent from the Islamic videos. The lack of disagreement indicates that reels of an Islamic nature are largely viewed as compatible and non perturbing, reflecting a fundamental synchronization of participants’ religious predilections with the emotional disposition of the videos.

Motivation and feeling emotionally moved were the most frequent answers to the emotional response questionnaire. Many participants commented that the videos were inspiring, uplifting, and gave, even if for a short time, the feeling of being spiritually motivated. Such responses were often due to inputs having short religious reminders, emotional narratives, reflective morals, and pictures of religiosity and daily Islamic activities. These components seem to elicit positive emotional responses and lead users to feel encouraged and/or emotionally stirred. In this regard, emotional responses become a core part of the emotion process which determines the message and how it relates to the individual’s sense of self.

Calmness was less common before, as well as feelings of comfort, which before was linked to peace evoked by religious scenes visually or through recitation. Empathy and sadness were responses to wore narratives focusing on moral struggles and challenges of life or social issues within an Islamic framework. Participants attribute these feelings as not simply from content consumption, but from emotionally engaging with their stories. These were seen as these feelings were evoked from their lived experiences. These emotional responses strengthened Islamic reels and psychanalytical role as Islamic spiritually responsive to Muslim youth where there are a formation and solidification of their Religious Identity.

Spiritual Interpretation

Picture 6. Spiritual Interpretation



Source: Researcher

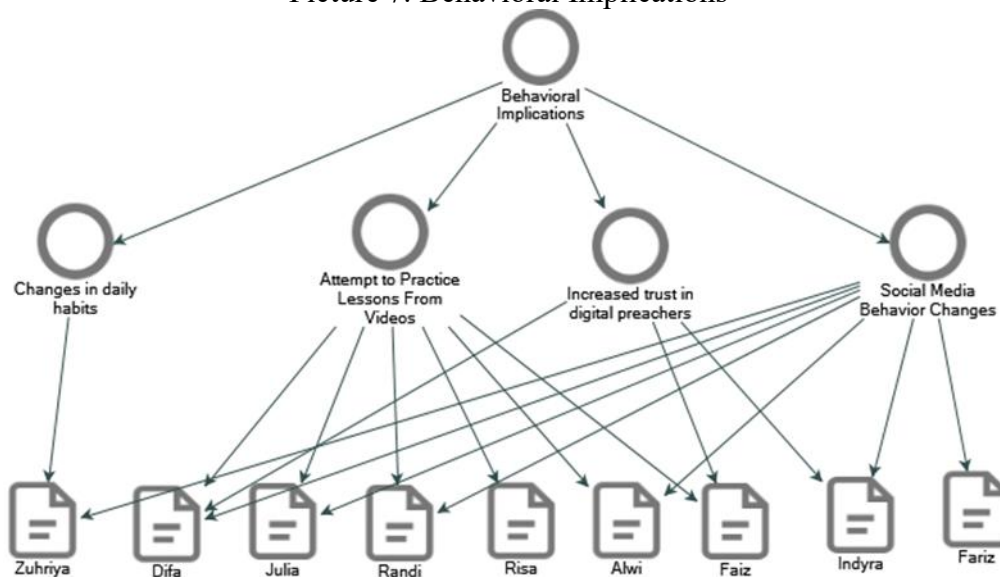
Participants showed a greater Islamic engagement due to their exposure to religious videos spiritually. Most of those participants feel videos of a religious Islamic nature bring them Islamic value closeness. Their comments explaining that Instagram's home page feed, or search suggestions, enable them to be more aware of faith aspects they tend to neglect often. This emotional closeness isn't just sentimental but also a considered means of relating to content. They view it as a gentle prompting of their spiritual obligations or the deeper aspects of their faith.

At the same time, many participants commented on an increased awareness of their religious responsibilities. Reminders of religious duties became sharper due to the immediacy of the reminders, as people remembered, due to short videos, to pray, review the lessons of morality, recollect their decisions of the day, and review set guidelines. Some people viewed this as a form of micro spiritual counselling, and even a moment of spiritual clarity. These comments show captioned micro videos have an impact as a contrapuntal source of religious education, in addition to, religious instruction.

Yet, when engaging within a spiritual context, one must also be cautious. Some participants also expressed a certain level of discomfort in thinking about the chances of super quick, short, condensed religious talk leading to some sort of interpretive bias or an inability to differentiate between fact learned versus linked misinformation. This concern demonstrates that the complexities of digital spirituality. Islam short videos have the potential to inspire, provide direction, fortify religious identity, but at the same time do require an extent of critical as well as constructive engagement to avoid oversimplified, or inaccurate video casting religious knowledge. In the end, when you look at the spiritual interpretations, it is a result of an active engagement between one's beliefs, digital technology, and self interpretation, which brings to light the inherent potential, but also the limitations of the religious material available in an algorithm driven digital space such as Instagram.

Identity Construction Process

Picture 7. Behavioral Implications



Source: Researcher

The impressions recorded by the study suggest that Islamic videos for social networks are a significant factor to consider in the identity construction process of UINSA students. Some of the several changes of the various changes seen, but the changes to daily habits are probably the most significant. Changes to daily habits as a result of the videos are relating to the scheduling of prayers, the practice of devotional readings, and shifting consumption of digital media as a result of the consistent religious reminders in the videos. The incremental, almost unconscious, daily patterns of behavior suggest that exposure to these algorithmic videos changes the normalized routines to incorporate more religious activities.

The videos not only teach moral values, but people watch and try to apply them to their lives. They are trying to adapt their religious teachings and values to their everyday actions. This is especially true when digital preachers, especially upper level, are trusted more and more. This is the trust of online religious authorities. They digital influencers have great trust in online religious authorities. This trust reinforces the online religious authority and digital influencers as important in the moral reasoning and value learning of the youth. This is especially true when they have higher trust in digital preachers.

These videos have also changed social media behavior in a wider sense. Users are now more selective in who they follow, prefer religious videos, and disengaged from entertainment. Collectively, the behavioral changes illustrate how short videos have provided a focus for the construction of identity, shaped moral practice, and redefined the digital space within which young Muslims have constructed a sense of self.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how UINSA students understand da'wah content on Instagram through short videos. They went through differing and non-linear processes of meaning making. Through this research, there found UINSA had various deeper knowledge, engagement, and customized preferences that shaped their Cognitive Processing of Video content. Formal religious education, personal digital experiences, and religious education knowledge influenced the irritation of meaning. Furthermore, students influenced the videos with different religious motivations and spiritual connection, while others viewed the videos simply and with an awareness of the temporal nature. The engagement connection of content

with meaning through the expressed religion and the spirit resulted in different religious activities, while content was viewed as temporary and reminders.

These interpretive processes inform the students' construction of religious identity in their own ways. Students' identities are not defined by just one authority. It is rather the integration of formal Islamic teachings, online interactions, peer contexts, and autobiographical processes. In this way, Instagram Reels is an engagement site where students negotiate the meaning. In this site, they weigh the values and reinterpret the means of religious expression to suit the prevalent digital culture. Given this understanding, the content of the short videos does not have a direct impact on the construction of the self, rather they provide an interfacial space in which self-construction, self-integration, and self-redefinition, of the religious dimensions. The study, therefore, confirms and concludes that the identity of the young Muslims is built from the interrelation of pedagogy and lived experience, emotions and engagement, and the algorithm of the social media.

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