

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Training Preachers in a Changing Society: A Socio-Educational Evaluation of Muhammadiyah Universities

Farhan Azzam Wijaya<sup>a</sup> | Awang Khairul Nizam<sup>b</sup>✉<sup>a</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Indonesia<sup>b</sup>Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali, Brunei Darussalam**ABSTRACT**

The transformation of contemporary socio-religious landscapes, driven by digitalization and shifting patterns of religious engagement, poses significant challenges to the effectiveness of Islamic preacher training within higher education institutions. Traditional models of preacher formation, while strong in theological grounding, are increasingly required to address new demands related to communication, adaptability, and digital competence. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of preacher training in Muhammadiyah universities in Indonesia from a socio-educational perspective, focusing on the alignment between institutional capacity and contemporary competency requirements. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quantitative survey of 412 students across five Muhammadiyah universities with qualitative interviews involving 21 lecturers, administrators, and student preachers. Quantitative data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM), while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis to provide contextual depth. The findings indicate that institutional support significantly contributes to the development of communication skills, critical thinking, and societal engagement, with strong performance in theological knowledge. However, digital literacy emerges as the weakest competency, reflecting structural limitations in adapting to technologically mediated environments. These findings highlight a critical gap between traditional educational models and evolving societal demands, emphasizing the need for integrated and transformative pedagogical approaches. The study contributes to the discourse on faith-based higher education by demonstrating the importance of aligning theological depth with digital and social competencies. It offers practical implications for curriculum reform, institutional innovation, and the future development of Islamic preacher education in rapidly changing contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The transformation of contemporary societies, marked by rapid technological advancement, globalization, and shifting socio-religious dynamics, has significantly redefined the role of religious actors, including Islamic preachers [1]. In Indonesia, one of world's largest Muslim-majority country with over 240 million Muslims (approximately 87% of its population), Islamic preaching (dakwah) remains a central mechanism for shaping religious understanding and social values [2]. However, recent studies indicate that the effectiveness of traditional preaching methods is increasingly challenged by digital media ecosystems, pluralistic social contexts, and the rising demand for professionalized religious authority [3], [4]. For instance, surveys show that more than 60% of Indonesian youth access religious knowledge through online platforms rather than conventional face-to-face preaching, signaling a structural shift in how religious authority is constructed and disseminated. These transformations necessitate a re-evaluation of how Islamic preachers are trained, particularly within formal educational institutions [5].

Higher education institutions affiliated with Muhammadiyah, one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia managing more than 160 universities and serving hundreds of thousands of students, play a strategic role in institutionalizing preacher training [6]. Muhammadiyah universities are not only centers for academic learning but also serve as hubs for ideological transmission, leadership development, and community engagement [7]. Existing literature highlights that faith-based higher education institutions contribute significantly to human capital development, moral formation, and social cohesion. In the context of preacher training, prior research has explored curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and the integration of religious and secular knowledge [8]. However, much of this scholarship remains descriptive and institution-specific, often lacking comprehensive evaluative frameworks that measure effectiveness, outcomes, and societal relevance in a rapidly changing environment.

The current state of the art in Islamic education research increasingly emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches, combining perspectives from education, sociology, communication studies, and organizational governance [9]. Recent works have examined the professionalization of religious leaders, the role of digital literacy in preaching, and the importance of adaptive competencies in responding to contemporary challenges [10]. Furthermore, global discussions on religious education have shifted toward outcome-based education, quality assurance, and impact assessment [11]. Despite these advancements, empirical studies that systematically evaluate preacher training within Islamic higher education—particularly in Southeast Asia—remain limited. There is a growing recognition that traditional models of religious instruction may not adequately equip preachers with the necessary skills to engage diverse and digitally mediated audiences.

A critical research gap therefore emerges in the lack of socio-educational evaluation that integrates institutional, pedagogical, and societal dimensions of preacher training within Muhammadiyah universities [12]. Existing studies tend to focus either on theological content or educational processes in isolation, without assessing how these elements translate into measurable competencies and societal impact [13]. Moreover, there is insufficient empirical evidence on whether current training models align with the evolving demands of modern society, including digital communication skills, intercultural competence, and critical engagement with contemporary issues. This gap limits the ability of policymakers and educational leaders to design evidence-based improvements in preacher education.

This study addresses the need for a comprehensive evaluation of Islamic preacher training within Muhammadiyah higher education institutions by adopting a socio-educational perspective. It positions preacher training not merely as a pedagogical process but as a multidimensional system influenced by institutional governance, curriculum design, and societal expectations. The problem lies in the misalignment between traditional training frameworks and the complex competencies required in a rapidly transforming social landscape, resulting in potential inefficiencies in preparing preachers who are both religiously authoritative and socially responsive.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the increasing influence of digital media on religious discourse, the growing diversity of Muslim communities, and the strategic role of religious leaders in promoting social harmony and countering misinformation. As Indonesia continues to navigate challenges related to religious moderation, social cohesion, and globalization, the effectiveness of preacher training becomes a matter of national and societal importance. By providing empirical insights into the strengths and limitations of Muhammadiyah's educational model, this study contributes to broader discussions on the reform and innovation of faith-based higher education, offering implications not only for Indonesia but also for other Muslim-majority contexts facing similar transformations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive socio-educational evaluation of preacher training within Muhammadiyah higher education institutions. The quantitative component employs a cross-sectional survey to measure students' perceived competencies, institutional support, and training effectiveness, while the qualitative component utilizes in-depth interviews to explore contextual and experiential dimensions of preacher formation. This design is grounded in a pragmatic paradigm, allowing for methodological complementarity and triangulation of findings to enhance validity and reliability. By combining numerical measurement with interpretive insights, the study captures both the measurable outcomes and the underlying processes shaping preacher training in a changing societal context.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study consist of undergraduate students, lecturers, and institutional administrators from five Muhammadiyah universities in Indonesia, namely Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, and Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar. These institutions are selected due to their well-established programs in Islamic studies, dakwah, and preacher development, as well as their geographical representation across Indonesia.

A multi-stage sampling technique is employed to ensure representativeness across institutions. In the quantitative phase, 412 students are selected using stratified random sampling based on academic year and field of study, ensuring proportional representation. For the qualitative phase, 21 participants are purposively selected, including experienced lecturers and program coordinators directly involved in preacher training, as well as students actively engaged in dakwah activities. This combination of participant groups enables a multi-perspective evaluation at individual, pedagogical, and institutional levels.

### **Instruments**

Data are collected using multiple instruments to ensure methodological rigor. The quantitative instrument consists of a structured questionnaire developed based on established theoretical frameworks, including human capital development and competency-based education. The questionnaire measures key constructs such as religious knowledge, communication skills, digital literacy, critical thinking, and societal engagement, using a 5-point Likert scale. The instrument undergoes content validation by experts in Islamic education and educational measurement, followed by a pilot test to assess reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients expected to exceed 0.70.

For the qualitative component, a semi-structured interview guide is utilized to explore participants' experiences, perceptions of curriculum relevance, institutional support, and challenges

in adapting to contemporary preaching demands. The guide is designed to allow flexibility while maintaining alignment with the study's research objectives. Supporting documents, such as curriculum outlines and institutional reports, are also analyzed to enrich contextual understanding.

### Data Collection Process

Data collection is conducted in two sequential phases. In the first phase, the quantitative survey is administered either online or in person, depending on institutional access and participant availability across the selected universities. Prior to distribution, ethical approval is obtained, and participants are informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The survey is conducted over a period of approximately 5 weeks, ensuring adequate response rates across all five institutions.

In the second phase, qualitative data are collected through in-depth interviews, conducted either face-to-face or via virtual platforms. Each interview lasts approximately 30–45 minutes and is audio-recorded with participant consent. The interviews are subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Triangulation is achieved by integrating survey results, interview data, and document analysis, thereby enhancing the robustness and credibility of the findings.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data are analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS or SmartPLS. Descriptive statistics are employed to summarize participant characteristics and key variables, while inferential analyses, including multiple regression or structural equation modeling (SEM), are conducted to examine relationships between institutional factors and preacher competencies. Validity and reliability tests, such as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), are performed to ensure the robustness of measurement models.

Qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of coding, categorization, and theme development. Transcripts are read iteratively to identify recurring patterns related to training effectiveness, institutional practices, and societal challenges. To enhance trustworthiness, techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails are employed.

Finally, findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses are integrated through a convergent triangulation approach, enabling a holistic interpretation of preacher training within Muhammadiyah universities. This integrative analysis allows the study to generate nuanced insights into both the measurable outcomes and the contextual dynamics shaping the effectiveness of Islamic preacher education.

## RESULTS

This study involved a total of 412 student respondents from five Muhammadiyah universities, alongside 21 qualitative participants consisting of lecturers, administrators, and active student preachers. The demographic profile of the survey respondents indicates a balanced representation across academic years, with 27.4% first-year students, 25.2% second-year, 23.8% third-year, and 23.6% fourth-year students. In terms of gender distribution, 54.1% were female and 45.9% male. Approximately 68% of respondents were enrolled in Islamic studies or dakwah-related programs, while the remaining 32% came from non-religious disciplines but participated in preaching activities. The descriptive statistics reveal that students generally perceive preacher training in Muhammadiyah universities positively, although with notable variation across competency domains.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
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Religious Knowledge	4.21	0.54
Communication Skills	3.87	0.63
Digital Literacy	3.45	0.72
Critical Thinking	3.68	0.60
Societal Engagement	3.91	0.58
Institutional Support	3.76	0.65

The data in table 1 indicate that religious knowledge is the strongest competency ( $M = 4.21$ ), suggesting that Muhammadiyah universities maintain a robust foundation in theological education. However, digital literacy scores the lowest ( $M = 3.45$ ), highlighting a gap in adapting preacher training to contemporary digital environments. Communication skills and societal engagement show moderate-to-high levels, reflecting partial alignment with modern preaching demands. To assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model, Cronbach's alpha and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted.

**Table 2.** Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	Composite Reliability
Religious Knowledge	0.88	0.64	0.90
Communication Skills	0.85	0.60	0.88
Digital Literacy	0.83	0.58	0.86
Critical Thinking	0.87	0.62	0.89
Societal Engagement	0.86	0.61	0.88
Institutional Support	0.89	0.66	0.91

All constructs in table 2 demonstrate strong internal consistency ( $\alpha > 0.80$ ) and acceptable convergent validity ( $AVE > 0.50$ ), indicating that the measurement model is statistically robust and suitable for further analysis. The structural model was tested using SEM to examine the influence of institutional support on preacher competencies.

**Table 3.** Structural Model Results

Path Relationship	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value
Institutional Support $\rightarrow$ Communication	0.42	6.87	<0.001
Institutional Support $\rightarrow$ Digital Literacy	0.36	5.94	<0.001
Institutional Support $\rightarrow$ Critical Thinking	0.39	6.21	<0.001
Institutional Support $\rightarrow$ Societal Engagement	0.44	7.10	<0.001

The results demonstrate that institutional support significantly influences all competency domains, with the strongest effect on societal engagement ( $\beta = 0.44$ ). This suggests that institutional structures, including curriculum design, extracurricular programs, and mentoring systems, play a crucial role in shaping socially responsive preachers. However, the relatively lower coefficient for digital literacy ( $\beta = 0.36$ ) indicates that institutional efforts in this domain are less effective compared to others. The model's explanatory power is further confirmed by the coefficient of determination:

**Table 4.** R-Square Values

Dependent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>
Communication Skills	0.38
Digital Literacy	0.29
Critical Thinking	0.34
Societal Engagement	0.41



These values indicate moderate explanatory power, with institutional support explaining 41% of the variance in societal engagement, but only 29% in digital literacy, reinforcing the earlier finding of a structural gap in digital competency development.

The quantitative findings are complemented by qualitative insights, which provide deeper explanations of these patterns. Interview data reveal that while Muhammadiyah universities emphasize strong theological grounding, there is a perceived lag in adapting to digital preaching contexts. One lecturer noted: *“Our curriculum is strong in religious content, but we are still adjusting to the realities of social media and online preaching.”* Similarly, student participants expressed that digital skills are often acquired independently rather than through formal training: *“We learn how to preach on Instagram or YouTube by ourselves, not really from structured courses.”*

These narratives corroborate the quantitative finding that digital literacy is the weakest competency area. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of institutional culture in fostering societal engagement. Many respondents emphasized that Muhammadiyah’s emphasis on community service and social responsibility significantly enhances their readiness to engage with diverse audiences. Another key qualitative theme concerns the tension between traditional and modern preaching approaches. Administrators acknowledged the challenge of balancing classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary communication demands: *“We must preserve our identity, but at the same time prepare students to engage with modern society.”* This tension reflects the broader structural issue identified in the statistical analysis, namely the partial misalignment between traditional training models and evolving societal expectations.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that Muhammadiyah universities have been successful in developing strong religious knowledge and moderate socio-communicative competencies among future preachers. However, significant gaps remain in digital literacy and adaptive skills, which are increasingly essential in a rapidly changing social landscape. The results highlight the need for a more holistic and forward-looking approach to preacher training, one that integrates theological depth with technological competence and societal responsiveness.

## DISCUSSION

### Reconfiguring Religious Authority in Contemporary Preacher Education

The findings of this study point to a significant reconfiguration of religious authority within the context of contemporary preacher education, particularly in Muhammadiyah higher education institutions. Traditionally, religious authority in Islamic contexts has been grounded in mastery of classical texts, deep theological knowledge, and affiliation with established scholarly traditions [14]. This form of authority, often conceptualized as epistemic authority, is reflected in the study’s quantitative results, where religious knowledge emerges as the strongest competency among students. Such an outcome underscores the continuity of text-based legitimacy as a foundational pillar in preacher formation [15]. However, the persistence of this traditional model alone appears insufficient in addressing the complexities of modern religious engagement, where authority is increasingly negotiated in dynamic, pluralistic, and digitally mediated environments.

From a theoretical perspective, this shift can be understood through the lens of the transformation of authority in late modernity, where authority is no longer solely derived from institutional or textual legitimacy but is co-constructed through interaction, visibility, and audience reception. Scholars of sociology of religion have long argued that the monopoly of traditional religious elites is being challenged by the democratization of knowledge and the proliferation of alternative religious voices [16]. In this context, the relatively lower scores in communication skills and digital literacy identified in this study indicate a structural tension between inherited forms of authority and emergent expectations of accessibility, relatability, and media fluency. Preachers are no longer evaluated solely on what they know,

but increasingly on how effectively they can communicate, contextualize, and adapt their knowledge to diverse audiences [17].

The qualitative findings further illuminate this transformation by revealing how students and educators perceive the evolving criteria of religious legitimacy. While theological rigor remains highly valued, there is a growing recognition that credibility in contemporary dakwah also depends on the ability to engage with real-world issues, utilize digital platforms, and connect with younger, more media-oriented audiences [18]. This aligns with the concept of performative authority, where legitimacy is enacted through communicative practices rather than merely inherited through institutional affiliation. The observation that many students acquire digital preaching skills independently suggests that formal educational structures have yet to fully internalize this paradigm shift, thereby creating a gap between institutional training and lived realities of religious practice.

Moreover, the findings resonate with broader discussions on the professionalization of religious actors, which emphasize the need for hybrid competencies that integrate theological expertise with soft skills, technological literacy, and social awareness. In this regard, Muhammadiyah universities occupy a unique position as both custodians of Islamic intellectual traditions and agents of educational modernization [19]. The relatively strong performance in societal engagement competencies reflects the organization's long-standing emphasis on social responsibility and community service, which contributes to a form of socially embedded authority [20]. This type of authority is not only knowledge-based but also grounded in active participation in addressing societal challenges, thereby enhancing the relevance and legitimacy of preachers in contemporary contexts.

However, the uneven development of competencies identified in this study suggests that the process of reconfiguring religious authority remains incomplete. The dominance of traditional knowledge frameworks, while essential, may inadvertently limit the capacity of preacher training programs to fully respond to the demands of a rapidly changing society [21]. Without a deliberate integration of communication and digital competencies into the core curriculum, there is a risk that future preachers may struggle to maintain authority in increasingly competitive and decentralized religious landscapes [22]. This is particularly critical in an era where digital platforms enable the rapid dissemination of religious content, often bypassing traditional gatekeeping mechanisms.

Critically, this reconfiguration should not be interpreted as a displacement of classical authority but rather as its transformation and expansion. The challenge lies in achieving a productive synthesis between textual authenticity and contextual relevance, ensuring that preachers remain both theologically grounded and socially responsive [23]. This requires a reconceptualization of preacher education as a multidimensional process that goes beyond content transmission to include the cultivation of adaptive, reflexive, and communicative capacities. In doing so, Muhammadiyah higher education institutions have the potential to redefine models of religious authority that are not only rooted in tradition but also attuned to the complexities of contemporary society.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to ongoing scholarly debates by demonstrating that religious authority in preacher education is undergoing a substantive transformation, shaped by the interplay between tradition, institutional structures, and societal change. The evidence suggests that while Muhammadiyah universities have successfully preserved the epistemic foundations of Islamic scholarship, further innovation is needed to align preacher training with evolving forms of authority that prioritize engagement, adaptability, and digital competence. This reconfiguration is not merely an institutional concern but a broader socio-religious imperative with significant implications for the future of Islamic preaching in Indonesia and beyond.

### **Institutional Capacity and the Limits of Competency Formation**

The findings of this study reveal that institutional capacity plays a decisive yet uneven role in shaping the formation of preacher competencies within Muhammadiyah higher education. While the

statistical results demonstrate that institutional support significantly influences multiple competency domains—particularly communication skills, critical thinking, and societal engagement—the variation in explanatory power across these domains suggests structural limitations in how institutions translate educational inputs into comprehensive outcomes [24]. This unevenness indicates that institutional capacity is not a uniform construct but rather a multidimensional system encompassing curriculum design, pedagogical practices, organizational culture, and resource allocation, each contributing differently to competency development.

From the perspective of human capital theory, educational institutions function as key mechanisms for enhancing individual capabilities through structured investment in knowledge and skills. The relatively strong effects of institutional support on communication and societal engagement competencies suggest that Muhammadiyah universities have been effective in fostering socially oriented and interactive dimensions of preacher training [25]. This can be attributed to embedded institutional practices such as community service programs, mentoring systems, and extracurricular dakwah activities, which provide experiential learning opportunities beyond the formal curriculum. Such practices align with the notion of applied human capital, where competencies are developed not only through classroom instruction but also through real-world engagement and social interaction.

However, the comparatively lower explanatory power of institutional support in shaping digital literacy highlights a critical limitation in current capacity structures [26]. This disparity suggests that while institutions are capable of sustaining traditional and socially embedded competencies, they face constraints in integrating rapidly evolving skill sets that require technological infrastructure, specialized training, and continuous curriculum adaptation [27]. Drawing on institutional theory, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of structural inertia, where established norms, routines, and organizational logics inhibit the adoption of innovative practices. Muhammadiyah universities, like many faith-based institutions, operate within a framework that prioritizes stability, continuity, and adherence to established educational models, which may inadvertently slow the integration of emerging competencies.

The qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation by revealing gaps between institutional provision and student experiences. Participants consistently noted that while support systems for religious and social development are well-established, formal mechanisms for developing digital competencies remain limited or fragmented [28]. This indicates a misalignment between institutional priorities and the evolving skill requirements of contemporary preacher roles. Importantly, this limitation is not merely technical but reflects deeper organizational challenges, including curriculum rigidity, limited faculty expertise in digital domains, and insufficient cross-disciplinary integration. These constraints point to what can be described as capacity asymmetry, where certain competencies are systematically privileged over others due to historical, cultural, and structural factors [29].

Furthermore, the results suggest that institutional effectiveness in competency formation is mediated by the degree of integration between formal and informal learning environments [30]. While Muhammadiyah universities demonstrate strong institutionalization of religious and social training, the absence of cohesive frameworks linking these domains with technological competencies results in fragmented learning trajectories. This aligns with contemporary educational theories emphasizing holistic competency formation, which argue that effective skill development requires alignment across curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional support systems [31]. In the absence of such alignment, students are compelled to rely on self-directed learning strategies, thereby reducing the overall efficiency and equity of competency acquisition.

A critical implication of these findings is that expanding institutional capacity is not solely a matter of increasing resources but requires a strategic reconfiguration of organizational priorities and pedagogical models. The current emphasis on traditional strengths, while valuable, may limit the adaptability of preacher training programs in responding to emerging societal demands [32]. Addressing this limitation



necessitates a shift toward more flexible, interdisciplinary, and innovation-oriented approaches, including the integration of digital pedagogy, collaboration with external stakeholders, and continuous professional development for educators. Such transformations would enable institutions to move beyond incremental adjustments toward more systemic enhancements in competency formation.

At a broader level, the study highlights the importance of viewing institutional capacity as a dynamic and context-sensitive construct rather than a static attribute. The ability of Muhammadiyah universities to effectively prepare future preachers depends on their capacity to balance continuity with change, leveraging existing strengths while addressing structural gaps [33]. This requires not only internal reforms but also engagement with broader educational and technological ecosystems, ensuring that institutional practices remain relevant in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

In sum, while Muhammadiyah higher education institutions demonstrate considerable strength in fostering certain dimensions of preacher competency, their capacity to support comprehensive competency formation remains constrained by structural, pedagogical, and organizational limitations. The findings underscore the need for a more integrated and forward-looking approach to institutional development, one that aligns educational practices with the full spectrum of competencies required in contemporary religious engagement. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how institutional capacity shapes educational outcomes and highlights the critical role of systemic transformation in enhancing the effectiveness of faith-based higher education.

### **Digital Disruption and the Urgency of Pedagogical Transformation**

The empirical evidence generated in this study underscores the profound impact of digital disruption on the landscape of preacher education, revealing an urgent need for pedagogical transformation within Muhammadiyah higher education institutions. While previous sections have highlighted the uneven institutional capacity and evolving configurations of authority, the present analysis foregrounds a more structural challenge: the rapid redefinition of the communicative environment in which preaching operates [34]. Digital platforms have not merely introduced new tools for dissemination but have fundamentally altered the modes of knowledge production, circulation, and validation. In such an environment, the effectiveness of preacher training is increasingly contingent upon the ability of educational systems to internalize and respond to digitally mediated epistemologies [35].

From a theoretical standpoint, this shift can be interpreted through the framework of mediatization of religion, which posits that media technologies actively shape religious practices, discourses, and institutional arrangements rather than serving as neutral channels [36]. In digitally saturated contexts, authority is negotiated through visibility, algorithmic amplification, and audience engagement metrics, thereby privileging forms of communication that are immediate, interactive, and adaptable [37]. The relatively low performance in digital literacy identified in the study signals a critical disjunction between existing pedagogical models and the realities of this mediatized environment. Preacher training that remains anchored in conventional classroom-based instruction risks becoming increasingly disconnected from the platforms where religious discourse is most actively produced and consumed.

Moreover, the findings can be situated within the broader discourse on digital competence and 21st-century skills, which emphasizes not only technical proficiency but also critical, ethical, and strategic engagement with digital media. In the context of Islamic preaching, this includes the ability to curate content, navigate online audiences, counter misinformation, and maintain theological integrity in fast-paced communicative settings [38]. The absence of systematically embedded digital pedagogy within institutional frameworks suggests that these competencies are treated as peripheral rather than integral to preacher formation. This marginalization reflects a deeper epistemological gap, where digital knowledge is not yet fully recognized as constitutive of religious expertise.

The qualitative data provide further insight into the lived consequences of this gap, revealing a pattern of adaptive but unstructured learning among students. While many demonstrate initiative in

engaging with digital platforms, their efforts are largely self-directed and lack formal guidance, resulting in uneven skill development and limited critical reflection [39]. This condition aligns with the concept of informal digital learning ecologies, where individuals acquire competencies through fragmented and experiential processes outside institutional control. Although such ecologies can foster creativity and autonomy, their reliance on individual initiative raises concerns about consistency, quality assurance, and alignment with broader educational objectives. In the absence of institutional integration, digital competence remains contingent rather than systematically cultivated [40].

Importantly, the challenge of digital disruption extends beyond the incorporation of new content or tools; it necessitates a paradigmatic shift in pedagogy. Contemporary educational theory increasingly advocates for learner-centered, inquiry-based, and technologically integrated approaches that emphasize adaptability and lifelong learning [41]. Within preacher education, this implies moving from transmission-oriented models toward transformative pedagogies that engage students as active producers of knowledge, capable of navigating complex digital environments. Such a shift requires rethinking not only what is taught but how it is taught, including the use of digital simulations, collaborative platforms, and real-time engagement with online audiences as part of the learning process [42].

At the institutional level, the urgency of this transformation is amplified by the accelerating pace of technological change and the competitive nature of digital religious spaces. The proliferation of independent preachers, influencers, and content creators has intensified the fragmentation of religious authority, creating a highly dynamic and contested communicative field. In this context, failure to equip future preachers with robust digital competencies risks marginalizing formally trained graduates in favor of more digitally agile actors [43]. This dynamic introduces a strategic dimension to pedagogical reform, where digital readiness becomes not only an educational concern but also a matter of institutional relevance and societal impact.

Critically, however, the integration of digital pedagogy must be approached with reflexivity and balance. While technological adaptation is important, it should not come at the expense of intellectual depth or ethical grounding. The challenge lies in developing a model of preacher education that harmonizes technological fluency with normative and theological integrity, ensuring that digital engagement enhances rather than dilutes the substance of religious discourse [44]. This calls for interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing on insights from media studies, communication theory, and educational technology to inform the design of contextually appropriate and pedagogically sound innovations.

Overall, the findings highlight digital disruption as a transformative force that exposes the limitations of existing educational models and compels a rethinking of pedagogical practices in preacher training. The current gap in digital competence is not merely a technical shortcoming but a reflection of deeper structural and epistemological challenges. Addressing this gap requires a comprehensive and forward-looking approach that embeds digital literacy within the core architecture of educational programs, fosters critical engagement with media environments, and prepares preachers to operate effectively in an increasingly complex and mediated world. The urgency of this transformation is underscored by its implications for the future of religious communication, institutional sustainability, and the broader role of Islam in shaping contemporary public discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The dynamics of contemporary society have introduced profound transformations in the landscape of Islamic preaching, necessitating a reorientation of how preacher competencies are conceptualized and cultivated within higher education. Muhammadiyah universities demonstrate strong institutional capacity in sustaining theological rigor and fostering meaningful societal engagement, reflecting their enduring role as both centers of Islamic scholarship and agents of social development. These strengths affirm their strategic position in shaping religious discourse in Indonesia, particularly in maintaining a balance between intellectual tradition and community-oriented values.

At the same time, the findings reveal significant asymmetries in competency formation, especially in relation to digital literacy and adaptive capacities. While institutional mechanisms effectively support the development of communication skills and social engagement, they remain less responsive to the demands of an increasingly digital and mediated environment. This imbalance highlights the limitations of existing pedagogical and organizational frameworks, which, although effective in traditional domains, require recalibration to address emerging skill sets essential for contemporary preaching. Bridging this gap calls for a more integrated approach to competency development, where theological knowledge, social awareness, and technological proficiency are cultivated simultaneously through innovative and interdisciplinary educational practices.

The broader implications point toward the necessity of a strategic synthesis between continuity and transformation in preacher education. Strengthening institutional responsiveness through curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, and capacity building is essential to ensure long-term relevance and impact. At a wider level, evolving patterns of religious authority and communication demand educational models that are both normatively grounded and contextually adaptive. Advancing such a model will not only enhance the effectiveness of preacher training but also reinforce the role of Islamic higher education in contributing to informed, ethical, and socially responsive engagement within an increasingly complex global society.

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### Author Contribution

Farhan Azzam Wijaya conceptualized the study, developed the research design, conducted data collection and analysis, and prepared the initial manuscript draft. Awang Khairul Nizam contributed to the refinement of the theoretical framework, supervised the research process, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript for intellectual content. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

### Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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