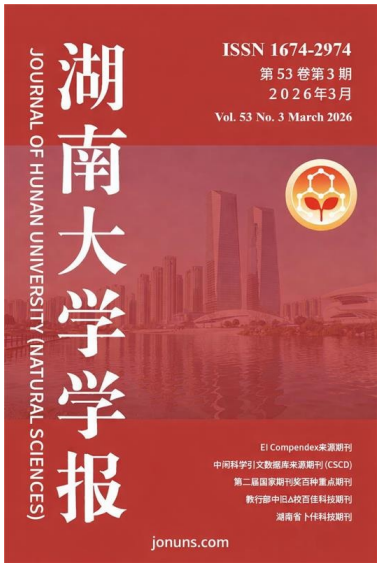

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Social Media Interaction as Surveillance and Panopticon: A Digital Ethnography of a Muslim Youth Community

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Abstract: Social media platforms have become central arenas for identity formation and community interaction, yet their role as instruments of disciplinary power within religious communities remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study examines how digital social interactions within a youth Muslim religious community function as a panoptic mechanism that shapes members' self-presentation practices and collective identity on Instagram. Grounded in Michel Foucault's theoretical framework of panopticism, discursive power, and subjectivation, the study employs a qualitative approach within a critical constructivist paradigm. Digital ethnography was used as the primary research strategy, combining digital observation of the community's official and personal member accounts with semi-structured interviews conducted with six active members of the MM community (pseudonym), a youth-based Islamic organization in South Tangerang, Indonesia. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. Findings reveal three interconnected dynamics. First, religious knowledge held by community advisors and leaders operates as a dominant discursive authority that disciplines members' digital behavior both overtly and covertly. Second, members internalize communal norms of piety, resulting in self-censorship, cautious content selection, and the reproduction of symbolic religious narratives on their Instagram accounts. Third, members actively negotiate spaces of personal freedom through the use of alternative accounts, selective audience features such as "close friends," and strategic content curation. These findings demonstrate that Instagram functions simultaneously as a site of disciplinary surveillance and a contested space for identity negotiation.

This study contributes empirically and theoretically by demonstrating that digital panopticism in religious communities is not a replication of classical surveillance models, but a discursively constructed process in which religious knowledge itself becomes the primary instrument of normalization.

Keywords: Digital Panopticism; Discursive Power; Religious Identity; Social Media; Subjectivation; Digital Ethnography.

社交媒体互动作为监控与全景敞视机制：一项关于穆斯林青年社群的数字民族志研究

摘要：社交媒体平台已成为身份建构与群体互动的重要场域，然而其作为宗教社群中规训性权力工具的作用仍缺乏充分研究，尤其是在非西方语境中。本研究探讨青年穆斯林宗教社群中的数字社会互动如何作为一种“全景敞视机制”，塑造成员在Instagram上的自我呈现实践与集体身份。

本研究以Michel Foucault关于全景敞视、话语权力与主体化的理论框架为基础，在批判建构主义范式下采用定性研究方法。以数字民族志作为主要研究策略，通过对该社群官方账号及成员个人账号的数字观察，并结合对六名MM社群（化名）活跃成员的半结构式访谈（该社群为位于印度尼西亚南唐格朗的青年伊斯兰组织），进行数据收集。数据分析采用Braun和Clarke提出的主题分析方法。

研究发现呈现出三个相互关联的动态。首先，社群顾问与领导者所掌握的宗教知识构成主导性话语权力，对成员的数字行为产生显性与隐性的规训作用。其次，成员内化了群体的虔诚信仰规范，从而表现出自我审查、谨慎的内容选择以及在Instagram上再生产宗教象征性叙事。第三，成员通过使用替代账号、“密友”等选择性受众功能以及策略性内容策划，主动协商个人自由空间。

研究表明，Instagram既是规训性监控的场域，同时也是身份协商的空间。本研究在经验与理论层面作出贡献，指出宗教社群中的数字全景敞视并非传统监控模式的简单延伸，而是一种话语建构过程，其中宗教知识本身成为规范化的核心工具。

关键词：数字全景敞视；话语权力；宗教身份；社交媒体；主体化；数字民族志

1. Introduction

Social media has become a significant arena for the formation of individual identities and social bonds within groups [1], including religious communities. Through various features such as text messaging, images, audio, and video, individuals now have broader and more flexible access to connect with their communities and to shape both personal and group identities more effectively [2]. One of the most widely used social media platforms in Indonesia is Instagram. According to DataReportal, by early 2025, Instagram users in Indonesia had reached 103 million, placing the country fourth globally in terms of user count. Social media platforms like Instagram offer individuals and groups the space to present their self-image, expand their social networks, and strengthen group cohesion within the digital ecosystem [3]. For religious communities, social media also serves as a medium for proselytization (*dakwah*) and the representation of religious values in a more inclusive and contextually relevant manner [4].

Bunt [5] asserts that faith-based organizations actively utilize social media to reach broader audiences, disseminate religious messages, and construct a strong collective identity. However, despite social media's critical role in religious outreach and the representation of religious values, there remains a lack of studies specifically examining how power and discourse [6]

operate within the dynamics of personal identity performance among members of religious communities, particularly in the context of Indonesia, where the population is predominantly Muslim.

Instagram was selected as the primary focus of this study not only due to its high penetration rate in Indonesia, but also because of its distinctive visual-first affordances that make identity performance particularly salient. Unlike text-dominant platforms such as Twitter/X or WhatsApp, Instagram's emphasis on curated imagery, stories, and public profiles makes it an especially revealing site for examining how religious self-presentation and surveillance operate [4]. In comparison, platforms like YouTube are more content-consumption oriented, while according to DataReportal, Facebook's demographic skews older and its usage patterns differ significantly among Indonesian youth. Instagram therefore represents the most appropriate platform for capturing the daily identity negotiation practices of young religious community members.

While existing studies have examined digital religion and online identity performance in Western Christian communities and surveillance within insular religious organizations, the dynamics of discursive power and panoptic discipline operating through social media within Muslim youth communities in Southeast Asia remain critically underexplored. Most prior research either focuses on political-economic dimensions of digital surveillance or examines religious communities in majority non-Muslim societies, leaving a significant gap in understanding how Islamic religious knowledge itself functions as the primary instrument of digital normalization. Furthermore, studies on identity negotiation in digital religious spaces have rarely addressed the coexistence of disciplinary subjectivation and agonism within the same community context. This study addresses these gaps by examining how social media interactions within an Indonesian Muslim youth community operate as a Foucauldian panoptic structure, and how members simultaneously resist and internalize its disciplinary effects. To situate these questions theoretically, the following section reviews key scholarship on Foucauldian panopticism, pastoral power, and digital identity formation, with particular attention to how these concepts have been applied, and where they remain limited in the study of online religious communities.

2. Literature Review

This study adopts Michel Foucault's theoretical framework to explore the formation of identity and the dynamics of power. Foucault's conception of the individual contrasts with those of symbolic interactionist scholars and sociologists such as Erving Goffman, George Mead, or Herbert Blumer, who have extensively theorized the formation of the "self" and identity [7]. Foucault [8] views individual identity as the outcome of how people are positioned and position themselves as subjects (both through the influence of others and through self-reflection) within interrelated power relations. He conceives of identity as a dynamic, historically constructed phenomenon.

Foucault's conception of power also diverges from that of the Marxist and Frankfurt School tradition, which centers on the dynamics of political-economic power and macro-level institutions [9]. Foucault [8] argues that power is not centralized within institutions but is instead diffused throughout society. It is a pervasive practice of domination that no individual can escape, even from birth. According to Foucault, individuals are never outside power relations; they are always entangled within them or subjected to them. It is therefore unsurprising that Foucault views identity as often being a form of subjugation, a mechanism through which power is exercised to prevent individuals from transgressing established boundaries [8].

One particularly rich locus for examining the exercise of power in the formation of individual identity is the religious community. Foucault [8] identifies religion-based power as a significant source of influence on identity formation, referring to it as *pastoral power*. He views religion as a mode of power that operates through knowledge and is both individualizing and totalizing in nature, as it governs both the soul and the body simultaneously [10]. Foucault elaborates that pastoral power operates through four defining characteristics: it aims at individual salvation; it is sacrificial, in that the pastor must be prepared to serve the flock; it is lifelong and individualizing, attending to each member in particular; and crucially, it requires intimate knowledge of individuals' inner lives, their conscience and conduct, as the very condition of its exercise [8]. This makes pastoral power fundamentally different from sovereign or disciplinary power: its instrument is not the law or physical force, but truth, specifically, the truth about religious conduct and identity.

Foucault's perspective on religion is further reinforced by findings from Yi's [11] study, which reveals how, in countries where Islam is not the majority religion, such as Japan and South Korea, societies construct categories of the "Good Muslim" and the "Bad Muslim" as a means to legitimize surveillance practices. A "Good Muslim" is characterized by a calm demeanor, the absence of visible religious symbols, and conformity to "majority norms." In contrast, a "Bad Muslim" is perceived as different, often actively involved in mosque expansion, wearing the hijab, or engaging in conflict. These categorizations are not state-sanctioned, but rather emerge from the subjective judgments of the public, serving as a moral rationale for informal surveillance.

A related study by McDonald [12] on the FLDS (Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day

Saints) community revealed similar dynamics. The research found that the religious community enforced a surveillance system grounded in strict social control and loyalty. This mechanism closely mirrors Foucault's concept of the panopticon, wherein individuals internalize the sense of being constantly watched, not only by leaders but also by fellow community members. In practice, members often acted as "agents of surveillance," monitoring and reporting on one another as a demonstration of their loyalty to the community's leadership figure.

Nonetheless, these studies primarily reveal surveillance practices within traditional, non-technological contexts. In contrast, the digital era has expanded community networks and social relationships into new domains. Therefore, this research aims to focus on the phenomenon of digital surveillance among members of religious communities. This focus is highly relevant for enriching contemporary cultural and media studies, particularly in examining how social media practices influence individuals' everyday lives.

One of the most relevant concepts for examining these phenomena from Foucault's perspective is the concept of the *panopticon*. The panopticon is defined as a social structure in which individuals constantly feel they are being watched, thereby disciplining themselves even in the absence of active enforcement. This concept serves as a metaphor rooted in Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panoptic prison design [6], a tower with darkened glass from which a guard could observe the surrounding prison cells. The design was intended to make prisoners feel as though they were under constant surveillance, despite not knowing whether a guard was actually present inside the tower.

Lewis's [13] study revealed that modern digital religious practices are inseparable from the phenomenon of the panopticon in virtual spaces. Lewis found that religious communities in digital environments tend to engage in practices where users present only the most favorable aspects of their faith life, what he terms a "digital mask." His findings demonstrate that, for Christians, online activity is not merely a form of communication but also a form of mission, aimed at displaying one's faith. This results in a new form of social and spiritual discipline in the digital realm, where users modify their behavior based on the perceived possibility of being observed by peers.

When members present their collective identity through social media content, there exists a form of interaction within the community that indirectly reminds them to maintain alignment between their self-image and the community's values [14]. This dynamic compels members of religious communities to use alternative accounts or features such as "close friends" as personal strategies to manage the boundary between public and private identity. Research by Agustin and Angeliqa [15] shows that adolescents often use more than one account when performing their identity on social media. The primary account, known as a *Rinsta* (real Instagram), serves as the front stage for projecting an ideal self-image aligned with social norms, such as professionalism, achievement, or productivity. In contrast, the alternative account, referred to as a *Finsta* (fake Instagram), is typically associated with a freer space for self-expression. On *Rinsta*, the prevailing *doxa* is the demand to be competent, accomplished, and in line with mainstream social expectations.

These dual-account practices, however, should not be read simply as acts of escape or resistance. Foucault [8] argues that power and freedom are not opposites; rather, freedom is the very condition that makes power relations possible. Where there is no possibility of resistance, there is no power relation. To capture this permanent, productive tension, Foucault introduces the concept of agonism: a relationship of "reciprocal incitation and struggle," a permanent provocation in which power and freedom mutually constitute each other rather than cancel each other out [8]. In the context of religious communities on social media, agonism offers a more precise analytical lens than simple resistance: members are neither fully controlled nor fully free, but continuously negotiating their conduct within the field of force that community discourse establishes.

Nevertheless, few studies have explored how knowledge authorities exercise discipline through discourse within religious communities in digital spaces, particularly in Indonesian society, which continues to be deeply rooted in religious values [16]. This study, therefore, aims to examine how social interactions within religious communities in digital spaces function as instruments of the panopticon that influence members' social media practices, as well as how individuals attempt to navigate or resist these disciplinary mechanisms. Unlike prior studies that examine digital religion in Western contexts or surveillance primarily in political-economic frameworks, this study offers a novel contribution by combining Foucauldian panopticism with empirical evidence from a Southeast Asian Muslim youth community, revealing how religious discourse operates as the primary disciplinary force in digital self-presentation.

The subject of this study is the MM community (pseudonym), a youth-based Muslim religious group located in South Tangerang. This community utilizes Instagram not only to disseminate Islamic messages but also to maintain the group's reputation through the production of Islamic discourse among its members. In addition to using the official community account as a medium for promoting values, MM members actively engage their personal accounts to repost community content, embed religious symbols that are regulated by discourse authorities within the group, and construct

religious narratives that align with the community's collective reputation on Instagram.

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the paradigm of critical constructivism. Critical constructivism is an epistemological stance that investigates how knowledge is socially constructed. It emphasizes that all knowledge is a social construct shaped by cultural, political, and power contexts [17]. Feenberg [17] explains that this philosophical and methodological approach integrates insights from constructivism with critical theory. Consequently, this study views social reality not as a fixed and objective entity, but as a dynamic construction formed through social interaction and individuals' subjective interpretations [18].

At the same time, the study critically considers that all constructions of reality surrounding individuals' experiences with social media are not merely practical engagements with technological components; rather, they reflect a worldview shaped by existing power relations in society [19]. Guided by this paradigm, the research seeks to deeply understand how members of the MM community construct and interpret discourse power in their practices of self-presentation and collective identity formation within the digital space of Instagram.

This study employs a digital ethnography strategy for data collection. Digital ethnography is a crucial approach for exploring the interplay between digital media and individuals' everyday experiences across various levels, ranging from practices, objects, relationships, and social worlds to notions of locality [20]. This strategy specifically enables the researcher to observe and analyze social interactions, symbols, narratives, and communication practices that emerge within online communities, while also connecting them to the dynamics of offline interactions.

The subjects of this study consist of six homogeneous informants (two men and four women, aged around 21-28 years) who are active members of the MM community. It is acknowledged that a sample of six informants represents a limitation of this study, as is common in in-depth qualitative research. While this sample size allows for rich, nuanced exploration of individual experiences and meanings, findings should not be generalized beyond the specific context of this community. The limited sample may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different religious communities, cultural backgrounds, or social media usage patterns. Nevertheless, the primary aim of this study is analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness, consistent with the epistemological stance of critical constructivism and digital ethnography.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that allows the researcher to strategically choose individuals with relevant characteristics and experiences aligned with the research questions. The selection criteria for the informants were as follows: (1) active membership and involvement in MM's activities or programs; (2) ownership and active use of an Instagram account; and (3) prior experience posting content related to MM on their personal accounts, whether through stories, feeds, or highlights.

In this study, digital ethnography was operationalized through sustained and systematic immersion in the MM community's digital spaces over a four-month period, from March to June 2025. Data collection was conducted in two main stages. In the first stage, the researchers conducted observation of the community's official Instagram account and the personal Instagram accounts of all six informants. Throughout the observation period, the researchers monitored the full stream of content across all seven accounts; from this broader corpus, a purposive selection of approximately 50 items (posts, stories, and highlights) was made for systematic analysis. Those content items were specifically relevant to self-presentation practices, community identity performance, and the deployment of Islamic religious discourse.

Content was selected based on three criteria: (1) posts that explicitly displayed community membership or religious identity markers; (2) content that generated visible community interaction such as comments or reposts among members; and (3) content referenced or discussed by informants during interviews, enabling triangulation between observed digital behavior and stated practices. Observation was structured around four analytical dimensions: (1) types and themes of content posted; (2) patterns of interaction, including likes, comments, and reposts; (3) deployment of religious symbols, visual aesthetics, and Islamic discourse markers; and (4) use of platform-specific affordances such as the "close friends" feature, highlights, and story archives.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six informants. This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for in-depth exploration of the informants' perspectives and experiences [21]. All interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data collected through digital observation and interviews were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's [22] six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Religious Knowledge as a Source of Discourse and Power

The MM community is a religious organization based in South Tangerang that focuses on Islamic

education and social activities. Established in 2024, the community organizes a range of religious study programs and seminars, including topics such as Shafi'i jurisprudence, prophetic stories, and MM sessions specifically designed for youth. These study sessions are guided by accompanying male and female religious teachers and are based on classical Islamic texts.

MM actively utilizes Instagram as a social media platform for *da'wah* (religious outreach) and education that is responsive to contemporary developments. Their digital presence serves not only to publicize activities, but also to build networks, expand the reach of their *da'wah*, and strengthen member engagement in virtual spaces, especially among young people.

In terms of knowledge structure, the MM community relies heavily on two senior advisors who consistently lead study sessions and serve as the primary sources of religious knowledge within the group. These two advisors are seasoned Islamic preachers with recognized scholarly authority. One of them holds a master's degree in Islamic jurisprudence from a university in Jordan. All directives and scholarly discourse within the community are discussed in consultation with these two figures.

Both advisors are grounded in the Shafi'i school of thought and adhere to Sunni Islam, which significantly shapes the community's educational orientation. Their theological background influences the selection of Islamic study themes, deemed appropriate and authoritative for dissemination by the MM community.

When formulating study themes, only the core leadership team holds the authority to determine the content for upcoming sessions. These decisions are then communicated by the community leader to the advisors for coordination. If the advisors approve, they will deliver the content developed by the organizational leader and their team to the community members during the next study session.

In this structure, the leader of the MM community holds a highly influential role. They act as both the head of the membership and the intermediary linking the advisors' scholarly authority with the broader community. Consequently, this leadership position must be filled by an individual with both substantial knowledge of Islamic teachings and an authoritative background, enabling them to determine which values are appropriate for inclusion in future study materials.

Foucault [8] argues that knowledge is never neutral. Within Foucault's framework, knowledge is understood as inherently tied to power relations and specific regimes of truth. Accordingly, this study identifies a dual structure of power centered around two key roles: the MM community advisors and the community leader. The centralization of knowledge in the hands of the advisors, channeled through the leader, demonstrates how power within a religious community can function both directly and indirectly to discipline its members.

McDonald [12] states that within surveillance societies, leaders or community heads often assume the role of monitoring members' behaviors to enforce social control and moral conformity through observation and the cultivation of fear. In religious communities such as MM, leaders implement a system of rewards and punishments as a form of manipulative discipline. Those who comply are often granted rewards or privileges, while those who deviate are publicly shamed [12].

In his analysis, Foucault argues that knowledge and power are central to the construction of reputation and subjectivity. Therefore, in examining the dynamics of power within the MM religious community, it is crucial to identify the holders of authority who dictate disciplinary practices through their control of knowledge. This dynamic is evident within the MM community. The leader of MM possesses a more extensive background in religious education compared to other members. In terms of appearance, the community leader also embodies religious symbols that align with dominant religious narratives, such as wearing a long beard, memorizing the Qur'an, reciting it with a melodious voice, and frequently donning traditional Islamic attire (*gamis*). Through this knowledge and symbolic capital, the MM community leader holds greater power to define what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable based on religious norms. Meanwhile, members lacking sufficient religious knowledge ultimately submit to the disciplinary mechanisms enforced by the leader.

Foucault views religious discourse as an inevitable manifestation of the relationship between power and knowledge within a broader cultural network [23]. He argues that religion is a domain of power relations [10], functioning as part of institutional structures that manipulate and regulate the body through disciplinary practices and the production of truth [24]. Accordingly, the Islamic study sessions conducted by the MM community can be seen as instruments for sustaining dominant discursive power within society. The sources of knowledge, namely *ustaz* and *ustazah*, act as extensions of the disciplinary practices imposed by "the government" or ruling groups.

This dynamic can be more precisely understood through Foucault's concept of pastoral power [8]. The two senior advisors within the MM community function as pastors in a Foucauldian sense: they claim authority not through coercive force, but through religious knowledge and their responsibility for the spiritual well-being of each member. Pastoral power is characterized by its life-long individualizing of subjects and its capacity to hold knowledge about the conscience of people. In the MM community, this manifests clearly: advisors do not merely deliver religious content in study sessions; they actively shape what counts as truth, which school of thought is legitimate, and by extension, what

kind of Muslim identity is acceptable for members to perform on social media.

The discourse formed within the MM community is also limited, for instance, when discussing Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), only the Shafi'i school of thought is used as a reference. However, there are no formal rules stating that the community exclusively accepts young people who follow the Shafi'i school in their religious practice. Community members acknowledge that this choice of *madhhab* was directed by the community advisors, who consider the Shafi'i school to be the dominant religious framework within Indonesian society.

"Yes, it's because the Shafi'i school is widely followed in Indonesia. So, to avoid creating further friction among the ummah, we decided to just focus on promoting and grounding Shafi'i jurisprudence." (Informant 1, male, 28 years old)

Having established the knowledge-power structure within the MM community, the following section examines how this discursive authority extends into members' digital identity practices on Instagram.

4.2. Discourse of Collective Identity and Disciplinary Practices in the Digital Space

The formation of collective identity among MM members is deeply rooted in offline interactions and experiences. Upon joining, members take on various important roles within the community structure, such as serving as young preachers, functionaries, or event committee members. These activities serve as spaces for the internalization of the community's interpretation of Islamic values. Events organized by MM that actively involve members in planning and execution demonstrate the community's role in reinforcing collective values through shared experiences.

This process of value internalization occurs on both cognitive and conative levels. Cognitively, members report an increased understanding of Islamic principles and social responsibility, reflected in a sense of familial bonds and openness among members, while still adhering to Islamic ethics. Conatively, this internalization leads to shifts in attitudes and behaviors that are more closely aligned with Islamic values.

"So it's like we've become more mindful of ourselves, more careful with how we speak. For example, if someone used to speak bluntly, now they're more aware. Especially for women, there's a sense of guarding the way they speak, like how one would guard their aurat." (Informant 5, female, 21 years old)

The emotional attachment formed through MM members' offline activities extends into the digital sphere via interactions on Instagram. Through their personal accounts, members incorporate MM's values and teachings into their content. They actively support the dissemination of community teachings by liking, sharing, and commenting on posts uploaded by the official community account. MM members are also motivated to display their collective identity on social media. This is evident in the way they post MM-related symbols on their Instagram accounts, for instance, by sharing photos of themselves wearing MM attributes or participating as committee members in MM events.

Additionally, the findings show that the presence of the community's Instagram account, which effectively shapes the community's image, has influenced members' motivation to accept practices of subjectivation as devout Muslims as defined by MM's framework. This leads them to carefully curate the content they engage with, favoring content that aligns with MM's Islamic teachings and avoiding those that contradict them. One such example is their decision not to share content associated with fundamentalist, liberal, or other divergent Islamic groups.

These findings reveal that the application of religious discourse within the MM community occurs not only offline through Islamic study sessions but also through mechanisms of surveillance and discipline in the digital sphere. When presenting themselves on their main Instagram accounts, members often feel compelled to align with the religious values promoted by the MM community. This is largely due to the interconnected nature of members' social media accounts, which fosters a sense of mutual observation among them.

Many members admitted to feeling hesitant and anxious when posting content on social media. This condition drives them to be more cautious and to carefully consider each piece of content they share. When intending to upload content related to their daily lives, separate from community activities, members often weigh multiple factors. This reflects how their role as members of a religious community adds an extra layer of responsibility to uphold the community's positive image on social media.

"I think more carefully now before posting. It's because people have started to notice that I'm part of a religious study group." (Informant 5, female, 21 years old)

Direct disciplinary practices are also carried out by the MM community leader through interactions in digital spaces. This aligns with Foucault's concept of discipline. While Foucault's early works primarily focused on knowledge and discourse as central to power, his later writings also emphasize the importance of analyzing religious power practices and mechanisms as part of *governmentality* and discipline [10]. These disciplinary practices are experienced by members, positioning them as subjects of power. The community leader does not hesitate to reprimand members who post content deemed inconsistent with the dominant Islamic discourse within the community.

"I posted something about Velocity, and the leader said, 'Velocity again?' He mentioned that there's going to be a study session soon about, like, Freemason

symbols or something." (Informant 3, female, 21 years old)

In his study, Lewis [13] reveals that social media operates as a space that assumes the presence of an observer. Every user activity, whether posting a status, photo, or comment, occurs within a public or semi-public space visible to others. This condition turns social media into an environment where users constantly feel they are under the gaze of others. This phenomenon strongly aligns with Foucault's [6] concept of the panopticon. The sense of being watched leads MM community members to impose limitations or self-censorship on their social media behavior. They also begin to conform their actions to the norms of specific online communities, a process referred to as normalization.

"We're definitely seen as people who understand religion, which in turn limits us. Like if we want to post something unusual or controversial, we'd immediately get questioned, like, 'Why would he post that? Isn't he an MM preacher?' Yeah, something like that." (Informant 2, male, 25 years old)

This testimony illustrates how the panoptic gaze is not imposed by a singular authority but internalized by members themselves. The informant's awareness of being perceived as a religious figure reflects precisely what Foucault describes as subjectivation. Subjectivation is the process by which individuals come to govern their own conduct in accordance with the norms they perceive to be expected of them. Rather than external coercion, it is this internalized scrutiny that produces self-censorship in their social media behavior.

Even so, the nature of surveillance on social media is unique and differs from the traditional panopticon. In fact, previous scholars have argued that today's practices of digital surveillance go beyond the panopticon due to their decentralized nature [25]. On social media, surveillance occurs in a participatory manner [13], where users are both subjects and agents of surveillance simultaneously. For example, by viewing other members' profiles or commenting on their posts. This behavior renders surveillance a normalized social activity, carried out consciously or unconsciously, yet still functioning productively to generate discipline. These findings illustrate how the panoptic mechanism leads individuals to internalize surveillance and accept their subjection, as they become aware that they may be observed at any time [6].

The MM community has successfully established disciplinary control through panoptic practices. This discursive power is constructed by the community through its interpretation of dominant Islamic values, such as appropriate clothing for pious men and women, norms for male-female interaction, and boundaries regarding *aurat* between them. The study sessions and topic selections within the MM community further demonstrate how power operates automatically and without physical force. This disciplinary power effectively governs individuals through their bodies and behaviors, turning MM members into obedient bodily subjects, what Foucault refers to as *docile bodies* [8]. This concept is proven by the recognition of community members.

"I have become more mindful of covering my awrah properly. For instance, I ensure my hair and neck are not visible, and that my chest and back are well-covered. I have also reduced my use of denim jeans." (Informant 6, female, 22 years old)

Another key finding reveals that members of the MM community do not feel they are being controlled. Instead, they voluntarily internalize the community's symbols, which are shaped by its authoritative knowledge. Members perceive that MM does not impose physical restrictions on them, and as a result, the motivation to integrate the community's discourse of piety into their personal identity arises from within, willingly and autonomously.

"When I share a post about MM, I feel like it's a form of da'wah that I'm engaging in." (Informant 2, male, 25 years old)

Based on Foucault's conceptual framework, these findings illustrate how power operates through discourse (issuing commands without appearing to do so). Although individuals consciously and voluntarily share community content containing Islamic discourse constructed by the community's authoritative knowledge, they are often unaware that their actions are shaped by that very discourse. Within the community, the discourse frames content sharing as a form of *da'wah*, intended to educate "outsiders" about the community's Islamic values and to reach other youth who might be encouraged to join. When members fail to consistently engage in this practice, a sense of guilt tends to emerge within them.

According to Foucault, this phenomenon is known as *technologies of the self,* mechanisms of self-formation and self-regulation that occur through the individual's own efforts when they become aware of surveillance in the digital realm [26]. This highlights how the most powerful form of surveillance does not necessarily come from political-economic institutions or the state, but rather from close peers and fellow users [13]. Peer surveillance is based on collective judgments about what is considered "acceptable" or "appropriate" according to community norms. This dynamic creates pressure to appear "good," "normal," or "competent".

"If they upload something inappropriate for a Muslim woman or a Muslim man on social media, that's what we remind them about." (Informant 4, female, 22 years old)

In a religious context, members of the MM community monitor one another's moral behavior. These findings align with previous research [27], which shows that organizations often function as panoptic

apparatuses that reproduce subjugation and reinforce dominant discourses, outcomes of the power-knowledge practices embedded within such organizations or communities.

While the preceding analysis demonstrates how panoptic surveillance disciplines members' digital behavior and reinforces collective identity norms, it is equally important to recognize that members do not passively surrender to these pressures. The following section examines the strategies through which MM members negotiate spaces of personal freedom within the community's dominant discourse.

4.3. The Use of Alternative Accounts as a Practice of Agonism

The findings reveal that self-censorship and self-imposed limitations, particularly in managing self-presentation on social media, lead MM community members to adopt specific strategies when expressing their identities. One such strategy involves creating alternative social media accounts as a secondary space for expression. This practice emerges from the reality that they cannot freely present their authentic selves outside the boundaries set by the religious community.

On their alternative Instagram accounts, members present a more private side of themselves, one they do not wish to be directly associated with the collective identity of their religious community. Some members even reported having more than two Instagram accounts, while others manage their audience through the "close friends" feature on their only account. This practice reflects their desire to express a broader sense of identity without disrupting the consistency of their religious persona, which is closely tied to the MM community and maintained on their main Instagram account.

"The first account is for people I'm not that close with, just mutuals. The second account is more for friends, and I post random stuff there. Then the third one is just for close female friends." (Informant 6, female, 22 years old)

The *close friends* feature used by MM members allows them to restrict certain content so it is only accessible to selected accounts. This practice is typically employed when members wish to post content that does not align with the Islamic discourse upheld within the community, such as dark humor or depictions of a hedonistic lifestyle. These posts are deliberately hidden from community advisors, who are believed to actively monitor the social media activity of MM members.

Content curation strategies are also carefully applied before reposting community content. Members selectively choose content based on personal preferences and the image they wish to project. This reflects self-control and caution to ensure their online reputation remains consistent with the community's discourse and values. Members often edit and apply filters to the content they repost, ensuring alignment with the image the community seeks to cultivate, rooted in the dominant discourse on piety within Islamic teachings. While personal freedom exists, this ultimately reinforces the persistent grip of MM's discursive power over how its members construct their identities in digital spaces.

The findings of this study reveal that the self-presentation of religious community members on social media is not a monolithic or rigid practice. Rather, it is the complex result of identity negotiation between the discourse of the community's collective values and individuals' personal expressions. This process unfolds dynamically in the digital space, which functions like a double-edged sword: on one side, it offers flexibility for members, while on the other, it imposes social pressure rooted in dominant discourses, values, and internalized community norms.

"I upload photos or videos on Instagram, which are in accordance with the teachings of MM." (Informant 6, female, 22 years old)

This intersection between discursive power and expressive freedom aligns with Foucault's [8] concept of *agonism*. The concept suggests that freedom does not disappear under the exercise of power but remains in a continuous and more complex struggle. It illustrates that at the core of every power relationship, there is always a rebellious freedom and this relationship perpetually incites struggle. Members of the MM community, who in principle have the freedom to use social media, exemplify this concept. The *agonism* experienced by MM members is evident in their ongoing internal dilemmas whenever they consider posting content on social media. One informant explained his upload practices on social media.

"I usually vent on my 'Close Friend'. Because they already know my true character. No matter how 'messy' I am. So, it's not a problem for me to vent about anything there." (Informant 2, male, 25 years old)

Based on these findings, the concept of *depersonalized harmony* introduced by Ni et al. [28] is both reinforced and expanded, particularly in the context of youth-based religious communities in Indonesia. *Depersonalized harmony* refers to a social mechanism within online groups in which members intentionally suppress personal identity expressions to maintain collective harmony, especially within large-scale, heterogeneous interaction spaces.

In the MM community, members actively set aside or adapt their personal identities in public digital spaces to project a collective image aligned with the community's values and missionary goals. This practice serves to strengthen the public perception of the community as moderate and inclusive in the eyes of digital audiences.

As a new social arena, social media has evolved beyond a mere tool for communication. It has become a platform for performative self-presentation. Individuals

actively construct, display, and sustain identities and values that reflect their group affiliations [29, 30, 31]. Within the context of this study, social media has been shown to provide a digital space where individuals assert their existence and shape their social identities through various forms of online interaction [32]. Social media also supports individuals in maintaining their online persona and identity consistency, including group identity, through its accessibility and the wide availability of diverse content [33]. Thus, this demonstrates that the power of discourse through practices of subjectivation among religious community members is not only articulated directly in physical gatherings, but also significantly enacted in the digital realm through online interactions among members on social media.

This process demonstrates that digital identity is not merely a reflection of the dominant discourse within a community, but rather the result of compromise, selection, and strategic management by individuals. They do not function solely as passive subjects subjected to community discipline, but also as active agents who manage narratives, curate visual representations, and control their audience based on their expressive intentions. Thus, the findings of this study reinforce previous research which argues that collective identity on social media is fluid and contextual [34, 35], and highlight the significance of digital spaces as arenas for negotiating dominant discourse and the symbolic power of piety within contemporary religious communities.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that social relationships within the MM community's digital space function as a panoptic instrument shaping members' self-presentation and collective identity. The key theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that digital panopticism in religious communities is not merely a replication of classical surveillance models, but a discursively constructed process in which religious knowledge itself becomes the instrument of normalization and self-regulation. The discursive power rooted in religious knowledge held by the community's advisors and leader operates through subtle disciplinary mechanisms, both offline and online, leading members to internalize norms of piety and adjust their social media behavior accordingly. Members expressed feelings of discomfort or concern when presenting personal aspects that might conflict with community values. This indicates that collective identity can become a source of symbolic pressure, restricting individual expression. However, the findings also show that members actively seek out spaces of freedom through the use of alternative accounts, audience curation, and identity negotiation practices on social media.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study also carries practical implications for several stakeholders. Community leaders and religious advisors are encouraged to be mindful of the disciplinary effects their discursive authority may have on members' digital agency, and to foster an environment that balances collective values with space for individual expression. Additionally, these findings underscore the importance of digital literacy programs for young members of religious communities that equip individuals with the critical capacity to recognize the power dynamics embedded in their online interactions.

In sum, this study demonstrates that digital social media spaces, specifically Instagram, function as Foucauldian panoptic structures within which religious discourse operates as the primary mechanism of disciplinary power. The subjectivation experienced by MM community members reveals the coexistence of constraint and agency: members are simultaneously shaped by communal norms of piety and capable of negotiating their identities through alternative digital strategies. This dual dynamic affirms that power and freedom are not mutually exclusive but exist in continuous, productive tension. Future research is encouraged to include different religious communities, compare religious discourse practices across various social media platforms, or examine power dynamics within communities that have more diverse authority structures.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.F.S.I and D.K.; methodology, M.F.S.I. and I.A.P.; software, I.A.P and M.R.R.; validation, N.H. and P.A.D.W.; formal analysis, M.R.R. and N.H.; investigation, D.K.; resources, P.A.D.W.; data curation, D.K. and P.A.D.W.; writing original draft preparation, M.F.S.I.; writing review and editing, M.F.S.I.; supervision, M.R.R. and I.A.P.; project administration, N.H., D.K. and P.A.D.W.; funding acquisition, M.F.S.I and M.R.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations, as interview data contain private and personal information about informants.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative social research. As this research does not involve clinical interventions or medical procedures, formal institutional review board (IRB) approval was not required under the applicable institutional guidelines. However, all ethical principles were rigorously observed throughout the research process. To protect participants' privacy, all personal identities and community names have been anonymized throughout the manuscript. Digital observation of social media accounts was limited to publicly accessible content or content shared with explicit permission from account holders. All data are stored securely and will not be shared publicly in identifiable form.

Informed Consent Statement

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all six informants, who were clearly briefed on the study's objectives, data usage, and their right to withdraw at any time.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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