



## Virtual Sufism Identity in Majelis Kalbun Salim (MKS)

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### Article History:

Received: 26 Oct 2024

Accepted: 10 Dec 2024

Published: 12 Dec 2024

### How to cite this article:

Khotimah, Khusnul,  
Amirotun Sholikhah, and  
Zidan Abid Maulana  
“Virtual Sufim Identity in  
Majelis Kalbun Salim  
MKŞ” *Teosofia:*

*Indonesian Journal of  
Islamic Mysticism* 13, no 2  
(2024): 269-302.

[https://doi.org/10.21580/](https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v13i2.23598)

[tos.v13i2.23598](https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v13i2.23598)

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Journal of Islamic  
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**Abstract:** Sufism communities in the digital world have emerged as a form of religious accentuation in the digital era and a space for reflection on religious and social issues. This study aims to disclose the identity of virtual Sufism in Majelis Kalbun Salim (MKS). The research was conducted using qualitative methods with a symbolic interactionism approach. Symbolic interactionism requires the production of meanings created from certain symbols within a community/social group. Data collection techniques included documentation studies and in-depth interviews. Documentation was used to capture and observe the interactions of MKS members in both the virtual and real worlds. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted with Muhammad Yaser Arafat, one of the founders of MKS, Kiai Akrom Solihin, Kiai Abdul Ghodir, and Kang Din Rosyidin as active members. The results of this study explain that the identity of MKS's virtual Sufism is created through two elements: first, the influence of the online study of Ihya' Ulumuddin led by Ulil Abshar Abdalla (Gus Ulil), and second, the production of Sufi humour. MKS members use both as a control medium to continually self-regulate, erode ego and self-importance, discard ideal human attributes, and transcend merely ritualistic practices.

**Contribution:** This study provides another perspective in understanding the form of Sufism in the digital/virtual world. The virtual world is perceived and positioned by Majelis Kalbun Salim members as a medium for deconstructing personal ego in religion so that it transcends ritual aspects alone.

**Keywords:** Sufism; identity; Majelis Kalbun Salim

## Introduction

Sufism in the digital/technological era creates new dynamics in its discourse and practice.<sup>1</sup> As Fa spiritual tradition within Islam, Sufism adapts itself to technological advancements,<sup>2</sup> making it dynamic and reflective of the adaptation of spiritual teachings to changing times. The following are some aspects of the relationship between Sufism and the digital era.<sup>3</sup> First, access to information; second, distance learning. Technology supports the teaching and study of Sufism online; third, Sufi applications: Some Sufi applications are designed to guide spiritual practices; fourth, the formation of virtual communities. This fourth point will be the focus of this research study.

These four points also demonstrate the penetration of digital media in influencing human life, becoming a strategic issue, especially in terms of spirituality. Spirituality in the digital era has become an intriguing and complex topic.<sup>4</sup> On one hand, digital technology has changed how we live our spiritual lives. For instance, online meditation and mental wellness apps make it easier for people to engage in spiritual practices amidst modern busyness despite frequent concerns that digital technology creates spiritual dryness.

Sufism in the digital era has become a discourse for contemporary academic research. Annisa Wahid and Lailatul Maskuroh, through their research "Sufism in the Digital Era (Maintaining Spiritual Awareness Amidst the Flow of Technology)," conclude that through the approach of Sufism,

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<sup>1</sup> Muzammil Saced, Maria Naem, and Usbah Yousaf, "Sufism in the Digital Age: A Study of Fareed's Poetry," *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2021): 183–91, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10340354>.

<sup>2</sup> Milad Milani and Adam Possamai, "The Nimatullahiya and Naqshbandiya Sufi Orders on the Internet: The Cyber-Construction of Tradition and the McDonaldisation of Spirituality," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2013): 51–75, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.v26i1.51>.

<sup>3</sup> Nur Azizah and Miftakhul Jannah, "Spiritualitas Masyarakat Modern Dalam Tasawuf Buya Hamka," *Academic Journal of Islamic Principles and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2022): 85–108; Elvira Purnamasari, "Psikoterapi Dan Tasawuf Dalam Mengatasi Krisis Manusia Modern," *El-Afkar* 8, no. 2 (2019): 89–102, <https://doi.org/10.29300/jpkth.v8i2.6513>; Fitrawati, "Tasawuf Sebagai Solusi Dari Kosongnya Spiritualitas Pada Masyarakat Modern Akibat Perkembangan Teknologi," *Majalah Ilmu Pengetahuan Dan Pemikiran Keagamaan TAJDID* 24, no. 2 (2021): 160–75, <https://doi.org/10.15548/tajdid.v24i2.2934>.

<sup>4</sup> Premilla D'Cruz et al., "Technology, Megatrends and Work: Thoughts on the Future of Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 180, no. 3 (October 3, 2022): 879–902, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05240-9>.

individuals can wisely face the challenges posed by digital technology and utilize it as a means to deepen their relationship with God.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, in other research, Rozehnal<sup>6</sup> explains that this digital Sufism movement has also penetrated the Western world. From early French and British colonial administrations who admired Persian poetry to American transcendentalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant Sufi guides and their movements, broad and multi-faceted expressions of Sufism, such as its role in Western esotericism, to circling dervishes and Rumi cafes, and new articulations in the world digital.

Alongside Rozehnal, Doyle also makes a unique argument that Sufi theory and practice can provide creative solutions and different perspectives to the problems of digital society. The practice of *tawajjuh* allows us to consider the art of spiritually orienting attention, which corresponds to what Foucault calls the technology of the self. Sufi practices are active in knowledge production and have a theory of knowledge, *ma'rifa*. They are not only objects of knowledge for social sciences such as anthropology but are also active in producing knowledge. This means the dialogue between Sufism and the social sciences of the humanities enables.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship with God is the essence of every Sufi practice. This thesis is confirmed by the research of Jamal Ma'mur Asmani and Miftahul Munir titled "The Social Sufism Thought of KH. Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha')."<sup>8</sup> Besides being a pesantren cleric, Gus Baha' is always associated with "digital recitation," as many online platforms (YouTube) broadcast his teachings.

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<sup>5</sup> Annisa Wahid and Lailatul Maskhuroh, "Tasawuf Dalam Era Digital (Menjaga Kesadaran Spiritual Di Tengah Arus Teknologi)," *ILJ: Islamic Learning Journal* 2, no. 1 (November 16, 2023): 55–73, <https://doi.org/10.54437/iljjislamiclearningjournal.v2i1.1209>; Syamsul Bakri, "Dakwah, Sufisme Jawa Dan Potret Keberagamaan Di Era Milenial Berbasis Kearifan Lokal," *ESOTERIK* 5, no. 2 (December 27, 2019): 267–81, <https://doi.org/10.21043/esoterik.v5i2.5936>.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Rozehnal, "Cyber Sufism in the Global West," in *Sufism in Western Contexts* (BRILL, 2023), 139–61, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004392625\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004392625_007).

<sup>7</sup> Doyle Waddick, "Sufism, Attention and Digital Colonization," *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 2023, no. 3 (May 2023): 11–25, <https://doi.org/10.32739/ustad.2023.3.37>.

<sup>8</sup> Miftakhul Munif and Jamal Ma'mur Asmani, "Pemikiran Tasawuf Sosial KH. Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha')," *Islamic Review: Jurnal Riset Dan Kajian Keislaman* 11, no. 1 (April 29, 2022): 95–108, <https://doi.org/10.35878/islamiereview.v11i1.370>.

Asmani and Munif<sup>9</sup> identify Gus Baha's thoughts on social Sufism in the digital era as follows: all Muslims will enter paradise, the recommendation to follow the scholars, surrender as the highest logic, the importance of knowledge, removing suspicion in worship, respecting others' struggles, and not speaking against other religions.

Gus Baha's Sufi thoughts affirm the importance of a moderate attitude, or what Kiai Said Aqil Siraj refers to as *tawassuth*. Kiai Said emphasizes harmony among all human beings.<sup>10</sup> This principle was previously confirmed in Elmansyah's research on "Sufistic Preaching in the Digital Era."<sup>11</sup> His findings regarding the possibility of harmonious preaching, enriching spirituality, and countering radicalism in the digital era are commendable. Muvid and Aliyah,<sup>12</sup> along with Elmansyah,<sup>13</sup> as well as Asmani and Munir,<sup>14</sup> agree that the concept of Sufism and moderation will become a paradigm in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0.

The principles of Sufism in today's digital era also reflect the religious identity patterns of users, both at the individual and group levels.<sup>15</sup> Much has been discussed about religious identity as an academic study, such as the proliferation of the "hijrah" tradition among urbanites. Hijrah represents a

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<sup>9</sup> Munif and Asmani.

<sup>10</sup> Hasan Baharun and Farah Nuril Badriyah, "Pendidikan Multikultural Dalam Bingkai Islam Nusantara Perspektif KH. Said Aqil Siroj," *Tafaqquh: Jurnal Penelitian Dan Kajian Keislaman* 8, no. 1 (May 14, 2020): 37–51, <https://doi.org/10.52431/tafaqquh.v8i1.240>; Eka Prasetawati and Habib Shulton Asnawi, "Wawasan Islam Nusantara; Pribumisasi Nilai-Nilai Kearifan Lokal Di Indonesia," *FIKRI: Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 3, no. 1 (July 31, 2018): 219–58, <https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v3i1.283>.

<sup>11</sup> Elmansyah Elmansyah, "Dakwah Sufistik Di Era Digital," *Al-Hikmah* 10, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 56–74, <https://doi.org/10.24260/al-hikmah.v10i1.547>.

<sup>12</sup> Muhamad Basyrul Muvid and Nelud Darajaatul Aliyah, "The Tasawuf Wasathiyah Concept in Central Flow of Industrial Revolution 4.0," *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 31, no. 1 (January 13, 2020): 169–86, <https://doi.org/10.33367/tribakti.v31i1.1008>.

<sup>13</sup> Elmansyah, "Dakwah Sufistik Di Era Digital."

<sup>14</sup> Munif and Asmani, "Pemikiran Tasawuf Sosial KH. Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha')."

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Heitmeyer, "Religion as Practice, Religion as Identity: Sufi Dargah s in Contemporary Gujarat," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (December 2011): 485–503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2011.620557>; Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh, "Sufism in Western Historiography: A Brief Overview," *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 1 (2016): 194–217, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2016.0022>.

spiritual evolution<sup>16</sup> because negative attitudes and behaviors are transformed into commendable ones. Even in research conducted by Ekky,<sup>17</sup> religious identity fandoms, both moderate and conservative, have emerged within the K-Pop community. This phenomenon indicates that religious identity becomes a characteristic representation of certain groups. Their research findings strengthen what Peter L. Berger stated, that religious experiences depend on the meaning attributed by each individual or group through objectification, internalization, and externalization.<sup>18</sup>

While Lu'luul & Pratama,<sup>19</sup> and Ekky<sup>20</sup> highlight communities as their research subjects, Rofidah & Muhid<sup>21</sup> present a thesis that religious identity emerges in a hybrid form in the digital world. The rise of religious communities drives this concept of hybrid religious identity. The main actors are Generation Z, who are eager for spiritual guidance. Consequently, many turn to digital media as an arena/stage for contesting religious identities, as noted by Saprillah et al.<sup>22</sup>

Another interesting phenomenon emerging from the development of the digital world is the proliferation of online Quranic study communities initiated

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<sup>16</sup> Anata Lu'luul Jannah and Bayu Indra Pratama, "Perempuan Hijrah : Tinjauan Identitas Keagamaan Anggota Komunitas Move Malang," *Al Huwiyah: Journal of Woman and Children Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.24042/jwces.v1i2.10677>.

<sup>17</sup> Ekky Abi Wibowo, "Konstruksi Identitas Keagamaan Perempuan Berhijab Penggemar K-Pop: Studi Tentang Corak Islam Di Indonesia," *Risenologi* 9, no. 1 (2024): 37–48, <https://doi.org/10.47028/risenologi.v9i1.660>.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Muslim and Wilis Werdiningsih, "Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama Dan Simbol Keagamaan (Pembentukan Identitas Islam Moderat Anak Melalui Songkok NU Perspektif Teori Konstruksi Sosial Peter Berger)," *Southeast Asian Journal of Islamic Education Management* 4, no. 1 (2023): 29–42, <https://doi.org/10.21154/sajiem.v4i1.135>; Peter L. dan Thomas Luckmann Berger, *Langit Suci* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1991); Isa Anshori, "Melacak State Of The Art Fenomenologi Dalam Kajian Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial," *Halaqa: Islamic Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (December 5, 2018): 165–81, <https://doi.org/10.21070/halaqa.v2i2.1814>.

<sup>19</sup> Lu'luul Jannah and Pratama, "Perempuan Hijrah : Tinjauan Identitas Keagamaan Anggota Komunitas Move Malang."

<sup>20</sup> Ekky Abi Wibowo, "Konstruksi Identitas Keagamaan Perempuan Berhijab Penggemar K-Pop: Studi Tentang Corak Islam Di Indonesia."

<sup>21</sup> Lailatur Rofidah and Abdul Muhid, "Media Dan Hibrid Identitas Keagamaan Di Era Digital," *Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 7, no. 1 (2022): 81, <https://doi.org/10.29240/jdk.v7i1.4805>.

<sup>22</sup> Saprillah Saprillah et al., "Kontestasi Keagamaan Dalam Masyarakat Muslim Urban," *Al-Qalam* 26, no. 1 (June 29, 2020): 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v26i1.844>.

by specific figures, such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla (Gus Ulil). Gus Ulil, through live Facebook sessions, studies the *Ihya' Ulumuddin* by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a great Islamic scholar who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He explains that:

"The initiation of the *ngaji* online of *Ihya'* was driven by his longing to study in the pesantren and a sense of 'greget' (enthusiasm or passion) because social media often presents negative information. Additionally, social media can be utilized to present positive discourse. According to Ulil, *ngaji* online also implies changes in social dynamics and shifts in people's thinking methodologies in the digital era. The advent of digital media opens the gateway to an 'all-online' civilization in the realm of religion."<sup>23</sup>

One of the virtual communities linked to the *ngaji* online of *Ihya'* is MKS. According to Muhammad Yaser Arafat (Yaser), one of the founders, the community initially began as a WhatsApp group titled "Kalbun Salim." "Kalbun Salim" was Yaser's idea.<sup>24</sup> Other central figures include Rijal Mummaziq, Bachrudin Ahmad, Muhammad Akrom Solihin, and Abdul Ghofir.

Over time, Kalbun Salim WhatsApp group members developed a shared vision encompassing religious, social, and cultural aspects. Many members participated in the *ngaji* online of *Ihya'*, fostering intense interactions among them. Interestingly, members come from various regions, including Purwokerto, Purbalingga, Yogyakarta, Brebes, Tangerang, Jakarta, Jember, and Situbondo.<sup>25</sup>

Why the Virtual Community Majelis Kalbun Salim? Its members' intellectual preferences, religiosity, and cultural backgrounds are diverse. However, most belong to the Nahdliyyin (Nahdlatul Ulama). Some are affiliated with specific Sufi orders, such as Syekh Fahd Muhammad from the Naqshbandi Haqqani order. Besides Syekh Fahd, there is Abdul Ghofir (Kang Ghofir) and Muhammad Akrom Solihin from Tangerang, an ASN (Civil Servant) at a State Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs N) in Tangerang. From the intellectual circles of higher education, there is Muhammad Yaser Arafat, a researcher of ancient tombstones, and Rijal Mummaziq, the rector of an Islamic university in Jember.

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<sup>23</sup> Evi Fitriana and Muhamad Khoiri Ridlwan, "Ngaji Online: Transformasi Ngaji Kitab Di Media Sosial," *ASANKA: Journal of Social Science And Education* 2, no. 2 (September 30, 2021): 203–20, <https://doi.org/10.21154/asanka.v2i2.3238>; Muhammad Saifullah, "Lingkaran Ulil Abshar Abdalla Dan Negosiasi Keberagamaan Di Indonesia: Investigasi Atas 'Ngaji Ihya Online,'" *ABHATS: Jurnal Islam Ulil Albab* 3, no. 2 (2022): 27–39, <https://journal.uui.ac.id/Abhats/article/view/29280>.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Muhammad Yaser Arafat, May 12, 2024

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Muhammad Yaser Arafat, May 12, 2024

Members of this community also often initiate intellectual, social, and economic activities. Rijal Mumazziq, in addition to being the rector of INAFAS Kencong, Jember, is a cleric and Banser member with a high social conscience. His social activities include helping Banser family members obtain school scholarships, providing stipends to committed Quran teachers, and even sponsoring Umrah trips, garnering support from various circles. Meanwhile, Muhammad Yaser Arafat, a lecturer and anthropologist at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, researches ancient tombstones in the Yogyakarta area. His research has been published in a book titled *Nisan Hanyakrakusuman*.

Interestingly, Yaser adds that the communication pattern in Majelis Kalbun Salim uses humor with Sufi narratives, even incorporating erotic idioms or symbols. Moreover, it is common for highly respected and renowned members to engage in mutual bullying. According to Yaser, this is intended to demonstrate that all humans are equal. Before Allah, no one is higher than another, regardless of their attributes. This principle of humility (*tawadhu*) becomes crucial.

Therefore, this study was conducted based on these phenomena and research facts. The diverse intellectual preferences of Majelis Kalbun Salim members, Gus Ulil's influence as the facilitator of the *ngaji* online Ihya' Ulumuddin, and the Sufi humor content within MKS are expected to bring novelty to this research in understanding and explaining the virtual Sufi identity. Thus, this study aims to identify and explain the identity of MKS Sufism in cyberspace as a representation of real life.

## Literature Review

### Virtual Sufism

Virtual Sufism refers to Sufism practices developing in digital spaces through online platforms such as social media, websites, and specialized applications.<sup>26</sup> The development of digital technology has changed the pattern of spiritual interaction, allowing Muslims to access Sufi studies, join online recitations, and engage in virtual Sufism communities without geographical limitations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Francesco Piraino, "Between Real and Virtual Communities: Sufism in Western Societies and the Naqshbandi Haqqani Case," *Social Compass* 63, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 93–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615606619>.

<sup>27</sup> Rozehnal, "Cyber Sufism in the Global West," 2023.

Several studies have shown that virtual sufism is not only a means of religious learning but also shapes the religious identity of individuals and communities.<sup>28</sup> For example, the study of Majelis Kalbun Salim (MKS) shows how this community utilizes digital platforms to develop its Sufistic identity through the online recitation of Ihya' Ulumuddin by Gus Ulil and the production of Sufistic humor as a mechanism for self-reflection and collective spirituality formation.

In the digital era, Sufism has been transformed as a value and practice.<sup>29</sup> The transformation of Sufism in the digital space reflects how Sufism adapts to the development of information and community technology. In the digital era, Sufism is no longer limited to physical assemblies but occurs through various online platforms such as social media, podcasts, and religious applications.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, digital Sufism plays a role in shaping a moderate religious narrative. Through online da'wa, Sufism values such as simplicity, love, and tolerance are more easily disseminated, making digital space a new arena for expressing and strengthening a broader and more flexible Islamic spirituality.<sup>31</sup>

## Method

Using a qualitative research approach,<sup>32</sup> the researchers aim to understand and explain the virtual Sufi identity of Majelis Kalbun Salim (MKS), including

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<sup>28</sup> Armyn Hasibuan, Ismail Fahmi Arrauf Nasution, and Mowafg Masuwad, "Tarekat in the Digital Age: Transforming Spirituality for the Age of Technology," *Religia* 27, no. 1 (April 27, 2024): 13–30, <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v27i1.2306>; Ziaulhaq Hidayat and Achyar Zein, "Sufism and Virtual Piety: A Narration of the Millennial Murshid in North Sumatra," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 16, no. 1 (June 1, 2022): 133–52, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2022.16.1.133-152>.

<sup>29</sup> Usman Waheed, "Exploring Sufi Practices on Social Media: Distortions and Complexities in Contemporary Pakistan," *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif* 18, no. 2 (2024): 317–44, <https://doi.org/10.14421/522e5653>.

<sup>30</sup> Siswoyo Aris Munandar Siswoyo and Fahrurrozi Fahrurrozi, "Bridging the Traditional and the Digital: Practices of Indonesia's Tarekat Qadiriyya and Naqsyabandiyya," *Journal of Asian Wisdom and Islamic Behavior* 1, no. 2 (September 30, 2023): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.59371/jawab.v1i2.62>.

<sup>31</sup> Robingatun, Fidia Astuti, and Abdul Wasik, "Sufism Revisited: A Comprehensive Analysis of Emha Ainun Najib's Philosophical Contributions to Modern Society," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 14, no. 1 (June 14, 2024): 352–71, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.141.21>.

<sup>32</sup> H Zuchri Abdussamad and M Si Sik, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif* (CV. Syakir Media Press, 2021); Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan RD* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2012).



the *ngaji* online movement and the production of Sufi humor by some of its members, such as Muhammad Yaser Arafat, Abdul Ghofir, Din Rosyidin, and Muhammad Akrom Solihin. Without making any justifications or hypotheses, the researcher observes and directly listens to the arguments, opinions, and activities of several Majelis Kalbun Salim members in the virtual and real world. Their arguments and activities in both realms will be the basis for analyzing the research findings.

This study employs a symbolic interactionism approach. According to symbolic interactionism theory, human life is essentially the interaction between humans using symbols. Briefly, symbolic interactionism is based on the following premises: 1) individuals respond to symbolic situations; 2) the production of meaning results from social interaction; and 3) the interpreted meaning is dynamic.<sup>33</sup>

Data were collected using several techniques, namely: first, document study. This document study relates to the results of other research documented in journals, books, seminars, or proceedings related to the issue of Sufism in the digital era. The second is in-depth interviews. The subjects or informants of the interviews were Muhammad Yaser Arafat, the initiator of the Majelis Kalbun Salim community name and a lecturer at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta; Abdul Ghofir, a community member and caretaker of the Siti Jamilah Orphanage in Purbalingga; Din Rosyidin, a community member and entrepreneur in Yogyakarta; and Muhammad Akrom Solihin, a community member as well as a cleric and teacher at a State Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs N) in Tangerang. Third, observation. This study observed the *Facebook* accounts (Majelis Kalbun Salim) of the MKS virtual community and its core members' daily activities.

The data analysis technique in this research is conducted using descriptive qualitative methods,<sup>34</sup> tracing the origins of Sufi ideas and philosophies in the digital era in their various forms of practice, including those found in MKS. Additionally, it involves inventorying data within accounts,

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<sup>33</sup> Christiany Juditha, "Interaksi Simbolik Dalam Komunitas Virtual Anti Hoaks Untuk Mengurangi Penyebaran Hoaks," *Jurnal Penelitian Komunikasi Dan Pembangunan* 19, no. 1 (June 28, 2018): 17, <https://doi.org/10.31346/jpkp.v19i1.1401>.

<sup>34</sup> Sri Lindawati and Muhammad Hendri, "Penggunaan Metode Deskriptif Kualitatif Untuk Analisis Strategi Pengembangan Kepariwisata Kota Sibolga Provinsi Sumatera Utara," in *Seminar Nasional APTIKOM (SEMNASTIKOM), Hotel Lombok Raya Mataram*, 2016, 833–37.

such as words, sentences, and discourses, as structures of ideas, philosophies, and worldviews of the virtual community MKS. Data is reduced to exclude irrelevant parts, thus obtaining analytical results based on quality data using a symbolic interactionism approach.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Concept of Virtual Identity Formation**

Self-identity formation is a complex psychological condition for individuals.<sup>35</sup> It relates to self-acceptance, life orientation and goals, and principles influencing considerations in various aspects. Understanding the process of self-identity formation helps individuals create a clear view of their own identity.<sup>36</sup>

In synthesis, identity formation involves multiple aspects and factors influencing the development of an individual's identity. National identity, group identity, individual identity, and self-identity each have distinct characteristics and unique formation processes.<sup>37</sup> Self-identity formation involves two aspects: exploration and commitment. Self-identity can encompass physical attributes, beliefs, goals, aspirations, moral principles, or social styles. Factors influencing the development of an individual's identity include family, parents, parenting style, role models, and individual social roles.

Dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism, in general, can serve as a conceptual framework for identity formation, including the virtual identity of individuals or specific communities. Dramaturgy, developed by a Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman (1922-1982), focuses on social interactions rather

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<sup>35</sup> Jihan Kamilla Azhar et al., "Pembentukan Identitas Diri Remaja Pecandu Hisap Lem," *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat (JPPM)* 2, no. 3 (January 31, 2022): 449, <https://doi.org/10.24198/jppm.v2i3.37831>.

<sup>36</sup> Sholiha Sholiha and Lailatuzzahro Al-Akhda Aulia, "Hubungan Self Concept Dan Self Confidence," *Jurnal Psikologi: Jurnal Ilmiah Fakultas Psikologi Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan* 7, no. 1 (March 26, 2020): 41–55, <https://doi.org/10.35891/jip.v7i1.1954>.

<sup>37</sup> Mia Oktavianti Lutfi, Nurlaela Widyaningrum, and Iin Ervina, "Hubungan Kelekatan Remaja Dan Orang Tua Dengan Identitas Diri Remaja Di SMA Negeri 2 Bondowoso," *Nasional Multidisciplinary Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2023): 88–97; Dwi Nurrahmi Kusumastuti, "Peran Komunikasi Keluarga Dalam Pembentukan Identitas Remaja Akhir Di Kalangan Mahasiswa Akademi Komunikasi Radya Binatama," *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi AKRAB* 7, no. 2 (2023), <https://ojs.akrb.ac.id/index.php/AKRAB/article/view/60>.

than social structure.<sup>38</sup> Goffman's theory emphasizes face-to-face interactions or co-presence, where individuals mutually influence each other's actions.<sup>39</sup>

In Girnanfa and Susilo's research on "Dramaturgical Study of Impression Management Through Twitter as a Means of Self-Existence for Students in Jakarta,"<sup>40</sup> dramaturgy portrays human life as a stage divided into front and back regions. The concept explains that individuals strive to present themselves in the best possible light.

Similarly, in the study by Bilqis et al. on "Dramaturgy in Social Media: Second Accounts on Instagram as Self-Discourse,"<sup>41</sup> second accounts are examined as part of the backstage, where individuals can design roles and self-presentations without the constraints of their main accounts. These second accounts function as digital dramaturgy, preserving privacy, enhancing creativity, and strengthening identity through self-discourse.

Likewise, as Bilqis et al.,<sup>42</sup> using Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, Kulsum et al.'s<sup>43</sup> research on adolescent self-presenting on social media highlights how adolescents often use social media to seek peer validation and support. This study underscores the importance of self-presenting from a

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<sup>38</sup> Nguyen Trung Kien, "Contemporary Social Interaction: How Communication Technologies Alter Goffman's Dramaturgical Model?," *Ho Chi Minh City Open University Journal of Science-Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2015): 54–65, <https://journalofscience.ou.edu.vn/index.php/soci-en/article/view/326>; Charles Edgley, "Dramaturgy," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Goffman Studies* (Routledge, 2022), 15–25.

<sup>39</sup> M Hafis Fazry, "Fenomena Crossdressing Selebgram Dalam Membangun Eksistensi Di Media Sosial," *JSIKOM* 2, no. 2 (2023): 55–61, <https://jurnal.radenfatah.ac.id/index.php/jsikom/article/view/14447>; Luh Suryatni, "Komunikasi Media Sosial Dan Nilai-Nilai Budaya Pancasila Social Media Communications and Cultural Values of Pancasila," *Jurnal Sistem Informasi Universitas Suryadarma* 5, no. 1 (June 3, 2014): 117–33, <https://doi.org/10.35968/jsi.v5i1.27>.

<sup>40</sup> Felly Aulia Girnanfa and Anindita Susilo, "Studi Dramaturgi Pengelolaan Kesan Melalui Twitter Sebagai Sarana Eksistensi Diri Mahasiswa Di Jakarta," *Journal of New Media and Communication* 1, no. 1 (2022): 58–73, <https://doi.org/10.55985/jnmc.v1i1.2>.

<sup>41</sup> Tri Dewi Bilqis et al., "Dramaturgi Dalam Media Sosial: Second Account Di Instagram Sebagai Self Disclosure," *HUMANUS: Jurnal Sosiohumaniora Nusantara* 1, no. 2 (2024): 155–64, <https://doi.org/10.62180/914e5g76>.

<sup>42</sup> Bilqis et al.

<sup>43</sup> Umi Kulsum, Imam Bukhori, and Nining Winarsih, "Analisis Self Presenting Remaja Di Media Sosial," *Moderasi: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial* 5, no. 1 (June 1, 2024): 20–34, <https://doi.org/10.24239/moderasi.Vol5.Iss1.222>.

dramaturgical perspective for constructing social identities among adolescents.<sup>44</sup>

The studies presented affirm that dramaturgy is a theoretical concept representing an "alternative image" of individuals on the front stage to create specific identities. Meanwhile, dramaturgy is also significant in identity formation in groups or communities, such as the Save Street Child Surabaya (SSCS) community. In Merawati's research,<sup>45</sup> SSCS constructs a front-stage identity as a means of image formation, while the backstage serves as an alternative manifestation of personal interests. SSCS is a non-governmental organization (NGO) supporting street children with various programs, including the "cool teacher" initiative.

In contrast to Merawati,<sup>46</sup> Cholil et al.,<sup>47</sup> in their study titled "Dramaturgy of Dakwah by Hanan Attaki in the Motorcycle Gang Community in Bandung," they apply dramaturgy to the religious domain. Their research shows that Hanan Attaki successfully transformed the image or identity of the motorcycle gang community in Bandung through a widely accepted approach to dawah (religious outreach). Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube served as his dakwah media. This media illustrates that role models and a humanistic approach play a significant role in creating new identities, particularly religious identities, within motorcycle gangs, specifically in Bandung.

The question then arises: what about the concept of symbolic interactionism? History records that symbolic interactionism was initially proposed by George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). He argued that individual and societal consciousness are formed through social interaction.<sup>48</sup> Mead

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<sup>44</sup> Nevi Dwi Kirana and Farid Pribadi, "Dramaturgi Di Balik Kehidupan Akun Alter Twitter Dramaturgy Behind Twitter Alter Accounts," *Jurnal ISIP: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 18, no. 1 (September 28, 2023): 39–47, <https://doi.org/10.36451/jisip.v18i1.65>.

<sup>45</sup> Erwin Merawati and M. Jacky, "Analisis Dramaturgi Komunitas Save Street Child Surabaya," *Paradigma* 3, no. 2 (2015): 1–10, <https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/paradigma/article/view/11571/10877>.

<sup>46</sup> Merawati and Jacky.

<sup>47</sup> Cholil, Nur Syam, and Yasyva Agfa Nizar, "Dramaturgi Dakwah Hanan Attaki Pada Komunitas Geng Motor Di Bandung," *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 11, no. 2 (2021): 392–407, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2021.11.2.392-407>.

<sup>48</sup> Jean-François Côté, *George Herbert Mead's Concept of Society* (Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315634517>; Barbara Simpson, *George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)*, ed. Jenny Helin et al., *George Herbert Mead's Concept of Society: A*

emphasized that self-identity develops through social interaction, where individuals learn to see themselves from the perspective of others.<sup>49</sup> He also developed essential concepts such as "I" (the creative and spontaneous aspect of self) and "Me" (the social aspect influenced by societal expectations and norms).<sup>50</sup>

Mead's (1863-1931) perspective was further developed by his student, Herbert Blumer (1900-1987). Blumer coined the term "symbolic interactionism."<sup>51</sup> According to Blumer, symbolic interactionism emphasizes three basic premises: first, individuals act based on the meanings attributed to objects or others; second, these meanings arise from social interaction; third, these meanings are interpreted and modified through the process of interpretation used by individuals when interacting with their environment.<sup>52</sup>

Academic evidence shows that, like dramaturgy, symbolic interactionism is also relevant to forming group or community identities, particularly in virtual

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*Critical Reconstruction*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199669356.013.0017>.

<sup>49</sup> Phillip L Hammack, *Theoretical Foundations of Identity*, ed. Kate C. McLean and Syed Moin, *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199936564.013.027>; Stevi Jackson, "Self, Time and Narrative: Re-Thinking the Contribution of G. H. Mead," *Life Writing* 7, no. 2 (August 2010): 123–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484520903445255>.

<sup>50</sup> Jyoti Dalal, "George Herbert Mead," *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 85–103, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097318491000800105>; Filipe Carreira da Silva, "G.H. Mead," in *Key Sociological Thinkers* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2017), 117–27, [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-93166-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-93166-8_7); Antony J Puddephatt, "George Herbert Mead: –The Evolution of Mind, Self and Society Through Interaction," in *The Interactionist Imagination: Studying Meaning, Situation and Micro-Social Order*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Springer, 2017), 95–119.

<sup>51</sup> Alessandro Orsini, "Symbolic Interactionism," in *Sociological Theory* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 435–84, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52539-1\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52539-1_11); Andreas Schneider, "Symbolic Interactionism," in *Theories in Social Psychology, Second Edition* (Wiley, 2022), 317–49, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394266616.ch13>.

<sup>52</sup> J Sudtho, W Singhasiri, and P Jimarkon, "Using Symbolic Interactionism to Investigate Teachers' Professional Identity.," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 23, no. 4 (2015): 1153–66, <http://www.pertanika.upm.edu.my/pjssh/browse/regular-issue?article=JSSH-1250-2015>; Khaldoun Aldiabat and Carole-Lynne Le Navenc, "Philosophical Roots of Classical Grounded Theory: Its Foundations in Symbolic Interactionism," *The Qualitative Report* 16, no. 4 (November 11, 2014): 1063–80, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1121>.

or online spaces. Yohana and Wulandari,<sup>53</sup> in their study entitled "Communication Behavior of the Virtual Community Group Kaskus Regional Riau Raya," state that using the symbolic interactionism approach helps understand the role of communication behavior in virtual groups, the messages exchanged, interaction patterns, group cohesion, and communication norms.

Juditha<sup>54</sup> later confirmed Yohana and Wulandari's findings<sup>55</sup> by researching "Symbolic Interactionism in the Anti-Hoax Virtual Community to Reduce Hoax Spread." She presented academic information that the Forum Anti Fitnah, Hasut, dan Hoaks (FAFHH) can control and suppress the circulation of hoaxes. This control is achieved by inventorying messages that can be verified for truthfulness, covering political news, entertainment, and educational content.

Symbolic interactionism in virtual spaces has popularized unique forms of address, expressions, and hashtags. Thus, social interactions within a virtual community also possess unique cultures or ways of interaction. This phenomenon also strengthens the identity of virtual communities or groups.<sup>56</sup>

The research findings demonstrate that dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism are relevant concepts in building character, interaction patterns, and cohesion within virtual communities. According to Van Dijk, virtual media and digital media serve as platforms focusing on users' existence, facilitating their activities and collaborations. Therefore, social media can be seen as an online medium that strengthens user relationships while serving as a social bond.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nova Yohana and Tika Wulandari, "Perilaku Komunikasi Kelompok Komunitas Virtual Kaskus Regional Riau Raya," *Jurnal Penelitian Komunikasi* 17, no. 2 (2014): 117–28, <https://doi.org/10.20422/jpk.v17i2.11>.

<sup>54</sup> Juditha, "Interaksi Simbolik Dalam Komunitas Virtual Anti Hoaks Untuk Mengurangi Penyebaran Hoaks."

<sup>55</sup> Yohana and Wulandari, "Perilaku Komunikasi Kelompok Komunitas Virtual Kaskus Regional Riau Raya."

<sup>56</sup> Indah Mestika, Ratih Hasanah Sudrajat, and Arie Prasetio, "Interaksi Sosial Komunitas Virtual Meme Comic Indonesia," *DIALEKTIKA* 3, no. 2 (2016): 143–57.

<sup>57</sup> Hendra Junawan and Nurdin Laugu, "Eksistensi Media Sosial, Youtube, Instagram Dan Whatsapp Ditengah Pandemi Covid-19 Dikalangan Masyarakat Virtual Indonesia," *Baitul 'Ulum: Jurnal Ilmu Perpustakaan Dan Informasi*, September 12, 2020, 41–57, <https://doi.org/10.30631/baitululum.v4i1.46>; Dessy Andamisari, "Penggunaan Status Whatsapp Sebagai Digital Marketing Warga Kecamatan Medan Satria Bekasi Di Era New Normal," *LUGAS Jurnal Komunikasi* 5, no. 1 (June 30, 2021): 66–72, <https://doi.org/10.31334/lugas.v5i1.1559>.

## Virtual Sufism Community Identity: Spiritual Revitalization

Virtual Sufism refers to using digital technology and the internet to practice, access, and disseminate teachings and practices of Sufism on a broader scale.<sup>58</sup> This definition includes activities such as Attending online religious lectures, listening to Sufi teachings via podcasts or video streaming, participating in Sufi discussion groups on social media, and using apps for dhikr (remembrance of God) and prayers.

Through digital media, individuals can easily access content on Sufism spiritualism. In other words, efforts to improve religious quality can be done dynamically, not limited by time and space. For example, Gus Baha's recitations can be watched and downloaded through the Santri Online YouTube account. Gus Baha himself is a contemporary Indonesian cleric, a student of K.H. Maimoen Zubair, who is currently receiving widespread public attention, in addition to previous popular figures such as K.H. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus) and K.H. Anwar Zahid. This means that spiritual revitalization in the digital era, in the context of this research, is an effort made by individuals through certain media platforms and figures believed to be authoritative in increasing their religious capacity.

## Factors Influencing the Development of the Virtual Sufism Community

At least three factors influence the development of virtual Sufi communities. First, borrowing the term from Buya Hamka involves the spread of modern Sufism.<sup>59</sup> Second, it encompasses the social-religious reconstruction due to the penetration of digital technology.<sup>60</sup> Third, it consists of information technology tools called virtual communities<sup>61</sup>. Meanwhile, Haramain in

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<sup>58</sup> Muhamad Basyrul Muvid, "Pendidikan Sufistik KH. Abdurrahman Wahid Dan Relevansinya Pada Kehidupan Masyarakat Era Digital," *EL-BANAT: Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Pendidikan Islam* 13, no. 2 (2023): 162–76, <https://doi.org/10.54180/elbanat.2023.13.2.162-176>.

<sup>59</sup> Muhammad Ainun Najib, "Epistemologi Tasawuf Modern Hamka," *Urnal Dinamika Penelitian: Media Komunikasi Sosial Keagamaan* 18, no. 2 (2018): 303–24, <https://doi.org/10.21274/dinamika.2018.18.2.303-324>; Azizah and Jannah, "Spiritualitas Masyarakat Modern Dalam Tasawuf Buya Hamka."

<sup>60</sup> Evelyn Ruppert, John Law, and Mike Savage, "Reassembling Social Science Methods: The Challenge of Digital Devices," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 4 (July 14, 2013): 22–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413484941>.

<sup>61</sup> Francesco Piraino, "Between Real and Virtual Communities: Sufism in Western Societies and the Naqshbandi Haqqani Case," *Social Compass* 63, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 93–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615606619>.

Wekke<sup>62</sup> specifically discusses the digital era concerning Sufism by analyzing the changing views of Sufism in contemporary conditions. Thus, according to several scholars, Sufism in the digital era or virtual Sufi communities is popularly known as cyber-Sufism,<sup>63</sup> online Sufism,<sup>64</sup> Sufism on the web,<sup>65</sup> and online rituals.<sup>66</sup>

In the contemporary paradigm, virtual Sufi communities, with their various terminologies developed by scholars, seek to reconstruct public perceptions of Sufism, especially within digital spaces. Thus, the meaning of Sufism has expanded. Initially limited to rituals, it has become a strong social bond today. Academically, the phenomenon of virtual Sufi communities has been studied by Indonesian scholars. For instance, "Tarekat Virtual: A Alternative Idea to Join Tarekat by Muhammad Nursamad Kamba" by Helmi Mustofa.<sup>67</sup> Together with Emha Ainun Nadjib (Cak Nun), Nursamad Kamba regularly conducts lectures and discussions on Sufism, culture, and religion, especially at the Kenduri Cinta forum in Jakarta, broadcast live on YouTube Maiyah.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ismail Suardi Wekke, "Menelusuri Sufi Digital," *Jurnal Sains Dan Seni ITS*, April 6, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.31227/osf.io/n9hjg>.

<sup>63</sup> Stéphane A Dudoignon, "Cyber Sufism," in *Sufi Institutions* (Brill, 2020), 405–14.

<sup>64</sup> Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, "Online Sufism—Young British Muslims, Their Internet 'Selves' and Virtual Reality," *Sufism in Britain* 161 (2015): 176.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Rozehnal, "Cyber Sufism in the Global West," in *Sufism in Western Contexts* (Brill, 2023), 139–61.

<sup>66</sup> Göran Larsson, "On-Line Rituals: A New Field of Research: Neo-Pagan and Muslim Cyber Rituals," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 18 (January 1, 2003): 118–30, <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67286>.

<sup>67</sup> Helmi Mustofa, "Tarekat 'Virtual': Sebuah Gagasan Alternatif Bertarekat Dari Muhammad Nursamad Kamba," *Jurnal Kajian Islam Interdisipliner* 4, no. 2 (2021): 163, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jkii.v4i2.1068>.

<sup>68</sup> Eka Rahayu, Nurwahidin Nurwahidin, and Chotib Chotib, "Analysis of the Level of Political Participation of the Kenduri Cinta Community in Jakarta," *International Journal of Social Service and Research* 3, no. 12 (December 25, 2023): 3071–79, <https://doi.org/10.46799/ijssr.v3i12.634>; Della Amaliya Khoiro, Tantan Hermansyah, and Kiky Rizky, "Emha Ainun Nadjib and Sufism Communication: Congregation of Maiyah Kenduri Cinta as Case Study," *Jurnal Ilmiah Syi'ar* 22, no. 1 (July 8, 2022): 56–69, <https://doi.org/10.29300/syr.v22i1.6383>; M Dimas Septian, "Retorika Dakwah Emha Ainun Nadjib 'Cak Nun' Dalam Pengajian Maiyah Kenduri Cinta Jakarta" (UIN SMH BANTEN, 2020).



The primary narrative of these virtual Sufi communities revolves around a narrative of peace, as found in the research by Anam et al.<sup>69</sup> Expressions that emerge include, firstly, the practice of clarity and sincerity in inner intentions; secondly, strengthening the values of longing (*al-raghbah*), expansion (*al-inbisat*), elevation (*al-wara*), and love (*al-mahabbah*)<sup>70</sup>; thirdly, shifting traditional Sufi behaviors.<sup>71</sup> The narrative of peace, clarity, and sincerity in inner intentions aligns with Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) saying: "Verily, Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but He looks at your hearts and deeds." (HR. Muslim Ra.).

Virtual Sufi communities also strive to uphold the compassionate face of Islam through Sufi preaching approaches.<sup>72</sup> Sufi preaching content conveys truths to families and close acquaintances (*bi al-lisan*)<sup>73</sup>, teaches monotheism and life (*bi al-kalam*)<sup>74</sup>, exemplifies noble behavior (*bi al-hal*),<sup>75</sup> and communicates with enemies and friends (*bi al-qalam*).<sup>76</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Royanulloh, Thiyas Tono Taufiq, and Komari, "Ekspresi Sufi Di Ruang Maya Sebagai Narasi Damai," *Esoterik: Jurnal Akhlak Dan Tasawuf* 7, no. 1 (2021): 78–96, <https://doi.org/10.21043/esoterik.v6i1.10528>.

<sup>70</sup> Enjang AS and Ridwan Rustandi, "Komunikasi Transendental Ritual Keagamaan Tarekat Qadiriyyah Wa Naqsabandiyyah Pesantren Suryalaya Tasikmalaya," *Jurnal Komunikasi* 17, no. 1 (2022): 47–66, <https://doi.org/10.20885/komunikasi.vol17.iss1.art4>; Yayan Mulyana, "Konsep Mahabbah Imam Al-Tustari (200-283 H.)," *Syifa Al-Qulub* 1, no. 2 (January 29, 2017): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.15575/saq.v1i2.1427>; Mubassyrarah Muhammad Bakry, "Maqamat, Ahwal Dan Konsep Mahabbah Ilahiyah Rabi'ah Al-'Adawiyah (Suatu Kajian Tasawuf)," *Al-Azar* 1, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>71</sup> Rubaidi Rubaidi, "The Role of Urban Sufism of Shalawat Muhammad Assembly on Urban Middle Class Society," *Jurnal Ushuluddin* 26, no. 2 (December 13, 2018): 183–99, <https://doi.org/10.24014/jush.v26i2.4895>.

<sup>72</sup> Musta'in, *Komunikasi Sufistik Analisis Heremeneutika Teks Dakwah K.H. Musta'in Ramly* (Yogyakarta: Maghza Pustaka, 2014); Joko Tri Haryanto, "Perkembangan Dakwah Sufistik Persepektif Tasawuf Kontemporer," *Addin* 8, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.21043/addin.v8i2.598>; Elmansyah, "Dakwah Sufistik Di Era Digital."

<sup>73</sup> Zainol Huda, "Dakwah Islam Multikultural (Metode Dakwah Nabi SAW Kepada Umat Agama Lain)," *RELIGIA* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 89, <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v19i1.661>.

<sup>74</sup> Ichsan Saputro, "Konsep Tauhid Menurut Abdul Karim Amrullah Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Tujuan Pendidikan Islam," *AT TA'DIB* 11, no. 2 (December 29, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.21111/at-tadib.v11i2.779>; Firda Inayah Inayah, "Tauhid Sebagai Prinsip Ilmu Pengetahuan (Studi Analisis Ismail Raji Al Faruqi)," *Tasfiah* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 97, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tasfiah.v2i1.2484>.

<sup>75</sup> Nur Risqi Amalia Rahman et al., "Pengertian Akidah Islam," *Artikel Akidah Islam* 1 (2022); Khotib Khotib and Muhammad Ufuqul Mubin, "Tazkiyah Al-Nafs Melalui

Maintaining spiritual awareness amidst the turmoil and penetration of technology is another benefit of virtual Sufi communities. Through Sufi approaches, individuals can wisely face the challenges posed by digital technology and utilize it to deepen their relationship with God.<sup>77</sup> In terms of content perspective, these virtual Sufi communities also present Sufi humor content as associations or metaphors in their preaching.

Sufi humor is a prominent aspect of the Sufi tradition, where stories, anecdotes, and jokes impart spiritual and moral wisdom.<sup>78</sup> Sufi humor often conveys profound messages through light-hearted, funny, and meaningful stories containing teachings about life, humility, wisdom, and love for God.<sup>79</sup> In Yasmin Amin's thesis titled "Humour in The Hadith"<sup>80</sup> at the University of Exeter, she states that humor signifies affection, tolerance, ease, and comfort. Yasmin further argues that humor can spread laughter across all segments of society, strengthen social relationships, bridge differences, and build identity. Additionally, through his research on "The Comedy Reason: Strategies of Humor in al-Ghazali," Ormsby<sup>81</sup> asserts that Imam al-Ghazali also utilized humor in his works. Among al-Ghazali's works noted for their high humor value are "*l̥ḥyā* ' *Ulūm al-Dīn*" and "*Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*".

As a community movement and private ritual, Sufism seeks to fill the void of spirituality. Humans need to pay attention to their spirituality because

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Pendekatan Tasawuf Dan Fikih Dalam Membangun Kesalehan Sosial Dan Relegiositas Masyarakat," *IBDA: Jurnal Kajian Islam Dan Budaya* 17, no. 2 (2019): 193–213, <https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v17i2.2257>.

<sup>76</sup> Agusti Alfi Nurul Insani, "Dakwah Politik Nabi Muhammad Kepada Raja Heraklius, Kisra Abrawaiz, Muqauqis, Dan Najasyi," *Islamic Communication Journal* 4, no. 1 (July 7, 2019): 60, <https://doi.org/10.21580/icj.2019.4.1.3595>.

<sup>77</sup> Muhammad Iqbal Yaqin and Faris Faris, "Komunikasi Transendental Penganut Kapitayan Dalam Peningkatan Kesadaran Spiritual," *Commed Jurnal Komunikasi Dan Media* 7, no. 1 (October 14, 2022): 15–29, <https://doi.org/10.33884/commed.v7i1.6603>; Anita Ulyati Azizah and Arif Hidayat, "Teologi Dalam Kidung Rumeksa Ing Wengi," *Mediakita* 5, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.30762/mediakita.v5i2.3492>; Wahid and Maskhuroh, "Tasawuf Dalam Era Digital (Menjaga Kesadaran Spiritual Di Tengah Arus Teknologi)."

<sup>78</sup> Wildani Hefni and Ayis Mukholik, "Nalar Sufistik Dan Satire Nashruddin Hodja Dalam Sastra Hikayat Jenaka," *Islamika Inside: Jurnal Keislaman Dan Humaniora* 7, no. 2 (January 8, 2022): 302–24, <https://doi.org/10.35719/islamikainside.v7i2.159>.

<sup>79</sup> Eric Ormsby, "The Comedy of Reason," in *Islam and Rationality* (BRILL, 2015), 121–37, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004290952\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004290952_007); Yasmin Amin, *Humour in the Ḥadīth* (University of Exeter (United Kingdom), 2020).

<sup>80</sup> Amin, *Humour in the Ḥadīth*.

<sup>81</sup> Ormsby, "The Comedy of Reason."

they need it to achieve genuine life goals. Essentially, Sufism is an effort to purify oneself (*Tazkiyat al-Nafs*) by distancing oneself from the influences of worldly life, which John Naisbitt refers to as "high-tech, high-touch."<sup>82</sup>

### **Ngaji Online and Sufi Humor as the Identity of Virtual Sufism of MKS**

As a movement, the values of Sufism have initiated various religious and social activities. For example, the movement of "Komunitas Tasawuf Underground."<sup>83</sup> Komunitas Tasawuf Underground was founded by Halim Ambiya, a lecturer who was moved to initiate Quranic recitation movements in the streets. This movement not only pursues worldly aspects but also serves as spiritual preparation for the afterlife. Halim Ambiya also utilizes social media to expand his preaching.<sup>84</sup> The role of social media is significant in disseminating Halim Ambiya's ideas and mobilizing his students.<sup>85</sup>

The MKS community has also undertaken a similar movement. MKS was officially formed as a community in 2019, shortly before the COVID-19 disaster hit Indonesia. However, Yaser coined the name Kalbun Salim a year earlier. The phrase MKS became an online identity, such as a hashtag, when Yaser posted a status on Facebook. With increasing intensity, Yaser connected with Bachrudin Ahmad (Kang Bachrudin), a caretaker of a pesantren in Cimande, and Din Rosyidin (Kang Din), a businessman of original sarongs from Yogyakarta, through online platforms.

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<sup>82</sup> Fitrawati, "Tasawuf Sebagai Solusi Dari Kosongnya Spiritualitas Pada Masyarakat Modern Akibat Perkembangan Teknologi"; Asep Ahmad Arsyul, "Gerakan Sosial Tarekat Idrisiyyah; (Melacak Akar Moderasi Dalam Konsep Tasawuf Sanusiyyah)," *Hikamia: Jurnal Pemikiran Tasawuf Dan Peradaban Islam* 3, no. 2 (2023): 104–18, <https://doi.org/10.58572/hkm.v3i2.36>.

<sup>83</sup> Agustina Norma Pratama, "Tasawuf Underground: Menumbuhkan Self-Awareness Anak Jalanan Dalam Kesadaran Melaksanakan Ibadah," *Syntax Idea* 4, no. 10 (October 21, 2022): 1471–82, <https://doi.org/10.46799/syntax-idea.v4i10.1975>; Imam Fauzi, "Pemberdayaan Kaum Marginal Melalui Keterampilan Wirausaha Sablon (Studi Analisis Deskriptif Di Komunitas Tasawuf Underground)," *Jurnal Syntax Admiration* 3, no. 3 (April 9, 2022): 607–25, <https://doi.org/10.46799/jsa.v3i3.412>.

<sup>84</sup> Ahmad Kamaluddin, *Kontribusi Regulasi Emosi Qur'ani Dalam Membentuk Perilaku Positif: Studi Fenomenologi Komunitas Punk Tasawuf Underground* (UIPM Journal, 2022); Muhamad Rosit, Moudy Karina Dewi, and Nurul Hidayat, "Instagram Sebagai Media Dakwah Oleh Komunitas Tasawuf Undergorund," *Nusantara: Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial* 10, no. 1 (2023): 201–12, <https://doi.org/10.31604/jips.v10i1.2023.201-212>.

<sup>85</sup> Rosit, Dewi, and Hidayat, "Instagram Sebagai Media Dakwah Oleh Komunitas Tasawuf Undergorund."

Initially, the name MKS was Majelis Ta'lim Kalbun Salim. The term "ta'lim" was initiated by Kang Bachrudin. However, Kiai Muhammad Akrom Solihin (Kiai Akrom) suggested removing the word "ta'lim" to avoid sounding too serious and formal. After everyone agreed, Kang Bachrudin created the MKS WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These groups function as forums for socializing, Quranic recitation sessions, and humor among their members.<sup>86</sup>

The name "kalbun," as Yaser mentioned in the interview, is a play on words derived from "qalibun" (clear heart and mind), which signifies peculiar manners or behavior. This derivation suggests an antithesis to the essence of qalibun within the MKS community. However, this antithesis is not aimed at deconstruction but rather at innovating and improvising worldviews and religious movements more relaxed, joyful, and informal.

MKS Sufism has a specific identity, namely online religious study (*ngaji* online) of Kitab Ihya Ulumuddin by Imam al-Ghazali, led by Ulil Abshar Abdalla (Gus Ulil). This identity of online Quranic recitation and Sufi humor within MKS will be discussed within the framework of symbolic interactionism in this study. This *ngaji* Ihya' was first live-streamed by Gus Ulil in 2017.<sup>87</sup> Gradually, the viewership for these *ngaji* online sessions multiplied. Gus Ulil has even frequently received invitations for offline *ngaji* sessions of Ihya', although these were limited to a few locations. Among the active viewers of these *ngaji* sessions are members of MKS. Indirectly, MKS drives Gus Ulil's *ngaji* online activities.<sup>88</sup>

MKS perceives Gus Ulil as a spiritual teacher. Interestingly, when Gus Ulil meets members of MKS, he positions himself as a peer, despite his role as one of the Chairmen of the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU). Kiai Akrom added:

"Yes, there are many [sessions]. Since the last time we discussed simplicity when we have obtained something, the old things should be discarded so they do not accumulate in our homes. That is a good Sufi value. About 30-40% of MKS members participate actively in *ngaji* sessions. So, the figure of Gus Ulil and the book Ihya' have a significant influence even though they are presented with humor and jokes."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Kang Yaser, May 12, 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Saifullah, "Lingkaran Ulil Abshar Abdalla Dan Negosiasi Keberagamaan Di Indonesia: Investigasi Atas 'Ngaji Ihya Online'"; Muvid and Aliyah, "The Tasawuf Wasathiyah Concept in Central Flow of Industrial Revolution 4.0."

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Kang Yaser, May 12, 2024.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Kiai Akrom, April 5, 2024.

Kiai Akrom's statement validates that many studies on religious practices/online recitations (*ngaji*) and their connection to real-world practices have been conducted. For example, Husein and Slama<sup>90</sup> highlight online piety, a reinterpretation of the concept of *riya'* (showing off), allowing each member to share anything openly. In addition to Husein and Slama, Lengauer<sup>91</sup> researched the movement of young Muslim women in Bandung, The Great Muslimah, whose activities focus on practical matters such as waking members up for *tahajud* prayers through social media platforms like WhatsApp, Line, and others.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, these online recitations of *Ihya'* encourage MKS members to reinterpret the meaning of life. For instance, Kang Ghofir, a member of MKS and the caretaker of the Siti Djamilah Orphanage in Purbalingga, says, "MKS members do not want to appear pious or good, even though they truly have good character."<sup>92</sup> Kang Yaser adds that the members' reluctance to be seen as pious and good refers to the phenomenon of the Malamatiyah order practitioners, who greatly avoid praise.<sup>93</sup>

There is a meaning derived from the online recitations of *Ihya'*, even though each MKS member uniquely reproduces this meaning, one of which is through humor or jokes with a Sufi tone. Kang Ghofir and Kang Yaser provided similar answers when interviewed. They stated that MKS serves as a symbolic space for displaying different meanings and realities for each member. Humor and jokes are markers and have become the general attributes of MKS.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, "Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018): 80–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1415056>.

<sup>91</sup> Husein and Slama.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Kang Ghofir, April 23, 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Nurul Anam, Sayyidah Syaikhotin, and Hasyim Asy'ari, "Tasawuf Transformatif Di Indonesia," *Al-Mada: Jurnal Agama, Sosial, Dan Budaya* 2, no. 2 (2019): 64–75, <https://doi.org/10.31538/almada.v2i2.337>; Aly Mashar, "Tarekat & Aliran Kebatinan," *Diktat*, 2021, 16–36.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Kang Yaser, May 12, 2024.



Figure 1. The Latest MKS T-Shirt with Humorous Caption on Facebook

At first glance, the caption on the front of the MKS T-shirt appears erotic. The commonly understood phrase "the apple does not fall far from the tree" implies that a person's character or traits are not significantly different from those of their father or ancestors. However, MKS has paraphrased and altered this phrase to "the fruit will not fall far from her chest." This phrase spontaneously leads to an erotic interpretation, with the assumption that it refers to "breasts."

According to Kang Din, the T-shirt with this caption symbolizes the humor or jokes among MKS members. Kang Din adds, "No matter how serious a person is, they need a place to heal, lower themselves, shed their academic, clerical, or even public official identity."<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, Kang Din likens MKS to an exhaust pipe or a septic tank, suggesting that outsiders will see a reality contradicting common sense or logic. Kang Din also uses an interesting metaphor involving a dog to convey a point:

"If I see MKS's mission of Sufism, it is like the story of a dog that can be so loyal to its master. However, as servants, we never seem fully devoted to God. So, the aspect of Sufism lies in its servitude. From a religious standpoint, we are religious people who, ironically, become irreligious because sometimes we are too religious to feel religious. I see MKS as people who have moved past formalized Islam and reached a state beyond mere acquaintance (*ma'rifah*)."

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Kang Din, May 12, 2024.

According to Kang Din, the Sufism identity of MKS strives to transcend mere ritual identity. Sufism also nullifies dogmas and prejudices, eliminating the perception of being the "most pure" among others. In Artani Hasbi's<sup>96</sup> study, Sufism is described as the science of prophetic ethics and the pinnacle of human rationality. Tohari<sup>97</sup> adds that sociologically, Sufism is believed to contain a divine system that is not easily rationally processed by the mind.

## **Conclusion**

Building a Sufism identity virtually is contemporary *ijtihad* amidst the pervasive penetration of digital information technology. This movement significantly affects the methods and behaviors of both individuals and specific groups in practicing their religion. A notable development is the proliferation of Sufi communities or cyber-Sufism in the virtual world, aimed at creating a religious image and serving as a medium for religious self-development.

Among these communities is MKS. Established in 2019 by a group of like-minded individuals, MKS aims to reflect and revitalize spiritual values in the online realm. MKS allows individuals to relax, annul their egos, and erode arrogance. The virtual Sufism identity of MKS emerges through two main aspects: the online study of "*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*" led by Gus Ulil and Sufi humor.

The Sufi humor developed by MKS, although sometimes challenging for rational minds, particularly those outside MKS, is a Sufistic effort to eliminate self-glorification, diminish arrogance, and strip away ideal human attributes. The online study of *Ihya'* serves not only as a scholarly pursuit but also as a means to control the soul, encouraging members always to behave and act with good morals in line with prophetic guidance.

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<sup>96</sup> Artani Hasbi, "Hakikat Kebenaran Mengkaji Tasawuf Akhlaki – Akhlak Kenabian," *MISYKAT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Quran, Hadist, Syari'ah Dan Tarbiyah* 1, no. 2 (2016): 43, <https://doi.org/10.33511/misykat.v1n2.43>.

<sup>97</sup> Achmad Tohari and Achmad Tohari, "Makna Syariat Dan Hakikat Tasawuf Al-Qusyairi Dalam Kehidupan Sosial," *Studi Multidisipliner: Jurnal Kajian Keislaman* 9, no. 2 (2022): 78–91, <https://doi.org/10.24952/multidisipliner.v9i2.5485>.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) UIN Prof. KH Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto for the funding support, Kiai Akrom Solikhin, Kang Muhammad Yaser Arafat, Kang Din Rosyidin and Kang Abdul Ghofir.

### **Funding**

Dipa Ministry of Religious Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia through the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) UIN Prof. KH Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto.

### **Author Contributions**

K.K. contributed to the research design, problem formulations, proposal preparation, research methods, and the final review of journal articles. A.S. designed and wrote in-depth theoretical studies. Z.A.M. searched for field data such as observations and interviews with sources, compiled discussions and conclusions of research reports, and finally finished the draft journal article to submit.



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