

Reframing Professionalism: English Teachers' Digital Competence and Identity in Modern Pesantren

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study examines how English teachers in modern pesantren redefine professionalism by integrating digital competence with Islamic educational values. While digital competence has been widely studied, its role in shaping teacher identity in faith-based contexts, particularly Indonesian pesantren remains underexplored. This study investigates how digital literacy is negotiated alongside moral and spiritual responsibilities.

Methods – A qualitative design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 12 English teachers from five modern pesantren across Indonesia. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in institutional context, gender, and teaching experience. Data was analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework to identify patterns related to digital integration and teacher identity.

Findings – Digital competence is not treated as a neutral technical skill but is interpreted through the normative framework of pesantren education. This process constructs a hybrid form of professionalism in which pedagogical innovation is balanced with spiritual accountability. Technology adoption is therefore guided not only by efficiency or innovation but also by moral considerations such as appropriateness, discipline, and institutional values. As a result, teachers apply digital tools selectively, enhancing learning while restricting practices perceived to conflict with the pesantren's ethical ethos.

Research Implications – The study is limited by its small qualitative sample and focus on selected pesantren, which may constrain generalizability. However, it underscores the need to integrate digital competence with value-based professional development in Islamic educational contexts.

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Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped expectations of teacher professionalism across educational contexts. Professionalism is no longer confined to subject knowledge and pedagogical performance but increasingly encompasses teachers' capacity to integrate digital tools into meaningful learning practices. In language education, this transformation is particularly significant, as digital environments enable access to authentic materials, global communication, and collaborative learning experiences (Morrison & Hughes, 2024). Consequently, digital competence has emerged as a critical component of teacher professionalism and an essential dimension of effective teaching in contemporary classrooms (Baran et al., 2019; Choi & Liu, 2020).

However, the enactment of digital competence is not uniform across contexts. In faith-based educational institutions such as *pesantren* in Indonesia, teacher professionalism is deeply rooted in moral authority, spiritual responsibility, and ethical leadership. Teachers are expected not only to deliver instruction but also to embody Islamic values and serve as role models within the educational community (Firmansyah & Abidin, 2024). At the same time, *pesantren* are undergoing processes of modernization, including the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning practices (Lestari et al., 2025). This dual demand creates a structural tension: teachers must adopt digital innovations while ensuring that such practices remain aligned with institutional values and religious principles.

In this context, professionalism cannot be reduced to technical competence alone but must be understood as a value-laden construct that integrates pedagogical, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Professional development in such settings extends beyond instructional improvement to include ethical formation and value-based leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Usman et al., 2024). This perspective suggests that the integration of digital technologies in *pesantren* involves not only skill acquisition but also a process of negotiation in which teachers interpret and regulate digital practices in relation to Islamic norms and institutional expectations.

Existing literature provides important insights into the components of this process, yet remains insufficiently integrated. On the one hand, frameworks such as DigCompEdu and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) conceptualize digital competence as the interplay of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge required for effective teaching in technology-rich environments (Falloon, 2020; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Schmidt et al., 2009). On the other hand, studies on teacher professional identity emphasize that professionalism is a dynamic construct shaped by personal beliefs, institutional contexts, and ongoing social interactions (Alam et al., 2024; Groenewald & Arnold, 2024; Halal Orfali et al., 2024). From this perspective, professional

identity is continuously negotiated, particularly in response to changing educational demands (Korthagen, 2017).

Despite these advances, the relationship between digital competence and professional identity has rarely been examined in an integrated manner, especially within faith-based educational contexts. Existing studies tend to treat digital competence as a technical or pedagogical issue, while research on professional identity often overlooks the role of digitalization in shaping teachers' professional self-concept (Syafryadin et al., 2020). Moreover, most empirical studies are situated in secular educational environments, leaving limited understanding of how digital competence is interpreted and enacted within institutions where moral and religious values play a central role. This gap is particularly relevant in the context of *pesantren*, where teachers operate at the intersection of global educational trends and local religious expectations. Previous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by *pesantren* teachers in navigating tensions between modernization and Islamic values (Kholili, 2021; Firmansyah & Abidin, 2024). At the same time, *pesantren* have increasingly expanded their educational scope to include foreign languages, science, and technology-oriented learning as part of broader efforts to prepare students for global engagement (Lestari et al., 2025; Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022). This transformation reflects what has been described as a form of "harmonious moderation," in which modern advancements are integrated without undermining spiritual and cultural foundations (Azhar et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding how teachers interpret digital competence within this evolving context becomes essential for explaining how professionalism is constructed in *pesantren*.

Building on this rationale, this study adopts an integrative perspective that links digital competence frameworks with professional identity theory. It conceptualizes digital competence not merely as a set of technical skills but as a socially and morally mediated practice that contributes to the construction of professional identity. In this view, teachers actively interpret, evaluate, and regulate their use of digital technologies in response to both pedagogical demands and ethical considerations. This perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of professionalism in faith-based educational settings, where technological innovation is inseparable from value-based commitments.

This study aims to examine how English teachers in modern *pesantren* construct and negotiate their professional identity through digital competence. It focuses on how teachers conceptualize digital competence within their professional roles, how institutional and religious values shape their decisions in integrating digital technologies, and how the interaction between technological demands and moral expectations informs the enactment of teacher professionalism in a faith-based educational context.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design to explore how English teachers in modern *pesantren* construct and negotiate their professional identity in relation to digital competence. An interpretive approach was adopted as the study seeks to understand how participants make meaning of their experiences within a specific socio-cultural and religious context, rather than to generalize findings. A semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data source to capture participants' perspectives on digital competence, professional identity, and the integration of technology within *pesantren* values. This method was selected for its flexibility in eliciting in-depth reflections while allowing the researcher to probe emerging themes during the interaction.

The interview guideline was developed based on a synthesis of relevant literature on teacher professionalism by Beijaard et al., (2004), digital competence frameworks by Falloon (2020), and teacher identity in faith-based contexts by Maesaroh (2024). To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts, two in English education from *pesantren*-based university and one in Islamic pedagogy from *pesantren* context, resulting in refinements to improve clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity. A pilot interview with one English teacher outside the sample but still within the context was conducted to test the flow and comprehensibility of the questions. Minor revisions were made to reduce redundancy and encourage more reflective responses.

Table 1. The thematic sections in the interview instrument

Domains	Purposes	Questions
Professional Background	To understand participants' roles and initial views of professionalism.	"How would you describe your role and responsibility as an English teacher in this <i>pesantren</i> ?"
Digital Practice	To explore their use and perception of digital tools	"What digital tools do you use in teaching, and how do they support your instruction?"
Value Negotiation	To examine how digital practices align with <i>pesantren</i> values	"How do you ensure that the use of technology in your teaching remains aligned with <i>pesantren</i> values?"
Reframing Professionalism	To investigate changing perceptions of professionalism due to digital integration.	"In your opinion, how has the meaning of professionalism changed for <i>pesantren</i> teachers in the digital era?"
Future Development	To identify institutional support and perceived needs in the future	"What kind of support or training would help you enhance your digital teaching skills while maintaining <i>pesantren</i> values?"

A total of twelve English teachers from five modern *pesantren* across different regions of Indonesia participated in the study. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse institutional types, urban and rural *pesantren*, varying in size from small community-based schools to large modern institutions. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 1 to 20 years, reflecting both early-career and experienced teachers. This variation allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how professional identity and digital competence are interpreted across different career stages. To maintain confidentiality and ethical consideration, all institutions are presented using pseudonyms (e.g., PPS, PMDE, PMT).

Table 2. Participants' Distribution

Affiliations	Teaching Experience	Gender
PPS	10 years	Female
PPS	15 years	Male
PMDE	5 years	Male
PMDE	20 years	Female
PMT	10 years	Male
PMT	10 years	Male
PMT	3 years	Male
PMT	1 year	Male
PMT	15 years	Male
PPMA	7 years	Female
PPMA	12 years	Female
PPA	5 years	Female

The teaching experience period had prior exposure to digital tools in English instruction, though with differing levels of proficiency. Seven participants were male and five were female. This distribution provided a comprehensive perspective on how teachers from different educational and social contexts conceptualize professionalism in relation to digital transformation. Such variation also enriched the analysis by capturing both experienced teachers' reflective insights and younger educators' adaptive strategies in navigating the digital landscape within *pesantren* environments.

In light of geographical and scheduling constraints, all interviews were conducted through online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. This approach enabled the inclusion of participants from multiple regions while maintaining interactive dialogue and rapport. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and verified for accuracy. Following the transcript, coding process was conducted and iteratively refined through constant comparison across transcripts. Emerging themes were repeatedly reviewed to ensure coherence and alignment with the data. The final data were then analysed through thematic analysis following six-phase framework to identify recurring themes and patterns across responses. It was conducted inductively which

involved (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts. Participants were also given the opportunity to review and confirm their interview responses to ensure accuracy and transparency.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of their responses, while peer debriefing was conducted to review coding decisions and interpretations. An audit trail documenting the research process and analytical decisions was maintained to ensure transparency and dependability. In addition, the researcher engaged in reflexivity to critically examine potential biases in interpreting the data.

Result

The results of the study reveal a significant shift in how English teachers within Indonesia's Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren* construct and negotiate their professional identities amid rapid digital transformation. To enhance transparency, all interview excerpts were originally conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and have been translated into English, with minor editing for clarity without altering meaning. They also reveal a dynamic and, at times, contested construction of digital competence and teacher professionalism in the *pesantren* context. While many teachers embrace digital tools as part of their evolving roles, others express hesitation, limitations, and even resistance, reflecting the uneven development of digital literacy and pedagogical readiness among Indonesian teachers (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Deschênes, 2024; Tondeur et al., 2016). This variation is consistent with prior studies indicating that teachers' professional identity transformation is closely linked to institutional culture, technological access, and ongoing professional development, particularly in faith-based or culturally specific educational settings (Zein, 2017). To capture this complexity, the findings are organized into three interrelated themes.

1. Digital Competence as Pedagogical Support: Opportunity and Limitation

The interview findings reveal that English teachers in modern *pesantren* perceive digital competence as an essential component of contemporary professionalism. They interpret digital competence not merely as technical ability but as a pedagogical resource that enhances instructional quality, promotes student engagement, and aligns teaching practices with the evolving demands of 21st-century education. Teachers generally

viewed technology as a supportive extension of effective teaching, provided that its use remains consistent with the moral and spiritual framework upheld in *pesantren* education.

Many participants described digital tools as facilitating more meaningful language learning by enabling students to visualize and practice English in authentic contexts, which increased motivation and classroom participation. Teachers also associated digital competence with professional relevance, emphasizing that adapting to technological developments is necessary to maintain meaningful connections with students. For many, technology integration strengthened their sense of professionalism through creativity and instructional innovation, while also helping reshape public perceptions of *pesantren* as institutions capable of combining traditional values with modern educational practices.

Despite these positive perspectives, digital integration was not without constraints. Some teachers, particularly those with more than ten years of teaching experience, positioned themselves as partial users of technology. They demonstrated confidence in using basic tools such as presentation software and video platforms but reported limitations in exploring more advanced applications. Institutional factors also contributed to these challenges, as some senior teachers preferred traditional methods and relied on familiar platforms. Additionally, restricted student access to digital devices and unstable internet connectivity reduced the practicality of technology-based instruction, making traditional approaches more effective in certain situations.

These contrasting views suggest that while digital competence is widely valued, its implementation remains uneven and context-dependent. For some teachers, digital tools provide opportunities to enrich instruction and sustain professional relevance. For others, integration is constrained by infrastructural challenges, limited access to resources, and insufficient training opportunities. Consequently, digital competence emerges as a flexible and occasionally contested process shaped by individual readiness, institutional support, and cultural expectations.

2. Negotiating Professional Identity: Alignment, Tension, and Moral Boundaries

Teachers in *pesantren* consistently framed their professional identity as extending beyond academic instruction to encompass moral and spiritual responsibility. Within this broader framework, digital competence was not adopted uncritically; instead, it was filtered through ethical considerations and institutional values. Participants emphasized that teachers are expected to serve as role models in both character and knowledge, which requires careful consideration of how technology is used in educational settings. Although they acknowledged the benefits of digital tools, they stressed that technological practices should remain aligned with Islamic principles and should not distract students from their spiritual development.

In negotiating their engagement with digital resources, teachers demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility in selecting and adapting learning materials. Many

participants reported experiencing a sense of caution when using online content, recognizing that while numerous digital resources offer valuable learning opportunities, not all materials are suitable for *pesantren* students. As a result, teachers described modifying, filtering, or selectively adapting digital content to ensure compatibility with the cultural and religious values embedded in *pesantren* education. This practice of careful selection was also evident during classroom observations and material demonstrations, where digital resources appeared curated and adjusted rather than adopted directly from online platforms.

However, maintaining alignment between technological use and institutional values was not always straightforward. Some participants expressed concerns regarding the broader implications of digital exposure, particularly its potential to divert students' attention from their primary educational and spiritual objectives. Teachers acknowledged that excessive reliance on digital technology might lead to distractions or unintended influences on students' attitudes and behaviors. They also recognized that digital environments may introduce values or content that are inconsistent with the principles emphasized within *pesantren* settings, creating an ongoing need for vigilance and ethical judgment.

These reflections illustrate that English teachers in modern *pesantren* continuously engage in a process of negotiating their professional identity. Their professional roles require balancing the pursuit of digital literacy with the preservation of religious and cultural integrity. Teachers perceived themselves not only as facilitators of linguistic and academic development but also as moral exemplars responsible for guiding students' character formation. Consequently, their professional identity emerges as a dynamic synthesis of pedagogical innovation and spiritual responsibility, shaped by ongoing negotiation between modern educational demands and deeply rooted institutional values.

3. Redefining Professionalism: Aspiration, Adaptation, and Unequal Support

The integration of digital tools into English teaching practices has significantly reshaped how teachers in modern *pesantren* conceptualize professionalism. Interview findings indicate that teachers increasingly associate professionalism not only with subject mastery and moral integrity but also with their ability to adapt to technological developments. Digital competence has emerged as a defining feature of professional growth, reflecting a shift from traditional views of teaching toward more dynamic and digitally mediated practices. Teachers also viewed themselves as lifelong learners, emphasizing that continuous learning alongside students is an essential aspect of contemporary professionalism. While traditional attributes such as discipline and strong moral character remain highly valued, openness to technological innovation has become equally important in supporting student engagement and learning outcomes.

Teachers further emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance between technological advancement and moral guidance within the *pesantren* environment. Professionalism was described as involving a shift in mindset, where adaptability to students' needs and technological change becomes essential while remaining grounded in religious and institutional values. In this sense, digital tools were not perceived as replacements for traditional values but rather as instruments that support educational and spiritual missions. This perspective highlights that technological integration in *pesantren* settings is closely linked to ethical responsibility and institutional identity.

Despite these aspirational perspectives, the realization of digital professionalism was not experienced equally among teachers. Several participants identified structural limitations within their institutions, particularly the limited availability of professional development programs such as digital training and instructional workshops. In many cases, teachers relied on self-directed learning to improve their digital competence, indicating a gap between institutional expectations and the support provided. This uneven access contributed to differences in confidence levels, with some teachers experiencing pressure to adopt technology despite feeling insufficiently prepared.

Overall, the findings indicate that English teachers in modern *pesantren* construct digital competence as a multidimensional concept encompassing technical skills, adaptive attitudes, professional confidence, and ethical awareness. Technology is widely valued as a means of promoting pedagogical innovation, sustaining professional relevance, and supporting institutional development, while its use remains guided by the moral vision of *pesantren* education. Consequently, digital competence emerges as a reflection of balanced professionalism, integrating technological literacy with spiritual responsibility and cultural continuity.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that digital competence among English teachers in modern *pesantren* should not be understood merely as a set of technical or pedagogical skills, but as an integrated dimension of professional identity shaped by moral and spiritual considerations. This perspective extends existing digital competence frameworks such as DigCompEdu, which conceptualize digital competence as involving critical, creative, and pedagogically meaningful use of technology (Falloon, 2020). However, digital competence in practice is often influenced by contextual and cultural factors beyond technical ability (Deschênes, 2024; Tondeur et al., 2016). In the *pesantren* context, this study demonstrates that digital competence is reframed within an ethical-religious paradigm, where technology use is not only pedagogically justified but also morally regulated, reinforcing the view that professional competence is inseparable from institutional values.

This finding contributes to the literature by proposing what can be termed a value-anchored digital professionalism model, which emphasizes the inseparability of technological practice from spiritual accountability. Previous research in Islamic education has highlighted the importance of integrating ethical awareness into educational practices, yet limited studies have explored how such integration occurs at the level of everyday classroom decisions (Azhar et al., 2024; Rahayu et al., 2025). The present study supports previous study that teachers in culturally grounded educational contexts often adapt pedagogical innovations to align with institutional expectations and learner needs (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Girocki & Widodo, 2019). Unlike dominant frameworks that prioritize innovation alone, the findings here suggest that innovation in *pesantren* settings is filtered through moral reasoning, thereby reinforcing the notion that professionalism in religious institutions is defined not only by instructional competence but also by value consistency.

The process through which teachers negotiate their professional identity further illustrates the distinctiveness of the *pesantren* context. Consistent with other result, professional identity is dynamic and continuously reconstructed through interaction with social and institutional contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004). However, this study reveals that identity reconstruction in *pesantren* involves a unique tension between global digital culture and locally embedded religious norms. Similar patterns have been observed in studies, which demonstrate that teachers actively reshape their professional identities in response to contextual demands (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021). In line with (Lestari et al., 2025), who identified contextual professionalism among Indonesian educators, the present findings suggest that *pesantren* teachers transform potential tensions into opportunities for adaptation by selectively adopting digital resources and filtering content to maintain alignment with institutional values.

Importantly, this study refines existing understandings of teacher identity in digital contexts by showing that identity negotiation is not only pedagogical or institutional but also ethical. Teachers in this study positioned themselves simultaneously as facilitators of digital learning and as guardians of moral boundaries. This dual role aligns with findings reported by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), who emphasize the multidimensional nature of teacher identity, and with Korthagen (2017), who highlights the role of values and beliefs in shaping professional practice. Furthermore, studies on technology integration in religious and culturally sensitive settings indicate that teachers often assume responsibility for monitoring the ethical implications of digital content (Tondeur et al., 2016). These findings suggest that digital identity formation in *pesantren* contexts is characterized by integration rather than fragmentation, supporting the idea that hybrid professional identities can coexist harmoniously within strong moral frameworks.

Furthermore, the evolving conception of professionalism identified in this study challenges the assumption that digital transformation inevitably leads to secularization or

homogenization of teaching practices. Instead, teachers reinterpret professionalism as a fluid yet principled construct that combines technological adaptability with moral consistency. This finding resonates with research by Zein (2017), who highlight the importance of contextualizing global pedagogical practices within local cultural and institutional traditions. Similarly, Azhar et al. (2024) introduce the concept of harmonious moderation in Islamic education, suggesting that modern educational practices can coexist with religious traditions when guided by ethical considerations. The present study extends this notion by demonstrating how such moderation is enacted at the level of teacher cognition and classroom decision-making.

The insistence that technology should support rather than transform institutional missions reflects a critical stance toward digital adoption that is often underrepresented in mainstream educational discourse. Rather than adopting technology uncritically, teachers demonstrated agency in defining acceptable boundaries for its use. This observation supports prior research by Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010), which found that teachers' beliefs and professional judgment significantly influence the success of technology integration. Similarly, Howard (2013) emphasize that teacher beliefs and pedagogical values play a decisive role in shaping technology adoption practices. The present findings further nuance these perspectives by highlighting that, in faith-based educational settings, such beliefs are deeply rooted in religious and moral frameworks.

Finally, the uniqueness of the modern *pesantren* context lies in its dual institutional identity as both a religious and an increasingly modern educational environment. This hybridity creates a distinctive space in which global educational trends are not simply adopted but reinterpreted through value-based lenses. Similar conclusions have been drawn in cross-cultural studies of teacher professional development, which emphasize the role of institutional culture in shaping professional competence (Damkuviene et al., 2023; Samundeeswari, 2024). Therefore, professional development in *pesantren* contexts cannot be fully explained by conventional models derived primarily from secular educational systems. Instead, the findings call for context-sensitive frameworks that recognize the influence of faith, institutional authority, and moral values in shaping professional practice.

In sum, this study offers a conceptual contribution by articulating a model of teacher professionalism that is simultaneously digital, pedagogical, and moral. It demonstrates that in modern *pesantren*, professional identity is not fragmented by digitalization but reconfigured into an integrated form that balances innovation with spiritual responsibility. This perspective enriches the growing literature on digital competence and teacher identity by incorporating insights from faith-based educational environments, which remain underrepresented in global educational research (Beijaard et al., 2004; Tri Suryanto et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the professional identity of English teachers in modern *pesantren* is being dynamically redefined through the integration of digital competence within faith-based educational values. In doing so, the study advances a conceptual contribution through the articulation of value-anchored digital professionalism, a model in which technological practice is inseparable from spiritual accountability and institutional mission, thereby extending existing frameworks of digital competence that have largely overlooked the role of moral reasoning and religious context. The findings further highlight the teachers' perception on digital literacy not merely as a technical skill but as a moral and pedagogical responsibility that enhances their professionalism and relevance in the digital era. Thus, the teachers in *pesantren* are embodying a hybrid professionalism that harmonizes technological innovation with religious authenticity in which they adapt digital pedagogy while safeguarding spiritual principles, thus reshaping professionalism into a balanced construct of ethical digital engagement and lifelong learning. Practically, the study suggests that *pesantren* institutions should strengthen teacher development programs that integrate digital training with Islamic pedagogical values. However, this study is limited by its qualitative design, the relatively small number of participants, and its focus on specific *pesantren* contexts, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is needed to examine and refine the concept of value-anchored digital professionalism across broader educational settings, including other faith-based and non-faith-based institutions, in order to strengthen its theoretical applicability and deepen understanding of teacher identity in digitally transforming contexts.

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