
A Portrait of Self-Branding on Social Media: Understanding Islamic Values and Trends in The Digital Native Generation

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Abstract

The growth of social media has transformed how digital-native generations construct and present identity. Islamic college students face a unique challenge in balancing digital trends with Islamic values. This study examines self-branding patterns and strategies among students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University, Surabaya, focusing on Instagram and TikTok and the integration of Islamic values. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, social media observation, and documentation of six selected students, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's model and Goffman's dramaturgical framework. The findings show that students consciously curate content as digital self-presentation (front stage), while the selection process and consideration of Islamic values occur in the back stage. Self-branding combines modern visual aesthetics, personal narratives, and religious symbols presented in popular, contextual forms. Students experience dual pressures from religious expectations and social media algorithms, yet gain opportunities for networking, reputation building, and digital da'wah. The study concludes that student self-branding at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya represents a hybrid identity adapting Islamic values to contemporary digital culture.

Keyword: *Self-branding, social media, digital native generation, Islamic values, dramaturgy*

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INTRODUCTION

In this increasingly digital age, social media has become an integral part of everyday life. The phenomenon of self-branding is common among teenagers, especially university students. Social media platforms frequently used by students, such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn, are not only used as a means of communication but also as a tool for shaping one's identity through self-branding. Self-branding is the process by which individuals shape and promote themselves as selling points by highlighting their uniqueness, expertise, and personality in order to gain social and professional recognition. Self-branding on social media is often done to build one's image and expand one's network in preparation for the world of work. Personal branding can influence other people's views or perceptions of many aspects of oneself according to one's desires (Soewandi & Wijanarko, 2021).

The phenomenon of self-branding in this digital era has become one of the strategies for building and projecting one's identity. An individual actively builds their self-image to introduce their qualities, which is related to preparing for the job market that will become their future life. Explaining the self-branding strategy of the digital native generation through personalized content and social media algorithm adaptation (Abidin, 2021).

The field conditions observed by the author through interviews show how self-branding has become a dynamic field of negotiation between local and global identities. In this digital age, social media is not only a place to share moments, but also a platform for building self-image or self-branding. For students at Sunan Ampel Islamic University in Surabaya, this activity is interesting because they have to balance the desire to look attractive in the virtual world with the Islamic values upheld on campus. It turns out that self-branding is not just about likes and followers; it also affects their real relationships with friends on campus. Several recent studies show that self-branding that is too focused on image can create social distance. For example, students who actively build an “ideal” image on Instagram are sometimes considered less authentic in their daily interactions (Hasanah & Priyanto, 2022). On the other hand, some also use self-branding to expand their networks and strengthen social relationships, such as by becoming influencers in Islamic studies (Yumna et al., 2021).

Social media is now not only a place for communication, but also a platform for shaping one's identity. This is particularly interesting to observe among students at Sunan Ampel Islamic University in Surabaya, who exist in two worlds: as a tech-savvy generation (digital natives) and as inheritors of Islamic values (Fidi et al., 2023). In Surabaya, a city with high internet access and a center for

Islamic education, students at Sunan Ampel Islamic University are exposed to global trends that influence how they present themselves on social media (APJII, 2022).

Within the framework of Goffman's dramaturgy, Instagram and TikTok function as the *front stage* for students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University in Surabaya. However, from a sociological perspective, social media is also a symbolic communication space mediated by algorithms, imaginary audiences, and the logic of visibility. Students engage in the process of encoding messages through religious visuals, reflective captions, and Islamic hashtags to construct specific identity meanings, while audiences perform diverse decoding based on their social backgrounds and preferences. Interactions such as likes, comments, and shares function as communicative feedback that influences self-evaluation and subsequent adjustments to identity representation, so that the formation of Islamic identity takes place dynamically through a two-way symbolic communication process in the social media space.

Recent research has found that Muslim students often combine religious content (such as Islamic studies or stories of hijrah) with popular and contemporary styles (Muhammadiyah Mataram et al., n.d.). However, the tension between freedom of expression and pressure from the religious environment has rarely been studied in depth, especially among the digital native generation, who are more flexible in interpreting identity (Chrysostomos, 2023). This study aims to map these dynamics using a cultural sociology approach.

Digital transformation and social media in student life are growing so rapidly that they are creating a fundamental transformation in the way people build their identity. Digital transformation is the process of integrating technology to change the way people use existing technology. The changes that can result from digital transformation and social media are changes in culture and ways of thinking in order to use technology effectively.

In Indonesia, Instagram usage has increased, with internet user penetration reaching 77.02% of the total population in 2023 (APJII, 2023), with the 18-24 age group being the most active users. This phenomenon is particularly evident among university students, who are digital natives. Surabaya, as a metropolitan city, is an ideal location to observe the phenomenon of self-branding, as evidenced by the daily increase in social media usage. Goffman's theory of self-presentation (1959) has found new relevance in the digital age.

Students are actors in performances on social media platforms such as Instagram Stories and others. Self-branding among Surabaya students is not just a superficial trend, but a social phenomenon that reflects the transformation in identity construction in the digital age (Nasiroh & Afiqoh, 2023). Based on preliminary observations and exploratory interviews conducted by the researcher with 10 UINSA students in January 2025, it was revealed that informants actively and consciously curate content on social media to shape a certain self-image, including considering Islamic values in each piece of content.

Furthermore, observations of student social media content show a tendency to commodify Islamic values in creative and easily consumable forms. For example, “hijrah style” content combines modest fashion with contemporary aesthetics, while “Quran study vlogs” package religious activities in an entertaining content format. Initial field findings also reveal the double pressure faced by students (Abidin Muhja et al., n.d.). On the one hand, they face expectations from the campus environment and family to maintain their image as religious students. On the other hand, there is pressure from social media culture that encourages them to always keep up with the latest trends.

The digital native generation, born and raised in the internet era, has a unique way of using social media. For students at Sunan Ampel Islamic University in Surabaya, social media is not just a place to vent or update their status, but a stage to showcase their identity through self-branding. They skillfully combine contemporary styles with Islamic values in their content. Recent research highlights two intriguing aspects of this phenomenon. First, digital natives tend to be more bold in expressing themselves on social media, but sometimes struggle to distinguish between online and offline life (Chamadi et al., 2023).

Second, social media has become an important tool for Muslim students to build networks and reputations, while also spreading Islamic values in creative ways (Fadzilah, 2024). In Surabaya, a city of students with many well-known Islamic universities, this phenomenon of self-branding is increasingly interesting to observe. Therefore, this raises the question of whether students at Sunan Ampel Islamic University in Surabaya continue to build their self-image while upholding Islamic values that align with current digital trends.

The selection of Surabaya students as research subjects was based on unique sociological, demographic, and cultural conditions. Surabaya is the second metropolitan city that presents complex digital dynamics and has specific local characteristics. Survey results show that 83.1% of Surabaya residents are digital natives in their use of Instagram, while 16.9% of Surabaya residents use other

social media devices or applications (Azizah & Andriansyah, n.d.). They use the Instagram application. Surabaya City students come from different backgrounds, enabling them to create different environments for exploring individuals in building their self-image on their respective social media platforms.

The diverse student population in terms of socioeconomic status, multiculturalism, and equal digital access led to good results in the research process. Surabaya has a representation of the digital native generation that encourages them to use social media in their daily lives, to the extent that they spend a significant amount of time accessing these social media platforms. The fierce competition for jobs in this metropolitan area poses a challenge for students in Surabaya. Amidst the rapid pace of digitalization, self-branding among students at Sunan Ampel Islamic University in Surabaya is not just a trend, but also reflects their response to current social issues. This digital native generation often uses social media not only to showcase their personal identities but also to voice their views on various social issues, such as gender equality, diversity, and environmental issues, all framed within an Islamic perspective. For example, many PTI students raise the issue of hijrah not only as a spiritual transformation but also as part of a modern lifestyle (Alfian et al., 2023).

On the other hand, there are also those who use platforms such as TikTok or Instagram for campaigns promoting tolerance and religious moderation, responding to increasing social polarization (Saputra & Hidayat, 2022). This phenomenon shows that self-branding is no longer just about self-image but has also become a tool for engaging in broader social discourse. This study is novel in that it expands the use of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory in the context of self-branding among Islamic university students, showing that the front stage and back stage on social media are no longer merely individual social spaces but have been influenced by platform algorithms, religious audience expectations, and digital aesthetic standards. Unlike previous studies that viewed student personal branding as merely an image-building or career development strategy, this study emphasizes that students at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya undergo a simultaneous negotiation process between Islamic normative pressures and digital existence demands.

Thus, self-branding is understood as a reflective process of forming a hybrid digital Islamic identity, where Islamic values are not abandoned but rather produced and adaptively re-represented in contemporary digital spaces, distinguishing it from self-branding practices in non-religious campus contexts.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the self-branding practices of digital native students on social media in the context of Islamic values. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, strategies, and meanings constructed by students in managing their digital identities.

The research was conducted at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University in Surabaya from May to October 2025. The research subjects were determined using purposive sampling with the following criteria:

1. Students aged 18–25 years old
2. Have active social media accounts (especially Instagram)
3. Consciously engage in self-branding activities. Based on these criteria, this study involved six main informants.

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and documentation of informants' social media content. The data obtained was analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation. Data analysis used Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory to understand the practice of self-branding as a form of impression management between the front stage and back stage in social media spaces.

This study involved six informants who were purposively selected to represent UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya students who actively build their self-branding on social media. The limited number of informants requires a more critical methodological reflection, particularly regarding the social position of the informants and its implications for the research findings. The informants in this study have diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, organizational involvement, social class, and level of religiosity, which directly influence the self-branding strategies they develop.

Students with a strong Islamic organizational background tended to display more normative religious content and were careful in maintaining their moral image, while informants with a non-organizational or creative community background were more flexible in packaging Islamic symbols in an aesthetic and popular way. In terms of gender, female informants emphasize visual aspects, fashion, and gentle hijrah narratives, while male informants tend to display their religious identity through opinions, religious quotes, or social activities.

Social class differences and digital access also affect the quality of content production, frequency of uploads, and choice of platform used. Thus, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalized, but rather to provide an in-depth understanding (thick description) of how UIN students' self-branding is shaped through the interaction between personal identity, social position, and digital cultural logic.

Data Collection

In-depth Interviews. In this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews. This technique allowed the researcher to explore deeply the students' subjective experiences, understandings, and meanings related to their self-branding activities on social media.

Observation. Observation was conducted by analyzing content uploads, captions, visuals, and interaction patterns (likes, comments, and story highlights) that represent self-branding strategies and the integration of Islamic values. This technique enabled the researcher to understand the informants' self-presentation practices contextually within the digital space.

Documentation. This included screenshots of the informants' social media posts and a literature review of scientific journals, academic articles, and other written sources relevant to self-branding, social media, digital-native generations, and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Secondary data were used to strengthen the analysis and provide a theoretical foundation for the empirical findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of self-branding among UINSA students has become an inevitable practice in the context of the digital native generation. Self-branding can be defined as a deliberate step to create a solid personal image through various communication channels, both directly and on digital platforms (Maulana et al., 2025).

Understanding the concept of self, which includes individual characteristics and personal motivations, requires more in-depth development (Latif & Hariawan, 2021). The main motivations behind the practice of self-branding vary, ranging from networking, career preparation, to the expression of Islamic identity.

An in-depth analysis of the profiles and practices of the six research subjects reveals that self-branding is not a spontaneous or haphazard activity. Instead, it is a strategic process that is planned, measured, and carefully considered. Using a strategy of "planned and ethical content curation," all

sources demonstrated a high level of awareness in sorting and selecting the content to be displayed on the front stage of their social media.

Governance, as described here, also helps to ensure that they can achieve strategic goals in an efficient, clear, and accountable manner (Syuhada, W, 2025). Islamic values are not only the foundation but also serve as the main filter in every self-branding strategy that is established. The integration of Islamic values can deepen one's understanding of Islamic teachings, strengthen character, and provide support in facing moral and ethical challenges in the digital age (Eryandi, 2023).

Challenges that reflect the dynamic tension between self-expression, the demands of the digital world, and Islamic values often occur in the midst of branding carried out by students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University. The psychological burden of “pressure to appear perfect” occurs as a result of burnout and social comparison in everyday life.

Nurul Faiza revealed that staying true to oneself and not abandoning content planning is the best strategy to manage this issue (interview, 2025). Consistency in content development and effective use of social media can be measured and improve campaign performance (Roli & Artikel, 2024).

This practice has transformed into a process of self-discovery, social action, and investment in the future. One way to showcase personal branding that attracts others is through a conscious process of self-branding, which involves designing and projecting the best version of oneself, which is the meaning of “Measurable Ideal Self-Formation.”

Dakwah Bil-Hal, or preaching through actions or exemplary behavior and inspiration and education of peers, is the second meaning, namely “Instrument of Preaching and Social Contribution.” Contemporary preaching is delivered through a combination of technological innovation and Islamic values and principles in order to effectively respond to the challenges of society (Qury S, 2024).

This chapter discusses the analysis of findings on self-branding practices through the lens of Dramaturgical Theory proposed by Erving Goffman. In this theory, Goffman describes social interactions in a community as if they were a drama or theater performance taking place on stage (Luky et al., 2022).

The practice of self-branding among students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University in Surabaya takes place within a complex communication relationship between actors, audiences (followers), and institutional Islamic norms. Students not only express themselves, but also adjust their

communication strategies to the expectations of their digital audience and the image of an Islamic campus, which encourages self-censorship and message filtering to remain socially and religiously “safe.” This process demonstrates that identity formation on social media is the result of ongoing negotiation between personal expression, audience pressure, and institutional constraints, so that the identity of Muslim students is formed relationally and structurally within the digital communication space.

The findings of this study confirm the relevance of Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory in understanding students' self-branding practices on social media. Social media functions as a front stage, where students consciously curate and perform their identities (Suma Hafiz, 2025a). Photo and video posts, captions, and interactions with audiences are part of impression management efforts to shape certain perceptions. In this framework, social media is positioned as the front stage, a performance space where students consciously display a curated image of themselves.

Meanwhile, the process of content selection, visual editing, consideration of Islamic values, and discussions with friends before uploading content represent the backstage, a private space where identity is prepared before being displayed to the public. These findings indicate that student self-branding is not merely an expression of self, but a social practice laden with symbolic calculations. The analysis shows that all informants use Instagram as their main stage to display certain self-performances, such as the image of a religious-modern student, an intellectual, an active member of an organization, or a young professional.

Posts in the form of aesthetic photos, reflective captions with Islamic nuances, academic achievements, and organizational activities are forms of performance that are deliberately displayed to create a certain impression in front of the audience (Zaid et al., 2022). Students do not completely blend into global trends, but they also do not shut themselves off from the logic of social media. They play the role of “modern Muslim students,” a social role that is accepted by the audience and is in line with the institutional values of the campus.

The analysis of the self-branding phenomenon among students at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya in this study is not only understood through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, but also deepened by contemporary religious sociology discourse (Pradina & Azizah, 2025). The findings show that the practice of presenting religious content that is aesthetic, consistent, and easily consumed by

the public reflects what is called performative religiosity, namely, religious practices that are not only oriented towards spiritual appreciation but also towards how religion is presented and validated in the digital public sphere.

Furthermore, the tendency of students to package Islamic symbols such as hijrah, studies, Muslim clothing, and Islamic motivational narratives into popular visual formats indicates a process of commodification of religious symbols, where religious values function simultaneously as content, identity, and social appeal. In this context, religion is not only a system of meaning, but also acts as symbolic capital that can increase students' social legitimacy, credibility, and bargaining position in the digital space, as explained in Pierre Bourdieu's perspective on symbolic capital (Dwi Fitriyanti & Anggur, 2025). Thus, the self-branding practices of students at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya can be understood as a hybrid process between identity performance, symbolic strategy, and expressions of religiosity that are actively negotiated within the logic of digital culture.

The concept of double pressure in this study is not only understood as a personal experience of students, but as structural pressure that works through power relations between institutional religious norms and the algorithmic logic of social media (Hannan, 2024). On the one hand, students at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya are subject to religious demands that are institutionalized through the Islamic identity of the campus, collective moral norms, and the expectations of a religious audience that judges the appropriateness of Islamic expression.

On the other hand, social media algorithms function as a power structure that regulates visibility, determines what content is considered "appropriate to display," and promotes certain aesthetic standards and narratives that have the potential to reduce the complexity of religious experiences (Yanuar, 2025). In this relationship, the most benefited parties are students with adequate symbolic and cultural capital, such as content production skills, high digital literacy, and access to popular Islamic symbols, because they can more easily adapt to algorithmic demands without losing religious legitimacy.

Conversely, students with limited digital capital or interpretations of Islam that do not align with digital market tastes tend to be marginalized, either through algorithmic invisibility or social criticism. Thus, the practice of religious self-branding does not take place in a neutral space, but rather within power structures that reproduce symbolic inequality, where religion functions both as a source of moral legitimacy and an instrument of social differentiation in the digital space.

The discussion in this study not only summarizes empirical findings but also places them in critical dialogue with contemporary religious sociology theory and literature. Findings regarding the self-branding practices of students at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya show that religious expression on social media can be understood through Erving Goffman's dramaturgy framework, in which students consciously manage the front stage and back stage of their Islamic identity (Suma Hafiz, 2025).

However, this study expands this framework by showing that religious self-presentation does not take place in a neutral social interaction space, but is shaped by algorithmic structures and institutional religious norms, as discussed in the literature on religion in digital spaces. It also affirms the concept of performative religiosity, in which religiosity functions not only as spiritual appreciation but also as a symbolic performance that is publicly assessed and validated. Furthermore, the tendency of students to package Islamic symbols in popular visual formats indicates a process of commodification of religion, which reinforces the argument that religion in digital space functions as symbolic capital to gain social legitimacy and visibility.

Theoretically, these findings have implications for enriching the study of the sociology of religion by emphasizing that the religious practices of the digital native generation need to be understood as a hybrid process between faith, symbolic strategies, and digital power relations, thus opening up space for the development of religious theories that are more sensitive to the context of social media and algorithmic culture.

The practice of self-branding among students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University in Surabaya is a cultural practice that utilizes symbols, visual aesthetics, and reflective narratives as cultural codes in digital culture. Symbols such as hijrah style, religious-modern visuals, and reflective captions serve to mark the identity of modern Muslims who are hybrid, namely a combination of Islamic values and digital trends. Through aesthetic and moderate visual curation, students not only display personal piety but also build identities that are recognizable, accepted, and socially validated on social media.

From a cultural sociology perspective, these symbols are produced and negotiated through interactions between individuals, audiences, and platform algorithms. Within Pierre Bourdieu's framework, this modern religious aesthetic shapes new cultural tastes among Muslim students and becomes a source of symbolic legitimacy. Mastery of visual codes and narratives that are considered

“religious yet relevant” results in social recognition, even though this legitimacy is dynamic and constantly changing in line with developments in digital trends and Islamic values.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that students' self-branding practices on social media at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University Surabaya are conscious, strategic, and socially meaningful. As digital natives, students utilize social media not only as a space for self-expression but also as a means of simultaneously building their professional, religious, and social identities. Self-branding is not singular but manifests in various patterns that encompass academic identity, adaptive Islamic values, and authentic personal lifestyles.

The research findings confirm that Islamic values remain an important foundation in the process of shaping students' self-image, even though they are expressed through digital formats and aesthetics that follow global trends. This integration reflects the hybridity of identity, in which students negotiate between religious demands, campus social expectations, and the logic of social media based on popularity and visibility.

From the perspective of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, social media can be seen as a front stage where students perform curated identities, while the processes of selection, editing, and ethical considerations take place behind the scenes (back stage). This process shows that self-branding is not merely an individual activity, but a social practice influenced by audiences, institutional norms, and digital validation mechanisms such as likes and comments.

Overall, this study concludes that self-branding among Islamic university students in the digital age functions not only as a personal strategy but also as a reflection of broader social dynamics. This phenomenon shows how young Muslims strive to maintain Islamic values amid the tide of digital culture, while utilizing social media as symbolic capital to build their academic and professional futures.

The self-branding practices of students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University in Surabaya show that packaging Islamic values in popular, algorithmically driven visual formats is inseparable from the logic of the digital culture market. Religious content, such as hijrah-style, short studies, or aesthetic reflective narratives, serves not only as expressions of faith but also as symbolic commodities that are valuable in the social media attention economy. Likes, views, and engagement become

indicators of religious performance success, so that Islamic values risk being reduced to performative, quantitatively measurable practices.

However, this commodification process does not completely negate student agency. The findings show that there are reflective efforts to filter trends, limit exposure, and redefine Islamic representation so that it remains in line with personal values and religious ethics. Thus, the practice of self-branding is caught between the demands of platform capitalism and student cultural creativity. Social media has become an arena for negotiating meaning, where the identities and religiosity of young Muslims are not only reproduced according to market logic, but also critically negotiated within contemporary digital culture.

Research findings show that the self-branding practices of students at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University Surabaya ,as a means of digital da'wah ,are caught between reflective religious messages and the demands of popular communication, which is concise, visual, and algorithmic. From a sociological communication perspective, Islamic values in social media content are often simplified to make them easier to consume and align with the platform's visibility logic, such as short durations, aesthetic visuals, and concise narratives. This process has the potential to reduce the complexity of religious messages into a more performative and popular form of communication, although on the other hand, it also opens up space for adaptation and creativity among students in packaging da'wah so that it remains relevant and acceptable to digital audiences.

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