Between Tradition and Digitalisation: Negotiated Mediation in Early Childhood Parenting Among Kiai Families in Sumenep Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how Kiai families in Sumenep, Madura, mediate digital technology in early childhood parenting through value-based filtering grounded in Islamic traditions.

Design/methods/approach – An ethnographic study with phenomenological sensitivity was conducted over four months. Data were collected through participatory observation of five kiai families and in-depth interviews with ten key informants (five kiai and five nyai). Thematic analysis was employed, involving open coding, axial coding, and interpretive synthesis to identify patterns of technology negotiation.

Findings – Kiai families predominantly refused children's ownership of personal digital devices, prioritising direct parent-child interaction and physical play. Technology access was filtered through religious considerations, with children exposed only to pre-selected Islamic content under strict parental supervision. However, enforcement remained inconsistent due to practical constraints, and indirect exposure through extended family networks produced observable behavioural changes, including adoption of digital expressions, reduced participation in religious routines, and shifts from active to passive play. Nyai reported greater stress in managing boundary violations, revealing gendered dimensions of mediation labour. Interpretations of problematic change were contested across kiai, nyai, and non-kiai informants.

Research implications/limitations – This study demonstrates that resistance to digital parenting reflects value-based negotiation rather than technological illiteracy, challenging dominant digital parenting frameworks widely used in scholarship worldwide. By introducing negotiated mediation, the study extends parental mediation theory by foregrounding religious authority and culturally embedded conceptions of childhood as analytically significant. Limitations include the small sample size, cultural specificity of the pesantren context in Sumenep, the four-month observation period, and potential researcher bias. Findings may not be directly transferable to other religious or non-religious settings.

Practical implications – Community-based digital parenting programmes should integrate religious perspectives and involve local religious leaders to increase acceptance. Educational interventions must balance digital literacy with the preservation of community values rather than imposing universal models.

Originality/value – This study introduces negotiated mediation as an analytical framework explaining how religious authority shapes parental responses to digitalisation through dialectical processes between Islamic values and technological realities. It addresses a gap in the digital parenting literature by foregrounding perspectives from a religiously conservative community, thereby challenging urban-centric and secular assumptions in existing research.

Keywords Negotiated mediation, Digital parenting, Kiai families, Parly childhood, Parental mediation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has reshaped family life and parenting practices worldwide (Livingstone et al., 2017; Mascheroni & Holloway, 2019). Children now encounter digital devices from infancy, prompting parents to develop new strategies for mediating their children's technology use (Mohamed et al., 2025; Nikken & Schols, 2015). This has given rise to the concept of digital parenting, which refers to parental practices aimed at guiding, supervising, and regulating children's engagement with digital media (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). While digital parenting frameworks have been extensively studied through urban, Western, and secular lenses (Reich et al., 2025), considerably less attention has been paid to how religious communities negotiate technology use for early childhood care, particularly when parenting is grounded through faith-based values and community traditions.

Existing research on digital parenting predominantly reflects urban-centric and individualistic assumptions, often framing parental engagement with technology as a matter of technical skill development or risk management (Çalhan & Göksu, 2024; Rudnova et al., 2023). Studies have examined authoritative, permissive, and democratic parenting styles related to digital media (Nurhayati et al., 2024; Zheng, 2025), yet few have explored how religious values and community traditions inform parental responses to digitalisation. This gap is pronounced when examining early childhood, where the intersection of faith-based parenting and digital mediation remains underexamined (Qayyum et al., 2025). The Global South, including religiously conservative communities such as Islamic pesantren families, remains largely absent from digital parenting scholarship despite representing substantial populations with distinct value systems (Salim et al., 2025).

Addressing this gap is important because evidence indicates that unregulated digital exposure in early childhood is associated with developmental risks, including digital addiction, diminished emotional regulation, and reduced face-to-face social interaction (Elkin et al., 2025; Şenol et al., 2024). Responses to these risks vary considerably across cultural and religious settings (Kapoor et al., 2024). Where parenting is deeply embedded through religious traditions, technology is not simply a neutral tool but a potential carrier of external values that may conflict with established moral frameworks. Understanding how such communities negotiate digital technology is therefore critical for developing culturally responsive and inclusive approaches to digital parenting education.

This study examines how Kiai families from Sumenep, Madura, mediate digital technology when raising young children. Kiai are Islamic religious scholars who hold moral and spiritual authority within pesantren communities across Indonesia. Their families maintain parenting practices grounded in Islamic teachings, emphasising adab (proper conduct), spiritual closeness, and role modelling for parents. The central analytical framework employed in this study is negotiated mediation. This conceptual mechanism describes the dynamic process by which Kiai families selectively filter, adapt, and regulate the use of digital technology in accordance with Islamic values and pesantren traditions (Arofah et al., 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2024).

Negotiated mediation operates as an analytical tool for understanding how religious authority shapes parental technology decisions in contexts where faith-based values take precedence over secular developmental models. This framework acknowledges that technology engagement among religiously conservative communities is neither wholesale acceptance nor outright rejection, but rather a value-based negotiation process in which religious teachings provide explicit criteria for determining what constitutes appropriate technology use. Unlike the term "resistance," which carries political and antagonistic connotations suggesting defiance against technological modernity, negotiated mediation foregrounds agency, intentionality, and moral deliberation, positioning religious families as active evaluators who apply comprehensive ethical frameworks rather than passive recipients resisting inevitable change.

The concept of negotiated mediation extends existing parental mediation theory (Livingstone et al., 2017; Ren, 2023) by foregrounding three distinctive elements. First, it centres religious authority as the primary lens through which technology decisions are evaluated, shifting the focus from age appropriateness or content safety to questions of spiritual alignment and moral

formation. Second, it emphasises community embeddedness, recognizing that individual parenting decisions are shaped by collective values and the social expectations of pesantren networks rather than purely individualistic cost-benefit analyses. Third, it introduces the concept of temporal prioritisation, in which technology engagement is deliberately delayed to allow the establishment of strong ethical foundations through traditional parenting methods before children independently encounter digital media.

To enhance its analytical rigor, negotiated mediation is conceptualised in this study as a theoretically bounded and operationalisable mechanism rather than a descriptive category. Operationally, negotiated mediation refers to a value-oriented process in which parents selectively permit, restrict, or delay children's engagement with digital technology according to explicit religious–moral criteria. It comprises three core components: normative evaluation, whereby religious teachings function as the primary framework for assessing digital practices; contextual regulation, in which mediation strategies are continuously adjusted in relation to community norms and institutional expectations; and temporal sequencing, which prioritises ethical and spiritual formation before sustained digital exposure. Conceptually, negotiated mediation is limited to contexts in which parental authority is embedded in collective moral systems, thereby distinguishing it from classical models of parental mediation that emphasise age-appropriateness, risk management, or individual parental agency. By foregrounding moral reasoning and religious authority as central mediating forces, negotiated mediation provides a transferable analytical lens for examining digital parenting in faith-based and culturally conservative settings beyond secular and urban paradigms.

Through this analytical lens, the study addresses three research questions. First, how do Kiai families mediate the use of digital technology when raising young children? Second, how do religious values shape their perceptions of technology use in relation to children's development? Third, what behavioural and cultural changes are observed among children despite parental efforts to regulate digital exposure? These questions illuminate the specific practices, justifications, and challenges that characterise digital mediation in a religiously conservative setting, offering empirical insight into how negotiated mediation operates in everyday family life.

This study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it introduces negotiated mediation as an analytical framework for understanding how religious authority shapes parental strategies in the digital era, offering a counterpoint to secular and individualistic models that predominate in the digital parenting literature. Empirically, it foregrounds the perspectives of an underrepresented community, specifically pesantren families from rural Indonesia, thereby expanding the geographic and cultural scope of digital parenting research beyond Western urban contexts. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of ethnographic inquiry for capturing the lived experiences and moral reasoning of religious families, providing thick description that enhances the transferability of findings to similar settings. By addressing these dimensions, the study contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of digital parenting across diverse cultural and religious settings—these challenging assumptions position technological adaptation as a universal developmental imperative.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed an ethnographic design with a phenomenological sensitivity to explore how Kiai families negotiate the use of digital technology when raising young children. Ethnography was chosen because the research aimed to understand socio-cultural practices, value systems, and family interactions embedded within the pesantren community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Spradley, 2019). Phenomenological sensitivity was integrated to capture the lived experiences and subjective meanings that participants construct regarding technology use and religious-based parenting (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Van Manen, 2017). The epistemological stance draws from interpretivism, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings that individuals and communities ascribe to their experiences (Burns et al., 2022). This combination allowed the study to examine both observable patterns of behaviour and the

interpretive frameworks through which Kiai families make sense of digital mediation, aligning with the research aim of foregrounding perspectives from a religiously conservative community whose responses to digitalisation are shaped by Islamic values and pesantren traditions.

2.2. Participants and Sampling Technique

The study was conducted across five pesantren-affiliated households in Sumenep Regency, Madura, Indonesia, a region recognized for its strong Islamic scholarly tradition, in which kiai serve as both religious authorities and moral exemplars. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with maximum variation Patton, (2020) to capture diverse expressions of negotiated mediation across different family structures, pesantren sizes, and levels of digital exposure. The selection of five kiai families was justified by theoretical saturation principles (Saunders et al., 2018), as the fifth family's data patterns demonstrated coherence with no substantially new themes emerging. This sample size aligns with the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2021), where fewer participants are justified when the study aim is narrow, the sample is specific, the quality of dialogue is high, and the analysis is supported by established theory.

The families were deliberately chosen to represent variation across pesantren size (50 to 300+ students), family structure (nuclear versus extended households), children's ages (3 to 7 years), and levels of indirect digital exposure. Access required extensive trust-building through formal introductions facilitated by local pesantren networks over a two-month preliminary period. Five families constituted the maximum feasible sample given the intensive ethnographic approach, which involved three visits per week over four months per family. The primary participant group consisted of ten key informants (five kiai and five nyai) who were interviewed in depth and observed. At the same time, three non-kiai families from the same communities provided a comparative perspective on whether technology mediation patterns were distinctive to families with religious authority or reflected broader community norms.

Table 1. Characteristics of Key Informants and Data Collection Methods

Informant Code	Status	Role in Family	Pesantren Location	Data Collection Methods
K1	Kiai	Head of household, religious teacher	Pesantren A, Batuan District	In-depth interview (90 min), Participatory observation, Field documentation
N1	Nyai	Mother, household manager, informal educator	Pesantren A, Batuan District	In-depth interview (85 min), Participatory observation
K2	Kiai	Head of household, pesantren director	Pesantren B, Dungkek District	In-depth interview (95 min), Participatory observation, Field documentation
N2	Nyai	Mother, Qur'anic teacher for female students	Pesantren B, Dungkek District	In-depth interview (80 min), Participatory observation
K3	Kiai	Head of household, Islamic scholar	Pesantren C, Saronggi District	In-depth interview (70 min), Participatory observation, Field documentation
N3	Nyai	Mother, children's primary caregiver	Pesantren C, Saronggi District	In-depth interview (75 min), Participatory observation
K4	Kiai	Head of household, Arabic language teacher	Pesantren D, Gapura District	In-depth interview (88 min), Participatory observation, Field documentation
N4	Nyai	Mother, household educator	Pesantren D, Gapura District	In-depth interview (82 min), Participatory observation
K5	Kiai	Head of household, pesantren founder	Pesantren E, Bluto District	In-depth interview (92 min), Participatory observation, Field documentation

Informant Code	Status	Role in Family	Pesantren Location	Data Collection Methods
N5	Nyai	Mother, religious counselor for mothers in the community	Pesantren E, Bluto District	In-depth interview (78 min), Participatory observation

Table 2. Comparative Non-Kiai Informants

Informant Code	Status	Role in Family	Location	Data Collection Methods
NK1	Non-kiai father	Farmer, santri parent	Pesantren A community	Semi-structured interview (45 min), Informal observation
NK2	Non-kiai mother	Trader, santri parent	Pesantren C community	Semi-structured interview (50 min), Informal observation
NK3	Non-kiai father	Fisherman, santri parent	Pesantren E community	Semi-structured interview (40 min), Informal observation

Kiai participants were selected based on their recognised status as religious authorities within their pesantren or local community, their active role in teaching Islamic knowledge, their direct involvement in everyday child-rearing decisions, and their responsibility for at least one child aged 3–7 years residing in the household. Nyai participants were included due to their marital relationship with the participating kiai and their substantive involvement in parenting practices. All participants provided informed consent after receiving a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. To ensure complete comprehension, consent materials were made available in both Indonesian and Madurese.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected over four months, from July to October 2024, through participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Participatory observation with moderate involvement was conducted three times per week for each family, with visits lasting two to three hours per session. During these sessions, the researcher observed mealtimes, religious instruction, children's play activities, parental interactions with digital devices, and extended family visits. Field notes were written immediately after each session, following structured observation protocols that documented descriptive observations, reflective notes on emerging patterns, methodological decisions, and theoretical connections to the negotiated mediation framework. Visual documentation of play areas and household technology arrangements was gathered with explicit permission to support descriptive analysis. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with ten key informants, consisting of five kiai and five nyai, lasting 60 to 95 minutes and audio-recorded with consent. The interviews addressed perceptions of digital technology, parenting practices in managing children's device use, religious values shaping technology-related decisions, observed changes in children's behaviour due to digital exposure, and reflections on balancing traditional values with technological adaptation. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, with occasional code-switching to Madurese; they were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis, with back-translation checks performed by a bilingual research assistant to ensure semantic accuracy.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic approach, informed by interpretative phenomenological principles and structured coding procedures, and unfolded in three phases. First, transcripts and field notes were repeatedly read to develop a deep familiarity with the data, and initial codes were generated inductively by identifying recurring phrases, practices, concepts, and themes, without imposing predetermined categories. Second, relationships among initial codes were examined through axial coding, in which related codes were grouped thematically and constant comparison across data sources was conducted to identify patterns and variations. Third, core themes were identified that connected categories into a coherent narrative addressing the research questions, with three primary themes emerging: mediation strategies for digital

technology, technology presence within households, and observed behavioural changes in children. These themes were refined through iterative cycles of coding and interpretation. NVivo 12 was used to organise data, manage codes, and track code development across the dataset; manual coding was performed first to maintain close engagement with the data, with NVivo serving as an organisational tool rather than for automated analysis. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the analysis to document interpretive decisions, emerging insights, and potential biases, with regular entries reflecting on the researcher's positionality as a non-pesantren-affiliated outsider and how this might influence interpretations of religious practices.

2.5. Research Ethics

Ethical principles guided the entire research process to ensure participants' rights and the study's integrity. All informants were clearly informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their freedom to withdraw at any time, after which verbal and written consent was obtained. Confidentiality was protected by using pseudonyms and secure data storage. To enhance credibility, triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents, while member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants for validation. These measures ensured that the research adhered to professional ethical standards and accurately respected participants' perspectives.

3. Result

This section presents empirical findings derived from four months of ethnographic fieldwork involving five kiai families in Sumenep, Madura. Data analysis followed an iterative thematic approach, beginning with open coding of interview transcripts and field notes to identify recurring statements and practices. Axial coding then grouped related codes into broader categories such as device prohibition practices, content filtering strategies, and observed behavioural changes among children. Selective coding identified three core themes that address the research questions on how Kiai families negotiate digital technology when raising young children. Findings are organised into four subsections that present patterns in mediation strategies, the presence of technology within households, observed changes in children's behaviour, and the dialectical emergence of negotiated mediation. Throughout this section, participant voices from both kiai and nyai are represented proportionally, and tensions between stated principles and actual practices are examined to provide a dialectical rather than normative account of negotiated mediation.

3.1. Mediation Strategies for Digital Technology in Early Childhood

Kiai families demonstrated diverse approaches to managing digital technology for young children. Four out of five Kiai families explicitly prohibited children from owning personal digital devices, such as smartphones or tablets. In contrast, one family allowed limited, supervised access to a shared family tablet under strict conditions. The rationales underlying these decisions revealed both convergence and divergence across informants. Kiai consistently emphasised theological concerns about content misalignment and the protection of children's fitrah or natural spiritual disposition. Nyai perspectives foregrounded distinct concerns regarding relational quality, developmental wellbeing, and pragmatic challenges. The nyai whose family permitted limited tablet access expressed ambivalence about whether controlled exposure to tablets helped children learn necessary technology skills or introduced problems into the home.

Observational data corroborated verbal accounts but also revealed inconsistencies. Field notes documented three instances in which children aged 6-7 were observed using their parents' smartphones without active supervision for periods exceeding 15 minutes, typically when parents were occupied with household tasks or receiving guests. Member checking sessions led two nyai to acknowledge that enforcement weakened during busy periods due to practical necessity. Comparison across families showed that the decision to permit limited tablet access created tension with community norms, as other mothers questioned whether this practice compromised religious principles.

Interview data revealed three distinct patterns of mediation strategies. Through thematic analysis comparing responses across all ten key informants, these patterns consistently appeared in verbal narratives, though with varying emphases between kiai and nyai. Table 3 presents representative statements from both kiai and nyai informants that illustrate these three patterns and demonstrate how mediation strategies are justified through religious, pedagogical, and practical reasoning.

Table 3. Patterns of Mediation Strategies for Digital Technology Among Kiai Families

Mediation Pattern	Frequency	Representative Statement (Kiai)	Representative Statement (Nyai)	Observed Practice
Device Prohibition	4 out of 5 families	*"We do not give children their own devices because they need to learn from us directly, not from screens. Their minds are still forming, and we must guide them ourselves." (K1)*	*"When children have devices, they stop talking to us. They become quiet, isolated. I want my children to play with soil, help me in the kitchen, ask questions." (N2)*	Children were not observed independently using smartphones or tablets in most contexts, although exceptions occurred during busy household periods.
Content Filtering	5 out of 5 families	*"If we show them something, it must be Islamic content that we have already watched ourselves. We choose videos of Quranic recitation or stories about prophets, never cartoons or entertainment." (K2*	*"I screen everything before they watch. But sometimes relatives show videos I have not approved, and I must intervene politely to maintain family harmony." (N4)*	Parents pre-screen all digital content. Children watched videos on parental devices under supervision, though extended family members sometimes bypassed this filtering.
Emphasis on Physical Interaction	5 out of 5 families	*"Children need to run, play with soil, help in the kitchen, learn by doing with their hands. Sitting with a screen makes them passive and disconnected from reality." (K4)*	*"Physical play teaches patience, cooperation, problem-solving. These lessons disappear when children only watch screens." (N1)*	Daily schedules prioritised outdoor play, household chores, and participation in family activities, though adherence varied by weather and family circumstances.

Mediation strategies were not framed as resistance to technology itself, but rather as selective regulation grounded in religious values, developmental beliefs, and practical constraints. Triangulation across data sources revealed tensions between stated ideals and lived realities. A comparison of kiai and nyai perspectives showed that kiai articulated mediation in theological terms, such as fitrah, tarbiyah, and barakah. Nyai more frequently referenced relational quality and practical management challenges. Comparison of verbal statements with observational data revealed that device prohibition was enforced more strictly when researchers or community members were present than during informal household contexts. This finding demonstrates that Kiai families mediate access to digital technology through the prohibition of personal device ownership, strict content filtering, and the prioritisation of physical interaction as pedagogical tools. These strategies are negotiated through ongoing dialogue between theological ideals, parenting pragmatism, and community expectations rather than implemented uniformly.

3.2. Technology Presence within Kiai Families

Technology remained ubiquitously present in adult use and extended family interactions, despite explicit mediation strategies that limited children's direct access. Observations revealed that parents and older siblings regularly used smartphones for communication and occasionally

accessed YouTube for religious content. Children were exposed to technology indirectly when family members used devices in shared spaces. Kiai generally framed adult technology use as justified by productive purposes and adult maturity. Nyai's perspectives revealed greater awareness of children's observational learning and the contradictions between parental rhetoric and behaviour. They described telling children that screens are harmful, even as children observe parents constantly using screens. Some nyai described feelings of guilt when recording children's Quranic recitation to share with distant relatives, then seeing children ask to watch the video repeatedly.

Field notes documented several instances of indirect exposure, revealing gaps between stated principles and actual practices. At one household, a four-year-old son watched attentively while his mother scrolled through WhatsApp status updates and later mimicked recitation phrases he had seen. At another household, children periodically glanced at screens and responded to visual content when their father watched Islamic lectures. The most challenging issue emerged through extended family interactions. Four out of five families reported that relatives visiting the home would show children videos without seeking parental permission. Parents acknowledged they could not control what relatives showed their children during celebrations without appearing rude or disrespectful. Comparison across informants revealed that the nyai experienced greater stress from these boundary violations because they were more frequently present during visits and bore responsibility for managing children's behaviour. This gendered dimension was largely absent from kiai narratives.

Parents across families used technology selectively for documenting family religious activities. These recordings were shared through private WhatsApp groups. This practice generated unintended consequences. Kiai reported that children now perform for the camera rather than for God, and their intention shifts from spiritual practice to social performance. Nyai added that when families share videos of children, it becomes a competition about whose child recites better or has better adab. Table 4 presents examples of how technology appeared within Kiai households, illustrating gaps between stated mediation principles and actual domestic practices.

Three patterns emerged from technology presence data triangulated across kiai narratives, nyai narratives, and observational documentation. Technology served as a tool for documenting and sharing family spiritual practices, yet it introduced unintended performativity into religious education. Children's exposure to religious digital content was carefully controlled, yet even controlled exposure produced behavioural changes. Extended family members created the most challenging situations for maintaining consistent mediation practices because gendered family hierarchies constrained nyai's ability to enforce boundaries. A comparison of kiai and nyai perspectives revealed that kiai emphasised the justifiability of adult technology use for professional and religious purposes. Nyai more frequently articulated concerns about contradictions between parental rhetoric and behaviour. Comparison of verbal statements with observational data revealed that the presence of technology in shared family spaces was more pervasive than informants initially reported. This finding indicates that religious values shape technology use through the selective incorporation of digital media to document spiritual moments, while simultaneously attempting to limit children's independent access. The practical realities of adult technology dependence, extended family dynamics, and the impossibility of complete environmental control continually renegotiate these efforts.

3.3. Observed Changes in Children's Behaviour

Systematic observations revealed behavioural changes in children from indirect digital exposure, with divergent interpretations across kiai, nyai, and non-kiai informants regarding problematic development versus normal adaptation. Parents in all five families reported changes in speech patterns, including the use of YouTube phrases despite limited exposure; Kiai viewed this as cultural contamination, while nyai questioned the pathologization of linguistic adaptation. Two nyai noted a decline in interest in traditional games, as children preferred video content and enacted "making videos" scenarios. Four families reported difficulties sustaining Quranic recitation after media exposure, with children exhibiting fidgeting and losing focus; one nyai

suggested adjusting expectations for young children, prompting a kiai objection to accommodating shortened attention spans. Table 5 presents triangulated behavioural changes across all informant groups.

Table 4. Technology Presence and Usage Patterns in Kiai Family Environments

Context of Exposure	Frequency	Typical Scenario	Kiai Perspective	Nyai Perspective	Observed Practice
Parental Device Use	Daily in all five families	Parents use smartphones to communicate via WhatsApp and access Islamic content while children are present in the same room.	*"This is professional need and religious learning, not entertainment. Adults can discern beneficial content." (K2).*	*"We tell children screens are not good, but they see us using screens constantly. The contradiction troubles me." (N1)*	Parents attempted to angle screens away from children but did not leave the room to use devices. Children frequently observe screens peripherally.
Documentation of Religious Activities	Weekly in 4 families	Parents record videos of children reciting the Quran or participating in family prayers to share with relatives.	*"Recording helps us share our children's spiritual progress with grandparents who live far away. This strengthens family bonds." (K1).*	*"Recording changes how children approach religious practice. They perform for the camera rather than for spiritual growth. Their intention becomes external rather than internal." (N1)*	Children demonstrated awareness of being recorded, with observable shifts in demeanor and performance quality when cameras appeared.
Extended Family Visits	2-3 times per month in 3 families	Relatives visiting the home show children photos or videos on their smartphones, sometimes without asking permission.	*"We cannot forbid relatives without appearing rude. During Eid, our mediation rules break down." (K3)*	*"My husband can tell his mother not to show videos, but if I do, I am seen as disrespectful. I must tolerate practices I disagree with." (N4)*	Researchers observed multiple instances in which extended family members provided children with devices without parental permission. Parents responded with subtle discomfort but rarely intervened directly.
Exposure to Religious Content	2-3 times per week in 5 families	Children watch pre-selected Islamic videos showing prophetic stories or Quranic recitations on parental devices under supervision.	*"Islamic content is educational and aligns with our values. This is different from entertainment media." (K2)*	*"Even Islamic content makes children restless afterward. They want to watch more, they negotiate. The medium itself creates dependency." (N4)*	Parents maintained physical proximity during viewing. Children repeatedly requested viewing of their favorite segments, demonstrating the formation of preferences, including for religious content.

Table 5. Observed Behavioural Changes in Children Related to Digital Exposure

Type of Change	Frequency	Specific Observation	Kiai Interpretation	Nyai Interpretation	Non-Kiai Interpretation
Language Patterns	Observed in 3 families	Children aged 5-7 began using English phrases like "like and subscribe" during play, imitating YouTuber speaking styles.	*"These phrases represent cultural contamination and adoption of foreign values incompatible with Islamic adab and Madurese identity." (K3)*	*"Children have always mimicked what they observe. I worry more about the intent behind the speech than the speech itself." (N5)*	*"The world is changing. Children must learn to navigate both traditional and modern ways of speaking." (NK1)*
Play Preferences	Reported by four families	Children showed reduced interest in traditional outdoor games and instead requested to watch videos on parental devices.	*"Traditional games teach cooperation and physical problem-solving. Video watching teaches passivity and consumption." (K5)*	*"I want outdoor play, but I also need children occupied safely while I manage household and teaching responsibilities. This is a practical reality." (N5)*	*"My children still play outside when the weather permits. The change is not as dramatic as some parents describe." (NK2)*
Religious Routine Participation	Observed in 5 families	Children demonstrated shorter attention spans during evening Quran recitation sessions, particularly on days when they had previously watched digital content.	*"Visual stimulation from screens diminishes capacity for quiet spiritual activities. We should protect children's attention spans by limiting technology." (K3)*	*"Perhaps we need to adjust the length of recitation sessions to match young children's developmental capacities rather than blame technology." (N3)*	*"Children's restlessness during religious activities is normal developmental behaviour, not necessarily caused by technology." (NK1)*
Imitative Behaviour	Observed in 2 families	Children mimicked gestures and vocal tones from digital content during pretend play, for example, by making hand gestures associated with video introductions.	*"Children are internalizing performance culture from media. Their play becomes about attention-seeking rather than authentic exploration." (K4)*	*"Imitative play has always been how children learn social roles. The content has changed, but the mechanism is the same." (N2)*	*"Children copy what interests them. This is a natural learning process." (NK3)*

Activity tracking data collected during a two-week intensive period supplemented these observations. Graph 1 illustrates shifts in how children allocated daily activity time, comparing baseline patterns with patterns after repeated digital exposure. Physical play declined from approximately 40% to 30% of daily activity time. Interpretations of this decline varied. Kiai attributed it primarily to digital exposure. Nyai noted confounding factors, including rainy-season weather. Non-kiai offered developmental perspectives that children naturally spend less time in unstructured physical play as they approach school age. Religious activities remained stable at

20%, although the quality of engagement varied. Passive observation increased from 5% to 10%, primarily during extended family visits or when parents used devices in shared spaces.
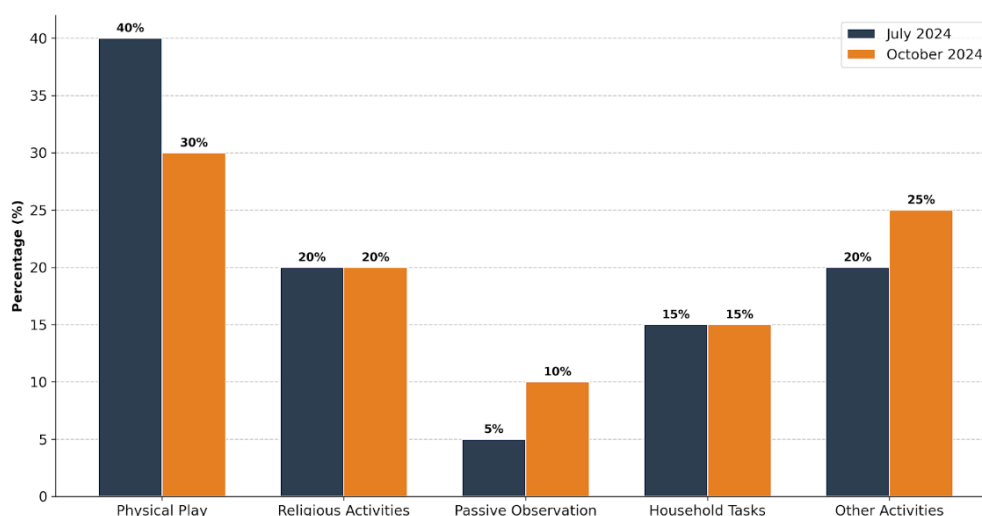

Figure 1. Changes in Children's Daily Activity Patterns Across Four-Month Observation Period

Triangulation across data sources revealed several tensions. All kiai and most nyai reported concern about behavioural changes. Three non-kiai parents characterized these same changes as normal developmental variation or necessary adaptation. This suggests that the interpretation of what constitutes problematic change is shaped by religious authority and pedagogical values rather than being self-evident. Kiai attributed behavioural changes primarily to digital exposure and interpreted them as evidence of harmful influence. Nyai more frequently acknowledged multiple contributing factors, including weather, developmental stages, and family circumstances. Observational data documented measurable shifts, though the magnitude varied considerably across families. The most notable finding is not simply that behavioural changes occurred but that the meaning and significance remained contested across informants. This finding demonstrates that behavioural and cultural changes occur even under selective mediation. Technology's influence extends beyond direct usage to include observation and environmental exposure. Negotiated mediation involves not only regulating children's access to technology but also negotiating the meaning of observed changes and determining which changes warrant intervention versus acceptance.

3.4. The Dialectic Between Tradition and Digitalisation: How Negotiated Mediation Emerges
Negotiated mediation emerges from a dialectical process between pesantren-based traditional values oriented toward adab, tarbiyah, fitrah, and religious authority, and the digital realities that cannot be entirely avoided in contemporary family life. This subsection synthesizes how Kiai families actively negotiate digital modernity without losing their value framework. Rather than positioning negotiated mediation merely as a practical strategy, this study theorises it as a mechanism explaining how religious communities respond to technological change through continuous value-based evaluation and adaptive regulation.

The dialectical process operates through three interconnected tensions. First, theological ideals regarding the protection of children's fitrah confront the practical realities of adult dependence on technology. Kiai articulates clear principles about limiting children's exposure, yet simultaneously uses devices for professional and religious purposes. This creates observational learning pathways that parents cannot fully control. Second, nyai's responsibility for daily childcare management confronts gendered family hierarchies that constrain their authority to enforce mediation boundaries. Extended family members bypass parental filtering, particularly during social gatherings, creating inconsistencies between stated rules and lived experiences. Third, parents' desire to document children's spiritual progress entails the unintended

consequences when performativity is introduced into religious education. Recording practices shift children's intentions from spiritual sincerity to social validation.

These tensions generate adaptive responses rather than rigid adherence to predetermined strategies. Families continually recalibrate their approaches in response to observed outcomes, practical constraints, and community expectations. Mediation strategies evolve through negotiation between the kiai and the nyai perspectives. Kiai prioritises theological consistency, whereas nyai foregrounds relational quality and developmental pragmatism. This negotiation produces household-specific implementations of shared values. Some families maintain strict prohibition, while others permit controlled access. Some prioritise complete avoidance while others emphasise gradual scaffolding. The diversity of implementations reflects active problem-solving within a shared moral framework rather than passive acceptance or wholesale rejection of technology.

Figure 2 visualises the dialectical relationships among the key variables that shape negotiated mediation. Islamic traditions and values provide the evaluative framework for assessing technology. Kiai and nyai authority structures determine decision-making processes and enforcement mechanisms. Parental mediation practices translate values into concrete household rules and daily routines. The presence of direct and indirect digital technologies creates exposure pathways that challenge parental control efforts. Children's behavioural changes feed back into parental assessments, prompting recalibration of mediation strategies. The bidirectional arrows represent ongoing negotiation rather than linear causation. Negotiated mediation is not a stable endpoint but a dynamic equilibrium maintained through continuous adjustment.
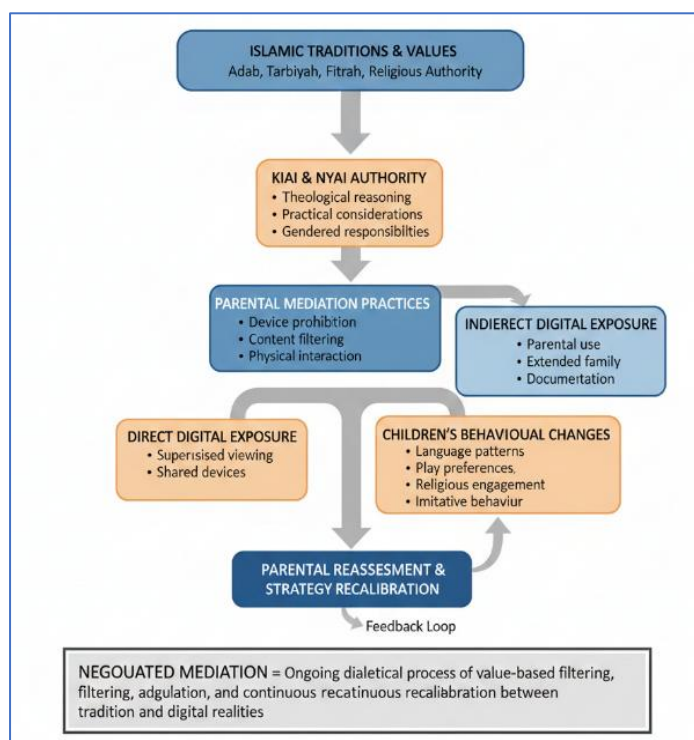

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Negotiated Mediation in Kiai Families

4. Discussion

This study examined how Kiai families in Sumenep, Madura, negotiate the use of digital technology when raising young children. Four key findings emerged. *First*, Kiai families employed selective mediation strategies characterised by device prohibition, content filtering, and prioritisation of physical interaction, yet implementation was inconsistent due to practical constraints. *Second*, technology remained ubiquitously present through adult usage and extended

family interactions, creating indirect exposure pathways. *Third*, children exhibited behavioural changes, including the adoption of digital expressions and shifts toward passive play patterns. Fourth, interpretations of what constitutes problematic change were contested across kiai, nyai, and non-kiai informants. These findings demonstrate that technology negotiation is shaped by religious authority, gendered family dynamics, and ecological contexts rather than being a universal adaptation or simple resistance.

The observed mediation strategies align with protective parenting models yet exhibit distinctive features rooted in Islamic pedagogical traditions. Research identifies active, restrictive, and co-viewing strategies as primary approaches for managing children's digital engagement (Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken & Schols, 2015). Kiai families primarily employed restrictive mediation, resonating with conservative religious communities expressing heightened concerns about media influence (Dhir et al., 2018). However, the underlying rationale differs from that of secular risk management. Where mainstream literature frames restriction as protection from harmful content (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021), Kiai families articulated restriction as preservation of adab and protection of children's fitrah. This extends parental mediation theory by demonstrating that religious values serve as evaluative criteria for technology decisions.

Triangulation across kiai, nyai, and non-kiai perspectives revealed that mediation strategies emerge through negotiation rather than unilateral authority. Kiai articulated mediation using theological terms such as fitrah, tarbiyah, and barakah. Nyai foregrounded relational quality and practical management challenges, acknowledging that enforcement weakened during busy periods. Comparison with non-kiai families showed that interpretations of problematic behavioural change varied based on religious authority and pedagogical values. Gendered dimensions emerged as theoretically noteworthy. Nyai experienced greater stress from boundary violations by extended family members because gendered hierarchies constrained their authority to enforce boundaries. This suggests that technology boundary negotiation operates through broader family power structures rather than being a gender-neutral practice.

Counterarguments warrant consideration of the potential risks of highly restrictive approaches. Critics argue that excessive restriction may hinder children's development of digital literacy skills (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021). Research suggests that gradual, scaffolded exposure yields stronger critical evaluation skills than complete prohibition (Jiang et al., 2024; Steinfeld, 2021). However, this critique assumes universal developmental trajectories privileging digital competence, overlooking culturally specific definitions of childhood readiness. Kiai families articulated a developmental timeline in which ethical formation precedes technological engagement, suggesting that delayed exposure, accompanied by firm moral grounding, might produce different outcomes than early, unrestricted access.

The phenomenon of indirect digital exposure merits careful theoretical examination. Despite restrictive practices, children demonstrated observable behavioural changes associated with environmental technology exposure, as evidenced by observing parental device use and extended family interactions. This finding aligns with habitus formation theory, which posits that children absorb cultural practices through observation rather than solely through direct instruction (Presta et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025). The adoption of phrases such as "like and subscribe" by children who never independently used YouTube illustrates how linguistic patterns are transmitted through peripheral exposure. This extends scholarship by documenting mechanisms of technology influence operating below direct usage thresholds, challenging binary framings that position children as either users or non-users.

Comparative analysis illuminates convergences and divergences with existing scholarship. Hammond et al. (2024), Bayar et al. (2025), and Lafton et al. (2024) found active parental involvement enhances children's resilience, yet involvement manifests differently across cultural contexts. Where mainstream literature assumes involvement occurs through co-viewing or technical assistance (Reich et al., 2025), Kiai families demonstrated involvement through technology restriction and promotion of alternative activities. Research by Qamaria et al. (2025) similarly found that mediation strategies vary based on family values. This pattern reflects adaptive conservatism whereby traditional communities selectively incorporate modernity while

maintaining core value structures (Kudaibergenov et al., 2025; Warisno et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

The theoretical contribution centres on negotiated mediation as an analytical framework for understanding how religious authority shapes parental responses to digitalisation through dialectical processes. Figure 1 visualises this dialectical mechanism, showing bidirectional relationships among Islamic traditions and values, authority structures, mediation practices, exposure to technology, and children's behavioural changes, which feed back into parental reassessments. Existing parental mediation theory identifies strategies developed primarily through Western secular families (Du et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023; Sciacca et al., 2022). Negotiated mediation extends this by foregrounding value alignment as the primary criterion for technology decisions. Three interconnected tensions generate adaptive responses rather than rigid adherence to predetermined strategies. Negotiated mediation is not a static strategy but a dynamic equilibrium maintained through continuous adjustment, which explains how religious communities sustain cultural continuity while adapting to inevitable technological change.

Despite these contributions, an internal critical reflection is necessary to avoid overextending the analytical reach of negotiated mediation. First, as a framework derived from a specific religious and cultural context, negotiated mediation risks normative bias, insofar as it foregrounds moral coherence and religious authority while potentially underplaying children's agency or alternative developmental perspectives. Second, there is a risk of romanticising tradition, particularly when delayed digital exposure is implicitly framed as ethically superior without longitudinal evidence of its broader cognitive or social consequences. Third, the concept remains context-dependent, raising questions about its transferability beyond pesantren-based Muslim communities or similarly structured moral ecosystems. While this study positions negotiated mediation as analytically expandable, it does not claim universal applicability in the manner of classical parental mediation theory. Acknowledging these limitations is essential to prevent the framework from being read as a culturally prescriptive model rather than a situated analytical lens. By explicitly articulating its boundaries, the study resists reductive "localism" while contributing a theoretically grounded, context-sensitive perspective that invites comparative testing across diverse religious and cultural settings.

4.1. Research Contribution

This study introduces negotiated mediation as an analytical framework for examining how religious authority shapes parental responses to digitalisation through ongoing dialectical processes between traditional value systems and digital realities. By foregrounding perspectives from pesantren families, the study contributes to broader discussions in digital parenting scholarship by documenting the gendered dimensions of mediation and showing that interpretations of problematic change are culturally and morally situated rather than universal. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of ethnographic inquiry for revealing tensions between articulated norms and everyday practices through systematic triangulation across multiple data sources.

4.2. Limitations

The study's small sample of five kiai families and the cultural specificity of Sumenep's pesantren context constrain generalisability. Observations were captured over a four-month period, which is insufficient for documenting long-term developmental outcomes. The researcher's outsider status may have influenced participant responses. Activity tracking acknowledged confounding factors, such as seasonal weather changes, affecting interpretations. Findings should inform rather than determine approaches for other contexts.

4.3. Suggestions

Future research should expand participant diversity across pesantren types, geographic regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Studies tracking children from early childhood through adolescence would clarify how restrictive mediation influences later development. Comparative

research across religious traditions would strengthen cross-cultural validity. Participatory action research, co-designing programmes with religious leaders, could generate culturally responsive interventions. Policymakers should foster dialogue between technological advancement goals and religious community values.

5. Conclusion

This study positions negotiated mediation as an analytical lens for examining how religious authority shapes digital parenting practices within contexts where moral formation and communal values remain central. The findings indicate that the restrictive strategies adopted by Kiai families, including device prohibition and content filtering, are not expressions of technological resistance or deficiency, but emerge from ongoing negotiations between Islamic values, practical caregiving demands, and the pervasive presence of digital technologies. Observed behavioural changes among children, such as the adoption of digital expressions and shifts toward more passive forms of play, do not carry a single meaning. Divergent interpretations across kiai, nyai, and non-kiai informants suggest that assessments of problematic change are culturally and pedagogically situated rather than universally defined, inviting reconsideration of how digital parenting is commonly theorised.

This study remains bounded by its contextual and methodological limits. The focus on pesantren-based families in Sumenep and the four-month observation period constrain claims about long-term developmental trajectories and broader transferability. These limitations caution against treating negotiated mediation as a prescriptive or generalisable model. Instead, the findings invite sustained dialogue and comparative inquiry into how value-based mediation practices take shape across diverse religious, cultural, and socio-digital contexts, and how such practices intersect over time with children's agency, moral formation, and emerging digital competencies.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Thorik Aziz led the conceptual development of the study, designed the methodology, managed data curation and analysis, and prepared the original draft of the manuscript. Mahmud Arif contributed to the investigative process, provided supervision and validation, and supported the visualisation of the findings. Nurjannah was responsible for reviewing, revising, and editing the manuscript, with particular attention to refining the final version for publication.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and the involvement of children and community members, raw data is not publicly archived.

Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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