

THE PATHOLOGY OF TOXIC RELIGIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS NEUROTICISM AT SMK DARUSSALAM BLOKAGUNG

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the manifestations of religious neuroticism that trigger symptoms of toxic religiosity among students in the pesantren ecosystem. The research setting is SMK Darussalam Blokagung, Banyuwangi, this school integrates the national vocational education curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology) with character education based on the traditional pesantren model. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with students and caregivers, participant observation of daily behaviors, and a review of documents related to the curriculum and disciplinary records. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model that included data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions, while the validity of the findings was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques. The research findings indicate that religious neuroticism manifests as excessive spiritual anxiety, an obsession with rigid ritual purity, and a tendency to judge other groups harshly as a defense mechanism. This phenomenon of toxic religiosity is often a sublimation of poorly managed psychological stress within an environment of piety competition. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of integrating clinical psychological counseling services in Islamic boarding schools to transform neurotic religious orientations into a healthy, inclusive religiosity that supports students' mental well-being.

Keywords: *Religious Neuroticism; Toxic Religiosity; Clinical Psychology; Mental Health of Islamic Boarding School Students.*



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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis manifestasi neurotisme religius yang memicu gejala religiusitas toksik di kalangan siswa dalam ekosistem pesantren. Lokasi penelitian adalah SMK Darussalam Blokagung, Banyuwangi, sebuah sekolah yang mengintegrasikan kurikulum pendidikan vokasi nasional (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi) dengan pendidikan karakter berbasis model pesantren tradisional. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan siswa dan pengasuh, observasi partisipatif terhadap perilaku sehari-hari, serta telaah dokumen terkait kurikulum dan catatan kedisiplinan. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif yang mencakup reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, sementara validitas temuan dipastikan melalui triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa neurotisme religius termanifestasi dalam bentuk kecemasan spiritual yang berlebihan, obsesi terhadap kemurnian ritual yang kaku, serta kecenderungan menghakimi kelompok lain secara keras sebagai mekanisme pertahanan diri. Fenomena religiusitas toksik ini sering kali merupakan sublimasi dari stres psikologis yang tidak terkelola dengan baik di tengah lingkungan persaingan dalam kesalehan. Implikasi penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya mengintegrasikan layanan konseling psikologi klinis di pesantren untuk mengubah orientasi keagamaan yang neurotik menjadi religiusitas yang sehat dan inklusif, yang mendukung kesejahteraan mental siswa.

Kata Kunci: *Neurotisme Religius; Religiusitas Toksik; Psikologi Klinis; Kesehatan Mental Santri.*

INTRODUCTION

The tendency among individuals in Islamic boarding schools who experience excessive spiritual anxiety often manifests itself in the form of obsessive and rigid obedience (Lubis & Salabi, 2025 ; Islamic et al., 2024). This condition is triggered by the internalization of distorted religious doctrines that exclusively instill fear through threats of punishment and torment. Without a balanced understanding of Divine compassion and forgiveness, an individual's spiritual perspective becomes fragile, rigid, and susceptible to radical fanaticism., (Rubin, 2025 ; Ebron, 2024 ; Mu et al., 2022 ; Wang, 2022) thereby creating psychological pressure on the students. This phenomenon is clearly evident in the behavior of students who feel disproportionately guilty over minor infractions, (Bettens, 2024:Ibrahim, 2024) which then triggers clinical stress in their daily lives (Chan et al., 2023) ; Masood & Moorthy, 2023). Therefore, displays of obedience rooted in excessive fear serve as a strong indicator of mental health imbalances in religious practices within educational institutions.

The emergence of a sense of moral superiority among students is a result of an exclusive and literal interpretation of religious texts (Ohrvik, 2024 ; Mulyana, 2023). The main reason this phenomenon has emerged is the presence of an unhealthy competition in piety, in which a student's social status is often measured by how strictly they observe the outward aspects of religion. (Komisarof & Akaliyski, 2025 ; Guo et al., 2024). Empirical evidence from the field indicates the existence of patterns of judgemental behaviour and exclusion towards colleagues (Gorris & Koch, 2024 ; Serenko, 2023) who are considered not to meet the standards of piety set by a particular group (Popescu-Sarry, 2024 ; Margolis, 2026). Behavioural patterns such as these indicate that religion is sometimes used as a means of ego-validation to belittle others whose level of understanding differs from one's own.

The internalisation of religious values combined with neuroticism has created a standard of piety (McCullough, 2026 ; Ip et al., 2025) which is paradoxical and actually places a strain on the emotional well-being of students (Bishop & High, 2025 ; Yin, 2023). The pressure to appear spiritually perfect often leads students to hide their inner conflicts (Walker et al., 2023) or their mental health issues in order to maintain their image as devout individuals (Prizeman et al., 2024 ; Lloyd & Panagopoulos, 2022). Observational data indicate an increase in psychosomatic symptoms among students who strive hard to meet the expectations of those around them (Hahn et al., 2025 ; Huang et al., 2023) without a safe space in which to express their intellectual doubts. This suggests that the educational environment needs to recognise that unrealistic demands for piety have the potential to give rise to psychologically fragmented personalities.

The use of religious narratives as a defence mechanism (Badarneh, 2023) Avoiding the resolution of genuine emotional issues has become a rather worrying trend in Islamic academic circles (Roszak et al., 2025 ; Alrashidi & Alnufaishan, 2024). This is because there is a perception that turning to anyone other than God is a sign of weak faith (Frolov, 2026 ; Sierocki, 2024), as a result, issues such as depression or anxiety are often addressed simply by suggesting an increase in the frequency of rituals (Manter et al., 2025 ; Kashfi et al., 2025). This practice is evident in the low uptake of professional counselling services by students, who prefer to withdraw into spiritual isolation when facing personal crises (Duncan & Pond, 2025). The conclusion to be drawn from this reality is that the concept of tawakkal needs to be redefined so that it is not misused as a means of shirking responsibility for mental health.

The transformation of the pesantren's role as an institution that safeguards psychological stability depends heavily on how educational authorities manage the

religious discourse that develops within it (Abbas et al., 2024 ; Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024). If religious narratives continue to be produced in a monolithic manner without taking psychological empathy into account (Lloyd et al., 2026 ; Werner, 2026), therefore, the risk of radical ideologies emerging as a response to feelings of insecurity will grow (Rahimi, 2025). Evidence from the field suggests that students who are open-minded and receive good emotional support tend to be more resilient (Dolbier et al., 2025 ; F. Wang & King, 2025 ; Vosoughi & Ahmadi, 2025) compared to those who are trapped in a black-and-white mindset. This underscores the fact that the future of Islamic educational institutions is largely determined by their ability to integrate theological values with the humanistic principles of clinical psychology.

The following are some relevant studies, including one that examined the mental health of pupils at an Islamic boarding school. (Farhan, 2024) The study identified the complexity of the psychological challenges faced by students at Assalaam Modern Islamic Boarding School, including academic pressure, identity conflicts, and socio-spiritual dynamics, and pinpointed environmental factors, educational practices, and social interactions as factors that substantially influence mental health. The study proposed integrative counselling that combines psychological approaches with spiritual guidance.

In addition, (Purba & Astuti, 2023) documenting mental health issues among boarding school pupils (Anderson, 2022 ; Verlenden, 2024), notes that Islamic religious education plays a vital role in rehabilitation through the development of faith and spiritual integration (Rofiah et al., 2025). However, this represents only two studies with limited scope. These sources lack quantitative data, comparative analysis, or direct measurements of religious neuroticism specifically. Further research is needed to establish the prevalence and mechanisms of religion-influenced psychological disorders in this educational context.

This study offers significant novelty compared to previous research as it focuses specifically on the construct of religious neuroticism and the phenomenon of toxic religiosity, an area that has not yet been explored in depth and tends to remain rather general. Unlike previous research, which viewed religion solely as a tool for rehabilitation or positive spiritual guidance, this study critically employs a clinical psychology approach to examine how the internalisation of rigid religious values or repressive doctrines within the pesantren environment can actually trigger neurotic symptoms. By integrating in-depth qualitative analysis to explore the mechanisms of psychological distress influenced by theological factors, this study fills a gap in the literature regarding mental health dynamics stemming from

spiritual distress and offers a fresh contribution to the discourse on mental health within pesantren (Islamic boarding schools).

This research is urgently needed in view of the paradoxical phenomenon observed within Islamic boarding schools, where institutions that are supposed to be centres of mental and spiritual well-being are, in fact, at risk of causing severe psychological distress due to rigid patterns of religiosity. The emergence of symptoms of religious neuroticism—characterised by excessive anxiety about sin, an obsession with divine punishment, and pathological guilt—points to signs of toxic religiosity that are often overlooked under the guise of spiritual discipline. This clinical psychology study is crucial for delineating the boundaries between healthy obedience and anxiety disorders internalised within religious doctrine, so that Islamic boarding schools can intervene early to support students' mental health. Without a deep understanding of these psychological mechanisms, the educational environment of Islamic boarding schools risks producing individuals who not only experience mental exhaustion, but also hold a distorted view of the nature of divinity, which should be a source of comfort rather than a threat to their psychosocial well-being. Based on the above, this study aims to analyse the manifestations of religious neuroticism that trigger symptoms of toxic religiosity among students within the pesantren ecosystem.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the phenomenon of religious neuroticism in depth at SMK Darussalam Blokagung. Fieldwork was conducted over a six-month period—from January to June 2026—encompassing continuous field observations and semi-structured interviews held between May 16 and May 20, 2026. By focusing rigorously on an in-depth qualitative analysis to map the mechanisms underlying spiritually triggered psychological distress, this research addresses a crucial thematic gap regarding mental health dynamics within the SMK Darussalam Blokagung environment. Specifically, the novelty of this study lies in its rich, contextualized mapping of how internalizations of religious doctrine manifest as psychological distress, moving beyond surface-level symptoms to reveal the underlying subjective mechanisms. The use of a case study is particularly relevant as it enables the researcher to understand the psychological complexities and dynamics of toxic religiosity, which are unique and specific to the cultural context of a particular pesantren. Through this approach, researchers do not merely observe the clinical symptoms that are apparent on the surface, but also delve into the students' subjective experiences in interpreting the religious doctrines that trigger

their anxiety. The primary focus of the research is to capture the voices of individuals experiencing mental distress within a religious context, thereby yielding a holistic understanding of how religious education environments can influence students' personality structures and mental health in a specific and detailed manner.

The setting for this study is the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Blokagung, Banyuwangi, a legendary Islamic educational institution that wields considerable socio-religious influence in the East Java region, with thousands of students. The choice of this location is highly relevant to the research title due to its nature as a large Islamic boarding school that implements an integrated educational system combining a formal curriculum with a very intensive traditional boarding school programme. The high intensity of spiritual activities, strict standards of discipline, and high moral expectations placed on students at this institution provide a rich data set for observing how symptoms of religious neuroticism may develop. As an institution that serves as a barometer of Islamic education, The psychological dynamics at play here effectively capture the complexity of the relationship between religious authority and students' mental health; consequently, findings regarding toxic religiosity in this context will have strong external validity for the development of clinical psychology studies within the broader context of Islamic boarding schools.

Data was collected using a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis to obtain a comprehensive picture of the subjects' clinical condition. In-depth interviews were conducted with the students to explore their experiences of anxiety, feelings of guilt and fear of divine punishment, as well as to the carers to understand the religious pedagogical perspective being applied. Participant observation was conducted by observing the daily behaviour of the students, such as obsessive patterns of worship or withdrawn behaviour, which serve as indicators of toxic religiosity in the field. Furthermore, a document analysis of the pesantren curriculum and disciplinary records was used to analyse whether there were academic pressures or theological rules that indirectly contributed to the emergence of neuroticism, so that all the data collected could provide strong empirical evidence for clinical psychological analysis.

This study involved eleven key informants selected through purposive sampling, comprising six students as the main subjects who showed signs of religious neuroticism. The data were supplemented by the perspectives of carers, fiqh teachers, discipline officers and boarding school counsellors. This collaborative study aims to thoroughly validate the symptoms of toxic religiosity

and clinical psychological dynamics within the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic boarding school.

Table 1. Informants

Number	Informant	Amount	Description of Roles and Responsibilities in the Research
1	Santri (Main Subject)	6 people	Providing a narrative of subjective experiences relating to anxiety, pathological guilt and perceptions of religious doctrine.
2	Caretaker/Religious Leader	1 people	Explaining the educational philosophy, the theological vision of the pesantren, and the authority to impose sanctions or provide religious motivation.
3	Ustaz/Teacher of Islamic Jurisprudence	2 people	Providing information on the methods used to teach Islamic legal principles (halal and haram) that affect the mental well-being of students.
4	Pengurus Kedisiplinan	1 people	Describing the students' conduct records, disciplinary procedures, and their compliance with the boarding school's daily rules.
5	Konselor/Psikolog Pesantren	1 people	Providing clinical data on the history of anxiety disorders or mental distress frequently reported by students in relation to religious matters.
Total		11 people	

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model comprising three concurrent processes: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. During the data reduction stage, the researcher sorted through the raw information from interviews and observations to focus on key themes such as religious obsession, pathological anxiety, and toxic behaviour. Next, the data is presented systematically in the form of clinical narratives or tables categorising symptoms, so that patterns of religious neuroticism among students can be more easily mapped and their interrelationships understood. The final stage involves drawing conclusions or verification, in which the researcher interprets the findings to address the research question. This process was carried out repeatedly and in an interrelated manner throughout the study to ensure that the resulting psychological interpretations were truly accurate and reflected the mental reality experienced by the students.

The validity of the findings in this study was ensured through source triangulation and methodological triangulation to minimise researcher bias and ensure the credibility of the clinical data. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information obtained from students, carers and psychologists to assess the consistency of the neuroticism symptoms identified. Meanwhile, technical triangulation was applied by cross-checking the results of interviews, field observation notes, and written documents relating to the religious curriculum. By verifying the data from various perspectives and using different methods, the researcher was able to ensure that the findings regarding toxic religiosity were not a coincidental phenomenon, but rather the result of a valid and reliable analysis. This step is crucial in clinical psychology studies in Islamic boarding schools to avoid interpretative bias regarding religious practices that are sensitive and complex in nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Internalization of the "Kualat" Culture as a Predictor of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

The internalisation of the culture of 'kualat' at the pesantren-based SMK Darussalam Blokagung has been shown to be a significant predictor of generalised anxiety disorder among students, due to an irrational fear of losing divine blessing as a result of minor transgressions. This toxic religiosity leads students to view academic failure as a metaphysical punishment rather than a learning process, thereby triggering constant cognitive strain, insomnia and physical tension, whilst eroding their self-efficacy and emotional stability amidst the demanding vocational curriculum. To understand the clinical implications of these cultural constructs, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with participants who scored highly on the disorder scale to explore how their perceptions of the authority of teachers/religious leaders and spiritual risks affect their mental well-being at school.

"I feel anxious and short of breath every day for fear of incurring divine wrath. I worry that even a minor transgression might displease the religious leader, meaning that my knowledge will not be blessed and my future will be bleak. This sense of guilt weighs so heavily on my mind that I find it hard to sleep peacefully."

These findings suggest that the concept of kualat has been internalised not merely as an ethical value, but as a chronic stressor that triggers clinical

symptoms. The subjects exhibited excessive anxiety, chest tightness, tremors and insomnia stemming from metaphysical fears. Psychologically, there has been a shift from healthy motivation to learn to a pathological fear. Students perceive academic failure not as a technical challenge, but as a sign of the loss of spiritual blessing. This demonstrates that the culture of *kualat*, when combined with a neurotic personality, exacerbates mental health issues by fostering a constant sense of helplessness within the *pesantren* educational environment. The following diagram illustrates the process by which the doctrine of *karma* has evolved into a key trigger for the onset of anxiety disorders.

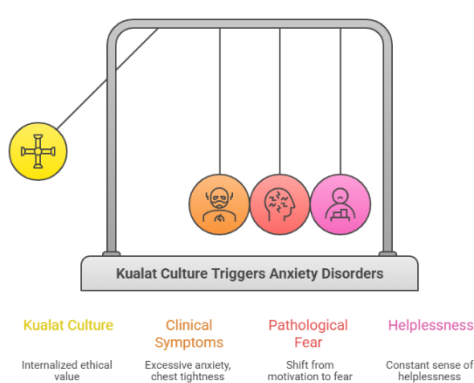


Figure 1. The Psychological Transition Model of Santri within the Toxic Religiosity Spectrum

The image illustrates the process of psychological decline in students, likened to a reverse metamorphosis cycle, in which healthy motivation to learn gradually gives way to a pathological state. Beginning with the caterpillar stage, which represents the natural technical challenges of learning, this process becomes distorted when the concept of '*kualat*' is internalised as a rigid ethical value. This shift triggers the dominance of metaphysical fear, which supplants intrinsic motivation, eventually developing into the clinical symptoms of Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) characterised by excessive anxiety and physical symptoms. Ultimately, students reach a phase of chronic stress, described as being like a butterfly trapped in a constant sense of helplessness, demonstrating that toxic spiritual pressure can undermine self-efficacy and overall mental health.

Scrupulousness in Religious Practice: The Conflict Between Discipline and Inner Peace

The findings reveal scrupulosity as a form of religious neuroticism at SMK Darussalam Blokagung, where students experience a pathological obsession with

the validity of rituals due to the strictness of the disciplinary system. Rather than finding peace, students become trapped in a cycle of compulsively checking their intentions and purity in order to avoid punishment. This toxic religiosity replaces love-based obedience with clinical anxiety. As a result, psychological energy is drained in an attempt to alleviate irrational guilt, which disrupts students' concentration in their studies and their mental well-being. The phenomenon of scrupulosity (religious-themed OCD symptoms) is often not recognised as a mental health condition because it is regarded as a form of religious caution. The researchers conducted observations and clinical interviews with students who exhibited extreme repetitive behaviour during religious rituals amidst the strict disciplinary system of the pesantren. The aim of this interview was to explore whether this meticulousness stems from a sense of devotion or, on the contrary, from pathological anxiety. The following is an excerpt from an interview with one of the students at SMK Darussalam Blokagung in Banyuwangi:

"I'm so exhausted because I constantly feel that my wudu or intention isn't valid. The fear of impurity and the ustaz's reprimands have made me I repeated the prayers over and over until I was in tears and fell behind in my vocational school practical work. My heart was pounding because my fear of making a mistake was greater than the peace I felt during prayer."

This information points to very clear clinical symptoms of scrupulosity, in which religious rituals are performed not to achieve peace of mind, rather than as an attempt to alleviate anxiety. Internal conflict arises due to pressure from the system of religious punishment, which treats errors in the formalities of worship as serious offences. Clinically, this repetitive behaviour (compulsion) is a manifestation of toxic religiosity, where the strict discipline of the pesantren actually exacerbates the students' obsessive tendencies. As a result, there is a significant decline in their quality of life; students lose productive time that could be spent on vocational activities at vocational schools and suffer from chronic emotional exhaustion due to an internal struggle with their own thoughts, which constantly make them feel guilty or inadequate. The following table summarises the identification of these clinical symptoms, which are then examined in detail through interpretation.

Table 2. Identification of Factors and the Impact of Clinical Scrupulosity

Aspect	Clinical Explanation
Condition	Scrupulosity: Religious practices are performed solely to alleviate anxiety.
Trigger	The Takzir System: Fear of punishment for formal ritual errors.
Action	Compulsion: The continuous repetition of ritual acts of worship.
Impact	Toxic Religiosity: Emotional exhaustion and impaired concentration on studies.

The table identifies the existence of a systemic phenomenon of scrupulosity, in which religious practices undergo a shift in function from a spiritual means to a defence mechanism for alleviating clinical anxiety. The pressure exerted by a rigid disciplinary system is the main trigger for the emergence of compulsive behaviour in the form of ritualistic repetition, which ultimately traps students in a cycle of toxic religiosity. This situation not only undermines emotional stability through a chronic sense of guilt, but also significantly hinders the effectiveness of vocational education, as students' psychological energy and productive time are completely drained by an obsession with irrational ritual perfection.

The Phenomenon of 'Performative Religiosity' Resulting from Dual Pressures (Vocational Training and Religious Boarding School Life)

The phenomenon of performative religiosity at SMK Darussalam Blokagung has emerged as a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to the pressures of the vocational curriculum and the rigid discipline of the Islamic boarding school, where students engage in ritualistic worship to avoid negative labelling, even though they are clinically experiencing burnout and cognitive dissonance. This toxic religiosity reduces worship to a mere social performance rather than a space for catharsis, thereby triggering chronic psychological strain that diminishes motivation to learn and fosters apathy towards fundamental spiritual values. To explore the mental exhaustion resulting from this dual role, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with students showing signs of burnout and a drastic decline in motivation—one of whom was Diana—to examine how they manage the high expectations of the pesantren environment amidst a heavy school timetable, which creates a disconnect between their outward behaviour and their inner state.

*'I am extremely tired, both physically and mentally, due to the hectic schedule at vocational college and the Islamic boarding school.
'Now, I only attend formally to avoid punishment and being labelled*

as insincere. Religion feels like an extra burden, making me feel like a hypocrite for pretending to be devout just to keep the peace...'

The evidence above confirms the presence of performative religiosity, characterised by severe cognitive dissonance among the students. The subject is trapped in toxic religiosity; they are compelled to go through the motions of worship for the sake of social security and to avoid conflict, yet internally they experience a void of meaning and pent-up resentment. The dual pressure of the vocational curriculum and the strict discipline of the pesantren, which leaves no room for emotional catharsis, causes students to lose their spiritual authenticity. Clinically speaking, if this religious 'mask' continues to be imposed without any psychological support, students are at high risk of developing mild depression and losing their commitment to both religious values and the vocational profession they are pursuing. Please note the following visual documentation of the cultural practices of reverence among students at SMK Darussalam Blokagung.



Figure 2. A Visual Representation of Religious Culture and Student Discipline at Darussalam Vocational School

The image depicts the practice of respect at SMK Darussalam Blokagung, where the act of kissing the hand serves as a symbol of the students internalisation of good manners and obedience towards their teachers. This photograph illustrates the integration of pesantren values into vocational education in the pursuit of the blessings of knowledge. Whilst reflecting moral excellence, this tradition also emphasises the high ethical standards that underpin the psychological dynamics of a teacher's approval of their students.

Students experience performative religiosity and scrupulosity as a result of the dual pressures of the vocational curriculum and the strict discipline of the pesantren. The pressures of the takzir system trigger compulsive religious behaviour aimed at alleviating clinical anxiety, rather than achieving spiritual

peace. This situation is exacerbated by the internalisation of a culture of *kualat*—a concept that serves as a predictor of generalised anxiety disorder, in which academic failure is viewed as a metaphysical punishment. Visibly, this culture of reverence reflects high ethical standards which, if left unmanaged, can actually drain students' psychological energy, reduce their motivation to learn, and trigger burnout and chronic helplessness.

The Stigma of a Lack of Faith as a Barrier to Mental Health Literacy

Research has revealed systemic barriers to mental health care at SMK Darussalam Blokagung stemming from the stigma of a lack of faith, where clinical symptoms such as depression and anxiety are addressed solely through instant spiritual diagnoses that fuel toxic religiosity and a sense of shame. The lack of even a basic understanding of mental health means that students are reluctant to seek professional help for fear of being seen as religious failures, thereby exacerbating their psychological condition and hindering the effectiveness of vocational and boarding school education. To understand students' reluctance to seek professional help, the researchers interviewed students experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety who were reluctant to report these to the guidance counsellor or healthcare staff—one of whom was Intan—in order to uncover the collective perception within the boarding school environment, which often reduces mental health issues to mere spiritual problems.

"I kept my worries to myself for fear of being labelled as lacking in devotion or weak in faith. At the Islamic boarding school, stress is seen as a disgrace and a sign of ingratitude. To protect the students' identities, I pretended to be strong even though I often cried in private, feeling overwhelmed, because I was afraid to seek professional help."

This admission reflects a form of toxic religiosity in which mental health issues are reduced to spiritual failure. The stigma of lacking faith triggers cognitive dissonance, forcing the subject to display performative religiosity in order to preserve their identity as a *santri*. As a result, emotional isolation and chronic anxiety set in, as the individuals bore the psychological strain alone and were afraid to seek professional help due to the boarding school environment, which viewed stress as a source of shame and a sign of ingratitude.



Figure 3. The Impact of Religious Stigma on Students' Mental Health

The infographic illustrates the decline in students' mental health triggered by the pressure of religious stigma, where psychological issues are often misinterpreted as a sign of a lack of faith. This view fosters a toxic religious environment that forces students to suppress their emotions in order to maintain an image of piety, leading them to treat ritual worship merely as a remedy to alleviate symptoms of anxiety without addressing the underlying clinical causes. Consequently, despite the urgent need for psychological support, resistance to professional help actually exacerbates the students' neurotic conditions, creating a cycle of mental suffering that grows increasingly severe due to the neglect of appropriate medical treatment under the guise of religious formalities.

The internalisation of a culture of punishment and a rigid disciplinary system at SMK Darussalam Blokagung is a significant predictor of the emergence of generalised anxiety disorder and clinical scrupulosity among students. This phenomenon of toxic religiosity transforms the motivation for worship into a defence mechanism to alleviate pathological anxiety, which is exacerbated by the dual pressures of the vocational curriculum and the stigma of a perceived lack of faith surrounding mental health issues. As a result, students find themselves trapped in performative religiosity and emotional repression, which leads to chronic fatigue, thereby hindering the effectiveness of their learning and undermining their overall mental health due to the lack of appropriate psychological support.

Discussion

Internalisasi Budaya Kualat sebagai Prediktor Gangguan Kecemasan Umum

The internalization of the kualat culture at SMK Darussalam Blokagung illustrates how a (Hasanah & Hakim, 2026)socio-religious construct can transform from an ethical norm into a psychological risk factor (a chronic stressor). Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's Cognitive Appraisal Theory, the extreme anxiety experienced by the students stems from a distorted primary appraisal, wherein minor academic or behavioral infractions are perceived not merely as technical errors but as profound metaphysical threats—specifically, divine wrath. This imbalance is exacerbated by a weak secondary appraisal, leaving students feeling they lack the capacity or control to mitigate such potential spiritual retribution. Consequently, an interpretation of doctrine rooted in fear—or "fear-based religiosity"—exerts constant pressure on the individual's personality structure and undermines their sense of self-efficacy.

From clinical and neuropsychological perspectives, the shift from healthy learning motivation to Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) illustrates a chain reaction of neuroticism triggered by spiritual pressure(X. Wang & Li, 2025). Drawing on Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, an individual's cognitive processes are heavily influenced by the perception of environmental authority—specifically, figures such as teachers and kyai (religious scholars). When obedience is exploited through doctrines regarding the loss of spiritual blessings, individuals develop "learned helplessness," a concept formulated by Martin Seligman. Santri (Islamic boarding school students) come to believe that their fate and future failures lie beyond rational control; this belief triggers recurrent somatic symptoms—such as shortness of breath, insomnia, and chronic physical tension—stemming from a constantly active fight-or-flight response.

The inverted metamorphosis depicted in this psychological model underscores the phenomenon of "toxic religiosity," wherein the adaptive function of religion shifts into a maladaptive one. Viewed through the lens of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, santri (Islamic boarding school students) become trapped in the "punishment and obedience orientation" stage; here, compliance is no longer grounded in mature moral awareness but is driven solely by the desire to avoid a dreaded, intrinsic form of punishment. The internalization of the culture of kualat (divine retribution)—unbalanced by an understanding of Divine grace and compassion—ultimately erodes the students' psychological resilience, transforming an educational environment meant for spiritual growth into an incubator for generalized anxiety disorder.

Scrupulousness in Religious Practice: The Conflict Between Discipline and Inner Peace

The phenomenon of scrupulosity observed among students at SMK Darussalam Blokagung illustrates a shift in the function of religious rituals: from a means of achieving spiritual well-being to an ego-defense mechanism against pathological anxiety (Amirinia, 2024). Grounded in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this condition reflects the dominance of an excessively rigid and punitive superego that relentlessly intimidates the ego with threats of guilt and the fear of punishment (ta'zir). An overemphasis on ritual formalities—devoid of the internalization of Divine mercy—triggers an obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorder; here, obsessive urges (manifesting as constant doubts regarding purity or the validity of intentions) are met with compulsive behaviors, such as the repetitive performance of wudu (ablution) and prayer.

From cognitive and behavioral perspectives, this cycle can be explained through B.F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning—specifically the mechanism of negative reinforcement. When a santri (Islamic boarding school student) experiences anxiety stemming from the perception of ritual errors or the fear of a teacher's reprimand, the compulsive act of repeating the prayer offers momentary relief from that anxiety (Pinciotti et al., 2026). This temporary reduction in anxiety indirectly reinforces the compulsive behavior, prompting its repetition whenever doubt arises. The situation is exacerbated by the boarding school environment, which employs a disciplinary system oriented toward formal punishment; consequently, rather than fostering love-based obedience, the system entrenches a conditioned fear response that triggers chronic emotional exhaustion.

The impact of toxic religiosity directly results in a decline in the self-efficacy and cognitive functioning of santri (Islamic boarding school students), as explained by John Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory. The students' psychological energy and working memory capacity are consumed by processing metaphysical obsessions and irrational anxieties, leaving minimal cognitive resources for academic learning and vocational training. The fact that students become trapped in this cycle of scrupulosity demonstrates that extreme approaches to religious discipline not only erode individual mental health but also undermine the effectiveness of vocational education due to the loss of productive time and the emergence of prolonged emotional dysfunction.

The Phenomenon of 'Performative Religiosity' Resulting from Dual Pressures (Vocational Training and Religious Boarding School Life)

The phenomenon of "performative religiosity" among students at SMK Darussalam Blokagung illustrates a maladaptive coping mechanism resulting from the dual pressures of a demanding vocational curriculum and the rigid discipline of the pesantren (Islamic boarding school). Drawing on Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Hajipour & Majidi-Rasti, 2025), this condition triggers an intense internal conflict between the individual's inner state and their outwardly displayed religious behavior. Acts of worship—which ought to serve as a space for spiritual catharsis—are reduced to mere "social masks" or formalistic compromises adopted solely to avoid punishment (takzir) and negative labeling. This persistent discrepancy depletes the students' emotional reserves, leads to psychological burnout, and erodes the authenticity of the spiritual values they practice.

From a socio-psychological perspective, this performative religious behavior can be understood through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which posits a stark distinction between the "front stage" and the "back stage." On the front stage—manifested in practices such as kissing a teacher's hand, showing deference, and participating in religious rituals—santri (Islamic boarding school students) project an image of obedience and piety to meet institutional expectations and gain social acceptance. Yet, in the back stage, they grapple with mental exhaustion, a sense of meaninglessness, and even pent-up resentment. This relentless front-stage performance, lacking a safe space to express psychological fatigue, triggers depersonalization; religion ceases to be experienced as an act of sincere devotion and instead becomes a structural burden that alienates them from their own selves.

The long-term impact of this dual pressure leads to a decline in motivational functioning and a heightened risk of severe psychopathology, as outlined in Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. When basic psychological needs—specifically autonomy and authentic relatedness—are thwarted by punitive external control, the santri's intrinsic motivation for both learning and religious practice collapses. Compliance driven solely by external regulation renders these students vulnerable to learned helplessness, diminished self-efficacy, and even mild depression. If this dynamic of toxic religiosity persists without adequate mental health intervention, the institution risks not only producing graduates suffering from chronic emotional exhaustion but also undermining their future professional and spiritual commitments.

The Stigma of a Lack of Faith as a Barrier to Mental Health Literacy

The stigma of a "lack of faith" prevalent at SMK Darussalam Blokagung acts as a systemic barrier to mental health literacy, wherein psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety are unilaterally reduced to mere spiritual failure (Cazares Diaz, 2026). Drawing on Erving Goffman's Social Stigma Theory, this negative perception fosters widespread "enacted stigma" (external discriminatory acts) and "felt stigma" (an internal fear of rejection) among the santri (Islamic boarding school students). When emotional dysfunction and psychological crises are oversimplified as a "flaw in faith" or evidence of ingratitude, affected individuals suffer a "spoiled identity"—a degradation of social identity in which their moral standing as santri is deemed compromised. Consequently, rather than seeking appropriate clinical interventions, students resort to emotional repression and conceal their suffering to preserve their social status and religious reputation within the pesantren environment.

From a psychosocial perspective, this phenomenon of resistance to professional help can be analyzed through Icek Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior—an elaboration of the Theory of Reasoned Action—specifically regarding the interplay between subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Collective conformity within *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) fosters a normative belief that consulting a mental health professional signifies a lack of faith in God's sovereignty. This hasty spiritual judgment accelerates the transition from environmental stigma to self-stigma, leading students to internalize the notion that they are "religious failures." This state triggers secondary anxiety and chronic emotional isolation; students become trapped in "performative religiosity," where religious rituals are enacted solely as a defensive coping mechanism to mask emotional distress, without addressing the underlying clinical pathology.

The medical neglect resulting from this stigma creates a vicious cycle that exacerbates the students' neurotic conditions, a phenomenon explained by Irwin M. Rosenstock's Health Belief Model. Although the students perceive both the susceptibility to and the severity of their psychological disorders, significant perceived barriers—such as social sanctions, shame, and the threat of symbolic excommunication—effectively suppress any impetus to seek medical intervention. This neglect of psychiatric and psychological care, masked by religious formalities, not only erodes emotional resilience—leading to chronic fatigue and cognitive dysfunction—but also undermines the effectiveness of vocational education and diminishes the essence of substantive spiritual well-being.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that manifestations of religious neuroticism among students take the form of excessive spiritual anxiety and a pathological obsession with rigid ritual purity, as well as the use of extreme judgement towards outsiders as a psychological defence mechanism. This phenomenon of toxic religiosity is identified not as a form of pure piety, but rather a manifestation of poorly managed mental pressure within the pesantren environment, which is characterised by intense moral competition and high standards of discipline. In summary, it can be concluded that when religious education places too much emphasis on threats and punishment without allowing space for empathetic dialogue, This actually transforms the function of religion from a source of inner peace into a source of neurosis that triggers toxic behaviour, whereby outward piety serves merely as a compensation for the psychological fragility experienced by the students.

The limitation of this study lies in its focus, which covers only one specific location at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic boarding school using a qualitative approach; consequently, the findings regarding religious neuroticism cannot yet be broadly generalised to various models of Islamic boarding schools with different theological backgrounds. Furthermore, time constraints and limited clinical access to all groups of students may lead to subjective bias when identifying the more subtle aspects of toxic religiosity. Therefore, the recommendation for future researchers is to adopt a mixed-methods approach with a larger sample size and to include a comparison between modern and traditional Islamic boarding schools in order to map the impact of the curriculum in a comparative manner. Future researchers are also advised to explore moderating variables such as the role of parenting styles and the influence of religious social media in exacerbating or alleviating neurotic symptoms among students in Islamic educational settings.

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