

# Strengthening the Identity of Nahdliyin Youth: Analysis of the Whirling Dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia

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**Abstract:** This study is ethnographic research of the Indonesian Mafia Shalawat music group in Ponorogo, East Java, by using the communication theory of Jane Collier and Milt Thomas as a framework for discussing two important themes, i.e. efforts to strengthen the identity of Nahdliyin youth and the construction of Nahdliyin youth identity in the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia. The results of this study are First, The whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia as a medium to strengthen the identity of Nahdliyin youth in the digital era. The model is semi-virtual in which conventional stage art is combined with publications on social media youtube, Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, twitter, streaming TV, Islamic popular music, reading sholawat, and Sufi dances as cultural Sufism. Second, the construction of Nahdliyin youth identity with the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia is an exploration and commitment of deradicalization through moderate Islam (wasathiyah), ahlu sunnah wal jama'ah ideologies, love peace, gender equality, patriotism, nationalism of the Republic of Indonesia, trends, lifestyles, multicultural dialogues, rejecting extreme Islamic ideology (left or right), and rejecting radical acts such as terrorism, fighting between youths, separatist movements, betrayal, and so on.

**Keywords:** Identity, Nahdliyin Youth, Mafia Shalawat Indonesia.

## 1 Introduction

The digital age is influenced by the globalization of information technology, transportation, and communication causing the exchange of world views, products, thoughts, and culture that drives the birth of the millennial community lifestyle. The millennial generation was born between 1980 and 2000. According to Strauss & Howe [1], millennial generation or Generation Y is a demographic cohort after generation X, their lifestyle is influenced by three things namely the use of the internet, smartphones, and social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blog, email, skype, videocall, line, WhatsApp, and so on. These three things affect the mindset, values, and behavior of millennial youth. Among the important issues of millennial youth lifestyle are: 1) The influence of religious, educational and social problems can be accessed freely and openly through online media, this is prone to causes various problems including radical thought and action; 2) The influence of individualist, materialist, hedonistic, apathetic lifestyles causes a decrease in the identity of

youth, they are preoccupied with their own lives and forget their country, nationalism, and patriotism.

The shift in lifestyle of Nahdliyin youth in the digital era begins with the transformation of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that were initially transferred directly by educators and religious leaders in the mashallah, mosque, majelis ta'lim, madrasa, and pesantren then shifted to the pattern of knowledge virtualization, internet-based and social media. The Nahdliyin youth style is identical with koko clothes, skullcap, sarong; young women wear long dresses complete with veils. Fashion trends force them to adapt to more elegant, modern clothing models. The simple, quiet, peaceful life of Nahdliyin youth in rural areas is confronted with the expansion of cosmopolitan, materialist, hedonic in urban areas. This affects the pattern of social relations, religion, identity and traditions of millennial youth. How does NU respond to the opportunities of young men who are quite large in the digital age? How NU prepares young people to respond to various issues such as the intense socialization of transnational ideology through virtual media, cyberbullying, slander, sheep fighting, moral degradation, violence, drugs, modernization, digitalization, and other criminal cases.

This problem requires NU's religious institutions to respond and contribute to overcoming the various problems that have plagued youth by recognizing and utilizing the existing potential as an alternative solution to the problem of weakening youth identity and symptoms of radical behavior. One of them is by examining The Whirling Dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia in Ponorogo Regency. According to Ngadhimah [2], the Mafia Sholawat Indonesia community was established on November 9, 2013, in Ponorogo Regency, and has been developing widely in various regions of Indonesia.

The meaning of the term Mafia Shalawat is *manunggaling pikiran lan ati ing ndalem Sholawat* or the merging of hearts and minds in holiness. This community was founded by the autonomy body Nahdlatul 'Ulama (Banom NU) among them; Nahdlatul Ulama Youth Association (IPNU), Nahdlatul Ulama Women's Youth Association (IPPNU), Nahdlatul Ulama Versatile Ansor Line (NU Banser), Indonesian Islamic Student Movement (PMII), and Fatayat. The establishment of this community as a solutive response to the frequent brawls between youths from Peguruan Pencak Silat. This idea was later accommodated by KH. Muhammad Sugeng Hariono (Head of the Ponorogo Branch NU Economic Institute), Idham (Chair of the Anchor Youth Movement), KH Fathul Azis and KH Lutfi Hadi Aminuddin, KHM Muhsin (Board of Ponorogo Branch NU) collaborated with KH Mohammad Ali Sodiqin (nickname Gus Aliis the leader of the Roudotun Ni'ah Islamic Boarding School, Jl Supriyadi Gg. IV, No. 3, Kalicari Semarang) who regularly stops at Camp Mafia Shalawat Ponorogo. According to Gus Ali (2015), the goals of the Indonesian Mafia Shalawat are: 1) By reading prayers, it is hoped that it will reduce immoral behavior, increase awareness of carrying out Islamic religious commands, there is no enmity and brawl between young people, creating an atmosphere of harmony among NU youth autonomous bodies including IPNU, IPPNU, Banser, GP Anshor, PMII, Fatayat; 2) Instilling the spirit of nationalism and patriotism among NU youth; 3) Building the ideology of Ahlus Sunnah Wa al-Jama'ah to the younger generation of Nahdlatul 'Ulama.

This background becomes the basis for answering the problems: the efforts to strengthen the identity of Nahdliyin youth; and The construction of Nahdliyin youth identity in the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia.

Prior research on Mafia Shalawat Indonesia, First, Ngadhimah [2] concluded that Mafia Shalawat Indonesia as performing art was established in 2013 in Ponorogo Regency, developing rapidly through environmental adaptation, packaging its propaganda through popular religious trends and popular culture. The Mafia Shalawat community realizes that the

militancy of the NU community is weakening due to the influence of information and communication technology, digitalization of knowledge, the rapid development of transnational ideology, and changes in mindset, lifestyle, and trends. For this reason, it requires propaganda of religious doctrine with the culture of reading shalawat which is sung, accompanied by musical instruments. Mafia Shalawat as an effective media to overcome the crisis of ideology, values, ethics, and aesthetics in the modern era, which is useful for the therapy of spiritual poverty, psycho-social treatment, alienation, and moral degradation.

Second, Hikmawati, Purwasito, and Pitana [3] concluded that the Mafia Shalawat is a modern da'wah media to attract worshipers, by ignoring the passive response of social structures and conditions. The style of the Mafia Shalawat metal includes yells, three-finger greetings, and the motto "josss." Mafia Shalawat communication functions as a means of gaining power, by changing behavior according to vision and mission, influencing the construct of thought, and desired ideals. The concept of free propaganda as a form of resistance to the establishment of preaching that already exists implements the practice of shalawat that does not have to be exactly the same as the prevailing Islamic Sharia patterns.

Third, M. Syaifuddin [4], concludes that preaching material in the Mafia Shalawat is teaching unity, harmony, respecting differences, avoiding fighting, loving peace. The da'wah strategy used was that pilgrims were invited to repent at one-third of the night, using various symbols of identity. The positive impact of the congregation felt light and easy to return to the path of truth, the negative impact of waking up late and late to go to school.

This paper uses the same subject, focusing on a different problem namely, examining the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia to find the construction of Nahdliyin's youth identity and its strategy of utilizing social media and popular music.

Research on Indonesian youth was reviewed by, first, according to Suzanne Naafs & Ben White [5] there were three models of millennial youth studies in Indonesia, namely: (a) youth as a generation, including studies of youth relations with adults, youth with social-political change, youth and the State, youth as identity; (b) youth as creators and consumers of culture, including studies of language, youth, and new media, lifestyles, religious identities and practices; and (c) youth as a transition, including studies of the relationship between schools and alumni workplaces, reliance on autonomy, youth mobility, ways to overcome and respond to transition problems, studies of youth and "risk behaviors" towards sexuality, health, crime, violence, drugs, as well as the problem of "defectology" of youth.

Second, Nilan [6] has been argued that although demographically the number of Indonesian youth is very abundant, they have lost their identity due to the national political situation since 1998. Third, Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera [7] confirm the high unemployment rate and their marginality to radical Islam. Economic marginality has caused millions of Indonesian youth to be unable to enjoy the latest trends in fashion, music, ITC and so on.

This paper is antitheses the statements of Bayat and Herrera, assuming: Nahdlatul 'Ulama' youth in Ponorogo Regency, East Java with a sufficient level of knowledge, a lower-middle-class economic level, a harmonious level of social relations, they will not be dragged into the promotion of radical action if they have clear and strong identity. Through the whirling dances of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia, Nahdliyin youth are able to explore their identity, determine their identity to fortify themselves from the deception of religious understanding and the radical-extremist movement.

According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial model [8], the maturity of one's age requires the formation of a coherent and stable identity according to meaning and value in society. Identity is achieved through exploration and commitment in a process that is driven by reducing dependence on parents and improving the navigation of relationships in the wider social field during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Youth identity and future transitions are influenced by digitizing patterns from 'media' to 'social media'. Social media as youth's control over self-presentation in increasing social interaction, networking, and wider access to social information to solicit feedback and change self-concept as a result of facing opportunities and challenges, stability, and personality as well as forms of identity development during the transition towards adulthood. For this reason, development policies and the social environment need to consider: (1) Providing opportunities for youth to utilize the internet according to their own needs and interests. (2) Awareness of youth's self-presentation is formed on the same screen in arranging commercial activities and accessing programs. Digital world trends offer valuable opportunities for young people to develop vast social networking sites in large numbers so they can improve social navigation and reflect their self-image. This has caused concern among many people, social media places youth in danger of identity construction that prioritizes shallow surfaces, rather than the substance of identity.

The communication theory of Mary Jane Collier & Milt Thomas [9] cultural identity theory (CIT) is used as a framework for analyzing this theme. CIT as one of several theories developed to build knowledge about communicative processes used by individuals to build and negotiate their cultural group identity and relationships in certain contexts. They combine the ethnography of communication and social construction, from the proposals of several applicable properties, or the creation, of clear cultural identities in communication texts. Mary Jane and Milt Thomas explained that messages conveyed by individuals during interaction can contain various types of cultural identities, such as national, racial, ethnic, social class, sex, gender roles, politics, and religion. Because individuals impose a variety of identities, then each identity group does not voice things in the same way or have the same recognition by others.

Collier and Thomas's cultural identity theory helped the writer find, first, The efforts to strengthen the identity of Nahdliyin youth; second, The construction of Nahdliyin youth identity in the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia.

## **2 Method**

This research on strengthening the identity of Nahdliyin youth through the analysis of the whirling dances of the Mafia Shalawat Indonesia uses an interpretative paradigm with an ethnographic approach. The cultural identity theory is used to construct the research findings. Data collection was carried out in a direct and natural setting, the material objects were the Indonesian Mafia Shalawat community in Ponorogo Regency, and the formal objects of NU youth or BANOM NU included: IPNU-IPPNU, BANSER, GP. Ansor, PMII, Fatayat and several Sufi dancers. The object of this study is 11 to 30 years old.

The type of data is in the form of words, arguments and documents. The techniques of taking data is in-depth interviews, observations, documentation. Text messages in documents are traced from journals, theses, videos, social media: Facebook, IG, Tweeter, youtube, TV Streaming. The main data source is KH. Muhammad Ali Shodiqin, Sufi dancer, NU figure, NU Youth member of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia. Data validity was tested using triangulation techniques of source, time, and theory.

Data will be analyzed by interpretive techniques [10] through the process of giving meaning and significance to the analysis carried out, explaining descriptive patterns of the construction of youth identity Nahdliyin, looking for relationships and linkages between existing data descriptions such as the whirling dances with social media and popular culture, Aswaja's ideological relations and transnational ideologies, religious culture, gender relations, regional cultures with ethnicities and so on.

### 3 Results and Discussion

#### The Efforts to Strengthen the Identity of Nahdliyin Youth

NU is one of the largest religious social organizations in Indonesia. Since its birth in the nineties three years ago, this organisation has always avoided the negational approach, emphasizing the importance of preservation and respect for the cultural treasures of the archipelago. Inspired by the Wali Songo propaganda pattern which succeeded in 'marrying' cultural locality with the universality of religion (Islam), NU's preaching pattern is very conducive for two things that are very much needed in the context of pluralism [11], namely: *First*, gluing national identity, respecting cultural diversity by bringing pluralist character. This gave rise to the rule of Islamic law *al-'ādah muhakkamah* which gave a great opportunity to any tradition to be converted into part of Islamic law as long as it did not damage the benefit. The honor of Islam in Indonesia will always be safeguarded through ways that can be accepted by other groups, not enforced by oppression or denial of the interests and existence of any community, which in turn, these ways can make a major contribution to the efforts to glue together a common identity as a nation. *Second*, the development of human values. The accommodative appearance of Islam as proof of the totality of understanding of religion is believed to be a blessing for all people (*rahmatan lil 'alamīn*). This has a positive impact on efforts to uphold humanitarian values compared to exclusive religious attitudes that can reduce people's human rights because of the potential to monopolize the truth and easily ignite religious-based violence.

**Figure 1.** Illustration of The Whirling Dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia



The NU missionary pattern that emphasizes adhering to national identity, respecting cultural diversity, and upholding human values is an Islamic marwah *rahmatan lil 'alamīn*.

The whirling dances of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia represent popular Islam as a result of the adoption and adaptation of the whirling dervishes in the Maulawiah congregation of Anatoli Turkey, by taking spinning dance techniques sourced from Jalaluddin Rumi's al-Matsnawi, combined with fashion, language, music, and culture. Java, accompanied by multiplying the Nabawi dhikr (shalawat) as proof of love and longing for Allah SWT and Rasulullah Muhammad SAW. sourced from the Alawiyah order (the tarekat is the Habaib). The art of music is published through the internet and social media. According to Eva F. Nisa [12], the use of media in the propaganda of Islam in the era of Indonesia's democratic transition (after the fall of the New Order) by Muslim activists is very important to stay away from radical activities. One of them is the use of social media in Islamic da'wah through the WhatsApp mobile application, One Day One Juz (ODOJ) as a semi-virtual Al-Qur'an tarbiyah movement that relies on the use of communication technology. ODOJ is a form of transformation of Indonesian religious media-scape in the contemporary era.

A dancer of the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia is a young man who is trained to receive permission, and a diploma from Gus Ali Shodikin. They actively participate in routine training at Camp Mafia Shalawat. There were 100 Sufi dancers in 2014 and 386 dancers in 2019, which spread in the Ponorogo area and its surroundings. According to Dwi, Nur Aida and Fakhruddin (2015), there are some techniques of display used by the whirling dances of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia. *First*, dancers intend to concentrate on *dhikr* by reading *Bismillāhi ar-rahmān ar-rahīm*, taking ablution water, reading *fatihah* letters for the auliya 'especially, Sheikh Abdul Qodir al Jaelani, Sheikh Jalaludin Rumi, Sheikh Nazim Adil al-Haqqani, Sheikh Hisham Kabbani. *Second*, dancers wear Sufi clothes, then dancers stand up, left hand crossed over the right shoulder and right hand crossed over the left shoulder. *Third*, the dancer surrenders herself to repent of all sins. The dancer ducks (*ruku'*) as a confession he is weak before Allah SWT, then rises upright as a symbol given the opportunity to rise from adversity. *Fourth*, dancers step their right foot back, then rotate to the left following the rotation of the universe (like tawaf). The dancer's hands form love on her chest until her stomach then her hands are raised up like a blooming flower. The dancer's right hand asks for mercy and divine blessing, while his left-hand shares his love for mercy and blessing with humanity on earth.

Popular music trends performed by Mafia Shalawat is according to the taste of millennial youth. The poems and lyrics of the blessing songs by Gus Ali and Muslim musicians were sung in conjunction with the performance of the whirling dance, 10-15 personnel from the Semut Ireng music group or Team Ghali from Semarang also accompanied the soft religious music and loud rock music. The results of traditional-modern music collaboration with guitar, bass, organ, violin, drums, tanjidor and tambourine are displayed neatly on every performance. The whirling dance performance of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia is usually held in the Village field, the District field, and even in the District Square, which has the strength of 5000 to 20,000 people. A variety of slogans were echoed to arouse enthusiasm such as: Joss, NKRI dead price, repentance before death, blessings until death. Various symbols are also displayed as flags: RI, Mafia Shalawat, NU, GP. Ansor, Banser, IPNU-IPPNU, PMII, Fatayat. The national song that is sung Indonesia Raya, Indonesia Tanah Pusaka, Padamu Negeri, *Subbanul Wathan*.

The appearance of the whirling dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesian which was considered paradoxically was strongly opposed by some NU figures, salafi community, and Muhammadiyah, because it was considered heresy, misleading, noisy voice and deafening disturbing the peace of the surrounding community, over time with various evaluations conducted by Mafia Shalawat Indonesia can finally be accepted by the wider community. In

the NU tradition, reading prayers is performed in mosques, mushola, majelis ta'lim, madrasa, and pesantren, with the attitude, behavior of *ta'dzim* and *khusyu'*, dressed politely in the style of students wearing *koko* clothes complete with skullcaps and sarongs, female students wearing complete Muslim clothes with hijab, not wearing T-shirts and jeans in the style of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia. NU youths are very polite to teachers, kyai, parents, elders, and love for the younger ones.

According to Erna Wati [13], the acceptance of the Nahdliyin millennial youth to the popular music performed by Mafia Shalawat Indonesia and the success of the Islamization movement in Malaysia and Indonesia in the last few decades is due to its moderate character, harmony with diverse political culture. The spread of popular culture in the form of music as an economic, political and cultural agenda globally and significantly influences the development of Islamic popular music and the rise of Islamic social culture. Popular Islamic music trends such as nasheed boy-bands are a product of Islamic popular culture in Southeast Asia.

The whirling dances strategy of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia in strengthening the identity of the young generation of NU through publications on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, streaming TV and youtube social media. This strategy is in line with L.C. Epafra [14] that, around 82% of Indonesians who are active on the internet are youth, the online world for them is a space for individualization, socialization, and expression of godliness. Diverse youth religious expressions show the complexity of issues including, religious authority, conservatism, the shadow of a plural society, and transnational religious phenomena.

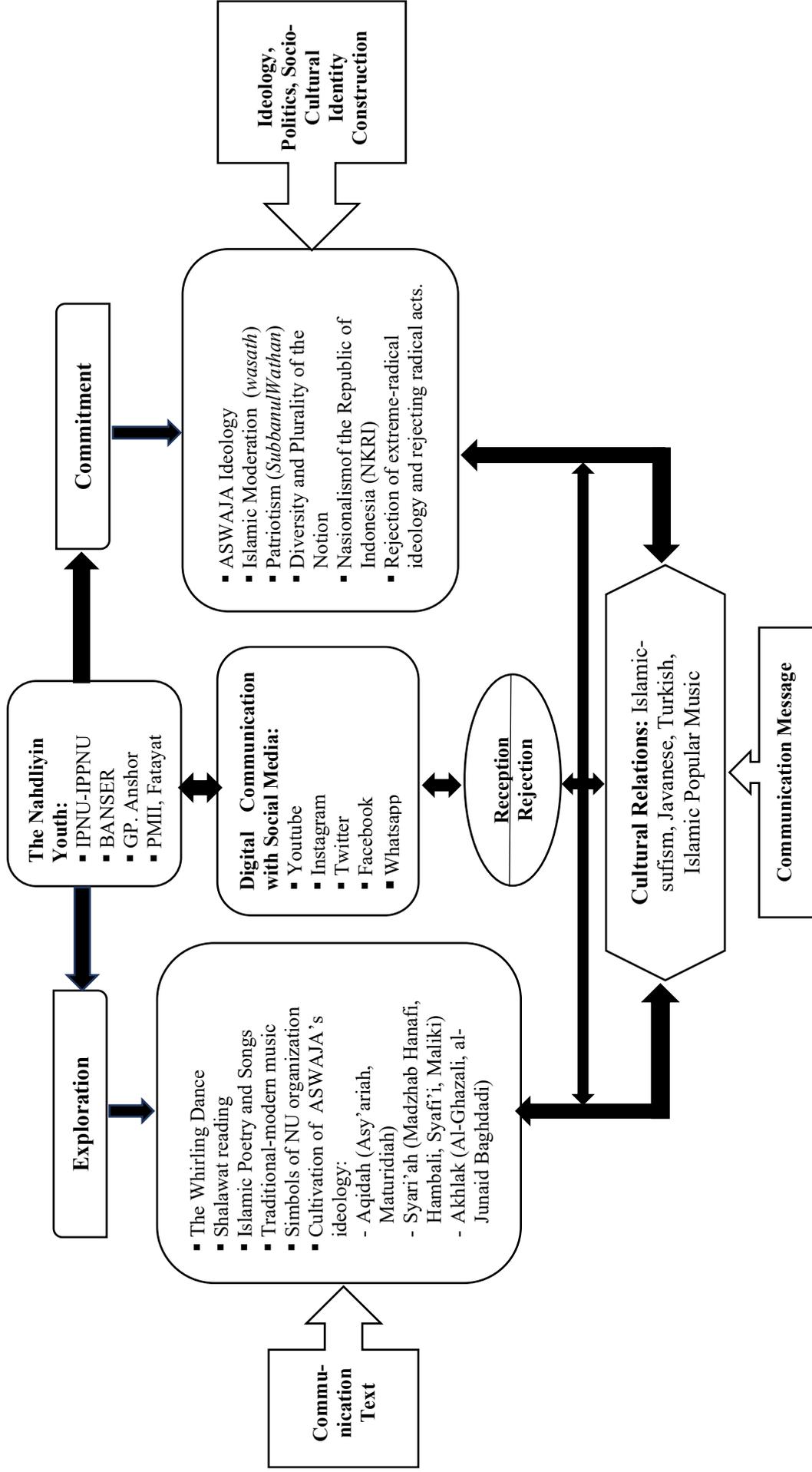
### **The Construction of Nahdliyin Youth Identity in The Whirling Dances Mafia Shalawat Indonesia**

NU is the largest religious social organization in Indonesia consisting of approximately 50% of NU residents out of a population of 223.18 million (BPS, 2016). NU must respond intelligently and humanely to challenges in the digital era, including a pluralistic wave of contemporary religious thought and practice, in which thought movements do not originate from locality genuineness that is contrary to the mainstream of Indonesian Islamic thought [15] such as (a) Liberalism, critical and contextual thinking that exists in NU youth in understanding religious teachings that have been considered standard and boosting traditionalism, (b) Fundamentalism-scriptural influenced by Middle Eastern thinking: Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, Wahabi thought, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Muslim Brotherhood. This scriptural fundamentalism rejects all systems that come from the West by applying shari'ah in a kaffah, Islamic caliphate, and returning to Islam Salafus Salih.

Cultural identity Collier & Thomas [9] were developed to build knowledge about the communicative process used by individuals to build and negotiate their cultural group identity and relationships in certain contexts. The religious expressions of the Nahdliyin community are very diverse but still in the traditional pattern and tend to be conservative. The globalization of technology has penetrated traditional communities in utilizing digital products as a medium to strengthen their identity. The whirling dances of the Indonesian Mafia Shalawat as a Sufi dance circling for tens of minutes are the result of the adaptation of the Maulawiyah Sufi tradition known as 'Sima' and the Alawiyah tradition with various shalawat readings depicting universal Islamic values, gentle, peaceful, tolerant and mutual love between human beings. Through the whirling dances as a communication text to deliver messages between senior NU figures (Abah Ali) to the young nahdliyin in order to have a commitment

to moderate Islam (*wasathiyah*), the ideology of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah an-Nahdliyah, safeguarding the NKRI with a spirit of patriotism and nationalism, gender equality, respect for diversity, reject various ideologies and extreme-radical movements.

**Figure 2.**  
The Identity of Nahdliyin Youth Construction



Islam *wasathiyah* as a model of expression and religious understanding is relevant in the frame of Indonesian statehood. A model of this expression is the moderation of NU citizens' religious diversity [15] with the rules, (a) *Tawassuth* (moderate), polite, not hard and not radical in proving that human destiny is given the opportunity to make every effort to be accompanied by the awareness of trust. (b) *Tawazun* (balance), there is a balance in religiopolitical, social, economic, cultural, voluntary, not forced, not intimidating. This is in accordance with the rules of jurisprudence "*darul mafasid khoirun min jalbil mashalih*". (c) *Itidal* (justice), building cultural trust that promotes the principle of justice. (d) *Tatharruf* (universalism), prioritizing universal Islamic values that love each other, do not hate each other and are hostile to fellow Muslims and non-Muslims, by developing concepts: divinity, humanism, justice, and safety.

Technological sophistication causes changes in devices to carry out many life activities, which change the landscape of ways of preaching and serving the community to meet trends, lifestyles, consumption patterns and relations between generations. Technological innovation and the digital revolution provide many conveniences, but at the same time threaten humanitarian roles. In the past, religious lectures were conducted from stage to stage, now recitation and lectures can be accessed from their respective homes through social media such as youtube, Facebook, Instagram, or other social media. With digital media, the true content of religion or Hoak is conveyed directly and spread throughout the world. NU youths must have sufficient competence in adjusting to changing times and information technology so that in instilling religious values of NU Aswaja, patriotism and nationalism for the glory of the archipelago will be realized. In this era, it is important to prepare NU citizens by growing digital literacy.

#### 4 Conclusions

The conclusion of this research is, firstly, the whirling dances of Mafia Shalawat Indonesia as a communication media is to convey messages from NU figures to NU youths in the digital era in strengthening traditional-conservative identity by instilling cultural identity through social media, and popular Islamic music. Second, the construction of the Nahdliyyin youth identity was explored through the whirling dances of the Mafia Shalawat Indonesia and committed to deradicalization through moderate Islam (*wasathiyah*), ASWAJA ideology, patriotism and nationalism of the Republic of Indonesia, gender equality, class relations and the rejection of extreme-radical ideology.

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