
Negotiation of Santri Agency in the Practice of Munaqosyah Tilawah: A Case Study at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Quran Negotiating Santri Agency in Quranic Recitation Assessments: A Pedagogical Case Study in an Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze how the agency of students is negotiated – defined as the capacity of students to navigate and exert influence within structured educational environments – in the practice of Munaqosyah Tilawah (a formal oral examination of Quranic recitation skills) at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Quran. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed, purposively involving 6 students and 3 ustaz to obtain in-depth experiential data from a specialized cohort. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis by systematically coding field notes and transcripts to identify recurring patterns of student agency. The analysis focused on the dynamics of students' experiences in a public, structured evaluative forum. The results of the study indicate that the negotiation of agency takes place through four main fields: (1) an emotional threshold where students navigate nervousness and anxiety as an initial mental test; (2) relationship-based agency where performance is influenced by parental and teacher encouragement as a form of socio-religious accountability; (3) bodily limitations in tilawah (recitation) performance, especially breath regulation and tone control; and (4) self-reflexivity that raises awareness of abilities and targets for improvement. Munaqosyah not only serves as a technical evaluation of reading but also as a pedagogical space that shapes religious subjects through the interaction among emotional pressure, social relations, physical discipline, and spiritual orientation. This study contributes to Islamic education research by illustrating how evaluative practices can become sites of personal empowerment. Practically, munaqosyah should be designed supportively to foster sustainable student agency.

Keywords Agency Negotiation; Embodied Performance; Munaqosyah Tilawah; Religious Subject Formation; Student Agency

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INTRODUCTION

Quranic learning in the context of contemporary Islamic education can no longer be understood solely as a ritual activity, but rather as a pedagogical practice that shapes the quality of religious literacy, the structure of religious experience, and even the formation of individual agency (Hudha & Tentiasih, 2025). However, a critical problem arises when rigid standardization of Qur'anic evaluation often suppresses students' subjective role, turning the learning process into a mechanical fulfillment of technical criteria rather than a meaningful pedagogical encounter. Tilawah, as emphasized by Mohd Aderi Che Noh (2019), is an integrated science encompassing reading, memorization, and understanding. Therefore, learning and assessment cannot be reduced solely to the accuracy of pronunciation or technical fluency, but rather require a multidimensional approach that considers cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects (Noh, Kasan, Yusak, & Yusuf, 2019).

In practice, the problem of Quranic reading literacy remains a recurring issue across educational levels. Research by the Jakarta Institute of Quranic Sciences (IIQ) reported that the Quranic illiteracy rate in Indonesia was 72.25% (Rozi, 2025). Crucially, these alarming statistics are not merely technical failures; they reflect a deeper crisis in how evaluative practices like Munaqosyah Tilawah are implemented, where the focus on quantitative scores often overlooks the student's capacity to internalize and navigate the text (agency). Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Islamic Community Guidance at the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (2023) released a Quran Literacy Index score in Indonesia of 66.038%, with 38.49% of respondents unable to read the Quran (Asrori, 2023). The National Research and Innovation Agency (2025) stated that understanding tajwid was the weakest competency among teachers, at 53.97 points, and for students, it was the weakest skill, at 43.10 points (Setiawan, 2026). This underscores the challenge: when evaluative standards are poorly mastered, the space for student agency in negotiating their learning journey becomes even more restricted by institutional anxieties over literacy scores.

Extensive research has explored Qur'anic pedagogy from various thematic lenses, yet it remains largely descriptive. Studies by Shamsul et al. (2021), Alawiyah et al. (2024), Hudha & Tentiasih (2025), Rosikhin (2025), Kustati & Amelia (2024), and Neli Hidayah (2024) have collectively mapped the landscape of Tilawah instruction. Specifically, Shamsul et al. (2021) and Alawiyah et al. (2024) focus on teacher-centered methods like **talaqqi** and **Tahfizh Camp**, yet they treat the student as a passive recipient of traditional authority (Shamsul, Kato, & Hanufi, 2021). While Rosikhin (2025) and Kustati & Amelia (2024) highlight the importance of standardization and motivation in **Munaqosyah**, their analysis is confined to instructional efficiency and fails to critique how these structures regulate student behavior. Even though Hidayah (2024) introduces the Living Qur'an, her work remains at the level of social perception without addressing the power dynamics inherent in formal assessment. The common limitation across these studies is a "pedagogical blindness" toward the internal negotiation of the student when facing rigid institutional evaluations (Kustati & Amelia, 2024).

On the other hand, the living Quran approach offers a more social perspective on the practice of Quranic recitation. Neli Hidayah (2024) demonstrates that acceptance of the Quran stems from the perceptions individuals construct through the interpretation of ontologically based symbols as solutions to life. This perspective broadens the analytical horizon: reading and being assessed in recitation is not merely

a matter of technical competence, but also a process of forming religious identity and social position (Hidayah, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in its shift from examining Tilawah as a purely technical-instructional outcome to analyzing it as a site of "agency negotiation." Unlike previous studies that prioritize teacher roles or method effectiveness, this study provides a state-of-the-art perspective by treating Munaqosyah Tilawah as a discursive arena. It shows that students do not merely "comply" with standards but actively interpret, resist, or adapt to evaluative pressures, offering a fresh look at the intersection of religious authority and individual autonomy in Islamic education.

A significant research gap exists between the sociological study of the Living Qur'an and the practical application of Qur'anic assessment. While literature has addressed literacy issues and the role of teachers, research remains relatively limited concerning the dimension of student agency in evaluative activities such as Munaqosyah Tilawah. Most research focuses on improving learning outcomes, the effectiveness of methods, or structural constraints (Noor, 2017; Rasdi et al., 2017; Ujang & Salleh, 2018). These studies tend to position students as the objects of pedagogical intervention. This study fills this void by investigating how evaluation practices directly shape how students assert their religious identity and agency.

This research utilizes the Living Qur'an perspective as its theoretical framework, specifically focusing on the "phenomenology of the social world." In the context of the living Quran, agency is understood as the result of interpretations and social interactions with the Quran (Hidayah, 2024). This framework is elaborated here to analyze how students transform a "frozen" evaluative standard into a "lived" religious experience. It posits that during *Munaqosyah*, the Qur'an is not just a text to be read correctly but a social force that students must navigate to establish their legitimacy as religious subjects.

To achieve conceptual clarity, "agency negotiation" is operationally defined as the student's capacity to navigate, adapt, and give personal meaning to the formal requirements of Munaqosyah while maintaining their subjective religious commitment. The Munaqosyah forum does not simply examine readings; it also presents authority relations, standards of legitimacy, and normative expectations. This negotiation involves the friction between institutional "rules of the game" and the student's own "internalized disposition" toward the holy text.

This study is conducted at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Quran, an institution uniquely characterized by its rigorous integration of traditional tahfizh and modern evaluative standards. This setting is particularly relevant because it represents a high-stakes environment where the pressure to meet institutional "sanad" (chain of narration) standards directly tests the limits of student agency. Based on this gap, this study examines how students interpret, respond to, and position themselves within these evaluative structures.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics of student agency within the formal structures of Qur'anic evaluation. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following question: How do students negotiate their agency amidst the normative pressures of Munaqosyah Tilawah at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Quran? Through observations of the experiences of several students, their interactions with examiners, and the assessment structures used, this study seeks to demonstrate that Munaqosyah Tilawah is a socio-religious space where agency is formed, tested, and redefined.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design (Yin as cited in Septiana, Khoiriyah, & Shaleh, 2024).

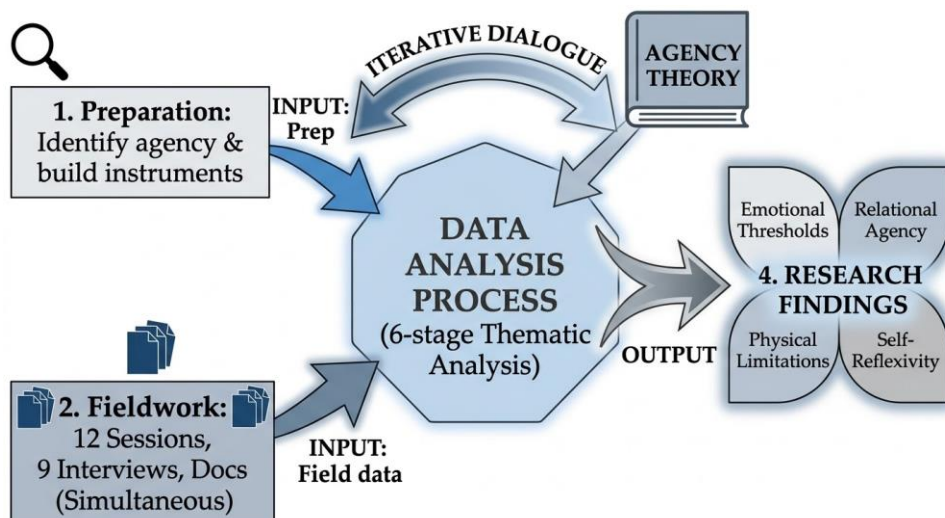


Figure 1. Research desing methode

Figure 1 Research desain metode Specifically, a single-case study strategy was employed to facilitate an idiographic, in-depth exploration of the negotiation of student agency, a phenomenon deeply embedded in the specific socio-cultural and normative fabric of a single institution (Yin, 2018). This design was chosen because the research focuses on the practice of *Munaqosyah Tilawah* (Recitation of the Qur'an) as a contemporary phenomenon that cannot be separated from its institutional context. *Munaqosyah* is not merely a technical procedure but an evaluative space encompassing reading standards, authority relations, and normative expectations that shape students' (*santri*) experiences. Thus, the case study allows for an in-depth exploration of these dynamics within the concrete context of *Ma'had Dhiyau'l Quran*.

Table 1. Research Questions and Types of Analysis

Research Question (RQ)	Research Question	Data Source	Types of Analysis
RQ 1	How do <i>santri</i> (students) navigate their agency when facing emotional thresholds and psychological pressure within the <i>munaqosyah</i> forum?	In-depth Interviews & Observation	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke)
RQ 2	How does the structure of the <i>munaqosyah</i> assessment framework provide space for the manifestation of student agency?	Curriculum Documents & Interviews	Qualitative Content Analysis

Research Question (RQ)	Research Question	Data Source	Types of Analysis
RQ 3	How do the dynamics of authority interaction between <i>ustadz</i> (teachers) and <i>santri</i> shape the process of agency negotiation during evaluation?	Participatory Observation	Thematic & Interactional Analysis

The table above demonstrates that each research question is approached with a specific analytical method to ensure a profound interpretation of data regarding the concept of agency.

Research Site and Participants

This research is a single-case study with embedded units of analysis to comprehensively uncover a case and focus on several aspects related to the subject (Asyasyauki & Widjaja, 2026). The research was conducted at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Quran over a six-month period. This site was purposively selected for its unique status as a pilot institution for standardized Qur'anic certification in the region, providing a critical context for studying evaluative authority. The single case is the practice of Munaqosyah Tilawah at a single institution, while the embedded units of analysis are operationally defined as: (1) the students' agentic experiences, (2) evaluative interactions between examiners and examinees within the Munaqosyah forum, and (3) the assessment framework used. The research participants consisted of three ustaz/examiners with more than 5 years of evaluative experience and 6 students selected to represent a diversity of learning backgrounds and proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) during the study period. This participant size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation for a single-case study while maintaining the depth of individual narratives.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through non-participant observation, where the researcher observed 10 separate munaqosyah sessions (each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes) to record interactional dynamics without interfering in the process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant for 30–50 minutes, focusing on their subjective perceptions of agency; these sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Document analysis involved examining specific artifacts, including the institutional Tajwid rubric, student progress reports, and the formal assessment framework used by the examiners. The use of multiple data sources adhered to the principle of triangulation in case studies to strengthen construct validity.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis used Thematic Analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved six stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme discovery, theme review, defining and naming themes, and developing a thematic narrative (Savitri Fatimaningrum, 2021). To ensure theoretical alignment, the concept of student agency—defined as the capacity to navigate and influence evaluative outcomes—served as a deductive lens during the coding process,

specifically in identifying patterns of resistance or compliance within the evaluative structure.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed member checking by returning interview transcripts to participants for validation, peer debriefing with two external academic experts, and the maintenance of a clear audit trail of all analytical decisions.

The analysis procedure was conducted reflectively and inductively, where the concept of "agency" was used as the primary interpretive lens in coding. The analysis stages included: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial code generation, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the thematic narrative (Savitri Fatimaningrum, 2021). The workflow from the initial stage to the final result is visualized in the following figure 2.

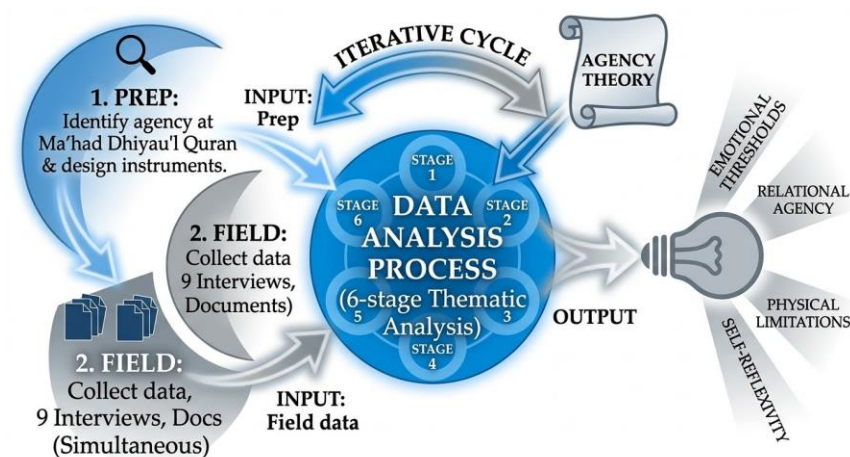


Figure 2. Research Method Process Flow

Validity and Reliability

The validity of the findings is a fundamental element in qualitative research to avoid excessive subjectivity. Trustworthiness strategies were applied to ensure the validity and reliability of the generated data. This study uses source and method triangulation to cross-check information from various perspectives. Additionally, member checking was performed by returning the interview transcript drafts to the participants for verification. The researcher also provided an audit trail, consisting of detailed, systematic field notes, as evidence of the transparency of the research process from start to finish. This data quality assurance process is illustrated as follows.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section delineates the empirical findings regarding the negotiation of santri agency during *Munaqosyah Tilawah* assessments at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Qur'an. Moving beyond mere description, the following analysis employs a critical inquiry approach to deconstruct how pedagogical structures, social relations, and bodily disciplines intersect to shape the students' agency. The results indicate that agency in this religious context is not a static property of the individual but a fluid, negotiated process that emerges through the confrontation between personal capacity and institutional expectation..

Affective Negotiation: Navigating the Performative Threshold

The data indicate that participation in *Munaqosyah Tilawah* is almost always preceded by heightened emotional intensity. The recurring patterns of "nervousness" (S04) and being "afraid" (S05) are not merely psychological side effects; they represent a 'performative threshold'—a liminal space where the santri's private practice meets public scrutiny. In this threshold, the student is forced to confront their own vulnerability. Micro-analysis of participant S02's journey from being "very nervous" during their first attempt to becoming "used to it" reveals a sophisticated mechanism of 'affective habituation.' This suggests that munaqosyah functions as a pedagogical tool for emotional regulation, where the repeated exposure to high-stakes evaluation gradually desensitizes the student to the paralyzing effects of fear.

Furthermore, the "mixed feelings of relief and nervousness" expressed by S03 signify a state of cognitive and emotional dissonance. This dissonance occurs when the santri must reconcile the high sacred stakes of Qur'anic recitation—where every letter is believed to carry divine weight—with their subjective, fallible capacity. Unlike traditional classroom settings where errors might be corrected privately, the munaqosyah environment imposes a 'productive pressure' (U2). This pressure acts as a crucible; it forces the santri to externalize their internalized skills under extreme duress. The ustadz's deliberate choice to "let them feel a bit of pressure" (U2) reveals an intentional pedagogical strategy designed to cultivate mental resilience. This finding extends the work of Hanafi (2016) by demonstrating that anxiety, when structured within a supportive religious framework, transforms from a psychological barrier into a formative catalyst for *mental jihad* (inner struggle) and resilience.

Relational-Based Agency: The Social Architecture of Performance

The findings reveal that santri agency is not an isolated individual trait but is 'co-constructed' within a complex relational field involving parents, teachers, and peers. The pervasive desire to "make parents proud" (S03, S01, S06) indicates that the santri's motivation is deeply embedded in the logic of *birrul walidain* (filial piety). In this context, agency is negotiated as a form of social and spiritual accountability. The santri does not act as an autonomous secular agent seeking personal fame; rather, they act as a representative of the family's religious honor. A successful recitation is seen as a 'symbolic gift' returned to the parents in exchange for their support and prayers.

The inclusion of "netizens" (S04) in the audience spectrum highlights a contemporary shift in Qur'anic pedagogy. At Ma'had Dhiyau'l Qur'an, the live-streaming of assessments introduces a 'digital surveillance' layer that expands the traditional boarding school boundary. This digital visibility creates a 'scaffolding effect'—where the gaze of the global community provides an additional moral pressure to excel. However, it also introduces the risk of 'performative anxiety' related to public image maintenance. This relational architecture contradicts the Western-centric notion of agency as pure, detached autonomy. Instead, it suggests that in Islamic educational settings, true agency is discovered through the successful negotiation and fulfillment of relational obligations (Hamid et al., 2025; Baharun & Rizqiyah, 2020). The santri finds power not in being free *from* others, but in being meaningful *for* others.

Performative-Technical Negotiation: The Embodied Agency of the Body

The data consistently identify "shortness of breath" and "unstable tone" (S02, S03, S42) as the primary physical sites of struggle. This underscores the fact that tilawah is an 'embodied performance' where the biological body acts as the final gatekeeper of

agency. A micro-analysis of the correlation between "nervousness" and "breath control" (U3) reveals that technical failure is often a somatic manifestation of psychological pressure—a phenomenon we might term 'pedagogical somatization.' When the student is nervous, the diaphragm tightens, the heart rate increases, and the breath—the very lifeblood of *tilawah*—becomes shallow.

The santri's agency is therefore physically limited by their physiological capacity to manage the 'high notes' (*jawwab*) of both the musical melody and the evaluative situation. As S42 noted, high notes "drain the breath," suggesting a literal exhaustion of agency through physical exertion. This finding highlights a critical gap in current Qur'anic pedagogy: the urgent need for a more integrated 'breath-body-mind' training protocol. Such a protocol would acknowledge that technical fluency is not just a cognitive achievement but an emotional and physiological state (Siregar & Siagian, 2023). By training the body to remain calm under the ustadz's gaze, the santri is essentially training their agency to remain intact during the trials of life. The body, in this sense, is the canvas upon which religious character is physically etched.

Reflexivity and Self-Orientation: The Emergence of Autonomous Agency

The final stage of negotiation involves a profound shift from external pressure to internal reflexivity. Participants who view *munaqosyah* as a "benchmark" (S54) or a way to "recognize own ability" (S01) demonstrate what Biesta (2015) terms 'subjectification'—the process of becoming a self-directing agent. This is the moment where the student stops being an 'object' of assessment and starts being the 'subject' of their own learning. The move from "wanting to please parents" to "intention for the sake of Allah" (S06) marks a critical transition from extrinsic to intrinsic religious motivation, or a shift in the 'locus of control.'

This reflexivity allows the santri to deconstruct their own performance errors with a degree of critical distance. When S02 mentions setting "future targets," they are exhibiting forward-looking agency, effectively turning a moment of judgment into a cycle of continuous self-improvement. The *munaqosyah* thus acts as a 'reflexive mirror.' It provides the necessary friction for the santri to see their own strengths and weaknesses clearly. The ultimate implication for Qur'anic pedagogy is that the assessment should be reframed: it is not a final destination or a binary pass/fail event, but a diagnostic tool that enables the santri to navigate their own spiritual and technical growth trajectory with increasing independence.

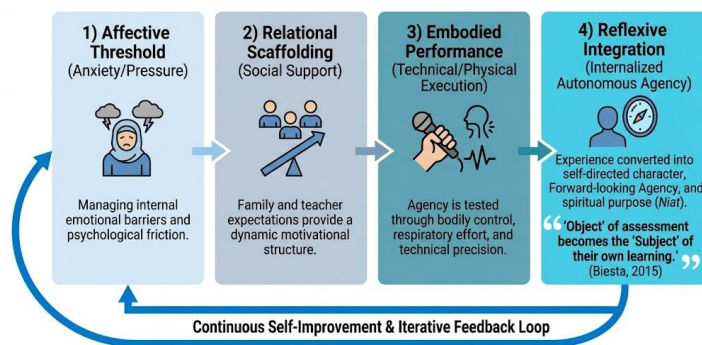


Figure 3. The Dynamic Flow of Santri Agency Negotiation in *Munaqosyah Tilawah*.

The figure illustrates the progression from **1) Affective Threshold (Anxiety)**, where the student manages internal emotional barriers; to **2) Relational Scaffolding (Social Support)**, where the expectations of family and teachers provide a motivational

structure; to 3) **Embodied Performance (Technical/Physical Execution)**, where agency is tested through bodily control; and finally 4) **Reflexive Integration (Internalized Agency)**, where the experience is converted into self-directed character and spiritual purpose.

The four indicators presented are not simply descriptive categories, but rather the result of analytical reduction, representing the dominant patterns of agency negotiation in the practice of Munaqosyah Tilawah.

Table 2. The Negotiation Table of Santri Agency in the Practice of Munaqosyah Tilawah.

No	Indicator	Evidence (Interview Excerpts + Code)	Coded Theme
1	Affective Negotiation	<p>“When I first joined Munaqosyah, I felt very nervous, but now I’m not as nervous anymore because I’m used to it.” (S02)</p> <p>“There is always nervousness. I worry that some notes might be off or out of tune.” (S04)</p> <p>“I feel nervous, afraid my breath won’t last and that I might get the melody wrong.” (S05)</p> <p>“My feelings are still mixed between relief and nervousness.” (S03)</p> <p>“Usually those who perform well in practice become tense during munaqosyah. But that’s where their mental strength is trained.” (U1)</p> <p>“We intentionally let them feel a bit of pressure, so they learn how to control their nervousness.” (U2)</p>	Emotional Threshold and the Growth of Confidence
2	Relational Negotiation	<p>“My parents, because I want to make them proud.” (S03)</p> <p>“My teacher, because they trained me in the melody of tilawah, and also my parents so they can feel proud.” (S01)</p> <p>“Friends and parents... because they are the ones who encourage me.” (S06)</p> <p>“I have to maintain my image in front of friends, teachers, and even netizens.” (S04)</p> <p>“Many santri perform not only for themselves, but also to carry their parents’ name.” (U3)</p> <p>“Sometimes they say they want to see their parents smile while watching the live broadcast.” (U1)</p>	Relational-Based Agency
3	Performative–	<p>“My breath is not long enough.” (S02)</p>	Bodily Limitations

No	Indicator	Evidence (Interview Excerpts + Code)	Coded Theme
	Technical Negotiation	“It’s difficult to reach high notes and manage my breathing.” (S03) “When reaching high notes, it really drains my breath.” (S42) “Breath control and melody are still unstable.” (S51) “The most common obstacle is breath and tone control, especially when their mental state is not stable.” (U2) “Technically they are capable, but when nervous, their breath becomes short.” (U3)	in Tilawah Performance
4	Reflexivity and Self-Orientation	“We can recognize our own ability in reciting.” (S01) “It becomes a benchmark in reciting each verse of the Qur’an.” (S54) “I definitely set a target and practice more often.” (S02) “Myself... my first intention is for the sake of Allah.” (S06) “The purpose of munaqosyah is not only to assess, but to help them realize their strengths and weaknesses.” (U1) “When they start evaluating themselves without being told, that’s a sign their agency is beginning to grow.” (U2)	Self-Awareness and Emerging Agency

Analytical Interpretation of Table 1: The data in Table 1 reveal a hierarchical and temporal progression of agency. The first two indicators (Affective and Relational) represent 'pre-performance' negotiations where the santri manages internal emotions and navigates external expectations before even opening the Qur’an. These stages set the psychological foundation for the performance. The third indicator (Performative-Technical) represents the 'active' negotiation during the assessment, where agency is physically tested against biological limits. Finally, the fourth indicator (Reflexive) represents 'post-performance' negotiation, where the external experience is cognitively processed and integrated into the student’s identity. The recurring dominance of "breath" and "nervousness" across multiple codes (S02, S03, S05, S42) confirms that the body remains the most volatile variable in this negotiation process, acting as the bridge between psychological intention and spiritual execution.

Revised Findings in Table Format

This table structure complements Table 1 (Questions and Analysis) by organizing the key categories that emerged from your analysis. It uses

consistent terminology with your text (Affective, Relational, Embodied, Reflexive).

Table 3. Typology and Negotiation of Santri Agency in Munaqosyah Tilawah

Typology Dimension	Description of Negotiation	Critical Components / Drivers	Conceptual Framework Alignment
I. Affective Agency (Threshold)	Navigating internal emotional barriers, converting friction into effort.	Managing 'muroqobah'; Emotional stabilization; Anxiety conversion.	Agency-as-capacity (Emirbayer & Mische); Psychological friction.
II. Relational Agency (Scaffolding)	Exercised through social structures, converting expectations into motivation.	Converting social pressure to support; Parental expectations; Teacher feedback.	Scaffolding (Vygotsky); Dynamic support structures.
III. Embodied Agency (Performance)	Manifestation through bodily control; physical performance as the testing ground.	Breathing technique; Fatigue management; Technical precision (Somatic testing).	Embodied agency; Performance-as-action; Somatic testing.
IV. Reflexive Agency (Self-Orientation)	Shift from 'object' to 'subject'; internal forward-looking agency.	Biesta's 'subjectification'; Locus of control shift (Allah over judges); Error deconstruction.	Subjectification (Biesta 2015); Intrinsic religious motivation.

Analytical Interpretation of Table 3: The data in Table 1 reveal a hierarchical and temporal progression of agency. The Affective and Relational dimensions represent 'pre-performance' negotiations where the santri manages internal emotions and external expectations. These are the "foundational" agencies that allow the student to enter the performative space. The Embodied and Reflexive dimensions represent 'active' and 'post-performance' negotiations in which agency is physically tested in real time and then cognitively integrated into the student's identity. The persistent issues with "breath" (S02, S03, S42) underscore that the body remains the most volatile variable in this negotiated process.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Qur'an challenge the binary view of agency as either "total freedom" or "total submission," revealing instead a "Negotiated Agency" that thrives within the structures of religious authority. In this context, santri agency emerges not as a rejection of institutional rules, but as an active, creative capacity to navigate the performative threshold. The dominance of anxiety and nervousness in the data suggests that *tilawah* is far more than a technical activity; it is an intense 'threshold condition' that tests the boundaries of the self. This observation expands upon the theses of Hanafi (2016) and Nurdin, Amang, & Priyadi (2025), who argue that evaluative pressure in *munaqosyah* is not merely a source of distress but a vital medium

for mental formation. When pedagogically mediated through the concept of *muroqobah*—the continuous consciousness of the Divine presence—this anxiety allows santri to convert psychological friction into character strength. It is a process where the "fear of the judge" is sublimated into "awe of the Creator," a finding that aligns perfectly with Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) framework of agency as an iterative capacity informed by past habits and future aspirations.

Further elaboration on the relational dimension demonstrates that santri agency is deeply rooted in networks of family and teachers, which function as a moral 'scaffolding' that prevents the student from collapsing under the weight of the assessment. The motivation to "make parents proud" (S03) is not a sign of dependency or lack of autonomy; rather, it is a manifestation of *birrul walidain* (filial piety) being converted into a powerful form of social accountability. This creates a "relational field" where the student's success is a shared triumph, reinforcing the communal nature of Islamic learning. Recent literature underscores that such supportive educational ecosystems are absolutely crucial in fostering deep Qur'anic literacy and identity (Baharun & Rizqiyah, 2020; Panjaitan & Mahariah, 2025). This study critiques modern, individualistic views of agency by showing that in the *pesantren* environment, agency is found precisely in the successful fulfillment of relational obligations.

However, the emergence of "netizens" (S04) as a digital audience introduces a new, more complex layer of surveillance that requires further investigation. Santri must now negotiate their agency not only within the sacred, controlled walls of the *madrasah* but within a broader, often judgmental, digital public sphere. This transition requires a form of "digital *muru'ah*" (reputation management) that aligns with the work of Hamid, Qomaruddin, & Rosdianti (2025), emphasizing that the modern religious subject is perpetually visible and thus perpetually "on stage." The implications of this are profound: the santri must learn to balance the sincerity of their heart (*ikhlas*) with the performative demands of a global audience.

Analysis of the performative-technical aspect reveals that the santri's body is the primary arena where agency is somatically tested and validated. Recurring complaints regarding breath control and tonal stability (S02, S42) confirm that *tilawah* is an embodied performance requiring the total, integrated engagement of physical, mental, and cognitive capacities (Siregar & Siagian, 2023). The inability to control one's breath under pressure is not merely a technical flaw to be corrected by a metronome or a coach; it is a manifestation of the "vulnerable religious subject" confronting the infinite perfection of the Sacred Text. This reinforces the argument of Mohd Aderi Che Noh (2019) that recitation quality is fundamentally shaped by trained physiological capacity and mental discipline. We analyze that the body functions as a psychological barometer; technical failure—such as a cracked voice or a missed beat—is a somatic manifestation of mental instability or a lack of spiritual focus (U3). Consequently, agency in *munaqosyah* depends heavily on disciplined self-regulation—the ability to govern the body and the breath even when under the immense weight of the authoritative gaze. The "short breath" is the physical evidence of the ontological gap between the reciter and the Recited, and the effort to overcome it is the very essence of agency.

Reflecting on these findings leads to the process of "subjectification" as theorized by Biesta (2015), where santri transform from mere objects of assessment into independent subjects of faith and learning. The shift in the locus of motivation from "pleasing parents" to "intention for the sake of Allah" (*ikhlas*) (S06) marks the ultimate maturation of spiritual agency. In this sense, the *munaqosyah* serves as a "reflexive

mirror," enabling santri to recognize their own abilities, diagnose their weaknesses, and set future targets with a sense of "strategic improvement" (S01, S54). This integration of Divine values into lived, physical practice aligns with the core goal of Qur'anic education: cultivating individuals who embody *akhlak al-karimah* (noble character) through the synthesis of technical skill and spiritual depth (Qomaruddin, 2024).

This study concludes that *munaqosyah* is not just a final exam but a catalyst for santri to "read" themselves as critically as they read the verses, directing their own learning process with a new sense of purpose (Hidayah, 2024). The impact of this research highlights the urgent need for a pedagogical reorientation in Qur'anic instruction—one that moves beyond the mechanical mastery of vocal patterns to encompass emotional management and social scaffolding. Practical recommendations include:

1. **Integration of Affective Coaching:** Incorporate spiritual "grounding" techniques to help students stabilize the "psychological friction" of performance.
2. **Formal Breath and Somatic Training:** Recognize breath control not just as a vocal technique, but as a form of "embodied agency" that requires physical conditioning.
3. **Parental-Institutional Scaffolding:** Train parents and teachers to provide "supportive pressure" (*scaffolding*) rather than "judgmental weight," fostering a healthier and more resilient santri subjectification.

Ultimately, the agency negotiated within the *munaqosyah* reflects the profound, universal human struggle to align one's limited, fragile self with the majesty and infinity of the Qur'an in the context of daily, lived practice. The success of the *munaqosyah* is not measured by the beauty of the voice alone, but by the strength of the agent who wields it.

The findings at Ma'had Dhiyau'l Qur'an shatter the conventional binary view of agency as either absolute individual freedom or total structural submission. Paradoxically, the data illuminate a "Negotiated Agency" that thrives precisely within the rigorous constraints of religious authority. This phenomenon suggests that the emotional threshold—nervousness and fear—is not a psychological error to be minimized, but a structural catalyst for profound subjectification. The transition from acute anxiety to "habitual confidence" (S02) validates the *munaqosyah* environment as a "sanctified crucible." Within this space, anxiety is pedagogically mediated to foster resilience rather than trauma, complicating the secular psychological models that view stress as purely detrimental. This mechanism transforms "productive pressure" (U2) into an instrument of empowerment, forcing the santri to reclaim their agency through disciplined, ritualized repetition.

This negotiation extends deeply into the physical body, which serves as the primary site of sacred struggle. The recurrent failure in breath control (S02, S42) transcends technical inadequacy; it manifests the ontological vulnerability of the religious subject in the face of the perfect Divine Word. In the practice of *tilawah*, the body is not an external tool but a living vessel. When the body "breaks" under pressure—manifesting as shallow breathing or tonal instability—it exposes the gap between the perfect Text and the imperfect human vessel. Agency, in this context, is the deliberate effort to narrow this gap through somatic discipline. This observation complicates the findings of Siregar and Siagian (2023) by suggesting that physiological

breakdown is a moment of "agency under construction." The santri learns that true mastery requires a total submission of the biological self to the spiritual task, making the body a physical record of spiritual labor.

A significant anomaly in this study is the influence of "digital surveillance" via live-streaming (S04), which introduces a modern layer of complexity to the relational field. While traditional scholarship (Baharun & Rizqiyah, 2020) emphasizes the teacher-student dyad, this finding reveals a "distributed agency" involving an invisible global audience. The presence of "netizens" could potentially threaten the pursuit of *ikhlas* (sincerity), yet for the santri, it appears to function as an additional moral scaffold. This suggests a local cultural adaptation where digital visibility is leveraged to heighten performance stakes. The eventual move from "wanting to please others" to "intention for the sake of Allah" (S06) represents the ultimate realization of Biesta's (2015) concept of subjectification. The rigid structures of the boarding school provide the necessary friction for the self to be defined and exercised, overturning the critique that religious education stifles individual growth.

The long-term implications of this study necessitate a radical reframing of "pressure" in religious pedagogy. If agency is negotiated through these fields, the role of the educator is not to remove tension, but to curate it in a way that encourages autonomous spiritual formation. This study proposes a shift toward a model of "Empowered Submission." Practically, this requires the integration of "Affective Coaching" utilizing *muroqobah* (self-vigilance) and formalizing breath training as "embodied agency." By recognizing that agency is negotiated through emotion, body, and social bonds, Qur'an pedagogy can empower the student as a resilient religious subject capable of navigating the pressures of the 21st century (Panjaitan & Mahariah, 2025; Qomaruddin, 2024). Ultimately, *munaqosyah* is not merely an assessment of skill, but a transformative initiation into a more profound, agentic way of being in the world.

CONCLUSION

Santri agency extends beyond academic achievement and should be understood as a dynamic and multidimensional process integrating emotional, social, physical, and spiritual dimensions throughout the *munaqosyah* assessment. The findings demonstrate that the assessment fosters students' transformation from anxiety to confidence through the practice of *muroqobah*, while relational support from parents and teachers strengthens moral accountability both within and beyond the educational environment. Moreover, the development of embodied agency highlights that technical mastery is inseparable from spiritual discipline. Ultimately, the *munaqosyah* assessment serves as a process of subjectification, enabling students to move beyond externally driven compliance toward an autonomous and deeply internalized spiritual commitment centered on sincere worship for the sake of Allah.

Educational institutions should prioritize the development of holistic pedagogical frameworks that address the psychosomatic and affective needs of students, moving beyond purely technical instruction toward integrated emotional coaching and somatic training. It is recommended that educators consciously frame evaluative high-pressure environments as supportive scaffolding to encourage spiritual autonomy rather than performance anxiety. Future research should explore the long-term impact of digital visibility and public streaming on the development of spiritual sincerity (*ikhlas*) among students in traditional religious settings.

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