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The Construction of Religious Identity among Sapta Darma Adherents in Digital Space: A Study of Social Media in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study analyses the construction of religious identity among Sapta Darma adherents in digital space, focusing on the relationship between internal ritual practices and community representation on social media. The issue is significant because indigenous belief adherents in Indonesia have gained administrative recognition following Constitutional Court Decision Number 97/PUU-XIV/2016, yet they continue to face social stigma and limited public representation. Using a qualitative approach and a contextual case study design, this research was conducted at Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with adherents, sanggar administrators, community figures, and social media managers, as well as documentation of ritual activities and digital content. The data were analysed interpretatively using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework and Frame Analysis. The findings reveal three main points. First, ritual space functions as backstage, where identity authenticity is formed through *sujud*, *racut*, *ulah rasa*, and bodily-spiritual cultivation. Second, social media functions as front stage, where identity is selected, simplified, and translated into public language. Third, impression management is used to emphasise humanitarian values, ethics, social harmony, and community activities in order to build legitimacy and reduce stigma. This study implies that indigenous belief communities need balanced digital communication strategies that combine public openness with the protection of spiritual depth. Its originality lies in viewing social media as a dramaturgical space and politics of meaning for local belief communities, rather than merely as a medium of religious communication.

Keywords: religious identity; Sapta Darma; social media; dramaturgy; indigenous belief adherents.

Introduction

Contemporary religious transformation is marked by a shift of authority from formal institutions towards more personal spiritual experience. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) describe this tendency as *subjective-life spirituality*, namely a religious orientation that places inner experience as the main source of meaning and religious authority. In Indonesia, this tendency can be observed in the continuity of indigenous belief communities that emphasise spiritual experience, ethical conduct, and bodily practice as the basis of religiosity. Sapta Darma is an important example of this phenomenon, since its teachings are not constructed primarily through formal doctrine, but through spiritual practices such as *sujud*, *racut*, and *ulah rasa*, which are experienced directly by its adherents (Ahda, 2020; Munafiah, 2017).

From a socio-political perspective, the position of indigenous belief adherents has been strengthened following Constitutional Court Decision Number 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which opened the possibility for belief identity to be recorded in civil registration documents. This decision was significant because it corrected administrative practices that had previously placed indigenous belief adherents in an unequal position compared with followers of state-recognised religions (Sajiwo et al., 2022). However, administrative recognition does not automatically eliminate social stigma. Indigenous belief adherents continue to encounter problems of public acceptance, religious stereotyping, and pressure to adjust their identity to the dominant categories of majority religion. This condition shows that the identity of indigenous belief adherents is negotiated not only within the legal sphere of the state, but also in everyday social life.

This transformation has taken place alongside the strengthening of digital space as a new arena for the production of religious meaning. DataReportal (2025) recorded that, in January 2025, Indonesia had 212 million internet users, with an internet penetration rate of 74.6 per cent, and 143 million social media user identities, equivalent to 50.2 per cent of the total population. These figures indicate that social media is no longer merely an additional space, but has become part of the social ecology in which religious identity, authority, and legitimacy are constructed and negotiated. For minority communities such as Sapta Darma, social media offers an opportunity to introduce their values to the wider public. At the same time, it also creates risks of misunderstanding, reduction of meaning, negative comments, and the reproduction of stigma through audience logic and the algorithms of digital platforms (Campbell & Cheong, 2022; Hjarvard, 2013).

Previous studies on this topic can be mapped into three main tendencies. The first tendency concerns studies of subjective spirituality and Javanese mysticism, which emphasise inner experience, bodily practice, and ethical conduct as important foundations of local belief traditions. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) show that modern spirituality increasingly places personal experience at the centre of religious authority. Woodward (2011) explains that Javanese religious traditions are flexible, syncretic, and rooted in cultural practice. Meanwhile, Khasbullah and Nisa (2021), and Haryati et al. (2025) demonstrate that local spirituality in Indonesia has not disappeared in modernity, but has instead adapted through new and more contextual forms of identity. Nevertheless, this body of literature tends to emphasise inner experience, syncretism, and the historical development of local spirituality, while paying less attention to how ritual experience is translated into digital representation.

The second tendency concerns studies of digital religion, which show that media does not merely function as a channel for disseminating religious messages, but also transforms the ways in which religious authority, practice, and identity are formed. Campbell (2022) argues that digital space enables new patterns of religious practice and authority. Hjarvard (2016), through the concept of the *mediatization of religion*, explains that media shapes how religion appears in the public sphere. These studies are important because they show that social media is not a neutral instrument, but actively shapes the logic of religious representation. However, studies of digital religion generally focus on major religions or mainstream religious communities, while the digital experiences of local indigenous belief communities such as Sapta Darma remain underexplored.

The third tendency concerns studies of indigenous belief adherents in Indonesia, which mostly examine legal recognition, citizenship, and socio-political dynamics after the Constitutional Court decision. Sirait et al (2015) highlights the power relations between the state, official religion, and local belief systems in Indonesian religious policy. Sajiwo et al. (2022) discuss the fulfilment of the rights of indigenous belief adherents after Constitutional Court Decision Number 97/PUU-XIV/2016. Saputra and Mustika (2023) also show that Sapta Darma adherents continue to face social and cultural challenges in their relationship with wider society. This tendency makes an important contribution to understanding indigenous belief adherents as citizens. However, it has not sufficiently explained how these communities actively manage their identity in digital space in order to respond to stigma and build public legitimacy.

Based on these three tendencies, an important research gap can be identified. Studies of subjective spirituality have explained the inner experiential basis of indigenous belief traditions; studies of digital religion have explained the transformation of religion through media; and studies of indigenous belief citizenship have highlighted legal and socio-political recognition. However, these three bodies of literature tend to develop separately. Few studies have connected the internal ritual practices of Sapta Darma with its digital representation strategies through a dramaturgical perspective. Sapta Darma identity, therefore, should not be understood merely as

a theological, administrative, or cultural identity, but as a social construction that moves between the private space of ritual and the public space of digital media.

This study aims to analyse the construction of religious identity among Sapta Darma adherents in relation to ritual practice and social media representation. More specifically, this study addresses three main questions: first, how Sapta Darma religious identity is formed within ritual space as a *backstage* arena; second, how this identity is negotiated on social media as a *front stage* arena; and third, how strategies of *impression management* are used to build public legitimacy while responding to social stigma. Through these objectives, this study seeks to address the limitations of previous research by linking internal spiritual experience, digital representation, and the politics of recognition within an integrated analytical framework.

The main argument of this study is that Sapta Darma religious identity in digital space is performative, selective, and relational. This identity is rooted in internal spiritual experience shaped through ritual practice. However, when it appears on social media, it undergoes processes of selection, simplification, and framing in order to be accepted by a wider audience. Within Goffman's dramaturgical and frame analysis perspective, the relationship between *backstage* and *front stage* does not merely explain the distinction between private and public spaces, but also reveals how minority communities manage impressions within unequal social situations (Persson, 2018). Thus, this study extends Goffman's framework in the context of digital religion by showing that impression management does not only take place in face-to-face interaction, but also in the relationship between community ritual, social media, algorithms, stigma, and public expectations.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a contextual case study design (Sugiyono, 2010). The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on meaning, spiritual experience, and strategies of identity representation that cannot be reduced to quantitative measurement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The case study design was used to examine in depth the relationship between ritual practice, community identity, and digital representation within a specific social context (Yin, 2014). Through this design, the study is able to investigate how the religious identity of Sapta Darma is formed within ritual space and negotiated within social media space.

The unit of analysis in this study is the Sapta Darma adherent community at Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta (Ramadhan, 2018). This unit of analysis includes community ritual practices, the experiences and narratives of adherents, the management of the sanggar, and the representation of Sapta Darma identity on social media. This location was selected because Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga is one of the active spaces for Sapta Darma spiritual practice and is also connected to the community's representational activities in digital space. Thus, this sanggar provides an appropriate context for understanding the encounter between ritual tradition, community organisation, and digital communication.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from active adherents, sanggar administrators, community figures, and the community's social media managers. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement in ritual practice, community management, and Sapta Darma's digital representation activities. Primary data were also obtained from ritual activities, community activities, photographs, videos, sanggar archives, and social media posts representing social activities, value education, and community activities. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from academic literature, legal documents, and previous studies on digital religion, indigenous belief adherents, and Sapta Darma.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, participant observation was carried out on ritual practices and community activities at the sanggar, particularly *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, *racut*, *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa*. Observation was used to understand the community's social and symbolic practices directly within their natural context (Spradley, 1980). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with active adherents, sanggar administrators, community figures, and social media managers to explore the meaning of rituals, identity experiences, representational strategies, and ethical considerations in displaying content (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Third, documentation was conducted on photographs, videos, community archives, and social media posts related to the representation of Sapta Darma identity. The research instruments used included observation guidelines, interview guidelines, field notes, visual documentation, and screenshots of relevant social media content.

Data analysis was conducted interpretatively through three stages. First, data reduction was carried out by grouping the findings according to the themes of ritual practice, identity experience, digital representation, and audience response. Second, thematic reading was conducted to identify patterns of relationship between ritual space as *backstage* and social media as *front stage*. Third, theoretical interpretation was carried out using Goffman's concepts of dramaturgy, *Frame Analysis*, and *impression management* to understand how the Sapta Darma community frames identity and manages impressions in the digital public sphere. Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation by comparing the results of observation, interviews, documentation, and supporting literature (Miles et al., 2014). This study also observed research ethics by preserving the context of informants' statements, avoiding the disclosure of ritual details considered sensitive by the community, and treating digital data as public representation that still requires contextual interpretation.

Results

1. The Formation of Religious Identity in Ritual Space (*Backstage*)

The first set of data shows that the formation of religious identity among Sapta Darma adherents primarily takes place within the ritual space of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta. Based on field observation, the spiritual practices performed in the sanggar include *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, *racut*, *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa*. These practices are not merely understood as religious activities, but as inner spiritual disciplines that shape self-awareness, spiritual discipline, and the identity of adherents. In Sapta Darma teachings, spiritual practice occupies an important position because it is closely related to inner experience, social morality, and the formation of the adherents' spiritual character (Ahda, 2020; Munafiah, 2017). The field report also affirms that the main teachings of Sapta Darma include *sesanti*, *Wewarah Pitu*, and the practical application of teachings through *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, *racut*, *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa*.

This evidence is strengthened by an interview with Mr Slamet Basuki, S.H., Manager of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta. As the manager of the sanggar, he explained that the sanggar is the main space in which Sapta Darma teachings are practised within community life. He stated:

"Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga is a place where members practise Sapta Darma teachings at the local level. Here, members do not merely gather, but also perform spiritual disciplines such as *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, *racut*, *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa* as a way to cultivate inner peace and the spirituality of adherents." (Interview with Mr Slamet Basuki, S.H., Manager of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta, 2025).

Mr Slamet also emphasised that ritual in Sapta Darma cannot be understood merely as an outward action. He stated:

“Spiritual discipline in Sapta Darma cannot simply be seen as external movement. Sujud, sujud penggalian, and tukar hawa are part of the process of ordering the inner self. Through these disciplines, members learn to understand themselves, preserve their sense of inner feeling, and draw closer to God.” (Interview with Mr Slamet Basuki, S.H., Manager of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta, 2025).

In addition to its personal dimension, ritual space also has a communal function. The sanggar becomes a place where Sapta Darma members meet one another, practise the teachings, and maintain the continuity of spiritual values. In the interview, Mr Slamet explained:

“Inside the sanggar, members learn from and strengthen one another. Sapta Darma teachings are preserved through shared activities, through practice, and through relationships among members. Therefore, the sanggar is not only a place of ritual, but also a place for maintaining the continuity of the teachings.” (Interview with Mr Slamet Basuki, S.H., Manager of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta, 2025).

This collective dimension is further supported by an interview with Mr Naen Soeryono, S.H., M.H., Chairperson of the Central Persatuan Warga Sapta Darma (Persada). He explained that Persada plays a role in uniting Sapta Darma adherents and maintaining the legitimacy of the teachings within society. He stated:

“Persada plays a role in uniting Sapta Darma members and ensuring that these teachings continue to be understood and practised by adherents. Sapta Darma identity does not only live in personal experience, but also in the communal bond that preserves the teachings and their continuity.” (Interview with Mr Naen Soeryono, S.H., M.H., Chairperson of the Central Persatuan Warga Sapta Darma/Persada, 2025).

This quotation shows that Sapta Darma identity is formed not only through individual experience, but also through organisational bonds and community solidarity. In other words, ritual space functions as a site for the formation of both personal and collective identity. Within Goffman’s framework, the sanggar can be understood as a *backstage* space that preserves the authenticity of the teachings before this identity is presented in the digital public sphere.



Figure 1. Documentation of observation at Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta

Documentation data also strengthens this finding. The observation documentation shows that ritual activities take place in a simple, centred sanggar space that has symbolic boundaries separating it from the outside public sphere. The position of participants, the community symbol, and the atmosphere of the room indicate that the sanggar functions as a socio-spiritual space. This visual data shows that Sapta Darma identity is formed within a collective space that is relatively protected from public exposure. Thus, the community is able to preserve the depth of spiritual experience before this identity is negotiated in external spaces, especially social media.

Based on the observation, interview, and documentation data, the findings can be visualised in the following table.

Table 1. The Formation of Sapta Darma Religious Identity in Ritual Space

Practice/Finding	Meaning for Adherents	Identity Function	Dramaturgical Reading
Daily <i>sujud</i>	Calming the inner self and directing consciousness towards God	Forms spiritual discipline and personal closeness to the Divine	The main <i>backstage</i> where identity is prepared through bodily-spiritual routine
<i>Sujud penggalian</i> and <i>racut</i>	Deepening of feeling, reflection on the origin of the self, and spiritual union	Affirms an esoteric identity that can only be understood through direct experience	A space of meaning that cannot be fully transferred to the <i>front stage</i>
<i>Tukar hawa, ulah rasa, and gerak nur rasa</i>	Cultivation of energy, body, and consciousness	Shows an <i>embodied</i> and holistic spirituality	Becomes the internal source of authenticity that is later filtered when appearing in public
Quiet and supportive sanggar atmosphere	Creates a sense of safety and reflective depth	Connects personal experience with community solidarity	Builds a symbolic boundary between private religious space and public space

Based on these data, it can be understood that the religious identity of Sapta Darma adherents is formed primarily through ritual practice in the sanggar. Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga is not merely a gathering place, but an important space for adherents to practise the teachings, order the inner self, deepen spirituality, and maintain their relationship with God. Practices such as *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, *racut*, *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa* become the main means of shaping self-awareness and spiritual discipline. Sapta Darma identity is also not formed individually alone, but is strengthened through relationships among members and the role of the community in preserving the continuity of the teachings. Thus, ritual space functions as *backstage*, namely an internal space where religious identity is prepared, deepened, and preserved before it is later presented or negotiated in the digital public sphere.

These data reveal several important patterns in the formation of Sapta Darma religious identity within ritual space. The first pattern is identity based on inner experience. Sapta Darma religious identity is not formed primarily through written doctrine or formal recognition, but through spiritual experience directly lived by adherents. Practices such as *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, and *racut* become ways for members to order the inner self, recognise themselves, and draw closer to God. Thus, inner experience becomes the main source of religious meaning-making.

The second pattern is ritual as a form of spiritual discipline. Ritual practices performed repeatedly show that religious identity is formed through consistent habit and discipline. Daily *sujud*, the cultivation of feeling, and bodily practice are not merely religious activities, but also shape inner attitude, calmness, and spiritual awareness. This shows that Sapta Darma identity is built through a continuous process, not through momentary understanding.

The third pattern is spirituality that is united with the body. The data show that the body plays an important role in Sapta Darma religious practice. Practices such as *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa* show that the body is not merely a physical instrument, but a medium for cultivating feeling, energy, and consciousness. Therefore, Sapta Darma spirituality can be understood as *embodied* spirituality, namely spirituality experienced through the unity of body, feeling, and inner self.

The fourth pattern is identity formed communally. Although spiritual experience is personal, Sapta Darma identity is also strengthened through shared life in the sanggar. The sanggar becomes a space where members learn from one another, strengthen one another, and maintain the continuity of the teachings. Therefore, religious identity grows not only from individual experience, but also from community solidarity and collective formation.

Based on these patterns, the provisional conclusion is that ritual space functions as the main *backstage* in the formation of Sapta Darma religious identity. In this space, identity is prepared,

deepened, and preserved through inner experience, ritual discipline, bodily cultivation, and community relations. The identity formed in the sanggar becomes an authentic foundation before it is later selected and negotiated in the digital public sphere.

2. Negotiating Religious Identity on Social Media (*Front Stage*)

The second set of data shows that social media has become an important space for the Sapta Darma community to negotiate its religious identity before the public. If ritual space functions as the *backstage*, where identity is formed through inner experience, social media functions as the *front stage*, where that identity is displayed, selected, and adjusted for a wider audience. Digital documentation of community activities, including the social media account managed by younger Sapta Darma members, shows that the content displayed more frequently consists of social activities, moral education, *Wewarah Pitu* values, and harmonious interaction with wider society. Meanwhile, deeper ritual practices such as *racut*, *sujud penggalan*, and esoteric experiences of *rasa* tend not to be displayed openly. This pattern shows that social media is not used to present the whole religious identity of Sapta Darma, but rather as a space for selecting and translating identity so that it can be understood by the public.

This evidence is supported by an interview with Mr Baskoro Waskitho Husodo, S.Pd., manager of the Instagram account @remajaksddiy/Remaja Sapta Darma Jogja–GEMAPAKTI DIY. As the social media manager for the younger generation of the community, he explained that Instagram is used as a means of introducing Sapta Darma values to a broader audience. He stated:

"We use the Instagram account @remajaksddiy to introduce Sapta Darma activities and values to society, especially to the younger generation. The content we usually display consists of social activities, education, and general values, so that people can more easily understand Sapta Darma without immediately making negative judgements." (Interview with Mr Baskoro Waskitho Husodo, S.Pd., manager of the Instagram account @remajaksddiy/Remaja Sapta Darma Jogja–GEMAPAKTI DIY, 2025).

Mr Baskoro also explained that content selection is carried out carefully to prevent Sapta Darma teachings from being misunderstood by the public. He stated:

"We more often display social activities, education, or general values so that people do not misunderstand Sapta Darma. If we directly show something too deep, not everyone will necessarily understand the context." (Interview with Mr Baskoro Waskitho Husodo, S.Pd., manager of the Instagram account @remajaksddiy/Remaja Sapta Darma Jogja–GEMAPAKTI DIY, 2025).

In addition, Mr Baskoro emphasised that not all parts of the teachings can be directly published on social media. He explained:

"Not everything can be shown directly on social media. There are parts of the teachings or activities that need to be explained carefully, because if people only see fragments of images or videos, they may misunderstand. Therefore, we first choose content that is more educational and easier to accept." (Interview with Mr Baskoro Waskitho Husodo, S.Pd., manager of the Instagram account @remajaksddiy/Remaja Sapta Darma Jogja–GEMAPAKTI DIY, 2025).

This quotation shows that the decision not to display certain rituals is not merely a technical choice, but part of a strategy for dealing with a social structure that is not entirely neutral. The community is aware that digital space carries risks: negative comments, majority standards, visual misinterpretation, and the circulation of decontextualised fragments of information. Therefore, the identity that appears on social media is the result of negotiation between the authenticity of the teachings and the need to gain public legitimacy. This is consistent with the report's observation that social media serves as a *front stage* where actors select and frame elements of experience for the audience, while more intensive ritual elements are maintained as *backstage* material.



Figure 2. Documentation of the digital activities of younger Sapta Darma members through the Instagram account @remajaksddiy

Documentation data also strengthens this finding. Digital documentation shows that the younger Sapta Darma account contains activities related to Sapta Darma, particularly community activities, value education, and activities that can be understood by a wider public. The research report notes that the Instagram account @remajaksddiy is used to disseminate Sapta Darma values to a broader audience, manage content so that it can be publicly accepted, and avoid negative stereotypes or stigma. This documentation shows that social media functions as a new social space in which Sapta Darma identity is not merely published, but reorganised according to visual language, communication rhythms, and the expectations of digital audiences.

Based on digital observation, interview, and documentation data, the findings can be visualised in the following table.

Table 2. Negotiating Sapta Darma Religious Identity on Social Media

Forms of <i>Front Stage</i> Content	Aspects Emphasised	Aspects Withheld	Impact on Identity
Social activities and community service	Humanity, care, and openness	Esoteric rituals and terms that are difficult for the public to understand	Builds an inclusive image and reduces distance from wider society
Moral education and <i>Wewarah Pitu</i>	Ethics of life, harmony, and moral discipline	Technical explanations of deeper experiences of <i>rasa</i>	Translates the teachings into a universal moral language
Documentation of interaction with society	The presence of Sapta Darma as part of social life	Symbolic differences that may be read as strangeness	Seeks legitimacy through social closeness
Youth-oriented content	Visual language, concise messages, and connection with digital audiences	The complexity of oral teachings and senior authority	Shifts part of representational authority to younger, digitally literate actors

Based on these data, it can be understood that social media functions as a space for negotiating the religious identity of Sapta Darma. The identity formed within ritual space is not displayed in full on social media, but is selected, simplified, and translated into forms that are easier for the public to understand. Social content, moral education, and universal values are displayed more frequently because they are considered safer and have broader public acceptability. Meanwhile,

deeper and more esoteric aspects of the teachings tend to be withheld in order to avoid misunderstanding. Thus, social media functions as a *front stage*, namely a space in which the community arranges its public face through content selection, visual language, and digital communication strategies.

These data reveal several important patterns in the negotiation of Sapta Darma religious identity on social media. The first pattern is the selectivity of identity representation. The community does not display all aspects of its teachings and ritual practices openly, but selects those considered most acceptable to the public. Social activities, moral education, and humanitarian values are emphasised more often, while esoteric rituals tend not to be published. This pattern shows that Sapta Darma's digital identity is constructed through a conscious process of selection.

The second pattern is the translation of teachings into a universal moral language. Sapta Darma values, especially those related to harmony, ethics, and humanity, are translated into more general and communicative forms of content. This strategy makes Sapta Darma teachings easier for a wider audience to understand without requiring them first to enter into the complexity of ritual practice. In this way, the community attempts to bridge the depth of its internal teachings with the demands of public communication.

The third pattern is the negotiation between authenticity and public legitimacy. On the one hand, the community needs to preserve the depth of the teachings that live within ritual space. On the other hand, it must also gain social acceptance in digital space, which is vulnerable to misinterpretation. This tension makes the representation of Sapta Darma identity adaptive: some core values are preserved, while the way they are communicated is adjusted to public norms and expectations.

The fourth pattern is the increasing role of younger members as digital mediators. The management of social media accounts by younger members indicates a shift in the community's authority of representation. Younger members act as intermediaries between traditional teachings and the visual, concise, and fast-paced language of social media. This role strengthens Sapta Darma's digital adaptation, but also shows that actors who master technology occupy an important position in shaping the public face of the community.

Based on these patterns, the provisional conclusion is that social media functions as the *front stage* in the negotiation of Sapta Darma religious identity. In this space, identity is not displayed in full, but is selected and translated so that it can be accepted by a wider audience. This process helps the community reduce stigma and build public legitimacy, but it also carries the risk of simplifying spiritual meaning. Thus, identity negotiation on social media reveals the tension between preserving the authenticity of the teachings and meeting the demands of digital public representation.

3. Religious Identity Representation as a Strategy of *Impression Management*

The third set of data shows that the representation of Sapta Darma religious identity on social media does not occur spontaneously, but forms part of a conscious strategy of *impression management*. After identity is formed in ritual space and negotiated through social media, the Sapta Darma community seeks to present itself as a spiritual community that promotes goodness, moral order, social harmony, and openness. This representation is important because Sapta Darma occupies a position as a local belief community that continues to face social stigma and the dominance of mainstream religious perspectives (Hasanah et al., 2021; Saputra & Mustika, 2023). In this context, social media is not merely a means of publication, but also a space for managing image, building legitimacy, and reducing public prejudice. This strategy is in line with Goffman's concept of *impression management*, namely the effort of social actors to arrange appearances, symbols, and narratives so that audiences receive a particular impression.

Evidence of the importance of impression management is strengthened by an interview with Mr KRT Dr R. Otto Bambang Wahyudi Dwijodipuro, Presidium of the Regional Council of the Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa Indonesia (MLKI) East Java and Founder of Indonesia Merayakan Perbedaan (IMP). He explained that indigenous belief adherents, including Sapta Darma adherents, require not only legal recognition but also social recognition from wider society. He stated:

“Sapta Darma adherents need to build social recognition, not only legal recognition. Social media can become a means of introducing the values of belief communities to society, so that the public can see that adherents also have teachings about goodness, ethics, and harmonious living.” (Interview with Mr KRT Dr R. Otto Bambang Wahyudi Dwijodipuro, Presidium of the MLKI East Java Regional Council and Founder of Indonesia Merayakan Perbedaan, 2025).

In addition to the dimension of social legitimacy, the strategy of impression management is also visible in Sapta Darma’s relationship with the surrounding community. An interview with Mr Supriyanto, Head of Neighbourhood Unit 21 in the area of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta, shows that social acceptance is shaped not only through digital narratives, but also through everyday practices and social relations in the local environment. He stated:

“So far, the relationship between residents and Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga has been good. They are able to cooperate with the surrounding community and help maintain harmonious relations. The existence of the sanggar does not create tension; instead, it can be accepted because there is communication and cooperation with local residents.” (Interview with Mr Supriyanto, Head of Neighbourhood Unit 21 in the area of Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga, Yogyakarta, 2025).

This representational strategy is also related to the challenges faced by local belief communities in maintaining their existence. Mr Otto emphasised that indigenous belief communities still need to confront the dominance of majority perspectives and public misunderstanding of local religions. He stated:

“The challenge for indigenous belief adherents is how to maintain their identity amid the dominance of mainstream religions. Therefore, the values of belief communities need to be introduced more openly, but still in a wise manner, so that society understands them rather than misjudges them.” (Interview with Mr KRT Dr R. Otto Bambang Wahyudi Dwijodipuro, Presidium of the MLKI East Java Regional Council and Founder of Indonesia Merayakan Perbedaan, 2025).



Figure 3. Documentation of social activities and the relationship between the Sapta Darma community and wider society

Documentation data further strengthens this finding. Documentation of community activities shows that Sapta Darma’s representation more frequently displays activities that are easily

understood by the public, such as social activities, relations with the local community, value education, and open community engagement. This type of representation indicates that the community seeks to present a public image that is positive, inclusive, and harmonious. The documentation also shows that symbols and narratives that may potentially lead to misunderstanding tend not to be emphasised. Thus, social media functions as a space in which the community manages public impressions through the careful selection of symbols, narratives, and forms of activity.

Based on observation, interview, and documentation data, the findings can be visualised in the following table.

Table 3. Religious Identity Representation as a Strategy of Impression Management

<i>Impression Management Strategy</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Advantage</i>	<i>Critical Risk</i>
Framing universal values	To build the impression that Sapta Darma is aligned with public values	Increases social acceptance and reduces stigma	The teachings may be reduced to general moral messages
Emphasising harmonious relations with society	To show that Sapta Darma is part of local social life	Strengthens local legitimacy and reduces prejudice	Spiritual identity may be recognised more as social identity than as a deep belief system
Separating ritual space and public space	To protect sensitive practices from misinterpretation	Preserves internal authenticity and community safety	The public does not fully recognise the spiritual depth of Sapta Darma
Managing digital narratives carefully	To shape how the public understands Sapta Darma identity	Helps the community control impressions and build a positive image	Identity becomes too dependant on public standards of acceptance

Based on these data, it can be understood that the representation of Sapta Darma identity is a conscious strategy of impression management. The community seeks to present itself as a spiritual group that promotes goodness, ethics, harmony, and openness. This strategy is carried out through the selection of content that is easy to accept, the emphasis on harmonious social relations, and careful consideration in displaying elements of the teachings that may be misunderstood. Thus, social media is not merely a place for disseminating information, but an arena in which the community builds a positive image and manages public perception.

These data reveal several important patterns in the representation of Sapta Darma religious identity as a strategy of *impression management*. The first pattern is the emphasis on universal values. The community more frequently displays values of goodness, ethics, humanity, and social harmony because these values have broader public acceptability. This strategy helps Sapta Darma appear as a community aligned with public values, rather than as a group perceived as strange or deviant (Munafiah, 2017).

The second pattern is the use of social relations as a source of legitimacy. Acceptance by the surrounding community becomes important evidence that Sapta Darma can live harmoniously alongside other residents. Good relations with the local environment strengthen the image that this community is not a social threat, but part of everyday social life. Thus, legitimacy is built not only through formal recognition, but also through daily social interaction.

The third pattern is the separation between internal identity and public identity. The community continues to preserve the depth of its teachings and ritual practices within internal space, while in public space it displays aspects that are easier to understand. This pattern shows the existence of a boundary between *backstage* and *front stage*. Such separation functions to protect the authenticity of the teachings, but also carries the risk that the public may only recognise Sapta Darma through its social and moral aspects.

The fourth pattern is careful management of digital narratives. The community realises that social media can broaden acceptance, but it can also accelerate misinterpretation. For this reason, digital narratives are arranged carefully so as not to create new stigma. This shows that *impression management* is not merely a strategy of image-building, but also a protective mechanism for minority communities within a public sphere still influenced by majority norms.

Based on these patterns, the provisional conclusion is that the representation of Sapta Darma identity on social media is a strategy of *impression management* aimed at building legitimacy and reducing stigma. The community displays universal values, harmonious relations, and a positive image in order to be accepted by the public. However, this strategy also carries risks, namely the simplification of spiritual meaning and limited public understanding of the depth of Sapta Darma teachings. Thus, the digital representation of Sapta Darma reveals a tension between the need to build social acceptance and the effort to preserve the complexity of the community's spiritual identity.

Discussion

This study shows that the religious identity of Sapta Darma is constructed through a dialectical relationship between ritual depth and public intelligibility. The findings reveal three interconnected processes. First, ritual space at Sanggar Candi Sapta Rengga functions as *backstage*, where identity is formed through practices such as *sujud*, *sujud penggalian*, *racut*, *tukar hawa*, *ulah rasa*, and *gerak nur rasa*. Second, social media functions as *front stage*, where this identity is selected, translated, and adjusted for a wider digital audience. Third, the digital representation of Sapta Darma operates as a form of *impression management* aimed at building a positive image, gaining social legitimacy, and reducing stigma. These findings indicate that Sapta Darma identity is not static, but is continuously negotiated between internal authenticity and the demand for public acceptance.

This process occurs because Sapta Darma occupies a complex social position. On the one hand, ritual practice is the main source of authenticity for its adherents. Practices such as *sujud*, *racut*, and *ulah rasa* are not merely religious activities, but inner experiences that shape spiritual discipline, self-awareness, and communal solidarity (Saputra & Mustika, 2023). On the other hand, when this identity enters digital space, the community must consider how the public reads, judges, and responds to its representation. Social media requires messages that are concise, visual, accessible, and relatively non-controversial. For this reason, the community tends to emphasise social activities, moral values, *Wewarah Pitu*, and social harmony, while more esoteric ritual practices are maintained within the internal space of the community. This selective representation emerges because the community occupies a minority position, where every public appearance carries the risk of stigma, misinterpretation, and evaluation through majority religious standards (Wibisono et al., 2020).

These findings extend Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) concept of *subjective-life spirituality*. In their view, contemporary spirituality reflects a shift from institutional religious authority towards personal inner experience. The case of Sapta Darma supports this argument because inner experience becomes the foundation of religious identity. However, this study also shows that, in the digital era, subjective spirituality does not remain purely personal or private. Once inner experience enters digital public space, it must be translated, selected, and performed in order to be recognised by a wider audience. Thus, in the context of Sapta Darma, subjective spirituality is not only personal, but also performative and relational.

This study also contributes to the field of digital religion. Campbell (2022) and Hjarvard (2013) argue that digital media transforms religious practice, authority, and representation. The findings of this study support this view, but also show that such transformation is not neutral. Social media has its own logic of visibility, audience response, and algorithmic circulation, all of

which influence which forms of identity are considered suitable for public display. Social and moral content is more easily circulated because it is perceived as safe and non-controversial, whereas deeper ritual practices remain in the *backstage* because they are more vulnerable to misunderstanding. In this sense, algorithms should not be understood merely as technical mechanisms, but as part of a digital power structure that shapes what becomes visible, what remains hidden, and how minority identities are interpreted by the public.

Compared with studies on indigenous belief communities that focus mainly on legal recognition, citizenship, and state-religion relations (Sajiwo et al., 2022), this study shows that identity recognition does not take place only through the state, but also through the digital public sphere. Legal decisions and administrative policies are important because they provide formal recognition for indigenous belief adherents. However, formal recognition does not automatically produce social acceptance. In the case of Sapta Darma, legitimacy must continue to be negotiated through everyday representation, both in social relations with the surrounding community and in digital narratives. Therefore, social media becomes a new arena in which local belief communities struggle to make their identity appear reasonable, acceptable, and socially legitimate.

The novelty of this study lies in its use of Goffman's dramaturgy and *Frame Analysis* to examine the relationship between ritual practice and digital representation. Previous studies have often treated social media as a medium for disseminating teachings or as a communication tool for religious communities. This study, however, positions social media as a social stage with its own rules, audiences, risks, and power relations. In this framework, the *backstage* of Sapta Darma produces authenticity, while the *front stage* produces public acceptability. The relationship between the two is not always harmonious, because what is authentic internally is not always easily understood or accepted publicly. In this way, the study extends Goffman's framework from face-to-face interaction to the relationship between community ritual, digital representation, algorithms, stigma, and platform-based power structures.

Historically, the findings show that Sapta Darma is part of the continuity of Javanese spiritual traditions that have adapted to modernity and the digitalisation of religion. Sapta Darma should not only be understood as a continuation of Javanese mysticism, but also as a form of local-modern spirituality that responds to changing social conditions. Ritual practice remains the centre of authenticity, but the way the community explains itself to the public has changed along with the development of social media. Thus, the history of Sapta Darma reflects a shift from sanggar-based spirituality towards a form of spirituality that must also engage with the logic of digital public space (Wibisono et al., 2020).

Socially, the findings show that indigenous belief communities remain vulnerable to stigma and public misunderstanding. For this reason, social media is used to build a positive image, introduce the values of the teachings, and demonstrate that Sapta Darma can coexist harmoniously with wider society. However, social acceptance is not built only through digital content. It is also shaped by everyday relations with the surrounding community. This means that social legitimacy is produced through the combination of digital representation and direct social interaction (Muqoyyin, 2013).

Ideologically, the findings reveal that the digital public sphere is not entirely neutral. Sapta Darma identity must be negotiated within a space still influenced by majority religious norms, public standards of propriety, and the tendency of platforms to favour short, visual, and emotionally engaging content. This condition requires the community to adjust the way it presents itself so that it is not perceived as strange, deviant, or threatening. Therefore, the digital representation of Sapta Darma reveals a power relation that determines which identities are regarded as normal, safe, and worthy of appearing in public.

Functionally, digital representation offers several important benefits. Social media helps the Sapta Darma community expand its visibility, introduce its teachings, build counter-stigma narratives, and strengthen the involvement of younger members. The framing of universal values such as goodness, harmony, ethics, and humanity makes Sapta Darma easier for the public to understand. *Impression management* also functions as a protective strategy by limiting the exposure of sensitive ritual practices and emphasising aspects of identity that are more publicly acceptable.

However, this strategy also has several dysfunctional consequences. First, overly safe representation may reduce the complexity of Sapta Darma teachings into general moral messages. Second, a strong separation between *backstage* and *front stage* may prevent the public from understanding the spiritual depth of the tradition. Third, dependence on audience response and algorithmic visibility may encourage the community to adjust its identity too strongly to public preferences. Fourth, the increasing role of younger members as social media managers may shift representational authority from ritual elders to digital actors. This creates a need to balance digital literacy with a deeper understanding of the teachings (Sirait et al., 2015).

Based on these functional and dysfunctional dimensions, several action plans are necessary. First, to address the risk of reducing spiritual meaning, the community needs to develop content guidelines that distinguish between information that can be opened for public education and ritual elements that should remain protected. Second, to reduce misinterpretation of ritual practices, the community can produce gradual, contextual, and non-sensational educational content, such as simple explanations of the meaning of *sujud*, *Wewarah Pitu*, and Sapta Darma's ethical values without revealing ritual details considered sensitive. Third, to avoid excessive dependence on algorithms, the community needs to strengthen communication networks beyond social media, including neighbourhood dialogue, social activities, interfaith forums, and cooperation with local community leaders. Fourth, to balance the role of younger members and senior figures, social media management should be carried out through intergenerational collaboration, so that the content remains digitally communicative without losing the depth of the teachings.

In addition, academics and the government need to strengthen public literacy about indigenous belief communities. Such literacy is important so that society does not understand these communities only through fragments of digital content, but also through their historical, social, and spiritual contexts. The government also needs to encourage policies that protect minority belief communities in digital space, particularly from stigma, hate speech, and disinformation. In this way, the community's digital communication strategy would not stand alone, but would be supported by a more inclusive social and policy ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study shows that the religious identity of Sapta Darma adherents in digital space is a dynamic, performative, and relational construction. The main lesson of this study is that Sapta Darma identity is not only formed through spiritual practice in the *sanggar*, but is also negotiated through social media so that it can be recognised and accepted by the public. Ritual space functions as *backstage*, producing authenticity through practices such as *sujud*, *racut*, *ulah rasa*, and bodily-spiritual cultivation, while social media functions as *front stage*, requiring the selection, simplification, and framing of identity. Thus, Sapta Darma identity moves within the tension between the depth of inner experience and the need for public intelligibility.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its relational reading of internal ritual practice, digital representation, and the social legitimacy of indigenous belief communities. By using Goffman's dramaturgy and *Frame Analysis*, this study shows that social media is not merely a medium for disseminating teachings, but a dramaturgical space and a politics of meaning in which religious identity is produced, negotiated, and contested. This finding enriches digital religion

studies and the study of local indigenous belief communities by showing that minority groups maintain their identity not only through ritual space, but also through strategies of *impression management* to build a positive image, reduce stigma, and gain social acceptance.

This study has limitations in its focus on only one *sanggar*, the non-longitudinal duration of observation, and digital data that are still influenced by the community's level of media literacy. These limitations mean that the findings cannot yet be generalised to all Sapta Darma communities in Indonesia. Therefore, future research should employ long-term digital ethnography, compare several Sapta Darma communities in different regions, and analyse audience responses as well as the influence of platform algorithms on the formation of religious identity among indigenous belief communities.

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