



COMPETENCY OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS COUNSELORS IN PREVENTING ONLINE GAMBLING IN TANJUNG TIRAM DISTRICT, BATU BARA REGENCY

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Abstract

The increasingly rampant phenomenon of online gambling in the digital space is a serious challenge to fostering community morals, especially among the younger generation. This study aims to examine the competence of Islamic religious instructors in addressing this issue through the use of digital technology, with a focus on Tanjung Tiram District, Batu Bara Regency. Using a qualitative approach with in-depth interview techniques and analyzed using NVivo software, this study explores the ability of instructors to utilize social media, compile educational content, and build effective da'wah communication in the digital space. The results of the study show that instructors such as Edi Yanto and Kamelia Sambas already possess basic digital competencies that support the effectiveness of da'wah, including the use of Facebook to convey religious messages and warnings about the dangers of online gambling. However, technical limitations, such as mastering visual design and video editing, remain significant obstacles. This study concludes that synergy between religious competence and digital skills is essential for counseling to operate effectively in a digital context and reach digitally active levels of society. These findings provide a basis for developing digital training for religious instructors as part of a da'wah-based social prevention strategy.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information technology in recent years has had a significant impact on various aspects of Indonesian society, including social and moral aspects (Wiryany et al., 2022). One of the most disturbing negative impacts is the increase in online gambling activities that reach various segments of society, including coastal and rural areas such as Tanjung Tiram District, Batu Bara Regency. Data from the Financial Transaction Reporting and Analysis Center (PPATK) indicates that in 2023, approximately 3.3 million Indonesians were involved in online gambling activities, with transaction values reaching Rp517 trillion (PPATK, 2025).

In the North Sumatra region, efforts to eradicate online gambling continue to be intensified by the North Sumatra Police Ditreskrimsus and the police ranks. During the period November 25 to December 1, 2024, they managed to uncover four online gambling cases. The North Sumatra Police Chief, Inspector General of Police Whisnu Hermawan, through Head of Public Relations Kombes Pol Hadi Wahyudi, emphasized the police's commitment to crack down on all forms of gambling, including online gambling (Polri, 2024). This step is not only aimed at enforcing the law, but also at protecting the community from the negative impacts that may arise, whether from an economic, social, or legal perspective. One concrete action taken was the arrest of two individuals suspected of being involved in online gambling by the Criminal Investigation Unit of the Batu Bara Police Department on November 25, 2024. Additionally, on March 6, 2024, the Criminal Investigation Unit of the Labuhan Ruku Police Station successfully arrested three men in Tanjung Tiram District who are suspected of being involved in a similar case (detiknews86.com, 2024).

Based on data obtained from the North Sumatra Police, Batu Bara Criminal Investigation Unit, and Labuhan Ruku Police Criminal Investigation Unit, it was revealed that online gambling cases continue to occur in this region and have caused unrest among the community. The existence of online gambling, which is increasingly accessible through digital devices, has changed the face of gambling, which was previously limited to physical locations, into activities that can be done anytime and anywhere.

The main factor driving the rise of this phenomenon is technological advances and easier access to the internet. Many individuals, especially in areas such as Tanjung Tiram Sub-district, are entangled in online gambling due to a low understanding of the negative impacts of the activity, both financially, socially and psychologically. (Ikhsan, 2015). This phenomenon not only reflects weak social control, but also indicates a crisis of values in a society that is increasingly permissive of deviant practices packaged in digital form.

This condition is exacerbated by widespread internet access, low digital literacy, and economic pressures that make online gambling a shortcut for some people (Wijayanti & Abdurrahman, 2025). Islamic religious counselors, who have a mandate as agents of da'wah and community development, are required to be actively involved in responding to this situation. However, the effectiveness of religious counselors in preventing online gambling depends heavily on their competencies. These competencies include religious knowledge, adaptive da'wah communication skills, an understanding of social change, and mastery of digital media as a means of da'wah. Unfortunately, in many regions, religious counselors still face structural challenges such as limited training, lack of synergy with local governments, and minimal innovation in contextual da'wah methods.

Previous studies have highlighted the urgency of enhancing the capacity of religious counselors to address contemporary issues. Research by Wulandari and Syawaluddin (2024) revealed that religious counselors can curb online gambling addiction through persuasive communication approaches, despite resistance from the community and counselors' lack of understanding of digital media. Similarly, a study by Andriani highlights the need to integrate traditional da'wah approaches with the use of social media in addressing religious social issues (Andriani, 2023). Unfortunately, to date, there have been few studies that specifically evaluate the competence of Islamic religious counselors in the context of preventing online gambling in coastal areas such as Tanjung Tiram, which has unique socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

In this context, several interesting yet controversial issues arise. For instance, there is ongoing debate among religious leaders and government officials regarding the most effective approach to addressing online gambling: whether to adopt an educational and persuasive approach or a normative and repressive one.

Additionally, the weak integration of religious counselors' outreach programs with national digital literacy policies highlights unresolved policy gaps. These issues require a conceptual and practical approach based on a comprehensive mapping of religious counselors' competencies.

Based on this, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the competencies of Islamic religious counselors in preventing online gambling in Tanjung Tiram Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency. This study will examine the forms of competencies possessed, the da'wah strategies used, the challenges faced, as well as the potential for strengthening the capacity of religious counselors through an adaptive approach to digital developments and social dynamics. This study uses the competency theory framework from Spencer and Spencer (1993), which views competencies as fundamental characteristics of individuals that influence performance in the workplace. This theory will be used to identify relevant competency indicators in the context of religious counseling in the digital era. With this approach, it is hoped that the research can provide conceptual and practical contributions to strengthening the role of Islamic religious counselors as the frontline in preventing deviant practices such as online gambling. This research is based on communication network theory, which explains how information spreads within a social system through relationships between individuals or groups. In the context of digital da'wah, Islamic religious counselors play a key role in the social-religious communication network that connects religious institutions, the government, and the general public, especially in the digital space.

Religious counselors with high digital competence, such as Edi Yanto and Kamelia Sambas, can take a central position in the digital da'wah communication network. This position allows them to play the role of opinion leaders, i.e., parties who have influence in shaping public opinion and directing social behavior through the delivery of relevant and contextual religious messages. By utilizing social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, religious counselors form a more egalitarian and open horizontal communication network compared to traditional vertical communication models such as sermons in mosques or face-to-face religious gatherings.

According to communication network theory, the effectiveness of conveying religious messages in preventing deviant behavior such as online gambling is greatly

influenced by the extent to which religious counselors can build reciprocal ties with their audience. These relationships are formed through active two-way interaction, responsive to questions or comments, and the use of communication language that is easily understood by the digital community. By building an active digital da'wah network, religious educators not only convey information but also maintain ongoing communication and strengthen the social and emotional reach of da'wah messages (Hapsari *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, network density, which is the level of connectivity between members in a network, also plays an important role. The higher the level of participation and interaction in the digital network built by religious counselors, the greater the opportunity for religious messages to spread widely and be socially accepted. In this context, the digital competence of religious counselors is a key determinant in expanding networks, building credibility, and creating social effects on behavioral change, including in preventing online gambling.

By using communication network theory as an analytical framework, this study shows that religious educators who are digitally literate and able to strategically utilize social media can expand the influence of religious messages, strengthen religious social networks, and significantly contribute to shaping public opinion and improving religious literacy among the community regarding the dangers of online gambling. This theory also emphasizes that effective religious outreach in the digital age requires an understanding of communication network dynamics, not merely mastery of religious content alone (Alfarizy *et al.*, 2024).

B. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical field research. (Lexy J. Moleong, 2012). This approach was chosen to explore in depth complex socio-religious phenomena, particularly in understanding the competence of Islamic religious counselors in preventing online gambling in Tanjung Tiram Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency. The research subjects are active Islamic religious counselors in the area, with the main topics covering the dimensions of counselor competence, such as religious knowledge, communication skills in preaching, adaptability to digital media, and counseling strategies applied in the context of preventing online gambling.

Data collection techniques were conducted through direct observation of counseling activities, in-depth interviews with religious counselors, community leaders, and other relevant parties. Additionally, documentation in the form of counseling materials, activity reports, and relevant local policies were also collected to enrich the data. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to ensure that the data obtained was in-depth and contextual while remaining focused on the research theme. To manage and analyze the relatively complex qualitative data, the researcher utilized NVivo software. NVivo was used to assist in the systematic coding of interview data, observations, and documentation. With NVivo, textual data can be organized into categories and themes that emerge in a more structured manner, making it easier to identify patterns of extension workers' competencies and the challenges they face in preventing online gambling. Additionally, NVivo facilitates data triangulation by efficiently and validly comparing findings from various data sources (Yulianto & Wijaya, 2022).

Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). The use of NVivo in the data reduction stage is very helpful in filtering and sifting through important information, while in the data presentation stage, NVivo enables the visualization of relationships between themes through mind mapping and graphing features. This makes it easier for researchers to interpret the findings comprehensively. With this methodological approach, the research is expected to provide a complete and valid picture of the competence of Islamic religious counselors in facing contemporary da'wah challenges, particularly in tackling online gambling practices. The integration of NVivo in data analysis supports a more systematic and reliable research process so that the results can be used as strategic recommendations for developing the capacity of religious counselors in the digital era.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the digital age, Islamic religious teachers are required to not only master conventional preaching, but also digital literacy and the ability to utilize social media as a means of preaching (Asegap et al., 2024). Changes in people's behavior have made it necessary to adapt how Islamic messages are shared, especially when it

comes to stopping online gambling. Based on interviews, religious teachers like Edi Yanto and Kamelia Sambas have shown digital skills that include creativity, communication, and social awareness, which are key to effective preaching in the digital space.

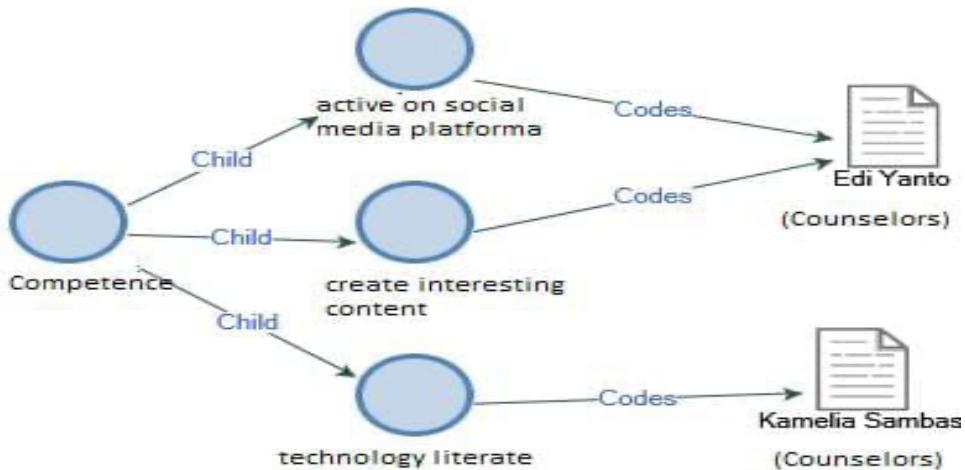


Figure 1: Competencies of Islamic Religious Counselors

This study found that digital competencies are an essential aspect of the effectiveness of Islamic religious counselors, especially in dealing with contemporary social phenomena such as online gambling. Based on in-depth interviews and data mapping using NVivo software, two key informants, Edi Yanto and Kamelia Sambas, demonstrated adaptive capabilities in navigating the dynamics of the digital space as a medium for religious outreach. Both are active religious counselors in Tanjung Tiram Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency, and are known for their active role in disseminating religious messages through social media.

Edi Yanto stated that social media, particularly Facebook, has become the primary medium for conveying Islamic messages and warnings against online gambling practices. He does not merely share religious content but also addresses current issues developing in society, such as the prevalence of online gambling among teenagers. His approach is communicative and persuasive, using language that resonates with everyday life, thereby touching the emotional and spiritual aspects of his audience. This aligns with findings by Firdaus (2025) which shows that the success of digital da'wah is greatly influenced by relevant and contextual communication styles in delivering religious messages through digital platforms.

As a concrete example of the application of digital competencies, Edi regularly uploads da'wah content that highlights Islamic values and the dangers of online gambling in the form of text, images, and short videos. He also utilizes comment features and private messages to answer community questions, demonstrating that da'wah is no longer one-sided but more dialogic. Within the framework of communication network theory, Edi has positioned himself as an opinion leader within the digital da'wah network (Rogers, 2003), where he not only disseminates information but also builds dynamic religious social relationships.

This finding is further reinforced through an interview with Kamelia Sambas, who emphasizes the importance of technical skills and digital literacy for every religious counselor. According to her, religious counseling today cannot rely solely on conventional methods such as face-to-face lectures at mosques or religious study groups, as the majority of the public is more active in digital spaces. Therefore, religious counselors must be actively present on social media such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. Kamelia regularly shares messages of da'wah through daily statuses and short content posts, including quotes from verses and hadiths related to the prohibition of gambling.

He also demonstrated an understanding of the digital reporting system currently used by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in which all outreach activities are entered online. This signifies a transformation in the role of outreach workers from mere religious communicators to part of the institutional digital communication system. According to Althaus and Tewksbury (2002), The success of a message in the digital age is not only determined by the content, but also by media literacy and an understanding of the structure of the information network being used.

More than just an administrative obligation, Kamelia understands that social media is a strategic tool for reaching the public widely, quickly, and efficiently. She recognizes that people today spend a significant amount of time on digital platforms, so religious educators must also be present in those spaces. As a result, religious education can be conducted not only through sermons at mosques but also through posts on Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp messages explaining the negative impacts of online gambling and encouraging the community to return to religious values (Meswari & Ritonga, 2023).

In practice, Kamelia uses social media to share relevant and contextual content. This content can include quotations from verses and hadiths related to the prohibition of gambling, explanations of Islamic law on gambling, and moral messages packaged in simple and interesting language. According to her, this approach is more easily accepted by the digital community, which tends to be visual and prefers messages that are concise, practical, and accessible at any time.

The importance of digital competence is also reflected in the ability of educators to adapt to the ever-evolving online communication systems (Mukzizatin, 2020). Kamelia not only masters social media as an information channel, but also demonstrates an understanding that the role of religious counselors has now merged into the government's digital communication system. This indicates that religious counselors are not only communicators of Islamic values, but also part of a technology-based national religious information system.

Kamelia also hints at the importance of collaboration among religious counselors in strengthening the presence of digital da'wah. She sees that counseling on social media cannot be individualistic, but rather needs to be managed as a collective movement. According to her, each counselor has a role to play in building public digital awareness through their respective channels, so that messages of goodness can spread more widely and have a greater reach than conventional da'wah.

Overall, the interview with Kamelia Sambas illustrates that the competence of religious educators in the digital age is not only determined by the breadth of their religious knowledge but also by how effectively they can utilize technology to convey those values. This technological ability is part of the professional integrity of modern religious counselors who are not only oriented toward texts and pulpits but are also adaptive to the dynamics of digital communication to address social challenges such as online gambling.

Complementing the previous description of the importance of digital competence in religious counseling, Edi Yanto also revealed the technical challenges faced in digital da'wah practices. One of the main obstacles he faces is his limited ability to edit videos and create interesting content. Although he is active on social media platforms like Facebook, Edi acknowledges that simply conveying a message is insufficient; religious educators are now expected to package their

messages in formats that align with the preferences and habits of today's digital audience.

Difficulties in video editing and designing visually appealing content are common challenges for many religious educators who lack a background in design or multimedia. In an era where social media algorithms favor dynamic visual content, the inability to process material into attractive videos can impact the reach of digital outreach. This serves as a reminder that the success of outreach does not solely depend on the quality of the message's content but also on the delivery techniques, which must be adapted to the platform and preferences of digital users.

However, this challenge has not dampened Edi Yanto's enthusiasm to continue learning and adapting to the demands of the times. He emphasizes the importance of continuous digital capacity building for religious educators, both through formal training and self-learning. Support from relevant institutions, such as the Ministry of Religion, is also highly anticipated in providing technical training for the creation of digital religious content, so that educators are not only able to be present on social media but also appear competent and capture the attention of the broader public.

Thus, the synergy between religious competence and digital skills is essential. The technical challenges faced by Edi Yanto actually reflect a broader reality among religious counselors, namely the need for upskilling in the fields of visual communication and information technology (Reynaldi et al., 2024). It is important to ensure that Islamic messages are not only relevant in terms of content, but also competitive in terms of format and delivery, especially in efforts to prevent online gambling, which is widely spread through the same digital media.

Cross-sectoral implementation in the prevention of online gambling is a collaborative approach that combines the strengths of various social actors, including religious counselors, police officers, village governments, community leaders, and educational institutions. This collaboration is important considering that the issue of online gambling is not only a moral or legal issue, but also concerns socio-economic structures, technological developments, and digital literacy gaps in society. As stated by Agranoff and McGuire (2003), in a network collaboration model, the success of public policy is largely determined by the capacity of actors to work synergistically across sectoral and institutional boundaries.

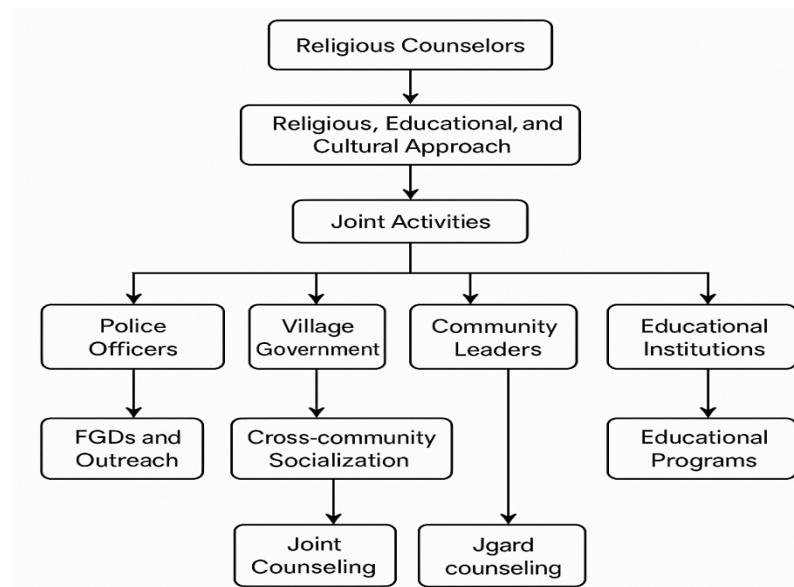


Figure 2. Cross-Sectoral Implementation of Online Gambling Prevention

At the local level, religious leaders play a strategic role as communicators of values. They are at the forefront of bringing the issue of online gambling to the community through religious, educational, and cultural approaches. However, they cannot work alone. Therefore, the involvement of law enforcement agencies, particularly in deterring and prosecuting offenders, is an integral part of the prevention strategy. This model aligns with Rhodes' (1997) concept of a policy network, where public policy is shaped through the interaction of diverse, interdependent actors.

One concrete form of cross-sectoral collaboration is the implementation of focused group discussions (FGDs), joint outreach programs, and community-wide socialization activities. In practice, these activities bring together religious educators, police officers, village officials, school principals, and even traditional leaders or youth representatives in a discussion forum addressing the dangers of online gambling. This collaboration reflects interorganizational communication theory (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004), which emphasizes the importance of interorganizational communication mechanisms to achieve more effective social outcomes.

Another crucial actor is community leaders. They possess social authority and symbolic capital that can influence public opinion. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu (1991) refers to this as symbolic capital, a form of power based on cultural

legitimacy. When community leaders actively raise awareness about the dangers of online gambling in social and religious forums, they reinforce the messages conveyed by educators and law enforcement officials while expanding public acceptance of the issue.

Equally important is the role of educational institutions, both formal and informal. Schools serve as the initial medium for educating young people about the dangers of online gambling. (Saleh et al., 2024). Teachers, religious counselors, and law enforcement officials can collaborate on additional curriculum or extracurricular programs. This collaboration reflects the community-based prevention model (Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998), which emphasizes the role of education in building social awareness from an early age, especially on crucial issues such as digital addiction and deviant behavior.

In a cross-sectoral approach, it is also important to consider the existence of a structured coordination system. Local governments, particularly through social services or community empowerment agencies, should serve as the primary facilitators in unifying the efforts of various parties (Hariadi et al., 2025). Based on governance network theory (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005), state actors are no longer the sole controllers, but have transformed into regulators of interactions within social actor networks to achieve collective goals.

The implementation of online gambling prevention also requires an accurate database and monitoring system (Bakhtiar & Adilah, 2024). This is where collaboration with the information technology sector is essential, whether for blocking websites, reporting suspicious activity, or evaluating policies. When technology is managed transparently and accountably by the government with the involvement of the public, what is known as smart governance (Meijer & Rodri, 2016), namely data-driven governance and collaboration.

From a communication perspective, the success of cross-sector collaboration on the issue of online gambling prevention depends on the clarity of the message, the consistency of the narrative, and the frequency of communication between actors. Shannon & Weaver (1949) Linear communication theory emphasizes the importance of effective communication channels with minimal interference. In cross-sector work, “noise” often arises in the form of overlapping roles, miscommunication between agencies, or differences in priorities. Therefore,

boundary spanners are needed—actors who are able to bridge communication between sectors, such as religious leaders or village leaders (Fikriana & Irsyad, 2023; Hardiansyah & Asriwandari, 2016).

One of the main challenges of cross-sectoral implementation is the imbalance of resources and capacity among actors. For example, religious leaders in villages may not have sufficient digital competence to create educational content, while the police have access to information but lack an adaptive cultural approach. To overcome this, there needs to be periodic cross-sectoral training so that all actors have a common ground in terms of strategy and working methods (Sulaiman & Yusuf, 2024).

In addition to the barriers, there are significant differences in culture, customs, habits, perceptions, and values, resulting in different tendencies, needs, and expectations between the two communicating parties. For example, a communicator (speaker) uses the word momok, which is correct according to the Indonesian dictionary. However, in the Sundanese language, this word carries a positive connotation. If this word is used in a speech or opening remarks at a formal event attended by officials, community leaders, and elders of the Sundanese community, the communicator's image may be tarnished due to a misunderstanding of the language (Umilawati & Jasman, 2022).

In addition, cross-sectoral implementation must also consider sustainability (Salim & Zuhri, 2024). Collaboration should not be ceremonial or project-based. It must be institutionalized in the form of regional regulations, memoranda of understanding between agencies, and the formation of integrated teams with clear mandates. This principle is in line with the idea of institutional embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), which states that the success of a social practice will be long-lasting if it has become part of the institutional structure (Nasution & Nasution, Syawaluddin, 2024; Susanti, 2021).

In terms of financing and logistics, budgetary support from local governments is crucial to the sustainability of cross-sectoral activities. Without adequate resources, collaborative efforts will only be short-lived. Therefore, village budgets, religious grants, or CSR funds from the private sector can be optimized to strengthen the cross-sectoral ecosystem for the prevention of online gambling (Martias, 2023).

It is also important to conduct regular evaluations of the effectiveness of this cross-sectoral strategy. Evaluations should be participatory, involving the community, users, and other stakeholders. The results of these evaluations will provide feedback for improving the program and building trust among actors. In organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978), systems that are open to evaluation will have a higher capacity for learning and tend to adapt better to social change.

Within the framework of Islam, the cross-sectoral approach is also reinforced by the principle of *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation in goodness) as mentioned in QS. Al-Maidah: 2 :

*“O you who believe, do not violate the sacred symbols of Allah, nor the sanctity of the sacred months, do not (disturb) the animals of the *had-ya*, and the animals of the *qala-*id**, and do not (either) disturb those who are visiting the House of Allah while they are seeking the bounty and pleasure of their Lord. And when you have completed the pilgrimage, then you may hunt. And let not hatred for a people who have hindered you from the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgress against them. And help one another in righteousness and piety, but do not help one another in sin and transgression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in punishment (Kemenag, 2019).*

This verse emphasizes that collaboration between elements of society to prevent evil, including online gambling, is a form of social worship recommended in Islam. Cross-sector collaboration is not only a worldly strategy, but also a collective effort towards the common good. cross-sector implementation in online gambling prevention must be understood as a dynamic socio-political process. It requires a shared vision, mutual trust between actors, an adaptive coordination system, and strong institutional support. By building functional and inclusive cross-sector collaboration, online gambling prevention is not only the responsibility of a single individual or institution, but becomes a collective movement that reaches the root of the problem and produces sustainable social change.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the competence of Islamic religious counselors in Tanjung Tiram Subdistrict in preventing online gambling is highly dependent on their ability to adapt to digital technology and social media communication. Counselors such as Edi Yanto and Kamelia Sambas have demonstrated that digital

literacy and mastery of social media are crucial aspects in the effectiveness of religious counseling, especially in reaching young people who are vulnerable to online gambling. In addition to mastering religious material, the ability to create engaging and communicative educational content is part of the digital competencies that modern counselors must possess. However, technical challenges such as limitations in producing visual content still require serious attention through ongoing training. Therefore, the synergy between religious competencies and digital skills forms the foundation for improving the quality and reach of religious counseling in preventing online gambling practices in the digital age. Strengthening the digital capacity of religious counselors is expected to reinforce the role of religious counseling as a relevant and effective social prevention tool amid the current societal dynamics.

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