

Religious Literacy in the Digital Era: Challenges and Opportunities for Generations Z and Alpha

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed how young people access, interpret, and practice religion. Generations Z and Alpha increasingly rely on social media, mobile applications, and online communities as important sources of religious learning. This study examined the levels, challenges, and opportunities associated with digital religious literacy among members of Generations Z and Alpha in Indonesia. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through a survey of 420 respondents, while qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and a content analysis of 50 social media accounts and five Islamic applications. The findings indicated that respondents' digital religious literacy was generally at a moderate-to-high level. Ethical competence was the strongest dimension, whereas critical digital competence was comparatively weaker. Correlation analysis demonstrated a positive relationship between the intensity of digital religious engagement and digital religious literacy, although the explanatory contribution of engagement intensity was limited. Qualitative findings showed that digital media broaden access to Islamic knowledge and enable pedagogical innovation; however, they also generate challenges, including the fragmentation of religious authority, exposure to radical or misleading content, and the superficial interpretation of religious teachings. These findings suggest that digital religious literacy is multidimensional and cannot be strengthened merely by increasing access to religious content. Islamic Religious Education should therefore integrate textual, contextual, digital, and ethical competencies through critical, participatory, and context-sensitive learning. Collaboration among educational institutions, teachers, government agencies, and digital da'wah communities is also required to cultivate informed, ethical, and resilient religious engagement among younger generations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has reshaped nearly every domain of contemporary life, including the ways in which young people access, understand, communicate, and practice religious teachings. For Generations Z and Alpha, the internet is not merely an auxiliary communication tool but a central environment in which social relationships, cultural identities, and spiritual experiences are formed. Members of Generation Z are commonly associated with birth years from the mid-1990s to approximately 2010, whereas Generation Alpha generally refers to those born from 2010 onward; nevertheless, generational boundaries remain analytical conventions rather than fixed biological categories (McCrindle et al., 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Both cohorts have grown up in media-rich environments, although Generation Alpha's childhood has been even more deeply embedded in mobile devices, artificial intelligence, interconnected platforms, and personalized digital services.

This technological environment has altered the ecology of religious learning. Earlier generations tended to depend more heavily on teachers, religious scholars, families, mosques, *pesantren*, and formal educational institutions. Younger users now encounter religious information through a wider range of sources, including YouTube lectures, TikTok videos, podcasts, Instagram posts, digital Qur'an platforms, hadith databases, prayer applications, and online study groups. Research on digital religion demonstrates that online and offline religious practices are increasingly intertwined rather than separate; digital media can extend established practices while also creating new forms of expression, participation, and community (Abokhodair et al., 2020; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022). Consequently, the digital sphere has become a significant site for the production, circulation, and negotiation of religious meaning.

In Indonesia, this transformation is particularly consequential because internet access has expanded rapidly. The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association reported that internet penetration reached 78.19% in 2023, representing more than 215 million users (*Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia* [APJII], 2023). Such extensive connectivity provides unprecedented opportunities for young Muslims to access Qur'anic exegesis, hadith scholarship, religious lectures, historical materials, and transnational intellectual networks. Digital platforms can reduce geographical barriers, facilitate flexible learning, and enable users to engage with religious materials beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of conventional classrooms.

At the same time, greater access does not automatically produce deeper understanding. The contemporary information environment is characterized by abundance, speed, fragmentation, and algorithmic personalization. Users frequently encounter religious messages in brief, visually attractive, and emotionally charged formats. Platform systems rank and recommend content according to engagement-related signals rather than scholarly reliability. As media environments become increasingly datafied, users require not only technical access but also the capacity to recognize how platforms organize visibility, shape attention, and influence interpretation (Livingstone, 2019). Media education, therefore, needs to extend beyond operational competence toward critical analysis of representation, power, ownership, algorithms, and credibility (Buckingham, 2019).

These conditions make religious literacy an urgent educational concern. Religious literacy is not equivalent to memorizing doctrines or recognizing religious terminology. It involves the ability to understand religious texts, traditions, histories, practices, and internal diversity; interpret them in relation to social and cultural contexts; and communicate about religion accurately and respectfully. Moore (2007) emphasizes that religion should be understood as internally diverse, historically dynamic, and embedded in culture rather than treated as a static or uniform system. Similarly, Dinham and Shaw (2017) argue that religious education should prepare learners to engage constructively with religion and belief in plural societies. Within the Islamic educational tradition, this orientation resonates with the ideal of *tafaqquh fi al-din*, or deep and responsible understanding of religion, which requires the integration of textual knowledge, intellectual judgment, moral formation, and sensitivity to changing contexts.

In a digital environment, religious literacy must also include the ability to identify reliable sources, examine authorship and institutional affiliation, distinguish scholarly interpretation from personal opinion, compare competing claims, and evaluate the ethical implications of online participation. Critical

evaluation is especially important because polished design, popularity, and repeated exposure can create an appearance of authority without guaranteeing accuracy. Research on online information evaluation has shown that expert fact-checkers often verify claims through lateral reading—that is, by leaving a webpage to investigate its source, reputation, and corroborating evidence—rather than relying solely on the internal appearance of the page (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). This practice is directly relevant to digital religious literacy, as young users must often assess sermons, quotations, legal opinions, and religious narratives circulated outside conventional systems of scholarly review.

The opportunities offered by digital religion are nevertheless substantial. Social media can support devotional expression, identity formation, solidarity, and communal participation. For example, the sharing of Qur'anic verses on social media may extend offline religious life and enable practices such as remembrance, supplication, memorialization, and charitable intention (Abokhodair et al., 2020). Islamic lifestyle applications can also assist users with prayer schedules, Qur'an reading, reminders, and other devotional routines, although existing applications do not always provide sufficient opportunities for comprehensive learning, scholarly consultation, or meaningful community interaction (Kabir et al., 2024). The educational value of digital tools therefore depends on their design, the quality of their content, and the interpretive competence of their users.

Generational characteristics further shape these patterns. Generation Z is often described as accustomed to rapid information retrieval, visual communication, interactive media, and movement between online and offline spaces (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Generation Alpha is growing up within an even more technologically saturated environment in which smart devices, artificial intelligence, and personalized interfaces are normalized from early childhood (McCrindle et al., 2021). These tendencies may encourage creativity, connectivity, and autonomous exploration, but they can also promote fragmented attention, dependence on recommendations, and preference for concise content over sustained study. Research on the religious literacy of Generation Z also indicates that young people's knowledge of religion is shaped by educational access, social context, and exposure to diverse worldviews rather than by age alone (Halafoff et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, the strengthening of digital religious literacy is closely connected to Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* [PAI]). PAI has traditionally emphasized foundational knowledge, worship practices, moral development, and the transmission of Islamic values. These objectives remain essential, but the digital environment requires additional competencies. Learners need opportunities to evaluate online religious claims, identify manipulation and misinformation, examine disagreements among scholars, understand the social effects of algorithms, and produce responsible religious communication. Religious education must therefore move beyond a purely transmissive model toward a pedagogy that combines substantive knowledge with inquiry, verification, dialogue, ethical reflection, and digital creation.

Previous studies have discussed religious literacy, youth religiosity, digital media, and online Islamic learning; however, several gaps remain. First, many studies treat younger users as a single category and do not adequately distinguish between the developmental and technological experiences of Generations Z and Alpha. Second, general models of digital literacy do not always address the theological, interpretive, and ethical dimensions of Islamic knowledge. Third, discussions of digital religion frequently describe media practices without translating their findings into specific pedagogical implications for PAI. Fourth, access to religious content is sometimes treated as an indicator of literacy, even though frequent exposure may coexist with limited verification skills and shallow understanding. Rolando et al. (2024), for example, underscore the importance of strengthening religious literacy among Generation Z in response to moral challenges in the digital era, but further empirical work is needed to identify the competencies through which such literacy can be developed.

To address these gaps, the present study conceptualized digital religious literacy as comprising four interconnected dimensions: textual competence, contextual competence, critical digital competence, and ethical competence. Textual competence refers to the ability to understand and interpret foundational religious sources. Contextual competence concerns the ability to relate religious teachings to historical,

social, and cultural circumstances. Critical digital competence involves evaluating the credibility, authority, evidence, and platform conditions of online religious information. Ethical competence refers to responsible conduct, respectful communication, and awareness of the consequences of creating or sharing religious content.

The study sought to answer three questions: (1) What is the level of digital religious literacy among members of Generations Z and Alpha? (2) What challenges and opportunities characterize their engagement with religious content in digital environments? and (3) What implications do these findings have for the development of PAI? By combining survey data, interviews, and digital content analysis, this study aimed to provide a more comprehensive account of digital religious literacy as both an individual competence and a socially situated educational practice.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same general research phase, analyzed separately, and subsequently integrated during interpretation. This design was selected because digital religious literacy encompasses measurable patterns of competence as well as experiences, perceptions, and platform practices that require qualitative explanation. The mixed-methods approach therefore enabled numerical trends to be examined alongside participants' accounts and observable characteristics of digital religious content (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

2.2 Research Context and Participants

The research involved several educational and digital settings. Participants included students from junior secondary schools and *madrasah tsanawiyah* (SMP/MTs), students from senior secondary schools and *madrasah aliyah* (SMA/MA), university students, members of digital da'wah communities, and users of Islamic applications. For the purposes of this study, younger secondary-school participants represented the early segment of Generation Alpha, whereas older secondary-school and university participants represented Generation Z. This operational classification reflected the study's educational context and should not be interpreted as a universal generational boundary.

The quantitative sample consisted of 420 respondents selected through stratified random sampling to represent the relevant educational and community categories. The qualitative component involved 20 participants selected purposively as key informants. Eligibility criteria included being between 12 and 24 years of age, using digital media for religious purposes at least three times per week, and providing informed consent to participate. The purposive sample was designed to capture variation in educational level, patterns of digital engagement, and participation in religious learning communities.

2.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. The instrument measured four dimensions of digital religious literacy: textual competence, contextual competence, critical digital competence, and ethical competence. Textual items assessed respondents' perceived ability to understand religious sources and distinguish between primary texts and interpretations. Contextual items examined their ability to relate religious teachings to historical, social, and cultural circumstances. Critical digital items assessed source verification, comparison of claims, recognition of manipulation, and evaluation of online authority. Ethical items addressed respectful communication, responsibility in sharing content, and awareness of the potential social consequences of online religious expression.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. The interview guide explored participants' preferred sources of religious information, reasons for selecting particular platforms or figures, methods of verifying religious claims, experiences with conflicting or

radical content, perceptions of religious authority, and expectations of PAI. The semi-structured format enabled the researchers to address comparable themes while allowing participants to elaborate on their individual experiences.

A digital content analysis was also conducted on 50 social media accounts and five Islamic applications. The accounts were selected from platforms commonly used by participants and represented a range of religious communication styles. The applications included tools used for Qur'an reading, prayer schedules, devotional reminders, and religious information. The analysis considered content format, depth of explanation, presentation of sources, indicators of authority, interaction patterns, emotional framing, moderation, and features supporting learning or community engagement.

2.4 Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the overall level and dimensional profile of digital religious literacy. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between the intensity of digital religious engagement and digital religious literacy. Simple linear regression was then used to estimate the proportion of variation in literacy associated with engagement intensity.

Interview data were analyzed thematically following the general procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytical narrative. Trustworthiness was strengthened by maintaining an explicit analytical process, comparing interpretations across data sources, and examining whether the themes were adequately supported by participants' accounts (Nowell et al., 2017). Content-analysis findings were organized around recurrent features of platform content, authority, interaction, and pedagogical value.

2.5 Integration, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through triangulation. Areas of convergence were identified, such as the relationship between frequent digital engagement and expanded access to religious information. Areas of divergence were also examined, particularly the contrast between high reported ethical awareness and the continued circulation of unverified content. Member checking was conducted with selected participants, and interpretations were discussed with relevant experts to improve credibility.

Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained in reporting. Personal identifiers were removed from the dataset. The digital content analysis focused on publicly accessible material, and account-level observations were reported in aggregate rather than used to expose individual users. These procedures were intended to minimize harm while preserving the analytical value of publicly circulating religious content.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Overall Level and Dimensions of Digital Religious Literacy

The quantitative findings indicated that respondents' digital religious literacy was generally within the moderate-to-high category. This result suggests that members of Generations Z and Alpha possessed a meaningful foundation for engaging with religious information online. However, the four dimensions were not equally developed. Ethical competence emerged as the strongest dimension, followed by textual and contextual competence, while critical digital competence was comparatively weaker.

The strength of ethical competence indicates that many respondents recognized the importance of respectful interaction, caution in sharing sensitive religious content, and avoidance of overtly insulting or inflammatory communication. Such awareness is valuable because digital religious discourse can

easily intensify social conflict when doctrinal differences are expressed without restraint. Nevertheless, ethical self-perception should not be equated automatically with consistently ethical behavior. Interview findings showed that some participants forwarded content because it appeared beneficial, emotionally persuasive, or consistent with their existing beliefs even when they had not verified the source. Ethical intention was therefore not always accompanied by sufficient verification.

Textual competence was moderate to high, particularly for familiar religious themes, Qur'anic passages, worship practices, and widely circulated teachings. Participants were generally able to recognize basic religious sources and terminology. However, their interpretation was often dependent on summaries provided by preachers, content creators, or applications. Fewer participants described consulting complete texts, comparing translations, examining chains of interpretation, or distinguishing clearly between scripture, commentary, jurisprudential opinion, motivational advice, and popular religious discourse. The result suggests that recognition of religious content was stronger than independent interpretive depth.

Contextual competence also showed a moderate level. Participants could often relate religious teachings to contemporary issues such as friendship, education, family life, mental well-being, and online conduct. Yet contextualization sometimes took the form of immediate personal application rather than historically and socially informed interpretation. A short quotation was frequently treated as universally self-explanatory, even when its meaning depended on genre, occasion, jurisprudential method, or scholarly debate. This pattern reflects a central challenge of digital religion: decontextualized fragments can circulate more efficiently than carefully qualified explanations.

Critical digital competence was the weakest dimension. Many respondents relied on surface indicators of credibility, including follower counts, professional visual presentation, confident delivery, verified-account symbols, and the frequency with which content appeared in recommendations. Only a smaller group consistently examined the creator's scholarly background, institutional affiliation, cited evidence, or the presence of corroboration from independent sources. This finding is consistent with the distinction between access and evaluative competence emphasized in media-literacy scholarship (Buckingham, 2019; Livingstone, 2019). It also supports the relevance of lateral reading for religious information: users need to investigate the source beyond the original post rather than assessing credibility from appearance alone (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

Taken together, the dimensional pattern demonstrates that digital religious literacy is not a single skill. A learner may behave politely but lack source-evaluation strategies; recognize a Qur'anic verse but misunderstand its context; or use a sophisticated application without critically examining its interpretive assumptions. Educational interventions must therefore address the interdependence of textual, contextual, digital, and ethical competencies.

3.2 Intensity of Digital Engagement and Learning Environment

Pearson correlation analysis identified a positive and statistically significant relationship between the intensity of digital religious engagement and respondents' digital religious literacy. Respondents who used digital media more frequently for religious purposes generally reported higher literacy levels. However, the simple regression model produced an R^2 value of .17, indicating that engagement intensity accounted for only 17% of the observed variation in digital religious literacy.

This result is important because it challenges the assumption that frequent exposure is sufficient for literacy development. Repeated access may increase familiarity with terminology, speakers, and common themes, but it does not necessarily cultivate critical judgment. The remaining variation is likely related to factors not measured by engagement intensity alone, including educational background, prior religious knowledge, family guidance, teacher support, participation in discussion, motivation, socioeconomic access, and the quality of the content consumed. This interpretation should be treated as an inference because these additional variables were not all tested directly in the regression model.

Comparison across participant groups further clarified the role of the learning environment. Members of digital *da'wah* communities generally demonstrated stronger literacy than respondents whose engagement was predominantly individual and passive. Community participants were more likely to discuss interpretations, ask questions, receive corrective feedback, and encounter expectations regarding responsible sharing. University students and active users of Islamic applications tended to occupy an intermediate position, whereas some secondary-school participants displayed greater dependence on short-form content and recommendation systems.

The qualitative findings suggest that sustained, dialogical, and participatory learning is more educationally productive than passive exposure. Digital communities can provide opportunities for peer explanation, mentorship, collaborative verification, and reflection. However, their benefits depend on the quality of moderation and the credibility of their facilitators. A highly active community may reinforce misinformation if it discourages questioning or treats group loyalty as a substitute for evidence. Participation alone should therefore not be interpreted as a guarantee of literacy.

Generational tendencies also influenced patterns of engagement. Generation Z participants generally valued visual presentation, interactivity, immediate access, and the ability to compare multiple speakers. These preferences are consistent with broader accounts of Generation Z's technologically mediated communication and learning practices (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Younger Generation Alpha participants were even more accustomed to personalized interfaces, mobile devices, and automated recommendations, reflecting the technologically saturated environment described by McCrindle et al. (2021). Their ease with devices should not, however, be confused with critical media competence. Operational fluency—such as searching, scrolling, subscribing, and sharing—can coexist with limited understanding of algorithmic selection, commercial incentives, and data-driven personalization.

3.3 Digital Sources and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority

YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram emerged as the principal sources of religious information among participants. YouTube was valued for longer lectures and searchable archives, while TikTok and Instagram were preferred for concise explanations, motivational messages, short question-and-answer formats, and visually engaging content. Islamic applications were used primarily for Qur'an reading, prayer schedules, devotional reminders, and practical guidance. Teachers and religious scholars remained important, but they were no longer always the first point of reference when participants encountered a religious question.

The prominence of these platforms illustrates a broader reconfiguration of religious authority. Authority in digital environments is not based solely on formal education, scholarly lineage, or institutional recognition. It is also produced through visibility, accessibility, communication style, emotional resonance, and algorithmic amplification. Some participants equated popularity with trustworthiness, reasoning that a creator followed by millions of users was unlikely to be seriously mistaken. Others selected speakers whose tone appeared moderate, relatable, or relevant to everyday problems, even when they knew little about the speaker's academic background.

This shift does not mean that traditional authority has disappeared. Rather, established scholars, institutions, and educational organizations now operate within the same platform environment as entertainers, activists, commercial influencers, anonymous accounts, and self-appointed religious commentators. Digital religion therefore involves both continuity and change: online practices extend offline religious life while altering how legitimacy, participation, and visibility are negotiated (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022). The circulation of Qur'anic material on social media, for instance, can support genuine devotional expression and communal solidarity (Abokhodair et al., 2020), yet the same technical affordances can detach quotations from interpretive context or encourage symbolic sharing without sustained learning.

The content analysis showed that brief, emotionally intense, controversial, or provocative material frequently generated greater visible engagement than nuanced educational content. Posts containing categorical judgments, fear-based narratives, identity conflict, or simplified doctrinal claims were more likely to invite rapid reactions and polarized discussion. By contrast, content that explained uncertainty, scholarly disagreement, methodology, or historical context often required more time and attracted less immediate interaction. These patterns do not establish a universal causal law about platform algorithms, but they demonstrate how engagement-oriented environments can reward communicative simplicity and emotional intensity.

Participants also reported encountering hoaxes, unauthenticated quotations, decontextualized legal opinions, and messages that framed religious difference in hostile terms. Exposure to radical content was not uniform, and the study did not measure the prevalence of radicalization as a behavioral outcome. Nevertheless, the interviews indicated that some young users had difficulty distinguishing between firm religious conviction, polemical simplification, and ideologically manipulative communication. This difficulty is particularly serious when content presents exclusion, hostility, or violence as an unquestionable religious obligation.

The findings reinforce the need to understand religious authority as both substantive and mediated. Substantive authority concerns knowledge, interpretive method, integrity, and accountability. Mediated authority concerns the formats, metrics, and platform mechanisms through which a speaker becomes visible and persuasive. Digital religious literacy requires learners to examine both dimensions. Questions of credibility should include the following: Who produced this content? What qualifications or institutional relationships are relevant? What sources are cited? Does the interpretation acknowledge legitimate disagreement? How is the message edited and framed? What emotional response does it seek to produce? Who benefits from its circulation? Is the claim corroborated by independent and credible sources?

3.4 Opportunities for Religious Learning

Despite these challenges, participants described digital media as a valuable expansion of religious learning. First, digital platforms enabled access to a broad range of Islamic scholarship. Learners could listen to lectures from scholars in different regions, compare translations, access classical and contemporary texts, and participate in study sessions that would otherwise be geographically inaccessible. This broader access is especially significant for users who live far from major educational institutions or whose schedules limit attendance at face-to-face programs.

Second, digital tools supported flexible and personalized learning. Participants could revisit recorded explanations, adjust playback speed, save materials, search for specific topics, and organize devotional routines through reminders. Islamic applications were particularly useful for practical religious activities, although research indicates that many existing applications still provide limited support for autonomy, comprehensive learning, social connection, and direct scholarly consultation (Kabir et al., 2024). Application design should therefore move beyond isolated utilities toward features that encourage explanation, reflection, community support, and accountable access to expertise.

Third, social media created opportunities for creative *da'wah*. Young users could translate complex ideas into infographics, short videos, podcasts, animations, and interactive discussions. These formats can make religious learning more accessible without necessarily sacrificing rigor, provided that creators use reliable sources and communicate interpretive limitations. Creativity should not be treated as the opposite of scholarship; rather, the educational challenge is to combine accurate knowledge with forms of communication suited to contemporary media practices.

Fourth, online communities enabled peer support and sustained participation. Participants valued spaces in which they could ask questions without embarrassment, exchange learning resources, and connect religious teachings to everyday concerns. Such communities may be especially meaningful for

young people who feel distant from formal institutions. Their educational potential is strongest when they are moderated transparently, connected to credible scholars or educators, and structured to welcome questions rather than reward conformity.

Finally, digital religious literacy can contribute to social inclusion and informed engagement with diversity. Religious literacy helps learners recognize that religious traditions contain internal variation and that religious identities are shaped by historical and cultural contexts (Moore, 2007). Research involving Generation Z has similarly shown the relevance of religious literacy to young people's understanding of diversity and social inclusion (Halafoff et al., 2020). In Indonesia's plural society, digital religious education should therefore prepare learners to uphold Islamic commitments while communicating responsibly across differences.

3.5 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

To address the convergent mixed-methods design of the study, the quantitative, interview, and digital content-analysis findings were integrated to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence. As shown in Table 1, the qualitative findings generally expanded and contextualized the quantitative patterns, particularly regarding critical digital competence, ethical awareness, and the relationship between engagement intensity and digital religious literacy.

Table 1. Joint Display of Integrated Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative finding	Qualitative/content-analysis finding	Type of integration	Integrated interpretation
Ethical competence was the strongest dimension	Participants recognized the importance of respectful communication, but some continued to share religious content without verifying its source	Divergence/expansion	Ethical awareness does not necessarily translate into adequate verification practices
Critical digital competence was comparatively weaker	Participants frequently relied on follower counts, visual presentation, confident delivery, and platform visibility as credibility indicators	Convergence	Weak critical competence is reflected in reliance on surface-level indicators of religious authority
Digital religious engagement was positively associated with literacy, but explained only 17% of its variation	Dialogical community participation appeared more educationally productive than passive individual exposure	Complementarity	The quality and social context of digital engagement may be as important as its frequency
Textual and contextual competencies were moderate to high	Participants recognized basic religious sources but often relied on summaries and decontextualized quotations	Expansion	Familiarity with religious content does not necessarily indicate independent textual or contextual interpretation

The integrated findings reveal an important distinction between exposure, awareness, and competence. Although respondents demonstrated relatively strong ethical awareness, qualitative evidence indicated that responsible intentions were not always accompanied by systematic source verification. This divergence suggests that ethical competence and critical digital competence, while interconnected, should not be treated as interchangeable dimensions of digital religious literacy.

A second point of integration concerns the role of digital engagement. The quantitative analysis showed that engagement intensity accounted for only 17% of the variation in digital religious literacy. Qualitative findings help explain this limited contribution by indicating that dialogical and participatory engagement provided opportunities for questioning, feedback, and collaborative

verification, whereas frequent passive exposure did not necessarily develop critical judgment. Thus, the educational value of digital engagement appears to depend not only on frequency but also on the quality and social context of participation.

3.6 Challenges for Islamic Religious Education

The findings indicate that PAI faces a dual responsibility. It must preserve the depth, continuity, and ethical orientation of Islamic learning while equipping students to navigate rapidly changing media environments. A curriculum limited to memorization and reproduction of established answers will not adequately prepare learners to evaluate conflicting digital claims. Conversely, a curriculum focused only on generic digital skills may neglect the textual, theological, and moral dimensions that distinguish religious literacy from general information literacy.

PAI should first incorporate explicit source-evaluation instruction. Students need to learn how to identify the status of a religious statement, distinguish primary sources from commentary, evaluate the qualifications of a speaker, trace quotations, compare interpretations, and recognize fabricated or incomplete references. Lateral reading can be adapted for this purpose by asking learners to leave the original post, examine independent information about the creator, locate the cited source, and compare the claim with credible scholarly explanations (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

Second, PAI should strengthen contextual interpretation. Students should be guided to ask how genre, historical setting, audience, legal methodology, and scholarly disagreement affect meaning. This approach does not weaken commitment to religious texts; rather, it protects texts from arbitrary or manipulative use. The Islamic ideal of deep religious understanding requires disciplined interpretation rather than the accumulation of disconnected quotations. In this respect, engagement with modern media should remain connected to the intellectual and ethical resources of the Islamic tradition (Nasr, 2010).

Third, pedagogical practice should become more dialogical. Teachers should create structured opportunities for students to bring digital content into the classroom, explain why it appears persuasive, test its claims, and discuss its ethical implications. This approach recognizes that students already encounter religious information outside school. The classroom can become a space for guided interpretation rather than pretending that formal textbooks are their only source of knowledge.

Fourth, PAI should develop students as responsible producers, not merely consumers, of digital religious content. One of the study's most important findings was that respondents watched, read, and listened far more often than they created or critically reflected. Learning activities could include producing source-based explanatory videos, annotated infographics, podcast discussions, digital narratives, or comparative reviews of Islamic applications. Assessment should consider accuracy, transparency of sources, contextual sensitivity, ethical language, and awareness of audience.

Fifth, teacher and lecturer competence must be strengthened. Religious educators require continuing professional development in digital pedagogy, online source verification, platform cultures, misinformation, privacy, and ethical content production. Subject knowledge remains indispensable, but it must be accompanied by the ability to guide learners through a media environment that changes faster than conventional curricula.

3.7 Institutional and Policy Implications

The findings have several strategic implications. At the curriculum level, digital religious literacy should be incorporated systematically into PAI rather than offered as an occasional supplementary topic. Learning outcomes should explicitly address textual interpretation, contextual reasoning, digital verification, ethical participation, and responsible creation. These competencies should be developed progressively across educational levels.

At the institutional level, schools, madrasahs, universities, and pesantren should establish partnerships with credible digital da'wah communities, scholars, media practitioners, and technology developers. The relatively strong literacy observed among participants in dialogical digital

communities suggests that structured nonformal learning can complement classroom instruction. Partnerships should nevertheless be governed by clear criteria concerning scholarly accountability, child protection, moderation, transparency, and respect for diversity.

At the professional level, continuing professional development should support teachers and lecturers in designing digital learning activities and responding to controversial online material. Educators need practical strategies for verifying claims, facilitating discussion, addressing ideological manipulation, and helping students manage uncertainty. They should also be prepared to explain that legitimate scholarly disagreement is not equivalent to misinformation.

At the policy level, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and other relevant agencies should develop a comprehensive framework for digital religious literacy. Possible measures include standards for educational religious content, public guidance on source verification, support for moderate and evidence-based digital materials, transparent collaboration with platforms, and competency-based development programs for digital preachers. Any certification or regulatory initiative should be implemented carefully to avoid reducing scholarly diversity or turning administrative recognition into the sole measure of authority.

3.8 Practical Implications and Study Limitations

The practical direction emerging from this study is a shift from consumption to production, from passive reception to participatory inquiry, and from the memorization of isolated texts to the creation of accountable digital narratives. This shift does not require abandoning foundational knowledge. On the contrary, responsible production makes gaps in knowledge visible and encourages learners to justify their interpretations. When students must cite a source, explain context, anticipate audience response, and revise misleading wording, they practice multiple dimensions of digital religious literacy simultaneously.

The study has several limitations. First, participants were drawn from students and young adults in particular regions, so the findings should not be generalized to all members of Generations Z and Alpha in Indonesia. Second, the content analysis covered only 50 social media accounts and five Islamic applications, whereas the digital religious ecosystem is substantially broader and changes rapidly. Third, the cross-sectional design could not capture longitudinal changes in literacy, platform use, or religious development. Fourth, engagement intensity explained only a limited proportion of literacy variation, but the study did not test all relevant personal, educational, familial, and socioeconomic predictors.

Future research should include more geographically diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and comparative studies across educational settings or countries. It should also examine emerging platforms, including generative artificial intelligence and Islamic chatbots, with particular attention to source transparency, hallucinated religious claims, embedded interpretive assumptions, privacy, and the changing relationship between learners and scholars. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies could further evaluate whether specific PAI interventions improve source verification, contextual reasoning, and ethical content production.

4. CONCLUSION

This study was motivated by the expanding role of digital media in shaping the religious learning and identities of Generations Z and Alpha. The quantitative findings showed that respondents' digital religious literacy was generally moderate to high, with ethical competence stronger than critical digital competence. Although many participants recognized norms of respectful online conduct, they experienced greater difficulty evaluating the credibility, authority, and contextual adequacy of digital religious sources.

The qualitative findings revealed three central dynamics. First, social media and Islamic applications have become major sources of religious information. Participants frequently accessed short sermons, motivational videos, podcasts, digital Qur'an resources, and practical applications rather than

relying exclusively on direct instruction from teachers or religious scholars. Second, this expanded access was accompanied by serious challenges, including fragmented authority, misinformation, radical or hostile content, and the superficial interpretation of religious teachings. Third, digital environments also offered significant opportunities through creative da'wah, access to global Islamic scholarship, flexible learning, and adaptive virtual communities.

Digital religious literacy should therefore be understood as a multidimensional capacity integrating textual understanding, contextual interpretation, critical digital evaluation, and ethical participation. Increasing the frequency of digital engagement alone is insufficient, as demonstrated by the limited explanatory contribution of engagement intensity. The quality of guidance, dialogue, content, and educational context is equally important.

PAI must respond by becoming more adaptive, critical, participatory, and creative while maintaining scholarly rigor and moral responsibility. Its role should extend beyond transmitting doctrine to cultivating learners who can investigate sources, understand interpretive complexity, communicate respectfully, and produce responsible religious content. The effective strengthening of digital religious literacy will depend on collaboration among relevant curricula, competent educators, supportive public policy, accountable technology design, and innovative digital da'wah communities. Through such collaboration, PAI can help prepare young Muslims who are knowledgeable, ethical, critically informed, and capable of navigating global digital challenges without losing the depth of their religious tradition.

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