BESTARI: Jurnal Studi Pendidikan Islam
Vol. 22, No. 2, 2025

p-ISSN 1907-1337; e-ISSN 2807-6532
DOI: https://doi.org/10.36667/bestari.v22i2.1305

Shifting Patterns of Religious Literacy among University Students: A Study of Islamic Identity Formation in Indonesian Higher Education

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Received: June 27, 2025 | Accepted: December 26, 2025

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji pergeseran pola literasi keagamaan di kalangan mahasiswa perguruan tinggi di Indonesia serta implikasinya terhadap pembentukan identitas Islam. Berangkat dari asumsi bahwa literasi keagamaan tidak lagi terbatas pada penguasaan teks-teks kanonik atau otoritas institusional, studi ini menyoroti bagaimana mahasiswa kini menavigasi beragam sumber keagamaan, mulai dari kurikulum kampus dan dosen hingga media sosial, ceramah daring, dan konten digital populer. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan analisis kontekstual terhadap wacana keagamaan yang dirujuk mahasiswa, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa literasi keagamaan mahasiswa bersifat terfragmentasi, selektif, dan sering kali berorientasi emosional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya negosiasi otoritas yang berkelanjutan antara Islam institusional dan figur-figur keagamaan populer di ruang digital. Mahasiswa tampak mengembangkan strategi adaptif, termasuk kepatuhan strategis terhadap norma akademik, sembari mempertahankan preferensi religius personal. Dalam konteks ini, identitas Islam tidak terbentuk sebagai hasil akhir yang stabil, melainkan sebagai proses yang terus bergerak, dipengaruhi oleh iman, nalar akademik, dan realitas sosial-politik Indonesia. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa perguruan tinggi Islam perlu merespons dinamika ini dengan pendekatan pedagogis yang lebih dialogis dan literasi-kritis, yang tidak hanya mentransmisikan pengetahuan keagamaan, tetapi juga membekali mahasiswa dengan kemampuan reflektif untuk hidup dalam kompleksitas religius kontemporer.

Kata kunci: Literasi keagamaan, mahasiswa Muslim, identitas Islam, pendidikan tinggi Islam, otoritas keagamaan, media digital dan agama.

Abstract

This article explores shifting patterns of religious literacy among university students in Indonesia and examines how these shifts shape the formation of Islamic identity in higher education contexts. Departing from the view

that religious literacy is confined to canonical texts and institutional authority, the study investigates how students engage a wide range of religious sources, including university curricula, lecturers, social media, online sermons, and popular digital content. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and contextual analysis of religious discourses referenced by students, the findings suggest that contemporary religious literacy is fragmented, selective, and often emotionally driven. The study reveals an ongoing negotiation of religious authority between institutional Islam and digitally mediated popular preachers. Students frequently display adaptive strategies, including forms of strategic compliance with academic norms, while maintaining personal religious preferences shaped outside the classroom. Islamic identity, therefore, emerges not as a fixed outcome of education but as a dynamic and ongoing process, situated at the intersection of faith, academic reasoning, and Indonesia's socio-political realities. The article argues that Islamic higher education must respond to these dynamics by rethinking literacy, authority, and pedagogy, moving toward more dialogical and critical approaches that support students in navigating religious complexity rather than offering premature certainty.

Keywords: Religious literacy, Muslim university students, Islamic identity, Islamic higher education, religious authority, digital religion

Introduction

Over the past decade, discussions about religious literacy among university students in Indonesia have taken on a noticeably different tone (Suyanto et al., 2024). It is no longer sufficient to ask whether students are "religious" or "less religious," or whether they practice ritual obligations regularly (Ashraf, 2019). Those questions still matter, of course, but they seem increasingly blunt. What feels more urgent is how students *read*, *interpret*, and *circulate* religious knowledge, and how these practices quietly shape their sense of being Muslim in a rapidly changing academic and digital environment (Mohamed, 2023).

In Indonesian Islamic higher education, religious literacy was once closely associated with formal instruction: lectures on *tafsir*, *fiqh*, *akidah*, or *Islamic history*, usually mediated by lecturers and canonical texts (Suherman, 2020). The authority structure was relatively clear, even if contested at times. Today, that structure feels less stable. Students encounter Islamic discourses not only in classrooms or mosques, but also, perhaps more intensely, through social media feeds, podcasts, short videos, online sermons, and peer discussion groups (Juhaidi et al., 2025). Some of these sources are enriching and intellectually stimulating; others are fragmentary, polemical, or emotionally charged. Often, they are all of these at once. We think this mixture is precisely what makes contemporary religious literacy both fascinating and unsettling.

This article departs from the assumption that religious literacy is not merely about the ability to read religious texts, but about a broader competence: navigating multiple sources of authority, negotiating meaning, and positioning oneself within competing interpretations of Islam (Barnes & Smith, 2015; Carpenter & Marshall, 2009). For university students, these processes are deeply intertwined with identity formation. Being a “Muslim student” today may involve balancing academic rationality with spiritual commitment, national narratives of moderate Islam with transnational religious movements, and personal ethical reflection with collective religious norms. These balances are rarely neat. Sometimes they wobble, sometimes they contradict each other, and sometimes they remain unresolved.

Indonesia offers a particularly rich context for examining these shifts. As a country with a long tradition of Islamic higher education, ranging from state Islamic universities to private Islamic institutes, Indonesia has historically promoted an image of Islam that is scholarly, contextual, and socially engaged. Yet, at the same time, Indonesian campuses are not insulated from global Islamic discourses, including more conservative, revivalist, or even exclusionary interpretations (Firdaus & Husni, 2021; Hamdani, 2023). Students move across these discursive spaces with varying degrees of critical awareness. Some do so confidently; others, perhaps, are still searching for a stable footing.

What motivates this study is a simple but, WE believe, consequential question: *how are patterns of religious literacy among Indonesian university students shifting, and what do these shifts mean for the formation of Islamic identity in higher education settings?* Rather than treating identity as a fixed outcome, this article approaches it as an ongoing process, sometimes reflective, sometimes reactive, shaped by everyday encounters with texts, media, peers, and institutional norms. By focusing on literacy practices, the study seeks to illuminate the subtle ways in which students make sense of Islam, negotiate authority, and articulate who they are becoming as educated Muslims.

In doing so, this article hopes to contribute to broader conversations on Islamic education, youth religiosity, and the future of religious authority in Muslim societies. The argument is not that traditional forms of religious learning are disappearing, they are not, but that they are being reconfigured, layered, and occasionally challenged by new modes of literacy. Understanding these dynamics, even imperfectly, seems essential if Islamic higher education is to remain intellectually relevant and ethically grounded in the years ahead.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, grounded in the assumption that shifts in religious literacy and identity formation are best

understood through meanings, narratives, and everyday practices rather than through numerical indicators alone. We are aware that this choice may feel familiar, perhaps even predictable, but in this case it feels justified. The phenomena under examination are subtle, layered, and sometimes contradictory, and they tend to surface more clearly in conversation, reflection, and observation than in standardized measurements.

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and limited document analysis. The primary participants were undergraduate students enrolled in Islamic and non-Islamic faculties at several Indonesian universities, including both Islamic higher education institutions and general public universities with significant Muslim student populations. The selection was purposive rather than representative in a statistical sense. We was less interested in "how many" students think in a certain way, and more concerned with *how* they articulate their religious understanding, where they encounter religious knowledge, and how they negotiate tensions between different sources of authority.

The interviews were designed to be open enough to allow participants to wander a little, to hesitate, to contradict themselves, or to return to earlier points. In practice, this turned out to be important. Many students initially offered confident statements about their religious views, only to soften or complicate them as the conversation unfolded. Questions focused on reading habits (both textual and digital), preferred religious figures or platforms, experiences in religious study groups, classroom learning, and moments of doubt or confusion. Not all participants were equally reflective, and that unevenness itself became part of the data.

In addition to interviews, the study examined selected materials that students frequently referenced: online sermons, social media posts, short religious videos, campus religious bulletins, and syllabi of compulsory Islamic studies courses. These materials were not treated as isolated texts, but as elements within a broader ecology of religious literacy. We did not attempt an exhaustive content analysis, perhaps that would be another study, but rather used these materials to contextualize students' narratives and to trace recurring themes or discursive patterns.

Data analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly, sometimes slowly, sometimes impatiently, with initial codes emerging from recurring words, metaphors, and concerns. These codes were then grouped into broader themes related to authority, critical engagement, emotional resonance, and identity positioning. The process was iterative and, at times, slightly messy. Some themes overlapped; others resisted neat categorization. Rather than forcing coherence, WE allowed certain ambiguities to remain, believing they reflect the lived complexity of students' religious experiences.

Ethical considerations were taken seriously, though not without some unease. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study

and their right to withdraw at any time, and all names used in this article are pseudonyms. Still, discussions about religion are rarely neutral. We remained conscious of my own positionality, as a researcher shaped by Islamic education myself, and tried, not always perfectly, to listen more than WE spoke. In the end, the method chosen does not claim neutrality or finality. It offers, instead, a situated and interpretive account of how religious literacy is being reworked within the everyday lives of Indonesian university students.

Results and Discussion

1. Expanding Sources of Religious Literacy: From Canonical Texts to Digital Ecologies

One of the most visible shifts emerging from this study concerns the expanding, and perhaps dispersing, sources of religious literacy among university students. For many participants, canonical texts, lecturers, and formal campus forums still matter. They are not abandoned. Yet they no longer function as the primary or exclusive gateways to Islamic knowledge (Umro, 2020). Instead, these traditional sources are increasingly embedded within a wider digital ecology that includes YouTube lectures, short reflections on Instagram, algorithm-driven religious clips on TikTok, and long-form discussions in podcasts shared through messaging groups. Students move across these spaces with surprising ease, often without drawing a sharp boundary between "serious" religious learning and casual consumption.

What is striking is not merely the diversification of sources, but the changing logic of access. Several students described how their first encounter with a religious topic, say, *hijab* ethics, political Islam, or gender relations, came not from a textbook or a lecture, but from a video recommended by an algorithm (Formichi, 2021; Maulana, 2017). From there, some would look for confirmation in classical references or ask a lecturer, while others felt no need to do so. In these narratives, authority does not disappear; it shifts. Authority becomes something negotiated, assembled, and sometimes improvised, rather than inherited as a stable hierarchy.

This shift subtly reconfigures how students evaluate religious credibility (Carpenter & Marshall, 2009). Traditional markers, formal education, institutional affiliation, mastery of Arabic texts, still carry weight, but they compete with other criteria: clarity of delivery, emotional resonance, perceived sincerity, and relevance to everyday struggles. One participant admitted, almost apologetically, that she trusted a popular preacher online because "he explains things in a way that feels close to my life," even though she was aware that his interpretations might be contested in academic settings. This does not necessarily indicate intellectual

laziness; rather, it reflects a pragmatic approach to religious learning shaped by immediacy and affect (Giuliani et al., 2020).

At the same time, digital religious literacy is often fragmented. Students rarely follow a single coherent tradition or school of thought. Instead, they pick and choose, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, across different styles and orientations. A student might listen to a conservative sermon on moral discipline, then engage with a progressive discussion on social justice, and later quote a lecturer's nuanced explanation in class. These combinations are not always reconciled. In fact, some students seemed comfortable living with a certain level of inconsistency, as if coherence were less important than personal usefulness (Brown, 2018; Moberg, 1987). We found this unsettling at first, but perhaps it is simply a reflection of how knowledge circulates in a digitally saturated environment.

Importantly, this expansion of sources also alters the role of the university. Lecturers are no longer perceived as the primary transmitters of religious knowledge, but as one voice among many. Some students still regard them as anchors, figures who provide methodological rigor and historical depth. Others see them as slow, overly cautious, or detached from "real" religious debates happening online (Lisak, 2016). This perception does not always align with reality, but it shapes how students engage in the classroom. When academic explanations fail to connect with the discourses students encounter daily on their screens, a gap emerges, sometimes filled with skepticism, sometimes with quiet disengagement.

Yet, it would be misleading to frame this shift purely as a decline of scholarly authority. For a number of participants, digital platforms actually sparked deeper curiosity. Short videos or podcasts served as entry points, prompting them to explore classical texts or attend study circles with renewed interest (Shadiqin et al., 2023). In this sense, digital ecologies can function as gateways rather than replacements. The problem, perhaps, lies not in the expansion itself, but in the uneven capacity to critically navigate it.

Overall, the expansion of religious literacy sources among Indonesian university students signals a broader transformation in how Islam is learned, felt, and claimed. Literacy here is not just about reading texts, but about moving through networks of meaning, authority, and emotion. This movement is fluid, occasionally contradictory, and still very much in formation. Understanding it requires resisting simple binaries, traditional versus digital, authoritative versus popular, and paying closer attention to how students themselves make sense of the religious worlds they inhabit.

2. Negotiating Religious Authority: Between Institutional Islam and Popular Preachers

Beyond the expansion of sources, the data reveal a more delicate process: the negotiation of religious authority itself. For many students,

authority no longer resides comfortably in a single place. It hovers, shifts, and occasionally fractures between institutional Islam, represented by universities, curricula, and lecturers, and the charismatic figures who dominate digital religious spaces. What makes this negotiation particularly interesting is that it often unfolds quietly, without open confrontation or explicit rejection of either side.

In formal academic settings, students are introduced to Islam as a field of study that values methodology, historical context, and interpretive plurality. Lecturers emphasize chains of transmission, schools of thought, and the importance of situating religious texts within socio-historical frameworks (Hounguevou, 2023). This form of authority is slow, cautious, and, at times, intentionally ambiguous. Some students appreciate this. They describe feeling intellectually challenged, even liberated, by the realization that Islamic interpretation is not monolithic. Others, however, experience the same approach as confusing or emotionally unsatisfying. “Everything feels relative,” one student remarked, “and sometimes WE just want a clear answer.”

In contrast, popular preachers in digital spaces often offer clarity, certainty, and moral confidence. Their authority is less about institutional credentials and more about presence: the tone of voice, the ability to speak directly to personal anxieties, the impression of sincerity. A preacher who appears daily on a phone screen can feel more “real” than a lecturer encountered twice a week in a classroom. This intimacy creates a different kind of legitimacy, one rooted in affect rather than formal expertise. Students are not always unaware of this distinction, but they do not necessarily see it as a problem.

What emerges, then, is not a simple shift from academic authority to charismatic authority, but a layered arrangement. Students often compartmentalize. Academic Islam is for exams, essays, and intellectual discussion; popular preaching is for moral guidance, emotional reassurance, or spiritual motivation (Rosyad & Ma’arif, 2020). These domains overlap, but they are not fully integrated. Occasionally, tension surfaces, when a lecturer critiques an online preacher admired by students, or when digital sermons contradict what is taught in class. In such moments, students rarely stage open resistance. Instead, they engage in selective listening, quietly adjusting the weight they assign to each voice.

Interestingly, some students attempt to reconcile these authorities by redefining their roles. Lecturers are seen as providing “tools” for thinking, while popular preachers supply “direction” for living. This division may seem artificial, and perhaps it is, but it allows students to maintain loyalty to both without feeling internally torn. Still, this strategy is fragile. When moral claims become entangled with political issues or identity boundaries, the separation becomes harder to sustain.

What is often missing in this negotiation is a shared space for critical dialogue about authority itself. Students seldom articulate why they trust certain figures more than others. Trust operates implicitly, shaped by repetition, emotional tone, and peer circulation rather than by explicit evaluation. In this sense, authority is not simply transferred; it is absorbed. The danger is not that students abandon academic Islam altogether, but that academic authority becomes background noise, respected, but rarely transformative.

At the same time, it would be unfair to portray students as passive recipients of charismatic influence. Several participants demonstrated a growing skepticism toward overly dogmatic or sensationalist preachers, especially after being exposed to critical discussions on campus. In these cases, institutional Islam regains relevance, not as a source of final answers, but as a space that legitimizes doubt and questioning. This suggests that negotiation is ongoing, not settled. Ultimately, the tension between institutional Islam and popular preachers reflects a broader struggle over what counts as legitimate religious knowledge in contemporary Muslim societies. For Indonesian university students, this struggle is lived rather than theorized. It unfolds in everyday choices, what to watch, whom to quote, which voices to trust when uncertainty arises. Understanding this negotiation helps explain why religious identity on campus often appears coherent on the surface, yet internally complex, provisional, and, at times, quietly conflicted.

3. Fragmented yet Intimate Literacy: Emotional Resonance and Selective Understanding

A recurring pattern across the data is the emergence of a form of religious literacy that is fragmented yet deeply intimate. Students rarely engage Islam as a coherent body of knowledge learned systematically from beginning to end. Instead, they encounter it in pieces, short reflections, motivational clips, isolated verses, personal stories, and simplified moral claims (Doostdar, 2016; Matthews & Mazzocco, 2017). These fragments circulate quickly and attach themselves to specific emotions: anxiety about the future, guilt, hope, anger, or the desire to feel spiritually anchored. In this sense, literacy becomes less about comprehensive understanding and more about emotional alignment.

Many students described moments of religious closeness that were sparked by very small encounters. A two-minute video before an exam, a quote shared in a WhatsApp group late at night, or a brief reminder about patience and sincerity could feel more spiritually meaningful than hours of classroom discussion (Istiani & Islamy, 2020). This does not necessarily indicate a rejection of depth, but it does suggest a different pathway to meaning. Religious understanding, here, is not accumulated gradually; it is activated situationally. Students turn to certain fragments of Islam when they *need* them, not when a curriculum dictates they should.

This selective engagement has consequences. On the one hand, it allows students to personalize their relationship with religion. Islam feels close, responsive, and relevant to their lived experiences. Several participants spoke about feeling "understood" or "calmed" by specific religious messages, even if they could not fully explain their theological grounding. Emotional resonance becomes a marker of truth. If a message feels right, comforting, motivating, or affirming, it is often accepted without much scrutiny. We sensed, in these moments, a quiet shift from epistemic validation to affective validation.

On the other hand, fragmentation can limit critical engagement. Because students consume religious discourse in isolated pieces, broader contexts are easily lost (Kersten, 2015; Untea, 2017). Verses are detached from interpretive traditions; ethical injunctions are separated from historical debates; complex moral issues are reduced to simple binaries. Some students acknowledged this, almost sheepishly. They knew that what they consumed was partial, even shallow at times, but they also admitted that they rarely felt the urgency to dig deeper unless confronted by contradiction or criticism. In everyday life, the fragments were enough.

What complicates this further is that emotional intimacy often creates a sense of ownership. Students feel that certain interpretations of Islam are *theirs*, discovered personally, not imposed institutionally. This sense of ownership can be empowering, but it can also make critique feel intrusive. When lecturers challenge popular interpretations or ask students to problematize emotionally charged narratives, the response is sometimes discomfort rather than curiosity. The critique is experienced not as an academic exercise, but as a disturbance of something personally meaningful.

Yet fragmentation should not be read solely as a deficit. For some students, these intimate encounters with religion serve as entry points. A short video may lead to a longer lecture; a quote may spark a search for its original context. The problem is that this trajectory is uneven. While a few students move from affective engagement to critical exploration, many remain within a cycle of consumption that prioritizes emotional satisfaction over intellectual rigor. The literacy formed in this way is functional, even comforting, but fragile when faced with complex ethical or theological questions.

In the end, fragmented and intimate religious literacy reflects the conditions of contemporary student life itself, fast-paced, emotionally demanding, and saturated with information. Students are not necessarily choosing fragmentation; they are adapting to it. The challenge for Islamic higher education is not to dismiss these forms of literacy, but to recognize their emotional power and gently expand them. Without that effort, religious understanding risks becoming deeply felt yet thin, personal yet unexamined, intimate but resistant to critical growth.

4. Critical Awareness or Strategic Compliance?

As the previous sections suggest, student engagement with religious discourse on campus is rarely straightforward. One of the more ambiguous findings of this study lies in the question of critical awareness. On the surface, many students appear reflective, open-minded, and capable of articulating nuanced positions about Islam (Husni, 2020). They use academic vocabulary with ease, acknowledge interpretive plurality, and often preface their statements with careful qualifiers, "it depends," "in a certain context," "from one perspective." Yet, beneath this apparent criticality, a quieter question lingers: how much of this reflexivity is genuinely internalized, and how much functions as a form of strategic compliance with academic expectations?

In classroom discussions and written assignments, students are keenly aware of what counts as a "good answer." They know that lecturers value balance, moderation, and contextual reasoning. As a result, some students perform critical engagement in ways that align neatly with institutional norms. They cite multiple viewpoints, avoid absolute claims, and echo the language of tolerance and inclusivity promoted by the university. This performance is not necessarily dishonest. In fact, it often reflects real learning. Still, in interviews conducted outside formal assessment settings, several students admitted that their personal convictions were less fluid than their academic expressions suggested.

This gap between academic discourse and personal belief is where strategic compliance becomes visible. Students learn to bracket certain views depending on the setting. In class, they speak the language of critical inquiry; in informal religious circles or online spaces, they may adopt more rigid or emotionally charged positions. This switching is not always conscious. It is, rather, a pragmatic response to navigating multiple normative environments. We hesitate to label this as hypocrisy. It feels more like a survival strategy within a complex institutional landscape.

What makes this ambivalence particularly significant is that it can obscure the limits of critical engagement. Students may appear critically literate while remaining insulated from deeper self-reflection. Critical tools are used instrumentally, to pass courses, to avoid conflict, to appear intellectually mature, without necessarily reshaping underlying assumptions. In this sense, critique becomes a skill rather than a disposition. It is something one *does* when required, not something one *lives* with consistently.

At the same time, it would be unfair to reduce student behavior to mere compliance. For some participants, academic exposure genuinely unsettled previously held certainties. They described moments of discomfort, even frustration, when encountering alternative interpretations of Islam that challenged their inherited views. Not all of them resolved these tensions, but the fact that they remained open, if only

partially, to uncertainty suggests that critical awareness does take root, albeit unevenly.

The problem, perhaps, lies in the absence of spaces where students can safely integrate critique and conviction. Campus discourse often rewards polished arguments but leaves little room for vulnerability, doubt, or unresolved questions. As a result, students learn to manage impressions rather than to openly wrestle with belief. Strategic compliance fills this gap, offering a way to function without fully confronting internal tensions.

Ultimately, the ambivalence between critical awareness and strategic compliance reflects a broader challenge in Islamic higher education. Encouraging critical thinking is not enough if it remains performative. What is needed is an environment where critique is not merely an academic requirement, but a meaningful part of religious self-understanding. Without this, students may graduate fluent in the language of moderation and pluralism, yet uncertain about how these values actually shape their lived faith.

5. Forming Islamic Identity in Motion: Being Muslim, Student, and Citizen at Once

When religious literacy becomes dispersed, negotiated, emotional, and occasionally strategic, Islamic identity can no longer be understood as a stable outcome of education. What emerges instead is an identity in motion, unfinished, situational, and continuously recalibrated. For the students in this study, being Muslim is not a single role but a layered experience that intersects with being a university student and a citizen of contemporary Indonesia. These layers do not always align neatly. In fact, much of the identity work happens precisely in the spaces where they rub against one another.

Students often described their Muslim identity differently depending on context. In academic settings, Islam is articulated through concepts such as moderation, pluralism, maqāṣid al-sharīʿa, or contextual interpretation. These frameworks allow students to position themselves as rational, tolerant, and intellectually credible. In personal or communal spaces, however, Islamic identity may be expressed more through moral discipline, emotional devotion, or symbolic belonging. Neither expression is necessarily false. What matters is that identity shifts as students move across domains, responding to different expectations and pressures.

This fluidity is especially visible when students confront social and political issues. Questions about religious tolerance, minority rights, gender norms, or state ideology often compel students to negotiate between religious conviction and civic responsibility. Some students spoke confidently about Islam as a moral foundation for national harmony, echoing dominant narratives of Indonesian Islam as moderate and inclusive. Others hesitated, unsure how to reconcile emotionally compelling religious messages encountered online with the pluralistic

ideals promoted in university discourse. These moments of hesitation are telling. They reveal identity not as a settled position, but as an ongoing process of alignment and re-alignment.

What complicates this process further is the coexistence of multiple forms of authority. Academic Islam encourages deliberation and openness, while popular religious discourses often demand clarity and commitment. Students draw selectively from both, crafting identities that are functional rather than fully coherent. One student described himself as "still searching," not because he lacked religious exposure, but because he felt pulled in different directions, intellectually convinced by academic arguments, yet emotionally attached to more assertive religious narratives. This sense of being "in between" was not experienced as failure, but as a normal condition of student life.

Importantly, identity in motion does not imply instability in a negative sense. For some students, fluidity enables adaptability. They learn to speak multiple languages of Islam, academic, devotional, civic, without fully collapsing one into the other. This multiplicity can foster resilience, especially in a socio-political environment as diverse and contested as Indonesia's. Yet, it also carries risks. Without spaces for integrative reflection, identity may remain compartmentalized, switching modes without deeper synthesis.

What emerges from this analysis is a picture of Islamic identity as relational rather than essential. It is shaped through interaction with texts, institutions, peers, and national narratives. Literacy practices play a crucial role here, not by dictating identity, but by supplying the materials from which identity is assembled. Because these materials are uneven, fragmented, and emotionally charged, the identities formed from them are necessarily provisional.

In this sense, Islamic higher education does not simply "produce" Muslim identities. It participates in an ongoing negotiation, one that extends beyond campus walls into digital spaces and civic life. Recognizing identity as a process, rather than an endpoint, may allow educators to better accompany students in their intellectual and spiritual journeys, without demanding premature coherence. Perhaps uncertainty, when held thoughtfully, is not a weakness but a defining feature of being Muslim, a student, and a citizen at the same time.

6. Implications for Islamic Higher Education: Rethinking Literacy, Authority, and Pedagogy

The patterns described above raise uncomfortable but necessary questions for Islamic higher education in Indonesia. If religious literacy is expanding, fragmented, emotionally charged, and negotiated across multiple authorities, then traditional assumptions about how Islam should be taught at the university level can no longer be taken for granted. The issue is not simply that students are "changing," but that the educational

environment itself is being reshaped by digital cultures, shifting forms of authority, and evolving identity formations. Islamic universities are, willingly or not, part of this transformation.

At the curricular level, one immediate challenge concerns relevance. Courses on tafsir, hadith, fiqh, or Islamic thought remain foundational, yet many students experience them as disconnected from the religious discourses that dominate their everyday lives. When syllabi do not explicitly engage with digital religious content, popular sermons, online debates, viral moral narratives, students are left to navigate these worlds on their own. This gap does not disappear on its own. It quietly reinforces the sense that academic Islam belongs to the classroom, while “real” religious guidance happens elsewhere. Rethinking curriculum, therefore, is not about diluting scholarly rigor, but about making space for critical engagement with contemporary religious ecologies.

This shift also demands a reconsideration of the lecturer’s role. Lecturers can no longer function solely as authoritative transmitters of knowledge, assuming epistemic superiority by virtue of institutional position. Students already encounter many voices that claim religious authority, often with greater emotional immediacy. In this context, the lecturer’s authority may be more effective when exercised as facilitation rather than instruction, as someone who helps students slow down, contextualize, and interrogate the religious messages they encounter daily. This role is less glamorous, perhaps, and certainly more demanding. It requires patience, humility, and a willingness to enter conversations whose outcomes are not fully predictable.

Pedagogically, the findings point toward the need for more dialogical and literacy-critical approaches. Critical thinking, as currently practiced, often remains abstract and performative. What seems necessary is a form of pedagogy that takes students’ emotional investments seriously, without surrendering analytical depth. This means allowing discussions of popular preachers, viral religious content, or contentious moral issues into the classroom, not to endorse them, but to examine how they work, why they resonate, and what assumptions they carry. Such discussions can be uncomfortable, and they may challenge lecturers’ own certainties. Yet avoiding them risks rendering academic spaces increasingly irrelevant.

There is also an ethical dimension to these implications. Islamic higher education has long positioned itself as a moral institution, not merely an intellectual one. In a landscape where religious authority is increasingly mediated by algorithms and charisma, universities have a responsibility to cultivate discernment. This involves more than teaching students *what* to think; it involves helping them reflect on *how* they come to trust certain voices, texts, or interpretations. Literacy, in this sense, becomes an ethical practice, a way of engaging religion responsibly amid complexity.

Finally, these implications suggest a shift in how success in Islamic education is imagined. Rather than aiming for doctrinal uniformity or premature certainty, Islamic higher education might embrace uncertainty as part of learning. Students who ask difficult questions, express ambivalence, or resist simple answers are not necessarily failing; they may be engaging Islam more honestly. Pedagogy that acknowledges this can foster graduates who are not only knowledgeable, but also reflective, resilient, and capable of navigating religious plurality without losing moral orientation.

As a bridge to the conclusion, these reflections underline a central tension: Islamic higher education stands between tradition and transformation. How it responds to shifting patterns of literacy and authority will shape not only what students know about Islam, but how they live it, on campus, online, and as citizens in a complex society.

Conclusion

This study set out with a relatively modest question, how patterns of religious literacy among Indonesian university students are shifting, but it quickly became clear that the implications are anything but modest. What emerges from the analysis is not a linear story of decline or progress, but a more uneven, human picture. Religious literacy among students is expanding in form while narrowing in coherence; it is emotionally rich yet often intellectually fragmented; confident in appearance yet ambivalent beneath the surface. These characteristics are not accidental. They are shaped by the intersection of digital media, institutional education, and the lived realities of being young, Muslim, and socially situated in contemporary Indonesia.

Rather than encountering Islam as a stable body of knowledge transmitted through clear hierarchies of authority, students navigate a dense ecology of texts, voices, and moral claims. Authority is negotiated rather than assumed, credibility is felt as much as it is reasoned, and understanding is often selective and situational. In this context, Islamic identity does not crystallize as a final product of education. It remains in motion, continuously adjusted as students move between classrooms, online spaces, peer groups, and civic life. This motion is sometimes productive, sometimes confusing, and often unresolved.

The findings suggest that the challenge for Islamic higher education is not simply to defend traditional authority or to accommodate digital change, but to rethink the relationship between literacy, authority, and pedagogy itself. Universities remain important, but not because they monopolize religious truth. Their distinctive contribution lies in cultivating habits of critical discernment, ethical reflection, and intellectual patience, qualities that are increasingly scarce in fast-moving digital environments.

When these qualities are reduced to performative skills rather than lived dispositions, education risks losing its transformative potential.

At the same time, this study has clear limitations. It is qualitative, context-bound, and interpretive. The voices presented here do not represent all Indonesian students, nor do they capture the full diversity of institutional contexts. Future research could explore comparative settings, longitudinal identity trajectories, or the role of specific digital platforms in shaping religious imagination. There is also room to examine how gender, socio-economic background, or disciplinary affiliation further complicate patterns of religious literacy.

Still, even within these limits, one conclusion feels difficult to avoid: uncertainty has become a defining feature of contemporary student religiosity. This uncertainty should not be hastily framed as a crisis. It may, in fact, signal a transitional moment, one in which Islamic education is called to accompany students not toward ready-made answers, but toward deeper, more responsible ways of asking questions. In that sense, the future of Islamic higher education may depend less on preserving certainty than on learning how to live thoughtfully with complexity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The authors would like to thank their colleagues for valuable scholarly discussions and acknowledge the support provided by the university in improving the academic quality and practical relevance of this publication.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. We also confirm that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to, nor is it under consideration by, any other publisher.

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