



Religious Resource Literacy as a Predictor of Collective Participation of Indonesian Muslim Students in the Digital Era

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61987/jasp.vii2.220>

Article History:

Received: 04 June 2026

Revised: 16 September 2026

Accepted: 26 October 2026

Keywords:

Religious Literacy, Indonesian

Muslim Students, Digital

Religious Authority, Source

Assessment Competency,

Collective Religious

Participation

Abstract:

Digital platforms are transforming the way religious authorities reach Muslim students. However, researchers often measure religious literacy solely as doctrinal knowledge, leaving source-assessment skills and participation in religious collectives understudied. This study maps the religious literacy of Indonesian Muslim students and identifies dimensions that predict their participation in religious collectives. A cross-sectional survey of 161 students from 34 universities used a 27-item instrument covering five dimensions ($\alpha = 0.931$). Data were analysed using nonparametric tests, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, the chi-square test, and multiple regression. Respondents' self-assessed literacy was high on the doctrinal and devotional dimensions ($M = 4.02-4.17$), but significantly lower on the religious network dimension ($M = 3.47$). For 59.0% of respondents, religious network was the lowest-scoring dimension. Students rated their critical attitude toward online religious content 0.53 points higher than their competence in verifying hadith ($p < 0.001$; $r = 0.545$). Access to religious sources was the only significant predictor of collective participation ($\beta = 0.305$; $p = 0.001$), while devotional practices were not. Secondary education background did not differentiate any competency scores ($p = 0.348$), but significantly influenced students' reliance on religious authority ($\chi^2 = 18.39$; $p = 0.005$). These findings suggest that strengthening collective religious participation is likely more effective through teaching methodological verification skills than by simply strengthening ritual observance.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of religious literacy first emerged in scientific debate as both a diagnosis of public ignorance about religion and a proposal to overcome it. then reformulated more ambitiously: religious literacy is not merely memorising doctrinal content, but rather the ability to analyse how religion intersects with social, political, and cultural life (Bowling, 2022; Lee, 2026; Riegel et al., 2025). Recent conceptual studies push the question further: whether religious literacy truly functions as a literacy, whether it involves interpretive procedures that apply across contexts rather than domain-specific information, and how such procedures can be taught (Acquah et al., 2026; BinTaleb, 2024). Other efforts are beginning to

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extend this construct to education systems in Muslim-majority countries and to prospective teacher education. One common thread runs throughout this literature: knowing religious content and knowing how religious claims are adjudicated are distinct, separable competencies.

This distinction is important because the infrastructure of religious transmission has changed. Digital platforms are not simply adding new channels; they are also changing the terms that determine who is recognised as having religious authority. Studies in the Muslim context suggest that what is occurring is a reconfiguration, not a replacement, of authority: social media influencers are reimagining scholarly authority while still adhering to it (Febrian, 2024; Saavedra et al., 2022; Zaid et al., 2022). Online religious actors negotiate their legitimacy through the platform's distinctive features; anonymity actually becomes a source of validation, and visual intimacy replaces the institutional distance that once characterised religious authority (Astor et al., 2024; Whyte, 2022). Golan, (2023) and Loskota (2021) argues that youth digital religiosity is a distinct field of study, precisely because platform logic reshapes the way religion is transmitted. Through short-form media, conclusions are easily disseminated, but the methods behind them are much more difficult to convey.

Indonesia offers a relevant case for examining this issue. As the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, Indonesia has invested heavily in religious moderation, both through educational programs and policy, which largely relies on the legitimacy of traditional scholarly authority to voice moderate positions (Faisal et al., 2022; Subchi et al., 2022). At the same time, Indonesian religious politics also demonstrates the mobilising power of populist religious movements. Campuses are at the intersection of these two trends. Student religious organisations have historically served as engines of intellectual and political formation for Muslims, but ethnographic studies suggest that Muslim students are increasingly constructing their own verification practices within their peer groups, precisely because they distrust digital sources at face value (Wahid et al., 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence on Indonesian students' religious literacy remains limited. The most relevant previous study was conducted at a single Islamic religious college; this study found high levels of reported religious understanding, accompanied by a heavy reliance on digital resources and online preachers, but used an unvalidated instrument and was not designed to compare across types of institutions (Mensah et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2020). At the international level, the closest study surveyed 150 university students in Ghana using a nine-item literacy measure and reported high religious literacy with no differences by academic discipline or religious affiliation. Broader studies of student religiosity in Turkey, Austria, and other European countries consistently report the same pattern: personal beliefs and practices persist, while institutional participation weakens (Donlic, 2023; Sbalchiero et al., 2024; Sobi et al., 2025).

This highlights three research gaps. First, religious literacy is typically operationalised solely as knowledge. Consequently, the dimensions most impacted by digital reconfiguration how students select and evaluate sources and whether they participate in religious collectives are rarely measured alongside such knowledge. Even when a multidimensional framework is available, collective

participation is rarely included as a constituent of literacy; it is often treated as merely an outcome. Second, no studies have tested whether religious literacy also experiences calibration failures, as documented in other literacy domains. The digital generation is known to overestimate its privacy literacy compared to its proven performance; students' self-assessed digital literacy deviates systematically from objective assessments; overconfidence in health literacy actually predicts poorer ability to recognise health misinformation; and overconfidence increases vulnerability to online fraud (Lee et al., 2025; Ma et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2025). The question remains unanswered: whether students who consider themselves critical consumers of religious content actually master the interpretive tools required by such a critical attitude. This is a pressing question, because self-assessed competence determines whether verification will be attempted at all.

Third, the transmission structures assumed to shape religious literacy in Indonesia have never been tested against literacy itself. Pesantren education is generally assumed to produce stronger religious competence, but comparative evidence is scarce. Research on religious socialisation more broadly suggests that family and institutional environments influence not only the strength of a person's religious attachment, but also its form (Gemar, 2023; Tuna et al., 2023; Unser, 2022). This opens up the possibility that educational background influences which authorities students accept, without changing how competent they perceive themselves to be. This dissociation would go undetected by instruments focused solely on knowledge.

This study addresses these three gaps through a cross-sectional survey of 161 Muslim students at 34 universities in Indonesia, using a 27-item instrument covering five dimensions: basic religious knowledge, contextual religious understanding, religious practice, access to religious resources, and religious networks. The following three questions guided the analysis: How is self-assessed religious literacy distributed across the five dimensions, and does the profile differ by demographic and institutional setting? Do students rate their ability to assess religious information higher than the substantive verification competency that is a prerequisite for such assessment? Which dimensions predict participation in religious collectivities?

This study makes three main contributions. First, it presents the first multidimensional profile of Indonesian Muslim students' religious literacy, treating source assessment and collective participation as dimensions of literacy rather than mere consequences. Second, it introduces consistency testing between assessment and verification within the same respondent, extending calibration research to religious literacy, where authority is contested and relevant verification skills are explicitly methodological. Third, it separates two questions often conflated in public debate in Indonesia: whether educational background enhances religious competence and whether it shapes whom religious authority is addressed to, by examining both in the same sample.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Reporting

This study used a cross-sectional online survey design, with data collected from June 24 to July 15, 2026. Reporting follows the STROBE recommendations for

cross-sectional studies (von Elm et al., 2007). Figure 1 summarises the participant flow, data preparation, and sequence of research analysis.

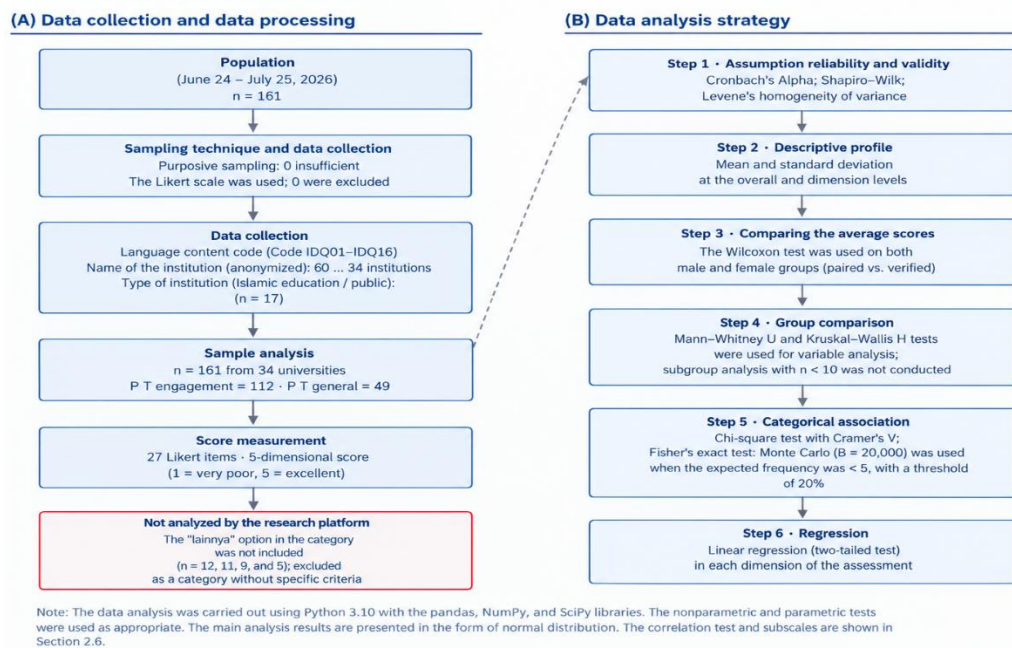


Figure 1. Participant Flow, Data Preparation, And Analysis Strategy

The research methodology involved collecting and processing data from 161 respondents across 34 universities. We gathered data using Likert-scale questionnaires and analysed them using descriptive statistics, nonparametric tests, categorical association analysis, and linear regression. We conducted all analyses in Python to identify data patterns, between-group differences, associations among variables, and predictive factors relevant to the research objectives.

Participants and Recruitment

Eligible participants were Muslim undergraduate students at Indonesian universities. We distributed a self-administered questionnaire online through campus networks and student organisations using voluntary-response nonprobability sampling. No incentives were provided for participation. The final sample consisted of 161 students from 34 institutions; participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N = 161)

Characteristics	Category	n	%
Gender	Woman	97	60.2
	Man	64	39.8
Age	Less than 19 years	17	10.6
	19–21 years	112	69.6
	22–24 years	24	14.9
	More than 24 years	8	5.0
Type of college	Islamic religious college	112	69.6
	Public college	49	30.4
Semester	1–2	74	46.0
	3–4	32	19.9
	5–6	43	26.7

	7-8	11	6.8
	Above 8	1	0.6
Secondary education background	Islamic boarding school	82	50.9
	Senior High School	60	37.3
	Both of them	19	11.8

Notes. The percentage total may not be exactly 100 due to rounding. The type of college refers to the classification described in Subsection 2.5.

Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of 39 items in three sections: eight demographic items (Section A), 27 Likert-type items measuring religious literacy (Section B), and four single-choice items with an "other" option that captured the religious profile (Section C). The items in Part B are structured deductively based on the established framework of religious literacy and religiosity, then organised into five theoretical dimensions: basic religious knowledge consists of six items, Contextual religious understanding has six points, religious practice consists of five points, access to religious sources has five points, and there are five points in the religious network (Loskota, 2021; Sari et al., 2020).

Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and all items are formulated in positive sentences so that no reverse coding is required. Content validity is enforced through an instrument grid that maps each item to one dimension and one indicator. Items in Section C cover sources of religious authority, the digital platforms most frequently used to access religious content, respondents' habits in responding to contentious religious content, and the religious socialisation agents that initially shaped respondents' understanding.

Procedures and Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire took approximately 8–11 minutes to complete. The opening section outlined the study's purpose, emphasised voluntary participation, and guaranteed data confidentiality; submitting responses served as consent. Names were optional, and respondents were permitted to use initials. All identifiers were removed prior to analysis, and participants were recoded as ID001–ID161.

Data Preparation

All 161 responses were retained: no duplicate email addresses were found, and no missing values were found on the 27 Likert items (4,347 cells). The free-form university names were normalised from 60 variants to 34 institutions; six respondents wrote only "UIN" and therefore could not be identified. Seventeen respondents who selected "other" for the type of university were reclassified based on the institution name they wrote, resulting in 112 participants from Islamic religious universities and 49 participants from public universities. The survey platform did not export free-form entries in the "other" option in Section C (12, 11, 9, and 5 cases across the four items, respectively), so these were treated as categories without details. Dimension scores were calculated as the unweighted average of the constituent items.

Statistical Analysis

The analysis was performed in Python 3.10 using the pandas library, NumPy, and SciPy (Harris et al., 2020; Virtanen et al., 2020). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Distribution assumptions were checked using the Shapiro–Wilk test and Levene's test. Because all dimension scores deviated from normality, the nonparametric procedure was the primary analysis; the parametric equivalent was still calculated and reported only if the two yielded different conclusions. Differences between groups were tested using the Mann–Whitney U test for two groups and the Kruskal–Wallis H test for three or more groups, with Cohen's and epsilon squared as an effect size. Subgroups with fewer than 10 cases were excluded from the analysis. Differences within the same respondent between two paired items were tested using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

Associations between categorical variables were tested with Pearson's chi-square and quantified with Cramér's V; Fisher's exact test was applied to 2×2 tables with low-frequency cells. If more than 20% of the cells had expected frequencies below five, a Monte Carlo permutation test ($B = 20,000$) was used instead. Predictors of religious network dimensions were examined using multiple linear regression with least squares methods. All tests were two-tailed with an alpha level of 0.05. Correction for multiple comparisons was not applied; its interpretive consequences are discussed in the Discussion section.

Deviations from Planned Protocol

This study was originally planned to involve approximately 500 respondents, with confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling as the targeted validation procedures. However, the resulting sample size of only 161 respondents was insufficient for either technique, so neither was implemented. Thus, the instrument's dimensional structure relies on an a priori grid, rather than empirical verification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Reliability and dimension profile

The five subscales achieved acceptable to good internal consistency, and the complete 27-item scale demonstrated excellent consistency ($\alpha = 0.931$; 95% CI [0.914; 0.945]). Table 2 reports descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for each dimension.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency of five dimensions of religious literacy (N = 161)

Dimensions	k	M	Elementary School	SK 95%	Min–Max	skewness	α	SK 95% for α
D1 Basic religious knowledge	6	4.02	0.52	[3.94; 4.10]	2.67–5.00	0.23	0.830	[0.786; 0.868]
D2 Contextual religious understanding	6	4.11	0.49	[4.04; 4.19]	2.83–5.00	0.18	0.838	[0.797; 0.874]
D3 Religious Practices	5	4.17	0.45	[4.09; 4.24]	3.00–5.00	0.17	0.770	[0.709; 0.822]

D4 Access to religious resources	5	4.00	0.56	[3.92; 4.09]	2.80–5.00	0.10	0.760	[0.697; 0.814]
D5 Religious networks	5	3.47	0.83	[3.34; 3.60]	1.40–5.00	–0.06	0.840	[0.797; 0.876]
Total scale	27	3.9	0.46	[3.89; 4.03]	2.89–5.00	0.52	0.931	[0.914; 0.945]

Notes. k = number of items. Confidence intervals for α were calculated using the Feldt procedure. All dimension scores deviated from a normal distribution (Shapiro–Wilk, all $p < 0.05$).

Overall, respondents' self-reported literacy was high, but not yet close to the maximum scale limit. The median total score was 3.93 (RIK 3.59–4.22); 44.1% of respondents scored 4.00 or higher, and 14.3% scored 4.50 or higher, indicating a mild ceiling effect. Only one respondent (0.6%) scored 3.00 or lower. Thus, the instrument performed reasonably well in differentiating respondents in the upper half of the scale, although its separation power was limited at the highest end.

The five dimensions differed significantly (Friedman $\chi^2(4) = 149.66$; $p < 0.001$; Kendall's $W = 0.232$). These differences followed a clear pattern: the four dimensions clustered tightly in the range 4.00–4.17, while religious networks lagged far behind, at only 3.47. Pairwise comparisons confirmed that religious networks were significantly lower than every other dimension (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, all Bonferroni-corrected $p < 0.001$), with large effect sizes ranging from $r = 0.646$ (versus access to religious resources) to $r = 0.724$ (versus religious practices).

Religious networks also had the widest distribution (SD = 0.83, compared with 0.45–0.56 for the other dimensions) and the only minimum score near the bottom of the scale (1.40). The median was 3.40 with an interquartile range of 3.00–4.00; the sample was split almost evenly between respondents scoring 3.00 or less (35.4%) and those scoring 4.00 or more (36.6%). Furthermore, for 95 respondents (59.0%), religious networks had the lowest score among the five dimensions. This means that respondents were not simply lower on collective religious involvement on average; this deficit was the dominant pattern at the individual level, sharply dividing respondents on this dimension, a pattern that did not occur for knowledge, understanding, or personal devotional practices.

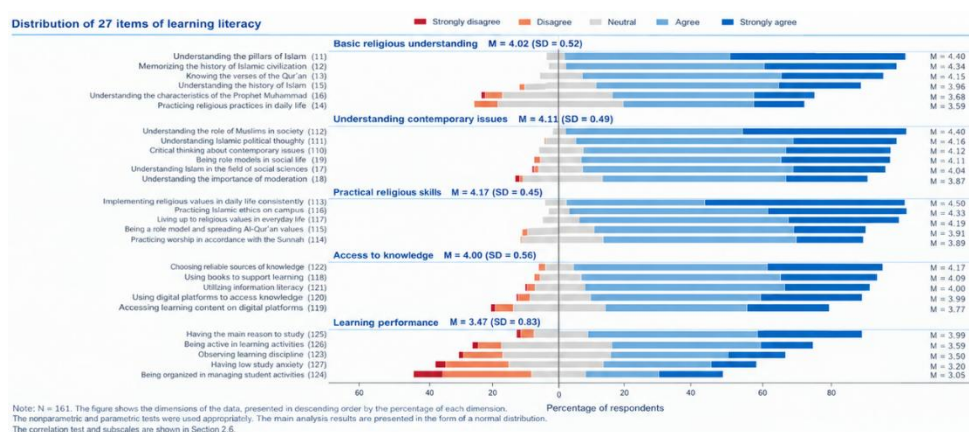


Figure 2. Distribution of answers to 27 religious literacy items

Figure 2 presents the distribution of responses across 27 religious literacy items, illustrating variations in participants' knowledge and understanding of religious concepts. This distribution helps identify patterns of religious literacy,

highlighting areas of stronger comprehension and potential knowledge gaps that may require further educational attention and targeted interventions.

Patterns at the grain level

Figure 2 displays the distribution of complete responses for each item, grouped by dimension and sorted by descending mean. The item-level view sharpens the dimensional picture in three ways. First, the highest-scoring items were doctrinal or devotional. Consistent performance of obligatory worship was the highest-scoring item ($M = 4.50$; $SD = 0.60$), followed by the ability to explain the pillars of faith and respect for differences among fellow Muslims (both $M = 4.40$; $SD = 0.59$ and 0.56 , respectively). For these three items, at least 94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, and none disagreed. The practice of Islamic morals on campus ($M = 4.33$; $SD = 0.56$) and understanding of basic Islamic jurisprudence ($M = 4.34$; $SD = 0.56$) followed a similar pattern, with at least 95% of the sample agreeing.

Second, the lowest-scoring items in the cognitive dimension were methodological. The ability to distinguish between authentic and weak hadith recorded the lowest mean in D1 ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 0.84$), with 37.9% of respondents undecided, 8.7% disagreeing, and only 53.4% agreeing. Understanding the differences between Islamic schools of thought followed ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 0.86$; 35.4% undecided). Both were approximately 0.7 scale points below the doctrinal items in the same dimension. In D2, understanding religious moderation was the weakest item ($M = 3.87$; $SD = 0.77$), even though this term is most prominent in current Indonesian religious policy discourse. Thus, respondents reported a strong grasp of what Islam teaches, but a much weaker grasp of how religious claims are adjudicated.

Third, the five lowest items overall are concentrated on religious networks. Membership in a student religious organisation is the lowest item in the instrument ($M = 3.05$; $SD = 1.35$) and the most polarised: 42.2% disagree or strongly disagree, while 41.6% agree or strongly agree, resulting in a clear bimodal distribution and the largest standard deviation among all items. Involvement in campus da'wah activities follows ($M = 3.20$; $SD = 1.11$; 28.0% disagree), followed by participation in religious studies outside of class hours ($M = 3.50$; $SD = 1.00$) and discussions of religious issues with friends ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 0.90$). The only item on this dimension that behaves differently is having a particular religious figure as a primary reference ($M = 3.99$; $SD = 0.85$), which is supported by 77.6% of respondents whose orientation toward religious authority does not at all require collective participation.

Within the dimension of access to religious sources, the ranking is equally interesting. Source selection based on scholarly credibility received the highest rating ($M = 4.17$; $SD = 0.69$), followed by the use of books or scriptures as primary references ($M = 4.09$; $SD = 0.69$), while actively accessing religious content on digital platforms was rated the lowest ($M = 3.77$; $SD = 0.92$). Respondents thus described their own sourcing behaviour within a framework that prioritises scholarly and textual selection over digital consumption.

The gap between self-assessment and verification

Respondents rated their ability to assess religious information higher than their ability to perform substantive verification, which is a prerequisite for such assessment. Because both assessments came from the same respondents, on the same scale, and at the same time, this discrepancy was tested within the respondents. The comparison was significant across all three pairs (Table 3). The largest difference occurred on the two items closest to the same basic task: respondents rated their critical attitude toward online religious content as $M = 4.12$, but rated their ability to distinguish between authentic and weak hadith as only $M = 3.59$, a mean difference of 0.53 scale points; 95% CI [0.40; 0.65]; Wilcoxon signed-rank test $W = 380$; $p < 0.001$; $r = 0.545$.

Table 3. Comparison within respondents between perceptions of measuring ability and verification competence (N = 161)

Perceptio n points	Competen cy items	M ₁	M ₂	M_differ ence [SK 95%]	W	p	r	% higher	% lowe r	% The sam e
I10 Be critical of online religious content	I4 Differentiat ing between authentic and weak hadith	4.12	3.59	0.53 [0.40; 0.65]	380	< 0.0 01	0.5 45	47.2	6.8	46.0
I10 Be critical of online religious content	I6 Understand ing the differences between schools of thought	4.12	3.6 8	0.44 [0.31; 0.57]	448	< 0.0 01	0.4 66	40.4	8.7	50.9
I21 Assess the credibility of online informati on	I4 Differentiat ing between authentic and weak hadith	4.0 0	3.59	0.41 [0.28; 0.54]	452	< 0.0 01	0.4 36	39.1	8.1	52.8

Notes: $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$. The percentage refers to respondents whose perception assessment exceeds, falls below, or equals their competency assessment.

This asymmetrical pattern is the crux of the matter. On the main item pair, 47.2% of respondents rated their critical attitude higher than their verification competence, while only 6.8% rated the opposite, a ratio of about seven to one. Nearly half of respondents (46.0%) rated the two equally, meaning this aggregate gap is generated by a large number of respondents, not by a uniform shift across the sample. Figure 3 shows the distribution of within-respondent differences: 57 respondents differed by one scale point, 18 by two points, and 1 by three points, compared with only 11 respondents who differed in the opposite direction. This pattern persisted, albeit to a lesser extent, when critical attitudes were compared with understanding of differences between schools of thought, and when

credibility judgments replaced critical attitudes as the perception item. This suggests that the gap is not simply an artifact of a single item pair.

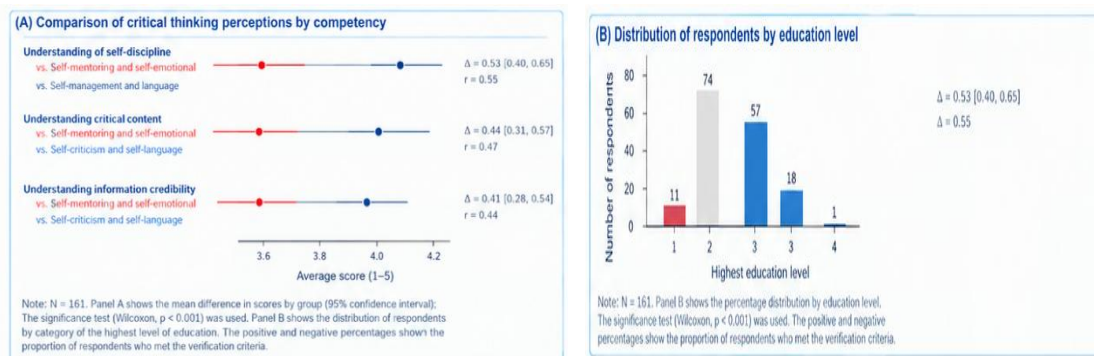


Figure 3. Perception of critical ability compared to substantive verification competency

One behavioural item points in the same direction. When asked what they typically do when they encounter controversial religious content, 117 respondents (72.7%) reported seeking confirmation from other sources or figures before accepting it, and another 25 respondents (15.5%) reported discussing it with friends or lecturers. Only 3 respondents (1.9%) reported accepting such content immediately, and 7 respondents (4.3%) reported ignoring it; 9 respondents (5.6%) selected "other" without any traceable details. Reported verification behaviour is thus nearly universal, while the methodological competency required to carry it out is among the weakest items measured.

Predictors of religious networks

Because religious networks had the lowest scores and the largest variance, we tested which of the other four dimensions predicted it. Together, all four predictors explained a substantial proportion of the variance ($R^2 = 0.411$; corrected $R^2 = 0.396$; $F(4, 156) = 27.25$; $p < 0.001$). Table 4 reports the coefficients.

Table 4. Multiple regression predicting religious networks (N = 161)

Predictor	b	SE	SK 95%	β	t	p	sr ²	VIF
(Constant)	-1.43	0.512	[-2.445; 3]		-2.8	0.006		
D1 Basic religious knowledge	0.216	0.150	[-0.081; 0.513]	0.136	1.44	0.152	0.008	2.37
D2 Contextual religious understanding	0.281	0.152	[-0.019; 0.581]	0.167	1.85	0.066	0.013	2.15
D3 Religious Practices	0.255	0.154	[-0.050; 0.560]	0.140	1.65	0.100	0.010	1.89
D4 Access to religious resources	0.453	0.135	[0.185; 0.720]	0.305	3.34	0.001	0.042	2.21

Notes. sr² = squared semipartial correlation. The residuals are homoscedastic (Breusch–Pagan LM = 1.27; db = 4; $p = 0.866$) and independent (Durbin–Watson = 1.92), although slightly deviated from normal (Shapiro–Wilk W = 0.970; $p = 0.002$).

Only access to religious resources predicted religious networks when controlling for the other dimensions ($b = 0.453$; $\beta = 0.305$; $p = 0.001$). Entered after the other three dimensions, this variable significantly increased explained

variance, $\Delta R^2 = 0.042$; $F(1, 156) = 11.16$; $p = 0.001$, raising R^2 from 0.369 to 0.411. The equivalent unique increases for the other predictors were 0.013 for contextual religious understanding ($p = 0.066$), 0.010 for religious practice ($p = 0.100$), and 0.008 for basic religious knowledge ($p = 0.152$), meaning the unique contribution of access to religious resources was three to five times greater than that of any competing dimension.

Two points are worth highlighting. First, religious practice, the highest-scoring dimension, did not predict collective engagement after controlling for other dimensions; devotional intensity and communal participation were statistically separate in this sample. Second, basic religious knowledge was also insignificant, suggesting that neither doctrinal mastery nor ritual consistency explains who participates in religious collectivities. Multicollinearity is not an issue here; all variance inflation factors are below 2.4.

Two limitations constrain interpreting this model. The cross-sectional survey design makes the association between access to religious resources and religious networks predictive, not causal, and the reverse order is also consistent with the data: students already involved in religious collectives may acquire resource assessment skills precisely through that participation. Furthermore, both constructs are measured through self-report measures in a single instrument, so some of the shared variance may reflect similar response tendencies rather than substantive relationships. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the increase and its robustness after controlling for the three correlated dimensions distinguish this predictor from the others tested.

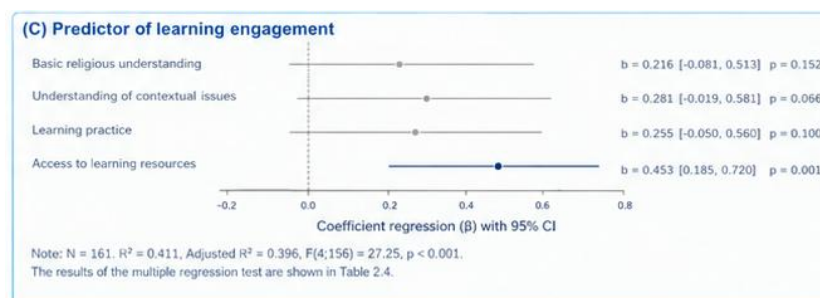


Figure 4. Predictors of religious network dimensions

Figure 4 illustrates the predictors associated with different dimensions of religious networks, highlighting the factors that shape religious connections and interactions. These relationships suggest that multiple determinants shape religious networks, reflecting variation in social engagement, institutional affiliation, and the development of religious ties across individuals and communities.

Sources of religious authority and digital consumption patterns

Classical scholars were the most frequently cited source of religious authority ($n = 62$; 38.5%), followed by social media preachers ($n = 45$; 28.0%), the respondents' own lecturers or teachers ($n = 27$; 16.8%), Indonesian scholars such as national kiai ($n = 13$; 8.1%), and global contemporary figures ($n = 2$; 1.2%); 12 respondents (7.5%) selected "other" without any traceable details. Traditional

textual authority thus remained the single most frequently chosen reference, leading digital preachers by more than ten percentage points. However, digital consumption is moving in the opposite direction from the authorities. Short-form social platforms (Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok) were the primary channel for 88 respondents (54.7%), surpassing YouTube ($n = 44$; 27.3%), WhatsApp or Telegram messaging groups ($n = 7$; 4.3%), religious websites or blogs ($n = 6$; 3.7%), and podcasts ($n = 5$; 3.1%). Eleven respondents (6.8%) chose "other."

Interestingly, platform preferences did not differ by authority source, $\chi^2(6) = 7.28$; $p = 0.296$; Cramér's $V = 0.150$. Among respondents who cited classical scholars as their primary authority, 61.3% used short-form platforms as their primary channel, the highest proportion among all authority groups, even surpassing respondents who cited social media da'is (57.8%). Thus, reliance on short-form media was uniform across the sample and not a characteristic of any particular subgroup; an orientation toward classical scholarship did not protect against this tendency. Platform preferences also did not predict any literacy scores: Kruskal–Wallis tests comparing short-form media users, YouTube users, and the other groups were insignificant across all six scores (all $p > 0.35$).

In contrast, the source of authority was associated with respondents' reported attitudes toward contentious content, $\chi^2(3) = 12.20$; $p = 0.007$; Cramér's $V = 0.275$. Because two of the eight cells had expected frequencies below five, this result was retested with Monte Carlo permutations ($B = 20,000$) and confirmed ($p = 0.006$). Corrected standardised residuals indicate that this effect is entirely localised to one cell: only 1 of the 62 respondents oriented toward classical scholars (1.6%) reported a passive attitude, well below the expected 7.3 (corrected residual = -3.17). The equivalent proportion in the group oriented toward social media da'i was 15.6% (7 of 45), and in the group citing "other" sources it was 25.9% (7 of 27).

Religious authority according to secondary education background

Secondary education background is associated with source of authority, $\chi^2(6) = 18.39$; $p = 0.005$; Cramér's $V = 0.239$. Figure 5 and Table 5 present the distribution.

Table 5. Sources of religious authority by secondary education background (N = 161)

Source of authority	Islamic boarding		
	schools (n = 82)	Public schools (n = 60)	Both (n = 19)
Classical scholars	34 (41.5%)	20 (33.3%)	8 (42.1%)
From social media	12 (14.6%) ^a	27 (45.0%) ^a	6 (31.6%)
Lecturer or teacher himself	19 (23.2%) ^a	5 (8.3%) ^a	3 (15.8%)
Other	17 (20.7%)	8 (13.3%)	2 (10.5%)

Notes. Percentages are calculated per column. ^a Corrected standardised residuals exceed |1.96|

Two cells drive this association. Public school graduates mentioned social media preachers significantly more (45.0%; corrected residual = 3.72), while Islamic boarding school graduates mentioned them significantly less (14.6%; corrected residual = -3.84), a difference in relative frequency of about threefold. The opposite pattern held for the respondents' own lecturers and teachers, mentioned by 23.2% of Islamic boarding school graduates but only 8.3% of public school graduates (corrected residuals 2.21 and -2.21 , respectively). Orientation

toward classical ulama did not differ by educational background, with approximately one-third to two-fifths of respondents in each group mentioning it. This finding is deliberately contrasted with Subsection 3.7: educational background does not differentiate any scores on the literacy instrument, but it clearly differentiates whom respondents refer to.

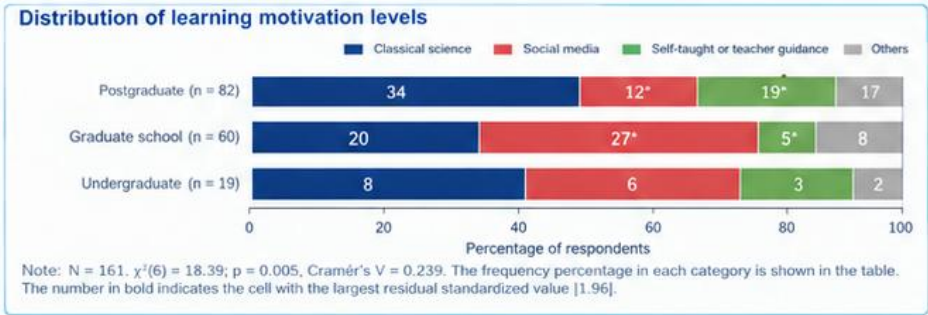


Figure 5. Sources of religious authority according to secondary education background

A similar pattern emerged for the earliest agents of religious socialisation. Parents or family were mentioned by 95 respondents (59.0%), followed by religious teachers at school or Islamic boarding schools (n = 32; 19.9%), personal experiences or significant life events (n = 18; 11.2%), social media or digital influencers (n = 8; 5.0%), and peers (n = 3; 1.9%); 5 respondents (3.1%) chose "other." Of the eight respondents whose religious formation was linked to digital content, seven later cited social media influencers as their primary authority (Fisher's exact test, $p < 0.001$). However, these cell numbers are too small to support inference and should be read as purely descriptive.

Differences according to demographic characteristics

We conducted 30 comparisons (five demographic variables $\times$ six scores). Four reached $\alpha = 0.05$, compared with the 1.5 expected by chance alone, and all four had small effect sizes. Table 6 reports the overall results.

Table 6. Intergroup comparison on the six scores (N = 161)						
Grouping variables	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	Total
Gender (P = 97; M = 64)	p = 0.131	p = 0.010	p = 0.960	p = 0.744	p = 0.478	p = 0.329
Age (3 groups)	p = 0.463	p = 0.691	p = 0.984	p = 0.662	p = 0.500	p = 0.584
Type of PT (religious = 112; general = 49)	p = 0.104	p = 0.094	p = 0.045	p = 0.223	p = 0.030	p = 0.030
Semester (4 groups)	p = 0.300	p = 0.981	p = 0.740	p = 0.649	p = 0.883	p = 0.638
Secondary education background (3 groups)	p = 0.305	p = 0.641	p = 0.956	p = 0.310	p = 0.176	p = 0.348

Notes. Two-group comparisons used the Mann–Whitney U test; three- and four-group comparisons used the Kruskal–Wallis H test. Subgroups with $n < 10$ were excluded (age over 24 years, $n = 8$; semester over 8, $n = 1$). Significant results are in bold. Multiple comparison correction was not applied.

Males scored higher than females on contextual religious understanding (Mdn = 4.17 vs. 4.00; $U = 2372$; $p = 0.010$; $d = 0.37$). Respondents from Islamic religious colleges also scored higher than respondents from general colleges on religious practices (Mdn = 4.20 vs. 4.00; $U = 3284$; $p = 0.045$; $d = 0.33$), religious networks (Mdn = 3.60 vs. 3.00; $U = 3332$; $p = 0.030$; $d = 0.35$), and the total scale (Mdn = 3.96 vs. 3.85; $U = 3335$; $p = 0.030$; $d = 0.37$).

None of the comparisons involving age, semester, or secondary education background reached significance on any score. The null result on secondary education background is the most significant for this study: pesantren graduates ($M = 3.99$) did not differ from general school graduates ($M = 3.91$) on the total scale ($H = 2.11$; $p = 0.348$), nor on any of the dimensions, including basic religious knowledge ($H = 2.38$; $p = 0.305$) and religious networks ($H = 3.47$; $p = 0.176$). The largest effect size among the fifteen comparisons was only $\epsilon^2 = 0.009$.

Because no multiple comparison correction was applied, and because the four significant results out of thirty tests were close to the expected number under the null hypothesis, these differences between subgroups should be read as tentative findings. None of the findings in Subsections 3.1 through 3.6 depend on these results.

Interdimensional relationships

The five dimensions are positively and significantly correlated (Table 7). Access to religious resources is most strongly correlated with religious networks ($\rho = 0.604$), consistent with the regression results, while it is most weakly correlated with religious practice ($\rho = 0.449$). This again indicates that devotional intensity and collective involvement are relatively loosely related.

Table 7. Spearman correlation between dimensions (N = 161)

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
D1 Basic religious knowledge					
D2 Contextual religious understanding	0.653				
D3 Religious Practices	0.603	0.522			
D4 Access to religious resources	0.666	0.644	0.587		
D5 Religious networks	0.548	0.532	0.449	0.604	

Notes. All coefficients are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Because all measures are self-reported and collected on a single occasion with a uniform response format, these coefficients are likely inflated by common method variance. They are reported for completeness and to document patterns of differentiation across dimensions, not as stand-alone evidence of association.

Discussion

This study maps the religious literacy of Indonesian Muslim students and examines which dimensions predict participation in religious collectivities. Three key findings structure this discussion. First, self-reported literacy is high on the doctrinal and devotional dimensions, but significantly lower on collective engagement. Second, respondents' confidence in their ability to systematically assess religious information exceeds their confidence in the verification skills that are a prerequisite for such assessment. Third, access to religious sources, not devotional practices, is the sole predictor of collective participation. One

additional, more detailed finding provides a crucial caveat for all three: secondary education background does not differentiate any competency score, but it does significantly differentiate whose authority respondents accept.

Religious practice ($M = 4.17$) differed by 0.70 points from religious networks ($M = 3.47$), and this difference recurred as the lowest individual score for 59.0% of respondents. This pattern reflects religiosity that is intensely nurtured in the private sphere but weakly manifested in the public sphere. This pattern is not unique to Indonesia. Studies of European and Turkish students report a similar split: personal beliefs and rituals persist, while institutional affiliations weaken (Krok et al., 2024; Sbalchiero et al., 2024; Sobi et al., 2025). Studies during the pandemic also document the same divergence, under conditions that particularly suppress collective worship. Young Muslims in pluralistic environments also tend to reform their religious understanding more individually, rather than through institutional mediation (Dobosz et al., 2022; Donlic, 2023).

What distinguishes the Indonesian case is its institutional setting. Campus religious organisations such as HMI, PMII, IMM, and KAMMI have historically been the primary vehicles for intellectual formation and political socialisation of Muslims. Therefore, the finding that membership in these organisations is both the lowest-scoring item on the instrument ($M = 3.05$) and the most polarising suggests something more profound than a general secular shift. It suggests that organisational form itself has become optional for maintaining religious identity. This conclusion is reinforced by one religious network item that behaves differently: the use of a particular religious figure as a primary reference ($M = 3.99$) was supported by 77.6% of respondents. In other words, submission to religious authority remains widespread; what has changed is that it no longer requires collective membership to sustain it. Respondents rated their critical attitude toward online religious content 0.53 points higher than their ability to distinguish between authentic and weak hadith, with 47.2% rating the former higher, compared to only 6.8% rating the latter. This discrepancy recurs across three item pairs, making it unlikely to be simply an artifact of the specific item formulation.

This pattern aligns with the now well-documented asymmetry between self-assessed and objectively measured competencies in other literacy domains. Digital natives have been found to overestimate their privacy literacy relative to their tested performance substantially; students' subjective digital literacy deviates systematically from objective assessments; overconfidence in health literacy predicted poorer ability to recognise health misinformation, a finding the authors interpreted through the Dunning–Kruger effect and metacognitive monitoring failures; and overconfidence increases vulnerability to online fraud, even in users with adequate digital skills (Lee et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2025).

However, one important difference between our findings and those of these studies is that we did not administer an objective test. We did not administer an objective test; both sides of the comparison were self-reported. Therefore, we observed not a demonstrable gap between confidence and ability, but an internal inconsistency in respondents' self-assessments, in which they rated derived skills higher than the skills on which they were based. This evidence is weaker than the subjective–objective comparison. However, it cannot be ignored: it suggests that students do not view substantive verification competency as a prerequisite for

critical judgment. The behavioural items reinforce this concern. 72.7% of respondents reported seeking confirmation from other sources before accepting disputed content, even though tools for such confirmation, such as hadith criticism ($M = 3.59$) and madhhab literacy ($M = 3.68$), are among the weakest items on the measure. The intention to verify is widespread; the ability to do so is weak or limited.

Access to religious resources was the only significant predictor of religious networks ($\beta = 0.305$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.042$; $p = 0.001$), while religious practices, the highest-scoring dimension, was not significant ($p = 0.100$). Devotional intensity and communal participation were statistically separate in this sample. One possible reading is that source literacy provides the discursive confidence needed in collective religious spaces. Studies, organisational forums, and campus preaching require the ability to maintain a public position, while private worship does not. Wahid et al. (2023) study of young Muslim activists in Bima is relevant here. These activists explicitly distrusted digital sources and established peer groups as a forum for collective verification, suggesting that source scepticism and collective participation are mutually constitutive, not simply correlated. Given the cross-sectional design of this study, the reverse order is equally plausible: participation may foster rather than require source-assessment skills, and both may be driven by a third factor such as general intellectual engagement. This finding narrows down possible explanations without exhausting them.

The following two results should be read together. Classical scholars were the most frequently cited authority (38.5%), but 61.3% of those cited used short-form platforms as their primary channel, a higher proportion than respondents who cited social media. Platform choice did not differ by authority source and did not predict any literacy scores (Babacan, 2025; Gvura et al., 2026). These findings complicate the common notion that digital consumption is displacing traditional authority. Our data instead suggest something more subtle: traditional authority is now channelled through infrastructures that were not designed to transmit the methodological tools historically attached to that authority (Febrian, 2024; Whyte, 2022).

The literature on digital Islamic authority generally converges on the same idea: reconfiguration, not replacement. Social media influencers are reimagining, not replacing, scholarly authority; online religious actors negotiate legitimacy through the platform's distinctive features; Indonesian religious influencers build visual intimacy while strategically maintaining distance; and anonymity actually becomes a resource in digital religious authority (Astor et al., 2024; Zaid et al., 2022). Golan, (2023) positioning youth digital religiosity as a distinct field of study, precisely because the logic of platforms reshapes the way religion is transmitted. Our contribution is to show that this reliance on short formats is widespread, not a characteristic of any particular subgroup: an orientation toward classical scholarship does not in any way protect against this tendency.

One related result is worth noting. Respondents who cited classical scholars as their primary authority were rarely passive toward disputed content (1.6%; corrected residual = -3.17). Reference to textual tradition may function less as a body of knowledge than as a disposition toward verification, consistent with views that place religious authority in interpretive attitudes rather than mere credentials (Tuna et al., 2023; Unser, 2022). Pesantren graduates did not differ from public school

graduates on any dimension (total scale $p = 0.348$; largest ϵ^2 only 0.009). However, educational background strongly predicted authority orientation: social media was mentioned by 45.0% of public school graduates but only 14.6% of pesantren graduates. In contrast, pesantren graduates mentioned lecturers three times more often.

This dissociation is the most policy-relevant finding. Pesantren appear to establish structures of religious submission or obedience, maintaining relationships with living, locally accountable teachers without producing higher levels of self-assessed competence (Faisal et al., 2022; Subchi et al., 2022). Comparable studies show that religious learning environments differ in the relational forms they foster, not just in the content they deliver; that opportunities for religious education are stratified according to social background; and that the family remains the dominant channel of transmission even when institutions play a strong role (Bossi et al., 2022; Findeis, 2026; Gemar, 2023; Herranz et al., 2024). This aligns with our finding that 59.0% of respondents named parents as the earliest formative influence. This zero-score difference should not be read as evidence of the ineffectiveness of Islamic boarding schools, but rather as an indication that self-reported instruments of this kind are not sensitive enough to capture what Islamic boarding school education actually transmits.

Five limitations limit the above claims. First, the sample was recruited voluntarily and heavily skewed toward religious colleges (69.6%) and three specific universities, so the estimates are not representative of the national population. Second, all measures were self-reported measures of perceived literacy; no objective tests were administered, which limits the measurement–verification gap findings discussed above. Third, similar measurement methods and timing likely inflated correlations between dimensions. Fourth, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Fifth, four of the thirty comparisons between subgroups reached significance, compared with the 1.5 expected by chance, and multiple-comparison correction was not applied; these comparisons should therefore be read as preliminary findings. The instrument's dimensional structure also relies on an *a priori* grid, as the sample size did not permit confirmatory factor analysis.

If the competence of assessing sources, not devotional intensity, is what is related to collective engagement, then a curricular strategy that reinforces ritual observance is unlikely to strengthen participation. A more promising methodological goal would be to teach students how religious claims are adjudicated, such as hadith criticism, school of thought reasoning, and tracing the origins of sources, not simply their conclusions. This is particularly relevant for religious moderation policies. Moderation understood as an attitude proved robust in our data; moderation understood as the capacity to adjudicate disputed claims did not. Because moderation programs in Indonesia have relied heavily on traditional authority structures, and since our data show that such structures no longer guarantee methodological transmission, this gap deserves further attention.

CONCLUSION

This study examines religious literacy among 161 Indonesian Muslim students across five dimensions and identifies predictors of participation in religious collectives. Doctrinal and devotional literacy scored highly, whereas

religious networks recorded the lowest mean ($M = 3.47$). Access to religious sources significantly predicted collective participation, unlike devotional practices. Educational background influenced accepted religious authority but not competency scores. Widespread reliance on short-form platforms highlighted the limits of evaluating religious claims. Although attitudinal moderation appeared robust, critical verification competency remained underdeveloped. Findings are limited by voluntary sampling, self-reported measures, and cross-sectional design. Future research should employ objective assessments, representative sampling, and longitudinal approaches to establish temporal relationships between source literacy and collective participation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge all students who participated in this study and contributed their perspectives on religious literacy and religious engagement. Appreciation is also extended to the academic institutions that facilitated data collection. The authors thank colleagues and reviewers for constructive feedback that helped refine the analysis and strengthen the manuscript. Any remaining errors or interpretations are the sole responsibility of the authors.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted technology was used to support language refinement, improve structural organisation, and enhance academic clarity. The author critically reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted suggestions to ensure their alignment with the research objectives and findings. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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