

Religious confusion and emptiness: Evaluating the impact of online Islamic learning among Indonesian Muslim adolescents

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Internet-based religious learning has presented a new face to the diversity of Muslim youth. This article aims to analyse and evaluate Muslim youth's understanding, attitudes, and religious practices and demonstrate the impact of internet-based Islamic learning. As many as 23 Muslim youths in Jepara, Central Java, aged 17–20 years, became the informants of this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations. Further research data were analysed descriptively and interpretatively. This study found that most Muslim youths who studied Islam online experienced confusion and emptiness in religion caused by an incomplete learning process. Most Muslim youths do not have solid theological views, pseudo-worship practices and weak religious ideologies. This study suggests that teenagers acquire essential Islamic knowledge from credible sources such as *kyai* with clear scientific credentials. This foundation enables them to discern reliable Islamic content in cyberspace, safeguarding against distortions in their understanding of Islam and spirituality.

Contribution: This research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the impact of internet-based learning on the diverse experiences of Muslim youth. Although the internet has the potential to be an invaluable source of knowledge, the challenges of integrating information with traditional understanding require serious attention.

Keywords: religious confusion; hyperreality; internet era; Muslim adolescents; Islamic religious learning.

Introduction

Advancements in information and communication technology have transformed how Muslim youth acquire knowledge about Islam (Fakhruroji 2019b). In the past, individuals sought religious information through trusted figures such as *kiyai*. Today's teenagers, however, favour the internet over direct consultation with religious authorities for Islamic knowledge (Fakhruroji 2015). Survey findings reveal that a significant 58% of young people opt for social media as their preferred platform for religious education (Soraya & Hafil 2020). Almost all aspects of Islamic doctrine can now be questioned, altered and adapted, resulting in Islamic religious beliefs' relative, subjective nature (Iqbal et al. 2014). Previously sacrosanct, Islamic doctrines now undergo desacralisation, with numerous teachings subjected to critical scrutiny and acceptance (Malik 2021b). This condition proves that Islamic doctrine is experiencing desacralisation in the digital era, which shows that aspects that were previously considered sacred or could not be discussed can now be examined and accepted critically. This reveals an increasingly open space for discussion and questions regarding religious teachings that were previously considered taboo.

Many studies have highlighted changes in religious learning in the digital era. Fakhruroji (2019a) shows that the Internet manifests the accommodation of media logic carried out by religious leaders so that it remains accessible to people increasingly saturated with conventional media. Solahudin & Fakhruroji (2020) show that the digital era has changed the pattern of relationships in obtaining religious knowledge, where religious authority shifts to impersonal media. Furthermore, researchers have also studied the internet as a source of information in responding to religious issues (Hidayatullah et al. 2022) and as a reference for young scholars in giving fatwas (Rusli & Nurdin 2022).

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Research discussing the adverse effects of using the internet for studying Islam has yet to be performed from the studies that have been performed before. Therefore, this research was carried out to analyse and evaluate the understanding, attitudes and religious behaviour of Muslim youth associated with the internet-based Islamic religious learning process. The research is expected to complement previous studies and can also be an input for stakeholders to be more active in educating about the dangers of learning religion from the internet. Because the internet is an open platform on which anyone can post content without being filtered first, this can potentially lead to the emergence of incorrect, distorted or radicalised materials (Niglia, Sabaileh & Hammad 2017). Without proper control, beginners learning Islam on the internet may be exposed to misguided or extremist understandings that contradict the true teachings of Islam. There is an undeniable potential danger behind the ease of access and completeness of information offered by the internet. Online sources are often not guaranteed authenticity, which can spread misconceptions or extremism that harm the correct understanding of Islamic teachings (Al-Zaman & Alimi 2021). In addition, the internet has also become a place for extremist groups to spread their propaganda and ideology, which can influence individuals vulnerable to radical views (Shapovalova, Lebedev & Blagojevic 2022). Discussions and debates on social media or online forums often lead to conflicts and divisions between religious communities, threatening peace and harmony (Bräuchler 2007). In addition, the quality of learning about Islam is also threatened by in-depth, inaccurate or even misleading information that can be found on the internet. Disruption to religious practice is also possible, where excessive internet use can reduce the time that would otherwise be spent worshipping or deepening religious knowledge. One's religious identity is also vulnerable to risks on the internet, where a person can be subjected to harassment or discrimination because of his or her religious beliefs (Wallace et al. 2012). Therefore, in learning the religion of Islam through the internet, individuals need to be wise in sorting through sources of information and strengthening their understanding with trusted traditional approaches.

This research centres on Muslim adolescents because of the tumultuous nature of adolescence – a stage marked by individual development and intense curiosity. Teenagers often undergo fluctuations in their religious sentiments, oscillating between periods of heightened piety and moments of doubt in their faith (Nirwana 2020). Research indicates that social media can impact adolescents' attitudes and behaviours, sometimes leading them to disregard religious and social values (Saputra 2016). The advent of the internet, with its wealth of diverse Islamic information and knowledge, has given rise to a phenomenon known as religious hyperreality. Hyperreality involves the creation of something resembling reality through models that lack an origin or actual reality (Jauhari 2019). It encompasses the development of a new reality infused with engineering (Piliang &

Adlin 2003), where falsehood intertwines with authenticity, the past merges with the present, facts contend with fabrication, signs blend with reality, and lies coexist with truth (Piliang 2010; Siswadi 2022). Although the concept of hyperreality may have been forgotten in some internet-related studies, its presence remains relevant in religious practice in the digital age. Social media and digital content often create alternative realities far from objective realities, affecting individuals' perceptions of their religion (Srinawati, Pratiwi & Arimbi 2020). The manipulation of information and the spread of misconceptions can result in inaccurate perceptions of religious teachings, increasing the risk of extremism or distorted understanding. In the face of hyperreality, critical appraisal skills of digital information become essential for religious practitioners to distinguish between truth and manipulation. Furthermore, hyperreality can also affect one's religious practices, create unrealistic expectations or distract from spiritual practices that should be carried out (Rachmawati 2017). Therefore, religious practitioners need to return to traditional and authoritative sources to understand the teachings of their religion and ensure that their religious understanding and practice remain in accordance with correct values and teachings amid the sometimes confusing flow of digital information.

Previous research has provided an empirical basis for the claim that social media can influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviour. On the other hand, learning about Islam through the internet can lead to isolation from various perspectives. Adolescents tend to consume content that suits their own views and ignores different viewpoints or constructive criticism. This can reinforce a narrow and radical understanding of Islam. Thus, there is a need for special attention to Islamic religious learning through the internet, especially for adolescents who are vulnerable to extremist and radical influences. Stakeholders, including families, educators and communities must ensure that adolescents have access to verified information and appropriate guidance to help them develop a balanced and moderate understanding of religion.

Literature review

Characteristics of youth religion

Adolescence is a transition period from childhood to adulthood (Oktonika 2020). The probability of being a teenager ranges from 12 to 21 years (Hamali 2016). In this phase, adolescents experience various kinds of changes so that they can produce turmoil in adolescents. In general and even under normal conditions, this period is challenging to go through, individually and as a group, so adolescents are often said to be problematic (Wahyuni 2021). In its development, there are marked changes in several positive and negative behaviours because adolescence is a transitional period from childhood to adolescence. In this adolescent phase, religion as a means of social control plays a crucial role in adolescent growth (Wardi 2012).

The characteristics of adolescent religion have been explained in the identity statuses (Kroger & Marcia 2011). Through this theory, it can be explained that adolescent religiousness can develop through exploring religious values, beliefs and practices. Kroger and Marcia (2011) identified four identity statuses, namely diffusion, moratorium, achievement and impasse, which can be used to understand how adolescents develop their religious identity. The application of the four status identities as described by Kroger and Marcia (2011) is used to reveal adolescents' religious identities and explore their commitment to religious issues. The form of application of the theory can be described as follows:

- **Identity Diffusion Status:** Adolescents in this status may not engage in deep exploration of religious beliefs. They may not have a firm commitment to religious issues and tend to go with the flow without careful consideration. In a religious context, they may not deepen their understanding of religious teachings or have no strong connection to religious practice.
- **Identity Forfeiture Status:** Adolescents with this status may have committed to a religious identity without an adequate exploratory process. They may adopt religious beliefs established by their parents or environment without considering other alternatives or understanding their implications and meanings in depth. They may identify with the beliefs of others without personal reflection.
- **Identity Moratorium Status:** Adolescents in this status actively explore religious beliefs and practices. They may ask deep questions about religion, seek more profound understanding, and explore various aspects of their beliefs. However, they have not made a firm commitment to a religious identity.
- **Identity-Achievement Status:** Adolescents in this status have completed the exploration process and are committed firmly to their religious identity. They have a deep understanding of their religious beliefs and practices, and they choose to follow the teachings of the religion with solid convictions and without hesitation.

Using these four identity statuses, research can be conducted to identify which adolescents fall into each category and to understand what factors influence their journey towards a stable religious identity. This can provide valuable insights into how adolescents understand and respond to religion in the complex and diverse contexts of their lives.

Religious hyperreality on the internet

The internet era signifies a civilisation of information and telecommunications engineering, a product of scientific progress that has given birth to advanced technology (Madjid 2019). In this era, digital spaces encompassing science and religion gradually gain reverence and trust, potentially eroding metaphysical and formal religious beliefs. This phenomenon leads to the emergence of hyperreality, paving the way for hyper-spirituality (Piliang 2010). On the internet, various religions vie to harness the power of cyberspace to

revolutionise worship, religious institutions, communities and core practices (Piliang 2005). Theologians, spiritual leaders and religious figures strive to comprehend and leverage cyberspace's transformative impact on religion (Purwanto & Nuha 2020). The global cyberspace revolution prompts religious groups to transition from physical spaces to virtual realms (Malik 2021a). This revolution also encourages the exploration of electronic religions, encompassing virtual congregations, internet clergy, digital da'wah and virtual places of worship. The digital realm on the internet facilitates reporting of events via social media, including religious symbols and language (Bunt 2018).

The spirituality of metaphysical religion, initially abstract and evoking profound religious emotions, undergoes a transformative shift towards a tangible and rational manifestation in the realm of digital religion (Keriapy, Giban & Giban 2022). Digital platforms have not only reshaped spirituality but also distanced it from the ascetic experiences prevalent in the pre-digital era (Hermawan 2009). Despite utilising digital channels such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook for learning purposes (Gilliat Ray 2020), the authenticity of the spiritual experience falls short when compared to the rich communal engagement found in traditional religious communities (Mulyono & Suryoputro 2020). While the internet offers diverse learning resources and facilitates user-created environments, its engagement predominantly revolves around the external facets of religion. This digital spirituality, although present, remains an imitation, characterised by signs and symbols crafted through advanced technology (Wahyudin 2011). In the digital space, religious education serves not only as a means of preaching but also as a mechanism to attract substantial capital from its followers (Rizki 2012).

The ideality of Islamic religious education

Philosophically, the basic view of Islamic religious education is core to the 'trichotomy' of three central spiritual powers (Rahman 2022) that develop in the centre of perfect human, including: (1) individuality, the ability to develop oneself as a personal being; (2) sociality, ability to develop oneself as a member of society; and (3) morality, the ability to develop oneself as a person and a member of society based on religious and moral values. The three basic spiritual abilities develop in a three-way relationship pattern known as the trilogy of relationships, namely: (1) relationship with God as his creature; (2) its relationship with the community as a member of society; and (3) its relationship with the surrounding nature as the caliph of Allah who must manage natural resources according to his teachings.

The achievement of Islamic religious education goals is developed through the detailed presentation of Islamic religious education material, which contains at least three aspects (Halik 2016). Firstly, *aqidah* or faith, namely monotheism. Islamic religious education seeks to increase a sense of faith in the *Khalīq*. This is important, so science always goes hand in hand with an increased sense of faith

and piety (Budiyanti et al. 2020). Secondly, *shari'ah* rules or laws of Allah SWT regarding implementation and total surrender through the process of worship directly to Allah or indirectly concerning fellow creatures, both with fellow humans and the natural surroundings. *Shari'ah* includes two main things: worship in a unique sense (*mahdhah* worship) and worship in a general sense or *mu'amalah* (*ghairu mahdhah* worship) (Maghfuri 2019). Thirdly, morals, values and characteristics are embedded in the soul so that a person can judge an act as good or bad, solely based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, and then choose to do or leave it (Halik 2016). Thus, there are three main aspects of the objectives of Islamic religious education, namely *aqidah*, sharia rules and morals. Even though these aspects are placed separately, emphasis is needed on the interrelationship and integration between the three. How increasing faith (*aqidah*), understanding of Allah's law (*syariat*) and character formation (*akhlak*) support each other and form a solid foundation needs to be considered while studying religion from the internet.

Method

This research aims to analyse and evaluate the understanding, attitudes and religious behaviour of Muslim adolescents in the context of internet-based Islamic learning. Research data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations of 23 informants, who were Muslim teenagers in Jepara Regency, Central Java, with ages ranging from 17 to 20 years. Of the number of informants, 16 of them were women, and 7 were men. This research approach uses mixed methods triangulation design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011), which combines the use of surveys and interviews as research instruments (Curry, Nembhard & Bradley 2009). Mixed methods research is a type, approach or research paradigm that combines qualitative and quantitative research in a particular research field (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004). In this study, researchers combine qualitative research as the main data, while quantitative research data are used as supporting data (Jokonya 2016).

The selection of informants was carried out purposively based on their intensity in using the internet as a source of learning about the Islamic religion. To provide variation in the group of informants, gender and level of education were considered, whereof 18 informants were made up of 6 high school students, 8 Masters' (MA) students and 4 vocational school students. Furthermore, 5 informants comprised of 2 students from a general university and 3 students from a private Islamic college.

The research process began by identifying Muslim teenagers who were active in seeking religious knowledge through Islamic content on the internet. After that, a survey was conducted on research respondents. The survey results were then followed up by conducting in-depth interviews regarding their worship practices in daily life. Each source was interviewed for approximately 30 min so that researchers could obtain in-depth research data. The data collected through interviews was then analysed thematically through the stages of data reduction, data display and conclusion.

Results

Theology and pseudo worship

Therefore, theology should be the primary consideration when assessing the diversity of individuals, including teenagers learning about Islam online. Pseudo-worship, in this research, is defined as a form of worship that is fake or inauthentic. It can refer to religious or spiritual practices that imitate or display characteristics of worship but do not actually have a strong or authentic religious basis. Through interviews, teenagers have emphasised their preference for straightforward and pragmatic knowledge of Islamic religion, particularly in matters of theology and worship. A significant majority (74%) seeks to avoid the complexities of theological debates, deeming them counterproductive in today's digital age, which prioritises practicality and immediacy. Consequently, they are hesitant to delve into the intricacies of theology taught by monotheistic scholars and Islamic thinkers. Most (61%) opt for *taqlid* (following) of their trusted *ustadz* figures, while only a few (39%) choose to *taqlid* scholars in Sanad, specifically *kiyai* alumni of Islamic boarding schools:

'In my opinion, studying directly with the *kiyai* at the Islamic boarding school is clearer and more convincing because usually, the Islamic boarding school caretakers have clear scientific sources, their opinions, and fatwas come from authentic and authoritative Islamic religious reference books.' (RA 20 years, female, university student Private Islamic College)

They believe that having faith (and knowledge) from Islamic boarding school clerics is more critical than cyberspace *ustadz*, and knowledge from cyberspace is only an addition. The content chosen by the majority (78%) of teenagers needed to be based on adequate knowledge from credible religious sources. Most (83%) of teenagers choose content based on likes and dislikes, attractive or unattractive, or simply appropriate or not according to the conditions they are feeling. What is more worrying is that many (52%) teenagers do not care about sects, *madzhab* or *firqah*, both in terms of theology and *mahdhah* worship:

'I like Islamic religious content that looks attractive, uses the language of young people, and is not rigid, according to my circumstances. As long as the teachings are good, whether it is a sect or any mass organization, it is acceptable, and you have to listen to it.' (DW 18 Years, female, vocational school student)

Finally, the socio-religious reality understood by teenagers in cyberspace differs from the social-religious reality in the real world. The clash between social reality in real life and social reality in cyberspace makes teenagers experience religious delusions that lead to hyper-semiotic theological understanding. For example, when teenagers describe their understanding of faith in God, most of them are not (yet) able to explain it precisely and even hesitate to express it. They understood it in bits and pieces based on video footage of their idol preachers.

Related to the *Ubudiyah* issue, especially the *Mahdlah* worship, Muslim youths who learn a lot about Islam through the internet seem to be starting to see the formation of extreme religious attitudes that have lost the meaning of spirituality in religion. For them, getting religious emotions to get closer to Allah is no longer essential. However, the most important thing is that they have carried out (aborted) their obligations as Muslims. Worship for them is a means of communicating with Allah, but it is no longer critical (tend to ignore) whether the communication is of good quality or not:

'Yes, I think it is good to do the five daily prayers because prayer is mandatory for every Muslim so we can go to heaven.' (SW, 19 years, male, Master's [MA] student)

This situation is mentioned by Syafi'i Mufid (2006) and Bertrand Russell (1952) that they are religious but godless, while the purpose of being religious is to know God as best as possible by finding the true meaning in carrying out God's commands, so that the practice of religious rituals (*Mahdlah* worship) can shape the character or personality of religious.

Religious ideological nihilism

Religious ideological nihilism in this research is interpreted as a view or attitude that rejects or does not believe in religious values or principles. This includes rejecting the belief in the existence of purpose or meaning in a religious context. Religious nihilism states that concepts such as absolute truth, morality originating from a transcendent entity or the meaning of life governed by religion have no basis or substance.

The presence of religion in the digital space provides a compelling alternative media for religious activists (ulama, *kiayi*, academics and preachers) to convey religious messages. They can present different religious and social realities for the object of their da'wah (Yahya, Fajari & Mahmudah 2021). The social reality constructed in such a way makes the objects of their da'wah more enthusiastic about gaining the knowledge being taught (Malik 2021b). However, sometimes, the reality built by preachers in the digital space transcends boundaries or makes the imagination of the object of da'wah interpret it excessively. This is what is experienced by the majority (43%) of Muslim youth who perceive da'wah messages on social media with excessive reactions or understanding.

For example, quite a lot (43%) of Muslim youths understand 'pleasure in the hereafter' by equating pleasures in the world, such as the fulfilment of all kinds of luxury goods and all kinds of desires coveted in the world:

'What I learned on the internet is that the blessings that will be received in the afterlife are like being free to eat whatever we want, having a beautiful physical appearance, and not lacking in wealth.' (TK, 20 years 20 years, female, general university student)

Indeed, most scholars accept such interpretations; in fact, many interpretation books explain this, but this is only a

partial depiction of the visualisation of the Koran regarding pleasures in the afterlife (Kamil & Yunos 2015). It becomes dangerous when such an explanation is not balanced with references and knowledge related to this interpretation; it will be easily diverted to the indoctrination of radical religious views. There are many victims among teenagers whose religious understanding is distorted so that they are willing to become 'suicide bomb brides' by offering utopian afterlife pleasures in the name of martyrdom and are rewarded by Allah with 72 angels (Arifinsyah, Andy & Damanik 2020).

The aforesaid concepts are the basic concepts of Islamic society, which are based on spiritual logic, which directs the main points of social relations in the religious sphere and establishes a clear relationship between individual conscience and society so that if Muslim society loses these values, then what happens is the emptiness of meaning in religion. Many teenagers (80.8%) stated that they had never experienced pleasure (ascetic experience) in carrying out the teachings of Islam. In other words, they generally have not found the meaning of carrying out Islamic religious teachings in depth. Religion, for them, is just an identity imposed by the environment around them, including their families:

'So far, yes, I always pray because, in my family, I get used to it; it is mandatory.' (SY, 20 years, male, general university student)

Some (36.5%) informants stated their families directed them to be Muslim. However, their parents had never accompanied them to study Islam, so they used the internet to learn Islam because of limited learning resources in their social environment.

Discussion

Overall, this research can be analysed through the lens of Religious Identity Theory to understand how Muslim adolescents in digital contexts experience the development of their religious identity. This provides insight into the stages of religious identity development, especially in the context of learning about the Islamic religion via the internet. Muslim teenagers who are involved in learning about Islam via the internet face challenges in understanding religious teachings comprehensively. This reflects the need for more clarity (diffusion) in their religious identity. Identity diffusion is a stage where individuals have not explored religious values thoroughly (Kroger & Marcia 2011). Limited understanding and a void in religious experiences in research may reflect this stage.

Challenges in understanding lead to confusion and emptiness in religious experience. An incomplete religious learning process indicates active exploration but without a strong commitment to religious understanding. This stage in identity theory is the moratorium stage, namely the exploration stage without strong commitment (Kroger & Marcia 2011). Adolescents in the study experienced this phase, where they were seeking an understanding of religion but had yet to achieve a firm commitment.

The majority of teenagers are only able to grasp the exoteric aspects of religion, while the deeper esoteric aspects are neglected. This reflects an inability to reach the stage of identity attainment, where exploration has been undertaken, and commitment to a religious identity has been formed. Identity achievement is the stage where an individual has completed the exploration process and formed a strong commitment to religious identity (Kroger & Marcia 2011). Apart from that, limitations in understanding religion cause deadlock and confusion. Teenagers may feel trapped in an understanding that is yet to be mature or comprehensive. In this context, it is the stage where adolescents experience identity impasse (Kroger & Marcia 2011). Identity impasse is a stage where individuals have made commitments without adequate exploration. Conditions of confusion and emptiness in research may reflect this stage of identity impasse.

Conclusion

The research underscores the impact of internet-based learning on the comprehension of religion among Muslim youth. While the internet has broadened access to religious knowledge, it has posed challenges for many young Muslims striving to grasp religious teachings holistically. This limited understanding often fosters confusion and a sense of spiritual emptiness. Adolescents often learn only the superficial aspects of religion, leaving the more profound, esoteric facets unexplored. In addition, the study reveals that many Muslim youth lack a solid theological foundation, resulting in an immature grasp of fundamental Islamic concepts such as *aqidah* [belief] and theology. This immaturity can engender uncertainty in their religious convictions and practices, with routine and formal worship rituals lacking spiritual profundity. The digital realm's influence, coupled with the accessibility of diverse interpretations online, contributes to a weakened religious ideology among Muslim youth, resulting in fragmented perspectives on religion.

Given these findings, it becomes apparent that prioritising efforts to fortify theological understanding, enrich worship practices, and establish robust ideological foundations is imperative for Muslim youth navigating the digital age. This research underscores teenagers' need to build a strong Islamic knowledge foundation through trusted sources such as *kyai* or *ustadz*, who adhere to evident scientific traditions. This foundational knowledge empowers them to critically assess and select reliable religious content in the digital sphere, thereby averting any distortion in their understanding of Islam and spirituality. Striking a balance between the advantages of internet-based learning and preserving traditional religious knowledge is vital to ensure that Muslim youth cultivate a comprehensive and gratifying understanding of their faith in today's digital era.

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Authors' contributions

S.A. has especially contributed with the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing of the original draft. M.M. and J.J. have contributed to the conceptualisation and investigation. P.P. has contributed to the formal analysis, project administration, writing, review, and editing.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Disclaimer

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