

Virtual Religion and Digital Engagement: Constructing Muslim Self-Identity

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study is to examine how digital media literacy influences online religious engagement and identity formation among Indonesian Muslims, considering the role of personal comprehension of Islamic teachings. A quantitative survey was conducted with 320 adult participants from diverse regions who actively followed Islamic preachers on social media platforms. The methodology tested sequential relationships among digital media literacy, virtual religion engagement, self-identity, and cultural identity. Results indicate that higher levels of digital media literacy are associated with more reflective engagement with online religious content, which strengthens self-identity and reinforces cultural identity. Findings also reveal that individual depth of religious understanding provides a critical foundation for responsible interpretation of digital content, while media literacy enhances the ability to critically evaluate information, navigate platform dynamics, and engage ethically. Overall, the study demonstrates that combining strong personal religious knowledge with digital media literacy supports informed, reflective, and culturally grounded religious participation. These outcomes highlight the strategic role of digital literacy in shaping contemporary religious experiences and sustaining both personal and communal dimensions of faith in digital environments.

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1. Introduction

Digital media have reshaped the ways individuals' access, interpret, and share information, profoundly influencing social interactions and the formation of collective understanding. In Indonesia, where Islam constitutes the predominant faith, online platforms increasingly mediate encounters with religious content, shaping both personal beliefs and broader cultural norms. Empirical studies suggest that engagement with Islamic discourse through digital channels can contribute to spiritual learning while simultaneously supporting the development of moral values, communal identity, and social

cohesion (Larsson & Willander, 2024). Contemporary digital environments serve as critical spaces where communication practices intersect with cultural continuity and identity negotiation.

Emergence of digital platforms has transformed the ways people access, interpret, and share information, creating new dynamics in communication and social interaction. Online networks now play a central role in shaping exposure to religious content, as Indonesian Muslims increasingly engage with Islamic teachings through social media, video-sharing services, and online forums. These developments extend learning beyond traditional institutions and introduce evolving forms of participation, often described under the concepts of digital religion and virtual religion (Bingaman, 2023). While these platforms broaden access and promote interactive discourse, they also present challenges, such as divergent interpretations, uneven credibility, and fragmentation of religious authority (Muringa & Adjin-Tetty, 2024).

Understanding of religious teachings critically affects how online content is interpreted and integrated into personal belief systems. Individuals differ in their ability to engage with theological nuances, reconcile varying perspectives, and apply moral guidance to everyday life. This indicates that meaningful engagement with digital religious content depends not only on platform features but also on users' prior knowledge, interpretative skills, and familiarity with Islamic teachings. As a result, personal comprehension interacts with digital exposure to shape self-identity and reinforce cultural norms.

Use of social media in religious life has transformed authority structures and community interaction patterns. Platforms such as Instagram allow religious figures to reach broad audiences and deliver teachings in visually engaging, accessible, and contextually relevant formats (Askar et al., 2025). Variation in preaching styles, from conservative to progressive, provides multiple interpretative frameworks that interact with users' personal understanding of Islamic teachings, influencing how individuals construct faith, negotiate moral and social expectations, and situate themselves within broader Muslim community (Einarsson et al., 2024). Social media thus operates as both a medium for religious dissemination and a critical space where personal comprehension, identity formation, community negotiation, and cultural continuity converge.

Beyond its informational role, digital religious engagement increasingly takes on a performative aspect, as individuals construct and present their religious identities in response to audience expectations and platform dynamics. Empirical studies indicate that such expressions are shaped by social validation mechanisms, including likes, comments, and shares, which reinforce particular patterns of self-presentation (Kholili et al., 2024). This dynamic can intersect with psychological tendencies toward self-enhancement and the pursuit of external recognition, traits often associated with narcissism (Stolz et al., 2021). As a result, religious engagement in digital spaces may shift from introspective reflection to curated public performance, raising important concerns about the authenticity and depth of online religious practice.

In addition to the influence of digital media literacy, the depth of personal faith and understanding of Islamic teachings plays a critical role in shaping how individuals interpret religious content online. Even when exposed to the same messages or virtual religious activities, individuals differ in their ability to evaluate theological nuances, reconcile divergent perspectives, and internalize moral guidance. Strong personal comprehension provides a foundational framework that guides reflective engagement, helping users distinguish authentic teachings from misleading or oversimplified content. In this context, digital media literacy complements this intrinsic knowledge, enabling individuals to navigate complex online religious environments responsibly and constructively while reinforcing both self-identity and cultural values.

Deep knowledge of Islamic teachings forms the cornerstone for interpreting religious content encountered online. Digital media literacy enhances the ability to assess sources critically and engage ethically, but genuine understanding of faith determines whether online participation results in meaningful reflection or superficial adoption of ideas. Within digital religious spaces, individuals with strong religious comprehension can identify authentic messages, avoid misinterpretation, and integrate spiritual guidance into everyday life. When complemented by critical digital skills, this

foundational knowledge ensures that online engagement reinforces personal identity and community values rather than promoting performative or unreflective practices.

The significance of digital media literacy extends beyond individual cognitive skills, influencing how communities collectively engage with and interpret religious content online. In digital religious environments, individuals encounter diverse interpretations, theological debates, and varying presentations of Islamic teachings, which can either reinforce or challenge preexisting beliefs (Casey et al., 2023). Higher levels of literacy equip users to critically navigate these complexities, discerning credible interpretations from misleading or oversimplified messages (Whyte, 2025). Such reflective engagement promotes a more nuanced understanding of religious content, fostering the development of an informed and contextually grounded religious perspective. Moreover, digital media literacy functions as a mediator between exposure to online religious content and the internalization of values, enabling users to synthesize information in ways that support coherent self-identity and community cohesion.

Digital media literacy shapes the manner in which individuals participate in digital religious communities. Social media platforms allow for the formation of virtual communities where knowledge is co-constructed, debated, and shared across diverse audiences (Talawanich & Pongwat, 2024). Users with advanced media literacy are more likely to engage meaningfully in these communities by contributing thoughtfully to discussions, critically evaluating peer-generated content, and adhering to norms that uphold accuracy and ethical communication (DuBosar et al., 2025). Limited literacy may lead to passive consumption or uncritical acceptance of content, which can reinforce misconceptions or superficial interpretations of faith. As such, digital media literacy is not only a tool for personal comprehension but also a foundational competency for responsible and constructive participation in digitally mediated religious spaces.

Engagement with digital media carries broad implications for religious education and identity formation. A solid grounding in Islamic teachings enables individuals to critically assess online content and resist misinterpretations, providing the strongest safeguard against misleading messages. In this context, digital media literacy serves as a complementary skill set, enhancing the ability to navigate information, evaluate credibility, and interact ethically within online religious spaces (Liu et al., 2025). By combining foundational religious knowledge with reflective digital competencies, Muslims can cultivate thoughtful, culturally informed, and ethically grounded identities that reinforce both personal development and community cohesion (Ameer et al., 2024).

Within this context, digital media literacy emerges as a pivotal factor in shaping how individuals interpret and evaluate religious content encountered online. Existing research indicates that limited media literacy constrains critical engagement, increasing susceptibility to biased or misleading information and fostering reductive understandings of religious teachings (Ali et al., 2023). Conversely, higher levels of digital media literacy enable individuals to engage more analytically and reflectively, facilitating informed interpretation and meaningful integration of religious knowledge into personal belief systems. Despite these insights, prior studies have largely examined digital literacy, religious engagement, and identity formation as separate constructs, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how these elements interact within digital religious environments (Kheryadi & Chorbwhan, 2025). This gap highlights the need for a more integrative and systematically structured approach capable of explaining the interconnected processes underlying identity construction among digitally engaged Muslim communities.

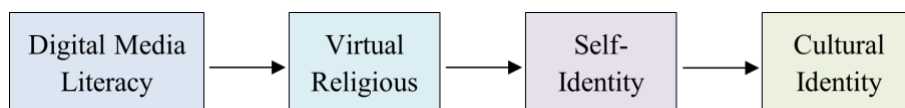


Fig. 1. Research Model Framework (2026)

This study seeks to address these gaps by proposing an integrative analytical framework that links digital media literacy, virtual religious engagement, self-identity, and cultural identity within the Indonesian Muslim context. The state of the art of this research lies in its synthesis of perspectives

from digital religion, media studies, and identity theory into a cohesive empirical model. The novelty of this study is reflected in its emphasis on the mediating and reinforcing role of digital media literacy as a foundational mechanism that shapes both engagement patterns and identity outcomes.

The central question guiding the research examines how Indonesian Muslims navigate, interpret, and internalize religious content within digital environments, with particular attention to the role of digital media literacy in shaping engagement and identity. Investigation focuses on how literacy influences virtual religious participation, self-identity, and cultural identity, addressing gaps in prior studies on the interaction between digital platforms, personal comprehension, and communal practices. Empirical findings provide insight into the mechanisms through which digital media literacy facilitates critical engagement, reflective understanding, and culturally informed identity construction. Beyond theoretical contribution, the results inform the design of interventions, educational initiatives, and community programs that promote responsible, ethically grounded, and reflective engagement with online religious content in an increasingly digitalized society.

2. Method

A quantitative paradigm with an explanatory focus was employed, using a structured survey to examine the relationships among digital media literacy, virtual religious engagement, self-identity, and cultural identity within Indonesian Muslim communities. The explanatory design allows for measurement of both the magnitude and direction of influence among variables, enabling statistical testing of hypothesized causal pathways. It captures direct and indirect effects, providing a comprehensive understanding of how digital media literacy shapes individual identity formation while reinforcing collective cultural identity. Structured surveys facilitated consistency in data collection, numerical analysis, and identification of patterns across the population (Hirose & Creswell, 2022).

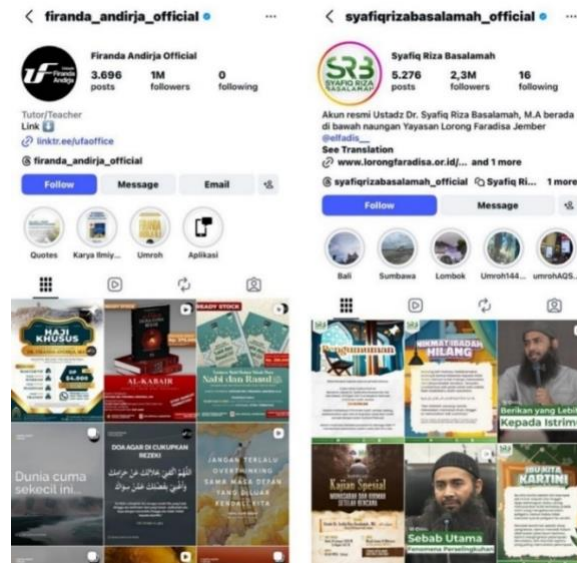


Fig. 2. Instagram-Based Religious Content from Two Indonesian Preachers '@firanda_andirja_official' and '@syafiqrizabasalamah_official' (2026)

Indonesian Muslims actively engaging with Islamic preaching content on Instagram were targeted, particularly followers of digital preachers @firanda_andirja_official and @syafiqrizabalbasalamah_official. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to include individuals capable of providing meaningful insights into online religious engagement. Eligibility criteria required self-identification as Muslim, active Instagram use for at least one year, and following a digital ustadz account for a minimum of six months, ensuring sufficient exposure to diverse preaching styles and familiarity with digital religious content. While age was not a strict inclusion criterion, the sample encompassed a broad range of adult participants, allowing examination of engagement patterns across different life stages and social contexts.

The survey included 320 respondents from various regions of Indonesia, providing a sample large enough to ensure statistical reliability while reflecting geographic, cultural, and demographic diversity. This sample enabled detailed analysis of digital religious engagement, self-identity, and cultural identity formation while minimizing sampling bias and enhancing representativeness (Berger, 2020). Distribution of participants further allowed exploration of differences in engagement and identity construction across age groups, gender, and urban-rural contexts. References to peer interaction in the analysis reflect social dynamics within online communities rather than a focus on adolescent participants, capturing how engagement with digital religious content involves discussion, exchange, and mutual influence among users of varying adult ages.

Data collection employed a structured questionnaire composed of close-ended items on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree) to ensure clear and decisive responses (Wallwey & Kaifez, 2023). The instrument was designed to measure four key constructs: digital media literacy, virtual religious engagement, self-identity, and cultural identity, drawing on validated scales adapted from previous research to ensure reliability and construct validity. Using a four-point scale minimized neutral responses and encouraged participants to reflect carefully on their engagement and experiences with online religious content. Prior to analysis, all responses were screened for completeness, internal consistency, and adherence to assumptions of normality, providing a robust foundation for subsequent statistical procedures.

Analytical procedures included multiple regression and path analyses to examine both direct and mediating relationships among the variables. Multiple regression allowed evaluation of the relative contribution of digital media literacy and virtual religious engagement to self-identity and cultural identity, while path analysis enabled assessment of complex causal pathways and mediation effects (Query et al., 2009). These techniques provided a nuanced understanding of how online religious engagement shapes personal beliefs and cultural orientation, facilitating identification of patterns that might not be apparent through simpler descriptive analyses. Screening and rigorous analytical procedures ensured the results were statistically sound and supported robust interpretation of relationships across Indonesian Muslim participants.

Table 1. Research Validity and Reliability (2026)

Variable	Digital Media Literacy	Virtual Religious	Self-Identity	Cultural Identity
Validity	KMO = .786 Sig. = .000	KMO = .723 Sig. = .000	KMO = .782 Sig. = .000	KMO = .759 Sig. = .000
Reliability	r = .823	r = .745	r = .759	r = .772

Prior to the main analysis, validity and reliability of the measurement instruments were evaluated to ensure methodological rigor. Construct validity was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, with KMO values exceeding 0.50 and Bartlett's significance at $P < 0.05$ indicating suitability for factor extraction (Hocevar & Flanagin, 2017). Reliability, reflecting internal consistency, was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, with coefficients above 0.71 considered satisfactory (Allen et al., 2009). As shown in Table 1, all constructs met the established thresholds: digital media literacy ($\alpha = 0.823$), cultural identity ($\alpha = 0.772$), self-identity ($\alpha = 0.759$), and virtual religious engagement ($\alpha = 0.745$), confirming the instruments' appropriateness for subsequent regression and path analyses.

Following the confirmation of validity and reliability, the collected data were subjected to multiple regression and path analyses to examine both direct and mediating relationships among digital media literacy, virtual religious engagement, self-identity, and cultural identity. These statistical techniques allowed for a rigorous evaluation of the strength, direction, and significance of associations, providing a nuanced understanding of how cognitive competencies in digital media translate into engagement with online religious content. By quantifying these relationships, the study captured the extent to which digital literacy empowers users to participate actively, critically, and reflectively within virtual religious environments, moving beyond mere exposure to content consumption (Pasitselska & Neag, 2026).

The path analysis further enabled the assessment of mediating mechanisms, revealing how virtual religious engagement serves as an intermediary between digital media literacy and self-identity formation. This finding underscores the importance of active, reflective participation in online religious spaces as a conduit through which cognitive competencies influence personal identity construction. Users with high digital literacy were found to navigate complex theological discourse, interpret divergent viewpoints, and internalize lessons from digital platforms in ways that enhance personal reflection, moral reasoning, and alignment with community norms (Ul Haq & Kwok, 2024). Such mediation highlights the interplay between individual skills and social context, demonstrating that literacy alone is insufficient without meaningful engagement within interactive digital spaces.

Moreover, the analysis explored how self-identity, shaped through virtual religious participation, contributes to cultural identity reinforcement. By examining patterns across demographic groups, the study illustrated that individuals who integrate online religious learning with reflective self-assessment also demonstrate stronger connections to communal norms, traditional practices, and broader cultural narratives. This process reflects a dynamic relationship between personal and collective dimensions of religious life, wherein digital engagement reinforces continuity of cultural values while simultaneously allowing for adaptation and reinterpretation in light of contemporary digital experiences (Zaid et al., 2022).

The methodological design also incorporated demographic controls, including age, gender, and regional background, which provided additional insight into variability within the sample. Stratified sampling ensured that the data reflected the diversity of Indonesian Muslim communities, from urban to rural contexts, while maintaining proportional representation across key sociocultural characteristics. Such a design strengthens the external validity of the findings, suggesting that the observed relationships are not limited to specific subgroups but may reflect broader trends in digitally mediated religious engagement and identity formation across Indonesia (Zhang, 2025).

The integration of robust measurement instruments with sophisticated statistical analysis provided a comprehensive view of the cognitive, behavioral, and social mechanisms operating within digital religious spaces (Sözen, 2025). The results underscore the critical role of digital media literacy in enabling informed, ethical, and reflective engagement with online religious content. By highlighting both direct and indirect pathways, the study contributes to theoretical frameworks in digital religiosity, identity formation, and media studies, while offering practical guidance for designing educational interventions, digital literacy programs, and community initiatives aimed at enhancing meaningful engagement within contemporary Muslim societies (Aziz, 2022).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Result

Research conducted in this study examined the interrelationships among digital media literacy, virtual religion, and self-identity, with particular attention to their individual and combined roles in strengthening cultural identity among Indonesian Muslims (Abdo et al., 2026). The integration of these constructs within a unified analytical framework enabled an exploration of how engagement with digital media intersects with religious experience and processes of identity formation. This focus is particularly relevant within the Indonesian context, where rapid digital transformation unfolds alongside deeply rooted religious traditions and diverse cultural expressions. Additional considerations include the growing influence of social media platforms in shaping not only the accessibility of religious knowledge but also the modalities through which individuals interpret and internalize spiritual teachings (Moravec et al., 2025).

The proposed path model conceptualizes a sequence of causal relationships that explain how interactions within the digital media ecosystem shape spiritual practices and identity negotiation. Emphasis is placed on the influence of digital media literacy on engagement with virtual religious content, the contribution of such engagement to self-identity construction, and the subsequent implications for cultural identity reinforcement (Derbaix et al., 2025). Furthermore, the model

accommodates emerging factors such as peer interaction, algorithmic content exposure, and personalized media consumption patterns, which may further mediate or moderate these relationships (Echchaibi & Hoover, 2023). The empirical results derived from this model are presented in Figure 3, which illustrates the structural relationships and their relative influence within the overall framework, providing a clear visual representation of the hypothesized causal pathways.

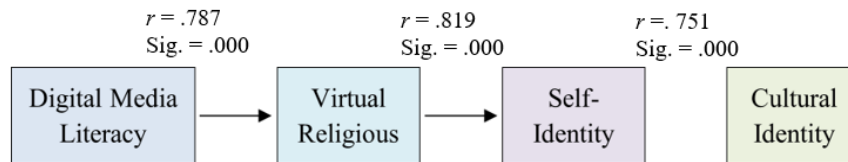


Fig 3. Research Results Model (2026)

Preliminary statistical results demonstrated a strong positive relationship between digital media literacy and virtual religious engagement ($r = 0.787$; $\text{Sig.} = 0.000$). These findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of digital media literacy exhibit significantly greater involvement in religious activities conducted through digital platforms. Engagement in virtual religious spaces is characterized not merely by passive consumption but by deliberate, reflective, and interactive participation, suggesting that the ability to critically navigate digital environments is fundamental to meaningful engagement (Pretorius, 2024). Moreover, the evidence underscores the centrality of digital literacy in shaping both the intensity and quality of online religious involvement, particularly within contexts where social media has become a primary conduit for religious knowledge dissemination.

Self-identity emerges as a central outcome of sustained engagement with virtual religious environments. As Indonesian Muslims navigate digital platforms, repeated exposure to religious teachings, community discussions, and interactive content contributes to the construction of personal beliefs, values, and spiritual orientations. Individuals negotiate their positions within these communities, balancing personal convictions with normative expectations conveyed by online preachers and fellow participants. This negotiation process strengthens reflective self-awareness, enabling users to critically evaluate their own beliefs, identify areas of growth, and develop a coherent sense of self in relation to both religious and social contexts (Erlita et al., 2023).

The influence of self-identity on cultural identity becomes apparent as personal interpretations of faith intersect with broader social and communal frameworks. Individuals who engage thoughtfully with digital religious content are more likely to internalize cultural norms, local traditions, and collective values that shape Indonesian Muslim society (Putri, Setiawan, et al., 2024). These engagements facilitate a sense of belonging and continuity, linking online religious experiences with offline cultural practices. In this way, virtual religious participation serves not only as a platform for personal reflection but also as a mechanism for reinforcing collective identity, demonstrating how digital environments can mediate both self-understanding and cultural integration.

Moreover, the pathway from digital media literacy through virtual religious engagement to self-identity and ultimately cultural identity highlights the mediating role of critical digital competencies. Individuals who possess advanced skills in evaluating content, recognizing bias, and interpreting nuanced messages are better positioned to translate online engagement into meaningful personal and social outcomes. These competencies prevent the uncritical adoption of information and reduce the likelihood of superficial or performative religious behaviors, instead fostering authentic reflection and value-based participation. As such, the research underscores the strategic importance of promoting digital media literacy as a foundational component for sustaining both personal development and communal cultural continuity in digitally mediated religious contexts (Askar et al., 2025).

Digital media literacy extends beyond mere technical or operational proficiency, encompassing the capacity to evaluate the credibility of sources, interpret nuanced theological content, and contextualize religious messages within broader cultural and spiritual frameworks. Individuals possessing these skills are better equipped to manage the abundance of online religious information, including potentially conflicting perspectives, thereby facilitating informed engagement and reducing

the risk of misinterpretation (Putri, Fazli, et al., 2024). The development of these cognitive and evaluative skills enables users to navigate digital religious environments with discernment, fostering reflective comprehension and critical engagement rather than superficial or uncritical consumption of content.

Higher levels of digital media literacy further correlate with enhanced self-identity formation and more profound social and spiritual interactions within online religious communities. Users with advanced digital competence are more likely to contribute to discussions, share insights, and participate in interactive activities that reinforce personal understanding as well as collective cultural norms (Chen et al., 2025). This convergence of technical, cognitive, and social capacities allows individuals to construct coherent and meaningful religious identities while actively engaging with diverse digital audiences, thereby positioning digital media literacy as both a participatory and evaluative competency critical to contemporary religious practice.

Consequently, the integration of religious knowledge and digital competence supports more nuanced engagement with theological diversity and mitigates the prevalence of oversimplified interpretations. Users are able to exercise contextual reasoning, engage empathetically with differing viewpoints, and critically reflect on content, which promotes ethically informed and culturally aware participation in virtual religious spaces (Kasianenko, 2026). These dynamic highlights that digital media literacy functions not only as a gateway to accessing religious knowledge but also as a decisive driver of reflective, socially responsible, and culturally grounded engagement, ultimately contributing to the development of robust personal and communal identities within Indonesian Muslim communities.

3.2. Discussion

The findings indicate that engagement in virtual religion significantly shapes self-identity development ($r = 0.819$, Sig. = 0.000), underscoring a robust association between digitally mediated religious participation and individual identity processes. Digital platforms facilitate more than the transmission of religious knowledge, functioning as spaces for constructing meaning, positioning the self, and negotiating belief systems within evolving religious contexts (Gao et al., 2024). Through repeated interaction with online content and communities, individuals cultivate interpretative orientations that inform personal values, ethical commitments, and symbolic affiliation with religious identity.

Virtual religious spaces also enable individuals to express, affirm, and reassess religious commitments in a manner that is not always possible in conventional institutional settings (Barton et al., 2021). Digital interaction provides greater flexibility for experimenting with religious expressions, selecting interpretative references, and engaging with diverse theological perspectives. Such conditions encourage reflective engagement rather than passive reception of religious messages, allowing individuals to actively evaluate personal alignment with specific beliefs and practices. Consequently, virtual religion functions not merely as a medium of spiritual consumption but as a social and cultural space that supports continuous identity negotiation and self-definition in relation to religious meaning systems.

Digital media can be understood as a form of spiritual infrastructure that enables emotional and existential connectivity within religious communities. Online platforms extend the spatial reach of religious freedom by allowing participation beyond physical congregations and institutional boundaries, thereby supporting more individualized pathways of religious belonging. This infrastructural function facilitates situational identity formation, as religious engagement becomes increasingly shaped by personal context, lived experiences, and evolving spiritual orientations (Rehman et al., 2023). Such adaptability strengthens the significance of virtual environments in shaping contemporary religious subjectivity while maintaining a sense of collective attachment beyond geographical and organizational constraints.

Digital mediation introduces structural changes in religious authority and stimulates the emergence of integrative religious identities that combine conventional norms with digital cultural

dynamics. Virtual interaction spaces, algorithmic curation of content, and participatory ritual engagement redefine the circulation and validation of religious knowledge (Zheng, 2023). These mechanisms strengthen personal autonomy in selecting and interpreting religious meanings, fostering more diverse and individualized identity trajectories. The rise of communicators who adopt informal and relatable styles further supports the redistribution of authority and encourages confident exploration of personal religious expression.

Statistical analysis reveals a strong positive linkage between personal identity and cultural identity ($r = 0.751$, Sig. = 0.000), emphasizing the mutual reinforcement of self-concept and cultural orientation. Digitally mediated religious engagement strengthens belief coherence and reinforces commitment to local norms and symbolic traditions, positioning virtual religiosity as a medium of cultural continuity and negotiation (Nurhayati et al., 2025). Research on social media further indicates that identity performance contributes to shared cultural meaning, while religious identity connects personal spirituality with collective narratives, supporting sustained cultural alignment.

Virtual religion serves as a psychosocial platform where identity coherence, cultural affiliation, and social legitimacy are continuously shaped through digitally mediated value alignment. When ethical awareness and critical media competence remain limited, religious engagement may shift toward performative or self-focused expression, reinforcing the need for comprehensive digital literacy integrating technical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions (Youn et al., 2024). Limitations related to purposive sampling and inferential measurement constrain generalizability and behavioral interpretation, indicating that observed narcissistic tendencies should be treated as analytical signals rather than clinical conclusions and that future research would benefit from qualitative or mixed methods designs to strengthen validity.

The findings further suggest that virtual religious engagement offers a unique environment for negotiating communal norms and individual expression simultaneously. Digital platforms allow followers to observe, emulate, and interact with influential preachers, shaping perceptions of piety, devotion, and social responsibility. Such interactions contribute to identity construction by linking personal religious practices with broader cultural narratives, reinforcing social cohesion within digital Muslim communities. In this sense, engagement with virtual religion is not solely an act of consumption but represents a participatory process where users continually calibrate their beliefs and behaviors in response to both content and community feedback (Alordiah & Ossai, 2023).

Critical digital literacy plays a pivotal role in shaping whether online religious participation leads to meaningful personal growth or superficial self-presentation. Analysis of survey data from 320 respondents revealed that higher digital media literacy was strongly associated with reflective engagement with religious content. Path analysis showed that digital literacy significantly influenced self-identity formation, which in turn affected cultural identity, demonstrating how evaluative skills enable individuals to critically assess online religious messages, recognize biased or misleading content, and integrate moral guidance into their own belief systems (Putri et al., 2022).

These competencies mitigate risks associated with selective exposure, echo chambers, and performative religiosity, supporting the development of reflective, ethically grounded, and culturally informed identities. In this context, digital media literacy functions as a practical cognitive framework that guides users toward responsible engagement and informed decision-making within online religious environments. By linking technical competence with ethical and cultural reflection, it provides both a tool for understanding complex digital religious content and a mechanism for sustaining meaningful personal and communal identity construction.

The interplay between virtual religious engagement and self-identity also has implications for broader cultural identity formation. Active participation in online religious communities encourages the internalization of shared values, traditions, and norms, reinforcing collective identity even in geographically dispersed populations. This dynamic illustrates how digital environments can serve as extensions of offline cultural spaces, providing continuity for religious and social practices while simultaneously offering new modalities for expression, collaboration, and ethical reflection. By

linking individual development with community values, virtual religious participation strengthens the reciprocal relationship between personal identity and cultural cohesion (Skogerbø et al., 2024).

The increasing autonomy of individuals in digital religious spaces raises important questions about the role of institutional authorities in shaping identity. As Muslims engage with online religious content and interpret teachings through personal understanding, participation in traditional institutions may become less central to identity formation. Nevertheless, institutional guidance continues to provide normative frameworks and communal validation that support ethical engagement and cultural continuity. Digital literacy and personal comprehension enable individuals to navigate online environments independently, but these competencies do not entirely replace the influence of established religious institutions. Instead, personal autonomy and institutional presence coexist, with self-directed engagement complementing institutional norms to produce a more reflective, informed, and contextually grounded religious identity.

Integration of digital media literacy into religious education and community programs is essential for fostering holistic development. Training that combines technical, cognitive, ethical, and spiritual components can empower users to engage critically with religious content, resist manipulative or reductionist messages, and cultivate meaningful identity formation. Such interventions not only enhance personal understanding and ethical discernment but also contribute to sustaining vibrant, culturally coherent, and digitally resilient religious communities. Future research should continue to explore these mechanisms through longitudinal or mixed methods designs, providing deeper insights into the evolving nexus of digital religiosity, identity formation, and cultural continuity.

4. Conclusion

Digital media literacy, virtual religious engagement, and self-identity interact in complex ways to shape cultural identity among Indonesian Muslims. Individuals with advanced digital literacy are better able to critically navigate online religious content, engage thoughtfully in virtual religious activities, and participate in reflective social interactions. At the same time, personal faith and a solid understanding of Islamic teachings remain the foundational framework guiding interpretation and meaning making. Without this grounding, online engagement risks becoming superficial or performative, potentially limiting deeper spiritual development.

These findings highlight the importance of educational initiatives that combine digital literacy with ethical, spiritual, and reflective dimensions. Programs designed by government agencies, religious organizations, and academic institutions can cultivate both technical competencies and moral discernment, ensuring that users interpret and engage with online religious content responsibly. Emphasizing individual faith alongside digital skills strengthens the capacity for reflective self-identity formation and reinforces communal and cultural values.

Integrating strong personal religious understanding with digital media literacy can foster meaningful identity construction and sustain cultural continuity in increasingly mediated environments. Future research may explore longitudinal effects of digital religious engagement on identity development or examine other religious communities in Indonesia and beyond. Tailored media literacy frameworks that incorporate cultural sensitivity and spiritual ethics could enhance the effectiveness of educational programs and promote authentic, responsible, and ethically grounded engagement with digital religious content.

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