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Cyber Religion as a Digital Learning Alternative: Perceptions and Practices of Islamic Studies Students at Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to explore how students at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya, utilize cyber religion as an alternative source of Islamic learning in the digital era. It investigates their preferred platforms, motivations, types of content consumed, engagement patterns, and perceptions of online religious authority.

Design/methods/approach – Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research collected data through non-participatory observation, in-depth interviews with 15 students, and document analysis of digital artifacts. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data, supported by triangulation to ensure validity.

Findings – The results indicate that students actively use platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Islamic websites for religious learning. Their engagement is driven by both academic and personal motives, with fiqh and aqidah being the most frequently accessed topics. Students demonstrate selective trust in digital preachers, forming hybrid models of religious authority. While cyber religion enhances religious understanding, it also raises concerns about information credibility and theological consistency.

Research implications/limitations – The study highlights the need for Islamic higher education institutions to integrate digital literacy into their curricula, enabling students to critically evaluate online religious content. It also suggests a reevaluation of how authority and authenticity are framed in contemporary Islamic learning environments.

Originality/value – This research contributes a localized, empirical analysis of cyber religion among university students in Indonesia. It bridges theoretical concepts of digital religion with real-world student practices, offering insights into the transformation of religious learning in a digitally connected society.

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Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technology has significantly transformed various aspects of human life, including religious practices. One of the emerging trends in this digital transformation is the phenomenon of cyber religion, referring to religious engagement through digital platforms. This phenomenon has become increasingly prominent, particularly among the younger generation who are not only digitally native but also heavily dependent on online content for information and learning, including in the domain of religious knowledge.

Globally, the number of people engaging with religious content through digital platforms is steadily increasing. According to the Solahudin & Fakhruroji (2019), over 60% of young Muslims across the world use social media to access religious materials, follow religious leaders, or participate in online religious discussions. In Indonesia—the country with the largest Muslim population globally—a 2022 survey by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta revealed that 64.2% of Muslim youth use social media as a primary source of religious information (Subhani et al., 2018). This trend suggests a significant shift from conventional, institutional forms of religious education towards more decentralized and flexible modes of learning.

This shift has prompted scholars to analyze the implications of cyber religion on religious authority and literacy. For example, Chair et al. (2024) noted that the rise of online preachers and digital da'wah content has the potential to weaken traditional religious authority, as youth increasingly trust charismatic digital clerics who are more accessible and relatable. Meanwhile, Hanief et al. (2024), Agarwal & Kayal (2024) and Pratama et al. (2024) highlighted how platforms like YouTube have become strategic tools for disseminating Islamic teachings, combining entertainment and education.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital religion, there is still limited research focusing specifically on students of Islamic higher education and their patterns of engagement with cyber religion (Fakhruroji, 2025; Thalgi, 2024). This is a critical gap, considering that these students are future religious professionals, educators, or leaders, and their religious formation is now being shaped not only by classrooms and textbooks, but also by Instagram reels, TikTok videos, and YouTube sermons (Campbell, 2010; Turner, 2007).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the phenomenon of cyber religion as experienced by students of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya. It examines how they utilize digital platforms to seek Islamic knowledge, the frequency and intensity of their engagement, the religious figures they follow, their motivations, and the types of content they prefer. It also investigates whether cyber religion acts as a complementary learning source or functions as an alternative—potentially replacing—traditional religious education.

This study is built upon four main theoretical perspectives that frame the analysis of cyber religion among university students: digital communication theory, religious authority in the digital age, digital literacy theory, and the distinction between cyber religion and real religion. These frameworks are reinforced by insights from global scholars such as Heidi Campbell, Paul L. Hoover, and Renee Hobbs, whose work contextualizes the transformation of religious engagement in a networked, digital society.

Digital communication theory suggests that religious messages are no longer disseminated in a linear, top-down fashion but are now mediated through interactive, algorithm-driven platforms (Andok, 2024; Hajdini & Iaia, 2024). Briandana et al. (2020) and Hulliyah et al. (2021) emphasizes the role of digital media in da'wah; however, this study expands upon that by incorporating Campbell & Tsuria (2021) concept of the *religious social shaping of technology*, which highlights interactivity, personalization, and user agency. In this context, students are not merely passive recipients of da'wah content. Instead, they engage actively—selecting, reinterpreting, or even resisting digital religious content based on their social context and perceived needs (Missier, 2025; Müller & Friemel, 2024).

The transformation of religious authority in the digital age is another key concern. Chair et al. (2024) and Hoover (2006) argue that legitimacy is increasingly based on visibility and popularity metrics such as likes, shares, and followers, rather than institutional or scholarly credibility. This study examines how students of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya perceive this shift. Do they view digital preachers as legitimate replacements, temporary sources, or as complements to traditional clerics? Furthermore, the research analyzes how digital branding and informal communication influence students' religious trust and choice of religious figures.

Regarding digital literacy, Pratama et al. (2024) emphasize its importance in helping users navigate religious information online. To strengthen this aspect, the current research adopts a more comprehensive framework based on Hobbs (2010) and Xu et al. (2021) , which includes five core competencies: access, analyze, reflect, create, and act. This framework allows a deeper analysis of how students understand, critique, and respond to religious content. It also enables the researcher to assess variations in digital literacy among students with different educational backgrounds, particularly those from pesantren and public schools.

Finally, Malik (2021) presents a conceptual distinction between *cyber religion*—characterized by asynchronicity, lack of physical presence, and media mediation—and *real religion*, which involves embodied rituals and institutional structures. This study investigates how students interpret these differences. Do they view online religious practice as valid and sufficient, as a complement to offline practices, or simply as an introduction? These questions are critical in assessing how digital platforms reshape students' religious experience and understanding.

This study situates itself in relation to earlier research. Hanif et al. (2024) explored YouTube as a da'wah medium but did not examine how students interpret such content. Smith & Denton (2005) and Uecker et al. (Senge, 1994; 2007) highlighted shifts in religious authority among youth, yet did not address higher education students specifically. Chair et al. (2024) offered insights into the mechanisms of digital authority formation but did not connect them to localized university contexts. Campbell (2012) provided a foundational theoretical framework but did not conduct empirical studies in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, although Hobbs (2010) outlined robust models of digital literacy, these frameworks have rarely been applied in Islamic education contexts. Malik (2021) philosophical distinction between cyber and real religion has also not been examined from the empirical standpoint of student users.

Thus, this study makes a localized yet globally relevant contribution to the growing field of digital religion. It bridges theoretical concepts with empirical realities by exploring

how Islamic Studies students—who are both digital natives and future religious leaders—engage with, evaluate, and are influenced by online religious content. The findings offer valuable insights for religious educators, curriculum developers, and digital literacy practitioners concerned with the intersection of technology, authority, and Islamic learning in contemporary life.

Methods

This study used a qualitative case study approach to explore how students of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya engage with cyber religion. This approach was chosen to gain deep insights into students' motivations, perceptions, and digital religious behavior. Data were collected through non-participatory observation, in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected students (aged 19–23, from various educational backgrounds), and document analysis of digital content and student artifacts. Observation was conducted over four weeks, focusing on content types, access duration, and context of media use. Interviews explored platform preferences, motivations, content interpretation, and perceptions of religious authority. Document analysis included user-generated materials and accessed digital da'wah content (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Instagram). Thematic analysis was applied using manual coding to identify patterns across all data sources. Triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing ensured research trustworthiness. The three methods were integrated to reinforce findings; interview data confirmed observations, while documents contextualized both verbal and behavioral patterns. This methodological synergy deepened the credibility and interpretative richness of the study.

Result and Discussion

The data obtained from observations, interviews, and document analysis revealed several key themes regarding students' engagement with cyber religion. These themes include: (1) frequently used digital platforms, (2) motivations for accessing religious content online, (3) the types of religious content sought, (4) the religious figures followed, (5) the frequency and patterns of access, and (6) the perceived impact on students' religious understanding and authority recognition.

1. Frequently Used Digital Platforms

The majority of participants reported using YouTube, TikTok, and Islamic websites as their primary platforms for accessing religious content. YouTube was favored for longer, lecture-based content, particularly during individual study sessions. TikTok was popular for its short-form videos, usually consumed in peer groups due to its engaging and entertaining format. Islamic websites were mainly accessed for academic purposes, such as referencing Qur'anic exegesis, fatwas, or scholarly articles.

Analysis showed that all 15 participants actively engaged with at least one religious digital platform. The most frequently used were:

Table 1. Frequently Used Digital Platforms for Accessing Religious Content Among Students

Platform	Users (n)	Percentage
YouTube	13	86.7%
TikTok	11	73.3%
Instagram	6	40.0%
Islamic websites	9	60.0%
Telegram Channels	4	26.7%

Students in the study demonstrated high levels of engagement with multiple religious digital platforms. YouTube emerged as the most widely used, with 86.7% of participants relying on it for structured religious lectures and thematic series. TikTok followed at 73.3%, primarily used for brief inspirational content and reminders. Islamic websites (60%) were favored when students required credible sources for academic tasks. Instagram and Telegram channels were used less frequently but were still mentioned as supplementary tools. Observational data showed that YouTube was predominantly used during individual study time, while TikTok and Instagram were accessed in group settings or during informal breaks, indicating contextual variation in media usage.

The dominance of YouTube and TikTok among students aligns with Campbell & Tsuria (2021) framework of *religious social shaping of technology*, which argues that technology is not merely a tool but a medium that reshapes how religion is practiced and learned. YouTube's preference for long-form, thematic content indicates that students still value depth, especially when engaging in solitary study. In contrast, TikTok and Instagram—platforms driven by algorithms and visual brevity—support more situational and emotional engagement, often shared in peer groups or used to fulfill micro-moments of reflection Cheong & Liu (2025). These usage patterns reflect a context-sensitive form of religious media consumption, influenced by time availability, academic pressure, and peer dynamics.

2. *Motivations for Accessing Religious Content*

Students expressed multiple motivations for engaging with cyber religion platforms. These ranged from a desire for personal spiritual enrichment, to academic assignments, to the need for accessible religious guidance outside formal classes. Students from pesantren backgrounds mentioned a desire to compare classical teachings with contemporary digital da'wah, while those from general education backgrounds emphasized the convenience and relatability of online content.

Students' motivations for accessing religious content online were both intrinsic and extrinsic:

Table 2. Students' Motivations for Accessing Online Religious Content

Motivations	Users (n)	Percentage
Personal spiritual growth	12	80%
Academic assignments	9	60%
Emotional comfort	6	40%
Curiosity about contemporary issues	7	46.7%

Students expressed both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for accessing online religious content. The most commonly cited reason was personal spiritual enrichment, followed by the need to complete academic assignments related to Islamic subjects. Emotional support and curiosity about contemporary religious issues also drove their online engagement. Notably, students from pesantren backgrounds tended to seek validation or comparison between traditional teachings and digital da'wah, while those from general educational backgrounds emphasized the convenience, accessibility, and relatability of digital content. This diversity in motivation influenced how critically and deeply they processed the information encountered.

The presence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations—such as personal growth, academic need, emotional support, and curiosity—demonstrates the multifunctionality of cyber religion. Unlike the traditional classroom, digital religious content offers immediate access to religious answers, personalized messages, and affective resonance. This aligns with Hoover (2006) assertion that digital religion allows users to select content that aligns with their individual life contexts and emotional needs.

Interestingly, students from pesantren backgrounds showed greater awareness of textual integrity and theological consistency, suggesting varying levels of digital religious literacy. This difference supports Hobbs (2010) model of media literacy, particularly in the "analyze" and "reflect" dimensions, which emphasize critical thinking and ethical evaluation. Anthonysamy et al. (2020) also stresses that digital literacy must include cognitive and ethical competencies, especially in navigating conflicting religious messages—an issue experienced by 40% of students in this study.

3. Types of Religious Content Sought

The most frequently accessed religious topics included aqidah (Islamic theology), fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and tafsir (Qur'anic interpretation). These were commonly searched in response to personal questions (e.g., rulings about daily practices), academic requirements (e.g., writing papers), or current issues (e.g., religious responses to social trends). Several students also sought motivational Islamic content, especially during emotionally stressful periods.

Participants reported engaging most often with content on:

Table 3. Types of Religious Content Accessed by Students Online

Topic	Users (n)	Percentage
Aqidah (Theology)	10	66.7%
Fiqh (Jurisprudence)	12	80.0%
Tafsir (Interpretation)	7	46.7%
Islamic ethics (akhlaq)	5	33.3%
Religious motivation	9	60.0%

The study revealed that students primarily accessed content related to Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*aqidah*), and Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir*). Jurisprudential content was the most frequently sought (80%), often driven by practical needs such as understanding religious rulings in daily life. Theological and interpretive materials were explored in response to personal questions or academic discussions. Many students also

followed content that promoted ethical behavior and emotional well-being, reflecting a growing interest in moral-spiritual guidance tailored to personal and generational issues. Documents analyzed included saved YouTube playlists, screenshots of lecture slides, and downloaded PDFs, which demonstrated recurring attention to these themes.

The high demand for fiqh and aqidah content reflects students' need for practical and theological clarity in their daily lives. This confirms the findings of Hanief et al. (2024), who found that digital da'wah is not merely inspirational but often problem-solving and instructional. However, the diversity of preachers followed—ranging from Adi Hidayat's structured academic style to Husein Ja'far's pluralist rhetoric—illustrates a fragmentation of religious authority, echoing the observations of Chair et al. (2024).

This fragmentation does not necessarily lead to confusion alone; rather, it allows for multiperspectival engagement, where students are exposed to multiple interpretations and learn to assess their coherence. The data suggest that students are developing hybrid authority models, where traditional ulama and digital preachers coexist in a personal hierarchy of trust (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). This indicates a shift not toward total digital replacement, but toward a reconfiguration of authority in which credibility is earned through relevance, clarity, and perceived authenticity.

4. Digital Religious Figures Followed

Participants reported following prominent preachers such as Ustadz Abdul Somad, Habib Husein Ja'far, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, and Ustadz Khalid Basalamah. The choice of religious figures was based on perceived clarity, style of delivery, media presence, and alignment with personal ideology. Students noted that they often selected speakers based on tone, ease of understanding, and relevance to their own social realities.

Students followed different digital religious figures based on style, clarity, and ideology:

Table 4. Digital Religious Figures Followed by Students and Reasons for Preference

Religious Figure	Mentioned By (n)	Percentage	Reasons for Following
Ustadz Adi Hidayat	11	73.3%	Structured, academic delivery
Ustadz Abdul Somad	9	60.0%	Strong rhetoric, relatable humor
Habib Husein Ja'far	8	53.3%	Tolerant message, easy to digest
Ustadz Khalid Basalamah	5	33.3%	Scriptural clarity, salafi-oriented content

Participants consistently mentioned a set of popular digital preachers as their primary sources of online religious learning. Ustadz Adi Hidayat was the most followed (73.3%), appreciated for his structured, analytical style. Ustadz Abdul Somad (60%) was known for his rhetorical strength and humor, while Habib Husein Ja'far (53.3%) was valued for his tolerant and relatable approach. The selection of religious figures was often influenced by their presentation style, frequency of uploads, thematic alignment with students' concerns, and social media presence. Observations and digital trace data showed

that students frequently engaged with these figures across multiple platforms, reinforcing their influence as hybrid sources of religious authority.

The fact that many students encountered religious content via algorithmic feeds rather than deliberate search reflects what Cheong & Liu (2025) calls ambient religion—religious content embedded within everyday digital consumption. While this suggests a passive exposure to religious messages, the repeated return to certain figures and topics also shows intentional continuity, particularly in academic and personal contexts. This duality—between algorithmic suggestion and conscious selection—adds complexity to the concept of "learning," requiring us to view cyber religion as both episodic and accumulative in its pedagogical function.

5. *Frequency and Patterns of Access*

Most students accessed religious content several times per week, with some reporting daily interaction via TikTok or Instagram. Evening hours and break times between classes were the most common periods for engagement. Some participants stated that religious content appeared in their feeds algorithmically, prompting spontaneous consumption rather than intentional searching.

Most students accessed religious content 3–5 times per week, with TikTok used more frequently (even daily) than YouTube. Access patterns:

Table 5. Frequency and Patterns of Students' Access to Online Religious Content

Frequently	Digital Content	Student	Percentage
Daily Use	mostly TikTok/Instagram	7	46.7%
3-5 times/week	mostly YouTube	10	66.7%
Weekend-only learning	-	4	26.7%

Most students engaged with religious digital content regularly, with 66.7% accessing content 3–5 times per week and nearly half reporting daily interaction, especially through TikTok or Instagram. The most common periods for access were during evenings and between academic activities. Observational records indicated that many students were exposed to religious content through algorithmic suggestions, suggesting that some interactions were incidental rather than intentional. Despite this, the students generally demonstrated patterns of sustained engagement, returning to the same preachers or topics over time.

The overwhelmingly positive perception of cyber religion's impact—especially in enhancing vocabulary, awareness, and access—validates its role as a complementary tool to traditional Islamic education. However, the concern about contradictory messages and unverified claims emphasizes the urgency of integrating digital religious literacy into Islamic Studies curricula. As suggested by Malik (2021), cyber religion carries the risk of *religious fluidity* and *decentralized interpretation*, which can destabilize theological clarity if not mediated by critical pedagogical frameworks.

The students' reflective attitudes—especially the 53.3% who reported being more critical toward religious authority—suggest that they are not merely passive recipients but negotiators of religious meaning. This resonates with the findings of Campbell and Tsuria (2021), who argue that young Muslims increasingly function as "religious consumers and

curators," shaping their own interpretive environments through selective engagement with online religious content.

6. Perceived Impact on Religious Understanding and Authority

Students reported that cyber religion platforms helped improve their religious vocabulary, understanding of contemporary issues in Islam, and spiritual awareness. However, several participants also noted the difficulty of discerning accurate information, especially when encountering conflicting interpretations. Some expressed concern about becoming "too reliant" on social media scholars and emphasized the continued importance of guidance from campus lecturers and traditional clerics.

Table 6. Perceived Impact of Cyber Religion on Students' Religious Understanding and Authority Perception

Impact	Student	Percentage
Increased understanding	13	86.7%
Better spiritual self-awareness	9	60.0%
Confusion from contradictory content	6	40.0%
More critical toward religious authority	8	53.3%

The majority of students reported that cyber religion platforms contributed positively to their religious understanding, particularly in improving conceptual clarity and spiritual awareness. Many acknowledged that online content filled gaps left by formal education, especially on topics that were not covered in the classroom. However, a significant portion (40%) also expressed confusion when exposed to contradictory interpretations between different online preachers. This prompted them to seek clarification through traditional sources, such as lecturers or offline religious classes. The data suggest that students are developing a more critical stance toward online religious content, recognizing both its educational value and its limitations. Furthermore, over half of the participants reported becoming more reflective and evaluative of religious authority as a result of their digital consumption, indicating a shift toward hybrid authority models.

The findings from Table 6 reveal a complex but insightful picture of how students perceive the influence of cyber religion on their religious knowledge and spiritual development. A substantial majority (86.7%) reported that exposure to digital religious content has increased their understanding of Islamic teachings. This affirms the role of cyber religion as an accessible and responsive educational supplement, particularly in areas where formal curriculum does not sufficiently address students' evolving questions or needs. This finding echoes Campbell (2012) theory that digital religion can enhance religious participation by providing flexible access to content that aligns with users' immediate concerns and life contexts.

In addition, 60% of students experienced greater spiritual self-awareness, indicating that cyber religion is not only cognitive but also affective in its impact. The affective dimension of religious engagement in online spaces has been discussed by Hoover (2006), who noted that media-based religion often appeals to emotional and identity-based aspects of faith, thereby fostering deeper personal connection.

However, the study also uncovered critical concerns, particularly regarding conflicting interpretations and the reliability of online preachers. Forty percent of students

expressed confusion when encountering contradictory messages, which led them to seek clarification from traditional sources such as lecturers or religious teachers. This reflects the risk noted by Malik (2021) and Campbell & Tsuria (2021): that digital religious spaces, while democratizing access to knowledge, can also result in fragmented authority and theological inconsistency. In this context, cyber religion serves both as an opportunity and a challenge—providing abundant content but often lacking in standardization, verification, and scholarly rigor.

Importantly, more than half (53.3%) of the students reported becoming more critical and reflective toward religious authority as a result of engaging with online content. This suggests a shift toward hybrid authority models, in which students do not solely rely on traditional clerics or digital preachers but instead evaluate and negotiate between them. Chair et al. (2024) argue that in the digital era, authority is no longer inherited or institutional alone, but must be actively constructed through consistency, credibility, and relevance to the audience. Students in this study appear to navigate between online charisma and offline legitimacy, assessing religious figures not only by title but also by the clarity, tone, and context of their teachings.

These findings support the perspective that today's students are not merely passive recipients of digital da'wah but act as religious curators, selectively trusting sources, comparing interpretations, and forming personalized understandings of Islam. This resonates with Hobbs (2010) notion of critical digital literacy, where users are empowered to access, analyze, evaluate, and act on information in informed and ethical ways.

In conclusion, while cyber religion significantly contributes to students' knowledge and self-awareness, it also demands stronger institutional support, particularly in developing students' critical evaluation skills. Islamic higher education institutions are thus urged to integrate digital religious literacy into their curricula to help students navigate online religious landscapes with discernment and responsibility.

Conclusion

This study concludes that cyber religion serves as a complementary source of Islamic learning for students in the digital era. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok provide accessible, varied, and engaging religious content that supports both academic and personal spiritual needs. Students demonstrate diverse motivations and selective engagement, indicating a shift toward hybrid models of religious authority and personalized learning patterns. While cyber religion enhances religious understanding and access, it also presents challenges—particularly in content verification and theological consistency. The findings highlight the importance of digital religious literacy, especially in filtering contradictory messages and critically assessing online preachers. To address these dynamics, Islamic higher education institutions should integrate digital literacy into religious studies curricula, equipping students with the tools to navigate and interpret digital content responsibly. Cyber religion is not a replacement for traditional learning, but a dynamic space that, when critically engaged, can enrich students' religious knowledge and practice.

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