

THE URGENCY OF DIGITAL LITERACY IN ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS TO RESPOND TO RELIGIOUS INFORMATION AMONG STUDENTS AT SMK PUI JATIBARANG

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Abstract. The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed how students access and interpret religious information. This study aims to analyze the urgency of digital literacy in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in responding to religious information at SMK PUI Jatibarang. The research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, involving eleventh-grade students and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers as informants. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and documentation, and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. The findings indicate that students' digital literacy skills are generally in the moderate category, particularly in accessing and understanding information. Students demonstrate the ability to search for and compare information from various digital sources, although their evaluation and verification processes remain relatively basic. Their critical thinking skills have begun to develop, as reflected in their ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, and draw conclusions from religious information. However, these skills have not yet reached a deep and systematic level. Supporting factors include access to digital technology, the role of teachers as facilitators, and students' awareness of information verification. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors include variations in digital literacy levels, exposure to misinformation, and a tendency toward superficial information consumption. This study concludes that digital literacy plays a crucial role as an epistemological foundation in strengthening students' critical thinking skills in responding to religious information. Therefore, the integration of digital literacy into Islamic Religious Education learning is essential to foster critical, reflective, and moderate religious understanding among students.

Keywords: digital literacy; critical thinking; religious information; Islamic religious education; students

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in the digital era has reconstructed the way individuals access, produce, and distribute information, including religious information. The religious practices of the younger generation are no longer confined to formal spaces such as schools and places of worship but are also intensively carried out in digital spaces through social media, online video platforms, and various religious websites (Halimah et al., 2024). Sari (2025) refers to this phenomenon as digital religion, namely the transformation of religious practices and authority mediated by digital technology. This shift has significant implications for how students understand religious teachings and shape their religious attitudes.

On the one hand, digital spaces provide broad access to religious literature and Islamic discourse from various perspectives. On the other hand, they also serve as a medium for the dissemination of religious information that is not always verified, tends to be partial, and may even contain distortions of meaning. Arifianto (2020) emphasizes that

social media often becomes a channel for spreading ideological and exclusive religious narratives, particularly when users lack adequate digital literacy skills. This condition indicates that the core issue lies not merely in access to technology, but in individuals' ability to evaluate, verify, and critically interpret religious information.

The phenomenon of religious misinformation circulating in digital spaces further underscores the urgency of this issue. In recent years, social media in Indonesia has frequently been marked by the spread of claims about the prohibition of the call to prayer (adhan) in certain areas or rumors regarding the removal of religious subjects from the national curriculum without any official policy basis. Such information is often accompanied by selectively edited video clips that lead to public misunderstanding. In addition, chain messages in messaging applications frequently impersonate religious figures by spreading instant "fatwas" on contemporary social or political issues, which upon verification turn out to have never been officially stated by the figures concerned.

It is also common to find quotations from the Qur'an or hadith without clear sources, often misinterpreted in terms of

context and the validity of their chains of transmission. Such content tends to go viral quickly because it appears religious and appeals to users' emotions. For students who are in the phase of forming their religious identity, exposure to unverified information has the potential to shape a simplistic, textual, and less contextual understanding of religion. In some national cases, the spread of religion-based misinformation has even triggered social unrest and polarization within society. This reality shows that without adequate digital literacy and critical thinking skills, students may become passive consumers and even contributors to the spread of invalid information.

In the academic context, digital literacy is not merely understood as the technical ability to operate digital devices but as a set of cognitive, ethical, and reflective competencies in accessing, understanding, evaluating, and producing information responsibly (Gilster, 1997). When related to the religious domain, digital literacy becomes an essential instrument in preventing the acceptance of religious information in a purely textual and decontextualized manner. Students are required not only to read digital religious content but also to identify the credibility of sources, understand the background of scholarly authority, compare perspectives, and assess the arguments presented.

These abilities are closely related to critical thinking skills. Ennis (2011) defines critical thinking as reflective and rational thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. In the context of digital religious information, critical thinking includes the ability to analyze religious arguments (dalil), evaluate the validity of claims, understand historical and methodological contexts, and draw proportional conclusions. Without critical thinking skills, students are more likely to accept religious information based on popularity, emotional appeal, or group affiliation rather than on scientifically accountable arguments.

The urgency of strengthening digital literacy in fostering critical thinking skills becomes even more relevant when linked to national literacy conditions. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that Indonesian students' reading literacy remains below the global average (Pratama et al., 2025). Low reading literacy has implications for students' analytical and interpretative abilities in understanding texts, including religious texts. This condition increases the risk of simplistic and less contextual religious understanding when students encounter the complex flow of digital information.

In educational practice, particularly in Islamic Religious Education subjects, learning still tends to focus on cognitive aspects and the mastery of normative material. The integration of digital literacy and the strengthening of critical thinking skills in addressing contemporary religious issues have not been systematically implemented (Nugraha, 2022). In fact, digital spaces have become a primary arena for shaping the opinions and religious identities of the younger generation. Without appropriate pedagogical intervention, there is a gap between the intensity of digital media use and students' reflective abilities in processing religious information.

This phenomenon is also reflected at SMK PUI Jatibarang. Based on preliminary observations, students are quite active in using social media as a source of information, including religious information. However, the processes of clarification and verification of information sources have not yet become structured academic habits. In addition, limitations in digital infrastructure and uneven internet access also influence patterns of technology use that tend to be more consumptive rather than productive. This situation indicates an urgent need to integrate digital literacy more substantively into learning in order to strengthen students' critical thinking skills in responding to religious information.

Several previous studies have demonstrated a relationship between digital literacy and critical thinking skills (Sari, 2021). However, these studies have generally been conducted at the senior high school or higher education levels and have not specifically examined vocational high school (SMK) students. Moreover, previous research has largely focused on digital literacy in general contexts, rather than specifically on critical thinking skills in responding to religious information in digital spaces. In fact, religious issues carry more sensitive social, ideological, and identity dimensions compared to other types of information.

Based on the above explanation, it can be affirmed that the urgency of digital literacy in this study is not merely related to technological competence but more fundamentally to the development of students' critical thinking skills in understanding and responding to digital religious information. Digital literacy functions as an epistemological foundation that enables students to conduct analysis, evaluate sources, interpret contextually, and develop rational and moderate religious attitudes. Therefore, research on the urgency of digital literacy in improving students' critical thinking skills in responding to religious information at SMK PUI Jatibarang is relevant, timely, and significant both theoretically and practically.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach is chosen because this research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the urgency of digital literacy in improving students' critical thinking skills when responding to religious information. Qualitative research focuses on meaning, understanding, and interpretation of social phenomena occurring in the field (Creswell, 2018). Meanwhile, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence (Sinaga, 2025).

The study was conducted from March to April 2026 at SMK PUI Jatibarang, Indramayu Regency. The research subjects were eleventh-grade students, with supporting informants including Islamic Education (PAI) teachers. In qualitative research, research subjects are referred to as informants, namely individuals who provide information related to the research context and situation (Moleong, 2007).

The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observations, interviews, and questionnaires administered to eleventh-grade students,

as well as interviews with PAI teachers. Secondary data were collected from school documents such as curriculum, syllabus, and other relevant literature.

Data collection techniques include: (1) observation to examine students' activities in accessing and responding to religious information in digital media; (2) semi-structured interviews to explore in depth students' digital literacy and critical thinking skills; and (3) documentation to obtain supporting data from written records (Qotrunnada & Darmiyanti, 2024; Suriani et al., 2023).

Data validity was ensured through triangulation techniques, including source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation to enhance data credibility. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive process involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification until valid and reliable findings were obtained.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Digital Literacy Skills in Accessing and Understanding Religious Information

a. Information Access Skills (Searching & Finding)

The findings indicate that students' ability to access religious information is in the fairly good category. This is reflected in their use of search engines (predominantly Google), utilization of digital platforms (such as YouTube and others), and efforts to compare multiple sources of information. Students are able to use simple keywords and access various websites as initial references.

However, the findings also reveal that their search strategies remain intuitive rather than systematic, particularly in terms of using academic keywords, exploring primary sources, and applying information validation techniques. In contrast, teachers demonstrate more structured search patterns by considering institutional credibility, alignment of religious methodology (manhaj), and clarity of references.

These findings indicate a gap in digital literacy between teachers and students, especially in terms of analytical depth and information validation. This condition is consistent with studies by Lubis et al. (2025) and Nugraeni & Suyatno (2023), which emphasize that digital literacy encompasses not only technical skills but also evaluative and academic abilities in managing information. Thus, it can be concluded that students' information access skills have developed operationally, but still require strengthening in methodological and critical aspects.

b. Evaluation and Critical Thinking Skills (Analyzing & Verifying)

Students' ability to evaluate and verify religious information shows significant development, as indicated by their cautious attitude, habit of re-checking information, and comparing various sources before accepting it.

Students also begin to demonstrate awareness in identifying hoaxes through indicators such as the credibility of sources, provocative language, and consistency with religious teachings. However, some students still rely on superficial indicators, such as public comments or content popularity.

This suggests that students' critical thinking skills are still at a transitional stage—from merely receiving information to evaluating it, but not yet reaching deeper analysis. These findings are in line with studies by Husaeni et al. (2023) and Sudianto et al. (2025), which state that digital literacy contributes to critical thinking skills, but its quality largely depends on the depth of evaluation conducted by individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen learning approaches that emphasize evaluation based on religious evidence (dalil), context, and scientific methodology, rather than relying solely on popular indicators.

c. Comprehension and Contextualization Skills (Comprehending)

Students' ability to understand and contextualize religious information is categorized as good. This is demonstrated by their ability to relate information to daily practices, such as worship, social attitudes, and moral behavior. In addition, students utilize various learning resources (books, teachers, and social media) to deepen their understanding. Social media plays a role as an alternative learning resource that is flexible and easily accessible.

However, the resulting understanding tends to be practical-applicative and has not fully reached reflective-critical levels. Students focus more on direct implementation rather than deeper analysis of meaning. These findings are consistent with Aqmarina & Susilo (2025), who state that digital media can enhance contextual understanding but often does not reach critical reflection.

Thus, learning strategies are needed to encourage students not only to understand and apply, but also to reflect on and critically analyze the broader meaning of religious teachings.

d. Ethics and Use of Digital Information (Ethical Use)

Students' digital ethics are categorized as fairly good, as indicated by polite attitudes in discussions, a tendency to avoid provocative content, and awareness of maintaining religious tolerance. Students also demonstrate ethical behavior, such as not sharing unverified information and respecting differing opinions. However, there is still a tendency toward passivity, particularly in expressing opinions constructively in digital spaces.

This indicates that students' digital ethics have developed in the defensive aspect (avoiding mistakes), but are not yet optimal in the active aspect (participating critically and responsibly). These findings align with Aulia & Hasmy (2025) and Zaman et al. (2026), which emphasize that digital ethics do not develop automatically, but rather through educational processes integrated with moral and religious values.

Thus, strengthening digital literacy should be directed toward developing participatory ethics, not merely preventive ethics.

2. Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Responding to Religious Information

a. Interpretation Skills

Students' interpretation skills are categorized as fairly good, as shown by their ability to understand information comprehensively, distinguish between facts and opinions, and identify the main message of religious content.

However, their interpretation tends to remain at a literal level and has not fully reached deeper, contextual, and critical interpretation.

This is consistent with Utami & Nurohman (2025), who state that most students are still at a basic comprehension stage and have not yet developed complex interpretations.

b. Analytical Skills

Students' analytical skills show fairly good development, particularly in comparing multiple sources, connecting information with prior knowledge, and assessing relevance. However, some students are still at a basic level of analysis and have not yet achieved comprehensive synthesis.

c. Evaluation Skills

Students' evaluation skills have developed, as indicated by their ability to assess source credibility, examine religious evidence (dalil), and consider the accuracy of information. However, evaluation still needs to be strengthened, particularly in understanding the context of religious evidence and scientific methodology.

d. Inference Skills

Students' inference skills show good development, especially in drawing conclusions based on available information and religious evidence. However, this ability still needs improvement in terms of deeper prediction and generalization.

e. Explanation Skills

Students' explanation skills are categorized as fairly good, as indicated by their ability to restate information in simple terms and express opinions politely. However, the structure of their arguments still needs to be strengthened to become more systematic and evidence-based.

f. Self-Regulation Skills

Students' self-regulation skills show positive development, as indicated by their awareness of self-evaluation, willingness to acknowledge mistakes, and efforts to improve understanding. However, consistency in self-reflection still needs to be enhanced so that it becomes a sustainable habit of critical thinking.

3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Digital Literacy in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills

a. Supporting Factors

The findings show that strengthening students' digital literacy in enhancing critical thinking skills is supported by several key factors:

1) Access to Technology and Availability of Digital Platforms

Easy access to the internet and various digital platforms is a dominant factor in supporting students' digital literacy. Students are accustomed to using search engines and digital media as sources of religious information. This enables the process of searching for information to become faster, broader, and more varied.

Theoretically, this condition reinforces the view that access to technology is a primary prerequisite for the development of digital literacy.

2) The Role of Teachers as Digital Literacy Facilitators Teachers play a strategic role in guiding students to use credible sources and in facilitating systematic processes of searching and evaluating information.

This role goes beyond delivering content, functioning also as a digital literacy guide who shapes students' critical thinking patterns. These findings emphasize the importance of teacher scaffolding in digital literacy.

3) Awareness of Information Verification Students show a tendency not to immediately accept information, but to re-check and compare multiple sources.

This is an indicator of the development of evaluative skills in critical thinking, although still at a basic level.

4) Culture of Discussion and Consultation Social interaction through discussions with peers and consultations with teachers or religious figures (ustaz) plays an important role in deepening understanding and clarifying information.

This culture supports the construction of knowledge collaboratively (social constructivism).

5) Utilization of Social Media as a Learning Resource Social media is utilized as a flexible and contextual learning resource, allowing students to obtain more varied explanations.

This indicates that social media functions not only as entertainment but also as a learning resource.

6) Moderate and Tolerant Religious Attitudes Students' tendency to avoid provocative content and respect differences is an important factor in shaping healthy digital ethics.

This attitude supports the wise and responsible use of digital literacy.

b. Inhibiting Factors

On the other hand, several factors hinder the strengthening of digital literacy and critical thinking skills:

1) Variation in Students' Digital Literacy Levels Unequal levels of digital literacy among students lead to differences in critical thinking abilities. Some students still rely on simple indicators such as popularity or public comments in assessing information.

2) Tendency Toward Instant Information Consumption Some students tend to take information quickly without in-depth analysis. This indicates that their thinking process is still at the surface learning level.

3) Exposure to Hoaxes and Provocative Content The open digital environment makes students vulnerable to invalid information, including hoaxes and provocative content.

a. This poses a serious challenge to the development of critical digital literacy.

4) Lack of Engagement with Authoritative Sources Students tend to rely on general digital sources and have not optimally used more in-depth religious sources such as classical texts or tafsir.

5) Lack of Confidence in Expressing Opinions Some students tend to be passive in discussions, especially on social media, resulting in underdeveloped explanation and argumentation skills.

6) Suboptimal Structured Reinforcement of Critical Thinking The development of critical thinking has not been systematically integrated into the learning process, so

students' abilities remain in the developmental stage and are not yet comprehensive.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the research conducted at SMK PUI Jatibarang, the following conclusions can be drawn: The level of students' digital literacy in accessing and understanding religious information is categorized as fairly good. This is indicated by students' ability to use search engines and various digital platforms such as Google and social media to obtain religious information. Students have also developed an awareness of comparing multiple sources and conducting simple verification of the information obtained. In terms of comprehension, students are able to relate religious information to their daily lives and utilize digital media as a learning tool. However, the depth of analysis, systematic searching, and use of authoritative sources still need to be improved. Students' critical thinking skills in responding to religious information from digital media have begun to develop, but are not yet fully optimal. This can be seen from students' ability to understand information content (interpretation), compare different viewpoints (analysis), assess the validity of information (evaluation), draw conclusions (inference), and restate information in a simple manner (explanation). In addition, students demonstrate self-regulation, such as being cautious in accepting information and showing willingness to correct mistakes. Nevertheless, some students remain at a basic level of critical thinking, with limited depth of analysis and arguments that are not yet strong or systematic. The supporting and inhibiting factors in strengthening digital literacy to enhance students' critical thinking skills are quite diverse. Supporting factors include ease of access to technology, the role of teachers as facilitators, students' awareness in verifying information, a culture of discussion and consultation, the use of social media as a learning resource, and attitudes of tolerance in religious practice. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors include variations in students' digital literacy levels, the tendency to consume information instantly, exposure to hoaxes and provocative content, limited use of authoritative religious sources, lack of confidence in expressing opinions, and the suboptimal structured integration of critical thinking in the learning process.

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