

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC STUDIES AND STUDENTS' INTELLECTUAL RESILIENCE AGAINST DIGITAL RELIGIOUS DISINFORMATION

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Abstract

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The rapid circulation of religious content in digital spaces has expanded students' access to Islamic knowledge while simultaneously increasing their exposure to digital religious disinformation. This condition creates an important academic challenge, as students are required not only to receive religious information but also to evaluate its validity, context, and source authority critically. Although previous studies have discussed digital literacy, religious authority, and misinformation, limited attention has been given to the role of the Introduction to Islamic Studies course in strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation, particularly in Islamic higher education. This study aims to analyze the role of the Introduction to Islamic Studies course in strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted in the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the course plays a strategic role in building students' epistemological foundation, fostering critical religious literacy, and developing the habit of verifying religious information circulating in digital spaces. The study further finds that Introduction to Islamic Studies functions not merely as a foundational course, but also as a pedagogical medium for shaping students who are more critical, reflective, and intellectually responsible in responding to digital religious disinformation..

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has transformed the patterns through which university students access, produce, and disseminate religious knowledge (Sa'diya et al., 2026). Religious information, which was previously obtained primarily through teachers, classical texts, and academic forums, now circulates rapidly through social media, video platforms, messaging applications, and various other digital channels. While this transformation has broadened access to Islamic knowledge, it has also created wider opportunities for the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Zainal & Sofa, 2026). In this context, the challenge faced by students today is not merely how to obtain religious information, but also how to critically evaluate its validity, context, and source authority (Hasanah & Sofa, 2026).

In religious discourse, this challenge becomes even more complex because the digital sphere has significantly altered the configuration of scholarly authority (Sofa, 2026). The digitalization of religious communication has enabled broader participation from multiple actors, including popular preachers, content creators, and religious influencers (Sofa & Qamariyah, 2026). However, it has also led to the fragmentation of religious authority and the increasing circulation of misleading religious narratives (Sofa et al., 2025). Authority is no longer constructed solely on the basis of scholarly depth, intellectual lineage, and methodological rigor, but is often shaped by virality, emotional appeal, and algorithmic visibility (Saputra & Sofa, 2026). As a result, students are confronted with an overwhelming flow of religious information in which it is not always easy to distinguish between authoritative knowledge, interpretive opinion, and manipulative content (Fillah & Sofa, 2026).

This condition indicates that digital religious disinformation is not merely a technical issue of communication, but also an epistemological and pedagogical problem (Khomsiyah & Sofa, 2026). Religious information that is taken out of context, packaged provocatively, or disseminated without verification may generate simplistic, emotional, and polarized understandings of religion (Fansuri & Sofa, 2026). The circulation of false or misleading religious content in digital spaces demonstrates that students' status as members of the digital generation does not automatically correspond to intellectual maturity or critical literacy in dealing with online information (Muchlis & Sofa, 2025). This reality highlights the urgent need to strengthen students' capacity to engage with religious information in a more careful, critical, and responsible manner (Sofa, 2026).

For this reason, strengthening students' intellectual resilience has become an urgent academic necessity (Laili & Sofa, 2025). In this study, intellectual resilience refers to students' ability to remain intellectually grounded when confronted with misleading information by verifying sources, assessing arguments, understanding contexts, and taking reflective and responsible positions (Qumariyah & Sofa, 2025). Intellectual resilience is not merely the ability to reject hoaxes, but also an epistemic competence that enables students to distinguish between normative teachings, religious interpretations, personal opinions, and manipulative digital content (Sholihah & Sofa, 2025). At this point, higher education plays a vital role, since universities are not only responsible for transmitting knowledge, but also for shaping scientific habits of mind, academic ethics, and maturity in responding to difference (Fitriah & Sofa, 2025).

Within this framework, the course Introduction to Islamic Studies occupies a strategic position (Umaidah & Sofa, 2025). This course does not merely introduce Islam as a system of normative teachings, but also as an object of academic inquiry that can be

approached through historical, sociological, philosophical, and methodological perspectives (Isnaini & Sofa, 2025). Through such learning, students may be guided to understand the distinction between text and interpretation, between doctrine and social practice, and between religious authority grounded in scholarship and digital narratives constructed through sensationalism (Sultan & Sofa, 2025). In this way, Introduction to Islamic Studies has the potential to function as an academic medium for cultivating critical religious literacy, broadening students' intellectual horizons, and strengthening their ability to respond rationally to digital religious disinformation (Mh & Sofa, 2025).

Nevertheless, in practice, the teaching of Introduction to Islamic Studies is still often positioned merely as a foundational course focused on introducing general concepts of Islamic studies (Arifin & Sofa, 2025a). In many cases, its responsiveness to contemporary religious issues, particularly digital disinformation, has not yet been explicitly integrated as a major pedagogical orientation (Qamariyah & Sofa, 2025). In fact, students' religious experiences today unfold amid changing media landscapes, the emergence of nonformal authorities, and the rapid circulation of religious content (Anwar & Sofa, 2025). Therefore, a reorientation of the course is necessary so that it does not stop at the mastery of basic concepts, but also becomes a space for cultivating students' intellectual resilience in facing misleading religious information (Silvia & Sofa, 2025). It is at this point that the rationale for this study emerges, namely to examine how Introduction to Islamic Studies can function as an instrument for strengthening students' intellectual resilience (Khaq, 2023).

This study specifically focuses on the implementation of the Introduction to Islamic Studies course in the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo (Sofa et al., 2025). The selection of these two academic contexts is significant (Astutik & Sofa, 2025). The English Education Department represents a learning environment characterized by strong access to digital resources, multimedia communication, and exposure to global discourse, while the Master's Program in Islamic Education represents an academic environment more intensively engaged with Islamic scholarship and Islamic pedagogy (Sita & Sofa, 2025). The intersection of these two academic characteristics makes the study particularly relevant, as both groups are equally exposed to digital information flows, yet they possess different epistemic backgrounds and academic orientations (Sofa et al., 2025). Thus, this research is important not only conceptually, but also contextually, in understanding the need to strengthen students' critical reasoning across two different academic settings and levels of study (Ramdani et al., 2025).

From the perspective of problem-solving, several alternatives may be proposed to address digital religious disinformation, such as strengthening platform regulation, improving content moderation, promoting digital literacy campaigns, providing fact-checking training, and monitoring accounts that spread hoaxes (Zummah & Sofa, 2025). However, this study chooses the instructional pathway through the Introduction to Islamic Studies course as its main solution (Nafila & Sofa, 2025). This choice is based on the consideration that an education-based solution works at a more fundamental level because it shapes students' ways of thinking, habits of verification, and intellectual ethics in a sustainable manner (Mardiyah & Sofa, 2025). While regulation and content moderation tend to address the visible symptoms of the problem, appropriate learning processes can strengthen students' epistemological foundations, enabling them to

independently assess, filter, and respond to digital religious information (Salsabela & Sofa, 2025).

Based on this background, the problem of this study lies in how the Introduction to Islamic Studies course can effectively function in strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation, particularly among students in the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo. This study aims to describe the academic rationale for strengthening intellectual resilience, to analyze the relevance of the Introduction to Islamic Studies course in responding to digital religious disinformation, and to explain its significance for the formation of students who are critical, reflective, and responsible in managing religious information. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the study of Islamic studies, digital literacy, and Islamic higher education. Practically, it is expected to serve as a reference for curriculum development, instructional strategies, and course design that are more contextual to the challenges of religious life in the digital era. In this way, Introduction to Islamic Studies is understood not merely as an introductory course, but also as a strategic medium for building students' intellectual resilience amid the growing spread of digital religious disinformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expansion of digital space has transformed the patterns of production, distribution, and consumption of religious knowledge among university students (Fitria & Sofa, 2025). Religious information is no longer obtained primarily through teachers, classical texts, and academic forums, but also through social media, video platforms, search engines, and messaging applications (Rosida & Sofa, 2025). UNESCO emphasizes that *media and information literacy* is an essential competence for enabling learners to navigate digital environments critically, safely, and responsibly, including in response to misinformation and disinformation (Hasanah & Sofa, 2025). In the context of higher education, this framework suggests that digital religious disinformation is not merely a technical issue of information flow, but also an educational issue related to the formation of students' critical reasoning (Asror & Sofa, 2025).

Within the study of digital religion, this transformation has also been accompanied by changes in religious authority. Recent studies indicate that the digitalization of religious communication has created broader participation for popular preachers, content creators, and influencers in shaping religious interpretations and opinions (Sofa, 2025). On the one hand, this condition expands access and enriches public participation; on the other hand, it also fragments authority and increases the circulation of religious claims detached from adequate methodological foundations (Sakinah & Sofa, 2025). As a result, students often encounter a situation in which authoritative religious knowledge, interpretive opinion, and manipulative narratives circulate through the same channels and appear to possess similar persuasive force (Amelia & Sofa, 2025).

This condition confirms that digital religious disinformation must be understood as both an epistemological and pedagogical problem (Maulidya & Sofa, 2025). From an epistemological perspective, disinformation emerges when religious information is decontextualized, oversimplified, or circulated without proper source verification and interpretive grounding (Ramadani & Sofa, 2025). From a pedagogical perspective, this

situation requires educational institutions not only to transmit religious knowledge, but also to cultivate students' ability to examine source authority, evaluate arguments, and distinguish between normative teachings, interpretations, personal opinions, and manipulative information. Studies on religious hoaxes demonstrate that misinformation and disinformation appear in various forms, ranging from misleading content to false content and authentic content used in misleading ways (NURUL, 2024).

In this context, the concept of intellectual resilience becomes highly relevant. In this study, intellectual resilience refers to students' ability to remain intellectually clear, reflective, and methodologically grounded when confronted with questionable religious information (Firdausiyah & Sofa, 2025). This resilience should not be limited to the ability to reject hoaxes, but should include the capacity to verify sources, compare claims, read contexts, and take positions that are argumentative and responsible. Recent research on misinformation indicates that resistance to false information is strongly associated with habits of reasoning, credibility assessment, and evaluative strategies toward digital sources. Research on students' reasoning about digital sources and claims further underlines the importance of skills such as *lateral reading* for assessing source credibility and claim accuracy more reliably (Shalawati & Sofa, 2025).

From the perspective of higher education, strengthening intellectual resilience is closely related to the development of information literacy and digital literacy. UNESCO consistently places the integration of *media and information literacy* into higher education curricula as one of the long-term strategies for responding to disinformation. This means that students need to be trained not only to access information, but also to evaluate its validity, bias, context, and social consequences. In the context of religiosity, this literacy must be extended into digital religious literacy, namely the ability to read religious texts and discourses critically within digital environments that are rapid, emotional, and fragmented (Sukandarman et al., 2024).

The Introduction to Islamic Studies course occupies a strategic position within this framework because substantively it introduces Islam not only as a normative system of teachings, but also as an object of scholarly inquiry that can be approached through historical, sociological, philosophical, and methodological perspectives. This interdisciplinary character opens space for the formation of students' academic reasoning. Through learning that emphasizes the distinction between text and interpretation, doctrine and social practice, and scholarly authority and popular opinion, students may be equipped with a stronger epistemological foundation for navigating the flood of digital religious information. Recent literature on moderate Islamic knowledge in the *post-truth* era suggests that critical and contextual Islamic approaches play an important role in protecting students from extreme or manipulative narratives in digital media (Arifin & Sofa, 2025b).

Recent studies also show that social media users' exposure to religious misinformation is relatively high. Research on user engagement with religious misinformation indicates that a significant proportion of users tend to believe or fail to identify religious misinformation accurately. Such findings imply that digital religiosity is not always accompanied by sufficient verification capacity. In the context of university students, this condition reinforces the urgency of learning processes that move beyond mastery of Islamic subject matter and instead cultivate critical habits, methodological caution, and intellectual ethics in both receiving and disseminating religious information.

Nevertheless, the existing literature has largely focused on disinformation in general, media and information literacy, or the macro-level transformation of digital religious authority. There is still relatively limited research that specifically positions the Introduction to Islamic Studies course as a pedagogical instrument for strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation. This limitation becomes even more apparent when the inquiry is directed toward a more specific setting, namely students in the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo, both of whom live within the same digital flow but possess different epistemic backgrounds and academic orientations. Therefore, an important research gap remains, namely the need to understand how a foundational Islamic studies course may be reoriented into a space for developing students' intellectual resilience in responding to digital religious information.

Based on this review, the present study departs from the conceptual assumption that Introduction to Islamic Studies, when taught critically, contextually, and methodologically, has the potential to strengthen students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation. In qualitative research, this assumption is not formulated as a statistical hypothesis, but rather as a conceptual foundation for examining in depth students' experiences, learning practices, and academic dynamics that shape their ability to select, verify, and respond to digital religious information in a reflective and responsible manner. Within this perspective, Introduction to Islamic Studies is understood not merely as an introductory course, but as a medium for cultivating students' critical religious literacy and intellectual resilience in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course in strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation. Through a qualitative approach, the study is able to explore the experiences, perspectives, and learning practices that occur within the academic setting, allowing the meaning of the learning process to be understood in a more comprehensive and contextual manner.

The research was conducted in the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo. These two programs were selected on the grounds that they represent different academic characteristics while both are situated within a digital environment that requires students to develop critical thinking in responding to religious information. Therefore, both contexts were considered relevant for examining how the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course functions as a means of strengthening students' intellectual resilience.

The research participants consisted of the lecturers teaching the Introduction to Islamic Studies course and the students enrolled in the course in both programs. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on the consideration that they possessed relevant knowledge, direct experience, and active involvement in the learning process under study. Lecturers were selected because they are responsible for designing and implementing the course, while students were selected because they

directly experience the learning process and simultaneously engage with various forms of digital religious information in their academic and social lives.

The data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives and experiences of lecturers and students regarding the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course and its relation to the strengthening of critical awareness toward digital religious disinformation. Observation was used to examine the actual learning process, academic interactions, and students' responses to the course materials. Documentation was employed to complement the data by reviewing academic documents such as the semester lesson plan, teaching materials, lecture notes, and student assignments relevant to the study (Zainuddin & Junaida, 2026). The data is clarified in the following diagram 1:

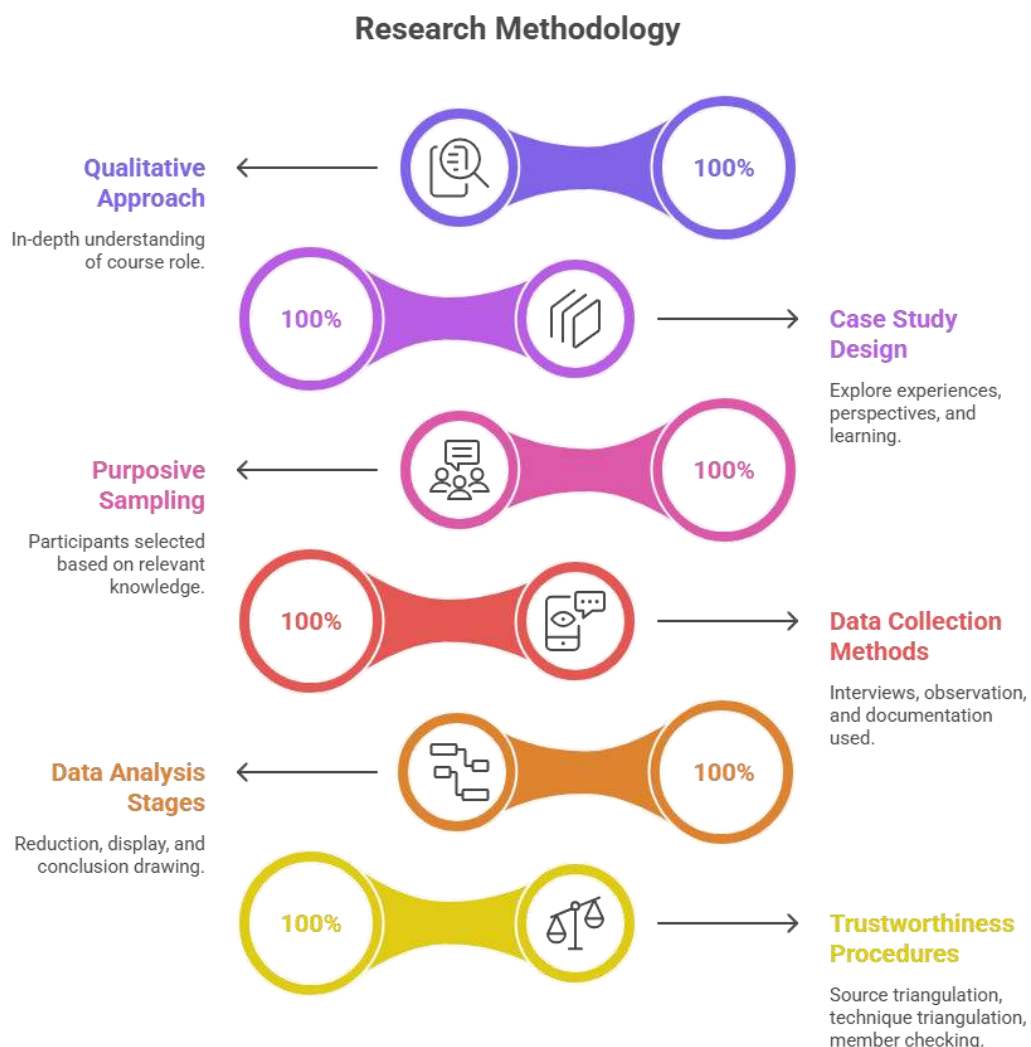


Diagram 1: Research Methodology

The collected data were analyzed interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing the data in accordance with the objectives of the research. Data display was presented in a systematic narrative form so that the relationships among the findings could be clearly understood. Furthermore, conclusions were drawn gradually

based on the patterns, themes, and meanings emerging from the overall research data (Wulandari & Ardiani, 2026).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from lecturers, students, and academic documents. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing findings from interviews, observation, and documentation. Meanwhile, member checking was used to confirm that the data and the researcher's interpretations were consistent with the participants' actual experiences and intentions. Through these procedures, the study is expected to provide a valid and in-depth account of how the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course functions in shaping students' critical reasoning, verification skills, and intellectual responsibility in responding to digital religious disinformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subjects of this study consisted of the Director of the Graduate School of UNZAH, Dr. H. Imam Bukhori, M.Pd., the Head of the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of UNZAH, Dr. Ainur Rofiq Sofa, M.Pd., and students enrolled in the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation, and were analyzed to examine the role of the course in strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation.

The findings show that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course occupies a strategic position in shaping students' academic way of thinking. Based on the interview with Dr. H. Imam Bukhori, M.Pd., students today are exposed to a rapid flow of digital religious information, yet not all of it is supported by valid sources and sound methodology. He emphasized that "*students should not merely receive religious information from digital media, but must be able to examine its sources, context, and validity academically.*" This statement indicates that the main challenge lies not only in the abundance of information, but also in students' ability to filter and critically assess it.

The study also found that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course should not function merely as a basic introduction to Islam, but also as a space for developing critical religious literacy. Dr. Ainur Rofiq Sofa, M.Pd. stated that "*Introduction to Islamic Studies not only introduces the scope of Islamic studies, but also shapes students' scientific way of thinking in understanding contemporary religious issues.*" In this context, the course plays an important role in strengthening students' ability to distinguish between text and interpretation, normative teachings and social practice, as well as scholarly authority and viral religious opinions in digital spaces.

The data analysis further revealed that the strengthening of students' intellectual resilience takes place through three main aspects. First, the course provides an epistemological foundation for understanding Islam scientifically. Second, it fosters critical thinking skills in reading digital religious information. Third, it develops intellectual responsibility, so that students do not easily accept or disseminate unverified religious information. This is reinforced by the statement of Dr. Ainur Rofiq Sofa, M.Pd., who noted that "*amid the growing spread of religious content on social media, students need to be equipped with the ability to distinguish between normative teachings, interpretation, opinion, and misleading information.*"

These findings are consistent with the theory of information literacy, which emphasizes an individual's ability to access, evaluate, and use information appropriately. In this study, students are not only expected to obtain religious information, but also to assess its source, context, and validity. This alignment indicates that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course functions as a medium for strengthening students' religious information literacy.

The findings are also in line with the theory of digital religious authority. This theory explains that digital media have expanded the sources of religious authority, so that authority is no longer located solely in scholars, lecturers, or formal institutions, but also in influencers, content creators, and popular public figures. In such a condition, students need the ability to distinguish between scholarly authority and digital popularity. The results of this study demonstrate that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course helps students develop this awareness.

In addition, the findings are compatible with the concept of intellectual resilience, which refers to the ability to remain critical, reflective, and methodologically grounded when confronted with conflicting information. In this research, intellectual resilience is reflected in students' ability not to accept religious information uncritically, but instead to examine the source, compare opinions, and understand the context. Thus, the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course serves as a means of developing students' intellectual endurance amid the spread of digital religious disinformation.

From the perspective of learning theory, these findings are also consistent with the contextual learning approach, which connects academic material with the real-life situations faced by learners. In this study, the content of *Introduction to Islamic Studies* is not understood merely as basic concepts, but is linked directly to phenomena such as digital religious content, hoaxes, viral sermon clips, and religious opinions circulating on social media. This shows that learning becomes more meaningful when academic material is connected to the actual problems encountered by students.

In conclusion, the answer to the research question shows that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course makes a significant contribution to strengthening students' intellectual resilience. This contribution can be seen in its role in developing academic reasoning, critical religious literacy, and the habit of verifying information. The findings confirm that *Introduction to Islamic Studies* is not only relevant as a foundational course, but also important as a pedagogical means of addressing the challenge of digital religious disinformation in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course plays a strategic role in strengthening students' intellectual resilience against digital religious disinformation. This role is reflected in its contribution to building students' epistemological foundation, fostering critical religious literacy, and developing the habit of verifying religious information circulating in digital spaces. In the context of the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at the Graduate School of Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo, *Introduction to Islamic Studies* does not function merely as a foundational course, but also as a pedagogical medium for shaping students who are more critical, reflective, and responsible in responding to digital religious information.

The implications of this study suggest that the *Introduction to Islamic Studies*

course should be designed more contextually by linking its materials to actual phenomena such as religious hoaxes, viral sermon clips, religious opinions on social media, and the shifting nature of digital religious authority. Lecturers need to develop learning strategies that not only emphasize conceptual understanding but also train students to examine sources, evaluate arguments, and understand the context of information academically. Therefore, the findings of this study may serve as a practical reference for curriculum development, teaching materials, and learning models that are more responsive to the challenges of religious life in the digital era.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted only in two academic contexts, namely the English Education Department and the Master's Program in Islamic Education at UNZAH, so the findings cannot yet be generalized to other higher education settings. Second, this study employed a qualitative approach, meaning that the findings emphasize depth of understanding rather than statistical measurement of effect. Third, the data were mainly derived from interviews, observation, and learning documents, so they have not yet captured more broadly students' behavior in consuming and producing digital religious information outside the academic setting.

Based on these limitations, future studies are recommended to expand the research setting to different study programs, universities, or levels of education in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding. Future researchers may also employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to measure the influence of the *Introduction to Islamic Studies* course on students' intellectual resilience more systematically. In addition, further studies may examine more specifically the forms of digital religious disinformation that most strongly affect students, as well as the most effective learning strategies for strengthening critical religious literacy in higher education.

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