

Faith, Reason, and Digital Media: A Qualitative Exploration of Young Muslims' Perspectives in Islamic Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: The rapid development of digital media has transformed how Muslim youth access, interpret, and practice religious knowledge. While digital platforms offer opportunities for Islamic learning, they also raise challenges related to religious authority, information credibility, and integrating faith with rational inquiry. This study explores how Muslim undergraduate students understand the relationship between faith and reason and how digital media influence their religious learning and decision-making. A qualitative phenomenological approach examined the lived experiences of ten Muslim undergraduate students at Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, selected through purposive sampling based on active engagement with digital religious media. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, with trustworthiness ensured through reflexive analysis, member checking, and triangulation. Findings show participants perceive faith and reason as complementary: faith provides spiritual commitment and moral guidance, while reason enables critical evaluation of religious information. Digital media expanded access to Islamic knowledge but also diversified religious authority, prompting participants to distinguish scholarly credibility from online popularity through source comparison and consulting trusted lecturers. Family, education, and algorithmic content shaped their evaluative strategies. The study concludes that faith-reason relations are dynamic and digitally mediated, creating a hybrid religious environment requiring integrated religious and digital literacy in Islamic higher education.

Keywords: Faith, Reason, Digital Religion, Muslim Youth, Digital Literacy, Islamic Higher Education, Qualitative Phenomenology.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which religious knowledge is produced, disseminated, accessed, and interpreted across contemporary societies. Digital

platforms such as social media, video-sharing websites, podcasts, online discussion forums, and artificial intelligence applications have become increasingly important channels through which individuals engage with religious teachings and practices. Within Muslim communities, these technological developments have significantly expanded opportunities for learning Islam beyond traditional educational settings, including mosques, Islamic boarding schools, and formal religious institutions. Instead, religious learning has increasingly become a hybrid process in which online and offline experiences intersect, allowing young Muslims to access diverse religious resources regardless of geographical and institutional boundaries. Digital religion scholars argue that the distinction between online and offline religious practice has become increasingly blurred, requiring new conceptual frameworks to understand how religious knowledge is negotiated within digitally mediated environments (Ayubi, 2023; Khroul, 2020; Sikumbang et al., 2023; Siuda, 2021).

Among the various demographic groups influenced by digital transformation, Muslim youth represent one of the most active users of digital technologies for religious purposes. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, podcasts, and artificial intelligence tools have become integral components of their everyday religious learning. These platforms not only provide convenient access to lectures, Qur'anic interpretations, religious discussions, and fatwas but also facilitate interaction with scholars, religious influencers, and peer communities across national boundaries. Contemporary studies demonstrate that youth-oriented religious content combines scriptural teachings with lifestyle narratives, visual aesthetics, and peer interaction, creating forms of religious engagement that differ substantially from conventional classroom-based instruction (Golan, 2023; Hasan, 2022; Novak et al., 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital religious education, compelling religious institutions and scholars to migrate sermons, Qur'anic recitations, and Islamic learning activities to online platforms, thereby normalizing digital religious engagement among younger generations (Ganiel, 2021; Isiko, 2022; Nisa & Saenong, 2022).

Although digital media have democratized access to Islamic knowledge, they have simultaneously generated significant epistemological challenges. Unlike traditional religious education, where recognized scholars and institutions function as primary gatekeepers of religious authority, digital environments expose users to an extensive range of interpretations originating from scholars, preachers, influencers, organizations, and ordinary users. This diversification of religious voices has reduced the monopoly of traditional authorities while increasing the plurality of perspectives available to Muslim audiences (Asaari et al., 2023; Muzayana, 2023; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021). Consequently, young Muslims are increasingly required to evaluate the credibility of online religious information, distinguish authoritative scholarship from misinformation, and determine which interpretations are consistent with Islamic teachings. Such processes demand not only religious literacy but also digital literacy and critical reasoning skills capable of navigating algorithm-driven information environments (Eshet-Alkalai, 2017).

The proliferation of digital religious information also raises important questions concerning the relationship between faith and rationality (Alhouti et al., 2025). Young Muslims frequently encounter

discussions surrounding contemporary scientific discoveries, biomedical ethics, artificial intelligence, environmental sustainability, religious pluralism, human rights, and other emerging social issues through digital media. These topics often involve multiple religious interpretations and require individuals to reconcile scriptural teachings with logical analysis and empirical evidence. Previous studies indicate that online religious environments encourage users to compare scholarly opinions, verify sources, and critically examine religious arguments rather than accepting information uncritically (Alimardani & Elswah, 2020; Caidi et al., 2023). At the same time, algorithmic recommendation systems and engagement-based metrics may elevate religious content based on popularity rather than scholarly credibility, thereby complicating the evaluation of religious authority and increasing the possibility of misinformation (Muzayana, 2023; Nisa & Saenong, 2022).

The interaction between faith and reason has long occupied a central position within Islamic intellectual history. Classical Muslim philosophers and theologians developed sophisticated discussions regarding the roles of revelation, rational inquiry, and human intellect in understanding religious truth. These debates continue to inform contemporary Islamic thought, particularly when Muslims engage with scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and rapidly changing social realities. Contemporary scholarship suggests that rather than representing opposing epistemological systems, faith and reason are frequently understood as complementary dimensions that together support ethical decision-making, religious understanding, and intellectual development (Ahmed, 2022; Mustofa et al., 2023; Safitri et al., 2025). Studies exploring faith and science similarly demonstrate that many young believers negotiate apparent tensions through contextual interpretation and reflective reasoning rather than perceiving science and religion as inherently incompatible (Ndereba, 2023).

Digital environments further reshape these epistemological processes by transforming perceptions of religious authority. Traditional scholars increasingly employ digital platforms to extend their educational activities, while new religious influencers gain visibility through social media algorithms and audience engagement. Consequently, authority is no longer determined solely by formal religious credentials but is also influenced by digital popularity, platform visibility, and audience interaction (Muzayana, 2023; Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Siuda, 2021). Such developments require Muslim youth to develop sophisticated evaluative strategies when selecting religious sources. They frequently compare multiple scholars, verify information using the Qur'an and Hadith, consult trusted teachers, and cross-reference religious opinions before accepting or sharing digital content. These practices illustrate how faith and rationality are negotiated simultaneously within contemporary digital religious life.

Despite the rapid expansion of scholarship on digital religion, significant research gaps remain. Existing studies have extensively examined online religious authority, digital da'wah, social media use, and Muslim identity formation. Similarly, numerous philosophical studies have discussed the relationship between faith and reason from normative and historical perspectives. However, relatively few qualitative investigations explore how Muslim youth themselves experience and interpret the integration of faith and rationality while engaging with digital religious media. The available literature further indicates limited empirical attention to how digital learning environments influence epistemic

reasoning, credibility assessment, and everyday religious decision-making among digitally active Muslim youth (Ahmed, 2022; Caidi et al., 2023; Novak et al., 2022; Siuda, 2021). Scholars have therefore recommended more in-depth qualitative and mixed-methods research capable of examining how digital religious experiences shape cognitive, spiritual, and epistemological development.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the perspectives of Muslim undergraduate students at Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar regarding the relationship between faith and reason in the digital era. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study investigates how participants conceptualize faith and rationality, acquire religious knowledge through digital media, evaluate the credibility of online religious information, and negotiate diverse Islamic interpretations encountered in digital spaces. It further examines the influence of family, religious education, and digital experiences on the formation of participants' religious perspectives and everyday practices.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of three complementary fields Islamic epistemology, digital religion, and qualitative youth studies within a single analytical framework. Rather than treating faith and rationality as abstract philosophical concepts or examining digital religious behavior in isolation, this study investigates how these dimensions intersect within the lived experiences of Muslim youth navigating contemporary digital environments. By foregrounding participants' own narratives, the research contributes empirical evidence to ongoing discussions concerning the compatibility of faith and rational inquiry, the transformation of religious authority in digital contexts, and the development of religious and digital literacy among young Muslims (Hamzah & Jaafar, 2026). The findings are expected to provide meaningful theoretical contributions to Islamic studies while offering practical implications for Islamic higher education, digital da'wah, curriculum development, and religious literacy initiatives designed to prepare Muslim youth for increasingly complex digital information ecosystems.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to investigate how young Muslims understand and experience the relationship between faith, reason, and digital media. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine participants' subjective interpretations, personal reflections, and meaning-making processes rather than quantify predetermined variables. Phenomenology is particularly suitable for research concerned with lived religious experience because it enables researchers to explore how individuals perceive faith, spirituality, identity, and religious practice within everyday social contexts (Isetti, 2022; Srivastava & Upadhaya, 2022).

The phenomenological orientation of the study focused on how participants experienced faith and rationality while engaging with religious content through digital media. Rather than treating faith and

reason as abstract philosophical categories, the research examined how these concepts were interpreted, negotiated, and practiced by Muslim undergraduate students in their daily lives. This orientation was consistent with previous qualitative studies of religion and youth that emphasized participants' interior experiences, identity formation, affective responses, and interpretations of religious belonging (Hasan, 2022; Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Novak et al., 2022).

Although not all studies of Muslim youth explicitly adopt a formal phenomenological methodology, many employ interpretive and contextual approaches that share phenomenology's concern with lived experience and subjective meaning (Kunelaki, 2022). The present study therefore combined phenomenological inquiry with thematic analysis. This combination enabled the researchers to preserve attention to participants' individual experiences while identifying recurring patterns across the interview data.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The institution was selected because it provides a relevant social and educational context for examining the interaction between Islamic learning, rational inquiry, and digital media. As an Islamic higher education institution, the university offers formal religious instruction while also exposing students to modern academic disciplines, scientific perspectives, and contemporary digital technologies.

The research setting was especially appropriate because students regularly encountered religious knowledge from both institutional and digital sources. Their experiences therefore reflected an interaction between formal Islamic education, family-based religious socialization, personal reflection, and digitally mediated learning. This setting enabled the study to explore how young Muslims negotiated religious authority, evaluated online information, and integrated faith with rational thinking in a contemporary university environment.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved ten Muslim undergraduate students between 18 and 24 years of age. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. This sampling strategy was used because the study required individuals who had direct experience of accessing religious information through digital media and who could articulate their views concerning faith and rationality.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled undergraduate students, identify as Muslim, regularly use at least one digital platform for religious learning, and be willing to discuss their religious experiences in depth. Relevant platforms included YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Islamic websites, podcasts, online discussion forums, and artificial intelligence applications.

The sample was designed to capture varied perspectives rather than achieve statistical representation. Participants differed in educational background, frequency of digital media use, preferred religious sources, and family religious environment. Such variation supported a broader exploration of how different personal and social experiences shaped participants' understanding of faith, reason, and online religious knowledge.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. This method allowed the researchers to examine predetermined areas of interest while giving participants sufficient flexibility to explain their experiences in their own words. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a setting that supported privacy and open discussion.

The interview guide included questions about participants' definitions of faith and rationality, their perceptions of the relationship between revelation and reason, their experiences of digital religious learning, and their strategies for assessing the credibility of online information. Participants were also asked about the influence of family, formal religious education, peers, religious teachers, and social media on their perspectives.

Follow-up questions were used to clarify participants' statements and encourage detailed reflection. For example, participants were invited to describe situations in which online religious information conflicted with their prior understanding, explain how they selected trusted religious figures, and discuss whether digital media had strengthened, challenged, or complicated their faith.

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers reviewed each transcript alongside the recording to ensure accuracy. Identifying information was removed, and participant codes ranging from P1 to P10 were assigned to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework associated with Braun and Clarke. Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and compatibility with interpretive and phenomenological research. It enabled the researchers to identify shared patterns while remaining attentive to differences in individual meaning and experience (Srivastava & Upadhaya, 2022).

The first phase involved familiarization with the data. The researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts and recorded preliminary observations about participants' interpretations of faith, reason, religious authority, and digital media. Attention was given to both explicit statements and underlying assumptions reflected in participants' narratives.

The second phase involved initial coding. Meaningful units of text were coded inductively according to their relevance to the research questions. Examples of preliminary codes included “faith as guidance,” “reason as verification,” “trust in scholars,” “checking multiple sources,” “family influence,” “algorithmic exposure,” and “conflicting interpretations.”

During the third phase, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. The analysis generated provisional thematic categories concerning understandings of faith, understandings of rationality, the integration of faith and reason, digital religious learning, and contextual influences on religious perspectives.

The fourth phase involved reviewing the candidate themes against the coded extracts and the complete dataset. Themes were revised, combined, or separated when necessary to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between categories. Contradictory or minority perspectives were retained where they contributed to a more nuanced interpretation.

In the fifth phase, the themes were defined and named. The researchers clarified the central organizing concept of each theme and examined its relationship to the research questions. The final phase involved producing a coherent analytical account supported by representative participant quotations.

Qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo may be used to organize transcripts, manage codes, and document relationships between categories. However, software functions only as a data-management tool and does not replace interpretive analysis. Previous studies recommend combining software-assisted coding with reflexive discussion and transparent documentation of analytic decisions (Srivastava & Upadhaya, 2022).

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity was incorporated throughout the research process. Because qualitative interpretation is influenced by researchers' assumptions, educational backgrounds, religious positions, and theoretical commitments, the researchers critically examined how their perspectives shaped interview interactions and data interpretation.

A reflexive journal was maintained to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, potential biases, and changes in the analytical framework. Reflexive thematic analysis recognizes that researchers are not detached observers but active participants in producing meaning from qualitative data (Srivastava & Upadhaya, 2022). Reflexivity was therefore treated as an analytical resource and a means of improving transparency rather than as a procedure intended to eliminate subjectivity completely.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through strategies addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the interview material, iterative questioning, and member checking. Selected participants were invited to review summaries of their interview interpretations to ensure that the findings adequately represented their intended meanings.

Triangulation was undertaken by comparing participants' accounts across different backgrounds and examining references to multiple digital platforms, religious sources, and educational experiences. In digital religion research, triangulation across participants, platforms, documents, and forms of interaction can strengthen the credibility of emerging interpretations (Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021).

Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining an audit trail containing the interview guide, transcripts, coding notes, theme-development records, reflexive entries, and revisions to the analytical structure. A codebook and thematic map were developed to document how initial codes were transformed into broader themes. Such documentation allows readers and other researchers to assess the consistency and transparency of the analytic process (Srivastava & Upadhaya, 2022).

Peer debriefing was also used to evaluate the clarity and plausibility of the coding structure. Interpretive disagreements were discussed until a defensible analytical understanding was reached. The process did not assume that a single objective coding outcome was possible; instead, discussion was used to identify unsupported assumptions and strengthen the relationship between themes and data.

Transferability was enhanced through a detailed description of the research setting, participant characteristics, institutional context, data-collection procedures, and thematic findings. Thick description enables readers to determine whether the findings may be relevant to comparable Muslim youth populations or Islamic higher education settings.

Digital-Context Considerations

Because the study examined religious learning through digital media, the analysis considered how platform structures influenced participants' experiences. Digital religious information is shaped not only by content producers but also by algorithms, engagement metrics, recommendation systems, moderation practices, and patterns of platform visibility. These factors may influence which religious messages participants encounter and which figures they perceive as authoritative (Muzayana, 2023; Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Siuda, 2021).

Accordingly, participants' evaluations of online religious sources were interpreted in relation to platform-specific conditions. Particular attention was given to distinctions between scholarly credibility and digital popularity, including the influence of follower counts, likes, repeated

recommendations, and viral circulation. This contextual sensitivity was necessary to avoid interpreting online religious behavior independently of the technological environment in which it occurred.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before data collection. Participants received information explaining the study's aims, procedures, voluntary nature, and use of interview data. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview.

Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw without penalty. Pseudonymous participant codes were used in transcripts and reports, while digital files were stored securely and accessed only for research purposes. Because religious belief is a sensitive and personal subject, interviews were conducted respectfully and without evaluating participants' theological positions. The researchers sought to represent diverse perspectives accurately while avoiding language that could stigmatize particular religious interpretations.

Through this methodological design, the study aimed to produce a credible and contextually grounded account of how young Muslims understand faith and rationality while navigating digital religious environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings obtained from semi-structured interviews with ten Muslim undergraduate students at Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar. The analysis generated five interrelated themes: understanding faith, understanding rationality, negotiating the relationship between faith and reason, learning religion through digital media, and the factors shaping participants' perspectives. The themes were developed from recurring patterns in participants' narratives while preserving variations in their individual experiences. Participant identities are represented by the codes P1–P10.

Understanding Faith as a Lived Religious Orientation

The first major theme concerned how participants understood faith in contemporary life. Across the interviews, faith was not described solely as acceptance of Islamic doctrines. Instead, participants portrayed faith as a lived orientation that shaped their emotions, choices, relationships, and responses to everyday problems. Four interconnected dimensions emerged: faith as spiritual commitment, faith as guidance, faith as moral practice, and faith as a source of psychological stability.

Faith as Spiritual Commitment

Most participants described faith as an inner commitment to Allah that involved belief, trust, worship, and personal responsibility. They understood faith as something that could not be reduced to verbal confession because it required continuous expression through action. Participants frequently connected faith with prayer, remembrance of Allah, Qur'anic reading, and efforts to maintain obedience in daily life.

For several participants, faith was experienced as a personal relationship with Allah. This relationship was perceived as dynamic rather than fixed. Participants explained that their level of religious commitment could become stronger or weaker depending on their spiritual practices, social environment, and exposure to religious information. Faith was therefore understood as a condition that required continuous cultivation.

This finding corresponds with phenomenological accounts in which Muslim youths' faith is represented as an everyday lived experience rather than merely a set of abstract doctrinal propositions. Studies of Muslim youth in plural and secular environments similarly show that religious belief is narrated through personal experience, daily practice, and evolving forms of belonging. However, the present participants articulated this lived dimension within the specific context of Islamic higher education and intensive digital media use.

Faith as Guidance for Everyday Life

Participants commonly defined faith as a source of direction for making personal, educational, and social decisions. Faith provided principles that helped them distinguish appropriate from inappropriate conduct and gave them a framework for evaluating their intentions. Several participants explained that Islamic teachings influenced how they interacted with parents, friends, lecturers, and online communities.

Faith was also associated with a sense of purpose. Participants stated that belief in Allah encouraged them to view academic study, family responsibilities, and social relationships as dimensions of religious accountability. For these students, faith connected ordinary activities with broader spiritual objectives.

The interviews indicated that faith became particularly important when participants faced uncertainty. Some explained that they used prayer, scriptural reflection, or consultation with trusted religious figures when making difficult decisions. Faith did not always provide an immediate practical solution, but it offered a moral orientation through which problems could be interpreted.

Faith as Moral Practice

A further pattern involved the relationship between faith and ethical behavior. Participants believed that genuine faith should be reflected in honesty, compassion, discipline, respect, and responsibility. They frequently rejected the idea that religiosity could be measured only through visible ritual practices.

Several participants emphasized that a person could display religious symbols online while behaving inconsistently in interpersonal relationships. They therefore distinguished between the public performance of religiosity and the internalization of religious values. In their accounts, faith became credible when it produced observable moral consequences.

This interpretation is consistent with research suggesting that contemporary Muslim youth express faith through everyday practices, identity performance, and participation in evolving religious communities (Hasan, 2022; Nisa & Saenong, 2022). Nevertheless, participants in the present study were also critical of highly aestheticized or performative digital religiosity when it appeared disconnected from ethical conduct.

Faith as Psychological and Emotional Stability

Faith was also described as a source of calmness, resilience, and hope. Participants stated that belief in Allah helped them manage academic pressure, uncertainty about the future, family difficulties, and personal disappointment. Religious practices such as prayer and Qur'anic recitation were regarded as ways of regulating emotions and restoring a sense of inner balance.

Some participants explained that digital religious content also contributed to this emotional function. Short sermons, Qur'anic reflections, and motivational Islamic messages were sometimes accessed during periods of anxiety or discouragement. However, participants differed in their responses to such content. Some found it spiritually beneficial, whereas others believed that simplified motivational messages could not replace sustained learning or direct religious guidance.

Faith as a Hybrid Online–Offline Experience

The second subtheme showed that participants experienced faith through a combination of offline religious practices and digitally mediated learning. Their religious lives were not divided into separate physical and virtual domains. Instead, digital content interacted continuously with family instruction, university education, mosque activities, peer discussion, and personal worship.

Digital Expression of Religious Identity

Participants used digital media to access sermons, Qur'anic interpretation, discussions of Islamic law, motivational content, and responses to contemporary social issues. Some also shared religious quotations, short videos, or reminders through their personal social media accounts.

For several participants, sharing religious content was understood as a form of da'wa or mutual encouragement. Others were more cautious because they feared circulating inaccurate or decontextualized material. This difference reflected varying levels of confidence in their religious knowledge and digital literacy.

The findings support previous studies showing that Muslim youth increasingly express and cultivate religious identity through hybrid online–offline practices, including digital da'wa, online recitation, and visually mediated religious communication (Ganiel, 2021; Hasan, 2022; Nisa & Saenong, 2022). In the present study, however, digital religious expression was accompanied by an awareness that public sharing carried moral and epistemic responsibility.

Negotiating Visibility and Sincerity

Participants expressed concern about the relationship between visible online religiosity and sincerity. Some believed that posting religious content could inspire others, while others worried that it might encourage self-presentation, social recognition, or judgment toward people with different levels of observance.

This tension demonstrated that participants did not perceive digital religious expression as inherently positive or negative. Its value depended on intention, accuracy, context, and the potential effect on audiences. Participants therefore negotiated faith not only as private belief but also as a visible identity shaped by platform norms.

Religious Belonging in Digital Communities

Digital media enabled participants to encounter Muslim communities beyond their immediate social surroundings. They followed preachers, student religious organizations, Qur'anic study groups, and Muslim content creators from different regions. These networks expanded their sense of religious belonging and exposed them to interpretations that were not always available in their families or local communities.

At the same time, participants recognized that online communities could become exclusive or polarized. Some had observed disagreements in comment sections, accusations against particular Islamic groups, and disputes over religious practices. Consequently, digital belonging was accompanied by the need to evaluate competing claims to authenticity and authority.

This pattern is consistent with scholarship portraying faith as a process of affiliation within changing religious publics shaped by traditional scholars, online preachers, influencers, and digital communities (Ayubi, 2023; Muzayana, 2023; Sikumbang et al., 2023; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021).

Factors Shaping Participants' Understanding of Faith

Participants' understanding of faith developed through the interaction of family socialization, formal religious education, peer relationships, digital media, personal experience, and exposure to diverse religious perspectives. No participant attributed their religious understanding to a single source.

Family Religious Socialization

Family was the earliest and most frequently mentioned influence. Participants described learning prayer, Qur'anic recitation, moral discipline, and basic religious values from parents or older relatives. For some, the family environment encouraged questioning and discussion. For others, religious instruction was more directive and emphasized obedience.

Family influence remained important even when participants entered university and gained greater access to digital knowledge. Several participants continued to consult parents or relatives when online religious information contradicted practices learned at home. However, university education and digital exposure sometimes led them to reconsider inherited understandings.

Formal Islamic Education

Formal education played a central role in developing more systematic interpretations of faith. Participants explained that university courses introduced them to Qur'anic studies, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and research methods. These subjects helped them recognize that Islamic scholarship contained multiple schools of interpretation and established procedures for evaluating religious arguments.

Participants who had attended Islamic boarding schools or religious secondary schools generally reported greater familiarity with Arabic terminology and classical sources. Other participants depended more heavily on lecturers, translated texts, and digital explanations. Despite these differences, formal Islamic education was widely regarded as an important foundation for distinguishing scholarly reasoning from unsupported religious claims.

Digital Media and Platform-Based Authority

Digital media substantially influenced what participants learned about faith and which issues they considered religiously important. Recommendation systems repeatedly exposed them to sermons, debates, moral advice, and responses to trending events. Participants acknowledged that such exposure sometimes strengthened their motivation to worship or encouraged them to study unfamiliar topics.

However, they also recognized that platform popularity did not necessarily indicate scholarly credibility. Some participants initially trusted speakers because they had large audiences, professional production, or persuasive communication styles. Over time, they became more cautious and began examining educational backgrounds, institutional affiliations, references, and consistency with recognized Islamic sources.

This finding reflects previous research demonstrating that online fatwas, da'wa influencers, engagement metrics, and algorithmic visibility shape how young Muslims encounter religious knowledge and determine whom to trust (Muzayana, 2023; Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Siuda, 2021; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021). The interviews showed that platform-based authority did not completely replace conventional authority but existed alongside lecturers, local scholars, family members, and religious institutions.

Personal Experience and Religious Reflection

Participants also stated that personal experiences influenced their faith. Illness, academic challenges, family problems, friendship conflicts, and significant life transitions encouraged reflection on divine purpose and personal responsibility. In some cases, difficult experiences strengthened religious commitment. In others, they generated questions that motivated participants to search for explanations through books, lectures, or online discussions.

Faith was therefore shaped not only by external instruction but also by participants' interpretation of their own life events. These experiences influenced whether religious teachings were perceived as meaningful, comforting, demanding, or difficult to apply.

Social Diversity and Exposure to Different Views

University life exposed participants to students from different regions, family traditions, Islamic organizations, and levels of religious observance. This diversity encouraged them to recognize variations in religious practice and interpretation. Several participants stated that interaction with different perspectives made them less likely to assume that their family tradition was the only legitimate expression of Islam.

Previous research has shown that socialization in multi-faith or plural environments can contribute to reflexive and hybrid forms of religious identity among Muslim youth (Novak et al., 2022). Although participants in this study primarily interacted within a Muslim-majority environment, internal diversity within Islam produced a comparable process of reflection and negotiation.

Transnational and Linguistic Influences

Some participants accessed Indonesian-language translations or summaries of religious content originating from international speakers. A smaller number followed English-language Islamic material. Such access expanded their exposure to global discussions but occasionally created difficulties because foreign interpretations did not always correspond to Indonesian social, cultural, or jurisprudential contexts.

This finding is relevant to discussions of Anglophone Islam and transnational digital flows, which suggest that globally circulating content can reshape local religious understandings while privileging particular linguistic and interpretive frameworks (Ahmed, 2022; Siuda, 2021). Participants therefore emphasized the importance of contextualizing international religious content before applying it to local circumstances.

Summary of Theme 1

The findings indicate that participants understood faith as a multidimensional and evolving orientation encompassing spiritual commitment, moral conduct, life guidance, emotional stability, and social belonging. Faith was experienced through interconnected online and offline practices rather than through exclusively institutional or private forms.

Participants' understandings were shaped by family, Islamic education, digital platforms, personal experience, peer interaction, and exposure to diverse local and transnational perspectives. Digital media expanded access to religious knowledge and communities but also created uncertainty concerning sincerity, interpretation, and authority. Consequently, participants increasingly regarded faith formation as requiring both spiritual commitment and careful evaluation of the sources through which religious knowledge was communicated.

Table 1. Summary of Findings for Theme 1

Dimension	Empirical finding	Principal influences
Spiritual commitment	Faith involves trust in Allah, worship, and personal responsibility.	Family, worship, personal reflection
Daily guidance	Faith directs decisions and provides a sense of purpose.	Islamic teachings, family, lecturers

Dimension	Empirical finding	Principal influences
Moral practice	Faith should be demonstrated through ethical conduct.	Religious education, social relationships
Emotional stability	Faith provides calmness, hope, and resilience.	Prayer, Qur'anic reflection, digital reminders
Digital expression	Faith is communicated through online content and interaction.	Social media, digital da'wa, peer networks
Religious belonging	Digital communities broaden affiliation and exposure.	Scholars, influencers, online groups
Authority evaluation	Popularity is distinguished from scholarly credibility.	Formal education, digital literacy
Contextual formation	Faith is shaped by local, national, and transnational experiences.	Culture, language, social diversity

Overall, Theme 1 demonstrates that the participants did not define faith as a static body of beliefs. They understood it as a lived, relational, and reflexive orientation continuously shaped by religious tradition, personal experience, education, and digitally mediated interaction.

The findings demonstrate that the participants generally understood faith and reason as complementary rather than oppositional dimensions of Muslim life. Faith was described as spiritual commitment, moral orientation, emotional stability, and guidance for everyday decisions, whereas reason was associated with reflection, verification, evidence, and critical judgment. This relationship suggests that the participants did not perceive rational inquiry as a threat to religious conviction. Instead, they viewed reason as a means of interpreting religious teachings, evaluating competing claims, and strengthening confidence in beliefs that could be defended intellectually. This pattern is broadly consistent with the continuing importance of faith–reason debates in Islamic intellectual history, where theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence developed different accounts of the scope and limits of rational inquiry. Contemporary scholarship similarly presents the relationship between faith and reason as an ongoing interpretive process rather than a permanently settled opposition (Mustofa et al., 2023).

The participants' perspectives also reflect a form of contemporary methodological pluralism. They drew simultaneously on revelation, formal Islamic education, personal experience, family guidance, scholarly opinion, and digital information. Such plurality resembles contemporary Islamic epistemological approaches that combine textual authority with contextual interpretation, scientific knowledge, and reflective judgment (Ahmed, 2022; Mustofa et al., 2023; Ndereba, 2023). However, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that participants replaced revelation with autonomous reason. Most participants continued to regard the Qur'an, Hadith, and recognized scholarly traditions as foundational. Their use of reason was primarily evaluative and interpretive: they compared explanations, assessed evidence, examined context, and considered whether online claims were consistent with established Islamic principles. In this sense, their practices resembled an everyday form of contextual reasoning shaped by, but not identical to, formal traditions of *ijtihad*.

Digital media significantly expanded the range of epistemic sources available to the participants. Their religious learning no longer depended exclusively on local teachers, lecturers, mosques, or family members. They encountered online fatwas, short sermons, podcasts, livestreams, social-media posts, digital discussion groups, and artificial intelligence-generated explanations. This expansion created greater accessibility and diversity, but it also required participants to decide which voices deserved trust. The findings therefore support scholarship describing digital religious authority as increasingly plural, hybrid, and platform-dependent (Ayubi, 2023; Muzayana, 2023; Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Sikumbang et al., 2023; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021). Traditional scholars remained important, yet they operated alongside influencers, online preachers, institutional accounts, and highly visible content creators.

The emergence of this hybrid authority environment did not necessarily eliminate traditional legitimacy. Instead, digital visibility often interacted with established religious credentials. Participants were more likely to trust online figures when they could identify their educational background, institutional affiliation, scholarly references, or connection to recognized teachers. At the same time, they acknowledged that follower counts, production quality, emotional delivery, and algorithmic repetition could create an impression of authority. This illustrates the growing influence of what has been described as algorithmic or platform-based authority, in which visibility and engagement contribute to perceived legitimacy (Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Siuda, 2021). The participants' cautious responses indicate that digital authority is negotiated rather than passively accepted.

The findings also reveal that participants developed practical credibility-assessment strategies. They compared multiple sources, checked whether religious claims were supported by the Qur'an or Hadith, examined the speaker's scholarly background, consulted lecturers or trusted religious figures, and considered the social context of an interpretation. These practices demonstrate an emerging integration of religious literacy and digital literacy. Religious literacy enabled participants to recognize key sources, concepts, and traditions, while digital literacy helped them evaluate platform dynamics, source credibility, framing, and the risks of misinformation. This combination is increasingly necessary because online religious content can be persuasive, decontextualized, or amplified for reasons unrelated to scholarly quality (Mustofa et al., 2023; Siuda, 2021; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021).

The educational implications are substantial. Islamic higher education should not treat digital literacy as a purely technical competence concerned only with device use or information retrieval (Arifin & Pratama, 2022; Atmowidjoyo et al., 2022; Gunawan, 2020). It should instead include critical source evaluation, algorithmic awareness, media ethics, verification practices, and responsible participation in online religious discourse. Students should learn to distinguish between popularity and expertise, identify decontextualized religious claims, compare legal or theological interpretations, and understand how platform design shapes exposure. Such competencies could be incorporated into courses on Islamic studies, research methodology, communication, ethics, or religious education. Digital storytelling, critical analysis of online fatwas, comparative review of religious content, and structured discussion of digital da'wa could provide practical pedagogical models (Ganiel, 2021).

The findings further indicate that digital literacy initiatives must remain attentive to differences in access, language, and prior educational background. Participants with stronger formal Islamic education appeared better positioned to recognize scholarly terminology and evaluate religious arguments, while those with less specialized training relied more heavily on presentation style, familiarity, or perceived sincerity. This suggests that digital religious literacy should be designed inclusively and should not assume equal levels of theological knowledge or technological confidence. Previous research similarly emphasizes disparities in access and competence across generations and social groups (Isiko, 2022). In addition, transnational religious content may not always correspond to Indonesian legal, cultural, or institutional contexts. Students therefore need contextual literacy as well as technical and doctrinal knowledge.

Several limitations define the scope of the study. The research involved ten undergraduate students from a single Islamic university, and the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all Muslim youth. The participants' educational environment may also have provided greater access to Islamic scholarship than is available to young Muslims in other settings. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported experiences rather than direct observation of participants' digital practices. Future research should therefore examine faith–reason integration across different universities, regions, social classes, and religious educational backgrounds. Comparative studies could investigate how national regulation, language, gender, institutional culture, and platform use shape religious reasoning.

Longitudinal and mixed-methods research would also strengthen the field. Surveys could examine broader patterns of trust and information evaluation, while interviews and digital ethnography could provide deeper insight into the reasoning behind those patterns. Intervention studies could assess whether courses in digital religious literacy improve students' ability to identify unreliable content, compare religious arguments, and integrate faith with critical inquiry. Research is also needed on how recommendation systems, artificial intelligence tools, moderation practices, and platform design influence epistemic trust and susceptibility to misinformation (Nisa & Saenong, 2022; Siuda, 2021; Yücel & Albayrak, 2021). Overall, the present study shows that young Muslims are not merely passive recipients of digital religion. They actively negotiate faith, reason, authority, and credibility within a complex environment shaped by Islamic tradition, education, personal experience, and platform logic.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Muslim undergraduate students at Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar understood and negotiated the relationship between faith, reason, and digital media. The findings show that participants did not generally regard faith and rationality as contradictory. Faith was understood as spiritual commitment, moral guidance, emotional strength, and a framework for everyday decision-making, while reason was associated with reflection, verification, critical judgment, and the interpretation of religious claims. Participants therefore used rational inquiry not to replace

revelation, but to assess information, clarify meaning, and strengthen their understanding of Islamic teachings.

Digital media played a central role in this process by broadening access to religious knowledge and exposing participants to a wide range of scholars, institutions, preachers, influencers, and online communities. This expansion created new opportunities for learning, but it also complicated traditional patterns of religious authority. Participants were required to distinguish scholarly credibility from digital popularity and to evaluate religious content through multiple strategies, including comparing sources, checking scriptural foundations, examining the background of speakers, and consulting trusted lecturers or religious figures.

The study's main contribution lies in showing that faith–reason integration among young Muslims is increasingly shaped by digitally mediated religious environments. Rather than experiencing faith only through formal institutions, participants constructed religious understanding through the interaction of family socialization, university education, personal experience, peer networks, and online platforms. This finding contributes to research on Islamic epistemology by demonstrating how abstract debates about faith and reason are translated into everyday practices of interpretation and credibility assessment. It also advances digital religion research by showing that Muslim youth are active evaluators of online religious information rather than passive recipients of digital content.

The findings have practical implications for Islamic higher education (Achruh et al., 2024). Universities should integrate religious literacy, digital literacy, source evaluation, media ethics, and algorithmic awareness into relevant curricula (Ravikumar et al., 2022). Students need opportunities to examine online fatwas, digital da'wa, social-media sermons, and artificial intelligence-generated religious content critically and responsibly. Such educational initiatives could help students differentiate between popularity and expertise, recognize misinformation, and engage with religious diversity without abandoning doctrinal integrity.

The study is limited by its small sample and single institutional setting. Its findings therefore cannot be generalized statistically to all Muslim youth. Future research should involve participants from different universities, regions, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic contexts. Comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies are also needed to examine how gender, language, political regulation, platform design, and artificial intelligence influence faith, rationality, and religious authority. Further research should also evaluate whether digital religious literacy programs improve young Muslims' capacity to assess online religious information and integrate critical reasoning with faith-based commitments.

Overall, the study concludes that the relationship between faith and reason among Muslim youth is dynamic, complementary, and increasingly mediated by digital technology. Digital media do not simply weaken or strengthen religion; rather, they reshape the conditions under which religious knowledge is accessed, interpreted, trusted, and practiced.

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