
Mutual Recognition and Social Accountability in Online Islamic Learning in Indonesia

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Abstract

Business capital assistance from Baitul Mal Aceh is designed to reduce poverty through productive zakat and infaq, yet prior research has mainly assessed its effects on recipients rather than on applicants screened out before aid is granted. This article analyzes the eligibility criteria of five business capital schemes run by Baitul Mal institutions in Aceh between 2024 and 2026, focusing on an age range of 20–60 years and mandatory online registration. The study uses qualitative document analysis of legislation, classical and contemporary fiqh texts on the asnaf categories, official statistics from Statistics Indonesia (BPS), and public announcements; it involves no human participants. The findings show that the age ceiling affects a population in which 55.21% of older persons are in the labour force and 84.69% of working older persons are in the informal sector, while online registration relies on digital access that is lower among older persons, particularly women. Neither the qanun definition of mustahik nor the classical asnaf framework contains an age limit, and another scheme in the same system sets no upper age limit. The article argues that procedural criteria may function as a distributive policy, shifting eligibility from need toward administrative convenience. Its contribution is a coding matrix that links each criterion to its normative basis, burden type, and statistical exposure. Because the analysis is documentary and relies on secondary sources, it identifies potential exclusion rather than measuring its scale.

Keywords: digital religion; online religious study; sense of belonging; religious community; social obligation; Indonesia.

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Introduction

Followers of an online religious study can listen to a preacher regularly without ever being known to other participants. Conversely, study groups built on messaging applications can arrange meetings, share tasks, and sustain communication beyond the scheduled sessions. These two situations are often discussed together under the heading of digital religious community, yet the social relations that need to be demonstrated are different. The sociological question is therefore not only how religious material reaches users, but when a relationship with the material and the teacher becomes a relationship among participants with social consequences.

Research on digital religion provides a basis for understanding the entanglement of online and offline practice, identity, authority, and everyday life. This perspective discourages readings that treat the internet as a space separate from social relations beyond the screen. Even so, acknowledging this entanglement does not resolve the problem of measuring community. Access to a shared space, emotional attachment, and mutual support each require different indicators.¹

In the Indonesian context, research on Islamic learning has shown how religious actors negotiate media and authority through digital platforms. Earlier studies of ODOJ indicate how movements can be organized through social media, while studies of Islamic sociality in Bandung place practices of sharing within both online and offline relations. These findings matter because digital community is not an entirely new idea. The remaining question concerns the extent to which conclusions drawn from organized groups can explain users who only follow content.²

The recent literature in this article's corpus reveals a productive tension. WhatsApp studies describe communicative practices and coordination within groups, whereas research on individual learners examines learning experiences, source selection, and perceived connectedness. These designs capture different facets of digital religious life. Reading them as equivalent evidence of community may produce an inferential leap: the experience of feeling connected is converted into reciprocal relations, or group activities are projected onto the entire audience of a preacher.

¹ Heidi A. Campbell, "Surveying Theoretical Approaches within Digital Religion Studies," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 15-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649912>; Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies," *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 5-17, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.149>; Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, eds., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295683>; Heidi A. Campbell and Wendi Bellar, *Digital Religion: The Basics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058465>.

² Dindin Solahudin and Moch Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority," *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010019>; Eva F. Nisa, "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 24-43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2017.1416758>; Dayana Lengauer, "Sharing Semangat Taqwa: Social Media and Digital Islamic Socialities in Bandung," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 5-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1415276>.

Religious identity must also be separated from a sense of belonging to a particular group. The belonging framework treats identification, emotional attachment, and the process of drawing membership boundaries as related but non-identical issues. A user may identify as a Muslim who is improving their knowledge without considering themselves a member of a particular study community. Conversely, a person may be registered in a group without feeling accepted or holding any influence within it. Formal membership, therefore, cannot serve as the sole measure.³

Research question: how do empirical studies of digital Islamic learning in Indonesia distinguish access to religious sources, a sense of belonging, reciprocal relations, and social obligation, and what evidence is used to support such distinctions? The question is operationalized through a distinction between engagement with religious sources, the experience of belonging to a collectivity, and responsibilities directed toward other people. The term online religious study (*pengajian daring*) refers to non-formal Islamic learning activities mediated by the internet. Coordinated Qur'an recitation is treated as an adjacent practice rather than equated with every form of religious study.

The central argument of this article is that digital engagement should be assessed through three analytical dimensions: access, reciprocal recognition, and collective accountability. Access enables learning; reciprocal recognition refers to participants who know one another or are treated as part of a group; collective accountability refers to expectations for which individuals can be called to answer. These dimensions are not mandatory stages. The article offers conceptual refinement through a cross-study reading rather than claiming to have observed all followers of online religious study in Indonesia.

Methods

This study employs a directed integrative review to bring together findings from different methods and to develop a conceptual distinction.⁴ Its unit of analysis comprises statements of findings, descriptions of practice, and design limitations reported in published articles. The study did not conduct surveys, interviews, observations of private groups, or the collection of new comments. The review does not claim a comprehensive search equivalent to a systematic review, nor does it aggregate participant numbers across studies, because the research question calls for a reading of the mechanisms of social relations rather than an estimate of effect sizes. The difference between textual analysis, interviews, and ethnography in digital religion research constitutes the principal methodological consideration.⁵ Retrospective searching was

³ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging," *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 197–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>; Marco Antonsich, "Searching for Belonging—An Analytical Framework," *Geography Compass* 4, no. 6 (2010): 644–659, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00317.x>.

⁴ Robin Whitemore and Kathleen Knafl, "The Integrative Review: Updated Methodology," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 52, no. 5 (2005): 546–553, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x>; Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333–339, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.

⁵ Ruth Tsuria et al., "Approaches to Digital Methods in Studies of Digital Religion," *The Communication Review* 20, no. 2 (2017): 73–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2017.1304137>.

carried out on 18 October 2026 through academic web search, journal websites, publishers, and repositories, using combinations of the terms online pengajian, community, belonging, digital religion, Indonesia, WhatsApp, and Islamic learning, as well as examination of reference lists. The eligibility boundary for sources was publications available no later than 30 June 2026. The core corpus consists of six empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 on Indonesia, selected purposively on the basis of accessible full texts and relevance to digital Islamic learning or communication. The six studies are not a representative sample, and the number of search results and the list of exclusions are not recorded in this manuscript.

Extraction covers the context, data sources, period, and evidentiary limits of each study, summarized in Table 1; reporting quality is assessed in Table 2. Synthesis was conducted interpretively by separating statements about experience from descriptions of relations and from the normative judgments of the source authors, and then grouping the evidence into access, identification, connectedness, reciprocity, coordination, and obligation.⁶ Three analytical dimensions were formulated from a comparison of cases and tested against the synthesis matrix in Table 3. Social obligations were distinguished as invitations, voluntary commitments, group expectations, and rules accompanied by consequences. The category of rules requires explicit evidence, so the absence of reported sanctions is not interpreted as evidence of absence. No independent coding by multiple raters and no inter-rater reliability calculation were conducted. Publication dates and fieldwork dates were distinguished; undocumented dates were not filled in with estimates, and no participant quotations were transferred as if they originated from this study. Bibliographic identities were verified against journal pages, publisher pages, or DOIs; the page numbers cited in Table 3 are journal pagination, checked against the full-text PDF of each study. The sources are publications made publicly available without data collection from private accounts or groups, so this article does not claim ethical approval for participant research that was not conducted.

Results

The core corpus consists of six articles published between 2021 and 2025. Their focus is not uniform: some examine established groups, while others study users or stakeholders. Consequently, the synthesis does not produce a comparison of how many people feel a sense of community. Its outcome is a mapping of forms of engagement and of the limits within which conclusions can be drawn.

Table 1. Core empirical corpus and evidentiary limits

Study	Context and data source	Reported period	Relevance and evidentiary limits
Setia and Dilawati ⁷	Shift Bandung; observation, interviews with administrators,	The text reports personal communication	Programs and online-offline relations within an organized movement; not a

⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–597, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.

⁷ Paelani Setia and Rika Dilawati, "Tren Baru Islam melalui Gerakan Hijrah: Studi Kasus Shift Pemuda Hijrah," *Khazanah Theologia* 3, no. 3 (2021): 134, 142–143, <https://doi.org/10.15575/kt.v3i3.12708>.

	members, and congregants, documents	from February 2020; the complete fieldwork period is not specified	sample of the entire audience
Fakhruroji and Nurhasanah ⁸	Ruquu Bandung; founder and four members; online and offline interviews	Interview quoted and dated December 2021	Voluntary reporting of reading; does not establish universal obligation
Abdullah et al. ⁹	23 Muslim adolescents aged 17–20 in Jepara; interviews and observation, with a supporting survey as stated in the method	Fieldwork date not stated explicitly; manuscript received by the journal in October 2023	Source selection and learning experience; does not directly map networks of relations
Kholili et al. ¹⁰	13 informants from religious communication stakeholders in Yogyakarta; interviews, observation, documentation	Methods narrative: July–September 2022 and June–July 2023; the table also lists interviews from June 2022	Changes in audience and regulation; not a measurement of obligations among fellow followers
Abdurrahman et al. ¹¹	WAG Kopdar Masjid BDG Raya; group communication and six key informants	Mid-2023 to mid-2024	Interaction and coordination of activities; the selection of key informants limits the picture of passive members
Himam et al. ¹²	Narrative qualitative survey of 84 students at	15 April–1 May 2025	Reported connectedness and hybrid practice; not

⁸ Moch Fakhruroji and Nunung Nurhasanah, “Utilizing WhatsApp for Mutaba’ah during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences of Ruquu Community Members in Bandung,” *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2022): 11–15, <https://doi.org/10.15575/idajhs.v16i1.17178>.

⁹ Shodiq Abdullah et al., “Religious Confusion and Emptiness: Evaluating the Impact of Online Islamic Learning among Indonesian Muslim Adolescents,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): a9510, bagian “Method” dan “Results”, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9510>.

¹⁰ M. Kholili, Ahmad Izudin, and Muhammad Lutfi Hakim, “Islamic Proselytizing in Digital Religion in Indonesia: The Challenges of Broadcasting Regulation,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 2357460, 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2357460>.

¹¹ Muhammad Sufyan Abdurrahman et al., “Strengthening Digital Islamic Activism: Virtual Ethnography of Bandung Hijrah Youth’s WhatsApp Engagement,” *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi* 9, no. 1 (2025): 19–22, <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v9i1.9372>.

¹² Mohammad Muafi Himam et al., “Shifting Authority, Shaping Spirituality: A Qualitative Digital Survey of Religious Practices among the Indonesian Muslim Students,” *Jurnal SMART (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, dan Tradisi)* 11, no. 2 (2025): 245–246, <https://doi.org/10.18784/smart.v11i2.3125>.

	STAI Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang		longitudinal observation of obligations
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Note: all informants and procedures listed above belong to the source studies. The internal inconsistency in the fieldwork dates of Kholili et al. is retained openly, without speculatively selecting one version. Page numbers and DOIs are provided in the reference list.

Table 2. Quality assessment of the source studies based on the information in the examined texts

Study	Design suitability	Participant selection	Data transparency	Support from quotations/observation	Limits of inference
Setia and Dilawati	Adequate for reading the practice of a single movement through observation and documents; the reporting of the number of informants and the fieldwork range is not detailed	Administrators, members, and congregants of Shift; numbers not specified in the corpus table	Incomplete fieldwork range; the text includes personal communication from February 2020	Observation and documents	A single movement; not representative of content audiences
Fakhruroji and Nurhasanah	Interviews, participant observation online and offline, and screenshot documentation on the reading-reporting program	Founder and four members of Ruquu Bandung	Quoted interview dated December 2021	Interview quotations	Voluntary reporting of reading; does not establish universal obligation

Abdullah et al.	Adequate for assessing learning experiences and source selection, with a survey as support; not designed to map networks among participants	23 Muslim adolescents aged 17–20 in Jepara	Fieldwork date not stated explicitly	Interview and observation quotations	Learning experience and source selection; does not map networks
Kholili et al.	Suitable for issues of communication and broadcasting regulation; not equivalent to studies of networks of participant relations	13 informants in Yogyakarta, including four audience-category informants and other stakeholders	Fieldwork period inconsistent between the methods narrative and the table	Interviews and documentation	Changes in audience and regulation; not obligations among fellow followers
Abdurrahman et al.	Suitable for tracing coordination and the reporting of activities within groups; interviews represent leaders more closely	Conversations of 124 WAG members and six leader informants	Mid-2023 to mid-2024	Group interaction and interviews	Selection of key informants limits the depiction of passive members
Himam et al.	Adequate for the connectedness experiences	84 students at STAI Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang	15 April–1 May 2025	Respondent narratives (self-report)	Reported connectedness; not longitudinal observation

	of 84 students in one institution; the data are self-reports from a single collection period				
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Access and sense of belonging

Abdullah et al. examine the experiences of adolescents who use the internet as a source of Islamic learning. The study reports problems of understanding and source selection; evaluative terms about religious confusion and emptiness are the authors' own interpretations.¹³

Kholili et al. describe changes in religious communication through interactivity, the use of hypermedia or hypertext, and virtual communities, in research centered on regulatory challenges. This material demonstrates the breadth of the term digital religion, but it does not provide comparable measures of closeness to preachers, participation in conversations, and responsibility toward other participants.¹⁴

At the level of synthesis, accessing material, liking a preacher, or choosing a source constitutes evidence of religious engagement. These indicators do not yet answer whether other people recognize the user, respond to their needs, or expect their contribution. The absence of an answer in a given article reflects the limits of its design and reporting. This matters because claims about community can outrun the kind of data that was collected.

Three forms need to be distinguished within this corpus: the use of material (accessing or saving it), religious identification (regarding oneself as a Muslim who is learning), and attachment to a particular group (feeling accepted and bound). Abdullah et al. primarily provide evidence on the use of material, while Himam et al. provide evidence of self-reported experiences of connectedness, not yet an enduring attachment.

Himam et al. report the experiences of students who gained access across regions and built connections with other Muslims through digital spaces. The text also includes experiences of online relations that felt less warm, and the need to balance them with offline interaction.¹⁵

These findings provide evidence about experiences of connectedness as respondents describe them. Yet such experiences are not equivalent to mapping who helps whom, how long relationships last, or what happens when a participant does not contribute. The synthesis therefore treats a sense of belonging as a dimension to be heard from participants, while maintaining the distinction between subjective recognition and reciprocal relations that can be traced.

¹³ Abdullah et al., "Religious Confusion and Emptiness", bagian "Method" dan "Results".

¹⁴ Kholili, Izudin, and Hakim, "Islamic Proselytizing in Digital Religion", 1.

¹⁵ Himam et al., "Shifting Authority, Shaping Spirituality", 249–250.

In Shift, Setia and Dilawati describe the use of social media alongside learning activities and methods connected to offline gatherings. The object of the study is a movement involving administrators, members, and congregants. The case shows that digital forms can operate within organizations whose social ties extend beyond interaction on a single platform.¹⁶

Abdurrahman et al. examine interaction in the WAG Kopdar Masjid BDG Raya. The study links group communication with trust, a sense of belonging, decision-making, and offline activities such as charity programs and da'wah trips. The material includes calls for participation in mosque programs, and the study describes financial reporting after programs as a practice of transparency and accountability in management (p. 25). This evidence is closer to the coordination of action than to follower counts or view numbers. Nevertheless, the interview informants are key figures, so the experiences of people who are silent, leave, or decline activities are not represented in a balanced way.¹⁷

The two studies together show that evidence of community becomes more concrete when research follows relationships and activities rather than only the distribution of messages. However, the existence of shared activities still does not demonstrate an obligation binding every follower. Reaching that conclusion requires information on who is subject to expectations, how those expectations are communicated, and what consequences follow when they are not met.

Fakhruroji and Nurhasanah describe the Ruquu mutaba'ah program as the voluntary reporting of Qur'anic reading. Participants use a dedicated group to report progress and to motivate one another, and not all community members take part in the program. The text also describes time constraints and internet connectivity problems. Accordingly, the existence of shared monitoring must not be converted into a claim that all members are required to report or face sanctions.¹⁸

This case is an important limit on explanations that equate group routines with obligations. Regular practice can take place through voluntary consent. Meanwhile, reading the Qur'an as an act of worship and reporting one's reading to a group are two distinct actions. The latter does not automatically acquire the status of a social obligation merely because the former carries religious meaning for participants.

In this case, the participants themselves agreed to the mutaba'ah program, and accountability is directed to the reporting group. The reviewed text does not specify who is entitled to admonish a participant who does not report, although it includes an account that fellow members understand the difficulties when someone does not report (p. 14). Therefore, claims about internal rules are not sustained, and this limitation of reporting is recorded as a boundary of the source.

¹⁶ Setia and Dilawati, "Tren Baru Islam melalui Gerakan Hijrah", 142-143.

¹⁷ Muhammad Sufyan Abdurrahman et al., "Strengthening Digital Islamic Activism: Virtual Ethnography of Bandung Hijrah Youth's WhatsApp Engagement," *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi* 9, no. 1 (2025): 17-28, <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v9i1.9372>.

¹⁸ Moch Fakhruroji and Nunung Nurhasanah, "Utilizing WhatsApp for Mutaba'ah during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences of Ruquu Community Members in Bandung," *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2022): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.15575/idajhs.v16i1.17178>.

Overall, the corpus supports several forms of connectedness and coordination. Evidence on binding expectations, sanctions, or the right to refuse is more limited. The corpus shows different forms of accountability: contribution commitments among formal members (Setia and Dilawati, p. 137), agreements to report reading among participants in voluntary programs (Fakhruroji and Nurhasanah, pp. 12-14), and financial reporting in the management of activities (Abdurrahman et al., p. 25). This evidence does not justify extending obligations to the entire audience of online religious study; the party responsible, the object of accountability, and the scope of membership must be distinguished. These results do not mean that online religious study is free of social pressure. The conclusion is narrower: the research read does not provide sufficient grounds to assert that following digital religious study automatically generates social obligations.

Table 3. Synthesis matrix: claims, evidence, status, and limits of inference

Synthesis claim	Source evidence and pages	Claim status	Limits of inference
Reporting of reading is voluntary.	Fakhruroji and Nurhasanah, 12-14	Source finding	Does not establish an obligation for all members.
Participants feel digital connectedness, but the relations are limited.	Himam et al., 249-250	Source finding (reported experience)	Does not demonstrate an exchange of assistance or a lasting relationship.
Group studies document organized activities and contributions.	Setia and Dilawati, 137, 140-143; Abdurrahman et al., 25	Author synthesis	Applies to organized groups; key informants limit generalization.
Access to material is not yet mutual recognition.	Abdullah et al., 4; Kholili et al., 5-8	Author synthesis	The designs of both studies do not measure relations among participants.
Evidence on the scope, basis, and enforcement of obligations among participants is not yet sufficient in the reviewed corpus.	Entire corpus; the bases assessed include rules, task agreements, contribution expectations, and responses to non-participation, as far as they are described in the reviewed texts	Limits of evidence in the corpus	The absence of reported sanctions does not equate to evidence of the absence of obligation.

The largest evidentiary gap lies with groups that the study designs do not cover. In the WAG community and learning-program studies, key informants were selected from active

figures, so passive users were not analyzed directly. Participants who leave also do not become a focus of analysis in the corpus read; the corpus describes participation, not the reasons for disengaging.

Refusal of tasks has also not been mapped. The Ruquu study notes that not all members take part in the program, but the reviewed account does not explain how the group receives such refusal, and the accounts of difficulty in not reporting show only members' understanding rather than a mechanism for accepting refusal. The corpus reviewed does not yet provide adequate longitudinal evidence on whether relations persist after the program ends and after participants stop contributing.

The defensible conclusion is therefore limited to active groups. For passive users, departing participants, and refusal of tasks, this corpus only indicates that such evidence is not yet available.

Discussion

The question of whether digital religious study produces community must be answered conditionally. The synthesis shows that learning experience, connectedness, and coordination cannot be treated as one and the same outcome. Online religious study can be a place for learning and, at the same time, a place for relating to other people, but the evidence for each function differs. The contribution of this article is to make that difference an explicit analytical problem.

Literature on sense of community provides a basis for assessing attachment through membership, influence, need fulfillment, and shared emotional bonds. In virtual communities, Blanchard examines the roles of norms, identity recognition, and the exchange of support. This article uses both works to establish the need for evidence that goes beyond presence on the same channel. The definition of community is not confined to formal organizations, but it is also not extended to the point where every shared consumption of content is treated as a mutually binding social relation.¹⁹

This approach differs from claims that digital relations are inherently shallow. Criticism of religious superficiality in hijrah community studies is an evaluation that must be placed within the context and indicators of those studies. Depth of doctrinal understanding and the density of social relations are two issues that may move in different directions. Members of closely knit groups do not necessarily have deep religious knowledge, and individuals who learn on their own do not necessarily lack social support.²⁰

Compared with sense of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), which encompasses membership, influence, need fulfillment, and shared emotional bonds, the present framework adds two distinctions. First, access is assessed as a separate dimension, so that following materials is not read directly as membership. Second, recognition (whether a person's presence is known

¹⁹ David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory," *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986): 6-23, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(198601\)14:1%3C6::AID-JCOP2290140103%3E3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1%3C6::AID-JCOP2290140103%3E3.0.CO;2-I); Anita L. Blanchard, "Testing a Model of Sense of Virtual Community," *Computers in Human Behavior* 24, no. 5 (2008): 2107-2123, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2007.10.002>.

²⁰ Rahmad Hidayat, Muhammad Sholihin, and Deri Wanto, "The Hijrah Communities and Religious Superficiality: Ideology and Religiosity of the Islamic Hijrah Communities on Social Media," *Journal of Population and Social Studies* 29 (2021): 118-138, <https://doi.org/10.25133/JPSSv292021.008>.

and responded to) is separated from accountability (whether there are expectations that can be claimed). Blanchard tests norms, identity recognition, and support exchange; the dimensions of recognition and accountability rest on closely related ideas but separate them. The concept of belonging (Antonsich; Yuval-Davis) is useful for examining the boundaries of membership, whereas the accountability dimension adds an examination of obligations. The concept of networked religion (Campbell, 2012) situates digital religious life within networks of community, identity, authority, practice, and online-offline relations. Within that framework, the three analytical dimensions can be read as tools for differentiating evidence: access indicates engagement with sources, recognition directs attention to relations, and accountability traces contribution expectations and answerability. This position does not assume that Campbell neglects commitment, nor does it claim that the three dimensions have been tested in that work.

Three analytical dimensions: access, recognition, and accountability

The first dimension is access, namely the possibility of following learning sources without an obligation to form relations with other participants. Its indicators may include attending lessons, saving materials, or returning to particular sources. This dimension explains engagement with a source. It does not permit the researcher to conclude that users have been accepted as members of a group. By distinguishing the targets of relation, the term followers can be used more carefully: followers of an account are not necessarily members of a community.

The second dimension is reciprocal recognition. What is examined is not only whether users recognize a preacher, but whether their presence is known and responded to by others. Indicators may include sustained responses, histories of mutual help, or participants' acknowledgment of the relations they hold. Recognition does not require that every member communicate with everyone else. Still, it should at least be clear where the relation lies: between a participant and an administrator, among several participants, or across the group as a whole.

The third dimension is collective accountability. At this analytical point, engagement includes expectations that can be directed at a person: agreed tasks, responsibility for resources, or the need to give an explanation when a commitment is not fulfilled. Such demands must be demonstrated rather than presumed from the term congregation. Obligations may be negotiated and are not always accompanied by formal sanctions. Researchers therefore need to distinguish expectations that participants actually recognize from external interpretations of their behavior.

Worked reading: Abdullah et al. (2024) and Himam et al. (2025) both address participants' experiences. Abdullah et al. provide evidence only for the access dimension, because what was examined was the selection of learning sources. Himam et al. provide evidence for the recognition dimension only at the level of the experiences respondents reported, so it cannot be read as evidence of reciprocal exchange. Without this distinction, both studies can easily be read as evidence of community connectedness.

Table 4. Three-dimensional framework and evidentiary requirements

Dimension	Examination question	Relevant evidence	Conclusions not yet warranted
Access	What do users learn or follow?	Engagement history and users' own accounts	Membership or responsibility toward others

Reciprocal recognition	Who recognizes, responds to, or supports whom?	Recurrent interaction, acknowledgment of relations, exchange of support	Obligations applying to all participants
Collective accountability	Who may request contributions or explanations, and on what agreement?	Rules, task allocation, stated expectations, responses to non-participation	Coercion or sanctions unless demonstrated

Source: conceptual development of this article from the synthesis of the corpus and the literature; the table is not a validated instrument.

The three dimensions are neither a moral scale of piety nor a sequence of maturity. A person may contribute to activities without desiring personal closeness. Other participants may feel accepted but lack the time to take on tasks. Groups that preserve the right to remain silent or to leave may also have meaningful relations. The framework allows such variation to be analyzed without forcing it into a developmental narrative that moves from audience to active member.

The distinction between vertical and horizontal orientations of relations is important for online religious study. Parasocial theory explains the possibility of experiencing closeness to a media figure without a commensurate reciprocal relationship. Dibble et al. clarify the conceptual difference between parasocial interaction experiences and parasocial relationships that persist beyond a single exposure. Both concepts help frame questions about preachers, but the corpus of this article does not measure parasocial relationships directly.²¹

For this reason, regular attention to a preacher should not be labeled parasocial directly, still less treated as evidence of dependency. That possibility is an alternative explanation that needs to be tested. Likewise, closeness to a media figure may coexist with genuine friendships among followers. Research designs must capture both directions of relation before assessing whether the study primarily generates attachment to a figure, relations among followers, or both.

Mediated communication also does not by itself eliminate interpersonal closeness. Walther shows that computer-mediated communication must be understood through variations in conditions and processes of interaction, including the possibility of highly personal relations. This reading opens room for assessing how regularity of response, recognition of identity, and communicative expectations operate. The focus shifts from a contrast between screen and face-to-face toward the configurations of relations formed through both.²²

Membership boundaries and who may demand contributions

²¹ Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215-229, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>; Jayson L. Dibble, Tilo Hartmann, and Sarah F. Rosaen, "Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures," *Human Communication Research* 42, no. 1 (2016): 21-44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12063>.

²² Joseph B. Walther, "Computer-Mediated Communication: Impersonal, Interpersonal, and Hyperpersonal Interaction," *Communication Research* 23, no. 1 (1996): 3-43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365096023001001>.

Sense of belonging is connected to the question of boundaries: who is described as part of a group, and on what basis. The distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging is useful for examining the relation between attachment and the processes that determine boundaries. In online religious study, boundaries may differ among the application's membership list, administrators' recognition, participants' judgments, and personal identification. Research that uses a single indicator of membership needs to explain which indicator it means.²³

The question of authority is also not resolved by the growing accessibility of preachers. Cheong directs attention to communicative practices and shifts in authority within spiritual organization. For the question of this article, the implication is to distinguish authority to explain teachings from the authority to regulate group contributions. A teacher may be trusted in religious material without automatically being entitled to demand donations, voluntary work, or the reporting of worship from every member of the audience.²⁴

The literature on online piety anxiety indicates that publicizing religious practice can become a matter of moral evaluation, including concern about *riya'* (ostentation). That work is not used to conclude that the programs in the corpus are coercive. Its function is to open questions about how recognition and visibility are negotiated. Is visible contribution considered more valuable than private contribution? Is silence understood as a choice, as limited access, or as a lack of commitment? Answering these questions requires data from participants who bear such evaluations.²⁵

Platform infrastructure and the cost of sustaining relations

The platform shapes the conditions of content distribution and visibility. Nieborg and Poell explain the platformization of cultural production through economic and infrastructural linkages, while Bucher discusses how algorithmic systems shape the conditions for acting and knowing. This literature provides grounds for attending to the dependence of religious study on digital channels. However, the corpus of this study does not audit algorithms, and there is no basis for asserting that a particular algorithm causes the weakness of a study community.²⁶

A more measurable conceptual implication is to distinguish the measures available to platforms from the relations that sociologists wish to know. Views, likes, or member counts record particular types of activity. Such measures do not reveal whether help is received, whether tasks are fairly distributed, or whether participants can refuse. The usefulness of a metric should be judged by its fit to the research question, not by how easily it can be obtained.

²³ Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging".

²⁴ Pauline Hope Cheong, "The Vitality of New Media and Religion: Communicative Perspectives, Practices, and Changing Authority in Spiritual Organization," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 25-33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649913>.

²⁵ Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, "Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 80-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1415056>.

²⁶ David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275-4292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>; Taina Bucher, *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190493028.001.0001>.

Coordinated help does not always produce lasting bonds. Kailani and Slama discuss the acceleration and urgency of Islamic philanthropy mediated by social media. This article uses these insights as a comparison: acts of helping can be organized quickly, whereas the sustainability of relations requires separate examination. A one-time donation cannot be treated as evidence of a stable sense of belonging. Conversely, an inability to contribute is not enough to conclude that participants do not care.²⁷

The synthesis generates three propositions for future research. First, at a comparable level of learning access, participants who experience reciprocal recognition are expected to be more likely to express a sense of belonging to a particular group. Second, commitment to shared activities is expected to be easier to distinguish from content consumption when there is agreement about roles and contributions. Third, the relation between belonging and contribution is expected to depend on opportunities to participate and on the right to refuse. These three propositions are analytical conjectures; the corpus does not test the direction or magnitude of these relations.

Testing needs to include users who only read, participants who leave, and people who refuse tasks, in addition to administrators and active members. Interviews can examine the meaning of relations; observation with participants' consent can trace exchanges of support; longitudinal designs can assess whether relations persist after a program ends. The choice of method needs to follow the type of claim, in line with Tsuria et al.'s attention to digital approaches. Samples must make it possible to compare varied forms of engagement, without assuming that passive members are less religious.²⁸

For practitioners, the framework suggests clarity about the differences among following material, joining a group, and accepting tasks. Invitations to contribute should be understandable as invitations or specific agreements, not as vague demands made in the name of piety. This implication is normative and derived from the need for transparency of roles; the article does not claim to have tested whether such governance increases retention or trust.

There are four principal limitations. First, the selection of six studies is purposive and does not cover the whole literature; this mapping does not justify claims about the frequency of a pattern in the Indonesian Muslim population. Second, the main studies are concentrated in Java, with a limited range of participants. The article does not produce findings specific to Aceh and cannot be used directly to explain the context of Muslim minorities in other countries.

Third, the corpus combines different designs and terms. One source contains an internal inconsistency in its fieldwork dates, and other sources do not state dates explicitly; these details constrain the precision of temporal comparison. The June 2026 boundary is an eligibility limit for evidence rather than a period of direct observation, and it does not permit claims about change during the first semester of 2026. Fourth, the three-dimensional framework has not been validated through primary data; its present usefulness lies in sharpening questions and delimiting inferences.

Fifth, the number of search results and the rationale for exclusions are not available in this manuscript and cannot be reconstructed from the source package. This shortcoming is reported openly rather than filled with estimates

²⁷ Najib Kailani and Martin Slama, "Accelerating Islamic Charities in Indonesia: Zakat, Sedekah and the Immediacy of Social Media," *South East Asia Research* 28, no. 1 (2020): 70–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2019.1691939>.

²⁸ Tsuria et al., "Approaches to Digital Methods".

Conclusion

Following digital religious study may be associated with connectedness and shared activity, but it does not by itself demonstrate communal bonds or social obligations. The review of six studies shows that access to learning, the experience of belonging, and the coordination of action are dimensions that need to be separated. Evidence from organized groups more directly explains relations among participants, whereas audience evidence helps us understand experiences without always mapping reciprocal relations. Voluntary commitment must not be converted into a universal obligation.

This article offers three analytical dimensions (access, reciprocal recognition, and collective accountability) as tools for determining what evidence is required before describing an engagement as a mutually binding community. Its contribution is to clarify the relationship between units of analysis and sociological conclusions. The framework does not treat formal membership or visible activity as the single measure of religiosity. Future research should test the variation in relations, the right to refuse, and the persistence of support, involving active and passive participants alike as well as those who have left the group

Declarations

Use of AI

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with language editing and the preparation of this declaration. The authors reviewed the AI-assisted text and take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, drafting, and revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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