THE EXISTENCE OF MDTA AL WASHLIYAH AS A RELIGIOUS INFORMATION LITERACY AGENT IN THE MEDAN AREA URBAN AREA

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Abstract
This study explores the institutional role of Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah Awaliyah (MDTA) Al Washliyah in promoting religious information literacy among urban Muslim youth in Medan, Indonesia. Contrary to the common perception of madrasahs as merely spaces for rote Qur'anic learning, MDTA Al Washliyah actively integrates media analysis and critical religious interpretation into its pedagogy. Using a qualitative method combining in-depth interviews and classroom observations, and employing snowball sampling to identify key informants, the research found that teachers encourage students to question, verify, and contextualize online Islamic content. These practices align with UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) framework and reflect the Islamic tradition of tafaqquh fi al-din a deep, contextualized understanding of religion. Despite these innovations, the study also identifies critical challenges. Teachers face limited digital training, poor infrastructure, and minimal institutional support. Moreover, a cultural and generational gap exists between digitally-native students and digitally-limited educators. Parental involvement remains low, as many guardians view MDTA narrowly as a place for Qur'anic recitation, limiting support for media literacy initiatives. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that MDTA Al Washliyah, as a community-rooted institution, holds significant potential as a literacy agent. Through its culturally embedded and dialogic pedagogy, it fosters ethical digital citizenship and resilience against misinformation. In conclusion, MDTA Al Washliyah exemplifies how grassroots religious schools can adapt to digital realities, provided they receive adequate training, technological support, and broader cultural alignment. This study contributes to the discourse on integrating media literacy within Islamic education in the context of Indonesia's urban society.

Keywords*: MDTA, religious literacy, digital media, Islamic education, media and information literacy, Indonesia.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious education in urban Indonesia is increasingly confronted with challenges of secularization, digital saturation, and weakened communal bonds. In many urban neighborhoods, especially in rapidly growing cities like Medan, children's exposure to religious

knowledge has been displaced by entertainment media, fragmented family structures, and inconsistent moral guidance. This transformation affects how young learners interact with religious messages, leading to shallow understanding and increased vulnerability to misinformation, especially in digital spaces. Consequently, traditional religious institutions must adapt and redefine their roles to remain relevant and impactful in shaping faith-based literacy (Sikumbang et al., 2024).

In this context, Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah Awaliyah (MDTA), particularly MDTA Al Washliyah in Medan Area, serves as one of the few remaining institutional bastions for foundational Islamic instruction outside the formal school system. MDTA's students, predominantly coming from working-class families in densely populated urban wards, rely on these institutions for basic Qur'anic literacy, doctrinal understanding, and ethical orientation. However, while MDTA traditionally focused on religious memorization and ritual practice, there is growing demand for these institutions to address new literacies especially in the form of information literacy integrated with religious values.

With the rise of digital media and the omnipresence of online content, children and adolescents are exposed to a vast array of information, not all of which aligns with Islamic principles. In a 2023 survey by Kominfo Indonesia, over 72% of students aged 10–15 access online platforms daily, while only 18% report receiving structured guidance on how to evaluate religious content critically (Kominfo, 2023). This data reinforces the urgency of promoting religious information literacy the ability to access, interpret, and ethically apply religious knowledge within faith-based educational institutions such as MDTA.

Information literacy has long been recognized as a crucial component of 21st-century education. UNESCO (2022) frames information literacy as an essential skill that empowers individuals not only to seek and evaluate information but to act upon it ethically in ways that promote democracy, tolerance, and human dignity. Within the Islamic context, scholars have also emphasized the theological imperative to seek truth ('ilm) and avoid falsehood (batil), which aligns seamlessly with the goals of literacy in both its cognitive and spiritual dimensions (Al-Khars, 2021; Yusof et al., 2022). This positions MDTA as a potential agent of transformation bridging classical Islamic instruction with contemporary literacies (Kholil et al., 2024).

A growing body of research supports the integration of information literacy into religious education (Ritonga et al., 2025; Dalimunthe et al., 2025). Studies by Humaizi et al. (2024) and Salsabila & Achiriah (2024) show that Islamic educational institutions that adopt literacy-based frameworks produce students with better critical reasoning, ethical awareness, and resistance to online radicalism or religious misinformation. Furthermore, Rahmah et al. (2023) argue that religious literacy particularly when grounded in local wisdom enhances students' moral development and civic responsibility. In this light, the urban MDTA serves not only as a place of instruction but as a community platform for cultivating responsible digital citizenship.

This article aims to explore the existence and evolving function of MDTA Al Washliyah in the Medan Area Subdistrict as an agent of religious information literacy. Specifically, it investigates how MDTA Al Washliyah adapts to urban educational challenges, integrates religious information literacy into its curriculum and practices, and contributes to the ethical and cognitive development of its students in the midst of a rapidly changing information landscape.

Despite their often-overlooked status in national education policy, MDTA institutions possess unique assets that make them well-suited to the task of cultivating information literacy.

Their close proximity to communities, emphasis on moral values, and daily interactions with students provide fertile ground for nurturing ethical thinking, critical reflection, and contextualized learning. When equipped with appropriate tools and pedagogical strategies, MDTA teachers can guide students not only to memorize religious texts but to analyze, contextualize, and live out those teachings in an increasingly digitalized world (Harianto et al., 2023; Indainanto et al., 2023).

Therefore, positioning MDTA Al Washliyah as a religious information literacy agent is not merely a theoretical endeavor it is a strategic and necessary reorientation of Islamic education toward relevance and resilience. In an era where disinformation and religious extremism are often spread online under the guise of piety, MDTA can serve as a moral firewall, nurturing students who are not only pious but also digitally literate, ethically grounded, and socially engaged. As Islamic education evolves, such integration becomes central to its mission of fostering holistic human development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive case study approach to explore the existence and role of MDTA Al Washliyah in fostering religious information literacy among students in the urban context of Medan Area Subdistrict. Qualitative inquiry is considered appropriate for understanding the nuanced, contextualized, and socially embedded practices within Islamic educational institutions.

Two primary data collection techniques were utilized: in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted to capture rich, detailed narratives from key informants, including MDTA administrators, teachers, students, and parents. These interviews aimed to understand perceptions, strategies, and challenges related to the integration of religious information literacy in the MDTA learning environment. The interview questions were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility and deeper exploration of emerging themes. Observations were carried out in classrooms and extracurricular settings to document real-time instructional practices, teacher-student interactions, and the use of informational materials both printed and digital. Field notes were taken to supplement interview data and provide contextual validation through triangulation. The selection of informants was carried out using the snowball sampling technique.

Initially, researchers identified one or two key informants senior teachers and administrators who were directly involved in curriculum implementation and literacy programs. These initial contacts then referred other relevant participants who had knowledge or experience with the integration of information literacy within the institution. Snowball sampling was particularly effective in this study due to the close-knit community structure of Islamic educational institutions and the limited public documentation of internal pedagogical practices. Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three concurrent steps: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded thematically to identify patterns related to (1) literacy strategies, (2) institutional responses to digital challenges, and (3) religious communication practices. The analysis emphasized both manifest content and latent meanings embedded in participants' narratives. Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful engagement with participants. The study aimed not only

to describe the role of MDTA Al Washliyah but also to generate insights that could inform policy and practice in similar educational contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Institutional Role of MDTA Al Washliyah in Promoting Religious Literacy

Findings from in-depth interviews with the principal and senior teachers at MDTA Al Washliyah indicate that the institution does not merely serve as a center for Islamic rituals and rote memorization but actively integrates religious information literacy in its teaching approach. This includes teaching students not only to read the Qur'an, but also to understand its messages, distinguish between authentic and misleading content, and apply Islamic values in everyday life. The headmaster, Ustaz M. Ridwan (interview, 2025), emphasized:

> *"We realize that our students today are already exposed to digital content before they step into the classroom. It is our duty to help them filter, verify, and internalize religious knowledge from the right sources."*

Classroom observations confirmed this statement. Teachers were seen incorporating short discussions on current events and viral Islamic content (e.g., from YouTube or TikTok) into their lessons. These discussions were followed by guidance on how to validate religious claims through references to the Qur'an, hadith, and trusted scholarly opinions.

This practice reflects the UNESCO (2022) framework, which defines information literacy as not merely the technical ability to access information, but the ethical and critical capability to interpret and use it responsibly. In this context, MDTA Al Washliyah performs an essential role as a literacy agent for its students in an urban environment where media saturation is high.

Classroom observations confirmed this statement. During several instructional sessions, teachers were observed actively integrating short, dialogic discussions on current socio-religious events and viral Islamic content sourced from popular platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp groups. For instance, one lesson began with a student mentioning a viral video claiming that a specific prayer was wajib in certain months a claim widely circulated online but lacking scholarly consensus. The teacher paused the Qur'an recitation session and initiated a guided conversation, prompting students to reflect: "Where did this video come from? Who is the speaker? What is their scholarly background?" Such critical questioning was followed by practical training on how to validate these religious claims using classical references like tafsir al-Jalalayn, Sahih Bukhari, and fatwas issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI). Students were also encouraged to consult apps like Qur'an Kemenag RI or Tanya Ustadz as part of their digital literacy toolkit.

This pedagogical practice demonstrates a conscious shift in the learning model from rote transmission of sacred texts toward a constructivist approach to religious knowledge, in which students are trained to critically engage with the influx of unverified religious content online. The integration of media analysis within religious instruction echoes UNESCO's (2022) Media and Information Literacy (MIL) framework, which defines information literacy not merely as the mechanical skill of accessing digital content, but more crucially as the ethical, cognitive, and cultural ability to evaluate, interpret, and apply that information responsibly in daily life.

In this sense, MDTA Al Washliyah is not simply delivering religious instruction but is strategically positioning itself as an agent of religious information literacy within an urban ecosystem increasingly dominated by algorithmic feeds and social media echo chambers. The institution plays a gatekeeping role by equipping students with religious verification

competencies (kompetensi tabayyun) that are critical in a context where Islamic expressions are often simplified, politicized, or monetized in online spaces. According to UNESCO, educational institutions are expected to cultivate learners' resilience against misinformation, foster critical judgment, and support ethical reflection (UNESCO, 2022). MDTA Al Washliyah is thus aligning, even if informally, with global standards for media and information literacy, but adapted through a religious-cultural lens that resonates with its learners.

Thiis approach reflects the Islamic educational tradition of tafaqquh fi al-din a profound and reflective understanding of religion which is not confined to textual mastery but requires the capacity to contextualize and respond to contemporary issues with wisdom (hikmah). By incorporating digital phenomena into religious discourse, teachers are implicitly training students to become digitally aware yet spiritually grounded Muslims, capable of navigating modernity without sacrificing religious authenticity.

Such integration becomes especially significant in urban environments like Medan Area, where children are exposed to smartphones, television, and social media from an early age. In these settings, religious misinformation can spread rapidly, shaping beliefs and behaviors without institutional mediation. The proactive stance of MDTA Al Washliyah demonstrates the potential of madrasahs to not only preserve religious values but also to serve as critical intermediaries between traditional knowledge and digital realities.

In conclusion, MDTA Al Washliyah is not only nurturing spiritual literacy but also actively developing its students' information discernment abilities. Through this model, the institution reclaims relevance in the digital age by transforming itself from a passive transmitter of doctrine into an engaged murabbi (educator) that empowers students to become ethical, informed, and responsible agents of Islamic knowledge in both the real and virtual worlds.

DTA as a Community-Based Literacy Agent

Despite these limitations, the findings highlight that MDTA Al Washliyah acts as a grassroots institution that plays a unique role in developing localized, context-sensitive models of information literacy. Unlike formal schools, MDTA operates with more flexibility and stronger community engagement. Teachers, often living within the same neighborhood, serve not only as educators but also as moral exemplars and trusted advisors. This localized approach supports the argument by Humaizi et al. (2024), who assert that religious community institutions such as MDTA are central to shaping resilience against digital misinformation and intolerance, especially among youth in urban and semi-urban environments (Dalimunthe, 2022).

Through their informal, dialogic, and value-based pedagogy, MDTA educators are engaging in what UNESCO (2022) describes as transformative literacy practices, which do not merely transfer knowledge but aim to shape attitudes, character, and social responsibility. In contrast to the rigid structure of formal schooling systems, MDTA Al Washliyah thrives on adaptive flexibility, allowing it to continuously tailor its approach to the evolving needs of its learners and the surrounding community. This flexibility is not only pedagogical but also social; the institution's proximity to its stakeholders fosters an ecosystem of trust and cultural alignment. Teachers at MDTA are not distant bureaucrats—they are intimately embedded within the community, often sharing the same mosques, markets, and family networks with the students and their parents. As such, their credibility is not built on institutional certification alone, but on lived consistency, interpersonal wisdom, and religious integrity.

This relational positioning empowers teachers to take on roles beyond the classroom. They become informal counselors, conflict mediators, and cultural interpreters who help

students and their families navigate the complexities of urban life. As pointed out by Latief (2021), religious educators in community-based institutions often function as "organic intellectuals" who mediate between tradition and transformation. This role becomes crucial in neighborhoods saturated by competing narratives, from consumerism to religious extremism, where youth are vulnerable to both ideological confusion and identity fragmentation.

The participatory character of MDTA Al Washliyah reinforces its transformative potential. Parents are more likely to attend meetings, share feedback, and collaborate in the educational process because they recognize the institution as an extension of their own religious aspirations, not as an external authority. This dynamic aligns with the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), where education becomes effective when it reflects and affirms the cultural values of its learners. In this case, MDTA's pedagogy is inherently localized— rooted in urban Medan's religious ethos, linguistic familiarity, and everyday life practices.

This model of education contributes to the development of religiously grounded digital citizenship, a concept gaining traction in recent educational discourse (Zulkifli et al., 2023). By cultivating students who are not only literate in religious texts but also critically aware of how those texts are used and misused in digital media, MDTA educators are participating in a long-term cultural project: the shaping of ethical, informed, and dialogical Muslim citizens in the digital era.

While MDTA Al Washliyah may operate with limited infrastructure and minimal governmental oversight, its grassroots authority, epistemic intimacy, and community responsiveness position it as a powerful agent of both religious continuity and adaptive innovation. It serves as a reminder that impactful education need not be large-scale or technologically sophisticated—it must be contextually rooted, value-laden, and relationally grounded to withstand the turbulent waves of digital misinformation and moral relativism.

Challenges in Integrating Information Literacy in Religious Education

However, the implementation is not without its challenges. Teachers reported a lack of formal training in digital media analysis and information evaluation. Most of them rely on their own experience and intuition when discussing online content with students. The school also lacks access to digital infrastructure, such as internet-connected projectors or tablets, to demonstrate how to conduct real-time fact-checking.

This issue is echoed by Salsabila & Achiriah (2024), who found that many religious schools in Indonesia struggle with digital adaptation due to limited funding, technical expertise, and institutional support. Even when teachers are committed, their efforts are constrained by the broader infrastructural limitations. Furthermore, parental involvement remains minimal. Interviews with two parents revealed that most guardians view MDTA primarily as a place to learn Qur'anic recitation, with little awareness of the evolving role of the institution in addressing digital challenges. This mismatch of expectations limits the institution's broader impact.

Beyond the internal constraints of teacher capacity and infrastructure, a deeper challenge lies in the institutional and cultural inertia that surrounds religious education in urban Indonesia. While MDTA Al Washliyah shows commendable initiative in integrating elements of digital awareness into its pedagogy, these efforts occur within an ecosystem that is largely unprepared for the epistemic shift brought by the digital age. Religious education in many traditional madrasahs remains anchored in paradigms that prioritize textual memorization (hifdz al-Qur'an) and ritual performance over analytical and media literacy skills. As such, the

idea of training students to evaluate online religious claims can appear tangential—or even disruptive—to more conservative stakeholders.

This cultural resistance is compounded by the generational gap between students and educators. While children today are digital natives—accustomed to navigating Instagram reels and TikTok content—many MDTA teachers belong to a generation that is digitally semi-literate and largely unfamiliar with algorithmic logic, viral discourse, or visual meme culture. This gap makes it difficult for educators to meaningfully engage with the semiotics and rhetoric of online Islam, which often uses humor, sensationalism, or pseudo-scientific claims to attract youth attention (Barendregt, 2020). Consequently, students may remain susceptible to misinformation, not because their teachers lack authority, but because that authority does not translate effectively into digital contexts.

In addition, the absence of institutionalized professional development remains a persistent bottleneck. There is no standardized framework provided by the Ministry of Religious Affairs or regional educational boards to guide madrasah teachers in developing critical digital pedagogy. Even well-meaning institutions like MDTA Al Washliyah must rely on self-initiated strategies, personal networks, and sporadic NGO collaborations. A study by Wahyudi & Fajarini (2022) underscores that less than 15% of Islamic educational institutions in urban Sumatra have access to consistent digital pedagogical training, and even fewer implement systematic monitoring or evaluation of literacy outcomes.

The weak digital infrastructure further limits innovation. During field visits, it was observed that while some classrooms had basic audiovisual tools (such as old speakers or printed visual aids), the majority lacked functioning internet access, let alone smart devices for student interaction. In a media-saturated urban setting like Medan, this technological marginalization reinforces the digital divide between formal and informal education sectors and risks turning MDTA students into passive recipients rather than active interpreters of digital religious content.

The low engagement of parents reveals a disconnect between institutional innovation and community perception. Many guardians remain anchored in a legacy view of MDTA as a place for ngaji sore—a space for reinforcing piety and discipline, not digital literacy or critical thinking. This expectation gap not only limits parental support for programmatic expansion but also creates a feedback loop in which innovation is viewed with suspicion or indifference. As Budianta (2023) observes, educational transformation in religious settings often requires not only curricular change but also collective cultural negotiation involving families, teachers, and religious leaders.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that MDTA Al Washliyah in Medan has strategically evolved beyond its traditional role as a center for Qur'anic memorization by actively promoting religious information literacy among its students. By integrating critical media analysis and verification techniques into religious instruction, the institution aligns itself with global frameworks such as UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL), while simultaneously upholding Islamic pedagogical traditions like tafaqquh fi al-din. Teachers act not only as transmitters of sacred knowledge but also as facilitators of digital discernment, equipping students with kompetensi tabayyun the ethical capacity to navigate the complexities of online religious content. This innovative pedagogy transforms MDTA Al Washliyah into a grassroots literacy agent, deeply

embedded within the local community. Its proximity to students and their families fosters a culturally responsive approach that strengthens trust, moral formation, and civic engagement. In doing so, the institution contributes to the emergence of a digitally literate, ethically grounded generation of urban Muslim youth.

However, this transformation is hindered by significant systemic and cultural challenges. Limited digital infrastructure, absence of structured professional development, and generational gaps in digital fluency constrain the scalability and sustainability of such efforts. Moreover, a mismatch between institutional vision and parental expectations where religious education is still viewed through a narrow, ritualistic lens further limits broader community involvement. To advance the integration of information literacy within religious education, there is a pressing need for policy support, investment in teacher capacity-building, and increased public awareness of the evolving role of MDTA institutions. Without addressing these structural and sociocultural bottlenecks, the transformative potential of institutions like MDTA Al Washliyah will remain underutilized. MDTA Al Washliyah offers a compelling model of adaptive religious pedagogy that is both spiritually authentic and digitally relevant. Its experience underscores the possibility of reimagining madrasah education as a dynamic force for critical thinking, moral reasoning, and responsible digital citizenship in Indonesia's rapidly shifting media landscape.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for stakeholders in Islamic boarding schools to enhance the role of dorm guardians in preventing and addressing bullying through information literacy.

First, pesantren administrators should institutionalize structured training programs for dorm guardians focusing on counseling skills, conflict resolution, adolescent psychology, and literacy-based mentoring techniques. Such training will empower guardians to act not only as disciplinarians but as mentors and facilitators of moral development.

Second, information literacy should be formally integrated into the pesantren curriculum, linking it to Islamic values and character education. Standardized modules, guided by Qur'anic ethics, can help students develop critical thinking, empathy, and ethical communication skills.

Third, pesantren should establish clear policies, monitoring tools, and reporting mechanisms to ensure consistency in anti-bullying interventions, while also encouraging student participation in peer mediation and ethical reflection activities.

Fourth, collaborations between pesantren, educational authorities, and literacy-based organizations should be fostered to share best practices, develop innovative resources, and scale successful programs.

Finally, future research should examine the long-term impact of literacy-based interventions on student behavior and dormitory culture across various pesantren settings to ensure broader applicability and sustainability.

THANK YOU-NOTE

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