

Engaging with Islamic Narratives in a Digital Space: Insights from High School Readers

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how high school students perceive Islamic narrative texts presented through a digital reading platform, focusing on clarity, relevance, and spiritual value. It explores how students engage with these texts as digital technology increasingly becomes a part of religious education. The research was conducted at an Islamic senior high school and focused on how students interpret the clarity, relevance, and spiritual value of Islamic texts delivered in English. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) with ten students who were active users of the SMART READING virtual platform. Thematic analysis revealed that students generally perceived the content positively. They found the stories about prophets to be morally enriching and relatable to their daily lives, with values such as honesty, patience, and gratitude standing out. However, suggestions were made to improve the variety of content, include visual support, and add interactive features such as quizzes and vocabulary aids. This study contributes to digital religious education by emphasizing the importance of relevant, engaging, and spiritually meaningful content in supporting student learning and moral reflection.

Keywords: Students' Perception; Islamic Narratives; Digital Reading; Virtual Learning; Religious Education

INTRODUCTION

The integration of digital media into educational settings has transformed the way students access and interact with learning materials, including those related to religious education. In Islamic learning contexts, the shift toward digitalization has led to the development of virtual platforms that present Islamic narratives in engaging and accessible ways. These innovations are particularly significant in Islamic senior high schools, where students are expected not only to understand religious teachings but also to connect them with their personal and social lives. As religious content increasingly appears in digital spaces, the quality and relevance of that content become crucial factors influencing students' engagement.

While the technological shift offers increased access to Islamic learning resources, it also introduces new challenges. One major concern is whether the content delivered digitally retains its spiritual value, clarity, and personal significance for young readers. Many platforms focus heavily on digital delivery techniques and technological features but give limited attention to how students perceive, engage with, and internalize the Islamic messages conveyed through the content itself. This issue becomes even more pressing when Islamic narratives are presented in English, where language choice can simultaneously enrich understanding and introduce barriers.

Several previous studies have addressed the integration of digital media into religious education. Ali et al. (2025) emphasized the role of cultural identity in shaping students' digital reading preferences, while Lesmawan et al. (2024) explored how multimedia elements can enhance student engagement. Mahmudi (2024) highlighted the importance of aligning Islamic content with students' daily experiences to boost relevance. However, these studies tend to concentrate on the effectiveness of technology, platform features, or teacher-mediated strategies. They do not fully explore students' direct, personal responses to the content itself, particularly regarding its clarity, relevance, and impact on spiritual reflection. Thus, there remains a critical gap in understanding how students perceive and emotionally engage with Islamic reading content in virtual environments. Little is known about whether the narratives themselves can promote deep moral reflection, fostering religious values, or supporting personal relevance when presented in a digital format.

In response to this gap, this study focuses specifically on students' experiences and perceptions of Islamic narratives delivered through a virtual reading platform. Rather than evaluating technological features, the research emphasizes students' interpretations of the content—its clarity, relevance, and spiritual depth. The purpose of this study is to provide insights into students' lived experiences as readers of Islamic stories in a digital environment. This paper aims to explore how students interact with Islamic content in English, and to identify the challenges and suggestions they offer for improving the quality and spiritual value of such materials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Study

The incorporation of digital tools in religious education has been widely explored in recent years, especially regarding how technology enhances learning environments. Ali et al. (2025) examined how digital religious materials, when aligned with students' cultural identities, positively influenced their motivation to read Islamic texts. Their study highlighted that cultural relevance plays a key role in emotional and cognitive engagement. However, their focus remained on how

digital formats influence student motivation, rather than investigating students' deeper perceptions of the religious narratives themselves.

Similarly, Lesmawan et al. (2024) explored the impact of multimedia elements such as animations and narrations in Qur'anic storytelling applications. Their findings showed that multimedia features significantly improved comprehension and retention, especially for visual learners. Yet, their study emphasized the technical enhancements in presentation, with little attention given to how students internally interpret the Islamic values and messages conveyed in the narratives.

Mahmudi (2024) investigated students' experiences using Islamic learning applications in senior high schools and found that while students appreciated the ease and accessibility of digital platforms, they criticized the lack of content variety and spiritual depth. His study suggests a growing concern that technology alone does not guarantee meaningful spiritual engagement, indirectly pointing to the importance of examining the content quality more closely.

In contrast to these previous studies that primarily address technological tools and features, the current study focuses specifically on students' perceptions of Islamic reading content itself. It aims to understand how students evaluate the clarity, relevance, and spiritual significance of Islamic narratives presented through a digital platform. By placing students' interpretation and emotional connection to the narratives at the center of analysis, this research addresses a critical gap that previous technology-focused studies have overlooked.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' perceptions of Islamic reading content accessed through a digital platform. The study was conducted at SIT Darul Fikri Makassar, an Islamic senior high school where students regularly engage with online Islamic reading materials as part of their learning process. The participants were ten eleventh-grade students selected through purposive sampling. This sampling method was chosen because the study required participants who had specific experiences relevant to the research focus — namely, students who were active users of the SMART READING platform and who had prior experience accessing Islamic narratives in English through the application. Selecting participants with firsthand engagement ensured the data collected would be rich, detailed, and directly aligned with the study's objectives. The use of qualitative design allowed the researcher to collect rich, in-depth information about students' personal experiences, reflections, and suggestions concerning the content. Rather than seeking numerical measurements, the study aimed to understand how students interpret the spiritual and educational value of the stories they read.

Instrument and Procedure

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured Focus Group Interview (FGI) guide. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore students' opinions regarding the clarity, relevance, and spiritual impact of the content. Questions also invited students to share challenges they faced and recommendations for improving the reading experience. The FGIs were conducted in a comfortable, familiar classroom environment to encourage open and honest responses. Each session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The discussions were conducted in a mix of English and Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity and to allow students to express themselves freely. After transcription, the data were translated into English for analysis and presentation.

Data Analysis

The data collected through Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) were analyzed using thematic analysis to explore patterns of meaning within participants' responses. The analysis followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by transcribing the recordings verbatim and reading through them multiple times. During this stage, initial notes and impressions were recorded to identify recurring ideas and emotional expressions. Second, meaningful units of text were systematically coded. The coding process was done manually and included both descriptive codes, such as "clear language" and "visual suggestion," and interpretive codes like "spiritual reflection" and "moral connection." These codes were then reviewed and grouped into potential themes in the third phase. During this stage, three dominant themes began to emerge: Clarity and Comprehensibility of Content, Spiritual and Moral Connection, and Suggestions for Improvement. In the fourth phase, each theme was refined and reviewed against the original data to ensure that they were internally coherent and well-supported by multiple data extracts. This process also helped ensure that the themes accurately reflected the participants' perspectives. Next, the themes were defined and named clearly to capture their essence. Each theme was given a concise description and supported by relevant quotes from students to strengthen the interpretation. Finally, the themes were organized into a written narrative that connected directly to the research question. The findings were interpreted in the context of the study's objectives and supported with student voices to highlight their engagement with the Islamic reading content. This analytical process helped reveal not only how students perceived the content but also the values they connected with and the improvements they hoped to see in future digital Islamic reading experiences. An overview of the coding and theme development is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding Categories

Initial Codes	Subcategories	Theme
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Clear sentences, simple language, easy words	Language clarity, content structure	Clarity and Comprehensibility of Content
Lessons from prophets, emotional connection, spiritual reminder	Moral reflection, religious identity	Spiritual and Moral Connection
More visuals, want quizzes, need vocabulary help	Interactive features, content variety	Suggestions for Improvement

RESULT

This section presents the key findings from the Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) and discusses them in light of previous studies and relevant theory. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes related to students' engagement with Islamic narratives on the SMART READING platform: Clarity and Comprehensibility of Content, Spiritual and Moral Connection, and Suggestions for Improvement.

Table 2. Theme Development from Initial Coding

Theme	Description	Sample Student Quote
Clarity and Comprehensibility	Students found the language generally understandable and content well-organized.	"The stories are easy to follow. I understand the main ideas even though some words are new."
Spiritual and Moral Connection	Content led to reflection on Islamic values and personal faith.	"Reading Prophet Yusuf's story reminded me to be patient and thankful in life."
Suggestions for Improvement	Desire for more diverse content, visuals, and interactive features.	"I hope there are more pictures or questions after reading to help us remember better."

Clarity and Comprehensibility of Content

Most participants stated that the Islamic stories presented in English were generally clear and understandable. Students reported that the vocabulary used in the narratives was familiar and appropriate for their level, although some expressions required explanation from teachers or peers. The content structure organized chronologically and with short paragraphs helped maintain students' focus and facilitated comprehension.

"The stories are easy to follow. I understand the main ideas even though some words are new for me," (Participant 3).

This finding is in line with Nugraha et al. (2023), who found that learning materials designed with a clear structure and accessible language improve students' focus, comprehension, and motivation during the learning process, particularly in religious

education contexts. Furthermore, Lesmawan et al. (2024) noted that clear and structured digital content enhances learners' ability to retain religious values effectively.

Spiritual and Moral Connection

Students expressed that the stories - particularly those about prophets - encouraged personal reflection and reinforced core Islamic values such as honesty, patience, obedience, and gratitude. The narratives were perceived not just as historical accounts, but as morally instructive lessons relevant to students' daily lives.

*“When I read about Prophet Yusuf’s patience, I reflect on my own life.
It makes me think about being grateful even when I face problems”
(Participant 5).*

This finding aligns with Bruner’s (1991) theory that narratives enable readers to internalize abstract values through emotionally resonant storytelling. Similarly, Mahmudi (2024) found that when religious content is perceived as personally meaningful, students are more likely to engage with it on a deeper spiritual level.

Suggestions for Improvement

While students appreciated the content, several participants expressed a desire for greater variety in text types and themes. They suggested the addition of short reflections after each story, more stories involving female figures, and the inclusion of multimedia features such as images, audio recordings, or short quizzes.

“It would be nice if after reading, we could answer some questions or see a picture of the story. That would help us understand and remember more” (Participant 7).

These suggestions are consistent with findings by Ali et al. (2025), who highlighted that interactive features in digital platforms can increase student engagement and content retention. Enhancing content with visual or auditory elements may also help address different learning preferences, especially for visual and kinesthetic learners. Together, these findings show that while the SMART READING platform offers valuable spiritual content, students’ experience could be further enriched by making the reading process more interactive and diverse. The integration of student feedback into future content development is essential to ensure sustained interest, deeper moral reflection, and more inclusive representation.

The findings of this study highlight key aspects of students’ perceptions toward Islamic reading content accessed through a digital platform, specifically related to content clarity, personal relevance, and spiritual value. Firstly, students' positive evaluations of content clarity emphasize that language accessibility plays a central role in supporting comprehension of Islamic narratives. The majority of student

reported that the stories were easy to understand, with simple vocabulary and logical narrative flow. This finding aligns with Nugraha et al.'s (2023) study, which demonstrated that structured and clear instructional materials, as outlined in the Dick and Carey model, significantly enhance students' motivation and engagement in Islamic Religious Education. In the context of Islamic narratives, clarity is crucial not only for understanding the stories but also for accurately internalizing the spiritual lessons contained within them.

Secondly, the strong personal and spiritual connections students formed with the narratives demonstrate the importance of relevance in religious education. Students related the values embedded in the stories—such as patience, honesty, and gratitude—to their own experiences, suggesting that the content successfully bridged religious teachings with everyday realities. Moreover, Mahmudi (2024) stressed that when Islamic educational content aligns with students' real-life experiences, it becomes more meaningful and impactful. These findings affirm that for Islamic reading content to be effective, it must not only present religious knowledge but also connect deeply to students' personal contexts.

Thirdly, the challenges identified by students highlight critical areas for content improvement rather than platform functionality. Students expressed the need for a greater variety of narratives, including more female-centered stories, and suggested incorporating visual elements and interactive features such as quizzes or vocabulary supports. This recommendation aligns with the findings of Lesmawan et al. (2024), who noted that multimedia elements in Islamic storytelling significantly increased students' engagement and comprehension. These insights suggest that developing richer, more diversified, and student-responsive content is necessary to sustain interest and maximize the educational and spiritual value of digital Islamic reading materials.

Overall, this study reaffirms that the effectiveness of Islamic narratives presented digitally depends less on technological sophistication and more on the clarity, relevance, and spiritual richness of the materials. This finding is consistent with Hassan's (2015) view that religious education in digital spaces must preserve spiritual authenticity while adapting to the needs and expectations of contemporary learners. Consequently, digital platforms should prioritize student-centered content development that maintains the integrity of Islamic teachings while presenting them in ways that are accessible, reflective, and personally meaningful for high school readers.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Islamic senior high school students engage with narrative Islamic content presented in a digital reading platform. The findings revealed that students generally perceived the content as clear, relevant, and spiritually meaningful. Stories about prophets were particularly effective in promoting reflection on core Islamic values such as honesty, patience, and gratitude. However,

students also identified several areas for improvement, including the need for a wider variety of stories, inclusion of multimedia elements, and the addition of interactive features. These suggestions highlight the importance of not only delivering religious content digitally but also ensuring that the content remains engaging and pedagogically responsive to students' needs. The results of this study contribute to the field of digital religious education by emphasizing the critical role of content quality and student-centered design. It is recommended that educators and content developers collaborate to refine digital Islamic reading materials in ways that enhance both educational outcomes and spiritual development. Future research may focus on assessing the long-term impact of such content on students' moral behavior and religious understanding.

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