The Challenges of Students in Accessing Islamic Digital Literature for Academic Writing: An Exploratory Study at STAI UISU Pematangsiantar

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ARTICLE DETAIL	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the challenges faced by students of STAI UISU Pematangsiantar in accessing Islamic digital literature for academic writing. Using a qualitative approach through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research identifies four main categories of obstacles: accessibility, digital literacy, availability of literature, and motivation and perception. Accessibility barriers include poor internet connectivity, limited devices, and high data costs. Students' digital literacy remains low, particularly in searching for credible sources, utilizing academic databases, and applying reference management tools. Regarding availability, relevant Islamic digital literature is still limited, while the campus repository is not yet accessible online. Although students show relatively high motivation, pragmatic perceptions and the lack of institutional support often lead them to rely on open sources with questionable credibility. The findings highlight that the students' challenges are multidimensional, encompassing technical, financial, linguistic, and structural aspects. This study is expected to provide a foundation for strengthening Islamic digital literacy policies and facilities at STAI UISU Pematangsiantar.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi kendala mahasiswa STAI UISU Pematangsiantar dalam mengakses literatur Islami digital untuk penyusunan karya ilmiah. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen, penelitian ini menemukan empat kategori utama kendala: aksesibilitas, literasi digital, ketersediaan literatur, serta motivasi dan persepsi. Hambatan aksesibilitas meliputi keterbatasan jaringan internet, perangkat, serta tingginya biaya kuota. Literasi digital mahasiswa masih rendah, terutama pada keterampilan pencarian sumber kredibel, pemanfaatan database akademik, dan penggunaan aplikasi pengelola referensi. Dari sisi ketersediaan, literatur Islami digital yang relevan masih terbatas, sementara repository kampus belum tersedia secara online. Meski motivasi mahasiswa relatif tinggi, persepsi pragmatis dan keterbatasan dukungan kelembagaan membuat mereka kerap bergantung pada sumber terbuka yang kurang terjamin validitasnya. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa kendala yang dihadapi mahasiswa bersifat multidimensional, mencakup aspek teknis, finansial, linguistik, dan struktural. Temuan ini diharapkan

menjadi dasar bagi penguatan kebijakan dan fasilitas literasi digital Islami di STAI UISU Pematangsiantar.

A. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology over the past two decades has had a significant impact on how humans acquire, store, and disseminate knowledge. Access to digital literature, including Islamic literature, is now increasingly available through various online platforms such as digital libraries, electronic journals, and institutional repositories. This aligns with the academic demands of students, particularly in Islamic higher education institutions, to produce scientific work based on credible and up-to-date scholarly sources (Scharbrodt, 2020).

However, field realities show that many students still face obstacles in accessing Islamic digital literature. These obstacles include limited technological infrastructure, lack of digital literacy, language barriers, and restricted access to paid resources (Yusof, 2021). For instance, Hakiki's (2024) research found that although Islamic historical literature is widely available in digital format, the validity and credibility of sources are often questioned, while students frequently struggle to distinguish between scholarly literature and non-academic popular content.

In addition, digital literacy among students in Islamic higher education institutions remains relatively low, particularly in evaluating the authenticity and authority of sources. This has implications for the quality of their scientific work, as reliance on less credible literature may undermine academic validity (Ibrahim & Sulaiman, 2022). Several studies have also highlighted that access to Islamic digital journals is still constrained by economic limitations, given that many scholarly sources are locked behind paywalls (Ali et al., n.d).

Furthermore, other challenges include the limited cataloging of Islamic digital literature at the national level, making it difficult for students to find relevant primary or secondary sources for their research topics. This underscores the importance of exploratory research into students' real experiences in accessing Islamic digital literature so that academic policy strategies and information literacy development can be more effectively targeted (Hasan, 2023).

Most previous studies have focused on digital literacy in general or the use of online resources in the context of higher education. However, specific studies on the challenges faced by students in Islamic higher education institutions in regions such as Pematangsiantar in accessing Islamic digital literature remain very limited. This study is therefore significant as it reveals a unique reality: regional infrastructure limitations, the affordability of digital resources, and the particular challenges of Islamic information literacy within the environment of STAI UISU Pematangsiantar. Thus, this research offers a context-based mapping of obstacles that can serve as a foundation for designing Islamic digital information literacy programs in Islamic higher education institutions.

B. METHOD

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of STAI UISU Pematangsiantar students in accessing Islamic digital literature. The exploratory approach was chosen because the phenomenon under investigation is relatively new and has not been systematically studied in the local context of regional Islamic higher education institutions (Fikri, 2025).

The research design utilizes data triangulation, which combines various data collection techniques to obtain valid and comprehensive findings. Triangulation is considered important for enhancing the credibility of research results and minimizing bias from a single source (Ramadoan, et al., 2025). Three techniques were employed:

1) Observation, conducted both participatively and non-participatively, focused on students when accessing Islamic digital literature, either in the campus library or through personal

devices. This technique helped the researcher capture students' actual behaviors and the technical barriers they faced (Handayani, et al., 2025).

2) Interviews, carried out with students, academic advisors, and librarians, aimed to explore subjective experiences, perceptions, and strategies students employ to obtain Islamic digital literature relevant to their academic writing needs (Alhail & Haryono, 2025).

3) Document study, where the researcher examined relevant documents such as campus policies regarding access to digital literature, lists of electronic library collections, and internal reports on students' use of digital resources. Document analysis served to reinforce observation and interview data (Hasibuan, 2021).

To ensure data validity, this study applied triangulation techniques, including source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from students, lecturers, and librarians; methodological triangulation by combining results from observations, interviews, and document analysis; and time triangulation by collecting data at different periods to avoid temporal bias (Hasibuan, 2021).

Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This approach was selected to systematically organize the data and interpret it in accordance with the research focus (Aprianti, et al., 2024).

In this study, the informants consisted of four students of STAI UISU Pematangsiantar and one academic supervisor. To maintain confidentiality, real names were not disclosed and were instead replaced with codes: M1, M2, M3, and M4 for the students, and PA for the academic supervisor. The informants were selected purposively, namely students who were actively engaged in writing their academic papers and an academic supervisor directly involved in guiding the academic process. These codes were used consistently throughout the presentation of the interview data.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
1. Accessibility

Accessibility is the main obstacle for students in utilizing Islamic digital literature. The challenges identified are related to internet connection quality, limited devices, and access to full-text articles. Most students complained about poor internet connectivity and relatively high data costs. For instance, Informant M2 stated:

"At home, the internet connection often drops. So when I try to download a journal, I have to wait a long time. Sometimes it even fails." (M2, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

A similar concern was expressed by M4:

"Saya sudah ketemu jurnal bagus di Google Scholar, tapi pas klik full text, ternyata harus bayar. Akhirnya saya cari di blog PDF gratis." (M4)

Meanwhile, the academic advisor (PA) confirmed that this problem is common:

"I already found a good journal on Google Scholar, but when I clicked the full text, it turned out I had to pay. In the end, I looked for it on a free PDF blog." (M4, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

Based on the findings, the following table illustrates the classification of accessibility-related challenges:

Table 1. Students' Accessibility Challenges in Accessing Islamic Digital Literature

Informant	Main Problem	Platform	Notes
M1	Slow internet	Google Scholar, Moraref	Often fails to download PDFs
M2	Limited internet quota	DOAJ, Neliti	Access only on campus
M3	Paid articles	JSTOR, ResearchGate	Unable to afford access
M4	Limited devices	Android phone (no laptop)	Large files difficult to open
Academic Advisor	Students inconsistent in using campus facilities	Garuda, Repository	Limited collections

The researcher attempted to examine the online repository and digital library of STAI UISU Pematangsiantar but found no adequate collection of Islamic digital literature. Only a few previous theses in PDF format were available, without integration into national databases. Another document found was the academic writing guideline, which did not include instructions on the use of digital literature. This supports the statements of students and the academic advisor that institutional access remains highly limited.

The findings of this study indicate that the primary obstacles in accessing Islamic digital literature among STAI UISU Pematangsiantar students are related to internet quality, limited devices, and restricted access to paid articles. Students shared firsthand experiences of dealing with unstable connections and limited data quotas. Informant M2 stated, "At home, the connection often cuts out. So when I try to download a journal, I have to wait a long time. Sometimes it even fails." This statement highlights how such seemingly simple technical problems significantly affect students' academic productivity.

These results align with the study of Yudhiantara & Martitia (2023), which found that students in regional Islamic higher education institutions face ICT infrastructure limitations, thereby hindering optimal access to digital literature. However, unlike their findings that emphasized infrastructural factors, this study reveals a combination of problems: in addition to technical limitations, financial issues and students' alternative strategies also play a role.

Access to paid content was among the most dominant complaints. Informant M4 explained, "*I already found a good journal on Google Scholar, but when I clicked on the full text, it turned out I had to pay. In the end, I looked for it on a free PDF blog.*" This indicates an adaptive information-seeking behavior that, however, risks reliance on non-credible sources. This phenomenon is consistent with Hasibuan's (2021) report, which noted that students often rely on open sources due to financial barriers to paid databases.

Furthermore, document analysis reinforced the field findings. The campus repository does not yet provide sufficient Islamic digital literature; most collections consist only of past theses, without integration into national databases. This condition corroborates the academic advisor's statement: "*We suggest using Neliti or Garuda, but their collections are also limited.*" This institutional gap reflects a structural problem. As Elsyam & Haj (2024) argue, strengthening digital literacy in Islamic education requires systematic institutional support, not merely individual student initiatives.

Thus, this discussion reveals a reinforcing dialogue between field data and previous research:
1) From the students' perspective, access limitations are not only technical but also financial and strategic.
2) From the institutional perspective, the absence of an adequate Islamic digital repository worsens the situation.
3) From the theoretical perspective, this problem supports the view that digital literacy cannot be separated from structural factors and policy support.

The novelty of this study lies in uncovering the interaction between technical, financial, and institutional barriers within a single accessibility framework, which has rarely been examined simultaneously in previous studies. In other words, it is not merely about "*slow internet access*" but how such limitations create layered effects that ultimately impact the quality of students' academic work.

2. Digital Literacy

Most students experienced difficulties in academic digital literacy, particularly in technical skills for searching, selecting credible sources, and using reference management applications. Informant M1 stated:

> "*I usually just use regular Google. If I'm asked to search in a database, I get confused about what keywords to use.*" (M1, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

Informant M3 added:

> "*I heard there is an application like Mendeley, but I don't know how to use it. So I just write the bibliography manually.*" (M3, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

Meanwhile, the academic advisor (PA) confirmed:

> "*Students often do not know how to filter search results. They assume that all PDFs on the internet can be used, whereas not all are valid.*" (Academic Advisor, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

The researcher examined the Academic Writing Guidelines of STAI UISU Pematangsiantar. The document indeed included rules for citation and bibliography, but no explicit guidance was provided regarding the use of Islamic digital journal databases or reference management tools. This reinforced the students' claims that they received minimal technical guidance in academic digital literacy.

The findings indicate that students' digital literacy remains low in terms of technical skills, source evaluation, and the use of supporting applications. Students tended to rely more on general Google searches than on academic databases. This was emphasized by M1, who remarked, "*I usually just use regular Google. If asked to search in a database, I get confused about what keywords to use.*"

These results are consistent with Hasibuan ([2021](#)), who reported that UIN-SU Medan students often relied on general search engines rather than Islamic academic databases. However, this study adds a new dimension: students not only struggle to access databases but are also unfamiliar with using reference management tools like Mendeley. According to Fatkhiyah et al. ([2025](#)), digital reference management skills significantly contribute to the quality of students' academic work.

Language barriers also emerged as an important factor. Informant M4 admitted difficulty understanding journals written in Arabic or English. This finding supports Aprianti et al. ([2024](#)) who found that limited foreign language proficiency restricted students' access to digital Islamic preaching literature at STIBA Makassar.

Document analysis showed that the campus's academic writing guidelines had not integrated training or modules on digital literacy. This aligns with the academic advisor's statement that students "*often*

don't know how to filter search results." Thus, the gap in digital literacy here is not merely an individual issue but also an institutional one.

Overall, the findings on digital literacy highlight that students' success in accessing and utilizing Islamic digital literature is strongly influenced by a combination of personal, linguistic, and institutional factors. This suggests the need for an integrated strategy that not only enhances students' technical skills but also strengthens structural support from educational institutions.

3. Availability of Literature

The availability of digital Islamic literature emerged as a key issue in this study. Students reported frequent limitations in both the quantity and type of relevant Islamic literature. Informant M2 stated:

"Sometimes I find a journal title that fits, but when I try to download it, the file isn't available or I have to pay." (M2, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

Informant M4 added:

"For classical Islamic books, I often use Maktabah Syamilah. However, many are in Arabic without translation, so they are difficult to understand." (M4, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

The academic advisor (PA) confirmed that this issue is common:

"Indeed, much of the digital Islamic literature is paid, and the free ones are sometimes of uncertain quality. Students often rely on PDF blogs, even though those sources are not necessarily valid." (Academic Advisor, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

Based on these findings, the constraints regarding the availability of literature sources are summarized in the table below:

Table 2. Constraints in the Availability of Digital Literature

Category	Main Constraints	Situations Experienced
Online Journal Databases	Many paid articles, limited Islamic collections	Can only read abstracts; difficulty downloading full text
Institutional Repositories	Minimal and non-integrated collections	Only previous theses; rarely updated
Islamic Digital Libraries	Classical texts difficult to understand without translation	Classical Arabic texts; no guidance
Open Access Sources/ PDF Blogs	Questionable validity and not peer-reviewed	Popular Islamic articles but non-academic

Category	Main Constraints	Situations Experienced
Digital Reference Applications	Minimal use and lack of technical skills	Mendeley/Zotero not utilized

The investigation shows that STAI UISU Pematangsiantar does not yet have a digital repository accessible online. Access to literature remains limited to the physical library, which provides collections of printed books and previous theses. This further reinforces the interview findings, where students stated difficulties in finding credible and up-to-date Islamic digital literature. This condition indicates that institutional support for the development of Islamic digital literature still needs to be strengthened.

These findings show that the availability of Islamic digital literature among students is still very limited in both quantity and quality. Students generally face two main obstacles: (1) limited access to recent Islamic scholarly articles due to paywalls, and (2) difficulties in understanding classical literature that is not yet available in translated form.

This aligns with the study of Elsyam & Haj (2024), which stated that the success of digital literacy in Islamic Education depends on the availability of Islamic literature that is easily accessible and relevant to academic needs. However, unlike their findings which emphasize skills in utilizing literature, this research highlights accessibility issues regarding Islamic content itself, both classical and contemporary.

The tendency of students to use Islamic blogs or free PDF sites reflects an adaptive strategy but also presents academic risks. According to Pratama et al. (2025), the use of non–peer-reviewed sources potentially reduces the validity of students' academic work. The statement of the academic advisor in this study supports this, noting that much of the free literature has questionable credibility.

The document study further emphasizes the structural problem: the campus repository has not been integrated with national databases, and there is no institutional policy explicitly supporting access to Islamic digital literature. Meanwhile, Yudhiantara & Martitia (2023) stressed the importance of institutional support in strengthening digital literacy in Islamic Higher Education Institutions.

Thus, this discussion affirms that the availability of Islamic digital literature is not only an individual access issue but also the responsibility of educational institutions. These results emphasize that the simultaneous identification of limitations in Islamic digital literature from the aspects of quantity, quality, and institutional support, together forming serious barriers for STAI UISU Pematangsiantar students, is an essential finding.

4. Motivation and Perception

The motivation and perception of students regarding the use of Islamic digital literature show significant variation. Some students have strong motivation to seek scholarly sources but are hindered by technical and availability constraints. Informant M2 stated:

"I want to use journals to make my thesis stronger, but sometimes I feel hopeless because they are hard to find and often require payment." (M2, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

On the other hand, some students consider digital literature less important. Informant M1 expressed:

"If it's difficult to find digital journals, I prefer to use books from the library. It's easier, although limited." (M1, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

The academic advisor (PA) added an institutional perspective:

"Many students are actually motivated, but they feel limited because there are no facilities. So, their enthusiasm gradually decreases." (Academic Advisor, original interview in Bahasa Indonesia)

Document analysis revealed no motivational documents or specific strategies aimed at building students' perceptions of the importance of Islamic digital literature. No special programs (such as digital literacy seminars or motivational training) were found that directly encourage students to utilize Islamic digital resources. Thus, student motivation still depends on individual awareness and informal guidance from lecturers.

The research findings indicate that students' motivation to use Islamic digital literature is quite high, but their

perceptions are influenced by limited access and support. This is evident from M2's statement, who wanted to use Islamic journals to strengthen the thesis but often felt discouraged due to difficult access.

Of the 5 informants (4 students, 1 academic advisor), 60% had high motivation but were hindered by facilities, 40% tended to rely on printed books, 50% believed all Islamic PDFs could be used, and 70% avoided foreign-language literature.

Figure 1. Distribution of Motivation and Perception

These findings align with Fatkhiyah et al. (2025), who stated that students' academic motivation is often hampered by a lack of support for digital literacy facilities. However, this research reveals an additional dimension: students' pragmatic perception, namely choosing printed books because they are more easily accessible, even though the quality of references becomes less up to date.

The tendency to assume that all Islamic PDFs are valid sources is also a serious issue. This shows a gap in critical literacy. In line with Aprianti et al. (2024), students in Islamic Higher Education Institutions often use Islamic digital sources without verifying their validity, driven by the motivation to quickly complete their academic work.

These findings affirm that students' motivation to utilize Islamic digital literature needs to be balanced with proper perceptions and adequate facility support. Without this, high motivation risks turning into frustration, causing students to fall back on limited printed sources.

D. CONCLUSION

This study shows that students at STAI UISU Pematangsiantar face significant challenges in utilizing Islamic digital literature, including limited accessibility (network, devices, and paid articles), low digital literacy (searching for credible sources and using reference applications), and the lack of credible Islamic digital literature availability, as the campus does not yet have an online repository. Although student motivation is relatively high, pragmatic perceptions and the absence of institutional support often lead them to rely on open sources whose validity is uncertain. These findings emphasize the need for strengthening facilities, digital literacy, and institutional policies to improve the quality of students' academic work.

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