Integrating Media Literacy in Da'wah: Effective Communication Strategies for Religious Counselors in Preventing Early Marriage

Ahmad Sampurna[1*], Atikah Asna[2] & Ghasem Mohammadi[3]
[12]*Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia*
[3]*Internasional Institut for Islamic Studies, Iran*
*ahmadsampurna@uinsu.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Early marriage remains a serious issue in West Nias Regency, particularly affecting young girls. Religious instructors, as respected community figures, are seen as vital agents in preventing early marriage through education based on religious values. However, challenges such as limited digital access, low media proficiency, and generational communication gaps reduce their effectiveness, especially in reaching youth influenced by social media. This study explores how media literacy can enhance religious instructors' role in early marriage prevention. Using a Community-Based Research (CBR) approach and qualitative methods, the study engaged 28 participants— including instructors, community leaders, and youth—through interviews, FGDs, and observations. Results show that instructors trained in basic digital skills used tools like WhatsApp, Facebook, and video editing apps to create religious-themed videos and interactive content. These methods significantly improved youth engagement. One instructor noted, "After learning how to use videos and infographics, more teenagers listened and asked questions." The study concludes that media literacy is a key communication strategy, not just a technical skill. It enables instructors to connect more effectively with younger audiences and address sensitive topics like early marriage. Two key recommendations are: (1) establish ongoing, tailored media literacy training for religious instructors, and (2) build partnerships with schools and youth organizations to develop collaborative digital campaigns. These strategies can empower religious instructors to become more dynamic, youth-friendly communicators and help reduce early marriage in West Nias.

Keywords: *Early marriage; communication strategy; media literacy; religious counselor.*

INTRODUCTION

Early marriage remains a pressing social issue in many regions of Indonesia, including West Nias Regency (Wahid, 2023a). According to the

Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the early marriage rate in West Nias reached approximately 28% of total marriages in 2023. This figure represents a persistent challenge, especially when compared to the national average, which was recorded at 19.47% in the same year (BPS, 2023; Nurhaidah et al., 2024). Over the past five years, West Nias has consistently ranked among regions with higher early marriage rates, with minimal year-to-year decline—indicating that current interventions have had limited impact. These marriages often occur among girls aged 15 to 18 and are influenced by a combination of cultural norms, economic hardship, and limited access to education and reproductive health information (Halihasimi et al., 2024). The consequences are profound, ranging from interrupted educational trajectories to restricted economic opportunities and heightened risks of reproductive health complications and psychosocial problems (Beckwith et al., 2024).

In this context, religious instructors (penyuluh agama) serve as influential agents of change due to their respected social standing and authority in conveying religious teachings (Wijaya & Nurchamidah, 2024; Aprilianto et al., 2025). Their role is especially strategic in rural and traditional communities such as West Nias, where religious values significantly influence daily life and social practices (Ashoumi et al., 2022). However, the rapidly evolving digital landscape presents new challenges. The younger generation, which is the most vulnerable to early marriage, increasingly consumes information through digital media rather than through conventional means such as sermons or community meetings (Habib & Pardi, 2024). Consequently, the effectiveness of traditional religious counseling is diminishing, necessitating the integration of media literacy into da'wah strategies to better engage modern audiences (Anurogo et al., 2023).

Media literacy, defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms, has been identified as a critical competency for enhancing the communicative effectiveness of religious instructors (Habib & Pardi, 2024). When applied within religious contexts, media literacy empowers instructors to deliver faith-based messages in compelling, accessible, and contextually relevant formats through digital channels such as social media, short videos, podcasts, and interactive educational platforms (Sampurna & Ritonga, 2024). Despite its potential, the application of media literacy in religious outreach remains underexplored and underutilized (Anurogo et al., 2023). Existing studies

often highlight the lack of digital skills, minimal exposure to media tools, and insufficient training opportunities for religious counselors, particularly in remote or underdeveloped regions.

Critically, while previous research has acknowledged the need for digital engagement among religious figures, there has been limited focus on the integration of media literacy as a structured framework within da'wah efforts aimed at social transformation—such as the prevention of early marriage (Shayan et al., 2022). This study addresses that gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of how media literacy can be operationalized as a component of religious instruction (Hasan et al., 2024). It explores the synergies between digital communication, religious authority, and social change, proposing a model in which religious instructors act not only as spiritual guides but also as digital educators equipped with media skills to influence behavioral outcomes (Kojansow et al., 2023).

The conceptual framework for this study connects three core elements: (1) media literacy, as a communicative toolset that enables more effective message delivery; (2) religious counseling (da'wah), as a moral and cultural influence rooted in Islamic values; and (3) early marriage prevention, as the targeted social outcome (Shofiyyah et al., 2023). This tripartite model suggests that religious messages grounded in media literacy can resonate more strongly with digitally literate youth, thereby reinforcing cultural and religious arguments against early marriage while also addressing broader socio-economic implications (Elmi et al., 2024).

The socio-cultural context of West Nias adds further relevance to this study (Karomah et al., 2024). Located in North Sumatra, West Nias is characterized by traditional kinship systems, patriarchal norms, and limited infrastructure (Wulandari, 2023). These factors contribute to the normalization of early marriage as a coping mechanism for poverty, family honor, or perceived protection of girls' futures. Religious beliefs play a central role in community life, making religious instructors key influencers (Shihan & Zaroum, 2022). However, limited digital infrastructure—only about 35% of the population has stable internet access—combined with low levels of digital literacy among instructors creates significant barriers to modernizing communication strategies (Uyuni et al., n.d.). As such, West Nias provides a unique and critical setting for testing the integration of media literacy in religious outreach (Irbathy et al., 2025).

To explore this issue, this study employs a qualitative research design with a Community-Based Research (CBR) approach, which emphasizes

collaborative engagement with the community to identify issues and co-create solutions. The research was conducted in four stages: (1) Laying the Foundations, which involved building trust with local stakeholders and forming a research steering group; (2) Planning, focused on designing culturally relevant research instruments; (3) Information Gathering and Analysis, which engaged community members in participatory data collection and interpretation; and (4) Acting on Findings, aimed at developing practical interventions, such as media literacy training modules for religious instructors.

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the Community-Based Research (CBR) framework to investigate how media literacy can be integrated into religious counseling as a strategy to prevent early marriage in West Nias (Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2024). CBR was chosen due to its emphasis on inclusivity, collaboration, and mutual benefit, facilitating meaningful partnerships between researchers and community stakeholders. This approach is particularly effective in addressing complex, culturally embedded social issues, as it centers local knowledge and ensures that research outcomes are relevant, sustainable, and contextually grounded.

Community participation was integrated throughout the research process in four interconnected stages. The initial phase, known as "Laying the Foundations," involved building partnerships with religious instructors, community leaders, youth representatives, and local government officials. These early engagements—through community meetings and informal dialogues—helped establish mutual trust and shared ownership of the research goals (Rong et al., 2023). A local steering committee was formed to guide the study, ensuring alignment with local cultural values and community expectations (Karlsen, 2020). In the subsequent planning phase, research instruments such as interview guides and focus group discussion (FGD) protocols were co-developed with input from the steering committee (Dewi, 2022). This collaborative process ensured that the instruments reflected local linguistic nuances and cultural sensitivities, and also included the logistical coordination necessary for effective data collection.

Data collection and analysis were approached as participatory processes. Community members were not only respondents but also collaborators in the gathering and interpretation of information (Plekhanov et al., 2023). During the data collection phase, researchers worked alongside

local facilitators, allowing for a more organic and culturally appropriate dialogue with participants. Preliminary findings were regularly presented to the community for validation, fostering a sense of inclusion and enhancing the authenticity of the data (Putra et al., 2024a). This iterative process strengthened the reliability of the findings by enabling participants to confirm or challenge emerging interpretations. The final phase, "Acting on Findings," translated the research outcomes into community interventions. These included workshops and training sessions focused on enhancing media literacy among religious instructors, as well as policy recommendations developed in collaboration with local authorities to support broader implementation (Achmad, 2022).

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants who held relevant knowledge or influence regarding the issue of early marriage (Makwana et al., 2023). The sample comprised eight religious instructors, six parents, and six youth aged 15–20 (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Religious instructors were chosen based on their active role in community-based religious counseling and their experience in delivering da'wah. Parents were selected to capture perspectives from those directly involved in marriage decision-making, particularly those with adolescent children. The youth participants represented the demographic most vulnerable to early marriage and most familiar with digital media. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection ceased when no new insights emerged. Given the population size and geographic distribution of West Nias, the sample was considered adequate for achieving a rich and contextually nuanced understanding of the research topic (Hossan et al., 2023).

Data collection employed three primary qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexible, in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, views on early marriage, and familiarity with media use in religious contexts. FGDs were conducted separately with youth and parents, using structured protocols that incorporated scenario-based discussions and role-playing to encourage open conversation. Participant observation was carried out during religious counseling sessions, enabling researchers to document communication styles, audience engagement, and media usage in real-time (Huriani et al., 2022). All instruments were pilot-tested in a neighboring community with similar socio-cultural characteristics. Feedback from the pilot phase informed

revisions to improve clarity and cultural appropriateness.

Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with both written and verbal explanations provided to ensure understanding of the study's aims, procedures, and potential risks (Cilar Budler & Stiglic, 2025). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained through the use of anonymized transcripts and pseudonyms (Millum & Bromwich, 2021). Special care was taken to ensure that the research process respected local religious and cultural norms, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic.

To further ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several methodological strategies were employed. Data triangulation, involving multiple sources and methods, enhanced the depth and consistency of the analysis (Marfiyanti et al., 2024). Member checking was used to verify the accuracy of interpretations by presenting preliminary findings to participants for feedback. Reflexivity was also practiced throughout the research, with the research team maintaining journals to critically examine their own assumptions, positionalities, and potential biases that could influence data interpretation (Lim, 2024).

This comprehensive and participatory research design not only generated valuable insights into the intersection of media literacy, religious counseling, and early marriage prevention, but also empowered local actors (Firmansyah et al., 2022). By integrating the community at every stage, the study aimed to build local capacity, enhance the relevance of religious instructors' outreach, and contribute to the development of actionable, culturally sensitive strategies for reducing early marriage in West Nias.

This study is expected to contribute to the development of more adaptive and effective religious communication strategies that are responsive to contemporary digital realities and cultural nuances (Irbathy et al., 2025). The findings may serve as recommendations for local governments, religious institutions, and development organizations aiming to enhance the role of religious instructors in social change efforts—particularly in the prevention of early marriage (Khasanah et al., 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Religious Counselors and Their Role in Preventing Early Marriage

Despite the formal structure and regulatory support behind religious counselors' roles as outlined by the Ministry of Religion, there remains a critical need to scrutinize the actual effectiveness of religious counseling strategies in contemporary Indonesia, particularly in relation to early marriage prevention (Yusuf et al., 2025). While theoretical models present religious counselors as moral guides, educators, and community advocates, their practical interventions often remain confined to conventional formats—sermons, formal lectures, or passive information delivery—which are increasingly out of step with the communication preferences and cultural consumption patterns of the younger generation. In West Nias, for instance, many of the counseling sessions continue to rely on didactic preaching during prayer gatherings or community meetings. These sessions are frequently dominated by one-way communication with minimal interaction or engagement.

The lack of dialogical spaces limits the extent to which counseling can respond to the lived experiences of adolescents, who are simultaneously navigating religious values, peer influence, digital culture, and socioeconomic pressures (Wahid, 2024b). As one religious counselor in Gunungsitoli candidly admitted, *"Sometimes I feel like I am speaking into a void. I speak of the importance of delaying marriage and finishing school, but the youth don't ask questions or respond. Later, I hear that the same youth got married at 16."* This reflection highlights the disjunction between message dissemination and message reception, suggesting that the current methods of religious counseling may be inadequate in addressing the complex social forces that normalize early marriage (Wilkinson et al., 2024; Nadhrah et al., 2025).

To understand this gap, it is essential to evaluate the limitations of the current counseling model not just in terms of logistics or content, but in its very orientation toward authority, audience, and methodology (Rua & Santos, 2022). Many religious counselors in rural or remote regions lack the training to adapt religious messages to contemporary social issues using modern media or youth-centric platforms (Martínez-Peláez et al., 2023). Unlike in urban areas such as Bandung or Yogyakarta—where digital Islamic influencers, youth-oriented preaching, and participatory religious programs have emerged—West Nias has yet to fully integrate digital or multimedia strategies into its religious communication infrastructure (Tahir

& Rayhaniah, 2022). In Bandung, for example, religious youth programs now frequently use interactive podcasting, online video platforms, and even TikTok to discuss Islamic perspectives on education, reproductive health, and youth empowerment (Kusaini, 2024). These approaches are not only modern in form but also dynamic in content, often allowing for live feedback, question-and-answer sessions, and the sharing of personal stories. In contrast, religious counseling in West Nias still predominantly views media as a supplementary tool rather than a primary means of engagement, resulting in a communication strategy that may feel distant or irrelevant to adolescents. This regional disparity underscores the importance of local adaptation and innovation, revealing that the success of religious counseling in preventing early marriage is highly contingent on the capacity of counselors to contextualize and mediate their messages in culturally resonant and youth-friendly ways (Chalisha, 2023).

Moreover, the issue is compounded by a structural and institutional rigidity that often discourages innovation among religious counselors. Many are bound by bureaucratic expectations that emphasize quantitative metrics—such as the number of sessions delivered—over qualitative outcomes, such as behavioral change or increased critical awareness among youth. Additionally, counselors in West Nias frequently report that they receive little to no training in adolescent psychology, gender-sensitive communication, or the social determinants of early marriage. One counselor shared his frustration, stating, *"We are always told to preach about marriage, but no one ever gave us materials about how to speak to teenagers. They just say: speak with religious wisdom. But what does that mean when children are facing pressure from poverty, from social media, from their own families?"* This quote not only reflects the lack of institutional support but also a broader epistemological gap between religious knowledge and the socio-emotional realities of modern youth. Without tools to bridge this gap, counselors are often forced to rely on tradition-bound messages that, while morally sound, may lack immediate resonance or practical value in the lives of their adolescent audiences.

A more nuanced understanding also requires examining the power dynamics between religious counselors and the communities they serve, particularly regarding deeply entrenched practices such as early marriage (Mohammed, 2024). Religious counselors typically hold significant moral authority in rural Indonesian communities, often being perceived as custodians of divine truth and social harmony (Arimatea & Sukarna, 2025).

This positional power enables them to influence community norms; however, it also places them in a delicate position when attempting to challenge traditional practices that are often justified on religious or cultural grounds (Schroevers et al., 2021). The issue of early marriage is one such practice. In many cases, parents or community elders view early marriage not as a social problem but as a solution to perceived risks, such as premarital sex, economic hardship, or family dishonor (Bunyamin et al., 2023). When religious counselors advocate for delaying marriage, they may be perceived as undermining these protective rationales. One female religious counselor explained this dilemma poignantly: *"When I say that marriage should come after 18, some families say I am trying to westernize their children or turn them against religion. But I am only trying to help them see the bigger picture—education, health, maturity. Still, it is very hard to change a mindset that sees early marriage as a blessing."* This reveals how the counselor's influence is constrained by cultural resistance, and how their messages can be reframed as threats to tradition rather than as protections for youth.

In addition, the gendered nature of power in these interactions must be acknowledged. Female counselors often face even more challenges in asserting their authority, particularly when discussing topics such as reproductive health, consent, or sexual education—areas that remain taboo in many traditional settings (Fernandes et al., 2025). While male counselors may face less overt resistance when speaking on marriage, they too often avoid sensitive topics to maintain social cohesion (Aibangbee et al., 2024). This leads to a selective moral pedagogy, where only certain aspects of religious teaching—such as obedience, family duty, or modesty—are emphasized, while more progressive interpretations that support women's rights or personal agency are muted or ignored. Such selective messaging not only narrows the scope of religious counseling but also perpetuates gender inequalities by framing the conversation around moral control rather than youth empowerment (Flusberg et al., 2024).

To break through these limitations, religious counseling must move beyond the static model of authority-based preaching and adopt a more dialogical, participatory, and interdisciplinary approach. Counselors must be equipped not only with religious knowledge but also with skills in communication theory, digital literacy, gender-sensitive pedagogy, and social psychology (Maisuroh et al., 2024). Training programs should be restructured to include modules on adolescent development, trauma-informed counseling, and collaborative message design (Hauzel & Pattnaik,

2024). Partnerships with local schools, health services, and NGOs can also help diversify the content and channels of counseling efforts, providing a richer and more comprehensive support system for youth. Drawing on successful models from places like Surabaya—where interfaith youth groups and digital storytelling projects have become tools for early marriage prevention—West Nias could develop locally tailored initiatives that maintain religious authenticity while embracing modern methods of communication (Vodă et al., 2022).

In conclusion, while the institutional presence of religious counselors in West Nias provides a foundation for addressing early marriage, the current strategies remain limited in effectiveness due to outdated communication models, lack of contextual adaptation, and complex community power dynamics. By listening more deeply to the voices of counselors and community members, integrating youth-centered methods, and critically reevaluating the structures of religious pedagogy, a more effective and transformative form of religious counseling can be developed (Zyromski & Dimmitt, 2022). Only through such integrative and reflexive practices can religious counselors fulfill their potential—not only as moral guides, but as authentic agents of social change in the fight against early marriage.

Media Literacy as a Communication Strategy for Religious Counselors

Media literacy is increasingly recognized as an essential skill in the digital era, particularly as individuals are constantly exposed to vast quantities of media content across platforms ranging from print to digital (Firmansyah et al., 2022). Defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms, media literacy enables individuals not only to understand how media messages are constructed but also to critically assess their accuracy, purpose, and implications (Adriana et al., 2024). This skill is especially critical in societies where misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly, influencing public perceptions and decision-making processes. In this context, media literacy goes beyond simple content consumption—it involves decoding the underlying messages, identifying biases, and engaging with media in an active, reflective, and informed manner. Importantly, media literacy equips individuals to identify and challenge manipulation techniques such as framing, propaganda, and

sensationalism, which are often employed to distort public understanding of complex issues(Dwivedi et al., 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, media literacy can be understood within the framework of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that audiences actively select and use media to fulfill specific needs, such as acquiring information, reinforcing personal identity, and engaging with others (Irbathy et al., 2025). This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for religious instructors, who play a dual role as spiritual leaders and community educators. As active users of media, religious counselors can leverage media platforms to meet both their own communicative goals and the informational needs of the public. Additionally, Diffusion of Innovations Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how religious counselors can act as change agents who influence the adoption of new ideas—such as delaying early marriage—by using media to reach different segments of society (Sutticherchart & Rakthin, 2023). Within these frameworks, media literacy becomes not only a defensive skill against misinformation but also a proactive communication strategy that allows religious instructors to shape public discourse through credible, targeted, and persuasive media messages (Jannah et al., 2025).

In practical terms, media literacy can be applied by religious counselors through a variety of concrete actions and strategies. For example, counselors can create and distribute short educational videos on YouTube or TikTok that explain the risks of early marriage from both a religious and health-based perspective (Arisanty et al., 2020). These videos can include expert interviews, testimonials from individuals affected by early marriage, and scriptural interpretations that support child protection and education (Gebremariam et al., 2024). On Facebook or Instagram, counselors can design visual infographics that debunk myths about early marriage and emphasize the importance of maturity and consent in Islamic teachings. On WhatsApp or Telegram, which are more private and widely used communication channels in many communities, religious instructors can initiate discussion groups or provide personal counseling, addressing questions and concerns in a more intimate and confidential setting (Metzler & Garcia, 2023). Such applications not only broaden the reach of religious messages but also allow for dialogic communication, where feedback and engagement from the community can further enrich the counseling process.

It is also essential to recognize the differentiated use of media

platforms according to target audiences. For example, adolescents are more likely to be influenced by short, emotionally resonant video content delivered via platforms like TikTok or YouTube (Sharma, 2024). Here, religious counselors can employ storytelling techniques and emotionally engaging narratives to make abstract concepts more relatable. For parents and community leaders, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, or even local radio broadcasts may be more effective, as these audiences often respond better to detailed explanations and traditional communication formats. Meanwhile, educational institutions and policy advocates can be engaged through more formal platforms like webinars, online publications, and digital forums (Sharma, 2024). By aligning the format, tone, and content of messages with audience preferences and media usage habits, religious instructors can optimize the impact of their outreach and ensure that messages are both relevant and persuasive.

Despite these opportunities, the use of digital media in religious counseling also introduces a range of ethical challenges that must be navigated carefully (Adegbesan et al., 2024). One major concern is the issue of privacy and confidentiality, especially when religious instructors provide counseling or engage in discussions involving sensitive topics such as early marriage (Bingaman, 2023). Ensuring that information shared by individuals is not misused or exposed publicly is a fundamental ethical obligation (Rohmiati, 2025). Another concern is authenticity—given the rise of deepfakes, manipulated content, and algorithm-driven misinformation, religious counselors must critically assess the sources and credibility of the information they share. Furthermore, there is the risk of unintentionally reinforcing harmful narratives if messages are not carefully framed. For instance, overemphasizing religious obedience without contextualizing it with human rights and health information could inadvertently support child marriage under the guise of religious duty. Ethical media use requires that counselors be transparent, inclusive, and respectful, promoting messages that align not only with religious values but also with universal principles of human dignity and well-being.

Another ethical consideration involves representational justice—who is represented in the media messages, and how? Religious counselors must be mindful of the images and voices they amplify, ensuring that their content reflects the diversity of experiences within their communities, including those of women, children, and marginalized groups. Failing to do so could lead to exclusion or the perpetuation of stereotypes. Moreover,

religious counselors must be aware of the commercial and algorithmic structures of the platforms they use, as these can influence the visibility of content and potentially skew audience perceptions (Jiménez-Martínez & Edwards, 2023). Platforms often promote sensationalist or emotionally charged content because it drives engagement, which can tempt content creators to compromise the integrity of their messages for broader reach. Hence, religious instructors must strike a careful balance between engagement and ethics, crafting messages that are both compelling and truthful (Ho et al., 2025).

Media literacy offers a robust and strategic communication tool that religious counselors can utilize to address pressing social issues like early marriage (Metzler & Garcia, 2023). Through the lens of established communication theories and ethical frameworks, media literacy empowers counselors to critically engage with digital platforms, produce meaningful and accurate content, and influence public discourse in ways that are both theologically sound and socially responsible. By integrating storytelling, interactive dialogue, and credible information across multiple media platforms, religious instructors can enhance their role as community leaders who promote informed, compassionate, and evidence-based responses to complex social challenges. Therefore, investing in media literacy training for religious counselors is not just a practical necessity—it is a strategic imperative for fostering a more informed, inclusive, and ethical society.

The Importance of Media Literacy for Religious Counselors in Preventing Early Marriage

The growing significance of media literacy in the digital age is undeniable, particularly as information technology continues to evolve, enabling the rapid and widespread dissemination of content. In this context, media literacy is not merely a technical skill but a critical competency that empowers individuals to become discerning consumers and responsible producers of media (Hasan et al., 2024). It encompasses several key dimensions: access, analysis, evaluation, and creation. Access refers to the ability to navigate various media platforms, while analysis involves understanding how media messages are constructed, identifying biases, and recognizing persuasive strategies. Evaluation emphasizes the capacity to critically assess the credibility and relevance of information, and creation focuses on the ethical and effective generation of original content using digital tools.

These theoretical dimensions of media literacy find direct and urgent application in the context of early marriage prevention. Religious counselors, as influential community figures, can leverage these skills to better communicate the dangers and long-term consequences of early marriage. By accessing credible data and presenting it in a format that resonates with their audience—especially youth—religious instructors can shift public discourse from culturally entrenched norms to informed decision-making. The ability to analyze prevailing media narratives allows them to identify and counteract misinformation or romanticized portrayals of early marriage that circulate widely on social media. Furthermore, the skill to create engaging and contextually appropriate content enables religious instructors to extend their reach beyond traditional lecture halls and into the digital spaces where young people are most active. This transition from passive dissemination to interactive dialogue represents a significant evolution in the practice of da'wah in the digital era (Irbathy et al., 2025)

Field research conducted in West Nias Regency, however, reveals a considerable gap between the theoretical potential of media literacy and its practical implementation among religious instructors. While several instructors acknowledged using media as part of their early marriage prevention efforts, many also expressed difficulties in navigating digital tools effectively. Most were limited to basic use of messaging apps or social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. Few had experience with content creation tools or were familiar with the critical evaluation of online information. These findings highlight an urgent need for structured training programs that not only enhance digital skills but also contextualize media literacy within the framework of religious counseling (Wulandari, 2024). Religious instructors in West Nias expressed a strong willingness to learn, but also noted barriers such as lack of training opportunities, limited internet connectivity, and a general perception that digital media is a secondary rather than primary tool for da'wah (Setiawati et al., 2022).

Bridging the generational divide in discussions about sensitive topics like marriage is another area where media literacy can play a transformative role. Younger generations tend to consume information visually and interactively, often through short-form video content or interactive social media discussions. Religious instructors who are equipped with media literacy skills can meet youth where they are, using appropriate language, visual formats, and storytelling techniques that foster engagement and

openness (Putra et al., 2024b). This alignment between medium and message not only enhances comprehension but also builds trust, allowing for more nuanced and respectful conversations around early marriage, gender roles, and personal agency.

Despite its potential, the integration of media literacy into religious counseling is not without challenges. One significant barrier is resistance from more traditional religious instructors who may view digital media as incompatible with religious values or who may feel uncomfortable altering long-standing teaching methods. Some express skepticism about the credibility of online content and fear that reliance on digital tools might undermine the spiritual authority of face-to-face religious guidance. Additionally, generational differences among the instructors themselves may create disparities in digital competence, further complicating collaborative efforts (da Silva et al., 2022). Addressing these concerns requires not only technical training but also theological framing—positioning media literacy as a tool for amplifying rather than replacing religious values in the modern world. It also necessitates peer learning approaches, where more digitally adept instructors can mentor others within their communities.

In this study, the Community-Based Research (CBR) approach provided a platform to both identify these barriers and begin addressing them. Through participatory focus group discussions, researchers introduced foundational media literacy concepts and facilitated dialogue on how these could enhance current counseling efforts (Iskandar et al., 2022). The inclusion of religious instructors in these conversations helped reduce apprehension and fostered a sense of ownership over the process. It became clear that while the path to integrating media literacy is not without obstacles, it holds significant promise for transforming religious counseling into a more dynamic, inclusive, and effective strategy for early marriage prevention.

Challenges and Opportunities of Media Integration for Religious Instructors

The integration of media literacy into religious counseling in West Nias presents a promising yet complex pathway toward transforming early marriage prevention efforts. However, its implementation is significantly hindered by infrastructural, cultural, and financial challenges. One of the most pressing limitations is the region's underdeveloped digital

infrastructure. While only 35% of the population currently has stable internet access, further data reveals that just 20% of households own smartphones capable of supporting multimedia content, and less than 10% have regular access to computers or internet-enabled educational devices. The geographic isolation of many villages exacerbates this issue, with certain rural areas relying solely on limited mobile network coverage, often restricted to 2G or 3G connections (Dwivedi et al., 2021). These statistics underscore the impracticality of relying exclusively on online platforms for counseling and call for innovative, context-sensitive alternatives.

To address these limitations, hybrid communication strategies that combine offline and mobile-based approaches offer significant potential. One such approach is the use of preloaded educational content on USB drives, SD cards, or portable projectors, which can be distributed through religious centers or schools (Elihami, 2022). These can include videos, interactive guides, and visual storytelling materials tailored to the community's language and cultural norms. Another promising strategy is leveraging mobile phones, which are more widely available than computers. By utilizing SMS-based campaigns, WhatsApp groups, and interactive voice response (IVR) systems, counselors can reach a broader audience without relying on consistent internet access. These solutions not only reduce reliance on infrastructure but also ensure inclusivity by accommodating users with varying levels of digital proficiency.

Cost is another critical factor influencing the feasibility of media literacy integration. Developing high-quality digital content, training materials, and outreach programs demands substantial financial investment (Ginting et al., 2023). A detailed cost-benefit analysis suggests, however, that the long-term gains—such as reductions in early marriage rates, improved youth engagement, and enhanced community awareness—far outweigh the initial expenditures. For example, the cost of a basic media literacy workshop per instructor may range between IDR 500,000 to IDR 1,000,000 (approximately USD 30–60), depending on the scope and location (Irbathy et al., 2025). Compared to the social and economic costs of early marriage—including health complications, school dropouts, and intergenerational poverty—such investments prove both economically and socially justified.

Addressing financial and logistical barriers will require the active involvement of external stakeholders. Partnerships with technology companies could facilitate access to devices, platforms, and technical

expertise. For instance, collaborations with mobile service providers could enable subsidized data packages or access to educational apps (Sharma, 2024). NGOs focused on youth development or digital inclusion can offer both funding and technical support for training programs. Government agencies, particularly those operating under ministries of religious affairs, education, and communication, can also play a pivotal role by institutionalizing media literacy curricula within religious training institutions and supporting community outreach through policy and funding (Kuswana, 2024). The private sector's involvement could be encouraged through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs that target digital inclusion and community empowerment.

Despite these barriers, the integration of media literacy into religious counseling in West Nias is not only possible but also necessary. By equipping religious instructors with the skills to navigate digital media critically and creatively, while simultaneously addressing infrastructural and cultural constraints, a more adaptive and inclusive approach to early marriage prevention can be developed (Arisman, 2022). The synthesis of traditional counseling practices with innovative media strategies has the potential to bridge generational divides, enhance message credibility, and ultimately foster sustainable, community-driven social change.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pivotal role of religious instructors in West Nias as key agents of change in the effort to prevent early marriage through religious and value-based education. Religious counselors not only provide moral and ethical guidance rooted in religious teachings but also serve as community influencers who can shape public perceptions and behaviors. However, the effectiveness of their outreach is constrained by several critical challenges, including limited internet access—available to only 35% of the population—low digital literacy among counselors, and generational divides that hinder communication with youth who are more digitally engaged.

To address these challenges, the study proposes the integration of media literacy as a transformative communication strategy for religious instructors. Media literacy enables counselors to critically engage with, produce, and disseminate information across digital platforms, including social media, educational videos, and messaging applications. The use of these tools can significantly extend the reach and impact of early marriage

prevention messages, especially among young people. Utilizing the Community-Based Research (CBR) approach, this study found that while religious instructors in West Nias are committed to their role, many lack the digital competence needed to navigate modern communication environments. As such, capacity-building efforts are essential to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of counseling programs.

In light of these findings, this study offers several specific and actionable recommendations. First, a structured media literacy training program for religious instructors should be developed and implemented within the next 12 months. This program should be spearheaded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in collaboration with local universities, NGOs specializing in digital education, and technology providers. Second, the establishment of a local task force—including religious leaders, youth representatives, and community media practitioners—within six months can help guide the creation of culturally sensitive, multimedia educational content. Third, partnerships with telecommunication providers should be pursued to facilitate access to low-cost or zero-rated digital platforms for community education purposes. Lastly, a pilot initiative should be launched within the year to distribute offline digital learning kits (e.g., SD cards or USBs containing educational content) in areas with low connectivity, followed by monitoring and evaluation phases to assess impact.

While this research offers meaningful insights and practical pathways for policy and program development, it is not without limitations. The study is context-specific to West Nias and may not fully capture the diversity of religious counseling practices or media access in other regions. Moreover, the qualitative sample size, though sufficient for exploratory analysis, may limit generalizability. Future research should therefore employ comparative studies across multiple regions, incorporate longitudinal designs to assess long-term behavioral change, and explore the role of female religious instructors in digital counseling as a potentially impactful but under-researched area.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing discourse on the intersection of media literacy, religious education, and social change. It extends existing literature by demonstrating how religious communication, when augmented with media literacy competencies, can be repositioned as a dynamic tool for addressing complex social issues such as early marriage. Moreover, the integration of the CBR framework not only ensured contextual relevance and community ownership of the research process but

also fostered deeper engagement and trust among participants. The participatory nature of the CBR approach proved instrumental in surfacing local knowledge, validating findings through collective interpretation, and co-developing culturally resonant interventions.

In conclusion, the integration of media literacy into religious counseling presents a timely and impactful strategy for preventing early marriage in West Nias. By empowering religious instructors with digital skills and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration, this approach has the potential to bridge communication gaps, influence social norms, and contribute to a sustainable reduction in early marriage. More broadly, this research offers a model for how localized, community-driven, and media-enhanced religious education can serve as a catalyst for social transformation.

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