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Teacher Strategies for Fostering Students' Learning Interest in Islamic Religious Education: A Qualitative Study in an Indonesian Junior High School

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors contributing to students' low interest in learning Islamic Religious Education, examines the pedagogical strategies employed by teachers to foster learning interest, and explores the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in an Indonesian junior high school context. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed at SMP Negeri 2 Lubuk Basung, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with one Islamic Religious Education teacher, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and seven seventh-grade students, complemented by classroom observations and document analysis. The data were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with source triangulation to enhance trustworthiness. The findings reveal that students' low learning interest results from the interaction between internal factors, including limited intrinsic motivation and perceptions of IRE as theoretical and memorization-oriented, and external factors, such as teacher-centred instruction, limited instructional media, inadequate learning time, unconducive classroom conditions, and insufficient family support. Teachers addressed these challenges through student-centred strategies, including Project-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, collaborative discussions, multimedia integration, classroom management, and continuous motivational support, which increased classroom participation from approximately 30% to 45–60%. However, improvements remained context-dependent and students' independent learning habits were still limited. This study extends the literature by demonstrating that students' learning interest develops through the interaction between pedagogical practices, supportive classroom environments, and students' self-directed use of digital religious learning resources beyond formal instruction. The study provides a contextual pedagogical framework for fostering learning interest in Islamic Religious Education and offers practical implications for teachers and schools seeking to develop more engaging, student-centred, and digitally integrated religious learning environments.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education; learning interest; teacher strategies; student-centred learning; qualitative research; digital religious literacy

Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in developing students' intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacities while preparing them to become responsible members of society. In Indonesia, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) occupies a strategic position within the national education system because its objectives extend beyond the acquisition of religious knowledge to include the cultivation of faith, moral values, character, and responsible social behaviour. This role is explicitly emphasized in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which defines education as a conscious and planned effort to develop learners' spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and essential life skills. Furthermore, Government Regulation Number 55 of 2007 concerning Religious Education requires every educational institution to provide religious education as an integral component of national education. Consequently, improving the quality of IRE learning is not only an educational concern but also a national priority for strengthening students' character development.

Despite its strategic importance, achieving meaningful learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education remains a considerable challenge. Successful learning is influenced not only by curriculum quality and teacher competence but also by students' learning interest, which determines their willingness to participate actively in classroom activities. Learning interest encourages students to pay attention, engage cognitively, and persist in learning tasks, thereby facilitating meaningful knowledge construction and value internalization (Slameto, 2010). Contemporary educational research similarly argues that interest functions as a powerful motivational resource that enhances engagement, self-regulation, and long-term academic achievement (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Without sufficient learning interest, students tend to participate passively, resulting in superficial understanding and limited internalization of religious values.

The importance of learning interest becomes even more significant in Islamic Religious Education because the subject requires students not only to understand religious concepts but also to transform these values into everyday behaviour. According to Self-Determination Theory, students demonstrate higher engagement when learning environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Likewise, student engagement theory emphasizes that meaningful classroom interaction, supportive teacher-student relationships, and active learning experiences substantially influence students' motivation and participation (Fredricks et al., 2019). These perspectives indicate that teachers play a central role in creating learning environments capable of stimulating students' interest through instructional strategies that are interactive, relevant, and responsive to students' needs.

However, previous studies indicate that many Indonesian junior secondary schools continue to face difficulties in fostering students' interest in Islamic Religious Education. Ilham and Eka (2024) reported that many

students perceived IRE lessons as monotonous and overly dependent on memorization, resulting in limited classroom participation. Similarly, Sholehatin and Wirdati (2021) found that varied teaching methods contributed positively to students' learning interest, while Mukkaromah and Vardia (2021) demonstrated a positive relationship between learning interest and learning outcomes. More recently, Kurniyadi and Fatimah (2025) identified interactive instruction, relevant learning media, personal teacher approaches, and positive reinforcement as important strategies for improving students' motivation in IRE classrooms.

Although these studies have enriched the understanding of learning interest in Islamic Religious Education, several important gaps remain. First, most previous studies primarily examined the effectiveness of specific teaching methods or the statistical relationship between learning interest and learning outcomes, providing limited explanation of how teachers develop and sustain students' learning interest through everyday classroom practices. Second, relatively few qualitative studies have explored students' and teachers' perspectives simultaneously to understand how instructional strategies are experienced within authentic classroom contexts. Third, evidence from junior secondary schools in rural Indonesian settings remains limited, despite the possibility that socio-cultural contexts shape students' responses to religious learning differently. These gaps indicate the need for contextual qualitative research that explores teacher strategies, students' experiences, and classroom dynamics in a more comprehensive manner.

These issues were also identified during preliminary observations conducted in October 2025 at SMP Negeri 2 Lubuk Basung, Agam Regency, West Sumatra. Classroom observations revealed that many seventh-grade students showed limited enthusiasm during Islamic Religious Education lessons, particularly when learning relied predominantly on lectures and textbooks. Interviews with the IRE teacher further indicated that only a small proportion of students actively participated in classroom discussions, while school documentation demonstrated relatively low classroom participation and unsatisfactory academic achievement. These preliminary findings suggest that understanding teacher strategies requires attention not only to instructional methods but also to classroom management, learning media, motivational support, and students' perceptions of the learning process.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to explore teacher strategies for fostering students' learning interest in Islamic Religious Education at SMP Negeri 2 Lubuk Basung through a qualitative descriptive approach. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of particular instructional interventions, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors contributing to students' low learning interest, the strategies implemented by teachers to address these challenges, and the ways these strategies are perceived within the natural classroom setting. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on Islamic Religious Education by offering contextually grounded insights into teacher practices that may inform future instructional improvement in similar educational settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of teacher strategies for fostering students' learning interest in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in a natural classroom setting. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and instructional practices without manipulating the learning environment or testing causal relationships. According to Moleong (2017), qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena holistically by describing participants' behaviours, perceptions, motivations, and actions within their natural contexts. This design is particularly suitable for educational research focusing on everyday teaching practices and participants' perspectives (Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Lubuk Basung, Agam Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia, during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The school was purposively selected because preliminary observations indicated persistent challenges related to students' low learning interest in Islamic Religious Education. Furthermore, the school administration granted permission for the study, and the setting enabled prolonged engagement and repeated observations, which are essential characteristics of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants consisted of one Islamic Religious Education teacher, one vice principal for curriculum affairs, and seven seventh-grade students. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Sugiyono, 2020) based on their direct involvement in the teaching and learning process and their ability to provide rich information relevant to the research objectives. The student participants represented different levels of classroom participation (high, moderate, and low engagement) to capture diverse learning experiences and perspectives. Such variation enabled the researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how teacher strategies were perceived by students with different learning characteristics.

Data were collected between May and June 2026 using three complementary techniques. First, passive participant observation was conducted during Islamic Religious Education lessons to document classroom interaction, instructional strategies, classroom management, learning media utilization, and students' behavioural engagement. Field notes were recorded immediately after each observation to preserve contextual details. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Islamic Religious Education teacher, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and the selected students. An interview guide containing open-ended questions was developed to explore participants' perceptions regarding factors influencing students' learning interest, teacher instructional strategies, and classroom learning experiences. Follow-up questions were used to clarify participants' responses and obtain richer descriptions. Third, document analysis was undertaken to examine lesson plans (RPP), students' attendance records, learning

achievement records, and school documents relevant to instructional implementation. The use of multiple data sources facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from teachers, school administrators, and students, while methodological triangulation involved comparing findings derived from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Member checking was also undertaken by returning interview summaries to participants for confirmation of accuracy and interpretation. In addition, prolonged engagement in the research setting enabled the researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the classroom context and reduce potential misinterpretations. These procedures are widely recommended to improve the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were carefully reviewed, coded, and organized into meaningful categories representing factors affecting students' learning interest and teacher strategies. The categorized data were subsequently presented in descriptive narrative form to facilitate interpretation (Sukmadinata, 2017). Finally, conclusions were generated through continuous comparison across different data sources and were repeatedly verified against empirical evidence until coherent themes emerged. This iterative analytical process ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and the classroom realities observed throughout the study.

The study also considered ethical principles throughout the research process. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the school administration before data collection commenced. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving information regarding the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the collected data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used when reporting interview excerpts, and all research data were stored securely for academic purposes only. Furthermore, the reporting of this study was guided by the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) to enhance methodological transparency and reporting quality (O'Brien et al., 2014).

Results and Discussion

Results

Research Context

SMP Negeri 2 Lubuk Basung is a public junior high school located in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia. Established on April 1, 1974, the school holds an "A" accreditation and provides adequate educational facilities, including classrooms, a library, science laboratories, sports facilities, internet access, and supporting learning infrastructure. During the 2025/2026 academic year, the school employed 52 teachers and served 797 students distributed across 26 classes. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) was taught for three instructional hours per week, with seventh-grade classes being instructed by one IRE teacher, Mrs. Gusriati.

Although the school is situated in the Minangkabau cultural environment, where Islamic values strongly influence community life, classroom observations revealed that many seventh-grade students demonstrated relatively low interest in Islamic Religious Education. During classroom instruction, students frequently showed passive learning behaviours, limited participation in classroom discussions, and low enthusiasm for learning activities. These patterns were consistently observed during the field observations conducted between May and June 2026.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, data were collected through interviews with the IRE teacher, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and three student participants representing different levels of classroom engagement. To maintain confidentiality, the students are referred to using the pseudonyms Corry, Luthfia, and Fellya. The integration of interview, observation, and documentary evidence provided a comprehensive description of classroom conditions and the instructional practices implemented by the teacher.

Factors Contributing to Students' Low Learning Interest in Islamic Religious Education

The analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and school documentation identified that students' low learning interest resulted from the interaction of both internal and external factors. Internal factors primarily involved limited intrinsic motivation and students' perceptions that Islamic Religious Education was largely theoretical, heavily dependent on memorization, and insufficiently connected to their daily lives. Nevertheless, the findings also indicated that students generally recognized the importance of Islamic Religious Education and appreciated its contribution to their moral and religious development.

Corry expressed a positive perception of the subject despite experiencing learning difficulties: "I enjoy Islamic Religious Education because it teaches religious values that can be applied in understanding the lessons delivered." (Interview with Corry, May 18, 2026)

Similarly, Luthfia emphasized the personal value of the subject: "I feel happy and comfortable during Islamic Religious Education because I learn many things about religion, morality, and stories that provide valuable life lessons." (Interview with Luthfia, May 18, 2026)

These responses suggest that students' low learning interest was not caused by rejection of the subject itself. Instead, students generally appreciated the content while experiencing difficulties in maintaining sustained attention during classroom instruction.

Observation data and interview findings consistently revealed that students' attention declined when lessons relied heavily on prolonged teacher explanations without sufficient variation in instructional activities. Luthfia described this experience as follows: "I try to pay attention carefully, but sometimes when the explanation is too long and there are no examples, I find it difficult to stay focused." (Interview with Luthfia, May 18, 2026)

Fellya reported a similar experience: "I try to stay focused, but sometimes I get distracted when the explanation takes too long."

She further explained: "I feel bored when learning only consists of lectures for a long time without activities that involve students." (Interview with Fellya, May 18, 2026)

These interview findings were supported by classroom observations, which showed that students were more likely to lose concentration, engage in conversations with classmates, or become passive during lengthy lecture-based instruction. Documentary evidence also indicated relatively low classroom participation, reinforcing the consistency between observational and interview data.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' low learning interest was influenced not only by internal motivational factors but also by classroom conditions characterized by limited instructional variation and insufficient opportunities for active student participation.

Teacher Strategies for Fostering Students' Learning Interest

The findings revealed that the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teacher implemented several instructional strategies to address students' low learning interest. These strategies included the use of more varied teaching methods, the integration of learning media, classroom management improvements, continuous motivational support, and positive reinforcement. According to classroom observations, these strategies were intended to encourage greater student participation and create a more engaging learning environment.

One of the most prominent strategies involved replacing predominantly lecture-based instruction with more student-centred learning activities. The teacher regularly organized students into small discussion groups and implemented Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL), allowing students to collaborate in solving learning tasks and discussing religious issues relevant to the lesson.

The teacher explained: "In teaching Islamic Religious Education to seventh-grade students, I usually apply Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as well as Problem-Based Learning (PBL). Students work in groups, discuss the questions given, exchange ideas, and collaboratively find appropriate answers based on the lesson being taught." (Interview with Mrs. Gusriati, IRE Teacher, May 16, 2026)

Classroom observations confirmed that students became more actively involved when learning activities required discussion and collaborative problem-solving. During group work, students were more willing to express opinions, ask questions, and respond to their peers than during conventional lecture sessions.

The teacher further explained that instructional decisions were adapted to students' individual characteristics rather than following a single teaching approach for every lesson. She stated: "When selecting teaching methods, I first consider the students' learning styles, their individual characteristics, and their social backgrounds." (Interview with Mrs. Gusriati, May 16, 2026)

In addition to instructional methods, classroom management emerged as another important strategy. Classroom observations showed that the teacher established classroom rules at the beginning of the semester and consistently reinforced agreed behavioural expectations throughout the learning process. This strategy helped maintain classroom discipline while encouraging students to participate more confidently in learning activities.

The teacher described this approach as follows: "At the beginning of the school year, we establish classroom agreements together. Students understand the rules, and if they violate them, there are agreed consequences. This helps maintain classroom discipline throughout the learning process." (Interview with Mrs. Gusriati, May 16, 2026)

Another strategy involved the use of various instructional media, including pictures, posters, PowerPoint presentations, and educational videos. Observation data indicated that students demonstrated greater attention and enthusiasm when visual materials and multimedia resources were incorporated into classroom instruction than when lessons relied exclusively on textbooks.

Students' perspectives largely supported the instructional approaches implemented by the teacher while also providing suggestions for further improvement. Corry expressed a preference for discussion, educational games, instructional videos, and practical learning activities. Luthfia similarly suggested that classroom learning should include videos, stories about the Prophets, quizzes, and group work.

As she explained: "I hope there will be more videos, stories about the Prophets, quizzes, and group activities, so we don't just listen to lectures all the time." (Interview with Luthfia, May 18, 2026)

Fellya emphasized the importance of practical activities that allowed students to directly apply religious knowledge.

She stated: "I prefer practical activities, such as practicing ablution or discussing real-life cases together." (Interview with Fellya, May 18, 2026)

An additional finding emerging from the interviews was that some students independently sought supplementary learning resources outside school when classroom instruction did not fully satisfy their learning needs. Luthfia reported reading books on Islamic moral values and watching Islamic lectures on YouTube, while Fellya stated that she frequently accessed Islamic lectures through YouTube and TikTok "to gain more knowledge." These findings suggest that students demonstrated varying degrees of self-initiated learning by utilizing digital platforms to complement classroom instruction.

Perceived Outcomes of Teacher Strategies

Interview, observation, and documentary data consistently indicated that the instructional strategies implemented by the teacher contributed to improvements in students' classroom participation. Rather than evaluating instructional effectiveness through experimental measurement, the findings describe participants' perceptions regarding observable changes in students' learning engagement during classroom activities.

Student interviews suggested that participation remained conditional upon their understanding of the lesson and the attractiveness of classroom activities. Corry explained: "Sometimes. If I understand the lesson or want to know something, I will ask or answer questions." (Interview with Corry, May 18, 2026)

Similarly, Fellya stated: "Quite often. I don't want to stay silent, and asking questions helps me understand the lesson better." (Interview with Fellya, May 18, 2026)

These perceptions were consistent with classroom documentation indicating that students' average active participation increased from approximately 30% before the implementation of more varied instructional strategies to around 45–60% during the observation period. Classroom observations also showed more frequent student participation in group discussions, classroom questioning, and collaborative learning activities than had been observed during preliminary visits.

Despite these positive developments, both teacher and student interviews suggested that improvements in learning interest remained inconsistent across students and learning situations. The teacher explained that several students' participation continued to be influenced by personal and family-related circumstances beyond classroom instruction.

She stated: "There are not many obstacles from the teaching side. Sometimes students become less active because of problems outside school or personal family issues. Usually, after those problems are resolved, they become active again. I believe I have done my best, but students' participation also depends on their own readiness." (Interview with Mrs. Gusriati, May 16, 2026)

Students also described several expectations for future classroom improvement. Corry hoped for more interactive learning through discussions, games, and practical activities. Luthfia suggested incorporating more practical sessions, Islamic educational games, short films about the Prophet's companions, and discussions relating Islamic values to contemporary adolescent issues. Meanwhile, Fellya proposed project-based activities and competitions, such as the Islamic call to prayer (adhan), linked to students' everyday experiences.

Overall, the findings indicate that teacher strategies were perceived as contributing to higher levels of classroom participation and greater student engagement. Nevertheless, the data also demonstrate that students' learning interest remained dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by instructional practices as well as individual and environmental factors. These findings provide a contextual description of how teacher strategies were experienced within the classroom and establish the basis for the subsequent discussion regarding their educational implications.

Discussion

Understanding Students' Learning Interest in Islamic Religious Education: Beyond Individual Motivation

The findings indicate that students' learning interest in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological characteristic. Instead, learning interest emerged from the interaction between students' intrinsic dispositions and the quality of the instructional environment. Although participants generally acknowledged the importance of IRE for developing religious understanding and moral character, their willingness to engage in classroom learning fluctuated depending on how learning experiences were organized. This finding suggests that appreciating the value of a subject does not automatically translate into sustained learning engagement.

This pattern can be interpreted through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which proposes that students are more likely to develop autonomous motivation when three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are adequately supported (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The present findings suggest that students' learning interest declined when classroom instruction relied heavily on teacher-centred explanations with limited opportunities for interaction or participation. Under such conditions, students may experience reduced autonomy and limited opportunities to demonstrate competence, thereby weakening intrinsic motivation. Conversely, learning activities that encourage collaboration, questioning, and active participation are more likely to satisfy these psychological needs and stimulate greater engagement.

The findings also resonate with Hidi and Renninger's Four-Phase Model of Interest Development, which distinguishes between situational interest and well-developed individual interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Students participating in this study appeared to possess positive attitudes toward

Islamic education as a school subject, indicating the presence of emerging individual interest. However, sustaining that interest required learning environments capable of continuously triggering situational interest through meaningful instructional experiences. This explains why students reported greater enthusiasm during lessons involving discussions, collaborative activities, multimedia resources, or practical learning experiences than during prolonged lecture-based instruction.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the distinction between valuing religious education and enjoying classroom learning. Students consistently described Islamic Religious Education as personally important while simultaneously acknowledging moments of boredom during classroom instruction. This distinction supports contemporary perspectives on student engagement, which emphasize that engagement is multidimensional, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive components rather than reflecting students' attitudes alone (Fredricks et al., 2019). Students may therefore recognize the significance of religious learning yet demonstrate relatively low behavioural engagement when instructional approaches fail to stimulate active participation.

The findings further highlight the contextual nature of learning interest within religious education. Unlike many academic subjects that primarily emphasize cognitive achievement, Islamic Religious Education simultaneously addresses moral development, religious identity, and character formation. Consequently, students' learning interest is shaped not only by instructional effectiveness but also by opportunities to connect religious concepts with authentic personal experiences. This observation aligns with recent international studies arguing that meaningful religious education requires pedagogical approaches that facilitate reflection, dialogue, and real-life application rather than rote memorization alone (Biesta, 2022; Krok, 2023).

Overall, the present study suggests that students' learning interest should be conceptualized as a dynamic educational outcome emerging from continuous interactions between learner characteristics, classroom pedagogy, and social learning experiences. Rather than treating low learning interest as a deficiency within students themselves, the findings indicate that instructional design plays a central role in creating conditions that enable students' interest to develop and be sustained over time.

How Teacher Strategies Foster Students' Learning Interest through Active and Student-Centred Pedagogy

The findings demonstrate that students' learning interest increased when teachers adopted more active and student-centred instructional approaches rather than relying exclusively on conventional lecturing. The use of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), collaborative discussions, multimedia resources, and continuous motivational support appeared to create learning experiences that encouraged students to participate more actively in classroom activities. These findings suggest that

teacher strategies influence learning interest not merely by transmitting knowledge but by shaping the quality of students' learning experiences.

From a constructivist perspective, learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through interaction with ideas, peers, and authentic learning situations rather than passively receiving information from teachers (Bruner, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978). The instructional approaches identified in this study reflect these principles by positioning students as active participants in the learning process. Collaborative discussions and problem-solving activities provide opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, exchange perspectives, and apply religious concepts to practical situations. Such experiences are likely to strengthen both cognitive engagement and emotional involvement, two dimensions consistently associated with sustained learning interest.

The effectiveness of Project-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning observed in this study is also consistent with recent international evidence. Meta-analyses have shown that active learning strategies significantly improve students' motivation, engagement, critical thinking, and academic achievement across diverse educational contexts (Freeman et al., 2014; Theobald et al., 2020). Rather than simply increasing classroom activity, these approaches encourage learners to assume greater responsibility for their own learning while allowing teachers to function as facilitators who guide inquiry and reflection. Within Islamic Religious Education, this shift is particularly meaningful because understanding religious teachings requires interpretation, reflection, and application rather than memorization alone.

An equally important finding concerns the teacher's deliberate adaptation of instructional strategies to students' characteristics and learning needs. Instead of implementing identical instructional procedures in every lesson, the teacher considered students' learning styles, classroom dynamics, and social backgrounds before selecting appropriate learning activities. This practice reflects principles of responsive teaching, which emphasize that effective instruction depends upon teachers' ability to recognize learner diversity and adjust pedagogical decisions accordingly (Tomlinson, 2017). Such pedagogical flexibility is increasingly recognized as a hallmark of high-quality teaching because it enables instruction to remain relevant to students with varying abilities, motivations, and prior experiences.

The findings further highlight the contribution of classroom management to fostering learning interest. Classroom management in this study extended beyond maintaining discipline; it involved establishing shared expectations, creating supportive classroom norms, and promoting positive interactions between teachers and students. Contemporary educational research suggests that emotionally supportive classroom environments strengthen students' sense of psychological safety, thereby encouraging participation, questioning, and collaborative learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). In religious education, where students may hesitate to express uncertainty about religious concepts, such supportive classroom climates become

particularly important for facilitating meaningful dialogue and reflective learning.

Another notable aspect of the findings is the integration of multimedia resources into classroom instruction. Students consistently reported greater enthusiasm when lessons incorporated videos, visual presentations, and other digital learning media. This observation aligns with Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2021), which argues that well-designed combinations of visual and verbal information facilitate deeper understanding while reducing unnecessary cognitive load. Within Islamic Religious Education, multimedia resources may also help bridge abstract theological concepts with concrete examples drawn from students' everyday experiences, thereby making learning more meaningful and accessible.

Taken together, these findings suggest that no single instructional strategy independently determines students' learning interest. Instead, learning interest appears to emerge from the combined influence of active learning methods, responsive pedagogy, effective classroom management, and meaningful learning resources. This integrated pedagogical approach provides students with opportunities to participate actively, experience success, and recognize the relevance of religious knowledge to their personal lives. Consequently, fostering learning interest should be understood as a comprehensive pedagogical process rather than the application of isolated teaching techniques.

Students' Independent Use of Digital Religious Learning Resources: An Emerging Dimension of Learning Interest

An important finding emerging from this study is that several students independently accessed Islamic learning materials through digital platforms, particularly YouTube and TikTok, to complement classroom instruction. Rather than viewing digital media solely as sources of distraction, the findings indicate that students intentionally utilized these platforms to obtain explanations, religious stories, and practical demonstrations that enhanced their understanding of Islamic Religious Education. This behaviour suggests that learning interest may extend beyond formal classroom participation and continue through self-directed learning activities in digital environments.

This finding can be interpreted through the perspective of self-regulated learning (SRL), which emphasizes learners' capacity to take responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning processes (Zimmerman, 2002). Students who voluntarily searched for additional learning resources demonstrated initiative in addressing knowledge gaps and deepening their understanding without direct teacher supervision. Such behaviour reflects not only curiosity but also a growing sense of learning autonomy, which has consistently been associated with higher academic motivation and lifelong learning habits.

The increasing reliance on digital platforms also reflects broader transformations in contemporary learning ecosystems. Knowledge acquisition is no longer confined to textbooks or classroom instruction but increasingly

occurs through interconnected formal, informal, and online learning environments. From this perspective, students' use of YouTube and other social media platforms represents an extension of the learning process rather than an alternative to school-based education. Recent studies on digital learning environments indicate that students frequently integrate multiple sources of information to construct understanding, particularly when classroom explanations are perceived as insufficient or difficult to comprehend (Bond et al., 2024).

Within Islamic Religious Education, this phenomenon has particular significance because digital media provide access to diverse forms of religious content, including Qur'anic recitation, prophetic stories, ethical discussions, and practical demonstrations of worship. Visual and audio-based explanations may help students understand abstract religious concepts more concretely, thereby strengthening both conceptual understanding and learning motivation. At the same time, unrestricted access to online religious content exposes learners to varying interpretations, differences in scholarly opinion, and information of uneven quality. Consequently, digital learning environments present both educational opportunities and pedagogical challenges.

These findings highlight an evolving role for teachers in the digital era. Rather than functioning solely as transmitters of religious knowledge, teachers increasingly serve as facilitators who guide students in selecting credible, accurate, and contextually appropriate digital learning resources. This role aligns with the concept of digital religious literacy, which extends beyond technical digital skills to include the ability to critically evaluate religious information encountered in online environments, distinguish authoritative sources from misinformation, and apply religious knowledge responsibly in everyday life. Developing these competencies has become increasingly important as adolescents spend substantial portions of their learning time in digital spaces.

The findings therefore suggest that digital learning should not be positioned as a competitor to classroom instruction but as a complementary component of effective Islamic Religious Education. Integrating carefully selected digital resources into classroom pedagogy may strengthen connections between formal instruction and students' independent learning practices while encouraging greater continuity between school-based learning and everyday religious experiences. Such integration has the potential to transform students from passive recipients of information into active learners capable of navigating diverse religious knowledge in increasingly digital societies.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing literature on Islamic Religious Education by demonstrating that students' learning interest is expressed not only through observable classroom participation but also through voluntary engagement with digital religious learning resources beyond school. This broader understanding expands existing perspectives on

learning interest by recognizing that meaningful engagement increasingly occurs across multiple learning environments, including formal classrooms, informal social interactions, and digital educational spaces. Consequently, fostering students' learning interest in contemporary Islamic education requires pedagogical strategies that intentionally connect these complementary learning contexts rather than treating them as separate educational domains.

Conclusion

This study found that students' interest in learning Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is not determined solely by their intrinsic motivation but rather emerges from the complex interaction between internal factors and the quality of the learning environment created by teachers. Low learning interest was associated with teacher-centred instruction, limited variation in teaching methods and learning media, and insufficient connections between instructional content and students' everyday experiences. Conversely, the implementation of student-centred pedagogical strategies—including small-group discussions, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), the use of visual and digital learning media, effective classroom management, and continuous motivational support—contributed to higher levels of student participation and engagement. These findings suggest that students' learning interest is shaped more by the quality of the learning experiences provided by teachers than by students' individual characteristics alone, thereby challenging the traditional assumption that low learning interest primarily originates from students' personal motivation.

From a scholarly perspective, this study reinforces previous research highlighting the importance of active learning approaches in enhancing student engagement. At the same time, it extends the existing literature on Islamic Religious Education by demonstrating that learning interest develops through the interaction between teachers' pedagogical strategies, supportive classroom environments, and students' self-directed learning initiatives, including the use of digital learning resources beyond the classroom. Accordingly, this study contributes to the field by conceptualizing learning interest as a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a fixed individual attribute, thereby enriching contemporary discussions on effective pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single junior high school with a relatively small number of participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the qualitative design emphasizes an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than establishing causal relationships among variables. Therefore, future research should involve larger and more diverse samples across different educational settings and regions. Employing mixed-methods designs or classroom action research would also provide more comprehensive empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of various pedagogical

strategies in fostering students' interest in learning Islamic Religious Education.

Based on these findings, Islamic Religious Education teachers are encouraged to consistently implement active, collaborative, and contextually relevant learning through diverse instructional methods, digital learning media, and authentic learning activities that connect religious concepts with students' everyday lives. Schools should support these efforts by providing adequate technological infrastructure, strengthening teachers' professional competencies in innovative pedagogy, and promoting policies that facilitate the integration of educational technology into Islamic Religious Education. Furthermore, future studies should explore the roles of digital religious literacy, technology-enhanced learning, family support, and the broader social environment in shaping students' learning interest to develop a more comprehensive pedagogical framework for Islamic Religious Education in the digital era.

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