

Gendered Digital Vulnerabilities: Empirical Challenges Faced by Islamic Female High School Students in Foreign Language Learning in Medan, Indonesia

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HOW TO CITE:

Rita Suswati, Tengku Ratna Soraya, Hesti Fibriasari, Wahyu Triatmodjo, Trisnawati Hutagalung, Oksari Sihaloho (2026). Gendered Digital Vulnerabilities: Empirical Challenges Faced by Islamic Female High School Students in Foreign Language Learning in Medan, Indonesia. International Journal of Special Education, 41(8s), 76-89

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ABSTRACT:

Foreign language learning is increasingly influenced by digital communication, transnational interaction, and the widespread adoption of online learning platforms. However, students do not participate in these digital environments from equal social positions. This study investigates the gendered, religious, and sociotechnical challenges experienced by Islamic female high school students in Medan, Indonesia, during foreign language learning. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from 186 Muslim female students enrolled in public and private Islamic high schools through open-ended questionnaires. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The findings reveal six major themes: exposure to digital harassment and unsafe interactions, Islamophobic and stereotypical assumptions, linguistic anxiety and fear of judgment, cultural conflict and exposure to inappropriate content, digital inequality and access disparities, and the burden of representing Islam during intercultural communication. These findings demonstrate that foreign language learning is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by gendered vulnerability, religious visibility, and unequal digital infrastructures. The study contributes to gender and educational research by highlighting how Muslim female learners negotiate safety, identity, and participation within global digital learning spaces. The results underscore the need for culturally responsive, gender-sensitive, and safer digital language-learning environments.

Keywords: gendered digital vulnerabilities, Islamic female students, foreign language learning, digital inequality, intersectionality

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of globalization, digital connectivity, and transnational communication, foreign language proficiency has become an increasingly valuable competence for young learners. In Indonesia, languages such as English and French are widely regarded as strategic resources for accessing higher educational opportunities, international networks, and global knowledge. At the same time, rapid technological advancements have significantly transformed language education by enabling learners to engage in authentic communication, participate in online learning communities, and interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Consequently, digital platforms have become integral components of modern foreign language learning environments.

Despite the considerable educational benefits offered by digital technologies, access to and experiences within these environments remain unevenly distributed. Emerging evidence suggests that digital learning spaces often reproduce existing social inequalities, exposing certain groups of learners to greater risks and barriers than others. In particular, female adolescents frequently encounter online harassment, identity-based discrimination, and unequal opportunities for digital participation, all of which may negatively affect their educational engagement and learning outcomes (Davies, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). For Muslim female students, these challenges can be further intensified by the visibility of their religious identity, especially through the wearing of the hijab and adherence to Islamic values of modesty, which may attract stereotyping, prejudice, or discriminatory treatment in online interactions (Awan et al., 2022).

Although a growing body of literature has examined digital literacy, gender disparities, and foreign language education, these areas are often investigated separately. As a result, limited attention has been given to the ways in which Muslim female adolescents navigate the intersection of gender, religious identity, and digital learning experiences within foreign

language education. This gap is particularly significant in multicultural and digitally connected contexts where students are increasingly required to engage with global audiences and diverse cultural perspectives. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the gendered digital vulnerabilities experienced by Islamic female high school students in Medan, Indonesia, during their participation in digitally mediated foreign language learning.

Specifically, this research aims to identify the major digital challenges encountered by Islamic female students in foreign language learning, examine how gender and religious identity influence their learning experiences, and analyze the implications of digital inequality for linguistic participation and academic achievement. Guided by Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004), Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991), and the Digital Inequality Framework (van Dijk, 2006), this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how sociocultural structures shape foreign language learning experiences among Muslim female adolescents in contemporary digital environments. By highlighting the complex interplay between gender, religion, and technology, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on educational equity, digital inclusion, and culturally responsive language learning practices.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the lived experiences of Islamic female high school students engaged in foreign language learning within digital environments. A qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate methodological framework because the study sought to understand participants' perceptions, emotions, challenges, and interpretations of their experiences rather than to measure predetermined variables quantitatively. Qualitative descriptive research allows researchers to capture participants' voices in their natural form and provides rich contextual

insights into social phenomena that are often overlooked by statistical approaches.

The selection of a qualitative design was further motivated by the exploratory nature of the study. Although a growing body of research has examined digital learning, gender disparities, and language education, limited scholarly attention has been given to the intersection of these dimensions among Muslim female adolescents in Indonesia. Consequently, an in-depth exploration was necessary to reveal how gender, religious identity, and digital experiences interact in shaping foreign language learning practices. The qualitative descriptive approach enabled the researchers to document participants' experiences directly and to identify recurring patterns related to online learning, digital safety, intercultural communication, and religious identity.

Moreover, this design aligns with the theoretical perspectives underpinning the study, namely Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004), Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991), and the Digital Inequality Framework (van Dijk, 2006). These frameworks emphasize the importance of understanding social experiences within their broader cultural, institutional, and technological contexts. Through qualitative inquiry, the study was able to examine how structural inequalities are manifested in everyday digital language-learning practices among Islamic female students.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, a multicultural urban area characterized by increasing access to digital technologies and growing participation in foreign language education. Medan provides an appropriate context for examining the experiences of Muslim female students because of its diverse educational institutions, varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and expanding engagement with digital learning platforms.

The participants consisted of 186 Muslim female students between the ages of 15 and 19 years who were enrolled in Islamic senior high schools. The

sample was drawn from two different educational settings: one public Islamic senior high school and one private Islamic senior high school. The inclusion of both institutions was intended to capture diverse experiences related to access to technology, educational resources, and digital learning opportunities.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants met specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it enables researchers to select information-rich participants who possess direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, participants were required to satisfy three primary criteria. First, they had to identify as Muslim females. Second, they had to be actively enrolled in foreign language courses, particularly English or other internationally oriented language programs. Third, they had to possess prior experience using digital technologies, such as online learning platforms, language-learning applications, social media, video conferencing tools, or virtual communication platforms, for foreign language learning purposes.

The demographic characteristics of the participants reflected varying levels of digital access, language proficiency, and socioeconomic background. Students from the public Islamic school generally reported more limited access to digital resources and internet connectivity, whereas students from the private Islamic school tended to have greater access to personal devices and online learning opportunities. This diversity enriched the dataset by providing multiple perspectives on the relationship between digital environments and foreign language learning experiences.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire specifically designed to explore participants' experiences in digitally mediated foreign language learning environments. The decision to use open-ended questions was based on the need to obtain detailed narratives and personal reflections that could not be adequately

captured through closed-ended survey instruments.

The questionnaire consisted of several thematic sections covering key aspects of students' digital learning experiences. These sections addressed the use of digital language-learning tools, perceptions of online safety, experiences of identity-based discrimination, intercultural interactions in digital spaces, challenges encountered during language-learning activities, and expectations regarding culturally sensitive and inclusive learning environments.

Participants were encouraged to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences and were given sufficient space to elaborate on their responses. This format allowed students to express their thoughts freely without being constrained by predetermined response categories. Consequently, the questionnaire generated rich qualitative data that reflected the complexity of participants' experiences across multiple dimensions of digital learning.

Several questions were specifically designed to explore how students navigated interactions with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additional questions focused on experiences related to religious identity, particularly situations in which participants felt that their Islamic identity influenced their interactions in online language-learning environments. Through these questions, the study sought to uncover the nuanced ways in which gender and religion intersect with digital learning experiences.

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire underwent expert review to ensure content validity and clarity. Feedback from language education scholars and qualitative research experts was incorporated to improve the comprehensibility and relevance of the questions. Minor revisions were subsequently made to enhance the overall quality of the instrument.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out over several stages to ensure systematic and ethical research implementation. The process began with

obtaining institutional approval from the participating schools. School administrators were informed about the objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study before permission was granted.

Following institutional approval, potential participants were invited to participate voluntarily. Information sheets explaining the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights were distributed electronically. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

The questionnaire was administered online using a secure digital platform. Online administration was selected because it provided flexibility for participants and allowed them to complete the questionnaire in a familiar digital environment. The online format also facilitated participation from students with varying schedules and minimized logistical constraints associated with face-to-face data collection.

Participants completed the questionnaire individually and anonymously. No personally identifiable information, such as names, addresses, telephone numbers, or student identification numbers, was collected. This anonymity was intended to encourage honest and unrestricted responses, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as online harassment, discrimination, and religious identity.

Once the questionnaires were completed, all responses were downloaded, organized, and prepared for analysis. The researchers carefully reviewed the data to ensure completeness and removed any responses that did not meet the inclusion criteria. The resulting dataset consisted of extensive textual narratives describing participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections related to foreign language learning in digital environments.

Ethical Considerations

Given that the study involved adolescent participants, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations throughout the research

process. The study adhered to established ethical principles concerning respect for participants, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection from harm.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection commenced. Participants were clearly informed about the objectives of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their right to discontinue participation without penalty. The anonymity of participants was strictly maintained to safeguard their privacy and encourage open disclosure of experiences.

The researchers also took precautions to ensure that discussions of sensitive topics, such as online harassment and discrimination, were handled responsibly. Data were stored securely, and access was restricted to the research team. All findings were reported in aggregate form to prevent the identification of individual participants or educational institutions.

By implementing these ethical safeguards, the study sought to create a trustworthy research environment in which participants could share their experiences safely and confidently.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative datasets. This method is particularly suitable for research exploring complex social experiences and allows researchers to generate meaningful themes grounded in participants' narratives.

The first phase involved familiarization with the data. Researchers repeatedly read all responses to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and to identify preliminary patterns emerging from the narratives. During this stage, reflective notes and analytical memos were recorded to document initial observations.

The second phase consisted of generating initial codes. Segments of text representing meaningful units of information were systematically labeled according to their content. Coding focused on issues related to gender, religious identity, digital experiences, language-learning practices, safety concerns, and intercultural communication.

The third phase involved searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader conceptual categories. Similar codes were clustered together to identify recurring patterns across participants' responses. This process resulted in the emergence of several preliminary themes reflecting shared experiences among Islamic female students.

The fourth phase focused on reviewing the themes. Researchers evaluated whether the identified themes accurately represented the coded data and the overall dataset. Themes were refined, merged, or reorganized where necessary to improve conceptual coherence.

The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes. Each theme was clearly articulated and supported by representative participant narratives. Researchers examined the relationships between themes to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Finally, the sixth phase consisted of producing the analytical narrative. The themes were interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature on gender, religion, digital inequality, and foreign language learning. Through this process, the analysis generated a nuanced understanding of how Islamic female students experience digital language-learning environments and how these experiences are shaped by broader sociocultural structures.

The analytical process ultimately focused on identifying recurring patterns associated with gendered digital vulnerabilities, religious visibility, online safety, intercultural communication, digital inequality, and linguistic participation. These themes provided the foundation for understanding the complex interactions between

gender, religion, and technology in contemporary foreign language education.

3. Results

The thematic analysis of responses obtained from 186 Islamic female high school students revealed six interconnected themes that characterize their experiences of foreign language learning in digitally mediated environments. These themes reflect the multifaceted challenges encountered by participants as they navigate online language-learning platforms, intercultural communication spaces, and global digital communities. Although participants acknowledged the educational benefits of digital technologies in improving language skills and facilitating international communication, their narratives consistently demonstrated that digital learning environments are not experienced as neutral or universally inclusive spaces. Instead, students reported encountering various forms of social, cultural, religious, and technological barriers that influenced their participation, confidence, and overall learning experiences.

The six themes identified through the analysis include: (1) exposure to digital harassment and unsafe interactions, (2) Islamophobic and stereotypical assumptions, (3) linguistic anxiety and fear of judgment, (4) cultural conflict and exposure to inappropriate content, (5) digital inequality and access disparities, and (6) the burden of representing Islam during intercultural communication. Together, these themes illustrate how foreign language learning among Muslim female students is shaped by the intersection of gender, religion, and digital engagement.

Theme 1: Exposure to Digital Harassment and Unsafe Interactions

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the data concerns participants' experiences with digital harassment and unsafe online interactions. A substantial number of students reported that their efforts to engage in foreign language practice through online communication platforms frequently exposed them to unwanted attention, inappropriate comments, and uncomfortable social encounters. These

experiences were particularly common when students used language-exchange applications, video-chat platforms, social networking sites, and international communication forums intended to facilitate authentic language practice.

Many participants explained that interactions originally intended to support language learning often shifted toward personal or inappropriate topics. Students described receiving unsolicited messages, intrusive personal questions, flirtatious comments, and sexually suggestive remarks from strangers encountered online. Such experiences created feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and vulnerability, particularly because participants had entered these digital spaces with the primary objective of improving their foreign language proficiency rather than engaging in personal relationships.

Several students noted that repeated exposure to inappropriate interactions led them to reduce their participation in online communication activities. Some avoided video-based language exchanges altogether, while others limited their interactions to text-based communication to minimize potential risks. As a result, opportunities for authentic spoken language practice were often reduced. Participants indicated that concerns about online safety sometimes outweighed the perceived benefits of interacting with native speakers or international language partners.

The data further reveal that digital harassment was not limited to isolated incidents. Rather, many participants described it as a recurring challenge that shaped their perceptions of digital learning environments. Consequently, online spaces that were originally designed to facilitate educational engagement were frequently perceived as environments requiring constant vigilance and self-protection.

Theme 2: Islamophobic and Stereotypical Assumptions

A second recurring theme relates to the presence of Islamophobic attitudes and stereotypical assumptions encountered during online foreign language interactions. Participants frequently

reported that their religious identity became a focal point of attention, particularly when they wore the hijab during video-based communication or shared photographs that visibly reflected their Muslim identity.

Many students indicated that interactions intended to focus on language practice were often redirected toward discussions about Islam. Participants described receiving questions regarding religious practices, gender roles, veiling, and cultural traditions. While some inquiries were perceived as expressions of genuine curiosity, many students felt that certain questions were based on stereotypes or misconceptions about Islam and Muslim women.

Several participants reported being asked whether they were forced to wear the hijab, whether Muslim women enjoyed equal rights, or whether Islamic teachings encouraged violence. Others encountered comments associating Islam with extremism, terrorism, or social oppression. These interactions frequently generated feelings of frustration, discomfort, and emotional exhaustion because students felt compelled to respond to complex questions beyond the scope of the intended language-learning activity.

The findings indicate that religious visibility often transformed ordinary language-learning encounters into situations where participants became representatives of their faith. Students expressed concern that they lacked the linguistic proficiency necessary to explain nuanced religious concepts in a foreign language, which further increased their anxiety during intercultural communication. Consequently, many participants reported becoming more cautious when engaging with international interlocutors, particularly in situations where their religious identity was immediately visible.

The prevalence of these experiences demonstrates that foreign language learning in digital environments is often intertwined with broader social perceptions of religion, identity, and cultural difference. For many participants, language practice involved not only linguistic engagement but also the management of religious stereotypes and identity-based assumptions.

Theme 3: Linguistic Anxiety and Fear of Judgment

Another significant theme identified in the data concerns linguistic anxiety and the fear of being negatively evaluated by others. Although participants recognized the importance of active communication for language development, many expressed feelings of insecurity regarding their foreign language abilities. These concerns frequently centered on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary selection, and fluency.

Students commonly reported worrying about making mistakes while communicating with native speakers or highly proficient language users. Many feared that grammatical errors or pronunciation difficulties would lead to ridicule, criticism, or unfavorable judgments. Such concerns often discouraged active participation in online discussions and limited students' willingness to engage in spontaneous communication.

The findings suggest that linguistic anxiety was intensified in digital environments where communication occurred with unfamiliar individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Participants frequently described feeling self-conscious when speaking during video conferences, voice chats, or live language exchanges. Unlike classroom settings, where teachers and classmates often provide supportive feedback, online interactions were perceived as less predictable and potentially more judgmental.

Several students also reported comparing their language abilities with those of international peers. Exposure to fluent speakers sometimes generated feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-confidence. Participants indicated that these comparisons contributed to a fear of making mistakes publicly, particularly in settings where conversations were recorded, observed by others, or conducted in large online groups.

For some students, linguistic anxiety was further compounded by concerns about representing themselves positively as Muslim women. They worried that language mistakes might reinforce negative stereotypes regarding their educational

background, cultural identity, or intellectual competence. As a result, language learning became associated not only with academic performance but also with concerns about social perception and personal identity.

Theme 4: Cultural Conflict and Exposure to Inappropriate Content

The fourth theme emerging from the analysis involves experiences of cultural conflict and exposure to content perceived as inconsistent with Islamic values. Participants reported that many digital language-learning environments introduced them to cultural expressions, communication styles, and social practices that differed significantly from the norms emphasized within their families, schools, and religious communities.

Students frequently encountered profanity, explicit language, sexual humor, discussions of romantic relationships, and references to dating culture during online interactions. While participants acknowledged that such expressions formed part of authentic language use in certain contexts, many described feeling uncomfortable or conflicted when exposed to this content. Some students indicated that they struggled to balance the desire to understand authentic language usage with the desire to maintain adherence to Islamic principles of modesty and respectful communication.

Several participants explained that they deliberately avoided certain online platforms because of the prevalence of inappropriate content. Others reported filtering conversations, ignoring particular topics, or terminating interactions that they considered incompatible with their values. Such strategies allowed students to protect their personal beliefs but sometimes limited opportunities for broader linguistic and intercultural engagement.

The findings also reveal that participants often experienced tension between educational objectives and moral considerations. On one hand, exposure to authentic language environments was viewed as beneficial for developing communicative competence. On the

other hand, the nature of some online content created concerns regarding cultural appropriateness and religious acceptability. Consequently, students frequently engaged in ongoing processes of negotiation and adaptation while participating in digital language-learning spaces.

Theme 5: Digital Inequality and Access Disparities

The analysis further revealed significant differences in participants' experiences related to digital access and technological resources. Although all participants had some degree of engagement with digital learning technologies, the quality and consistency of access varied considerably across educational and socioeconomic contexts.

Students attending public Islamic schools generally reported experiencing greater limitations related to internet connectivity, device availability, and technological infrastructure. Unstable internet connections frequently disrupted online learning activities, reduced participation in real-time communication, and limited access to interactive language-learning resources. Some participants indicated that they shared devices with family members, which further constrained opportunities for independent language practice.

In contrast, students from private Islamic schools generally reported better access to high-speed internet, personal devices, and premium educational applications. These resources enabled more frequent participation in online language-learning activities and international communication opportunities. However, increased access also resulted in greater exposure to online risks, including harassment, inappropriate content, and unsupervised interactions with strangers.

The findings therefore reveal a complex pattern of digital inequality. Greater technological access did not automatically guarantee safer or more positive learning experiences. Similarly, limited access sometimes reduced educational opportunities while simultaneously decreasing

exposure to certain online risks. These contrasting experiences illustrate that digital inequality encompasses not only differences in access but also differences in the quality, safety, and outcomes of digital engagement.

Theme 6: Burden of Representing Islam During Intercultural Communication

The final theme concerns the burden of representing Islam during intercultural communication. Many participants reported that interactions with international peers frequently extended beyond language practice and evolved into discussions about religion, culture, and identity. In these situations, students often felt responsible for explaining Islamic beliefs, correcting misconceptions, and responding to questions about Muslim practices.

Participants described experiencing pressure to provide accurate explanations about topics such as the hijab, prayer, gender relations, and Islamic values. While some students welcomed opportunities to share information about their faith, many reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectation that they should serve as informal representatives of Islam during language-learning activities.

This responsibility was particularly challenging when students lacked sufficient linguistic proficiency to articulate complex religious concepts in a foreign language. Several participants expressed concerns about providing incomplete or inaccurate explanations, which created additional stress during intercultural interactions. Others indicated that they preferred to avoid religious discussions altogether because such conversations diverted attention from their primary objective of improving language skills.

The data demonstrate that many participants experienced a dual role during online communication. In addition to functioning as language learners, they often perceived themselves as cultural and religious ambassadors. This dual responsibility increased cognitive and emotional demands, requiring students to simultaneously manage language performance,

cultural representation, and interpersonal communication.

Overall, the six themes identified in this study reveal that the foreign language learning experiences of Islamic female students are shaped by a complex interplay of digital opportunities and social challenges. Participants' narratives highlight the ways in which gender, religion, cultural values, and technological conditions intersect to influence linguistic participation and engagement within contemporary digital learning environments.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the foreign language learning experiences of Islamic female high school students in Medan are shaped by a complex interaction of gender, religion, and digital technology. Although digital platforms have expanded opportunities for language learning by facilitating access to authentic communication, intercultural interaction, and global learning resources, these environments simultaneously reproduce social inequalities and vulnerabilities that affect students' participation. The experiences reported by participants demonstrate that digital language-learning spaces cannot be understood solely as technological environments; rather, they constitute sociocultural arenas in which power relations, identity negotiations, and cultural expectations continuously influence learners' engagement and opportunities for success.

One of the most significant findings concerns the pervasive impact of digital harassment on students' willingness to participate in online language-learning activities. The participants' narratives indicate that many digital interactions intended for educational purposes were disrupted by inappropriate comments, unsolicited attention, and gender-based harassment. These experiences frequently led students to withdraw from communicative activities, avoid video-based interactions, or limit engagement with international language partners. Such responses have important implications for foreign language acquisition because communicative competence

develops primarily through meaningful interaction and authentic language use.

From the perspective of Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004), these findings illustrate how gender operates as a social structure that extends beyond physical environments and becomes embedded within digital spaces. Online platforms often reproduce the same unequal power relations observed in offline contexts, where female users are more likely to be subjected to surveillance, objectification, and unwanted attention. For Islamic female students, the educational benefits of digital communication are therefore accompanied by heightened concerns regarding safety and personal dignity. The findings suggest that language-learning opportunities are not distributed equally among learners because participation itself is conditioned by gendered experiences of risk and vulnerability. Consequently, communicative engagement becomes not merely a pedagogical activity but also a process of negotiating personal security within digital environments.

The study further demonstrates that religious identity constitutes a significant factor influencing intercultural communication experiences. Many participants reported that visible markers of Islamic identity, particularly the hijab, attracted attention and frequently redirected conversations toward discussions about religion, gender roles, or cultural practices. Instead of focusing exclusively on language learning, students often found themselves responding to questions, misconceptions, or stereotypes concerning Islam and Muslim women.

This finding is particularly significant when examined through the lens of Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991). The participants do not experience digital vulnerability solely because they are female, nor solely because they are Muslim. Rather, their experiences emerge from the intersection of these identities. As Muslim female adolescents, they occupy a social position that simultaneously exposes them to gender-based discrimination and religion-based stereotyping. Their narratives illustrate how

multiple dimensions of identity interact to produce unique forms of marginalization that cannot be fully explained by a single social category.

The findings also reveal that intercultural communication often imposes additional emotional and cognitive burdens on students. Participants frequently reported feeling compelled to defend Islamic values, explain religious practices, or correct misconceptions about Islam. Such responsibilities extend beyond the normal expectations associated with language learning and require learners to engage in continuous identity management. In many cases, students perceived themselves not only as language learners but also as representatives of their religion and culture. This dual role increased communicative pressure and contributed to feelings of anxiety during intercultural interactions.

Another important contribution of this study concerns the relationship between digital inequality and foreign language learning opportunities. Consistent with the Digital Inequality Framework proposed by van Dijk (2006), the findings indicate that inequalities in digital participation extend beyond mere access to technology. Differences in internet quality, device ownership, supervision, digital literacy, and exposure to online risks significantly influence students' learning experiences and outcomes.

The comparison between public and private school students provides valuable insight into the multidimensional nature of digital inequality. Participants from private schools generally enjoyed greater access to technological resources, including high-speed internet, personal devices, and international communication platforms. These advantages facilitated more frequent engagement with authentic language-learning opportunities. However, increased digital access was accompanied by greater exposure to online harassment, inappropriate content, and unsupervised interactions with strangers. Conversely, students from public schools often faced technological limitations that restricted

participation in online language-learning activities, yet these constraints also reduced exposure to certain digital risks.

These findings challenge simplistic assumptions that increased technological access automatically leads to improved educational outcomes. Instead, the results suggest that digital inclusion must be understood in relation to both opportunity and safety. Educational policies that focus exclusively on expanding access without addressing issues of digital protection, ethical engagement, and online well-being may inadvertently expose learners to additional vulnerabilities. Therefore, efforts to promote digital equity should incorporate comprehensive strategies that address not only infrastructure but also digital citizenship, online safety, and psychosocial support.

The findings additionally highlight the existence of cultural tensions within global digital learning environments. Participants reported frequent exposure to content, communication styles, and social practices that conflicted with Islamic values and norms. Discussions involving dating culture, sexual humor, profanity, and highly individualized forms of self-expression were commonly perceived as incompatible with participants' religious beliefs and cultural expectations.

These experiences reveal the cultural complexities inherent in contemporary foreign language learning. Language acquisition is often associated with exposure to authentic cultural practices and communicative conventions. However, for Islamic female students, authentic exposure does not always align with culturally acceptable forms of engagement. Consequently, students must constantly negotiate between linguistic participation and cultural adherence. This negotiation requires substantial emotional and cognitive effort, as learners attempt to benefit from authentic language interactions while simultaneously preserving their religious and cultural identities.

The findings support arguments advanced by scholars of intercultural communication who emphasize that language learning involves far more than acquiring grammatical competence. It

also requires learners to navigate cultural meanings, ideological assumptions, and social expectations embedded within communication practices. For Muslim female learners, this process is particularly complex because global digital environments are frequently shaped by dominant cultural norms that do not necessarily reflect Islamic perspectives or values. As a result, language learning becomes a site of cultural negotiation where students continuously balance educational aspirations with moral and religious commitments.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the emergence of linguistic anxiety as both an educational and sociocultural phenomenon. While language anxiety has long been recognized as a common challenge in foreign language education, the experiences reported by participants suggest that anxiety is amplified when language performance intersects with concerns about gender, religion, and social representation. Students feared not only making linguistic mistakes but also being judged negatively because of their identity as Muslim women.

This finding suggests that language anxiety among Islamic female learners cannot be understood exclusively through traditional cognitive or pedagogical frameworks. Instead, it must be examined within broader social contexts that shape learners' perceptions of competence, belonging, and acceptance. The fear of reinforcing stereotypes or being perceived as intellectually inferior increases the psychological burden associated with communication and may discourage active participation in language-learning activities.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that foreign language learning in digital environments is influenced by a convergence of three interrelated structures: gender, religion, and digitality. Gender shapes students' exposure to harassment and influences patterns of participation. Religion influences how students are perceived, questioned, and evaluated by others. Digitality creates opportunities for global engagement while simultaneously exposing

learners to new forms of risk and inequality. These dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they interact dynamically to shape learners' educational experiences.

The study therefore contributes to the growing body of literature on digital education by demonstrating that technological innovation alone cannot guarantee equitable learning opportunities. Effective digital language-learning environments must be designed with consideration for the diverse social identities and cultural backgrounds of learners. Educational institutions should recognize that students enter digital spaces with different levels of vulnerability and different experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings underscore the need for culturally responsive and gender-sensitive approaches to digital language education. Language-learning platforms should incorporate stronger moderation systems, reporting mechanisms, and safety features to protect students from harassment and discrimination. Educators should also provide guidance on digital citizenship, intercultural communication, and online safety to prepare learners for participation in global communication networks. Furthermore, culturally inclusive learning materials should be developed to ensure that students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds can engage meaningfully without feeling marginalized or misrepresented.

From a policy perspective, governments and educational institutions should move beyond infrastructure-centered models of digital development and adopt more holistic approaches to digital inclusion. Such approaches should integrate technological access, digital literacy, online safety, psychological well-being, and cultural sensitivity. By addressing these interconnected dimensions, policymakers can create learning environments that promote both educational achievement and social equity.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focused exclusively on Islamic female high school students in Medan, Indonesia. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of Muslim female learners in other regions, educational contexts, or cultural settings. Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective interpretations, memory recall, or willingness to disclose sensitive experiences. Third, the qualitative nature of the research prioritizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalizability. While the findings provide rich insights into participants' lived experiences, they should not be interpreted as representative of all Muslim female students.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies may expand upon these findings by employing mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative exploration with quantitative measurement. Comparative studies involving different regions, educational levels, religious groups, or national contexts would also provide a broader understanding of digital vulnerabilities in foreign language learning. Additionally, future research could investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as digital safety training, culturally responsive pedagogies, and gender-sensitive online learning platforms, in reducing barriers and promoting equitable participation among diverse learner populations.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the foreign language learning experiences of Islamic female high school students in Medan are shaped by a complex interaction between gender, religious identity, and digital technology. While digital platforms provide valuable opportunities for authentic communication, intercultural exchange, and language development, they also reproduce forms of vulnerability that affect students' participation and confidence. The findings show that participants frequently encountered online harassment, Islamophobic stereotyping, cultural tensions, and unequal access to digital resources,

all of which influenced their willingness to engage in digital language-learning environments.

Importantly, the study reveals that linguistic confidence is not determined solely by grammatical knowledge or communicative competence. Students' sense of confidence was closely connected to concerns about personal safety, religious visibility, cultural acceptance, and the pressure to represent Islam during intercultural interactions. These factors created additional emotional and cognitive demands that shaped how learners participated in online communication and language practice.

The research further highlights that digital inequality is multidimensional. Differences in internet access, device ownership, supervision, and exposure to online risks produced unequal learning experiences among students from different educational backgrounds. Greater technological access did not automatically guarantee safer or more empowering learning

conditions, indicating that digital inclusion must address both opportunity and protection.

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sociocultural structures influence foreign language learning in contemporary digital contexts. The findings suggest that educational institutions, policymakers, and technology developers should prioritize culturally inclusive, gender-sensitive, and ethically moderated digital learning environments. Such efforts are essential for ensuring that Muslim female learners can participate in global communication spaces without compromising their safety, dignity, or cultural identity. Future research should explore intervention models and pedagogical strategies capable of enhancing digital safety, intercultural competence, and equitable participation in foreign language education across broader social and geographic contexts.

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7. Acknowledgements (Optional)

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues at Universitas Negeri Medan, Universitas Negeri Malang, and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia for their support and research collaboration.

This research was funded through the Collaborative Research of Indonesian Teacher Training Institutes (RKLI) under the Association of Research and Community Service Institutes of Indonesian Public Teacher Education Institutions (ALPTKNI), supervised by the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM), Universitas Negeri Medan.

8. Author Declaration

The authors hereby declare that this manuscript represents an original scholarly work that has not been previously published, either in whole or in part, nor is it currently under consideration for publication by any other journal, conference proceeding, or publishing platform. The authors affirm that all sources, references, and materials used in the preparation of this manuscript have been appropriately cited and acknowledged in accordance with academic and ethical standards.

Furthermore, the authors declare that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research process, interpretation of findings, or presentation of results. The study was conducted in compliance with established ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and all procedures adhered to relevant institutional ethical guidelines.

The authors also confirm that each author has made a significant contribution to the conception, design, implementation, analysis, and/or writing of this study. All authors have critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version for publication, and agree to be accountable for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work presented herein.