



# Multiculturalism in Indonesia: Diversity and its Characteristics as the Nation's Strength

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## Article Information:

Received August 28, 2026

Revised September 24, 2026

Accepted September 30, 2026

## Keywords:

*Multiculturalism;*

*Diversity; Ethnic Groups;*

*Tolerance; National*

*Unity*

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23113954>

## Abstract

Indonesia is a multicultural country characterized by a diversity of ethnic groups, religions, languages, and races spread across its entire territory. This diversity is both a source of richness and a challenge in maintaining national unity. This study aims to examine the characteristics and forms of multiculturalism in Indonesia, specifically by identifying major ethnic groups along with their social and cultural values and kinship systems. The method used is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach based on demographic data and a literature review. The findings indicate that while each ethnic group in Indonesia possesses distinct cultural characteristics, they all share universal values such as mutual cooperation, tolerance, solidarity, and religiosity. The concept of multiculturalism in Indonesia is reflected in the motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” which emphasizes unity in diversity. To strengthen national unity and cohesion, strategic efforts are needed, such as multicultural education, intercultural and interfaith dialogue, the instillation of tolerance, inclusive public policies, and the preservation of regional cultures. Thus, an effective understanding and management of multiculturalism are key to maintaining the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a unique country because of its diversity. Diversity in Indonesia is not merely reflected in its many islands, but also encompasses different ethnic groups, religions, languages, and races. According to data from the Population and Civil Registration Agency of the Ministry of Home Affairs, as of June 30, 2024, Indonesia's population stood at 282.48 million (Dukcapil Kemendagri, 2024). Based on the results of the 2020 Long Form Indonesian Population Census, there are more than 1,200 ethnic groups and 694 regional languages spread across Indonesia (BPS, 2020). In addition, the Indonesian people adhere to six official religions Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism as well as various other belief systems (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020).

## How to cite:

Anah, D, R, Salsabila, S, Rahmadhani, Y, Iskandar, R, P, Delta, D. (2026). *Multiculturalism in Indonesia: Diversity and its Characteristics as the Nation's Strength*. Jamik. *Journal Islamic Studies and Multidisciplinary* 1(2), 78-87

## E-ISSN:

3164-1679

## Published by:

PT Pendidikan Islam Al-Fatihah

This diversity makes Indonesia a multicultural society one composed of various cultural groups living side by side within a single nation. Multiculturalism in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon; rather, it has a long and complex history dating back to the pre-colonial era, when various kingdoms and ethnic groups coexisted (Bazzi, 2025). Maritime trade routes also brought influences from various civilizations, such as those of India, China, and the Middle East, shaping a unique cultural mosaic (Sealy, 2025). This diversity is both a source of richness and a challenge because, on the one hand, it sparks creativity and dynamic cultural exchange (Saepulmilah et al., 2025).

The concept of multiculturalism in Indonesia is encapsulated in the national motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” which means “Unity in Diversity” (Amin & Ritonga, 2024). This motto is not merely a slogan but a philosophy that serves as the foundation of national unity. However, reality shows that diversity can also trigger social tensions, discrimination, and even horizontal conflicts, making the management of multiculturalism a critically important issue (Cathrin & Wikandaru, 2023).

Given the importance of this issue, a deep understanding of the various forms and characteristics of multiculturalism in Indonesia is highly relevant. This study examines various aspects of diversity, ranging from ethnic characteristics and customs to the social values that shape community identity. By understanding the characteristics of each group, it is hoped that tolerance, mutual respect, and empathy can be fostered (Lasambouw et al., 2022). Therefore, the study of multiculturalism is not merely an academic endeavor but also a strategic step toward strengthening unity and preserving the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) (Sariyatun & Marpelina, 2024).

While existing literature extensively documents Indonesia’s rich demographic diversity and the theoretical foundation of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Mariyono, 2024), there remains a critical empirical gap in understanding how these macro-level multicultural ideals are operationalized at the micro-level within local communities. Most studies frame Indonesian multiculturalism either through a historical lens or as broad policy frameworks, often overlooking the specific socio-cultural values and daily interactions that prevent horizontal conflicts in heterogeneous settings (J. Setiawan, 2024).

This study addresses this gap by offering a novel empirical investigation into the localized characteristics, lived experiences, and community-level social mechanisms that shape contemporary inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony. Rather than treating diversity merely as a static national asset or a source of social tension, this research introduces a nuanced framework that connects specific local customs (*adat*) and shared social values directly to the cultivation of everyday tolerance and empathy. In doing so, it advances multicultural theory from abstract philosophical discourse into actionable strategies for sustaining national integration within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).

## METHODS

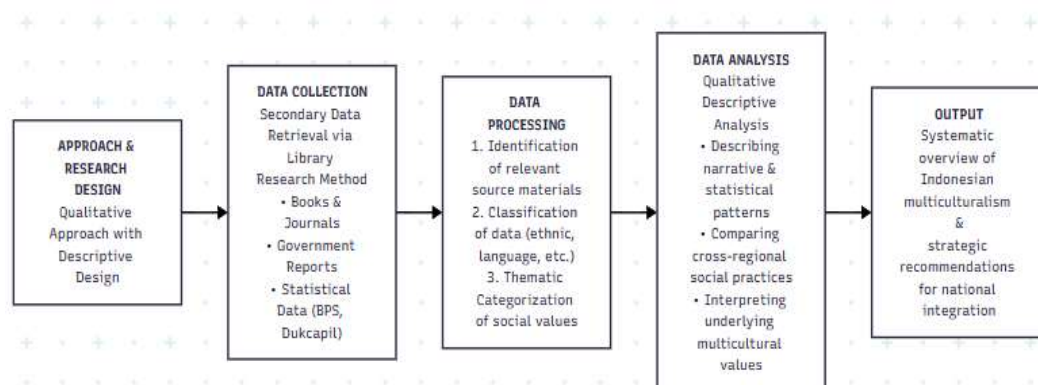
This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing a descriptive research design to achieve a comprehensive understanding of multiculturalism in Indonesia. This methodology is specifically selected because it allows for a nuanced, contextualized, and in-depth exploration of the unique socio-cultural characteristics, lived dynamics, and varied expressions of diversity present across the archipelago. Given the complex historical and demographic landscape of the nation, a descriptive qualitative strategy provides the analytical flexibility required to examine how

multicultural values are embedded within everyday social practices and institutional frameworks (Jeri et al., 2025); (Jeri et al., 2025); (Sitiodung, 2025).

The empirical foundation of this research relies entirely on secondary data gathered through a rigorous and systematic library research process. The literature search encompasses a broad range of authoritative written materials, including peer-reviewed scientific journal articles, academic books, official government reports, and statistical publications released by national agencies. These sources supply critical qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding the distribution of ethnic groups, regional languages, religious affiliations, and local customs (Tirtosudarmo, 2022).

The data collection procedure involves three main phases: identification, classification, and thematic categorization. Information related to socio-cultural identity, inter-group interactions, and national integration policies is systematically organized to trace patterns and identify underlying social trends. Subsequently, the data is examined through qualitative descriptive analysis techniques. This analytical process entails describing narrative accounts, comparing cross-regional practices, and interpreting the underlying social values to build a holistic narrative of Indonesian multiculturalism (Syofrianisda et al., 2025).

By employing this structured methodological framework, the study delivers a detailed and systematic synthesis of the current state of Indonesia's multicultural society. Ultimately, this approach illuminates the key socio-cultural mechanisms and strategic policy measures necessary to foster inter-ethnic tolerance, mitigate social fragmentation, and reinforce long-term national cohesion within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.



## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A multicultural society is a group formed by various differences such as ethnicity, language, religion, and customs. J.S. Furnival defines a multicultural society as a collection of elements that exist independently within a single political entity without any intermingling. Nasikun describes a multicultural society as a collection of two or more social orders, communities, or groups that are culturally, economically, and politically distinct. Each of these groups has its own unique and distinct institutional structure.

In the Indonesian context, the motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” not only reflects ethnic diversity but also encompasses a vast cultural richness. Multiculturalism serves as the primary foundation for the creation of a multicultural Indonesian society. This concept views and values differences on an equal footing, both at the individual level and among cultural groups (Siddik et al., 2025).

Indonesia is a country with many ethnic groups. Based on data from a 2022 Goodstats study, the following are the 10 largest ethnic groups in Indonesia:

The Javanese are the largest ethnic group in Indonesia, with a population of

95,217,002. This figure indicates that 40.22% of Indonesia's total population is Javanese. The majority of this ethnic group resides in Central Java, East Java, and the Special Region of Yogyakarta, though their distribution extends to other regions such as Jakarta, Banten, and Sumatra. Javanese migration has also reached overseas, forming communities in Suriname and Malaysia.

The following are characteristics of the Javanese people: a. Distinctive Javanese Social and Ethical Values. Some values that frequently emerge include: harmony, tolerance, *tepa selira* (mutual respect), *aja ngaya* (humility), *aja kesusu-susu* (taking one's time), *nrimo* (acceptance), politeness, and respect for elders or those held in high regard. b. Leadership and Noble Values Javanese culture is also examined in the context of leadership: how Javanese cultural values are synthesized into a framework for leaders who are just, responsible, and uphold ethical standards. c. Social Solidarity and Mutual Aid. Relationships among community members are very close-knit, characterized by traditions of mutual aid (*gotong royong*), community cooperation, and a sense of togetherness in social activities (Sibaweh et al., 2024).

Javanese Cultural Diversity: a. Traditional Performing Arts. Wayang kulit (Purwa), Kethoprak, Ludruk, and dances such as Reog Ponorogo and Jaranan. b. Traditional Songs or Campursari. Campursari songs that blend Javanese elements with modern/pop music to create a lively sound. Cultural values in song lyrics, such as Javanese ethics and social norms. c. Ritual or Religious Traditions. Slametan rituals, local rites, *salawat*, and Janengan (a local Islamic artistic tradition) that imply syncretism. d. Crafts. For example, pottery in Pageralang, Malang; although there have been changes in form, technique, and function, the local cultural heritage remains strong (Muqarramah Sulaiman Kurdi, 2023).

The Sundanese people rank second among Indonesia's ethnic groups in terms of population size. According to data, their population totals 36,701,670. The majority of the Sundanese people live in West Java, Banten, and the Special Capital Region of Jakarta. The following are characteristics of the Sundanese people: Local wisdom and moral values (Local Sundanese values such as *Cageur*, *Bageur*, *Pinter*, *Bener*, and *Singer*). The Relationship Between Humans, Nature, and God (It is evident that Sundanese culture features a strong integration of spirituality, a relationship with nature, and a belief in God not merely as rituals but as a way of life). Commitment to Culture (With a strong commitment to Sundanese culture, they regard language, customs, and the arts as integral parts of their identity) (Hasanuddin, 2024).

The following are examples of Sundanese cultural diversity: Traditional Ceremonies (The *Tiwu Penganten* ritual in Babakan (Cirebon) and the *Rewahan Perpadayan* tradition in Taraju Village, Kuningan). Traditional Performing Arts and Music (Syncretism in the Koromong Gamelan of Cikubang Village, Sumedang (a fusion of Sundanese, Islamic, and Hindu elements in ritual symbols and art). Language and Local Dialects (The Sundanese language varies by region, with dialects such as Sumedang, Majalengka, and Cirebon, as well as variations in language use within the contexts of ceremonies, literature, and everyday speech). Traditional Games and Character Education (Traditional games serve as a medium for fostering national character traits such as discipline, responsibility, tolerance, leadership, and other social values within the Sundanese community. Example: The Hong Dago Community (Bandung) (Ansari, 2024).

The Batak people are the third-largest ethnic group in Indonesia. This ethnic group, the majority of whose population resides in North Sumatra, has a population of 8,466,969. Historically, the Batak people are believed to be of Proto-Malay

(Ancient Malay) descent, having arrived approximately 3,000 years ago. This long historical journey marks the beginning of Batak civilization. The following are the characteristics of the Batak people: Patrilineal Kinship System and Clan (Descent is traced through the paternal line. Clan identity is crucial in social life, customs, and marriage). *Dalihan Na Tolu* and the Values of Mutual Cooperation (The concept of “*Dalihan Na Tolu*” namely *horjaon*: *hula-hula* (the wife’s family), *dongan tubu* (members of the same clan), and *boru* (the daughter’s family) reflects traditional social interactions and obligations toward these groups). Socio-Religious Characteristics & Religiosity (Many Batak people have adopted Christianity (Protestantism), as well as Catholicism or Islam in some sub ethnic groups; traditional rituals are still practiced. There is a blend of tradition and religion in daily life). Positive Character Values (The study “Characteristics of the Toba Society from a Cultural Perspective” found that the Toba Batak people possess values such as friendliness, mutual cooperation, respect for elders, trust, and steadfastness in upholding traditional customs) (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024).

The Following Are the Diverse Batak Ethnic Groups: Different Languages and Dialects Among Sub-Ethnic Groups (The Toba, Karo, Mandailing or Angkola, Simalungun, and Pakpak languages have differences in vocabulary). Customary Inheritance Practices and Inheritance Rights (The Toba Batak traditional inheritance system upholds the patrilineal principle, which prioritizes males because clan lineage is traced through the father’s side). Clothing / Ulos Cloth (Ulos is a traditional Batak cloth worn in various traditional ceremonies; it serves as a symbol of status and a means of strengthening social bonds (through the gifting of ulos). The patterns and colors of ulos vary depending on the sub-ethnic group and the cloth’s intended use) (Thahir, 2021).

The Sulawesi Ethnic Group, the fourth-largest ethnic group in Indonesia, originates from Sulawesi. This group comprises a population of 7,634,262 people. The Sulawesi ethnic group consists of various tribes, including the Bugis, Mandar, Toraja, Makassar, Buton, Minahasa, Talaud, and Balaesang tribes. The following are characteristics of the Sulawesi ethnic group: The value of “*siri’na pacce*” (self-respect and solidarity), skilled seafarers, traders, migrants, and a strong social structure. Egalitarian, open to modernization, clan-based system, and a strong sense of mutual aid. The Bugis-Makassar people generally follow a bilateral system (where both the paternal and maternal lines are equally important), while the Toraja are patrilineal (where the paternal line is dominant) (D. E. Setiawan & Stevanus, 2023).

The following are the diverse ethnic groups of Sulawesi: Ethnic and Local Language Diversity (Sulawesi is home to various major ethnic groups such as the Bugis, Makassar, Mandar, Toraja, Minahasa, Gorontalo, Kaili, Tolaki, Muna, Bajau, and others. Each has its own distinct local language). Customs and Traditions (The Toraja people are famous for their *Rambu Solo’* funeral rites, while the Bugis people are known for their wedding customs involving high dowries and traditional celebrations). Distinctive material culture (Bugis/Makassar stilt houses, Toraja Tongkonan houses, Bugis Bodo attire, and the colorful traditional clothing of the Minahasa people. These serve as symbols of social status and cultural traditions).

The Madurese Ranking fifth on the list of ethnic groups with the largest populations in Indonesia are the Madurese, with a population of approximately 7,179,356. This ethnic group originates from Madura Island and several surrounding areas within East Java Province. Madura Island itself is divided into four regencies: Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep.

The following are characteristics of the Madurese people: A bilateral kinship system and a sense of honor (self-respect). Madura society practices a bilateral kinship system (recognizing both paternal and maternal lines), but social life places greater emphasis on solidarity among close family members and clans. The value of

honor or self-respect (personal honor or masculine honor) is of utmost importance and forms the basis for the emergence of the “carok” culture (fights to defend one’s honor). Cultural values: discipline, hard work, loyalty, egalitarianism, and simplicity (Several studies indicate that Madurese people tend to be disciplined, frugal, tenacious in trade or when working away from home, loyal to their superiors, and uphold equality among peers).

The following are aspects of Madurese culture: The Carok Tradition as a Symbol of Courage and Dignity (Carok is not merely an act of violence but is considered a means of defending one’s own or one’s family’s dignity. It typically occurs due to disputes over honor or domestic conflicts). The Madurese Language with Many Dialects (The Madurese language has several dialects: Sumenep, Bangkalan, Pamekasan, and the Pandhalungan dialect (influenced by Javanese culture). Each dialect has differences in phonology, vocabulary, and register) (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2020).

With a population of approximately 6.8 million, the Betawi people rank sixth among Indonesia’s ethnic groups in terms of population size. The Betawi people emerged from the intermingling of various ethnic groups who settled in Batavia (now Jakarta) during the Dutch colonial period. Characteristics of the Betawi people include their origins in an ethnic mix (Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Arab, Chinese, Portuguese) dating back to the Batavia era; they possess an urban, egalitarian, humorous, and religious culture (predominantly Islamic), and they uphold good manners. The Betawi language has a distinctive accent. The language varies by subgroup: Central Betawi (Central Jakarta), Peripheral Betawi (East and South Jakarta), and Ora Betawi (West Jakarta and Tangerang). Each group has its own linguistic variations or accents and traditions (Ashraf, 2021).

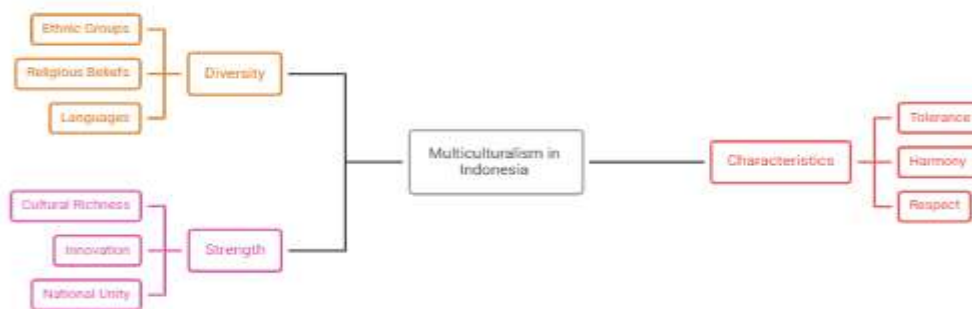
The Minangkabau People With a population of approximately 6.4 million, the Minangkabau people, who originate from West Sumatra, are known to have the largest population in Indonesia. This ethnic group is famous for its traditional dishes, which are rich in natural spices and herbs and do not use artificial flavor enhancers. The Minangkabau people follow a matrilineal kinship system (traced through the mother’s line), adhere to the principle of “adat basandi syara’, syara’ basandi Kitabullah” (custom is based on Islamic law, and Islamic law is based on the Quran), are known for their wanderlust, are skilled traders, and highly value consensus-building. The Minangkabau language is characterized by a highly developed oral tradition. The Minangkabau people are divided into subgroups: the Minang darek (Luhak nan Tigo: Tanah Datar, Agam, Lima Puluh Kota) and the Minang rantau (Sumatra, Riau, Malaysia, etc.), each with distinct dialects and customs (Jeri, Ihsan, Efendi, Akbar, & Majid, 2025).

The Bugis people rank eighth among the ethnic groups with the largest populations in Indonesia. With a population of 6.3 million, they live not only in South Sulawesi but are also scattered across various other regions of Indonesia. One of the most fascinating aspects of the Bugis people is their unique wedding tradition. Their wedding procession consists of 12 stages, ranging from the introduction of the families, the marriage vows, the “knocking on the door” ritual, to the newlyweds’ visit to seek blessings (Jeri, Ihsan, Efendi, Akbar, Majid, et al., 2025). Characteristics of the Bugis people include a bilateral kinship system, a strong emphasis on siri’ na pacce (self-respect and solidarity), a maritime culture, high rates of migration, and a strong Islamic faith. The Bugis language boasts many classical literary works (Lontara). The Bugis people are divided into subgroups Bone, Wajo, Soppeng, Sidrap, and Parepare and each region has its own distinct dialects and traditional attire (Fatmawati, 2021).

The Malay ethnic group ranks ninth among the largest ethnic groups in Indonesia. Its population numbers 5.3 million. The Malay people trace their origins to the Austronesian group, a population believed to have originated in the Yunnan region of China. They migrated in several waves to Southeast Asia and eventually settled in the region. Characteristics of the Malay ethnic group include their origins in the migration from Yunnan (Southern China) to Southeast Asia, the Malay language, a predominantly Muslim population, a royal court culture, a strong emphasis on etiquette and manners, and a rich literary tradition. The various Malay ethnic groups, based on their subgroups, include the Deli Malays, Palembang Malays, Riau Malays, Sambas Malays, and Pontianak Malays, each with distinct differences in dialect, clothing, marriage customs, and the arts (A. D. Setiawan, 2020).

**Ethnic Groups of South Sumatra** Ranking tenth on the list of ethnic groups with the largest populations in Indonesia, the ethnic groups native to South Sumatra have a population of approximately 5.2 million. South Sumatra is an ethnically diverse region, home to various ethnic groups such as the Palembang Malays, Komering, Semendo, Empat Lawang, Musi, and Banyuasin, as well as other groups like the Javanese, Sundanese, Chinese, and Minangkabau. The South Sumatran ethnic group is characterized by its multi-ethnic nature: Palembang Malays, Komering, Semendo, Musi, and Banyuasin. The population is predominantly Muslim, speaks the Palembang Malay language, and practices customs of mutual cooperation, consensus-building, and strong kinship ties. The ethnic groups of South Sumatra, based on their subgroups, include the Palembang Malay, Komering (Ogan Komering Ulu), Semendo (Muara Enim), Musi, and Banyuasin; each group has its own dialect, traditional clothing, and customs.

**Strengthening National Unity and Solidarity Through an Effective Understanding and Management of Multiculturalism**, including: Multicultural education is essential for instilling the values of tolerance, respect for differences, and an awareness of diversity as a source of national strength.



This is implemented through the integration of multicultural values into the curriculum, teacher training, and diversity-based school activities. Dialogue creates space for mutual understanding, reduces negative stereotypes, and builds mutual trust among groups. Examples include interfaith discussion forums, cultural festivals, and interregional student exchanges. Instilling the Values of Tolerance and “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity). Fostering a sense of mutual respect, mutual cooperation, and national solidarity. This is implemented through tolerance training in schools, anti-discrimination campaigns, and cross-cultural activities. Inclusive Public Policy. The government guarantees equal rights and participation for all ethnic groups in public policy-making. Implementation includes ethnic representation in government, protection of customary rights, and strengthening anti-discrimination laws. Preservation of Local Culture and Positive Media. Local culture is promoted as both an identity and a means of fostering mutual understanding among cultures, and

digital media is utilized to spread messages of unity. Implementation includes regional cultural festivals, social media content centered on tolerance, and the strengthening of arts centers.

## CONCLUSION

The diversity of ethnic groups such as the Javanese, Sundanese, Batak, Sulawesi (Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, Minahasa, and others), Madurese, Betawi, and Minangkabau is clear evidence that Indonesia is a multicultural nation. Each ethnic group possesses distinctive sociocultural characteristics, such as value systems, ethical norms, regional languages, traditional arts, kinship systems, customs, and tangible cultural heritage (traditional clothing, traditional houses, and handicrafts). Although they differ from one another, each ethnic group shares similar universal values, such as mutual cooperation, respect, solidarity, religiosity, and a commitment to preserving ancestral culture.

These values form the foundation of social cohesion among community members and strengthen national identity. This diversity demonstrates that Indonesia's national identity is shaped by a variety of cultures that coexist harmoniously. The concept of multiculturalism in Indonesia entails the recognition, appreciation, and protection of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity as the nation's strength. In this context, the diversity of Indonesia's major ethnic groups is evident. Thus, the diversity of ethnic groups and their cultures is not a threat but rather a strength of the nation. Indonesia is not only multiethnic demographically but also multicultural in sociocultural terms, which requires an open, tolerant, and inclusive attitude that values differences as part of our shared identity as the Indonesian nation.

## DECLARATIONS

### Author Contribution

**Dhiya Roiha Anah & Syifa Salsabila:** Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, Conceptualization, **Yade Rahmadhani, Raju Putra Iskandar & Delta:** Visualization, Methodology, Improve Language, Investigation.

### AI Statement

The data and language usage in this article have been validated and verified by English language experts and no AI-generated sentences are included in this article.

### Funding Statement

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

### Ethical Clearance

The place or location studied has agreed to conduct research and is willing if the results of this study are published.

### Publisher's and Journal's Note

Researcher and (PT Pendidikan Islam Al-Fatihah) as the publisher and Editor of Journal Jamik that there is no conflict of interest towards this article publication.

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**First publication right:**

Jamik: Journal Islamic Studies and Multidisciplinary

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