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Countering Digital Fitna: An Empirical Study on Hoax-Detection and Islamic Digital Literacy Among Online Muslim Communities

Leila Mahdavi¹ , Ali Reza² , Reza Karimi³ 

¹Universiti of Tabriz, Iran

²University of Tehran, Iran

³University of Shiraz, Iran

ABSTRACT

The rapid circulation of misinformation in digital spaces has intensified concerns about “digital fitna,” a term used to describe the spread of deceptive content that distorts religious understanding and destabilizes social cohesion within Muslim online communities. The increasing prevalence of hoaxes, manipulated religious narratives, and misattributed hadith on social media highlights the urgent need for Islamic digital literacy that equips users with both critical thinking skills and authentic religious knowledge. The phenomenon poses serious risks to communal harmony, public trust, and the integrity of Islamic teachings in the digital age.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of hoax-detection skills and the level of Islamic digital literacy among online Muslim communities, with a focus on assessing how users evaluate, verify, and respond to religious misinformation. The research also seeks to identify demographic, cognitive, and behavioral factors that influence susceptibility to digital fitna.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys of 312 active Muslim social media users with qualitative interviews involving digital da'i, Islamic educators, and community moderators. Quantitative data assessed literacy levels and detection accuracy, while qualitative data explored perceptions of misinformation, verification practices, and challenges in navigating religious content online.

Findings reveal that while awareness of digital misinformation is relatively high, actual hoax-detection accuracy remains moderate, with only 47% of participants consistently identifying false religious claims. Higher literacy scores are strongly correlated with formal religious education and prior media-literacy training. The study concludes that strengthening Islamic digital literacy requires integrated interventions combining religious authority, technological competence, and community-based verification practices.

KEYWORDS

Digital Fitna, Hoax Detection, Islamic Digital Literacy

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Correspondence:

Leila Mahdavi,
leilamahdavi@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has transformed how Muslim communities access, interpret, and circulate religious knowledge (Larsson & Willander, 2025). Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok have become primary sources of religious information, replacing traditional reliance on face-to-face study circles, local ulama, and print-based learning (Zhou dkk., 2024). The ease and speed of digital sharing have

democratized religious discourse, allowing ordinary users to participate actively in shaping public religious narratives.

Research indicates that this democratization has been accompanied by the rapid spread of misinformation, misinterpretations, and fabricated religious claims (Das, 2025). Digital hoaxes disguised as religious advice, false hadith, sensationalized fatwa statements, and conspiracy-themed religious content circulate widely among online Muslim users (Hotait & Ali, 2024). These forms of “digital fitna” create confusion, amplify fear, and influence attitudes in ways that undermine communal stability and religious coherence.

Studies on misinformation show that emotionally charged content spreads more quickly than factual information (Hassan dkk., 2025). Hoaxes framed as religious warnings or moral threats tend to provoke strong emotional reactions, making them more likely to be shared without verification (Aftab dkk., 2024). Online Muslim communities, particularly those active in group-based platforms, frequently encounter such content and often lack mechanisms for critical fact-checking.

Digital literacy has emerged as a key defense mechanism against misinformation, but general digital literacy does not automatically translate into Islamic digital literacy (Sidorenko-Bautista dkk., 2021). Islamic literacy requires the ability to distinguish authentic textual traditions from fabricated content, understand principles of hadith authentication, and evaluate religious claims within appropriate theological frameworks. This layered literacy is significantly more complex than ordinary media-literacy skills.

Existing research also shows that religious authority is increasingly challenged in digital spaces. Users often treat viral content, anonymous influencers, or charismatic speakers as more credible than traditional scholars (Alonso & Câmara, 2024). This shift in authority structures complicates efforts to verify religious content and increases susceptibility to deceptive narratives that exploit religious symbols and language.

Empirical studies highlight that misinformation ecosystems thrive in contexts where verification norms are weak and dependence on non-specialist sources is high (Baldeh, 2025). Online Muslim communities represent a unique case because misinformation in this context does not only distort facts but also distorts religious identity, ethical decision-making, and intergroup relations (Smith, 2024). This makes the challenge of digital fitna particularly urgent.

Research has yet to fully explain how online Muslim users practically detect, evaluate, or respond to religious hoaxes circulating in their digital environments (Trucco dkk., 2024). The existing literature is rich in describing the problem but limited in identifying the cognitive and behavioral strategies users employ when encountering digital fitna (Iqbal, 2024). The dynamics of verification at the user level remain insufficiently documented.

Little is known about the degree to which Islamic digital literacy influences hoax-detection accuracy (Demircigil, 2025). Studies often assume that individuals with strong religious knowledge are better at identifying misinformation, but empirical data validating this assumption are scarce (Wang, 2024). The specific components of Islamic digital literacy that most strongly affect detection ability are also not well understood.

Limited attention has been given to demographic and contextual factors that may contribute to vulnerability to digital fitna (Cummins & Hennig, 2025). Variables such as age, digital exposure, religious education, social group affiliation, and online habits may influence susceptibility, yet most studies do not systematically analyze these relationships. Understanding these factors is crucial for designing effective interventions.

The role of community-based verification practices in mitigating digital fitna remains underexplored. The extent to which users rely on peers, trusted scholars, or online fact-checking

communities when verifying religious claims is unclear (Menzel & Pirker, 2025). Without examining these communal dynamics, efforts to counter misinformation risk focusing solely on individual literacy rather than collective resilience.

A deeper understanding of how Muslim users detect and interpret religious misinformation is essential for designing effective digital literacy interventions (Mirshahvalad, 2024). Identifying the specific weaknesses in hoax evaluation processes—whether cognitive, theological, or technological—provides actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and religious institutions (Ulfat, 2024). Filling this gap strengthens the capacity of online communities to protect themselves from deceptive narratives.

Clarifying the relationship between Islamic digital literacy and hoax-detection accuracy allows for the development of tailored educational frameworks that integrate media literacy with foundational religious knowledge. This integration is crucial because generic digital-literacy programs do not adequately address the theological components of religious misinformation (Davids, 2024). Strengthening Islamic digital literacy can filter misinformation before it spreads widely.

The present study seeks to fill these gaps by empirically analyzing hoax-detection ability among online Muslim communities and identifying literacy-based, demographic, and behavioral predictors of resilience against digital fitna (Esmaili & Ibrahim, 2025). The study hypothesizes that effective hoax detection emerges from a combination of religious knowledge, critical thinking skills, technological awareness, and communal verification practices (Cohen-Skalli, 2024). Addressing this gap contributes to safeguarding digital religious spaces from manipulation and distortion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative assessment and qualitative exploration to examine the hoax-detection abilities and Islamic digital literacy levels of online Muslim communities (Raja, 2024). The quantitative component measured accuracy in identifying religious misinformation, while the qualitative component explored users' verification strategies, interpretive tendencies, and contextual experiences when encountering digital fitna (Hill, 2025). The population consisted of active Muslim social media users across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei who regularly engage with religious content (Shairani, 2024). Sampling employed a multi-stage strategy combining purposive and snowball techniques to identify a quantitative sample of 312 respondents and a qualitative subsample of fifteen in-depth interview participants selected based on varying hoax-detection scores (Federici, 2025). The primary quantitative instrument was a validated hoax-detection test containing fabricated religious claims and misinformation, and the second was a questionnaire measuring Islamic digital literacy (assessing theological knowledge, critical reasoning, and verification habits). The qualitative instrument was a semi-structured interview guide exploring participants' verification strategies and emotional responses (Laufer, 2025). Data collection proceeded in two phases: first, administering the test and literacy questionnaire online for statistical analysis; and second, conducting virtual interviews. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlational analysis, and thematic coding, with rigorous ethical considerations applied throughout.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics indicate that participants demonstrated moderate hoax-detection accuracy when confronted with fabricated hadith, misleading Qur'anic claims, and viral religious

misinformation. The mean hoax-detection score was 47%, with wide variation across demographic groups. Younger participants aged 18–25 performed lower than older respondents, suggesting generational differences in verification competence. Respondents with formal Islamic education scored significantly higher, reflecting the relevance of foundational religious knowledge in identifying digital fitna.

Secondary data from digital behavior logs reveal that nearly 76% of respondents frequently encountered religious misinformation through WhatsApp groups, while 59% reported receiving such content via Instagram and TikTok. High exposure did not guarantee higher detection accuracy, indicating that repeated contact with misinformation may normalize deceptive content rather than enhance vigilance. The dataset shows that platform familiarity alone is insufficient without literacy in religious verification principles.

Table 1. Hoax-Detection and Exposure Levels

Variable	Percentage / Score
Mean hoax-detection accuracy	47%
Encountering misinformation on WhatsApp	76%
Encountering misinformation on Instagram	59%
Encountering misinformation on TikTok	54%
Participants with formal Islamic education scoring >70%	68%

Data patterns indicate that users’ confidence in identifying hoaxes did not correlate with actual accuracy. Many respondents overestimated their ability to detect misinformation despite scoring below 50% on objective tests. This discrepancy demonstrates the presence of a cognitive bias in which familiarity with digital platforms fosters false confidence, leading users to believe they are more competent evaluators than they actually are.

Data also show that religious misinformation often gained traction because it employed authoritative language, moral warnings, and emotionally charged narratives. These stylistic elements created an illusion of authenticity that influenced user perceptions. Respondents admitted relying on emotional resonance, perceived urgency, or sender identity rather than systematic verification, revealing underlying weaknesses in critical literacy.

Coding of qualitative interviews shows that participants who struggled with hoax detection frequently relied on heuristic shortcuts such as trusting content from family, religious figures, or social groups without checking primary sources. These individuals described limited familiarity with hadith authentication principles and minimal experience using verification tools such as digital tafsir databases or official fatwa sources. Their verification practices were largely intuitive rather than analytical.

Interview data also reveal that participants with strong Islamic digital literacy exhibited deliberate verification behaviors, including cross-checking sources, comparing interpretations, and consulting authoritative online platforms. These individuals articulated a clearer conceptual framework for distinguishing authentic religious texts from fabricated content. Their analytical strategies were consistent and aligned with established principles of Islamic scholarship.

Inferential statistical analysis reveals a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.72$) between Islamic digital literacy and hoax-detection accuracy. Participants with higher literacy scores were significantly more likely to identify fabricated hadith and misleading claims correctly. Regression analysis demonstrated that literacy dimensions related to epistemic caution, cross-referencing skills, and knowledge of religious sources contributed substantially to predictive accuracy.

Analysis further indicates that excessive social media exposure correlates negatively ($r = -0.41$) with accuracy when not accompanied by adequate literacy. Higher frequency of content consumption, particularly in WhatsApp groups, increased susceptibility to persuasive misinformation. These findings support the conclusion that exposure without literacy functions as a risk factor rather than a protective one.

Table 2. Correlation Summary

Variable Pair	Correlation (r)
Islamic digital literacy × Detection accuracy	0.72
Exposure frequency × Detection accuracy	-0.41
Formal religious education × Detection accuracy	0.58

The relationship between literacy and hoax detection illustrates that religious knowledge alone does not guarantee resilience without critical digital competencies. Participants with strong theological grounding but weak media literacy struggled to navigate the multimodal, fast-paced nature of digital misinformation. This relational pattern demonstrates the necessity of integrating religious education with digital skills to strengthen user resilience. Data also indicate that communal dynamics play a substantial role in shaping verification practices. Participants frequently expressed trust toward content shared by close-knit groups, which sometimes amplified misinformation due to uncritical group acceptance. The relational structure of online communities thus mediates individual susceptibility, creating environments where misinformation circulates unchecked.

One participant, an active social media user in her early twenties, consistently misidentified fabricated hadith as authentic despite high confidence in her religious knowledge. Her responses revealed reliance on aesthetic cues, emotional tone, and sender reputation rather than textual verification. She explained that content “felt Islamic,” illustrating how affective cues override analytical judgment in digital contexts. Another case involved a community moderator who scored above 85% in hoax detection and demonstrated systematic verification behaviors. He described cross-checking hadith through digital databases, confirming scholars’ interpretations, and comparing sources before sharing content. His literacy profile illustrates how integrated religious knowledge and digital competence enable effective filtering of misinformation.

The first case demonstrates how cognitive heuristics and emotional reliance create vulnerabilities to digital fitna. The participant’s inability to distinguish authenticity stemmed not from lack of exposure but from reliance on intuitive judgments shaped by trust and affect. Her case reflects broader trends where perceived religiosity substitutes for actual verification. The second case shows that deliberate verification practices can significantly reduce susceptibility to misinformation. The moderator’s behavior aligns with the statistical patterns showing high literacy as a strong predictor of accuracy. His approach demonstrates that protective behaviors can be taught and institutionalized within online communities.

The overall evidence indicates that digital fitna thrives in environments where emotional resonance, social trust, and algorithmic amplification overshadow analytical and theological literacy. Users often operate within echo chambers that reinforce intuitive rather than evidence-based judgments, creating fertile ground for misinformation to spread rapidly. The results suggest that countering digital fitna requires a multidimensional approach that integrates Islamic epistemology, critical media literacy, and community-based verification mechanisms. Strengthening Islamic digital literacy is essential for building resilient online Muslim communities capable of detecting and mitigating the spread of religious misinformation.

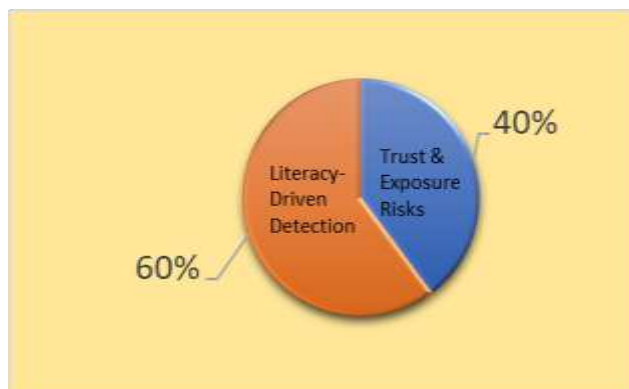


Figure 1. Resilience Against Digital Fitna: The Interplay of Literacy and Critical Verification

Findings reveal that online Muslim communities possess moderate awareness of digital misinformation yet demonstrate limited accuracy in distinguishing authentic religious content from fabricated claims. The hoax-detection test showed that only 47% of participants correctly identified misleading religious information, highlighting a substantial gap between perceived knowledge and actual verification competence. This discrepancy indicates the prevalence of overconfidence in digital spaces. Findings also illustrate that Islamic digital literacy strongly predicts the ability to detect religious hoaxes. Participants with higher literacy scores—particularly in areas related to hadith authentication, epistemological caution, and cross-source comparison—achieved significantly better detection outcomes. The strong correlation coefficient suggests that literacy functions as a critical protective factor against digital fitna.

Findings from exposure-related data illustrate that frequent encounters with religious misinformation do not enhance resilience (Topkara, 2025). High exposure levels, especially within WhatsApp family groups and Instagram story reposts, were associated with lower detection accuracy among participants lacking proper literacy. This pattern demonstrates how misinformation ecosystems normalize deceptive content and reduce critical vigilance. Findings from qualitative interviews reveal that verification practices among users vary widely. Participants with strong literacy skills engaged in systematic checking of sources, whereas others relied heavily on emotional resonance, trust in familiar senders, or intuitive judgment (Ali, 2024). These variations underscore the uneven distribution of verification competencies within online Muslim communities.

Studies on digital misinformation commonly show that emotionally charged content spreads faster than factual information. Current findings align with this pattern, as participants frequently misclassified hoaxes framed as moral warnings or religious appeals. The results extend existing theories by showing that religious misinformation functions not only through cognitive error but also through spiritual vulnerability and moral urgency (Opara dkk., 2024). Research on media literacy suggests that digital literacy enhances users' ability to critique online content. Current findings support this claim but further demonstrate that general digital literacy is insufficient for countering religious misinformation. Islamic digital literacy—which integrates theological knowledge with verification skills—emerges as a more accurate predictor of hoax-detection ability than generic media-literacy competencies.

Studies on misinformation in religious communities often emphasize the role of authority. Current findings differ by showing that traditional authority does not always serve as a protective factor. Participants frequently trusted content shared by family groups rather than consulting scholars or authoritative religious sources, highlighting a shift from hierarchical to horizontal trust networks (Mattern, 2025). Research on cognitive bias shows that users often rely on heuristic shortcuts in digital environments. Current findings build on this by identifying culturally specific

heuristics such as “content that feels Islamic” or “messages shared by pious individuals,” which influence Muslim users’ judgments. These heuristics complicate fact-checking efforts and contribute to misinformation resilience issues.

Findings signify that digital fitna represents a new form of religious disruption that emerges not from ideological conflict alone but from structural weaknesses in digital epistemology. The inability to verify religious claims suggests that online Muslim communities are navigating a fragmented knowledge ecosystem where credibility is unstable and authenticity is difficult to evaluate (Colombo, 2025). Findings also indicate that religious authority is undergoing decentralization. The shift from institutional sources to peer-based content curation reflects a transformation in how legitimacy is constructed in digital spaces. This transformation signals a broader cultural change in which religious interpretation becomes democratized, personalized, and increasingly vulnerable to manipulation.

Findings highlight that emotional certainty often overrides theological accuracy in digital interactions. Users tend to trust content that evokes fear, compassion, or moral urgency, even when it lacks textual authenticity (Tais, 2024). This pattern signals the growing dominance of affect-driven religious communication in online environments. Findings further demonstrate that Islamic digital literacy must be reconceptualized as both a cognitive and theological skillset. The mixed success of participants indicates that digital resilience requires not only media competence but also the ability to interpret religious texts systematically. This intersection between digital literacy and religious scholarship marks a new domain of educational urgency.

Implications for educators include the need to integrate Islamic digital literacy into school and community curricula. Effective religious education must address not only memorization of texts but also verification practices, epistemological ethics, and digital reasoning skills. This integration can enhance resilience against misinformation among younger generations (Ramadhan dkk., 2025). Implications for Islamic institutions involve developing structured responses to digital misinformation. Institutions must adopt proactive strategies such as creating verified digital channels, disseminating authenticated content, and supporting community-based fact-checking initiatives. These strategies can strengthen institutional authority in digital spaces.

Implications for policymakers highlight the need to recognize religious misinformation as a public threat affecting social cohesion and intergroup relations (Jurekovic, 2024). Policies focused on digital safety must consider culturally sensitive mechanisms for identifying and mitigating religious hoaxes without infringing on religious expression. Implications for community leaders center on leveraging existing trust networks to promote responsible sharing behaviors. Community-based interventions that encourage users to verify before forwarding can significantly reduce the spread of digital fitna. Such interventions rely on cultural norms of collective responsibility and ethical communication.

Findings emerged because digital environments prioritize speed, visibility, and emotional intensity over accuracy. The algorithmic structures of social media amplify content that triggers strong reactions, making misinformation more attractive than nuanced religious discourse. These structural dynamics undermine careful verification (Gitler, 2024). Findings also reflect the cognitive limitations users face when processing large volumes of content. Many participants described feeling overwhelmed by constant exposure to moral warnings, devotional advice, and viral religious claims. This overload encourages reliance on intuitive judgment rather than systematic evaluation.

Findings are shaped by the decline in direct engagement with authoritative religious sources. Participants often lacked familiarity with basic tools of religious verification such as hadith classification or fiqh principles (Mancinelli, 2025). This gap creates vulnerability to content that

appears religious but lacks authenticity. Findings also result from the social dynamics of trust within online communities. Users frequently prioritize relational trust—particularly from family or religious peers—over textual evidence. This relational bias allows misinformation to circulate widely within close-knit groups where verification norms are weak.

Future initiatives should focus on building integrated Islamic digital literacy programs that combine critical thinking, theological grounding, and digital competence. Such programs can be implemented through schools, pesantren, mosques, and online learning platforms, enabling widespread impact across generations (Demirkoparan, 2025). Future research should expand to cross-national comparisons to examine how cultural differences influence susceptibility to religious misinformation. Comparative studies can provide insight into how digital fitna functions in diverse Muslim contexts and identify localized strategies for strengthening resilience.

Future interventions should incorporate community-led fact-checking mechanisms, leveraging trusted religious leaders, educators, and digital influencers to counter misinformation. Collaborative digital verification groups could function as rapid-response teams for clarifying viral religious claims. Future technological developments should consider the creation of AI-assisted verification tools capable of detecting fabricated hadith, misquoted verses, or misleading religious narratives (Demiryürek dkk., 2024). These innovations can support online Muslim communities by providing accessible, real-time assistance for navigating digital religious content.

CONCLUSION

Findings underscore a distinctive contribution by revealing that Islamic digital literacy—rather than general digital literacy—is the strongest predictor of hoax-detection accuracy among online Muslim communities. The study demonstrates that religious misinformation operates through culturally embedded heuristics, emotional triggers, and moral authority cues that uniquely shape Muslim users' interpretive responses. This insight differentiates the research from conventional misinformation studies by showing that digital fitna cannot be adequately understood through technological or cognitive frameworks alone. The results highlight the need to conceptualize misinformation within a hybrid epistemic domain where religious knowledge, emotional resonance, and digital behavior intersect to produce vulnerabilities or resilience.

The study provides substantial conceptual advancement by introducing the integrated framework of Islamic digital literacy, which combines theological knowledge, critical media skills, and epistemic ethics as a unified model for countering religious misinformation. This framework offers a new lens for understanding how online Muslim communities assess authenticity, interpret religious claims, and engage in verification practices. The research also contributes methodologically through its mixed-methods design that triangulates quantitative detection tests, literacy measures, and narrative-based interviews. This methodological integration enables a deeper examination of both behavioral patterns and interpretive logics, positioning the study as a methodological reference point for future research on digital religion and misinformation.

The study is limited by its reliance on self-reported digital behavior, which may not fully capture real-time decision-making processes or the complexity of algorithmic exposure patterns on different platforms. The sample is geographically diverse but not fully representative of the broader Muslim digital public, particularly users in less connected regions or older demographic groups. Future research should employ digital ethnography, platform analytics, and longitudinal designs to examine how hoax-detection practices evolve over time and across digital environments. Expanding the scope to compare communities across countries, sectarian groups, and levels of religious

literacy would deepen understanding of how digital fitna manifests differently within global Muslim populations.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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