

Countering Religious Disinformation in the Digital Era: The Role of Indonesian Language Competence in the Public Communication of Islamic Religious Counselors in Sinjai Regency

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Abstract

Religious disinformation circulating on social media poses a significant challenge to Indonesian Muslim communities by threatening social cohesion and undermining religious authority in the digital era. This study examines the influence of Indonesian language competence on the effectiveness of public communication by Islamic religious counselors in countering religious disinformation on social media in Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi. A quantitative correlational design was employed, involving all 79 functional and non-functional Islamic religious counselors through total sampling. Data were collected using a validated and reliable Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 37 items measuring Indonesian language competence across five dimensions (grammatical, discourse, lexical, argumentative, and sociolinguistic) and public communication effectiveness across three dimensions (message clarity and trustworthiness, digital credibility and reach, and responsiveness and counter-narrative capacity). Data were analyzed using Pearson's product-moment correlation and simple linear regression. The findings indicate that respondents demonstrated a very high level of Indonesian language competence ($M = 78.63$; 81.91% of the ideal score) and effective public communication ($M = 41.29$; 79.41% of the ideal score). A very strong positive correlation was found between the two variables ($r = 0.908$, $*p* < 0.001$). Regression analysis further revealed that Indonesian language competence significantly predicted public communication effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.825$; $\hat{Y} = 1.213 + 0.510X$), explaining 82.5% of its variance. These findings highlight Indonesian language competence as a key predictor of effective public communication by Islamic religious counselors and underscore the strategic importance of strengthening their digital language competence to enhance community resilience against religious disinformation.

Keywords: *Indonesian language competence, public communication effectiveness, Islamic religious counselors, religious disinformation, social media*

Introduction

Digital technology has developed rapidly over the past decade, with social media emerging as one of its most influential components. Social media is widely used across all segments of society for communication, entertainment, information seeking, and social interaction (Ayu et al., n.d.). Its use has also become increasingly prevalent among children and adolescents (Niko Wahyuni et al., 2025). Beyond serving as a platform for interpersonal communication, social media has fundamentally transformed the way people access, process, and disseminate information, including religious information. Although originally designed as an inclusive communication medium, social media has evolved into an environment highly susceptible to disinformation. Algorithm-driven content personalization encourages opinion polarization, while limited digital literacy among users further intensifies debates over religious issues. At a broader level, engagement with religious disinformation is often shaped by personal beliefs that influence interactions within online religious communities on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Al-Zaman, 2024). Consequently, religious disinformation is not merely a

matter of misleading content but also reflects the communicative competence of those who disseminate contradictory or inaccurate religious messages to the public.

As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia faces an increasingly alarming challenge of religious disinformation. This problem is exacerbated by the widespread use of social media among young people, with approximately 80% of adolescents integrating social media into their daily lives, including for religious learning and engagement (Kirana Nur Lyansari, 2019). Survey findings indicate that 62% of Indonesian Muslim respondents struggle to distinguish authentic (*sahih*) from fabricated (*mawdu'*) hadith encountered on social media, while 31% report placing greater trust in religious content delivered by popular digital influencers despite their limited religious authority (Nasrul Mu'minin, 2004). These findings reveal a growing crisis of religious authority in digital spaces, where popularity increasingly outweighs expertise and viral content often overshadows substantive religious knowledge. The situation is further aggravated by the limited application of *tabayyun*, the Islamic principle of verifying information before sharing it among social media users (Abdillah, n.d.). Consequently, the spread of religious misinformation has become a critical issue with the potential to undermine social harmony and create divisions within Muslim communities (Amirah Saniyah Serrepa, 2025).

The challenge of religious disinformation also extends to local communities, where the communication competence of Islamic religious counselors plays a pivotal role. As frontline communicators responsible for religious guidance and public education, Islamic religious counselors are expected to provide accurate and persuasive religious information. Sinjai Regency, widely recognized as the **Bumi Panrita Kitta'** (Land of Islamic Scholars), is characterized by a predominantly Muslim and religiously observant population. Nevertheless, the region has not been immune to the rapid spread of religious disinformation through social media. Digital platforms have become important channels for religious outreach, enabling counselors to disseminate Islamic teachings to wider audiences.

A preliminary investigation involving 80 functional and non-functional Islamic religious counselors in Sinjai Regency found that most respondents actively utilized WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube for religious outreach. However, their effectiveness in countering religious disinformation varied considerably. These differences appear to be closely associated with their Indonesian language competence, encompassing grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, argumentative ability, and persuasive communication skills. Counselors possessing stronger linguistic competence were better able to construct coherent, persuasive, and audience-appropriate counter-narratives than those with weaker language skills. These preliminary findings support previous research suggesting that the communicative competence of Islamic religious counselors, in both formal and informal settings, is a key determinant of the effectiveness of religious messages (Wanto et al., 2024).

Previous studies have generated important insights into the communication competence of Islamic religious counselors in Indonesia. Research on communication strategies for promoting religious moderation demonstrates that effective audience identification and the strategic use of social media constitute essential components of successful religious communication (Pikri et al., 2023). Other studies emphasize that social media significantly contributes to the spread of misinformation and identify media literacy interventions as one of the most effective responses to false information circulating on digital platforms (Anstead et al., 2025). Furthermore, studies on religious disinformation in Indonesia reveal that Islamic religious disinformation possesses strong

persuasive power because it is often rooted in historical narratives, reinforced by influential actors, and sustained by socioeconomic inequalities associated with religion and ethnicity. Such narratives frequently evoke emotions such as anger and hostility among audiences (Br Sembiring & Nasution, 2024). While these studies provide a valuable theoretical foundation, they do not specifically examine whether Indonesian language competence enhances the effectiveness of public communication by Islamic religious counselors in countering religious disinformation.

This study addresses three important research gaps. First, previous research has primarily focused on the communication strategies employed by Islamic religious counselors rather than the linguistic competence underlying effective communication. Second, existing studies on countering disinformation have predominantly been conducted in urban settings, with limited attention given to regency-level contexts, particularly in South Sulawesi. Third, no previous study has explicitly investigated Indonesian language competence the primary language of national religious communication as a determinant of counselors' ability to counter religious disinformation on social media.

To address these gaps, this study examines the relationship between Indonesian language competence and the effectiveness of public communication among Islamic religious counselors in Sinjai Regency. By involving 80 counselors, the study provides empirical evidence on how linguistic competence contributes to effective religious communication in an increasingly complex digital information environment. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on religious communication and digital disinformation while offering practical implications for strengthening the professional development of Islamic religious counselors in Indonesia's digital era.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach using a correlational-regression research design to examine the relationship between Indonesian language competence as the independent variable and the effectiveness of public communication by Islamic religious counselors in countering religious disinformation on social media as the dependent variable. This design is consistent with the principles of quantitative research, which emphasize objective and systematic measurement of variables (Creswell, 2017).

The study population consisted of 80 functional and non-functional Islamic religious counselors serving in Sinjai Regency, South Sulawesi. Given the manageable population size, all members of the population were included in the study using a total sampling (census) technique (Madeamin & Darmawati, 2018).

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Prior to data collection, the instrument was tested for validity and reliability. Indonesian language competence was measured across four dimensions: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Public communication effectiveness was evaluated using four dimensions: message clarity, persuasive capacity, audience reach, and the ability to construct counter-narratives against religious disinformation.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables. Second, simple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the predictive effect of Indonesian language competence on the effectiveness of public communication among Islamic religious counselors.

Results

A total sampling technique was employed, whereby the entire population of Islamic religious counselors serving in Sinjai Regency was included in the study. Of the 80 questionnaires distributed, 79 were completed and deemed valid for analysis ($N = 79$). One questionnaire was excluded due to incomplete responses.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree), comprising 37 items. Of these, 24 items measured Indonesian language competence (X), while the remaining 13 items assessed the effectiveness of public communication in countering religious disinformation on social media (Y). Descriptive statistics for both variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables ($N = 79$)

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	SD
Indonesian Language Competence (X)	79	24	96	78.63	12.83
Public Communication Effectiveness (Y)	79	13	52	41.29	7.20
Ideal Score for Variable X (24 items $\times$ 4 = 96)	–	24	96	60.00	–
Ideal Score for Variable Y (13 items $\times$ 4 = 52)	–	13	52	32.50	–

Note. The ideal score represents the theoretical midpoint of each variable based on the four point Likert scale and is provided for descriptive comparison.

Indonesian language competence (X) was measured using 24 questionnaire items representing five dimensions: (1) grammatical competence, (2) discourse competence, (3) lexical competence, (4) argumentative competence, and (5) sociolinguistic competence. The observed scores ranged from 24 to 96, with a mean of 78.63 ($SD = 12.8^*$). This mean corresponds to 81.91% of the maximum possible score, indicating a very high level of Indonesian language competence among Islamic religious counselors in Sinjai Regency. The frequency distribution across competency categories is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Indonesian Language Competence Levels ($N = 79$)

Percentage Interval	Competence Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative (%)
81–100	Very High	37	46.84	46.84
61–80	High	37	46.84	93.68
41–60	Moderate	4	5.06	98.74
21–40	Low	1	1.27	100.00
0–20	Very Low	0	0.00	100.00
Total	—	79	100.00	—

Note. Competence levels were classified based on the percentage of the maximum possible score for the Indonesian language competence scale.

As shown in Table 2, 37 respondents (46.84%) were classified as having very high Indonesian language competence, while another 37 respondents (46.84%) fell into the high category. Thus, a combined 93.68% of the Islamic religious counselors demonstrated high to very high levels of Indonesian language competence. Only four respondents (5.06%) were classified as having moderate competence, and one respondent (1.27%) fell into the low category. No respondents were classified as having very low competence.

Public communication effectiveness (Y) was measured using 13 questionnaire items representing three dimensions: (1) message clarity and credibility, (2) digital credibility and audience reach, and (3) responsiveness and counter-narrative effectiveness. Observed scores ranged from 13 to 52, with a mean of 41.29 ($SD = 7.20$). This mean represents 79.41% of the maximum possible score, indicating that the public

communication of Islamic religious counselors was generally effective. The distribution of respondents across effectiveness categories is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Public Communication Effectiveness Levels (N = 79)

Percentage Interval	Effectiveness Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative (%)
81–100	Very Effective	26	32.91	32.91
61–80	Effective	48	60.76	93.67
41–60	Moderately Effective	4	5.06	98.73
21–40	Less Effective	1	1.27	100.00
0–20	Ineffective	0	0.00	100.00
Total	—	79	100.00	—

Note. Effectiveness levels were classified based on the percentage of the maximum possible score for the public communication effectiveness scale.

As presented in Table 3, 26 respondents (32.91%) were classified as having very effective public communication, while 48 respondents (60.76%) were categorized as effective. Collectively, 93.67% of the Islamic religious counselors demonstrated effective to very effective public communication. Only four respondents (5.06%) fell into the moderately effective category, and one respondent (1.27%) was classified as less effective. These findings suggest that although the overall level of public communication effectiveness was high, a small proportion of counselors may benefit from further capacity building in digital communication. The descriptive statistics for each dimension of public communication effectiveness are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics by Dimension of Public Communication Effectiveness

Dimension	Number of Items	Maximum Score	Mean	Achievement (%)
Message Clarity and Trustworthiness	4	16	12.92	80.78
Digital Credibility and Audience Reach	4	16	12.53	78.32
Responsiveness and Counter-Narrative Capacity	5	20	15.84	79.18
Overall	13	52	41.29	79.41

Note. Achievement (%) represents the mean score as a percentage of the maximum possible score for each dimension.

As shown in Table 4, message clarity and trustworthiness achieved the highest mean percentage (80.78%), followed by responsiveness and counter-narrative capacity (79.18%) and digital credibility and audience reach (78.32%). Although all three dimensions demonstrated relatively high levels of achievement, the comparatively lower score for digital credibility and audience reach suggests that message amplification in digital environments including expanding audience reach, maintaining communication credibility, and increasing the dissemination of corrective content remains the aspect most in need of improvement.

To test the research hypothesis, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between Indonesian language competence (X) and public communication effectiveness (Y). The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Between Indonesian Language Competence and Public Communication Effectiveness (N = 79)

Variables	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i> (Two-tailed)	Interpretation
Indonesian Language Competence (X) and Public Communication Effectiveness (Y)	0.908	< 0.001	Very strong positive correlation

Note. The correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

The Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis revealed a **very strong** positive relationship between Indonesian language competence and public communication effectiveness ($r = 0.908$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 79$). According to Guilford's (1950) criteria, this coefficient indicates a **very strong** correlation. The positive direction of the relationship suggests that higher levels of Indonesian language competence are associated with greater effectiveness in the public communication of Islamic religious counselors when countering religious disinformation on social media. The interpretation of the correlation coefficient is presented in **Table 6**.

Table 6. Interpretation of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient

Absolute Value of <i>r</i>	Interpretation (Guilford, 1956)	Result of This Study
0.80–1.00	Very Strong	0.908 (Very Strong)
0.60–0.79	Strong	—
0.40–0.59	Moderate	—
0.20–0.39	Weak	—
0.00–0.19	Very Weak	—

Note. Based on Guilford's (1956) classification, the observed correlation coefficient ($r = 0.908$) indicates a very strong positive relationship.

To further examine the predictive effect of Indonesian language competence on public communication effectiveness, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The regression results include the model summary, ANOVA, and regression coefficients.

Table 7. Summary of the Simple Linear Regression Model

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	Standard Error of the Estimate	<i>F</i>
1	0.908	0.825	0.823	3.033	362.48

As shown in Table 7, the regression model produced a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.825$, indicating that 82.5% of the variance in public communication effectiveness was explained by Indonesian language competence. The minimal difference between R^2 (0.825) and the adjusted R^2 (0.823) suggests that the model is stable and demonstrates good explanatory power.

Table 8. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Regression	3334.06	1	3334.06	362.48	< 0.001
Residual	708.25	77	9.20		
Total	4042.30	78			

The ANOVA results in **Table 8** indicate that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 77) = 362.48, p < 0.001$. This finding confirms that Indonesian language competence significantly predicts the effectiveness of public communication among Islamic religious counselors.

Table 9. Regression Coefficients

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t	p
Constant	1.213	1.329	0.913	0.364
Indonesian Language Competence (X)	0.510	0.027	19.039	< 0.001

Regression equation: $\hat{Y} = 1,2133 + 0,5097X$

As shown in Table 9, Indonesian language competence had a significant positive effect on public communication effectiveness ($B = 0.510, t = 19.039, p < 0.001$), supporting the research hypothesis. Specifically, a one-point increase in Indonesian language competence was associated with an estimated 0.51-point increase in public communication effectiveness. The intercept ($B = 1.213$) represents the predicted level of public communication effectiveness when Indonesian language competence is zero, although this value has limited practical interpretation because a zero score falls outside the observed range of the data.

Discussion

Indonesian Language Competence of Islamic Religious Counselors

The findings indicate that Islamic religious counselors in Sinjai Regency demonstrated a very high level of Indonesian language competence, with an average achievement of 81.91% of the maximum possible score. This finding supports the communicative competence framework proposed by Canale and Swain (2002), which conceptualizes effective communication as the integration of grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies. High achievement across all dimensions suggests that the counselors possess the linguistic resources required to communicate religious messages accurately and effectively in digital environments.

Among the measured dimensions, grammatical competence obtained the highest score, indicating that most counselors are able to construct linguistically accurate religious messages using appropriate grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. This finding is consistent with Sarwari et al. (2024), who argue that grammatical competence forms the foundation of effective communication because linguistic inaccuracies may reduce message clarity and audience trust. In the context of social media, where written communication dominates, grammatical accuracy contributes directly to the credibility of religious messages.

Similarly, the high score for argumentative competence suggests that counselors are generally capable of presenting logical, evidence-based responses to religious disinformation. Persuasive counter-disinformation communication depends not only on theological knowledge but also on the ability to organize arguments coherently and communicate them convincingly. Conversely, ****sociolinguistic competence**** recorded the lowest score among the five dimensions, suggesting that adapting language to diverse audiences and local cultural contexts remains an area requiring further development.

Despite the overall high level of competence, the relatively large standard deviation indicates noticeable variation among individual counselors. This finding implies that professional development initiatives should focus not only on improving overall

competence but also on reducing disparities across counselors to ensure consistent communication quality throughout the region.

Public Communication Effectiveness in Countering Religious Disinformation

The study also found that the public communication of Islamic religious counselors was generally effective in countering religious disinformation on social media. Most respondents reported actively producing clarification content, responding to audience inquiries, and disseminating counter-narratives through digital platforms. These findings demonstrate that social media has become an important extension of religious outreach in Indonesia.

Dimension-level analysis provides further insights into communication performance. Message clarity and trustworthiness achieved the highest score, indicating that audiences generally perceive counselors' messages as understandable and credible. This finding supports previous research suggesting that trust is built through clear language, respectful communication, and the use of authentic religious sources.

In contrast, digital credibility and audience reach recorded the lowest achievement among the three dimensions. Although the difference was relatively small, it highlights a persistent challenge in digital religious communication. Producing accurate information alone is insufficient; effective counter-disinformation efforts also require strategic message dissemination capable of reaching vulnerable audiences. This interpretation aligns with Bateman and Jackson (2024), who emphasize that successful counter-disinformation initiatives depend on both message quality and effective distribution strategies.

The existence of a small group of counselors with only moderate communication effectiveness further indicates the need for continuous professional development, particularly in digital communication skills such as audience engagement, content optimization, and platform-specific communication strategies.

The Relationship Between Indonesian Language Competence and Public Communication Effectiveness

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a very strong positive association between Indonesian language competence and public communication effectiveness. This finding provides empirical support for communicative competence theory, which posits that language competence serves as a fundamental prerequisite for successful communication across social contexts.

The result also extends previous research by demonstrating that linguistic competence remains highly relevant in digital religious communication. Religious counselors with stronger grammatical, discourse, lexical, argumentative, and sociolinguistic competencies appear better equipped to develop persuasive and credible counter-narratives against religious disinformation. Effective communication therefore depends not only on the theological accuracy of messages but also on the communicator's ability to express those messages in forms that audiences can easily understand and trust.

These findings are also consistent with recent research emphasizing the importance of source credibility and message quality in reducing the influence of misinformation on social media. Linguistic competence contributes directly to both factors by enabling communicators to produce coherent, evidence-based, and audience-appropriate messages that enhance public trust while reducing engagement with misleading information.

The Predictive Effect of Indonesian Language Competence

The regression analysis demonstrated that Indonesian language competence explained a substantial proportion of the variance in public communication effectiveness. This finding indicates that language competence represents one of the most important predictors of successful public communication among Islamic religious counselors in the context of religious disinformation.

Nevertheless, approximately 17.5% of the variance remained unexplained by the model, suggesting that other factors also contribute to communication effectiveness. These factors may include digital literacy, social media engagement, content production skills, communication experience, institutional support, and technological proficiency. Future studies incorporating these variables could provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective digital religious communication.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening Indonesian language competence should become an integral component of counselor professional development. Training programs focusing on persuasive writing, digital storytelling, argumentation, audience-centered communication, and social media content production may substantially enhance counselors' capacity to counter religious disinformation. Such initiatives would not only improve individual communication performance but also strengthen community resilience against misleading religious information circulating on digital platforms.

Collectively, these findings extend current understanding of to the growing literature on digital religious communication by demonstrating that Indonesian language competence is not merely a linguistic skill but also a strategic resource for enhancing the effectiveness of public communication in countering religious disinformation. The findings extend communicative competence theory to the context of digital religious outreach and provide empirical evidence to inform future capacity-building programs for Islamic religious counselors in Indonesia.

Conclusion

The present findings indicate that Islamic religious counselors in Sinjai Regency possess a very high level of Indonesian language competence, while their public communication effectiveness in countering religious disinformation on social media can be categorized as effective. Although communication performance was generally strong, digital credibility and audience reach emerged as the weakest dimension, indicating that message amplification and dissemination remain key challenges in digital religious communication.

The analysis also indicates a very strong and statistically significant positive relationship between Indonesian language competence and public communication effectiveness. Regression analysis confirms that Indonesian language competence is a substantial predictor of communication effectiveness, explaining 82.5% of the observed variance. These results suggest that counselors with stronger linguistic competence are better equipped to produce credible, persuasive, and audience-appropriate counter-narratives against religious disinformation on social media.

Theoretically, this study extends communicative competence theory by demonstrating its relevance within the context of digital religious communication and counter-disinformation. Practically, the findings underscore the strategic importance of strengthening Indonesian language competence as part of the professional development of Islamic religious counselors. Enhancing counselors' linguistic competence may

improve not only message quality but also public resilience against religious disinformation in increasingly complex digital environments.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. It was conducted in a single regency using a cross-sectional design and examined only one predictor of communication effectiveness. Consequently, the findings should be generalized with caution, and causal relationships cannot be definitively established.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed.

1. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs should integrate Indonesian language competence, particularly digital language and persuasive communication skills, into the national professional development curriculum for Islamic religious counselors.
2. Capacity-building programs should prioritize digital communication competencies, especially strategies for enhancing audience reach, digital credibility, and the dissemination of evidence-based counter-narratives on social media.
3. Islamic religious counselors are encouraged to continuously strengthen their digital communication skills through professional training, online learning, and participation in communities of practice focusing on digital religious outreach.
4. Future research should include additional explanatory variables, such as digital literacy, social media engagement, content production skills, institutional support, and technological competence, to develop a more comprehensive model of public communication effectiveness. Comparative studies across different regions of Indonesia are also recommended to examine the generalizability of the present findings.

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence that Indonesian language competence is not merely a linguistic ability but a strategic resource for strengthening public communication and enhancing community resilience against religious disinformation in the digital era.

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