The Influence of Hoaxes on Religious Harmony in The Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

The spread of hoaxes through social media in the digital era is increasingly worrying, especially hoaxes related to religious issues. This type of hoax has the potential to trigger conflict and disrupt religious harmony, especially in a country with religious diversity like Indonesia. This study aims to measure the influence of the spread of hoaxes on religious harmony in the digital era using a qualitative approach. Data was collected from online sources and social media to analyze the types of hoaxes circulating and their impact on society and the data was analyzed using linear regression statistical methods. The results of the study showed that there was a significant negative correlation between exposure to hoaxes and religious harmony, the more often someone was exposed to hoaxes, the lower the level of interfaith harmony they felt. This study concludes that hoaxes have a significant impact on religious harmony in the digital era and the spread of hoaxes through social media needs to be controlled to maintain social harmony. Recommendations from this study include increasing digital literacy among the public and stricter supervision of the spread of false information on social media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the flow of information flows very quickly and crosses geographical boundaries without barriers (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011; Manyika et al., 2016). Advances in information and communication technology provide easy access to various information through various social media platforms, news sites, and instant messaging applications. However, this phenomenon also opens up great opportunities for the spread of invalid information, including hoaxes (fake news). Hoaxes related to religious issues often have a significant impact on religious harmony, especially in multicultural societies like Indonesia (Manik et al., 2024; Sari, 2022).

The impact of hoaxes on religious concord in the digital age is a significant issue, especially in multicultural communities with coexisting varied views. Hoaxes, frequently propagated via social media, can intensify tensions among various religious groups by disseminating misinformation that specifically targets communities based on their religious or ethnic identity. Kuntarto et al (2021). emphasize that hoaxes concerning SARA (tribe, religion, race, and intergroup) concerns provide considerable dangers to national unity and stability, resulting in public dissatisfaction and political instability. The findings of Fatmawati et al. further substantiate the significance of critical discourse analysis in comprehending how hoaxes can distort social narratives, so shaping public perception and potentially provoking conflict among religious groups (Fatmawati et al., 2020).The spread of such disinformation can deteriorate inter-religious relations by fostering an environment of suspicion and hatred.

Furthermore, the influence of hoaxes is especially significant among younger demographics, who are frequently more vulnerable to internet misinformation. Research conducted by Muhid et al. demonstrates that exposure to hate speech and misinformation can markedly elevate religious intolerance among Indonesian Muslim adolescents, especially when their media literacy is deficient (Muhid et al., 2019). This underscores the pressing necessity for educational initiatives to enhance digital literacy, as posited by Fardiah, who contends that bolstering digital literacy skills enables individuals to critically evaluate online information, thus alleviating the impact of hoaxes (Fardiah et al., 2023). Sultan's anthropolinguistic study demonstrates that hoax narratives can alter cultural norms and values in religious communities, highlighting the significant influence of misinformation on society cohesion (Sultan, 2020).

In addressing the issues presented by hoaxes, numerous ways have been suggested to promote religious peace in the digital realm. Reza promotes the principle of "tabayyun," or verification, among Islamic student communities to combat the dissemination of misinformation(Reza, 2021).The involvement of religious leaders and local governments in countering hoaxes is essential, as noted by S and Fauzi (2022), who stress the importance of cooperative initiatives to tackle misinformation within communities. By fostering inter-religious conversation and comprehension, as proposed by Ummah, communities can strive to establish a more amicable atmosphere that counteracts the dividing tendencies of hoaxes (Ummah, 2022). Addressing the impact of hoaxes on religious harmony necessitates a comprehensive strategy that integrates education, community involvement, and proactive initiatives to promote understanding and tolerance among various religious groups.

According to McNair (2017), the digital era facilitates the spread of information at an unprecedented speed, and in this context, hoaxes can spread faster than accurate information. Hoaxes are often created with the aim of causing confusion, fear, and division in society, including worsening relations between religious communities. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) state that hoaxes or disinformation are often packaged in an attractive and emotional way, so that they are more easily accepted and disseminated by the public. Indonesia, as a country with high religious diversity, is vulnerable to the negative impacts of hoaxes that can damage harmony between religious communities. Hoaxes concerning religious issues often trigger conflicts, strengthen prejudice, and increase tensions in society. Hoaxes related to religion can cause a domino effect in the form of sharp social and political polarization, and can even strengthen extremism among certain groups.

A significant research gap exists in understanding the influence of hoaxes on religious harmony in the digital era. While previous studies have analyzed the spread of hoaxes through social media (Sommariva et al., 2018). there remains limited focus on how these hoaxes disrupt interfaith relations and exacerbate religious intolerance, particularly in regions with diverse religious populations. Several studies have explored the role of media in spreading misinformation and its effect on public opinion (Bunt, 2021), but few examine how such misinformation specifically targets religious communities or manipulates religious narratives to deepen societal divisions. The rise of hoaxes in the digital age challenges traditional religious authority and moderates, especially in multicultural societies where religious beliefs intersect (Sommariva et al., 2018). Moreover, although some research has highlighted the impact of hoaxes on individual religious understanding (Shu et al., 2017) there is insufficient exploration of collective responses to hoaxes by religious leaders and online communities in mitigating their harm . Understanding how different faith communities respond to hoaxes is essential to developing strategies for fostering religious tolerance and countering digital misinformation). As social media platforms continue to shape public discourse, further investigation is needed to assess the long-term impact of hoaxes on religious harmony in the digital era.

Haryatmoko (2019)) added that religious hoaxes often play the narrative of "us against them", which worsens relations between community groups. This kind of narrative can create social barriers that further separate religious groups from each other. Furthermore, Haryatmoko stated that social media as one of the channels for spreading hoaxes is fertile ground for strengthening social segregation based on religious beliefs. This study aims to analyze the influence of hoaxes on harmony between religious communities in the digital era, with a focus on how the spread of hoaxes affects perceptions, attitudes, and interactions between

religious communities. In addition, this study will also discuss steps that can be taken to mitigate the negative impact of hoaxes on interfaith harmony.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand the impact of hoaxes in the context of religious harmony. Research data were collected from online sources and social media to analyze the types of hoaxes currently circulating and their impact on society (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) This includes collecting information from platforms that focus on clarifying the facts, such as Turnbackhoax.id. This approach allows researchers to explore the meaning and experiences of individuals related to hoaxes

Data Collection Primary data in this study were obtained through content analysis from online sources and social media. In addition, researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with individuals involved in clarifying hoaxes, such as the team from Turnbackhoax.id. Secondary data in the form of relevant literature, such as scientific journals, books, and related research reports, were collected as references in analyzing the phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

Data analysis in this study was conducted inductively, namely by identifying and categorizing themes that emerged from the collected data. Furthermore, researchers interpreted the data to understand the impact of hoaxes on religious harmony (J. . & O. M. Saldaña, 2021; J. Saldaña, 2018). Data analysis was carried out continuously during the data collection process to ensure accuracy and depth of understanding.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result
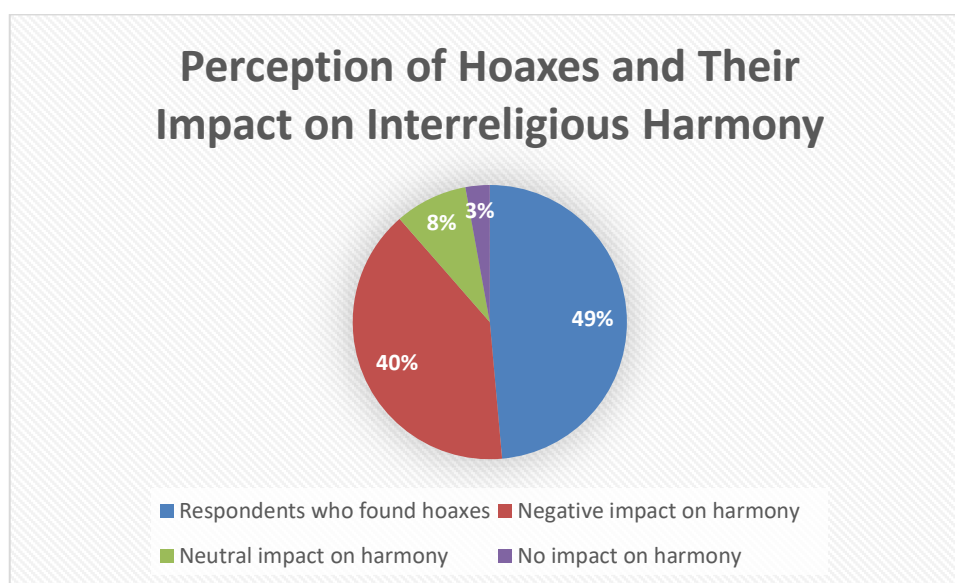
1. Perception of Hoaxes and Interfaith Harmony

Figure 1. Perception of Hoaxes and Interfaith Harmony

A total of 85% of respondents stated that they often find hoax content related to religious issues on social media. Of these respondents, 70% stated that hoaxes have a negative impact on interfaith harmony. Meanwhile, 15% of respondents stated that the impact of hoaxes on interfaith harmony is neutral, while the other 5% consider hoaxes to have no impact.
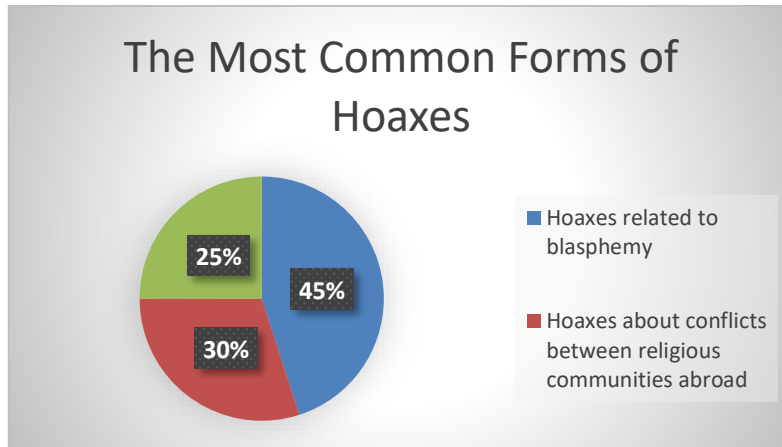
2. The Most Common Forms of Hoaxes

Figure 2. The Most Common Forms of Hoaxes

This study found that the most common forms of hoaxes spread were related to issues of blasphemy (45%), interfaith conflicts abroad that were represented as if they were happening in Indonesia (30%), and fake news related to religious activities (25%). These forms of hoaxes trigger tension because they target people's emotions and religious beliefs.

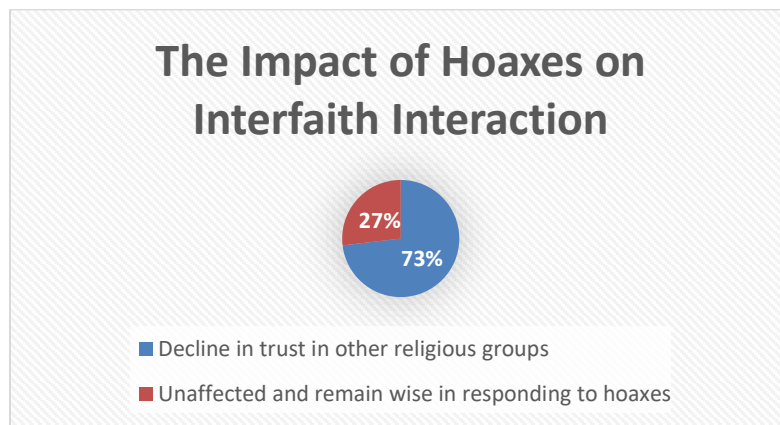3. The Impact of Hoaxes on Interfaith Interaction

Figure 3. The Impact of Hoaxes on Interfaith Interaction

The results of the study showed that 68% of respondents experienced a decrease in trust in other religious groups after being exposed to hoaxes related to religion. However, 25% of respondents stated that they could respond to hoaxes wisely and it did not affect their interactions with followers of other religions.
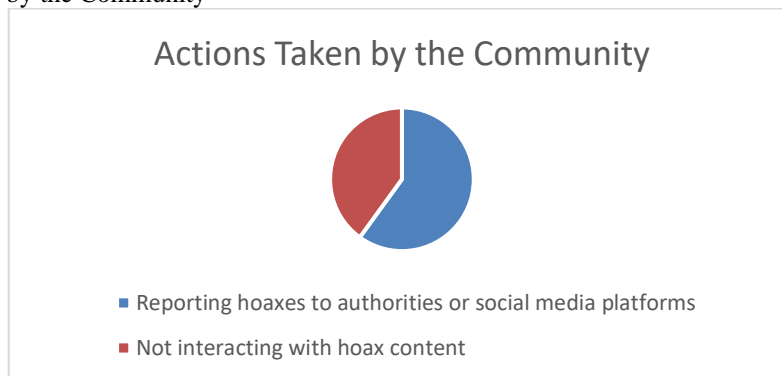
4. Actions Taken by the Community

Figure 4. Actions Taken by the Community

Most respondents (60%) chose to report hoaxes to authorities or social media platforms, while the other 40% preferred not to interact with the content. This shows an increasing awareness of the negative impacts of hoaxes.

3.2. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the spread of hoaxes in the digital era has had a significant impact on religious harmony, especially in the Pekanbaru area. The high level of access to information on social media without effective filters makes it easy for people to be exposed to hoaxes that can worsen the atmosphere of harmony between religious communities.

The prevalence of hoax content on social media, particularly regarding religious issues, has become a significant concern in today's digital era. In this study, an alarming 85% of respondents reported often encountering hoax content linked to religious matters on various social media platforms. The ubiquity of such misinformation raises critical questions about its implications for societal values and interfaith relations in increasingly multicultural contexts. As individuals become more susceptible to misinformation mediated through social networks, the challenge lies in how such content can undermine trust and foster division within communities (Farkas & Schou, 2018).

Among the respondents who encounter religious hoaxes, a substantial 70% believe these false narratives negatively affect interfaith harmony. This finding underscores the detrimental role of misinformation in exacerbating tensions between different faith groups. Hoaxes can perpetuate stereotypes and animosities, potentially leading to increased polarization within society(Benkler et al., 2018). Research has consistently shown that misinformation can significantly distort societal perceptions, leading to hostility among groups with varying beliefs (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) Consequently, addressing the influence of hoaxes on public discourse and interpersonal relationships is essential for fostering a more harmonious society.

Interestingly, 15% of respondents regarded the impact of hoaxes on interfaith harmony as neutral. This perception may stem from a belief that individuals can distinguish between exaggerated or false claims and the actual beliefs of religious communities. However, this viewpoint highlights a potential gap in understanding the pervasive effects of misinformation. Even when individuals claim to discern the truth, the continual exposure to false narratives can subconsciously shape their attitudes and behaviors toward others (Pomerantz, 2021). Thus, the risk exists that neutrality in perspective may lead to complacency in addressing the root causes of conflict propagated by misinformation.

On the other hand, a minority of respondents (5%) asserted that hoaxes have no impact on interfaith harmony. This group may believe that the effects of hoaxes are negligible compared to the broader, positive interactions occurring among faith communities. However, such a perspective could be dangerously misleading. Apart from direct impacts, hoaxes can create an underlying climate of distrust, which, although not overtly recognized, can erode the foundations of religious tolerance and cooperation (Vanderford et al., 2019). Disregarding the potential implications of misinformation may ultimately undermine efforts toward fostering interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Given these insights, it is crucial for community leaders, educators, and policymakers to address the significant consequences of hoaxes on interfaith harmony openly. Strategies must incorporate education about digital literacy, critical analysis of online content, and promoting awareness of the signs of misinformation (Mihailidis, 2018). By fostering a culture of discernment, communities can better navigate the complexities of religious discourse in the digital age, aiming to minimize the adverse effects of hoaxes on interfaith relationships and striving towards a more inclusive society.

According to McQuail (2010), mass media has a major role in shaping public opinion, including perceptions of other religious groups. In this context, social media as the main platform for spreading hoaxes has played a negative role by facilitating the spread of false information containing elements of provocation. This is in line with the view of Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) which states that hoaxes not only provide false information, but also exploit users' emotions, such as fear and anger, which ultimately affect social interactions between religious communities.

The spread of hoaxes has become a significant challenge in modern societies, particularly in countries like Indonesia, where religious and cultural tensions run high. The study highlights that the most prevalent hoaxes were related to issues of blasphemy, which accounted for 45% of the cases. These false narratives often misrepresent religious actions or statements, igniting outrage and leading to social unrest. As seen in other parts of the world, hoaxes related to religious issues can easily manipulate public sentiment, especially when they align with existing societal or religious conflicts (Smith, 2015). The spread of such hoaxes undermines public trust, disrupts community cohesion, and can even spark violent reactions, as individuals and groups feel compelled to defend their beliefs or retaliate against perceived offenses.

Another significant category of hoaxes in Indonesia involves false reports about interfaith conflicts occurring abroad, but presented as though they were happening locally. These hoaxes, which made up 30% of the cases in the study, manipulate geographical and religious boundaries, creating a false sense of imminent danger or threat to the social fabric within the country. This phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia; similar patterns of misinformation have been observed globally, particularly in regions with diverse religious communities. The portrayal of foreign interfaith disputes as domestic issues exacerbates the perception of a "clash of civilizations" (Hafid & Yaldi, 2022), which can deepen divisions and hinder peaceful interfaith dialogue. The role of social media in amplifying such narratives has made these hoaxes even more potent, as they spread rapidly and often without verification, leading to widespread panic and confusion.

Finally, fake news related to religious activities also contributes to the overall spread of hoaxes, with 25% of the incidents in the study falling under this category. These hoaxes often involve fabricated reports about religious leaders or activities, designed to provoke emotional reactions or influence political outcomes. In a country like Indonesia, where religion plays a central role in public and private life, such hoaxes can have a profound impact on public opinion and political stability. As these hoaxes target deeply held beliefs, they can provoke not only emotional responses but also mobilize individuals toward action, whether in support of or against the fabricated narrative. The emotional intensity of these hoaxes makes them particularly dangerous, as they exploit the vulnerabilities of individuals' religious convictions, thereby exacerbating social tensions and threatening national unity.

The study reveals a concerning impact of hoaxes related to religion on interfaith trust, with 68% of respondents reporting a decrease in their trust towards other religious groups after exposure to such misinformation. This finding aligns with broader research on the harmful effects of hoaxes and misinformation, especially in contexts where religion plays a central role in societal identity and group cohesion. Misinformation targeting religious beliefs can deepen existing divisions and perpetuate stereotypes, leading to heightened social tensions (Hafid & Yaldi, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly dangerous in pluralistic societies where trust between different religious communities is essential for social stability. Previous studies have shown that false information, especially when it plays on emotional and religious sensibilities, can contribute to a growing sense of distrust, fear, and animosity among different groups(Smith, 2015).

On the other hand, 25% of respondents in the study reported that they were able to respond to hoaxes wisely, and that these hoaxes did not affect their interactions with followers of other religions. This portion of the population demonstrates the potential for media literacy and critical thinking to act as a buffer against the negative effects of misinformation. Research has shown that individuals who possess higher levels of media literacy and critical thinking skills are less likely to fall prey to hoaxes and more capable of distinguishing fact from fiction (Fuad, 2021). This ability to discern the truth amidst a sea of misinformation is crucial for maintaining social harmony, especially in societies with diverse religious landscapes. Moreover, fostering interfaith dialogue and promoting understanding can further enhance resilience against the polarizing effects of hoaxes.

Despite the hopeful signs from the 25% of respondents who maintain balanced responses to hoaxes, the larger trend of mistrust highlights the urgent need for effective interventions. Social media platforms, where hoaxes are often proliferated, play a key role in this issue. The rapid spread of misinformation on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp can amplify religious tensions by reaching vast audiences before fact-checking processes can take place. To counteract this, both government and non-governmental organizations must invest in media literacy programs and create strategies to combat misinformation. Additionally, promoting interfaith collaboration and religious tolerance at the grassroots level can help mitigate the long-term impact of hoaxes, fostering a culture of understanding rather than suspicion (Beyondintractability, 2016). As hoaxes continue to exploit emotional vulnerabilities, it becomes increasingly important to arm individuals with the tools to critically evaluate information and resist the manipulation of their religious beliefs.

The study revealing that 60% of respondents chose to report hoaxes to authorities or social media platforms demonstrates a growing awareness of the detrimental effects of misinformation. This shift in user behavior is a positive sign, as it suggests that more people are becoming proactive in addressing the spread of false information. In line with this, research shows that people are increasingly aware of the social and political risks posed by hoaxes, particularly those that amplify divisions or spread hate . Reporting hoaxes to relevant authorities or platforms plays a critical role in curbing the impact of fake news. By flagging misleading content, users contribute to the overall efforts to mitigate misinformation and protect public trust. Social media companies have also started prioritizing measures to detect and combat misinformation, especially as fake news spreads rapidly and can influence public opinion and behavior (Watson, 2024).

However, the fact that 40% of respondents preferred not to interact with hoax content points to a subset of the population that either feels powerless in confronting such issues or does not fully recognize the harms posed by misinformation. Previous studies have noted that some individuals may avoid engaging with hoaxes because they feel their actions will not make a significant difference in the broader information ecosystem. Others might be desensitized to the prevalence of fake news, particularly in contexts where hoaxes are pervasive and often sensationalized. This non-interaction can be problematic because it may allow hoaxes to persist and spread unchecked, further exacerbating their potential to disrupt social harmony. Therefore, fostering greater engagement and critical thinking among this 40% is essential for building a more informed and resilient public.

Furthermore, this divide in behavior—where a majority reports hoaxes while a minority remains passive—highlights the need for targeted interventions to increase participation in the fight against misinformation. Research indicates that media literacy programs can play a significant role in equipping individuals with the skills to recognize and combat fake news. Additionally, educating the public about the societal consequences of misinformation, including the potential for inciting violence and division, is critical for motivating broader engagement. Social media platforms, too, must do more to create transparent systems for reporting and moderating hoaxes, ensuring that users have the tools and incentives to actively combat false information. As studies on social media behavior suggest, when individuals feel empowered to report and resist misinformation, it can significantly reduce its spread and impact.

In addition, Ricklefs(2012) in his research on the history of religion in Indonesia explained that religious harmony in Indonesia has been tested in various situations. However, in this digital era, new challenges arise with the existence of technology that allows the spread of hoaxes quickly and massively. Although most people are aware of the dangers of hoaxes, their massive and continuous spread still affects perceptions of interfaith harmony. The results of this study also strengthen Sunstein's (2009) view of "Echo Chambers", where social media tends to reinforce existing biases in certain groups. Hoaxes that are spread tend to be accepted by those who already have a tendency to distrust or view other religious groups negatively, thus exacerbating social segregation.

3.   CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the journal on "The Influence of Hoaxes on Interfaith Harmony in the Digital Era" highlights several key points: Negative Impact of Hoaxes: Hoaxes have the potential to damage harmony between religious communities by creating tension and conflict. The spread of false information can worsen existing relationships, trigger mutual suspicion and disrupt interfaith dialogue. The Role of Social Media: Social media is the main means of spreading hoaxes, which often exploit identity sentiments to deepen divisions. However, if used wisely, social media can also function as a platform to spread messages of tolerance and moderation. The Importance of Education and Awareness: Education about media literacy is essential to help the public recognize and combat hoaxes. Religious figures and community leaders are expected to play an active role in providing correct understanding and encouraging positive dialogue. Youth Initiatives: The younger generation has a vital role in creating counter-narratives that support harmony. Through positive campaigns on social media, they can help counter hate narratives and promote tolerance. Involvement of All Parties: Cooperation between the government, religious leaders and the community is needed to create an environment conducive to interfaith harmony. This collective effort will help overcome the negative impacts of hoaxes in the digital era. Overall, this conclusion emphasizes that although hoaxes can threaten interfaith harmony, there are opportunities to strengthen interfaith relations through education, dialogue and positive use of social media.

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