



PAI AS A COUNTER-NARRATIVE IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA: A LITERATURE STUDY ON DEVELOPING CRITICAL DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The post-truth era has presented significant challenges for the world of education, especially in the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), because the strong dominance of emotions and subjective opinions over objective facts makes it easier to spread misinformation and disinformation among students. This article aims to conduct a methodical study on how PAI can be utilized as a strategic counter-narrative in an effort to develop students' critical digital literacy to face the challenges of the post-truth era. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with an integrative literature review design, using thematic analysis techniques. The research findings show that PAI has important epistemological and pedagogical potential as a counter-narrative through strengthening the values of tabayyun, amar ma'ruf nahi munkar, justice, and honesty that are relevant to critical digital literacy. Effective strategies include the application of critical pedagogy, the use of authentic media, problem-based learning (PBL), project-based learning (PJBL), and interdisciplinary collaboration. In conclusion, the integration of critical digital literacy in PAI learning can equip students with evaluative critical thinking skills, moral responsibility, and cognitive resistance to hoaxes and religious propaganda, in addition to demanding educational policies and teacher training that support sustainable implementation.

Keywords: *Post-truth, Islamic Religious Education, Critical Digital Literacy, Counter-Narrative*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the post-truth era has drastically transformed how society, especially younger generations, produce, distribute, and internalize information (Dorosh et al., 2022). The integrity of knowledge and the moral foundation of society are seriously threatened by post-truth, characterized by the dominance of emotions and personal beliefs over objective facts in shaping public opinion (Bakir & McStay, 2023). Students in Indonesia are highly vulnerable to manipulative narratives and unverified content due to the widespread use of digital technologies and social media platforms, which have exacerbated the spread of misinformation, hoaxes, and disinformation (Jati, 2024). Beyond being an epistemological problem, this phenomenon presents moral and educational challenges that demand a considered response from the educational system. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role in developing students' critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and verification skills alongside imparting religious knowledge (Dalimunthe & Siregar, 2024). Critical digital literacy is theologically supported by the Qur'anic command of tabayyun (QS. Al-

Hujurat: 6), which emphasizes the importance of verifying information before accepting and disseminating it. To equip students with the moral acuity and critical digital literacy needed to successfully navigate the complexities of the modern information landscape, PAI must be reimagined as a counter-narrative to the post-truth discourse.

Students remain highly susceptible to the proliferation of false information, misleading narratives, and disinformation in digital spaces, despite the growing prominence of digital literacy in educational discourse (Verkijika, 2021). The current PAI curriculum, which traditionally emphasizes textual understanding and moral instruction without sufficiently focusing on information verification and evaluative judgment skills, contributes to this vulnerability due to the lack of systematic critical digital literacy training. Consequently, students' epistemic agency and moral responsibility as digital citizens are undermined by their tendency to accept online information uncritically and their frequent inability to distinguish factual content from fabricated or biased narratives (Lisyawati et al., 2023). Moreover, the shortage of adequate training, resources, and conceptual frameworks that align religious teachings with modern literacy demands presents significant pedagogical challenges for PAI teachers seeking to integrate critical digital literacy into their lesson plans. These issues raise important questions: how can PAI be strategically developed as a counter-narrative to enhance students' critical digital literacy competencies while addressing the moral and epistemological threats posed by the post-truth era?

The importance of digital literacy and critical thinking in education has been the subject of extensive literature; however, few studies explicitly explore how critical digital literacy is incorporated into Islamic Religious Education (Lisyawati et al., 2023). Prior research on PAI has largely concentrated on its impact on moral education, religious knowledge transmission, and character development, with limited attention to how it can enhance students' digital literacy (Zalsabella P et al., 2023). Additionally, studies on digital literacy in the Islamic educational context often treat it as a technical skill or online moral behavior rather than as a critical evaluative capacity to dissect and refute misleading online narratives (Hasanah & Sukri, 2023). This gap indicates a scarcity of comprehensive frameworks positioning PAI as both a pedagogical and epistemological tool for developing counter-narratives in the post-truth era. To address the epistemic and ethical challenges of contemporary digital culture, this study aims to close this research gap by providing an integrative analysis of PAI as a moral and critical literacy intervention.

This study's novelty lies in adopting an integrative approach to reconceptualize Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as a strategic pedagogical intervention for developing students' critical digital literacy skills, not merely as a vehicle for moral and spiritual instruction. The study highlights the epistemological and pedagogical potential of PAI to function as a counter-narrative framework that empowers students to critically examine, evaluate, and challenge manipulative information pervasive in the post-truth era. It addresses the urgent educational need to equip students as ethically grounded and critically literate digital citizens amid ongoing debates about the nature of truth itself by situating PAI within the domain of critical digital literacy. This contribution is unique within the fields of digital literacy and Islamic education.

The research aims to methodically review the body of literature concerning the integration of critical digital literacy into Islamic Religious

Education (PAI) as a tactical response to the challenges of the post-truth era, considering the issues outlined above. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) examine the post-truth era and its challenges in education, (2) demonstrate how Islamic religious education serves as a counter-narrative, (3) elucidate the concept and urgency of critical digital literacy, and (4) present strategies for developing critical digital literacy through PAI. Through these objectives, the study intends to bridge theoretical discourse with pedagogical practice, ensuring that PAI makes a meaningful contribution to developing students' moral responsibility and epistemic vigilance as they navigate the complexities of the digital information ecosystem.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach and a literature review research design to methodically synthesize and analyze previous academic works on Islamic Religious Education (PAI), critical digital literacy, and counter-narrative strategies in the Post-truth era. The research design falls under the category of an integrative literature review, which seeks to generate new theoretical perspectives by combining findings from various studies into a coherent conceptual framework (Ardyan et al., 2023). This strategy is considered appropriate for thoroughly investigating how PAI can be positioned as a pedagogical intervention to cultivate students' critical digital literacy skills while also addressing the moral and epistemic challenges posed by misleading narratives and misinformation.

The research process consists of four methodological steps. The first step involves formulating research questions and objectives to guide the focus of the review. Second, electronic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar are utilized for literature retrieval. Third, the collected articles are screened for relevance to the research objectives by examining their titles, abstracts, and full texts. Finally, information is extracted from the selected studies and organized thematically.

Thematic analysis is the data analysis method employed in this study, requiring the identification, examination, and interpretation of meaningful patterns within the literature (Rozali, 2022). To categorize the findings into significant themes, thematic coding is applied. These themes include: (1) the Post-truth era and its challenges in education, (2) Islamic Religious Education as a counter-narrative, (3) the concept and urgency of critical digital literacy, and (4) strategies for developing critical digital literacy through PAI. The themes are then integrated to construct a comprehensive framework illustrating how PAI can be utilized as a counter-narrative technique to enhance students' moral judgment and critical evaluative abilities when navigating the digital information environment. This methodological approach facilitates the development of theory relevant to current educational challenges while ensuring rigor and reliability in the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Post-Truth Era and Its Challenges in Education

In the post-truth era, individual feelings and beliefs have a greater impact on public opinion than objective facts (Pebrianto & Mulyono, 2024). The widespread misinformation and disinformation in politics and social media have contributed to the popularity of this term since Oxford Dictionaries named it Word of the Year in 2016 (Sofyan et al., 2025). The emergence of a culture of

instant thinking, cognitive biases, and rejection of scientific facts that contradict personal preferences or beliefs are some of the major issues faced by education in the post-truth era, particularly in Indonesia.

Furthermore, what is known as "information disorder" emerged in the post-truth era and is divided into three categories by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017): misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Imam et al., 2025). Malinformation refers to genuine information used to harm others, disinformation includes elements of deliberate deception, while misinformation is the spread of false information without malicious intent (Silalahi & Sevilla, 2020). The presence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is necessary as a counter-narrative that promotes the values of truth and peace, since these three types of information disorder often manifest in biased, radical, or intolerant religious narratives.

According to UNESCO's 2021 research, critical digital literacy — the capacity to critically analyze, assess, and evaluate the truthfulness of information — is essential for navigating the post-truth era (Frau-Meigs, 2016). Students lacking critical digital literacy are more likely to fall victim to hate speech, religious fraud, and other hostile narratives commonly found in the digital world. This supports Hobbs' (2020) conclusion that to prepare students as responsible digital citizens, digital critical thinking skills must be integrated into all subjects, including PAI (Hobbs, 2020).

The declining credibility of teachers as sources of knowledge and truth is another issue emerging in the post-truth era. Akgun and Greenhow (2021) claim that students now more often access social media or Google than seek answers from their instructors. Students without critical literacy skills become trapped in superficial knowledge, imitate online influencers, and reject religious teachings and scientific facts that do not align with their personal beliefs (Shi et al., 2021). This phenomenon is referred to by McIntyre (2018) as the "death of expertise," where respect for professors, scientists, and specialists is replaced by virality and popularity (McIntyre, 2018).

Therefore, in the post-truth era, PAI teachers must serve as educators of critical digital literacy who can instill Islamic values as a counter-narrative against misinformation and disinformation, in addition to teaching religious texts. According to Fadel et al. (2019), PAI must be contextualized to help students navigate the flood of information in the digital era while upholding the values of *tabayyun* (verification), critical thinking, and moral behavior when using technology. This underscores the critical importance of integrating critical digital literacy into PAI teaching as a considered response to the challenges of the post-truth era.

Islamic Religious Education as a Counter-Narrative

In the post-truth era, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role as a counter-narrative against the overwhelming flow of false information (Rasiana et al., 2025). The term "counter-narrative" itself refers to an alternative narrative designed to challenge dominant narratives that are radical, deceptive, or not based on reality (Rustandi & Muchtar, 2020). As a counter-narrative in the educational context, PAI involves presenting constructive and humanistic Islamic beliefs, principles, and teachings to correct misunderstandings about information in the digital realm.

Based on the Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat verse 6, which commands Muslims to verify news before accepting and spreading it, Islamic teachings theologically

emphasize the importance of tabayyun (clarification) in receiving or disseminating information (Al Qur'an Al Karim, 2024). Students are taught to evaluate the reliability of information before drawing conclusions or taking actions, and this value of tabayyun serves as an epistemological foundation relevant to critical digital literacy. Thus, as a counter-narrative in the post-truth era, PAI holds normative legitimacy as a basis to strengthen critical digital literacy.

Furthermore, PAI contributes to enhancing students' understanding of the values of moral responsibility and objective truth in online interactions. Values such as honesty, justice, and ethical communication needed to face the flood of digital information can be instilled through value-based education. Given that many social media stories lack substance and are motivated by feelings, fame, and sensationalism, PAI employs the concepts of haq (truth) and adl (justice) as moral and spiritual filters for its students (Widayanthi & Wulandari, 2025).

Critical digital literacy-based PAI learning significantly improves students' capacity to evaluate religious content on social media. By integrating digital literacy with moral and jurisprudential resources, students can filter extremist, intolerant, and provocative narratives commonly found on the internet, in addition to understanding religious regulations. This illustrates how PAI can serve as a powerful counter-narrative to halt the spread of post-truth that weakens students' critical thinking skills.

Moreover, initiatives for deradicalization and the cessation of extremism in schools relate to PAI's role as a counter-narrative. To combat narratives of violence or hatred motivated by religion, UNESCO (2021) highlights the importance of inclusive and moderate religious education (Frau-Meigs, 2016). Students who receive PAI teaching from a humanistic and contextual perspective will be better able to understand Islam comprehensively and moderately, thus making them less susceptible to radical propaganda often circulated on social media (Asdlori & Slamet Yahya, 2023).

However, PAI teachers must possess adequate critical digital literacy competence to maximize this position. To integrate digital literacy into religious education, instructors require extensive training as they often lag behind the advances of digital narratives. Furthermore, to develop students' transformational knowledge of their social and digital realities, a critical pedagogical approach should be applied in PAI learning. Consequently, PAI functions as a counter-narrative that not only assists students in learning religious content but also equips them with essential digital literacy skills and Islamic moral principles that they can apply in their digital lives. To effectively and sustainably address the challenges of the post-truth era, this strategic role must be maximized through curriculum development, teacher training, and instructional design that methodically integrates digital literacy, critical thinking, and religious values.

The Concept and Urgency of Critical Digital Literacy

Critical digital literacy not only encompasses the use of information technology but also the ability to produce, analyze, and evaluate digital information in an ethical and responsible manner (Silfia, 2024). It requires a deep understanding of how information is created, disseminated, and interpreted within specific social contexts. This ensures that students are not merely passive consumers of information but also active producers with moral and social obligations.

The philosophy of critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire, which emphasizes that education should liberate individuals from structural ignorance by training them to think critically about reality, serves as the foundation for the concept of critical digital literacy (Tjalla et al., 2016). In the context of digital literacy, this means students are encouraged to understand that information found on digital media is often biased toward certain political, economic, or ideological perspectives rather than being impartial or objective. To access and produce information, critical digital literacy combines technical, cognitive, and ethical skills.

Given that false information and disinformation spread faster than accurate information in the post-truth era, critical digital literacy becomes increasingly important (Khansa et al., 2024). According to Pennycook and Rand, fake news often attracts attention due to its emotional and sensational nature (F et al., 2024). However, by emphasizing fact-checking and logical analysis, critical digital literacy helps students avoid falling prey to such emotional biases. Furthermore, according to UNESCO (2021), critical digital literacy is one of the core 21st-century competencies that must be integrated across all subjects, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI), as it affects how well students comprehend religious values amid the flood of digital information (Frau-Meigs, 2016).

There is also a significant ethical component within critical digital literacy. Students must be taught to understand the ethical consequences of any information they disseminate, including how it affects the dignity of others, social harmony, and digital security. The Islamic concepts of *tabayyun* (verification) and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil), which call for verifying information and using digital media for the public good, align closely with critical digital literacy in the context of PAI. This illustrates how value and character education are deeply intertwined with critical digital literacy.

Critical digital literacy enhances students' reflective thinking and cultivates digital empathy, or the capacity to understand others' perspectives in online interactions. Beyond being skilled in information retrieval, students with critical digital literacy can apply humanistic multiperspective analysis to distinguish between facts, opinions, and propaganda (Sofyan et al., 2025). However, the implementation of critical digital literacy in schools remains challenging. The majority of school-based digital literacy programs primarily teach technical skills, such as how to safely use applications and social media, without educating students to critically analyze narratives, framing, and embedded ideologies. In fact, a reflective-dialogic strategy that encourages students to dissect and reinterpret digital content based on their moral and religious principles would be the most effective way to teach critical digital literacy.

According to research by Farida Nurul Aini et al. (2024), digital literacy includes not only technical understanding of how technology works but also awareness of the potential ethical, legal, and social impacts technology may have. Society must be educated to understand both the opportunities and risks associated with digital technology use. This underscores that critical digital literacy encompasses not only technical skills but also knowledge of ethics, society, and law (Nurul Aini et al., 2024). This affirms that preparing students for the challenges of the post-truth era requires critical digital literacy in Islamic Religious Education to include moral, religious, and cognitive components.

As a counter-narrative in the post-truth era, critical digital literacy is an essential skill that must be integrated into PAI education. Through this literacy, students will be empowered to use digital media to responsibly and wisely voice Islamic values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation), while developing cognitive resilience against misinformation and disinformation.

Strategies for Developing Critical Digital Literacy through Islamic Religious Education (PAI)

An integrative and contextual approach is essential for developing critical digital literacy in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). One key tactic is the application of critical pedagogy, rooted in Paulo Freire's theory (2018), which argues that education is not merely the transfer of knowledge but a means to liberate students from structural ignorance by fostering critical awareness of their digital and social realities (Prahastiwi et al., 2024). This strategy can be implemented in the context of PAI through in-depth discussions that connect Islamic teachings with the phenomena of post-truth, misinformation, and disinformation prevalent on social media.

According to research by Pasauran et al. (2025), the use of authentic media in critical digital literacy classrooms—such as memes, TikTok videos, and viral news content—enhances student engagement and analytical skills. This approach, which involves publicly shared digital content with religious themes followed by student critique to assess value, potential bias, argument accuracy, and moral and social consequences, is relevant to PAI. Besides learning *fiqh* or *aqidah*, students develop digital critical thinking skills grounded in Islamic principles through such exercises.

Another important strategy is integrating critical digital literacy into PAI lesson design. PAI teachers can embed critical digital literacy learning objectives across various subjects. For example, in moral education, emphasis can be placed on the responsible use of social media (*akhlaq al-karimah*) and information verification (*tabayyun*) (Pratiwi et al., 2024). Measurable learning outcomes should include students' capacity to evaluate sources, compare academic perspectives with popular information, and create responsible, moderate religious counter-narratives.

A further strategy involves using problem-based learning (PBL) training to enhance PAI teachers' proficiency in critical digital literacy. Teachers trained in PBL are better equipped to support critical digital literacy learning because they are accustomed to investigating real-world problems and helping students collaboratively find solutions (Az Zahra et al., 2024). Teachers can be trained to collect case studies on widespread hate speech, fake news, or religious misinformation within PAI contexts. Subsequently, they can develop case-based lessons to teach students how to think critically while upholding religious values.

The fourth strategy is implementing project-based learning (PJBL), which emphasizes creating moderate and legitimate digital religious content. According to Livingstone (2014), students who produce digital content develop a sense of agency, i.e., ownership and accountability for the information they generate (Widiastuti, 2016). PAI teachers can guide students in creating instructional videos on digital ethics, digital posters on *tabayyun*, or Islamic podcasts presenting tolerant and peaceful narratives based on primary Islamic sources. This approach supports Buckingham's (2015) finding that content creation fosters deeper internalization of values and critical digital literacy competencies than content analysis or consumption alone (Martinez, 2019).

Lastly, integrative projects involving collaboration with other subjects such as Indonesian language and citizenship education should be part of the strategy to cultivate critical digital literacy within PAI (Noor, 2022). Since critical digital literacy is a cross-curricular competency, UNESCO (2021) highlights the interdisciplinary value in this domain. Through such partnerships, students can develop comprehensive critical digital literacy skills by learning to analyze the structure, narrative, and framing of digital information while deepening their understanding of Islamic values (Frau-Meigs, 2016).

According to Sabran et al. (2024), teaching strategies that foster empathy and critical thinking are highly effective in building moderation values. PAI teachers can help students gain a more comprehensive understanding of religious teachings by promoting respectful debates and consideration of diverse viewpoints (Sabran et al., 2024). This indicates that empathetic and critical thinking pedagogies, such as guided debates and reflective dialogues, effectively nurture moderation values. By examining digital religious content, discussing religious disinformation on social media, and raising students' awareness of digital ethics, these methods can be employed within a critical digital literacy framework through Islamic Religious Education.

Therefore, to develop critical digital literacy through PAI, innovative pedagogical strategies grounded in real-world issues, integrated into the curriculum, and promoting moral responsibility and critical awareness aligned with Islamic values are required. The development of PAI as a counter-narrative in the post-truth era relies on these tactical approaches.

CONCLUSION

The post-truth era is marked by the predominance of emotions and personal opinions over objective facts. This phenomenon presents significant challenges to education, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Consequently, students' critical thinking skills weaken, and the concept of truth becomes obscured due to the widespread presence of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. The complexities of this era cannot be effectively addressed by traditional digital literacy approaches that focus solely on technical skills.

As a counter-narrative in the post-truth era, PAI holds strategic potential. Islamic teachings on *tabayyun* (verification), *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding wrong), along with the values of justice and honesty, provide a relevant moral and epistemological foundation to correct misleading narratives and foster a humanistic, rational, and moderate understanding of religion. This highlights the importance of recontextualizing PAI to address challenges arising from digital information disruption.

Critical digital literacy is an essential skill in the modern era, encompassing technical, cognitive, analytical, and moral abilities to acquire, evaluate, and produce digital information. Within PAI, critical digital literacy helps students become more resilient to hoaxes and provocative religious propaganda, while also enhancing their awareness and responsibility regarding moral obligations in digital engagement.

Strategies to develop critical digital literacy in PAI can be implemented through critical pedagogy, the use of authentic media, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Effective implementation requires PAI teachers to possess competencies as digital literacy

educators and the support of school policies that integrate critical digital literacy into the curriculum.

Based on this study's findings, PAI teachers should proactively incorporate critical digital literacy into their teaching materials through critical pedagogy and real-world problem-based learning approaches. Additionally, schools are encouraged to provide intensive training to enhance teachers' critical digital literacy skills. To equip students with a moderate, rational, and humanistic religious understanding in the post-truth era, policymakers in Islamic education at both national and regional levels should develop PAI curricula that explicitly include critical digital literacy.

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