

**Misinformation on Social Media: An Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods
Analysis of Users' Engagement with Religious Misinformation**

by

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Abstract

Bangladesh, the world's fourth-largest Muslim country, has a growing community of social media users. With the increasing social media usage, misinformation emerging from social media also becomes widespread in the country. In particular, religious misinformation has become more commonplace, inspiring violence against minorities and threatening interreligious harmony. Unfortunately, a lack of research prevents understanding Bangladesh's multifaceted online religious misinformation problem. This research endeavors to fill this gap. Following an exploratory sequential mixed methods analysis combining a qualitative thematic analysis and a quantitative content analysis, this study analyzed Bangladeshi users' Facebook data to answer two related research questions: (RQ1) How do social media users engage with religious misinformation? (RQ2) What are the frequencies of users' different types of engagement? The qualitative analysis found three types of engagement: their topics of discourse, reactions to misinformation, and misinformation appraisal. Users' discourse revolves around religious, radical, and political issues. Their expressions can be explained as positive and negative. The analysis also suggested that users appraise misinformation in four ways: trusting misinformation, denying misinformation, doubting misinformation, and no appraisal. The quantitative analysis of the second part of this study extended the qualitative findings, providing relevant statistical insights. It shows that radical issues (60.4%) dominate users' discourse, followed by political issues (37.1%). In most cases, users' reactions are negative (94.1%), exhibiting different destructive behaviors. Alarmingly, the negative reactions are more than seventeen times the positive reactions (5.5%). Results for misinformation appraisal suggest that 69.3% of users believe misinformation, and less than half of the believers (25.9%) can identify and deny misinformation. Users who both talk radical, react negatively, and trust misinformation comprise nearly half (48.21%) of the total users. Theoretical concepts, such as online vigilantism, destructive behavior, misinformation evaluation sets, and political Islam, help explain users' various engagements with religious misinformation. I end with a discussion of some limitations and recommendations.

Keywords: misinformation; religion; social media; religious misinformation; mixed methods analysis; Bangladesh.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received a research ethics exemption from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Misinformation on social media: An exploratory sequential mixed methods analysis of social media users’ engagement with religious misinformation”, No. Pro00121333, on 13 June 2022. No part of this has been published previously.

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Preface	iii
Acknowledgment	iv
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Rationales and objectives	3
1.2 Design of the study	5
2. Relevant Concepts and Literature	6
2.1 Social media	6
2.1.1 Social media in Bangladesh	8
2.1.2 Social media's social impacts in Bangladesh	8
2.2 Religion	9
2.2.1 Religion in Bangladesh	11
2.2.2 Religion on social media in Bangladesh	13
2.3 Misinformation	14
2.3.2 Social media misinformation in Bangladesh	17
2.4 Religious misinformation on social media	17
2.4.1 Misinformation, social media, and communalism	19
3. Research methodology	23
3.1 Research questions	23
3.2 Mixed methods design	24
4. Qualitative Method	27
4.1 Case selection and data source	27
4.2 Data collection	29
4.3 Data preparation	29
4.4 Data analysis	31
5. Qualitative Findings	32
5.1 Topics of discourse	32
5.1.1 Religious issues	32
5.1.1.1 Revivalism.	32
5.1.1.2 Cohesion.	33
5.1.2 Political issues	34
5.1.2.1 Institutions.	34
5.1.2.2 Ideologies.	35
5.1.3 Radical topics	37
5.1.3.1 Hatred.	37
5.1.3.2 Actions.	37
5.2 Reactions of users	38
5.2.1 Positive reactions	38
5.2.2 Negative reactions	39
5.3 Misinformation appraisal	40
5.3.1 Trust	40
5.3.2 Denial	41
5.3.3 Doubt	41
5.3.4 No appraisal	41

6. Quantitative Method	43
6.1 Data source and collection	43
6.2 Data preparation and analysis	44
7. Quantitative Findings	47
7.1 Topics of discourse	47
7.2 Reactions of users	47
7.3 Misinformation appraisals	48
7.4 Topics and reactions	48
7.5 Topics and appraisals	49
7.6 Reactions and appraisals	49
8. Discussion	51
8.1 Objectives and key findings	51
8.2 Radicality, aggressiveness, and digilantism	51
8.2.1 Hostility and verbal aggressiveness	52
8.2.2 Digilantism	53
8.3 Political Islam, agency, and oppression	54
8.3.1 Islam as a political agency	54
8.3.2 Political Islam in exploitation	57
9. Conclusion	60
9.1 Limitations and future research	61
References	64
Appendix	80
Appendix 1. Public lynching over misinformation	80
Appendix 2. Crafting religious misinformation	81
Appendix 3. Instances of misinformation-led violence	82
Appendix 4. Codebook for quantitative analysis	85

List of Tables

Table 1. Details of the data sources.	43
Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of topics.	47
Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of reactions.	47
Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of different appraisals.	48
Table 5. The intersection of topics and reactions.	48
Table 6. The intersection of reactions and topics.	48
Table 7. The intersection of topics and appraisals.	49
Table 8. The intersection of appraisals and topics.	49
Table 9. The intersection of reactions and appraisals.	50
Table 10. The intersection of appraisals and reactions.	50
Table 11. Codes and coding criteria.	85

List of Figures

Figure 1. A mixed methods design for the present study	25
Figure 2. Two screenshots of Biplob's Facebook message	28
Figure 3. The data cleaning process for the qualitative analysis	30
Figure 4. The data cleaning process for the quantitative analysis	45
Figure 5. A van driver was lynched over a piece of misinformation	80
Figure 6. Taslima, a mother of a child, was lynched	80
Figure 7. Jewel, a middle-aged man with mental health issues	80
Figure 8. Conspiracy against a Hindu man on Facebook	81
Figure 9. Attack on Buddhist temples in Ramu	82
Figure 10. Attack on Hindu temples and households in Nasirnagar	82
Figure 11. Attack on Hindu households in Rangpur	83
Figure 12. An angry Muslim congregation	83
Figure 13. An angry mob consists of Muslims demanding punishment	83
Figure 14. Angry Muslims torched down local Hindu households	84
Figure 15. Attack on Hindu households in Sunamganj	84
Figure 16. Attack on Hindu households in Rangpur	84

1. Introduction

Online misinformation can kill. Here is a real-life example of how this happens. At the beginning of the construction of the Padma Bridge in Bangladesh in 2019, a Chinese construction engineer uttered, “We need more heads”, indicating more workers are required in the construction works¹. This statement was misinterpreted and soon turned into a powerful piece of online misinformation: “The successful construction of Padma Bridge requires human sacrifices (human heads)” (Bahar, 2019). Rumors quickly spread across the country that kidnappers are kidnapping children in many places to collect their heads. People became panicked and suspicious, which made them ruthless as well. In many places, people started interrogating and beating suspicious individuals found near children as if they were the kidnappers. Within the next two weeks, public mobs had killed more than eight people over this misinformation (Appendix 1) (BBC News, 2019). Even a mother was beaten to death by an angry mob in her daughter’s school after people misidentified her as a kidnapper (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2021).

India, a neighbor of Bangladesh, has also been suffering from this problem for the past decade (Mukherjee, 2020). However, there is an absence of comprehensive data on Indian mob lynching, as “mob lynching” is an undefined crime in the country’s criminal law (The Hindu, 2021). Nevertheless, media reports inform us that cow vigilantes alone lynched more than a hundred Muslims² over WhatsApp misinformation in India roughly between 2012 and 2017 (Banaji et al., 2019; Farooq, 2018).

The statistics on mob lynching from both countries suggest that online misinformation³ emerging from social media platforms and applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, can be life-threatening. These killings over misinformation suffice the necessity to study social media misinformation and its social significance. The present study aims to contribute to this area, focusing on particularly religious misinformation and misinformation-led communal violence in Bangladesh. Of different types of misinformation, such as political, religious, entertainment, and crime, religious misinformation seems to have a continued, intense, and widespread impact (e.g., mob violence, interreligious tension, and minority expulsion) on Bangladesh society, which demands a closer look. These

¹ It is one of a few accounts of how this misinformation originated that is deemed more reliable than others. For more on this, see Bahar (2019).

² A group of self-proclaimed protectors of cows mainly consists of Hindu radicals. They apply physical forces in the name of “cow protection”, as cows are considered holy in Hinduism. For more on *cow vigilantes*, see Mukherjee (2020).

³ With the term *online misinformation* in this study, I precisely indicate social media misinformation. However, online misinformation includes non-social media misinformation, especially from other websites and blogs.

impacts inspired this study to focus on religious misinformation that originated from and/or disseminated on social media.

On 4 April 2019, Rajkumar Sen, a Hindu man, was accused of online blasphemy in Narail, Bangladesh. The next day, a large protest of local Muslims demanded his punishment. During the protest, screenshots of an online conversation between a few Muslim mullahs and followers received public attention. In that conversation, a local Huzur prescribed the strategies for convicting Hindus for blasphemy against Islam: “Do you want to harass a Hindu? Open a fake Facebook account using his name, post something defaming Islam from that account, and introduce him to others as an Islamophobe or atheist. Now you all thrash him hard” (see [Appendix 2](#) for more details).

Social media’s digital features and communication convenience (e.g., anonymity, identity theft, harmful information) allow religious misinformation propagation, leading to interreligious tensions and recurrent communal violence in Bangladesh. Social media platforms also contribute to this crisis by following their business interests. Facebook algorithms, for example, are designed to inspire user interactions, even sometimes spreading and allowing misinformation and other harmful content on the platform: the more the users interact, the more money Facebook can make (Hao, 2021). In addition, while Facebook’s harmful content moderation primarily focuses on English-speaking and Western countries, its lack of concern for other countries sometimes leads to severe social chaos instigated by harmful content. Bangladesh’s religious environment also suffers from this (M. Hasan et al., 2022).

The episodes of religious communalism also sketch a picture of how religious minorities⁴ may live in Bangladesh: relevant statistics may further illustrate this. According to Odhikar (2021), Bangladesh experienced roughly 4,141 incidents of various types of interreligious violence from 2007 to 2021. It includes 2,345 attacks on minorities’ properties and religious institutions and entities. Religious misinformation intensifies the hatred against minorities, widening the scope to persecute them. I must mention that not only minorities but also Muslims can be the victims of religious misinformation. For example, a Muslim man was beaten to death and burnt publicly in Lalmonirhat, a northwest district of Bangladesh, for alleged desecration of the Quran that was later proven untrue (Appendix 1) (Al Jazeera, 2020). However, such incidents are rare and cannot be generalized.

When religious misinformation gets connected to social media and aims at religious minorities, its recurrence, strengths, and extent increase, with remarkable impacts on

⁴ With the term *minority*, I primarily indicate religious minorities in this study. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that ethnic and other minorities also face challenges in Bangladesh, but not too often caused by online misinformation. In fact, online misinformation has a more visible connection with religion than gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity markers, which is evident in several incidents.

society. Moreover, most misinformation targeting religious minorities has proven political intentions aimed at dehumanizing and exploiting minorities, making them more powerless and panicked. This way, religious misinformation on social media has become a new tool for exploiting minorities. Therefore, misinformation targeting religious minorities is different from targeting others.

Referring to Rajkumar's incident, scrutinizing similar cases of religious misinformation (see [Appendix 3](#)), and relying on previous literature, I found three possible ways of misinformation propagation online: creating fake profiles and cloning online identities, doctoring and propagating fake religious and blasphemous content, and disseminating fabricated information and hate speech targeting a specific religion (Al-Zaman, 2020). Before social media emerged, religious hate and misinformation campaigns spread through "street movements and word of mouth" (M. Hasan et al., 2022). Social media has made it easier to clone minorities' online profiles and produce and spread misinformation to many users within the least possible time. It also provokes resentment and violence in multiple places simultaneously. Although social media is the primary source of information for many of its users in Bangladesh, sometimes they cannot determine the veracity of the information they receive from social media (Jana, 2019), making them easy prey to misinformation. Thus, it becomes easier to persuade ordinary religious followers online with religious misinformation and provoke them to act, justifying attacks on minorities based on the grounds of online blasphemy and hurting religious sentiments.

1.1 Rationales and objectives

Four contexts provide this study's rationales: some have already been mentioned.

- In most cases of online misinformation propagation, misinformation producers target religious minorities. Many of the successful investigations found Muslim individuals as the misinformation producers. Thus, we can infer that Muslim perpetrators craft online misinformation targeting religious minorities.
- Social media has been used to produce and disseminate religious misinformation that leads to offline mayhem. The reasons are manifold: Bangladesh's rapidly growing but less *digitally literate* social media users, more effortless and unregulated information production and dissemination online, increasing online piety and religious sentimentalism, and so forth.
- The crafting of online misinformation follows some common patterns: someone clones or *hacks* minorities' online profiles and shares blasphemous content, which are instances of identity theft; someone doctors or distorts digital content and makes it blasphemous, targeting the majority's religion (i.e., Islam) so that minorities can

be blamed for this and so that it can fuel mass hysteria; someone disseminates fabricated information and convince people with such lies that some infidels from other religions defamed Islam.

- Two groups of people seem to produce most of the misinformation: those who have political agendas and those who are religious sectarianists or enthusiasts. Political purposes of misinformation propagation against minorities appear to be influenced by achieving something earthly, such as occupying minorities' properties by displacing them with force: accusing them of blasphemy is an extraordinary way to accomplish this job. On the other hand, religious sectarianists might endeavor to oppress minorities (who sometimes are called *infidels*) as their holy duty. Such strict religious views can be an indication of increasing religious intolerance.

Guided by these contexts, this study aims to understand the under-researched area of online religious misinformation in Bangladesh. More specifically, I am interested in exploring and understanding how social media users are likely to perceive and engage with religious misinformation. Users' engagement is vital because engaged users are one of the key elements in the lifecycle of online misinformation. To be more specific, users' perception of and engagement patterns with misinformation sketches the trends of various factors: user's ideologies, information processing and evaluation capacity, religious and political propensities online, and so forth.

Considering global perspectives, scholars barely investigated religious misinformation despite its growing social significance. Political and health misinformation, among others, has been studied extensively worldwide (Ecker et al., 2022). Moreover, Western countries have received more attention in misinformation research, overlooking important regions like South Asia. The present research is also a response to such academic favoritism and gaps. Adopting an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach combining a thematic analysis and content analysis of social media text, this study endeavors to study social media users' engagement with religious misinformation in Bangladesh.

This study offers insights to academics and enthusiasts who want to understand the complex nexus of religious misinformation in Bangladesh, social activists who want to understand how misinformation is used to persecute religious minorities, policymakers who want to prevent misinformation-led interreligious violence, and social media companies who want to understand misinformation behavior in Bangladesh to rethink and revise their algorithms.

1.2 Design of the study

This thesis has eight main sections: background, research methodology, qualitative methods, qualitative findings, quantitative methods, quantitative findings, discussion, and conclusion. The background section discusses some relevant concepts used in this study and provides their operational definitions. Also, brief discussions of relevant literature are presented here. Three key concepts—social media, religion, and misinformation—and their intersections are discussed in separate subsections. The study’s design and its rationales, along with other essential methodological insights, are presented in the research methodology section. As this mixed methods design includes one qualitative and one quantitative section, I have placed them in two separate parts. Put simply, the four following sections—qualitative method, qualitative findings, quantitative method, and quantitative findings—describe what I have accomplished in my qualitative and quantitative analyses and what I have found from both analyses. As a prerequisite of mixed methods research, I have integrated findings from both methods in the discussion section and explained the findings in depth. In the conclusion section, I have summarized the key insights of this research. Also, the study’s strengths, implications, and limitations have been discussed in detail, along with some recommendations for future researchers.

2. Relevant Concepts and Literature

In this section, I discuss the three main concepts of this study: social media, religion, and misinformation. The primary purpose of this part is threefold: to reframe the concepts for operational definitions, to review the previous and relevant literature, and to provide a background for contextualizing the concepts to better understand the topic under investigation.

2.1 Social media

Social media usually refers to a virtual and intangible space created by digital communication technologies that allows users to interact with each other, producing user-generated content (UGC). Van Dijck and Poell (2013) also embraced such a view when explaining the logic of social media. Although multiple definitions of social media exist in the scholarly literature, Carr and Hayes (2015) argued that an interdisciplinary, reliable, exhaustive, and generalizable definition of social media is absent beyond discipline-specific definitions. At the same time, it is also true that the interdisciplinarity of the definitions complicates the essence and specificity of the concept.

Some scholars conceived a broad view of social media. Such definitions included many different platforms and facilities. In a more comprehensive description, for example, Aichner and Jacob (2015) proposed a typology consisting of 13 types of social media: social networks (e.g., Facebook, Google+), blogs (e.g., The Huffington Post, Boing Boing), business networks (e.g., LinkedIn, XING), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia, Mozilla), enterprise social networks (e.g., Yammer, Socialcast), forums (e.g., Gaia Online, IGN Boards), microblogs (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr), photo sharing (e.g., Flickr, Photobucket), product/services reviews (e.g., Amazon, Elance), social bookmarking (e.g., Delicious, Pinterest), social gaming (e.g., World of Warcraft, Mafia Wars), video sharing (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo), and virtual worlds (Second Life, Twinity) (p. 258).

Although Aichner and Jacob's study offered an inclusive view of social media, it is limited in a few ways. For example, it did not include instant messaging applications, such as WhatsApp (3rd most popular social media), WeChat (5th), QQ (9th), Snapchat (12th), and Telegram (13th), although these applications are widely used worldwide (Statista, 2022). Moreover, a large body of scholarly literature has already focused on these social media platforms. For example, Montag et al. (2015) empirically investigated WhatsApp users' demographic characteristics, such as age and gender. Kamel Boulos et al. (2016) revealed the positive contributions of WhatsApp in healthcare. Machado et al. (2019) studied WhatsApp misinformation that amplifies political polarization and violence. Other instant

messaging applications also occupy an increasing space in scholarly literature besides the leading social media platforms. Rogers (2020) studied, for instance, celebrities who were de-platformed by Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram and who took shelter in Telegram.

Fuchs (2014) asked some critical questions before defining social media: What is *social* about social media? Are not all media social? Baym (2015) and Papacharissi (2015) explained that not just social media but every communication medium is inherently social. What distinguishes social media from other media is that tech giants monetized existing communication and turned it into revenue for their capitalistic venture. Fuchs (2014) also followed the same line of thinking rooted in the Marxist view of media. While discussing the fundamentals and functions of social media, he emphasized *interactivity* and connected it to Web 2.0. In the acclaimed book *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, he focused more on Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia. However, while analyzing social media, he also discussed Google and Wikileaks alongside SNSs, considering them as social media. But how are Google and Wikileaks social media? How should we then define them with the comprehensive typology of Aichner and Jacob? Google is a search engine like Bing and Yahoo, and Wikileaks is a non-profit news-based organization like Unileaks and The Intercept. Should other similar names also be included in the list of social media platforms? Can they really be social media as per our collective understanding of what social media is or should be? These essential questions problematize Fuch's notion of social media and, perhaps, the entire definition of social media. Boyd (2008) understood social media as "an umbrella term that refers to the set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others using network technologies" (p. 92). Having said that, Boyd (2008) and Boyd and Ellison (2007) emphasized SNS in their analysis, indicating it as a crucial part of social media.

Relying on the thoughts of Boyd (2008), Fuchs (2014), and Aichner and Jacob (2015), I define social media for this study as a virtual space with a collection of individuals connected through Web 2.0-based computer-mediated networks that allow interactivity and independent content production. According to a recent report, Facebook (2,910 M) is the world's most populated social media platform, followed by YouTube (2,562 M) and WhatsApp (2,000 M) (Statista, 2022). Following Boyd (2008) and Boyd and Ellison (2007), I also emphasize SNSs here. Facebook is an SNS and the focus of this study: I provide rationales for this selection in the following sections.

2.1.1 Social media in Bangladesh

For a large share of social media users in Bangladesh, social media *is* the internet, demonstrating social media's pervasiveness and relative importance (Amit et al., 2020). Facebook (93.05%) is the most used social media platform, followed by YouTube (3.99%), indicating the immense popularity of Facebook over other social media platforms (StatCounter, 2022). In fact, Facebook has constantly been securing its top position since 2009. Other available social media platforms in Bangladesh are LinkedIn (1.18%), Pinterest (0.62%), Twitter (0.54%), and Instagram (0.39%). Bangladesh had 57.50 million Facebook users in July 2022, which was 33.1% of the country's entire population (NapoleonCat, 2022), while other statistics from January 2022 claim the number of users is 44.70 million (Kemp, 2022). Of the country's total Facebook users, 67.2% are men, and 32.8% are women. The age group 18-34, who comprise 73% of the total users, are avid users of Facebook. It suggests that the age distribution of the users is unequal, as young users constitute the largest share of Facebook users in Bangladesh. Due to Facebook's prominence in Bangladesh, it has become a key SNS, often implying that it *is* the internet (Jana, 2019). Of the total time spent on social media, users spend 63.5% of their time on Facebook. More than 70% of Facebook users use it for more than one hour daily. Therefore, social media, especially Facebook's nexus with significant social and political phenomena in Bangladesh, is worth discussing as it has considerable impacts on physical-world affairs (Baym, 2015).

2.1.2 Social media's social impacts in Bangladesh

Media effects have been a popular genre of media and communication research (McQuail, 2005). Like other media types, social media also has positive and negative effects. Previous literature discussed both effects in the context of Bangladesh. Social media's positive roles include crisis management, health behavior improvement, pandemic prevention, social cohesion, and social movements (Amit et al., 2020; Baniamin, 2021; Begum et al., 2021; Dey, 2022; M. M. Islam et al., 2021; Sharif et al., 2021). For example, Begum et al. (2021) studied Twitter and found hashtags helped to develop the Road Safety Movement in 2018. This study, however, has two problems. First, it excluded Facebook, the breeding ground of this movement, and other similar movements like the Quota Reform Movement. Second, due to Twitter's (0.76 M) small user community in Bangladesh (Kemp, 2022), it has insignificant social impacts. Based on the data from 352 respondents, Dey (2022) found that social media positively impacted relationships during the pandemic. In another survey of 1,808 respondents, Sharif et al. (2021) found that participants received health information mostly from Facebook (66.5%), indicating social media's substantial contribution to health communication.

Apart from social media's positive outcomes, it is responsible for many problems as well, such as online harassment, hate speech, radicalization, and misinformation (Atikuzzaman, 2022; Atikuzzaman & Akter, 2022; Nova, Rifat, et al., 2019; Nova, Saha, et al., 2019). Nova et al. (2019) conducted a survey of 340 respondents complemented by ten interviews and found that harassment against women is prevalent in Bangladesh and that social media contributes to it. Another study with insights from 401 survey participants found hate speech as a frequent and familiar user experience (Atikuzzaman & Akter, 2022). Most online hate speech targets others' political views, religion, and gender.

Facebook (95.2%) is the prime breeding and spreading ground for hate speech. What seems more pressing is social media's role in the radicalization of its users, which germinates interreligious tension and leads to verbal and non-verbal violence against religious minorities. To understand religious radicalization among Bangladeshi youths as social media users, Amit et al. (2020) surveyed 470 university students, complemented by ten interviews. They found that the participants could barely separate "Islamic theological understandings" from "radical interpretations of Islam" (p. 228). Sharma (2022) investigated Islamic extremism using social media and studied content from 10 prominent Islamic Facebook groups in Bangladesh. He concluded that most of the contents shared in these groups do not directly call for Islamic extremism. Instead, they try to create an appeal to the users by providing "the moral ground for jihadist ideology" and thus attempt to "justify the violent extremism" (p. 1).

To further unravel this topic and construct the theoretical bedrock of this research, I consider it imperative to frame religion in general and in the context of Bangladesh, providing an overview.

2.2 Religion

Religion is an essential topic in sociology. Previous research (Batson et al., 1993; Platvoet, 1990) studied religion as an important social institution that influences other institutions. Platvoet (1990) discussed two main purposes for defining religion: "to define what religion *is* and whenever it is found", and "to define what religion is *taken to be* in societies" (p. 181). The dictionary defines religion as "an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). From the sociological perspective, religion seems more complex (D. Carr et al., 2018; Giddens & Sutton, 2021). According to Durkheim (1995), religion is a belief system that mainly relies on the concept of supernatural, incomprehensible, mysterious, or unknowable. Giddens and Sutton (2021) explained religion as the belief in God and maybe in the afterlife, with some

extended features such as worshipping in holy places like temples, churches, synagogues, or mosques and practicing rituals, such as eating or not eating certain foods.

To understand Islam and Muslims and to answer a critical question: “How and why Muslims are Muslims?”, Marranci’s (2008) account is relevant: “the most important aspect is neither what the Islamic texts read, nor what Muslims believe, nor how they act, but rather whether or not they believe themselves to be Muslims, and here emotions play a very important role” (p. 3). In fact, it is true for all religions, not only Islam. This idea signifies the mental processes of the followers and their perceptions of their religions. It further suggests that understanding religion does not rely solely on understanding the religious texts but also on the followers’ psyche. However, thanks to religion’s conceptual and real-world complexities, Weber (1993) thinks that a single definition may not capture the entirety of a religion. Put another way, religion has multifaceted and diverse characteristics that may vary from society to society, causing a lack of consensus among scholars to produce an acceptable and uniform definition (Giddens & Sutton, 2021; Nongbri, 2013). On the other hand, “operational definitions of religion are constructed from data about particular religions”, limiting its capacity for generalizability (Platvoet, 1990, p. 182).

Although defining religion poses certain challenges, we can identify, relying on the previous notions, religion’s two key features: religion’s social-physical properties (e.g., religious monuments and holy places) and followers’ psychological processes (e.g., believing the mysteries and supernatural forces). In this research, I focus more on how followers perceive their religion and how *their* version of religion relates to other fundamental social phenomena, such as politics. Note that, referring to Marranci (2008) once again, followers’ perceptions do not always relate to what is inscribed in the religious scriptures. Barrett (2014) believes religious perception and meaning have always been experiential, having two different faces: a true religious feeling inside a follower’s mind and the expressions and contents of this feeling. While contents might be easily accessible and understandable, the inner feeling is not. Therefore, theoretically speaking, a complete understanding of religious perception and engagement of the followers can never be achieved.

Four major religions in today’s world in terms of population are Christianity (31.5%), Islam (23.2%), Hinduism (15%), and Buddhism (7.1%): a large portion of the population (16.3%) do not subscribe to any religions (Hackett & McClendon, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2012). Religious distribution across the world is uneven, meaning, for example, Christians are the majority in some regions (e.g., America and Europe), while Muslims are the majority in some (e.g., the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region). In this study, I particularly focus on Bangladesh, the world’s fourth-largest Muslim country, with some religious minority

communities. In the next section, I provide a brief background of religion in Bangladesh that should help better understand the research problem of this study.

2.2.1 Religion in Bangladesh

The religious landscape in Bangladesh is dominated by Muslims (90.39%), making Hindus (8.54%) the largest religious minority group, followed by Buddhists (0.60%) and Christians (0.37%) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The Great Indian Partition in 1947 led to the creation of two countries—India and Pakistan—based on religious composition: India with a majority of Hindus, and undivided Pakistan (comprising both East and West Pakistan) with a majority of Muslims (Chatterji, 2002; Khan, 2007; Mustafa & Nawaz, 2014). After a series of social, political, and economic disputes and struggles between East and West Pakistan, East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) achieved freedom from West Pakistan after nine months of battle (Riaz, 2016; Schendel, 2009). Islam united both parts of Pakistan during the partition, and the Liberation War in 1971 divided them. Many authors tend to address this war as the denial of Pakistan and the departure from the Islam-based state ideology (Hashmi, 2004; Majumdar, 2016; Riaz, 2016). Put another way, the independence from undivided Pakistan (considered a *Muslim state*) was the denial of Bangladesh's former religious (Islamic) identity and the acceptance of a more secular identity, reflected in the country's first constitution⁵.

However, some scholars are not confident about this narrative since religion's continued presence in society and politics still maintains a conflictual relation with secularism (Devine & White, 2013; M. N. Islam & Islam, 2018; M. N. Islam & Saidul Islam, 2018). In this regard, Rahman (2018) explicates that contemporary Bangladeshi society cannot be understood based on the religiosity-secularism binary. Instead, a triangular confluence of religiosity, secularism, and globalization would be helpful to understand modern Bangladesh. I am not extending this discussion further as it would be beyond the scope of this study.

Religion in Bangladesh has some defining features that might not be common in other places except for some other homogenous South Asian countries (e.g., India and Pakistan) that are intricately connected, sharing analogous history, culture, and politics.

First, the religious climate in Bangladesh has been transforming from more tolerant to rigid: religious violence and disputes and the proliferation and penetration of religious symbols and practices in every sphere of life might be some indications of this trend. Islam

⁵ The four state principles included in Bangladesh's first constitution in 1972 were nationalism, socialism, democracy, and *secularism*. However, many argue that while the first three principles were pre-determined and acceptable, while the fourth principle was formulated after independence and added arbitrarily.

in Bangladesh is rooted in *Sufism*, a more humane and philosophical branch of Islam. However, Islam, as it seems, is becoming more puritanical in recent years, divorcing its previous openness (Rahman, 2018, 2019). Many scholars believe that the root cause for this change lies in the colonial regime when the British rulers weaponized religion and commissioned the Divide and Rule policy as a political move to separate Hindus and Muslims for the ease of their (the British's) ruling in the subcontinent (Rafique, 2015). The political use of religion is still pursued by political actors, dividing and exploiting the religious communities for greater political gains. "Preaching activities, madrassah activisms, and Islamist political parties' Islamization projects" (p. 330), Rahman (2019) explained, are now collectively facilitating the Islamization process and constructing an Islamic public sphere in Bangladesh. The importation of religious practices and ideologies from the Middle East may also have contributed to this process (Rahman, 2018).

Second, with Islam's increasing dominance and religious intolerance, interreligious contention has become frequent in recent years. The incidents of religious violence against religious minorities by the dominant group (e.g., the Ramu violence in 2012, where Muslims attacked Buddhists, and the Nasirnagar Attack in 2016, where Muslims attacked Hindus) are some evidence of this propensity (Al-Zaman, 2019; Minority Rights Group International, 2016). In addition, Riaz & Parvez (2018) found that internet use contributes to the rise of interreligious violence and violent extremisms. Some other factors might be a sense that Islam is in peril, increasing religiosity and contestation over Islam's role in social and political affairs, and frustration due to social, political, and economic conditions (e.g., corruptions, political uncertainties, and growing inequalities) (Riaz & Parvez, 2018; Sharma, 2022).

Third, due to religion's historical legacy in the Indian subcontinent, religious and religiopolitical environments in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are somewhat interconnected, meaning one country's religious environment influences another country's religious environment. For example, the demolition of the historic Babri Mosque in India in 1991 inspired riots and a series of violence against Hindus by Muslims in Bangladesh (Bhardwaj, 2003). Moreover, violence and deprivation against Muslim minorities in India and Myanmar instigate discontent among Bangladeshi Muslims as well: the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 in India and the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar are recent examples of this.

Fourth, everyday morality, behavior, and trust intertwine with religion in Bangladesh. Every religion influences its followers to treat their fellow followers and followers from other religions in certain ways. Johansson-Stenman et al. (2009) conducted a large-scale survey in Bangladesh. They revealed that Muslims and Hindus trust their fellow

followers more than followers from other religions, meaning they are less likely to trust each other. Again, Muslims are less likely to trust Hindus than Hindus to trust Muslims.

Finally, rural religion appears to differ from urban religion regarding beliefs and practices. In rural areas, people call religion *dharma*. However, *dharma* does not always indicate the formal religion but suggests an underlying moral order in everyday life that the locals try to follow, such as not smoking or drinking alcohol in front of the elders (Devine & White, 2013; White, 2012). Sometimes, trivial moral misconducts such as drug-taking are considered more severe than other serious crimes such as harassing women. According to the laws of *dharma*, those moral misconducts are inappropriate, immoral, and unruly (Devine & White, 2013).

This discussion suggests that religion in Bangladesh is a complex social phenomenon that is challenging to elucidate because of its relation to myriad historical, political, and social factors. When it comes to specifically Islam, we can perceive that different versions of Islam exist and interplay in Bangladeshi society, sometimes further complicating the academic and holistic understanding of the religious environment. Again, despite religion's intricacy (e.g., interreligious relations and tensions) and Islam's diverse presence in society (e.g., political Islam and Islam as *dharma*), an overt transformation in the religious environment has recently been happening. The internet, specifically social media, emerges as a key player in this process. The following section sheds some light on this intersection of religion and social media.

2.2.2 Religion on social media in Bangladesh

Although Bangladeshi scholars are now publishing on the intersection of social media and religion, it is still insufficient compared to the topic's increasing relevance and impact. Rifat, Peer, et al. (2022) explained that "the advent of social media and video-sharing platforms have brought more opportunities for techno-spiritual practices for faith-based communities" in Bangladesh (p. 2). It suggests that social media, for some, is an extension of religious institutions. It resonates with the idea that media is an extension of humans and their social lives (McLuhan & Lapham, 1994).

A few researchers studied the link between social media and religious radicalization in Bangladesh. For example, Amit et al. (2020) investigated the nexus between social media use and Islamic extremism among Bangladeshi youths. Of the total respondents of the survey, 33.4% of youths encountered extremist and/or radical material online, which seems high. However, scholars assume that this percentage is under-reported due to youths' incapability of differentiating between religious and extremists online content (Amit et al., 2020, pp. 233-234). Regardless of youths' proper understanding of religion, 26.8% of them

“considered the material [radical contents] to be authentic and accurate and claimed to have absorbed it”, and another 25.1% thought it exciting and shared with others (pp. 235-236). In 90.6% of cases, Facebook provides such content.

One type of Islamic content demands separate discussion because of its immense influence over Muslims online in recent years, that is, *waz*, a type of Islamic sermon that takes place in a large congregation known as *waz mahfils* (Rifat, Amin, et al., 2022; Rifat, Prottoy, et al., 2022). Rifat, Prottoy, et al. (2022) described *waz* as an outdoor event organized more frequently in winter so that there is no monsoon (p. 8). Many grassroots content creators now capture videos of such congregations and upload those on Facebook and YouTube. As a result, the prevalence and popularity of *waz* have been increasing continuously from 2011 to 2019, a study of 73,120 *waz* videos revealed (Al-Zaman, 2022). However, as *waz* is an outdoor congregation, it was hampered during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the restrictions on physical movements, decreasing the number of online *waz* videos.

Many preachers in such congregations, commonly addressed as *Huzur*⁶, are half-illiterate and prejudiced (Hashmi, 2000). As a result, their sermons contain extreme provocations such as jihad against the infidels, religious hatred against the Hindus and Jews, and misogynistic remarks against women. Besides that, *waz* videos contain myriad religious misinformation and misinterpretations of holy texts. Political issues are also discussed in such congregations, along with religious issues. Since such extreme content becomes immediately available on social media platforms, Amit et al. (2021) proposed policy recommendations for countering them. However, limited or less effective academic and policy attention and measures have been paid to it.

This above discussion implies online religion’s close connection to politics and sociocultural aspects. In the next section, I frame the concept of misinformation.

2.3 Misinformation

Modern digital technologies transform people’s prior information behavior worldwide, creating a new *infosphere* (Lyon, 2012). On average, people now consume and produce more information than in previous centuries, thanks to digital communication technologies. In this era of overcommunication, information pollution is rampant, often leaving adverse impacts on individuals and societies: excessive information production and consumption contribute to this pollution substantially. When the amount of new information is high, the quality of every piece of information is nearly impossible to assess, thus misinformation surges.

⁶ An Arabic word that means “respected person”. In Bangladesh, persons who appear to have Islamic knowledge are called *Huzur*.

Scholars argue that information must be true because veracity is an inherent virtue of information, although many refuse this view (Fetzer, 2004; Floridi, 2005). What if a piece of information is not true or is misleading? Can it still be a *type* of information? This type of information has different names, such as misinformation, disinformation, fake news, rumor, hoax, and bullshit (Meel & Vishwakarma, 2020). According to Floridi (2003, 2005, 2011), information that is false and its source is unaware of that falsity is *misinformation*, while it would be *disinformation* if its source is aware of the falsity and has a specific goal to achieve this false information. However, according to Karlova and Lee (2011) and Karlova and Fisher (2013), misinformation can be true but misleading. This idea contradicts Floridi's accounts of misinformation. Such *truthfully misleading* content "allows speakers [information producers] to indirectly communicate false content while producing an utterance that is literally true" (Reboul, 2021, p. 1). The information producers "leave part of the responsibility for the false content to their hearers [receivers], with the triple effect that they can claim to have been misunderstood (plausible denial), claim that what they said was literally true, and explain the under-informativity of the utterance through ignorance" (Reboul, 2021, p. 1).

On the other hand, misinformation becomes disinformation only if it has specific intentions. However, it is nearly impossible to always know the intention of misinformation producers. Therefore, *disinformation* can sometimes be a contested term. Similarly, the term *fake news* has been used either "to refer to inaccurate stories circulated on social media and the internet, especially ones which serve a particular political or ideological purpose; or to seek to discredit media reports regarded as partisan or untrustworthy" (Petratos, 2021, p. 765). For these reasons, I avoided using both terms in this study. However, I also want to acknowledge that scholars have had many philosophical debates regarding these terms' accepted meaning and use. As a result, some researchers used these terms interchangeably as these terms serve more or less similar purposes (Duffy et al., 2020; Jr et al., 2018; Karppi et al., 2020).

I choose to use "misinformation" throughout this study because of its extensive use in scholarly literature and discussions. I adopt a simpler and more flexible view of misinformation, defining it as information that may or may not be true, have or have no intention, but misleads people. This view is consistent with Treen et al. (2020), who defined misinformation as "misleading information that is created and spread, regardless of whether there is intent to deceive" (p. 3).

Individuals' misinformation detection capacity and reactions to misinformation have been covered in some studies that demand a brief discussion. Buckner (1965), for instance, discussed in detail what individuals do when they encounter misinformation. They exhibit

two dominant attitudes: critical and uncritical. The first group of individuals critically evaluates the claims of misinformation based on proper reasons. Three factors help them evaluate misinformation:

- Their prior knowledge about misinformation's subject matter.
- Familiarity with the situation when such misinformation arises and/or similar misinformation from the past.
- The presence of a stable interaction system that allows individuals to cross-check the information with other sources.

The second group of individuals, on the other hand, do not critically evaluate misinformation. Instead, they tend to trust or speculate misinformation. Five reasons are behind this tendency, and most of them are found in the classical studies on misinformation (Allport & Postman, 1947; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007):

- Individuals are more likely to trust misinformation if it fulfills their needs.
- If there is no advanced knowledge regarding the subject matter.
- In a crisis when information exchange and reliable communication channels are disrupted.
- If no information is known about the subject matter but it has public interests.
- The absence of high-quality information or evidence to assess the claim (Buckner, 1965, p. 57).

Ecker et al. (2022) endeavored to identify why people believe false information. They proposed a model with two sets of psychological drivers (i.e., cognitive and socio-affective) to answer the question. They argued that when individuals are exposed to misinformation, these drivers lead an individual to false beliefs. Cognitive drivers describe the mental processes of acquiring knowledge and assessing misinformation, and social-affective drivers describe social, emotional, and moral factors of misinformation assessment. Cognitive drivers include intuitive thinking (lack of analytical thinking), cognitive failures (neglecting source cues and/or knowledge, forgetting source and/or counterevidence), and illusory truth (familiarity, fluency, cohesion) (p. 15).

On the other hand, socio-affective drivers include source cues (elites, in-group, attractive), emotion (emotive information, emotional state), and world views (personal views, partisanship). Buckner (1965) and Ecker et al. (2022) have a few common findings about misinformation believers, such as a lack of analytical skills and familiarity, which explain the belief in misinformation. Moreover, Buckner's (1965) discussion is essential to understand the context in which individuals identify and deny misinformation.

In the next section, I unravel some aspects of social media misinformation in Bangladesh.

2.3.2 Social media misinformation in Bangladesh

Although misinformation is frequent on social media in Bangladesh, the country has been overlooked in global scholarship (Mahfuzul et al., 2020). Social media misinformation in Bangladesh tends to escalate before, during, and after significant events, such as national elections (e.g., the 11th Parliamentary Election in 2018) and social movements (e.g., the Quota Reform Movement in 2018). Among different types of misinformation, political and religious misinformation is more prevalent in Bangladesh, comprising 54.9% of the total misinformation (Al-Zaman et al., 2020). Mahfuzul et al. (2020) investigated the perceptions of the public, journalists, and fact-checkers regarding misinformation. The public believes debunking misinformation and educating people about it are journalists' responsibilities. In contrast, journalists believe fact-checking is beyond their job responsibilities as it is impossible to cross-check every piece of online information daily. On the other hand, fact-checkers in Bangladesh are inadequately trained and equipped, preventing them from properly utilizing their potential.

Some recent studies focused on online misinformation in Bangladesh when it increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, like elsewhere in the world, leaving detrimental impacts on society. Atikuzzaman (2022), for example, empirically investigated how and why Bangladeshi youths use social media to share misinformation during the pandemic. A survey of 264 university students revealed that 92.8% of respondents received COVID-19-related news on social media, and 61% encountered misinformation.

Along with health misinformation, religious misinformation on social media has also escalated during this period.

2.4 Religious misinformation on social media

With the term *religious misinformation*, I indicate the type of misinformation related to one or more facets of religion, such as religious practices, scriptures, and beliefs. Although a few studies used this term (Alimardani & Elswah, 2020; Hegarty, 2021), none defined it adequately, leaving a conceptual gap. I found limited research and insights on religious misinformation. One reason could be religious misinformation does not exist in all countries always at the same level. It is true for other types of misinformation as well. For example, political misinformation might be more prevalent in countries where people are less politically educated and conscious. Similarly, religious misinformation seems more common in South Asian countries (Mahfuzul et al., 2020), perhaps thanks to their unique religious environments and histories.

A study of online religious misinformation in Bangladesh shows that users react to religious misinformation more emotionally than reasonably, and destructive behavior is more common among them when they interact with religious misinformation (Al-Zaman, 2021a). Moreover, religious misinformation is prevalent on social media, and users in Bangladesh tend to believe in online religious content they see every day, making the situation precarious (Al-Zaman, 2019, 2021b; Mahfuzul et al., 2020). Therefore, it is comprehensible what would happen when most believers of religious misinformation would act emotionally and destructively (Al-Zaman, 2021a).

What I found interesting is the worldwide scholarly attention on religious misinformation during the pandemic because of its ubiquity and impact (Druckman et al., 2021; Levin, 2020; Nagar & Ashaye, 2022). Religious leaders, mullahs, and congregations have become crucial sources of COVID-19 information across religious traditions throughout this period (Levin, 2020), which in some countries helped proliferate misinformation. Followed by an extensive survey of 18,132 respondents, Druckman et al. (2021) uncovered that people with a higher religiosity tend to believe misinformation the most. Among other discrepancies that religious misinformation has caused, vaccine hesitancy and fake remedies are noteworthy: many religious leaders from all major religions are, to a certain extent, responsible for promoting such misinformation (Barua, 2022; Hegarty, 2021; Nagar & Ashaye, 2022).

A few studies also focused on Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan due to religious misinformation's rapid growth in terms of amount and intensity in these South Asian countries (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021; Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021; Sarkar, 2020; Sultana & Fussell, 2021; Vasudevan & Alathur, 2020). Most of those studies investigated the Indian misinformation situation, where "color, religious structures, clothes and other physical markers of cultural identity" were used in online misinformation to spread Islamophobia (Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021). In addition, Instagram memes have portrayed the Islamic origin of the coronavirus, dehumanizing Muslims, the largest religious minority in the country. These practices of online religious misinformation have eventually led to unexpected consequences, including mob lynching and healthcare denial of Muslims (Apoorvanand, 2020; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021; Partha, 2020).

Besides other religious traditions, some studies specifically focused on either Islamic misinformation or Muslim countries, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the MENA countries (Al-Zaman, 2021b; Alimardani & Elswah, 2020; Barua, 2022; Barua et al., 2020; Irawan et al., 2019; Sajjad et al., 2022). For Bangladesh, Barua (2022) presented a brief but comprehensive account of religious misinformation during the pandemic; most of such misinformation was either originated or disseminated through social media. Like Hindu-

dominated India, where cow urine was prescribed as a medicine for COVID-19, Bangladeshi Islamic leaders—Imams and Huzurs—propagated that eating *Thankuni* (Indian Pennywort), praying to Allah, denying infidel-invented vaccines can rescue from COVID-19. Al-Zaman (2021b) analyzed Facebook users' comments on different types of COVID-19 misinformation posts and found that 60.88% of users trust misinformation, only 16.15% deny it, and 13.30% doubt it. Acceptance of religious misinformation (94.72%) is the highest among the five types of misinformation, suggesting the probable impacts of religious misinformation on people's lives and society, which seems alarming. Individuals who believe such misinformation usually exhibit a positive intention to act accordingly, defying factual information (Barua, 2022). Barua et al. (2020) further found that religious misinformation substantially impacts positive individual responses, where religious leaders play an essential role.

Why religious misinformation strongly influences people and why it is an important topic of study is not only that it is a growing type of misinformation or that it has offline repercussions. It is also important because religious misinformation sustains in the presence of contrary but authentic evidence, which makes it more alarming (Barrett, 2014). The present study is more interested in religious misinformation generated and disseminated to produce interreligious tension in Bangladesh. South Asian scholars call it *communalism*.

2.4.1 Misinformation, social media, and communalism

Communalism has at least two definitions: “social organization on a communal basis”, and “loyalty to a sociopolitical grouping based on religious or ethnic affiliation” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). The second definition resonates with what communalism means in the South Asian context. Pathan (2009) offers at least four views of communalism based on evaluative and historical narrative: “It is a prejudice against certain communities often displayed in terms of sharing of food and space, or in the stereotypes generated about them; it is an “ideology” that propounds one’s religious community as the fundamental social and political category to which one belongs and thrives on pitting itself against another community; it is a series of conflicts well known as “religious riots”, which have acquired a history of their own; it is a political position vis-à-vis the minorities, often called majoritarianism” (pp. 23-24).

Historically, communalism exists in the Indian subcontinent to varying degrees. However, as social media usage is steeply increasing, communalism, like other offline issues, also finds a new nest in social media that has transformed its (communalism's) previous strengths, modes, and intensities. Anonymity, rapid and low-cost information production, wide reach within minimum time, and persuasive content design have made social media an ideal weapon for communalism (Al-Zaman, 2019). More specifically, religious

misinformation on social media has become one of the main tools of communalism: blasphemy is a companion in this process.

Bangladesh is one of the 79 (40%) countries in the world that has a blasphemy law: it criminalizes “speech or actions considered to be contemptuous of God or of people or objects considered sacred” (Villa, 2022). According to Section 295A of Bangladesh’s Penal Code 1860, “any person who has a deliberate or “malicious” intention of hurting religious sentiments is liable to imprisonment.” However, demanding a death sentence for blasphemy, Islamists⁷ protested in 2013, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ruled it out (Ethirajan, 2013). While the punishments for violating blasphemy law can be fines, prison sentences, and in some cases, lashings, some Muslim countries (i.e., Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Mauritania, and Brunei) have a death penalty for this (Villa, 2022). For example, at least 17 persons were sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan in 2019. Therefore, there might be a chance that these examples from other Islamic countries influenced Bangladeshi Islamists to demand the death penalty for blasphemy.

How are the four factors—blasphemy, communalism, misinformation, and social media—interconnected in Bangladesh? Interreligious violence led by online misinformation connects these four factors (Al-Zaman, 2019). To simplify this, Muslim perpetrators commit blasphemy on social media in disguise: sometimes with a fake online profile, sometimes by hacking others’ accounts, and sometimes by creating accounts with Hindu or Buddhist names. Such blasphemous content includes doctored photos, statuses and comments, shared videos and photos, and private messages. For example, in the Nasirnagar violence, Rashraj Das, an illiterate Hindu fisherman, was accused of posting a doctored image on Facebook that allegedly insulted Islam. It caused mass hysteria among the local Muslims, who later vandalized the Hindu households. However, subsequent investigations found that Rashraj’s account was compromised, which was used to frame him (Al-Zaman, 2019; Shwapon, 2016). During the Nasirnagar mayhem, the police arrested a Muslim man from another district for producing and disseminating another doctored photo targeting a local Buddhist man (Shwapon, 2016).

In Ramu violence, the first incident of its kind, Uttam Barua, a Buddhist man, was framed with similar misinformation, which later led to an angry mob consisting of 25,000 Muslims vandalizing at least 24 temples and monasteries and more than a hundred households of minorities (M. Hasan & Macdonald, 2022; RT, 2012). In most similar cases, police investigations found either Muslim men or *unknown* culprits behind the conspiracies. In the end, investigations revealed that the political interests of various interest groups

⁷ The term *Islamists* indicates the advocates of Islam’s authority over everything. It is defined differently in different sources, ranging from people believing in Islamic militancy to advocates of Islam as a political system.

(e.g., Islamic groups, ruling party men, and local groups) are responsible for such conspiracies (M. Hasan & Macdonald, 2022). Such interest groups frequently exploit ordinary Muslims' religious sentiments and mobilize them toward violence, encouraging vigilante behavior.

Vigilante means “watchman” or “guard”. In the absence of consensus among scholars regarding an acceptable definition of vigilantism (Smallridge et al., 2016), Johnston's (1996) account seems more acceptable. He defines vigilantism as “a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force - or threatened force - by autonomous citizens” (p. 232). In layman's terms, vigilantism happens when unauthorized individuals or groups of people voluntarily take actions, such as punishments, against perceived crimes in pursuit of justice. The misinformation-led mob lynching discussed at the beginning of this study is an example of offline vigilantism.

When social media users demonstrate vigilant behavior online, it is called “digilantism” or “netilantism”, portmanteaus of “digital” or “networked” and “vigilantism” (Chang & Poon, 2017; Martin, 2007). Chang and Poon (2017) investigated the reasons for netilantism. They found that “netilantes most perceived the criminal justice system as ineffective, possess the highest level of self-efficacy in the cyber world, and are the only role who perceived netilantism as capable of achieving social justice” (p. 14). It may help explain how and why religious misinformation leads to online and offline aggressiveness and violence. The public perceives that committing blasphemy and defaming religion is a crime and the alleged perpetrators committed this crime. However, they have trust issues with the authorities (e.g., the government and law enforcement agencies) that they (the authorities) would go the perpetrators unpunished. This line of thinking may provoke them to act to deliver justice: burning and lynching in offline space and verbal aggressiveness in online space.

Apart from blasphemous content, users on social media also express communal attitudes through their language. Rashid (2022) compiled a dataset including toxic religious Bangla terms and phrases by analyzing Facebook public comments. He found 148 types of religious or communal toxic textual expressions: 106 contained mid-level, three high-level, and 35 extreme-level toxicity. The eight major contexts of such toxic expressions are anti-Arab ($n = 1$), anti-Hindu sentiment ($n = 9$), anti-Islam sentiment ($n = 2$), anti-Pakistan sentiment ($n = 2$), intra-Islamic conflict ($n = 2$), Islamic extremists bashing ($n = 20$), non-Muslim bashing ($n = 13$), and context-free ($n = 99$). The analysis found Islam *biddweshi* (anti-Islamic), *murti puja* (idolatry), Islam *biddwesh* (anti-Islam), Hindu *jongi* (Hindu militants), *dharma beboshayider* (religion merchants), and *Iyahudi Nasara* (Jewish and Christians) are the top five bigrams, suggesting the dominance of Muslims' toxicity and negative attitudes

against other religions. Although the small sample size of this dataset may not perfectly represent the entirety of religious and religiopolitical toxicity online, it can sketch a part of the problem.

The overall discussion on the various facets of social media, religion, and misinformation in the context of Bangladesh suggests that the presence of religion on social media is visible, undeniable, and worth studying. Also, faith-based misinformation on social media is a threat to the stability of the country's religious environment. Unfortunately, a lack of relevant research creates a knowledge vacuum (Sharma, 2022). Therefore, a scholarly endeavor is essential to explore the nexus between these decisive factors (i.e., social media, religion, and misinformation).

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

The review of previous literature implies, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that proper investigation of the intersection of social media and religious misinformation in Bangladesh is absent, warranting scholarly attention. Although some studies endeavored to deal with a few relevant topics (e.g., religious misinformation, online religious content, online communalism, and online-led offline violence), we cannot get an all-inclusive insight from them. Nevertheless, this insight is essential to understand the complex relations of religious misinformation with other social and technological factors. Therefore, as a contribution to the scholarly gap, this study has adopted a mixed methods approach to answer two interrelated research questions:

RQ1: How do social media users engage with religious misinformation?

RQ2: What are the frequencies of users' different types of engagement?

I determined some inclusion and exclusion criteria for misinformation selection for both phases of this study. Religious misinformation addressed and studied in this research has the following six features:

- Either originated from or disseminated through social media or both. Since this study deals with social media misinformation, I excluded the misinformation that originated and disappeared offline and has no or limited online presence.
- Directly connected to religion. The misinformation must have a religious connection. Such misinformation can refer to, for example, any religious communities (e.g., “Muslims are responsible for spreading COVID-19”).
- Contained hostile or blasphemous elements that can yield interreligious disharmony. Most harmful religious misinformation contains some forms of hatred and blasphemous claims, aiming to inspire discontent among religious communities and produce conflicts.
- Led to offline consequences, including protest, violence, tension, intervention, arrest, and imprisonment.
- Later investigations proved it misinformation.
- Attracted remarkable media and public attention both offline and online. This study only includes the prominent cases of religious misinformation.

The research questions aim to explain users' engagement with religious misinformation they encounter on social media. Previous studies defined and measured the online *engagement* of social media users with UGC in a few ways, such as interaction metrics analysis, time-series analysis, inferential statistical analysis, and in-depth interviews (Aichner, 2019; Marcella et al., 2019). For example, al-Zaman Field (2021a) qualitatively measured users' engagement by their reactions to misinformation. In the current project, I endeavor to analyze *engagement* from various perspectives based on the available communication elements in the text. I must acknowledge that textual analysis can pose certain challenges due to its limitations (e.g., absence of face-to-face communication, absence of audio and video elements, and chances of misinterpretations).

3.2 Mixed methods design

I devised a mixed methods analysis for this study (Figure 1). The mixed methods approach is a research design that combines at least one qualitative and one quantitative method. Johnson et al. (2007) defined mixed methods research as:

[...] the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

It is a similar research technique to multimethod research that uses more than one qualitative or quantitative method, unlike mixed methods research. Greene et al. (1989) provide five rationales for a mixed methods analysis that also inspired this study: Triangulation (the confirmation of results by different methods); complementarity (results from one method are used to enhance, elaborate, or clarify results from another method); initiation (where new insights are obtained which will stimulate new research questions); development (results from one method shape another method); expansion (expanding the breadth and the range of the research by using different methods for different lines of inquiry) (Johnson et al., 2007).

I devised an exploratory sequential method of the three major mixed methods designs (i.e., convergence, exploratory sequential, and explanatory sequential) proposed by Creswell and Clark (2017). This design requires at least two research questions from two different methods. In this study, RQ1 is qualitative, while RQ2 is quantitative, which fulfills the question requirement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Phases	Procedures and outcomes
Phase 1: Qualitative Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a piece of well-known misinformation • Determine relevant keywords • Search relevant posts on Facebook using CrowdTangle
Phase 2: Qualitative Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflexive thematic analysis • Data analysis with MAXQDA • Open, axial, and selective coding
Phase 3: Quantitative Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select five pieces of misinformation • Determine relevant keywords for each case • Search relevant posts on Facebook using CrowdTangle
Phase 4: Quantitative Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative content analysis • Manual coding by two coders • descriptive statistics: univariate and bivariate analysis
Phase 5: Integrating and Interpreting Qualitative and Quantitative Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complement qualitative findings with qualitative findings • Triangulation provides a holistic understanding of the topic • Produce a framework for further studies on the same topics

Figure 1. A mixed methods design for the present study.

An exploratory sequential design, which gathers qualitative and quantitative data in a sequence, usually serves one or more of the three purposes: instrument development, theory development, or treatment development (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Mihas, 2019). My primary aim in the qualitative part of this research was to develop a conceptual framework to understand the issue under investigation and other similar issues: The quantitative part tests the generalizability and explains the qualitative findings more rigorously (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2015). Put another way, I qualitatively explored how social media users engage with religious misinformation based on a smaller sample (1,819 users' comments) drawn from one relevant and representative religious misinformation.

The qualitative part of this two-part methodology is an emergent design. "An emergent design refers to the ability to adapt to new ideas, concepts, or findings that arise while conducting qualitative research" (Pailthorpe, 2017, p. 1). It is an integral part of the grounded theory approach that relies on an inductive technique of data analysis and that does not rely on any predetermined theoretical framework, "accommodating changes in the conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, and composition stages of research" (Pailthorpe, 2017, p. 1). Due to its inclusiveness, flexibility, and methodological rigor, I preferred this technique for the qualitative part.

Based on the results of the qualitative analysis, I quantitatively analyzed another set of data with a larger sample (7,350 users' comments) from five other religious

misinformation. This part has four aims: assessing the generalizability of qualitative insights, complementing qualitative findings, generating the statistical insights of the qualitative findings, and providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing similar cases. Following an accepted practice in mixed methods designs, the qualitative part of this study dealt with RQ1, and the quantitative part dealt with RQ2.

I selected Facebook as the data source for both analytical parts of this sequential design because of its immense global and national popularity and impact (StatCounter, 2022). The data used in both parts is users' comments on misinformation that indicated their engagement patterns. Social media text is a *born-digital* content (Drucker, 2021), which has received considerable attention from digital humanities researchers worldwide. Users' comments on social media platforms express their engagement patterns, so a growing body of literature has used this type of digital data for research purposes (Jenkins & Moreno, 2020; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017).

Designing a mixed methods study sometimes poses difficulties, such as creating distinct phases, their placements, and synchronizations with other phases. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the methodological structure of this research inspired by previous exploratory sequential designs (Lieberman et al., 2009; West, 2011). The following four sections discuss qualitative and quantitative methods and their findings. In addition, the results from both qualitative and quantitative have been integrated into the discussion section to explain the studied phenomenon in depth (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

4. Qualitative Method

4.1 Case selection and data source

In the qualitative part of this study, drawing from previous literature, I endeavored to answer the following research question (RQ1): How do social media users engage with religious disinformation? This part relied on a qualitative thematic analysis of social media text (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Terry et al., 2017).

For relevant data collection, I purposively selected a piece of well-known religious misinformation in Bangladesh that was debunked by the responsible authorities and independent fact-checkers, including BD Fact Check (<http://bdfactcheck.com>), Fact-Watch (<https://fact-watch.org>), Jachai (<https://jachai.org>), and Rumor Scanner (<https://rumorsscanner.com>). Before this misinformation was debunked, it led to a series of unexpected events, including the *Bhola violence*. Therefore, this misinformation fulfilled the inclusion-exclusion criteria of this study defined in the previous section, making it a strong candidate as a sample case.

On 20 October 2019, a piece of religious misinformation spread in Bhola, a coastal district of Bangladesh. The misinformation claimed that a 25-year-old Hindu man named Biplob Chandra Badiya defamed Allah and Prophet (PBUH⁸) on Facebook (The Daily Star, 2019). It stirred mass outrage among local Muslims and inspired them to protest. Meanwhile, police asserted that Biplob lodged a police complaint before the protest by stating that his Facebook account, “Biplob Chandra Shuvo”, was compromised, and the hackers were spreading blasphemous remarks using it. Police also claimed in media reports that the alleged hackers threatened Biplob over the phone when he was at the police station. The two accused—Sharif and Emon, two Muslim men, were arrested later (UNB News, 2019). However, protesting Muslims denied all these claims, addressed the police’s account as fabricated, and believed that the Hindu man was purposively *demeaning* their religion. They further conceived that the police and the government were covering up the culprits. The situation soon escalated, and an angry mob of local Muslims attacked the police and police station. The conflict killed four protesters, leaving a hundred more injured. The protest, supported by All-Party Muslim Unity Council, later proposed six-point demands, including hanging Biplob for his blasphemy and the acting Superintendent of Police (SP) and Officer in Charge (OC) for killing and injuring the protesters (The Daily Star, 2019).

⁸ PBUH is an honorific phrase that stands for Peace Be Upon Him.

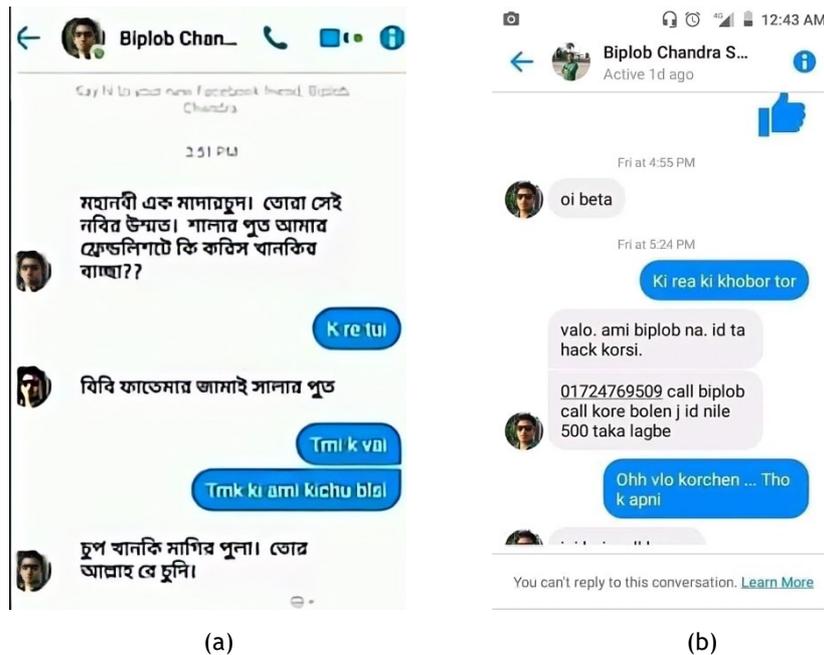


Figure 2. Two screenshots of Biplob's Facebook message.

Figure 2 attached the two screenshots of the misinformation that led to the atrocities and damages. Both screenshots show that messages sent from Biplob's account contain derogatory remarks against Islam and Prophet (PBUH). For example, the conversation in Figure 2(a), held before 3 pm that day, is the following:

Biplob (to a Muslim Facebook friend): Prophet was a motherfucker. You are his *ummah* (community or followers). Son of a bitch, what are you doing on my friend list?

Person 1: Who are you?

Biplob: I am the husband of Bibi Fatima [the daughter of the Prophet (PBUH)], you son of a bitch.

Person 1: Who are you, brother? Did I ever scold you?

Biplob: Shut up, you son of a whore. I fuck your Allah.

The conversation in Figure 2(b) was held on the same day between 4:55 pm and 5:30 pm with another person that revealed another version of the story that matches Biplob's statement and the police's statements:

Biplob: Hey man (in a neglectful way)!

Person 2: Hey, what's up?

Biplob: Good. I am not Biplob. I hacked this account. 01724769509, call Biplob and tell him that he must pay BDT 500 [equivalent to US\$ 6] to regain his Facebook account.

Person 2: Oh! Okay, well, but who are you?

This evidence, chronology of events, and the police investigation suggest that the religious misinformation was fabricated and purposely disseminated to instigate mass outrage and channel it against the Hindu minorities. In this regard, the producers of this misinformation utilized Facebook successfully. Note that such incidents of religious misinformation and violence resonate with similar interreligious tension that occurred several times in Bangladesh before (Al-Zaman et al., 2020). On that ground, I considered this incident a representative case of religious misinformation.

4.2 Data collection

After selecting the incident, I conducted a keyword search in CrowdTangle (<https://crowdtangle.com>), a public insight tool owned and operated by Facebook (CrowdTangle Team, 2021). My keyword search strategy was the following: (“Mohanabi”, “kotukti”, “songhorsho”, “hamla”) AND (“Bhola”) [Translations: (“Prophet”, “insult”, “conflict”, “attack”) AND (“Bhola”)]. These keywords were produced based on three criteria: my inclusion and exclusion criteria stated earlier, my previous research experience in this area, and a pilot observation that I initially conducted to understand what keywords best represent the cases.

I searched for the available news posts shared on Facebook about the misinformation on 20-30 October 2019. I set the second date (i.e., 30 October) considering two factors: the misinformation was debunked by this date, and the interests of the public and news media regarding this incident plummeted significantly. I searched only the Facebook pages, excluding public groups and individual profiles, to make my data free from ethical obligations. However, ethics researchers and responsible authorities assert that collecting publicly available data from social media platforms is a common research practice that barely disregards research ethics (Franzke et al., 2020; Mancosu & Vegetti, 2020). While searching for relevant data, I set the language to *Bengali* and the country of relevance to *Bangladesh*. This way, I found 114 posts that generated 91,235 interactions (e.g., comments, shares, and likes); all were news links.

4.3 Data preparation

Of the collected news items, I filtered out 15 items for at least one of the following reasons: they were duplicates, were ambiguous, did not talk about the misinformation in any way, or revealed that the violence was rooted in a piece of misinformation. I randomly chose five posts from this list, aligning with my research objectives (Bryman, 2012). I scraped the comments from these posts using Comment Exporter (<http://exportcomments.com>), a paid data harvesting platform specialized in social media data extraction. Such platforms are

used widely in social media data harvesting and research. While collecting the comments, I excluded the nested comments to understand how individual users engaged *directly* with the posts. The total extracted comments were 2,811 (Figure 3).

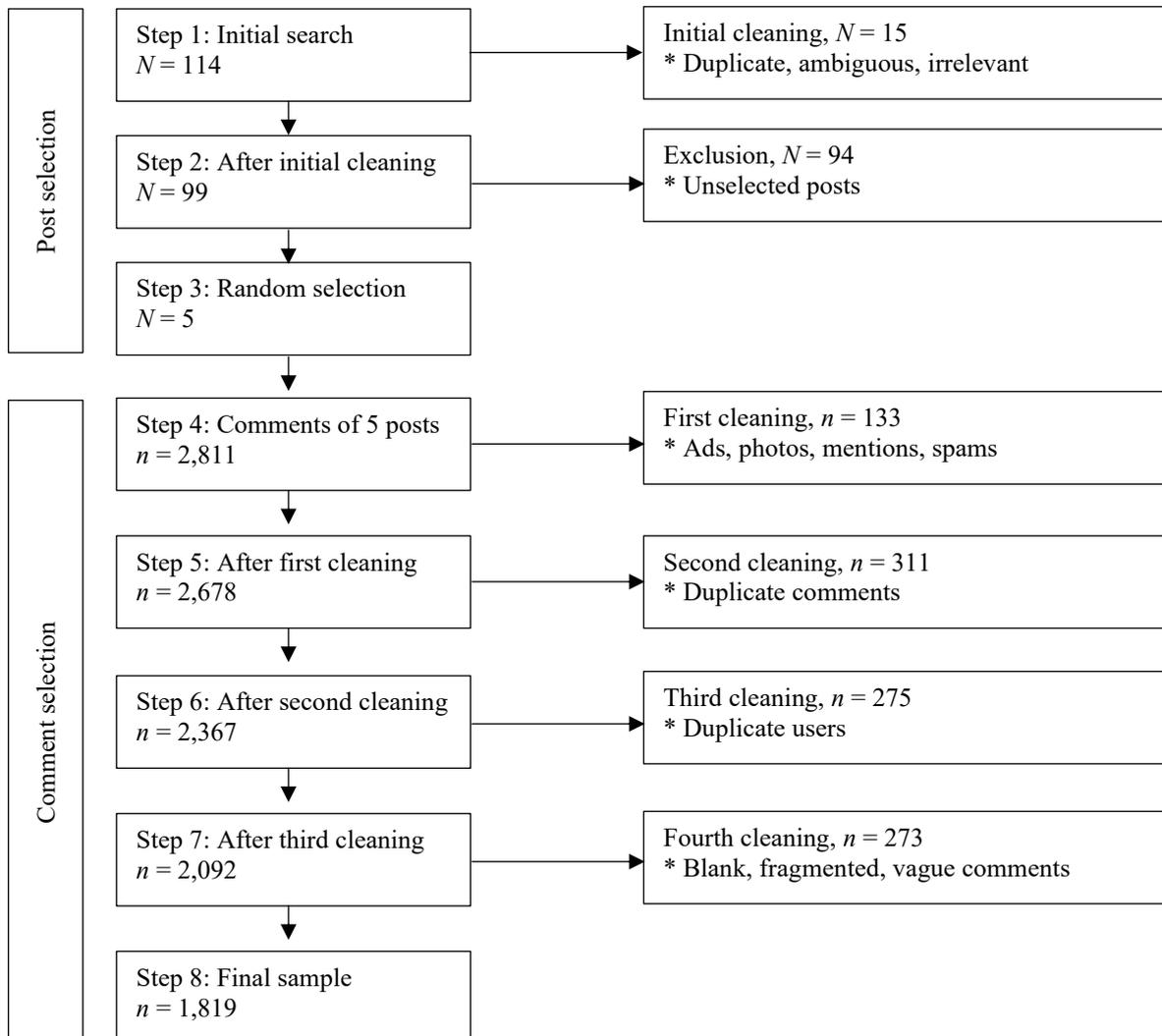


Figure 3. The data cleaning process for the qualitative analysis.

I created a dataset of the collected comments using Microsoft Excel. Afterward, I cleaned them to filter out unnecessary parts, including advertisements, photos, mentions, and spam links ($n = 133$). Also, I excluded the duplicate comments ($n = 311$) and duplicate users ($n = 275$) using the Duplicate Removal option. Finally, I excluded some blank comments, comments that contained fragmented words or sentences, vague expressions, and other irrelevant expressions ($n = 273$). My final sample included 1,819 comments, which occupied 200 A4-size pages. Note that Bangladeshi users use both Bangla and English fonts while commenting on Facebook. Although selecting only Bangla comments would have been more

convenient for this analysis, I decided to include both types of comments for more comprehensive and reliable results.

4.4 Data analysis

In this qualitative part, I dealt with the first question following a qualitative thematic analysis of social media comments. First, I imported the comments into MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2019), a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Then, following the reflexive thematic analysis method, which relies on an inductive approach to data analysis, I analyzed the data for relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Terry et al., 2017). Reflexive thematic analysis is “analyzing qualitative data to answer broad or narrow research questions about people’s experiences, views and perceptions, and representations of a given phenomenon” (Brulé, 2020). It has six steps of data analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this exploratory research, I used a grounded theory coding approach (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2016). I used open, axial, and selective coding in the three coding cycles to generate codes, categories, and themes from the raw data (Allen, 2017). This coding combination is inspired by Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory approach to provide a conceptual framework for the phenomenon under investigation (Allen, 2017; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2016). I conducted a sentence-by-sentence coding of the data to extract meaning, meaning the unit of analysis for the qualitative analysis was each sentence. However, all sentences did not convey relevant insights. Also, many sentences conveyed more than one insight, leading us to code them with more than one code. At first, I and another trained coder coded 10% ($n = 182$) of the data separately. We resolved the coding issues and disagreements based on mutual consent and thus determined intercoder reliability (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020).

5. Qualitative Findings

The analysis produced three themes that define users' engagement with religious misinformation. Put another way, I found three ways users engage with religious misinformation: topic-related engagement, reactionary engagement, and appraising misinformation.

5.1 Topics of discourse

I found three broad topics of misinformation discourse: religious issues, political issues, and radical issues. Each topic contains more than one subtopic as well. The topics are not mutually exclusive and sometimes overlap because of their issue-related proximities that we, the coders, found nearly impossible to distinguish.

5.1.1 Religious issues

With religious issues, I am implying the issues that are linked to the core ideas of religions, such as religious actions and rituals (e.g., namaz, puja), sacred religious texts (e.g., the Quran), religious monuments (e.g., temples, mosques), religious ways of life (e.g., prohibitions, brotherhood), and religious entities (e.g., the prophets, clergy). Users discussed several topics from different angles and raised issues that warrant discussion. In the following, I discuss two key religious issues that emerged from my analysis.

5.1.1.1 Revivalism.

Many users explained the necessity of a Muslim brotherhood—an *ummah*⁹—that can encounter conspiracies against Islam and Muslims. I found among these users fear of humiliation and defeat, survival instinct, self-loathing, and attempts at rejuvenation. For example, some users talked about how Muslims are becoming the targets of violence worldwide in recent times, which we know as *Islamophobia*. It is a threat that is making Muslims feeble and helpless. In their comments, users helplessly praying to Allah indicate such a tendency: “Oh Allah! Please be kind to us. Eliminate the enemies of Islam on behalf of us.” Some users implied that Muslims must regain their declining strengths and reputations. One of these users indicated it in a comment: “My dear Muslim brothers, how long would you only condemn the transgressions against Muslims? Should not it be the time we protest?”

⁹ *Ummah* is an Arabic word that means the followers of the Prophet (PBUH). In conventional meaning, it indicates the Muslim community and brotherhood worldwide.

Also, some believed that Muslims' inferiorities are their own "achievements". Some talked about Muslims' wrongdoings and unholy living, deviating from Islam's and the Prophet's (PBUH) paths. More specifically, users indicated and criticized Islamic clergy (e.g., Huzur, Imam) for their un-Islamic and unacceptable roles in society as the representatives of Islam:

Nowadays, people [Muslims] are remote-controlled, and the key is in Huzur's hand. The Huzurs live in peace and luxury, and their children live abroad. However, on the other hand, poor people fight and die [in interreligious violence] because of Huzur's provocations. So, who are the gainers here except for the Huzurs?

Core Islamic theologies, practices, and philosophies seemingly inspire a part of users' revivalist ideation. Criticizing the actions of Islamic clergy, users also talked about the acceptable practices that Islam supports, such as maintaining decency, becoming sober and peaceful, maintaining good relations with others, and following the paths of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions. According to a user: "The Huzurs are too aggressive, and you can understand if you listen to their sermons in waz. I have read the biographies of our prophet and his companions. However, I never heard about such behavior."

Although only a few instances remained in the dataset, I also found indications of Hindu revivalist discussion. However, such comments did not explicitly support the Hindu brotherhood but still provided an impression of their revivalist thinking. The fundamental reason for this, the users suggested, was to safeguard their threatened Hindu lives in Bangladesh, *a country of and for Muslims*.

5.1.1.2 Cohesion.

Besides religious conspiracies and revivalist comments, I found some users interested in religious cohesion among religious communities. The basis of this was introducing Islam as a religion of peace, not violence and hostility. Their discourse revolves around some specific ideas, such as Islam is peaceful, Muslims are good, "religion is for humans, humans are not for religion". Such ideas are more relevant to the Islamic mystic and more humane tradition called *Sufism*¹⁰.

Why are so many Hindus being tortured in Bangladesh? When will this stop? When Hindus face humiliation, they expatriate to India. Nevertheless, do you see so many Muslims coming to Bangladesh after being tortured in India? The Huzurs in madrasa

¹⁰ Huque and Akhter (1987) defined *Sufism* as "a mode of religious life in Islam in which the emphasis is placed not so much on the performance of external rituals as on the activities of the inner-self - in other words, it signifies Islamic mysticism" (p. 214).

often advise their pupils not to befriend Hindus because the Quran prohibits it. If Islam is a religion of peace, why is this? Why do Muslims become terrorists?

They also talked about violence against religious minorities and suggested religious tolerance as a countermeasure for this. Some users advised other Muslims to follow the path of the Prophet (PBUH). These are indications of religious tolerance and cohesion: “If people were truly fond of the Prophet (PBUH), crime and corruption in the country would have been incredibly low. But unfortunately, religiosity is alive only in name but not in action.” Such remarks seem constructive and helpful for greater benefits. However, these instances are less frequent in the dataset than political and radical comments.

5.1.2 Political issues

The main ideas of users’ discussions presented in this section are area-specific and pro-anti discussions. With area-specific discussion, I intend to mean that users talk about issues that can be categorized into geographical regions, such as national (e.g., Bangladesh) and regional (e.g., South Asia). Similarly, their discussion can also be identified as pro-anti binary, such as pro-Islam, anti-Islam, pro-Hinduism, and anti-Hinduism. These issues are discussed in the two following sections.

5.1.2.1 Institutions.

Users expressed resentments, criticisms, and appraisals around various political institutions and actions. I am using the term “political institution” in a broader sense here, indicating formal political bodies (e.g., the government, law enforcement) and actions (e.g., voting, policymaking). Users were concerned and talked extensively about issues like South Asian geopolitics and international, national, and local political issues. For example, indicating Islamic extremism and its possible aftermath, one user commented: “Some people [Islamists] are trying to make Bangladesh another Afghanistan.”

Among users, two other groups—pro-Islamic and anti-Islamic—were found criticizing Bangladeshi political bodies. Pro-Islamic groups, for example, were not happy with the role of the government that allegedly let the perpetrators who insulted Islam go unpunished. In this regard, they presumed that the government is anti-Islamic, implying that the government is subduing Muslims’ protests with the help of police to cover up the Hindu man who “insulted” the Prophet (PBUH). Moreover, they accused the government of being pro-India and pro-Hindutva: “Infidels surround the Bangladeshi government and its institutions. These Islamophobes work for the interest of only the BJP and Awami League¹¹.”

¹¹ Bangladesh Awami League is the current ruling party in Bangladesh that assumed power in 2009 and is in power for the third consecutive period. However, much criticism has been regarding the government’s legitimacy for

They vehemently criticized the ruling party, the party's members, and their actions and policies in their (users') comments, manifesting their frustration regarding Bangladeshi politics. As they perceived that the government was not supporting the *holy* cause of the protesting Muslims, they started talking about the illegitimacy of the ruling party that manipulated elections, the growing despotism in the political system, and the increasing power of the oppressive law enforcement (e.g., the police). One user commented, "It is a regime of autocrats. We cannot get justice in such a country of injustice."

As a key issue alongside the discussed issues, users' lower trust in media should also receive a space. Here, the media is understood as a political institution. Users criticized the media outlets for ostensibly allying with the *enemies* of Islam and Muslims. Some users suspected that Bangladeshi media is pro-government, pro-secular, pro-India, and anti-Islam. For example, some users stated that "BBC News Bangla is the agent" of anti-Islamists. Some of them seemed to argue that the media focuses on the plight of minorities, maybe for selling news items, sometimes bypassing the counternarratives. One user stated, "Hindus vandalized their temple [to blame Muslims]; why does the media not telecast it?"

5.1.2.2 Ideologies.

Users formulated several conspiracy theories. The misinformation I have dealt with in this part of the study is against Hindus and produced by Muslim perpetrators. Following this line of thought, some users deduced that Muslims consciously do such heinous works because of their political and materialistic interests, such as evicting Hindus from their land to capture it to satisfy their hatred against Hindus. One user commented:

Hacking Hindu people's Facebook profiles, blaming them for blasphemy they did not even commit, killing them as a punishment for this crime—the conspiracies have already started for evicting Hindus from their lands and capturing those, making Bangladesh a Hindu-free country [*sic*].

Although such conspiracy-related assumptions primarily targeted other religions and their followers, I found several instances where Muslims appeared to be criticizing Muslims for tricking Hindus and harassing them. Important to mention that Bengali Muslim names have some defining features (e.g., starting with MD, which stands for Mohammad) that make them different from other names as well as easily identifiable.

In contrast to this group of users, some users also believed that disparaging Islamic symbols and persons, such as the holy Quran and the Prophet (PBUH), is a part of a greater

the alleged election manipulation and increasing authoritarian practices. For a more elaborate discussion, see Riaz (2019, 2021).

plot against Muslims and Islam. The conspirators might be Bangladeshi Hindus allied with Indian Hindus. I found that such thoughts remind many users of Islamic revivalism.

Many users tended to argue that the alliance of the government, Hindus, and seculars would endanger Islam and Muslims. This triad conducts an anti-Islamic campaign to protect and expand Hindutva¹², suppressing the Islamic environment in Bangladesh. The alleged patronization of the Hindu perpetrators indicates the rising Hindutva ideology in India and Bangladesh. They think, “Awami League and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) both are the saviors of Hinduism but in two different countries, which makes them allies against Muslims” and “they [the government, Hindus, and seculars] are the agents of the Jews.” Interesting to notice that Jews became a part of the discussion out of nowhere, which might seem irrelevant. However, the reason for this is the historical-political contentions between Muslims and Jewish people, mainly over the control of Palestine, where Israeli Jewish people appear to be the oppressors of the Palestinian Muslims. Hence, according to the idea of some users, all anti-Islamic entities can equally be despised.

India, BJP, and Hindutva received much criticism from users: one reason has already been discussed in this section, i.e., the Bangladeshi government’s support for Hindus and perceived hatred against Muslims. However, two more reasons are noticeable in the discussion. One, India is selling the “plight” of Bangladeshi Hindus to bolster the stronghold of Hindutva. In this secret project, a few Hindu and non-Hindu organizations and conspirators are involved. Some users explained these issues in greater detail:

These are some of my naïve thoughts. The subcontinent experienced religious riots after the Babri Mosque demolition in 1992. In recent years, the remaking of India as a Hindu state has been ongoing, along with suppressing Muslims with the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Their Hindutva branch ISKCON¹³ is secretly operating such activities in Bangladesh. It is assumed that ISKCON’s main target is to spread religious violence in Bangladesh to successfully execute the NRC in India and deport 250 million Muslims. [...] However, our government is licking the boot of India just to sustain its power.

Two, the Indian Hindu nationalist government BJP, according to the users, knows well that only Muslims can prevent their expansionist agenda in South Asia. Therefore, they target Islam to defame and suspend Muslims’ authority. It is another reason some Muslim users

¹² A political ideology predominant in India as the harbinger of Hindu nationalism. This ideology is nurtured and promoted by BJP as a part of an ongoing Hindu revival movement in India.

¹³ The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is a religious organization of and for Hindus founded in the US in 1966. ISKCON controls at least 73 Hindu temples and other religious activities in Bangladesh, instigating nationwide criticisms mainly from Bangladeshi Muslims. Sometimes, religious discontent leads to violence against ISKCON’s places.

called for a Muslim brotherhood to resist Hindutva's influence. From the users' comments, Islam seems to be an essential source of political agency to them.

5.1.3 Radical topics

This section includes two issues: hatred and actions. The word *radical* used here implies more intensive issues than what was discussed in the two previous topics. In some cases, they may overlap, meaning radical statements may contain political or religious topics and vice versa. However, this category mainly includes issues that users immensely disliked and disparaged. It also includes users' endorsements of unauthorized, violent, and unacceptable actions.

5.1.3.1 Hatred.

Some users exhibit intense hatred against others using various verbal expressions. Much of such hatred is related to religion and politics, containing racial, ethnic, and religious slurs (e.g., Islam *biddwesh* (anti-Islam), Islam *biddweshi* (anti-Islamic), *Iyahudi Nasara* (Jewish and Christians), *jongi* (militants)). I also found extreme hatred towards seculars, Hindus, and media in the dataset, using slang such as *khankir pola* (son of a whore), *magir pola* (son a whore), *kuttar bacha* (son of a bitch), *jaroj* (bastard), *motherchod* (motherfucker), *chutmarani* (whore), and *bainchod* (sister fucker). One surprised and angry user commented: "One Malaun¹⁴ insulted our Prophet (PBUH) and you [the police] killed our four protesting Muslim brothers. To save one Hindu, you killed four Muslims!"

However, not only did Muslims admonish Hindus, but I also found evidence where Indian Hindus vilified Bangladeshi Muslims using pejorative terms: "Congrats! Kanglu¹⁵ people are gradually becoming successful in importing Afghan culture." With Afghan culture, the user indicated Islamic terrorism and radicalization that Afghanistan has been facing under Taliban rule. Such instances are less common as Indian users barely participate and interact on Bangladeshi Facebook pages.

5.1.3.2 Actions.

Many users endorse moderate and extreme actions in response to religious misinformation. Most of them talk about Islamic jihad, Islamic justice, and revenge. The concept of jihad is used both broadly (e.g., a war against the infidels in the world) and

¹⁴ "Malaun" or "Malu" is a derogatory term that originated from Arabic, and that means "accursed" or "deprived of God's mercy". It is used in Bangladesh to insult Hindus. For more, see Al-Zaman (2019).

¹⁵ A derogatory term Indian Bengali people use to disparage Bangladeshi Bengali people. Its origin can be explained in the following way: Bangal (Bangladeshi/Bengali) > Kangal > Kanglu. *Kangal* is a Bangla word that means beggar or poor.

narrowly (e.g., punishing the culprits of the country who insult Islam): “Hey Muslims brothers, prepare for a jihad.”

They also argue that Bangladesh is a country of Muslims, and *un-* and *anti-*Islamic sentiments should not be tolerated here. It seems to be a common expression from Muslim social media users in cases of online religious discourse. Some instances of Islamic brotherhood have also been found in the corpus, and such instances are radical in practice, unlike religious cohesion. In such comments, they urge the necessity to build an Islamic brotherhood to battle against the *growing* anti-Islamic sentiments.

A part of this sentiment seems to be influenced by the absence of Islamic justice against blasphemy and religious desecration that fails to bring anti-Islamists under justice. As a result, they endorse their versions of Islamic justice. Some users proposed different punishments for the alleged persons, including hanging, throwing into the fire, cross-firing (i.e., extrajudicial killing), killing brutally, and slaughtering. Comments like “throw the culprit dog into the fire” are common throughout the dataset. One user commented: “Those who humiliated the Prophet (PBUH) have no right to live.”

Interestingly, not only were Muslim users calling for extreme punishment of the alleged Hindu man, but I also found comments demanding extreme actions against the protesting Muslims: “These extremely insane people [protesting Muslims] should be killed like dogs.” It suggests that destructive behavior is common among all engaged groups in the discussion.

5.2 Reactions of users

I found two dominant polarized expressions in the dataset: positive and negative. As I analyzed textual data, expressions sometimes can be deceptive, meaning users’ encoded meaning could be different from the decoded meaning. Therefore, I acknowledge the possible limitations of the reaction identifications.

5.2.1 Positive reactions

Some users expressed positive attitudes toward the followers of other religions, political institutions, ideologies, and events. Such attitudes include the most common positive reactions, such as love, interest, and serenity. Even if they criticize, they do it constructively, indicating their control over emotions. All categories of users (e.g., pro-Islamists, anti-Islamists, seculars, pro-Hindus) show positive attitudes. Expressions of religious cohesion that I discussed earlier are also positive reactions that fall under this section. One user commented, “Humans are not for religion. Rather, religion is for the betterment of humanity.” Some users who believed in misinformation were also criticized

constructively. For example, addressing BBC News Bangla as a reputed international and reliable media outlet, one user stated:

BBC is one of the world's top news service providers. They could have investigated and unearthed the actual religious and political scenarios of contemporary Bangladesh and India. In both countries, preserving Hindu rights and magnifying Hindu plight are political games. Both Hindus and Muslims are suffering and will be suffering for this in many ways. BJP is the savior of Indian Hindus, while Awami League is of Bangladeshi Hindus, and both parties' interest lies in communal violence.

Some Muslim users suggested that other Muslims rethink similar situations differently and act leniently even if other people try to *defame* Islam. The core Islamic texts and guidelines seem to inspire such positive thinking. One such positive user commented:

Okay, tell me, was not our Prophet (PBUH) an ordinary human being, was he? Was he not Allah's messenger? Then his personality must be greater and stronger than Everest. Can a few people shake and topple down the foundation of Everest? Is he so light that a few atheists can criticize and humiliate him with mere words? If you believe they cannot do it, why do not you let them do whatever they want?

Interestingly, both positive and violent users claimed that they were inspired by the same religious texts and preaching, demonstrating the possibility of different interpretations of the same text.

5.2.2 Negative reactions

Some comments express certain negative emotional reactions, such as anger and hatred, that I think are noteworthy. Such reactions also suggest how users react to the same issues differently due to their different thought processes. A large share of the users expressing negative emotions seems to trust misinformation. There might be two reasons. First, their religious belief was hurt by the incident of insulting their Prophet (PBUH), no matter who committed the blasphemy. Second, they were apprehended by a series of events of violence where the government, as discussed earlier, did not take a proactive role in punishing the offender.

Additionally, seculars and the media's apparent bias toward supporting Hindus seem frustrating for many users. For these reasons, many unleashed hatreds with offensive language and intense anger. Some users expressed disgust and disappointment to a moderate degree, but the reasons are the same. For example, in the following comment, the user expressed disappointment with the police's thrashing of the Islamist protest: "You

cannot expect humanity from the beasts because humanity can only be expected from humans.”

Contrary to such instances, some angry comments highly criticized religious extremism, Islamists, and deceived Muslims. These comments are presumably from the seculars, Hindus, some Muslims, and others who are aware of the misinformation.

5.3 Misinformation appraisal

This theme discusses the ways users evaluate misinformation. After analyzing the data, I found four ways to define their misinformation appraisal capacity: trusting misinformation, denying misinformation, doubting misinformation, and no misinformation appraisal.

5.3.1 Trust

Many users seem to trust misinformation, suggesting they fail to separate facts from fiction. Two groups of believers can be discerned based on their reasoning skills: users who trust misinformation but lack reasoning skills and users who trust misinformation but possess reasoning skills. Comments that suffer from a lack of reasoning are relatively shorter and hostile with slurs and other hate expressions. Some believers are firm in their position, proposing extreme actions against the Hindu perpetrator: I have discussed such actions already. Many who tend to trust misinformation demand justice according to the blasphemy law: “Who insulted our Allah and Prophet (PBUH) should be punished. They encourage the interreligious strife.”

In contrast, users from the second group tend to argue with reasons why it is not a case of misinformation and Hindu people might commit blasphemy against Islam. Also, instead of directly analyzing misinformation, they try to support their position by bringing other relevant issues into the discussion. One user’s detailed comment:

[...] Another group always smells communalism in everything. Thus, they inadvertently support Hindutva. For example, Bangladeshi seculars tagged those who tried to alert the danger of Hindutva politics as “communalists”: these seculars are the agents of Modi. [...] They keep Hindutva politics alive through their services. [...] BJP, Awami League, and seculars all know that a rebellion against India’s Hindutva aggression and Bangladesh’s growing authoritarianism can only grow under the roof of Islam.

As mentioned once, this comment suggests that Islam is not only a religion but also a key source of political agency for many Muslims.

5.3.2 Denial

Some users could identify the misinformation and deny it. Like the previous category, some users identified the misinformation based on proper reasoning, while some outright denied it without providing enough explanation in favor of their position. Two key arguments are essential to mention here. First, one group of users who explained their position argued that misinformation propagation is religiously, politically, and morally disgraceful and must be dealt with. A user stated: “Hacking religious minorities’ social media accounts and spreading rumors that cannot be the acts of good Muslims. [...] Only those who are the country’s enemies can do such heinous works. They should be brought to justice immediately.”

Second, referring to previous incidents of misinformation propagated by Muslim perpetrators targeting Hindu and Buddhist minorities in Bangladesh, another group of users described the present misinformation as manufactured. Users who could spot the misinformation expressed both positive and negative reactions. While some users strongly labeled all Islamic organizations in Bangladesh as “terrorist groups”, some users congratulated the Hindu man for bravely complaining about the issues to the police and tolerating such a nuisance.

5.3.3 Doubt

Some users were doubtful, and neither can deny nor can trust misinformation through proper reasoning: “It can or cannot be fake news.” Some tried to be logical but still failed to demystify the misinformation properly. Some referred to the previous incidents of religious misinformation that targeted religious minorities in Bangladesh to address it might also be an incident of misinformation. One user commented: “In 2016, we saw perpetrators target Rashraj Das to frame him with religious misinformation. Many Hindus during that time had to suffer, and he was also imprisoned. The current event could also be a similar conspiracy.”

Although some users tried to assess the misinformation and related events based on available reasons and evidence, they could not reach any conclusion. Such doubtfulness may often lead them to support the misinformation.

5.3.4 No appraisal

Some comments did not overtly assess the truth-value of misinformation statements to learn whether it is true or false. Most of such comments are either reluctant to discuss the topic directly or lack adequate skills to analyze the claim. In such cases, some users preferred to avoid the main topic and decided not to enter the core argument of the discussion. For example, the following comment does not inform anything about the quality of the claim and neither denies nor accepts the proposition of misinformation: “A valuable virtue like

humanity cannot be expected from beasts because it can only be found in real human beings.” At some points, comments with no appraisal were difficult to distinguish as such comments were ambiguous and had more than one interpretation.

In this qualitative section, I explained how users engaged with a piece of online religious misinformation. To be more specific, I presented the topics of users’ discourse around misinformation, their emotional expressions, and their evaluation capacity. These findings are based on a single case, so their validity and generalizability are still undetermined. Therefore, the quantitative part in the second phase of this methodology tests these findings based on five other but similar cases. In that regard, these findings will help to build a codebook for quantitative data analysis. The following section explains these processes in detail.

6. Quantitative Method

6.1 Data source and collection

In an exploratory sequential design, the qualitative part guides the quantitative part. Based on the findings of qualitative analysis, this quantitative part devised a content analysis method to answer the second research question. In this part, I analyzed the public comments on five well-known and impactful cases of online religious misinformation in Bangladesh that led to offline violence. This analysis relied on a larger sample than the qualitative part (Allen, 2017; Krippendorff, 2004; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). The five selected cases were the Nasirnagar violence in 2016, the Rangpur violence in 2017, the Narail protest in 2019, the Comilla violence in 2020, and the Sunamganj violence in 2021. Although there are more similar cases of misinformation, I excluded them due to their limited extent, impacts, and/or online interactions. For example, the Ramu violence in 2012 was the first misinformation-led interreligious violence in Bangladesh, but the incident witnessed lower users' participation on social media. Two key reasons, among others, could be: fewer people used social media in Bangladesh during that period, and information sources on Facebook (e.g., media's Facebook pages) were fewer than now. In all selected incidents, Hindus were the targets, misinformation propagation was deliberate, and casualties were heavy (except for the Narail protest, which was slightly different from others, explained in [Appendix 2](#)).

Table 1. Details of the data sources.

No.	Incident	Date	Search keywords	Time range	Total posts	Total interactions
1	Nasirnagar violence against Hindus	30 Oct 2016	"In Nasirnagar"	29 Oct-3 Nov	116	126,618
2	Rangpur violence against Hindus	10 Nov 2017	"In Rangpur"	9-12 Nov	222	224,297
3	Narail blasphemy protest ^a	5 May 2019	"In Narail", "insulting Prophet"	4-9 Apr	137	32,439
4	Comilla violence against Hindus	30 Oct 2020	"Comilla", "Muradnagar", "defame", "insult", "Facebook"	30 Oct-2 Nov	290	120,585
5	Sunamganj violence against Hindus	18 Mar 2021	"In Sunamganj"	18-21 Mar	197	222,612

^a The perpetrators left evidence of this misinformation that later led Muslims to protest. For the details of this conspiracy, see Al-Zaman (2021a).

^{*} The data collection excluded the nested comments for the same reasons described in the qualitative data collection section.

I used CrowdTangle to search for posts related to each misinformation event. In this regard, I applied keyword search using different and relevant keywords to the events (see [Table 1](#)). I set the time range as 3 to 5 days. From the qualitative data analysis experience, I found

that sometimes it usually takes less than a week to find the real story behind a piece of misinformation. Therefore, I decreased the search time range in the quantitative data collection phase. I found 962 (M [Mean] = 192.4, SD [Standard Deviation] = 69.52) posts that contained and/or endorsed the claims of misinformation or did not debunk them. All posts generated 0.73 million interactions (M = 145,310, SD = 80,490.88).

6.2 Data preparation and analysis

I randomly selected 23 (2.39%) Facebook posts out of 962 (Figure 4). These posts generated 10,862 comments. I used the qualitative part's data collection technique here. In the first step of data cleaning, I filtered out 288 instances of spam, photos, ads, and links. Second, I filtered out 2,015 duplicate comments. The prevalence of duplicate comments in the dataset has two reasons: some users copy and paste others' comments instead of writing anything new, and the scraper used to collect the data sometimes duplicated comments while scraping. Third, I excluded 974 comments from the same users using their Facebook ID numbers. Finally, following a closer look at the data, I excluded 235 comments that were either blank, fragmented, or vague. The final corpus was equivalent to 482 A4-size pages.

Based on the findings of the qualitative part, I prepared a codebook to guide quantitative content analysis (see Appendix 4). Content analysis is one of media and communication studies' most popular research methods (Krippendorff, 2004; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaning matter) to the context of their use" (p. 18). In quantitative content analysis, the researcher "determines the frequency of specific ideas, concepts, terms, and other message characteristics and makes comparisons in order to describe or explain communicative behavior" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 243). Content analysis can be either manifest, latent, or a combination of both (Neuman, 2014). Manifest content analysis is the process of capturing the literal meaning of the content. On the other hand, latent content analysis endeavors to identify the underlying meaning of the content. In this study, I implemented both manifest and latent content analysis.

I built the codebook with the three qualitative themes (i.e., topics, reactions, and appraisal) as three variables with their categories (e.g., religious, political, and radical are the categories of *topics* variable) (see the codebook in Appendix 4). For the topic variable, I added another category, "others," to find out if there are other topics in the dataset beyond religious, political, and radical. The idea of this was to complement qualitative findings with quantitative findings. Put another way, I intended to explore other topics (if there are any) in the dataset beyond the topics I found in qualitative analysis. If I could find

new topics, I intended to add them to the final framework with an explanation. I also did the same for reactions, adding a “others” category. I sought help from two trained coders to code the data. After discussing the fundamentals and coding criteria with them, they started coding the dataset. The unit of analysis for this content analysis was each comment.

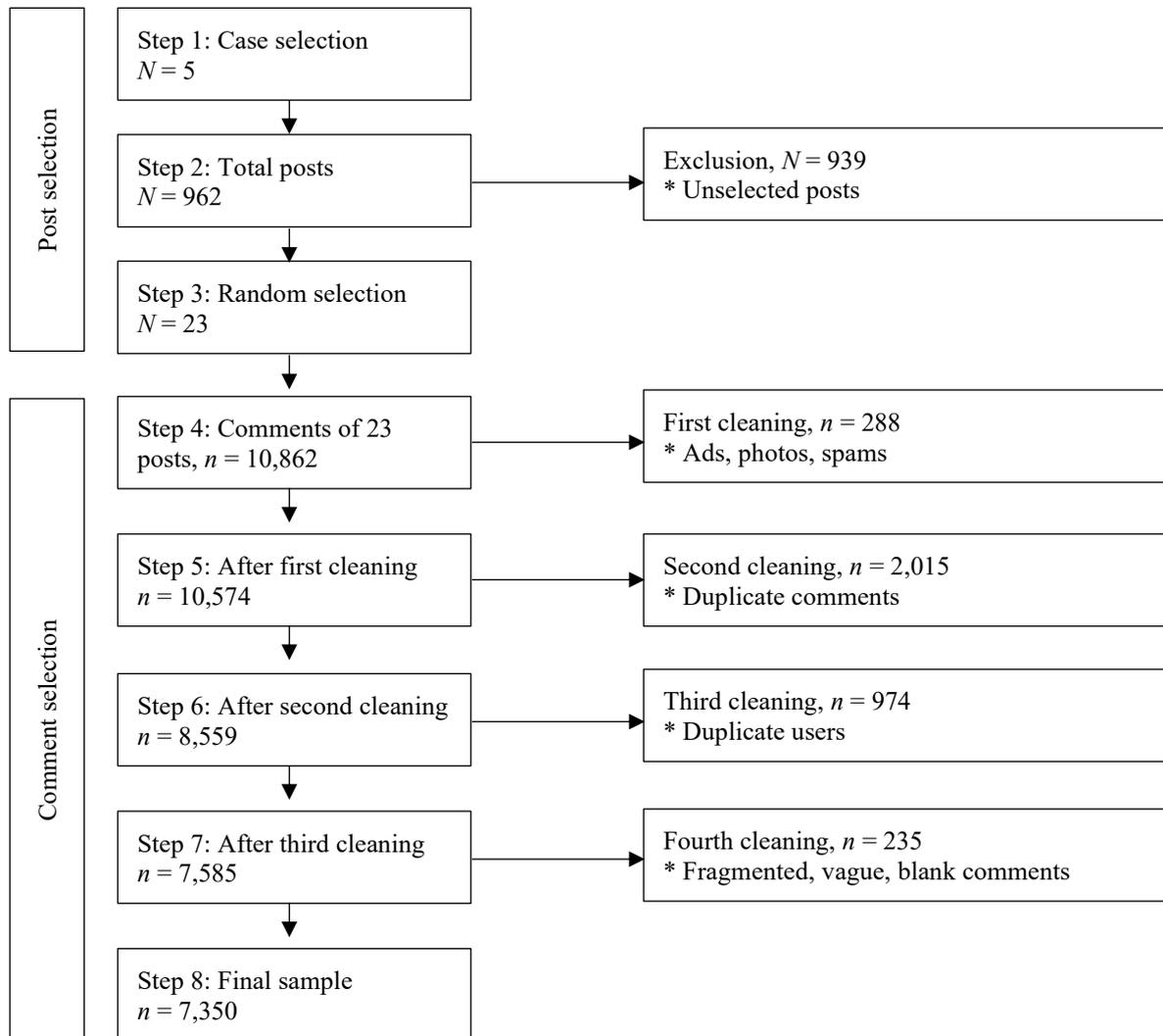


Figure 4. The data cleaning process for the quantitative analysis.

The problem with this unit selection was that one comment could contain more than one topic and reaction. In such cases, how should the coders code the data?

I decided to resolve this problem in two ways. One, I relied on the coders’ intuition and subjective interpretation of the comments. Two, the codes relied on the prevalent meaning in the comment, which is also subjective. Initially, both coders coded 10% ($n = 735$) of the comments, but an acceptable intercoder agreement was not achieved. Next, we set two meetings and discussed the points of disagreement and coding criteria for each variable (i.e., topics, reactions, and appraisal). Finally, in the third attempt of coding, we achieved

an almost perfect intercoder agreement, indicated by Cohen's kappa (κ) values (McHugh, 2012): 0.930 for *topics* ($p < 0.05$), 0.911 for *reactions* ($p < 0.05$), and 0.906 for *appraisals* ($p < 0.05$). All values suggest that our coding is 82-100% reliable (McHugh, 2012, p. 279). Both coders coded the data separately afterward.

I employed manual coding instead of automated coding for two reasons: manual coding is still more reliable than automated coding, and no software can process Bangla text adequately and reliably. The descriptive statistics are presented in tables, accompanied by chi-square values where necessary. Statistical analyses were performed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 (IBM Corp., 2020).

7. Quantitative Findings

7.1 Topics of discourse

The quantitative analysis found that radical issues— hatred and extreme actions ($n = 4,437$; 60.4%) are more prevalent in users' discourse when they engage with misinformation, followed by political issues ($n = 2,727$; 37.1%), which is almost half of the share of radical issues (Table 2). These results indicate the dominance of radical issues. On the other hand, compared to radical and political issues, religious issues ($n = 153$; 2.1%) have a limited space in users' discourse, which was unexpected to me as I expected a higher percentage of religious issues in the discourse of *religious* misinformation.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of topics.

No.	Topics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Radical	4437	60.4
2	Political	2727	37.1
3	Religious	153	2.1
4	Others	33	0.4
	Total	7350	100.0

The analysis also found only 0.4% ($n = 33$) other issues. This category includes miscellaneous comments like “Who should I blame when I am not a good person!” and “Boring topics. I do not feel like to see nothing of these” that we found difficult to categorize. This result suggests the minimal presence of topics beyond these three dominant topics in users' discourse. It further implies that the qualitative findings are generalizable for similar other cases.

7.2 Reactions of users

For the reaction variable, the findings show that users almost always respond with negative reactions ($n = 6,914$; 94.1%) when they engage with religious misinformation (Table 3). Conversely, only 5.5% ($n = 407$) cases show positive reactions: negative reactions are more than seventeen times higher than positive ones. Like topics, I did not expect negative reactions to dominate this much compared to positive reactions.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of reactions.

No.	Reactions	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Negative	6914	94.1
2	Positive	407	5.5
3	Others	29	0.4
	Total	7350	100.0

Like topics of discourse, the analysis also found only 0.4% ($n = 33$) of other reactions, suggesting a minimal share of reactions beyond these two major reactions from users when

they interact with online religious misinformation. It further implies that the qualitative findings for reactions are generalizable.

7.3 Misinformation appraisals

Most users tend to trust misinformation ($n = 5,091$; 69.3%), which comprises nearly a three-quarter of the total share (Table 4). Users who deny ($n = 1,903$; 25.9%) misinformation are far less than half of the believers. Only 3% ($n = 219$) of the users doubt misinformation while evaluating it, making their decision-making problematic.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of different appraisals.

No.	Appraisal	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Trust	5091	69.3
2	Deny	1903	25.9
3	Doubt	219	3.0
4	None	137	1.8
	Total	7350	100.0

No instances of misinformation assessment were found for 1.8% ($n = 137$) users in the dataset, which may suggest either their lack of information processing skills or enthusiasm.

7.4 Topics and reactions

The contingency table of topics and reactions shows a few interesting findings of their intersections. Radical issues (99.8%) are mostly negative (Table 5). Political issues in discourse (88%) also provoke users to react negatively. However, Table 6 suggests that political issues are less negative (34.70%) than radical issues (64.04%). Again, political issues are more positive (77.64%) than radical issues (2.21% positive). For religious issues, users mostly exhibit more positive reactions (49%) than negative reactions (47.7%) (Table 5), which is noteworthy, although such a minor difference can be negligible as well.

Table 5. The intersection of topics and reactions.

No.	Topics	Reactions ($n, \%$)			Total (%)
		Negative	Positive	Others	
1	Radical	4428 (99.8)	9 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	100.0
2	Political	2399 (88.0)	316 (11.6)	12 (0.4)	100.0
3	Religious	73 (47.7)	75 (49.0)	5 (3.3)	100.0
4	Others	14 (42.4)	7 (21.2)	12 (36.4)	100.0

Table 6. The intersection of reactions and topics.

No.	Reactions	Topics ($n, \%$)				Total (%)
		Radical	Political	Religious	Others	
1	Negative	4428 (64.04)	2399 (34.70)	73 (1.06)	14 (0.20)	100.0
2	Positive	9 (2.21)	316 (77.64)	75 (18.43)	7 (1.72)	100.0
3	Others	0 (0)	12 (41.38)	5 (17.24)	12 (41.38)	100.0

A chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2,147.666$) and both Phi ($\Phi = 0.541$) and Cramer's V ($\varphi = 0.382$) values suggest a strong association between topics and reactions, which is statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). Note that we have seen that *others* categories in both topics and reactions have a minimal presence in frequency and percentage analysis, so I have decided not to discuss them with emphasis.

7.5 Topics and appraisals

Primarily, users who talk about radical issues (80%) believe in misinformation (Table 7). Users talking about political issues (53%) also trust misinformation more than denying or doubting it. However, political users' trust (28.40%) in misinformation is less than radical users' trust (69.71%) in misinformation, Table 8 suggests. Instead, political users (37.4%) exhibit a better misinformation-identification capacity than radical users (18.8%) (Table 7). Another result in the same table suggests that users who talk about religious issues ($n = 96$; 62.7%) are more likely to trust misinformation than political ones but less likely than radical. Political users (79.91%) in the doubt category occupy the most significant space. These users (62.04%) also tend to avoid misinformation assessment more than others (Table 8).

Table 7. The intersection of topics and appraisals.

No.	Topics	Appraisals (n, %)				Total (%)
		Trust	Deny	Doubt	None	
1	Radical	3549 (80.0)	832 (18.8)	39 (0.9)	17 (0.4)	100.0
2	Political	1446 (53.0)	1021 (37.4)	175 (6.4)	85 (3.1)	100.0
3	Religious	96 (62.7)	37 (24.2)	5 (3.3)	15 (9.8)	100.0
4	Others	0 (0.0)	13 (39.4)	0 (0.0)	20 (60.6)	100.0

Table 8. The intersection of appraisals and topics.

No.	Appraisal	Topics (n, %)				Total (%)
		Radical	Political	Religious	Others	
1	Trust	3549 (69.71)	1446 (28.40)	96 (1.89)	0 (0.0)	100.0
2	Deny	832 (43.72)	1021 (53.65)	37 (1.94)	13 (0.68)	100.0
3	Doubt	39 (17.81)	175 (79.91)	5 (2.28)	0 (0.0)	100.0
4	None	17 (12.41)	85 (62.04)	15 (10.95)	20 (14.60)	100.0

A chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 1,344.341$) and both Phi ($\Phi = 0.428$) and Cramer's V ($\varphi = 0.247$) values suggest a strong association between topics and reactions, which is statistically significant ($p = 0.000$).

7.6 Reactions and appraisals

Users who express negative reactions (70.9%) predominantly trust misinformation (Table 9). Users who react positively also trust misinformation (45.5%) more than they deny (36.1%) but are less likely to trust it than negative users. It also suggests a close relationship between reacting negatively and trusting misinformation. In misinformation appraisal, Table

10 shows that users of all appraisals have their highest shares of negative reactions, while trust (96.35%) has a comparatively higher proportion than others.

Table 9. The intersection of reactions and appraisals.

No.	Reactions	Appraisals (n, %)				Total (%)
		Trust	Deny	Doubt	None	
1	Negative	4905 (70.9)	1752 (25.3)	176 (2.5)	81 (1.2)	100.0
2	Positive	185 (45.5)	147 (36.1)	42 (10.3)	33 (8.1)	100.0
3	Others	1 (3.4)	4 (13.8)	1 (3.4)	23 (79.3)	100.0

Table 10. The intersection of appraisals and reactions.

No.	Appraisal	Reactions (n, %)			Total (%)
		Negative	Positive	Others	
1	Trust	4905 (96.35)	185 (3.63)	1 (0.02)	100.0
2	Deny	1752 (92.07)	147 (7.72)	4 (0.21)	100.0
3	Doubt	176 (80.37)	42 (19.18)	1 (0.46)	100.0
4	None	81 (59.12)	33 (24.09)	23 (16.79)	100.0

A chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 1,187.236$) and both Phi ($\Phi = 0.402$) and Cramer's V ($\varphi = 0.284$) values suggest a strong association between topics and reactions, which is statistically significant ($p = 0.000$).

Overall, the quantitative findings support the qualitative findings. In the qualitative findings, I found three variables (i.e., topics of discourse, reactions to misinformation, and appraisal capacity) to define social media users' engagement with religious misinformation. The quantitative findings suggest that the categories for each variable are generalizable. Put another way, the qualitative findings can define similar cases of misinformation. In addition, the quantitative analysis adds a few more significant findings and significant statistical insights. In the next section, I summarize all findings from both phases and explain them in greater detail.

8. Discussion

8.1 Objectives and key findings

The present study asks two interrelated research questions: how do social media users engage with religious misinformation (RQ1), and how likely are they to engage in such ways (RQ2)? An exploratory sequential mixed methods analysis has been devised to answer the questions. The analysis suggests that users' engagement can be defined from three perspectives: their topics of discourse, their reactions to misinformation, and their misinformation appraisal capacities.

This study produces four broad findings. *First*, users' topics of discourse mostly revolve around religious, political, and radical issues. Of the three, radical issues (60.4%) dominate the discourse, followed by political issues (37.1%). Radical topics revolve around extreme issues, such as hatred and punishment endorsement. Although this study analyzes religious misinformation, the presence of religious issues (2.1%) is far less than two other topics, which is an unexpected finding. The overlapping nature of some comments could be one of the reasons: I discussed this in the limitations in detail. *Second*, reactions to misinformation are dominated by negative reactions (94.1%), except for only a few positive reactions (5.5%). *Third*, users show four types of misinformation appraisals: trust, deny, doubt, and none. Findings suggest that nearly three-quarters of the users (69.3%) cannot identify misinformation, nearly three times the misinformation deniers (25.9%). *Fourth*, radical users almost always react negatively (99.8%) and mostly trust misinformation (80%). Similarly, almost all users who trust misinformation (96.35%) react negatively. Altogether, users who are both radical, react negatively, and trust misinformation comprise nearly half (48.21%) of all users.

The subsequent discussion sheds further light on these findings and other noteworthy insights, extending the understanding of these issues.

8.2 Radicality, aggressiveness, and digilantism

The prevalence of radical issues in users' discussions indicates a negative proclivity. Radical issues include hatred against others: the targets are people from other religions (e.g., Hindus and Buddhists) and belief groups (e.g., seculars and atheists). Also, punishment endorsements, such as hanging or killing the alleged perpetrators who insulted Islam, are frequent in the dataset, which indicate users' vigilante behavior (Chang & Poon, 2017; Smallridge et al., 2016). Moreover, since almost all radical comments are negative, we can infer that hate speech, frustration, anger, and other negative reactions are commonplace. Here, I discuss these communication and behavioral patterns in two interrelated segments.

8.2.1 Hostility and verbal aggressiveness

Extreme online language, such as hate speech, is a form of destructive aggressive communication called *destructive symbolic aggression* (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). It differs from *destructive physical aggression*, which indicates physical actions like violence and vandalism. Destructive symbolic aggressive communication is categorized into *hostility* and *verbal aggressiveness*. Both may define social media users' radical verbal expressions when engaging with religious misinformation. Hostility explains users' irritability, negativity, resentment, and suspicion. Each of these expressions has identifying features. Irritability, for example, is related to quick tempers and little patience. Radical users show most of these negative reactions. I found several indications of these negative behaviors among users. A group of users, for instance, was resented because of the media's apparent bias toward other religions and perceived hatred against Islam. Also, many users were extremely unhappy with the authorities for not punishing the perpetrators for blasphemy and hostility against Islam. These are the indications of users' hostility, which primarily fall into the radical category of this research. However, previous literature defines hostility only in interpersonal communication, whereas the present study deals with public communication.

Another key feature of users' communication behavior is verbal aggressiveness. Infante and Wigley (1986) defined it as "a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concepts of other people instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication" (p. 61). Verbal aggressiveness incorporates a range of negative verbal and, to some extent, non-verbal expressions: character attacks, competence attacks, mocking, background attacks, appearance attacks, and threats (Infante & Rancer, 1996). It is the opposite of argumentativeness, a part of constructive behavior.

Four reasons inspire verbal aggressiveness: psychopathology or repressed hostility, disdain for others, social learning of aggression, and deficiency in argumentative skills (Infante et al., 1992). This study found evidence of users' lack of proper argumentative skills. However, the findings cannot confirm the other reasons for aggressiveness, leaving space for further investigation. Initially, it appears that some social and political factors may contribute to it. Like hostility, however, the scope of verbal aggressiveness seems also narrow in the previous studies, limiting it to a more interpersonal domain and excluding other types of negative verbal expressions such as racial and ethnic slurs. Although it incorporates some self-concept and identity-related issues (e.g., character, competence, and appearance), it excludes other identity markers that are socially acceptable (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality).

Users' radical talking, high prevalence of negative reactions, and positive associations of both factors are indications of hostility and verbal aggressiveness. Al-Zaman

(2021a) also observed verbal aggressiveness among users when they reacted to religious misinformation. The present study adds to the existing knowledge that not all topics of discourse (i.e., radical, political, and religious) in religious misinformation equally contain the elements of verbal aggressiveness. Also, instances of hostility are frequent in such discourse.

At least two large user groups show destructive behavior: (a) those who believe that others are targeting their religion and they are becoming the victims, but the authority is silent instead of taking proper actions; (b) those who believe that conspirators are trying to frame minorities to harass and exploit them for greater interests. Generally, users from the first group trust misinformation, while users from the second group deny or doubt it. The first group of users tends to use words and phrases like Islam *biddweshi* (anti-Islamic), *Malaun* (accursed), *bidhormi* (infidel), and *Iyahudi Nasara* (Jewish and Christian). In contrast, the second group of users uses words like *jongi* (militant) and *dharma beboshayi* (religion merchants). These expressions are similar to what Rashid (2022) found while analyzing Facebook public comments. It suggests that besides religious misinformation, these expressions are commonplace in other religious and religiopolitical discourses.

Although destructive symbolic aggressive communication may well explain some findings of this study, it may pose a theoretical problem. Both hostility and verbal aggressiveness are defined from the perspective of interpersonal communication (Infante et al., 1984, 1992; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986). In this regard, we must be careful when extending the framework to understand and explain users' engagement with religious misinformation. I, therefore, suggest conducting more studies to confirm or test whether symbolic aggressive communication is suitable enough to explain this research problem.

8.2.2 Digilantism

Users' aggressive behavior manifests and reaches the peak through justice endorsement, which I previously noted as *digilantism*. Two major groups of users demand punishments: (a) the first group believes that perpetrators committed crimes against religion and demands exemplary punishment of the alleged perpetrator; (b) the second group believes that some fundamentalists are conspiring against a religion and demands punishments for the conspirators. Most users in the first group trust misinformation (80%), while the majority in the second group deny misinformation (18.8%). What is common among them is that both groups demand mild and extreme punishments. Mild punishments include imprisonment and beating, while extreme punishment includes shooting, hanging, and burning. The proponents of punishments against misinformation producers believe the judicial system is

not pro-Muslim and not flawless. Instead, it serves other religions and institutions. It is true that the judicial system in Bangladesh is affected by many problems, such as corruption, creating predicaments in achieving proper justice (Hossain, 2019; Tahmina & Asaduzzaman, 2018).

The second group of users demands punishments against the religious extremists who commit crimes against religious minorities and support them online and offline. These users believe religious extremists and politicians conspire against minorities to drive them out of Bangladesh, a severe crime that must be brought to justice. Since the judicial system is faulty, they also propose their forms of punishment. Believing that lawlessness, corruption, and bias exist in the judicial process provides both groups a moral ground for justice endorsement and vigilantism (Chang & Poon, 2017).

What other factors encourage them to think in this way? I presume that a few religious and political factors, which Riaz and Parvez (2018) and Sharma (2022) explored, are responsible for this: a sense that Islam is in peril, increasing religiosity, contestation over Islam's role in social and political affairs, and frustration due to social, political, and economic conditions (e.g., corruptions, political uncertainties, and growing inequalities). These are the topics of discussion for the subsequent sections.

8.3 Political Islam, agency, and oppression

In political and radical discussions, at least two groups of users are important to understand because of their visible and impactful presence in the discourse: (a) Political commenters who trust misinformation (53%) and express negative reactions (88%); (b) political commenters who deny misinformation (37.4%). The two following sections discuss it in detail.

8.3.1 Islam as a political agency

The first group of users consists mainly of the critics of political entities and ideas (e.g., the ruling party and party men and anti-religious and anti-Islamic political ideologies). Some of them believe that Awami League, the current ruling party, is the friend of Hindu-dominated India and the enemy of Islam and Muslims. Its reasons can be manifold: the party's more secular stance, its historical-political alliance with India, its less supporting attitude to Islamic political entities and their demands, and its alleged Hindu patronization. Some other social-political factors contribute to this: two of them might be corruption and political uncertainty. In the last decade, Bangladesh experienced a gradual drop in the Corruption Perception Index with increasing corruption in both private and public sectors. The country's rank dropped from 120 in 2011 to 147 in 2021 among 183 countries worldwide (Transparency

International, 2022). Also, political corruption further intensifies the situation. For example, electoral manipulation, corruption in government offices, and corruption of political leaders are a few examples of political corruption in Bangladesh (Riaz, 2019, 2021; TIB, 2021). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread corruption in the health sector disrupted proper healthcare services (Julqarnine et al., 2020; TIB, 2021). The five indicators—electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties—suggest that Bangladesh falls short of becoming a full or flawed democracy. Altogether, it has transformed Bangladesh into a hybrid regime (Riaz, 2019; Riaz & Parvez, 2021), positioning the country at 75th in the Democracy Index ranking (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022).

Moreover, such corruption and lack of justice may increase political uncertainty and pessimism among people. Corruption and lack of justice coupled with political pessimism may lead to social frustration, as Riaz & Parvez (2018) suggested. These could be reasons for users' adversities against political entities and ideologies that I found, often surpassing the other issues related to misinformation.

The deteriorating relationship between Hindus and Muslims since the British colonial regime persists in the subcontinent, inspiring political and religious tensions from time to time. Bangladeshi Muslims are less likely to favor Hindu-dominated India, Indian and Bangladeshi Hindus, and their *conspiracies* against Islam and Muslims, leading to distrust and animosity. Johansson-Stenman et al. (2009) were right about this relationship of distrust. In recent years, India has been experiencing rising extremism in Hinduism with the help of the ruling party, the BJP. The possibility of Hindu domination further terrorizes Bangladeshi Muslims. The assumed conspiracy and patronization of Hindutva as two political affairs thus may create fear among Bangladeshi Muslims, threatening Muslim authority and sovereignty. These may also inspire them to trust misinformation and express negative reactions. We need more empirical studies to unravel and explicate this complex nexus.

However, what is evident from this interplay between a range of political-technological factors is that Islam cannot be understood without a holistic understanding of Bangladesh's historical and contemporary religiopolitical and social conditions. From the users' discussion, it is evident that Islam to them is a form of political agency. It could also be their last resort against all challenges, such as corruption, social insecurity, political uncertainty, rising Hindutva, and India's aggression. Contemporary Bangladesh is experiencing a revival of Islamism (M. N. Islam & Saidul Islam, 2018): Islamic symbols, sentiments, institutions, groups, activities, and practices are becoming ubiquitous, creating an Islamic ambiance in society (M. Hasan, 2020; Rahman, 2019). This revival can be understood from different directions. For example, Islamic revival can be seen as a

countermeasure to rising Hindutva or Hindu revival in India and Buddhist revival and nationalism in Myanmar. Alternatively, the call for online Muslim *ummah* identified in the analysis can be interpreted as the making of a networked Islamic brotherhood and an element of revivalism using social media. In another way, Islamic revival could indicate Islam's increasing acceptance as a political agency. International and regional politics also contribute to this revivalism (e.g., Salafism, pan-Islamism, Hindutva, and BJP politics). Hence, Islam's role in users' sense of empowerment and agency should not be underestimated by tagging it as the rise of Islamic militancy.

Besides the importance of Islamic political agency to users, previous literature also falls short in a few more aspects. First, although very limited, the positive reactions in the dataset are the indications of religious cohesion expressed by users. A small group of users also talked about core Islamic theology and philosophy for the greater benefit of humanity, which forbids harming others. However, most studies focusing on Islamism and Islamic militancy interpreted Islam as an instrument of radicalization, avoiding the existence of parallel thoughts (Griffiths & Hasan, 2015; M. Hasan & Macdonald, 2022; Riaz, 2013). Second, along with Islamic revival, indications of Hindu revivalism or Hindutva in Bangladesh are also observed in the corpus. It is identical to what we observed for radical Muslim users. Like cohesion, it also occupies a small space in users' discussions but demands future academic investigation since previous studies overlooked it.

Finally, no previous literature discussed why users vehemently criticized the media when it came to the topic of religious misinformation. The media here is considered a political institution with definite political stances and organizational policies. Users criticize the media for being partisan and anti-Islamic and supporting Awami League, Hindus, India, and other anti-Muslim entities. They identify that the media primarily cover incidents against Muslims and in favor of religious minorities only to sell their news items and the plights of minorities. They further point out that the media try to blame Muslim individuals, which is further convenient for selling their news items.

There are some instances where Hindu men vandalized their religious monuments to blame Muslims (Mollah, 2022). Also, in some cases of blasphemy and religious desecration, followers of other religions were found to have committed the crime. However, leading Bangladeshi media outlets seem to act strangely in such cases. Some media outlets initially tend to suggest that the alleged persons were framed under false accusations, although subsequent investigations find them guilty. These outlets are less likely to publish follow-up stories on these cases afterward. For example, for a recent incident in Narail, Molla (2022) started a report with the local Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) 's statement where he claimed the blasphemous Facebook post was not shared by the Hindu accused. However,

the accused later confessed his blasphemy (Molla, 2022) and the media published no follow-up report. On the other hand, some media outlets seem particularly interested in publishing and sharing only controversial issues (e.g., religion and gender) in the context of Bangladesh (Al-Zaman & Or Rashid, 2022). Research also found that users' news consumption on social media is diminishing: the credibility of news items could be a reason for this (Al-Zaman & Noman, 2021).

8.3.2 Political Islam in exploitation

The second group of users is important because political denial of misinformation is higher than two other topic categories, i.e., radical and religious. Al-Zaman (2021b) identified that users' identification capacity of COVID-19-related political misinformation (trust 27.91%, deny 35.27%) is higher than other types of misinformation, including religious (trust 94.72%, deny 2.31%). The results suggest that users in Bangladesh possess higher political knowledge and interpretive ability, but this ability is highly absent regarding religious issues. The present study adds to previous knowledge that users are more likely to identify religious misinformation if they assess it from a more political perspective.

Political comments that deny misinformation are primarily dominated by some common reasonings that warrant extended discussion. First, when these users deny misinformation, they usually refer to previous incidents of similar misinformation devised to frame religious minorities and the political games of interest groups behind such conspiracies. Consequently, most of their reasoning concerns political motives of displacing religious minorities from their lands, at least five-decade old practice. Interestingly, this practice is now presumably regenerating using social media and religious misinformation. Therefore, the politics of land grabbing seems essential to understand online religious misinformation in Bangladesh.

After the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965, India and Pakistan passed a new law known as the Enemy Property Act of 1968. The war forced many Hindus to flee India from Pakistan¹⁶ and Muslims to flee Pakistan from India. This law allowed both the Indian and Pakistani governments to expropriate the properties of the enemies of the state. Pakistan defined Hindus residing inside the country as state enemies (Barkat, 2018), but Muslims living in India were not declared as *enemies*, “making the Hindus the only ‘enemy’” (Panday, 2016, p. 17). Under this law, the governments had the liberty to redefine the “enemy of the state” and confiscate their properties, which widened the scope for discrimination against minorities. Although Bangladesh adopted *secularism* as one of the state ideologies, this law

¹⁶ With “Pakistan” before 1971, I indicate undivided Pakistan combining both East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan).

was not abolished even after the independence. Instead, it was renamed after the Vested Property Act in 1974, allowing the government to confiscate the properties of expatriated Hindus. Apart from the government's expropriation, the law opened new windows for corrupted politicians and interest groups to grab the lands of religious and ethnic minorities. Yasmin (2015) criticized it as "grabbing lands under the disguise of legislation" (p. 121). To counter this law, the then-ruling party Awami League passed the Vested Property Return Act in 2001 to return the expropriated lands to the victims. Although this law, with its features, initially could console the victims, "the unnecessarily complicated provisions for restoring possession, clogged with lengthy procedures could not bring the positive change it had promised" (Yasmin, 2015, p. 142). As a result, land grabbing persists, victimizing and expatriating more Hindus and other minorities (Jony, 2012; Panday, 2016; Yasmin, 2015).

Many believe such land grabbing is a part of the government's and politicians' complex political games and multilayered interests (Panday, 2016). In hundreds of incidents of land grabbing, media and non-profit organizations indicated the associations of politicians, the members of the parliament (MP), and the ruling party. The list of the incidents includes land grabbing in Thakurgaon, Faridpur, Pirojpur, Khulna, Barisal, Jhalokati, Gaibandha, and Lakshmipur by politicians (Shwapon, 2015). Barkat (2018) estimated that around 5 million Hindus from 1.2 million families suffered due to this oppressive law since its inception. They lost nearly 2.6 million acres of land. The amount and extent of their loss varied in different political regimes in Bangladesh. Relying on the idea that land grabbing is one of the most crucial factors responsible for the Hindu exodus from Bangladesh (Panday, 2016), Barkat (2018) established a link between land grabbing, violence, systematic oppression, and minority expatriation. Focusing on Hindu minorities who suffer the most from systematic deprivation, he found 11.3 million Hindus expatriated from Bangladesh between 1964 and 2013; the yearly average is more than 0.23 million, and the daily average is 632.

Unlike land grabbing, which fluctuated throughout political regimes, statistics suggest that the average number of Hindu expatriates remained almost the same, implying that minorities were oppressed equally, irrespective of political regimes. Studies also indicate that Bangladesh will have no or few Hindus after three decades if this expatriation continues (K. Hasan, 2016). In this regard, however, contrasting statistics and interpretations also exist. Although the percentage of the Hindu population went downward in Bangladesh between 1974 and 2011, their total population increased (Riaz, 2020). The same data shows that Muslims' growth (2.13%) was more than Hindus' (1.27%), perhaps due to Muslims' higher fertility rate. Still, there is a space for debate, which future studies may reconsider.

Despite ample existing evidence, including media reports and witnesses, limited academic scholarship investigated social media's use as a political tool in the systematic and structural violence against minorities in Bangladesh. In recent years, religious misinformation has been propagated on social media *intentionally* to serve specific political purposes of interest groups. For example, Muslims' attack on Hindu households in Sunamganj was a plotted incident inspired by political interests (Liton, 2021). The local political leader of the ruling party produced the misinformation, gathered local Muslims led by his political strongmen, and encouraged the furious Muslims to attack households. Media reports based on witnesses and investigations claim that different groups' political interests also led to Ramu's violence. Some accounts claimed that the local ruling party members led the violence for land-related issues, some claimed that the opposition party men participated in this violence, and some claimed that Rohingya militants initiated the mayhem as a response to the Buddhists' genocide on Rohingya people in Myanmar (Hassan & Kuddus, 2012). Investigations found different political motives behind similar attacks: some are connected to the ruling party, some are connected to Islamic and other extremist groups, some are connected to property-related issues, and some are religiopolitical. This discussion suggests that misinformation-led violence has more political connections than religious ones.

Further, political kingpins instrumentalize ordinary Muslims using their religious sentiments to achieve their (politicians') political goals. It suggests that two groups exist in this framework: religious followers and political interest groups. While politicians have political intentions, the intentions of ordinary religious followers who participate in such events might be religious and spiritual. Relevant to this context, further empirical research is required to investigate the following research problems this discussion has generated: Is online religious misinformation in Bangladesh more political than religious? What are the driving factors for ordinary Muslims to participate in misinformation-led interreligious violence? Do political groups use social media in Bangladesh to produce religious misinformation to displace minorities and grab their lands?

9. Conclusion

As stated earlier, this study employed an exploratory sequential mixed methods analysis to understand how social media users engage with religious misinformation. A combination of qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis in two separate stages explored that users' engagement can be defined from three aspects: their topics of discourse, reactions to misinformation, and appraisal capacities. Of the three topics, radical issues have the highest prevalence in users' discourse, followed by political issues. In most cases, users negatively react when engaging with misinformation. Again, most users trust misinformation, which is more than twofold that of misinformation deniers. All three major findings are alarming for online and offline environments, threatening interreligious harmony and social stability. Relevant existing theories and concepts suggest that users become destructive when engaging with religious misinformation, which makes them aggressive and vigilante. While online vigilante behavior is expressed through verbal expression, offline vigilante behavior could result in physical violence. Also, political and social dissatisfactions may influence users' engagement: political Islam is a key element in this regard. Although online religious misinformation and religious tension are frequent in Bangladesh, proposals for effective solutions are scarce (Mahfuzul et al., 2020). In this knowledge vacuum, this study contributes with some novel findings.

Based on the previous discussion, this study offers some academic and policy recommendations that might elucidate and tackle the misinformation problem. First, to prevent misinformation and misinformation-led offline violence, it is urgent to unearth who is propagating religious misinformation online. Profiling the perpetrators would help to understand what steps need to be taken to prevent them from committing the crime and educate users about the perpetrators. Second, digital interventions of the government and non-government bodies are essential. The government can play a key role here. Such interventions may include online and offline schooling centers to provide people with information literacy: what online sources of information can be trusted or what are not, what types of information require cross-checking and how to do that, how to spot potential misinformation and what to do if it is a piece of misinformation. It is important as sometimes users do not offer correction to misinformation to others inadvertently (Tandoc et al., 2020). Third, operating fact-checking groups online comprising experts who are vigilant and able to immediately fact-check a piece of potential misinformation to minimize public misunderstanding. However, it is sometimes challenging to fact-check misinformation transmitted through private communication channels.

9.1 Limitations and future research

The present study is limited in two ways: methodologically and theoretically. First, I will discuss methodological limitations briefly here. Then, I will point out some of the theoretical limitations of this research. Finally, the limitations point out some gaps where future researchers may want to focus and contribute.

This study has at least seven methodological limitations. *First*, the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis were not mutually exclusive, meaning, at some points, they overlap. For example, radical topics sometimes overlap with religious and political issues as later themes, to some extent, also contain radical elements but with strong religious or political messages. In the quantitative analysis, this overlapping posed a problem as the unit of analysis was users' comments. As mentioned earlier in the quantitative method section, I resolved it by relying on coders' intuition and finding out the dominant meaning in each comment.

Second, this study cannot provide any insights about *lurkers*. Lurkers are the individuals who surf and observe but do not participate in online platforms, hiding any visible digital footprints. Although they may constitute many social media users, their invisibility makes them almost impossible to study. Lurking can also be contextual, meaning some users prefer not to participate in specific discussions for some reason. I presume that some users are included in this category of lurkers who do not engage with religious misinformation online.

Third, this study does not include users' demographic information. Although it was beyond the scope of the research, I acknowledge that demographic insights could have provided more insight and background to the readers. Why I could not collect it has at least two explanations. Firstly, collecting demographic information for each user would have been not only beyond the scope of this study but also a laborious and time-consuming task. Therefore, I decided not to do it due to time and resource constraints. Secondly, Facebook has different privacy settings that allow users to customize their profiles and choose what to display and what not to. Although many users prefer to make their profile public, sometimes they lock it or hide the necessary information, which prevents researchers from collecting users' personal information.

Fourth, users included in this study were primarily Muslims as Bangladesh has a Muslim majority, and inevitably they would also compose most of the social media users. I also mentioned earlier that Bangladeshi Muslims are identifiable by their names. Since most users are Muslims, there might be a chance of their representation in the findings. Similarly, other religions' followers are probably not well-represented in the sample, so the study

lacks insights into their engagement patterns. However, I believe it was an unavoidable circumstance according to the scope and setting of this study.

Fifth, the sample selection for both phases may have shaped the research findings in certain ways. For example, although many cases of religious misinformation were available, I studied only five for the quantitative part. The inclusion of other cases might yield different results. Again, the cases were from different years. Presumably, engagement patterns may change over time, but this research cannot provide any insights into that. Lastly, I observed users' engagement with Facebook posts that did not debunk misinformation. It would have been more comprehensive to observe how they engaged with posts that debunked misinformation. Future researchers could consider extending this part.

Sixth, Facebook often relies on its third-party fact-checkers to flag and remove content containing misinformation. It is conceivable that much data regarding misinformation can be lost in this way. I suspect this study suffers from such a data loss—the data that could have been added to the sample could have yielded more insights. It was also an unavoidable and expected limitation for misinformation research with Facebook data.

Seventh, CrowdTangle has limited access to Facebook data and other limitations for tracking public data (Fraser, 2022). Therefore, a methodological triangulation for data collection could have mitigated this gap to a certain extent. However, due to time and resource constraints, it was not possible.

Apart from methodological limitations, this study has three theoretical limitations. *First*, it only focused on Bangladesh, a small South Asian country with a Muslim majority, a growing social media user community, and frequent interreligious violence led by online misinformation. These factors may vary from country to country. Also, Bangladesh's religious environment has unique features that might be absent in other countries. From these points of view, the findings of this study may not be generalizable for other countries with entirely different social-religious settings. *Second*, although I attempted to explain the findings based on existing theories and concepts, empirical relations could not be established for some issues that warrant further research. *Third*, my position as a researcher may influence the interpretations of the results. I am a Muslim man born and raised in a middle-class family in Bangladesh. Also, I have prior research experience with online religious misinformation. Altogether, these issues may shape my understanding of the topic that I dealt with in this study. Therefore, my positionality should also be considered while evaluating this research.

Despite these limitations, this study unravels an essential but poorly studied research problem. Moreover, it offers some novel findings that would be helpful for the academic

understanding of a complex web of online radicality, politics, misinformation, and religious violence. South Asian cyberspace has been a barely studied area in academic scholarship: the present study contributes to this gap. I hope it will encourage and guide future researchers to explore online religious misinformation in the Bangladeshi context more comprehensively.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Public lynching over misinformation



Figure 5. A van driver was lynched over a piece of misinformation claiming kidnappers are kidnapping children to collect their heads for the successful construction of the Padma Bridge. Based on alleged suspicion, local people beat and killed him. (Image source: RisingBD.com)



Figure 6. Taslima, a mother of a child, was lynched in her daughter's school by an angry mob when she went there to pick up her daughter. (Image source: BDnews24.com)



Figure 7. Jewel, a middle-aged man with mental health issues, was lynched and burnt for alleged Quran desecration. (Image source: Deshebideshe.com)

Appendix 2. Crafting religious misinformation

The image below is the *behind story* of the Narail protest of angry Muslims in April 2019 demanding the punishment of Rajkumar, a Hindu man, for his alleged online blasphemy against Islam. This case is included in the quantitative analysis of this study. The conversation in the image is as follows:

Robiul Ahmid (main post): Do you want to harass a Hindu? Open a fake Facebook account using his name, post something defaming Islam from that account, and introduce him to others as an Islamophobe or atheist. Now you all thrash him hard.

Ariful Islam (1st commenter): I also framed one and tagged him as an atheist in a similar way, driving him away from this area.

Maulana Mufti Mahbub Hathazari (2nd commenter): Oh ho! This is the real story! That is why I was wondering who hacked Rajkumar's Facebook account.

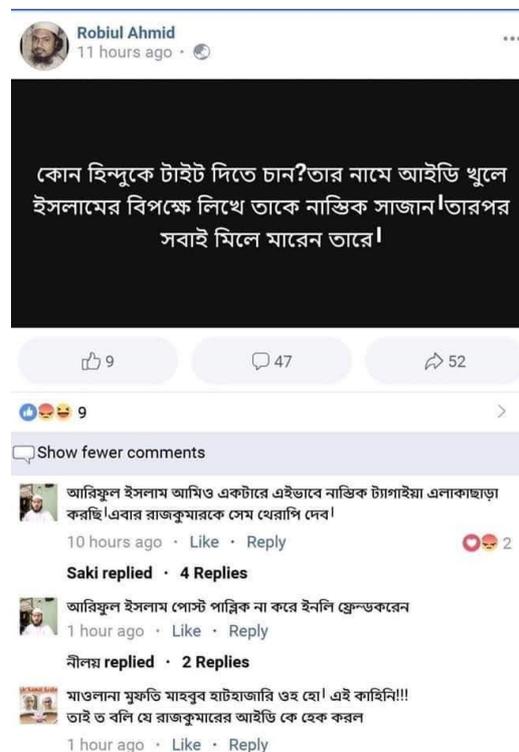


Figure 8. Conspiracy against a Hindu man on Facebook by Muslim perpetrators. (Image source: Facebook, 2019)

Appendix 3. Instances of misinformation-led violence

This section contains some photographs of the consequences of online religious misinformation. Such misinformation instigated religious sentiments among the local Muslims that led them to vandalize minorities' households and holy places. Each photo represents each incident here, maintaining an ascending order.



Figure 9. Attack on Buddhist temples in Ramu in 2012 over religious misinformation online. It was the first incident of online religious misinformation that led to offline mayhem. (Image source: Prothom Alo, 2012)



Figure 10. Attack on Hindu temples and households in Nasirnagar in 2016 over religious misinformation online. This event has been included in the quantitative part of this study. (Image source: BBC News Bangla, 2016)



Figure 11. Attack on Hindu households in Rangpur in 2017 over religious misinformation online. This event has been included in the quantitative part of this study. (Image source: BDnews24.com, 2017)



Figure 12. An angry Muslim congregation demands an exemplary punishment over a Hindu man's alleged defamation of the Prophet (PBUH) on Facebook. The incident occurred in Narail in 2019, and the photo was taken from Magura, a district beside Narail. This event has been included in the quantitative part of this study. (Image source: Kaler Kantho, 2019)



Figure 13. An angry mob consists of Muslims demanding punishment for alleged online blasphemy committed by a Hindu man in Bhola in 2019. This event has been included in the qualitative part of this study. (Image source: BBC News Bangla, 2019)



Figure 14. Angry Muslims torched down local Hindu households in Comilla in 2020 over a piece of online religious misinformation. This event has been included in the quantitative part of this study. (Image source: BDnews24.com, 2020)



Figure 15. Attack on Hindu households in Sunamganj in 2021 over a piece of online religious misinformation. This event has been included in the quantitative part of this study. (Image source: DW, 2021)



Figure 16. Attack on Hindu households in Rangpur in 2021 over religious misinformation online. (Image source: Prothom Alo, 2021)

Appendix 4. Codebook for quantitative analysis

Table 11. Codes and coding criteria.

Themes & Categories	Defining Factors
<i>Topics</i>	
Religious	Mention of religious actions (e.g., namaz, puja); sacred religious texts (e.g., the Quran, hadith); religious monuments, institutions, and objects (e.g., mosque, temple); religious ways of life (e.g., prohibitions); religious entities (e.g., clergies); religious revivalism, religious cohesion.
Political	Mention of regional, national, and local politics (e.g., India-Bangladesh relations); political institutions (e.g., political parties, government, governmental wings, and offices, media); law enforcement (e.g., police); political entities (e.g., political leaders, Islamists, seculars); political processes (e.g., policymaking, political corruption); political ideologies (e.g., Hindutva, anti-Hinduism and anti-Islamism, conspiracies).
Radical	Indications of hatred (e.g., racial, ethnic, and religious slurs); mentions and endorsements of actions (e.g., jihad, revenge, punishment, extremism).
Others	This category includes comments that are different from the three defined topics.
<i>Reactions</i>	
Positive	Emotional reactions that are considered positive, such as love, interest, serenity, constructive criticism, and suggestion
Negative	Emotional reactions that are considered negative, such as anger, hatred, despise, frustration, mockery, resentment, and irritation.
Others	This category includes comments whose emotional valence could not be properly identified.
<i>Appraisal</i>	
Trust	Trust misinformation with or without proper reasoning.
Deny	Deny misinformation with or without proper reasoning.
Doubt	Neither trust nor deny, perhaps due to a lack of enough evidence and reasoning skills.
None	No indication of misinformation assessment.

Note. This codebook is based on qualitative findings.