

## A Cross-sectional Study on Netizen *Tabayyun* Practices in Receiving and Conveying Information on Social Media

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33102/ujj.vol34no02.450>

### Abstract

**Background and Purpose:** Netizens are recipients and communicators of information on social media. However, a fast reception and dissemination of information communicated without any prior investigation and review process often occur. It even includes the dissemination of false information. Hence, this research aimed to analyze *tabayyun* practices and levels among netizens in receiving and conveying information on social media. Differences in *tabayyun* levels among male and female netizens were also explored.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional survey method design was employed in this research. Data were collected through the distribution of questionnaire instruments online. The study sample of 315 respondents used purposive sampling and was analyzed with descriptive test analysis. For non-parametric analysis, this research adopted the Mann–Whitney U test.

**Findings:** The study outcomes determined that the item “Disappointed with people who disseminate unauthentic information” obtained the highest mean value (mean = 3.49, S.P. = 0.68). Simultaneously, 80 percent of netizens were at a moderate *tabayyun* level on the reception and delivery of information (mean = 42.90, S.P. = 6.17). No significant difference was observed between male and female netizens in terms of the *tabayyun* level.

**Contributions:** This research adds value to *tabayyun* research knowledge for more comprehensive policy action parameters, mainly concerning policymakers. Accordingly, endeavors to raise awareness and foster the right attitude among netizens must be intensified to tackle cyber defamation.

**Keywords:** *tabayyun*, netizens, Muslims, information, social media

### Background

The social transformation of netizens expands in the era of cyber technology. Netizens’ dependence on the cyber domain leads to the notion of a borderless world as it empowers broad and unlimited information prospects. According to Dutta (2018), social media’s influence motivates netizens to change attitudes and behaviors in receiving information and making judgments about viral news. The inclination of netizens to utilize social media for spreading news is often correlated with sharing actions without referring to genuine and trustworthy sources. Similarly, information garnered from cyberspace goes beyond the needs of netizens. It triggers the necessity of

Manuscript Received Date: 07/03/22

Manuscript Acceptance Date: 19/06/22

Manuscript Published Date: 01/08/22

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*tajdid* in the cyber world, whereby netizens need to be the filters and ‘gatekeepers’, and avoid being carried away in the virtual world’s viral trends and latest phenomena. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the *tabayyun* information practices and levels among netizens. Differences in *tabayyun* information practices between male and female netizens were also analyzed.

### Social Media and Netizens

The development of new media underwent drastic growth from 2018 to date compared to five years ago. Statistics released by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2019) in the study of Internet users in 2018 show an increase in Internet users up to 28.7 million people compared with in 2016, which is 24.5 million. The penetration rate of Internet usage increased, which reported more than 87% in 2020 (SKMM, 2019). Social media use also raises among netizens. The SKMM study (2019) recorded that 27.8 million people use social media with an average of one to four hours a day, which is 39.2% among netizens. Meanwhile, 23.9% of netizens spend five to eight hours surfing social media in a day (SKMM, 2019). Therefore, the rate of Internet compulsion among netizens is high. Similarly, Malaysian netizens are among the hardcore users who experience social media addiction (Ismail, 2019).

Among the benefits of social media is that it operates as a medium for disseminating information swiftly and efficiently. Moreover, uploading and downloading photos and videos, updating profile pages, sending messages, and posting on one’s profile or friends are convenient to do (Akram and Kumar, 2018). Christofferson (2016) declared that adolescents are the biggest social media users because of their talent to create a virtual identity to become a part of their lives. Keles et al. (2020) argued that using social networking websites have become a “mandatory lifestyle” for most adolescents and children to prove their “popularity” among their peers. According to Bilal (2017), social media dramatically influences netizens to believe its contents due to the repetition.

Social media, a phenomenon in our lives today, should be managed prudently with sensible choices. The use of social media enables its users to express their feelings, relieve stress and complete the social life cycle (Keles et al., 2020) solely through virtual friends. Thus, conventional media’s role as disseminators of information and news has been partially supplanted by social media (Hisham, 2019; Oberiri, 2016). Thus, today’s society relies on information in social media. Moreover, netizens also treat social media as their primary source of information without recognising the source’s exactitude. According to Pentina and Tarafdar (2014), today’s digital culture depends on social media in obtaining information sources. Hence, social media is a medium of communication and a network of information sharing from various sources such as pictures, videos, and news. Netizens favour effortless access to social networks because it is readily available.

According to Mahyuddin and Sonny (2020), individual netizens blindly share news content found on their smartphones or computer screens, believing that they are “good Samaritans” for doing so. This includes netizens who like gossips and share unauthentic news where the truth is not determined, done to satisfy their self-interests. These actions fuel the spread of fake news in the virtual world.

In the context of news in the virtual world, a recipient should not quickly press the “like” button to like the “post” received, let alone press the “share” button as a sign of sharing it with others. The recipient can write in the “comment” column by making a reference through reading or asking the responsible party who has knowledge or information, so that the accuracy of facts and the validity of sources can be verified (Zulkefli & S. Salahudin, 2016). Some netizens want to become “instant journalists” by quickly disseminating any information obtained without a drive to check whether the information is authentic or otherwise. Their actions only aim to obtain many “likes” because they suffer from the syndrome of “enjoy five minutes of fame” (Syamsiah, 2015). In the study of Mohammad Khadafi et al. (2014), the culture of “copy and paste” when distributing the received information related to religious questions, such as the use of false hadith, is at a dangerous level.

Human natural circumstances can also be considered in confirming news (Zulkefli et al., 2020). Naturally, human beings want to see only the things they like and sometimes exaggerate the interpretation. At the same time, they try to find fault with people they dislike and then expose others’ weaknesses. In this regard, the Qur’an (surah al-Nisa ‘: 49; al-Najm: 32) suggests that both actions should be avoided, as the truth of certain news or information can be altered and thus lead to prejudice if one receives and disseminates the news. News carriers should also set aside their personal interests when reporting news to ensure its genuinity (Zulkefli & S. Salahudin, 2016).

Winarni and Rani Dewi (2019) found that virtual citizens or virtual society or better known as netizen statement is used as a news source by some news industries. Nonetheless, netizens' attitude to give a statement in the virtual space is disputed for its credibility. It includes elements of bias, irresponsibility, and apparent scope and argument foundation that can affect the completeness of a news story.

### Information on Social Media

The influx of information resulting in digital media losing the gatekeeper role has no control compared with mainstream media. Safori (2018) studied the impact of social media on the role of the world of journalism. Changes in media development have led to clashes between the evolution of the Internet and the mainstream journalism industry. Thus, screening and decision making on information sources affect the gatekeeping process practiced by mainstream media. Netizens now play the role of instant journalists. Filtering and validating news similar to existing journalistic practices are no longer performed (Lewis and Molyneux, 2019).

According to Lewis and Molyneux (2019), netizens should recognize the exact gatekeeping process to practice a right attitude in filtering every piece of information they obtain. The rise of citizen journalism leads to practitioners who are not bound by the ethics and operations of media institutions (Lewis and Molyneux, 2019). Mohamad Razif (2015) associated news or news, which is easily received through Facebook, emails, Twitter, newspapers, and magazines, as questionable in its exactness and efficacy. Brandtzaeg and Luders (2015) addressed gender issues, following information verification on social media. The method of verifying information sources and social media content differs among male and female journalists (Rodgers and Thorson, 2006).

In an epoch of information technology that has experienced the headway of the Internet, communication scholars are tested to retake the notion of gatekeeping (Erzikova, 2018). One view suggests that filtering information through the existing gatekeeping concept is outmoded. This situation happens when the field of mainstream print media journalism loses its monopoly in the production and distribution of news. Most kinds of information are now available on the Internet. Consequently, all online readers are gatekeepers who can convey, comment, and review news and social media networks. However, Erzikova (2018) argued that some scholars think that the gatekeeping process of a news story is still as good as it is in the world of conventional journalism, despite the advances in news technology.

### Tabayyun Information

Evidence on the need to carry out *tabayyun* about news obtained is found in verse 6 of Surah al-Hujurat. Allah SWT said, which means:

“O believers, if an evildoer brings you any news, verify it, so you do not harm people unknowingly, becoming regretful for what you have done.” (Surah al-Hujurat, 6).

According to Ibn Kathir (2000), this verse was revealed when al-Walid bin ‘Uqbah bin Abi Mu’ith became the messenger of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH to collect *zakat* from Bani Mustaliq. This verse debates on how a Muslim should react upon receiving news from a *fasiq* (unreliable) person. Therefore, the news that was conveyed from the *fasiq* person should be examined first instead of believed immediately. In pursuing the *da’wah* goal, the content of religious information through the internet is regarded as too open and free without censorship and can be done by anyone by uploading their content freely. This situation certainly challenges the concept of *mutawatir* and information integrity in Islam (Fadzli et al., 2015). Ibn Kathir (2000) linked the process of reviewing news from a reputable source to avoid confusion and lies. According to Fadzli et al. (2015), the Muslim community places a high value on the content of religious information, hence any information relating to religion must come with utmost integrity as declared in the Qur’an through Surah al-Hujurat, verse 6.

According to Ahmed (2018), the process of *al-tabayyun* in reporting news is related to three quintessential components, particularly knowledge, *tawhid*, and the practice of *hisbah* within the framework of *al-amr bi al-ma’ruf wa nahy ‘an al-Munkar*. It is integrated with the nature of trust and responsibility. The process of news reporting in the context of *al-tabayyun* should also consider the methodology of hadith experts in receiving and narrating a hadith as in the concept of narration (ensuring the authoritative source and accuracy in narrating ahadith) and *dirayah* (accuracy of a hadith material or text of hadith). Therefore, the scholars of hadith constitute

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and organize the disciplines of hadith, such as '*ilm Tarikh al-ruwat dan 'ilm al-jarh wa al-ta'dil*, to guarantee the purity of hadith. This way, the culture of narrating false hadith does not spread in society.

Similarly, Mohamad Razif (2015) established the principle of *tabayyun*, which demands that people think well and do not easily judge or assume. Mohd Anuar et al. (2018) discussed the verification of information if the information comes from a shady and unreliable person. Thus, the point of source authority exists on the validity and accuracy of the information and from whom they get it. Anyone in the cyber world can conduct information and share it, for example, to convey information about Islam. It is closely related to the source authority where it is an imperative aspect in tackling information uncertainty. People in the field of religion and authoritative religious institutions are supposed to provide information about Islam because they are experts who are acceptable in society. According to Husain (2019), the methods that must be employed to ensure the authenticity and validity of news are by researching every news received, ensuring the source of the news received, observing and understanding the news content accurately, and not immediately believing it; instead, conduct a research first to avoid fake news.

Al-Qaradawi (1995) related the importance of community relations by safeguarding the rights and honor protected by Islam. He also discussed the act of gossiping (*ghibah*) and tattling (*namimah*) that exist in society. Delivering news with the intention of wrong will create dissension and discord in society.

### Methods

This study used the survey method. Questionnaire was distributed as a method of data collection. The instrument used in this study is a new questionnaire that had been developed by the researchers. Each construct of the study had undergone validation and reliability tests through two pilot studies. The first pilot study was conducted to test the validity of the constructs of the questionnaire instrument through exploratory factor analysis. The validity test is important to ensure that the variables included in the questionnaire instrument can truly measure and meet the characteristics of the true variables. A total of 80 respondents were selected as the study sample. The number of respondents had been determined by taking into consideration the suggestion of Chua (2009). In the discussion about the size of respondents for a factor analysis, Chua (2009) stated that a large size of respondents is required. The number of respondents must be at least five times the number of items.

The Information *Tabayyun* questionnaire instrument consisted of 16 items for the exploratory factor analysis. The eigen values and the scree plot graphs showed that the questionnaire items comprise more than a single factor. This showed that the questionnaire instrument is multidimensional. Based on the varimax rotation procedure and principal component analysis, there are four factors that had been extracted from the proposed questionnaire. The four factors predicted 71.92 percent variance of the overall variables '*Information Tabayyun*' (factor 1=30.09 percent; factor 2=19.17 percent; factor 3=13.83 percent; factor 4=8.83 percent).

In addition, the second pilot study was conducted to analyse the reliability of the items in the Information *Tabayyun* instrument to check the consistencies between one another. This pilot study utilised the internal consistency method using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. A total 30 respondents were selected in this pilot study. Based on the pilot study, the variables in the study yielded a good reliability value which was 0.8. Since the value of the Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.7, it was concluded that the instrument for this study have acceptable consistency and reliability.

A sum of 315 respondents were selected to answer the questionnaire that was distributed online. Samples were selected using purposive sampling through a set criteria, which include respondents consisting of Muslim netizens aged 17–30. According to Taherdoost (2016), objective sampling is a type of non-probability sampling, which can assign characteristics and criteria to the study sample. A homogeneous study sample was selected because it shares the same set of characteristics. Nonrandom sample selection allows the data collection process to be performed easily, quickly, and at a lower cost than random sampling.

The study data were analyzed by conducting descriptive statistical tests through the analysis of percentage distribution, mean, standard deviation, and the level analysis test for minimum and maximum scores. Inference analysis through nonparametric Mann–Whitney U test was also performed to determine the difference in the *tabayyun* level among male and female netizens. According to Nachar (2008), the Mann–Whitney U test works as one type of nonparametric test and shows the same analysis as the independent sample t-test for the parametric

test. However, nonparametric tests do not need to make assumptions and meet the same statistical procedures as parametric ones.

## Results

### Demographics of Respondents

Table 1 shows that a total of 315 respondents, consisting of 89 males and 226 females, were selected as the study sample. They were among those aged between 17 and 30 years. Most respondents were between 20 and 23 years old, which accounted for 43.5%. A total of 237 respondents were still students, which was 75.2%. The remaining 25% were those who worked in various sectors. More than 55% of respondents had a bachelor’s degree. This demographic analysis revealed that social media netizens are among those who had an adequate education level.

Table 1. Respondents’ Frequency Distribution and Demographic Percentage

Variable	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	89	28.3
	Female	226	71.7
Age	17–19 years old	51	16.1
	20–23 years old	137	43.5
	24–26 years old	92	29.2
	27–30 years old	35	11.1
Jobs	Public sector	20	6.3
	Private sector	31	9.8
	Self-employed	12	3.8
	Students	237	75.2
	Unemployed	15	4.8
Education	SPM/SPVM	28	8.9
	Diploma/STPM/STAM	75	23.8
	Bachelor’s degree	176	55.9
	Master’s/Doctorate	27	8.6
	Others	9	2.9

### Information Practices on Social Media

The analysis results discovered the practice of *tabayyun* among social media netizens in terms of news reception and delivery. Table 2 shows the percentage distribution, mean, and standard deviation on the practice of *tabayyun* information among netizens on social media. The statement item for this variable uses a frequency scale that is close to netizens’ attitude in explaining the practices they perform. The item “Disappointed with people who disseminate unauthentic information” obtained the highest mean value (mean = 3.49, S.P. = 0.68). This item revealed netizens’ tendency not to compromise with those who disseminate unauthentic information. This action proved that netizens could assess and explain their frustrated emotions when faced with harmful actions by spreading false news.

The item “Research the information received first before disseminating it to others” obtained the second highest mean value of 3.23. It indicated that 45% of respondents regularly research the information they receive before dissemination. Meanwhile, 46.3% of social media netizens often feel responsible for all the information disseminated. Thus, the practice of *tabayyun* attitude toward information proves that netizens are aware of the need to take this action to make them responsible people. The mean value of the item “Proud to be the first to disseminate the information received” was the item with the lowest mean (Mean = 1.66, S.P. = 0.76). This analysis shows that they were never proud to be the first to disseminate the information they received with 48.9%.

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Table 2. Percentage Distribution, Mean, and Standard Deviation of *Tabayyun* Information Attitude Practices on Social Media

No.	<i>Tabayyun</i> Information	Percentage (%)				Mean	Standard Deviation
		Never	Some times	Frequently	Always		
1	Disappointed with people who spread unauthentic information.	0.6	9.2	30.5	59.7	3.49	0.68
2	Research the information received first before disseminating it to others.	0.0	15.9	45.7	38.4	3.23	0.70
3	Responsible for all information disseminated.	2.2	14.0	46.3	37.5	3.19	0.75
4	Talk to a friend about information whose authenticity is uncertain.	2.5	16.5	48.6	32.4	3.11	0.76
5	Examine any form of news or allegation before making a conclusion.	1.6	20.0	50.8	27.6	3.04	0.73
6	Be suspicious first when receiving information.	0.0	27.6	43.8	28.6	3.01	0.75
7	Refer to the authorities when receiving doubtful information.	5.7	25.4	36.8	32.1	2.95	0.89
8	Find the source of information received.	3.2	27.6	45.7	23.5	2.90	0.79
9	Ask the person spreading the word about the information he or she has obtained.	4.4	38.4	39.7	17.5	2.70	0.80
10	Share the information obtained.	2.9	47.0	37.5	12.7	2.60	0.74
11	Correct invalid information.	4.8	45.4	36.8	13.0	2.58	0.77
12	Be critical when receiving information.	3.8	47.9	34.6	13.7	2.58	0.77
13	Ignore the information received.	16.5	69.8	10.8	2.9	2.00	0.60
14	Excited by the information disseminated.	15.6	59.4	20.6	4.4	2.14	0.72
15	Disseminate information that is received, and then conduct a research about it.	45.4	41.9	7.9	4.8	1.72	0.80
16	Proud to be the first to disseminate the information received.	48.9	39.4	8.6	3.2	1.66	0.76

### *Tabayyun* Netizen Information Level

Table 3 shows the *tabayyun* information level of social media netizens. Approximately 19% of respondents (60 people) were at a low level. By contrast, a total of 252 people (80%) were at a moderate level. Only 1% was at a high level. Overall, netizens' *tabayyun* level on the information in new media showed a moderate level with a mean value of 42.90 and a standard deviation of 6.17.

Table 3. *Tabayyun* Netizen Information Level

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low (0–37)	60	19.0
Moderate (38–58)	252	80.0
High (59–80)	3	1.0
Mean: 42.90		Minimum: 10
Standard Deviation: 6.17		Maximum: 80

Differences in *Tabayyun* Information Level

The Mann–Whitney U test results showed no significant difference between the *tabayyun* information levels among male and female netizens ( $U = 9853.5, p > 0.592$ ). Nonetheless, by comparing the mean rank value (Mean Rank) between males and females, the mean value of female netizen rank (Mean rank = 159.21) exceeded that of male netizen rank (Mean rank = 154.98). That is, comparatively few female netizens could describe and understand the *tabayyun* aspect of the information obtained. However, a difference was observed in the mean value of female netizen rank (Mean rank = 159.21) over that of male netizen mean rank (Mean rank = 154.98).

Table 4. Mann–Whitney Test U Difference in the *Tabayyun* Information Level in terms of Gender

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	U Value	Significant Value ( $p$ )
<i>Tabayyun</i> Information Level	Male	90	154.98	9853.5	.592
	Female	225	159.21		
	Total	315			

**Discussion**

Netizens have never made this practice a chosen action in managing the information received on social media. Thus, an awareness is necessary among netizens to understand the basics and process of receiving and delivering news, which do not require them to be the first to broadcast such information. Netizens should also exhibit a mature attitude to confirm resource credibility and be careful not to share fake news. Al-Qaradawi (2015) asserted that lying is not a part of the characteristics of a believer. Instead, it is one of the characteristics of hypocrites who are always lying and authenticating their lies by swearing. Mohd Anuar et al. (2018) mentioned that a verification should be performed when obtaining news either through conversation or social media.

Nevertheless, netizens in Malaysia must be highly aware of the need to practice *tabayyun*. *Tabayyun* practice is an action that can profit the sharing of true and accurate information in cyberspace. Netizens on social media should fully understand their role as “gatekeepers” of the new millennium where they can commit “self-censorship” to the receipt and delivery of information. It is possible by updating gatekeeping, which involves three components: the information source, mass media, and the audience. It then produces a reader who can convey news digitally. In the context of the third component, not only journalists and editors can be powerful gatekeepers but also readers become active and likely actors in turning something into news. In the new technology age, the concept of gatekeeping can gradually transform into gate watching (Erzikova, 2018).

Islam raises the principle of *tabayyun* through the argument in surah al-Hujurat verse 6. According to Fadzli et al. (2015), the Muslim community powerfully celebrates the value of religious information, which motivates the Islamic information to have the most integrity, as asserted in the Quran through surah al-Hujuraat, verse 6. Muhammad Adnan et al. (2018) explained that the Muslim community users of social media must check and ensure the authenticity of information before making conclusions and actions. Mohd Anuar et al. (2018) assumed that anyone who acts to transmit information without practicing *tabayyun* causes harm.

In this study, the *tabayyun* level of netizens was modest in receiving and conveying information. It proved that *tabayyun* is still not widely used by social media netizens. The *tabayyun* level should be among those that should be emphasized to netizens to control the spread of false information on social media. Amjad et al. (2006) discussed changes in netizens when receiving information and checking its credibility. Social media should be the best medium in optimizing and gaining access to information easily and quickly. However, the abuse of functionality leads to netizens losing value and being less careful in handling the reception and delivery of information on social media. According to Wan Hakimin et al. (2018), the purpose of conducting the *tabayyun* process on a news item is to obtain an accurate conclusion, following the situation of the surrounding community. It is a reflection of the moral standard of a person who wants the truth to understand something.

Nevertheless, this investigation established that gendered subjects do not play a role in disseminating information without first researching it. Although Aidan (2009) argued that from the aspect of journalism, female journalists are convinced to prefer prejudice and discrimination in providing news reporting, they also symbolize





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