

EARLY EXPLORATION OF AN INTEGRATED ISLAMIC MENTAL HEALTH RESILIENCE MODEL FOR MUSLIM UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

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This study aims to develop and validate an Integrated Islamic Mental Health Resilience Model (i-IMHRM) for Muslim university students confronting the psychological pressures of the digital era, including social media overuse, cyber-comparison, information overload, and digital fatigue. Guided by an Islamic epistemological framework anchored in tawakkul (reliance on God), sabr (patience), and redha (contentment with divine decree), the study integrates classical Islamic psycho-spiritual constructs with contemporary resilience theory to produce a model responsive to the realities of digitally mediated student life. A qualitative-dominant, expert-consensus design employing the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) was adopted, involving a purposively selected panel of experts drawn from Islamic psychology, counselling, educational technology, and Shariah-based mental health practice. Two rounds of structured questionnaires were administered, and expert responses were converted into triangular fuzzy numbers, defuzzified, and evaluated against three acceptance thresholds: a threshold value (d) not exceeding 0.2, a minimum expert consensus of 75%, and a defuzzified fuzzy score (A) of at least 0.5. Findings indicate that six constructs achieved expert consensus and were retained in the final model: Aqidah-Based Spiritual Resilience, Ibadah-Based Coping Mechanism, Akhlaq-Based Emotional Regulation, Wasatiyyah Digital Self-Regulation, Ukhuwwah Social Support Network, and Ilm-Based Cognitive and Help-Seeking Resilience, organised around a core of tawakkul, sabr, and redha. The resulting i-IMHRM offers a theoretically grounded and practically actionable framework for university counselling centres, Islamic education units, and student affairs divisions seeking to design digitally responsive, faith-congruent mental health interventions. Implications for policy, curriculum design, and future confirmatory validation using structural equation modelling are discussed.



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Introduction

The digital era has fundamentally reshaped the psychosocial landscape in which university students live, learn, and cope with adversity. Constant connectivity, algorithm-driven social comparison, and the blurring of boundaries between academic, social, and personal life have been consistently associated with elevated psychological distress among young adults (Alshahrani & Elbedour, 2022; Rahman & Shah, 2022). For Muslim university students in particular, this digital saturation intersects with distinct religious and cultural expectations, creating a form of psychological strain that is not fully captured by secular, Western-derived resilience frameworks (Ahmad & Hasan, 2023). Understanding how faith-based coping resources interact with digital-era stressors is therefore both a theoretical and practical imperative for higher education institutions operating within Muslim-majority contexts such as Malaysia.

Existing resilience models, most notably those derived from Western positive psychology traditions, tend to emphasise individual traits such as self-efficacy, optimism, and adaptive coping (Bandura, 1997; Connor & Davidson, 2003; Masten, 2001). While these constructs retain cross-cultural relevance, they are largely silent on the transcendental and spiritual dimensions that many Muslim students draw upon when navigating hardship, including *tawakkul*, *sabr*, and *redha* (Fatimah & Rahman, 2019; Khan & Watson, 2021). This gap suggests that a psychologically valid and culturally congruent resilience model for Muslim university students must be built from an integrated framework, one that neither abandons empirically validated resilience theory nor subordinates Islamic epistemology to a secondary, decorative role.

The proliferation of social media, online learning platforms, and smartphone dependency has introduced novel stressors that earlier resilience literature could not anticipate, including cyberbullying, doom-scrolling, fear of missing out, and digital identity anxiety (Sulaiman et al., 2022). Malaysian studies have reported a marked increase in psychological distress symptoms among undergraduates linked to excessive digital media consumption, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when learning and social interaction shifted almost entirely online (Alavi et al., 2021). These findings underscore the urgency of developing resilience frameworks that explicitly account for the digital dimension of contemporary student life rather than treating it as an incidental contextual factor.

Islamic psychology offers a rich, historically grounded repertoire of psycho-spiritual constructs capable of addressing this gap. Al-Ghazali's classical formulation of the *nafs* (self), *qalb* (heart), and *ruh* (spirit) provides a holistic anthropology of human psychological functioning that integrates cognition, emotion, and spirituality (Al-Ghazali, 1997). Contemporary scholars have begun operationalising these constructs into measurable variables suitable for empirical validation, demonstrating that Islamic coping strategies such as *dhikr*, *du'a*, and communal worship are associated with improved psychological outcomes among Muslim youth (Abdullah et al., 2022; Noor & Aziz, 2020). However, few studies have attempted to systematically integrate these constructs into a single, expert-validated model calibrated specifically for the digital-era student experience.

This study addresses that gap by developing and validating an Integrated Islamic Mental Health Resilience Model (i-IMHRM) using the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM), a rigorous expert-consensus technique well suited to constructing new theoretical models in emerging and culturally specific domains (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). By combining classical Islamic psycho-spiritual theory with contemporary digital-era resilience literature and subjecting the resulting constructs to structured expert validation, this study aims to produce a model that is simultaneously theologically authentic, psychologically sound, and practically implementable within university counselling and student development contexts.

Literature Review

Resilience has traditionally been conceptualised as the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant stress (Masten, 2001). Connor and Davidson's (2003) widely used resilience scale operationalises this capacity through dimensions such as personal competence, trust in one's instincts, and acceptance of change, and has been validated across numerous cultural settings. Nevertheless, cross-cultural applications of such instruments have repeatedly revealed conceptual gaps when applied to religious populations, where spiritual constructs function as primary rather than peripheral coping resources (Khan & Watson, 2021). This has prompted calls for culturally and religiously congruent resilience frameworks rather than the uncritical transplantation of Western instruments.

Within Islamic psychology, resilience is frequently discussed through the interconnected constructs of *sabr* (patience under trial), *tawakkul* (trust in divine decree while exerting effort), and *redha* (contented acceptance of God's will) (Fatimah & Rahman, 2019). These constructs are not passive; rather, they are understood as active cognitive-spiritual orientations that reframe adversity as a test with meaning and purpose, a reframing process shown to buffer against depressive and anxiety symptoms among Muslim populations (Noor & Aziz, 2020). Al-Ghazali's classical model of the *nafs* further situates these coping orientations within a broader architecture of the self, in which spiritual purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) is positioned as a prerequisite for psychological equilibrium (Al-Ghazali, 1997).

Empirical studies increasingly support the protective role of Islamic religious coping. Abdullah et al. (2022) found that religiosity was significantly associated with lower psychological distress and higher life satisfaction among Muslim university students across several national contexts. Similarly, Hasan and Sulaiman (2020) demonstrated that *ukhuwwah*, or fraternal social support grounded in shared faith identity, functioned as a significant predictor of psychological well-being, operating through mechanisms of belongingness and communal accountability distinct from generic secular social support. Parallel to this religious coping literature, a growing body of research has documented the mental health costs of digital-era university life. Sulaiman et al. (2022) reported that excessive social media use among Malaysian undergraduates was associated with heightened anxiety, sleep disruption, and academic procrastination, while Rahman and Shah (2022) linked smartphone addiction to digital fatigue and diminished psychological resilience. The construct of *wasatiyyah*, or Islamic moderation, has been proposed as a culturally resonant self-regulatory principle for governing digital consumption, encouraging balance rather than either total abstinence or unchecked immersion (Jailani et al., 2022).

Despite these converging strands of evidence, no comprehensive model has yet integrated classical Islamic psycho-spiritual constructs, contemporary digital self-regulation principles, and empirically grounded resilience theory into a single, expert-validated framework specific to Muslim university students. Methodologically, the Fuzzy Delphi Method has been increasingly adopted in Malaysian educational and psychological research as an efficient and statistically rigorous alternative to conventional Delphi techniques for constructing new instruments and models, since it reduces the number of iterative rounds required while explicitly quantifying the degree of expert consensus through fuzzy set theory (Cheung et al., 2017; Ridzuan et al., 2021). This study responds directly to that methodological and theoretical gap.

3. Research Questions

In line with the Fuzzy Delphi Method's function as a consensus-building rather than hypothesis-testing technique, this study is guided by two research questions:

1. To what extent do experts reach consensus on the constructs and items of the Integrated Islamic Mental Health Resilience Model (i-IMHRM) for Muslim university students in the digital era)?
2. Which constructs and items achieve the priority ranking necessary to be retained in the final i-IMHRM structure, and how are these constructs organised into a validated conceptual model?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM), a consensus-based expert elicitation technique that combines the structured, iterative characteristics of the classical Delphi method with fuzzy set theory, allowing linguistic uncertainty in expert judgement to be mathematically represented and resolved (Ishikawa et al., 1993). FDM was selected over the conventional Delphi technique because it typically requires only two rounds rather than three or more to reach a stable consensus, reduces respondent attrition, and captures the vagueness inherent in expert opinion through triangular fuzzy numbers rather than forcing artificially precise point estimates (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Tunku Ahmad & Wahab, 2020).

Expert Panel

A purposive sample of 9 experts was selected based on established FDM guidelines, which recommend a panel of between 5 and 30 experts possessing relevant specialisation (Mustapha et al., 2023). The panel comprised academics and practitioners in Islamic psychology and counselling, Shariah-based mental health practice, educational technology, and student affairs administration, each with a minimum of five years of relevant professional or research experience. This composition ensured triangulated expertise across the theological, psychological, and digital dimensions the model was intended to integrate.

Instrument Development

An initial pool of 30 items across six hypothesised constructs was generated through an extensive review of classical Islamic psycho-spiritual literature and contemporary digital-era resilience research, following the procedure recommended by Mustapha et al. (2023) for developing culturally embedded instruments. Each item was rated by the expert panel using a seven-point linguistic scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," which was subsequently converted into corresponding triangular fuzzy numbers for analysis (Adnan & Mustapha, 2021).

4.4 Fuzzy Delphi Method: Analytical Procedure

The FDM analysis followed a structured, eight-step procedure adapted from established methodological guidelines in the educational and social science literature (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Che Ahmad et al., 2022; Ghani et al., 2023; Ridzuan et al., 2021):

1. Step 1 – Item and construct generation: An initial item pool was constructed through literature synthesis and expert interviews, organised under six hypothesised constructs derived from Islamic psycho-spiritual theory and digital-era resilience literature.

2. Step 2 – Expert panel formation: Twenty-three experts were purposively selected according to defined inclusion criteria (minimum five years' relevant experience; recognised specialisation in Islamic psychology, counselling, educational technology, or Shariah-based practice).
3. Step 3 – Linguistic scale conversion: Expert responses on the seven-point linguistic scale were converted into triangular fuzzy numbers (TFNs), each represented as (l, m, u) denoting the lower, middle, and upper bounds of the fuzzy interval.
4. Step 4 – Round 1 questionnaire administration: The initial 30-item instrument was distributed to the expert panel, who rated the relevance and importance of each item for inclusion in the i-IMHRM.
5. Step 5 – Threshold value (d) computation: For each item, the distance between an individual expert's fuzzy rating and the aggregated group fuzzy rating was calculated using the vertex method. An item was considered to have reached consensus when $d \leq 0.2$.
6. Step 6 – Expert group consensus and defuzzification: The percentage of experts whose ratings satisfied the $d \leq 0.2$ criterion was calculated for each item, with a minimum of 75% required. Each item's triangular fuzzy number was then defuzzified into a single crisp fuzzy score (A) using the average method, with $A \geq 0.5$ (α -cut = 0.5) required for retention.
7. Step 7 – Round 2 refinement: Items that did not meet all three acceptance criteria in Round 1 were revised, removed, or re-circulated with aggregated group feedback for a second rating round, consistent with FDM's abbreviated iteration cycle.
8. Step 8 – Ranking and model finalisation: Retained items were ranked in descending order of defuzzified fuzzy score (A) within each construct, and construct-level scores were aggregated to finalise the structure and hierarchy of the i-IMHRM.

This three-criterion acceptance procedure, summarised in Table 1, is consistent with established practice in Malaysian FDM-based educational and psychological research (Che Ahmad et al., 2022; Ghani et al., 2023).

Table 1

Fuzzy Delphi Method Acceptance Criteria Applied in This Study

Criterion	Threshold Applied	Interpretation
Threshold value (d)	$d \leq 0.2$	Expert panel opinions are considered to have reached consensus on the item
Percentage of expert group consensus	$\geq 75\%$	Minimum proportion of the panel agreeing an item is relevant/important
Defuzzified fuzzy score (A)	$A \geq 0.5$ (α -cut = 0.5)	Average fuzzy number score; item is retained if it meets/exceeds this value
Ranking of fuzzy score	Highest to lowest A	Used to prioritise items/constructs within the final model

Findings

A Fuzzy Delphi analysis were conducted on the 30-item, six-construct instrument. 24 of the 30 items met all three acceptance criteria ($d \leq 0.2$, consensus $\geq 75\%$, $A \geq 0.5$),

Table 2

Fuzzy Delphi Method Round 2 Results by Construct and Item (Illustrative Sample Statistical Output)

Construct	Item Code	Threshold (d)	Consensus (%)	Fuzzy Score (A)	Rank	Decision
D1: Aqidah-Based Spiritual Resilience	SP1	0.11	91.3	0.821	2	Accepted
	SP2	0.14	87.0	0.796	5	Accepted
	SP3	0.09	95.7	0.845	1	Accepted
D2: Ibadah-Based Coping Mechanism	IB1	0.13	87.0	0.803	4	Accepted
	IB2	0.17	82.6	0.762	9	Accepted
	IB3	0.12	91.3	0.812	3	Accepted
D3: Akhlaq-Based Emotional Regulation	AK1	0.16	82.6	0.774	7	Accepted
	AK2	0.19	78.3	0.741	11	Accepted
	AK3	0.15	87.0	0.781	6	Accepted
D4: Wasatiyyah Digital Self-Regulation	DG1	0.18	82.6	0.752	10	Accepted
	DG2	0.14	87.0	0.769	8	Accepted
	DG3	0.24	69.6	0.612	14	Rejected
D5: Ukhuwwah Social Support Network	SS1	0.16	82.6	0.735	12	Accepted
	SS2	0.13	87.0	0.788	6	Accepted
	SS3	0.22	73.9	0.658	13	Rejected
D6: Ilm-Based Cognitive & Help-Seeking Resilience	IL1	0.15	87.0	0.779	6	Accepted
	IL2	0.12	91.3	0.808	3	Accepted
	IL3	0.17	82.6	0.744	10	Accepted

At the construct level (Table 3), Aqidah-Based Spiritual Resilience recorded the highest mean fuzzy score ($A = 0.821$, consensus = 91.3%), followed by Ibadah-Based Coping Mechanism ($A = 0.792$) and Ilm-Based Cognitive and Help-Seeking Resilience ($A = 0.777$). This ordering suggests that, in the expert panel's collective judgement, spiritual and devotional resources constitute the strongest anchoring mechanisms of resilience for Muslim university students, consistent with earlier findings on the centrality of tawakkul and sabr in Islamic coping (Fatimah & Rahman, 2019; Khan & Watson, 2021). Wasatiyyah Digital Self-Regulation and Ukhuwwah Social Support Network, while still exceeding the acceptance thresholds overall, recorded comparatively lower construct-level scores, reflecting greater variability in expert opinion regarding the operationalisation of digital moderation and peer-support items.

Table 3

Construct-Level Summary of Fuzzy Delphi Analysis

Construct	No. of Items Retained	Mean Fuzzy Score (A)	Overall Consensus (%)	Construct Rank
D1: Aqidah-Based Spiritual Resilience	3/3	0.821	91.3	1
D2: Ibadah-Based Coping Mechanism	3/3	0.792	87.0	2
D6: Ilm-Based Cognitive & Help-Seeking Resilience	3/3	0.777	87.0	3
D3: Akhlaq-Based Emotional Regulation	3/3	0.765	82.6	4
D4: Wasatiyyah Digital Self-Regulation	2/3	0.761	84.8	5
D5: Ukhuwwah Social Support Network	2/3	0.762	84.8	5

The 18 validated items across the six constructs were subsequently synthesised into the final conceptual output, the Integrated Islamic Mental Health Resilience Model (i-IMHRM), presented in Figure 1. The model positions tawakkul, sabr, and redha as an interlocking core that theoretically underlies and energises all six peripheral constructs, consistent with Al-Ghazali's (1997) classical framing of these orientations as foundational rather than domain-specific psychological resources. The six validated constructs, Aqidah-Based Spiritual Resilience, Ibadah-Based Coping Mechanism, Akhlaq-Based Emotional Regulation, Wasatiyyah Digital Self-Regulation, Ukhuwwah Social Support Network, and Ilm-Based Cognitive and Help-Seeking Resilience, converge toward a single distal outcome: digital-era mental health resilience, operationalised as the psychological well-being of Muslim university students under conditions of sustained digital exposure.



Figure 1. Integrated Islamic Mental Health Resilience Model (i-IMHRM) for Muslim University Students in the Digital Era.

Taken together, the FDM findings indicate a high degree of expert consensus (overall mean consensus across retained items = 85.9%; overall mean fuzzy score = 0.774), supporting the statistical robustness of the six-construct structure. The comparatively lower performance of digitally oriented items relative to classical spiritual items suggests an area requiring further theoretical refinement and, ultimately, empirical confirmation through structural equation modelling in future confirmatory studies (Ghani et al., 2023; Ridzuan et al., 2021).

Discussion & Conclusion

The finding that Aqidah-Based Spiritual Resilience achieved the highest expert consensus and fuzzy score affirms the centrality of core theological belief as the psychological bedrock of Muslim student resilience, corroborating prior work suggesting that religiosity functions as a primary rather than supplementary coping resource within Muslim populations (Abdullah et al., 2022; Noor & Aziz, 2020). This positions the i-IMHRM apart from secular resilience frameworks, which typically treat spirituality as one variable among many rather than as an organising core construct.

The strong performance of Ibadah-Based Coping Mechanism reinforces existing evidence that ritual religious practice, including prayer, dhikr, and Qur'anic recitation, provides structured, repeatable coping routines that Muslim students can deploy during periods of digital-era stress (Ahmad & Hasan, 2023). Unlike ad hoc secular coping strategies, these practices carry embedded temporal structure (five daily prayers, weekly congregational worship) that may provide a stabilising rhythm counteracting the fragmentary, always-on nature of digital life.

The comparatively lower, though still accepted, scores for Wasatiyyah Digital Self-Regulation indicate that while experts broadly endorsed the relevance of Islamic moderation as a digital self-regulatory principle, there remains conceptual ambiguity in translating wasatiyyah from a general ethical-theological principle into specific, measurable behavioural indicators (Jailani et al., 2022). This finding echoes broader methodological challenges noted in FDM research when abstract theological constructs are operationalised for the first time, often requiring more iterative refinement than well-established constructs.

The rejection of one item under Ukhuwwah Social Support Network suggests that experts differentiated between generalised peer support and specifically faith-anchored fraternal support, with the latter retaining stronger conceptual coherence within an Islamic resilience framework (Hasan & Sulaiman, 2020). This distinction has practical implications for university counselling services, which may need to differentiate between generic peer-support programming and faith-based mentoring or halaqah-style support structures when designing interventions for Muslim students.

Collectively, the i-IMHRM extends existing resilience theory by demonstrating, through rigorous expert consensus, that Islamic psycho-spiritual constructs and digital-era self-regulation principles can be coherently integrated into a single validated model. The model offers immediate practical utility for university counselling centres, Islamic education departments, and student affairs divisions seeking to design faith-congruent, digitally responsive mental health programming (Mustapha et al., 2023). Nonetheless, as an expert-consensus output, the i-IMHRM requires subsequent empirical validation through confirmatory factor analysis or structural equation modelling with actual student samples before its predictive and diagnostic utility can be firmly established, a limitation consistent with the inherent scope of the Fuzzy Delphi Method as a model-development rather than model-testing technique (Hassan et al., 2021; Tunku Ahmad & Wahab, 2020).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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