

Research (English summary)

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# The information needs of Al-Azhar preachers in the governorates of Northern Upper Egypt: a field study

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## Abstract

The present study sought to investigate the motives that drive Al-Azhar preachers in the governorates of Northern Upper Egypt to search for information, to identify the sources of information they resort to in meeting their informational needs, and to uncover the difficulties and obstacles they face during the information-seeking process, as well as the means by which they attempt to overcome them. Given the nature of the research, a descriptive-analytical method was adopted, with a questionnaire as the data collection instrument.

The findings revealed that the proportion of Al-Azhar male preachers surpassed that of females, with males accounting for 93.5% compared to 6.5% for females. The study further demonstrated that the primary motive for information-seeking among Al-Azhar preachers was preaching and guidance (82.2%), followed by issuing fatwas (65.2%). It was also found that the most needed type of information among Al-Azhar preachers was religious information (such as creed, Sufism, Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith, etc.), ranking first at 90.7%.

The study concluded with several recommendations; the most significant of which are: strengthening training programs for Al-Azhar preachers in the skills of providing information to beneficiary communities; ensuring the availability of appropriate technological facilities (computers, tablets, internet access, etc.) and making them accessible to Al-Azhar preachers both at home and within Al-Azhar regions; and establishing libraries for preachers across the various Al-Azhar regions, equipped with seminal religious references, in order to facilitate their access to information.

## 1. Study overview and methodology

The study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate how Al-Azhar preachers identify, seek, and utilize information.

### Scope and context

- Geographic Focus: The northern Upper Egypt governorates of Minya, Beni Suef, and Fayoum.

- Objective: To identify motivations for information seeking, monitor sources used, and uncover obstacles faced during the retrieval process.
- Significance: Preachers are viewed as a "sensitive and active" social group responsible for promoting moderate Islamic discourse and addressing societal issues like domestic violence and tribal vendettas.

### Methodological rigor

- Population: A total population of 320 preachers.
- Sample: 247 respondents (77% response rate).
- Tool: A questionnaire designed across several stages, including a "jury validity" check by five professors in library and information science from various Egyptian and Omani universities.
- Statistical Analysis: Data was processed using SPSS, utilizing Pearson correlation coefficients and Cronbach's Alpha (scoring high reliability at 0.87).

## 2. Demographic and Professional Profile

The demographic data reveals a workforce in transition, characterized by a younger, highly educated cohort.

### Gender distribution

Gender	Percentage	Contextual Note
Male	93.5%	Historically the dominant group in preaching.
Female	6.5%	A small but vital group; Al-Azhar began appointing female preachers in 2015.

### Age and Experience

- Age: 66.8% of the sample falls within the 30 to 40-year-old bracket. This youth is noted as a "great advantage," as they are perceived to be more adaptable, enthusiastic, and tech-savvy.
- Experience: 60.7% have between 5 and 10 years of professional experience, striking a balance between foundational knowledge and contemporary awareness.

### Educational Attainment

The majority (75.7%) hold a "Licence" (Bachelor's degree) from Al-Azhar. Notably, a significant portion pursues postgraduate studies, with 16.2% holding Master's degrees and 2.8% holding Doctorates, reflecting a drive for deep specialization in fields like Fiqh and Creed.

### 3. Analysis of Information Needs

The study defines an "Information Need" as a gap between a person's current knowledge and their goals. For Al-Azhar preachers, this gap is often bridged to solve specific societal problems or provide religious clarity.

#### Primary Motivations for Information Seeking

Preachers seek information primarily to fulfill their professional mandates:

Rank	Motivation	Percentage
1	Preaching and guidance	82.2%
2	Fatwa (issuing legal rulings)	65.2%
3	General culture and knowledge	44.9%
4	Family guidance	44.5%
5	Academic research	35.2%
6	Professional specialization tracking	33.2%
7	Reconciliation (tribal/vendetta issues)	30.4%

#### Subject matter interests

The overwhelming majority of information sought is Religious Information (90.7%), covering:

- Tafsir (Exegesis) and Hadith.
- Fiqh (Jurisprudence) and Tawhid (Monotheism).
- Sufism and Ethics.

### 4. Linguistic and global outreach

The study highlights the role of Al-Azhar preachers in "correcting misconceptions" about Islam globally.

- Arabic Proficiency: Fundamental for understanding the Quran and Sunnah.
- Foreign Languages: 85% of those who speak a second language choose English. This is attributed to its status as a global lingua franca, essential for delivering lessons to non-Arabic speakers and translating Islamic materials.
- Other Languages: A negligible 0.8% speak French, while 14.2% report no second language proficiency.

## 5. Identified challenges and barriers

While the study highlights the *need* for information, it also exposes significant "informatics difficulties" that preachers face:

- **Technical Skills:** Many preachers struggle with the specific skills required to navigate digital databases and internet resources effectively.
- **Resource Compatibility:** Preachers often select databases that do not match their specific subject needs or find the search process overly complex.
- **Evaluation Dilemmas:** A noted difficulty in determining the reliability and relevance of the information retrieved (deciding "whether it benefits them or not").

## 6. Strategic recommendations

To enhance the efficacy of Al-Azhar preachers in Upper Egypt, the study proposes the following interventions:

- **Skill Development:** Implement comprehensive training programs focused on "informatics skills," specifically how to use search engines and religious databases.
- **Technological Infrastructure:** Provide preachers with appropriate technical equipment, including computers and tablets, and ensure reliable internet access at home and in Al-Azhar administrative centers.
- **Specialized Libraries:** Establish dedicated libraries within the Al-Azhar regions of Upper Egypt, specifically stocked with the "mother books" (foundational texts) of Islamic sciences.
- **Digital Platforms:** Create a unified digital presence or "knowledge bag" for each preacher to facilitate easy access to authenticated religious information.
- **Female Preacher Expansion:** Increase the number of female preachers to better serve the specific religious and social needs of women in the community.