
Reconfiguring Religious Authority in the Digital Age: an Analysis of Lay Preaching in Indonesian Muslim Society

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Abstract

This article analyzes the reconfiguration of religious authority within the Indonesian digital ecosystem through a study of three non-traditional da'wah figures: Syifa Nurfadhilah, Ning Umi Laila, and Akri Patrio. The three represent a new model of religious authority not based on scholarly lineage or formal institutions, but rather formed through digital performativity, emotional narratives, and the active engagement of audiences on social media. This research uses a qualitative approach with digital content analysis and a study of audience interaction in the comment section as the primary data. The research findings indicate that religious legitimacy now operates as "authority from below," formed participatorily through mechanisms of affection, psychological identification, and social and algorithmic capital. Syifa presents a narrative-based authority on healing and self-love that resonates with young women; Ning Umi Laila bridges pesantren traditions with digital culture through humor and warmth; while Akri Patrio converts celebrity reputation into dakwah credibility. This finding supports the thesis that the mediatization of religion has led to the fragmentation and pluralization of authority, and shows a shift in da'wah from institutional spaces to open, horizontal digital arenas heavily influenced by platform logic. This article recommends the need to reorient traditional da'wah strategies to remain relevant amidst an increasingly digitalized and democratized religious landscape.

Keywords

Digital Religious Authority, Mediatization of Da'wah, Authority from Below

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the rapid expansion of digital media has significantly reshaped the circulation of Islamic knowledge and the configuration of religious authority in Muslim societies. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, this transformation has generated new dynamics in the production and contestation of religious authority. Historically, Islamic authority in Indonesia was largely associated with *ulama* whose legitimacy derived from pesantren education, scholarly genealogy (*sanad*), and institutional affiliation with established religious organisations. However, the emergence of social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok has increasingly enabled new actors to participate in the dissemination of religious knowledge outside these traditional institutional structures. A growing body of scholarship on digital Islam in Indonesia has examined how Islamic authority is being renegotiated in online environments. Studies on the digital engagement of major Islamic organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah demonstrate



how these institutions actively utilise digital platforms to maintain religious authority and respond to emerging online publics (Husein & Slama, 2023; Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2021). Other scholars have analysed the circulation of digital fatwas and the role of online platforms in reshaping the relationship between Islamic institutions and Muslim audiences (Hosen, 2019; Bunt, 2018). In addition, research has highlighted the growing competition between Salafi-oriented digital preachers and mainstream Islamic organisations, showing how digital media have become an arena where different actors compete for religious legitimacy and influence (Beta, 2023; Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2021).

While these studies demonstrate that religious authority in Indonesia is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, much of the existing literature focuses on institutionally affiliated scholars or religious influencers who possess recognised Islamic educational credentials. Comparatively less attention has been given to actors who gain religious influence without formal religious academic training or institutional endorsement, yet manage to attract significant online audiences and shape religious discourse. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding how religious authority is constructed and legitimised in digital environments. Within this study, the term lay preacher refers to individuals who publicly disseminate Islamic messages without formal Islamic academic credentials or institutional recognition typically associated with the category of *ulama*. However, the Indonesian digital preaching landscape also includes actors who occupy a hybrid position between traditional and non-traditional authority. Some digital preachers possess elements of traditional legitimacy such as pesantren education or familial scholarly lineage—while simultaneously building influence through digital performance and platform visibility. Rather than treating these actors as anomalies within the category of lay preaching, this study conceptualises them as hybrid authorities, whose legitimacy emerges through the interaction between traditional forms of religious capital and digitally mediated forms of visibility and engagement. Recognising this hybrid configuration allows the study to analyse digital preaching not as a simple opposition between institutional scholars and lay actors, but as a spectrum of authority shaped by both religious credentials and platform dynamics.

The emergence of these actors reflects broader processes described in the literature on the mediatization of religion, where religious authority becomes increasingly shaped by media logics, technological infrastructures, and audience participation (Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). Campbell's concept of networked religious authority further suggests that religious credibility in digital environments emerges through interactions between religious actors, audiences, and communication networks rather than through hierarchical institutional structures (Campbell, 2020, 2023b). However, while this framework highlights the role of networks in shaping authority, it does not fully account for the specific role of platform architectures and algorithmic systems that structure visibility and influence within contemporary digital environments. To address this limitation, this study introduces the concept of platformized Islamic authority, referring to a form of religious authority that emerges through the interaction between religious actors, platform infrastructures, and algorithmically mediated audience engagement. Unlike the broader concept of networked religious authority, which emphasises relational dynamics within social networks, platformized authority highlights the role of platform-specific mechanisms such as recommendation algorithms, engagement metrics, and content visibility systems in shaping the production and distribution of religious credibility. In this sense, digital platforms do not merely host religious communication but actively structure the conditions under which religious authority can emerge and circulate.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to digital religion, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, while many studies examine the digital strategies of established Islamic organisations

or recognised religious scholars, relatively few focus specifically on non-traditional digital preachers whose authority is constructed primarily through digital visibility and performance rather than formal religious credentials (Kerim et al., 2025; Zaid, Rahman, et al., 2022). Second, much of the existing research remains descriptive and does not systematically analyse how visual presentation, narrative strategies, and platform affordances contribute to the construction of religious authority within digital preaching content. Third, although audience participation is often acknowledged as an important feature of digital religion, there is still limited research examining the conditions under which audience engagement reinforces, challenges, or transforms the authority of digital preachers.

This study seeks to address these gaps by analysing the reconfiguration of Islamic authority in Indonesia's digital religious sphere through an examination of digital preaching content produced by three influential online preachers representing different positions within the spectrum of digital religious authority. The research addresses the following questions: How is religious authority constructed and represented within digital preaching content in the Indonesian online religious sphere?, How do platform affordances, visual performativity, and algorithmic visibility contribute to the formation of authority among digital preachers? and Under what conditions does audience participation reinforce, negotiate, or challenge the authority of digital preachers in digital religious networks? By addressing these questions, this research contributes to the study of digital Islam in three ways. First, it advances the concept of platformized Islamic authority as an analytical framework for understanding how religious legitimacy emerges within algorithmically structured digital environments. Second, it provides a systematic analysis of the visual and narrative construction of authority within digital preaching content, an aspect that remains underexplored in existing studies. Third, it examines the role of audience participation as a dynamic factor that can both consolidate and contest the authority of digital religious actors. Through these contributions, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic authority in contemporary Indonesia is increasingly shaped by the interaction between traditional religious legitimacy, digital platform infrastructures, and participatory online publics.

2. METHODS

This study employs a multi-platform netnographic approach combined with qualitative content and discourse analysis to examine how religious authority is constructed, negotiated, and circulated through digital preaching practices within Indonesian Muslim online environments. Netnography is particularly suitable for analysing digitally mediated religious communication because it allows researchers to systematically observe interactions, narratives, and symbolic practices within online communities across different social media platforms. Rather than attempting to replicate the immersive community engagement typical of classical digital ethnography, this research focuses on the structured analysis of publicly accessible digital content and audience interactions produced within platform-based religious communication.

The study adopts a multiple-case study design in order to compare different patterns of digital authority construction across distinct types of online preachers. The unit of analysis consists of three prominent digital preaching figures: Akri Patrio, Ning Umi Laila, and Syifa Nurfadhilah. These figures were selected through purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) their substantial visibility within Indonesian digital Islamic discourse and (2) their representation of distinct styles of digital religious communication. The selection of these three figures is also informed by a preliminary mapping of digital preaching styles identified in prior scholarship on Indonesian digital Islam, which highlights the

diversity of religious communication strategies emerging in online environments (Beta, 2023; Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2021). Based on this mapping, the study analytically distinguishes three forms of digital preaching styles that frequently appear in Indonesian online religious discourse: celebrity-based preaching, vernacular-pop religious communication, and Islamic lifestyle–motivational preaching. These categories are used as analytical heuristics rather than rigid typologies, allowing the study to examine how different communicative styles contribute to the construction of digital religious authority.

Data were collected from three major platforms widely used for Islamic preaching in Indonesia: TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. The data collection period was conducted between 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024. This twelve-month observation window was selected in order to capture stable patterns of algorithmic visibility, audience engagement, and content production cycles across platforms. Limiting the dataset to a clearly defined period also allows the study to maintain analytical consistency and enables future replication of the research. The dataset consists of 90 digital preaching posts or videos, with 30 posts selected for each preacher. Posts were selected based on three criteria: (1) the presence of explicit religious or da‘wah messages, (2) a visible level of audience engagement (such as comments, likes, or shares), and (3) representation of different formats of digital preaching content, including short motivational videos, lecture excerpts, and narrative storytelling. In addition, approximately 360 audience comments were analysed to capture patterns of audience interpretation and engagement with the preaching content. Comments were selected using a maximum engagement sampling strategy, focusing on highly interacted comments (e.g., most-liked or most-replied comments) in order to capture dominant patterns of audience response.

Table 1. Dataset Overview

Preacher	Platform (TikTok / YouTube / Instagram)	Posts/Videos Analysed	Comments Analysed
Akri Patrio	TikTok, YouTube, Instagram	30	±120
Ning Umi Laila	TikTok, YouTube, Instagram	30	±120
Syifa Nurfadhilah	TikTok, YouTube, Instagram	30	±120
Total	—	90 posts/videos	±360 comments

The analytical procedure combines qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis follows the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first stage, all selected videos, captions, and comments were repeatedly reviewed to achieve data familiarisation. In the second stage, initial codes were generated inductively by identifying recurring elements such as visual presentation styles, rhetorical strategies, emotional appeals, religious symbolism, and references to religious authority. In the third stage, these codes were grouped into broader candidate themes, including patterns of authority construction, performative authenticity, audience validation, and algorithmic amplification. During the fourth stage, the themes were systematically reviewed and refined by comparing coded segments across the dataset to ensure internal coherence within themes and clear distinctions between themes. The fifth stage involved defining and naming themes, clarifying how each theme contributes to the broader analysis of digital religious authority. Finally, the sixth stage consisted of producing an analytical narrative that integrates empirical findings with theoretical insights from the literature on mediatization of religion and networked religious authority.

To identify broader structural patterns, the analysis was further extended through cross-case comparison. This comparative procedure examined similarities and differences in authority construction strategies across the three figures by comparing (1) visual performance styles, (2) narrative framing of religious messages, (3) audience engagement patterns, and (4) platform-specific visibility dynamics. This cross-case approach allows the study to identify both shared mechanisms and distinctive strategies through which digital religious authority is constructed in different communicative contexts. To enhance analytical credibility, the study employs triangulation across three dimensions: platforms, content types, and audience responses. Platform triangulation enables the analysis of how authority construction may vary across TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Content triangulation compares different forms of digital preaching material, including short videos, lecture excerpts, and motivational religious messages. Audience triangulation examines how different segments of the online audience respond to preaching content through comments, reactions, and engagement metrics.

Given that the study analyses publicly accessible social media content, ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with established guidelines for internet research. All analysed posts and comments were drawn from publicly available accounts and publicly visible comment sections. Nevertheless, to minimise potential risks to individuals, usernames of audience commenters are anonymised and screenshots used in the study avoid displaying identifiable personal information. The research therefore treats publicly accessible digital content as contextual public data while maintaining ethical sensitivity toward user privacy. Finally, the researcher acknowledges their positionality as an observer of Indonesian Muslim digital culture. As the interpretation of religious discourse may be influenced by the researcher's cultural and intellectual background, reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process to minimise interpretive bias. Analytical decisions were grounded in observable communication patterns within the dataset rather than in normative assumptions about religious authority. Through this methodological framework, the study provides a systematic analysis of how religious authority is constructed and negotiated within Indonesia's digital religious sphere, enabling a deeper understanding of how platform dynamics, communicative strategies, and audience participation collectively shape the contemporary transformation of Islamic authority.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Patterns of Digital Religious Authority Construction

The configuration of religious authority within Indonesia's digital ecosystem reveals a significant shift from the traditional model of legitimacy grounded in scholarly lineage and institutional affiliation toward a model that is increasingly performative, affective, and platform-mediated. Historically, religious authority in Indonesian Muslim society was largely associated with ulama who derived legitimacy from pesantren education, scholarly genealogy (*sanad*), and formal religious institutions. However, the rise of social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram has created new communicative spaces where authority can emerge through different mechanisms. Within this context, the analysis of digital preaching practices conducted by Syifa Nurfadhilah, Ning Umi Laila, and Akri Patrio demonstrates how religious legitimacy is increasingly constructed through narrative authenticity, emotional engagement, and platform visibility.

Each of these figures illustrates a distinct strategy for constructing digital religious authority. Syifa Nurfadhilah establishes authority through a moral storytelling approach and a motivational-

religious communication style that resonates strongly with millennial and Generation Z audiences. Rather than relying on formal academic credentials in Islamic scholarship, she builds legitimacy through personal narratives, emotional resonance, and messages centered on healing, self-acceptance, and spiritual resilience. Her preaching style emphasizes affective intimacy, positioning her as a relatable spiritual companion rather than a doctrinal authority. This communicative strategy allows her to cultivate a strong emotional connection with her audience, where authority is derived from perceived authenticity and shared experiences.

In contrast, Ning Umi Laila represents a form of hybrid authority that combines elements of traditional pesantren heritage with digital communication practices. Unlike Syifa, Ning possesses a background connected to pesantren culture, which provides symbolic religious capital. However, she adapts this traditional legitimacy to the logic of digital media through humor, storytelling, and conversational preaching styles that are easily circulated on social media platforms. Her sermons often integrate religious advice with everyday cultural references, enabling her to bridge traditional Islamic learning with contemporary digital culture. This hybrid configuration demonstrates how traditional religious authority can be rearticulated within digital environments rather than simply displaced by them.

A different pathway to digital religious legitimacy can be observed in the case of Akri Patrio, whose authority is closely linked to celebrity capital. With a background in the entertainment industry, Akri brings an existing reservoir of public recognition into the field of religious preaching. His sermons frequently combine humor, moral reflection, and motivational messages, creating a form of “moral entertainment” that resonates with a broad digital audience. In this context, religious authority emerges not from scholarly training but from familiarity, public trust, and long-standing audience recognition. Akri’s case illustrates how symbolic capital accumulated in other public domains can be converted into religious credibility within the digital preaching space.

Across these three cases, it becomes evident that religious authority in the digital environment is no longer exclusively controlled by actors with formal religious credentials. Instead, authority can be constructed by individuals who successfully manage communicative performance, emotional resonance, and platform visibility. This transformation reflects a broader democratization of religious authority, where the boundaries between traditional scholars and digital influencers become increasingly blurred. Such findings reinforce Campbell’s argument that “religious digital creatives” derive influence not primarily from theological training but from their ability to communicate effectively within digital networks and build sustained engagement with online audiences (Campbell, 2023a).

This shift also aligns with previous studies on the mediatization of religion, which demonstrate that digital media do not necessarily secularize religious practice but can instead intensify religious engagement through new communicative forms (Giorgi, 2019; Setianto, 2015). Within the framework of networked religion and the concept of digital “third spaces” (Helland, 2016), religious authority is increasingly produced through social connectivity, participatory communication, and shared affective experiences rather than hierarchical institutional structures. At the same time, digital religious authority operates within a broader ecosystem shaped by algorithmic visibility and platform infrastructures. Social media algorithms determine which religious content becomes visible, widely circulated, and socially recognized. Consequently, authority is increasingly shaped by the interaction between narrative performance, audience engagement patterns, and the technological logic of digital platforms. Religious legitimacy therefore emerges from a complex interplay between communicative strategy,

emotional resonance, and algorithmic amplification.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest the need to rethink religious authority beyond the traditional theological and institutional frameworks that have dominated classical religious studies. Instead, authority in the digital age must be understood as a product of affective communication, performative authenticity, and platform-mediated visibility. Such an approach aligns with contemporary discussions within the literature on mediatization and digital religion, which emphasize the role of media infrastructures in shaping religious practices and authority structures (Bunt, 2024; Lundby, 2023). Practically, this transformation has significant implications for the position of traditional religious scholars. When authority becomes linked to visibility, engagement metrics, and communicative resonance, scholars who remain absent from digital platforms may find their influence gradually diminishing within public religious discourse. This dynamic reflects the broader logic of the mediatization of religion, where media infrastructures increasingly shape both the structure and the content of religious communication (Eisenlohr, 2017). Rather than representing a simple decline of traditional authority, however, this transformation may also open opportunities for religious institutions to rearticulate their presence within digital environments and develop new forms of engagement with younger generations.

Ultimately, the success of figures such as Syifa Nurfadhilah, Ning Umi Laila, and Akri Patrio demonstrates that digital religious authority is deeply intertwined with narrative authenticity and affective communication. These preachers are not merely transmitters of religious messages but also communicative actors who combine personal spirituality, cultural relevance, and technological literacy to engage contemporary audiences. Their authority reflects the emergence of a new configuration of religious leadership in which legitimacy is continuously negotiated within the dynamic interaction between digital platforms, audiences, and communicative performance.

B. Comparative Patterns of Authority Construction

A systematic cross-case comparison reveals both convergences and divergences in the strategies through which Syifa Nurfadhilah, Ning Umi Laila, and Akri Patrio construct digital religious legitimacy. The lay preaching practices of these three figures demonstrate how personal narratives, emotional communication styles, and digital self-branding strategies contribute to the emergence of new forms of religious authority in Indonesia's digital sphere. Rather than relying on institutional religious authority, all three figures develop forms of self-narration, identity production, and digital personas that align with the communicative logic of social media platforms and the expectations of online audiences.

Despite these shared characteristics, each figure constructs authority through a distinct communicative pathway. Syifa Nurfadhilah relies heavily on short, repetitive, and emotionally resonant narratives that emphasise themes of healing, self-acceptance, and trust in God. Her preaching style avoids complex juridical discussions and instead focuses on affective communication that builds intimacy with audiences, particularly younger followers. Through this approach, her authority is derived primarily from emotional authenticity and perceived personal sincerity.

Ning Umi Laila, by contrast, represents a hybrid form of authority that integrates elements of pesantren heritage with digital communication practices. Her sermons often combine humour, light fiqh-based narratives, and conversational storytelling. This approach enables her to bridge traditional Islamic scholarship with the communicative preferences of digital audiences. In this sense, Ning's authority emerges not only from emotional engagement but also from the symbolic legitimacy

associated with pesantren culture.

Meanwhile, Akri Patrio constructs authority through a different form of symbolic capital rooted in celebrity recognition. Leveraging his background as a public entertainer, Akri presents a style of “moral entertainment” that blends humour, light religious reflection, and motivational storytelling. His religious authority therefore emerges less from doctrinal expertise and more from familiarity, charisma, and the nostalgic relationship audiences have with his public persona. Across these three cases, a shared pattern becomes visible: performativity rather than scholarly training becomes a key mechanism for building authority in the digital preaching environment. Religious legitimacy is formed through content continuity, emotional resonance, and digital intimacy rather than through traditional scholarly lineage. In this sense, religious authority increasingly operates within what may be described as an “authority marketplace,” where different actors compete for visibility and legitimacy within platform-based communication environments.

This dynamic can also be interpreted through the concept of religious self-branding (Gnanakumar, 2020), where religious identity is strategically constructed and communicated through digital media practices. Similar patterns have been observed in other contexts, such as the emergence of Islamic influencers and faith-based entrepreneurs who combine spirituality with digital marketing strategies (Putri & Achsanida Hendratmi, 2022). In these cases, authenticity and personal narrative become central elements in building symbolic capital within online religious communities.

The communicative strategies employed by Syifa and Ning particularly highlight the importance of narrative authenticity, where personal experience and emotional storytelling strengthen audience identification. Previous studies have shown that such narrative techniques can enhance audience engagement by creating a sense of proximity and relatability in digital preaching (Alkhalaf, 2022; Mohammed Saleh Al-Hamzi et al., 2023). At the same time, digital influencers like Akri demonstrate how public visibility and performative communication can convert non-religious forms of social capital into religious credibility.

Table 2. Cross-Case Comparison of Authority Construction Strategies

The differences between these three forms of digital religious authority become clearer when compared systematically.

Dimension	Syifa Nurfadhilah	Ning Umi Laila	Akri Patrio
Source of authority	Emotional storytelling	Pesantren heritage + digital humor	Celebrity capital
Communication style	Motivational narrative	Hybrid religious-pop communication	Moral entertainment
Audience relationship	Intimate emotional guidance	Community-based engagement	Nostalgic familiarity
Legitimacy mechanism	Emotional resonance	Hybrid credibility	Social recognition

This comparison highlights that digital religious authority is not a uniform phenomenon but rather a spectrum shaped by different forms of symbolic capital. Emotional authenticity enables Syifa to cultivate strong affective identification with her audience. Ning Umi Laila’s pesantren background provides symbolic legitimacy that complements her digital communication style. Akri Patrio’s authority, meanwhile, emerges from the transformation of celebrity reputation into religious credibility. The analytical significance of this comparison lies in demonstrating that different forms of capital—

emotional capital, religious capital, and celebrity capital—produce distinct pathways to legitimacy within the same digital platform environment. This finding supports previous studies showing that digital influencers increasingly shape contemporary Muslim identity and religious discourse through flexible and context-sensitive communication practices (Febrian, 2024; Zaid, Fedtke, et al., 2022).

At the same time, the emergence of these new forms of authority also reveals a broader transformation in the structure of religious legitimacy. Authority in digital preaching environments is increasingly negotiated through communicative performance, audience engagement, and platform visibility rather than institutional recognition. From a theoretical perspective, this shift reflects the ongoing mediatization of religion, where religious communication becomes intertwined with market logics, platform economies, and digital attention dynamics (Ding et al., 2025; Mora & Podkalicka, 2024). Practically, however, this transformation also introduces tensions between religious authenticity and the demands of digital popularity. Preachers such as Syifa, Ning, and Akri must constantly balance the preservation of religious values with the communicative expectations of social media audiences. This tension can lead to forms of religious commodification, where religious messages become embedded within broader attention economies and digital branding practices (F. H. Lubis et al., 2024; Yasuda, 2023). In this context, *dakwah* increasingly operates not only as a form of religious instruction but also as a media product that is curated, circulated, and consumed within digital communication networks.

Despite these challenges, the emergence of lay preaching practices in digital environments also opens opportunities for broader inclusivity and engagement. When conventional preaching formats often struggle to reach younger or urban audiences, digital preaching—characterised by emotional narratives and accessible communication styles—can facilitate higher levels of religious engagement (Rijal, 2020; Rosidi & Yazid, 2021). Consequently, the transformation of digital preaching should be understood not merely as a change in communication style but as part of a broader restructuring of religious authority, power relations, and religious practices within contemporary Muslim societies.

C. Audience Engagement and the Production of Digital Legitimacy

This research finds that the legitimacy of religious authority within Indonesia's digital ecosystem is increasingly shaped by measurable engagement indicators such as views, likes, comments, and shares, as well as by patterns of emotional interaction among audiences. In this environment, authority is no longer produced exclusively by formal religious institutions but instead operates as a form of "bottom-up authority" that is collectively constructed through audience participation. Religious credibility emerges through the visible support, interaction, and interpretive practices of online communities that actively engage with digital preaching content.

This finding corresponds with developments in audience reception studies, which have shifted from simply analysing how audiences decode meaning toward examining how audiences actively participate in meaning production across digital platforms (Schröder, 2019). In the context of digital preaching, audiences do not merely consume religious content but also contribute to its circulation and interpretation through commenting, remixing, and redistributing media fragments. Practices such as clipping sermon excerpts, sharing short video segments, or recirculating lectures across platforms illustrate how religious communication becomes embedded within broader audiovisual and sociotechnical infrastructures (Di Giovanni, 2020; Van Brussel, 2018). Moreover, the spatial and temporal context of digital consumption also shapes audience preferences for *da'wah* content, which emerge from the interaction between local media habits and transnational digital formats (Hill, 2018). To analyse these dynamics systematically, 360 audience comments were coded using thematic analysis.

Four dominant patterns of audience response were identified.

Table 3. Thematic Coding of Audience Comments

Comment Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
Positive affirmation (MasyaAllah, Aamiin)	145	40%
Emotional identification	92	26%
Requests for clarification or textual evidence	63	17%
Humor and relational interaction	60	17%

The thematic frequencies presented in Table 3 represent the distribution of coded patterns across the full dataset of 360 audience comments analysed in this study.

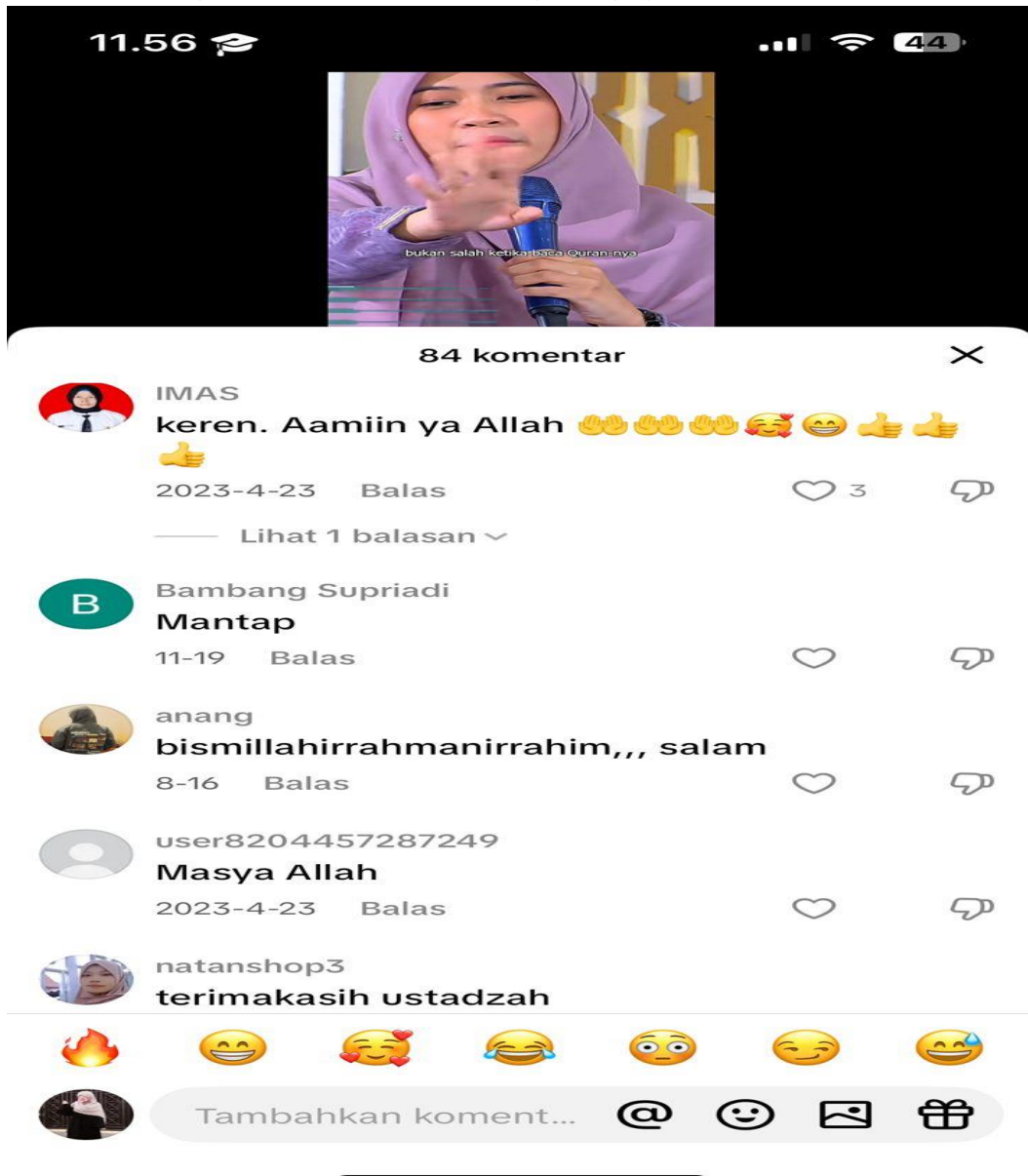
The predominance of positive affirmation indicates that many audiences express religious approval through short ritualised responses such as *"MasyaAllah," "Aamiin ya Allah,"* or *"Mantap."* These expressions function as forms of approval-based legitimacy, where authority is reinforced through visible and repeated expressions of public support. Such comments often appear alongside emojis associated with prayer, affection, or gratitude, indicating that emotional validation plays an important role in the digital recognition of religious authority.

Audience Legitimacy in Syifa Nurfadhilah's Digital Preaching

In the case of Syifa Nurfadhilah, audience legitimacy is largely formed through emotionally resonant responses from younger audiences, particularly women. Comments such as *"MasyaAllah," "Aamiin ya Allah," "Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,"* and *"Thank you, Ustadzah,"* frequently accompanied by prayer or hug emojis, illustrate how followers seek emotional reassurance and spiritual comfort rather than textual verification. These responses indicate that Syifa's authority is produced through what may be described as trustification—the explicit expression of trust and support within public comment spaces. A second pattern visible in these responses is narrativization, where audiences strengthen the meaning of the message by relating it to their own life experiences. Followers often respond by describing personal struggles, emotional healing, or spiritual reflection inspired by the content. In this context, Syifa is perceived less as a doctrinal authority and more as an affective spiritual companion, providing guidance through empathy and emotional proximity rather than through scholarly interpretation.

Three indicators are particularly visible in the comment patterns associated with Syifa's preaching. First, the dominance of positive evaluative expressions such as *"MasyaAllah," "keren,"* or *"mantap"* reflects the mechanism of approval-based legitimacy. Second, ritualised expressions like *"Aamiin ya Allah"* demonstrate a form of performative spiritual participation, where audiences symbolically participate in prayer through digital interaction. Third, the relative absence of critical questions or demands for textual evidence indicates that Syifa's authority is primarily constructed through emotional resonance rather than theological debate

Figure 1: Netizen comments regarding Syifa Nurfadhilah's lecture



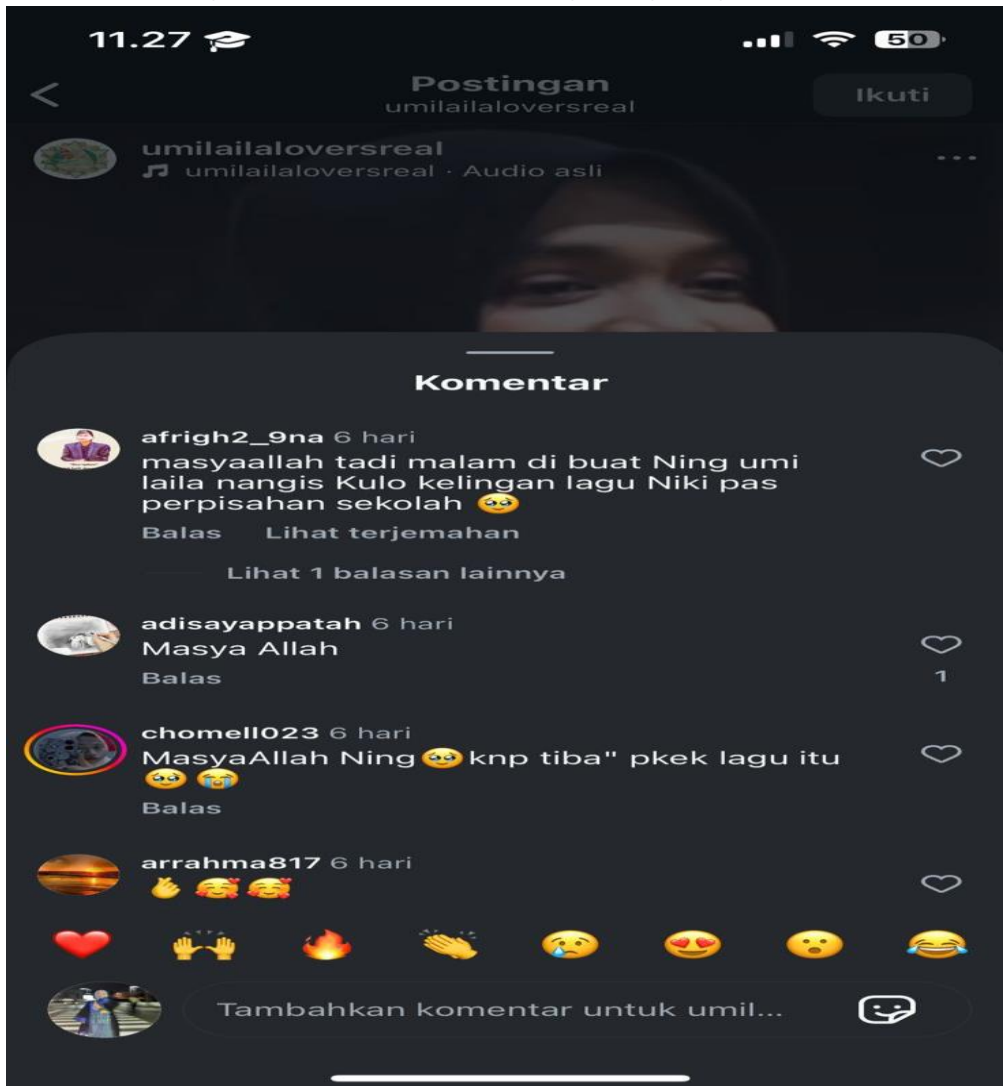
Audience Legitimacy in Ning Umi Laila’s Digital Preaching

Audience responses to Ning Umi Laila reveal a slightly different pattern of legitimacy formation. While emotional affirmation remains dominant, her preaching also generates strong responses connected to collective memory and narrative proximity. Comments such as “*MasyaAllah, Ning Umi made me cry last night,*” or “*I remember this song from my school graduation,*” demonstrate how her sermons often evoke personal memories and shared cultural experiences among followers.

The presence of digital fan communities, such as accounts dedicated to supporting Ning Umi Laila’s preaching, further illustrates how audiences actively participate in constructing a collective space of legitimacy. Comments filled with expressive emojis such as 🙏🥰👉 reinforce this communal dynamic, indicating that followers function not merely as passive recipients but also as active promoters and validators of the preacher’s authority. At the same time, a different pattern emerges in Ning’s more doctrinal or thematic content. In lectures discussing topics such as the permissibility of delaying

marriage, some comments request textual justification, for example: "Where is the evidence? Don't just say it is *makruh*." These responses suggest that when preaching shifts toward normative religious interpretation, audiences may expect stronger forms of textual or scholarly authority. Nevertheless, even within these discussions, humorous or reflective responses remain common, demonstrating that legitimacy in this context continues to rely heavily on narrative accessibility and emotional engagement.

Figure 02: Netizen comments regarding Ning Umi Laila's lecture





Audience Legitimacy in Akri Patrio's Digital Preaching

A distinct pattern of legitimacy formation appears in the comment sections of Akri Patrio's preaching content. Many audience responses reveal strong emotional loyalty linked to the public memory of his previous career as an entertainer. Comments such as "Ustadz Akri used to be a comedian," "May you always stay healthy and make us laugh," or "Pamulang is here, Ustadz," illustrate how audiences connect his religious persona with long-standing experiences of entertainment and public familiarity. Rather than undermining his religious credibility, Akri's transition from entertainment to preaching appears to reinforce his authority through social capital accumulated over time. Even comments noting that his lectures often repeat similar themes suggest that repetition does not diminish his legitimacy as long as audiences continue to perceive him as relatable and engaging.

This pattern aligns with the concept of moral entertainment, where religious messages are delivered through humour, storytelling, and relatable narratives without necessarily emphasising doctrinal complexity. Audience responses such as comparisons between Akri's voice and other public figures further demonstrate how familiarity and public recognition contribute to the construction of religious credibility in digital environments..

Figure 04: Netizen comments regarding Akri Patrio's lecture



Figure 05: Netizen comments regarding Akri Patrio's lecture



Participatory Legitimacy in the Digital Religious Sphere

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that religious authority within digital preaching environments is co-produced by audiences through participatory engagement. Followers actively shape legitimacy through expressions of approval, emotional identification, humor, and narrative interaction. In this sense, religious authority becomes embedded within a broader participatory culture, where audiences function not only as consumers of religious content but also as contributors to the processes that validate and circulate authority (Jenkins et al., 2017). However, this participatory dynamic remains conditioned by the technological and economic structures of digital platforms. Algorithms influence which preaching content becomes visible, platform aesthetics shape communicative styles, and the broader economy of digital attention determines which voices gain prominence. Consequently, authority in digital preaching spaces is simultaneously democratised and technologically mediated.

Within this framework, Syifa Nurfadhilah, Ning Umi Laila, and Akri Patrio represent different configurations of participatory legitimacy. Syifa's authority is primarily built through emotional intimacy and personal storytelling. Ning Umi Laila combines communal religious identity with

narrative engagement rooted in pesantren tradition. Akri Patrio's legitimacy, meanwhile, emerges from the conversion of celebrity recognition into religious credibility. These variations demonstrate that digital religious authority is not solely determined by the doctrinal content of preaching but also by how messages are emotionally received, collectively interpreted, and publicly celebrated within participatory digital communities.

D. Power Dynamics and the Risks of Platformized Authority

The findings of this research reveal a fundamental reconfiguration in the structure of religious authority in Indonesia following the emergence of digital preaching figures. The traditional model of authority rooted in pesantren institutions, Islamic organizations, and hierarchical scholarly lineages is increasingly being challenged by the rise of digital preachers who build legitimacy through media performance and audience engagement. Figures such as Syifa Nurfadhilah and Ning Umi Laila represent a new category of what may be described as popular religious communicators, whose authority is constructed through narrative authenticity, emotional communication, and relational proximity with digital audiences. Meanwhile, Akri Patrio represents an even more distinctive trajectory, in which celebrity capital accumulated in the entertainment industry is converted into symbolic capital within the field of religious preaching.

This transformation reflects a broader shift from a vertical-hierarchical model of authority toward a horizontal and networked configuration, where legitimacy is increasingly shaped through communicative performance, digital visibility, and audience participation. Authority is no longer centralized within institutional religious structures but is instead dispersed across networked media environments where multiple actors compete for recognition. Traditional institutions such as pesantren and Islamic organizations have not disappeared, but they now operate within a competitive digital landscape in which informal and semi-professional religious figures also claim authority. Within the broader literature on digital religion, this shift reflects the ongoing decentralization of religious authority driven by digital disruption (Abusharif, 2023; Salam-Salmaoui et al., 2024; Whyte, 2024). Whereas the interpretation of Islam was previously dominated by recognized scholars and institutions, digital media now allow diverse actors to disseminate religious messages quickly and widely. This development also creates opportunities for more inclusive participation in religious discourse. In particular, digital platforms enable groups that were historically marginalized within religious authority structures—such as women—to participate more actively in the public articulation of Islamic knowledge. The cases of Syifa Nurfadhilah and Ning Umi Laila illustrate how female figures can negotiate new forms of religious leadership within more open and participatory digital environments.

However, the democratization of religious authority in digital spaces also raises important critical concerns. First, the detachment of authority from formal scholarly training may increase the risk of theological simplification or misinformation, particularly when complex doctrinal issues are communicated through short and emotionally driven formats designed for algorithmic visibility. The prioritization of accessibility and engagement sometimes leads to the reduction of nuanced theological debates into simplified motivational messages. Second, the strong affective relationships cultivated between digital preachers and their audiences may produce forms of emotional dependency, where followers rely on charismatic digital figures for spiritual guidance rather than engaging with broader traditions of Islamic scholarship. This shift toward individualized religious authority reflects a broader transformation toward what scholars describe as a more hybrid and individualized model of Islam emerging in digital environments (Wael & Reda, 2025)

Third, digital platforms themselves play a decisive role in shaping the structure of religious authority. Social media algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, meaning that religious visibility is increasingly determined by metrics such as views, likes, and shares. Consequently, authority can become linked more closely to popularity and platform performance than to scholarly credibility. Within this context, media infrastructures function not merely as neutral communication channels but as actors that mediate and structure the production of religious legitimacy (Dhuhri et al., 2025; Mandaville, 2007). In addition, the increasing integration of religious communication into digital attention economies introduces the dynamics of religious commodification. Preaching content may become embedded within broader practices of branding, marketing, and audience monetization (S. Lubis, 2023; Yasuda, 2023). Dakwah therefore functions not only as the transmission of religious values but also as a media product that is curated, circulated, and consumed within digital communication markets. While such dynamics can increase the reach of religious messages, they also raise concerns about the potential commercialization of religious authority.

These transformations also have important implications for the formation of Muslim identity and religious practice. The shift from community-based religious environments toward digitally mediated religious engagement allows Islamic meanings to become more plural and personalized. Instead of being shaped primarily through local community norms and institutional authority, religious identity is increasingly negotiated through digital networks, algorithmic recommendations, and media interactions (Zaid, Fedtke, et al., 2022). This process contributes to the pluralization of Islamic discourse, where diverse interpretations circulate simultaneously within the digital public sphere. From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon confirms that religious authority in the contemporary Islamic public sphere is undergoing a process of fragmentation and reconfiguration under conditions of mediatization. Media platforms do not simply transmit religious discourse but actively participate in determining which voices become visible and authoritative. As a result, digital platforms function as arenas where religious actors compete, collaborate, and negotiate legitimacy within a dynamic field of communicative power (Akmaliah, 2020; Grishaeva, 2019). Practically, this transformation presents both challenges and opportunities for traditional religious institutions. Scholars and institutions that rely solely on traditional forms of authority may struggle to maintain influence within an increasingly digital public sphere. To remain relevant, they must not only maintain scholarly credibility but also develop new forms of digital literacy, communicative adaptability, and platform engagement (Madore, 2016). Otherwise, they risk losing visibility to figures who possess strong media performance skills even in the absence of formal scholarly training.

At the same time, the pluralization of religious authority enabled by digital media can also foster broader religious dialogue and participation. Digital preaching environments may facilitate more inclusive forms of Islamic communication and allow diverse voices to contribute to the interpretation of religious teachings (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024; Körs et al., 2020; Tuna, 2020). Yet this openness also carries potential risks, including ideological polarization, the spread of radical interpretations, and the oversimplification of religious teachings within highly competitive attention economies. The reconfiguration of religious authority through digital media has produced a new configuration of Islamic leadership in Indonesia that is more plural, participatory, and technologically mediated. Traditional scholars now operate within a communicative landscape where authority is negotiated not only through institutional recognition but also through digital visibility, audience engagement, and media performance. Religious authority in the digital age is therefore shaped by a complex interaction between technological infrastructures, communicative strategies, and participatory audience cultures.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the expansion of digital media has significantly reshaped the configuration of religious authority within Indonesia's contemporary Muslim public sphere. Through a multi-platform netnographic analysis of digital preaching content produced by Syifa Nurfadhilah, Ning Umi Laila, and Akri Patrio, the research shows that religious legitimacy in digital environments is increasingly constructed through communicative performance, emotional resonance, and audience participation rather than through formal institutional recognition alone. In contrast to the traditional model of authority associated with pesantren education, scholarly lineage, and organizational affiliation, digital preaching enables new actors to gain influence through narrative authenticity, platform visibility, and sustained engagement with online audiences.

The comparative analysis of the three cases highlights that digital religious authority in Indonesia is not produced through a single pathway but through multiple forms of symbolic capital operating within the same platform ecosystem. Syifa Nurfadhilah's authority is primarily built through emotionally oriented storytelling and motivational narratives that cultivate intimacy with younger audiences. Ning Umi Laila represents a hybrid configuration of authority that combines pesantren-derived symbolic legitimacy with digital communicative accessibility. Meanwhile, Akri Patrio illustrates how celebrity capital accumulated in the entertainment industry can be transformed into religious credibility through familiarity, humor, and moral storytelling. These empirical findings suggest that digital religious authority emerges from the interaction between emotional capital, religious capital, and celebrity capital within platform-based communication environments. Importantly, the analysis of audience engagement further demonstrates that religious legitimacy in digital preaching spaces is co-produced by audiences through participatory interaction. The thematic coding of 360 audience comments reveals that expressions of affirmation, emotional identification, humor, and requests for clarification function as mechanisms through which audiences validate, negotiate, or occasionally question the authority of digital preachers. In this sense, authority becomes a participatory phenomenon shaped not only by the communicative strategies of preachers but also by the interpretive practices of online communities. These findings extend existing discussions on networked religious authority by illustrating how platform infrastructures and engagement metrics contribute to the formation of what this study conceptualizes as platformized Islamic authority.

Beyond confirming existing theoretical perspectives on the mediatization of religion, the Indonesian cases analysed in this study illustrate how different types of religious communicators—motivational preachers, hybrid pesantren figures, and celebrity-based religious personalities—can coexist and compete for legitimacy within the same digital religious ecosystem. Rather than replacing traditional scholars entirely, digital platforms create a pluralized arena where multiple forms of authority operate simultaneously and where legitimacy is negotiated through communicative performance, platform visibility, and audience participation. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on three prominent figures and therefore cannot be generalized to the broader and highly diverse landscape of Indonesian digital da'wah. Second, the research relies on qualitative analysis of 90 digital preaching posts and approximately 360 audience comments, which provides insight into patterns of communication and engagement but does not allow for systematic quantitative measurement of audience reach or platform influence. Third, the conceptual category of "lay preacher" remains analytically complex, particularly in cases such as Ning Umi Laila, whose authority reflects a hybrid position combining elements of traditional religious legitimacy and digital media performance. For these reasons, the cross-case comparison presented in this study should

be understood as an exploratory analytical framework rather than a definitive typology of digital religious authority.

These limitations open several important directions for future research. Further studies could examine a larger number of digital preachers across different regions and platforms in order to develop a more systematic typology of digital Islamic authority. Longitudinal research may also help to explain how digital religious authority evolves over time as platform algorithms, audience cultures, and media practices continue to change. In addition, future scholarship should explore more deeply the gender dynamics of digital preaching, particularly how female preachers negotiate legitimacy within historically male-dominated religious authority structures. Finally, the relationship between digital preaching, religious commodification, and platform economies represents a critical area for further investigation, particularly in understanding how market logics influence the circulation of religious knowledge in digital environments. Taken together, this study demonstrates that digital preaching is not merely a technological extension of traditional *da'wah* but represents a broader transformation in the production and negotiation of religious authority within contemporary Muslim societies. In Indonesia's increasingly mediatized religious landscape, authority is shaped by a dynamic interaction between communicative performance, platform infrastructures, and participatory digital publics.

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