



MEDIATIZATION OF ISLAMIC DA'WAH ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE AUTHORITY OF ULAMA AND AUDIENCE LEGITIMATION IN DIGITAL SPACES

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the mediatization of Islamic da'wah on social media, with a particular focus on the transformation of ulama authority and audience legitimation in digital spaces. This research employs a literature review method with a qualitative-descriptive approach to studies on digital religion, the mediatization of religion, da'wah communication, religious authority, digital ulama, religious influencers, and social media audience reception. The findings indicate that social media does not merely function as a channel for disseminating da'wah messages, but also reshapes the ways in which Islamic da'wah is produced, packaged, distributed, and legitimized. The authority of ulama no longer rests solely on chains of scholarly transmission, religious institutions, organizational hierarchies, or recognition from traditional communities. It is also shaped by digital visibility, communicative performativity, visual aesthetics, platform interactivity, and audience engagement. In digital spaces, audiences play an active role in shaping the legitimacy of da'wah through following, liking, commenting, sharing, criticizing, and constructing the public image of ulama. These findings affirm that the mediatization of Islamic da'wah gives rise to religious authority that is relational, participatory, and digitalized. This article concludes that the transformation of Islamic da'wah on social media is not merely a shift of medium from the physical pulpit to digital platforms, but a process of reconfiguring religious communication involving ulama, the logic of social media, algorithms, and audiences as actors of legitimation.

Keywords: Mediatization of da'wah; Ulama authority; Social media; Audience legitimation; Digital religion.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of religious authority in the digital era has become one of the major changes in the landscape of contemporary Islamic da'wah. The production, distribution, and consumption of religious knowledge are no longer fully under the control of traditional religious institutions, as the internet and social media have opened spaces for non-institutional actors to convey interpretations, advice, fatwas, and religious views to broad audiences.¹ In Islam, this shift has given rise to figures described as "new translators of Islam": actors who gain influence not primarily through chains of scholarly transmission, institutional positions, or recognition from senior ulama (Muslim religious scholars), but through digital visibility, communicative appeal, and audience acceptance.² Religious authority is no longer understood only as a formal position within a hierarchical structure, but also as a social relationship negotiated through trust, connectedness, and communicative interaction in digital spaces.³ Social media accelerates the fragmentation of religious authority because it enables many actors to speak in the name of religion with diverse styles, follower bases, and claims to legitimacy.⁴

In urban Muslim societies, access to sermons, study circles, religious question-and-answer forums, and religious motivational content increasingly takes place through digital platforms, so that the

¹ Aldin, dkk. (2024). Digital Media and Islamic Jurisprudence: Exploring Legal Adaptations and Challenges. *PJC*, (16.2)

² Mokai, dkk (2023). Issues of an Ageing Population: A Comparative Study in Malaysia, Singapore, Maldives, and Pakistan. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (Mjssh)*, 8(9).

³ Ashari, dkk (2023). Religious Digital Literacy of Students in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Tadris Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 18(1), 189–210

⁴ Solahudin, dkk, (2019). Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority. *Religions*, 11(1), 19.

experience of learning religion is intensely mediated by technology.⁵ This condition shows that digitalization does not merely provide a new channel for da'wah, but transforms the ecology of religious authority through platform logic, algorithms, popularity, interactivity, and the attention economy.⁶ Theoretically, the transformation of digital religious authority can be understood through the development of digital religion studies, which has moved from descriptive approaches toward categorical, theoretical, and integrative approaches.⁷ The Religious-Social Shaping of Technology framework explains that religious communities are not only shaped by technology, but also negotiate the use of technology based on their respective histories, traditions, core beliefs, and communal framings.⁸ This framework is important because it prevents analysis from falling into technological determinism, which assumes that digital media automatically weakens traditional authority, even though some religious communities use technology precisely to strengthen their identity and communal boundaries.⁹ The mediatization of religion perspective also shows that media are not simply neutral channels for transmitting religious messages, but social institutions with logics, formats, rhythms, and selection mechanisms that influence how religion is presented and practiced.¹⁰ When religion is mediated by digital technology, religious

⁵Ali, dkk. (2021). Factors Influencing Islamic Financial Inclusion in Indonesia: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach. *Icr Journal*, 12(2), 249–274.

⁶Ul-Haq, dkk. (2024). *Encountering "The Other" in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*. *Social Media + Society*, 10(4).

⁷ERGEN, Y. (2023). Framing the Study of Digital Religion: Waves of Academic Research, Theoretical Approaches and Themes. *Medya Ve Din Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 6(2), 137–166.

⁸Campbell, H. A. (2016). Surveying Theoretical Approaches Within Digital Religion Studies. *New Media & Society*, 19(1), 15–24.

⁹Zhang, Y. (2017). Digital Religion in China: A Comparative Perspective on Buddhism and Christianity's Online Publics in Sina Weibo. *Journal of Religion Media and Digital Culture*, 6(1), 44–67.

¹⁰Guzek, D. (2019). *Mediatizing Secular State*.

authority embedded in the sociocultural sphere also changes because religious practices, communication patterns, and audience reception undergo transformation.¹¹ Therefore, digital religion does not only refer to the availability of religious content on the internet, but also to religious practices that take place through digital interaction and hybrid spaces between online and offline settings.¹²

In the Indonesian context, social media has become an important arena for religious populism, da'wah contestation, and shifts in the legitimacy of ulama. Islamic learning practices across various digital platforms show that religious authority is increasingly negotiated through new public spaces that allow users to disseminate religious messages independently.¹³ Mainstream authorities such as the MUI, pesantren, and major Islamic organizations have not lost their relevance, but they face challenges from preachers who gain popularity through YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and similar platforms.¹⁴ The phenomenon of the "New Ustaz" reveals the emergence of religious figures who quickly acquire the status of ulama without always undergoing the long religious education associated with traditional ulama.¹⁵ On the one hand, this phenomenon expands public access to religious knowledge because audiences can obtain religious answers quickly and according to their personal needs.¹⁶

¹¹Cloete, A. (2016). Mediated Religion: Implications for Religious Authority. *Verbum Et Ecclesia*, 37(1).

¹²Evolvi, G. (2021). Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (Hyper)mediated Spaces, and Materiality. *Zeitschrift Für Religion Gesellschaft Und Politik*, 6(1), 9–25.

¹³Sueca, dkk. (2023). Implementation of "Catur Guru" as the Basis of Character Education in Elementary School. *Ijils*, 1 (1), 1–12.

¹⁴Rosidi, dkk. (2021). The Fragmentation of Religious Authority in Provincial Towns in Indonesia: The Case of the Mui (Indonesian Muslim Scholar Council) in Pekanbaru and Pontianak. *Manusya Journal of Humanities*, 24(2), 185–203.

¹⁵Afandi, dkk. (2021). The New Ustad in Religious Authority: Challenge and Dynamic of Fatwa in the New Media Era. 20-10-2020.

¹⁶Adel, dkk. (2023). Online Fatwas in Pakistan Using Social Networking Platforms. *Ulumuna*, 27(1), 201–226.

On the other hand, this phenomenon raises concerns about scholarly quality, the authenticity of references, and the potential confusion of the public due to the spread of unverified religious views.¹⁷ However, digitalization does not always erase traditional authority, as platforms such as Cariustadz.id show that traditional religious authorities can also enter digital spaces to offer moderate Islamic discourse and compete in the field of cyber fatwa. Pesantren also remain a basis for reproducing kiai authority because the habitus of santri, the concept of barakah, and charismatic relations continue to shape social recognition of the kiai.¹⁸

The strategies of religious actors in building authority on social media show that digital legitimacy is determined not only by the depth of religious knowledge, but also by the ability to manage identity, networks, visibility, and audience interaction. Islamic preachers on YouTube use strategies of identity commodification, network collaboration, and interactive communication to build religious authority on the digital pulpit.¹⁹ Identity commodification enables preachers to present their background, life experiences, communication style, or personal uniqueness as symbolic resources for attracting digital audiences.²⁰ Network collaboration expands legitimacy because preachers can connect themselves with figures, communities, platforms, or da'wah networks that already have social

¹⁷Ningsih, dkk. (2023). Analysis of Habib Jafar's Da'wah Message in Login Program at Youtube Chanel Deddy Corbuzier. *Journal Transnational Universal Studies*, 1(3), 133–140.

¹⁸Harnadi, D., Siahaan, H., & Hilmy, M. (2021). Pesantren and the Preservation of Traditional Religious Authority in the Digital Age. *Masyarakat Kebudayaan Dan Politik*, 34(3), 272.

¹⁹Pranoto, S. S. (2023). Strategy for Constructing Religious Authority in the Digital Pulpit: Study of Three Indonesian Preachers on YouTube. *Al Hikmah International Journal of Islamic Studies and Human Sciences*, 6(1), 29–52.

²⁰Lyansari, K. N. (2022). Celebrification and Branding New Female Religious Authority in Indonesia. *Dialog*, 45(1), 99–110.

influence.²¹ Interactive communication becomes important because comments, live broadcasts, direct messages, and audience responses create personal closeness between preachers and their followers. In addition, visual authority becomes an important mechanism because religious influencers construct an impression of being friendly, close, informal, yet still authoritative through strategies of appearance, setting, visual focus, and text-image combinations.²² Strategies of self-presentation, code-switching, and textual reference also strengthen the legitimacy of religious narratives because audiences perceive religious identity, communicative flexibility, and a scriptural basis in the content they consume.

Audience legitimation is a central dimension in the transformation of religious authority because authority is not automatically attached to an actor; it must be recognized, followed, and trusted by the receiving community. Islamic authority is relational because religious education, scriptural proficiency, and institutional position are not always sufficient to produce an authoritative position without audience recognition.²³ Audiences do not merely receive messages passively; they interpret, approve, reject, compare, and share religious content based on their knowledge backgrounds, social experiences, and platform preferences. On social media, audience support appears through the number of followers, likes, comments, reshares, testimonials, community participation, and defense of particular figures

²¹Pranoto, S. S. (2023). Strategy for Constructing Religious Authority in the Digital Pulpit: Study of Three Indonesian Preachers on YouTube. *Al Hikmah International Journal of Islamic Studies and Human Sciences*, 6(1), 29–52.

²²Febrian, H. (2024). Visualizing Authority: Rise of the Religious Influencers on the Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 10(4).

²³Sunier, T. (2023). The Politics of Imam Training: The Domestication of Islam in Europe. 73–102.

in public debates.²⁴ Muslim youth also play a role in strengthening the popularity of traditional ulama by repackaging the image of ulama so that it aligns with the visual culture, language, and lifestyle of urban Muslims.²⁵ However, digital audiences are also vulnerable to echo chambers, selective exposure, and filter bubbles that reinforce certain religious preferences and limit encounters with different perspectives.

The transformation of digital religious authority has implications for literacy, moderation, gender, politics, and media regulation. Religious digital literacy has become an urgent need because society must not only access religious content, but also validate sources, distinguish credible authorities, and assess whether information corresponds with sound references.²⁶ Religious institutions, governments, and educational institutions play an important role in building a society capable of navigating digital religious information responsibly and critically. Digital media can also be used for counter-radicalism, the promotion of moderation, and harmony, but at the same time it can facilitate disinformation, the politicization of fatwas, and conflict mobilization. In electoral politics, ulama symbols and religious rituals can be commodified to build leadership images and mobilize public support.²⁷ On the other hand, new media open space for female ulama, although audience acceptance is still influenced by gender norms, da'wah approaches, and recognition from male authority structures. Thus, the transformation of digital religious authority is not

²⁴ Kurniasih, dkk. (2022). DIGITALIZING DA'WAH AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA: After the Fall of Religious Leader. *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies*, 6(1).

²⁵ Yazid, dkk. (2023). Reclaiming Traditional Religious Authority in the Contemporary Era. *Jurnal Dakwah Risalah*, 34(1), 01.

²⁶ Hippe, R. (2020). Human Capital in European Regions Since the French Revolution: Lessons for Economic and Education Policies. *Revue D Économie Politique*, Vol. 130(1), 27–50.

²⁷ Lubis, dkk. (2024). The Commodification of Religious Rituals: Representations of Political Actors in Indonesian Elections. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, (105(2)).

merely a shift in the medium of da'wah, but concerns questions of power, gender, regulation, literacy, identity politics, and the ethics of public communication.

Although the existing literature has made significant contributions, a research gap remains concerning the relationship between ulama, social media, and audience legitimation. Many studies have discussed changes in religious authority caused by digital media, but some still focus on actors or platforms without adequately integrating how audiences grant, negotiate, or withdraw legitimacy from such authority.²⁸ Studies on the mediatization of religion emphasize structural changes resulting from media logic, but a sharper reading is still needed of how these changes take place in everyday practices of legitimation on social media. Studies on religious populism have also explained the emergence of new actors, but they do not always conceptually distinguish between popularity, credibility, legitimacy, and authority. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the transformation of religious authority in the digital era through a literature review on ulama, social media, and audience legitimation. The novelty of this study lies in its effort to synthesize three areas of inquiry that are often discussed separately: ulama authority, the logic of social media, and audience legitimation. The research question is: how is the transformation of religious authority in the digital era constructed in the literature on ulama, social media, and audience legitimation? This question is important for understanding the shift of religious authority from hierarchical structures toward a more relational, participatory, and digitalized configuration.

²⁸Müller, J., & Friemel, T. N. (2024). Dynamics of Digital Media Use in Religious Communities—A Theoretical Model. *Religions*, 15(7), 762.

METHOD

This study uses a literature review design with a qualitative-descriptive approach to examine the mediatization of Islamic da'wah on social media, particularly in relation to ulama authority and audience legitimation in digital spaces. This design was chosen because the study does not seek to test relationships between variables statistically, but to map, interpret, and synthesize conceptual and empirical findings from the literature on digital religion, the mediatization of religion, religious authority, social media da'wah, and audience reception. The literature review is directed at explaining how religious authority, which previously rested on hierarchy, institutions, chains of scholarly transmission, and recognition from traditional communities, is renegotiated through digital platforms. The conceptual framework of this study is based on the idea of Religious-Social Shaping of Technology.²⁹ This study also uses the perspective of the mediatization of religion.³⁰ In addition, this study positions digital religious authority as a relational phenomenon because the influence of ulama or preachers does not automatically arise from religious education and institutional position, but also requires audience recognition.³¹

The research data consist of journal articles, academic books, and scholarly publications that directly discuss religious authority, social media, ulama, digital da'wah, cyber fatwas, digital religion, religious populism, audience legitimation, and the mediatization of religion. The literature reviewed includes conceptual and empirical studies in

²⁹ Campbell, H. A. (2016). Surveying Theoretical Approaches Within Digital Religion Studies. *New Media & Society*, 19(1), 15–24.

³⁰ Guzek, D. (2019). *Mediatizing Secular State*.

³¹ Sunier, T. (2023). *The Politics of Imam Training: The Domestication of Islam in Europe*. 73–102.

Indonesian and cross-national contexts, such as studies on the "New Ustaz," Cariustadz.id, the MUI, pesantren, female ulama, religious influencers, cyberwarriors, online fatwas, and audience reception of religious symbols on social media. The inclusion criteria cover literature that explicitly discusses the relationship between religion and digital media, changes in religious authority, strategies for constructing the legitimacy of ulama or preachers, and the role of audiences in accepting, negotiating, or rejecting such authority. The exclusion criteria include normative da'wah studies unrelated to digital media, popular non-academic writings, and publications not directly relevant to issues of authority, legitimacy, or audiences. The research instrument is a literature extraction sheet containing publication identity, study focus, research context, key concepts, methods, findings, and contributions to the theme of religious authority transformation.

Data collection was carried out through systematic reading of the literature established as the corpus of the study. The first stage was the identification of literature based on three main keywords: religious authority, social media, and audience legitimation. The second stage was literature screening by assessing the suitability of the content to the research focus. The third stage was data extraction by recording the main arguments, theoretical concepts, empirical contexts, and important findings of each source. The fourth stage was the grouping of literature into analytical themes, including digital religion and mediatization, fragmentation of ulama authority, preachers' legitimation strategies, audience reception, and religious digital literacy. The analysis was conducted using thematic synthesis, namely comparing, connecting, and organizing findings to produce a coherent conceptual map. The validity of the study was maintained through consistent use of relevant literature, source traceability for

each claim, and a limitation against adding references outside the corpus used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ulama Authority on Social Media

The main findings of this study show that religious authority in the digital era can no longer be understood only as authority derived from institutions, chains of scholarly transmission, organizational hierarchies, or recognition from traditional communities. Social media has created a new space that allows various actors to produce, disseminate, and negotiate religious knowledge more openly. This shift shows that digital media transform the structure of the production and consumption of religious knowledge by opening opportunities for figures who are not always located within formal structures of ulama authority, but who are able to reach broad audiences through digital platforms.³² In Islamic da'wah, social media is not merely a channel for delivering messages, but an arena where religious authority is constructed, contested, and publicly legitimized.

One important symptom of this transformation is the emergence of the "New Ustaz." Such figures gain influence through media visibility, popular communication styles, the ability to build closeness with audiences, and the capacity to adapt religious messages to digital culture.³³ This condition indicates a shift in the basis of legitimacy from authority grounded in the depth of scholarly transmission toward authority that is also determined by the ability to appear, network, and create emotional resonance with digital publics. However, this shift

³² Aldin, dkk. (2024). Digital Media and Islamic Jurisprudence: Exploring Legal Adaptations and Challenges. *PJC*, (16.2), 1031–1046.

³³ Afandi, dkk. (2021). *The New Ustad in Religious Authority: Challenge and Dynamic of Fatwa in the New Media Era*.

does not mean that traditional authority has been entirely weakened. Pesantren, kiai, the MUI, and major Islamic organizations continue to hold important positions because they still possess symbolic capital in the form of knowledge, historical legitimacy, and community recognition.³⁴

The relationship between traditional authority and new digital authority is better understood as both contestative and adaptive. The Cariustadz.id platform shows that traditional religious actors are not merely objects of digital disruption, but also seek to enter digital spaces to offer moderate Islamic discourse and challenge the dominance of new da'wah groups on social media.³⁵ Thus, digitalization does not produce a linear replacement of old authority by new authority. What occurs is the formation of a more plural configuration of authority, in which traditional ulama, popular preachers, religious influencers, fatwa institutions, digital communities, and ordinary audiences are all involved in the production of religious meaning.

This finding is consistent with the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology perspective, which emphasizes that religious communities are not merely influenced by technology, but also negotiate its use according to their respective traditions, values, and communal boundaries. Ulama, pesantren, and Islamic organizations do not always reject social media, but adopt it for da'wah, the protection of authority, and the framing of religious identity. A study of ulama in Ogan Ilir shows that social media has become part of the new identity of ulama, although most have not yet produced original da'wah messages on

³⁴ Mustofa, I. (2023). TEXT AUTHORIZATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHARIA ECONOMIC LAW IN INDONESIA: Study of the Fatwa of the National Sharia Council of the Indonesian Ulama Council. *Jurisdictie Jurnal Hukum Dan Syariah*, 13(2), 210–236.

³⁵ Zamhari, A., Han, M. I., & Zulkifli, Z. (2021). Traditional Religious Authorities in New Media: Cariustadz.id Platform as an Alternative Cyber Fatwa and Da'wah Media Among the Middle-Class Urban Muslims. *Ahkam Jurnal Ilmu Syariah*, 21(1).

the platform.³⁶ This indicates that traditional actors can integrate technology into religious practice without fully abandoning older bases of legitimacy. Within the framework of the mediatization of religion, this change shows that media do not merely transfer da'wah from the physical pulpit to digital spaces. Media reshape the ways religion is communicated, packaged, consumed, and perceived by the public. When social media logic emphasizes speed, visuality, interactivity, personalization, and audience engagement, religious actors are encouraged to adjust their communication formats. The strategies of identity commodification, network collaboration, and interactive communication used by YouTube preachers show that digital authority is built through a combination of religious competence and media competence.³⁷ In other words, religious authority is not only determined by who is most knowledgeable, but also by who is able to make that knowledge appear relevant, accessible, and trustworthy to digital audiences.

Visual strategy is also an important part of the formation of religious authority on social media. Religious influencers use visual approaches that are friendly, informal, and close to audiences, while still maintaining symbolic distance so as not to lose authority. Clothing, setting, facial expression, camera style, accompanying text, and content aesthetics all play a role in shaping audience perceptions of a person's religious credibility. Thus, visuality is not an additional element, but part of the production of authority. Social media creates a form of authority that is performative, visual, and affective.

³⁶ Yanti, M., & Yasnaini, Y. (2021). Social Media Acceptability Among Ulama in Ogan Ilir District, South Sumatra, Indonesia. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Indonesia*, 5(2), 170–185.

³⁷ Pranoto, S. S. (2023). Strategy for Constructing Religious Authority in the Digital Pulpit: Study of Three Indonesian Preachers on YouTube. *Al Hikmah International Journal of Islamic Studies and Human Sciences*, 6(1), 29–52.

Nevertheless, this transformation also raises issues of authenticity, scholarly depth, and accountability. When anyone can speak in the name of religion, the boundaries between ulama, preachers, religious motivators, hijrah celebrities, and content creators become increasingly blurred. Concern over the delivery of fatwas or religious advice by figures who lack adequate scholarly capacity is relevant because it can generate confusion and social friction. In this context, traditional authority remains important as a counterbalance to the current of digital religious populism. The MUI, pesantren, and ulama with strong scholarly foundations can function as guardians of the quality of religious discourse, although they also need to develop communication patterns that are more relevant to digital audiences.

The Role of Digital Audiences

The next finding shows that audiences can no longer be positioned as passive recipients of da'wah messages. In the social media ecosystem, audiences play an active role in shaping, strengthening, disseminating, and even challenging religious authority. Islamic authority is relational because an authoritative position is determined not only by education, mastery of texts, or institutional status, but also by recognition from others. Thus, audience legitimation is an important element in understanding the transformation of digital religious authority. An ulama figure may have a strong chain of scholarly transmission, but will not automatically become authoritative in digital spaces if they do not gain audience attention, trust, and acceptance.

Social media makes audience legitimation appear in concrete and observable forms, such as follower counts, views, comments, likes, reshares, testimonials, and the intensity of community engagement.

These measures do not always reflect scholarly depth, but in the digital ecology they are often perceived as signs of influence and credibility. This is where a shift in religious power relations occurs: authority is no longer only granted from above by institutions, but is also built from below through audience participation. A study of Aa Gym shows that the electability of religious figures in the digital public sphere is closely related to legitimacy and popularity formed through social media. This affirms that public recognition has become one important form of capital in the formation of contemporary religious authority.

The role of audiences also appears in the repackaging of the image of traditional ulama. The support of Muslim youth for the popularity of Ustaz Abdul Somad and Ustaz Hanan Attaki shows that audiences do not merely consume da'wah, but also help shape the format, style, and image of ulama so that they align with urban Muslim culture. Audiences can act as image editors, content disseminators, narrative amplifiers, and reputation guardians. Thus, digital authority is collaborative because it is formed through interaction between religious figures and their networks of followers. The phenomenon of cyberwarriors further clarifies the role of audiences in producing ulama legitimation. Through memes, hashtags, comics, and videos, kiai or ulama are constructed as savior figures, sources of true authority, and symbols of resistance against the threat of radicalism or social disintegration.³⁸ In this context, audiences do not only affirm ulama authority, but also create heroic narratives that expand ulama influence in the digital public sphere. However, this process is also ambivalent because the strengthening of certain authorities can

³⁸ Schmidt, L. (2018). Cyberwarriors and Counterstars: Contesting Religious Radicalism and Violence on Indonesian Social Media. *Asiascape Digital Asia*, 5(1–2), 32–67.

deepen fragmentation when different audience groups construct their own authoritative figures.

Audience legitimation is also closely related to the logic of affect. Digital audiences often assess preachers not only on the basis of rational arguments or textual depth, but also through emotional closeness, language style, comfort, humor, personal experience, and the fit between values and their identity. The concept of "God's Influencers" shows that religious authority on social media is built through trust, respect, belief, and connectedness. This means that digital authority has a strong emotional dimension. Preachers who make audiences feel understood, represented, and personally addressed often gain considerable legitimacy, even when they do not always hold formal positions within religious structures.

However, audience-based legitimation also creates risks. Popularity can be mistaken for authority, virality can be perceived as truth, and emotional closeness can replace scholarly verification. The phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers intensify these risks because audiences tend to be exposed to content that aligns with their own preferences, identities, and social networks.³⁹ When audiences only follow figures who reinforce their prior beliefs, the space for critical dialogue narrows. As a result, polarization can increase, cross-group authority can weaken, and standards of religious truth can become increasingly fragmented.

On the other hand, digital audiences can also play a critical role. Reception analysis shows that audiences have the ability to interpret, approve, reject, or negotiate the meaning of media content based on their own knowledge and experience. A study of feminist da'wah on

³⁹ Andok, M. (2023). Religious Filter Bubbles on Digital Public Sphere. *Religions*, 14(11), 1359.

YouTube shows that some audiences do not always accept religious legitimation that strengthens masculine domination in the family, because they assess such messages based on their experiences of justice and personal rights.⁴⁰ Thus, audiences are not a homogeneous mass that can easily be controlled, but active subjects who can produce alternative readings of religious messages.

Implications and Limitations

The main significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding digital religious authority as a phenomenon that is neither singular, static, nor entirely institutional. This study shows that religious authority on social media is formed through interactions among scholarly capital, institutional capital, performative capital, visual capital, network capital, and audience legitimation. Therefore, religious authority cannot be sufficiently analyzed through dichotomies such as traditional versus modern, offline versus online, or ulama versus influencer. The reality is more complex because traditional ulama can become digital actors, influencers can use textual references to build legitimacy, and audiences can become producers of authority through digital participation.

This study also strengthens the study of the mediatization of religion. The findings reviewed show that social media does not only mediate religious messages, but also reshapes the structure of religious relations. When da'wah is delivered through YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, or WhatsApp, the form of the message, its duration, language style, visuality, and audience responses help determine how the message is received. This strengthens the argument that the mediatization of religion affects the transformation of authority,

⁴⁰ Syam, dkk. (2022). Gender Construction in Feminist Da'wah by Women Preachers on Youtube. *Jurnal Dakwah Risalah*, 32(2).

identity, devotional practices, and religious communication.⁴¹ Therefore, studies of contemporary Islamic da'wah need to pay attention to platform logic, not only to the substance of religious messages.

The theoretical implication of this study is the need for an analytical model of digital religious authority that combines theories of digital religion, mediatization, and audience legitimation. The RSST framework is useful for explaining how religious communities negotiate technology based on values and traditions. Mediatization theory helps explain how media logic transforms communication structures and authority. The perspective of audience legitimation is needed to understand how public recognition shapes the authoritative status of a religious figure. These three approaches need to be read integratively so that analysis does not become trapped either in technological determinism or in the romanticization of traditional authority.

The practical implication of this study is the importance of religious digital literacy. When religious content circulates widely and does not always pass through adequate verification, audiences need to be able to evaluate source credibility, understand the context of religious texts, distinguish personal opinion from scholarly authority, and recognize emotional manipulation or the politicization of religion. Religious digital literacy can help society not only access information, but also validate information by referring to appropriate sources. In this context, educational institutions, religious organizations, governments, and digital communities need to collaborate to build a healthier digital religious ecosystem.

Another implication concerns the role of traditional religious institutions. The MUI, pesantren, Islamic organizations, and traditional

⁴¹ Guzek, D. (2019). *Mediatizing Secular State*.

ulama cannot rely solely on historical authority to maintain relevance in digital spaces. They need to develop communication strategies that are responsive to the characteristics of digital audiences without sacrificing scholarly depth and religious ethics. Platforms such as Cariustadz.id show that traditional authority can use new media to offer moderate counter-narratives and expand the reach of da'wah.⁴² This strategy needs to be strengthened through dialogical communication, attractive visuals, and rapid responses to public issues.

This study also has implications for religious moderation and gender. Social media can become a space for the spread of extremism, religious hoaxes, and identity polarization, but it can also be used to build counter-narratives, interfaith dialogue, and social solidarity. Digital platforms such as Sanadmedia.com show that narratives of patriotism based on Islamic principles can be used to promote harmony and counter radicalism. In terms of gender, digital media open space for female ulama to deliver da'wah and build authority, but audience acceptance remains influenced by social norms, da'wah style, and male authority structures. Therefore, digitalization opens opportunities, but does not automatically produce equality of authority.

The limitation of this study lies in its nature as a literature review that depends on the available corpus of literature. Because it does not conduct direct field data collection, this analysis cannot yet capture in depth the empirical experiences of audiences in choosing, trusting, or rejecting particular religious authorities. The literature used also covers diverse contexts, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Russia, and Kenya, so the resulting synthesis is conceptual and is not

⁴² Zamhari, dkk. (2021). Traditional Religious Authorities in New Media: Cariustadz.id Platform as an Alternative Cyber Fatwa and Da'wah Media Among the Middle-Class Urban Muslims. *Ahkam Jurnal Ilmu Syariah*, 21(1).

intended as a final empirical generalization. In addition, digital platforms continue to change through algorithms, new features, content moderation policies, and user consumption patterns. The way authority is built on YouTube is not necessarily the same as on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, or Telegram. Therefore, future research needs to empirically examine how the characteristics of specific platforms shape particular types of religious authority.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the mediatization of Islamic da'wah on social media has reconfigured religious authority through complex relations among ulama, digital platforms, and audiences. Ulama authority no longer rests solely on formal institutions, chains of scholarly transmission, organizational hierarchies, or recognition from traditional communities, but is also shaped by digital visibility, communicative performativity, visual aesthetics, platform interactivity, and audience acceptance. Social media transforms the ways religious knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed, thereby opening space for popular preachers, religious influencers, da'wah content creators, and digital communities that support ulama.

The main findings show that digital religious authority is relational because an ulama figure or preacher must obtain audience recognition, trust, and engagement. Audiences play an active role in shaping legitimation through following, liking, commenting, sharing, defending, criticizing, and repackaging the image of religious figures. Thus, social media is not merely a channel for da'wah, but an arena of symbolic contestation where religious authority is negotiated. This study affirms that traditional authority and new authority do not always negate one another, but can compete, adapt, and reinforce each

other. Future research needs to examine audience behavior, the role of algorithms, the attention economy, gender, and religious digital literacy in the formation of ulama authority.

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