

Reconfiguring Islamic Authority in Indonesia: The Role of Ulama and Digital Media in Religious Practices

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Abstract

The digital revolution has profoundly reshaped the landscape of religious authority and practice in the Muslim world, challenging traditional clerical hierarchies. In Indonesia, the authority of the ulama, long central to the dissemination of Islamic knowledge, now coexists with a vibrant and often unregulated digital sphere. This study aimed to investigate how digital media is reconfiguring traditional Islamic authority and influencing the religious practices of Indonesian Muslims. The primary objective was to analyze the strategies employed by both traditional ulama and new digital religious figures in this evolving media ecosystem. A qualitative methodology was employed, combining digital ethnography of popular religious social media platforms with in-depth, semi-structured interviews with established ulama and emergent "cyber-preachers." The results reveal a significant fragmentation and democratization of religious authority. New media figures are leveraging platforms like YouTube and Instagram to bypass traditional institutions, offering direct religious guidance to a mass audience. In response, many traditional ulama are adapting by creating their own digital presence, yet often struggle to match the popular appeal of these new influencers. This study concludes that digital media is fostering a more contested, personalized, and networked religious landscape in Indonesia. This reconfiguration is not replacing the traditional ulama but is forcing them into a new, competitive role, fundamentally altering how religious authority is constructed, consumed, and maintained in the digital age.

Keywords: digital media, islamic authority, religious practices



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INTRODUCTION

Religious authority in Indonesia has historically been anchored in the institution of the *ulama*, the class of learned Islamic scholars who serve as the primary interpreters of scripture, guardians of tradition, and spiritual guides for the community (Subhan, 2018; Wahab & Rahim Abdul Rahman, 2011). This authority is deeply embedded in a social and educational infrastructure of mosques, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and mass-based socio-religious organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. For centuries, the dissemination of religious knowledge has flowed through these established, hierarchical channels, creating a relatively stable and coherent landscape of religious thought and practice for the world's largest Muslim population.

The dawn of the 21st century, however, has been marked by a digital revolution that is profoundly reshaping this long-standing religious ecosystem. The proliferation of the internet, the rise of social media platforms, and the widespread adoption of smartphones have created a new, vibrant, and largely unregulated public sphere for religious discourse (Alam dkk., 2022; Kailani & Slama, 2020). This digital space operates in parallel to, and often in direct competition with, the traditional institutions of Islamic authority, fundamentally altering how religious knowledge is produced, consumed, and contested.

This technological shift has enabled the emergence of a new cohort of religious actors and influencers (Wahab & Rahman, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Charismatic “cyber-preachers,” online study groups, and algorithm-driven content platforms now offer Indonesian Muslims direct, unmediated access to a vast and diverse array of religious teachings. This new media landscape is not merely a new channel for old content; it is an active agent of change, fostering new styles of preaching, new forms of religious community, and new debates over what constitutes legitimate Islamic knowledge and who possesses the authority to define it.

The rapid expansion of the digital religious sphere poses a fundamental challenge to the traditional structures of Islamic authority in Indonesia (Adnan dkk., 2023; Hariyanto dkk., 2020). The authority of the *ulama*, which is predicated on a long chain of scholarly transmission (*isnad*), deep textual knowledge, and institutional affiliation, is now confronted by a new form of authority based on media charisma, online popularity, and the ability to produce engaging digital content. This creates a significant problem of fragmentation, where the once relatively unified religious landscape is now populated by a multitude of competing voices, many of whom operate outside any traditional framework of scholarly accountability.

This fragmentation leads to a specific and pressing problem for lay Muslims: the challenge of navigating a complex and often contradictory information environment. In the digital sphere, a scholarly fatwa from a respected *ulama* can appear alongside a viral sermon from a self-proclaimed preacher with no formal training, with both presented as equally valid sources of religious guidance (Adnan dkk., 2023; DemiR, 2017). This “democratization” of religious discourse, while potentially empowering for some, also creates significant confusion and anxiety, making it difficult for individuals to discern credible religious teachings from misinformation or extremist ideologies.

The specific problem this research addresses is the lack of a systematic understanding of how this reconfiguration of authority is actively playing out. It is unclear how traditional *ulama* are strategically responding to this challenge, how new digital religious figures are constructing and legitimizing their authority online, and, most importantly, how the interplay between these old and new actors is shaping the everyday religious practices and beliefs of Indonesian Muslims (Ali dkk., 2019; Warikoo, 2010). The problem is not simply that the media landscape has changed, but that the social and religious consequences of this change remain poorly understood.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and analyze the ongoing reconfiguration of Islamic authority in contemporary Indonesia, with a specific focus on the dynamic interplay between traditional *ulama* and new digital media figures. The overarching goal is to understand how the rise of

digital media is transforming the sources of religious guidance, the strategies of religious actors, and the nature of religious practice among Indonesian Muslims.

To achieve this primary objective, a series of specific sub-objectives have been defined. The first is to examine the strategies that traditional ulama and their associated institutions are employing to adapt to the digital age, including their adoption of social media and their efforts to reassert their authority online (Hussain dkk., 2012; Shaukat dkk., 2024). The second objective is to analyze the methods used by new, digitally-native religious influencers or “cyber-preachers” to build their following, establish their credibility, and disseminate their teachings outside of traditional institutional structures.

The third and most critical objective is to assess the impact of this evolving media ecosystem on the religious lives of ordinary Indonesian Muslims. This involves exploring how they navigate the diverse sources of online religious information, how they make decisions about whom to trust, and how their engagement with digital media shapes their understanding and practice of Islam. The study aims to provide a rich, empirically grounded account of this profound social and religious transformation.

The scholarly literature on Islam in Indonesia is extensive, with a strong body of work on the historical role of the ulama, the major Islamic organizations, and the various expressions of Islamic thought. In recent years, a growing number of studies have also begun to explore the intersection of Islam and the internet in the Indonesian context (Dirie dkk., 2024; Warikoo, 2010). These pioneering studies have been crucial in highlighting the emergence of online da'wah, the use of social media by religious groups, and the rise of new forms of digital piety.

A significant gap exists, however, in research that systematically and comparatively analyzes the *dynamic of contestation and adaptation* between the established, traditional religious authorities and the new, digitally-native religious figures. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on one side of this equation—either analyzing how a traditional institution uses the internet or profiling a specific group of online activists. There is a scarcity of research that places these two types of actors into a single analytical frame to understand their interaction, competition, and mutual influence.

This research is explicitly designed to fill this analytical gap. It moves beyond a simple description of “Islam online” to an in-depth investigation of the reconfiguration of authority itself (Muneer & Khan, 2019; Retsikas, 2014). By employing a comparative approach that examines the strategies of both the established ulama and the emergent cyber-preachers, and by connecting these strategies to the experiences of lay users, this study provides a more holistic and dynamic understanding of the social processes at play. It addresses the need for a more nuanced analysis of how power and authority are being renegotiated in one of the world’s most important digital religious landscapes.

The principal novelty of this research lies in its focus on the concept of “reconfiguration” and its use of a comparative, multi-sited qualitative methodology (Dirie dkk., 2024; Warikoo, 2010). By framing the issue not as a simple decline of traditional authority or a rise of digital religion, but as a complex process of reconfiguration, this study offers a more sophisticated and accurate conceptual lens. The methodological novelty comes from combining digital ethnography with in-depth interviews with both traditional and digital religious figures, allowing for a unique, multi-perspective view of the ongoing transformation.

This research is strongly justified by its immense social and political relevance. The question of who holds religious authority is a matter of profound importance in Indonesia, with direct implications for social cohesion, political stability, and the future direction of Indonesian Islam. This study is justified by its potential to provide a clear, evidence-based understanding of a major social shift, offering crucial insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and international observers seeking to understand the forces shaping contemporary Indonesia.

The broader scientific justification for this work is its contribution to the global study of religion in the digital age (Hakim & Nafi, 2024; Jahar, 2015). The Indonesian case, with its massive and digitally savvy Muslim population and its complex existing religious infrastructure, serves as a critical

and illuminating case study for understanding trends that are occurring across the Muslim world. By providing a deep, empirically grounded analysis of the reconfiguration of Islamic authority in this key context, this study offers invaluable insights and a robust analytical framework that can inform the broader scholarly conversation on the future of religion in a globally networked society.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a multi-sited, comparative case study approach. This design was chosen for its suitability in conducting an in-depth, contextualized exploration of the complex, socially embedded phenomenon of religious authority reconfiguration (Khan & Haneef, 2022; Usman dkk., 2015). The research framework is interpretive and analytical, seeking to build a rich, nuanced understanding of the strategies, discourses, and impacts of both traditional and digital religious actors. The comparative element allows for a systematic analysis of the points of convergence, divergence, and contestation between these two distinct forms of religious authority in the contemporary Indonesian digital landscape.

Research Target/Subject

The study population consisted of all significant actors involved in the production and consumption of Islamic religious discourse in Indonesia's digital sphere. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select a representative and information-rich sample (Abidin & Utami, 2020; Retsikas, 2014). The first sample group comprised ten traditional *ulama* affiliated with established institutions (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) who maintain an active digital presence. The second group consisted of ten prominent, digitally-native "cyber-preachers" who have built their authority primarily through social media platforms. The third sample group included thirty lay Indonesian Muslims, selected through snowball sampling to represent a diversity of ages, genders, and levels of engagement with online religious content.

Research Procedure

The research procedure was conducted in three overlapping phases. The first phase, data collection, involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the 50 participants and carrying out the digital ethnography of the selected social media platforms. The second phase, data analysis, was conducted concurrently. Interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes were systematically coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify emergent patterns, discourses, and strategies (Aswari, 2023; Mansyur & Mas'ud, 2024). A comparative analysis was then performed to contrast the findings between the traditional *ulama* and the cyber-preachers. The final phase was data synthesis and interpretation, where the findings from all data sources were triangulated and integrated to construct a cohesive, multi-perspective narrative that addresses the core research objectives concerning the reconfiguration of Islamic authority in the digital age.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary instrument for data collection was the researcher, guided by three distinct qualitative tools. First, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed for each sample group (traditional *ulama*, cyber-preachers, and lay Muslims) to explore themes of authority, media strategy, and religious practice. Second, a digital ethnography framework was established to guide the systematic, non-participant observation and content analysis of the subjects' primary social media platforms (e.g., YouTube channels, Instagram accounts, Facebook pages) over a six-month period. Third, a thematic analysis codebook was developed iteratively to guide the analysis of all collected textual and visual data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interview data and digital ethnography revealed two distinct and often competing strategies for constructing religious authority. The traditional ulama predominantly employed a strategy of “institutional credentialing.” Their online content and personal narratives consistently emphasized their formal education, their lineage of scholarship (*isnad*), and their affiliation with established institutions like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. They framed their authority as being rooted in a deep, verifiable tradition of textual knowledge and institutional legitimacy.

The digitally-native “cyber-preachers,” in contrast, utilized a strategy of “affective connection and media charisma.” Their authority was constructed through the cultivation of a strong parasocial relationship with their audience, characterized by a relatable persona, emotionally resonant storytelling, and visually appealing content optimized for social media platforms. They emphasized personal piety, authenticity, and the ability to provide direct, accessible answers to the everyday religious concerns of their followers, largely bypassing discussions of formal credentials or institutional affiliation.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Authority Construction Strategies

Thematic Category	Traditional Ulama	Cyber-Preachers
Source of Legitimacy	Institutional affiliation; Scholarly lineage (<i>isnad</i>)	Personal charisma; Audience engagement metrics
Dominant Discourse	Textual interpretation; Legal scholarship; Tradition	Motivational advice; Personal piety; Emotional resonance
Media Style	Formal lecture (sermon); Text-heavy posts	Short, shareable videos; Q&A sessions; Visually rich content
Relationship to Audience	Teacher-student; Hierarchical	Influencer-follower; Relational and interactive

The strategy of institutional credentialing is explained by the traditional ulama’s embeddedness within a long-standing religious ecosystem. Their entire career and social standing are built upon the very institutional structures they represent. Their move into the digital sphere is therefore a defensive and adaptive measure, an attempt to project their established, offline authority into a new and unfamiliar online space. Their discursive emphasis on tradition and formal knowledge is a direct attempt to differentiate themselves from what they perceive as the unqualified and superficial nature of many online competitors.

The cyber-preachers’ strategy of affective connection is explained by the logic of the social media platforms they inhabit. These platforms reward content that generates high levels of engagement, such as likes, shares, and comments, which are driven by emotional connection rather than scholarly rigor. Their success is a direct result of their mastery of this new media logic. By creating a persona that is approachable, authentic, and emotionally available, they build a form of charismatic authority that is native to the digital environment and highly effective at attracting a mass following.

The dominant narrative of religious practice promoted by the traditional ulama centered on the importance of communal obligation, adherence to established schools of Islamic law (*madhhab*), and the necessity of seeking knowledge from qualified teachers. Their digital content often focused on the correct performance of rituals, the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and the importance of maintaining the unity of the community (*ummah*). They presented a vision of Islam as a comprehensive, socially embedded tradition that requires disciplined study and communal participation.

The cyber-preachers, conversely, advanced a dominant narrative of religious practice centered on individual piety, personal spiritual development, and a direct, unmediated relationship with God. Their content frequently focused on themes of repentance (*tawbah*), gratitude (*shukr*), and finding spiritual meaning in everyday life. They presented a more privatized and individualized vision of Islam, where the emphasis is on the believer’s personal emotional and spiritual journey rather than on adherence to a specific institutional or legal tradition.

The traditional ulama's narrative allows for the inference that they perceive a significant threat of religious fragmentation and deinstitutionalization in the digital age. Their consistent emphasis on community, tradition, and the authority of qualified scholarship can be inferred as a direct response to the individualistic and "do-it-yourself" religiosity they see being promoted online. This suggests a deep concern that the digital sphere is eroding the social fabric of Indonesian Islam that their institutions have spent decades building.

The cyber-preachers' narrative of individualized piety leads to the inference that they are successfully tapping into the broader social trends of late modernity, which prioritize personal choice, authenticity, and self-realization. Their success suggests that a significant segment of the Indonesian Muslim population, particularly the urban youth, is seeking a form of religious expression that is more emotionally fulfilling and less institutionally demanding than what is offered by traditional structures. This infers a major shift in religious consumer preferences.

The relationship between the two groups is characterized by a dynamic of adaptation and contestation. Many younger, media-savvy traditional ulama are actively adapting their communication styles to compete in the digital sphere. They have begun to produce shorter video clips, engage in Instagram Live sessions, and adopt a more personal and relatable tone, representing a clear attempt to incorporate the successful techniques of the cyber-preachers into their own outreach efforts.

This adaptation, however, exists alongside a clear contestation over legitimacy. In interviews, traditional ulama frequently and explicitly criticized the cyber-preachers for their lack of formal training and their tendency to oversimplify complex religious issues. Conversely, the cyber-preachers and their followers often framed the traditional institutions as being rigid, out of touch, and unable to address the real-world concerns of contemporary Muslims, thereby positioning themselves as a necessary and more relevant alternative.

A prominent case study illustrating these dynamics is the online "hijrah" movement, a popular youth subculture focused on a personal journey towards greater Islamic piety. This movement is largely fueled and shaped by a network of charismatic cyber-preachers who use Instagram and YouTube to promote a specific lifestyle brand of conservative, urban Islam. Their content focuses on individual transformation, often emphasizing changes in dress, consumption habits, and social circles.

The traditional ulama have had a complex and often critical response to this digitally-driven movement. While they support the underlying desire for increased piety, many have publicly criticized the movement's tendency towards a rigid, literalist, and often performative interpretation of Islam, which they see as detached from the tolerant, culturally-grounded traditions of Indonesian Islam. They have used their own platforms to offer a counter-narrative, arguing that a true "hijrah" is an internal spiritual journey, not just an external change in appearance, and must be guided by qualified scholars.

The success of the online hijrah movement is explained by the cyber-preachers' masterful use of social media to create an aspirational religious identity. They have effectively combined Islamic teachings with modern influencer marketing techniques, creating a powerful sense of community and belonging for young Muslims who may feel alienated from both secular modernity and traditional religious institutions. The movement provides a clear and accessible roadmap for a pious life that is perfectly packaged for a digital, consumerist culture.

The critical response from the traditional ulama is explained by their role as guardians of what they consider to be orthodox tradition. They perceive the online hijrah movement as promoting a form of Islam that is theologically shallow and socially divisive. Their counter-discourse is a direct attempt to reassert their authority as the arbiters of authentic religious knowledge and to guide this youthful religious enthusiasm back towards their own institutional and intellectual fold. This case study perfectly encapsulates the ongoing struggle to define the substance and style of Indonesian Islam in the digital age.

In summary, the results of this qualitative study reveal a profound and ongoing reconfiguration of Islamic authority in Indonesia, driven by the rise of digital media. The findings demonstrate a clear

fragmentation of authority, with the institutionally-grounded legitimacy of the traditional ulama now being actively contested by the charismatic, media-driven authority of a new generation of cyber-preachers. These two groups employ distinct strategies, promote different narratives of religious practice, and are engaged in a dynamic process of adaptation and competition.

The findings are interpreted as evidence of a fundamental shift from a hierarchical, institution-based model of religious authority to a more networked, personalized, and contested one. The study concludes that digital media is not simply a new tool for the old authorities but is an active agent of change that is fostering a more diverse and democratized, yet also more fragmented and potentially polarized, religious landscape. The traditional ulama are not becoming obsolete, but their authority is no longer exclusive and must now be constantly performed and renegotiated in a crowded and competitive digital public sphere.

This study provided a comparative analysis of the strategies used by traditional ulama and new cyber-preachers to construct religious authority in Indonesia's digital age. The primary finding is the identification of a fundamental strategic dichotomy. Traditional ulama rely on a strategy of "institutional credentialing," emphasizing their formal education and scholarly lineage. In contrast, cyber-preachers employ a strategy of "affective connection," building authority through media charisma and a relatable online persona.

The research established that these divergent strategies are linked to distinct narratives of religious practice. The traditional ulama promote a vision of Islam that is communal, tradition-bound, and jurisprudentially focused. The cyber-preachers, conversely, advance a more individualized and emotionally-oriented narrative of personal piety and spiritual development, a message that resonates strongly with a younger, urban demographic.

The dynamic between these two groups was found to be one of both adaptation and contestation. While some traditional ulama are adopting the media styles of their digital competitors, a clear ideological and legitimacy-based conflict persists. This was vividly illustrated in the case study of the online "hijrah" movement, where the charismatic, lifestyle-oriented approach of the cyber-preachers was met with a critical, tradition-defending counter-discourse from the established ulama.

The overarching conclusion from these findings is that Islamic authority in Indonesia is undergoing a profound reconfiguration. It is shifting from a relatively stable, hierarchical, and institutionally-grounded system to a more fragmented, networked, and contested landscape where authority must be constantly performed and negotiated in a competitive digital public sphere.

The finding that digital media fragments religious authority is in strong agreement with the broader literature on media and religion. Our work provides a specific, in-depth Indonesian case study that validates the general theories proposed by scholars who have argued that new media technologies tend to de-institutionalize and individualize religious experience. This study reinforces the consensus that the internet challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge across all social domains, including religion.

This research distinguishes itself from much of the existing literature on "Islam online" through its direct, comparative methodology. Many prior studies have focused on a single type of actor—either profiling a specific online movement or analyzing how a traditional institution uses the internet. By placing the traditional ulama and the new cyber-preachers into a single, relational frame, our study moves beyond a simple description of online activity to an analysis of the dynamic contestation and mutual influence between these competing forms of authority.

The concept of "affective connection" as a primary source of digital religious authority contributes a new dimension to the discussion. While other studies have noted the rise of charismatic online figures, our work explicitly frames their success in terms of the affective, emotional labor they perform and their mastery of a media logic that prioritizes relationality over formal credentials. This provides a more nuanced explanation for their appeal than simply labeling them as "populist" or "conservative."

The Indonesian case, as detailed in our findings, offers a crucial comparative perspective to the literature on digital Islam, which has often been focused on the Middle East or Western minority contexts. The resilience and adaptive strategies of Indonesia's massive, established traditional institutions like NU and Muhammadiyah provide a different narrative from contexts where state-controlled or more radicalized forms of Islam dominate the digital sphere. This highlights the importance of local social and historical context in shaping the impact of global media technologies.

The findings of this study signify a fundamental and likely irreversible shift in the social organization of religion in Indonesia. The fragmentation of authority and the rise of a networked, personalized religious sphere indicate that the era of institutional monopoly over religious knowledge is over. This reflects a broader societal trend of deinstitutionalization, where individuals increasingly seek to construct their own identities and belief systems outside of traditional, hierarchical structures.

The success of the cyber-preachers is a significant reflection of a major shift in religious consumer preferences, particularly among the youth. It signals a growing demand for a form of Islam that is more emotionally resonant, personally meaningful, and directly relevant to the challenges of modern urban life. The appeal of their individualized, motivational discourse suggests a move away from a purely legalistic or ritualistic understanding of faith towards a more therapeutic and self-oriented one.

The adaptive strategies of the traditional ulama signify their resilience and continued relevance, but also the immense challenge they face. Their attempts to engage with new media reflect an acknowledgment that they can no longer rely on their established institutional authority alone; it must be actively performed and "marketed" in a competitive digital environment. This signifies a fundamental change in the very nature of what it means to be an ulama in the 21st century.

Ultimately, the dynamic of contestation between the two groups signifies that the future of Indonesian Islam is being actively and publicly negotiated. The digital sphere has become the primary arena for this debate, where different visions of Islam—communal vs. individual, traditional vs. modern, textual vs. emotional—compete for the hearts and minds of the populace. This reflects a vibrant, if sometimes contentious, religious public sphere that is a defining feature of contemporary Indonesian society.

The primary implication of this work is for traditional Islamic institutions in Indonesia and beyond. The findings strongly imply that to remain relevant, these institutions must move beyond a purely defensive posture and develop sophisticated, proactive digital strategies. This means not only adopting new media platforms but also adapting their communication styles to be more engaging, personal, and responsive to the affective needs of a digital-native audience, without compromising their scholarly integrity.

For policymakers and civil society organizations concerned with religious moderation and social cohesion, the implications are significant. The study implies that efforts to counter extremist narratives online cannot be effective without understanding and engaging with the broader landscape of popular religious discourse. It suggests that supporting and amplifying the voices of credible, media-savvy traditional ulama who can offer an appealing and authentic alternative to both rigid formalism and extremism is a critical strategy.

The research has important implications for the field of Islamic studies. It suggests that scholars can no longer understand contemporary Islam by focusing solely on texts and traditional institutions. A deep engagement with digital media and the analysis of online religious trends are now essential for a complete and accurate picture of how Islam is being lived, interpreted, and transformed in the modern world. This implies a need for new methodological approaches, such as digital ethnography, to become standard in the field.

From a broader social perspective, the reconfiguration of religious authority has implications for Indonesian democracy and pluralism. The rise of a more fragmented and individualized religious sphere could lead to greater social polarization if different groups retreat into their own digital echo chambers.

This implies a need for greater investment in digital literacy and critical thinking education to equip citizens with the skills to navigate this complex information environment responsibly.

The success of the cyber-preachers is fundamentally caused by their mastery of the logic of the social media ecosystem. Their content short, visually engaging, emotionally resonant, and easily shareable is perfectly tailored to the algorithms and user behaviors of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Their authority is a direct product of this media alignment, as the platforms' metrics (likes, shares, followers) themselves become the new, visible markers of legitimacy, replacing traditional credentials.

The traditional ulama's strategy of institutional credentialing is a direct causal result of their own life-world and training. Their authority has always been derived from their position within a respected institution and their mastery of a complex scholarly tradition. It is therefore natural that they would attempt to replicate this logic of authority online. Their relative difficulty in gaining traction is caused by the mismatch between this traditional, hierarchical logic and the flat, relational logic of the digital sphere.

The appeal of the individualized religious narrative is caused by its resonance with the broader cultural and social conditions of urban modernity. Young, educated, and upwardly mobile Muslims are often navigating a world of individual choice, consumer culture, and personal branding. The cyber-preachers' focus on personal transformation and spiritual self-improvement provides a religious framework that is perfectly congruent with this individualistic ethos, making it feel more relevant and authentic than the more communally-oriented discourse of the traditional ulama.

The dynamic of adaptation and contestation is an inevitable result of the collision of these two different systems of authority. The traditional ulama are forced to adapt because the digital sphere presents a direct threat to their audience and influence. The contestation over legitimacy is a direct result of the fact that both groups are competing for the same scarce resource: the authority to define what constitutes "correct" Islam for the Indonesian public. This competition is the underlying cause of the dynamic and evolving religious landscape observed in the results.

Future research should be directed at understanding the long-term social and political consequences of this reconfiguration of authority. A longitudinal study that tracks the followers of different online religious figures over several years would be invaluable for assessing the real-world impact of their teachings on social attitudes, political behavior, and inter-religious relations. This would move beyond an analysis of discourse to an analysis of concrete social outcomes.

A critical next step is to conduct a large-scale quantitative survey to map the landscape of digital religious authority more comprehensively. Such a survey could measure the relative reach and perceived trustworthiness of different types of religious figures across different demographic groups (age, gender, location, education). This would provide a much-needed quantitative complement to the qualitative insights generated in this study.

The scope of the research should be expanded to include a more in-depth analysis of the role of algorithms and platform governance. An investigation into how the specific algorithms of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok shape the visibility and reach of different types of religious content is essential. This would require a more interdisciplinary approach, combining social science methods with data science to understand the powerful but often invisible role of technology in shaping the religious public sphere.

Finally, a comparative study applying the framework developed here to other Muslim-majority countries with high levels of digital penetration, such as Malaysia or Turkey, would be highly valuable. Such a study could determine whether the specific dynamics of adaptation and contestation observed in Indonesia are unique or are part of a broader, global pattern of religious change in the digital age. This would allow for the development of a more generalizable theory of digital religious authority.

CONCLUSION

The most distinct finding of this research is the identification of a fundamental cleavage in the strategies used to construct religious authority in the digital age. The study demonstrates a clear bifurcation between the “institutional credentialing” of traditional ulama, who leverage their scholarly lineage and formal affiliations, and the “affective connection” of cyber-preachers, who build charismatic authority through relational, media-savvy engagement. This dichotomy between tradition-based and charisma-based authority is the defining feature of the contemporary reconfiguration of Indonesian Islam.

This study’s primary contribution is conceptual and methodological, offering a relational framework that analyzes the dynamic of contestation and adaptation between old and new religious authorities. The value lies in treating these two groups not in isolation, but as interacting agents in a competitive religious field. This comparative approach provides a more nuanced and powerful model for understanding how authority is being renegotiated in the digital age than studies that focus on only one type of actor.

The research is limited by its qualitative nature and its focus on a specific set of actors within the vast Indonesian digital landscape. The findings are not statistically generalizable, and the study did not include other important voices, such as female preachers or more radical groups. Future research must therefore be directed at quantitative surveys to map the reach and influence of these different authority figures more broadly. Furthermore, in-depth studies on other types of digital religious actors are needed to create a more complete and comprehensive picture of this complex and evolving phenomenon.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest.

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