



DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND ISLAMIC NARRATIVES: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SITE OF RELIGIOUS CONTESTATION

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Abstract

Social media has become a central arena in which Islamic narratives are produced, circulated, and contested through digitally mediated activism. This study aimed to examine how Muslim activists construct religious narratives, negotiate authority, and respond to platform structures and audience interaction. A qualitative comparative design combined multi-platform digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, and cross-case analysis. The dataset included six digital campaigns, thirty-six participants, public posts, videos, livestreams, podcasts, and audience comments collected from Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. The findings showed that justice, solidarity, human dignity, charity, and resistance to oppression dominated activist messaging. Qur'anic and Hadith references strengthened moral legitimacy, although audience engagement depended more consistently on emotional storytelling, visual communication, and practical calls to action. Formal religious training supported textual verification, while relational credibility and platform visibility shaped public influence. Online harassment and ideological contestation also encouraged self-censorship, audience separation, and strategic communication. The study concludes that social media functions not merely as a channel for Islamic activism but as an active site where religious legitimacy, activist credibility, and digital visibility are continuously negotiated. Effective digital activism therefore requires ethical representation, theological responsibility, platform awareness, and transparent engagement with diverse audiences across networked Muslim publics worldwide.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Islamic Narratives, Religious Authority



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INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed religious communication from a largely institution-centred process into a networked activity involving scholars, activists, influencers, community organizations, political actors, and ordinary users (Omar Elsaltani & Foster, 2025). Islamic narratives now circulate through videos, hashtags, podcasts, livestreams, memes, comment sections, and messaging applications, reaching audiences that may not be connected to conventional religious institutions (Gendron et al., 2025; McDaid & Free, 2025). These digital environments allow religious messages to travel rapidly across geographical, linguistic, and organizational boundaries. Research on digital Islam indicates that platform-based communication has expanded participation in religious learning and public discussion while changing how Islamic authority is produced, displayed, and recognized (Aldemir & Leurs, 2024; Dall'Agnola, 2025).

Digital activism has developed within this changing religious environment as Muslim actors use social media to mobilize solidarity, defend community interests, promote social reform, contest discrimination, and interpret political events through Islamic ethical language (Dong et al., 2025). Campaigns addressing humanitarian crises, environmental protection, gender justice, Islamophobia, charitable action, and political accountability frequently combine Qur'anic references, prophetic traditions, moral emotions, visual symbols, and calls for collective participation (Maleknia & Pakravan-Charvadeh, 2025). Studies of religious protest and environmental activism show that digital platforms can connect religious meaning with public mobilization by increasing visibility, networking activists, and facilitating rapid participation (Shahir et al., 2025).

Social media should not be understood as a neutral channel through which complete and stable Islamic messages are simply transmitted. Platform architectures influence which narratives become visible, which speakers acquire followers, and which controversies attract sustained engagement (Babu et al., 2025; Grenz, 2023). Recommendation algorithms, metrics of popularity, visual aesthetics, emotional intensity, and audience interaction shape the circulation of religious claims. Islamic narratives consequently compete not only on theological or moral grounds but also through platform-specific forms of communication (Brandmayr, 2025; Zelenkauskaitė & English, 2025). Emerging research describes digital Islamic authority as increasingly fluid because credibility may arise from relational proximity, persuasive presentation, network visibility, and perceived authenticity alongside formal scholarly qualifications (Andersson, 2024).

The central research problem concerns how Islamic narratives are constructed, circulated, challenged, and legitimized within social-media activism. Activists frequently employ religious concepts such as justice, solidarity, human dignity, communal responsibility, and resistance to oppression when framing public issues (Hodder, 2025; Mohammed, 2025). Competing actors may interpret the same concepts differently or use different textual references to support opposing political positions. Social media therefore becomes a site where Islamic meaning is not merely communicated but actively negotiated. The research must examine which narratives achieve visibility, how activists establish their religious credibility, and how audiences participate in affirming, modifying, or rejecting those narratives (Das et al., 2024; Kapoor et al., 2025).

Religious contestation becomes particularly complex when the boundaries among scholarship, activism, political communication, entertainment, and commercial influence are unclear. Formally trained scholars may compete with charismatic influencers, anonymous platforms, advocacy organizations, and users whose authority arises from personal testimony or digital popularity (Ali & Salam-Salmaoui, 2024; Seyfi, Kimbu, Tavangar, et al., 2025). Visual presentation and emotional storytelling can increase the persuasive power of a message without necessarily strengthening its theological foundation. Studies of digital authority show that the online environment can decentralize religious interpretation while creating new hierarchies

based on visibility, familiarity, branding, and algorithmic exposure (Saada, 2023; Weldon et al., 2023).

Political and technological pressures introduce another dimension of the problem. Muslim activists may encounter online harassment, Islamophobic discourse, surveillance, legal restrictions, content moderation, organized counter-narratives, and platform manipulation. Research involving Muslim communities in India documents how digital Islamophobia affects participation and creates demands for stronger platform accountability (Wahid, 2024; Winkler-Titus & Crafford, 2025). Studies of activism in politically constrained environments also identify surveillance, online manipulation, legal action, and digital repression as mechanisms capable of narrowing civic space. Islamic digital activism must therefore be analysed through unequal relations of power rather than interpreted only as an expression of individual agency or technological empowerment (Kalim, 2024; Mahmut, 2025).

The primary objective of this study is to analyse how Muslim activists construct Islamic narratives when addressing religious, social, humanitarian, and political issues through social media. The research seeks to identify the Qur'anic concepts, prophetic references, moral vocabularies, historical memories, visual symbols, and emotional appeals used to define problems and justify collective action. Attention will be directed toward the ways activists connect religious principles with contemporary concerns and translate complex theological ideas into accessible digital messages. This objective will clarify how Islamic meaning functions as a resource for mobilization rather than as a passive background to political or social action (Aharoni & Lissitsa, 2025; Jung, 2024).

A second objective is to investigate how religious authority is negotiated among scholars, activists, influencers, organizations, and digital audiences. The study will examine the strategies through which actors present themselves as credible interpreters of Islam, including scholarly credentials, personal piety, community experience, institutional affiliation, emotional authenticity, and social-media visibility. Audience responses will also be considered because likes, shares, comments, endorsements, and criticism contribute to the public validation or rejection of religious claims. Research on networked Islam suggests that contemporary authority increasingly develops through relationships among speakers, followers, platforms, and communicative practices rather than through institutional position alone (Ateş, 2025; Kadich, 2024).

The study further aims to explain how platform structures and wider political conditions influence religious contestation. The analysis will explore how algorithmic visibility, content formats, moderation practices, hashtag networks, counter-discourses, and online hostility shape the reach and interpretation of activist narratives (Saud et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2024). Differences among platforms should be examined because short-video applications, image-based networks, public discussion sites, and private messaging groups encourage different modes of participation. The expected outcome is an analytical framework linking Islamic narrative construction, activist strategy, religious authority, audience interaction, platform governance, and sociopolitical context.

Existing scholarship has generated valuable knowledge about digital Islam, online preaching, religious influencers, virtual fatwas, Muslim identity, and the transformation of religious authority. Research has shown that digital platforms can decentralize Islamic knowledge, create new religious publics, and allow users to negotiate interpretations beyond conventional institutional settings. Much of this literature concentrates on religious learning, da'wah, authority, piety, or influencer culture as primary objects of analysis. The connection between these religious processes and organized digital activism is often acknowledged but not systematically developed as a unified field of inquiry.

Research on Muslim digital activism has examined political mobilization, moderate Islamic campaigns, women's activism, environmental movements, solidarity networks, and resistance to Islamophobia. These studies reveal diverse ways in which Islamic language and

identity are mobilized for public causes. Their findings are frequently organized around individual movements, specific controversies, particular ideological groups, or single national contexts. Research on Muslim women in Indonesia and Thailand, for example, demonstrates how social media can support political subjectivity and counterpublic participation, while studies of eco-religious activism show how environmental and Islamic narratives are negotiated together. A comparative explanation of how different Islamic narratives compete across issues and platforms remains limited.

A methodological gap is visible in the separation of content analysis from the study of production, reception, and platform mediation. Studies based only on public posts can identify dominant themes but may not explain why activists select particular religious references, how they respond to platform constraints, or how audiences interpret contested messages. Interview-based research can reveal motivations and experiences but may not capture patterns of circulation and interaction at scale. The available literature, taken together, suggests the need for an integrated approach combining digital ethnography, discourse analysis, network observation, activist interviews, and audience interpretation. This conclusion represents a synthesis of the literature rather than a claim that no previous mixed-method research exists.

The principal novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing social media as a field of religious contestation in which Islamic narratives, activist claims, technological systems, and audience practices interact. The proposed framework moves beyond approaches that treat religious content as a finished message or social media as a neutral instrument. Islamic narratives are understood as dynamic constructions whose meanings can change through captions, images, hashtags, comments, reposting practices, and encounters with counter-narratives. This perspective makes it possible to analyse digital activism simultaneously as religious interpretation, political communication, cultural performance, and technologically mediated collective action.

A second element of novelty involves examining the relationship between narrative authority and platform visibility. The study will distinguish theological credibility from digital prominence while analysing how these forms of authority may reinforce or contradict one another. A highly visible activist may possess strong communicative authority but limited religious training, while a qualified scholar may struggle to adapt complex reasoning to short and emotionally driven formats (Anggara, 2025; Seyfi, Kimbu, Vo-Thanh, et al., 2025). Anonymous accounts may also acquire influence without relying on a recognizable charismatic figure. This relational approach can reveal how scholarly expertise, personal authenticity, organizational legitimacy, audience engagement, and algorithmic circulation jointly shape contested Islamic discourse.

The justification for this research rests on its theoretical, methodological, and practical significance. Theoretically, it connects digital religion with social-movement studies, political communication, narrative analysis, and platform governance. Methodologically, it supports an integrated examination of messages, actors, audiences, and technological infrastructures. Practically, the findings may assist religious institutions, activists, educators, and policymakers in distinguishing constructive religious participation from manipulation, hate speech, and ideologically closed mobilization. The study is important because digital Islamic activism can create solidarity, public education, and marginalized voices while also intensifying polarization, misinformation, and struggles over legitimate representation. A rigorous analysis must account for these competing possibilities without assuming that digital activism is inherently emancipatory or inherently harmful.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative comparative design supported by multi-platform digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis. The design was selected to examine how Islamic narratives were constructed, circulated, interpreted, and contested within social-media activism. Qualitative inquiry enabled the researchers to investigate the meanings attached to religious language, moral claims, visual symbols, and collective-action messages. The comparative approach facilitated the identification of similarities and differences across campaigns, platforms, activist groups, and sociopolitical contexts (Almethen & Alomair, 2024; Bures, 2023).

The units of analysis consisted of activist narratives, social-media content, digital interactions, religious authority claims, audience responses, and platform-specific communication practices. The study examined activism related to humanitarian solidarity, social justice, environmental responsibility, gender issues, anti-Islamophobia campaigns, and political accountability. Social media was treated as an active environment that shaped religious discourse through algorithms, engagement metrics, content formats, moderation systems, and networked audience participation. This analytical position allowed the research to evaluate both human agency and technological influence in the formation of contested Islamic narratives.

Research Target/Subject

The research population comprised Muslim activists, religious scholars, Islamic content creators, community organizations, advocacy networks, and social-media users involved in producing or responding to Islamic activist narratives. The digital population included public posts, short videos, livestreams, campaign materials, podcasts, hashtags, comments, and discussion threads published on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. These platforms were selected because they supported different forms of communication, ranging from brief visual messages and public debate to extended religious explanation and audiovisual storytelling.

The research sample was selected through purposive and maximum-variation sampling. Six digital campaigns were chosen based on their explicit use of Islamic language, sustained public engagement, relevance to social or political issues, and availability of sufficient digital documentation (Awais & Ali, 2025; Shaikh & Soomro, 2025). Thirty-six participants were recruited, consisting of 12 activists, six religious scholars or educators, six digital content creators, six organizational representatives, and six active audience members. Participant selection considered gender, age, institutional affiliation, level of religious training, campaign role, and intensity of social-media participation. Digital sampling produced a corpus of 1,500 public posts, 180 videos, 60 podcast or livestream recordings, and 3,000 audience comments collected from the selected campaigns.

Research Procedure

The research process began with the identification and preliminary mapping of Islamic digital-activism campaigns. Campaigns were monitored for three months before final selection to determine their thematic relevance, level of public interaction, continuity, and use of explicitly religious narratives. Ethical approval was obtained before formal data collection. Participants received detailed information concerning the research objectives, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, recording practices, and their right to withdraw. Written or digitally recorded informed consent was obtained before each interview (BEN YOUSSEF, 2024; Mellor, 2025).

Digital ethnographic observation was conducted over six months across the four selected platforms. Public posts, videos, livestreams, hashtags, comments, and interaction patterns were documented using standardized data-recording forms. Closed groups and private conversations

were excluded unless administrators and participants provided explicit permission. The researchers avoided direct intervention in observed discussions to minimize disruption. Screenshots and archived materials were anonymized, while usernames, profile photographs, geographical information, and other identifying features were removed from the research database.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or through encrypted video-conferencing applications. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Interview transcripts were checked against the recordings to maintain accuracy. Field notes were prepared after each interview and digital observation session to document contextual information, interpretive questions, emotional dynamics, and possible researcher assumptions. Relevant campaign documents, organizational statements, religious references, and public policy materials were collected to support contextual interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted through reflexive thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, and cross-case comparison. Initial coding identified religious concepts, activist frames, authority claims, emotional appeals, visual strategies, audience responses, counter-discourses, and experiences of digital repression. Focused coding organized these elements into broader themes concerning moral mobilization, contested Islamic authority, algorithmic visibility, narrative polarization, collective solidarity, and strategic self-presentation. Critical discourse analysis examined how language and imagery defined social problems, legitimized particular positions, and represented supporters or opponents. Cross-case analysis compared narrative patterns across issues, organizations, platforms, and participant categories.

Research trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member reflection, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail. Interview findings were compared with observed content, audience comments, campaign documents, and platform practices. Selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to identify factual inaccuracies or missing contextual information. Two qualitative researchers independently coded a portion of the dataset before discussing discrepancies and refining the coding framework. Reflexive journals were maintained throughout the study to examine how the researchers' religious, political, and academic positions could influence data selection and interpretation.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The researcher served as the primary instrument responsible for data collection, interpretation, comparison, and reflexive evaluation. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore participants' motivations, religious references, communication strategies, perceptions of authority, experiences of contestation, and responses to platform constraints. Interview questions addressed the selection of Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions, the translation of Islamic concepts into activist messages, the role of emotions and visual symbols, the management of disagreement, and the influence of audience expectations on narrative production (Alshaketheep et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2025).

A digital-observation protocol, discourse-analysis matrix, content-documentation form, and participant-profile questionnaire were used as supporting instruments. The observation protocol recorded interaction patterns, hashtag use, forms of endorsement, counter-narratives, moderation practices, and changes in campaign visibility. The discourse-analysis matrix examined problem definitions, moral evaluations, religious legitimations, proposed actions, representations of social groups, and claims to Islamic authority. Instrument quality was evaluated by three experts in digital religion, Islamic studies, and qualitative research methodology. Their recommendations were used to improve conceptual clarity, reduce overlapping indicators, and strengthen alignment between the research objectives and data-collection procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dataset consisted of six digital activism campaigns, 36 semi-structured interviews, 1,500 public social-media posts, 180 short and extended videos, 60 podcast or livestream recordings, and 3,000 audience comments. The selected campaigns addressed humanitarian solidarity, anti-Islamophobia, social justice, gender justice, environmental responsibility, and political accountability. Humanitarian solidarity generated the largest volume of material, comprising 310 posts, 44 videos, 12 podcast or livestream recordings, and 710 comments. Political accountability produced the smallest number of posts and videos, although its discussions remained relatively intensive because several posts generated prolonged debates concerning religious authority, citizenship, and political legitimacy.

Platform distribution showed that Instagram contained 420 posts, X contained 390 posts, TikTok contained 360 posts, and YouTube contained 330 posts or community updates. Instagram and TikTok were used predominantly for visual storytelling, brief moral messages, campaign graphics, and emotionally engaging calls to action. X hosted faster and more confrontational exchanges, while YouTube accommodated extended explanations, sermons, interviews, and responses to opposing interpretations. The participant sample included 12 activists, six religious scholars or educators, six content creators, six organizational representatives, and six active audience members. Twelve participants possessed formal or sustained Islamic educational backgrounds, while 24 relied primarily on organizational experience, personal study, activist involvement, or community recognition.

Table 1. Distribution of Digital Materials Across the Selected Campaigns

Campaign	Public Posts	Videos	Podcasts Or Livestreams	Audience Comments
Humanitarian solidarity	310	44	12	710
Anti-Islamophobia	285	31	8	605
Social justice	260	32	10	500
Gender justice	230	29	11	445
Environmental responsibility	210	24	9	350
Political accountability	205	20	10	390
Total	1,500	180	60	3,000

The predominance of humanitarian and anti-Islamophobia content indicates that digital Islamic activism was especially responsive to issues involving visible suffering, communal vulnerability, and perceived injustice. These topics provided activists with recognizable moral frames grounded in solidarity, human dignity, protection of the oppressed, charitable obligation, and collective responsibility. Their emotional immediacy also supported rapid circulation because audiences could respond through sharing, donating, commenting, or participating in symbolic campaigns. Environmental and political-accountability campaigns required more extensive explanation to connect specific policy concerns with Islamic ethical concepts, which partly explains their lower volume of posts.

Differences among platforms shaped the form rather than merely the quantity of activist communication. TikTok and Instagram encouraged compressed narratives that combined scriptural fragments, visual symbols, music, personal testimony, and direct calls to action. YouTube enabled participants to provide contextual interpretation and defend their use of religious sources in greater detail. X facilitated immediate response to public events but also intensified disagreement through short statements, quote-posting, and rapid counter-commentary. Platform characteristics therefore influenced how activists balanced accessibility, theological precision, emotional intensity, and the risk of misinterpretation.

Thematic analysis identified calls to collective action in 1,087 posts or 72.5% of the corpus. Justice and resistance to oppression appeared in 1,018 posts, while emotional framing was found in 934 posts. Visual religious or political symbols were used in 891 posts, and

references to Muslim solidarity or the *ummah* appeared in 846 posts. Moral responsibility expressed through concepts such as *amānah*, charity, accountability, or protection of human dignity appeared in 713 posts. Explicit quotations or direct references to the Qur'an and Hadith were present in 588 posts, representing 39.2% of the corpus.

Religious authority was constructed through several overlapping sources. Formally trained scholars emphasized textual interpretation, established legal reasoning, and recognized scholarly traditions. Activists and content creators more frequently relied on lived experience, moral urgency, personal authenticity, and proximity to affected communities. Organizational accounts used institutional reputation and evidence of humanitarian or advocacy work to establish credibility. Audience members participated in this process by endorsing speakers, requesting sources, correcting claims, challenging interpretations, and circulating alternative religious perspectives. Authority consequently emerged through interaction rather than from credentials alone.

Table 2. Frequency of Major Narrative and Discursive Themes

Theme	Frequency (n = 1,500)	Percentage
Calls to collective action	1,087	72.5%
Justice and resistance to oppression	1,018	67.9%
Emotional or affective framing	934	62.3%
Religious and political visual symbolism	891	59.4%
Muslim solidarity and <i>ummah</i> consciousness	846	56.4%
Moral responsibility and <i>amānah</i>	713	47.5%
Human dignity and protection of vulnerable groups	652	43.5%
Explicit Qur'anic or Hadith legitimation	588	39.2%
Response to competing narratives	468	31.2%
Reference to institutional religious authority	372	24.8%

Exploratory inferential analysis was conducted by converting selected interview themes into binary variables according to the coding framework. Formal religious training demonstrated a statistically significant association with consistent textual verification, $\chi^2(1, N = 36) = 6.74$, $p = .009$, Cramér's $V = .433$. Ten of the 12 participants with formal religious training consistently verified scriptural quotations and interpretive context, compared with nine of the 24 participants without comparable training. The moderate-to-strong effect suggests that educational background influenced the use of textual evidence, although it did not determine participants' overall persuasive influence.

High audience interaction was significantly associated with narrative adaptation, $\chi^2(1, N = 36) = 7.48$, $p = .006$, Cramér's $V = .456$. Fifteen of the 18 participants receiving high levels of audience engagement reported modifying their language, visuals, or explanatory strategies in response to comments and platform metrics. Exposure to harassment was also significantly associated with strategic self-censorship, audience separation, or restricted visibility, $\chi^2(1, N = 36) = 8.92$, $p = .003$, Cramér's $V = .498$. Fifteen of the 20 participants who experienced sustained hostility altered their public communication, compared with four of the 16 participants who reported little or no harassment.

Table 3. Exploratory Inferential Relationships Among Participant Variables

Variables Examined	Statistical Result	Significance	Effect Size	Interpretation
Formal religious training and textual verification	$\chi^2 = 6.74$	$p = .009$	$V = .433$	Significant moderate-to-strong association
Audience interaction and narrative adaptation	$\chi^2 = 7.48$	$p = .006$	$V = .456$	Significant moderate-to-strong association
Online harassment and	$\chi^2 = 8.92$	$p = .003$	$V =$	Significant moderate-

strategic self-censorship	.498	to-strong association
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The relationship between religious legitimization and audience engagement was not linear. Posts containing Qur’anic verses or Hadith did not automatically generate the highest interaction. Audience responses were stronger when textual references were connected to recognizable events, personal testimony, clear visual narratives, and practical forms of participation. Scriptural authority supplied moral legitimacy, while storytelling and emotional framing made the message accessible. Posts that cited religious texts without sufficient context frequently generated requests for clarification or accusations of selective interpretation.

Counter-narratives were most visible when activist claims challenged established gender roles, criticized political authorities, or presented unfamiliar interpretations of Islamic responsibility. Audience disagreement concerned both the substance of the campaigns and the legitimacy of those delivering the messages. Critics questioned activists’ qualifications, intentions, organizational affiliations, and political loyalties. Supporters responded by emphasizing moral consistency, lived experience, or the urgency of the issue. Religious contestation consequently involved struggles over who could speak for Islam, which sources were relevant, and how Islamic values should be translated into collective action.

Case A concerned a humanitarian solidarity campaign that circulated mainly through Instagram, TikTok, and private messaging networks. Campaign content framed humanitarian assistance as an Islamic duty grounded in compassion, justice, charitable giving, and responsibility toward oppressed communities. Short videos combined images of suffering with translated Qur’anic passages, supplications, donation links, and calls for public advocacy. The campaign generated substantial engagement and fundraising participation, but critics challenged the decontextualized use of traumatic imagery and questioned whether emotional urgency had replaced careful verification of information.

Case B examined a Muslim women’s gender-justice campaign, while Case C focused on an anti-Islamophobia network. Case B used Qur’anic concepts of justice, human dignity, consultation, and protection from harm to challenge discriminatory practices within Muslim communities. Opposing users accused the campaign of importing external ideological categories into Islamic discourse. Case C combined prophetic ethics, citizenship language, statistical evidence, and personal testimony to confront anti-Muslim stereotypes. Its content created alliances with non-Muslim civil-society organizations but exposed visible activists to coordinated harassment and demands to defend Muslims collectively.

Table 4. Comparative Characteristics of Selected Digital Activism Cases

Case	Main Issue	Dominant Islamic Narrative	Principal Strategy	Main Achievement	Primary Contestation
Case A	Humanitarian solidarity	Compassion, charity, justice, and protection of the oppressed	Emotional visual storytelling and donation mobilization	High public engagement and rapid resource mobilization	Verification, traumatic imagery, and selective textual use
Case B	Muslim gender justice	Human dignity, justice, consultation, and prevention of harm	Testimony, educational videos, and textual reinterpretation	Increased visibility of women’s religious experiences	Authority, feminism, and interpretive legitimacy
Case C	Anti-Islamophobia activism	Prophetic ethics, equality, civic responsibility,	Counter-narratives, public education, and	Broader civic support and stereotype correction	Harassment, collective blame, and representational

and solidarity

intercommunity
alliances

pressure

Case A demonstrates that emotional intensity can accelerate participation while creating ethical and epistemic risks. The moral visibility of suffering enabled activists to mobilize donations and public solidarity, but rapid circulation reduced the time available for contextual verification. Religious references strengthened the perceived urgency of action, yet their abbreviated presentation sometimes encouraged disagreement regarding interpretation. The case shows that effective digital activism requires a balance between immediacy, factual accuracy, ethical representation, and responsible use of sacred texts.

Cases B and C reveal that religious contestation becomes particularly intense when activism challenges established authority or public stereotypes. Case B confronted internal Muslim debates concerning gender, interpretation, and the boundaries of legitimate reform. Case C addressed external discrimination but also generated internal disagreement about political strategy and public representation. Both campaigns required activists to negotiate several audiences simultaneously. Messages had to remain religiously meaningful to Muslim supporters, understandable to broader publics, and resilient against hostile reinterpretation.

The combined findings indicate that social media functions as a site where Islamic narratives are produced through interaction among religious sources, activist objectives, platform structures, and audience responses. Digital activism did not merely transfer established religious positions into online environments. Activists selected, condensed, visualized, and reframed Islamic concepts according to particular issues and platform expectations. Audiences subsequently strengthened, revised, or rejected those narratives through engagement practices. Religious meaning therefore remained dynamic throughout the process of digital circulation.

The findings also demonstrate that visibility is an ambivalent resource. High visibility increased campaign reach, public participation, and access to alternative Muslim voices, but it also intensified surveillance, harassment, theological criticism, and pressure to simplify complex arguments. Formal religious knowledge supported textual verification, while relational credibility and emotional authenticity often generated wider engagement. Social media should consequently be understood as an unequal field of religious contestation in which scholarly expertise, activist experience, algorithmic exposure, and audience power compete to define legitimate Islamic responses to contemporary public issues (Dall'Agnola, 2025; Gendron et al., 2025).

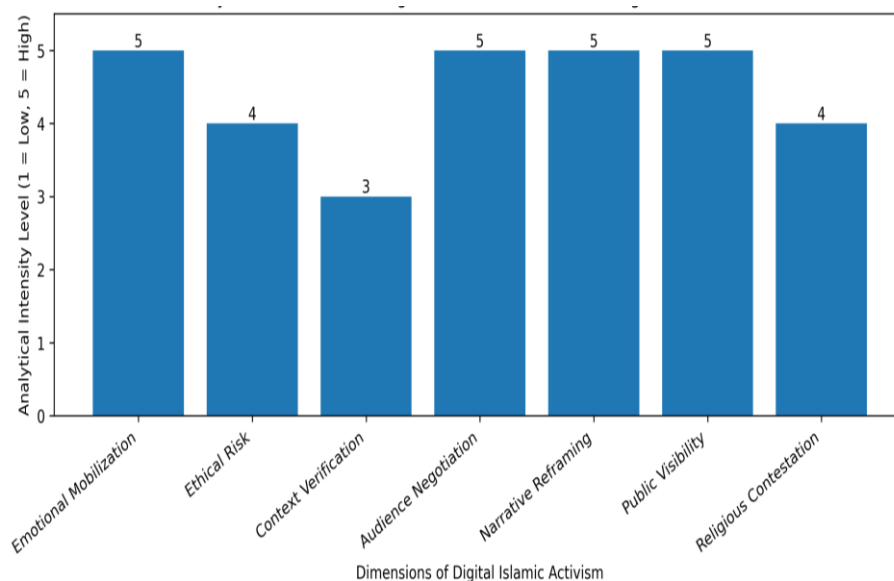


Figure 1. Analytical Dimension of Digital Islamic Activism & Religious Contestation

The findings indicate that social media has become an active arena in which Islamic narratives are constructed, circulated, disputed, and reformulated for collective action. Calls to action, justice, resistance to oppression, emotional appeals, religious symbolism, and Muslim solidarity dominated the analysed content. Humanitarian solidarity and anti-Islamophobia campaigns generated the greatest volume of posts and audience responses, showing that issues involving visible suffering and communal vulnerability were particularly effective in attracting public engagement. Environmental responsibility and political accountability received comparatively less content, although their discussions frequently required more extensive ethical and theological explanation.

Religious sources played an important but non-exclusive role in the formation of activist narratives. Qur'anic verses, Hadith, concepts of justice, *amānah*, human dignity, charity, and communal responsibility provided moral legitimacy for campaign objectives. Posts containing sacred references did not automatically produce the highest audience engagement. Stronger interaction generally occurred when religious sources were connected to recognizable events, personal testimonies, emotionally compelling images, and practical opportunities for participation. Islamic legitimation and digital storytelling consequently operated as complementary rather than interchangeable components of persuasive activism.

Religious authority emerged through a combination of formal knowledge, institutional affiliation, lived experience, moral consistency, communicative skill, and audience recognition. Participants with formal religious education were more likely to verify textual references and explain their interpretive contexts consistently (Aldemir & Leurs, 2024; Dong et al., 2025). Activists and content creators without comparable qualifications often generated wider engagement through accessible language, personal authenticity, and proximity to affected communities. Audience members also participated in the production of authority by endorsing speakers, demanding evidence, correcting quotations, disputing interpretations, and circulating competing narratives.

Platform visibility functioned as both an activist resource and a source of vulnerability. Instagram and TikTok supported emotionally condensed and visually attractive messages, YouTube accommodated extended theological explanations, and X facilitated immediate but frequently confrontational debate. High audience interaction encouraged activists to adapt language, visual presentation, and explanatory strategies. Sustained harassment prompted many participants to practise self-censorship, separate audiences, restrict account access, or avoid contentious subjects. Digital participation therefore increased opportunities for religious mobilization while imposing significant ethical, emotional, and communicative pressures.

The mobilizing function of Islamic narratives corresponds with earlier research on the One Day One Juz movement, which showed how social media could transform Qur'anic reading into a networked Islamic movement connecting Muslims across organizational and geographical boundaries. The present study confirms that religious symbols and moral commitments can support collective participation, but it extends this insight beyond devotional mobilization. The campaigns examined here addressed humanitarian crises, discrimination, gender justice, environmental responsibility, and political accountability, demonstrating that digital Islamic activism increasingly connects religious devotion with public and political concerns.

The diversification of religious authority is consistent with studies showing that social media influencers, online teachers, and new Islamic knowledge providers increasingly compete with conventional scholars and organizations. Research on Muslim millennials and online Islamic learning has found that visibility, relatability, communication style, and digital accessibility can reshape perceptions of credible authority. The present findings support that conclusion while identifying an important qualification: communicative influence and textual reliability do not always coincide. Participants with formal training demonstrated stronger

verification practices, whereas digitally prominent actors sometimes achieved greater persuasive reach despite offering less contextualized interpretation.

The narrative adaptation observed in this study resembles research on digital Islamic preaching, which describes how religious communication is reorganized according to platform formats, regulatory conditions, business interests, and audience expectations. The present findings differ from studies focused primarily on *da'wah* because the analysed actors did not merely communicate religious teaching. They strategically mobilized Islamic concepts to define public problems, legitimize action, answer opponents, and negotiate political identities. Digital activism consequently involved a more contested relationship among theological interpretation, movement objectives, media strategy, and public legitimacy.

The findings concerning gender justice and representational conflict correspond with recent studies of Muslim women's digital activism. Research on Malay Muslim women activists and online feminist campaigns shows that social media can create visibility, political subjectivity, advocacy networks, and collective action while exposing women to ideological opposition and gendered criticism. The present study reinforces these findings by showing that disagreement frequently targets not only the activist message but also the speaker's right to interpret Islamic sources. Religious contestation therefore operates through simultaneous struggles over gender, expertise, authenticity, and communal representation.

The dominance of justice and solidarity narratives signals an expansion in the public function of Islamic discourse. Religious language is not confined to personal morality, ritual observance, or institutional preaching within the analysed campaigns. Activists use Islamic concepts to interpret humanitarian suffering, social inequality, environmental damage, discrimination, and political responsibility. This development indicates that digital spaces have become important locations for translating Islamic ethics into public arguments. The translation remains contested because different actors disagree over which values, sources, and interpretations should guide contemporary collective action.

The coexistence of scholarly credentials and relational credibility signals a transformation rather than a simple disappearance of religious authority. Conventional authority based on formal education, recognized institutions, and mastery of Islamic texts remains relevant, particularly when audiences demand evidence or interpretive precision (Maleknia & Pakravan-Charvadeh, 2025; Shahir et al., 2025). Digital authority adds alternative criteria such as accessibility, emotional proximity, visibility, responsiveness, and personal experience. Contemporary Islamic authority is consequently distributed across relationships among scholars, activists, creators, organizations, audiences, and algorithmic systems rather than controlled by a single institutional centre.

The high frequency of emotional framing signals that affect has become a central infrastructure of digital religious mobilization. Images of suffering, testimonies, prayers, expressions of anger, and narratives of moral urgency can transform distant events into personally meaningful obligations. Emotional communication can deepen empathy and accelerate participation, but it may also compress complex problems into morally simplified oppositions. The challenge is not to remove emotion from activism because moral action often depends on emotional recognition. The more important task is to prevent emotional intensity from displacing factual verification, ethical representation, and contextual religious reasoning.

The association between harassment and strategic self-censorship signals an unequal distribution of digital freedom. Activists may formally possess access to the same platforms, yet they do not encounter equivalent risks when expressing religious or political positions (Andersson, 2024; Brandmayr, 2025). Muslim women, minority voices, and publicly identifiable activists may face disproportionate abuse, surveillance, collective blame, or pressure to represent entire communities. Digital visibility should therefore not be interpreted as uncomplicated empowerment. Visibility can provide influence and recognition while

simultaneously exposing users to disciplinary pressures that narrow what they consider safe or professionally acceptable to say.

The theoretical implication is that digital Islamic activism should be studied as a process of religious meaning-making rather than merely as the online dissemination of predetermined beliefs. Activists select religious concepts, connect them to current events, adapt them to platform formats, and revise them through audience interaction. Counter-narratives subsequently challenge the sources, framing, authority, or political implications of those messages. Islamic narratives remain dynamic throughout their circulation. A comprehensive analytical model must consequently connect textual interpretation, activist framing, emotional communication, platform architecture, audience participation, and political context.

The methodological implication concerns the inadequacy of examining posts without investigating the actors and interactions behind them. Content frequency can reveal dominant narratives, yet it cannot fully explain why activists select particular verses, modify their communication, or conceal certain positions. Interviews can clarify motivations but may overlook how messages change through circulation and audience response. The mixed qualitative architecture applied in this study connects discourse analysis, digital ethnography, interviews, thematic quantification, and cross-case comparison. Such integration responds to the strong reliance of existing scholarship on documentary and platform-based studies.

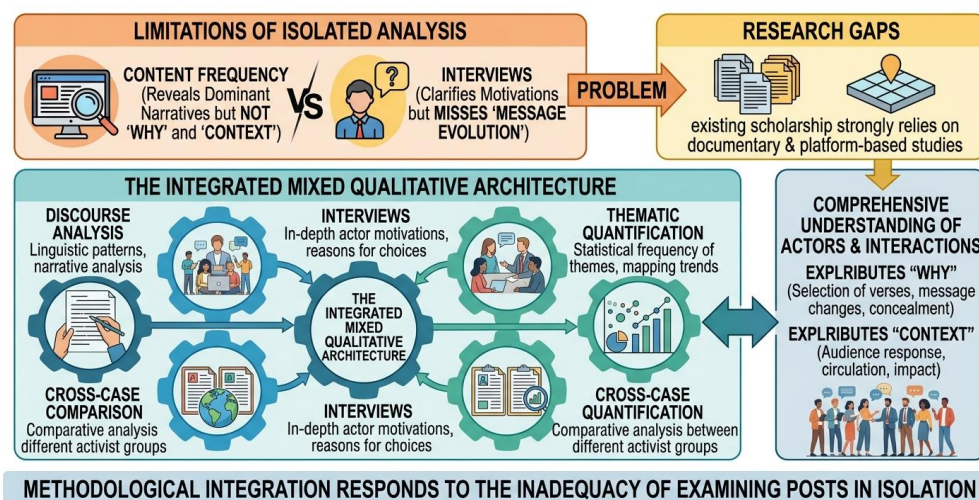


Figure 2. Advanced Methodology: Going Beyond Post to Understand Actors & Interaction

The educational implication concerns the urgent need for digital religious literacy. Muslim audiences require the ability to examine the authenticity of quotations, distinguish qualified interpretation from persuasive opinion, recognize decontextualized scripture, evaluate visual manipulation, and identify commercial or political interests behind religious content. Activists also need competencies in ethical storytelling, source verification, trauma-sensitive communication, and constructive engagement with disagreement. Religious literacy in networked societies should therefore include both classical interpretive awareness and critical understanding of algorithms, platform incentives, engagement metrics, and digital misinformation (Babu et al., 2025; Grenz, 2023).

The institutional implication concerns the relationship between scholars and activists. Religious institutions risk losing public relevance when they dismiss digital activism as superficial or treat emerging communicators solely as competitors. Activist networks risk theological oversimplification when they rely on moral urgency without adequate interpretive consultation. Collaborative arrangements can combine scholarly knowledge, activist experience, technical communication, and community trust. Such cooperation should preserve critical independence because institutional endorsement may also restrict activist voices or subordinate religious interpretation to organizational interests.

The prominence of humanitarian and anti-Islamophobia narratives can be explained by their moral immediacy. Visible suffering, discrimination, and communal vulnerability are easily connected to familiar Islamic principles such as compassion, justice, charity, protection of dignity, and assistance to oppressed people. These issues also offer accessible forms of participation, including donations, reposting, petitions, public statements, and community support. Environmental governance and political accountability often require longer causal explanations, technical information, and more controversial judgments regarding institutional responsibility, reducing their suitability for brief and emotionally driven formats.

The effectiveness of narrative combinations can be explained by the different functions performed by religious references and personal storytelling. Sacred texts provide normative legitimacy and connect present events to an established moral tradition. Personal testimony gives abstract principles a recognizable human form, while images and emotions increase attention and memorability. Practical calls to action transform moral recognition into observable participation. Religious quotations presented without these connections may appear detached, overly general, or selectively employed, which explains why scriptural content alone did not consistently generate high engagement.

The transformation of authority can be explained by the reduced barriers to religious communication. Social media allows users to publish Islamic interpretations without depending on mosques, universities, publishers, broadcasters, or established organizations. Algorithmic recommendation can expose large audiences to speakers based on engagement rather than scholarly standing. Users may prefer communicators who address personal concerns in familiar language and respond directly to questions. These conditions encourage innovation and accessibility but also create uncertainty regarding competence, accountability, and the difference between popularity and reliable interpretation.

The prevalence of strategic self-censorship can be explained by contextual collapse and persistent contestation. A single post may simultaneously reach family members, scholars, employers, activists, hostile users, political authorities, and anonymous audiences. Statements intended for one community can be extracted, reframed, or circulated without context by another. Participants consequently manage visibility through separate accounts, restricted audiences, moderated comments, coded language, and selective silence. These practices represent rational adaptations to platform risk, although they may reduce deliberative openness and reinforce fragmented digital publics.

The next step for activist organizations is to establish explicit ethical protocols for producing Islamic campaign content. These protocols should address verification of Qur'anic and Hadith references, contextual interpretation, consent for personal testimony, protection of vulnerable individuals, responsible use of traumatic images, correction of inaccurate information, and transparent disclosure of fundraising. Ethical standards should not become bureaucratic barriers that prevent urgent action. Their purpose is to protect the credibility of activism and ensure that religious legitimacy is not constructed through misinformation, emotional exploitation, or harm to represented communities.

The next step for religious institutions is to develop collaborative digital-authority models. Qualified scholars could work with activists, designers, journalists, researchers, and content creators to produce messages that are both accessible and interpretively responsible. Public explanations should acknowledge legitimate disagreement instead of presenting every contested issue as possessing a single self-evident Islamic answer. Transparent information about qualifications, sources, sponsorship, and organizational affiliation would help audiences evaluate credibility. Digital authority can become more accountable when expertise and communicative influence are connected rather than treated as mutually exclusive.

The next step for platform governance is to improve contextual moderation and protection against coordinated harassment. Automated systems often struggle to distinguish religious education, political critique, hateful content, satire, and documentation of abuse.

Consultation with diverse Muslim communities and independent experts can improve linguistic and cultural sensitivity without granting any single organization control over Islamic representation. Transparent appeal procedures, stronger protections against repeated harassment, and better tools for managing audiences would allow activists to participate publicly without accepting avoidable threats as a normal cost of visibility.

The next step for research is to test the present patterns across larger datasets, languages, countries, platforms, and ideological traditions. Longitudinal research could examine how campaigns evolve after moments of intense visibility and whether online engagement produces sustained institutional or political change. Network analysis could identify how religious claims travel among scholars, activists, influencers, and opposing groups. Experimental and survey research could evaluate how source credentials, emotional framing, scriptural references, and visual design affect trust and participation. Future studies should also investigate algorithmic suppression, financial incentives, artificial intelligence-generated preaching, closed messaging networks, and the ethical consequences of data-driven religious mobilization.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that social media functions not merely as a channel for distributing Islamic messages but as an active arena in which religious meaning, authority, and collective action are continuously negotiated. Islamic narratives concerning justice, solidarity, human dignity, charity, environmental responsibility, gender, and political accountability gained influence through the interaction of scriptural references, emotional storytelling, visual communication, platform visibility, and audience participation. Formal religious training strengthened textual verification, while relational credibility and communicative accessibility often produced wider public engagement. Digital visibility simultaneously expanded activist reach and increased exposure to harassment, theological criticism, surveillance, and strategic self-censorship.

The principal contribution of this research lies in its conceptual distinction among religious legitimacy, activist credibility, and digital visibility. These dimensions may reinforce one another, yet they do not automatically produce the same form of authority. The study demonstrates that Islamic digital activism should be understood as a relational process involving religious sources, activist objectives, platform architectures, political conditions, and audience responses. Its methodological contribution derives from the integration of multi-platform digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, thematic quantification, exploratory statistical analysis, and comparative case studies. This approach enables researchers to examine both the meanings embedded in activist narratives and the institutional, technological, and social conditions shaping their circulation.

The limitations of this study include the purposive sample, restricted number of campaigns, selected platform coverage, limited observation period, and reliance on publicly accessible materials and participant accounts. The findings cannot represent the full diversity of Islamic movements, political environments, linguistic communities, or social-media ecosystems. Exploratory statistical associations also indicate relationships rather than causal effects. Future research should employ larger multilingual datasets, longitudinal designs, comparative country studies, social-network analysis, and platform-specific investigations. Further inquiry should examine algorithmic moderation, artificial intelligence-generated religious content, closed messaging networks, financial sponsorship, digital surveillance, gendered harassment, misinformation, and the long-term relationship between online engagement and sustainable social change.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Claude and QuillBot solely to assist with text translation. After using these tools/services, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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