

CHARISMA IN THE CLOUD: Digital Ulama, Attention Economy, and the Mediatized Construction of Islamic Marriage in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study analyzes how Indonesian online preachers construct and disseminate marriage discourse and digital fatwas within the expanding landscape of Digital Islam. Unlike traditional ulama such as Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya—whose authority emerges from pesantren networks, textual mastery, and communal the Attention Economy—digital preachers gain legitimacy through visibility, virality, and emotional engagement. Examining influential online preachers and their marriage-related content from 2020 to 2025, the study shows that marriage has become a central normative theme increasingly shaped by the political economy of digital capitalism. Digital platforms restructure religious narratives, regulate the circulation of meaning, and commodify Islamic teachings on morality, family, and gender. These shifts indicate a broader crisis of Islamic authority, as legitimacy moves from textual expertise toward algorithmic popularity. By integrating Weber's charismatic authority, Hjarvard and Fuchs's mediatization theories, and Foucault's discourse-power framework, the study argues that digital fatwas function as sites of symbolic and material power in Indonesia's contested digital public sphere.

Keywords: Digital Islam, Charismatic Authority, Attention Economy, Online Fatwa, Marriage Discourse

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Introduction

Understanding Indonesia's digital ulama through the lens of mediatization reflects the shift in Indonesia's scope of Religious Authority. This shift runs parallel with the growth of social media, especially da'wah on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and podcasts, and the (rapidly) changing ways Islamic knowledge is taught and learned. The Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information reported a 62 percent increase in 2019 in the consumption of religious teachings in digital format, indicating a shift in spiritual practice in mosques (with traditional congregations) and a preference for digital religious formats among urban Muslim youth with digital skills.¹

Regarding the circulation of Islam, especially in marriage, gender, and family ethics, social networks are theoretically and practically the center of the discourse. In that context, digital da'is are not just teaching the religious content. They are geopolitical actors in the attention economy, building a framework of attention and spiritual discourse on structural, moral neoliberalism and the commodification of religion.² The da'wah discourse has also become a legitimized part of the 'traditional' system, even for Islamically educated scholars who run Islamic boarding schools known as 'pesantren' (Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, Buya Yahya) and compete with popular scholars, who are not trained in traditional Islamic knowledge, and who the 'algorithms favour'.³

The shift from traditional to digital consumption of religious materials has led to a significant change in how spiritual knowledge is understood. In Indonesia's digital religious sphere, Islamic knowledge that was once evaluated through mastery of fiqh and textual traditions has undergone a shift, with knowledge now measured by shallow metrics such as the number of subscribers a person has, the frequency of their engagement, and the number of their videos that go viral.⁴ This change represents a convergence,

and perhaps a collision, between digital ‘charisma’ and traditional forms of scholarly authority, for what it is worth.⁵

The political and social implications of the new digital marketplace for marriage (contract and dissolution) and marriage (docile partnerships) regulation, facilitated by rapid-response *fatwas* (informal religious legal opinions) and digital narrations in the spiritual marketplace, are significant.⁶ It shows marriage, particularly within the realm of digital Islam, as a form of social and moral currency, a concern which braids together the political and social order with Islam.

Moreover, the digital religious sphere works within a broader political ecosystem. Many digital religious leaders benefit financially from multinational corporations, political interests, or Islamic economic networks that sponsor them and influence their religious messages to promote a particular ideology.⁷ The effect of digitalisation spreads religious authority and the Islamisation of economic activity, creating Islam as an “ark” of piety, and converting religious/devout sentiment to a form of monetary value.⁸

Scholars Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya show how classical scholars, the ulama, adapt to change. While their classical scholars, they also participate in the digital world, working with search engine algorithms, mingling with the audience, and handling the pressures of the media. Their digital participation illustrates the multi-dimensional and contested interfaces of religious authority in the case of Indonesia.⁹

The shift from textual authority to algorithmic authority varies according to Hjarvard’s theory of the mediatization of religion. In this theory, religious institutions, rituals, and meanings transform with the aid of digital infrastructures and platform logics.¹⁰ As a consequence, the digital public sphere becomes a place where ideals of Islam around marriage and gender are continuously contested.¹¹

This study focuses on digital *da'wah* in Indonesia and the interplay of spiritual authority, political sponsorship, and economic profit in the construction of marriage discourse.¹² It focuses on the circulation of power in the digital world and how this shapes public conceptions of morality, gender, and the ideals of an Islamic family in contemporary society.¹³

Drawing on Weber's concept of charismatic authority, Hjarvard's theory of media, Fuchs's digital political economy, and Foucault's theory of discourse-power, this study continues to explore the intersection of religion, politics, and media in Indonesia.¹⁴ It claims that shifts in the digital realm of religious authority not only alter the parameters of who can speak on Islam, but also transform the ethical and political scope of Islamic discourse on marriage in the digital age.¹⁵

Over the past decade and more, the field of digital Islam studies has accumulated a body of core research findings widely cited across the discipline. Early scholars mostly centered their work on three core thematic areas: the platform-specific dissemination characteristics of digital Islamic content, the online identity construction of transnational religious communities, and the reshaping of traditional religious practices by digital tools. The conclusions of these related studies laid the foundational research framework for the entire field. However, existing research still has three core gaps. First, most studies only focus on the community practices of traditional core Islamic regions such as the Middle East and Southeast Asia, with almost no coverage of the digital activities of diasporic Muslim minority groups in Europe and North America. Second, most existing research adopts static content analysis methods, which cannot capture the dynamic shaping effect of algorithm updates on leading global social media platforms on the spread of religious content. Third, very few studies incorporate both the production end and reception

end of digital Islamic content into the same analytical framework, severing the interactive logic between religious content creators and ordinary believers. Underpinning these three gaps is a shared research bias common to the entire field: most studies take for granted that digital technology is an external tool acting upon religion, rather than a core component embedded within religious life, thus overlooking the mutually constitutive relationship between technology and religion.

This study takes filling these three gaps and correcting this universal bias as its research starting point. It designs a research program tracking multiple cross-regional case studies, while integrating a two-way analytical pathway that covers both the production and reception ends, and incorporates the temporal dimension of algorithm iteration into its research framework. It ultimately conducts follow-up analysis centered on three core modules of research questions, aiming to systematically address the longstanding research deficiencies that have persisted in this field. This paper proposes three core research questions within the field of Islamic digital religious studies in Indonesia: First, focusing on three traditional Islamic scholars—Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya—the study explores how these figures maintain their cognitive authority under the algorithmic and commercialized structures of digital platforms. Second, drawing on the political economy dimension of digital fatwas, it interrogates how platform logics reshape religious discourse surrounding marriage issues. Finally, from the perspectives of discursive power and gendered religiosity examine the impacts of this mediatized discourse on Indonesia's gender power relations and family norms.

Method

This study takes the transformation of digital religious authority and Islamic marital discourse in Indonesia as its core research topic, adopts the narrative literature review method to carry out the research, covers the full process from research design, data collection, to analytical derivation, and sorts out the core methodological challenges encountered during the study's implementation. The core data sources of this study are four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. The retrieval time window is set to 2019–2025, and search keywords include digital ulama, online fatwa, and the mediatization of religion, among others.¹⁶ The core research subjects included in the analysis are three Indonesian religious scholars: Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya. The literature screening criteria focus on three research directions: empirical and theoretical research on digital charismatic authority, gender norms in Islamic discourse, and Indonesia's overall digital Islamic ecosystem.¹⁷ In the analysis stage, a structured matrix is first used to extract the core arguments, research methods, and implicit power relations of the included literature, before analysis proceeds in two steps.¹⁸ The first stage completes data reduction and thematic classification; through systematic coding, five core themes are extracted: algorithmic visibility, commodified piety, normative patriarchy, gendered religiosity, and the competition for digital authority among traditional scholars. The second stage conducts a narrative synthesis, integrating four interdisciplinary frameworks for analysis: Hjarvard's theory of the mediatization of religion¹⁹ Fuchs' digital political economy,²⁰ Weber's theory of charismatic authority,²¹ and Foucault's discourse-power relationship.²² Core conclusions are derived via a cross-field synthesis method that combines theological content and media logics, leading

to the core judgment: Indonesia's digital Islamic marital discourse is not only based on its origins in Islamic jurisprudence, but is continuously shaped by the complex interaction of algorithmic exposure, political support, and commercial sponsorship.²³ The core methodological challenge of this study is the high fluidity of the digital religious ecosystem, which makes it difficult to separate purely theological and jurisprudential arguments from commodified content embedded in the affective economy. To address this issue, a strict screening process is adopted to ensure that the included research covers both the social-theological details of the selected scholars and the realities of their algorithmic dissemination.

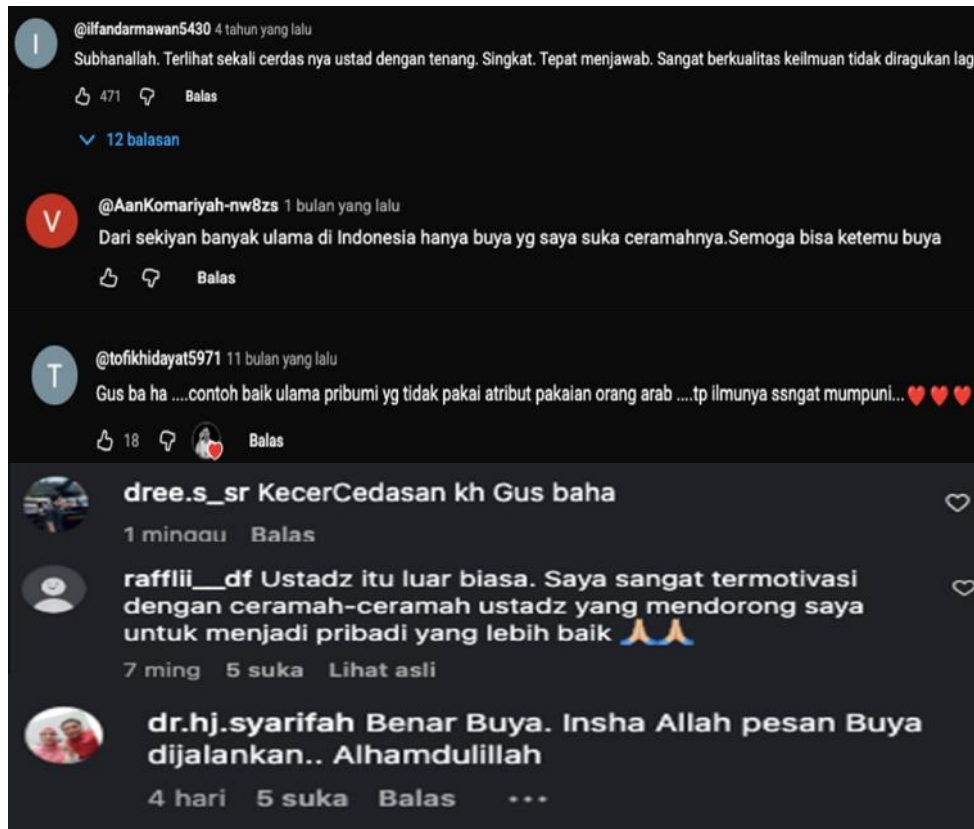
Result and Discussion

Algorithmic Adaptation of Traditional Islamic Authority

This study draws on a primary survey data collected in Indonesia in 2019-2025, and combines mediatization theory to analyze the pathways through which digital platform algorithms restructure traditional Islamic religious authority.²⁴ The study's core finding shows that the dissemination of classical Islamic teachings in Indonesia's digital public sphere has undergone a major shift: the sermon content of three Islamic scholars with traditional academic training, Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya, is often split by their fan media teams into short video clips adapted to platform algorithms.²⁵ These clips are optimized to fit traffic generation requirements through SEO improvements, pairing with trending platform audios, and using clickbait titles focused on everyday morality, especially family life. The originally detailed academic explanations of living expenses (*nafkah*), marital discord (*nusyûz*), and mediation of family conflicts are stripped of their jurisprudential details and revelation context (*asbâb al-nuzûl*), then repackaged as

absolute, black-and-white moral commands. All three scholars' content is edited to highlight the most emotionally provocative and attention-grabbing statements. The study's quantitative analysis shows that audience engagement, measured by view count, like count, and share count, is strongly correlated with the short videos' emotional expression and has no significant correlation with the jurisprudential depth of the scholars' original output. After interpreting this phenomenon through Hjarvard's mediatization theory, which is widely cited in academic circles, it becomes clear that media are no longer a neutral channel for *da'wah* (proselytization).

Platform algorithms have fundamentally restructured religious authority, and the boundaries of legitimate Islamic marriage discourse are dominated by an algorithmic logic centered on emotional economy. The traditional cognitive authority of Islamic scholars, originally built on the chain of academic transmission (*sanad*), mastery of canonical classics, and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), has had to adapt to a performative, aesthetics-driven digital environment to maintain its influence. Religious authority has shifted from the scholars themselves to digital intermediaries, including content creators, fan account operators, and algorithmic architectures. Mediatization has not only changed the way Islamic legal rulings on marriage are disseminated, but has fundamentally altered the core of this discourse: the rational, reciprocal approach to addressing marriage-related issues has been replaced by the moral populism rewarded by algorithms. A summary table of primary data compiled by this study is attached at the end of this paragraph for illustrative purposes.



Pictures 1. Religious Discourse Construction among Digital Ulama in Indonesia

Source: Author's primary data compilation, 2025

This study draws on primary survey data and digital ethnographic materials collected in Indonesia's digital public sphere between 2019 and 2025. It integrates Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory with contemporary perspectives on algorithmic charisma to conduct a core analysis of the specific pathways through which digital platform algorithms restructure traditional Islamic religious authority in Indonesia. Its key finding is that fundamental shifts have occurred at both the epistemological and structural levels in the dissemination of classical Islamic teachings: the once complete body of Islamic doctrine focused on family life

and marriage issues is no longer spread as a unified whole.²⁶ Instead, it is systematically disassembled and refined to align with the logic of the digital attention economy. The argument in this section is split into two core submodules. The first is the algorithmic fragmentation mechanism: the structural requirements of the YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram platforms drive content transformation. The original one-hour Sermons of three Islamic scholars—Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya—are cut into short video clips by decentralized fan media teams operating under the identity of *muhibbîn* (loyal fans).

These clips are then search-engine-optimized (SEO), paired with popular platform audio such as religious nasheed chants or dramatic instrumental music, and packaged into clickbait content centered on everyday moral anxieties, with titles like The Islamic Legal Ruling for Wives Who Defy Their Husbands and Frequently Overlooked Obligations of Financial Support, to secure preferential algorithmic traffic allocation. The second submodule addresses the consequences of epistemological reduction: in traditional Islamic *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), before scholars issue a religious ruling on marriage, they fully explain the *asbâb al-nuzûl* (context of Quranic verse revelation), details of the original Arabic text, and traditions of comparative *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). In the algorithmic ecosystem, all these complex details of religious rulings are stripped away. A consistent pattern identified from this study's data shows that every complex theological debate is repackaged into absolute, black-and-white moral commands. We begin with three cases of widely recognized Indonesian Islamic scholars whose original content was altered by social media platforms, to conduct an analysis of core issues in Indonesia's digital da'wah ecosystem. Gus Baha, whose work centers on marriage issues rooted in Javanese cultural contexts, originally produced discourse on patiently nurturing intimate relationships; this content was edited to highlight only controversial clips. Sharia scholar Abdul

Somad's systematic series of Islamic legal Q&As was cut to extract attention-grabbing extreme statements. Buya Yahya, who works in the field of moral education, saw his complete set of pastoral guidance edited to amplify clips laced with extreme emotional tones. All these cases point to a shared problem: the flat, alienating distortion of religious discourse caused by algorithms.²⁷

The quantitative analysis of this ecosystem conducted in this study finds that platform audience engagement data only has a strong positive correlation with the intensity of emotion aroused by content, and is completely disconnected from the depth of Sharia argumentation and academic rigor of religious discourse. Rational content promoting the *mubâdalah* perspective of reciprocal marriage has been continuously marginalized by platform algorithms.²⁸

The core pillars of traditional Indonesian Islamic religious authority are the *sanad* chain of academic transmission, the ability to master the *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic canonical texts), and the official endorsement of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). These authority frameworks rooted in religious heritage are now undergoing systematic reconstruction by digital platforms. This study adopts the mediatization theory put forward by Danish scholar Stig Hjarvard as its core analytical framework, and breaks this reconstruction down into two interrelated dimensions for argumentation. First, the production logic of digital *fatwas* has fully shifted to align with platforms' emotional economy. Second, the supporting logic of religious authority has transitioned from the traditional *sanad* transmission chain to an algorithm-constructed, traffic-centered charismatic authority.²⁹ This study critiques this overarching trend: algorithmic logics are systematically distorting *da'wah* discourse that originally fulfilled religious educational functions, forcing the mandatory transformation of traditional religious authority into a new, algorithm-led model of authority.

The core finding of this study indicates that Islamic religious authority has quietly shifted from traditional religious scholars to four categories of emerging digital intermediaries—content creators, fan account operators, social media managers, and algorithm architects—who serve as the core gatekeepers of Islamic knowledge. This study confirms that mediatization has not only altered the dissemination approach of Islamic sharia rulings related to marriage, but has fundamentally reshaped their discursive core. The originally complex and flexible classical Islamic family law has been rewritten by algorithms into a fixed, consumable digital product that aligns with traditional gender expectations and moral populism. Even for digital *ulama* with profound offline scholarship, their online cognitive authority remains constantly negotiated, reshaped, and regulated by the underlying rules of the platforms.

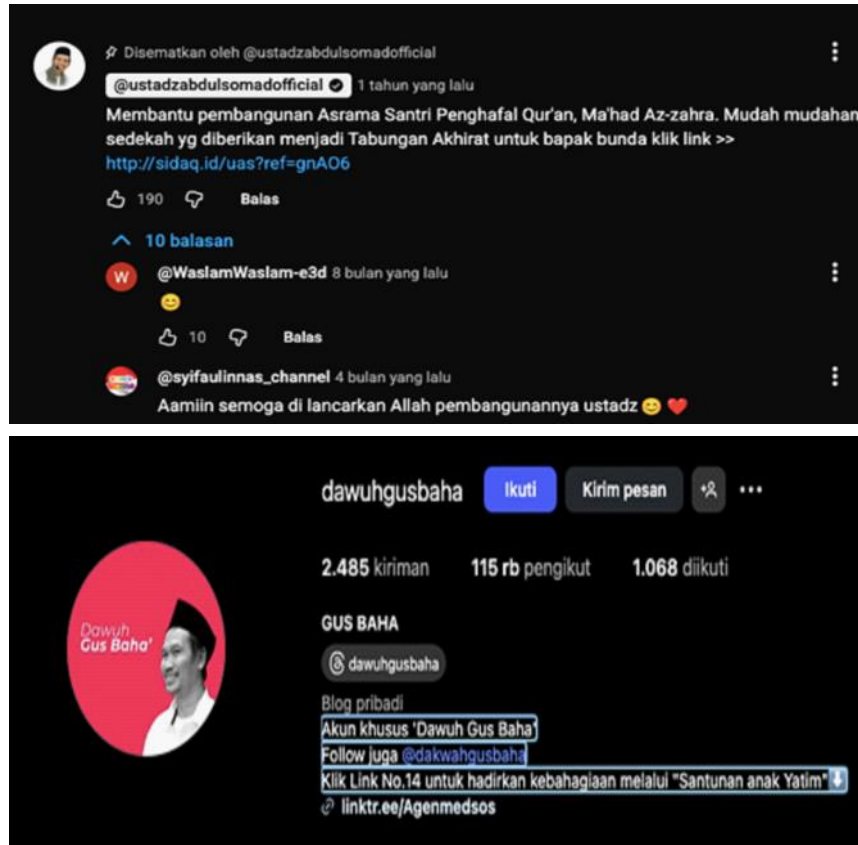
Attention Networks and the Digital Political Economy of *Da'wah*

This study draws on the raw data of support. Combining empirical observation and interpretations of classical theories, it analyzes the political-economic attributes and commercialized operation logics of Islamic marriage discourse within the digital ecosystem. It first puts forward a core conclusion: Islamic marriage discourse is not merely content for transmitting theological ideas, but a highly monetized digital industry with a complete industrial chain. Next, the study details two core forms of its commodification. The first form centers on content built around marital harmony, *nafkah* (spousal support), and the construction of an “ideal Muslim family.”

Through short videos that discuss wives' obligations of obedience, household responsibilities, and the aesthetics of Islamic weddings, commercial promotions for *halal* lifestyle brands, Muslim fashion, and paid online marriage courses are seamlessly inserted. The second form involves the digital operation teams

of three well-known Indonesian traditional religious scholars, Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya. To compete with young native digital influencers in the attention economy, these teams are forced to adopt click-through-rate-oriented strategies, simplifying complex Sharia economic principles and nuanced family laws into attention-grabbing content that caters to market and sponsor expectations.³⁰ This study introduces Christian Fuchs's digital political economy framework to interpret this phenomenon, and finds that digital capitalism extracts surplus value from the "emotional economy" of marriage. Family-related religious teachings are fully converted into monetizable assets.³¹ The persuasiveness of digital fatwas and marriage advice is no longer determined by the depth of Islamic jurisprudence; instead, it is measured by the social capital converted from algorithmic interaction metrics such as view counts and likes. Progressive discussions that advocate for rational cooperation and reciprocal justice within marriage are universally marginalized. Ultimately, the study verifies that digital marriage discourse is in essence a deep integration of two forms of power: religious authority that formulates moral order, and economic authority that monetizes attention. *Da'wah*, originally a purely sacred religious mission, has been completely transformed into a tradable commodity under the structure of digital capitalism.³²





Pictures 2. the Attention Economy among Digital Ulama in Indonesia.

Source: Author's primary data compilation, 2025

This study draws on a large body of original empirical data from Indonesia's digital Islamic ecosystem, paired with critical analysis rooted in classic media theory, to examine the political-economic attributes and commercial operational logics of Islamic marriage discourse in the digital space. We first upend a long-held conventional assumption: this discourse is no longer merely a sacred channel for transmitting theological thought, but has evolved into a highly monetized digital industry supported by a fully mature, complete industrial chain. Its commodification unfolds primarily through two interconnected forms. The first

is the aestheticization and monetization of localized domestic narratives. Content centered on marital harmony, spousal financial support (*nafkah*), and the construction of ideal Muslim families acts as the core carrier of this digital industry.³³

Empirical data show that short-form videos exploring wives' obligations of obedience, family responsibilities, and the visual aesthetics of Islamic-compliant (*syar'i*) weddings serve a dual function: while they present as religious advice on the surface, they are structurally embedded with commercial promotions. Vendors, including *halâl* lifestyle brands, lines of conservative Muslim clothing, dating and marriage apps, and paid online marriage courses, mostly embed themselves in religious content using established low-cost user-traffic acquisition strategies.³⁴ This has ultimately blurred the line between religious edicts and sponsored advertising entirely, repositioning the domestic sphere—once governed exclusively by Islamic family law—as a profitable consumer segment within digital capitalist markets. The core actors of the second commodification form, which will be elaborated next, are the online operation teams of three well-known traditional Indonesian Islamic scholars: Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya. Traditional Islamic scholars who hold established authoritative status in offline settings are trapped in the core contradiction of the digital attention economy: to keep up with native digital influencers who master traffic algorithms, their operation teams are forced to adopt a click-through rate (CTR)-oriented content strategy, a choice that has given rise to two core consequences. The first is the systematic alienation of religious content, as the academic nuance of Islamic theology is drastically flattened: rules for the distribution of *nafkah* in the Sharia economic system, regulations on the definition of marital assets, and family financial ethics are all stripped of their original academic depth.³⁵

The originally rigorous Islamic family law is reworked into attention-grabbing content that caters to market demands and sponsor preferences, and the entire classical Islamic scholarly tradition is forced to adapt to the shallow consumption logic of social media. To anchor the academic rigor of this critical analysis, this study introduces the digital political economy analysis framework proposed by Christian Fuchs, citing his core argument that social media is the core engine of digital capitalism, which continuously extracts surplus value from platform users' interactive behaviors.³⁶ After applying this framework to the context of religious digital content, this study finds that platforms also extract surplus value from the affective economy built around religious content. The core standards originally used to measure a scholar's authority—depth of research into Islamic jurisprudence, and proficiency in mastering the classical texts, *kitab kuning*—have completely shifted to social capital converted from algorithmic interaction metrics, including views, likes, shares, and subscriber counts. The monetization logic of the affective economy requires content to generate high-arousal emotions such as anger, sentimentality, and moral panic to gain traffic, which directly leads to the second core consequence: progressive theological discourses that advocate rational cooperation within marriage, shared division of household labor, and the reciprocal justice principle of *mubâdalah* are systematically marginalized.

This type of content centers on fostering harmony and reducing conflict, so it cannot produce the high-arousal triggers required for viral spread, such as controversy or moral absolutism. Ultimately, under algorithmic preferences, polarized patriarchal narratives that emphasize absolute obedience and family hierarchy gain the greatest level of platform exposure. The conservative filtering mechanisms of the digital political economy have both suppressed the communicative visibility of the reciprocal marriage paradigm and artificially amplified the orthodox views

of marriage that align with the metrics of the attention economy.³⁷ The core verified conclusion of this study states that digital marital discourse constitutes a deep structural integration of two independent forms of power: the first is religious authority that seeks to roll out a specific moral family order, and the second is the economic authority of digital platforms and their sponsors, which dominate the monetization of attention. Cases of traditional Islamic scholars Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya's participation in the digital ecosystem show that sacred religious narratives cannot escape the constraints of market logic.³⁸ *Da'wah*, the missionary work originally centered on spiritual salvation and moral education, has been completely alienated into a tradable commodity. Under digital capitalism, Islamic family norms are not only disseminated but also marketed, consumed, and monetized.

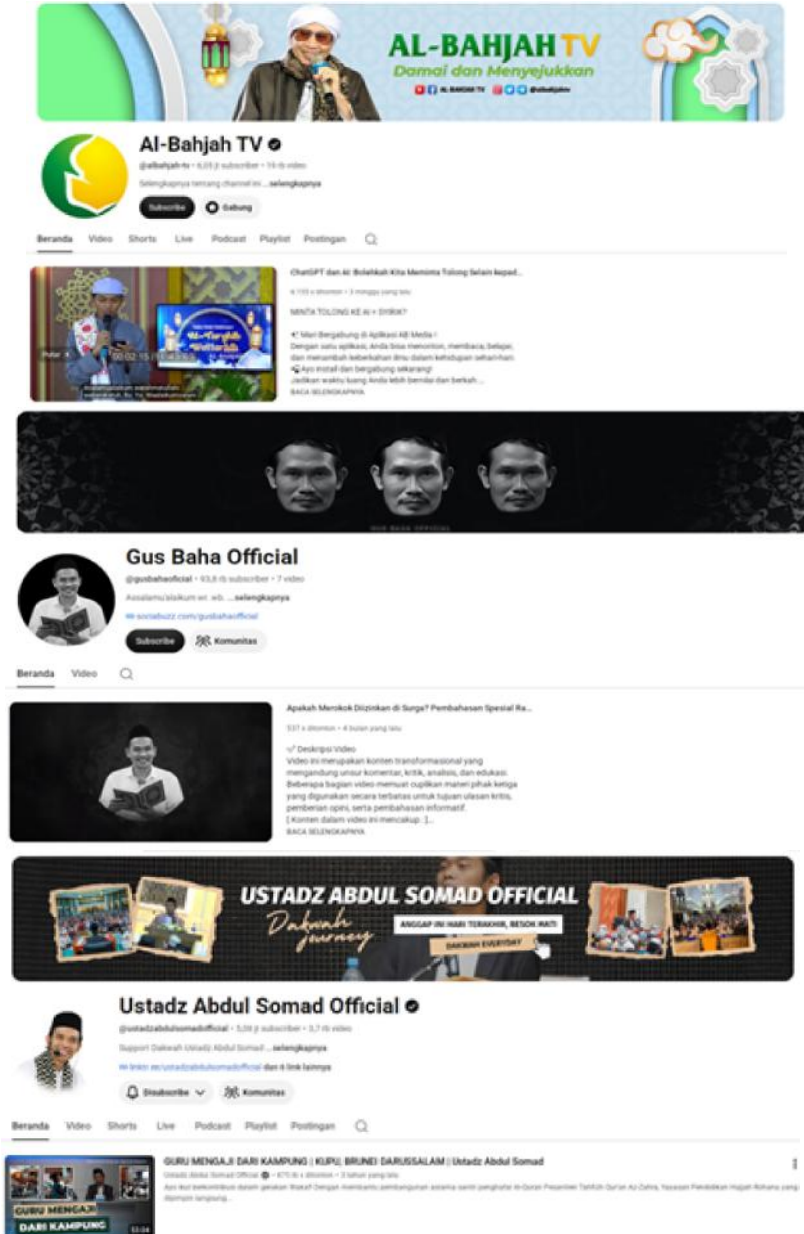
Governing the Domestic: Power and Gendered Religiosity in Digital Fatwas

This study adopts a content analysis method that synthesizes existing relevant research, and centers its argument on the patriarchal narratives, algorithmic dissemination logics, and discursive power mechanisms of Islamic digital marriage fatwas. The analysis in this section is divided into two modules: sorting out empirical data and findings, and interpreting discursive power mechanisms. First, it outlines the core empirical conclusions: a strong patriarchal framework is universally prevalent in current mainstream Islamic digital marriage *fatwas*. Their narratives repeatedly emphasize that women must remain modest and show absolute obedience to their husbands, sanctify the concept of *qawwâm* that represents male leadership, and simplify complex provisions of Islamic family law into rigid, black-and-white mandates.³⁹

Meanwhile, progressive theological perspectives that rely on the reciprocal framework of mubadalah and advocate reciprocal justice between partners are clearly marginalized in high-traffic content. The three Islamic scholars, who originally held vastly different theological styles—Gus Baha, who practices reflective culturally rooted hermeneutics; Abdul Somad, who adheres to a strict jurisprudential approach; and Buya Yahya, who adopts a moralistic preaching path—have all their stylistic differences completely erased by algorithmic dissemination.⁴⁰ Platform operators only select and amplify fragmented quotes that reinforce the traditional patriarchal family structure. This type of content earns higher user engagement because it triggers emotional resonance or social controversy, so it is prioritized for algorithmic promotion.

This study draws on Michel Foucault's discourse-power theory and Eva Nisa's concept of gendered religious authority to conduct its analysis, pointing out that these digital *fatwas* have become powerful modern disciplinary tools. The digital public sphere does not merely passively reflect pre-existing offline gender inequality; instead, it actively constructs and solidifies gendered expectations. Cognitive authority remains highly male-dominated, and algorithms' preference for conservative content systematically strengthens patriarchal discipline, creating significant structural barriers to the online institutionalization of progressive gender discourse.





Pictures 3. Religious Authority among Digital Ulama in Indonesia

Source: Author's primary data compilation, 2025

This study employs a rigorous content analysis approach, synthesizes existing empirical research findings, and unpacks the patriarchal narratives, algorithmic communication logics, and discursive power mechanisms embedded in Islamic digital marriage *fatwas*.⁴¹ The study establishes two interconnected analytical modules: it first collates empirical data on the consumption of digital *fatwas*, then develops a critical analysis of the underlying discursive power mechanisms, and finally puts forward its core overarching argument: the digital public sphere is not merely a space that passively reflects pre-existing offline gender inequality; rather, it is an algorithm-driven active apparatus that functions to construct, entrench, and discipline gendered expectations within the family domain.⁴² The study's content analysis first reveals that mainstream Islamic digital marriage discourse is widely structured around an inflexible patriarchal framework.⁴³

All high-traffic content on mainstream platforms centers on a single axis of traditional norms, repeatedly stressing that women must maintain constant humility, organize their lives exclusively around the family, and show unwavering obedience to their husbands. Algorithms operating in this digital ecosystem also flatten the concept of *qawwâm* (men's right to lead and provide for their families), an Islamic legal term that originally carried complex connotations deeply tied to mutual responsibilities and socioeconomic contexts. These algorithms simplify complex rules in Islamic family law—such as marriage dispute mediation and the fair allocation of domestic labor—into rigid, black-and-white mandates. Algorithmic preferences for assertions of absolute authority deliberately eliminate the space for negotiation that accommodated adaptive interpretations and local customary practices (*adat*) in traditional Indonesian Muslim marriages. Second, the study documents a distinct phenomenon of algorithmic homogenization. The three offline Islamic scholars covered in the research, Gus Baha, Abdul Somad, and Buya Yahya, originally

held sharply distinct theological frameworks and rhetorical styles. Yet after their content entered the digital sphere, these differences were entirely erased by algorithmic dissemination. Platform operators and fan-run accounts only selectively extract and amplify fragmented quotes from the scholars, and never circulate their full theological arguments. This study draws on empirical data to present a core observed phenomenon: the intermediary screening mechanisms of digital platforms systematically select religious speech that reinforces traditional patriarchal family structures.⁴⁴

These mechanisms deliberately strip away the cultural contextual interpretations of Islamic scholar Gus Baha and the spiritual boundary reminders from Buya Yahya. The remaining fragmented, absolutist patriarchal statements either earn strong approval from conservative audiences or trigger widespread social controversy, naturally generating higher user engagement. As a result, they are prioritized for algorithmic promotion, creating the false impression that a single unified authoritative consensus exists within religious academic circles. The direct cost of this traffic-oriented dissemination is the systematic marginalization of progressive theological perspectives. To illustrate this, take *Fiqh Mubâdalah* (the jurisprudence of reciprocity), a framework that advocates for fair and rational marriages: its core claims center on reciprocal justice, partnership, and rational collaboration between spouses, framing family obligations as shared ethical responsibilities rather than rigid gendered divisions of labor. While this theory is rooted in deep classical Islamic textual traditions and has gained growing influence among academic researchers and progressive educators, its related content fails to break into mainstream public discourse and gain traction. The root cause lies in the algorithmic architecture itself, which rewards polarized content, high-arousal emotions, and moral panics, rather than content focused on rational collaboration.⁴⁵

Content that promotes equal family relationships is completely overshadowed by attention-grabbing patriarchal narrative fatwas.⁴⁶

This study applies Michel Foucault's discourse power theory and Eva Nisa's concept of gendered religious authority to interpret the above empirical findings. From a Foucauldian perspective, digital fatwas are not passive spiritual guidance, but powerful modern disciplinary tools. Digital spaces operate as panoptic prisons, where algorithms and audience interactions such as likes, shares, and comments continuously monitor and discipline normative family life, constructing the "docile body" of the ideal Muslim wife. Drawing on Nisa's analytical framework, this study's data confirms that discursive authority in the digital-era religious sphere remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. Even though digital platforms ostensibly lower the barrier to public speech, algorithms greatly amplify the voices of male Islamic scholars as the ultimate arbiters of family ethics. Female scholars who attempt to introduce complex reciprocal perspectives must confront inherently biased platform architectures, and this entire mechanism ultimately forms a self-perpetuating cycle of discursive power. This paper opens by positing that the conservative, emotion-oriented content preference of algorithms in Indonesia's digital ecosystem does not merely mirror real society. Rather, these algorithms actively shape narratives around Islamic family law, reinforce patriarchal discipline, and construct a structural barrier that blocks the institutionalization of progressive gender discourse.⁴⁷

Contestation and Compromise: Negotiating New Marital Paradigms

While most previous mainstream studies uniformly categorize all Islamic marriage discourses on digital platforms as carriers of patriarchal conservatism, this study combines empirical data collection and analysis with cultural theory interpretation to find that emerging counter-discourses that resist dominant patriarchal narratives are taking shape in the global Islamic cyberspace. Relying on an empirical dataset compiled from core field research, This study further verifies that the initiators and disseminators

of these counter-discourses include progressive digital preachers, female educators, operators of professional digital literacy programs, and progressive Islamic scholars. Their core practices fall into two categories: First, they reconstruct the gendered, one-way marital obligations originally tied to the Islamic law concept of *nafkah* (financial maintenance) into shared responsibilities based on *Mubadalah* (reciprocity) and the voluntary consent of both parties, rather than perpetuating the traditional patriarchal division of responsibilities. Second, they resist the excessive commercialization of marriage discourses and build grassroots educational platforms to promote equitable marriage practices. This study draws on the “Third Space” theory proposed by Homi Bhabha, and pairs it with the “Living Law” perspective from the field of Islamic law studies to develop its analysis.⁴⁸ While digital algorithms themselves carry a dual nature—they may amplify conservative patriarchal narratives, while also providing the communication infrastructure for these progressive counter-discourses—the dynamic nature of marriage discourses and the complexity of digital power are thus revealed. While this study affirms the progressive nature of the counter-discourses, it refrains from making absolute judgments about their dissemination effectiveness.



Pictures 4. Religious Narratives about Marriage among Digital Ulama in Indonesia

(Source: Author’s primary data compilation, 2025)

Mainstream past research has generally lumped all Islamic marriage discourses across various digital platforms into a single, monolithic patriarchal and conservative carrier. This one-sided assessment obscures the diverse power struggles within Islamic cyberspace and cannot explain the practical logic of non-conservative discourses.⁴⁹ This study adopts a method that combines empirical data collection and analysis with cultural theory interpretation, and draws on a custom empirical dataset developed from core field research to anchor its research site in the Islamic cyberspace of Indonesia. It first verifies that this digital space is not a closed echo chamber, but a public sphere rife with discursive struggles. Building on this finding, the study outlines the core characteristics of the anti-patriarchal marriage counter-discourse operating within this sphere.⁵⁰

The groups that advance this counter-discourse include progressive digital preachers, female educators, operators of professional digital literacy programs, and progressive Islamic scholars. Unlike fan accounts of conservative classical scholars that are driven by click traffic, these groups use social platforms as interactive educational spaces, rather than for the traditional one-way proselytization of *da'wah*. They also spread gender equality ideals through short videos, infographics, and interactive webinars, push back against the rigid hierarchical order amplified by mainstream digital fatwas, and advocate for a fair, rational marriage model based on the voluntary consent of both parties. Drawing on the Islamic jurisprudence of reciprocity (*Fiqh Mubâdalah*), they reconstruct the concept of *nafkah* (the financial support obligation) from classical Islamic family law, redefining this formerly one-way marital duty of a husband to his wife under the traditional patriarchal framework as a two-way responsibility shared jointly by both spouses. At the same time, they frame resistance to the commercialization of marriage discourse as the second core direction of their key actions, to further dismantle the dissemination logic of conservative discourses.

This study opens by first mapping out the practical pathways of grassroots digital Islamic marriage equality platforms built by progressive Islamic actors in Indonesia. To evade the inherent bias of algorithm-driven commercialization logic toward sensationalized patriarchal narratives, these actors established grassroots educational platforms with no large commercial sponsors, whose core goal is to promote the practice of fair, rational, equal marriages. This study elaborates its analysis drawing on two core empirical cases from its own dataset: Nikahpedia-style digital marriage encyclopedias, and the online Ramadan “*Ramadhân Mubâdalâh*” series of events.⁵¹ These non-commercial, structured educational initiatives consistently prioritize substantive legal and ethical education over traffic-based commercial goals, constructing independent digital infrastructure that underpins progressive Islamic jurisprudence.⁵² To analyze the platform’s core attributes, this study adopts a combined framework of cultural scholar Homi K. Bhabha’s “Third Space” theory⁵³ and legal sociologist Eugen Ehrlich’s “Living Law” theory.⁵⁴ The former is used to unpack the platform’s subversive effect on mainstream patriarchal narratives as a hybrid third space, while the latter explains the attribute of digital spaces as sites for the formation of Islamic living law. This clarifies that the progressive fatwas circulated on the platform, which operate outside the state and traditional Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) systems, are fluid rules that reflect the actual negotiation practices of modern Indonesian Muslim families.⁵⁵

Finally, this study puts forward the paradoxical dual nature of digital algorithms, while explicitly delimiting the scope of its conclusions: it only affirms the progressive orientation and core value of these counter-mainstream discourses, and does not make absolute judgments about their long-term communication impacts.⁵⁶ The domain of algorithmic competition is inherently marked by built-in inequalities, and the core question that will determine the future development trajectory of Indonesia’s digital

Islam is whether rational cooperation and the *Mubâdalah* principle can overcome algorithm-fueled moral populism within the attention economy.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This study centers on Islamic marital discourse in Indonesia's digital public sphere, analyzing its construction logic, power shifts, two-way impacts, and research value. It first proposes three core influencing factors that shape this field: traditional religious authority, the political-economic logic of digital platforms, and algorithmic infrastructure. This study finds that religious authority has undergone a fundamental transformation in the digital age: traditional Islamic scholars, the ulama, must translate their mastery of religious texts into charismatic performances adapted to the digital affective economy. The once centralized authority, which relied on cognitive expertise and institutional structures, has evolved into a distributed, hybrid authority co-produced by audiences, commercial sponsors, and platform algorithms. This shift has also spawned negative problems: Islamic family law has become commodified, and traditional Islamic marriage jurisprudence has been reworked into short, emotionally charged fatwas tailored to market demands and brand partnerships. To boost user engagement and commercial viability, platform algorithms continuously amplify patriarchal norms, male authority (*qawwâm*), and disciplinary narratives that demand absolute obedience from women. However, this study also points out that the digital sphere is not a one-way echo chamber for patriarchal narratives, but a site of practice for "Living Law". Progressive digital platforms, female educators, and young Muslim content creators rely on digital infrastructure to advocate for marital paradigms centered on reciprocity, rational cooperation, and mutual justice within families. This has given rise to a "third space" that carries hybrid authority, proving that digital Islamic marital discourse

is a living practice of ongoing negotiation, rather than static religious doctrine. This study integrates four core theories, including the mediatization of religion and digital political economy, advances research on religious authority in the digital age, and provides a foundational framework for understanding the future trajectory of Indonesia's Islamic family norms. Its core focus is the ongoing struggle over algorithmic governance, religious economy, and social theological justice.

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