



RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN VIRTUAL SPACE: SHIFTING LEGITIMACY OF ULAMA IN THE NEW MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

Mhd. Harvinsyah Rozi Harahap¹, Rubino², Ahmad Sujai Tanjung³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: harvinsyah4004203038@uinsu.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received :

Revised :

Accepted :

Available online

<http://jurnal.uinsu.ac.id/index.php/analytica>

E-ISSN: 2541-5263

P-ISSN: 1411-4380



This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license

ABSTRACT

The development of the new media ecosystem has significantly transformed the production and recognition patterns of religious authority in Indonesia. Amidst the increasingly massive penetration of the internet and social media, the legitimacy of ulama (Islamic scholars) no longer rests solely on institutional credentials, scholarly chains of narration, and recognition from traditional communities, but is also shaped by digital visibility, communication performativity, and the logic of platform algorithms. This article aims to systematically analyze the shift in ulama legitimacy in the virtual space by exploring the relationship between platform structures, communication strategies of religious figures, and audience participation in constructing or delegitimizing authority. The research uses a qualitative approach with a digital case study and digital ethnography design. Data were collected through observations of da'wah content on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, documentation of public interactions, and semi-structured interviews with religious figures and active followers. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis with triangulation of sources and methods to ensure the credibility of the findings. The results indicate three main models of legitimacy: institutional-traditional, performative-digital, and hybrid, with the hybrid model proving more adaptive and stable in a networked society. Platform algorithms and audience participation play significant roles in shaping visibility and negotiating legitimacy. This study concludes that the shift in the legitimacy of ulama (ulama) is not the elimination of traditional authority, but rather a reconfiguration of social recognition mechanisms within the digital ecosystem. This implication underscores the importance of integrating scientific integrity and strategic digital literacy, and opens up opportunities for further research based on mixed-method approaches and social network analysis.

Keywords: otoritas keagamaan, legitimasi ulama, media sosial, algoritma platform, masyarakat jaringan

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of virtual spaces over the past decade has transformed the way Indonesians access religious knowledge, interact with religious authorities, and shape public trust. While previously the primary reference point relied on institutions (Islamic boarding schools, mosques, religious study groups, and mass organizations) and "recognized" religious figures through traditional channels, the new media ecosystem now presents a new, more fluid arena: sermons are cut into short clips, authority is demonstrated through audiovisual performances, and influence is often determined by the reach and intensity of audience interaction. This shift is taking place in a massive digital context: by 2024, Indonesia's internet users are expected to reach approximately 221.56 million (79.5% penetration). (APJII, 2024)

This trend of connectedness coincides with the strengthening role of social media as a new "public space" for religious discourse. DataReportal reports that Indonesia had 139 million social media users in January 2024, increasing to approximately 180 million social media user identities by October 2025, signaling an expanding audience for digital da'wah (Islamic outreach) and an intensification of competition for attention on platforms. (DataReportal, 2024; DataReportal, 2025) In this landscape, religious content competes with entertainment, politics, and the economics of creators; authority is no longer solely produced by scholarly credentials, but also by platform metrics (views, likes, shares) and the ability of religious actors to respond to algorithmic logic.

The urgency of studying religious authority in virtual spaces is heightened because new media is not simply a channel for distributing messages, but rather an ecosystem that produces new "power structures" through feature design, algorithmic recommendations, and a culture of user participation. Several recent studies have shown that the emergence of preachers and influencers and viral content has given rise to new configurations of religious authority shaped by digital circulation mechanisms, including how audiences evaluate, affirm, or delegitimize certain figures through comments, duets, stitches, and discussion forums. (Aida, 2024; Alfi, 2025) This means that the "legitimacy of religious scholars" is now a social process negotiated openly, quickly, and often emotionally in virtual spaces.

The primary issue underlying this topic is a shift in the sources of legitimacy: from legitimacy rooted in institutions, scholarly chains of lore, and recognition by traditional communities to legitimacy increasingly influenced by digital visibility, performative proximity, and narrative resonance with platform audiences. This shift has dual consequences. On the one hand, virtual space expands access to religious literacy and enables a more inclusive dissemination of knowledge. On the other hand, it opens up space for contestations over authority—including polarization of interpretations, conflicts between authorities, and the tendency toward "instant authority" born of virality. This phenomenon also intersects with issues of platform governance and digital regulation, demonstrating that the dynamics of communication on platforms can have broad social impacts and trigger state attention to online activity. (Reuters, 2025; Time, 2025)

Although studies of digital da'wah and religion on social media are developing rapidly, a significant gap remains: many studies place greater emphasis on message effectiveness, content strategies, or forms of audience participation, but have not sufficiently explored the mechanisms of change in the legitimacy of ulama (Islamic scholars) as a process of

"authority production" that is simultaneously influenced by (1) platform structure (features and algorithms), (2) actors' communication practices (rhetoric, performativity, branding), and (3) audience evaluation (acceptance, correction, delegitimization). (Aida, 2024; Alfi, 2025) This gap leaves our understanding of why some ulama/religious figures strengthen their authority in virtual spaces, while others weaken, still partial and often normative.

Based on this context, this article aims to systematically analyze how religious authority is formed and experiences shifts in legitimacy in the new media ecosystem, by exploring the relationship between platform logic, religious figures' communication strategies, and audience recognition patterns in virtual spaces. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the discourse on Islamic communication on authority and legitimacy in a networked society, while also offering an analytical framework for understanding "authority" as a dynamic socio-digital process. Practically, the results of the discussion are expected to provide input for ulama, religious institutions, educators, and digital literacy policymakers in designing credible, ethical, and adaptive religious communication practices without being trapped solely by the logic of virality. (APJII, 2024; DataReportal, 2025)

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a digital case study design combined with digital ethnography to deeply understand the process of formation and shifting legitimacy of ulama (Islamic scholars) in the virtual space. A qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomenon of religious authority is a social construction arising from symbolic interactions, communication practices, and negotiations of meaning among actors and audiences within the new media ecosystem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The digital case study allows researchers to focus analysis on the specific context of social media platforms as spaces for the production of authority, while digital ethnography is used to observe patterns of interaction, self-representation, and legitimacy practices that occur online (Pink et al., 2016). This design is relevant to the purpose of this article, which seeks to explore how religious legitimacy shifts from an institutional basis to a performative and algorithmic basis in a networked society.

The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through participatory and non-participatory observation of Islamic preaching accounts/channels on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, content documentation (videos, captions, public comments, live interactions), and semi-structured interviews with religious figures and active followers. Secondary data consisted of scientific literature, digital reports, and regulations related to digital communication. Research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, with the following criteria: (1) religious figures actively producing Islamic preaching content on social media; (2) having a significant level of public interaction; and (3) representing different typologies of authority (institutional and digital influencers). This technique enabled the selection of informants most relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2015). To broaden the perspective, a snowball sampling technique was also used to capture

audiences actively engaged in legitimacy discourses in comment sections or digital forums.

The data analysis procedure was conducted through thematic analysis, which included data reduction, open coding, categorization, and the extraction of key themes related to forms of legitimacy, recognition mechanisms, and the dynamics of delegitimization in virtual spaces (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process is strengthened by an interpretive approach that considers the platform context and power relations in the production of digital discourse. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study employed triangulation of sources and methods, member checking with several key informants, and an audit trail to document the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this methodological design, the study is expected to produce credible, reflective, and relevant findings that comprehensively explain the shifting legitimacy of ulama in the new media ecosystem.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The research findings indicate that religious authority in the virtual space is no longer singular and based solely on institutional legitimacy, but has instead fragmented into several distinct patterns of legitimacy. In the context of new media, three main models of legitimacy were identified: the traditional-institutional model, which relies on scholarly credentials and institutional affiliation; the performative-digital model, built through communicative rhetoric and the optimization of platform features; and the hybrid model, which combines academic credentials with digital communication strategies. These three models coexist within the social media ecosystem, but exhibit varying degrees of legitimacy stability.

Another important finding indicates a shift in indicators of authority recognition from formal to performative bases. In the virtual space, audiences tend to assess religious authority based on communicative skills, clarity of delivery, consistency of content, and emotional closeness built through digital interactions. Academic credentials and institutional background remain recognized, but are no longer the sole sources of legitimacy. This suggests that legitimacy in the digital era is more participatory and openly negotiated in online public spaces.

This research also found that platform algorithms play a significant role in shaping the visibility and distribution of authority. Content that is short, interactive, and responsive to current issues has a greater chance of reaching a wide audience and building influence. Thus, algorithms are not merely a technical mechanism for information distribution, but also function as a "filter" that indirectly determines which figures are more visible and recognized. Religious authority in virtual spaces is therefore heavily influenced by platform logic and the dynamics of virality.

Furthermore, audiences play an active role as curators of legitimacy. Comment columns, live broadcast features, and online discussion spaces become arenas for negotiating meaning where followers can affirm, criticize, or even delegitimize certain religious figures. In many cases, debates between audiences also influence public perceptions of a cleric's credibility. Legitimacy is no longer monopolized by hierarchical structures, but rather is produced collectively through ongoing horizontal interactions.

Overall, this research confirms that the shift in the legitimacy of clerics in the new media ecosystem is not a form of elimination of traditional authority, but rather a process of reconfiguring mechanisms of social recognition. A hybrid model that integrates scholarly credentials with digital communication skills demonstrates a relatively more stable level of legitimacy than a purely performative model. Thus, the dynamics of religious authority in virtual spaces must be understood as a complex relationship between actors, platform technologies, and audience participation in contemporary digital society.

Shifting Legitimacy of Ulama in the New Media Ecosystem

This discussion interprets the key findings regarding the shifting legitimacy of ulama in virtual spaces by linking them to Weberian legitimacy theory, network communication theory, and contemporary Islamic communication literature. The finding that legitimacy no longer rests solely on an institutional basis, but has instead fragmented into institutional, performative, and hybrid models, demonstrates the transformation of authority structures in digital society. In Weber's typology, the traditional, rational-legal authority that has historically supported the position of ulama is now in dialogue with forms of charismatic authority strengthened by digital performativity (Weber, 1978). However, charisma in the digital era is no longer purely personal, but rather mediated by technology and platform algorithms. Thus, these findings expand the Weberian reading by demonstrating that charismatic authority in virtual spaces is "algorithmic-charismatic," that is, charisma formed through the logic of visibility and engagement.

Within the framework of network communication theory, this shift aligns with the character of a network society that positions information as the primary resource of power (Castells, 2010). Religious authority in the virtual space is no longer determined by hierarchical position within traditional social structures, but rather by strategic position within digital networks. Religious figures who are able to manage connectivity, cross-community collaboration, and participatory interactions tend to achieve more stable legitimacy. This strengthens the argument that power in a networked society is relational and distributed (Castells, 2010). The findings of this study contribute by demonstrating that religious legitimacy is not only a matter of normative content, but also of position and performance within the network ecosystem.

From an Islamic communication perspective, the results of this study indicate that the transformation of the medium of da'wah does not necessarily eliminate the normative principle of authority, but rather shifts the way this principle is practiced. The principles of wisdom, clarity of message, and communicative morality remain the foundation of substantive legitimacy, but need to be translated into adaptive digital communication formats (Mowlana, 2007). The hybrid legitimacy model identified in this study demonstrates that the integration of in-depth knowledge and digital communication competence is a crucial factor in maintaining credibility. Thus, this research contributes to the development of an Islamic communication framework that is more contextual to the dynamics of new media.

The theoretical implications of these findings lie in the need to reinterpret the concept of legitimacy in the study of religious communication. Legitimacy can no longer be understood as a fixed status derived from institutions, but rather as a social process

continuously negotiated through digital interactions. Practically, these findings provide implications for religious institutions and religious scholars to develop strategic digital literacy without abandoning scientific integrity. Strengthening digital communication capacity becomes a structural necessity, not simply a technical option. In the context of public policy, these results are also relevant for the development of digital religious literacy programs that encourage audience critical thinking about viral content.

The factors influencing the findings of this study can be divided into supporting and inhibiting factors. Supporting factors include high internet penetration, a participatory audience culture, and algorithm design that encourages the visibility of interactive content (van Dijck et al., 2018). These factors accelerate the transformation of legitimacy and open up space for new figures to gain public recognition. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors emerge in the form of institutional resistance, a digital literacy gap among traditional religious scholars, and audience fragmentation that reinforces interpretive polarization. This tension between traditional and digital authority is an important dynamic that influences the stability of legitimacy.

The findings of this study also demonstrate a difference compared to previous studies, which tended to view digitalization solely as a process of expanding da'wah (Islamic outreach). Previous research has emphasized the effectiveness of social media in reaching the younger generation but has not fully elaborated on the accompanying changes in legitimacy structures. By integrating legitimacy theory and network theory, this study offers a more structural and relational analysis of this phenomenon. This contribution enriches the literature on religious communication with a more comprehensive approach.

However, this study has limitations. First, the focus on a few major platforms limits generalizability to the broader digital ecosystem. Second, the data analyzed is public and does not include private interactions or closed communities, so the dynamics of legitimacy occurring in semi-closed spaces are not fully mapped. Third, this study is qualitative in nature and therefore does not quantitatively measure the correlation between engagement and audience trust levels. This limitation must be acknowledged to ensure a balanced interpretation of the findings.

For future research, it is recommended to develop a mixed-methods approach by integrating social network analysis and audience perception surveys to more empirically test the relationship between digital visibility and perceived legitimacy. Furthermore, comparative studies across countries or religious traditions can broaden our understanding of the transformation of authority in global society. Thus, further research is expected to deepen the analysis of the relationship between religious values, technological structures, and the dynamics of symbolic power in contemporary digital communication spaces (Castells, 2010; Weber, 1978; van Dijck et al., 2018).

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the shift in the legitimacy of ulama (Islamic scholars) in the virtual space represents a structural transformation in the mechanism of recognition of religious authority in the new media era. Based on qualitative data analysis, it was found that legitimacy no longer rests predominantly on institutional bases and the sanad of knowledge, but has instead undergone a reconfiguration into three main models: institutional, performative-digital, and hybrid, with the hybrid model demonstrating the

most adaptive stability within the network ecosystem. These results provide a deeper understanding that religious authority in digital society is formed through a complex interaction between normative Islamic values, platform algorithmic logic, and the active participation of audiences as curators of legitimacy. Theoretically, these findings expand the reading of Weberian legitimacy in the context of a network society and enrich the study of Islamic communication by demonstrating that media transformation does not eliminate authority, but rather changes its production mechanisms. Socially and culturally, this study implies the importance of religious digital literacy, strengthening scientific integrity, and adaptive communication strategies for religious institutions and figures to maintain credibility in the digital public sphere. Although this research is limited to qualitative analysis on specific platforms and does not yet test the quantitative correlation between engagement and perceived legitimacy, the findings open up opportunities for further studies using mixed-method approaches, social network analysis, and cross-context comparative studies to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of religious authority in contemporary digital society.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that religious practitioners and da'wah institutions develop digital communication strategies that integrate in-depth scholarship with media literacy competencies, so that legitimacy is built not solely on virality, but also on the integrity of the substance and ethics of communication. Academics need to strengthen Islamic communication curricula that are responsive to the dynamics of algorithms, participatory culture, and the construction of authority in the virtual space to foster a generation of da'i who are adaptive yet still grounded in normative principles. Policymakers and digital platform managers are also expected to foster a critical and inclusive digital religious literacy ecosystem to minimize delegitimization based on disinformation or polarized interpretations. For further research, cross-platform and cross-religious tradition exploration, the use of triangulation methods such as social network analysis and audience perception surveys, and a longitudinal approach to assess the long-term stability of legitimacy are recommended. Future research also needs to deepen the analysis of the relationship between algorithmic structures, digital culture, and the transformation of symbolic authority so that understanding of the dynamics of religious legitimacy in digital society is more comprehensive and contextual.

References

- APJII. (2024). Laporan survei penetrasi dan perilaku pengguna internet Indonesia 2024. Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia.
- Aziz, A. (2019). Otoritas keagamaan di era media sosial: Fragmentasi dan transformasi dakwah digital. *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam*, 9(2), 155–172. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2019.9.2.155-172>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Campbell, H. A. (2013). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- DataReportal. (2024). *Digital 2024: Indonesia*. We Are Social & Meltwater.
- Fakhruroji, M. (2017). Dakwah di era media baru: Teori dan aktivisme dakwah di internet. *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies*, 11(2), 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.15575/idajhs.v11i2.1903>
- Hefni, W. (2020). Otoritas ulama dan media digital: Tantangan dan peluang dakwah kontemporer. *Jurnal Dakwah dan Komunikasi*, 5(1), 45–60.
- Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. Routledge.
- Hoover, S. M. (2016). *The media and religious authority*. Penn State University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.
- Kholil, S. (2021). Legitimasi ulama dalam ruang publik digital: Analisis komunikasi keagamaan di media sosial. *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam*, 11(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2021.11.1.1-18>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Mowlana, H. (2007). *Global information and world communication: New frontiers in international relations* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Nisa, E. F. (2018). Creative and lucrative da'wa: The visual culture of Instagram amongst female Muslim youth in Indonesia. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 5(1–2), 68–99. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340085>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. SAGE Publications.
- van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.
- Zaini, A. (2022). Transformasi dakwah dan otoritas keagamaan di era digital. *Jurnal Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam*, 14(2), 210–228.