

ARTICLE

Fatwas and Figures: How NU and Muhammadiyah Shape Religious Authority on Indonesian Instagram Accounts

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Abstract

Social media has significantly transformed how religious institutions communicate their teachings and assert authority among their followers. This shift became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Islamic organizations in Indonesia were required to issue clear guidance on how to carry out religious practices at home. This study examines how the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, employed public figures and authoritative religious references such as fatwas in their digital communication strategies related to home-based worship. Drawing on Postill and Pink's netnographic method, the research focused on the official Instagram accounts of the two organizations (@nuonline_id and @lensamu) over a four-month period from March to June 2020. Data were gathered through the observation of both visual and textual content, including captions, posts, and audience responses. The findings indicate that NU relied on respected religious figures and inter-institutional coalitions to legitimize its messaging, while Muhammadiyah emphasized structured authority through formal, systematic, and rationally composed official statements. The implication of this research is the potential to encourage religious institutions to utilize social media as a strategic arena for asserting authority, shaping public perceptions, and adapting their institutional roles in response to the evolving dynamics of society in the digital era.

Keywords: Religious Authority; COVID-19 Pandemic; Media Digital; Nahdlatul Ulama; Muhammadiyah

Media sosial telah membentuk ulang cara institusi agama dalam menyampaikan panduan keagamaan sekaligus menegaskan otoritasnya di hadapan para pengikutnya. Transformasi ini menjadi semakin jelas selama pandemi COVID-19, ketika organisasi Islam di Indonesia dituntut untuk memberikan arahan yang jelas terkait pelaksanaan ibadah di rumah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana dua organisasi Islam terbesar di Indonesia, yakni Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) dan Muhammadiyah dalam memanfaatkan figur publik dan rujukan otoritatif keagamaan (fatwa) di ruang digital berkenaan dengan pelaksanaan praktik ibadah di rumah. Penelitian dilakukan dengan metode netnografi dari Postill dan Pink terhadap akun Instagram resmi kedua organisasi tersebut (@nuonline_id dan @lensamu) selama empat bulan dari Maret hingga Juni 2020. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi konten visual dan tekstual, meliputi caption, unggahan, dan respons publik di kedua akun Instagram tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa NU menggunakan tokoh-tokoh agama yang dihormati serta membangun koalisi kelembagaan yang luas untuk melegitimasi panduan-panduan yang disampaikan, sedangkan Muhammadiyah menekankan otoritas yang terstruktur melalui pernyataan resmi yang sistematis, formal, dan disusun secara rasional. Implikasi penelitian ini adalah dapat mendorong lembaga keagamaan untuk memanfaatkan media sosial sebagai arena strategis dalam menegaskan otoritas, membentuk persepsi publik, dan menyesuaikan peran institusional menghadapi dinamika masyarakat di era digital yang terus berkembang.

A. INTRODUCTION

The advent of digital platforms has transformed the landscape of religious communication, particularly in countries with a sizeable Muslim population, such as Indonesia. Social media outlets like Instagram facilitate the widespread dissemination of religious messages and reshape how believers negotiate, affirm, and challenge the authority of established religious figures. In this context, digitization presents both opportunities and tensions: religious organizations can leverage new technologies to amplify their reach, yet they also encounter a diverse and often critical online audience that demands transparency and engagement.

In Indonesia, two of the country's most influential Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have long maintained distinct religious identities and interpretive traditions. Their respective views on ritual practices and theological orientations shaped Indonesian Muslim life. Increasingly, both of these organizations have developed robust online presence, often through official websites or social media accounts that enable them to propagate religious teachings and institutional perspectives to millions of followers nationwide. Scholars such as Stig Hjarvard (2011) have highlighted how the mediatization of religion influences the way faith-based messages are produced and consumed, thus potentially altering the balance of power between institutional authorities and lay audiences. Meanwhile, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital underscores the importance of recognized prestige or legitimacy within a particular religious, cultural, or political field.

Beyond these foundational insights, a broader body of literature on digital religion underscores how interactive online spaces can reshape established theological debates and communal norms (Cheong 2013; Bunt 2018; Lentini 2016). Scholars have observed that social media platforms act as critical arenas for religious communication, where traditional

gatekeepers—such as clergy, religious institutions, or established teachers—find their interpretive monopoly challenged by a more participatory digital public (Langer 2020; Lövheim 2013). This phenomenon is not limited to any single context: Lim (2012) discusses how Southeast Asian religious movements harness online networks to advance their agendas, while Helland (2007) identifies a similar ‘virtual religiosity’ in Western contexts, wherein users actively negotiate doctrinal matters via blogs and forums. The digital terrain’s egalitarian ethos, and the algorithmic push for viral content, have compelled religious organizations to adapt their communication strategies to maintain relevance and legitimacy (Couldry 2012; Golan and Martini 2021). These studies collectively illustrate that authority can become fluid, contingent upon an organization’s ability to effectively cultivate engagement and translate doctrinal stances into relatable digital narratives.

Nevertheless, much of this scholarship focuses on smaller-scale movements, Western-centric contexts, or individualized religious influencers. Although these research areas have provided valuable perspectives on the intersection of faith and technology, fewer works examine how major Islamic organizations in Indonesia, particularly Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama’s strategically deploy social media to assert and negotiate their religious authority. This gap becomes especially pronounced when examining sensitive issues such as the recommendation to conduct prayers at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when Islamic teachings typically emphasize performing prayers in the mosque, an act that traditionally requires leaving one’s home. Although NU and Muhammadiyah ultimately endorsed similar guidelines on home worship, they exhibited nuanced distinctions in their interpretive frameworks, modes of communication, and institutional imagery when disseminating those decisions to the public.

This study aims to explore how NU and Muhammadiyah employed public figures and authoritative religious references such as fatwas in their digital communication strategies related to home-based worship. The analysis highlights notable distinctions in how each institution frames and conveys its religious recommendations. Muhammadiyah's approach, characterized by structured fatwas and scientifically grounded explanations, demonstrates a rational-practical orientation emphasizing clarity, structured reasoning, and practical applicability. In contrast, NU integrates traditional values and local cultural sensibilities into its digital messaging, reflecting a culturally nuanced approach to religious communication. These different strategies illustrate how digital mediation significantly shapes public reception, interpretation, and adherence to religious authority in contemporary Indonesian Islam.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a netnographic approach based on the framework proposed by Postill and Pink (2012) to explore the dynamics of contestation over religious authority on social media. The research focuses on two official Instagram accounts – @nuonline_id, with 760,000 followers, and @lensamu, with 162,000 followers – that actively disseminate da'wah content. The researcher adopted a participatory observational stance by following these accounts as a regular follower and meticulously monitoring their activities over a four-month period from March 2020 to June 2020.

During this period, a systematic observation process was implemented, yielding 368 posts from @nuonline_id and 247 posts from @lensamu. Each post, comprising textual captions and images related to the promoting of home worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, was captured and archived for subsequent analysis. This process was guided by the 'daily routine of digital ethnographic practice', which encompasses five key

activities: capturing, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving. These routines facilitate the generation of rich empirical data and help create an immersive research environment or ethnographic place.

By integrating these netnographic methods, the study aims to uncover the nuanced contestation of religious authority as it unfolds on social media, revealing how these two influential organizations strategically engage with public discourse during significant religious and social transformation. This methodological framework is instrumental in exposing the subtle dynamics of institutional messaging and audience interaction, ultimately offering a deeper understanding of how contestation over religious legitimacy is negotiated in contemporary Indonesian Islam.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory to provide a nuanced understanding of how contestation over religious authority unfolds on social media. Bourdieu's framework posits that forms of symbolic capital such as religious titles, institutional legitimacy, and culturally endorsed credentials serve as crucial assets for organizations seeking to assert authority. In the digital context, these assets are accumulated and visibly displayed, contested, and re-negotiated through online interactions and content presentation. By examining how prominent Islamic organizations deploy symbolic capital in their digital communications, this study seeks to reveal the underlying power dynamics that contribute to their authoritative positioning.

Hjarvard's mediatization theory further enriches this analysis by arguing that media is not a passive conduit but an active agent in constructing social realities, including religious authority. According to this perspective, media platforms, especially interactive spaces like Instagram, play a formative role in shaping public perceptions, reinforcing institutional

legitimacy, and even redefining traditional modes of religious practice. The mediatization process transforms how religious messages are conveyed and received, thereby influencing the broader contest over legitimacy among competing institutions.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the framework of this study illuminates how digital platforms serve as arenas for symbolic struggle. On the one hand, organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah leverage their accumulated symbolic capital to project authority and foster follower loyalty. On the other, the inherent dynamism of media platforms creates conditions where these traditional markers of authority are continuously questioned, reinterpreted, and sometimes subverted. This duality underscores the tension between established religious legitimacy and the evolving discourses fostered by digital communication.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework provides the foundation for exploring the contestation over religious authority in contemporary Indonesian Islam. By focusing on the digital strategies employed during critical moments—such as the endorsement of home worship during the COVID-19 pandemic—this study aims to elucidate how major religious organizations negotiate their authoritative status within an evolving media landscape, thereby shaping and reshaping the broader discourse on religious legitimacy.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Representation of Religious Authority and Netizen Responses: Prominent Figures and Authoritative References

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesian Islamic institutions had to rapidly recalibrate traditional religious practices to comply with public health measures, significantly impacting established communal norms, particularly congregational prayer. Social media, particularly Instagram,

became a critical arena for major Islamic organizations to communicate their positions and assert their authority. This section examines explicitly how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), represented by the @nuonline_id Instagram account, and Muhammadiyah, represented by @lensamu, employed public figures and authoritative religious rulings (fatwas) to articulate their institutional stances.

NU, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, frequently invokes the authority of prominent religious scholars to validate its religious instructions. An analysis of Instagram content from @nuonline_id reveals a controlling communication style, where authoritative religious figures prominently articulate NU's institutional stance. For instance, NU utilized videos featuring explicit appeals from KH Said Aqil Siradj, the General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU). These visual messages reinforce the authoritative power of NU's recommendations by clearly displaying the speaker's name, position, and affiliation.

A representative caption underscoring the directive's authoritative legitimacy:

Figure 1.
PBNU Chairman's Instagram Appeal for Home Worship
During Ramadan 1441 H



Ketua PBNU menghimbau agar Ramadhan 1441 Hijriyah ini beribadah #dirumahaja

[The Chairman of PBNU appeals that Ramadan 1441 Hijri be utilized for worship at home#dirumahaja]

Moreover, NU's digital messaging frequently references broader collaborative authority involving multiple Islamic organizations. In the videos, PBNU (2020) explicitly states:

"PBNU appeals, together with other Islamic organizations and 14 mass organizations, to all Muslim communities in Indonesia to worship during the month of Ramadan at their respective homes, avoiding gatherings such as congregational Tarawih prayers, communal Quran recitations, and Eid prayers."

The explicit reference to prominent religious figures, such as the Chairman of PBNU, underscores Nahdlatul Ulama's strategic mobilization of symbolic capital in asserting its religious directives. By clearly highlighting key leaders' positions and institutional affiliation of in their digital content, NU leverages the established credibility and social recognition of these authoritative individuals to reinforce compliance and acceptance among its followers. Furthermore, NU's deliberate emphasis on collaboration with multiple Islamic organizations and mass movements enhances its authoritative legitimacy by suggesting broad communal consensus and solidarity. This collective endorsement by respected Islamic entities positions NU not only as a solitary voice of authority but also as the representative of a united religious front, thereby amplifying the perceived legitimacy and persuasive strength of its religious guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, Muhammadiyah's account @lensamu employed authoritative communication styles through formal announcements and visual elements. Instead of featuring prominent figures directly through visual appeals as consistently as NU, Muhammadiyah relied heavily on textual authority conveyed through official statements, explicitly endorsed by top leadership. Muhammadiyah's appeals, although occasionally accompanied by visual messages featuring recognizable figures, primarily

showcased authority through formal letters bearing signatures of high-ranking officials.

Figure 2.
Muhammadiyah's Formal Appeal for Home Worship
During the Pandemic



One such appeal explicitly stated:

“The Muhammadiyah Central Committee appeals to perform prayers at home as a replacement for Friday congregational prayers”.

Muhammadiyah's approach, exemplified by its explicit use of formal institutional endorsements, reflects a deliberate utilization of bureaucratic and organizational legitimacy. By prominently displaying the official signatures of high-ranking figures within its central management, Muhammadiyah emphasizes structural authority, indicating that its recommendations stem from institutional consensus rather than individual scholarly opinions alone. Such strategic use of authoritative documents and organizational stamps serves not only to affirm Muhammadiyah's traditional emphasis on systematic and rational approaches but also to position the organization as credible and trustworthy in navigating complex contemporary challenges, such as the unprecedented context of

worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reliance on formal, structured communication aligns well with Muhammadiyah's historical identity as a modernist organization advocating practical religious reasoning, appealing to its followers who value methodical clarity and clear institutional directives during periods of uncertainty.

Additionally, both organizations cited fatwas from their respective institutional religious councils to legitimize their guidelines, thus invoking established theological authority. Muhammadiyah, known for its structured and systematic approach, emphasized a rationalist interpretation of religious jurisprudence. For example, Muhammadiyah's leadership appealed directly:

"Muhammadiyah Central Committee appeals to carry out high prayers at their respective homes as a substitute for Friday prayers. May Allah give abundant rewards and always protect us all. Amen."

Muhammadiyah's citation of fatwas from its central religious authority underscores its established practice of coupling institutional legitimacy with rational theological reasoning. By explicitly referring to authoritative religious documents articulated, signed, and endorsed by prominent institutional leaders, Muhammadiyah reinforces its symbolic capital as an organized and disciplined authority in Islamic jurisprudence. The structured and systematic presentation of these fatwas highlights Muhammadiyah's preference for clarity, coherence, and scientific validation, resonating particularly well with followers seeking definitive guidance in uncertain times. Moreover, Muhammadiyah's strategic invocation of institutional authority through documented fatwas and authoritative figures reflects a broader effort to align religious reasoning with empirical realities, thus strengthening the organization's position as a modern, rational actor within Indonesia's complex religious landscape.

NU, however, often articulated its fatwas with a nuanced sensitivity towards traditional community practices. Their approach considered local sensibilities and traditions, emphasizing religious guidance aligned with cultural expectations. A clear demonstration is the deliberate use of respected religious scholars, like Quraish Shihab (2020), whose respected standing within Indonesian Islam lent significant legitimacy to the appeals.

“Given the consensus that coronavirus poses a serious threat to human life, the scholars issued a fatwa: it is not recommended for Muslims to attend congregational prayers or even Friday prayers.”

The statement reflecting NU's strategy to validate its religious authority through respected scholars whose legitimacy is widely acknowledged among its followers. Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) strategic invocation of prominent religious scholars, such as Quraysh Shihab, highlights its reliance on established scholarly authority to legitimize religious guidance during moments of crisis. Shihab, a figure widely respected for his scholarly depth, moderate stance, and authoritative interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, enhances the credibility and persuasive power of NU's religious rulings among diverse segments of Indonesian Muslims. By leveraging Shihab's authoritative voice, NU effectively situates its fatwas within a trusted and recognizable interpretive tradition, fostering followers' acceptance and compliance. This approach demonstrates NU's adeptness in blending scholarly authority with culturally rooted religious interpretations, ultimately reinforcing its legitimacy as a central actor capable of navigating complex religious dilemmas, particularly during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic.

The symbolic capital that NU and Muhammadiyah mobilize through social media underscores each organization's conscious effort to assert religious legitimacy in a digitally mediated environment. The prominence of well-known figures and institutional leaders in their communication

serves not merely informational purposes, but also a deeper strategic function: reinforcing their established authority within the Indonesian Muslim community. This deliberate display of authoritative figures aligns closely with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, where recognition and prestige are leveraged to influence followers' acceptance of institutional guidance.

Furthermore, the differing approaches—NU's reliance on culturally embedded authoritative figures versus Muhammadiyah's structural and textual emphasis—reveal distinct strategies for asserting authority, shaped by their historical and theological contexts. Instagram's visual and textual affordances thus offer each organization opportunities to amplify its doctrinal positions and institutional legitimacy in ways best suited to their respective audiences. This mediated engagement inherently becomes an arena for subtle yet tangible contestation, as each organization seeks to maintain and consolidate its symbolic capital in the public sphere.

Therefore, the representation of religious authority through prominent figures and authoritative fatwas during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the nuanced strategies employed by NU and Muhammadiyah to assert their legitimacy. Social media not only provides a platform for communicating religious guidelines but also serves as a critical space where symbolic contestation unfolds. Through their distinct communication strategies, visually explicit and authoritative appeals in the case of NU, and structurally articulated and practically oriented messages from Muhammadiyah, each organization continually negotiates their place within the evolving dynamics of religious authority in digital Indonesia.

The following table provides a comparative overview of how NU and Muhammadiyah utilize prominent figures, authoritative references, and communication styles on Instagram to assert and negotiate their religious authority, particularly about home worship guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1.
Comparative Analysis of NU and Muhammadiyah's Strategies
for Asserting Religious Authority on Instagram
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

	@nuonline_id (NU)	@lensamu (Muhammadiyah)
Type of Authority Employed	Cultural-traditional and scholarly authority (prominent ulama and respected figures such as KH Said Aqil Siradj, Quraish Shihab)	Institutional-rational authority (formal, structured, scientific rationale from organizational leaders and clear procedural guidelines)
Communication Style	More culturally nuanced, emphasizing emotional resonance and traditional community sensibilities.	Structured, rational, and practical, emphasizing clarity and direct guidance, often using official letters with clear signatures and organizational stamps.
Visual Presentation	Visuals often emphasize recognizable religious leaders or well-known scholars speaking directly to followers. Explicit in displaying names and institutional positions to reinforce credibility and obedience.	Formal visuals emphasizing structured messages, sometimes accompanied by scientific rationale; prioritizing clear textual content (e.g., official letters with stamps, structured appeals).
Linguistic Approach	More inclusive, community-oriented, integrating local wisdom, cultural idioms, and traditional religious expressions.	Straightforward and practical language with direct appeals emphasizing clear, concise, and rational directives suitable for followers' immediate implementation.
Interaction and Responsiveness	Frequently utilizes two-way	Primarily one-way, directive communication

	@nuonline_id (NU)	@lensamu (Muhammadiyah)
	communication approaches, inviting feedback, reflections, and discussions, but maintains authoritative finality through traditional and religious justifications.	style; feedback is generally less interactive, reflecting a structured approach focused on clarity and compliance.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, it is evident that NU consistently leverages culturally embedded forms of religious authority. NU features respected religious figures such as KH Said Aqil Siradj and Quraysh Shihab, whose established scholarly and cultural legitimacy enhances public receptiveness toward institutional guidelines. By positioning these authoritative voices explicitly – through direct video appeals and clearly stated titles and affiliations – NU reinforces its credibility and conveys authoritative messages grounded in longstanding traditional practices and community recognition.

In contrast, Muhammadiyah's representation of religious authority emphasizes structured, rational, and institutional legitimacy. Its communication strategy is characterized by the prominent use of formal letters, organizational stamps, and high-ranking officials' visible signatures affirming a systematic and bureaucratic approach. This method aligns closely with Muhammadiyah's historically rationalist approach to Islamic jurisprudence, appealing to an audience that values empirical clarity and practical application of religious rulings. Muhammadiyah's deployment of structured textual and visual content serves to solidify its authority as a pragmatic, evidence-driven religious institution, capable of responding decisively in moments of uncertainty and crisis.

Moreover, both organizations' nuanced employment of prominent figures and authoritative religious references signifies a deliberate contestation over religious authority within Indonesia's digitally mediated public sphere. As Hjarvard's mediatization theory suggests, Instagram does not merely serve as a passive conduit but actively shapes how religious authority is constructed, presented, and received. NU and Muhammadiyah's divergent yet equally intentional strategies demonstrate their awareness of the digital environment as an arena where audiences continuously construct, negotiate, and challenge institutional credibility. Through strategic representations—ranging from scholarly endorsements and collective fatwas to institutional decrees—each organization consciously seeks to affirm its distinct identity and authority, reflecting deeper negotiation processes and subtle contestation inherent in the contemporary religious landscape of Indonesian Islam.

2. Comparative Analysis of NU and Muhammadiyah's Strategies for Asserting Religious Authority on Instagram during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The digital space, particularly social media platforms like Instagram, has become a significant arena for religious authority contestation in contemporary Indonesia. Theoretical perspectives such as Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital and Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory provide crucial lenses to understand how established religious institutions, notably Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, negotiate their authority online. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital—derived from religious scholarship, institutional legacy, and recognized authority—becomes pivotal in reinforcing or contesting existing power dynamics within religious communities.

Traditionally, religious authority in Indonesia has been closely tied to charismatic leadership exemplified by figures such as *ulama*, *kiai*, and

other respected religious scholars, whose legitimacy was rooted deeply in textual knowledge, religious pedigree, and cultural recognition (Fealy and White 2008; Burhani 2020). These figures historically have shaped community practices, influenced public opinions, and guided interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. However, the advent of social media has reconfigured this authoritative landscape. Instagram accounts such as @nuonline_id and @lensamu, representing NU and Muhammadiyah respectively, illustrate how authority has adapted to digital platforms, with these institutions leveraging their established symbolic capital to guide religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The transformation of religious leadership roles can be framed through Hjarvard's mediatization theory, highlighting how digital media facilitates religious communication and actively shapes and reconstructs religious practices and perceptions of authority (Hjarvard 2011). This mediatization is not merely technical or logistical but epistemic and cultural, potentially altering perceptions of religious legitimacy by democratizing access to religious knowledge. Consequently, conventional religious leaders in Indonesia—whose authority was traditionally built upon direct interpersonal contact and hierarchical pedagogical models—now operate within a digital environment characterized by immediacy, transparency, and participatory engagement (Slama 2017).

Moreover, the ulama and *kiai*, historically gatekeepers of religious interpretation and Islamic jurisprudence, must now actively cultivate online symbolic capital by demonstrating responsiveness and agility in engaging public discourse. This digital context compels religious leaders to adapt from a one-directional model of delivering fatwas and religious rulings to a more dialogic interaction, where their authority is continually assessed, challenged, and re-affirmed by the online community (Nisa 2018).

Indeed, digital audiences can now offer immediate feedback – ranging from supportive endorsements to outright criticisms – which has altered the dynamics of religious leadership. Islamic scholars and institutions accustomed to traditional hierarchies find their pronouncements rapidly scrutinized by the digital public sphere. Such scrutiny can lead to controversies, challenges, and even crises of authority when online communities question the reasoning, intentions, or contextual appropriateness of religious decisions (Bunt 2018; Hefner 2018).

This interactive, sometimes contentious environment poses distinct implications for Indonesian Islamic discourse. On the one hand, instantaneous and transparent reactions from netizens may foster a more pluralistic and diverse religious conversation. The accessibility of social media empowers multiple interpretations of religious teachings to coexist, as online discussions can easily incorporate alternative viewpoints previously marginalized in conventional offline discourse (Anderson and Eickelman 2003; Lövheim 2013). This increased openness promotes greater inclusivity and flexibility within Indonesian Islamic communities, reflecting a broader global trend towards a mediated, networked religiosity (Cheong 2013).

Conversely, however, social media engagement's openness and immediacy may catalyze polarization, conflict, and fragmentation within religious communities. Prominent cases within Indonesian digital spheres demonstrate how online religious debates can quickly escalate, highlighting latent tensions around sensitive religious topics. For instance, debates concerning appropriate worship practices during the COVID-19 pandemic on platforms like Instagram often revealed stark divisions among netizens, amplifying existing socio-religious cleavages and raising tensions around interpretative authority and doctrinal authenticity (Lim 2017; Slama and Jones 2017).

Thus, the digitally mediated contestation of religious authority produces complex and paradoxical outcomes. While digital platforms create opportunities for broader participation and pluralistic discourses, they pose risks of deepened fragmentation and polarization. This paradox underscores a critical tension between the democratization of religious knowledge and the imperative to maintain religious coherence and communal harmony (Evolvi 2021). As conventional authorities engage with digital publics, they must balance openness and responsiveness with an awareness of their enduring role as anchors of Islamic tradition and community stability.

The evolving role of ulama and *kiai* in digital contexts further necessitates reflexivity by religious leaders and institutions. As they become active participants in digital forums, religious authorities must continuously reassess their communicative strategies and adapt engagement practices to maintain credibility and relevance. The participatory ethos of digital spaces calls for religious leaders to foster deeper dialogues with followers rather than simply disseminating unilateral pronouncements (Cheong et al. 2012). Conventional authorities may redefine their religious legitimacy—not merely as authoritative sources of definitive answers, but as responsive facilitators who guide meaningful discussions about complex contemporary issues.

Reflectively, this new digital reality invites us to reconsider the future of religious authority in Indonesian Islam. Although digital environments have disrupted traditional modes of religious authority, they also provide avenues for conventional authorities to innovate their roles, potentially strengthening rather than eroding their symbolic capital (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004). In embracing online engagement, ulama and *kiai* can demonstrate adaptive capacity and genuine responsiveness, ultimately enhancing their legitimacy among increasingly networked and digitally literate Indonesian Muslim communities.

3. Reflecting on Digital Religious Authority: A Momentary Phenomenon or an Emerging Long-Term Trend?

This research raises a pivotal question regarding the broader implications of digital authority negotiations between major Islamic institutions, such as NU and Muhammadiyah. At first glance, the shift toward digital religious communication during the COVID-19 pandemic might appear merely a situational adaptation—a temporary necessity driven by extraordinary circumstances. However, a deeper analysis of social media content and interaction patterns suggests that this shift may represent an enduring evolution in religious authority within Indonesian Islam, with ramifications extending beyond momentary crisis management.

Existing literature increasingly supports the view that social media reshapes communication practices and fundamental structures of religious legitimacy. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) argue that online platforms permanently alter traditional religious hierarchies by decentralizing the production and validation of religious knowledge. Rather than reverting after periods of crisis, the shift toward digital mediation potentially signifies a lasting reconfiguration of authority dynamics, embedding the logic of responsiveness, transparency, and public interaction into the very foundations of contemporary religious leadership.

In the Indonesian context, the active presence of respected Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama on digital platforms indicates a broader, enduring shift in their authority strategies. The deliberate engagement of authoritative religious figures and institutional fatwas online demonstrates adaptive tactics and strategic recalibration of religious capital for sustained legitimacy. As Bunt (2018) emphasizes, the digital landscape compels religious authorities to continuously renegotiate their positions, suggesting a long-term adaptation

to an environment where authority is dynamically tested and reshaped through online interactions.

Furthermore, the participatory and dialogic nature of digital interactions, as evident from NU and Muhammadiyah's solicitation of feedback and comments from netizens, may signal the emergence of a permanent cultural shift toward a more inclusive and participatory form of religious discourse. Cheong et al. (2011) emphasize that online spaces often push traditional religious institutions to reassess their communication models fundamentally. Rather than a temporary adjustment, this transformation might embed itself permanently in institutional practices, promoting more active audience involvement in shaping religious interpretations and directives.

Nevertheless, it remains crucial for scholars to critically examine whether these digital interactions represent genuine shifts in religious authority or simply transient adaptations triggered by crisis conditions. Hefner (2018) cautions that the immediacy of online discourse might generate fleeting changes rather than lasting reconfigurations. Within this study, a critical consideration is whether NU and Muhammadiyah's prominent use of authoritative symbols during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects pragmatic reactions to an extraordinary event or signifies more profound structural transformations that will persist beyond the pandemic.

Another critical aspect is how audiences themselves view digital religious authority. According to Nisa (2018), digital platforms empower younger generations with opportunities to question established religious interpretations openly. However, these generational attitudes toward digital authority can vary significantly over time, thus potentially stabilizing or destabilizing the institutional efforts at asserting digital authority. Future research must track longitudinal engagement patterns to determine if netizens' current enthusiastic participation is sustainable or diminishes once pandemic-driven urgency fades.

Moreover, Lim (2017) argued that the digital space's fluid and rapidly changing nature may challenge long-term religious institutional control over theological narratives. Authority that rests upon immediate responsiveness and popularity might suffer instability, especially as institutions face continuous pressure to keep their messaging relevant and engaging. Consequently, today's authoritative prominence on Instagram may become tomorrow's vulnerability unless managed proactively by traditional institutions.

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that the digital turn also holds substantial potential for sustained institutional authority. As demonstrated by Hirschkind (2006) and supported by Slama and Jones (2017), once religious organizations successfully engage followers digitally, a lasting bond can be created and strengthened through consistent online interaction. In the Indonesian context, NU and Muhammadiyah's effective integration of authoritative references and prominent figures online can consolidate followers' loyalty, potentially ensuring a sustained trend of digital legitimacy in the years to come.

This nuanced situation calls for careful and continuous scholarly observation. Future research should therefore longitudinally investigate how NU and Muhammadiyah sustain or alter their digital authority practices post-pandemic. A comparative analysis of subsequent years could reveal whether these strategies were merely situational adaptations or represented a genuine paradigmatic shift towards digital-based religious authority.

Ultimately, the analysis presented in this research encourages scholars to interpret current digital dynamics not merely as momentary phenomena but as potentially indicative of a substantial, enduring shift. Understanding whether digital contestations of religious authority constitute transient or stable transformations will have profound

implications for future research and theorizing about religious authority and mediatization processes in Indonesia and globally.

D. CONCLUSION

This study reveals significant differences in how Muhammadiyah and NU employed digital media, specifically Instagram, to communicate authoritative guidance for worship practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. NU strategically utilized culturally embedded authority by prominently featuring well-respected figures such as KH Said Aqil Siradj and Quraish Shihab, coupled with endorsements from broader Islamic coalitions. Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, relied heavily on formal institutional authority, explicitly communicated through structured documents and official statements bearing the signatures of top leadership. These distinctions underscore how each organization leverages distinct symbolic resources, cultural legitimacy versus structured rational-practical authority, to effectively communicate religious directives and maintain follower compliance amidst unprecedented circumstances.

These findings reflect how digital platforms are reshaping the modes through which religious legitimacy is asserted, community perceptions are shaped, and institutional authority is exercised, particularly in highly religious societies like Indonesia. What initially emerged as a strategic adaptation during the pandemic has signaled a deeper institutional shift. The use of charismatic figures, official declarations, and symbolic media content by NU and Muhammadiyah demonstrates that religious institutions now perceive social media as a vital arena for maintaining relevance and authority in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

This trajectory suggests broader implications for the future of religious communication and authority in Indonesia. The ways NU and Muhammadiyah have adapted to digital platforms demonstrate that

traditional religious institutions increasingly view social media not merely as tools for outreach, but as dynamic arenas central to sustaining legitimacy and public trust. While this analysis centers on the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis, it simultaneously reveals more permanent shifts toward digital engagement, transformations that are poised to redefine the contours of religious authority, institutional strategy, and community interaction in the years to come.

In light of these developments, future research should explore how digital religious communication intersects with variables such as age, gender, digital literacy, and local cultural contexts. Ethnographic and discourse-analytical approaches could offer deeper insight into how authority is constructed and negotiated across different digital environments. On a practical level, policymakers and religious organizations should consider investing in collaborative digital literacy initiatives, co-designed with religious leaders and communities, that respect theological boundaries while embracing the civic potential of digital connectivity. Such efforts can help ensure that the digital transformation of religious authority fosters not only broader reach but also ethical, inclusive, and culturally grounded modes of engagement.

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