

## PLATFORMIZED RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: Rethinking Legitimacy in the Age of Social Media Influencers

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### Abstract

*The proliferation of social media has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of religious authority in Muslim societies, shifting the locus of legitimacy from traditional ulama and institutions to a new class of digital actors known as “religious influencers.” While existing scholarship, grounded in Weberian typology or early digital religion theories, has extensively documented the fragmentation of authority, these frameworks remain insufficient to fully account for the emergence of authority structures shaped by algorithmic logics. This article addresses this theoretical gap by critically reviewing the literature and proposing a novel conceptual framework, “Platformized Religious Authority.” We argue that contemporary religious authority is not monolithic but a hybrid negotiation of three intersecting dimensions: knowledge-based authority (traditional scholarship), charisma-based authority (performative piety), and platform-based authority (algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics). In Indonesia, this framework reveals how platform logic acts as a new gatekeeper, favoring content that is visually performative and affectively resonant, thereby commodifying theology and forming algorithmic enclaves. By integrating the perspective of platform studies from communication science into the sociology of religion, this study offers a more robust*



*model for understanding how religious legitimacy is produced, maintained, and contested in the attention economy.*

*[Perkembangan media sosial telah secara fundamental mengubah lanskap otoritas agama di masyarakat Muslim, memindahkan pusat legitimasi dari ulama tradisional dan lembaga-lembaga ke kelas baru aktor digital yang dikenal sebagai “influencer agama.” Meskipun penelitian yang ada, yang didasarkan pada tipologi Weberian atau teori agama digital awal, telah mendokumentasikan secara luas fragmentasi otoritas, kerangka kerja ini tetap tidak memadai untuk sepenuhnya menjelaskan munculnya struktur otoritas yang dibentuk oleh logika algoritmik. Artikel ini mengatasi kesenjangan teoretis ini dengan meninjau secara kritis literatur yang ada dan mengusulkan kerangka konseptual baru, “Platformized Religious Authority.” Kami berargumen bahwa otoritas agama kontemporer bukanlah monolitik, melainkan negosiasi hibrida dari tiga dimensi yang saling berpotongan: otoritas berbasis pengetahuan (ilmu agama tradisional), otoritas berbasis karisma (kepatuhan agama yang performatif), dan otoritas berbasis platform (visibilitas algoritmik dan metrik keterlibatan). Di Indonesia, kerangka kerja ini mengungkapkan bagaimana logika platform bertindak sebagai penjaga gerbang baru, mengutamakan konten yang secara visual performatif dan secara emosional resonan, sehingga mengkomodifikasi teologi dan membentuk enklave algoritmik. Dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif studi platform dari ilmu komunikasi ke dalam sosiologi agama, artikel ini menawarkan model yang lebih kokoh untuk memahami bagaimana legitimasi agama diproduksi, dipertahankan, dan diperdebatkan dalam ekonomi perhatian.]*

**Keywords:** *Digital Religion, Platformized Authority, Religious Authority, Social Media Influencers*

## **Introduction**

In Muslim society, religious authority has historically been centered on figures such as scholars, clerics, or leaders affiliated with major religious organizations. Their legitimacy is not based solely on personal charisma but also on a solid foundation: mastery of classical Islamic knowledge, a scholarly lineage or “*sanad*,” connecting to previous generations, and

recognition from formal religious institutions.<sup>1</sup> This authority operates within a relatively controlled ecosystem, where knowledge is disseminated through institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, *majelis taklim* (religious gatherings), and mosque pulpits. This model relies on oral transmission and a hierarchical print-based authority.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, the truth of interpretations and *fatwas* is guarded by educated elites whose role is recognized as “heirs to the prophets.”<sup>3</sup>

However, this established landscape of authority is now experiencing significant disruption in the digital age. The explosion of social media has given rise to a new arena for religious discourse that is more fluid, fragmented, and transcends institutional boundaries<sup>4</sup>. It is in this arena that new religious actors, popularly known as religious influencers, have emerged: “*ustaz* YouTube,” “*dai* Instagram,” and “*penceramah* TikTok.” Unlike traditional scholars, the source of authority of these influencers does not always come from depth of knowledge or institutional legitimacy, but rather from popularity measured by digital metrics such as the number of followers, likes, and engagement rates.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Martin Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Milieu; Comments on a New Collection in the KITLV Library*, January 1, 1990; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Bryan S. Turner, “Religious Authority and the New Media,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 117–34.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rajab, *The Heirs of the Prophets* (Starlatch Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Akiva Berger and Oren Golan, “Online Religious Learning: Digital Epistemic Authority and Self-Socialization in Religious Communities,” *Learning, Media and Technology* 49, no. 2 (2023): 274–89; Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, “Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies,” *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 5–17; Liang Zhang, “The Digital Age of Religious Communication: The Shaping and Challenges of Religious Beliefs through Social Media,” *Studies on Religion and Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2025): 25–41.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Hope Cheong, “Authority,” in *Digital Religion*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2021); Harry Febrian, “Visualizing Authority: Rise of the Religious Influencers on the Instagram,” *Social Media + Society* 10, no. 4 (2024); Eva F. Nisa, “Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 24–43.

They have succeeded in attracting a broad audience, especially among urban youth, by packaging religious messages through a more personal, popular, and often entertaining style of communication.<sup>6</sup>

This phenomenon of shifting authority has profound significance, particularly in Muslim societies such as Indonesia, one of the countries with the most active social media users worldwide.<sup>7</sup> Previous studies show that most people, especially the younger generation, increasingly use social media as their primary source for learning about religion, bypassing traditional institutions.<sup>8</sup> This shift is not merely a change in medium but signifies a fundamental transformation in how religious authority is formed, consumed, and contested. This poses a serious challenge for the study of religious communication, including contemporary sociology of Islam, as existing theoretical frameworks are often unable to comprehensively explain how authority is negotiated at the intersection of scholarly tradition, mediated personal charisma, and platform algorithmic logic.

This phenomenon raises important questions: how is religious authority formed, negotiated, and exercised in the digital space? Are classical theoretical frameworks that emphasize charismatic, traditional,

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Slama, *Indonesia and the Malay World Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia*, 2018; Bouziane Zaid et al., “Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices,” *Religions* 2022, 13, no. 4 (2022): 335.

<sup>7</sup> The latest data shows that in January 2025, there were 143 million active social media accounts in Indonesia, equivalent to 50.2% of the total population. This level of activity is also reflected in the average of duration of social media use, which reached 3 hours and 8 minutes per day, exceeding the global average. See Simon Kemp, “Digital 2025: The State of Social Media in 2025,” DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 5, 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-sub-section-state-of-social>.

<sup>8</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2021); Clyde Anieldath Missier, “A Qualitative Study of Digital Religious Influence: Perspectives from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim Gen Y and Gen Z in Mumbai, India,” *Religions* 16, no. 1 (2025): 73; Saemah Shamim, “Social Media and the Reshaping of Religious Identity in Youth,” *International Journal of Academic Studies in Science and Education* 2, no. 1 (2024): 66–81.2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2021).

and rational-legal authority still relevant? Or do we need to construct new concepts to explain the emergence of algorithm-mediated authority and popularity?

Recent scholarship implies the need for such new concepts. For instance, Akmaliah explicitly introduces “Algorithmic Religious Authority” to highlight how digital metrics and popularity construct a new form of trust among Muslim audiences.<sup>9</sup> While this offers a crucial framework, focusing primarily on algorithmic metrics risks overlooking the complex negotiation between technology and tradition. Therefore, this article extends this discourse by proposing “Algorithmic Religious Authority”, not merely as authority derived from algorithms, but as a hybrid assemblage where three distinct dimensions (traditional knowledge, mediated charisma, and platform logic) intersect and reinforce one another.

To answer these questions, this article adopts a critical and theoretical review approach. This method was chosen to thoroughly examine the transformation of religious authority from traditional figures to digital influencers. Specifically, this review engages with three critical strands of scholarship, represented by key works including: foundational sociological theories of authority (e.g., Weber<sup>10</sup>); theories on the mediatization of religion and platform logic (e.g., Hjarvard<sup>11</sup>; van Dijck<sup>12</sup>); and (3) recent empirical studies on digital Islamic creatives and algorithmic authority in

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<sup>9</sup> Akmaliah, *Algorithmic Religious Authority*.

<sup>10</sup> M. Weber, G. Roth, and C. Wittich, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Economy and Society (University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Stig Hjarvard, “Mediatization and the Changing Authority of Religion,” *Media, Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (2016): 8–17.

<sup>12</sup> J. van Dijck, T. Poell, and M. de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Southeast Asia (e.g., Campbell<sup>13</sup>; Akmaliah<sup>14</sup>; Hew).<sup>15</sup> Unlike a systematic review, which aims to map the literature rigorously, this approach focuses on critical evaluation to identify theoretical gaps and build conceptual bridges between classical studies of religious authority and contemporary phenomena in the digital age.<sup>16</sup>

In line with this approach, the first objective of this article is to review the relevant literature strategically. This review will map two main currents of thought: first, fundamental sociological frameworks on religious authority, specifically Max Weber's typology of legitimacy, and second, more recent theories on digital religion that focus on networked fragmentation. The second objective is evaluative, namely, to critique the theoretical limitations of these existing frameworks.

This article argues that although these theories provide an important foundation, they are often not flexible enough to capture the dynamics of authority shaped by the logic of social media platforms, primarily because they presuppose authority as a human-centered interaction, thereby overlooking the role of algorithms as non-human agents that actively curate and restructure legitimacy. This critical analysis will highlight gaps in the literature, particularly its inability to explain how algorithmic popularity has become a new source of legitimacy. Building on this analysis, the third objective of this article is to offer a new conceptual framework. To address the identified theoretical gap, this article proposes the concept of "Platformized Religious Authority."

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<sup>13</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Wahyudi Akmaliah, "Algorithmic Religious Authority: Digital Islamic Preachers and Mainstreaming the Meaning of Jihad," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 14 (3), 2025: 430-453.

<sup>15</sup> Wai Weng Hew, "The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siau," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 61-79.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333-39.

## Religious Authority in Tradition

To understand how religious authority was constructed before the advent of the digital ecosystem, Max Weber's classical framework is the most influential theoretical reference. Weber identified three ideal types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority, which explain the social reasons why individuals obey a form of power.<sup>17</sup> This typology has long been used in religious studies to examine the sources of legitimacy of religious leaders, whether based on traditional heritage, personal appeal, or institutional structures.<sup>18</sup>

Traditional authority derives its legitimacy from historical continuity and the sanctity of tradition; for example, respected scholars and clerics do so through their scholarly lineage and inherited authority networks. In contrast, charismatic authority relies on the extraordinary qualities of a figure, such as piety, wisdom, or spiritual abilities, which inspire personal obedience, although this charisma must ultimately undergo routinization to survive.<sup>19</sup> Rational-legal authority relies on formal procedures, verified expertise, and institutional legitimacy, as seen in the structure of modern fatwa institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) or Darul Ifta in Egypt<sup>20</sup>, which issue decisions based on a standard methodological framework.

These three forms of authority do not operate separately but are intertwined in socio-religious practice. Weberian typology thus provides an important foundation for understanding the hierarchical

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<sup>17</sup> Weber, Roth, and Wittich, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Protestant Ethic Thesis in Analytical and Comparative Context," *Diogenes* 15, no. 59 (1967): 25–46; Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, "The Sociology of Economic Life, Third Edition," *The Sociology of Economic Life, Third Edition*, 1, 2018, 1–543. in 1901-02 (Vol. XX)

<sup>19</sup> Eisenstadt, "The Protestant Ethic Thesis in Analytical and Comparative Context."

<sup>20</sup> Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*; Jacob Skovgaard-Petersen, "Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār al-Iftā," in *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State* (Brill, 2021); N. Hosen, "Behind the Scenes: Fatwas of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (1975-1998)," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004).

structure and mechanisms of legitimacy of pre-digital religious authority.<sup>21</sup> This foundation is now under significant pressure with the advent of transnational platform logic and algorithms.

The authority framework described above, centered on religious scholars and institutions, aligns with classical discourse in religious studies. Historically, religious studies have identified three pillars as the main foundations of religious authority: religious institutions, the clergy, and doctrinal orthodoxy.<sup>22</sup> In this model, authority is understood as a hierarchical structure that is generated, maintained, and distributed from the top down. The truth and legitimacy of teachings flow through formal mechanisms controlled by religious institutions and elites, resulting in a relatively stable, centralized authority grounded in institutional control.

In line with this, the classical paradigm in religious studies strongly emphasizes institutional maintenance, namely how religious structures seek to maintain epistemic control through the authority of texts, traditions, and spiritual leadership.<sup>23</sup> This view forms the basis for many analyses of the role of religious leaders as guardians of orthodoxy. However, this approach has been challenged by ideas about epistemic authority that are more dialogical and contextual.<sup>24</sup> They highlight that in contemporary Muslim communities, especially in the diaspora, religious authority is no longer solely the result of structural domination. However, it is a process of negotiating knowledge and meaning in everyday practices, also referred to as vernacular uses of authority.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Turner, "Religious Authority and the New Media."

<sup>22</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (Sage Publications (CA), 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Stewart M. Hoover, *The Media and Religious Authority* (Penn State University Press, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Ali-Reza Bhojani and Morgan Clarke, "Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and its Vernacular Uses in the Shi'i Diaspora," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, no. 2 (2023): 272–95.

<sup>25</sup> Vernacular uses of authority refer to the ways in which individuals or lay communities interpret, negotiate, or produce religious authority through everyday practices, outside of formal institutional frameworks. This concept developed from the study of *vernacular religion* and has been adapted in the digital context to explain forms of

Thus, the classical discourse on religion provides an important foundation for understanding how the legitimacy and control of religious knowledge are constructed in hierarchical systems. However, in the modern context, especially in the digital age, this top-down structure of authority is increasingly open to contestation, reinterpretation, and decentralization of sources of legitimacy.

Although the classical Weberian and institutional framework provides an important foundation, its limitations in addressing the digital age are increasingly apparent.<sup>26</sup> The earliest criticism of this model arose from the observation that the internet erodes top-down forms of authority. The decentralized, networked nature of new media has opened space for the democratization of religious knowledge, a phenomenon provocatively described as an era in which anyone can act as a “mufti” in online chat rooms.<sup>27</sup> Such criticism marks a fundamental shift from institution-based authority to authority based on access and participation.<sup>28</sup>

However, as the digital landscape evolves from “networks” to algorithmically curated “platforms,” these initial criticisms now seem inadequate. The concept of networked religion is indeed helpful for explaining decentralization.<sup>29</sup> However, this concept is insufficient to explain the opposite phenomenon: the re-centralization of authority in the hands of religious influencers. Recent theoretical research shows that the digital ecosystem is not entirely fluid; instead, it gives rise to new structures of authority that operate through the logic of visibility and

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authority that emerge from everyday practices of media users. For an in-depth discussion of this concept, see Leonard Norman Primiano, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 37–56; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Hoover, *The Media and Religious Authority*.

<sup>27</sup> Turner, “Religious Authority and the New Media.”

<sup>28</sup> Campbell and Evolvi, “Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies.”

<sup>29</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, “Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds,” *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, January 1, 2012, 1–273; Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion*.

popularity.<sup>30</sup> In the Indonesian context, this dynamic is evident in the emergence of “a new generation of public preachers”<sup>31</sup> and “religious populism.”<sup>32</sup> These findings are further reinforced by recent studies mapping the rise of urban Salafism intertwined with pop culture<sup>33</sup> and the spread of specific ideologies through Salafi Instagram accounts.<sup>34</sup>

This is where the main theoretical gap lies, which this analysis attempts to fill. While recent scholarships have indeed begun to examine the influence of algorithms on authority,<sup>35</sup> the majority of the existing literature on digital religion continues to focus primarily on religious practices or communities on social media. The focus tends to be on how, for example, Indonesian youth learn about religion through social media<sup>36</sup> or how religious groups disseminate information about their ideas and activities through Twitter/X<sup>37</sup>, including specific communities such as Tablighi Jama’at using social media to negotiate their “virtual piety.”<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, literature that explicitly discusses the contestation

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<sup>30</sup> Cheong, “Authority”; José van Dijk, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Slama, *Indonesia and the Malay World Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia*.

<sup>32</sup> Dindin Solahudin and Moch Fakhruroji, “Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority,” *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 19.

<sup>33</sup> F. Aidulsyah, “The Rise of Urban Salafism in Indonesia: The Social-Media and Pop Culture of New Indonesian Islamic Youth,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 51, no. 4 (2023): 252–59.

<sup>34</sup> Mirza Nursyabani, “From Saudi to Social Media: Arabization of Islam Via Salafi Instagram Accounts in Indonesia,” *Afkaruna: Indonesian Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies* 20, no. 2 (2024): 337–56.

<sup>35</sup> Akmaliah, *Algorithmic Religious Authority*.

<sup>36</sup> Badrul Munir Chair, Wawaysadhya, and Tri Utami Oktafiani, “Cyber-Religion and the Issue of Religious Authority: How Indonesian Youth Learn Religion through Social Media?” *Al’Adalah* 27, no. 1 (2024): 1–12.

<sup>37</sup> Achmad Sulfikar, Peter Kerkhof, and Martin Tanis, “Tweeting for Religion: How Indonesian Islamic Fundamentalist Organizations Use Twitter,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 22, no. 1 (2023): 1–16.

<sup>38</sup> Wahyu Kuncoro, “Ambivalence, Virtual Piety, and Rebranding: Social Media Uses among Tablighi Jama’at in Indonesia,” *CyberOrient* 15, no. 1 (2021): 206–30.

of moderate authority<sup>39</sup> or analyzes traditional authority<sup>40</sup> highlights the dynamics of this contestation. However, even these critical studies have not yet moved to offer an integrated theoretical framework that explains the new source of legitimacy itself, namely, platform logic, which includes algorithms, engagement metrics, and the economy of visibility, as pillars of authority that are equivalent to knowledge (tradition) and charisma.

## Digital Religion and Networked Authority

The limitations of classical theoretical frameworks, including early critiques, in explaining the emergence of platform-based authority underscore the need to adopt a more up-to-date perspective. The study of digital religion, which has grown rapidly since the 2010s<sup>41</sup>, offers a more appropriate analytical lens for understanding how religious practices are transforming through the mediation of digital technology. Rather than viewing media solely as a channel of communication, theorists in this field assert that digital media actively reshape the social and epistemic structures of religion, including how religious authority is constructed, negotiated, and exercised.<sup>42</sup>

The digital religion approach views the interaction between religion and technology not as an external relationship, but as a process of co-production, in which religious practices and digital infrastructure shape each other. In this context, authority no longer operates through vertical

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<sup>39</sup> Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–24.

<sup>40</sup> Yahya Fathur Rozy, “The Influence of Traditional Religious Authority on Digital Preachers: Case Studies of Ustadz Hanan Attaki and Ustadz Adi Hidayat,” *Afkaruna: Indonesian Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies* 20, no. 2 (2024): 319–36.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, “Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds”; Campbell and Evolvi, “Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies.”

<sup>42</sup> Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion*; Giulia Evolvi, “Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (Hyper)Mediated Spaces, and Materiality,” *Zeitschrift Für Religion, Gesellschaft Und Politik* 6, no. 1 (2022): 9–25.

mechanisms, from institutions to the faithful, but through horizontal relationships mediated by algorithms, platforms, and online social networks.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the digital space functions not merely as a new medium but as an epistemic arena in which religious authority and legitimacy are reproduced through participation, affectivity, and visibility.<sup>44</sup>

This transformation can be understood as part of a process called the mediatization of religion<sup>45</sup>, in which the media not only disseminates religious messages but also regulates the internal logic of religious practice itself. This idea is then expanded by showing that digitization makes authority flexible and situational<sup>46</sup>: believers can now choose when, why, and to whom they submit to religion, depending on the figure's affective resonance and digital presence. In this sense, authority is no longer fixed or top-down, but is performatively produced through repeated interactions and social recognition in the digital space.

Furthermore, recent research shows that the relationship between the media and religious authorities is not linear. Digital media does not simply erode traditional authority but also creates hybrid forms in which clerics and classical institutions use the logic of media visibility to maintain their legitimacy.<sup>47</sup> This phenomenon reinforces the argument that religious authority in the digital age must be understood within the framework of hybridization between tradition and technology, rather than antagonism between the two.

Within this framework, new forms of authority have also emerged that operate according to platform logic, in which epistemic legitimacy is

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<sup>43</sup> Zaid et al., "Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices."

<sup>44</sup> Mónica Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1103; Míriam Díez Bosch and Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, "Authority, Religion, and Media," in *The Handbook on Religion and Communication* (Wiley, 2023), 469–85.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion*.

<sup>46</sup> Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority."

<sup>47</sup> Bosch and Gauxachs, "Authority, Religion, and Media."

determined by metrics such as followers, views, and engagement rates.<sup>48</sup> Digitalization has produced community dynamics that not only expand the reach of religiosity but also transform the power relations between leaders and congregations through the personalization and interactivity of messages.<sup>49</sup> Thus, digital religion paves the way for a more decentralized analysis of authority while, at the same time, highlighting the emergence of new centers of power shaped by the logic of algorithms and the attention economy.<sup>50</sup>

This entire discourse shows that religious authority in the digital age is no longer a stable entity, but a process constantly negotiated at the intersection of tradition, technology, and affect. Thus, studies on digital religion confirm that digital media not only mediate but also reconstruct religious legitimacy through the logic of participation, visibility, and algorithms.

### **The Rise of Religious Influencers**

In various countries, the emergence of religious influencers marks a profound transformation in the structure of religious authority. In this study, the term “religious influencer” is used as an inclusive category encompassing both new religious intermediaries (lifestyle bloggers, micro-celebrities) and traditional figures (*ustaz*, *keiai*) who have successfully adapted their authority to the logic of social media. While traditional

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<sup>48</sup> Berger and Golan, “Online Religious Learning.”

<sup>49</sup> Constantin Grigore and Alexandra Cobzeanu, “The Impact of Digitalization on Religious Practices and Community Dynamics Following the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review,” *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala* 17, no. 2 (2025): 302–43.

<sup>50</sup> The concept of *the attention economy* stems from the premise that amid the abundance of digital information, human attention has become a scarce and limited source. In the platform ecosystem, this attention is contested, quantified (through *views* or *likes*), and commodified into economic value. Platform algorithms are specifically designed to harvest this attention by prioritizing content that most triggers emotional engagement. For an in-depth discussion of these dynamics, see James G. Webster, *The Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age* (The MIT Press, 2014); Dijck, Poell, and Waal, *The Platform Society*.

clerics, priests, or rabbis derive their legitimacy from institutional authority or theological formation, digital influencers gain credibility through affective resonance and audience participation. Global studies show that digital authority operates through audience-driven authority, a model in which authority emerges when a figure's content receives widespread attention and is considered relevant within the online community.<sup>51</sup>

This phenomenon is seen in various religious communities. In the United States, Christian influencers build authority not solely through church affiliation but through subcultural narratives and personal storytelling that invite emotional closeness from followers.<sup>52</sup> In Muslim diaspora communities in Europe, actors such as “British Muslim lifestyle influencers” combine Islam, fashion, and everyday life to produce a form of authority that is aesthetic and aspirational, distinct from the hierarchical structure of traditional clerics.<sup>53</sup> Hindu influencers in India exhibit a similar pattern: their authority rests on their ability to present spiritual narratives that are easy to practice in everyday life, rather than on formal ritual authority.<sup>54</sup> The key mechanism is engagement, not just textual expertise. When audience responses (likes, comments, reposts) become a source of legitimacy, authority transforms into a collective process negotiated between the figure and their community. Thus, digital authority is relational, affective, and iterative, renewed each time a piece of content successfully creates social resonance. While global literature often frames these influencers as distinct from traditional cleric, in the Indonesian context discussed later, this boundary is more blurred, as

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<sup>51</sup> Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion*; Cheong, “Authority”; Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*, in *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (2018), 288.

<sup>52</sup> Zachary Sheldon, *Christian Influence: The Subcultural Narratives of Evangelical Celebrities on Instagram* (London: Routledge, 2024).

<sup>53</sup> R. Lewis, *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>54</sup> Missier, “A Qualitative Study of Digital Religious Influence.”

traditional kiai and *ustaz* increasingly adopt these influencer mechanics.

In Indonesia, audience-driven legitimacy has developed more rapidly due to the massive digital ecosystem and high levels of public religiosity. Indonesian religious influencers, whether from Islamic boarding schools or not, derive their legitimacy from their ability to read the spiritual aspirations of young urban audiences. These young preachers fill the emotional and identity needs that conventional authorities do not.<sup>55</sup> This shift is reflected in the phenomenon of “*ustaz* viral,” in which religious status can be attained instantly through short visual content that reaches thousands of users.<sup>56</sup> *Tafsir* courses or fiqh studies, which used to require formal authority, now compete with one-minute videos containing inspirational quotes. This is confirmed by a study that found that Indonesia’s younger generation views religious credibility as a combination of relevance, emotional closeness, and digital presence.<sup>57</sup>

In this context, legitimacy is no longer centered on institutions, but instead on audiences who act as “authentic communities,” affirming, correcting, or even revoking the authority of a figure through collective mechanisms. In other words, the Indonesian digital public now has the capacity to produce its own religious scholars.

The emergence of religious influencers has not only changed the source of authority but also the way that authority is displayed and performed. Global studies show that these actors build legitimacy through performative piety, which is produced through visual aesthetics, autobiographical narratives, and digitally exchangeable identity packaging.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Slama, *Indonesia and the Malay World Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia*.

<sup>56</sup> Febrian, “Visualizing Authority.”

<sup>57</sup> Chair, Wawaysadhya, and Oktafiani, “Cyber-Religion and the Issue of Religious Authority.”

<sup>58</sup> Farah Hasan, “Muslim Instagram: Eternal Youthfulness and Cultivating Deen,” *Religions* 2022, 13, no. 7 (2022): 658; Marcus Moberg et al., “From Socialization to Self-Socialization? Exploring the Role of Digital Media in the Religious Lives of Young Adults in Ghana, Turkey, and Peru,” no. 2 (2019): 240–61; Zaid et al., “Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious

Aesthetics has become a new form of theology: from Christian minimalist devotion aesthetics on Instagram to Qur'an journaling influencers who build global communities through colorful note-taking aesthetics. One study shows that Islamic content on YouTube Malaysia relies on persuasion aesthetics, visual and emotional techniques designed not only to inform but to build interpersonal closeness.<sup>59</sup> At this point, authority no longer comes exclusively from knowledge but from the ability to combine style, image, and affect, a new form of aesthetic authority in religious history.

In Indonesia, performativity and identity branding are central components in the production of digital authority. Studies of *hijab*-wearing communities show how a combination of fashion aesthetics, modern lifestyles, and Islamic narratives has succeeded in constructing what is known as “fashionable religion.”<sup>60</sup> *Hijrah* influencers also adopt a similar approach; they combine preaching, personal transformation, and visual aesthetics to create an image of piety that is both aspirational and relatable to urban audiences.

Other studies show that “virtual piety” is produced through specific visual patterns, ranging from color tone and dress style to voice intonation, which shape perceptions of authenticity.<sup>61</sup> Influencers such as Attaqi or female TikTok preachers utilize gestures, facial expressions, and emotional storytelling to present piety as an everyday experience. Thus, aesthetics, personal style, and performativity are not external elements, but standards of validity that determine whether someone is considered trustworthy.

Although many theories view the digital era as one of decentralization, recent studies show that digital platforms actually create Authority and Islamic Practices.”

<sup>59</sup> Hew, “The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siauw.”

<sup>60</sup> Emma Baulch and Alila Pramiyanti, “Hijabers on Instagram: Using Visual Social Media to Construct the Ideal Muslim Woman,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 4 (2018).

<sup>61</sup> Kuncoro, “Ambivalence, Virtual Piety, and Rebranding.”

a re-centralization of authority. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are not neutral: their algorithms determine which figures “rise” and which disappear. This creates a new authority structure called platformized authority, formed by technological and economic calculations rather than by communities or religious institutions.<sup>62</sup>

One study shows that algorithms promote religious content that is easy to understand, emotional, and quickly goes viral.<sup>63</sup> Not all forms of piety have the same opportunity to be seen: those most compatible with platform logic become dominant.

The attention economy adds another layer. Successful religious influencers are not only knowledgeable but also able to maintain a posting rhythm, optimize visual performance, and compete in crowded attention markets. In other words, platforms not only mediate but also reproduce forms of authority.

In Indonesia, this algorithmic logic plays a significant role in determining which figures become “popular authorities.” The phenomenon of viral ustaz is the result of algorithmic configurations that prioritize short, emotional, and relatable content. One study describes how certain Salafi accounts use pop aesthetics and micro-targeting strategies to increase visibility, thereby re-centralizing authority within a seemingly decentralized digital circle.<sup>64</sup>

In many cases, the attention economy creates new incentives that transform the relationship between leaders and followers. This phenomenon is referred to as a “personalized affective community”<sup>65</sup>: followers not only follow teachings, but also follow figures, complete with their daily lives. In Indonesia, this is seen in how followers are not just listeners but become the influencer’s “moral guardians,” correcting,

<sup>62</sup> Dijck, Poell, and Waal, *The Platform Society*.

<sup>63</sup> Berger and Golan, “Online Religious Learning”; Andok, “The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority.”

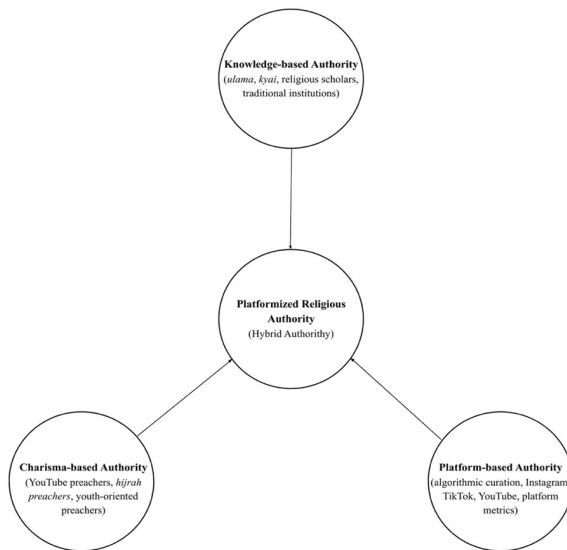
<sup>64</sup> Nursyabani, “From Saudi to Social Media.”

<sup>65</sup> Grigore and Cobzeanu, “The Impact of Digitalization on Religious Practices and Community Dynamics Following the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

defending, or viralizing certain content. Thus, rather than producing fragmentation, digital platforms are forming a new pyramid of authority centered on influencers most compatible with the logic of algorithms.

### **Platformized Religious Authority: A Conceptual Foundation**

Analysis of classical literature, digital religion theory, and empirical studies on influencers reveals a conceptual gap in understanding how religious authority operates within the platform ecosystem. The Weberian framework is important as a foundation, but it does not account for algorithmic logic. Meanwhile, digital religion theory highlights fragmentation and contestation, yet offers no integrated model to explain new sources of legitimacy. Therefore, this article proposes a “Platformized Religious Authority” framework that views religious authority as the outcome of hybrid negotiations among three dimensions: knowledge, charisma, and platform (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Platformized Religious Authority**

### *Knowledge-based Authority*

In the global context, knowledge-based authority remains an important foundation of religious authority, even when religious practices have been digitized. Recent literature shows that although the digital ecosystem encourages fragmentation and diversification of sources of authority, scholarly depth and theological competence still have significant legitimacy. Studies show that text-based authority and religious expertise remain the primary sources of reference in online religious communities, especially when ethical or doctrinal issues are debated.<sup>66</sup>

This framework is reinforced by findings emphasizing that epistemic authority remains an irreplaceable pillar, especially in “serious religious inquiry,” where users seek answers that require formal theological references.<sup>67</sup> Even in the context of global Islam, online *fatwa* seekers still distinguish between “informal religious voices” and “qualified scholars,” indicating that knowledge-based authority continues to function as an anchor authority, a pillar of epistemic stability, amid the diversification of authority sources triggered by social media.<sup>68</sup> Thus, even though the digital ecosystem opens up new spaces for competition, global religious legitimacy remains heavily influenced by scholarly depth.

In the Indonesian context, knowledge-based authority exhibits even more complex dynamics because its authority is grounded in a strong Islamic scholarly tradition, including Islamic boarding schools, intellectual “*sanad*,” and fatwa institutions. Various studies show that scholarly authority has not disappeared in the digital space but is instead being renegotiated through interactions between traditional scholars and popular figures.

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<sup>66</sup> Berger and Golan, “Online Religious Learning.”

<sup>67</sup> Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion*.

<sup>68</sup> Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Shaheen Amid Whyte, “Islamic Religious Authority in Cyberspace: A Qualitative Study of Muslim Religious Actors in Australia,” *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): 69.

Recent research shows that popular figures on social media, including influencers with millions of followers, continue to seek legitimacy from senior scholars to bolster their credibility.<sup>69</sup> A similar pattern can be seen in digital da'wah communities, which still refer to scholarly authority when determining the boundaries of orthodoxy in their daily practices.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, studies on urban Salafism show how these groups assert their legitimacy through text-based authority and references to Middle Eastern scholars, even though they are disseminated through social media aesthetics.<sup>71</sup> These findings confirm that, in Indonesia's increasingly commodified digital ecosystem, scholarly competence continues to serve as an important parameter that distinguishes scholarly preachers from popular preachers while maintaining epistemic stability within the national religious authority structure.

### *Charisma-based Authority*

Globally, the dimension of charisma has undergone the most dramatic transformation in the digital ecosystem. While in the Weberian framework charisma is understood as an extraordinary quality attached to a particular figure, recent research shows that digital charisma is performed, mediated, and jointly constructed in interactions between figures, audiences, and algorithms.<sup>72</sup> Studies of Christian livestream pastors, Muslim lifestyle creators, and rabbinic TikTok educators show that digital charisma does not exist as a stable personal quality, but as the result of aesthetic communication practices, voice intonation, body gestures, eye contact with the camera, intimate storytelling that evoke a sense of perceived proximity.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Rozy, "The Influence of Traditional Religious Authority on Digital Preachers."

<sup>70</sup> Solahudin and Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority."

<sup>71</sup> Aidulsyah, "The Rise of Urban Salafism in Indonesia."

<sup>72</sup> Hjarvard, "Mediatization and the Changing Authority of Religion"; Cheong, "Authority."

<sup>73</sup> Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion*; Sheldon, *Christian Influence*.

In fact, “charisma” can now be produced without a strong spiritual or theological basis; research on anonymous religious influencers shows that figures without a clear identity can build charismatic authority solely through the visual aesthetic consistency and emotional resonance of their content.<sup>74</sup> Thus, charisma is no longer an innate trait but the result of algorithmic amplification, as platforms prioritize emotional content, engagement, and ease of sharing.<sup>75</sup> This indicates that in a global context, digital charisma is a hybrid of human performativity and technological calculation.

Religious charisma in Indonesia exhibits unique dynamics, stemming from two traditions: Sufi-ulama charisma and populist charisma rooted in digital culture. Research shows that young preachers gain legitimacy through the emotional closeness they build with their audience, not through scientific excellence.<sup>76</sup> The digital charisma of figures such as Hanan Attaki, Felix Siauw, and Habib Ja’far combines elements of spirituality, humor, personal storytelling, and platform-friendly visual aesthetics. Recent findings reinforce this by showing that the authority of religious influencers in Indonesia increasingly relies on visual performativity, namely the ability to present a religious identity that is aesthetic and easily consumed by Instagram algorithms.<sup>77</sup>

Recent research also shows that the charisma of these figures is hybrid. On the one hand, they quote prominent scholars to maintain their connection with traditional authority. However, on the other hand, their charisma is mainly shaped by their style of speech, gestures, and emotional

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<sup>74</sup> Avi Astor, Ghufuran Khir-Allah, and Rosa Martínez-Cuadros, “Anonymity and Digital Islamic Authority,” *Religions* 15, no. 12 (2024): 1507.

<sup>75</sup> Dijck, Poell, and Waal, *The Platform Society*.

<sup>76</sup> Slama, *Indonesia and the Malay World Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia*; Eva F. Nisa, “Creative and Lucrative Dawa: The Visual Culture of Instagram amongst Female Muslim Youth in Indonesia,” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5, no. 1–2 (2018): 68–89.

<sup>77</sup> Febrian, “Visualizing Authority.”

atmosphere, which are very much in tune with the rhythm of social media.<sup>78</sup>

Findings on urban Salafism confirm that digital charisma also functions as an ideological recruitment mechanism: theological messages are packaged in modern aesthetics and popular language, resulting in figures who are both religious and aspirational.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, studies on virtual piety show that images of piety can be produced through color tones, camera angles, and fashion aesthetics, proving that charisma no longer stems from “special” spiritual qualities, but from the skill of managing performance and visibility in an algorithmic ecosystem.<sup>80</sup> Thus, digital charisma in Indonesia not only marks a shift in authority from text to affection but also shows how the Indonesian public now plays a role as co-producers of charisma through comments, likes, and virality.

### *Platform-based Authority*

Platform-based authority has emerged as the newest and most decisive form of religious legitimacy in the digital ecosystem. Unlike knowledge-based authority rooted in religious epistemology, or charismatic authority dependent on individual personas, platform-based authority is determined by algorithmic calculations, technological visibility, and the attention economy that regulates who appears, when, and in what context. This phenomenon is referred to as platformized authority, the authority produced by platforms’ technical logic through rankings, recommendations, trending lists, and engagement metrics.

Research shows that in online religious learning spaces, the figures most frequently recommended by YouTube algorithms are not always the most theologically competent, but rather those most compatible with the aesthetics and rhythm of the platform, namely, content that is short,

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<sup>78</sup> Rozy, “The Influence of Traditional Religious Authority on Digital Preachers.” plainCitation”.” Rozy, “The Influence of Traditional Religious Authority on Digital Preachers.”

<sup>79</sup> Aidulsyah, “The Rise of Urban Salafism in Indonesia.”

<sup>80</sup> Kuncoro, “Ambivalence, Virtual Piety, and Rebranding.”

emotional, and highly captivating.<sup>81</sup> This finding is supported by research on Indonesian Islamic groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, which shows that religious actors actively adjusted their communication styles, video durations, and narrative framing to better align with YouTube's recommendation logic as a strategy to maintain their digital visibility.<sup>82</sup>

Other studies confirm that digital platforms structurally encourage forms of religiosity that are “algorithmically legible,” that is, messages and visuals that can be read and prioritized by these technical systems, and therefore, the types of religious authority that survive are those most compatible with these technical mechanisms.<sup>83</sup> Within this framework, legitimacy is no longer solely social or spiritual, but also technological, with platforms acting as “epistemic actors” that determine who is deemed trustworthy in the digital public sphere.

In Indonesia, platform-based authority operates with even greater intensity due to the high penetration of social media and a highly visual and affective religious culture. Studies of Indonesian Salafi accounts show that Instagram and TikTok algorithms actively reinforce specific figures through pop aesthetics, consistent posting, and their ability to leverage the digital consumption patterns of urban youth.<sup>84</sup> These findings resonate with research showing that Indonesia's younger generation assesses the quality of religious content not only by its theological substance but also by discoverability, i.e., whether the content appears easily on their homepages.<sup>85</sup> Thus, platforms function as “authority curation engines” that determine the visibility of da'is, ustaz, and influencers.

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<sup>81</sup> Dijck, Poell, and Waal, *The Platform Society*; Berger and Golan, “Online Religious Learning.”

<sup>82</sup> Achmad Sulfikar, Martin Tanis, and Peter Kerkhof, “YouTube and Religion during COVID-19: Analyzing Indonesian Islamic Groups' Narratives,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, ahead of print, September 30, 2025.

<sup>83</sup> Hjarvard, “Mediatization and the Changing Authority of Religion”; Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*.

<sup>84</sup> Nursyabani, “From Saudi to Social Media.”

<sup>85</sup> Chair, Wawasyadhya, and Oktafiani, “Cyber-Religion and the Issue of Religious Authority.”

The phenomenon of “*ustaz* viral,” which often appears in Indonesia, is an extreme illustration of this mechanism: one emotional or funny video clip can propel an anonymous figure into becoming a national religious reference in a matter of hours.<sup>86</sup> This phenomenon reinforces a pattern in which Instagram’s algorithm actively promotes religious figures with a consistent visual aesthetic aligned with the platform’s visibility logic, so that their authority is often determined more by algorithmic readability than by scholarly depth. Meanwhile, other recent research explains that this algorithmic structure creates a new form of religious community, personalized affective communities, where the leader-congregation relationship is mediated not by institutions, but by the rhythm of posts, algorithmic compatibility, and intensity of engagement.<sup>87</sup> Overall, the Indonesian context shows that religious authority is now not only decentralized but also standardized by platforms, creating a new hierarchy determined by technical logic rather than formal scholarly or spiritual authority.

### **Three-Dimensional Synthesis of Authority in the Platform Era**

The three dimensions, knowledge-based authority, charisma-based authority, and platform-based authority, do not function as separate categories, but rather as layers of legitimacy that intersect, interact, and negotiate their respective positions within a highly dynamic digital ecosystem. Conceptually, religious authority in the digital age is not the result of a single source, but a hybrid product formed through a process of assemblage between epistemic traditions, personal performativity, and technological calculations. The dimension of knowledge provides a stable structure that serves as a theological and epistemic reference; the dimension of charisma provides affective appeal and personal persuasive capacity; while the dimension of platform regulates the material,

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<sup>86</sup> Febrian, “Visualizing Authority.”

<sup>87</sup> Grigore and Cobzeanu, “The Impact of Digitalization on Religious Practices and Community Dynamics Following the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

algorithmic, and economic conditions that determine a figure's visibility and reach. The three cannot be separated if we want to understand how religious authority is actually produced and maintained in the digital space. Figure 1 illustrates how the three dimensions interact not hierarchically but relationally, with each dimension shaping and being shaped by the others within platform-mediated environments.

In practice, these three dimensions work simultaneously and complement each other. Religious figures who possess knowledge and authority must now demonstrate digital charisma to remain relevant amid the dense flow of information. Conversely, charisma-based influencers need affiliations, explicit or implicit, with traditional sources of knowledge to avoid being seen as shallow or invalid. At the same time, platform logic acts as a "selection mechanism" that determines which forms of authority will be reinforced or removed from public attention. Thus, the authority that emerges in the digital space results from an interdependent relationship among structure (knowledge), agency (personal charisma), and technological infrastructure (platforms). This synthesis shows that contemporary religious authority must be understood not as an entity but as a process, a continuous production at the intersection of tradition, performativity, and algorithms.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that contemporary religious authority is undergoing a profound restructuring that cannot be fully explained by classical sociological models nor by early theoretical approaches to digital religion. Rather than disappearing, authority is being redistributed, hybridized, and, paradoxically, re-centralized through the logic of digital platforms. By tracing developments across three analytical domains, traditional authority rooted in textual knowledge, the dynamics of digital religion, and empirical transformations observable among religious influencers, this article advances the conceptual

framework of “Platformized Religious Authority.”

This model contends that legitimacy in the digital age is not derived from a single source but emerges through the interplay of three mutually constitutive dimensions: knowledge-based authority, which remains anchored in the epistemic capital of religious scholarship; charisma-based authority, which is performed and negotiated through affective and aesthetic practices; and platform-based authority, which is produced and sustained through algorithmic visibility, metrics of popularity, and the economics of attention. Together, these dimensions reconfigure how religious credibility is produced, circulated, and contested across digital ecosystems.

Thus, this article underscores that platforms are not neutral intermediaries. They operate as epistemic infrastructures that shape the contours of religious legitimacy by amplifying certain forms of speech, disciplining content through algorithmic logics, and encouraging affective, short-form, and monetizable modes of piety. The implications of these divergent authorities extend beyond theoretical debates. For Muslim communities, the shift toward platformized authority risks deepening social fragmentation, as the ummah is increasingly segmented into “algorithmic enclaves” bound by shared content consumption rather than theological consensus.

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