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CELEBRITY PREACHERS AND INSTANT RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS OF DA'WAH IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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Abstract

The rise of celebrity preachers on Indonesian social media has produced a new and increasingly dominant form of religious authority built on visibility rather than scholarly method. This article argues that this shift constitutes an epistemological crisis in da'wah, in which audience engagement gradually displaces demonstrated command of Islamic textual methods as the operative criterion of religious credibility. Drawing on recent scholarship concerning celebrification, algorithmic curation, fragmentation of authority, and the commercialization of digital da'wah, the article identifies a recurring pattern of instant religious authority characterized by rapid platform ascent, aesthetic self-construction, commercial integration, and fragmented audience loyalty. The analysis further evaluates the argument that social media democratizes religious knowledge, concluding that digital platforms expand religious speech without a corresponding expansion in the community's capacity to verify that speech, producing a decoupling of access from epistemic accountability. The article closes by discussing implications for religious literacy education, the strategic position of established Islamic organizations, and the design

responsibilities of digital platforms in shaping how religious truth claims circulate.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Indonesian Islamic public life over the past decade cannot be separated from the rise of social media as the dominant space for religious learning and religious performance. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have produced a new category of religious actor commonly labeled the celebrity preacher, an individual whose visibility, follower count, and content production skill often exceed his or her formal training in classical Islamic scholarship. This phenomenon raises a question that goes beyond communication studies and enters the domain of epistemology, namely how religious truth claims are validated when the primary currency of authority becomes engagement metrics rather than demonstrated mastery of the Islamic textual tradition.

Historically, religious authority in the Indonesian Muslim community was constructed through a recognizable chain of transmission. A person became an ustaz or a kiai through years of study in a pesantren, through an ijazah from a recognized teacher, or through formal affiliation with an established organization, such as Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah. This structure functioned as an epistemic gatekeeper. It slowed down the circulation of religious opinion, filtered interpretive claims through communal scrutiny, and tied the legitimacy of a fatwa to the credibility of its issuer. Social media disrupts this structure by allowing anyone with a smartphone and a compelling delivery style to reach audiences larger than those of many traditionally trained scholars. As Solahudin and Fakhruroji observed in their study of Islamic learning practices in Indonesia, new actors have emerged online who depend less on institutional pedigree and more on algorithmic visibility to build a following (as cited in Raya, 2024).

This shift matters because it changes not only who speaks for Islam but also how religious content is shaped. Short-form video formats reward brevity,

emotional intensity, and quotability, none of which are natural companions to the deliberative, source-heavy style of classical Islamic reasoning. A fatwa that once required reference to Qur'anic verses, hadith, the opinions of earlier jurists, and the specific circumstances of the questioner can now be compressed into a fifteen-second clip designed to be shared rather than studied. The concern this article raises is that this compression is not neutral. It changes the epistemic standard by which religious claims are judged credible, replacing a standard rooted in scholarly methods with one rooted in performative resonance.

The Indonesian case is particularly instructive because it combines an extremely high rate of social media adoption with a Muslim population accustomed to diverse and historically layered sources of religious authority, from pesantren networks to Sufi orders to modernist reform organizations. Lyansari (2022) has shown how new religious authority, including among women, is increasingly built through processes of celebrification and branding rather than through the traditional routes of scholarly certification. Hannan & Mursyidi (2023) describe a parallel process of fragmentation, in which social media enables the proliferation of competing religious voices that no longer answer to a shared institutional center. Febrian (2024) adds a visual dimension to this argument, demonstrating that image-based platforms such as Instagram allow relatively unknown preachers to construct authority primarily through aesthetic self-presentation rather than through demonstrated scholarly credentials.

This article argues that the celebrity preacher phenomenon represents an epistemological crisis in Indonesian da'wah, not merely a sociological curiosity or a matter of changing taste in religious style. The crisis lies in the gradual substitution of scholarly verification with popularity as the operative criterion of religious truth. The article proceeds in four further sections. The literature review traces existing scholarship on digital religious authority, religious commodification, and the platform logics that shape da'wah content. The methodology section explains the

qualitative, literature-based approach used to construct the analysis. The results and discussion section develops the central argument in three parts, namely the mechanism of epistemic displacement, the case pattern observable in the Indonesian preacher landscape, and the counterargument that digital da'wah represents a form of religious democratization, which this article evaluates critically rather than accepts at face value. The conclusion summarizes the argument and identifies its implications for religious literacy and platform governance in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Institutional Authority to Networked Authority

Scholarship on religious authority in the digital age generally agrees that the internet has altered who can speak credibly about Islam and how that credibility is established. Naamy (2023) documents how da'wah delivered through TikTok accounts operates through a management style closer to media production than to traditional pedagogy, noting that religious authority in this space is no longer the exclusive property of traditionally trained da'i who built their base within pesantren institutions. Instead, new figures emerge whose command of platform aesthetics, content pacing, and audience interaction substitutes for institutional pedigree.

This finding is consistent with Mustafa's (2023) discussion of the thirst for Islamic knowledge in the digital era, which observes that audiences increasingly seek religious content that is immediately accessible and emotionally engaging, a preference that favors preachers skilled in performance over those skilled in textual analysis. The result is a bifurcation between two forms of credibility. The first is scholarly credibility, built through years of study and recognized by peer scholars. The second is what can be called platform credibility, built through follower counts, view counts, and the algorithmic amplification that high engagement produces. Ni'am (2023) frames this bifurcation explicitly as a tension between kesalehan, meaning demonstrated piety and scholarly seriousness, and komodifikasi, meaning the commercial packaging of religious content for market consumption. His analysis

suggests that these two forms of credibility are not simply parallel but actively compete, with commodified content frequently outcompeting scholarly content for audience attention precisely because it is easier to consume.

Celebrification and the Aesthetics of Authority

Lyansari's (2022) study of female religious authority in Indonesia introduces the concept of celebrification to describe the process by which religious actors adopt branding strategies borrowed from entertainment and marketing industries. This includes curated visual identity, personal narrative arcs shared with audiences, and collaboration with commercial sponsors. Celebrification does not necessarily eliminate scholarly substance, but it reorders priorities, since visibility becomes a precondition for influence rather than a byproduct of it. Febrian (2024) extends this argument through the concept of visual authority, showing that Instagram in particular allows preachers to construct legitimacy through carefully composed imagery, aesthetic consistency, and lifestyle presentation, strategies that operate independently of textual argumentation. Febrian's analysis is significant because it demonstrates that authority construction on social media follows a logic borrowed from influencer culture more broadly rather than a logic specific to religious scholarship.

Sorgenfrei's (2021) comparative study of Salafi missionaries as social media influencers situates the Indonesian pattern within a broader global trend. Sorgenfrei argues that religious movements across different traditions have adapted influencer branding techniques, including personal testimony, direct audience address, and calls to action modeled on commercial marketing, to expand their reach. This comparative perspective suggests that the epistemic pressures described in the Indonesian context are not unique to Indonesia but are a structural feature of how religious communication adapts to platform economies generally.

Fragmentation, Populism, and the Loss of a Common Reference

Hannan & Mursyidi (2023) describe the consequence of these dynamics as

fragmentation, meaning the breakdown of a single, broadly recognized center of religious authority into multiple competing centers, each commanding loyalty from a distinct audience segment built around a particular preacher's platform presence. Fragmentation of this kind has consequences beyond diversity of opinion, which Islamic scholarship has always accommodated through the tradition of ikhtilaf, or legitimate disagreement among qualified scholars. The difference in the digital case is that disagreement no longer occurs primarily among qualified scholars applying a shared method but among audiences aligned with different platform personalities, many of whom lack the training to evaluate the underlying method at all. Dani & Humaidi (2026) describe the phenomenon as a shift toward what they term a digital stage for religion, in which the criteria audiences use to judge a preacher's credibility increasingly resemble the criteria used to judge celebrities in popular culture, including charisma, relatability, and production quality, rather than criteria specific to religious scholarship.

Fakhruroji's (2025) study of Indonesian digital natives during the Covid-19 pandemic adds a temporal dimension to this literature, showing that the pandemic accelerated reliance on digital religious content precisely at a moment when in-person verification of a preacher's credentials through pesantren networks or community reputation became difficult. This acceleration entrenched habits of digital religious consumption that have persisted after the pandemic, normalizing a preference for accessible digital content over institutionally verified sources.

Algorithmic Curation as an Epistemic Filter

A separate but related strand of literature addresses the role of platform algorithms themselves in shaping which religious content becomes visible. Shin & Shin (2024) demonstrate in a general communication context that algorithmic amplification tends to favor content that generates strong emotional reactions and rapid engagement, a pattern that applies regardless of the content's subject matter. Applied to religious content, the finding means that a short clip presenting a confident, simplified religious claim is more likely to be amplified than a longer

explanation that acknowledges scholarly disagreement or contextual nuance. Wahid's (2024) bibliometric analysis of the intersection between Islam and digital technology confirms that scholarly attention to this dynamic has grown substantially in recent years, reflecting a recognition within the field that platform architecture is not a neutral conduit for religious knowledge but an active filter that privileges certain epistemic styles over others.

Personal Branding and the Commercialization of Da'wah

Nawaf (2025) examines how da'i negotiate religious authority through personal branding and direct audience interaction, arguing that engagement itself becomes a form of authority negotiation, since preachers adjust their content and self-presentation in response to audience feedback loops built into platform design. This dynamic introduces a market logic into religious authority construction, where what audiences want to hear begins to shape what preachers choose to say, reversing the traditional relationship in which a scholar's authority derived from fidelity to an established method rather than from audience preference.

Synthesis

Taken together, this body of literature supports three interconnected claims that this article develops further in the discussion section. First, digital platforms have introduced a parallel and increasingly dominant criterion of religious authority based on visibility rather than scholarly method. Second, platform architecture actively produces this criterion through algorithmic amplification and the aesthetic and commercial incentives of influencer culture. Third, the consequence is a fragmentation of religious authority in which epistemic verification, historically performed by scholarly communities, is increasingly outsourced to audience engagement metrics that are poorly suited to that function.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive literature-based approach,

drawing on a critical synthesis of recent scholarship on digital religious authority, religious commodification, and platform-mediated da'wah in Indonesia. The approach is consistent with methodological patterns used in comparable studies of digital religion, several of which similarly rely on qualitative synthesis and discourse-oriented analysis of preacher content and audience response rather than large-scale quantitative measurement (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Naamy, 2023).

The literature selection prioritized peer-reviewed sources published between 2021 and 2026, drawn from journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, or the Indonesian Sinta accreditation system at rank four or higher, to ensure both currency and methodological rigor. Sources were identified through targeted searches combining terms such as celebrity preacher, ustaz selebriti, religious authority, da'wah digital, and religious commodification, followed by a review of each source's argument, evidence base, and relevance to the epistemic dimension of religious authority construction. Sources that addressed religious authority primarily through sociological, communication, or media studies lenses were included when their findings bore directly on questions of epistemic legitimacy, since the epistemological crisis this article describes is inseparable from the sociological conditions that produce it.

The analytical procedure followed three steps. First, each source was read to extract its core claim about the relationship between digital media and religious authority. Second, claims were grouped thematically according to the mechanisms they identified, namely celebrification and branding, algorithmic curation, fragmentation, and commercialization. Third, these mechanisms were synthesized into a single explanatory account of epistemic displacement, which forms the analytical core of the results and discussion section. This procedure does not involve primary data collection such as interviews or content analysis of specific preacher accounts, and this limitation is acknowledged directly in the conclusion. The contribution of the article lies instead in offering a critical conceptual synthesis that connects previously separate strands of literature—sociological, communication-

focused, and platform-focused—into a coherent epistemological argument that has not been fully articulated in prior Indonesian scholarship on this topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Mechanism of Epistemic Displacement

The central mechanism this article identifies can be described as epistemic displacement, meaning the gradual replacement of scholarly method as the criterion of religious credibility with audience engagement as that criterion. This displacement occurs through three interlocking processes documented across the literature reviewed above.

The first process is format compression. Platforms reward short, high-impact content, and preachers who succeed on these platforms are frequently those most skilled at compressing religious material into shareable units. Format compression is not itself a moral failing, since brevity has always existed in Islamic pedagogy through devices such as the hadith qudsi or the pithy maxim. The difference in the digital case is scale and selection pressure. Where traditional short-form religious sayings existed within a broader ecosystem of longer study that provided context, digital short-form content increasingly exists as a self-contained unit that audiences never supplement with more profound study. Ni'am (2023) captures this dynamic in describing the tension between demonstrated scholarly seriousness and market-oriented packaging, arguing that the packaging increasingly wins audience attention regardless of the underlying scholarly depth.

The second process is algorithmic selection. As Shin & Shin (2024) show in a non-religious context, platform algorithms are optimized to maximize engagement, not accuracy or depth, and this optimization applies without regard to subject matter. When applied to religious content, algorithmic selection systematically advantages preachers who produce emotionally resonant, confidently stated content over those who produce content that reflects the genuine complexity and internal

disagreement present within Islamic legal and theological reasoning. Wahid's (2024) bibliometric findings suggest that this algorithmic dimension has only recently become a focal point of scholarly attention, indicating that its full consequences for religious epistemology remain underexamined even as its practical effects are already visible in the Indonesian da'wah landscape.

The third process is audience-driven feedback. Nawaf (2025) demonstrates that preachers actively adjust content in response to audience interaction data, meaning that what is popular begins to shape what is produced in a feedback loop that privileges audience preference over scholarly method. This reverses the traditional epistemic direction of Islamic pedagogy, in which a teacher's obligation was to transmit an established method regardless of whether that method matched audience preference. Under audience-driven feedback, the direction of influence flows from audience to content rather than from method to audience, and popularity becomes both an input to and an output of religious authority.

Together, these three processes explain how the criterion of religious credibility can shift from scholarly method to popularity without any single actor intending that outcome. No individual preacher necessarily sets out to displace scholarly verification. Rather, the displacement emerges as a structural consequence of platform architecture interacting with audience behavior, a pattern consistent with what Raya (2024) describes as a new space of authority and commodification specific to the digital environment rather than a simple continuation of prior patterns of religious media use.

The Pattern of Celebrity Preacher Authority in Indonesia

This article reviews literature that identifies a recognizable pattern in the construction and sustenance of celebrity preacher authority within the Indonesian context. This pattern has four recurring elements.

The first element is rapid ascent through platform virality rather than gradual recognition through institutional advancement. Febrian (2024) documents that many of the preachers who now command the largest followings on Instagram were

relatively unknown figures before their rise on the platform, a pattern that stands in sharp contrast to the traditional route of a kiai gaining recognition over decades within a pesantren network. This compressed timeline of authority acquisition means that audiences frequently encounter a preacher's most polished, most confident content before they encounter any evidence of the preacher's underlying scholarly formation, reversing the traditional sequence in which credentials preceded the audience.

The second element is visual and aesthetic self-construction. Febrian's (2024) concept of visual authority captures how preachers use consistent imagery, lifestyle presentation, and stylistic branding to project credibility that operates independently of textual argument. Lyansari (2022) similarly documents deliberate celebrification strategies among religious actors seeking to expand influence, strategies borrowed directly from entertainment and marketing rather than from religious pedagogy.

The third element is commercial integration. Ni'am (2023) and Nawaf (2025) both note that digital da'wah increasingly operates within commercial structures, including sponsorship arrangements, merchandise, and monetized platform features, which create financial incentives that favor continued audience growth over scholarly rigor. This commercial dimension does not mean that celebrity preachers necessarily hold false beliefs or intend to mislead audiences, but it does mean that the economic structure surrounding their content production rewards popularity in ways that scholarly production traditionally did not.

The fourth element is fragmented audience loyalty. Hannan & Mursyidi (2023) describe how audiences increasingly organize around individual preacher platforms rather than around shared institutional affiliations, a pattern that weakens the capacity of established organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah to mediate disputes or provide a common epistemic reference point across the broader Muslim public. Dani & Humaidi (2026) note that this fragmentation is compounded by the tendency of digital audiences to evaluate preachers using

criteria borrowed from popular culture, including relatability and charisma, criteria that are largely orthogonal to scholarly competence.

This four-part pattern, rapid ascent, aesthetic self-construction, commercial integration, and fragmented audience loyalty, together constitutes what this article terms instant religious authority, meaning authority that is acquired and sustained primarily through platform performance rather than through the extended, communally verified process of scholarly formation that historically characterized Indonesian Islamic learning.

Evaluating the Democratization Counterargument

A significant strand of scholarship offers a more optimistic reading of these developments, arguing that social media democratizes access to religious knowledge by removing the gatekeeping function historically exercised by pesantren networks and established organizations. Naamy (2023) notes that digital da'wah expands religious authority beyond traditionally trained da'i, a development some scholars read as an expansion of religious literacy and participation rather than a decline in its quality. Mustafa (2023) similarly frames increased digital access to Islamic content as a response to genuine audience demand for accessible religious knowledge that traditional institutions had not adequately met.

This democratization argument deserves serious consideration rather than dismissal. It correctly identifies that traditional gatekeeping structures were never fully neutral or universally accessible, since access to recognized pesantren education has historically been shaped by geography, gender, and class, meaning that the pre-digital system of religious authority also excluded many capable voices from recognition. Digital platforms have genuinely expanded participation for some previously marginalized voices, including women, as Lyansari's (2022) study of female religious authority demonstrates.

However, this article argues that the democratization framing, while partially valid, obscures a critical distinction between access and verification. Expanding who can speak about Islam is not equivalent to expanding the community's capacity to

verify what is said. Traditional gatekeeping structures, whatever their exclusions, perform an epistemic function by tying authority to demonstrated method. Digital platforms have expanded speech without providing a comparable mechanism for verification, replacing scholarly peer review with audience engagement, a metric that Shin & Shin (2024) show is optimized for emotional resonance rather than accuracy. The result is not a simple democratization of religious knowledge but what might more precisely be called a democratization of religious speech accompanied by a concentration of epistemic risk, since audiences now bear greater individual responsibility for evaluating religious claims without the institutional scaffolding that previously assisted that evaluation.

This distinction matters because it reframes the appropriate policy and educational response. If the phenomenon were simply democratization, the appropriate response would be to celebrate increased access and do little else. If the phenomenon is instead a decoupling of access from verification, the appropriate response involves strengthening digital religious literacy, encouraging platform-level transparency about a content creator's credentials, and supporting scholarly institutions in developing digital-native forms of engagement that can compete for audience attention without abandoning scholarly methods. Fakhruroji's (2025) findings on the entrenchment of digital religious consumption habits during and after the pandemic suggest that this response is increasingly time-sensitive, since reliance on unverified digital religious content shows signs of becoming a durable feature of Indonesian religious life rather than a temporary adaptation.

Implications for Religious Literacy and Platform Governance

The analysis developed above suggests three implications worth highlighting. First, religious literacy education in Indonesia should explicitly address the difference between scholarly credibility and platform credibility, equipping audiences with the ability to ask what method underlies a given religious claim rather than evaluating the claim solely by the confidence or production quality with

which it is delivered. Second, established religious organizations must make a strategic decision: they can either try to compete within the existing platform logics, which could lead to the same pressures to compress and commercialize, or they can create new formats that keep scholarly depth while still being easy to use. This is a challenge that Wahid's (2024) bibliometric findings show is only just starting to get serious scholarly attention. Third, platform companies themselves bear some responsibility for the epistemic consequences of their design choices, since algorithmic amplification of high-engagement content is not a neutral technical fact but a design decision with measurable effects on which forms of religious knowledge become dominant, as Shin & Shin (2024) demonstrate in the broader communication literature.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the rise of celebrity preachers in Indonesian social media constitutes an epistemological crisis in da'wah, characterized by the displacement of scholarly method as the criterion of religious credibility in favor of audience engagement and platform visibility. Drawing on recent scholarship concerning celebrification, algorithmic curation, fragmentation, and the commercialization of digital da'wah, the article identified a recognizable pattern of instant religious authority built through rapid platform ascent, aesthetic self-construction, commercial integration, and fragmented audience loyalty. While acknowledging the partial validity of the democratization argument, the article concluded that digital platforms have expanded religious speech without a corresponding expansion in the community's capacity to verify that speech, producing a decoupling of access from epistemic accountability rather than a straightforward democratization of religious knowledge.

This conclusion carries practical implications for religious literacy education, for the strategic choices facing established Islamic organizations, and for the design responsibilities of platform companies. It also points toward directions for future

research, since the qualitative, literature-based approach used here would benefit from complementary empirical work, including systematic content analysis of specific preacher accounts and audience reception studies that could test the mechanisms identified here against direct evidence. Given the pace at which digital da'wah continues to evolve, sustained scholarly attention to the epistemic dimension of religious authority construction remains essential to understanding how Indonesian Muslim publics will negotiate religious truth in an increasingly platform-mediated environment.

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