

Digital Audience Reception and the Negotiation of Religious Authority on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Digital media have reconfigured religious authority by expanding the role of audiences in evaluating, affirming, and contesting religious legitimacy. This study examines how YouTube audiences interpret and negotiate representations of religious authority in digitally mediated religious communication. Using a qualitative approach informed by Stuart Hall's reception framework, the study draws on netnographic observation of audience comments collected between January and May 2025 from 10 videos across five YouTube channels selected for their relevance to debates on religious authority. The comments were analysed through Hall's decoding positions dominant, negotiated, and oppositional to identify how audiences recognize, qualify, or reject authority claims. The findings show that audiences evaluate religious authority through interrelated epistemic, institutional, performative, moral, experiential, and relational-digital criteria. Dominant readings tend to affirm scholarly competence and recognized religious credentials, negotiated readings introduce additional criteria such as communication style and audience experience, while oppositional readings challenge authority when public conduct is perceived as inconsistent with moral expectations. These intersecting evaluations indicate a hybrid configuration of religious authority in which traditional sources of legitimacy interact with audience-based judgments formed through digital engagement. The study contributes to scholarship on digital religion by showing that audience reception is not merely a response to established authority but an active site in which the foundations of religious legitimacy are continuously negotiated.

INTRODUCTION

As social media has become embedded in contemporary life, YouTube has significantly reshaped the social and religious landscape (Noviani & Udasmoro, 2021). The platform's accessibility and flexibility have enabled new religious actors to participate in the production, negotiation, and contestation of religious authority in the digital public sphere. Religious groups also use YouTube to articulate interpretations within their respective ideological frameworks. Hakim and Mukhlis (2023), for example, show how purist-Salafi, Jihadist-Salafi, and traditional-moderate groups use digital media to pursue and negotiate religious legitimacy. YouTube has therefore become a digital arena in which religious authority is contested and fragmented through the emergence of non-conventional actors operating beyond formal religious institutions.

Within these dynamics, the religious expressions articulated by audiences on social media warrant close attention (Arafat et al., 2022). The issue concerns not only the emergence of new religious actors but also how audiences interpret, respond to, and articulate positions toward the content they encounter. YouTube's comment function enables users to respond directly to the content they consume. Comments should therefore not be treated as merely spontaneous or inconsequential messages; rather, they constitute spaces of articulation in which meaning, affect, ideology, and audience positions are produced and expressed (Budiawan, 2022). Audiences thus operate not as passive recipients but as active participants in meaning-making and the circulation of meaning in digital spaces.

YouTube consequently enables audiences to participate in the production and reproduction of religious authority online. Digital religious communities are not merely passive listeners within Islamic discourse; users can comment on, redistribute, criticize, and even openly challenge the credibility of religious figures. The platform therefore facilitates not only the democratization and fragmentation of religious authority but also its public evaluation, affirmation, and negotiation by audiences.

Previous studies have documented the substantial influence of social media on religious authority. Greater access to religious discourse has weakened the exclusive control of mainstream or traditional scholars and dispersed authority across digital spaces. Digital media therefore function not only as channels for religious messages but also as arenas in which authority is contested and fragmented (Afriansyah, 2021; Al Ghozi et al., 2025). Research on digital religion likewise shows the proliferation of religious figures who communicate interpretations aligned with diverse ideological orientations. At the same time, conservative and Islamist discourses may attain greater visibility than moderate-progressive discourse, while new digital actors can, in some contexts, surpass traditional authorities in popularity (Halimatullah, 2022; Hew, 2018; Kirana & Garadian, 2020).

Reception studies conceptualize audience interpretation as an active process of meaning construction rather than passive message consumption. From Hall's reception perspective, audiences may accept, negotiate, or reject mediated representations (Hall, 1986). YouTube extends this participatory process by allowing users to produce and circulate interpretations through comments and other forms of engagement. Prior research has therefore identified not only the growth of Islamic content on the platform but also increasingly interactive relationships between content producers and audiences through comments, likes, views, and subscriptions (Al-Zaman, 2022; Hanif, 2024).

Although previous studies have examined the construction and dissemination of religious authority through digital media and recognized users as active agents of meaning-making, they have paid less attention to how different audience reading positions contribute to the negotiation of religious legitimacy. This study addresses that gap by examining how YouTube audiences receive, negotiate, and reject representations of religious authority within digitally mediated religious communication.

To address this question, the study draws on Stuart Hall's reception theory, which conceptualizes audiences as active interpreters of mediated messages. Religious messages and representations of religious figures may be decoded through acceptance, negotiation, or rejection. Hall's framework therefore makes it possible to identify how audiences position themselves toward representations of religious authority and how those representations are affirmed, qualified, or contested.

Accordingly, this study examines how YouTube audiences negotiate religious authority through dominant, negotiated, and *oppositional readings* of representations conveyed by religious figures. It contributes to scholarship on digital religion by showing that audience reception does more than register acceptance or rejection of religious messages; it also participates in negotiating the criteria through which religious authority becomes legitimate in digitally mediated communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship indicates that digitalization does not eliminate religious authority; rather, it transforms how authority is formed, exercised, and maintained. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) show that changing media environments have produced new configurations of religious practice and authority, including roles such as digital professionals, spokespersons, and strategists. Traditional religious authorities have simultaneously adapted to the logics of digital media in order to maintain relevance and legitimacy. Digital transformation is therefore better understood as a process of reconfiguration and negotiation than as the disappearance of traditional authority.

This understanding is consistent with Evolvi's (2022) account of digital religion, which emphasizes how digital media reshape the ways individuals and groups experience and practice religion. Digital spaces serve not only as sites for reproducing religious practices but also as arenas in which communities construct legitimacy, sustain practices, and negotiate authority. Whereas Campbell and Evolvi (2020) emphasize institutional transformation and new authority roles within changing media environments, Evolvi (2022) gives greater attention to the negotiations produced through interactions among religious practice, digital space, and users. This perspective highlights how digital openness creates new possibilities for imagining and discussing traditional religious authority.

More recent research shows that these transformations are increasingly visible across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Yuliani (2026) argues that platforms no longer function merely as channels for transmitting religious messages but also as environments in which religious authority is constructed. Legitimacy that once rested primarily on institutional position now increasingly intersects with communicative competence, audience proximity, and platform visibility. Religious legitimacy in digital environments is therefore formed through dynamic processes of interaction and negotiation rather than solely through formal institutional recognition.

Research on religious figures on YouTube has begun to show how this transformation unfolds through audience interaction. Malik and Masrur (2025), in their study of Ustaz Adi Hidayat, demonstrate that YouTube can function as a new arena of religious interpretation. His authority is associated not only with mastery of religious knowledge and the ability to articulate religious messages but also with audience engagement. Interactions in comment sections help validate, reinforce, and circulate religious content, suggesting a shift from viewing authority as an intrinsic attribute of a figure toward understanding it as something that also depends on recognition generated through audience engagement.

Triantoro's (2020) study of *Ustadz* Abdul Somad similarly demonstrates that *da'wah* communication strategies contribute to the formation of digital authority, while fan engagement strengthens the figure's position in digital media. Audiences do not merely consume content; they also disseminate videos through interpersonal networks, expanding the reach and visibility of *da'wah* messages. Whereas Malik and Masrur (2025) emphasize audience validation, Triantoro gives greater attention to communication strategy and fan-driven dissemination. Together, these studies show that audience engagement can contribute to digital authority through validation, interaction, circulation, and the production of visibility.

Taken together, these studies indicate that religious authority in digital spaces is no longer determined solely by institutional legitimacy or scholarly competence. It is also shaped by adaptation to media environments, communication strategies, digital visibility, and audience engagement. However, the literature conceptualizes audiences differently: some studies treat them primarily as users who interact with and extend the reach of religious content, whereas others recognize their role in validating religious figures. This variation points to the increasingly important, yet still underexplored, role of audiences in the formation of digital religious legitimacy.

What remains insufficiently explained is how audiences interpret representations of religious authority and how their interpretations help define what counts as legitimate authority. Comments, validation, dissemination, and interaction have not always been examined as reception practices that reveal positions of acceptance, negotiation, and rejection. A reception-based approach can therefore illuminate how audiences do more than enhance the visibility of religious figures: they actively negotiate legitimacy by interpreting religious messages and evaluating the figures who deliver them.

Building on this literature, the present study treats audience comments on YouTube as expressions of reception through which religious authority may be accepted, qualified, or rejected. Rather than viewing audiences only as sources of social validation, the study examines how dominant, negotiated, and *oppositional*

reading positions shape evaluations of religious figures. Drawing on Stuart Hall's reception framework, it analyses how variations in these positions contribute to the negotiation of religious legitimacy within digitally mediated religious communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Stuart Hall's reception theory as an analytical framework for examining how audiences interpret, construct, and negotiate religious authority in the digital public sphere (Xie et al., 2022). The analysis focuses on comments posted on YouTube channels featuring religious figures. First, a *dominant reading* identifies comments that accept and affirm the authority represented in the content. Second, a *negotiated reading* identifies comments that accept some aspects of an authority claim while introducing reservations, conditions, or alternative evaluations. Third, an *oppositional reading* identifies comments that understand the representation being offered but reject the associated authority claim or religious interpretation (Hall, 1986).

Table-1. Operational indicators of audience reading positions

No.	Position	Indicator	Description
1	Dominant	Affirmation, acceptance, justification	Accepting and affirming represented authority
2	Negotiated	Conditional acceptance, negotiation, qualification	Accepting aspects of authority while introducing qualifications or alternative evaluations
3	Oppositional	Criticism, rejection, alternative framing	Rejecting represented authority or proposing alternative interpretations or figures

Stuart Hall's reception framework is used here to examine how audiences interpret representations of religious figures and messages on YouTube. Through decoding, audience responses are classified into dominant, negotiated, or *oppositional reading* positions. As summarized in Table-1, these positions provide the basis for identifying how audiences evaluate the capacity and legitimacy of religious figures and the epistemic, institutional, performative, and relational criteria underlying that recognition. The framework thus extends the analysis beyond the interpretation of religious messages to the audience's evaluation of the legitimacy attached to the figures who communicate them.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach informed by Stuart Hall's reception framework to analyse how audiences interpret and respond to representations of religious authority on YouTube (Hall, 1986; Creswell, 2018). The unit of analysis is the individual audience comment that expresses an identifiable position toward a religious figure or message. Comments are first classified according to Hall's three reading positions dominant, negotiated, and oppositional and are then analysed thematically to identify the bases of religious legitimacy expressed in the data. Data collection follows a netnographic approach (Eriyanto, 2021; Priowidodo, 2022) by tracing audience comments on five YouTube channels featuring religious figures in podcasts and other forms of digital content (Zarkada et al., 2025).

Data Sources and Sampling

Data were collected from publicly accessible YouTube comment sections, which provide an active site of interaction between content producers and audiences. The observational corpus comprises five channels: Gus Miftah Official, Khalid Basalamah Official, Curhat BANG Denny Sumargo, dr. Richard Lee, and Deddy Corbuzier. Audience comments were examined across 10 videos published on these channels. Data collection was conducted from January to May 2025.

Videos were selected purposively according to their relevance to representations of religious authority. During the research period, Gus Miftah and Khalid Basalamah were among the religious figures receiving substantial public attention. The selected videos also generated high levels of audience interaction, providing sufficient material for reception analysis. Because some videos contained thousands of comments, comments were selected purposively according to their relevance to audience positions toward the represented figure or authority. Spam, duplicate comments, and comments unrelated to the substance of the videos were excluded from the corpus.

Research Procedures

The research proceeded in several stages to make the analytical process traceable from data collection to interpretation. First, the researcher identified and documented YouTube videos that met the study criteria during the specified period and collected comments relevant to the representation of religious figures, religious messages, and religious authority. Second, the comments were screened and organized according to the research focus. Comments unrelated to the religious messages, figure representations, or audience positions under investigation were excluded from the analysis.

Third, the researcher conducted familiarization and initial coding by repeatedly reading the selected comments to identify recurring patterns of meaning and expressions of acceptance, agreement, questioning, reservation, and rejection. Initial codes were generated from the substance of the comments before the application of Hall's theoretical categories.

Fourth, the initial codes were compared with Hall's three reception positions. Comments were categorized as a *dominant reading* when audiences accepted the meaning and representation of religious authority offered in the message. A *negotiated reading* was assigned when audiences accepted part of the offered meaning but introduced qualifications, limitations, or interpretations based on their own positions. An *oppositional reading* was assigned when audiences rejected the offered representation of religious authority and articulated alternative interpretations or criticisms. These reading positions were interpreted in relation to the audiences' ideological positions, subjectivities, experiences, and beliefs.

The final stage involved interpreting the classified comments comparatively to identify broader patterns of audience reception toward religious authority on YouTube. The analysis moved beyond assigning comments to the three reading positions and examined how acceptance, negotiation, and rejection contributed to the negotiation of religious legitimacy in digital communication. Interpretations were therefore developed by relating the comment data to audience reading positions and to the context in which religious authority was represented in the selected videos.

Ethical Considerations

This study uses screenshots of videos and comments that are publicly accessible on YouTube. Nevertheless, it applies ethical safeguards to the presentation of user-generated content. Account names, profile photographs, account links, and other potentially identifying information are not reproduced in their original form. Usernames shown in screenshots are partially anonymized by masking several characters for example, "rxxd hxxxtaa" to reduce the possibility of identifying individual users. Other identifying details are similarly removed or obscured. These measures are intended to minimize privacy risks while preserving the textual material required for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dominant and Negotiated Readings of Religious Authority

The emergence of social media has substantially altered the landscape of religious authority. Religious legitimacy is no longer monopolized by traditional religious actors or confined to conventional institutions (Afriansyah, 2021). This transformation has extended religious debate into the digital public sphere and created opportunities for participation by a wider range of actors, including non-scholars and ordinary users (Al Khozi et al., 2025).

Digital media have consequently become arenas in which religious legitimacy is continually constructed, contested, and negotiated. Religious authority has also become more decentralized because the production and circulation of religious knowledge can involve diverse actors, including ordinary users who create and distribute religious content. Digital media therefore function as discursive spaces in which competing claims to religious legitimacy are articulated and debated through participatory interaction (Sapriyallah et al., 2020).

Religious legitimacy in the digital era is shaped not only by traditional credentials but also by audience affirmation and engagement. Likes, subscriptions, views, and other forms of attention can increase the visibility and public recognition of religious actors. Such engagement, however, should not be equated automatically with religious legitimacy; rather, it represents one mechanism through which recognition may be produced and reinforced in the digital public sphere.

Religious authority has traditionally been associated with scholarly competence, particularly the capacity to master and articulate Islamic knowledge. Religious authorities are commonly recognized for expertise in disciplines such as Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), Prophetic traditions (*hadith*), and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*),

together with epistemic legitimacy within religious communities (Alatas, 2024; Van Bruinessen, 1995). Authority therefore derives not merely from individual claims but from social recognition of knowledge as a foundation of legitimacy. Audience reception in this study largely reflects this understanding. For example, Axxxa Zxxxxhxxa states, “*There should be clerics like Gus Kautsar to educate Islamic boarding school students, and clerics like Gus Miftah to guide ordinary people and street communities toward the true teachings of Islam.*” Similarly, Rxx Fxxxly remarks, “*Ustadz Khalid and Ustadz Adi Hidayat possess pure Islamic knowledge.*” These comments position religious knowledge as a fundamental criterion for recognizing authority and therefore exemplify a *dominant reading* of the figure's epistemic legitimacy.

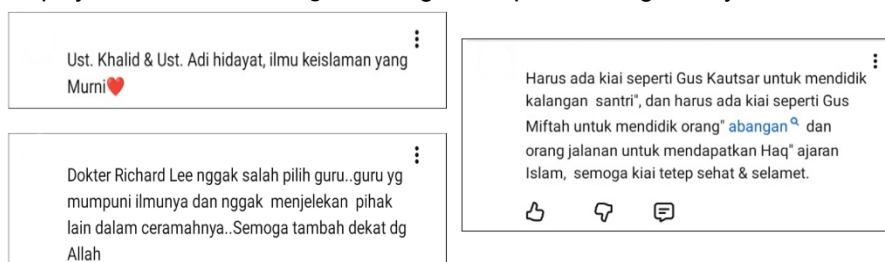


Figure-1. Scholarly competence as a basis for religious legitimacy

Figure-1 illustrates a *dominant reading* in which audiences accept both the religious message and the authority of the represented figure. The figure is perceived as possessing the symbolic capital expected of an *ustadz*, particularly Islamic religious knowledge and scholarly competence. Comments also indicate that *jamaah*, *santri*, *umat*, and *abangan* are understood as benefiting from their encounters with the figure. The pattern therefore shows that some audiences confer legitimacy primarily on the basis of epistemic capacity.

The construction of religious authority, however, is not confined to scholarly credentials. In digital environments, recognition by online communities increasingly influences how authority is evaluated (Hidayatullah, 2024). Audiences may also consider performative qualities such as communication style, rhetorical ability, presentation, and consistency of online presence. One user, Sxxxma Axxa, commented, “*Does anyone else feel that listening to Ustadz Basalamah is comforting? Even after listening for hours, you never get bored because he has a unique and attractive aura.*” This *dominant reading* suggests that authority may also be reinforced by the capacity to communicate religious messages in an engaging, accessible, and socially resonant manner.

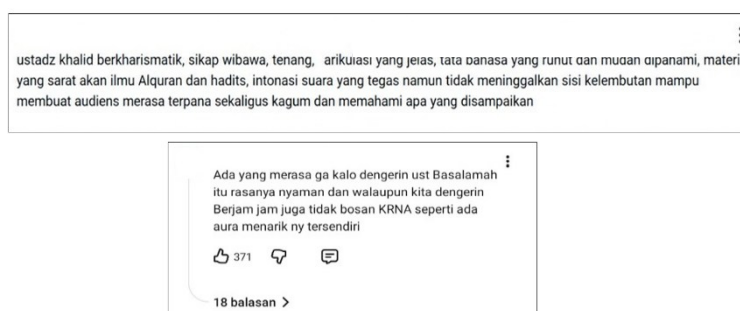


Figure-2. Da'wah communication as a basis for religious legitimacy

The comments in Figure-2 illustrate a *negotiated reading*. Audiences recognize epistemic legitimacy but introduce an additional criterion: the performative ability to conduct *da'wah* effectively. In doing so, they apply their own evaluative frameworks rather than accepting the represented authority without qualification. The comments suggest that communication skills influence the effectiveness with which religious messages are conveyed to Muslim audiences. This negotiated pattern therefore expands the basis of legitimacy from scholarly competence alone to include communicative performance.

The contemporary media environment reinforces the importance of this performative dimension. The effectiveness of religious preaching depends not only on doctrinal substance but also on a preacher's capacity to communicate in relatable ways and sustain meaningful audience engagement. Hanan Attaki, for example, uses popular language and youth-oriented communication strategies to reach millennial audiences (Astutik & Yaqin, 2024; Hermaya & Khatibah, 2024; Najmuddin, 2024). Such strategies can make religious messages

more accessible, foster emotional proximity, and strengthen a preacher's position within digital spaces. Performative competence has therefore become an important component of how religious authority is recognized in contemporary digital preaching.

Digital media have also broadened the range of religious references available to audiences. Whereas recognition of authority was once more localized and often tied to particular religious organizations or community-based figures, audiences can now encounter multiple religious authorities and competing interpretations across platforms. These interpretations may differ substantially and, in some cases, directly contradict one another, creating new conditions for comparison and negotiation.

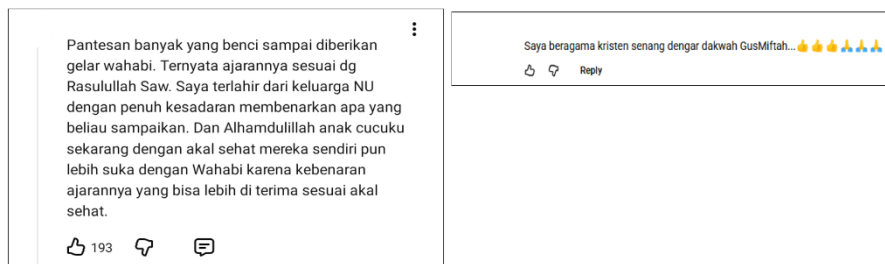


Figure-3. Cross-boundary recognition of religious legitimacy

A comment by Sang Petxxxxx “*As a member of Nahdlatul Ulama, I truly enjoy listening to every sermon delivered by Ustadz Khalid*” illustrates cross-boundary recognition of religious legitimacy. The statement acknowledges authority beyond the commenter's own religious-cultural affiliation. Although Khalid Basalamah is often associated with criticism of rituals practiced within Nahdlatul Ulama communities, recognition of his authority also emerges from audiences who identify with NU. Sumodi Hardjo, for example, commented, “*I was born into an NU family, and with full awareness I believe what he says is correct.*” Similarly, Dxxi Cxxxztxi Dyanarko stated, “*As a Christian, I enjoy listening to Gus Miftah's preaching.*” These responses show that recognition can extend beyond established theological or communal boundaries. Digital audiences are increasingly able to compare, evaluate, select, and negotiate competing claims to religious authority, making recognition more fluid and less strictly hierarchical.

The decoding process represented in Figure-3 therefore demonstrates cross-boundary recognition. Audiences may acknowledge religious figures who differ from the authorities or organizational affiliations they have traditionally trusted, and some comments even express recognition across religious backgrounds. Such responses indicate a negotiated form of recognition shaped by audiences' experiences, comparisons, and interactions with the figures represented in digital media.

Khalid Basalamah is frequently associated with Salafi-oriented Islamic preaching (Dewi et al., 2024; Dewi & Fata, 2023). During the early stages of his visibility in the digital public sphere, he was often labeled a preacher with radical tendencies. His appearances in podcast programs, however, have contributed to a more contested and multidimensional public image. In a *negotiated reading*, Mxxxxmad Rxxx commented, “*Open your eyes, those who keep insulting him and calling him Wahhabi.*” Such responses challenge negative labels by emphasizing perceived qualities such as calmness, gentleness, and adherence to Islamic sources, thereby participating in the renegotiation of his public image and authority.

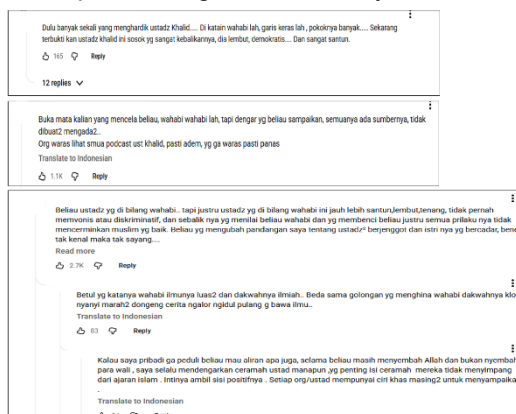


Figure-4. Negotiation of Khalid Basalamah's image within the YouTube digital community

As shown in Figure-4, this negotiation becomes particularly visible when audiences directly challenge descriptions of Khalid Basalamah as radical. Fxxi Gxxxh, for example, commented, “*He is often called a Wahhabi preacher, yet this so-called Wahhabi preacher is far more polite, gentle, calm, and never judgmental or discriminatory.*” Such comparisons go beyond personal preference; they actively redefine the criteria through which religious authority is assessed. By contrasting public labels with perceived conduct, audiences implicitly negotiate the boundaries of legitimacy and determine who deserves recognition as an authoritative religious figure.

The decoding process thus reflects a *negotiated reading* of Khalid Basalamah's representation. Rather than simply accepting external characterizations of the figure, audiences interpret them through their own experiences and understandings. These alternative evaluations renegotiate his public image and may, in turn, contribute to renewed recognition of his religious authority.

These reception patterns reveal competing audience constructions of religious authority and support accounts of the fragmentation of religion under conditions of digital mediation (Hakim & Mukhlis, 2023). Binary labels such as left-right, radical-moderate, and traditional-progressive are increasingly inadequate for capturing contemporary configurations of authority. Audience responses on YouTube instead display more fluid and hybrid combinations of acceptance, qualification, and rejection.

Audience-Led Delegitimization and the Negotiation of Religious Authority in Digital Media

In digital media, audiences have become active agents in shaping, evaluating, and negotiating religious authority. Social media provide relatively autonomous communicative spaces in which users not only consume religious discourse but also participate in producing and circulating meaning through interactive practices (Jenkins, 2006). These conditions create what can be described as an informal deliberative arena (Alimi, 2018), in which comments, criticism, and public argument can intervene in the reproduction of religious authority. Audience intervention may therefore extend beyond negotiation to critical reception and delegitimization, including efforts to deny the label of *ustadz* to figures considered no longer worthy of religious authority.

At the same time, new media have made religious authority increasingly contingent. Structures once grounded primarily in epistemic credentials, institutional affiliation, and established chains of scholarly transmission are now also subject to public evaluation in digital spaces. Audiences may therefore assess religious figures not only through traditional credentials but also through the performative qualities they display online.

Miftah Maulana Habiburrahman, for example, is widely known for a preaching style characterized by humor and informal communication (Zumaida & Nurcholis, 2021). Although this style has become a defining feature of his public persona and *da'wah* strategy, some audiences regard particular jokes or remarks as exceeding the standards of propriety expected of a religious leader. In these responses, communicative performance becomes a moral criterion through which religious authority is evaluated.

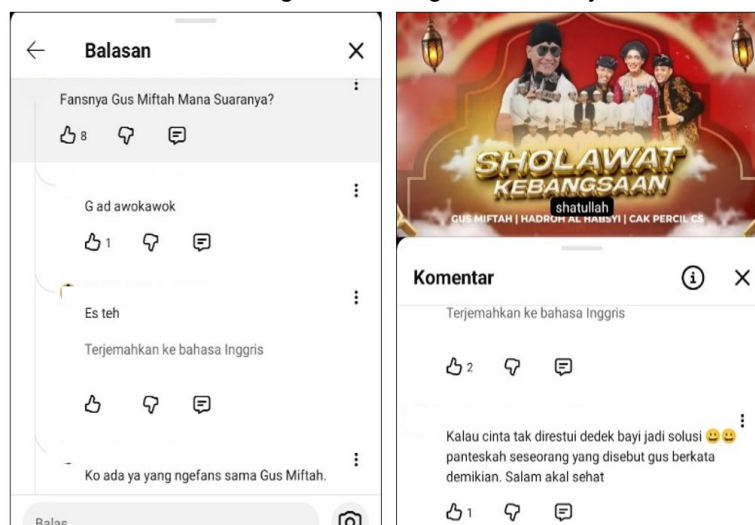


Figure-5. Controversy surrounding Gus Miftah's preaching style

As shown in Figure-5, the comment by Lxxu Sxxxxl “*If unapproved love can be solved by a baby, is it appropriate for someone called Gus to say such a thing?*” illustrates an *oppositional reading* of Gus Miftah's communicative style. The response shows that authority in digital environments is evaluated not only through scholarly expertise but also through communicative conduct and its perceived alignment with public moral expectations. Here, the audience challenges the *da'wah* performance associated with the figure and questions whether it is compatible with the ethical standards expected of religious authority.

Audience responses in digital public spaces are therefore neither entirely random nor purely spontaneous. Interpretations are shaped by collective norms, moral expectations, social sensitivities, and ideological orientations. Audiences approach religious content from particular interpretive positions, and these positions influence how a figure's authority is assessed.

Responses to controversies involving religious figures are nevertheless rarely uniform. Digital public discourse often contains simultaneous expressions of support and opposition because social media provide users with broad opportunities to articulate different emotions, perspectives, and ideological commitments. Multiple and competing interpretations can therefore emerge around the same event or religious figure.

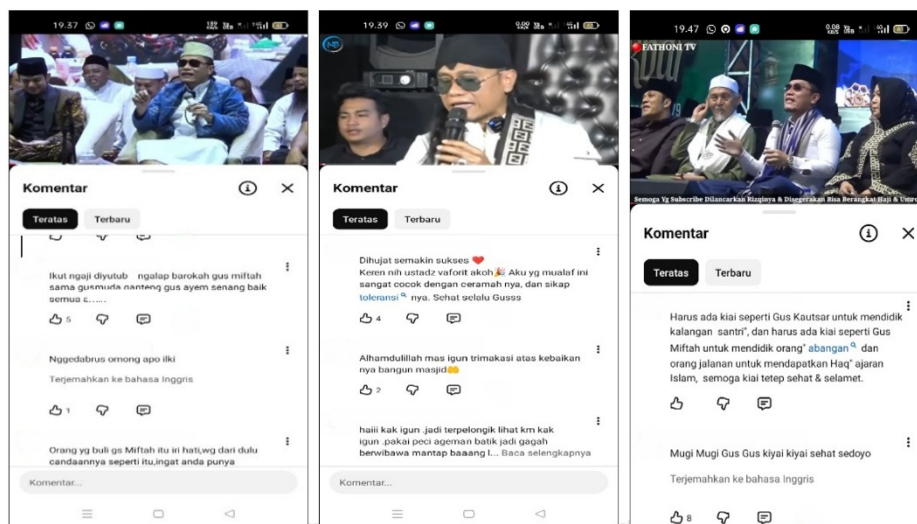


Figure-6. Oppositional readings in the Gus Miftah case

Although some audiences delegitimize Gus Miftah through *oppositional readings*, others continue to affirm his authority through *dominant readings*. Figure-6 therefore illustrates the contested character of digital legitimacy: the same figure may be criticized, defended, and revalidated within a shared public arena. Religious authority is consequently not a fixed attribute but a status continually negotiated through interactions among religious figures, audiences, and digital platforms.

The comments in Figure-6 require a more differentiated reading. Some audiences adopt an *oppositional reading* not of Gus Miftah's authority itself, but of the negative discourse surrounding him. Axxxd Rxxil Wxxxxxta, for example, stated, “*People who bully Gus Miftah are jealous; he has always joked like that.*” Other comments explicitly defend and recognize his religious authority. Bxxdx rhxxxmju wrote, “*He is great, my favorite ustadz. As a convert to Islam, I really connect with his sermons and his tolerant attitude,*” while Adxdrx Zixxxxra commented, “*There needs to be a kiai like Gus Miftah to educate abangan people and people from the streets so that they can understand the Haq of Islamic teachings.*” These responses indicate an *oppositional reading* of criticism directed at the figure while simultaneously expressing a dominant or affirmative reading of his authority. Criticism of communicative performance, therefore, does not necessarily result in the rejection of religious legitimacy.

This interpretive plurality also resonates with Roland Barthes's thesis on the death of the author, in which meaning is no longer monopolized by the author or originating subject but is reproduced through readers' interpretations (Barry, 2010). In social media contexts, audiences do not passively receive the actions or statements of religious figures; they construct meanings that may align with or depart from the figure's intended self-representation. YouTube thus becomes an arena in which the power to define meaning is distributed across plural and competing forms of public interpretation.

Audience responses further show that religious authority no longer rests solely on epistemic competence or scholarly legitimacy. Digital audiences also evaluate figures against collectively negotiated moral expectations. Criticism or rejection may therefore arise when a figure's public conduct is perceived as inconsistent with those expectations. This produces tensions between epistemic and performative dimensions, institutional legitimacy and digital public evaluation, and scholarly lineage and collective audience trust. Religious figures are consequently assessed not only as knowledgeable persons but also as moral representatives expected to respond to social sensitivities. The legitimacy of authority on YouTube is therefore multidirectional: audiences can challenge, sustain, and renegotiate it. These patterns point toward a hybrid configuration of religious authority in the digital era.

Hybridization of Religious Authority in the Digital Public Sphere

Social media have developed into informal deliberative spaces in which networked publics participate in the production and reproduction of meaning. Audiences not only receive information but also generate interpretations of the content they consume. In the context of religious legitimacy, they can accept, negotiate, or reject the authority circulating through YouTube. This dynamic resembles what Dale F. Eickelman describes as a *new public space*: a public sphere that enables Muslims to participate more openly in distributing and negotiating religious authority (Eickelman, 2003).

The reception patterns identified in this study show that audiences evaluate religious figures through both scholarly competence and communicative performance. The findings extend research on the transformation of religious authority in digital media (Bunt, 2018; Hakim & Mukhlis, 2023) and studies emphasizing the role of audience recognition (Al Ghazi et al., 2025; Yuliani, 2026). Religious authority does not emerge from a single institutional or epistemic source; it is also shaped by audience evaluations informed by ideology, subjectivity, religious experience, and interaction in digital spaces. Recognition therefore depends not only on institutional status or epistemic foundations but also on how audiences make meaning of religious figures and their own encounters with them.

Audiences also contribute to shaping and validating the symbolic capital on which religious legitimacy rests (Malik & Masrur, 2025). Consequently, the criteria for recognizing an authoritative figure have shifted. Religious figures continue to draw on epistemic and institutional legitimacy and on *sanad* of scholarly transmission, but they also depend on recognition generated through digital interaction. Compared with more stable, hierarchical, and institutionally grounded forms of authority, authority in social media environments is more fluid, contingent, and collectively produced. This shift provides the basis for understanding contemporary religious authority as hybrid.

Hybridity, a concept closely associated with cultural studies, refers to processes of encounter, mixing, and negotiation through which interacting cultural elements generate new forms without entirely eliminating earlier ones (Sintowoko, 2021). Applied to religious authority, this concept captures the way traditional sources of legitimacy interact with newer forms of audience-based recognition. Social media do not simply replace established authority; they create a setting in which multiple sources of legitimacy are combined and continuously negotiated.

Religious authority has traditionally drawn on sources such as *pesantren* ownership, kiai lineage, mastery of *kitab kuning*, and recognition within religious communities. Terms such as Gus, Nyai, and Habib can function as markers of identity and recognition for actors situated within lineages and scholarly networks associated with established religious communities. Religious authority is therefore socially constructed through the interaction of communal recognition, scholarly legitimacy, and symbolic position within particular social structures (Alatas, 2024; Harnadi et al., 2021; Van Bruinessen, 1995). Epistemic legitimacy and social recognition are thus mutually reinforcing foundations of traditional authority.

In the digital era, however, traditional sources of legitimacy may no longer be sufficient to sustain recognition. Even figures with strong religious credentials can become targets of criticism and have their legitimacy questioned by digital audiences. Recognition increasingly depends on the capacity to communicate in ways that correspond to audience expectations. Performative qualities can generate affective resonance and emotional connection between religious figures and audiences (Papacharissi, 2015), thereby fostering trust, approval, and recognition. Hybridization can therefore be understood as the interaction between traditional bases of legitimacy and performative criteria that audiences evaluate and negotiate through digital interaction.

Power over the distribution of religious authority no longer resides exclusively in religious institutions. Digital communities participate in shaping contemporary authority through responses and reception in the digital public sphere (Al Ghazi et al., 2025). The comments analysed here show that epistemic competence remains important, but it intersects with evaluations of communication style, audience experience, and the quality of digital interaction. These bases of legitimacy do not operate independently; rather, they form a multilayered configuration in which traditional and audience-based criteria interact. This configuration is what the present study identifies as the hybridization of religious authority.

Religious figures on YouTube are therefore positioned between epistemic foundations and performative demands. On the one hand, they may continue to receive recognition through scholarly transmission and institutional legitimacy. On the other hand, they are subject to moral evaluation and collective expectations articulated through social media. Legitimacy consequently rests on the interaction of epistemic and institutional credentials with evaluations of morality, communicative performance, audience experience, and digital interaction. The result is a hybrid configuration of authority produced through the intersection of established and reception-based criteria.

The significance of these findings lies not only in explaining the transformation of religious authority on YouTube but also in demonstrating the constitutive role of audiences in that transformation. Audience comments show how meaning is produced through dominant, negotiated, and *oppositional readings* of religious figures. Through these readings, audiences evaluate authority according to epistemic capacity, communicative performance, religious experience, morality, and the quality of digital interaction.

Religious legitimacy is therefore not determined entirely by institutional status or the epistemic credentials attached to religious figures. It is also negotiated through audience meaning-making. These findings extend scholarship on religious authority in social media by showing that transformation occurs not only at the levels of production and representation but also at the level of reception, where audiences participate in defining the foundations on which authority is recognized.

CONCLUSION

Audience reception shows that religious authority in the digital public sphere is no longer determined solely by religious institutions or the epistemic credentials attached to religious figures. Through dominant, negotiated, and *oppositional readings*, audiences actively construct meanings and evaluate, sustain, or question representations of religious authority. The YouTube comments analysed in this study reveal multiple criteria for recognition, including scholarly competence and *sanad* of scholarly transmission, institutional legitimacy, communicative performance, morality, audience experience, and the quality of digital interaction. These criteria operate in combination rather than isolation, indicating that religious legitimacy emerges through interaction between established epistemic and institutional foundations and audience-based evaluations in digital spaces.

The study contributes to the understanding of digitally mediated religious authority by showing that transformation occurs not only in the production and representation of religious figures but also in audience reception. Audiences are not merely recipients or supporters of authority; they participate in defining the criteria through which authority is recognized, sustained, or challenged. The intersection of traditional sources of legitimacy with audience evaluations, experiences, performative judgments, and digital interactions produces a hybrid configuration of religious authority. Religious authority in the digital era is therefore best understood as a dynamic and relational process whose legitimacy is continually negotiated between religious figures and audiences.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study is limited to YouTube as a site of digital religious communication. Second, the corpus comprises only the channels, videos, and comments selected according to the research criteria; it therefore captures particular reception patterns rather than the full range of conversations about religious authority across digital spaces. Third, the data come from users who actively posted comments and cannot be treated as representative of the entire YouTube audience. Fourth, the classification of comments into dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions necessarily involves researcher interpretation. Although classification was guided by theoretical indicators and the context of each comment, the analysis remains subject to interpretive judgment.

Future research could extend this study through cross-platform comparison, larger corpora, longer observation periods, and direct engagement with audiences through interviews or digital ethnography. These

approaches could capture dimensions of audience experience and meaning-making that are not always visible in public comments while also clarifying how different platform characteristics shape the reception and negotiation of religious authority. Such work would provide a more comprehensive account of authority within an increasingly diverse digital ecosystem.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the conduct and completion of this study. Junita BR Surbakti, the first author, was responsible for the research design, development of the conceptual framework, data collection and analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. Arfan contributed to the theoretical framework, supervision of the research process, and critical review of the manuscript. Juparno Hatta contributed to data collection, organization, and analysis, as well as manuscript editing. Suparman Jayadi was responsible for ensuring the article's compliance with scientific procedures and academic standards, including the translation process. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently and involved no commercial, financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could reasonably be perceived as influencing the research or publication process.

Data Availability

The data used in this study consist of screenshots of videos and comments that are publicly accessible on the YouTube platform. The screenshots are available as presented in Figure-1, Figure-2, Figure-3, Figure-4, Figure-5, and Figure-6.

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