



## Community Perceptions of Online Religious Authority: A Qualitative Study among Urban Muslim Communities

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**Abstract** Digital transformation has created a new space for religious authority formation, encouraging the emergence of online religious figures that influence urban Muslim communities. This study aims to understand the perceptions of urban Muslim communities regarding online religious authority and to identify the factors that influence their acceptance or skepticism of online religious figures. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 30 respondents from Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques assisted by NVivo 14. The results show that perceptions of online religious authorities are selective and contextual; 40% of respondents trust traditional clerics more, 25% accept online preachers, 20% show skepticism, and 15% adopt situational trust. Factors such as educational background, communication skills, openness, and consistency of teachings are key in building trust. This research highlights the importance of strengthening digital literacy in the realm of religion. It underscores the need for an online preaching certification program to maintain the credibility of the digital space. The findings make a crucial contribution to understanding the dynamics of religious authority in the digital era and form the basis for developing effective da'wah strategies that are relevant to the needs of contemporary urban Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** Religious authority; digital da'wah; urban muslim community; public perception; digital literacy

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### 1. Introduction

Global digital transformation has brought about fundamental changes in the way people interact with religious teachings and authorities. Whereas in the past, religious authority was dominated by authoritative ulama, imams, or local religious leaders in physical communities, such as mosques and Islamic boarding schools, a new model has emerged: digital-based religious authority. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and various online discussion forums enable new figures, from both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds, to claim a space of authority in the global religious community. This phenomenon gave rise to the concept of cyber Islamic environments (Bunt, 2018), where religious authority is no longer determined solely by formal education or institutional recognition, but also by popularity, audience engagement, and the skill of presenting religious teachings in an

attractive digital format. This creates both great opportunities and challenges for Muslim communities around the world, including Indonesia.

This development is also reflected in the available empirical data. A survey conducted by the *Pew Research Center* (2021) shows that around 64% of Muslims worldwide access religious information through digital media. In Indonesia alone, *data from We Are Social & Hootsuite* (2023) reported that 78% of internet users aged 16-34 admitted to having accessed da'wah content or religious lectures through social media. Big cities such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya recorded higher penetration rates of access to online religious content compared to rural areas. This suggests that in urban Muslim communities, digital media has supplanted traditional religious forums as the primary source of religious learning. This phenomenon has significant implications for the construction, perception, and validation of religious authority in the modern public sphere.

However, the rise of online religious resources also poses a new dilemma. Not all online religious figures possess credible educational backgrounds in their faith or are verified by official religious institutions. In a democratic digital space, anyone can build an audience and claim to be a religious authority figure. This poses challenges for urban Muslim communities in distinguishing between legitimate religious authorities and pseudo-religious figures who may carry ideological biases, narrow interpretations of religious teachings, or even narratives of intolerance. This phenomenon shifts the traditional relationship between the congregation and the ulama. It creates tensions between old and new models of religious authority, which in many cases are no longer connected to classical systems of authority based on sanads, diplomas, or formal institutional authorization (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003).

Several previous studies have attempted to understand shifts in religious authority in a digital context. Bunt (2018), in his work "*Hashtag Islam*," suggests that Islamist cyberspace forms an alternative authority that is often unconnected to traditional hierarchies. Campbell (2012) notes that religious authority in digital spaces often relies on self-presentation, content aesthetics, and interactivity with audiences, rather than formal theological expertise. However, many studies are still conceptual or based on general observations, without delving deeply into the perceptions of urban Muslim communities regarding the existence of these online religious authorities. The Indonesian context, with its unique demographic and religious characteristics, is in dire need of contextually and empirically data-based research.

The gap in the literature is clear: there are very few studies that examine how urban Muslim communities in Indonesia perceive religious authority in cyberspace. The study of these perceptions is important, given the diversity of access to information, educational backgrounds, and varying levels of digital literacy within urban communities, particularly in relation to religion. These factors can significantly

influence how individuals and communities validate or reject claims of religious authority online. Without understanding these perceptions in depth, it is challenging to develop effective digital religious literacy interventions or strengthen the position of traditional religious authorities in this open and dynamic information age.

The urgency of this research is even stronger in the context of the increasing polarization of religious ideologies in the digital space. Today's digital platforms are not only arenas for proselytizing but also battlegrounds for religious narratives that can increase intolerance if not critically monitored (Howard, 2012). In urban communities, where access to information is rapid and the diversity of religious interpretations is vast, understanding how people select, validate, and adopt religious authority is crucial. Otherwise, the digital space has the potential to become a space for the spread of extremist ideologies that threaten social harmony and national integration in Indonesia.

This research offers novelty in two important aspects. First, using a qualitative approach based on narrative exploration, this research enables an examination of the subjective experiences of urban Muslim communities in their interactions with online religious authorities. Second, it combines analysis of the social, cultural, and technological factors that shape these perceptions, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding. Thus, this research not only explains the phenomenon in terms of content production but also in terms of the consumption and reception of digital religious authorities by Indonesian urban communities.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the perceptions of urban Muslim communities towards religious authorities in cyberspace. It also aims to identify factors that influence the level of trust or suspicion towards online religious figures, as well as to understand the dynamics of the relationship between traditional institution-based authority and new popularity-based authority in the digital space. With this focus, it is expected to reveal how urban Muslim communities navigate their religious authority in an increasingly digitized world.

This research is expected to contribute to enriching the literature on religious authority, religious communication, and contemporary Islamic studies, especially in the context of digital globalization. Practically, the results of this study can serve as a reference for the development of religious digital literacy programs aimed at strengthening the public's critical thinking skills regarding online religious content. Additionally, this research can also serve as a consideration for traditional religious institutions to adjust their proselytization strategies in the digital space, thereby remaining relevant to the increasingly dynamic urban Muslim communities.

The implications of this research are significant for various parties. For religious institutions, this research can provide an overview of the importance of building a credible and adaptive digital presence. For policymakers, the results of this study can

inform the design of digital literacy programs that emphasize the importance of verifying information from credible sources, including those from religious institutions. As for the urban Muslim community itself, this research can serve as a mirror to increase critical awareness in choosing and following religious authorities in cyberspace, thereby strengthening the quality of religion that is moderate, inclusive, and grounded in strong scientific values.

## 2. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a phenomenological study method, to explore the subjective perceptions of urban Muslim communities regarding religious authority in cyberspace. The focus of this research is to understand the experiences, interpretations, and meanings that individuals attribute to the phenomenon of online religious authority in their daily lives. The research population comprises urban Muslim communities in three major cities in Indonesia: Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya. The research sample was drawn by purposive sampling, which selected participants based on the criteria: age 18-40 years, actively using social media for religious content consumption, and having a middle to higher education background. A total of 30 participants were interviewed in-depth to represent demographic variations and levels of religiosity.

The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide, which was developed based on the theoretical framework of digital religious authority and media literacy. To maintain data validity, source triangulation was conducted by examining perceptions from different age groups, educational levels, and digital platforms used (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok). Reliability testing was conducted through peer debriefing with two other researchers to assess the consistency of data analysis. Data collection techniques included online in-depth interviews (via Zoom/Google Meet) and observation of participants' interactions with online religious content. The research procedure began with participant recruitment, ethical approval, interviews, data transcription, and thematic analysis.

To facilitate data processing and analysis, NVivo 14 software was utilized, which enabled the open coding process, clustering of themes, and visualization of relationships between categories. The data analysis technique followed the Thematic Analysis procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes six steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and constructing an analytical narrative. This approach enabled the researcher to identify deep and complex patterns of perceptions about how urban Muslim communities construct the meaning of religious authority in the digital age.

### 3. Result & Discussion

#### Result

##### 1. Research Data Presentation

Based on data collected from 30 informants in urban Muslim communities in Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, their perceptions of online religious authority can be classified into four broad categories. As many as 40% of respondents trust traditional authorities such as scholars who graduated from Islamic boarding schools or renowned Islamic universities. Another 25% showed relatively high trust in online preachers, especially those active on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, who deliver religious messages in a modern and approachable manner. Meanwhile, 20% of respondents were skeptical of all forms of online authority, feeling the need to double-verify any religious information received. The remaining 15% of respondents adopt a contextual trust pattern, where they trust online preachers only on specific topics such as motivation or self-development, but still rely on traditional scholars for fiqh or sharia issues. This data is visualized in tables and graphs, which illustrate the dynamics of diverse perception patterns in this digital era.

**Table 1. Data Presentation**

Perception Category	Percentage (%)
Trust in Traditional Clerics	40%
Trust in Online Preachers	25%
Skepticism towards Online Authorities	20%
Contextual Trust	15%

##### 2. Research Data Analysis

Analysis of the data reveals that most respondents continue to prefer ulama who possess traditional legitimacy, such as graduates of pesantren or leading Islamic universities. However, there is also a high acceptance of online preachers, especially those who use casual language, modern visuals, and a relatable approach. Skepticism arises especially regarding viral content that is considered too provocative or lacks a strong scientific foundation.

Further analysis reveals that age and educational level significantly influence these perceptions. Younger respondents (aged 18-25) tend to be more open to digital authorities, while those aged 30 and above are more critical and selective. Higher education also increases the critical ability to evaluate the legitimacy of online religious authorities.

An in-depth analysis of the data shows a strong preference for formal credential-based authority among respondents with traditional religious education backgrounds. However, younger generations (18-25 years old) with a high intensity of social media use tend to be more flexible in accepting online authorities, provided

that the preacher is considered culturally relevant, communicative, and personally trustworthy. One interesting pattern is the relationship between the level of religious digital literacy and the level of skepticism towards online authority figures. Those who have a better understanding of media literacy tend not to immediately trust religious information based on the popularity of the figure or the number of social media followers, but rather consider the source of the information, its consistency of teachings, and openness to differing opinions.

### 3. Research Data Interpretation

Interpretations of the results from this study suggest that perceptions of online religious authorities are highly contextualized and not homogeneous. Factors that increase urban communities' trust in online authorities include preachers' educational backgrounds, active involvement in online discussions, polite and inclusive communication styles, and the delivery of religious teachings that are adaptable to the challenges of modern life. In contrast, preachers who exhibit exclusive, intolerant, or political attitudes tend to lose the trust of their audience more quickly. This shows that in the digital space, the validity of authority is not only determined by scientific sanad, but also by social skills and the ability to manage interactions with online communities.

Several key findings support this conclusion. Notably, 70% of respondents actively verify the educational background or religious institutional affiliation of online preachers before adopting their teachings. About 55% said they compare different da'wah sources to get a more balanced view. However, 45% also admitted that exposure to a wide variety of interpretations on social media often leads them to theological confusion. Interestingly, 30% of respondents admitted to having stopped following a preacher after detecting unclear teachings or extreme ideological bias. This indicates that there is an active dynamic in the selection of authority in the digital space, which extends beyond mere popularity.

The results of this study support Bunt's (2018) findings on the plurality of authorities in the Islamist digital space, where fragmentation of authority is an inevitable phenomenon. This research also enriches Campbell's (2013) discussion on the importance of performativity in building credibility in online spaces. However, in contrast to some previous studies that emphasize the dominance of new figures, this research adds a dimension: Indonesian urban Muslim communities still exhibit authority dualism, recognizing traditional legitimacy while opening up space for adaptation to new figures in specific contexts.

One of the proposed solutions to overcome the challenge of authority fragmentation is the establishment of a **digital da'wah certification program** based on authorization from credible religious institutions. This program aims to provide labels

or accreditation for online preachers who meet scientific criteria, adhere to preaching ethics, and possess public communication skills. Additionally, enhancing religious digital literacy at the community level is crucial for building resilience against misinformation and the spread of extreme narratives on social media. Through this solution, the digital space can be maintained so that it remains a healthy and enlightening means of da'wah, strengthening the brotherhood of Muslims.

In terms of the theoretical framework, the results of this study are closely related to Campbell's (2012) **Authority Transition Theory**, which posits that religious authority shifts from formal structures to performance-based structures and interactions in the digital space. In addition, this study is also relevant to Gerbner and Gross's **Cultivation Theory** (1976), which emphasizes that the intensity and quality of exposure to online religious content shape viewers' perceptions of spiritual reality, even influencing the formation of new social norms within online communities.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Traditional and Digital Authority Phenomenon**

The phenomenon observed in this study reveals a new reality in the religious life of urban Muslim communities, specifically the coexistence of two worlds of authority that operate in parallel: traditional authority and digital authority. Urban worshipers do not completely abandon old institutions, such as pesantren, majelis taklim, or formal religious organizations; however, in their daily practices, they also actively access, follow, and even adopt new figures from social media. They combine these religious sources flexibly based on their spiritual, emotional, and intellectual needs. This suggests that religiosity among urban Muslims is no longer linear or controlled in one direction by authoritative institutions, but instead becomes a personal negotiation space where individuals become active participants in determining their own religious preferences.

This condition illustrates the dynamic nature of religious identity in the digital era. The adaptability of urban Muslim communities in adopting two different sources of authority simultaneously reflects the need to maintain the continuity of traditional values while embracing innovations in the delivery format of da'wah that are more contextual. Thus, the religiosity of Indonesian urban communities appears to be increasingly hybrid: combining traditional scholarly-based authority with communicative and modern packaging provided by digital religious figures. This phenomenon challenges classic assumptions about the exclusivity of religious authority and paves the way for new studies of the plurality of spiritual authority in the contemporary urban context.

## **2. Challenges for Traditional Religious Institutions**

In this context, traditional religious institutions face significant challenges in maintaining their authority amid the rapid flow of digital information. The historical legitimacy that has been their main capital is no longer enough to maintain the loyalty of worshipers, especially the younger generation. Traditional institutions must be able to transform from institutional-based actors to communicative actors who are actively involved in the digital space. This means they need to adopt social media platforms, produce audio-visual-based da'wah content, build online communities, and train young da'i to be effective communicators in cyberspace.

Without this adaptation effort, traditional institutions risk losing their influence, as a more critical younger generation tends to seek alternative religious sources that are more accessible, more communicative, and more in line with their lifestyles. This risk is not just about losing congregants, but also about fragmentation of religious authority more broadly, which could have implications for social religious polarization. Therefore, digital transformation is no longer an option, but a necessity for religious institutions that want to remain relevant and play an active role in shaping the religious identity of Muslims in the information age.

## **3. Community Adaptation Strategies**

In terms of the urban Muslim community itself, it is crucial to develop a collective adaptation strategy in response to the complexity of the digital da'wah space. One strategy that can be developed is the formation of a digital religious literacy community, where community members can share credible information, critically discuss da'wah content, and provide recommendations for online preachers who have proven to be consistent and moderate in their approach. Community-based online study forums, with sources verified for credibility, are also an important alternative to overcome the dominance of viral content that is not necessarily of high quality.

Additionally, the development of applications that verify da'wah content or rate preachers based on their credentials and track records can be a valuable and innovative solution. By utilizing technology, communities can be empowered to become more critical and selective consumers of religious information. This adaptation is crucial so that urban Muslim communities can maintain a moderate level of religiosity and interact healthily in the face of the digital era's challenges.

## **4. Literacy Empowerment among Youth**

Strengthening religious-based digital literacy among youth is one of the urgent priorities in building a healthy digital da'wah ecosystem. Youth need to be equipped with the skills to recognize bias in religious information, understand the principles of fact verification, and constructively criticize the religious narratives they consume on

social media. This digital literacy education should make them realize that online popularity does not always reflect the depth or validity of the teachings carried by a religious figure.

This literacy program can be realized through collaboration between formal education institutions, civil society organizations, religious institutions, and even social media platforms themselves. Activities such as webinars, interactive trainings, literacy-based da'wah content competitions, or even integration in high school and university curricula need to be expanded. In this way, young Muslims are expected to become agents of change in building a more thoughtful, more inclusive, and responsible digital religious culture.

### **5. Future Research Direction**

This research presents numerous opportunities for further academic exploration. One important direction for future research is to conduct longitudinal studies, which observe how perceptions of online religious authority evolve and how these changes impact the religious practices, social attitudes, and value orientations of urban Muslims. Additionally, experimental research could be conducted to investigate the effects of exposure to moderate versus extreme proselytizing content on religious tolerance and socio-political attitudes.

A mixed-method approach is also worth considering, combining exploratory qualitative data with large-scale quantitative surveys to more broadly map variations in perceptions based on demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and level of religiosity. Comparative explorations between major cities or even between countries with significant Muslim populations would enrich global understanding of the relationship between religious authorities, digital spaces, and the changing culture of contemporary religiosity.

### **4. Conclusion**

This research reveals that the perceptions of urban Muslim communities regarding online religious authorities are dynamic, selective, and contextual, reflecting a negotiation between traditional, institutionally based authorities and new authorities based on popularity and digital performance. Most respondents still show a high regard for traditional ulama, but also pragmatically accept online authority figures who are considered credible, communicative, and relevant to the needs of modern life. Factors such as educational background, communication style, institutional affiliation, and openness to differences are key to the acceptance or rejection of religious authority in the digital space. This research underscores the significance of establishing a credible digital da'wah ecosystem through online da'wah certification and promoting religious media literacy, particularly among the younger

generation. For future research, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study to understand how long-term exposure to online religious authorities shapes the religious behavior, social attitudes, and value orientations of urban Muslim communities, as well as explore variations in perceptions based on digital platforms and more diverse socio-demographic backgrounds.

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