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# Digital Religion: Social Media and the Spread of Salafi Thought in Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study examines religious phenomena that occur on social media platforms, especially YouTube, Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. The platform is a medium for spreading understanding of Salafi thought in Indonesia using a digital ethnographic approach. This article aims to understand the pattern of dissemination, interpretation, and acceptance of Salafi ideas in Indonesian society. The focus of the study includes aspects of content visibility, audience engagement, and ideological models that are raised. Data was obtained from the accounts of Indonesian Salafi figures who have a large following and reach a wide audience. This article focuses on audience engagement indicators such as user interaction, content dissemination and participatory responses

analyzed with the theory of religious mediatization and digital religious authority. This study reveals how preachers adjust their da'wah strategies to increase the visibility and legitimacy of religious authority in the online space. This article contributes to the understanding of the relationship between religion and technology and the real impact of digital media on the formation of religious authority and participation in the context of Indonesian Islam.

Keywords: Moderation, preacher, religion, salafi, technology

### **Abstrak**

Studi ini mengkaji fenomena keagamaan yang terjadi di platform media sosial, khususnya YouTube, Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, dan Telegram. Platform tersebut menjadi media dalam menyebarkan pemahaman terhadap pemikiran Salafi di Indonesia dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi digital. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk memahami pola diseminasi, interpretasi, dan penerimaan ide-ide Salafi pada masyarakat Indonesia. Fokus kajian mencakup aspek visibilitas konten, keterlibatan audiens, serta model ideologis yang ditimbulkan. Data diperoleh dari akun-akun para tokoh Salafi Indonesia yang mempunyai pengikut banyak dan menjangkau audiens luas. Artikel ini memiliki fokus kajian pada indikator keterlibatan audiens seperti interaksi pengguna, penyebaran konten dan respons partisipatif yang dianalisis dengan teori mediatisasi agama dan otoritas keagamaan digital. Studi ini mengungkap bagaimana para pendakwah menyesuaikan strategi dakwah mereka untuk meningkatkan visibilitas dan legitimasi otoritas religius di ruang daring. Artikel ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pemahaman relasi antara agama dan teknologi serta dampak nyata media digital terhadap pembentukan otoritas dan partisipasi keagamaan dalam konteks Islam Indonesia.

Katakunci: Agama, moderasi, pendakwah, salafi, teknologi

### **Introduction**

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly transformed the dissemination and reception of religious ideologies, notably within Islam. Among the various Islamic movements, Salafism—with its stringent theological framework and considerable global influence—has adeptly navigated the digital landscape (Adraoui, 2023: 284-294). Social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram have become pivotal arenas for Salafi preachers and influencers to propagate their messages, establish religious authority, and shape followers' perceptions (Salafis et al., 2019). For example, YouTube frequently recommends content aligning with viewers' beliefs, such as Salafi material, which strengthens their current perspectives

(Sorgenfrei, 2021: 212-234). In this context, social media platforms are crucial in shaping and amplifying religious content. They determine which interpretations are emphasized and which are ignored. Understanding how these platforms influence Salafi discourse is essential for grasping the broader impact of religion in the digital age (Aidulsyah, 2023).

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Salafism is becoming more popular, mainly due to social media that spreads different ideological views, both common and more exclusive. The rise of Salafi content on digital platforms raises concerns about how these technologies promote specific ideas and change spiritual authority. As Salafi views gain prominence, they challenge the role of traditional religious institutions that have long helped interpret theology and maintain a variety of beliefs.

This change risks pushing moderate and traditional voices aside, reducing the range of religious discussion, and creating environments where only similar ideas are shared, discouraging critical thinking. In Indonesia's diverse Islamic setting, where various theological schools have coexisted, the unchecked rise of Salafi views threatens pluralism and may lessen the richness of religious thinking. This situation shows the urgent need to understand how digital platforms impact modern religious authority and Indonesia's broader social and religious landscape, highlighting the importance of active participation and critical engagement in religious conversations.

Scholars have extensively explored the intersection of Islam and digital media, emphasizing the influential role of online platforms in shaping contemporary religious discourse. Research, such as Skovgaard-Petersen's (2011) study on the online evolution of Salafi-jihadism, highlights how digital ecosystems selectively amplify certain ideological strands. Other scholars, including Hussain (2022), have explored how religious movements leverage social media to establish virtual authority. Despite progress in understanding how exclusive ideologies spread online, there remains a significant gap in understanding how digital platforms affect the spread of non-jihadist Salafism.

Most existing literature either focuses on pathways to radicalization or on qualitatively analyzing online religious discourse, without systematically examining the influence of digital curation in promoting mainstream Salafi ideology. Broader discussions about online religious engagement often center on issues of authenticity, community building, and the role of religious

authorities, yet they usually overlook how digital infrastructures mediate and shape mainstream Salafi thought (Pall & De Koning, 2017). This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how social media platforms influence the dissemination of Salafi ideology, particularly regarding visibility, engagement, and ideological positioning. While considerable attention has been given to traditional religious scholars in shaping Islamic discourse, little research has been done on how digital curation affects contemporary Salafi movements. Research indicates that Salafi influencers effectively tailor their content to resonate with diverse audiences, boosting their digital reach. Additionally, studies have shown that Salafist mosques in the Netherlands are more active on platforms like Twitter and YouTube, attracting larger followings compared to non-Salafist mosques (Adraoui, 2023). Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding the broader implications of digital platforms on religious discourse and authority structures within Islam.

This research is part of broader discussions about the influence of media power and its impact on the digital public sphere. Scholars such as Nasir (2023) and Kfir (2018) have critiqued the lack of transparency in decision-making processes, raising concerns about bias, misinformation, and reinforcing ideological bubbles. By applying these critiques to the study of Salafi discourse, this research reveals how technological infrastructures may inadvertently favor or marginalize certain religious voices. It also raises important and thought-provoking ethical questions regarding the neutrality of platform decision-making and its unintended role in shaping religious debates. Recent studies have examined how social media platforms play a role in political radicalization and ideological polarization, showing that platforms often prioritize content designed to maximize user engagement, which can amplify extreme viewpoints (Ramaioli, 2023; Merone, 2023).

Research on digital Islam has demonstrated that Salafi preachers have effectively adapted their messaging strategies to optimize engagement and leverage platform features (Sheikhzadegan, 2020: 196-219). However, there is still a notable gap in understanding how content moderation influences the spread of Salafism in Indonesia, where state policies, historical factors, and diverse interpretations of Islam uniquely shape the religious landscape. Addressing this gap is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the role of digital platforms in religious discourse. This study employs digital ethnography to thoroughly examine the interactions and engagement strategies of prominent Salafi preachers and social media figures. It focuses on

how Salafi content is amplified in digital spaces, analyzing their online activities and their impact on religious discourse. The individuals included in this research were selected based on their follower counts and engagement metrics, which are key influence indicators within these online communities.

The study uncovers patterns of audience interaction, the workload associated with content dissemination, and how religious messages are framed and conveyed in digital environments. It also evaluates the role of platform features in enhancing the visibility and reach of Salafi discourse. This provides practical insights into how content gains prominence in digital religious contexts, which can be applied to understand and influence online religious discourse. This study examines a crucial issue: the influence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on the visibility and interaction with Salafi content. It investigates how these digital tools challenge traditional religious authority and shape various expressions of Islam in Indonesia.

The features of these platforms can amplify Salafi discussions, extending their reach while also creating echo chambers that reinforce narrow interpretations of Islam. This digital amplification can push traditional and moderate beliefs to the margins, diminishing the role of established religious institutions and altering the discourse surrounding religion in Indonesia. In a country with a diverse history of Islamic thought, where moderate, traditional, and reformist groups have long debated theology, the dominant presence of Salafi voices may restrict the diversity of Islamic perspectives and promote rigid interpretations. However, this study also highlights the potential for positive change. It encourages the audience to critically assess these digital tools and actively engage in efforts to mitigate their influence. This is essential for maintaining inclusive discussions about Islam in Indonesia, reflecting its rich theological diversity.

### **The Digitalization of Salafi Thought**

In the modern era, the internet has profoundly transformed the dissemination of religious ideologies, including Salafism, which seeks to return to the practices of the early Muslim community. Salafi thought, traditionally confined to mosques, Islamic study circles (*halaqah*), and printed publications, has now undergone significant digitalization (Pall & De Koning, 2017). This shift has enabled various factions within the movement—quietist, activist, and jihadist Salafis—to expand their reach, influence, and interactions beyond

their immediate physical environments. Indonesia, with one of the largest Muslim populations globally, is a pivotal site for ideological transformation. The country's widespread internet connectivity has revolutionized religious discussions, enabling a variety of voices and perspectives to thrive in the digital sphere. Online platforms, where the audience's contributions are significant, have gained influence, serving as crucial spaces for exchanging and shaping new interpretations and debates about faith (Anshori et al., 2021: 40-48). The historical evolution of Salafism in Indonesia began in the 20th century, driven by scholars educated in the Middle East who introduced its teachings to the archipelago (Bruinessen, 2022).

Initially, Salafi scholars relied on traditional methods, such as study circles and personal mentorship. However, their outreach strategies have dramatically changed with the rise of the internet and social media. Quietist Salafis, who emphasize personal piety and avoidance of political activism, have utilized digital platforms to promote Islamic teachings through online lectures, podcasts, and e-books. Prominent figures within this stream have developed large followings on YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram, where they provide religious rulings, guidance on Islamic jurisprudence, and responses to contemporary issues.

Activist Salafis, who engage in social and political participation, have embraced digital tools to influence public policy and religious debates. In Indonesia, Salafi-oriented groups have effectively used social media to mobilize mass protests, such as the demonstrations against Jakarta's former governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), in 2016 and 2017. Their online campaigns have successfully rallied conservative Muslims and shaped political discourse (Noorhaidi, 2018). Additionally, some factions utilize platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to disseminate religious narratives that align with their socio-political goals, often reinforcing a rigid interpretation of Islam while rejecting perceived Western influences. However, the most concerning aspect of Salafi digitalization is the jihadist faction, which exploits online spaces for radicalization and recruitment (Jahroni, 2015).

Despite government efforts to limit extremist content, jihadist networks continue to thrive on encrypted messaging apps and dark web forums. In Indonesia, groups such as Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), which is affiliated with ISIS, have leveraged digital platforms to distribute propaganda, indoctrinate followers, and coordinate attacks (Woodward, 2017). The 2018 Surabaya bombings, in which families carried out suicide attacks, were

partially facilitated by online radicalization. The ability of jihadist Salafis to evade digital surveillance underscores the persistent challenge of countering extremism in cyberspace. The Indonesian government and civil society organizations recognize the urgent need to counter radical narratives online. Initiatives such as the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) and Nahdlatul Ulama's cyber da'wah efforts aim to combat extremist ideologies by promoting moderate Islamic teachings. Digital literacy campaigns have also been introduced to help young internet users critically assess religious content and avoid falling into radical echo chambers. While these efforts have made progress, the rapid evolution of online platforms necessitates continuous adaptation of counter-radicalization strategies (Birchok, 2023: 338-341).

Despite concerns over extremist narratives, the digitalization of Salafism is not inherently harmful. Many quietists and moderate Salafi scholars have leveraged the internet to provide accessible religious knowledge, debunk misconceptions, and guide Muslims toward ethical living. Platforms like YouTube and Telegram have become essential tools for disseminating Islamic teachings, helping followers deepen their understanding of faith without direct political or militant affiliations (Hasan, 2018).

The challenge remains in distinguishing between legitimate religious discourse and content that fosters intolerance or extremism. As Salafi's thought continues to evolve in the digital realm, its impact on Indonesian society largely depends on how online platforms are utilized. While digital media has democratized access to religious knowledge (Merone et al., 2021: 1-16), it has also amplified ideological divisions and given extremist factions new avenues for outreach. Moving forward, a balanced approach—combining regulation, counter-narratives, and digital education—will be crucial in ensuring that the digitalization of Salafism contributes to a peaceful and constructive religious environment rather than fueling ideological conflict.

The rise of Salafi content on social media has significantly disrupted Indonesia's traditional landscape of religious authority. This shift has created growing tension between established clerics and digital preachers. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram have enabled digital preachers, many affiliated with Salafi movements, to reach millions of followers directly, bypassing the established religious hierarchy. Traditional clerics, who historically held the primary role in shaping religious thought through mosques, halaqahs, and print media, now face challenges from these digital voices.

Salafi teachings—whether quietist, activist, or jihadist—spread rapidly online, they often confront the moderate and inclusive interpretations traditionally promoted by local Islamic organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). These tech-savvy digital preachers offer alternative interpretations of Islam, which can lead to a rise in religious conservatism that clashes with more pluralistic views. The situation is further complicated by the unregulated nature of digital platforms, which allow a wide range of religious discourse, including intolerant or extremist ideologies. A 2020 study conducted by the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology revealed that approximately 30% of the religious content circulated on social media was found to be exclusive or politically charged. This revelation underscores the critical importance of regulating these platforms and brings to light the intricate nature of the evolving religious authority (Maemonah et al., 2023).

### **Salafi Content Visibility**

In the digital age, social media platforms facilitate religious discourse, significantly influencing how Islamic teachings, including Salafi interpretations, are disseminated. Selective content filtering improves specific narratives, reinforces ideological perspectives, and affects religious engagement patterns. In Indonesia, where Islam is the predominant religion, Salafi teachings have gained popularity through platforms such as YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and Telegram. The relationship between recommendation systems and Salafi discourse is complex, raising essential questions about visibility, reach, and the reinforcement of ideologies. YouTube's recommendation system, a major factor in the spread of Salafi content, is a significant influence on the platform. It prioritizes watch time, engagement, and user retention, often directing viewers toward more radical or purist interpretations. This complexity underscores the need for in-depth media studies and religious discourse analysis (Sinani, 2022).

In Indonesia, well-known Salafi preachers like Ustadz Khalid Basalamah, Ustadz Firanda Andirja, Ustadz Zainal Abidin Syamsuddin, and Ustadz Muhammad Abduh Tuasikal have skillfully utilized YouTube to amass large audiences and expand their influence. Their content, often recommended to users who engage with Islamic teachings rooted in classical interpretations, creates a powerful feedback loop. This loop increases exposure to Salafi viewpoints, enhancing the visibility of Salafi discourse and marginalizing alternative Islamic perspectives that do not align with YouTube's engagement-

driven model. Recent studies have provided empirical evidence that Twitter's content ranking mechanisms amplify Salafi discourse in Indonesia (Siyech, 2017; Othman Alkaff & Bin Jani, 2021; Rusli, 2014).

One study, which analyzed 2,000 tweets from 20 Islamic fundamentalist accounts, found that these groups primarily use Twitter to disseminate information, followed by community-building and mobilization efforts. The study revealed that tweets focused on spreading information garnered higher engagement, particularly in terms of retweets, compared to those centered on calls to action or community building. This suggests that Twitter favors content that disseminates information, increasing visibility for these posts. Further research (Rosadi, 2022; Duderija & Rasool, 2019; Amghar, 2023) analyzing 23,433 tweets identified the top ten religious issues discussed by Indonesian Twitter users, with the hashtag #salafi leading the conversations. Other prominent hashtags included #wahabi, #intoleransi (intolerance), and #radikalisme (radicalism). It is important to highlight that these issues are interconnected and often appear together in discussions, creating echo chambers where specific interpretations dominate. These implications emphasize the need to understand Twitter's impact on Salafi discourse in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, Salafi groups have successfully used Telegram to create online study groups called *halaqah*. A *halaqah* is a gathering where people gather to learn and discuss religious teachings. Usually, a group sits in a circle, led by a knowledgeable teacher or scholar, to study the Qur'an, Hadith, or other Islamic topics. This casual format, guided by experienced leaders, helps people learn from each other and grow spiritually (Olsson, 2020: 1-16). These *halaqahs* serve as platforms for disseminating Salafi doctrines, promoting ideological consistency, and fostering a sense of community among followers. One notable example is the "Salafy Indonesia" channel on Telegram, which has over 66,700 subscribers. This channel shares content, including photos, videos, and files related to Salafi's teachings. The administrators not only encourage the dissemination of their materials but also emphasize the integral role of the audience in this process, provided the content remains unaltered and the source is credited. The channel also lists official media outlets and contact information, indicating a structured approach to their digital outreach.

Additionally, numerous other Salafi-focused Telegram channels cater to specific audiences. For instance, channels like "Forum Salafy Indonesia" and "*Manhajul Anbiya*" provide religious content tailored for male followers. In

contrast, channels such as "Salafiyat Indonesia" and "Nisaa Assunnah" are dedicated to female adherents. These channels offer a range of materials, from theological discussions to practical advice on daily religious practices. The utilization of Telegram for these *halaqahs* underscores the platform's role in facilitating closed, user-driven communities. The encrypted nature of Telegram ensures that discussions within these groups remain private, allowing for controlled dissemination of information and reinforcement of specific ideological perspectives (Aderus et al., 2023: 291-312).

Telegram, a messaging platform, plays a significant role in the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly within closed groups. The impact of this misinformation is profound, as research shows that the platform's lack of moderation allows it to proliferate unchecked. A clear example is the Salafi-oriented *halaqah* groups in Indonesia. These religious communities use Telegram to form insular groups, fostering discussions that reinforce their beliefs. This often leads to the swift dissemination of unverified information. The absence of external oversight and Telegram's emphasis on privacy can lead to the formation of echo chambers, making it even more challenging to combat misinformation in these contexts (Jahroni, 2020).

This method encourages active participation among members and strengthens ideological uniformity by regulating information flow and reducing exposure to opposing viewpoints. The mechanisms governing content visibility and distribution heavily shape the online discourse surrounding Salafi content. While they facilitate discussions on religious topics, they also give rise to serious challenges. One such challenge is the creation of echo chambers, where users are exposed only to opinions that align with their beliefs.

This severely restricts the diversity of ideas in Islamic discussions and facilitates the unchecked spread of misinformation, such as the propagation of exclusive ideologies or the misinterpretation of religious texts. Moreover, these systems amplify certain viewpoints, thereby marginalizing alternative Islamic perspectives. As a result, users find it increasingly difficult to access a comprehensive view of their faith. Authorities and religious scholars in Indonesia have taken action to tackle these issues.

They are promoting alternative ideas to create a more balanced online religious space. Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah run digital outreach programs to share more inclusive viewpoints. These efforts challenge extreme beliefs and empower followers to think critically about their faith and its online

representation (Emmerich, 2023: 413-43). Despite these challenges, there is potential for positive change. Understanding how social media systems shape religious discourse is key to navigating the future of digital Islam in Indonesia. As technology plays an increasingly central role in religious engagement, there is an urgent and growing need for greater transparency and accountability in managing content (Kohn et al., 2020). Addressing the unintended consequences of content amplification while protecting the freedom of religious expression is a significant challenge. However, policymakers, tech companies, and religious leaders are uniquely positioned to address it. The digital landscape will continue to be a battleground for competing religious narratives, making it essential to promote digital literacy and awareness regarding how content is prioritized among Indonesian Muslims.

### **Patterns of Engagement and Audience Reception**

The digital landscape has significantly transformed religious discourse, allowing movements like Salafism to reach broad and diverse audiences. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become vital channels for disseminating Salafi teachings, often increasing their reach through recommendations and targeted content. It can better understand how different audience groups interact with Salafi content by analyzing user engagement metrics—likes, shares, and comments—alongside digital ethnography data. These patterns reveal the extent to which Salafi narratives resonate with online users and how digital platforms shape religious engagement (Riviere, 2016).

One of the most notable aspects of Salafi digital engagement in Indonesia is how social media platforms prioritize content that generates high engagement levels, increasing its visibility. Influential Salafi preachers, such as *Ustadz* Khalid Basalamah and *Ustadz* Syafiq Riza Basalamah, take advantage of this system, as their videos often receive thousands of interactions. Their messages focus on doctrinal purity and Islamic orthodoxy, and they are frequently shared by devoted followers, extending their reach beyond immediate religious circles. This engagement creates a feedback loop, making popular Salafi content even more prominent in users' feeds. Interestingly, different audience segments engage with Salafi content in various ways; casual viewers may interact out of curiosity or a desire for religious knowledge, without fully committing to the movement, while others may be more deeply involved. (Merone et al., 2021).

In contrast, dedicated followers actively contribute to the spread of Salafi teachings by sharing videos, defending preachers in comment sections, and participating in online discussions. Some followers also establish online communities to reinforce their beliefs, creating a digital network that sustains and strengthens their religious identity (Battat et al., 2024). These interactions indicate that Salafi engagement involves passive consumption, active participation, and community-building. However, not all engagement with Salafi content is positive. Critics and skeptics often challenge Salafi narratives, leading to heated debates in comment sections and discussion forums. Some users question the rigid interpretations of Islam promoted by Salafi preachers, while others accuse them of fostering sectarian divisions.

This digital contestation reflects broader societal tensions in Indonesia, where religious pluralism often intersects with conservative interpretations of Islam. While critics often engage confrontationally, their involvement increases the visibility of Salafi content, as online systems do not distinguish between positive and negative interactions. By examining user behavior on social media platforms, the author discerns Salafi's teachings' impact on online and offline activities. For instance, the "One Day One Juz" (ODOJ) movement, a shining example of the potential of digital religious movements, utilizes WhatsApp to encourage Muslims to read one section of the Qur'an daily, fostering a semi-virtual Qur'anic community that bridges online engagement with offline religious practice. As of this study, ODOJ had successfully recruited more than 140,000 followers in Indonesia and abroad, indicating the movement's extensive reach and influence. Indonesia's high internet penetration amplifies the outreach of such digital religious movements. As of January 2024, internet penetration in Indonesia reached 79.5%, up from 78.1% in 2023. This growth is particularly notable among younger demographics, with Generation Z (ages 12-27) exhibiting an 87.02% penetration rate (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2021). This widespread internet access facilitates the dissemination of Salafi content, allowing it to shape offline behaviors, including social interactions and potentially voting patterns.

Salafi content on platforms like Instagram skillfully adapts to contemporary issues to remain relevant to Indonesian audiences. Influencers associated with Salafi beliefs, including those who manage the Instagram account @dakwah\_tauhid, share their interpretations of Islam by engaging with modern topics such as lifestyle choices and current events. This strategy promotes ongoing engagement and helps retain the audience by addressing

their immediate interests and concerns. Furthermore, technology is crucial in shaping visibility and content reach, significantly influencing how Salafi narratives are consumed and shared. Active participation from followers and contextual adaptation further enhance this engagement (Tais, 2024). In Indonesia's changing religious landscape, these interactions will continue to influence the future of Islamic discourse, reflecting broader societal tensions.

### **Digital Authority in Religious Discourse**

In the digital age, the religious authority has dramatically changed. It's no longer confined to traditional institutions like mosques, pesantren, Islamic boarding schools, or prestigious universities. Instead, social media has emerged as a powerful tool in religious discussions. Individuals, including preachers, scholars, and influential figures, now use these platforms to share and reinforce their religious beliefs. They connect with a vast audience through captivating posts, live streams, and stimulating conversations. This has led to communities where people can share, discuss, and reshape their faith, all outside the confines of traditional settings (Buckley et al., 2023). Salafi preachers in Indonesia are among the most notable figures using online spaces.

They utilize various rhetorical strategies, branding techniques, and content formats to establish credibility and expand their followership (Muthohirin et al., 2022). Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have provided Salafi preachers with unparalleled reach. Through engaging and emotionally impactful content, they capture the attention of a broad audience, including young Muslims who are looking for guidance in an increasingly complex world (Berger & Golan, 2024: 1-16).

One prominent rhetorical strategy is the appeal to scriptural purity, which emphasizes a return to the Quran and Hadith while rejecting innovations (*bid'ah*) in religious practice (Lubis, 2023). *Bid'ah* refers to any religious belief or practice considered an innovation that does not align with Islam's original teachings. This approach, which involves strict adherence to the original texts of Islam, resonates deeply with audiences who desire certainty in their faith. It also has the potential to shape and influence a more conservative interpretation of Islam significantly. Additionally, these preachers skillfully incorporate trending topics, such as discussions on morality, politics, and personal development, aligning their teachings with contemporary societal concerns.

The role of branding in the digital expansion of Salafi's influence is a key factor that many preachers leverage. They present themselves as authentic and uncorrupted by mainstream religious institutions, positioning their teachings as a purer alternative to traditional Islamic scholars. This self-presentation is often reinforced by high-quality production values, including crisp visuals, high-definition recordings, and aesthetically pleasing Islamic calligraphy or minimalist designs in their content.

Consistent color themes, typography, and personal branding further enhance their online authority, making them recognizable figures in Indonesia's digital religious landscape (Muttaqin, 2020: 165-174). Social media platforms amplify content that generates high engagement, which means preachers must tailor their messages to be shareable and emotionally impactful. Clickbait-style titles, reaction videos (videos where the creator reacts to something, often emotionally), and touchingly feeling-driven content are increasingly used to capture audience attention. Additionally, platforms reward frequent uploads, prompting many Salafi influencers to adopt daily posting schedules, live streaming, and interactive Q&A sessions to maintain visibility (Husein, 2021).

At times, the interplay between digital metrics and religious messaging has shifted from profound theological discussions to emotionally charged narratives designed to maximize engagement (Hannan & Fatayillah, 2023). This shift is not without its challenges, as recent developments in Indonesia highlight. Recent developments in Indonesia highlight the challenges of this shift. The emergence of TikTok-based da'wah (Islamic preaching) has sparked debates over the suitability of religious content in short-form videos. State authorities and Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, are actively working to counter the influence of independent digital preachers.

They are doing so by promoting moderate interpretations of Islam online, thereby preserving traditional values (Akmaliah, 2022: 223-243). Government initiatives regulating online religious discussions, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs' "Cyber Da'wah" programs, reflect growing concerns about misinformation and exclusionary rhetoric in the digital space. Establishing digital religious authority in Indonesia is a continually evolving process, which is both intriguing and challenging. While social media offers new opportunities for broader religious engagement, it raises crucial questions about credibility, authenticity, and accountability in religious leadership. As

digital platforms continue influencing religious discussions, scholars, policymakers, and religious communities must understand the mechanisms behind digital religious authority.

### **Content Moderation Challenges**

Religious content on social media has become a significant issue, especially when it intersects with religious expression, including discussions about Islam. Social media platforms struggle to balance regulating harmful content and protecting freedom of speech, and they are influenced by automated systems and keyword recognition. In Islam, a deep understanding of 'sharia' and 'fatwa' is not just beneficial but essential for spiritual and legal reasons. Without this knowledge, these terms can be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted, leading to confusion or even censorship.

'Sharia,' the set of Islamic laws based on the Qur'an, the Hadith, and other sources, plays a pivotal role in guiding every aspect of a Muslim's life, from prayer to everyday activities. Understanding this is crucial for respect and connection with the Islamic culture. A 'fatwa' is not just a legal opinion but a scholarly interpretation of Islamic law. It is given by an Islamic scholar or jurist in response to a specific question, showcasing their deep understanding and expertise in the field. Both terms are crucial in Islam and should be adequately understood to prevent confusion or misuse in online discussions. This misinterpretation can stifle authentic dialogue and threaten the diversity of religious voices in the digital public sphere.

These challenges are compounded in Indonesia, a country characterized by significant religious diversity. Minority Islamic groups, such as the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities, often face disproportionate censorship. This can lead to the marginalization of these groups, fostering social fragmentation and contributing to ideological polarization (Meirison & Harir, 2020: 2-17). To address these issues, content moderation frameworks must evolve to incorporate more sophisticated, context-aware systems. These systems should protect users from harmful content while ensuring the free expression of religious beliefs, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and balanced online environment (Evazpour & Akvani, 2019: 55-77). Indonesia's blasphemy laws have increasingly permeated the realm of online content, leading to the swift removal of materials considered offensive to Islamic values. This is a legal issue and a pressing concern for the digital space. A striking example occurred in March 2023 when social media influencer Lina Lutfiawati was handed a two-

year prison sentence and slapped with a hefty fine of around \$16,000. The court found her guilty after she posted a video in which she recited an Islamic prayer before consuming food that contained pork, a substance strictly forbidden in Islam.

The charges against her were brought forth by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), a powerful and influential Islamic organization in the nation, which underscored the serious nature of the allegations and ultimately facilitated her conviction. In Indonesia, there have been numerous instances where educational and devotional materials—crafted by respected religious scholars and content creators—were either removed or severely restricted due to their perceived blasphemous nature. This alarming trend starkly contrasts with the tolerance surrounding other forms of speech, some of which can be intentionally inflammatory yet remain unpunished. Such discrepancies highlight significant flaws in the current automated moderation systems, which often struggle to contextualize the content appropriately, thereby contributing to an uneven and unjust application of justice in matters of free expression (Jacobsen, 2019).

In today's digital landscape, the issue of bias in content moderation, particularly concerning discussions about religion, has emerged as a pressing concern. Content moderation frequently perpetuates existing biases, promoting specific narratives while inadvertently suppressing others. This imbalance can lead to a troubling amplification of exclusive ideologies on popular platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, where sensational content often overshadows more moderate viewpoints. As a result, nuanced conversations are sidelined, creating an environment where more extreme beliefs can thrive unchecked, distorting the overall discourse and shaping public perceptions in profound ways.

Studies, including Andok's (2023) on filter bubbles and Calosa et al. (2023) on social media bias, indicate that automated systems amplify content that enhances user engagement, often sensational or polarizing, which worsens the spread of exclusive ideologies. As Salafi movements increase their online presence, content moderation systems are scrutinized for ineffectively addressing exclusive content without infringing on free speech. Scholars like Tufekci (2014) and Helberger (2020) advocate for greater transparency in content moderation and the assurance of human oversight. Potential solutions to reduce biases in moderation include diversifying training datasets and employing more nuanced methods for addressing religious discourse.

Promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding is a critical strategy for navigating the complexities of religious expression. Expanding the conversation around digital religious content and its potential biases is essential for balancing the protection of freedom of expression with the prevention of harmful ideologies. Ultimately, these efforts aim to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for online religious discourse.

The bias in content moderation raises concerns about the unequal treatment of religious groups. It is especially troubling when content that encourages interfaith dialogue or peaceful discussions about religion is removed, while more controversial or divisive materials remain accessible. The need for unbiased content moderation is paramount, as it highlights the issue of bias in treating religious groups (Pribadi, 2019).

The imbalance in interfaith relations in Indonesia can intensify societal tensions, as these relations are particularly sensitive. Additionally, the lack of transparency in moderation decisions causes frustration among religious communities, who feel that their voices are being silenced arbitrarily. In 2021, Indonesia implemented stricter controls on digital platforms, requiring them to remove inappropriate or blasphemous content within tight deadlines. While these regulations aim to reduce harmful speech, they unintentionally pressure platforms to over-censor religious content to avoid penalties. As a result, spiritual educators, preachers, and content creators face increased scrutiny, often leading to self-censorship due to concerns about violating vague guidelines (Riviere, 2016).

Social media platforms must take responsibility for their content moderation by improving transparency and accountability. This involves refining methods to understand the complexities of religious expression better and engaging local religious scholars for cultural insights. Research indicates that filtering systems often struggle to distinguish between different forms of religious content, occasionally suppressing legitimate, non-violent discussions. This can seriously affect freedom of expression (Shin et al., 2022: 887-907). Platforms should create advanced systems that can differentiate between peaceful religious content and material that has the potential to provoke violence. Furthermore, it is essential to educate moderators about local cultural and religious contexts, enabling them to identify subtle distinctions in the content (Hjarvard, 2016).

## Conclusion

This research highlights how social media significantly spread Salafi ideology in Indonesia, especially on platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram. It examines how these platforms amplify Salafi content such as sermons, lectures, and debates. The study shows how these religious messages become more visible, reinforcing echo chambers. Salafi preachers use social media to bypass traditional religious authorities, allowing their messages to reach large and diverse audiences. This shift in how online religious discourse affects spiritual authority in Indonesia, where conventional Islamic institutions face challenges from digital influencers.

The study emphasizes the need to understand how social media influences religious discussions, particularly in Indonesia's diverse Islamic landscape. The unregulated spread of Salafi content on these platforms may limit discussions, push aside moderate voices, and create a more polarized religious environment. As Salafi preachers tailor their content to fit platform features, they boost the visibility of their messages, encouraging engagement while excluding other interpretations of Islam. This trend threatens the valued pluralism in Indonesian Islam. It calls for closer examination of the digital spaces used for religious discussions.

The research also stresses the need for a balanced way to regulate religious content on social media. It identifies biases that favor certain narratives over others and suggests more nuanced content moderation frameworks. These frameworks should ensure fair representation of various religious perspectives while protecting freedom of expression. As digital platforms shape religious debates, the research highlights the potential for cooperation among policymakers, religious authorities, and technology companies to tackle the challenges of digital religion and its impact on Indonesia's religious landscape.

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