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The Transformation of Islamic Religious Authority

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Abstract

The transformation of religious authority in the digital age is shaped by the interactions between human actors, digital media and algorithmic systems. This study uses digital ethnography to examine how religious authority is constructed and negotiated on digital platforms used by Muslims in Indonesia and globally. This study focuses on seven authoritative figures in the digital Islamic landscape, representing different spectra of authority, from traditional pesantren in Indonesia to transnational apologetics and urban liberalism. The findings reveal patterns of authority delegation in which digital platforms replace human roles in da'wah and Islamic institutions. Religious authority is formed through articulative work that connects the Sunnah, intermediaries (religious scholars), and congregations. Public search data show that digital spaces function as a medium of distribution, where religious authority is shaped by audience responses, message repetition, symbolic affiliation, and the dynamics of debate. This study highlights the role of algorithmic culture and authority representation aesthetics in mediating religious authority in the digital age. Algorithms shape exposure and reach audiences, and representational aesthetics are crucial for disseminating religious content. The study concludes that clerical authority in the digital era results from technocultural mediation, in which the cleric becomes both a figure and representation calculated by machines and validated by the audience's participation.

Keywords: religious authority; Islam; actor-network theory; articulative work; charisma; digital ethnography

1. Introduction

Religious authorities are undergoing significant transformation due to social media, new media, and fragmented religious discourse, which are changing the way these authorities are formed, perceived, and how traditional institutions respond to them (Hannan and Mursyidi 2023; Baidawi 2025; Ma'rufah and Ma'rufah 2023; Turner 2007). From the perspective of online religion and religion in cyberspace, religious authority in the post-foundational era has shifted in terms of its form, source, and the mechanisms of legitimacy. Since the development of the Internet, particularly information about religion, Helland (2016) analyzed this phenomenon by distinguishing between religion online—where websites only provide information without interaction—and online religion, which opens up space for active participation and allows individuals to negotiate or even reshape authority independently. Helland (2016) identified that the presence of digital technology has changed the way we practice religion and has expanded the possibilities for the emergence of new authoritative figures outside conventional structures of religion.

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Within the Islamic tradition, religious authority is shaped by at least three components: the transmission of knowledge within the framework of a school of thought, recognition by peers within a network of scholars, and commitment to the ethics of scholarship (Kister 1994, pp. 84–127). This authority applies as long as a scholar remains within the boundaries of legitimate tradition and performs their functions in the community. From Max Weber's perspective, this component reflects a mixture of traditional authority through the continuity of scholarly heritage within a school of thought and recognition by peers within a network of scholars. In certain dimensions, charismatic elements may also emerge, especially when a scholar's ethical commitment fosters personal exemplarity that inspires obedience among followers beyond formal structures. The *praeternatural* element of charisma and the focus on the personal qualities of charismatic persons have often prevailed, with less regard to the role of grace in endowing persons, places, and objects (Pantić and Lohlker 2025). The role of the Internet as a field of religious action contributes a new element to the study of charisma, restructured by the transformation of religious authority.

Ismail Fajrie Alatas (2021) proposes an alternative approach emphasizing that authority is not the result of inheritance, power, or charisma alone, but is formed through continuous articulative work—a long and intensive social process, like farmers tending their fields day after day. Within this framework, religious authority consists of three components: sunnah, which is the connection to an authoritative past; connectors, which is the ability to translate past values into the present context; and community, which is the capacity to build compliance without coercion in social relations that are continuously nurtured and maintained by the community. This approach helps to bring aspects beyond the concept of charisma into the narrative. Thus, it will be the main framework for this study.

Recent studies have provided evidence of the transformation of religious authority in Islam. From these studies, we identified several prominent patterns of transformation. First, there is a process of delocalization of authority, which is the shift in sources of authority from classical religious centers, such as Al-Azhar or state-sanctioned religious institutions, to transnational digital spaces. In this space, new figures have emerged, such as diaspora preachers, cyber-preachers, and religious influencers (Lohlker 2022), who gain legitimacy through social media, YouTube, and streaming platforms for religious preaching (Bunt 2018, 2022, 2024b, 2024a; Patel 2022; Alatas 2022; Rahimi 2022). Second, this transformation is also marked by the fragmentation and contestation of authority, in which various non-institutional religious actors—such as millennial ustaz, micro-celebrity preachers, and media mujtahids—operate without the control of traditional ulama (Arifianto 2020; Slama 2017). This creates a diversity of authorities that often overlap and even compete with each other to gain public legitimacy through digital metrics such as likes, views and followers (Beta 2019; Abidin 2016). Third, there is a tendency toward hybridization, in which digital actors combine their online charismatic influence with symbolic affiliations with established religious institutions such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah (Arifianto 2020).

However, this transformation has complex social and epistemological consequences (Campbell 2013; Hoover 2016). While widespread access to religious information supports the democratization of knowledge, it also leads to authority disorientation, marked by the proliferation of instant interpretations, DIY fatwas, and religious preaching trapped in the logic of the digital marketplace (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Turner 2007; Slama 2017). Online communities also tend to fragment into religious echo chambers, forming loyalties based on algorithmic preferences and identification with specific authorities (Andok 2023). However, the digital space also opens new opportunities for groups that have been marginalized, such as youth and women, to become producers and managers of authority (Beta 2019; Abidin 2016). In this situation, digital literacy and critical evaluation skills

are essential for the sustainability of authority, both from established religious institutions and independent actors, such as the laity (Livingstone 2004; Mihailidis 2014). Although most studies have focused on the Southeast Asian context, particularly Indonesia, the challenge ahead is to develop a conceptual framework that can address the complexity of this transformation globally and across denominations (Campbell 2013; Hoover 2016).

Lohlker (2024) offers a comprehensive and compelling approach to addressing the issue of religious authority transformation. He views this transformation as a shift in the structure of authority representation in Islamic digital culture, which occurs through interactions between humans, texts, media and digital objects. Through the framework of algorithm cultures, Lohlker highlights how religious authority is formed in a digital ecosystem governed by algorithmic logic and media practices. He combines four theoretical approaches—algorithmic culture, religious aesthetics, Actor–Network–Theory (ANT; Latour 2007), and global history—to analyze the dynamics of authority in an increasingly fluid and dispersed online space.

Lohlker's approach emphasizes that the normative boundaries traditionally associated with classical fiqh authority have shifted. Authority now manifests in various new forms of normativity disseminated through digital platforms, ranging from religious content and applications to lifestyle on social media. Religious agency is no longer solely the domain of institutions or professional scholars; it is also exercised by online communities that shape norms through digital aesthetics, social connections and everyday practices. This approach broadens our understanding of how Islam is practiced, discussed, and authorized in the age of new media. It emphasizes the transformation of Islamic authority online.

Based on Lohlker's approach, this study constructs a theoretical framework for the transformation of religious authority in the digital age, starting from actor-network theory (ANT) as integrating human and non-human agencies. This classification is enriched by integrating Weber's typology of authority with Alatas' (2021) concept of articulative work. This framework is applied in the context of algorithmic culture and religious aesthetics to understand how algorithms and visual expressions contribute to the formation of digital authority. Finally, the quality of authority is analyzed using semantic search engine optimization (SEO) data through a platform studies approach and strength metrics, examining how authoritative visibility is constructed through the logic of digital platforms.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a digital ethnography approach, an interdisciplinary framework aimed at understanding the social and cultural transformations that occur through digital technology. This approach focuses on the relationships between humans, digital media, and cultural practices, emphasizing representation, agency, and new configurations of power and authority. In this context, this study focuses on how religious authority is constructed, exercised, and negotiated through interactions on digital platforms used by contemporary Muslims in Indonesia.

Being aware that there is "no one-size-fits-all solution" (Varis 2016, p. 61) for conducting Internet research and digital ethnography, we chose AnswerThePublic as a tool to analyze the transformation of Islamic authority and the algorithmic representation of authoritative figures. Using AnswerThePublic allows for an immersive approach to the online narratives produced and transformed by the religious authorities.

This interpretive qualitative research employed digital ethnography as its methodological basis, with platform mapping as the preferred tool. This method allows for the observation of religious practices in digital spaces, particularly those related to the produc-

tion and perception of Islamic authority through websites, social media, religious applications, and online search systems.

The data were organized based on three main aspects: geographical origin, actively used digital platforms, and characteristics of the displayed religious authority. The figures analyzed include Buya Yahya, Ustaz Abdul Somad, Ustaz Adi Hidayat, Zakir Naik, and Sheikh Omar Suleiman. The main focus is on Indonesia, but international figures reaching Indonesian audiences are included. Each of these figures represents a different spectrum of authority, ranging from traditional pesantren, populist-rhetorical, and Salafi-literal to transnational apologetic and urban-liberal. These profiles are used to identify the diversity of religious authority forms present in the digital Islamic ecosystem, as well as to examine their correlations with algorithmic representation patterns and public perceptions in online search engines.

To trace public trends toward digital authoritative figures, this study uses AnswerThePublic, a search-listening analytics tool that maps autocomplete results from platforms (Perin 2026) such as Google and YouTube. As a tool with a focus on the interaction of users and producers of content, AnswerThePublic is able to present the representative and public perception. This tool was used to identify the questions, phrases, and topics that were most frequently associated with each figure based on their name keywords. Thus, it helps identify important aspects that emerge in the online sphere.

Thus, the questions that emerge in AnswerThePublic are used to capture the social narratives developing around authoritative figures, which are not always represented in institutional or formal discourse. The results were interpreted qualitatively to explore the logic of authority distribution in the digital age, which is determined by visibility and resonance within the platforms' algorithmic systems.

The first step in the analysis process was the application of actor–network theory (ANT) as a tool for classifying the roles and relationships between human and nonhuman actors. Within this framework, the study maps the functions performed by humans, such as clerics, preachers, institutions, and communities, and those performed by non-human entities, such as search engines, autocomplete suggestions, and content distribution algorithms. The principle of task delegation is used to trace the extent to which religious authority is exercised through digital systems as autonomous actors that mediate access to religious knowledge.

The results of this classification were then integrated with the theoretical framework of Ismail Fajrie Alatas' theory of articulatory labor. Weber's three types of authority (traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic) are used to reinterpret the forms of religious legitimacy in digital spaces. Drawing on Alatas, the relational dimension and long-term work in the formation of authority—rooted in connections to the past, social position, and symbolic practices—are treated as important variables in understanding digital authority as a social process that is continuously negotiated and maintained. These two theories help clarify the epistemic boundaries between authority based on institutions, symbolic affiliations, and online performance of the authority.

The analysis continues with the application of two approaches from Lohlker: algorithm cultures and the aesthetics of religion. The algorithm cultures approach is used to examine how the logic of algorithms and auto-completion in search engines shapes perceptions of authority in contemporary digital Islam. The aesthetics of religion are used to understand how visual styles, personal narratives, and religious symbols appearing on social media reinforce or challenge established religious authority structures.

3. Results

3.1. Delegation and Representation of Authority by Non-Human Systems

In analyzing the representation of religious authorities in the digital space, we begin by reviewing the popularity of scholars on YouTube, a platform that has become a major medium for daʿwah in recent years. As of May 2025, Mufti Ismail Menk has the highest dnumber of subscribers (5.98 million) with 5200 videos, followed by Buya Yahya (5.93 million subscribers, 18,000 videos), who stands out in terms of the intensity of content production. Ustadz Adi Hidayat and Ustadz Abdul Somad recorded 5.75 million and 4.8 million subscribers, respectively, with thousands of video lectures that are widely distributed among Indonesian Muslims.

Outside Indonesia, Zakir Naik (India/Malaysia) has 4.28 million subscribers and 5200 videos and is known for his comparative religion lectures. Two figures from the United States, Omar Suleiman and Nouman Ali Khan, have 2.07 million and 2.61 million subscribers, respectively, with content focusing on spirituality, interpretation, and social issues.

These YouTube data formed the initial basis for identifying the main figures of the Islamic digital authority. We then explored other platforms that they actively used, such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and institutional media, to illustrate the cross-channel da'wah ecosystem that shapes and propagates religious authority in the digital age.

In this study, we mapped the representation of religious authority not only from human figures but also from the digital media they use. Here, ANT is able to explain the intersectional aspect of human and technological actors. These platforms actively replace various human roles in the structure of da'wah and Islamic institutions, ranging from preachers, pesantren managers, and librarians to fundraisers and public relations officers (Table 1).

Table 1. Digital Media Platforms and Delegated Roles of Selected Islamic Preachers.

Human Actors	Digital Media for Da'wah	Delegated Roles
Ustadz Adi Hidayat	quantumakhyar.com, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, Spotify, WhatsApp	Muballigh, public relations, institutional admin, study reminders, audio announcer
/Dr. Zakir Naik	zakirnaik.com, alhidaayah.com, Peace TV, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, WhatsApp Channel	Itinerant preacher, educator, documentator, public relations staff
Mufti Menk	muftimenk.com, quwaco.com, Muslim Central, Quran Central, iTunes, Google Podcast, social media	Preacher, study leader, prayer book distributor, audio content librarian
Omar Suleiman	yaqeeninstitute.org, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter/X, Mobile App	Researcher, editor, visual preacher, sermonizer, public educator

Mufti Ismail Menk utilizes a complete digital ecosystem to distribute da'wah, sharia knowledge, and community services globally. The muftimenk.com website is used for event information and the delivery of da'wah content. Through quwaco.com, he distributes "The Book of Duas", replacing the function of a printed book distributor. Social

media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are used to share quotes, study schedules, and dawah content briefly and widely. Audio platforms such as Muslim Central, Quran Central, iTunes Podcast, and Google Podcast provide hundreds of hours of audio lectures that can be accessed at any time. The official Android app allows the Ummah to access all daʾwah materials through a single platform.

Buya Yahya, as the caretaker of Al-Bahjah Islamic Boarding School, utilizes various digital platforms to deliver da'wah and Islamic information. The buyayahya.org website serves as his personal information center, presenting articles, videos, and audio lectures that replace traditional preaching. Meanwhile, albahjah.or.id represents Al-Bahjah institutions that provide information on activities, educational programs, and online donation facilities, replacing the roles of administrative staff and fundraisers. Majelis Al-Bahjah's YouTube channel and Al-Bahjah TV are used to deliver live and recorded Islamic lectures and studies, replacing the role of preachers and majelis taklim organizers.

Ustadz Abdul Somad utilizes various digital platforms to deliver da'wah and to manage social programs. The foundationhajjahrohana.org and linktr.ee/ustadzabdulsomadofficial websites are used to deliver lectures, raise waqf funds, and provide information on educational programs. Social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, are used for interaction with congregants and the dissemination of da'wah content. The sale of books and da'wah products is conducted through social e-commerce, replacing the role of physical book sellers.

Ustadz Adi Hidayat developed a digital ecosystem through quantumakhyar.com, which functions as an institutional information center and online store. The YouTube channel "Adi Hidayat Official" is used to deliver thematic lectures, replacing the role of the muballigh or preacher. Social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, are used for interaction with congregants and dissemination of information on activities. Telegram was used as a study reminder and quick information channel, while Spotify provided access to lectures in a flexible audio form. WhatsApp Admin is used for direct communication services with the public, replacing the Secretariat Admin's duties.

Zakir Naik builds a global digital da'wah ecosystem through the websites zakirnaik.com and alhidaayah.com, which provide web-based lectures, articles, and publications. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, Pinterest, and Tumblr, are used for the broad and real-time delivery of dawah content. Video platforms, such as Vimeo and the Peace TV app, present his lectures in multiple languages and formats, reaching a global audience without the need for physical presence. Mobile applications allow the Umma/h to access all daʿwah material on a single platform.

Omar Suleiman, through the Yaqeen Institute, built a digital infrastructure to carry out the work of the Islamic research institute. The official website publishes scientific articles, Islamic papers, and field studies in both popular and interactive formats. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter are used for visual da'wah and positive narrative campaigns on Islam. Mobile applications for Android and iOS bring research content, multimedia, and spiritual material to users.

Nouman Ali Khan, through Bayyinah Institute, is modernizing Qur'anic education and Islamic preaching by building a digital ecosystem. The main website and bayyinahtv.com are used for program registration and subscription-based education. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Threads are used for da'wah broadcasting, Islamic motivation, community organization, and activity information delivery. Table 1 provides selected examples.

3.2. Public Perceptions of Authoritative Figures: What Do the Public Say

3.2.1. Ustadz Adi Hidayat

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that a search with the keyword "Ustadz Adi Hidayat" results in 652 related search suggestions. The total search volume was 49,500, which was classified as "Good" according to the platform's search volume scale. However, the estimated cost per click (CPC) for this keyword was not specified.

Table 2 shows public searches for "Ustadz Adi Hidayat" based on data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025, showing that user search queries are distributed into four main thematic clusters. The first cluster relates to religious and ideological affiliations, as seen from the question, "Ustadz Adi Hidayat follows what sect?", "Is it salafi?", and "What is the difference between Muhammadiyah and Salafi?". This indicates public interest in the UAH's mass organization and religious orientation.

Table 2. AnswerThePublic Analysis for the Keyword "Ustadz Adi Hidayat" (Data as of May 2025).

Category	Data Type	Dominant/Unique Keyword	Total	I.
Metadata	Search Volume	none	49.500	This volume is the highest among similar figures, indicating that UAH has a wide digital reach with a multidimensional character, science, institutions, and personal images.
	Cost Per Click (CPC)	none	not available	The absence of CPC confirms that searches come from authentic interest and not from paid promotional campaigns or monetized keywords.
question	questions	"what mazhab?", "manhaj vs. mazhab", "free hut?", "what IQ?", "what's so great about it?"	none	People sought clarification on UAH's scholarly position and personality, focusing on ideological questions and identity narratives intertwined with personal excellence.
relationships	prepositions	none	none	None
comparison	comparisons	"vs. abdul somad", "vs. firanda", "vs. salafi", "vs. wahabi", "vs. abdel"	8	This comparison shows that UAH is positioned as a figure who falls between the salafi-traditional and entertainment-educative spectrums. The public is interested in assessing his da'wah approach, ideological affiliation, and involvement in the popular media.
general topics	alphabeticals [1]	"mazhab", "muhammadiyah", "where to live", "wallpaper", "music", "tour and travel"	20 (top)	The search for a combination of religious identity, personal image, and economic–religious activities shows that UAH is seen as a transformative and adaptive public figure in digital space.
Google PAA	related (People Also Ask)	"What sect does he belong to?", "What's he good at?", "What's his IQ?", "UAH's boarding school is free?"	none	Google's questions indicate a process of public re-verification of UAH's scientific authority and unique value as a young preacher associated with intelligence and institutional independence.

[1] Category of the tool used for analysis, Organizes keyword variations alphabetically to reveal long-tail opportunities.

The second cluster highlights the educational institutions and pesantren associated with him, with questions such as "What is the name of Adi Hidayat's pesantren?" and "Is Adi Hidayat's pesantren free?". The third cluster concerns the school of jurisprudence and scholarly orientation, with questions such as "What is Ustadz Adi Hidayat's madzhab?", "What is the difference between Manhaj and mazhab?", and "What imam do you follow?".

Meanwhile, the fourth cluster contains searches on personal aspects and individual attributes, such as "What is Ustadz Adi Hidayat's IQ?", "What is his greatness?" and "Is he really replacing Gus Miftah?". Overall, this reflects the digital community's interest in the UAH in three main dimensions: religious identity, institutional affiliation, and personal qualities as a symbol of contemporary Islamic authority.

The image records eight comparative-type search entries that associate the name "Ustadz Adi Hidayat" (UAH) with several popular Islamic figures and categories. Among these entries, direct comparisons such as "ustadz adi hidayat vs. ustadz abdul somad" and "ustadz adi hidayat vs. ustadz firanda" indicate public interest in the differences in da'wah approach, manhaj, and delivery methods between UAH and other prominent da'is. In addition, entries such as "ustadz adi hidayat vs. salafi" and "ustadz adi hidayat vs. wahabi" reflect curiosity about UAH's ideological affiliation and theological position in the contemporary Islamic da'wah landscape in Indonesia.

Interestingly, the list also includes the entry "ustadz adi hidayat vs. abdel," which refers to the entertainment-educative interaction between UAH and Abdel Achrian in a popular format titled Tanding Pingpong Lawan Ulama. The appearance of this entry indicates public attention to UAH's appearance in non-traditional media spaces and the involvement of religious figures in entertainment formats. This search also featured explorative patterns such as "ustadz adi hidayat vs, " which did not include a specific counterpoint, showing users' attempts to compare UAH with other figures more generally. The inclusion of "ustadz adi hidayat tour and travel" in this cluster also shows how public interest is not only focused on the theological side but also on UAH's role in religious activities and da'wah trips.

The top 20 most searched keywords related to "Ustadz Adi Hidayat" based on data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 are as follows. The highest search was "ustadz adi hidayat replaces gus miftah" with 1600 searches, followed by "ustadz adi hidayat mazhab apa" (880), and "ustadz adi hidayat music" (880). Other prominent keywords included ideological topics and affiliations, such as "ustadz adi hidayat muhammadiyah" (480), as well as personal and visual searches such as "ustadz adi hidayat wallpaper" (720), "cartoon" (320), and "where do you live" (320).

The data reveal that public interest in Ustadz Adi Hidayat is divided into three main trends: (1) Islamic affiliation and ideological position, (2) public role and comparison with other figures such as Gus Miftah, and (3) personal image and digital aesthetics of the preacher.

3.2.2. Zakir Naik

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that a search with the keyword "Zakir Naik" yielded 2290 related searches. The total search volume was 40,500, which was classified as "Good" according to the platform's search volume scale.

Table 3 show 22 public queries are recorded that use prepositional structures in searches related to the character "Zakir Naik." These questions are divided into prepositional groups such as "with," "without," "to," "for," "is," and "near." Although the number of questions was smaller than the number of interrogatives, this pattern still provides important insights into how the public associates Zakir Naik with certain aspects of his social and religious life.

There are 20 comparative search entries that associate the name "Zakir Naik" with various other figures and entities. The search format used is the pattern "zakir naik vs. …," which reflects the public's intention to compare this figure's views,

Table 3. AnswerThePublic Analysis for the Keyword "Zakir Naik" (Data as of May 2025).

Category	Dominant/Unique Keyword	Total	Insights
Metadata	none	40.500	The search for Zakir Naik demonstrates his strong transnational appeal, not only as a preacher but also as a controversial figure with high exposure to conflict zones and diasporas.
	none	not available	The absence of CPC data implies that public searches are driven by controversy and the actuality of personalities rather than by advertising traffic or promotional keywords.
question	"with Owaisi", "without beard", "to enter countries", "is alive?", "is in Pakistan"	22	The prepositional structure shows interest in political affiliation, geographical mobility, and personal status, representing the "inter-relational" dimension in how the public assesses the Pope's existence and authority.
comparison	"vs. nouman ali khan", "vs. ahmad deedat", "vs. david wood", "vs. mufti menk", "vs. shabir ally"	20	Comparisons show that Zakir Naik is a key reference in interfaith and intra-Islamic debates, creating a field of comparison between global proselytizing figures across methodologies and streams.
general topics	"in Pakistan", "wife", "age", "education", "family", "image", "wallpaper", "nationality"	20 (top)	The top keywords showed a combination of geopolitical urgency (Pakistan) and personal and popular aspects. This demonstrates the consumption of Zakir Naik as a religious icon and digital persona.
Google PAA	"is he Sunni?", "does he have a son?", "how many languages?", "which religion?", "is he Wahabvi?"	none	The questions illustrate the public's need to map Zakir Naik's position within the sectarian and genealogical structures of global Islam, as well as to clarify the validity and legacy of his preaching.

The top two of the top 20 most popular keywords related to "Zakir Naik" based on data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 were " Zakir Naik in pakistan" and "zakir naik pakistan, " each with a search volume of 8100, indicating the public's great interest in Zakir Naik's geographical presence and activities in Pakistan. In addition, searches for personal aspects, such as "zakir naik wife" (1000), "zakir naik age" (1300), and "zakir naik education" (1600), also stood out. Other searches focused on biography, family, nationality, and visuals, such as "zakir naik family," "zakir naik nationality," "zakir naik image, " and "zakir naik wallpaper."

3.2.3. Mufti Menk

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that a search using the keyword "Mufti Menk" yielded 998 related search suggestions. The total search volume was 4400, which is classified as "Good" according to the platform's search volume scale. The average cost per click (CPC) estimate was $0.07, which falls into the "Cheap" category. This data reflects that this figure has a consistent digital appeal, especially around issues of personal identity, social media platforms, and motivational quotes widely quoted by the global public.

Table 4 show the data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that there are 62 questions asked by the public regarding the character "Mufti Menk," with a total search volume of 4400 per month and an estimated cost per click (CPC) of $0.07, which is classified as "Cheap." These questions are classified based on question words such as "who," "what," "when," "why," "where," "which," "can," and "how."

Table 4. AnswerThePublic Analysis for the Keyword "Mufti Menk" (Data as of May 2025).

Category	Data Type	Dominant/Unique Keyword	Total	Insights
Metadata	Search Violume	none	4400	Medium and stable volumes. This indicates that searches for Mufti Menk remain active but are not on the viral spectrum like figures often involved in controversy.
	Cost Per Click (CPC)	none	$0.07	The low CPC indicates that this name is not the object of heavy commercialization; searches tend to arise out of pure interest in the content of the talk and the public persona.
question	Questions	"who is Mufti Menk?", "what does he do?", "is he Sunni?", "how much does he earn?"	62	The questions targeted the public's understanding of Mufti Menk's basic profile, mazhab affiliation, social status, and scientific authority as a transnational da'wah figure.
relationship	Prepositions	"with wife", "to listen to", "via email", "is rich", "without beard", "for health"	32	The prepositional structure reveals curiosity about the relationship, accessibility, and context of Mufti Menk's use–both as a public figure and as a source of personal inspiration.
comparison	Comparisons	"Mufti Menk and Zakir Naik", "and Nouman Ali Khan", "and music", "and Omar Suleiman"	15	Comparisons are associations, not oppositions. This shows that the public perceives Mufti Menk in a network of similar figures and proselytizing topics, not as a thought opponent.
general topics	alphabeticals	"Zimbabwe", "Twitter", "quotes", "wife", "Jakarta", "Mazhab", "YouTube"	20 (top)	Public focus was on geographical settings, social media, and popular quotes, showing interest in global activities and concise and shareable messages.
Google PAA	Related (People Also Ask)	"Is he Sunni?", "Is he qualified?", "How many wives?", "What's his quote?"	none	Google's queries support a more verifiable search focus-seeking clarity on the scholarly status, mazhab, and private aspects commonly attached to public religious figures.

Search patterns reveal public interest in various aspects of Mufti Menk's life and religious authority, ranging from his personal identity, religious preferences, lifestyle, and language to his global proselytization contributions. For example, queries such as "who is Mufti Menk," "what does Mufti Menk do," "how much does Mufti Menk earn," and "why is Mufti Menk famous" show that internet users are interested in understanding his public role and socio-religious contributions. Other questions touch on the practical side, such as "can I visit Mufti Menk," "which country is Mufti Menk from," and "when is Mufti Menk coming to the UK."

Public inquiries about "Mufti Menk" are concentrated on four main thematic clusters: school affiliation, fame, personal life, and popular quotes.

The first cluster relates to religious affiliation and schools of jurisprudence, reflected in questions such as "Is Mufti Menk Sunni or Deobandi?", "Is Mufti Menk Shafi or Hanafi?", to comparisons with other figures such as "Is Zakir Naik Sunni?" and "Is Omar Suleiman Sunni or Shia?".

The second cluster included questions about popularity and scholarly credentials, such as "Why is Mufti Menk so popular?", "Is Mufti Menk a qualified scholar?", and "Who is the most famous mufti?". These questions indicate the audience's attempt to assess the legitimacy and influence of his da'wah.

The third cluster concerns personal life, specifically, marriage and family. Questions such as "How many wives does Mufti Menk have?", "At what age did Mufti Menk marry?",

and "Is Mufti Menk a divorcee?" showed public interest in the domestic aspects and social norms associated with public clerics.

The fourth cluster consisted of questions about famous quotes and statements, such as, "What was Mufti Menk's famous quote?" What is patience according to Mufti Menk quotes?" and "What did Mufti Menk say?". This shows that the digital audience is interested not only in the biographical side but also in the moral and spiritual messages conveyed by Mufti Menk.

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that there were 32 public searches that used prepositional forms related to the character "Mufti Menk." The total search volume for this category was 4400 searches per month, with an estimated cost per click of $0.07, which fell into the "Cheap" category according to the platform's classification. These queries were categorized by various prepositions, such as with, to, for, is, can, without, and via, which reflect the public's thematic and functional relationship with Mufti Menk.

The preposition "with" dominates search patterns that target personal relationships, such as in the phrases "Mufti Menk with wife," "Mufti Menk with cats," or "Mufti Menk with Dr. Zakir Naik." This shows users' interest in the relational and everyday aspects of the character. Meanwhile, preposition-based is and can searches lead to ontological and normative questions, such as "Mufti Menk is Sunni," "Mufti Menk is rich," or "Can Mufti Menk marry?" This reflects the public's curiosity about his religious status and personal circumstances.

The "to" and "for" forms reflect a search for the function, purpose, or value associated with Mufti Menk, as in "Mufti Menk to listen to" or "Mufti Menk is good for health," suggesting that he is positioned as a source of inspiration and spiritual authority. Some of the more unique queries also appear through the forms without and via, such as "Mufti Menk without beard" and "Mufti Menk via email," which suggest a search for the unconventional side of this figure.

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that there are 15 comparative search entries related to the figure "Mufti Menk," with a total estimated search volume of 4400 per month and an estimated cost per click of $0.07. All these searches use a "Mufti Menk and …" structure that illustrates how the public associates Mufti Menk with other figures, sociopolitical entities, or broader religious themes. This pattern indicates public interest in understanding Mufti Menk's position, relationships, and collaborations in the global da'wah landscape and current issues.

Some of the entries that appear in the AnswerThePublic include "Mufti Menk and Zakir Naik," "Mufti Menk and scholars," and "Mufti Menk and Israel." This reflects attention to intellectual collaboration between scholars and the figure's political or geopolitical stance on international issues. In addition, searches linking Mufti Menk to contemporary figures such as "Mufti Menk and Nouman Ali Khan" and "Mufti Menk and Omar Suleiman," suggest an expectation of comparative ideological positions, proselytizing styles, or digital religious social networks. Searches such as "Mufti Menk and music" and "Mufti Menk and marriage" show that the public's attention is not only focused on scientific or political aspects, but also on his personal opinions on moral issues and everyday life. Thus, this pattern shows how Mufti Menk is positioned at the intersection of scientific authority, moral symbols and actors in global public discourse.

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that the keyword "Mufti Menk Zimbabwe" occupies the top spot with a search volume of 4400 times per month. This is the only entry that falls into the "Good" category in the search volume classification. The next most popular search term was "Mufti Menk Twitter" (260 searches), followed by "Mufti Menk wife" (170), "Mufti Menk is" (140), and "Mufti Menk Jakarta" (110). Other entries that reflected high public interest included questions about Menk's origins, school

of thought, quotes, and social media. Searches such as "Mufti Menk quotes," "Mufti Menk mazhab," and "Mufti Menk YouTube " indicate interest in his Islamic ideas and digital expression of daʾwah. Overall, this distribution of public searches displays a combination of geographical identification, personalization, and high digital engagement, with Mufti Menk as a global figure in the contemporary daʿwah landscape.

3.2.4. Omer Suleiman

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show that 57 questions were asked by the public regarding the character "Omar Suleiman," with a total search volume of 12,100 per month and an estimated cost per click (CPC) of $6.44.

As shown in Table 5, the searches strategi were categorized into seven main categories based on interrogative prompts: what, why, who, how, when, where, and which.

Table 5. AnswerThePublic Analysis for Keyword "Omar Suleiman" (Data as of May 2025).

Category	Dominant/Unique Keyword	Total	Insights
Metadata	none	12,100	The searches were high and stable, showing consistent public interest in Omar Suleiman.
	none	$6.44	A high CPC indicates that this keyword has great advertising value and is likely related to classes, seminars, or paid content related to this character.
question	"Who is Omar Suleiman?", "What is his aqeedah?", "How to contact?", "When married?", "Which mosque?"	62	Public inquiries cover aspects of identity, education, income, and personal access, signaling an interest in basic and administrative information about the character.
relationship	""is Sunni", "is Hanafi", "with hair", "without kufi", "for kids", "is he a scholar"	22	The prepositional form reflects searches for religious status, appearance, and proselytizing content aimed at specific groups of people.
comparison	none	none	No explicit "vs" pattern was found; the search was descriptive and informative, not confrontational or polemical.
general topics	"imam", "scholar", "wife", "ethnicity", "books", "lectures", "net worth", "YouTube", "ramadan series"	20 (top)	Searches focus on professional status, work, and digital presence; the public wants to know who they are, what their work is, and how to access their content.
Google PAA	"Is he Sunni?", "Is he qualified?", "How many wives?", "What's his quote?"	none	Google queries reflect a focus on scholarship, popularity, and income, which marks the figure's position in public information searches.

The "who" cluster displays the public's curiosity about Omar Suleiman's personal and religious identity. Questions such as "Who is Omar Suleiman?", "Who is Omar Suleiman's wife?", and "Who is Sheikh Omar Suleiman?" This emphasizes that the public wants to know the figure's family background and marital status, as well as his religious credentials.

In the "what" cluster, the public seeks information about his academic background, school of thought affiliations, and doctrines, such as "What is Omar Suleiman's ethnicity?", "What is Omar Suleiman's aqeedah?" and "What did Omar Suleiman study?". This shows attention to his scholarly credentials and theological position in the spectrum of contemporary Islamic thought.

Meanwhile, the "how" category shows more pragmatic and personalized questions, such as "How tall is Omar Suleiman?", "How to contact Omar Suleiman?" and "How much does Omar Suleiman charge?". This indicates an interest in the physical, administrative, and commercial aspects of modern religious figures in the digital da'wah ecosystem.

The "where" and "when" clusters focus on chronology and location, such as "Where is Omar Suleiman right now?", "Where did Omar Suleiman study?" and "When did Omar Suleiman get married?". This data indicates that the audience follows the geographical

and temporal dynamics of his scholarly activities, including his teaching locations and scholarly institutions on which his authority is based.

Questions in the "which" cluster, such as "Which madhhab is Omar Suleiman?", or "Which mosque does Omar Suleiman go to?" expressed curiosity about their fiqh authority and institutional affiliations. Finally, there is the popularity of his dawah series in the "why" cluster, such as questions about the book and video series "Why me, Omar Suleiman?" which are part of his motivational work and contribute to the spiritual image and emotional impact of his dawah.

Google's "People Also Ask" data of public searches for Omar Suleiman show that people's questions are distributed into four main clusters: religious identity, income and academic affiliation, popularity, and personal access.

The first cluster highlights Omar Suleiman's madhhab affiliations and Islamic identity, with questions such as "Is Omar Suleiman Sunni or Shia?", "Which madhhab is Omar Suleiman?", and "Was Mehmed II Sunni or Shia?" This illustrates the public's interest in his ideological and theological positions in the contemporary Islamic landscape.

The second cluster contained questions about income and academic background, such as "How much does Omar Suleiman make?", "What does Omar Suleiman have a PhD in?" and "What degrees does Omar Suleiman have?" signaling the public's interest in knowing the credentials and economic value of his da'wah and intellectual activities.

The third cluster addresses reasons for popularity, such as "What made Omar Suleiman famous?" and "How did Omar Suleiman become famous?" reflecting curiosity about his work and achievements as an influential Muslim public figure in the West.

The fourth cluster covers accessibility and engagement fees, such as "How much does Omar Suleiman charge for speaking?", "How to get in contact with Omar Suleiman?", and "How much does it cost to book Don Omar?" (although it was combined with other searches).

Data from AnswerThePublic as of May 2025 show 22 prepositional-type public search entries related to the character "Omar Suleiman," with a total search volume of 12,100 per month and an estimated cost per click (CPC) of $6.44 USD, indicating the high commercial value of this keyword.

These prepositional patterns generally fall into three categories. First, religious identity and school affiliation, as seen in questions such as "Omar Suleiman is Sunni," "Omar Suleiman is Hanafi," and "Omar Suleiman is he a scholar." This reflects the public's curiosity about the figure's fiqh position and academic credentials in the global Islamic landscape. This reflects the public's curiosity regarding the figure's fiqh position and academic credibility in the global Islamic landscape.

Second, there are clusters of da'wah content and social themes, such as the entries "Omar Suleiman for kids" and "Omar Suleiman for those left behind," which indicate his association with the production of educational and spiritual content that touches on issues concerning marginalized communities and families. This shows that Omar Suleiman's da'wah is relevant to various social strata.

Third, searches related to physical appearance and visual imagery also appear, such as "Omar Suleiman with hair," "Omar Suleiman without hat," or "without kufi." Although superficial, such searches indicate that religious figures in the digital age are also constructed through visual symbols, and the public shows curiosity about the preacher's non-formal image."

The data of the top 20 keywords related to "Omar Suleiman" based on the search volume from AnswerThePublic data as of May 2025. The two most prominent keywords with the highest volume (22,200 searches each) were "omar suleiman imam" and "omar

suleiman scholar," indicating the public's great interest in his intellectual capacity and scholarly authority.

Other high searches include "omar suleiman wife" (1000), "omar suleiman ramadan series 2025" (590), and searches related to his age and ethnicity, such as "omar suleiman age" and "omar suleiman ethnicity" (210 each). Other keywords that stood out included "omar suleiman youtube," "omar suleiman books," "omar suleiman lectures," and "omar suleiman net worth," indicating interest in the digital content, track record, and personal and social aspects of this figure.

4. Discussion

4.1. Patterns of Delegation of Authority in the Digital Age

This study[1] shows that the functions of the clergy in contemporary Islamic da'wah have shifted in certain areas through an ongoing process of delegation to digital systems. Websites, YouTube channels, subscription video platforms, social media, and mobile applications perform tasks such as lecture delivery, information management, program administration and fundraising.

Within the framework of actor–network theory (ANT), these social phenomena can be understood as the result of relational networks between human and nonhuman actors. From Latour's (2007) perspective, the social is not an inherent category of human individuals or groups but rather a process that emerges through the interconnectedness of various elements, including technologies, artifacts, texts, and institutions, that shape reality collectively. Each element in the network has a role in enabling, mediating, or constraining action; thus, the agency is distributed. ANT offers a perspective in which what we call "social" is a constantly moving configuration dependent on the stability and dynamics of relations within the network.

Assuming that religious authority results from the configuration between human actors (preachers) and technological devices (websites, social media, and other digital channels), we can identify patterns of delegation that take place through two main channels. First, private delegation, namely the delegation of self-representation and the content of a cleric's da'wah through visual or textual media, such as videos of lectures, quotes, or educational captions that represent the figure as well as his religious messages, on an ongoing basis. Second, the delegation of institutional figures and functions, in which digital platforms represent individuals while also attaching legitimacy to the da'wah institution, pesantren, foundation, or community to which the figure belongs.

Furthermore, through these two lines of delegation, we can examine the extent to which the functioning of digital media replaces the direct presence of preachers in the mosque. Do these nonhuman devices act as total substitutes, partial complements, or merely intermediaries that do not replace anything at all? Empirically, we observe variations in the form of connections between audiences and authoritative figures, mediated by technology.

First, there is a group that has never met the cleric in person but develops a strong relationship of obedience and spiritual affiliation only through digital content, such as lectures on YouTube, quotes on Instagram, or live TikTok broadcasts. They consume and disseminate da'wah content without physical involvement yet form intense symbolic and ideological bonds with the preacher. In this context, digital media almost completely replace the cleric's personal presence.

Second, there is a group that occasionally interacts in person—for example, attending a study or seminar once or twice—but maintains a close relationship by regularly following digital channels. Their attachment is not entirely virtual, but their social relations are media-supported.

The third group consisted of those who consistently attended majelis taklim (Congregational religious assemblies) physically but utilized digital media to reinforce, document, or expand the meaning of their direct participation in the religious experience.

Fourth, in the context of institutions, we also find how digital media can represent institutional authority even when the institution has no direct interaction with the public. For example, someone can become a regular donor to a da'wah organization only through social media exposure, without ever visiting the organization's office or meeting its administrators in person.

Fifth, the group that is unintentionally exposed to digital algorithms, for example, through the recommendation of da'wah videos on video platforms, which then becomes the starting point for the transformation of their religious affiliation. In this case, the delegative function of the media not only replaces but also creates authoritative relationships from scratch without any prior social initiation.

In the framework of actor–network theory (ANT), religious authority can no longer be understood solely as a fixed attribute attached to individual clerics or to formal religious institutions. Instead, it is the result of network configurations that involve ongoing interactions between human actors (such as preachers, institutions, and congregations) and nonhuman actors (such as websites, YouTube channels, recommendation algorithms, donation management systems, and content distribution platforms). In these networks, digital media function as entities with agential capacities—the ability to selectively and repetitively mediate, format, and distribute religious meaning.

The relationship between clerics and the public is now mediated by tools that can maintain the form of representation, sequence messages, and establish continuity of presence without the direct involvement of the cleric. In some cases, such as video content or online learning systems, these tools even produce the first meeting point between the public and the religious figure, establishing authority before conventional physical social relations are established.

Thus, clerical authority becomes a dynamic, emergent, and unstable entity, depending on the performativity of relations in the network. It is not simply transferred or duplicated but is reproduced continuously through symbolic and technical repetitions in digital flows. The issue is not whether digital media has totally replaced the role of the ulama but how religious authority is now exercised through new patterns of interaction between humans and nonhuman devices. Authority no longer stands firmly as something fixed and inherent to the individual but is constantly reshaped in every relationship, impression, upload, or response of the audience. In this framework, the stability of authority does not come from the essential qualities of a figure but is the result of collective work in networks: between da'wah texts, distribution algorithms, public responses, and the consistency of representations that are continuously reproduced by digital systems.

In the context of digital clergy, the forms of authority that appear are no longer present in a "pure" form as categorized by Max Weber: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Instead, we witness a hybrid and dynamic configuration of authority, in which various forms of legitimacy are intertwined. A cleric may be respected for his scientific pedigree (a trace of traditional authority), have an appeal due to personal charisma on social media (a trace of charismatic authority), and gain public trust because of his consistent, structured, and widely accessible da'wah distribution system (a trace of legal-rational authority). However, these do not exist as separate forms but merge into a single praxis network.

What is important, then, is not to remap forms of authority into one of Weber's categories, but to recognize that contemporary clerical authority works through a performative mix of norms, personalities, and systems. It is precisely in this impermanence that today's

authority finds its form and legitimacy—as authority that is not pure, relational, and constantly changing according to technological mediation and patterns of public engagement.

Therefore, in this case, we agree with Hira Rizka's findings that highlight the significant role of the Internet in reshaping religious authority preferences among Generation Z. Based on a study of 15 respondents from 16 religious communities in Yogyakarta, Rizka (2019) shows that the Internet has become an active space for the construction of religious identity and the formation of social relations based on digital connectedness. She identifies two trends: the first group uses the internet as a primary source and trusts digitally active preachers such as Abdul Somad and Khalid Basalamah; while the second group continues to refer to traditional scholars such as Gus Mus and Buya Syafii Maarif, with the internet serving as a complementary reference.

These findings strengthen the argument that religious authority in the digital era does not rely on a single legitimacy. What emerges is a dynamic configuration built from various aspects: fame, digital connectedness, repetition of representation, and audience response in the process of articulating work (Alatas 2021). Authoritative relations are formed in social networks that are always on the move, and public preferences for a cleric can shift with the intensity of digital exposure and consistency of messages received through various platforms.

Table 6 shows that the forms of delegation of religious authority do not occur uniformly but follow a variety of paths—private, institutional, affective, and algorithmic—each of which utilizes certain types of media, such as YouTube, websites, apps, and social media. The level of functioning of the delegation also varies, from merely complementing the presence of the figure to almost completely replacing it. These patterns show that authority today is no longer exclusively attached to individuals but is formed and exercised through the systemic work of various digital media that are active, adaptive and participatory. Thus, we may witness a transformation of Islamic authority online (Lohlker 2024).

Table 6. Taxonomy of Digital Religious Delegation and Functional Levels.

Delegation Type	Delegated Entity	Digital Media Used	Level of Functioning [1]	Practice Example
Private representative	Personal representation of scholars & da'wah messages	YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, telegram, website	*It replaces most of the physical presence of a figure.*	Lectures on YouTube without face-to-face meetings
Private-Participatory	Interaction with followers & symbolic affiliation	Commentary, Q&A, live broadcast, exclusive channel	*Mediating the relationship between the figure and the audience*	direct interaction via live Q&A
Institutional-Informational	Institutional profile & scientific legitimacy	Official website, social media bio, academic portal	*Complementing traditional authority with digital legitimacy*	Physical and digital forms of foundations and boarding schools
Institutional-Functional	Da'wah administration, donation knowledge Distribution	Mobile application, e-donation, LMS, donation channel	*Autonomously replace the technical functions of the institution*	Donation website, Dawah App
Affective-Symbolic	Charismatic image & godly figure	Motivational content, religious memes, spiritual quotes	*Mediating and re-shaping public perception of figures*	Motivation on Instagram & YouTube Shorts
Algorithmic-Emergent	Spontaneous exposure by recommendation systems	YouTube Algorithm, TikTok, Twitter/X	*Creating authoritative relationships from scratch without social initiation*	videos appear via auto-recommendation

[1] Italics and bold are used to stress actions and the categories of taxonomy for readers.

4.2. Authority as an Articulate and Social Process

Furthermore, by emphasizing the concept of authority infrastructure proposed by Alatas (2021), we can understand the pattern of delegation of religious authority in the digital era as a result of complex, articulated work. Religious authority is not simply inher-

ited or claimed; it is formed through the interconnection of various elements that sustain and strengthen the legitimacy of religious figure. The following is a reading of the five main indicators in Alatas' (2021) infrastructure of authority, as reflected in the context of digital divinity:

First, text and tradition: Figures such as Buya Yahya and Ustadz Abdul Somad rely on classical Islamic texts, hadith quotations, and tafsir as the basis of their preaching. In the digital version, this authority is reinforced through lecture content equipped with Arabic texts, transliteration, and narrative visualization. This has transformed the format of the ongoing transmission of tradition to reach digital generations.

Second, the institutional role in building authority is represented by various official digital platforms that have become an extension of the structure of ulama's da'wah. Ustadz Adi Hidayat, through the Quantum Akhyar Institute, not only broadcasts da'wah, but also manages online education services, umrah guidance, to the distribution of zakat and waqf. Buya Yahya runs Al-Bahjah, a pesantren and da'wah institution that has its own digital broadcast system (Bahjah TV), as well as a mobile application that is integrated with the management system of studies, donations, and other community services. Ustadz Abdul Somad utilizes his foundation's digital channels to spread da'wah while managing the social and economic activities of the Ummah. Internationally, the Yaqeen Institute, founded by Omar Suleiman, is an example of a modern institution based on structured, consistent research and digital content production. All of these institutions use YouTube channels, websites, and apps as a medium for da'wah, which also functions as a systematic and professional manager of religious authority.

Third, in the digital landscape, a cleric's authority is influenced by their relationship with state institutions. Zakir Naik is a prominent example of how the state can be an actor that limits the space for religious authority. Despite having millions of followers online and being widely recognized through his digital lectures, he has faced entry bans and deportation from countries such as India, the UK, Canada, and Bangladesh for threatening stability and spreading controversial views. These restrictions demonstrate that state recognition directly impacts the legitimacy of da'wah spaces, even in the era of digital information openness. In this context, the relationship with the state becomes an important element in the infrastructure of authority, not only as a source of legitimacy but also as a political boundary against the expansion of digital religious influence across countries.

Fourth, the representation of scientific and spiritual lineages remains an important pillar in establishing digital authority and displaying the charismatic traits of an online persona. Ustadz Abdul Somad explicitly emphasizes his scientific sanad from prominent traditional institutions such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt and Dar al-Hadith in Morocco. In his lectures, he routinely mentioned the names of his teachers and scientific transmission routes as a form of recognition of the authority of classical scholars. This representation is reinforced through visual documentation in the form of diplomas, testimonials, and narratives of scientific journeys disseminated on YouTube and social media platforms.

Buya Yahya displays a strong spiritual pedigree through his connection to the tarekat and traditional network of scholars within pesantren. On many occasions, he refers to the tarekat and scholarly sanads that he inherited from the masyayikh and prominent Sufi figures, which form the basis of his moral and spiritual guidance. This lineage is not only displayed verbally but is also documented in the profile of the Al-Bahjah institution and re-shared by its followers.

Meanwhile, Ustadz Adi Hidayat constructs his authority and charisma through a modern and systematic scientific sanad path that includes mastery of various classical disciplines, such as tafsir, hadith, and usul fiqh. He often details his educational background, mentions the institutions and scholars where he has studied, and maps the scientific chain

using charts and digital modules. This reinforces epistemic claims regarding the credibility of his knowledge and adapts the traditional form of sanad into a format that is easily accessible to a digital audience.

Fifth, digital communities actively expand, maintain religious authority, and rotinize the charisma of these religious authorities. In the case of Ustadz Adi Hidayat (UAH), there are various unofficial channels created by his fans, such as "UAH Lovers," "Kajian Sunnah UAH," and fanbase Telegram and TikTok channels that actively disseminate lecture excerpts, motivational quotes, and organize collective activities such as joint donations or online studies. Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS) has online communities such as "Sahabat UAS" which are active on TikTok and Telegram, facilitating discussions and disseminating Da 'wah content. Buya Yahya is supported by the Al-Bahjah community, which manages YouTube channels and social media to disseminate lectures and da'wah activities among the public. Dr. Zakir Naik has an active following through Peace TV and social media channels that spread his talks across the world. Mufti Menk has a community of fans on TikTok and Telegram who share his inspirational quotes and lectures. Omar Suleiman through Yaqeen Institute has an active follower base on TikTok and other platforms, sharing educational and motivational content. This community engagement shows that the authority of religious figures is shaped not only by themselves or formal institutions but also reproduced and disseminated by emotionally and ideologically engaged audience communities.

Based on AnswerThePublic data current as of May 2025 on seven digital religious figures, public interest reflects a shift in the way people access, confirm, and internalize religious authority. At least five main dimensions can be inferred from these patterns.

4.2.1. Scientific and Ideological Verification

Almost all figures were questioned about their mazhab, aqeedah, scholarly lineage, and organizational affiliations. Questions such as "which school do you follow?", "manhaj vs. mazhab?", and "which school?" appeared predominantly, for example, in the cases of Buya Yahya, UAH, and Omar Suleiman. This shows that authority in the digital space must still be justified through traditional epistemic sources such as teachers, educational institutions, and institutional affiliations. In other words, although the platform has changed, the logic of authority verification remains the same.

4.2.2. Figure Personalization: Personal Life as Emotional Authority

The public not only wants to know who he is scientifically but also humanly: " Who is his wife?", "how old is he?", "what is his IQ?", " How many children does he have?", or " What is his hairstyle?". This shows that authority in the digital era is shaped by emotional and psychological dimensions, not just academic ones. Figures such as UAS and Nouman Ali Khan are strong examples of the merging of religious appeal with pop-cultural personas.

4.2.3. Comparison and Networking as an Authority Selection Tool

The emergence of many "vs." questions and some that use "and"-such as "Zakir Naik vs. David Wood," "UAS vs. Rocky Gerung,", "UAH vs. Salafi," or "Nouman Ali Khan and Omar Suleiman"-suggests that the public is actively comparing, weighing, and choosing who is considered more representative of their values, as well as tracing network relationships between these figures. This is not merely ideological voyeurism but a mechanism for sorting out authority: who is deemed compatible with their style of thinking, interpretation, or proselytizing approach.

4.2.4. The Social Function of Content: From Lecture to Collective Identity

Searches for topics such as "UAS wallpapers," "Mufti Menk quotes," and "Nouman Ali Khan podcast" reveal that their content is not only consumed as knowledge but also as a symbol of identity; it is posted on mobile screens, shared as a status, and discussed. This demonstrates that religious authority is now expressed in a participatory and aesthetic manner. Those chosen are not only selected for the content of their talks but also because their narratives and preaching styles are perceived to represent the collective self of the audience.

4.2.5. Controversy as a Testing Ground and Increased Exposure

Figures such as Zakir Naik attract attention because they are involved in polemics and scandals that attract media attention. Questions like "what was he accused of?", "why was he banned in India?", or "why did he sue Omar Suleiman?" shows that in the logic of digital search, controversy does not necessarily undermine authority but expands the range and intensity of attention. This suggests that the digital religious figure is constructed through conflict and resistance, not just through consensus.

From all this data, it can be seen that the public in the digital space is not only looking for religious answers but is also reshaping the way they identify, affirm, and even "own" religious authority. This process is dynamic, multimodal, and not always logical. Authority is now shaped by the interaction between sanad, visuality, personal narratives, positions in conflict and community engagement.

So, the answer to the question "what is the public looking for?" is that the public is looking for figures who are not only 'knowledgeable but also 'relatable, ' 'publicly confirmable, ' and emotionally and representative in shaping their digital religious identity.

In Alatas' (2021) framework, religious authority is understood as the result of an articulation process that connects sunnah, intermediaries (religious scholars), and congregations. Religious figures act as mediators who connect the teachings of the Prophet with the social reality of the people through transformative work that is contextual. AnswerThePublic data show that digital figures such as Buya Yahya, UAS, and UAH are searched by the public not only for the content of their lectures but also for their scientific sources, pedigree, and ideological position. This shows that legitimacy as a conduit of sunnah is still tested through established epistemic channels, such as sanad and institutional affiliation.

According to Alatas (2021), religious authority is not an attribute automatically attached to a cleric but the result of articulative work that occurs in the relationship between teaching (sunnah), the intermediary (the cleric), and the congregation (the community that receives and responds to it). Public search data on figures such as Buya Yahya, UAS, UAH, Zakir Naik, Mufti Menk, Omar Suleiman, and Nouman Ali Khan show that this articulation work is now taking place intensely in the digital space.

The public uses search engines to shape and negotiate authority; they seek clarity on scholarly sanad and mazhab affiliation, explore the personal side of scholars, compare figures on the ideological spectrum, make content an expression of collective identity, and follow controversies as part of testing authority. This is part of the process by which pilgrims rebuild their relationships with religious figures they consider legitimate. In other words, digital space functions as a medium of distribution as well as an articulate arena where religious authority is formed through audience responses, message repetition, symbolic affiliation, and debate dynamics.

4.3. Algorithmic Culture and the Aesthetics of Authority Representation

In the contemporary digital context, religious authority is no longer built solely through scholarly sanads or physically visible institutional structures but is also mediated

by the logic of visibility controlled by algorithms and publicly acceptable visual aesthetics. The widespread content of lectures, quotes, and video snippets is often not the result of a cleric's formal strategy but rather the product of the calculations of digital systems such as YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram algorithms. This makes (following Lohlker) the algorithm an actor that shapes exposure, reaches new audiences, and even mediates the first encounter between the public and the religious leaders. In some cases, authoritative relationships are formed from impressions that appear spontaneously on users' homepages, which then become entry points for further engagement.

The aesthetics of representation also play a crucial role in this process. Lectures packaged with modern visualizations, elegant graphic designs, and concise and moving narratives are more likely to be disseminated and consumed repeatedly. Content such as Mufti Menk's "quotes," UAS's "wallpapers," or "podcasts" becomes a medium for collective identity formation based on symbols, accompanied by substance. Algorithmic and aesthetic work not only distributes meaning but also produces new forms of authority based on the repetition of visual impressions, audience preferences, and the logic of viewability. Thus, clerical authority in this era is also the result of a complex technocultural mediation process in which the cleric becomes both a figure and a representation that is calculated by machines and validated by the audience's participation in the process.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the transformation of Islamic religious authority in the digital age is shaped by a constellation of technocultural processes involving human figures, digital platforms, algorithmic systems and audience participation. Using digital ethnography in the sense of platform-mapping and actor–network theory (ANT) as a framework integrating personal and algorithmic processes, we mapped how clerical authority is increasingly delegated to non-human actors—from websites and apps to recommendation systems—resulting in distributed forms of daʿwah, representation and institutional functionality. Authority is no longer a fixed attribute of individual scholars but an emergent and hybrid configuration mediated by platforms, interfaces, and publics.

Ismail Fajrie Alatas' articulation framework is particularly useful for capturing how religious authority is socially sustained and contextually negotiated through the triadic relationship between sunnah, connectors (ʿulamāʾ), and community. Public search behavior, analyzed through semantic SEO data, confirms that digital audiences actively shape clerical legitimacy through genealogical inquiry, ideological verification, emotional engagement, and alignment with aesthetics. The digital public does not merely consume religious content; they co-construct legitimacy through searching, comparing, repeating, and symbolic participation.

Furthermore, the algorithmic culture and visual aesthetics of digital platforms amplify or delimit religious authority through their calculated visibility. Recommendation systems, content packaging, and visual storytelling shape the conditions of discoverability and resonance, often determining which figures are granted widespread recognition in the media. In this context, authority becomes a function of both continuity and performativity, simultaneously rooted in epistemic lineage and crafted through a networked interaction.

Methodologically, this research affirms the strength of combining digital ethnography with platform mapping, ANT, and articulation theory to trace religious authority across mediated spaces. It offers a scalable framework for analyzing authority, not as a static quality but as a dynamic result of techno-social articulation.

This study does not attempt to generalize all expressions of religious authority across Islam but rather focuses on seven representative digital figures whose platforms, audiences, and practices illuminate broader shifts. Although the findings may be shaped by the

linguistic, cultural, and algorithmic specificity of the Indonesian and transnational Muslim contexts, the analytical model proposed here is adaptable for examining authority transformation in other digital religious ecosystems worldwide.

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Note

[1] Data friom non-published research is included. The data can be obtained through the authors.

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