

Ulama and Religious Legitimacy in Indonesia: The Shift from the Sanad Tradition to Digital Transformation in the Dissemination of Islamic Knowledge

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Abstract

This research examines the shift in ‘ulamā’ authority from traditional sanad-based knowledge systems toward legitimacy increasingly shaped by digital algorithmic mechanisms, fundamentally affecting contemporary Islamic education. The shift represents a substantial restructuring of Islamic epistemic authority, where scholarly credibility no longer stems exclusively from conventional knowledge transmission pathways but also draws from affective engagement and digital platform prominence. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach that merges Islamic scholarship with media studies, this investigation demonstrates how digital transformation accelerates the removal of intermediaries in religious authority, prioritizing metrics such as popularity, emotional connection, and user engagement over scholarly precision and methodological verification. The examples of Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki demonstrate different yet overlapping approaches to navigating authority in digital religious spaces, revealing the simultaneous operation of epistemic, affective, and algorithmic forms of legitimacy. The research identifies three interconnected transformation dimensions—epistemological, structural, and interactional—that drive the declining significance of traditional institutions and the fragmentation of Islamic educational programs. The article proposes a hybrid Islamic education model that integrates epistemic rigor, digital competency, critical thinking skills, and ethical development. The research’s principal theoretical advancement lies in developing a tripartite framework of religious legitimacy that accounts for the tension between democratization processes and the potential trivialization within contemporary Islamic discourse. On a practical level, the study recommends incorporating digital-religious literacy into foundational curricula and establishing formalized criteria for validating digital da’wah legitimacy.

Keywords: Digital Media, Knowledge Transmission, Islamic Education, ‘Ulamā’ Authority.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout Islamic history, religious scholars have served as crucial guardians of doctrinal integrity and academic heritage. Within the Islamic tradition, scholarly credentials are typically established through rigorous engagement with foundational texts and obtaining proper



certification from recognized teachers whose authority is validated by the wider academic community (Zaman, 2010). Over centuries, knowledge transmission occurred through intricate scholarly networks. The ‘ulamā’ functioned as key intermediaries in this process, engaging in instruction, authorship, and missionary work.

Historically, Indonesia’s Islamic knowledge transmission depended on face-to-face instruction, sanad-validated credentials, and circulation of heritage texts (*kutub turāth*). Traditional institutions like pesantren and madrasah functioned as primary spaces where scholarly credentials developed through sustained intellectual and spiritual formation (Daud Lintang et al., 2025). Indonesian Islamic scholarship’s genealogical connections have been extensively documented. Azra traces the cross-regional scholarly connections linking Indonesian religious scholars from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to Middle Eastern centers of learning (Azra, 2004). Bruinessen demonstrates the Naqshbandiyyah order’s role in connecting Indonesia, Kurdistan, and the Hijāz (Bruinessen, 1992).

Dhofier analyzes scholarly lineages’ significance within Javanese pesantren culture during the twentieth century (Dhofier, 2011). This scholarship reveals that Indonesia’s Islamic knowledge dissemination remains fundamentally connected to classical Muslim scholarly frameworks. This framework bridges local religious expression with worldwide Islamic discourse, creating a rich intellectual heritage across the archipelago. Classical and contemporary Arabic-language scholars have profoundly shaped Indonesian Muslim intellectual culture. Their works continue to provide comprehensive Islamic guidance across multiple domains (Facal, 2014). Traditional Islamic education builds upon these foundational texts (Shiddiq, 2016). Pesantren-type institutions heavily incorporate them into their pedagogy. Within pesantren environments, students develop moral and spiritual cultivation (*ta’dīb*), absorb scholarly conduct principles (*adab al-’ilm*), and construct their religious consciousness (Nashihin, 2017).

Indonesia’s Islamic continuity depends on the collaborative relationship among the ‘ulamā’, pesantren, and religious educational institutions. Historically, scholarly qualification systems ensured teaching competence through lineage verification (*sanad*), community authorization (*ijāzah*), and methodical pedagogical approaches. Indonesia’s Islamic development and transformation would have followed a fundamentally different trajectory without these interconnected cultural, religious, and intellectual structures (Munip, 2010). Islamic educational approaches have undergone substantial evolution over time. Previously, knowledge dissemination occurred exclusively through direct interpersonal contact. This pattern has shifted dramatically. Munip documents that from 1950 to 2004, extensive translation of Arabic Islamic literature into Indonesian occurred, significantly expanding access to expert religious scholarship. This marked the beginning of democratizing religious learning beyond Arabic-literate individuals or those geographically proximate to traditional schools (Munip, 2010). Recent decades have witnessed explosive digital technology growth, further intensifying this transformation.

Islamic knowledge-sharing practices have experienced profound shifts. Muhammad Wildan’s 2017 examination of Facebook-based theological discourse demonstrates that Indonesian Muslims now conduct religious discussions through social media platforms.

Contemporary digital environments enable knowledge dissemination on an unprecedented scale, permitting virtually anyone to produce and distribute religious content without adhering to conventional educational pathways or scholarly authentication systems that historically legitimized religious authority. This transformation unfolds within a wider sociocultural framework. Indonesia's younger generation comprises "digital natives" who process information through fundamentally different approaches than previous cohorts (Larson, 2024). Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok attract growing numbers of young Muslims seeking religious guidance. Unlike conventional pesantren settings, these digital spaces lack established scholarly verification mechanisms or standardized educational frameworks. They operate through algorithmic systems prioritizing emotional resonance over systematic scholarship, viral potential over substantive depth, and user engagement over factual precision. Contemporary Muslim communities increasingly look beyond traditional institutional 'ulamā' toward young preachers, Muslim media personalities, and digital content creators with minimal formal Islamic credentials or systematic religious training (Jannah & Al Ayubi, 2025). Figures like Adi Hidayat attract significant followings, with over 5.6 million Instagram followers and more than 6.1 million YouTube subscribers (Adi Hidayat Official – YouTube, n.d.; Adihidayatofficial-Instagram, n.d.). Similarly, Hanan Attaki commands substantial online audiences, exceeding ten million Instagram followers and approaching three million YouTube subscribers (Hanan Attaki YouTube, n.d.; Hanan_attaki Instagram, n.d.-a).

These metrics reflect evolving patterns of digital religious engagement while signaling a broader transformation from knowledge-centered legitimacy toward popularity-driven authority. Hoesterey identifies this phenomenon as the emergence of "religious celebrities," whose influence derives primarily from media visibility and personal charisma rather than scholarly rigor (Hoesterey, 2016). Here, Adi Hidayat, with his pesantren credentials and classical textual expertise, alongside Hanan Attaki, with his contemporary, emotionally-oriented da'wah approach, illustrate the transition from sanad-validated authority toward affective and algorithmic legitimation. This shift presents formidable challenges for traditional Islamic educational institutions. How can they preserve scholarly rigor and extensive pedagogical processes when digital platforms can grant religious credibility immediately, circumventing established learning frameworks? These developments are reshaping knowledge authority structures.

Consequently, the most significant transformations concern how religious knowledge is discussed, validated, and authenticated. Digital media don't merely replace conventional authority structures but also enable religious concept circulation and collective identity formation (Ronaldi et al., 2023). Expanding digital religious engagement generates novel legitimacy frameworks distinct from traditional models (Aida et al., 2024). Traditional Islamic institutions face increased instability given their historical dependence on gradual knowledge transmission, collective authentication, and intimate teacher-student relationships. This shift gains urgency as Indonesian Muslims experience growing interpretive pluralism regarding religious meaning. Religious legal opinions rapidly circulated through social media frequently lack proper methodology, historical grounding, or *maṣlahah*-*mafsadah* analysis—all fundamental elements of *ijtihād* (Bunt, 2003). This environment enables "self-proclaimed

authorities”—individuals issuing religious pronouncements based on unreliable online information. Traditional Islamic educational institutions thus adopt defensive postures, struggling to maintain relevance amid growing public trust in social media personalities over pesantren-trained scholars and declining institutional confidence.

Critical examination is needed regarding standards, credibility, and accountability in religious knowledge dissemination, alongside whether traditional institutions can adapt without abandoning core principles. This challenge transcends technical or methodological concerns, encompassing philosophical and epistemological dimensions: can educational systems grounded in oral and textual traditions endure within image- and video-saturated environments? While digitalization creates novel knowledge-sharing possibilities, it simultaneously demands reconceptualizing authority frameworks established during the classical ‘ulamā’ era (Feener, 2014). This transformation profoundly impacts Indonesian Muslim communities, revealing considerable complexity. Some santri communities maintain traditional learning approaches with minimal digital platform engagement, while urban Muslims depend extensively on digital religious resources (Alam et al., 2023). A substantial Muslim population participates in both conventional pengajian and digital religious content consumption (Mustofa et al., 2023) between these poles.

Islamic educational institutions face considerable difficulty balancing traditional authenticity with adaptive openness given this demographic diversity. Contemporary Islamic education’s central dilemma involves maintaining pesantren and madrasah relevance as religious authority increasingly migrates toward digital platforms. Preserving classical scholarly tradition depth while equipping santri with competencies necessary for digital engagement remains essential (Harmathilda et al., 2024). Curriculum reform has thus transitioned from theoretical consideration to urgent necessity, ensuring Islamic knowledge transmission within contexts characterized by rapid information dissemination, accelerated content circulation, and technology-mediated public discourse.

Within this framework, the present research examines how the digital era influences Islamic knowledge dissemination and the consequent transformation of religious authority, historically grounded in ‘ulamā’ tradition. This research analyzes how traditional and digital paradigms negotiate authority through figures such as Ustadz Hanan Attaki and Ustadz Adi Hidayat. This investigation considers historical knowledge transmission foundations and digital media’s transformative impact on learning processes, providing novel insights into evolving concepts of authority, legitimacy, and Islamic pedagogical approaches within contemporary information environments. This research integrates “ulamā” networks, social media platforms, and religious personalities within a unified analytical framework, examining the persistent tension between sanad-based epistemology and the affective-algorithmic systems embedded in digital platforms. It addresses how classical transmission frameworks might be adapted for continuously evolving digital contexts, highlighting marginalization pressures.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach grounded in library-based research methods. Such a methodological framework proves particularly suitable for

investigating the multifaceted transformation of religious scholarly authority within digital contexts—a development encompassing interconnected social, cultural, theological, and technological factors. According to Creswell, qualitative inquiry facilitates comprehensive exploration of how individuals construct meaning around social phenomena, particularly concerning shifts in religious authority within modern contexts (Creswell, 2013). The reliance on library research stems from the study's emphasis on exploring theoretical and conceptual frameworks rather than conducting empirical hypothesis testing through field-based investigation. As articulated by Zed (2008), library research represents a systematic methodology involving the gathering, examination, recording, and categorization of materials housed in library repositories.

The selection of literature followed explicit criteria to ensure analytical rigor and relevance. Sources were included based on three principal considerations: (1) thematic relevance, meaning direct engagement with Islamic scholarly authority, knowledge transmission (*sanad*), digital religion, or Indonesian Islamic education; (2) scholarly credibility, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and works published by recognized university presses, with particular attention to studies grounded in empirical research or established theoretical frameworks; and (3) temporal adequacy, favoring publications from 2000 onward to capture digital-era dynamics, while selectively incorporating foundational classical and pre-digital scholarship indispensable for historical contextualization (e.g., Azra, 2004; Bruinessen, 1992; Dhofier, 2011). Sources that failed to meet these criteria—including opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed commentary, and sources lacking methodological transparency—were excluded from the core analytical corpus. This selection process yielded a corpus spanning Islamic studies, media and communication studies, sociology of religion, and Indonesian studies, enabling interdisciplinary triangulation of the research questions.

This methodological choice enables thorough engagement with foundational texts addressing religious scholarly authority, historical scholarship examining scholarly networks across the Nusantara region, and contemporary analyses of digital religion and authority structures. Through its descriptive lens, the research illuminates the features of conventional religious scholarly legitimacy, traditional pedagogical pathways for Islamic knowledge dissemination, and novel authority configurations arising within digital environments. The analytical framework investigates the catalysts, processes, and ramifications of the shift from knowledge-based authority toward affective–algorithmic validation, encompassing its theological, epistemological, and pedagogical implications. Primary materials comprise academic scholarship spanning Islamic studies, Islamic pedagogy, and digital communication research. Literature identification proceeded through academic repositories including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, and institutional library archives.

Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki were selected as case studies over other prominent digital *da'wah* figures for reasons that are both substantive and comparative. First, they represent contrasting yet complementary models of digital religious authority: Adi Hidayat embodies a figure whose legitimacy retains strong epistemic foundations through classical textual credentials and *pesantren*-based formation, while Hanan Attaki represents a figure whose

authority is constructed primarily through affective and aesthetic means. This deliberate contrast enables the study to examine the full spectrum of legitimacy configurations available within contemporary digital Islamic spaces. Second, both figures command demonstrably large and sustained audiences—over 6.1 million YouTube subscribers and 5.6 million Instagram followers for Adi Hidayat, and over ten million Instagram followers and approximately three million YouTube subscribers for Hanan Attaki—indicating that their influence is not ephemeral but structurally embedded within Indonesia’s digital religious landscape. Third, both figures have been subjects of prior scholarly discussion, providing a degree of analytical foundation that enhances the credibility of library-based analysis. Other notable digital da‘wah figures, such as Felix Siauw or Evie Effendi, were acknowledged but not selected as primary cases because their profiles, while significant, do not present the same degree of theoretical contrast necessary to illustrate the tripartite legitimacy framework proposed in this study.

Cross-referencing among key materials was performed to ensure validity. The analytical process unfolded across four phases: cataloging available literature, organizing materials thematically, conducting critical textual evaluation, and producing synthetic interpretations. This sequence facilitated identification of enduring trends, theoretical tensions, and analytical lacunae that informed the study’s interpretive findings.

The analysis of both figures’ digital profiles was conducted through systematic non-participant observation of their verified YouTube channels and Instagram accounts during the period of October to December 2025. Content was selected for analysis based on three criteria: (1) platform representativeness, meaning content types characteristic of each platform’s dominant format (long-form video lectures on YouTube; short-form clips, infographics, and reels on Instagram); (2) thematic diversity, ensuring that selected content spanned multiple Islamic subjects (‘aqidah, fiqh, akhlaq, and motivational themes) rather than focusing on a single genre; and (3) engagement indicators, giving analytical attention to posts with notably high viewer interaction (likes, comments, shares) as proxies of audience resonance. The analysis did not involve quantitative content coding but rather qualitative thematic interpretation guided by the three legitimacy dimensions—epistemic, affective, and algorithmic—developed in the theoretical framework. Observations focused on presentation style, use of classical sources, visual aesthetics, audience interaction patterns, and platform-specific formatting choices. While this approach does not permit statistical generalization, it enables theoretically grounded interpretation of the authority-construction strategies employed by each figure within their respective digital contexts. While this library-centered investigation lacks direct empirical field evidence, its integrative approach constructs a robust theoretical foundation for comprehending contemporary transformations in religious scholarly authority and establishes groundwork for subsequent empirical research within Islamic education contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reconsidering the Power of Religious Scholars: From Traditional Knowledge Chains to Digital-Age Validation

Religious scholars, or “ulamā,” have long held a central position in Muslim communities, deriving their influence from extensive religious expertise and ethical standing (Chairi, 2019). However, this influence represents a dynamic rather than static epistemic arrangement, continually renegotiated in response to evolving social, political, and technological contexts. The contrasting approaches of Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki to constructing religious credibility in online spaces particularly illustrate this ongoing renegotiation. Weber’s tripartite framework of authority—encompassing legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic dimensions—offers valuable analytical tools for examining these shifts (Weber, 1997). The authority of Islamic scholars has historically centered on traditional legitimacy, enhanced by charismatic elements. This legitimacy stems from the chain of knowledge transmission (isnād) and the spiritual recognition granted by the community (Ali, 2024).

Unlike Weber’s more static notion of tradition, Islamic scholarly legitimacy operates through knowledge chains and ethical consistency maintained via sanad, which authorizes scriptural interpretation. Al-Attas emphasizes that the ‘ulamā’ function not merely as religious instructors but as guardians of proper conduct (adab) and authenticity, linking moral credibility to scholarly lineage (Al-Attas, 1998). Within Indonesian pesantren traditions, *al-tafaquh fi al-dīn* transcends mere intellectual pursuit, representing a transformative process of moral and character development within intensive scholarly environments (Bruinessen, 1995). Traditional authority therefore operates through relational dynamics, manifested in sustained teacher-student engagement. This framework stands in stark contrast to Hanan Attaki’s approach to digital preaching, characterized by brief, emotionally resonant materials that minimize face-to-face contact in favor of technologically mediated connection (Rejeki et al., 2024).

Conversely, Adi Hidayat embodies a hybrid authority model that preserves textual rigor while strategically leveraging digital channels for broader educational reach (Adi Hidayat Official, 2025c). Historically, Islamic scholarly authority rested on three interconnected pillars: an unbroken sanad, affiliation with recognized religious institutions, and sustained intellectual formation within established educational frameworks (Whyte, 2024). These elements collectively ensure knowledge authenticity, communal validation, and methodological consistency. Digital disruption, however, has reconfigured this landscape. Social media platforms enable religious knowledge claims without traditional sanad-based verification, undermining conventional authentication mechanisms (Campbell, 2010).

Individuals such as Hanan Attaki derive their influence less from formal credentials and more from their proximity and relatability to their audience, particularly urban youth (Hanan_attaki-Instagram, n.d.-a). Emotional resonance and platform-driven visibility are becoming increasingly important, either enhancing or replacing traditional scholarly credentials. Bourdieu’s framework of cultural capital provides valuable insight into understanding this transformation. According to Bourdieu (2011), legitimacy stems not merely from possessing knowledge but from leveraging that expertise to achieve symbolic

recognition within specific social fields. Adi Hidayat demonstrates how conventional cultural capital—such as proficiency in classical text interpretation and chains of transmission—can be converted into broadly accessible digital influence. In contrast, Hanan Attaki acquires authority through lifestyle-oriented cultural capital by employing accessible vocabulary, visually engaging content, and emotionally resonant narratives that connect with younger audiences.

This transformation in the digital era has given rise to what might be termed “algorithmic capital”—the capability to decode platform mechanics, maximize content visibility, and capture audience engagement (Lundahl, 2022). Metrics such as engagement rates and social sharing increasingly outweigh sustained theological expertise in determining authoritative status. According to Benkler, digital technologies enable networked communities, thereby decentralizing knowledge creation and bypassing traditional institutional gatekeepers (Benkler, 2006). This infrastructure enables new forms of authority based on performance-driven visibility instead of institutional validation.

Eickelman and Anderson describe this development as the rise of New Muslim Publics, marked by religious authority dispersing through informal digital channels rather than remaining concentrated in scholarly institutions (Eickelman & Anderson, 2005). Adi Hidayat represents a transitional form of authority that preserves scholarly rigor while embracing digital accessibility. Hanan Attaki, meanwhile, represents emotionally-driven authority grounded in aesthetic presentation and affective connection. What unites these approaches is not shared scholarly training but their ability to cultivate affective legitimacy—authority derived from emotional connection, accessibility, and aspirational storytelling (Perelló-Sobrepere, 2017). Digital religious personalities must carefully curate their self-presentation across platforms—including visual appearance, linguistic style, and engagement patterns—to preserve their legitimacy (Goffman, 2023).

This reflects Goffman’s concept of impression management. Adi Hidayat maintains scholarly formality, whereas Hanan Attaki cultivates approachability through casual aesthetics and personal transformation narratives. Through a Weberian lens, this shift represents an evolution in charismatic authority shaped by algorithmic systems. Traditional charisma depended on religious devotion and scholarly reputation. Contemporary charisma increasingly relies on digital visibility and platform engagement. Therefore, religious authority persists in the digital landscape but continuously evolves through competing forms of scholarly, emotional, and algorithmic validation.

This evolution occurs within the broader attention economy framework, where religious content competes with diverse media for scarce audience attention (Ibrahim, 2024). Consequently, theological concepts are frequently streamlined for shareability and emotional impact. Platform algorithms simultaneously favor accessibility over complexity. Context collapse intensifies these dynamics by merging diverse audiences with varying expectations into unified digital spaces (Boyd, 2014). Digital religious communicators frequently employ ambiguous language and non-controversial themes to maintain broad appeal while avoiding substantive but divisive discussions.

The transition from transmission-chain authority to platform-based legitimacy represents a fundamental restructuring of Islamic religious authority. While this shift democratizes religious discourse, it risks diminishing complex theological traditions through viral appeal and emotional manipulation. Consequently, religious authority in contemporary Indonesia exists within ongoing tension between scholarly depth and digital visibility. Navigating this dynamic requires Islamic educational institutions to develop critical digital literacy among students while creating adaptive frameworks responsive to evolving religious expression.

The Evolution of Islamic Knowledge Dissemination in the Digital Era

The digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of Islamic religious education and knowledge sharing among Muslims. What was once a vertically organized, institution-centered system has evolved into a horizontal, accessible network where geographical distance and strict academic formalities no longer serve as barriers. Figures such as Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki exemplify this shift—they have accumulated substantial religious influence outside conventional credentialing pathways. Hanan Attaki leveraged digital technologies to expand the Pemuda Hijrah movement, while Adi Hidayat transformed his YouTube presence into a virtual Islamic school attracting tens of thousands weekly. These developments reflect how social media algorithms prioritize viewer engagement over scholarly credentials or source authentication (Sierocki, 2024), effectively diminishing traditional gatekeeping mechanisms.

This democratization of religious authority carries profound implications for Islamic pedagogy. Historically, scholarly credibility derived from institutional affiliation, extended apprenticeship, and documented chains of transmission (*sanad*). The digital landscape has blurred these pathways, redirecting influence toward those who master media technologies and algorithmic systems. The rise of figures like Hanan Attaki and Adi Hidayat demonstrates how individuals can now establish religious credibility independently of traditional scholarly hierarchies. As Uyuni and Adnan (2020) observe, Islamic education faces growing challenges in preserving ethical and spiritual principles amid an environment characterized by instant information access and rapid dissemination. The challenge extends beyond curriculum revision to encompass fundamental questions about the source of ‘*ulamā*’ legitimacy—now shifting from institutional frameworks toward a more dynamic, populist digital ecosystem. This structural transformation has been accompanied by corresponding changes in knowledge transmission methods.

Contemporary digital religious material typically appears in compact, visually appealing, easily digestible formats that incorporate graphic elements and multimedia components, enabling consumption regardless of time or location (Nirwan Wahyudi Ar, 2022). Campbell notes that younger Muslims gravitate toward religious messaging that is immediate, visual, and directly applicable to everyday experience (Campbell, 2013). Hanan Attaki’s Instagram features primarily text-based graphics and brief inspirational clips (Hanan_attaki-Instagram, n.d.-b), while Adi Hidayat’s YouTube offerings include condensed lecture segments with accompanying commentary (Adi Hidayat Official, 2025a).

Such examples illustrate how religious communicators adapt their messaging to align with platform affordances. Eickelman and Anderson describe this shift as the creation of a New

Muslim Public Sphere, marked by the dispersal of religious authority away from official institutions toward diverse digital channels (Eickelman & Anderson, 2005). Within this sphere, credibility stems not solely from proficiency in classical texts (*kitāb kuning*) or possession of formal authorization (*ijāza*), but equally from competence in digital communication, platform algorithm navigation, and the ability to present religious teachings in formats optimized for viral distribution (Tarwiyyah, 2025). This creates a paradox where religious authority becomes simultaneously more accessible yet more vulnerable to contestation and displacement (Zaid et al., 2022).

The dominance of algorithmic systems reshapes legitimacy criteria. Quantitative measures—follower counts, video views, likes, and shares—serve as proxy indicators of authority, frequently overshadowing conventional assessments of scholarly qualification (Dessindi & Andalas, 2022). Content recommendation algorithms intensify this pattern by continuously presenting users with material aligned with existing preferences, fostering echo chambers where conformity displaces critical examination. Within this framework, viral appeal supplants veracity, allowing religiously simplistic or inaccurate content to achieve broad circulation while methodologically sophisticated discourse remains limited to specialized audiences. The accessibility of digital religious material produces both beneficial and problematic consequences for Islamic comprehension.

Digital technologies dramatically improve knowledge access, especially for populations removed from traditional educational centers, and offer students supplementary learning resources beyond formal instruction (Tolchah & Arfan Mu'ammam, 2019). Conversely, excessive unmoderated information can produce cognitive saturation, doctrinal oversimplification, and circulation of unverified or extremist interpretations, ultimately diminishing collective religious understanding.

Comparing traditional and digital authority models illuminates this transformation. Traditional systems depend on hierarchical transmission chains, institutional endorsement, extended study periods, and geographically bounded knowledge transfer, yielding systematic and contextually grounded understanding. Digital authority operates through algorithmic proficiency, audience engagement capacity, and content production skills, enabling global reach while generating fragmented, emotionally driven material. Empirically, individuals like Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki represent an emerging hybrid model of religious authority that combines substantive knowledge with digital competence, formal credentials with algorithmic visibility, and traditional education with media sophistication. Research on young Muslim populations reveals preference for emotionally resonant, inspirational, and entertaining content over dense theoretical analysis.

This pattern reflects movement from “learning to know” toward “learning to feel” (Husein & Slama, 2018). Such tendencies risk positioning religious knowledge as disposable consumption rather than sustained character formation. While increasing accessibility, this content form challenges pesantren and madrasah institutions to develop pedagogical approaches that maintain intellectual rigor. Addressing these concerns, Campbell advocates an adaptive integration model that incorporates digital technologies while safeguarding core religious principles (Campbell, 2010). Within this framework, ‘ulamā’ and Islamic educators

should actively participate in digital spaces, viewing technology as pedagogical infrastructure rather than a replacement for scholarly expertise.

Although digital platforms enable immediate information access, genuine depth and authenticity in religious comprehension necessitate guidance from ‘ulamā’ rooted in transmission chains and contextual mastery of Islamic tradition. The transformation of media and Islamic knowledge transmission methods does not eliminate traditional authority but reconfigures it. The ‘ulamā’ remain vital knowledge sources, with their authority enhanced through successful adaptation to digital environments and contemporary communication approaches (Uyuni & Adnan, 2022). This reconfiguration operates at both structural and epistemological dimensions—algorithmic endorsement increasingly determines legitimacy, while networked transmission patterns supersede hierarchical knowledge architectures. Consequently, Islamic educational institutions must reconceptualize their mission beyond knowledge preservation to include critical roles as curators and authenticators, guiding Muslim communities through an increasingly complex digital religious landscape.

Dispersed Religious Leadership and Institutional Credibility

The transformation of religious leadership structures in the contemporary digital landscape has created a decentralized environment of authority, characterized by the scattering of Islamic knowledge sources that once operated through more unified channels. Historically, religious instruction flowed through established transmission networks (*sanad al-‘ilm*), embodied by conventional ‘ulamā’ and organizational fatwā bodies such as the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI). Currently, however, Muslim populations encounter numerous alternative sources, many of which lack consistency or credibility. This decentralization creates widespread confusion about what credentials are required for religious leadership, especially when public recognition goes to high-profile figures without proper epistemic credentials, who achieve prominence through fame rather than meeting traditional scholarly standards (Hakim & Mukhlis, 2023).

Within this fragmented landscape, Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki are frequently perceived as representing contrasting approaches. Adi Hidayat gains recognition as more “academic” due to his demonstrated scholarly training and use of textual sources (Adi Hidayat Official, 2025b). Conversely, Hanan Attaki is commonly viewed as more “mainstream” through her contemporary motivational approach and lifestyle-focused da‘wah (Hanan_attaki-Instagram, n.d.-c). Yet both operate within the same contested digital marketplace where credibility and visibility remain constantly negotiable. A prominent illustration of this tension appears in responses to Hanan Attaki, who attracts youth audiences through the Pemuda Hijrah initiative and accessible communication style, while simultaneously facing critiques from established ‘ulamā’ who question this authority model for purportedly reducing Islamic knowledge to simplistic forms lacking methodological rigor (Sulistia Salsabiilaa et al., 2024).

Under these conditions, legitimacy rooted in *sanad* and institutional recognition can be overshadowed by figures whose influence derives from digital visibility and affective connection. Consequently, fragmentation not only redistributes how authority gets

acknowledged and evaluated publicly, but also multiplies its forms. This transformation extends beyond individual preachers to encompass platform-based religious services and micro-influencers. Digital projects like *Konsultasi Syariah*, which uses Instagram Stories for fiqh questions, and accounts such as @husein_hadar, which deploy compact infographics for Islamic content, demonstrate how religious instruction increasingly operates through platform structures and routine digital exchanges (A'yuni & Nasrullah, 2022). Simultaneously, Islamic practices are expanding throughout Indonesian society, migrating from conventional religious institutions into contemporary spaces including shopping centers, corporate offices, and beyond. Concurrently, shari'ah-compliant sectors like hijab fashion, cosmetics, tourism, and food have gained significant traction nationwide.

The digital environment serves as a powerful medium for religious discourse (Muhammad Wildan, 2017, p. 1), simultaneously reinforcing and rendering religious authority more contestable. This contestation must be understood within broader historical developments where modernization reshaped religious leadership and public engagement. Feener observes that contemporary scholars increasingly operate in competitive and contentious environments where traditional authorities can no longer maintain exclusive control over legitimacy. Modern discourse generates sophisticated frameworks for discussing belief and practice, rights and obligations, and public moral standards, continuously renegotiating boundaries of legitimate authority (Feener, 2014). Digital technologies accelerate this process by facilitating the circulation and contestation of authority claims.

A significant consequence of evolving media and transmission mechanisms is the simplification of sophisticated Islamic scholarship. Digital knowledge systems prioritize speed, accessibility, and visual appeal, necessitating that religious material be delivered through condensed, digestible formats (Turner & Nasir, 2013). Consequently, teachings traditionally requiring sustained reflection and comprehensive study may experience diminished nuance. Theological and philosophical ideas dependent on historical-contextual and interdisciplinary comprehension frequently lose their intellectual depth when reduced to brief declarations. Even *ijtihad*—an interpretive practice rooted in *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *qawā'id*, and *maqāṣid*—can be rhetorically deployed as an authority marker while remaining disconnected from the methodological structures that validate it.

Islamic principles, traditionally transmitted through demanding approaches like *talaqqī*, classical textual study, and spiritual guidance, now circulate as catchphrases, brief statements, and visually attractive fragments (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Initiatives such as *Mubadalah.id*, advancing gender-egalitarian readings of religious texts (Ilmiati et al., 2022), demonstrate how digital mediation can enhance interpretive participation while simultaneously generating concerns about the reduction of conversations that, within classical frameworks, unfold through elaborate methodological analysis. Thus, social media architectures privilege accessible and engaging material over content demanding sustained contemplation and scholarly rigor.

The resulting condition resembles hyperreality, where religious significance is increasingly experienced through symbolic forms disconnected from their knowledge foundations. Therefore, decentralized authority produces contradictory outcomes: it democratizes religious

conversation and facilitates Islamic learning accessibility, while simultaneously eroding the intellectual depth that has historically underpinned scholarly legitimacy, generating ambiguity in credibility standards and interpretive responsibility. This scenario presents substantial challenges for Islamic education: how can institutions maintain significance when religious knowledge circulates freely outside formal educational frameworks? How can educators and ustādhs preserve pedagogical legitimacy when students access multiple alternative sources that may appear visually compelling yet lack methodological foundation? These concerns highlight the necessity for institutional approaches that not only disseminate content but also cultivate critical literacy regarding credibility, context, and methodology within digital religious environments.

Ultimately, authority once established through systematic transmission and methodological validation is progressively supplanted by emotional resonance rooted in popularity, individual charisma, and content circulation. Digital democratization enhances participation while reducing sophistication, amplifies diverse voices while complicating truth discernment, and broadens inclusion while challenging sophisticated pedagogical transmission. The emergence of figures like Hanan Attaki signals that current developments transcend simple diversification of religious authority, reflecting a fundamental shift in the epistemic organization of Islamic discourse—moving from verified knowledge transmission toward a digital visibility economy where popularity can substitute for authenticity. This shift confronts Muslim communities and educational institutions with an enduring challenge: maintaining openness to innovation while preserving intellectual standards.

Rethinking Islamic Educational Institutions in the Digital Era

The shift from traditional chain-of-transmission (sanad) epistemology to digital-platform-driven authority represents a fundamental restructuring of Islamic educational systems. This represents more than mere methodological adjustment—it constitutes a deep disruption threatening the core educational principles of tarbiyah, ta'lim, and ta'dib that have long anchored Islamic scholarly practice. The dominance of digital metrics has eroded traditional epistemic credibility, creating a critical challenge: how can Islamic educational institutions maintain substantive learning and intellectual depth when contemporary culture prioritizes viral appeal over scholarly rigor and instant gratification over sustained engagement?

Indonesian educational institutions like pesantren and madrasah face mounting pressures from technological disparities and the tension between traditional pedagogical methods and digitally-oriented student expectations. According to Hefner, contemporary pesantren face the challenge of integrating classical instruction with modernization demands, particularly digital transformation (Hefner, 2009). Yet this equilibrium has become increasingly precarious: excessive conservatism risks alienating youth, while hasty modernization threatens to dilute institutional identity. Islamic schools consequently navigate uncertain terrain, attempting to preserve their scholarly inheritance while embracing innovation. The emergence of “digital santri”—students who consume classical materials alongside online religious content on platforms like YouTube—exemplifies this dilemma.

Such learners encounter competing authority models: traditionally credentialed scholars emphasizing sanad and methodological discipline versus charismatic digital influencers validated by audience metrics. Faced with such contradictions, students frequently perceive online personalities as more contemporary or accessible, privileging personal interpretations over formally trained educators' guidance (Lukens-Bull, 2013). This trend signals traditional pedagogical authority's erosion as systematic, progressive learning yields to disconnected, instantaneous knowledge consumption.

Traditional Islamic pedagogy has historically prioritized not merely cognitive development but comprehensive moral and spiritual formation through intimate teacher-student bonds and the principle of exemplification (*uswah*) (Huda et al., 2024). These affective and ethical dimensions, nurtured through face-to-face interaction and communal immersion, resist replication in digital formats. When religious instruction becomes transactional and content-focused, its transformative capacity diminishes. This contradicts Islam's educational heritage, which centers on holistic personal development rather than mere information transfer.

Authority's reconfiguration also complicates curriculum development. In an environment where digital prominence can substitute for formal credentials, traditional curricula emphasizing textual mastery and scholarly rigor face increasing skepticism. Bano's research reveals escalating tensions between curriculum devotion to tradition and practical relevance, tensions amplified in digital contexts (Bano, 2012). Without shared authority standards, consensus regarding educational content, methodology, and achievement criteria becomes elusive. Competency markers have similarly transformed. Conventional indicators—mastering foundational texts (*matan*), comprehending commentaries (*sharḥ*), and exercising legal reasoning (*istinbāt*)—yield primacy to communication effectiveness, aesthetic presentation, and audience rapport. Digital fluency and affective resonance now significantly determine religious messaging's impact (Lim, 2018). This creates epistemological tension: presentation skills may overshadow methodological sophistication, fundamentally altering how religious knowledge is transmitted and assessed.

Digital proliferation further fragments knowledge sources and restructures pedagogical relationships. Students no longer rely exclusively on teachers for information, instead accessing diverse, sometimes contradictory, digital resources. Studies indicate substantial numbers of young Indonesian Muslims consume religious content from inconsistent online sources (Slama, 2017), producing interpretive assemblages lacking coherent epistemological grounding. Consequently, teacher authority becomes continuously negotiable rather than assumed (Günther, 2020), allowing novices to engage sophisticated theological discussions without requisite preparation. This fragmentation creates illusory comprehension—mistaking broad exposure for genuine understanding.

Hirschkind suggests online religious engagement emphasizes performance over transformation, privileging self-display above meaningful understanding and sustained practice (Hirschkind, 2009). Such dynamics foster unwarranted confidence, encouraging claims of expertise on complex matters based on superficial digital interaction rather than rigorous scholarly training. Digitalization particularly threatens Islamic education's

foundational element: character formation (*tarbiyah*) and ethical internalization (*ta'dīb*). Pesantren tradition transmits values through implicit curricula involving mentorship, habituation, and communal existence (Dhofier, 2011). Digital content, however compelling, cannot replicate these experiential learning modes—witnessing patience, humility, and integrity embodied daily. Authentic moral development requires prolonged participation in practice communities where values are enacted, not merely discussed (Nilan, 2009).

While digital religious materials may provide intellectual or emotional stimulation, they inadequately support ethical habit formation. Studies of digital hijrah movements reveal that online-inspired transformations often prove unsustainable without communal reinforcement or ongoing mentorship (Nisa, 2018). Additionally, attention economy structures favor emotionally stimulating, entertaining content, marginalizing contemplative ethical teachings such as *ṣabr*, *tawāḍu'*, and *mujāhadah* that demand patience and depth. Algorithms thus channel religious discourse toward popularity rather than pedagogical value. These developments demonstrate that Islamic education requires not merely technological adoption but comprehensive conceptual reorientation. Institutions must epistemologically reconceive traditional and digital knowledge as complementary rather than oppositional.

Fadl maintains that Islamic intellectual tradition contains inherent adaptive mechanisms through *ijtihād*, *maṣlahah*, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (Fadl, 2014). These principles can guide constructive digital engagement without compromising methodological integrity. Structural-institutional reconfiguration requires embedding traditional scholarly depth alongside digital capabilities within educational frameworks, competency criteria, and accreditation mechanisms. Models integrating digital literacy with Islamic sciences knowledge are essential. Technology should enhance rather than replace scholarly mentorship. Innovation must cultivate student concentration, reflection, and critical analysis despite attention fragmentation (Mujani & Liddle, 2009).

Finally, ethically and normatively, Islamic education must clarify its fundamental purpose: producing content creators optimized for virality or cultivating 'ulamā' possessing intellectual sophistication and principled consistency regardless of popularity. Without comprehensive, coherent adaptation, Islamic institutions risk marginalization within contemporary religious discourse, unable to transmit the Islamic scholarly tradition's depth, rigor, and transformative capacity. Adaptation therefore transcends institutional survival—it becomes crucial knowledge preservation against trivialization inherent in digital platform dynamics.

The Tripartite Legitimacy Framework: Epistemic, Affective, and Algorithmic Dimensions and Their Interactions

The foregoing analysis supports the proposition of a tripartite framework of religious legitimacy comprising three analytically distinct yet empirically intertwined dimensions: epistemic legitimacy, affective legitimacy, and algorithmic legitimacy. Understanding how these three dimensions interact—rather than simply identifying them as separate categories—is essential for grasping the full dynamics of contemporary Islamic authority and its implications for Islamic education practice.

Epistemic legitimacy refers to the authority derived from verifiable scholarly credentials: mastery of classical texts (*kutub turāth*), documented chains of transmission (*sanad*), formal *ijāzah*, and affiliation with recognized educational institutions. This dimension is most clearly exemplified by Adi Hidayat, whose lectures consistently foreground textual citations, methodological references, and engagement with the *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* and *‘ulūm al-ḥadīth* frameworks. In terms of educational implications, epistemic legitimacy anchors curricular content: when a *da‘i* operates from this basis, students and audiences are guided toward systematic, scaffolded learning pathways that mirror classical pedagogical hierarchies. However, even figures with strong epistemic legitimacy must negotiate the digital environment’s demands for accessibility and brevity, which can create pressure to simplify or abbreviate complex scholarly content.

Affective legitimacy operates through emotional resonance, relatability, and identity-based connection. A figure’s ability to articulate personal narratives of spiritual transformation, use accessible language, and project aspirational Islamic identities cultivates a bond with audiences that is less dependent on scholarly credentials and more contingent on perceived authenticity and emotional proximity. Hanan Attaki exemplifies this dimension, as his *Pemuda Hijrah* movement’s appeal rests substantially on lifestyle aesthetics, personal hijrah narratives, and content formats calibrated to the emotional registers of young urban Muslims. For Islamic education, affective legitimacy carries a double-edged implication: it lowers the threshold of engagement and can draw previously disengaged youth into Islamic discourse, but it may simultaneously create an audience expectation that religious learning should be primarily emotionally gratifying rather than intellectually demanding. Educational institutions must acknowledge this affective dimension rather than dismissing it, incorporating emotive pedagogical strategies while insisting on methodological rigor.

Algorithmic legitimacy is the dimension most distinctive to the digital age. It is conferred not by human scholarly communities but by platform infrastructure: high subscriber counts, strong engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments, watch time), and favorable content recommendation by platform algorithms. Algorithmic legitimacy operates according to its own logic, which is largely indifferent to the epistemic or moral qualities of content and primarily rewards consistency, visual appeal, and audience retention. Both Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki benefit from algorithmic legitimacy, though in different ways: Adi Hidayat’s substantial YouTube viewership reflects in part the platform’s rewarding of regular, high-production-value content, while Hanan Attaki’s Instagram dominance reflects the platform’s premium on aesthetic curation and affective shareability. For Islamic education, algorithmic legitimacy poses a structural challenge: if institutional educators do not engage with digital platforms strategically, algorithmically prominent but epistemically weak figures will dominate the religious information landscape.

The three dimensions do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically. Epistemic legitimacy can be amplified or constrained by the other two dimensions: a scholar’s classical credentials may attract initial audiences, but sustained algorithmic reach requires the affective and presentational competencies that digital platforms reward. Conversely, affective legitimacy without epistemic grounding is vulnerable to theological contestation—as Hanan

Attaki's criticism from established 'ulamā' illustrates—and may produce audiences whose Islamic comprehension remains shallow despite sustained engagement. Algorithmic legitimacy, meanwhile, functions as a multiplier for whichever of the other two dimensions a figure already possesses: it can amplify both epistemically rigorous content and epistemically weak but emotionally compelling content indiscriminately. This interaction pattern has concrete implications for Islamic education practice. Curricula must be designed not merely to transmit epistemic content but to develop students' capacity to critically evaluate all three legitimacy forms when assessing the credibility of religious sources. Digital literacy programs within pesantren and madrasah should explicitly teach students to identify the difference between algorithmic prominence and scholarly qualification, between affective connection and epistemic trustworthiness. Furthermore, institutional educators who engage digital platforms must strategically cultivate all three dimensions—maintaining epistemic rigor, developing relatable communication styles, and building platform presence—if they are to remain competitive within an attention economy that does not automatically reward scholarly depth.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of religious scholarly authority in the internet age represents a fundamental shift from traditional chains of knowledge transmission (sanad) to a multifaceted legitimation structure based on emotional connection and platform-driven visibility. The examples of Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki demonstrate that this shift transcends mere technological advancement; it constitutes an epistemological revolution, reshaping how Islamic knowledge gains credibility, circulates, and earns trust within modern Muslim communities. The digital revolution has relocated religious authority's epicenter from face-to-face scholarly networks to online environments governed by visibility metrics, audience engagement, and emotional appeal. While this evolution democratizes religious dialogue, it simultaneously risks trivializing Islamic scholarship and eroding knowledge quality standards, generating persistent tension between accessibility and intellectual rigor.

This study proposes a multidimensional framework for understanding religious authority that encompasses three interconnected legitimacy forms: epistemic legitimacy rooted in scholarly lineage and academic credentials, affective legitimacy derived from emotional bonds and identity construction, and algorithmic legitimacy determined by platform prominence and user interaction patterns. This tripartite framework moves beyond simplistic traditional-versus-digital dichotomies by revealing how these authority forms coexist, intersect, and compete in shaping contemporary Islamic dialogue. Traditional scholarly authority persists rather than vanishes; instead, it adapts within a pluralistic environment demanding both substantive expertise and multimedia communication competence.

The findings indicate that these transformations necessitate reform in Islamic educational institutions. Religious schools must abandon exclusive knowledge transmission monopolies and reimagine themselves as vital custodians of authentic religious understanding. This requires cultivating intellectual capabilities, digital competencies, and scholarly foundations simultaneously. The objective is not abandoning conventional pedagogical approaches but

enhancing them through strategic digital integration, ensuring expanded accessibility does not compromise methodological integrity. Central to this endeavor is developing educators equipped with both digital literacy and epistemic credentials, enabling them to forge emotional connections with learners while maintaining scholarly rigor.

Subsequent research should extend this theoretical framework through practical examination of online religious engagement. Digital ethnographic methods can illuminate the concrete mechanisms by which authority and legitimacy are contested within virtual religious spaces, while network mapping techniques may expose the structural dynamics shaping algorithmic prominence. Additional investigation is needed to assess hybrid Islamic educational models' effectiveness, to examine institutional strategies for digital transformation, and to create educational programs emphasizing digital-religious competency. Understanding how these developments influence Indonesian Muslims' theological comprehension, devotional practices, and communal cohesion over time will constitute a critical area for future scholarly inquiry.

This study is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged honestly to preserve academic integrity and guide the interpretation of its findings. First, the scope of the case studies is deliberately narrow: only two figures—Adi Hidayat and Hanan Attaki—are analyzed in depth. While they were selected to represent contrasting authority models, the Indonesian digital da'wah landscape is considerably more diverse, and findings derived from these two cases cannot be generalized to all digital preachers operating within or beyond the Indonesian context. Second, the study relies entirely on library-based and observational desk-based methods, without incorporating empirical data from audiences. The ways in which viewers and followers actually interpret, use, and evaluate the religious content produced by these figures remain beyond the scope of this research. It is therefore possible that audience dynamics diverge substantially from the patterns inferred from content analysis and secondary literature. Third, the observation of digital profiles, while conducted systematically within a defined timeframe, does not capture the diachronic evolution of each figure's authority construction over time, nor does it account for platform-level changes in algorithm behavior or content policy that may alter the landscape between the observation period and the date of publication. Fourth, the theoretical framework proposed here—the tripartite legitimacy model—remains at the level of conceptual elaboration and has not been subjected to empirical testing through survey instruments, interviews, or large-scale content analysis. These limitations do not invalidate the study's theoretical contributions, but they do circumscribe the degree to which its conclusions can be taken as definitive empirical claims about Indonesian digital Islam. The authors encourage subsequent researchers to address these gaps through audience reception studies, longitudinal digital ethnography, and comparative multi-case analyses that extend the framework proposed here.

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