

DIGITAL INTERPRETATION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA: THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE CRISIS OF RELIGIOUS MODERATION

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology and social media has fundamentally changed the way religious information is disseminated, shifting society's dependence from traditional religious institutions to the consumption of abundant digital religious content on the internet. This transformation has not only reshaped religious authority, but also increased the potential for a decline in religious moderation due to the spread of inaccurate, biased, and radical interpretations. This study aims to analyze the shift in religious authority in the context of Islamic interpretation in the digital age and explore the role of social media in spreading radical ideology. Through a qualitative approach using a systematic literature review of scientific publications from 2019 to 2025, thematic analysis shows a shift from hierarchical authority based on religious scholars and religious institutions to authority based on popularity on social media, which contributes to vulnerability to misinformation, fragmentation of religious understanding, and commodification of religion. Digital literacy emerges as a key factor in filtering religious information, but access to it is not yet evenly distributed among the public. This study concludes that the transformation of religious authority in the digital era is an inevitability that has dual impacts: it opens up opportunities for the democratization of knowledge but also has the potential to erode religious moderation. Therefore, collaboration between the government, religious institutions, and the community is needed to strengthen religious digital literacy and develop responsive content regulations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has fundamentally changed the way people access, produce, and distribute information, including in the religious sphere. The process of learning and understanding religious teachings, which previously relied on traditional institutions and primary texts, has now undergone a significant shift with the advent of the internet and social media as new spaces for the dissemination of knowledge (Syahdaniya & Rifa'i, 2021). Contemporary societies can access a variety of religious content simply through their personal devices, giving them greater autonomy in determining and constructing their religious understanding according to their individual preferences (Albana, 2022). Such widespread access to information marks a shift in the relationship between authority and the patterns of religious knowledge transmission in the digital age.

This transformation has a direct impact on the structure of religious authority. Authority, which was previously hierarchical and centered on scholars, clerics, or religious institutions, is now beginning to be disrupted by the emergence of new figures who use digital popularity as the basis of their authority. Religious influencers, celebrity preachers, and Islamic content creators have become important actors who are able to reach massive audiences, often surpassing the influence of conventional religious institutions (Arief et al., 2025; Ilham, 2022). The emergence of this digital authority indicates a shift towards a more fluid, competitive, and decentralized religious ecosystem.

However, the democratization of access to religious information does not always have positive implications. The openness of the digital space makes the spread of inaccurate, biased, or even radical interpretations easier and more difficult to control (Nurfauziyanti et al., 2022). Low digital literacy among some communities contributes to increased vulnerability to partial, superficial, or methodologically unverified religious understanding

(Syahdaniya & Rifa'i, 2021). This situation is exacerbated by a flood of global information that has not necessarily been verified for accuracy, as well as the rapid influence of foreign cultures, which at a certain point can erode local values and threaten national integrity (Giroth et al., 2024; Nurfauziyanti et al., 2022).

In a more complex context, the digital era is also marked by the phenomenon of post-truth, where emotions and personal beliefs often determine the acceptance of information more than objective facts. In the religious sphere, this phenomenon triggers contestations over the interpretation of sacred texts that take place without adequate methodological references, so that claims to truth become increasingly layered and contradictory (Ahmadi, 2019). Social media has then become an arena for discourse battles, where extreme narratives can spread very quickly, deepening polarization and eroding the value of religious moderation (Gani et al., 2024). Thus, understanding the dynamics of religious authority and interpretation practices in the digital space has become an important agenda, both in an academic framework and in the context of maintaining social and national harmony.

Departing from this complexity, this study aims to answer three main questions: first, how does social media transform the structure and sources of religious authority in the context of Islamic interpretation in Indonesia? second, what are the challenges and crises that arise from the rise of digital interpretation practices in religious understanding and moderation; and third, how does digital literacy play a role in improving the community's ability to filter credible religious information amid the rapid flow of information.

In line with this, this study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the changes in religious authority and the dynamics of digital interpretation in the era of social media. Specifically, this study identifies patterns and characteristics of the shift in authority from conventional institutions to digital figures; analyzes the impact of social

media on the spread of radical ideology and the potential crisis of religious moderation; and explores preventive strategies based on digital literacy to minimize the risks posed by religious interpretation deviations. Thus, this research is expected to contribute relevant insights to the development of religious studies in the digital era while enriching.

2. METHODS

The research methodology was designed using a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review as the main foundation. This approach was chosen based on the exploratory and analytical objectives of the research to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of religious authority transformation and the crisis of religious moderation in the context of the digital era. As a structured approach, systematic literature studies enable researchers to comprehensively identify, evaluate, and synthesize scientific findings from various previous studies, thereby producing a comprehensive and argumentative understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Thus, this study does not collect primary data but utilizes existing knowledge as the basis for analysis.

The data sources in this study come from academic documents relevant to the focus of the study. The selection was made based on a number of criteria to ensure that the literature analyzed was of adequate quality and relevance. The types of documents used include national and international scientific journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, and officially published research reports. The publication time frame is limited to 2019 to 2025 to capture the latest dynamics regarding social media and rapidly developing religious issues. The literature search was conducted using keywords such as digital interpretation, religious authority, social media, digital literacy, religious moderation, digital radicalization, post-truth, and digital da'wah, including their English equivalents. Various databases were used in this process, including

Google Scholar, Portal Garuda, DOAJ, and Sinta-accredited journals. All documents that met the criteria were then collected through documentary review techniques, organized with reference management tools, and analyzed through important sections such as abstracts, introductions, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, results, and conclusions.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allows researchers to explore hidden and explicit patterns of meaning in the literature. The stages of analysis include familiarization through repeated reading, the creation of initial codes to mark relevant parts of the document, and the grouping of codes into broader themes based on similarities in meaning. Next, these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research focus. Each theme was then clearly defined and given a name that reflected its essence before being presented in the research report. Through this process, several main themes emerged as a framework for discussion, namely the shift and fragmentation of religious authority; social media as an arena for contestation and commodification of interpretation; the impact of digitalization on religious understanding and religious moderation; and the role of digital literacy as a mediating factor in these dynamics.

To maintain the credibility of the findings, this study applied a number of qualitative validity strategies. Source triangulation was carried out by analyzing various documents and research findings to ensure data consistency. In addition, the entire analysis process was documented in detail in the form of an audit trail, enabling other researchers to trace the research steps transparently. The results of the analysis also went through a peer debriefing stage, which involved discussions with colleagues who have expertise in the fields of religious studies and media, in order to obtain input and critical evaluation of the data interpretation.

Through a systematically structured, transparent, and scientifically rigorous

methodology, this study seeks to produce a strong and meaningful synthesis of knowledge regarding the complexity of digital interpretation and the dynamics of religious authority in the social media ecosystem.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Authority in Digital Transformation

Religious authority is traditionally understood as the authority possessed by certain individuals or institutions to interpret religious doctrine, determine law, and guide the faithful community. In the context of Islam, this authority is often attached to scholars, clerics, and formal religious institutions such as councils of scholars or Islamic boarding schools, which have clear and socially recognized scholarly lineage (Ahmadi, 2019). However, the development of digital technology has disrupted this hierarchical order. According to Arief et al. (2025), the digitization of religion has caused a shift in authority from traditional hierarchies dominated by scholars and religious institutions to popularity-based authority, where figures such as celebrity preachers and religious influencers have become dominant.

Social media acts as a catalyst in this transformation, as it not only facilitates the spread of da'wah (proselytizing), but also creates a phenomenon of such as instant fatwas, fragmentation of religious teachings, and commodification of religion (Arief et al., 2025). Within the framework of Post-Normal Times (PNT) as applied by Sardar, uncertainty regarding authority has increased, with algorithms and popularity replacing traditional scholarly credibility. As a result, there is a pluralization of sources of authority in the digital space, where religious narratives ranging from liberal to radical can compete freely without institutional filters (Ilham, 2022). This condition creates a more dynamic religious ecosystem but also one that is vulnerable to deviation and misinformation.

Social Media as a Space for Contesting Interpretations

Social media has become a new public space where religious interpretations are debated, constructed, and disseminated. Albana (2022) shows that religious narratives that develop on the internet or social media can be contradictory, such as narratives about religious moderation. Social media users are no longer limited to religious leaders who have direct scientific legitimacy, but can independently produce and disseminate interpretations through platforms such as Instagram.

In this context, social media enables both the desacralization and democratization of interpretation. On the one hand, sacred texts such as the Hadith can be accessed and interpreted by the general public without going through the authority of the ulama, which has the potential to lead to fabrication and distortion of understanding (Ahmadi, 2019). On the other hand, social media also opens up space for moderate or contextualist groups to voice more inclusive interpretations, although their voices are often not as loud as those of textualist-fundamentalist groups or, conversely, liberal groups. This contestation creates a highly fragmented and emotional landscape of religious understanding, especially in the post-truth era (Ahmadi, 2019).

Digital Literacy and the Ability to Filter Religious Information

Amidst the massive and uncontrolled flow of religious information, digital literacy has emerged as a critical competency for filtering credible information. Giroth et al. (2024) define digital literacy as a multidimensional concept that influences various aspects of community life, education, business, and personal well-being. Digital literacy equips individuals with the necessary abilities and skills to navigate the digital landscape effectively, critically, and ethically.

In a religious context, digital literacy encompasses not only the technical ability to use digital platforms, but more importantly, the ability to think critically about religious content encountered. This includes the ability

to evaluate sources, understand context, identify bias, and distinguish between scientifically based information and opinion or propaganda (Giroth et al., 2024). Unfortunately, research shows that many internet users in Indonesia still lack digital literacy skills, making them susceptible to exposure to and dissemination of hoaxes, including on religious issues (Nurfauziyanti et al., 2022). Therefore, strengthening digital literacy is an urgent strategy to mitigate the negative impacts of digital interpretation and build community resilience against radical narratives.

Social Media, Radicalization, and the Crisis of Religious Moderation

The global connectivity offered by social media presents a paradox: on the one hand, it promotes tolerance and the exchange of ideas, but on the other, it facilitates the spread of radical ideologies. Gani et al. (2024) assert that social media serves as the main channel for the dissemination of radical ideologies and identify moderation strategies that can be implemented. The paradigm shift in communication within digital society increases vulnerability to radical ideologies, with extremist groups exploiting algorithms and echo chambers to recruit and indoctrinate followers.

A crisis of religious moderation arises when the digital space is dominated by exclusive, intolerant, and anti-pluralistic narratives. Social media can accelerate the process of radicalization through mechanisms such as repeated exposure to extreme content, reinforcement of beliefs within closed groups, and emotional mobilization through narratives of victimhood (Gani et al., 2024). This poses a serious threat to social cohesion and diversity in Indonesia. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of digital radicalization and formulating effective counter-narrative strategies are integral to efforts to maintain religious moderation in the digital age. This study will further analyze how the contestation of interpretations on social media contributes to this crisis and the preventive measures that can be taken.

Transformation of Authority: From Institutional Hierarchy to Digital Popularity

An analysis of the literature shows that religious authority has undergone significant disruption with the development of the digital ecosystem. The previously vertical and hierarchical structure of authority, in which scholars, clerics, and religious institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Islamic boarding schools, and religious study groups (majelis taklim) served as the main sources of interpretation, has shifted towards a more horizontal and networked model of authority. In this new structure, legitimacy is no longer determined solely by depth of knowledge or institutional authority, but also by digital parameters such as popularity, follower engagement, and an individual's ability to build a personal brand through social media (Arief et al., 2025; Ilham, 2022).

This phenomenon is clearly evident in the emergence of celebrity preachers, religious influencers, and religious content creators as new authorities capable of reaching audiences on a scale never before achieved by conventional religious forums. Their authority is formed through their expertise in visual communication, the use of attractive videos and graphics, and their understanding of algorithmic strategies to ensure their content appears on users' homepages. Additionally, their ability to present religious teachings in a style that is relatable to the lives of the digital generation provides a unique appeal in building public trust (Albana, 2022). This shift is intertwined with the Post-Normal Times (PNT) framework proposed by Arief et al. (2025), which is a situation where uncertainty, complexity, and fluidity of information reach such high levels that algorithms and popularity often replace scientific credibility as the basis for public acceptance of an authority.

However, this transformation holds a paradox that cannot be ignored. On the one hand, the digitization of authority opens up opportunities for the democratization of religious discourse, providing space for

previously marginalized voices and allowing contextual interpretations to flourish (Ahmadi, 2019). On the other hand, however, this openness also blurs the standards of quality and accountability of interpretation. Anyone can now appear as a religious interpreter without going through an adequate process of learning and scientific verification. As a consequence, simplistic, superficial, or even erroneous religious understandings can easily circulate and be accepted by the public (Syahdaniya & Rifa'i, 2021). This condition has given rise to a crisis of authority, marked by the multitude of voices claiming to be right without any clear mechanism for clarification or verification, leaving the public often confused about which religious references are credible.

Social Media as an Arena for Contestation and Commodification of Interpretation

Social media has reconstructed the practice of religious interpretation from a sacred scholarly activity into a cultural commodity that operates within the logic of the attention economy (). Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter function as digital public spaces where various religious narratives, whether conservative, moderate, or liberal, compete for likes, shares, and subscribers (Albana, 2022; Ahmadi, 2019). This competition does not take place within the framework of in-depth scientific dialogue, but rather follows the mechanisms of polarization and virality, where provocative and emotional content has a greater chance of being disseminated. Thus, the quality of religious messages is no longer determined by their argumentative validity, but rather by their capacity to attract attention and trigger emotional responses from the audience.

The findings of the analysis show that these dynamics have led to fragmentation in religious understanding. People no longer refer to a single school of thought, figure, or authoritative institution, but instead consume interpretations in a cafeteria style, choosing, mixing, and adapting religious views from various digital sources according to personal preferences and confirmation bias tendencies.

This process is further reinforced by social media algorithms that create echo chambers and filter bubbles, exposing users only to information that aligns with their previous views and online behavior (Gani et al., 2024). As a result, inclusive religious solidarity tends to erode, replaced by the formation of exclusive, segmented group identities that are prone to discourse conflicts.

Furthermore, the commodification of religion can be observed in the way religious content is packaged according to audience demand. Elements of entertainment, motivation, and lifestyle are often combined with religious messages, resulting in a format that appeals to the younger generation but at the same time simplifies meaning. When religion is processed in such a way to satisfy the tastes of the digital market, there is a risk that the transformative and spiritual dimensions that should be at the core of religious teachings will fade. Thus, religion is not only reduced to a short-lived consumer product, but also loses its epistemological depth and moderating values that should be strengthened in religious life.

Threats to Religious Moderation and the Emergence of Radical Narratives

One of the most critical findings of this study is the potential of social media to erode religious moderation and foster radical narratives. Gani et al. (2024) explicitly refer to social media as "the latest threat to religious moderation." Digital platforms facilitate the spread of radical ideology in a more massive, targeted, and untraceable manner. Extremist groups utilize social media for recruitment, propaganda, and mobilization by presenting dichotomous narratives (infidel vs. Muslim, right vs. wrong) and constructing an imaginary resistance against systems deemed un-Islamic.

In the context of post-truth, facts and data are often defeated by emotions and beliefs. Radical narratives built on sentiments of anger, fear, or group pride become very persuasive to those who feel marginalized or are seeking a strong identity (Ahmadi, 2019). Social media accelerates the radicalization of lone wolves, where individuals can be

exposed to and indoctrinated independently through online content, without the need to physically join a particular group. This poses new challenges for security and social harmony.

Therefore, the crisis of religious moderation in the digital age is not only a matter of differences in interpretation, but also concerns ideological struggles and attempts to seize hegemony in the digital public sphere. When intolerant and exclusive narratives dominate algorithms, public discourse on religion will tend to shift towards a more conservative and closed spectrum, threatening the values of Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika.

Digital Literacy as a Key Factor and Strategic Solution

Amidst the complexity of challenges arising from digital disruption, literature consistently shows that digital literacy plays a key role in steering social media-based religious transformation in a constructive direction. A number of studies confirm that a good level of digital literacy is directly correlated with an individual's ability to sort information, assess the credibility of content, and increase resilience to religious hoaxes and misinformation (Nurfauziyanti et al., 2022; Giroth et al., 2024). In other words, digital literacy serves as both epistemic capital and a social protection mechanism that determines the quality of community interactions with religious discourse in the digital space.

However, digital literacy goes far beyond technical skills such as the ability to operate devices or social media applications. This literacy is critical-dialogical in nature and encompasses several key dimensions. First, information literacy, which is the ability to evaluate the credibility of sources, understand the motives behind content production, and assess the factual accuracy of religious information. Second, media literacy, which includes understanding how digital platforms, algorithms, and attention economy mechanisms work, so that users are able to recognize how their preferences are shaped, directed, or manipulated. Third, basic religious literacy, which is minimal

knowledge of interpretation methodologies such as ushul fiqh and hadith science, which helps the public assess the quality and authority of an interpretation even if they do not study it academically. Fourth, national literacy, which is an understanding of the values of Pancasila, diversity, and commitment to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia as a normative framework that frames religious practices in Indonesia.

These findings indicate that solutions to the crisis of authority and the challenges of religious moderation in the digital age cannot be achieved by restoring the authority structure to a traditional hierarchical model or through a strict approach to content censorship. Instead, a more strategic step is to strengthen community capacity through comprehensive digital literacy education. This effort requires multi-stakeholder collaboration: the government through the integration of digital literacy into the education curriculum; religious institutions through the provision of alternative content that is moderate and credible; social media platforms through the implementation of algorithmic transparency and the promotion of positive content; and civil society through training programs and literacy campaigns. By equipping the public with "digital immunity," the transformation of religious authority in the social media space has the potential to produce a more dynamic and critical religious ecosystem that remains in line with the values of moderation and nationalism.

4. CONCLUSION

A systematic analysis shows that social media has fundamentally changed the structure of authority and the process of religious interpretation in Indonesia. Religious authority has now shifted from a hierarchical-institutional pattern to a digital model based on popularity, communication skills, and the ability to utilize algorithms. This change has given rise to a more open and competitive religious ecosystem, but one that is also vulnerable to distortion due to the weakening of traditional scientific filters.

Social media also serves as a space for contestation and commodification of religious interpretations that operate within the logic of virality and polarization. These conditions reinforce fragmentation of understanding, create echo chambers, and facilitate the spread of radical religious narratives based on emotion and post-truth, thereby threatening religious moderation and social cohesion. In this context, digital literacy, which includes information evaluation, understanding of media mechanisms, and adequate religious

and national foundations, is a key factor in strengthening community resilience.

Overall, the transformation of religious authority in the digital age is an inevitable phenomenon with ambivalent impacts: it opens up space for the democratization of knowledge while also presenting the risk of a crisis of authority and covert radicalization. Therefore, strengthening comprehensive digital literacy is a key prerequisite for this change to move in a constructive direction.

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