

From pulpit to digital platform: The routinization of charisma online among Indonesian ulama

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords:</p> <p>digital charisma</p> <p>Weber</p> <p>ulama</p> <p>Islam Indonesia</p> <p>mediatization of religion</p>	<p>This article investigates how Indonesian ulama construct charismatic authority on social media, examining how Weberian charisma is signaled, routinized, and scaled in digital environments. The study employs a multiple case study design, analyzing five prominent Indonesian ulama through qualitative content and platform analysis. Data from Instagram, YouTube, and X/Twitter reveal digital charisma as a carefully curated performance, signaled through strategic blending of traditional piety with modern relatability. The research demonstrates how charisma becomes routinized through consistent, platform-specific content that fosters perceived intimacy with followers, while algorithmic amplification enables unprecedented scaling beyond traditional geographical and institutional boundaries. Platform algorithms play a crucial role in both routinizing charisma through content distribution patterns and scaling it through automated recommendation systems. The study's theoretical contribution lies in synthesizing Weber's sociology of charisma with deep mediatization theory within Indonesia's distinctive pluralistic Islamic context. These findings carry significant practical implications, particularly the urgent need to integrate critical digital literacy into Islamic leadership education curricula. Understanding platform mechanics becomes essential for navigating the new religious authority landscape, while the findings also raise important questions about platform governance and algorithmic amplification of religious content in diverse societies.</p>

Introduction

Religious authority has long been a complex and central issue within Indonesian Muslim society, deeply connected to the nation's social and political history (Hefner, 2000). Traditionally, an *ulama's* authority was constructed by long years of learning in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), acknowledgement by other scholars as well as leadership in local communities (Zulkifli, 2013). However, the rapid growth of social media is now greatly disrupting this model. The social media platforms Instagram, YouTube and Tik Tok are radically changing methods of producing, consuming and understanding religious authority (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). A new phenomenon which this article calls "digital charisma" is emerging. This concept describes a form of religious authority that is performatively constructed and amplified through the specific features of digital platforms, blending traditional Islamic scholarship with the logics of online attention economies (Larsson, 2020). This shift is especially important in Indonesia, home to one of the world's largest and most active online Muslim populations, where digital spaces have become central for religious discourse and identity formation (Slama, 2018; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Previous studies conducted by Indonesian scholars have, in part, been able to map that digital disruption. Studies have been conducted that illuminate the ways in which social media ruptures religious authority (Hannan, 2023), causes commodification of religion (Muzakki, 2018) and generates new Islamic based social movements (Nisa, 2018). Researchers have also examined the specific digital strategies of various preachers, from the visual persuasion of Felix Siau (Hew, 2018) to the traditionalist appeal of Gus Baha (Rohmatulloh et al., 2022) and the challenges that digital preachers pose to the ideal image

of a traditional kyai (Cahyono, 2025; Rozy, 2024). While these studies provide essential local knowledge, they often mention brief references to Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority. The term becomes a shorthand designation for popularity rather than the detailed analytical tool it should be to demonstrate how charisma is actively constructed and sustained online (Epley, 2015; Rijal, 2021). Thus, although we know *ulama* are using social media, no systematic analysis exists yet around how they perform charisma strategically through digital acts, and how platform infrastructures themselves shape this process.

This study aims to fill this gap within the Indonesian academic conversation. It seeks to move beyond simply applying Weber's terminology and instead actively uses his framework to analyze the digital practices of *ulama*. By breaking down charisma into components like signaling extraordinariness and processes of routinization, this research offers a systematic way to understand the mechanics of digital authority. It also integrates this refined Weberian perspective within the framework of "deep mediatization," which recognizes that digital media are not merely passive tools but active forces that reshape social phenomena from within (Campbell, 2022). This necessitates an enhanced understanding of the manner in which religious authority is not merely transmitted online but is transformed by virtue of the digital sphere.

The overarching research question for this investigation is as follows: How do contemporary Indonesian *ulama* cultivate and use their charismatic authority online, and how is this charisma routinized and amplified in its implementation according to the specific affordances of social media platforms? To answer this, the study employs a multiple case study design, analyzing the content and platform strategies of five

prominent *ulama* across Instagram, YouTube, and X/Twitter. The analysis will explore the curation of personas, the use of multimedia, and the communication styles that foster charismatic appeal.

In summary, this article contributes to the Sociology of Islam and the sociology of religion by providing a systematic, theoretical account of digital charisma in Indonesia. It builds on important work done by local scholars, providing a framework for understanding the "how" of the changes they have observed. The findings have major implications, suggesting the need for digital literacy in training Islamic leaders and raising important questions about the role of platform algorithms in religious discourse within Indonesia's pluralist society.

Method

This research utilized a qualitative multiple case study methodology to explore the multifaceted phenomenon of digital charisma among the *ulama* in Indonesia. This design permitted an in-depth exploration of charismatic authority in real life in its digital manifestations and provided the opportunity for analytical triangulation across cases. Such an approach afforded a more substantial understanding than could be expected from a single case (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). The procedures adopted in the design prioritized transparency and reproducibility, with clearly articulated procedures recorded in order to enhance the credibility of the study and to facilitate its critical evaluation by others (Merriam, 2009).

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select five prominent *ulama*: Gus Baha', Ustaz Adi Hidayat, Ustaz Felix Siauw, Ustaz Anwar Zahid, and Gus M. Iqdam Al-Badr. These particular figures serve to represent the broad spectrum of Islamic authority in Indonesia. They represent

diverse theological and institutional backgrounds, from traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama, modernist Muhammadiyah, and particular ideological movements of (former) Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia. This variation also includes different content strategies and primary audiences, ranging from deep, *pesantren*-style lectures to highly emotional and aesthetic short-form content. This strategic selection enabled a comparative analysis of how digital charisma is performed and constructed across distinctly different contexts within the Indonesian Islamic landscape (Qodarsasi et al., 2021). Data for this study were compiled from publicly available content on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for the 12 months period from January to December 2024. This content covered a variety of formats; long sermons, short videos (Reels, TikTok), live-streamed Q&A sessions, and supporting materials (e.g. thumbnails, captions) (Krippendorff, 2019).

The analysis was conducted in two main phases, which were iterative in nature. The first phase consisted of a structured content analysis based on a code book made up of Weberian concepts, including notions of signaling extraordinariness, devotion fostering and routinized practices and codes for the media preferring properties sought in terms of liveness and interactivity (Dow, 2005; Joosse, 2014; Weber, 1963). The second phase of the analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis in order to seek out the overarching themes in the material used, including a continual movement back and forth between the coded data and the wider theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure the rigor of the analysis, this process was accompanied by peer debriefing on a regular basis, and a continuing audit trail of the coding decisions which were made (Merriam, 2009). The requirements of ethical conduct in public

research were observed. All of the data was derived from publicly available sources, and any user comments used had been completely anonymized, in order to protect the privacy of the contributors.

Results and Discussion

The strategic case selection

The following five *ulama* were chosen for this analysis—Gus Baha', Ustaz Adi Hidayat, Ustaz Felix Siauw, Ustaz Anwar Zahid, and Gus M. Iqdam—by no means as a complete sample but as an intentional collection of cases that collectively represent the rich and changing arenas of Indonesian Islamic authority online. This selection provides critical coverage across key spectra: theological orientation (traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama to modernist and other specific movements), generational appeal, and institutional affiliation (N. Hasan, 2010, 2020). Such diversity is essential for understanding how digital charisma is not a monolithic phenomenon but is instead refracted through different pre-existing religious identities and strategies. For instance, the contrast between Gus Baha's deep traditionalist scholarship and Felix Siauw's movement-oriented messaging illustrates how the *performance* of charisma adapts to different segments of the Muslim community (Rozy, 2024; Zuhriyah & Rohim,

2024). The selected *ulama* also differ greatly in their content formats, ranging from Gus Baha's lengthy, lecture-based YouTube sessions to the intensely emotional short videos of Anwar Zahid. This variation lets this study explore how these religious leaders employ different digital platform features to establish their influence. This variety helps us understand the "mediatization" of religion—the process where media formats and their operational rules increasingly shape how religious activities are conducted and how authority is organized (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 13). Studying these different examples helps us look past simple ideas about internet popularity. Instead, we can examine how Max Weber's concept of charisma—a special personal quality seen as a divine gift and confirmed by followers—gets deliberately built, communicated, and expanded within today's media-saturated world (Weber, 1978, p. 241). The following table (see Table 1) summarizes the core rationales for each case, establishing a foundation for the detailed analysis that follows.

This strategic selection demonstrates that digital charisma operates within a competitive "religious market" where different models of authority cater to varied consumer tastes and religious needs (Zuhriyah & Rohim, 2024, p. 71). The persona of each *ulama* is a carefully managed brand, aligning with specific audience expectations and platform cultures. For example, the

Table 1. Selected Indonesian ulama and their digital presence

Ulama	Theological Orientation	Primary Platform	Core Appeal
Gus Baha'	Traditionalist NU	YouTube	Scholarly depth & traditional authenticity
Adi Hidayat	Modernist	YouTube, Instagram	Systematic teaching & institutional credibility
Felix Siauw	Movement-oriented	YouTube, Instagram	Ideological commitment & visual persuasion
Anwar Zahid	Traditionalist NU	YouTube, TikTok	Emotional expressiveness & cultural familiarity
Gus Iqdam	Traditionalist NU	Instagram, TikTok	Modern Sufism & youth engagement

Note: The data for this table was compiled through a qualitative content analysis of publicly available posts, videos, and channel metrics from the primary social media accounts of each ulama on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok between January and December 2024.

visual aesthetics and philosophical snippets of Gus Iqdam resonate strongly with urban, educated Muslim youth seeking a spirituality that feels both authentic and contemporary (Apriantika, 2023). This deliberate branding and positioning are fundamental to the modern construction of charismatic authority, illustrating a key process of its digital routine. Therefore, analyzing this diverse group allows us to dissect the mechanics of digital charisma as it is tailored for different constituencies, all within the overarching framework of Indonesia's complex and evolving Islamic public sphere.

Gus Baha': Scriptural authority & vernacular intimacy

The digital authority of Gus Baha' is constructed through a powerful synthesis of immense scriptural gravitas and profound vernacular warmth. His YouTube lectures, filmed in his typical relaxed *pesantren* environments, exhibit an unparalleled mastery of the classical Islamic texts, which he quotes from memory with confidence (LP3IA Official, 2023). This demonstration of extensive knowledge (*'ilm*) is complemented by easy uses of everyday Javanese vocabulary and wry humor to create a blend of higher erudition and simple approachability (Putriyani, 2023). The visual and algorithmic presentation on his primary channel, @officiallp3ia, reinforces this authenticity. Thumbnails are often simple and unpretentious, featuring Gus Baha' in everyday attire, which lowers the barrier to entry for viewers (Rijal, 2021). Furthermore, his content achieves significant reach not through viral trends but through high searchability for specific Quranic verses and Islamic legal issues, indicating an audience actively seeking deep religious instruction (Rohmatulloh et al., 2022). This combination

positions him as a community-anchored scholar whose authority feels both timeless and personally accessible.

Gus Baha's digital persona offers a compelling case of Weberian charisma being validated through traditional means but scaled through modern media. His "extraordinary quality" is demonstrably rooted in a form of traditional charismatic authority derived from recognized scholarly prowess and perceived piety, a well-established pathway in Indonesian Islam (Zulkifli, 2013). However, the platform enables the routinization of this charisma through serialized content, such as his ongoing *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis) sessions, which transform sporadic scholarly displays into a dependable, on-demand resource for religious learning (Weber, 1978). This process represents a key aspect of digital routinization. Moreover, the mediatization of his authority is evident in the construction of a new form of "mediatized intimacy." The liveness of his sessions, even when recorded, and the sprawling, essay-length comments that fill the chat replays and comment sections, create a participatory culture. Followers do not just consume; they engage in detailed discussions, translating his Javanese phrases or debating his points, thereby co-producing the religious knowledge and reinforcing the communal bonds that are central to his charismatic appeal (Lövhheim & Hjarvard, 2019). In Gus Baha', we see that digital charisma does not necessarily require high production values but rather thrives on the perceived authenticity and depth that platforms like YouTube can effectively broadcast and archive.

Adi Hidayat: Scholarly rigor & millennial packaging

Ustaz Adi Hidayat cultivates a distinct form of digital authority characterized by a

methodical, almost academic, presentation of Islamic knowledge. His primary YouTube channel features high-production-value lectures where he systematically employs digital slides to outline his arguments, seamlessly integrating Arabic script, Indonesian translation, and logical schematics (Adi Hidayat Official, 2023). This educational strategy is supported by a tightly organized content plan, making use of topical playlists as a well-organized syllabus on topics from theology through family law. His team also repurpose strategically the main sections of his long-form lectures into short-form videos for Instagram and TikTok to reach a larger audience with shorter attention spans (F. Hasan, 2022). A notable finding is the highly disciplined nature of his comment sections, which often resemble a digital catechism. Followers actively paraphrase his teachings, answer each other's questions based on his lectures, and enforce a discourse of respect, thereby collectively reinforcing the very systematic knowledge he promulgates (Rozy, 2024).

Adi Hidayat's model exemplifies a shift towards a charisma of competence and systematic clarity, a form of authority that resonates strongly with an urban, educated Muslim middle class. His authority is less about raw, traditional *barakah* (blessing) and more closely aligns with a Weberian rational-legal type, grounded in his formal educational credentials (including a doctorate) and his institutional position within Muhammadiyah, a modernist organization that highly values structured learning (Nugrahaeni, 2023). The routinization of his charisma is profoundly mediatized and programmatic. This stable structure is built into the predictable, series-based design of his YouTube channel and reinforced by his official institutional position. Together, these elements create a dependable and expandable system for delivering religious teachings (H. H. Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 297). In this way,

his personal charismatic appeal becomes a steady, renewable resource. Furthermore, the exceptionally high subscriber numbers and view counts on his channels act as a form of continuous public validation. These metrics confirm his authority online, serving as a measurable form of endorsement. This online endorsement is a fresh credential that augments or replaces the former recognition previously held in esteem by fellow scholars only (Lövheim, 2011). Adi Hidayat therefore symbolizes a fresh kind of Islamic leadership: a digital-era public intellectual whose legitimacy comes from uniting profound religious understanding with profound understanding of how communication occurs on the web.

Felix Siauww: Pop-aesthetics & youth mobilization

Felix Siauww's cyber presence differs from more conventional *ulama* in that it is exceedingly sophisticated and visually oriented. His posts on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are graphic-driven, fast-paced, and of direct engagement with contemporary youth trends (Felix Siauww Official, 2024). It is a deliberate use of a pop aesthetic. Brief attention-grabbing videos on his TikTok and Instagram accounts are particularly aimed at leading spectators to his longer, more comprehensive ideological production on his YouTube channel. He thus creates a multilevel media environment (Felix Siauww Official, 2024). Siauww is likely to focus his charismatic power on particular social and political issues, most visibly by means of his organized solidarity with Palestine. In these campaigns, he deliberately partners with other influencers in an effort to extend his audience (Tempo, 2024). In these means, he builds a contemporary, web-based society bonded by shared purpose and evocative visual form, guaranteeing him a vanguard position within a new Islamic movement.

Siauw's strategy exemplifies the deep mediatization of religious authority, where the religious message becomes inseparable from its media form (Hjarvard, 2008). The hyper-visual nature of his content serves as a form of visual persuasion, making complex ideological positions appear modern, cohesive, and attractive. This reliance on platform logic, however, creates a fundamental tension. His charismatic appeal depends heavily on the possibility of his content going viral, which also frequently draws him into controversy. The same algorithmic tools that help spread his message—by boosting engaging posts—also regularly place him at the center of public criticism and platform monitoring (Hew, 2018). This creates a key tension: expanding his charismatic influence risks turning his message into a product. To maintain his authority, he must constantly produce content within an attention-driven economy. This pressure has the ability to take high-level religious and political concepts and dumb them down into low-level, entertainment-based content (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 57). His leadership as such needs to walk cautiously between adhering to his ideology and succumbing to the trend-based competitive social media world.

Anwar Zahid: Traditional pengajian, virtual majelis

Ustaz Anwar Zahid represents a genre of authority that merges orthodox Islamic scholarship, or *pengajian*, with global spread of digital media. The content of his AnzaChannel YouTube website is defined by his energetic and serious presentation that makes significant use of humor, graphic storytelling, and his distinctive East Javanese accent (Anza Channel, 2023). This approach helps create a feeling of cultural familiarity and personal connection with his viewers. His style of presentation is

closely linked to the established cultural image of the Javanese kyai—a traditional figure known for both religious knowledge and community leadership (Dhofier, 1982). Most importantly, his online presence feeds into a symbiotic cycle of his offline life. His extensive touring circuit across Indonesia fills physical halls, while the simultaneous recording and archiving of these events online creates a permanent, accessible *majelis* (religious gathering) for a national audience, effectively blurring the lines between the physical and virtual congregation (Hannan, 2023).

Anwar Zahid's case demonstrates the remarkable persistence of traditional charismatic authority models even as they adapt to new technological environments. His authority is not fundamentally new; it is the familiar charisma of the kyai, now amplified and extended through platform logics (Weber, 1978). The digital space becomes a new stage for a very old performance. The routinization of his charisma follows a dual pathway. It occurs physically through his constant touring, a classic method of maintaining direct follower devotion. Simultaneously, it happens digitally through the archiving of his sermons on YouTube, which transforms sporadic charismatic performances into a stable, searchable repository of religious guidance (Baharudin, Memet Isa Waehama, 2024). This digital archive ensures his charismatic influence persists beyond the momentary event, allowing new followers to discover and become devoted to him at any time. This process illustrates a key aspect of deep mediatization, where the platform's affordances for preservation and distribution become integral to the sustenance of traditional religious authority, enabling it to scale while retaining its core cultural and emotional resonance (Amna, 2019).

Table 2. Digital authority strategies of Indonesian ulama

Ulama	Authority Strategy	Digital Approach	Key Risks
Gus Baha'	Scriptural mastery & traditional authenticity	Long-form YouTube, search-based content	Limited viral scalability
Adi Hidayat	Systematic scholarship & institutional credibility	Multi-platform, curriculum-structured content	Overly formal presentation
Felix Siauw	Ideological mobilization & visual persuasion	Cross-platform funneling, pop aesthetics	Polarization & commodification
Anwar Zahid	Emotional storytelling & cultural familiarity	Hybrid offline-online, touring circuits	Personalistic authority
Gus Iqdam	Youth engagement & brand community	Short-form content, event-based marketing	Spectacle over substance

Note: The typology is derived from a cross-case analysis of the five ulama, focusing on their strategic use of platform affordances. Data sources included a systematic review of content formats, engagement tactics, and public metrics from their social media channels throughout 2024.

Gus Iqdam: Da'wahtainment & brand community

Gus Iqdam cultivates a distinctive form of digital authority that masterfully blends religious propagation with entertainment logics, creating a phenomenon best described as "*da'wahtainment*." His model is marked by a high level of eventification, religious sermons being positioned as events that one can simply attend, with branded catchphrases and authorized merchandise that makes believers a real-world brand fan base (Fatimah et al., 2024; Gus Iqdam Official, 2024). His content structure cleverly utilizes short-form videos on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels as an accessible entry point, showcasing philosophical snippets and easy-to-scan clips that capture the attention of browsing youth (Gus Iqdam Official, 2020). These top-notch clips often transition into larger, ticketed in-person events or exclusive live streams, establishing a pathway that transforms followers from passive online viewers to active community participants. This approach creates a cohesive religious brand that is theologically sophisticated and financially viable, appealing directly to the sensibilities of Muslim youth living in urban areas.

The case of Gus Iqdam demonstrates a notable transformation in charismatic authority, with the "grammar" of entertainment serving as the main vehicle for religious messages. His charm is systematized not via conventional academic serialization but through the regular creation of captivating, shareable media instances that align with platform algorithms (Weber, 1978). This represents a profound mediatization of religious practice where the aesthetic and rational aspects of social media greatly influence the interpretation and dissemination of Islamic teachings (Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). This method inevitably raises concerns about the boundaries between religious teaching and performance. Emphasizing aesthetic appeal, virality, and community representation may prioritize style over meaningful depth and commercialize religious experiences (Cahyono, 2025). While this model manage the generation influenced by media, it treaded lightly. The widespread attraction is strong, yet it continually aims to ensure that the medium of entertainment enhances rather than overshadows the spiritual essence of the da'wah message.

This classification (Table 2) illustrates the variety of approaches Indonesian *ulama*

employ to establish and sustain charismatic authority in the online realm. These methods are not entirely distinct but instead illustrate various positions on a continuum. At one end, they enhance conventional techniques, while at the other, they develop innovative types of authority tailored for digital platforms.

Shifting along this spectrum demonstrates a distinct change. It starts by employing digital tools primarily to bolster current religious authority. It concludes with establishing entirely new forms of authority based on how social media platforms operate. Upon further examination, we can pinpoint various significant tensions that every model needs to manage:

- **Authenticity versus Scalability:** Gus Baha's raw, true style fails to circulate as widely through algorithms compared to Gus Iqdam's meticulously crafted content.
- **Support from Institutions versus Autonomous Movements:** The conventional and modern models derive power from recognized religious institutions. Conversely, the ideological and entertainment-oriented models create more adaptable, straightforward connections with their audience.
- **Depth of Education vs. Extensive Reach:** In-depth lessons offer richness but struggle to compete with the rapid, widespread appeal of brief, impactful content.

Consequently, "digital charisma" does not refer to a singular, clearly defined idea. It is more accurately seen as a collection of flexible tactics. The particular method an *ulama* selects greatly affects the extent of their authority's reach, the duration of its endurance, and the ethical dilemmas it may encounter.

Common threads in digital charisma

Albeit differing from one another in theological inclination and stylistic style, the five cases all point to significant resemblances in performing and sustaining digital charisma. Such common practices reflect the implicit patterns of charismatic leadership among Indonesia's highly mediatized Islamic society. Within each of the cases, there are five recurring patterns: intentional performance of authenticity, deliberate vernacularization, performative interactivity, professional production craft, and the employment of metricized social proof. Each practice further makes Weberian extraordinariness pronouncements, encourages commitment, and enables new types of routinization, all through particular platform affordances.

The performance of authenticity emerges as the foundational element. This is not mere spontaneity but a carefully curated presentation of the "real" self, whether through Gus Baha's unscripted scholarship, Anwar Zahid's raw emotionality, or Felix Siau's ideological consistency (Rohmatulloh et al., 2022). This authenticity directly signals what Weber termed the "extraordinary quality" of the charismatic leader, making it perceivable and relatable to a mass audience (Turner, 1987; Weber, 1978). The mediatized nature of this authenticity is crucial; it is crafted specifically for digital consumption, leveraging the affordance of liveness—even in recorded content—to create a sense of direct, unmediated access to the leader (Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). This finding aligns with prior research on Indonesian digital religion that emphasizes the premium placed on perceived genuineness in an increasingly saturated online religious market (Slama, 2018, p. 2).

Vernacularization and interactivity are co-conspirators in the construction of devotion. Local languages, puns, humor, and cultural

references construct close connections with certain segments of audiences, making the *ulama's* abstract authority a personally significant figure (Hasan, 2009). This is helped considerably by the utilization of platform features in interaction. Live chat, Q&As, and responsive comments form a feedback loop, which produces the sense of belonging and instant connection, charismatic devotion's most important elements in Weber's model (H. H. and M. C. W. Gerth, 2014, p. 52). The interactivity affordance of social media platforms thus becomes a fundamental tool for building and sustaining the emotional commitment of followers, a dynamic observed across the Indonesian Muslim digital sphere (Nisa, 2018).

Finally, production craft and metricized social proof represent the dual pillars of digital routinization. Even the seemingly "low-production" style of Gus Baha' involves strategic choices about framing and platform-specific presentation. For others, high-quality visuals, editing, and graphic design are essential for capturing and holding attention (Hew, 2018). This professional craft ensures the consistent, reliable delivery of charismatic content, a core aspect of routinization. At the same time, explicit metrics indicate success—view counts, follow numbers, and engagement rates—are strong, algorithm-driven social proof. They are concrete, measurable affirmations of the leader's charisma, verifying their authority in an auto-reinforcing feedback loop wherein popularity generates more popularity (Muzakki, 2018). This metricization signifies a uniquely contemporary type of charismatic endorsement, profoundly rooted in the reasoning of what Couldry and Hepp describe as the "mediated construction of reality" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

In summary, these common patterns show that digital charisma in Indonesia is not something that happens by chance. It

is a structured achievement. Indonesian *ulama* build it through specific practices that perform two functions at once. These practices fulfill the traditional sociological roles of charisma—showing extraordinary qualities and securing follower devotion—while also being reshaped by the capabilities of digital platforms. This analysis confirms and expands on earlier research about the growing importance of media skills in modern Indonesian Islam (Muzakki, 2018). More importantly, it provides a clearer framework, based on Weber's ideas, for understanding exactly how social media strategies develop into durable religious authority.

Divergent paths: Tradition vs innovation

Looking at the different models, we can see two main ways that digital charisma works in practice, each with its own clear compromises. These strategies point to a fundamental tension in contemporary Indonesian Islam: the challenge of preserving traditional religious authority while also adopting new, digital ways of connecting with people. The *ulama's* methods exist on a wide spectrum. At one end is Gus Baha's model, which stays firmly rooted in conventional religious institutions. At the other extreme is Gus Iqdam's method, which wholeheartedly embraces a media-focused style of "da'wahtainment." Each of these paths offers specific benefits and faces particular limitations when it comes to maintaining religious authority over time (N. Hasan, 2013). We can observe these differences most clearly in three important areas: how they balance deep religious knowledge with popular appeal, their use of institutional support versus independent personal branding, and their preference for either detailed long-form teaching or brief, widely-shared content.

The compromises within these models show different ways of dealing with what Hepp calls "deep mediatization." This refers to how digital media becomes deeply embedded in social life, fundamentally changing religious practices and authority figures (Hepp, 2020). The traditional approach, seen with Gus Baha and Anwar Zahid, maintains stronger connections to existing authority structures. However, this might limit its appeal mainly to people already knowledgeable about religion. On the other hand, the innovative methods of Gus Iqdam and Felix Siauwh reach wider audiences and attract younger followers more effectively. But this approach risks what Muzakki identifies as the "commodification of religion," where spiritual messages become subject to market pressures and competition for attention (Muzakki, 2018). These different paths represent alternative solutions to maintaining religious relevance in an increasingly digital society, each with different consequences for the future of Islamic leadership in Indonesia.

The ethical concerns and risks differ greatly across these models. For movement-oriented figures like Felix Siauwh, platform polarization and misinformation present special problems. His content often deals with politically charged issues, potentially adding to the increasingly divided religious discussions that Pribadi et al. observe in Indonesia's online spaces (Pribadi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the celebrity preacher market surrounding figures like Gus Iqdam raises questions about the commercialization of religious leadership and whether deep theological content might become less substantial. As Fabriar and Muhajarah note in their study of "Nawaning" preaching, the need to maintain audience interest with entertaining content can sometimes emphasize style over actual substance (Fabriar & Muhajarah, 2024).

The durability of religious authority online hinges on how well each approach manages its own set of tensions. How long religious leaders can keep their influence online depends on how they handle their specific challenges. Established religious figures can protect their traditional role by creating dependable online archives of their teachings while mixing their digital and real-world efforts. This lets them reach more people while still holding onto their core values. Meanwhile, newer religious voices carve out their influence by developing their personal brand and understanding how platforms work. Though these new models are more flexible, they can also be less stable. Today's religious environment, as Løvheim and Hjarvard note, forces leaders to walk a fine line between time-honored traditions and the demands of modern media systems (Løvheim & Hjarvard, 2019). Indonesia's experience proves there isn't just one correct method for religious leaders to keep their charismatic authority online. In fact, multiple methods can succeed, though each comes with its own particular strengths and weaknesses that affect the wider Muslim community.

Conclusion

This research reveals that Indonesian *ulama's* charismatic authority in the digital era involves more than simply moving their existing influence online. Rather, it represents a sophisticated performance developed through the combination of classical sociological concepts and modern platform design. Our analysis of five distinct cases shows how these religious leaders express charisma through carefully managed authenticity, conversational language, and interactive communication with followers. The study further demonstrates how this

otherwise temporary authority becomes established through specific digital approaches—structured content series, branded communities, and visible social validation. These approaches help the ulama build a more stable form of influence that can develop beyond momentary online trends.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. Our analysis focused primarily on content strategies and platform affordances from the perspective of the ulama as content producers. This approach did not deeply investigate how audiences actually perceive and experience this "digital charisma" in their daily lives. Additionally, the research examined data from a one-year period, which may not capture longer-term trends in how digital authority evolves. These limitations suggest valuable directions for future research. Subsequent studies could employ ethnographic methods to explore audience reception and meaning-making processes. Another promising avenue would be to investigate the role of gender in digital religious authority construction, particularly given the underrepresentation of female ulama in the current digital landscape.

These findings help us understand shifts occurring within Islamic leadership in Indonesia, which has become particularly advanced in adopting digital religious practices. The Indonesian example offers meaningful insights into a wider international pattern where digital tools are becoming deeply embedded in religious activities. The growth of digital charisma represents an important new phase in Indonesian Islam that will require ongoing examination, particularly as it intersects with traditional religious institutions and contributes to the evolving nature of Islamic education and public discourse.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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