

Anti-Performative Religious Authority in Algorithmic Culture: Rethinking Legitimacy through Inner Piety in the Digital Preaching of Gus Baha

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ABSTRACT

Digital media have changed how religious authority works by making visibility and engagement more important. Many studies in digital religion suggest that legitimacy depends on being visible in algorithms and presenting oneself strategically. This study questions that idea by looking at a different kind of religious authority that resists performative norms. I used an interpretive qualitative approach to analyze 30 sermon recordings from YouTube, published between February and December 2025, and 700 audience comments from various channels, including both official and informal community accounts. The analysis focused on how piety, authority, and authenticity are discussed and negotiated in digital religious spaces. For Gus Baha, authority came from inner piety, such as intention, ethical reasoning, and reflective understanding, and from keeping a clear distance from performative displays. Audience comments indicated that this non-performative approach appealed to listeners tired of moralistic, visibility-focused religious messages. They valued intellectual depth, humility, and emotional support over algorithmic popularity. This article introduces the idea of anti-performative religious authority and explains how it differs from authenticity, symbolic authority, and charismatic authority. The findings show that visibility is not required for religious legitimacy in algorithmic culture. The study also offers a framework for comparing digital religious figures, platforms, and communication contexts.

Keywords: Religious Authority; Algorithmic Culture; Digital Islam; Inner Piety; Performativity; Gus Baha

INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has fundamentally transformed how religious authority is built, sustained, and perceived in the public domain. In modern Indonesia, *da'wah* extends far beyond conventional settings like mosques, Islamic boarding schools, or study groups, increasingly channeled through digital platforms driven by algorithmic mechanisms. These mechanisms prioritize visibility, user interaction, emotional impact, and visual performance as key elements for effective communication (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; Gillespie, 2014). As a result, religious authority has shifted from foundations in academic knowledge and institutional endorsement to more dynamic, audience-driven models where preachers often serve as content producers, public

figures, and online influencers (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). In this landscape, symbolic devotion, emotive narratives, and straightforward ethical messages serve as vital tools in the digital attention economy.

This trend is extensively examined in research on digital religion, celebrity preachers, and the mediatization of Islam, which typically highlights how religious communicators adapt to social media's interactional requirements (Coudry & Hepp, 2017; Lundby, 2014). Yet, this adaptation carries significant sociological implications. The rise of performative faith often turns da'wah into a competitive arena shaped by reputation management, immediate emotional hooks, and displays of idealized devotion. Various researchers observe that online religious practices increasingly value showmanship and exposure over substance, contemplation, and moral growth. Consequently, greater media presence does not always enhance public confidence in religious leaders; in certain cases, overexposure can lead to viewer exhaustion, doubt, and erosion of trust in overly polished religious expressions.

Existing scholarship on digital religious authority has predominantly focused on visibility-based frameworks, examining how preachers leverage algorithmic reach, content optimization, and strategic self-presentation to construct legitimacy online (Campbell, 2013; Bunt, 2018). Considerably less attention has been directed toward authority that emerges not through mastery of performative dynamics, but through deliberate resistance to them. This gap is particularly evident in Indonesian scholarship on digital da'wah. Multiple analyses of Gus Baha's preaching engage aspects such as humor, rhetoric, communication style, linguistic courtesy, and digital credibility (Sadili, 2021; Dewi et al., 2023; Mustopa et al., 2024; Al Farisi, 2023), while additional studies address the reception of his moderate Islamic views and their relevance to contemporary Muslim communities (Khafidhoh, 2024; Hakim & Pardianto, 2025). These works confirm Gus Baha's prominence in Indonesia's digital da'wah landscape. However, prevailing research consistently frames his appeal as evidence of effective online preaching, without critically interrogating how his authority is constituted precisely through structural detachment from the performative dynamics that dominate social media. This study addresses that gap directly.

This paper advances digital religion scholarship by challenging visibility-centric models of religious authority. Rather than assuming digital legitimacy depends primarily on algorithmic success, branding efforts, and staged self-display, it proposes a fresh perspective: low- or anti-performative religious authority. In this model, legitimacy arises from measured discourse, organic audience sharing, intellectual substance, and symbolic separation from calculated visibility tactics. This perspective does not claim Gus Baha operates entirely beyond digital realms; his talks still circulate widely on algorithm-powered platforms but asserts that his influence is strengthened because audiences perceive his style as genuine, unforced, and free from digital showmanship.

Algorithmic systems inherently promote self-marketing, constant presence, and interactive outreach. In faith-based settings, this dynamic shifts da'wah from ethical and cognitive development toward branding optimization and affective engagement. Religious credibility thus relies less exclusively on expertise and more on appearing approachable, emotionally compelling, and persistently visible. This creates a symbolic crisis in religious authority: not a scarcity of leaders, but an overload of religious exposure that blurs boundaries between preaching, entertainment, and personal promotion.

In this context, Gus Baha emerges as a sociologically significant case. Unlike many digital preachers who craft online personas and maximize interactions, his prominence largely stems from audience-led sharing rather than deliberate branding. His content

eschews typical digital da'wah elements, such as sleek visuals, theatrical emotions, bite-sized inspirations, or sensationalism optimized for algorithms. Yet, it attracts broad, diverse followings, often regarded as thoughtful, soothing, and inclusive. This article frames Gus Baha not as doctrinally superior, but as an empirical example for investigating alternative forms of authority in algorithmic spaces. From this foundation, the paper poses a central research question: How is religious authority constructed and maintained through a predominantly anti-performative approach in social media's algorithmic environment? By redirecting focus from hyper-visible religious celebrities to figures whose credibility grows through subtle resistance to performative norms, this study expands ongoing discussions on digital da'wah, mediatization, symbolic power, and authenticity in contemporary religious practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Authority and the Transformation of Legitimacy

The concept of religious authority in classical sociology predominantly refers to the typology proposed by Max Weber, which distinguishes between traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority (Weber, 1978). In religious contexts, charismatic authority does not solely derive from institutional position, but from social recognition of extraordinary personal qualities. However, Weber also emphasized that charisma is not an inherent trait but a relational one it exists only insofar as it is recognized by followers (Weber, 1978).

Contemporary scholarship develops this idea further by demonstrating that such recognition is increasingly mediated by modern communication infrastructures, particularly mass media and digital media (Hjarvard, 2011; Hoover, 2016). In digitalized societies, religious authority has shifted from a foundation rooted in tradition and institutions toward more fluid and fluctuating mechanisms of legitimacy. Authority is no longer fully inherited or institutionalized, but is instead produced, performed, and negotiated within media-mediated public spaces (Campbell, 2013). Consequently, religious authority becomes increasingly vulnerable to the logics of popularity and visibility.

Algorithmic Culture, Validation Economy, and Religious Fatigue

Byung-Chul Han delivers a pointed structural critique of digital culture, portraying modern society as an achievement society and a transparency society (Han, 2015; 2017). In these contexts, people are compelled to perpetually showcase themselves, refine their performances, and pursue validation via constant exposure.

Within religion, this dynamic yields a validation economy of piety, where religious expressions' worth is gauged by public metrics like views, comments, and online emotions (Dijck, 2013). Emerging scholarship reveals that this setup can spark religious fatigue, especially among those overwhelmed by unrelenting piety benchmarks (Bunt, 2018; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Religious fatigue manifests as aversion to condemnatory sermons, overload from reductive moral tales, and a quest for rational, compassionate religiosity. Yet, although noted, most research centers on audiences rather than the authority figures arising to address this exhaustion.

Mediatization of Religion and Performative Piety

The mediatization of religion theory posits that media do not simply serve as conduits for religious transmission, but actively mold religious practice and

comprehension (Hjarvard, 2011). On social media, religion functions amid an algorithmic environment that favors audience interaction, emotional appeal, and visual display. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective offers a vital lens for analyzing this dynamic. His front stage and back stage notions depict how individuals craft impressions in public contexts (Goffman, 1959). In digital da'wah, piety expressions largely unfold on the front stage, with religious acts staged as public spectacles open to scrutiny, comparison, and endorsement.

Several studies indicate that this setup cultivates performative piety religiosity displays, whether deliberate or subconscious, aimed at garnering social approval (Abidin, 2016; Echchaibi, 2018). Here, piety extends beyond a vertical divine connection to become a moral signifier in the public domain. Though potent in communication, performative piety may oversimplify religious doctrines and redirect faith from introspection to exhibition.

Normative and Inner Piety in the Perspective of Mark Woodward

Anthropological research on Indonesian Islam by Mark Woodward differentiates two core piety orientations: normative piety and inner (or spiritual) piety (Woodward, 1989; 2011). This binary is analytical rather than theological-doctrinal, aimed at elucidating Muslim religious practices across varied social and cultural milieus. Normative piety encompasses practices focused on complying with formal religious rules, including rituals, fiqh-based Islamic jurisprudence, and established moral codes. It is typically overt and observable, featuring tangible, quantifiable acts subject to social judgment. In contemporary settings, normative piety aligns seamlessly with media dynamics, lending itself to depiction, symbolism, and performance. Conversely, inner piety prioritizes internal religiosity aspects like intent, ethical consciousness, worship comprehension, and direct divine bonds. It does not invariably manifest in conspicuous symbols or acts, thus evading social validation channels. Woodward notes that, in numerous Indonesian Muslim settings, inner piety underpins an ethical core that sustains religion's relevance in daily existence without necessitating flashy demonstrations. This dichotomy gains salience in algorithmic culture, where social media amplifies visually amenable normative piety, while inner piety encounters depiction challenges. This very friction forms the article's key analytical gateway.

In algorithmic culture, social and spiritual piety variants face representational hurdles. Social media inherently favors piety types that are visualizable and quantifiable, sidelining introspective and understated religious practices (Hjarvard, 2011; Han, 2017). This disparity sparks a representation crisis, narrowing public notions of "piety" to performative metrics. Scholarship posits that this widens the divide between private religious encounters and societal piety norms (Mahmood, 2005; Woodward, 2011). Nonetheless, current research seldom links this representational crisis to the emergence of alternative religious authority.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Drawing from the preceding literature review, a clear research gap is identified. Existing studies on digital da'wah and religious authority largely highlight highly prominent religious figures who successfully adapt to platform culture logic through visibility, engagement, branding, and performative self-presentation (Campbell, 2013; Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Within the framework of the mediatization of religion, legitimacy is often linked to algorithmic popularity, emotional appeal, and the ability to sustain audience interaction in digital spaces (Hjarvard, 2008; Couldry & Hepp, 2017;

Gillespie, 2014). Consequently, contemporary religious authority is frequently interpreted through metrics of circulation, spectacle, and media visibility, rather than moral depth or symbolic trust.

Several studies on Gus Baha have analyzed his da'wah style from perspectives of rhetoric, humor, politeness, and communicative effectiveness in digital media (Sadili, 2021; Dewi et al., 2023; Mustopa et al., 2024). Other research emphasizes his credibility as a preacher and the social acceptance of his moderate Islamic discourse in online spaces (Al Farisi, 2023; Hakim & Pardianto, 2025). However, these studies still tend to position Gus Baha primarily as a successful digital preacher, without deeply critiquing how his authority is produced through a relatively low-performative posture within algorithmic culture. In other words, existing literature has not sufficiently explored how religious legitimacy can emerge not from strategic visibility or self-branding, but from perceptions of authenticity, textual depth, humility, and social-spiritual piety.

This study positions itself to fill this gap by integrating theories of religious authority, mediatization of religion, symbolic authority, and Woodward's concepts of social and spiritual piety. Rather than claiming that Gus Baha is entirely outside digital performativity, this article proposes that his authority represents a form of low-performative religious authority within platform culture. His limited engagement with self-branding, emotional spectacle, and strategic digital visibility paradoxically strengthens his symbolic legitimacy among audiences. By examining the circulation and reception of Gus Baha's da'wah in digital spaces, this article argues that the relative refusal of performative self-presentation serves as a social mechanism through which social and spiritual piety become alternative foundations of religious legitimacy in algorithmic culture.

METHODS

This study used an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in a constructivist epistemological paradigm, treating religious authority as a socially negotiated phenomenon produced through discourse, practice, and audience response (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instead of measuring how often da'wah occurs or its quantitative impact, I focused on how symbolic and discursive processes build religious legitimacy in spaces shaped by algorithms.

Gus Baha is selected through theoretically-informed purposive case selection based on three considerations. First, his authority comes from recognized pesantren scholarship, but he does not have a personal social media presence or engage in digital self-branding. This makes his case important for questioning whether visibility is necessary for religious authority (Campbell, 2013). Second, audiences share his sermons across many YouTube channels run by independent users and informal religious communities. This allowed me to examine how symbolic authority can develop without intentional self-promotion and how audiences help build legitimacy (Couldry, 2008). Third, his sermons often show what Woodward (1989; 2011) calls inner piety, which focuses on intention, contextual reasoning, and a non-judgmental approach to religiosity. This provided a clear basis for connecting authority, media, and piety in the analysis.

This study operationalizes anti-performativity as a structural analytical category referring to a mode of religious communication characterized by systematic distance from dominant algorithmic media logics. It is identified by five empirical indicators: non-optimization for algorithmic visibility; discursive continuity rather than fragmentation; low affective intensification; non-curated visual and performative presentation; and

primacy of epistemic content over audience engagement metrics. These indicators function as both selection criteria and coding guides throughout the analysis.

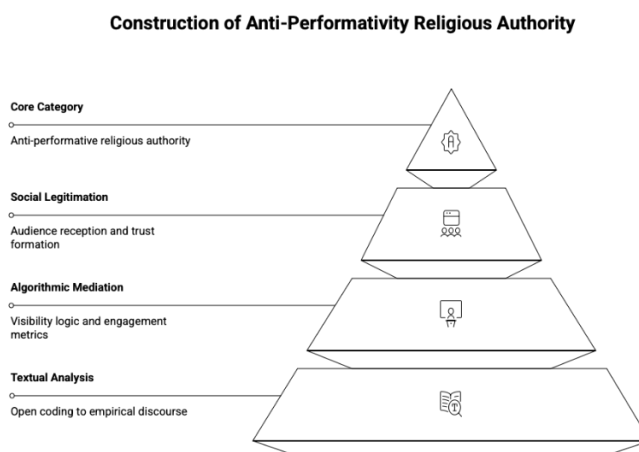
The empirical corpus consists of three data types: audio-visual sermon recordings from YouTube, which are treated as discursive artifacts shaped by their online circulation. Second, I made selective transcriptions of sermon segments that discuss sin, worship, intention, moral reasoning, and everyday religious practice. Third, I gathered audience reception data by analysing viewer comments for patterns of symbolic legitimation and interpretation.

A total of 30 sermon recordings were published between February and December 2025 from several YouTube channels, including both dedicated platforms like Santri Gayeng and independent, informal religious community accounts. Selection criteria require that sermons exhibit an extended, non-fragmented lecture structure, address themes of everyday religious practice and moral reasoning, and not appear to be optimized for social media. While these materials are still shaped by how platforms circulate content, I focused on discourse that shows some distance from typical algorithmic optimization, rather than claiming to study unmediated religious communication.

Reception data consist of 700 comments collected across the 30 sampled videos and purposively selected to prioritize substantive engagement with sermon content. Selection foregrounds three comment types: comments that explicitly respond to theological or ethical content; comments that reflect active interpretive negotiation or critical engagement; and comments that position Gus Baha within broader religious authority landscapes. Supplementary attention is given to patterns of cross-platform dissemination evident in audience requests to re-upload content a recurring pattern that empirically supports the claim of audience-driven secondary circulation.

The analysis employs qualitative discourse analysis based on Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse framework and follows three coding stages. First, I used open coding to find recurring themes about religious authority, inner piety, and audience roles. Next, I used axial coding to connect these themes to theoretical concepts such as inner piety, normative piety, performative piety, and anti-performativity. Finally, I used selective coding to build the main analytical category of anti-performative religious authority, showing how symbolic legitimacy comes from focusing on inner piety and staying separate from algorithmic visibility. I placed all discourse within the larger context of mediatization, recognizing that meaning and authority develop through the interaction of text, circulation, and audience reception.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Anti-Performative Religious Authority in Algorithmic Culture



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analytical findings from a qualitative discourse analysis of Gus Baha’s sermons circulating on YouTube, along with audience reception on digital platforms and supporting web sources. The analysis focuses on how non-performative religious authority is constructed through the affirmation of inner piety and the strategic distancing from performative forms of normative piety within algorithmic culture. Before proceeding to the thematic analysis, Table 2. serves as an empirical entry point, illustrating the relationships among sermon excerpts, digital sources, and analytical categories.

Table 1. Empirical Data, Analytical Categories, and Their Interpretive Relevance

No	Digital Source	Sermon Excerpt	Audience Response	Analytical Category	Analytical Relevance
1	YouTube – Santri Gayeng	"Sleep can be an act of worship if the intention is to protect oneself from sin."	"Ayo ditoto niat" (Come on, let's do it, intend)	Inner piety	Demonstrates intention-based worship rather than normative performance, confirmed by audience internalization of intentionality
2	YouTube – Independent users and informal religious communities	"Sin is not something to be constantly feared, but something to be understood."	"ternyata, beribadah itu mudah". (It turns out, worship is easy)	Anti-moral panic	Implicit critique of normative piety
3	YouTube – Pesantren Lecture	"Drinking coffee can be an act of worship if it leads you to accept your fate."	"Alkhamdulillaah... siapa saja bisa beramal di kelas tertinggi" (Alkhamdulillaah... anyone can do charity in the highest class)	Rationalization of piety	Integration of religion and everyday life, reinforced by audience reception confirming accessibility of worship beyond formal ritual hierarchy
4	Arrahim.id (religious portal)	Gus Baha does not actively manage personal social media	"Ini baru wali... Ilmunya tinggi rendah hati dan sederhana luar biasa" (This is just a guardian... His knowledge is high, humble and extraordinary simple)	Anti-performativity	Personal digital absence positions authority as independent from platform logic and attention economy dynamics

Anti-Performative Authority and Secondary Digital Circulation

The analysis of sermon circulation on YouTube indicates that religious authority is not always constructed through deliberate strategies of digital visibility. In contrast to many contemporary preachers who use official account management and content scheduling, Gus Baha's sermons are predominantly disseminated via third-party channels managed by independent users and informal religious communities, including Dakwah Digital and accounts for mosques or pesantrens. This distribution occurs without the speaker's direct involvement. The Santri Gayeng channel, a primary node in this network, reached approximately 493,000 subscribers as of June 2026. This audience scale was achieved through organic, community-driven dissemination rather than centralized platform management.

This circulation pattern suggests that social media platforms may function as decentralized audience aggregation sites rather than as tools for personal brand management. Authority in this context is constructed through audience-driven selection and redistribution, as evidenced by recurring patterns across the 30 analyzed recordings. The absence of algorithmic engagement or direct content management may contribute to perceptions of scholarly independence, consistent with Weberian interpretations. This dynamic also aligns with theoretical perspectives that associate symbolic power with strategic withdrawal from public attention. The observed anti-performative approach thus reflects a passive strategy that maintains distance from direct digital self-promotion.

The anti-performative character of Gus Baha's digital presence is empirically documented beyond audience reception data. Hamdi (2021), writing in Arrahim.id, notes that Gus Baha does not maintain a personal YouTube channel, does not use WhatsApp, and actively discourages unsolicited visits yet his popularity has been substantiated by multiple independent surveys. A 2019 survey conducted by the East Java Regional Unity and Politics Agency in collaboration with Universitas Airlangga found that Gus Baha ranked eighth among Islamic role models among 1,000 high school students across East Java, surpassing the Chairman of PBNU and the Chairman of PP Muhammadiyah, who ranked fourteenth and fifteenth, respectively. A subsequent 2020 survey by INFID across six major Indonesian cities placed him second among young Muslims aged 18–30, with 18.1% of 1,200 respondents identifying him as a prominent religious reference. Crucially, Hamdi (2021) attributes this reach not to self-managed digital strategy, but to the collective initiative of audiences *muhibbin* who record, edit, and distribute his sermons across multiple platforms without copyright restrictions. This pattern directly supports the claim that anti-performative authority can generate significant social reach precisely through its refusal of personal branding and algorithmic self-optimization.

Inner Piety and the Rationalization of Religious Practice

Content analysis of the 30 sermon recordings indicates a consistent shift in the framing of piety from normative compliance to inner piety. Religious practice is presented as an internal process grounded in intention and ethical awareness, rather than as a sequence of formalized public actions. Recurring discursive patterns, such as reframing sleep as worship when intended to avoid sin and interpreting everyday acts like drinking

coffee as worship when oriented toward acceptance of fate, align with Woodward's framework of inner piety, which prioritizes intention and lived meaning over external validation (Woodward, 1989; 2011). The recurrence of these themes across sermons addressing rest, social interaction, and emotional experience suggests that the emphasis on inner piety constitutes a stable discursive feature. The rationalization of religious practice observed in these sermons may function as an implicit critique of moral panic-oriented preaching. Instead of reinforcing norms through fear, the discourse normalizes experiences of fatigue, error, and limitation as integral to religious life. This approach appears to resonate with audiences who express fatigue toward rigid performative expectations, a trend increasingly documented in digital religion research (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Authority in this context is constructed through the articulation of religion as a system integrated with everyday experience rather than through normative enforcement.

Audience Reception: Negotiating Normative Pressure through Inner Piety

Analysis of 700 audience comments across the sampled videos indicates that Gus Baha's sermons are interpreted as spaces for negotiating normative religious pressures. Recurring expressions of emotional relief, such as "*hati jadi tenang*" (the heart becomes calm), "*obat hati*" (medicine for the heart), and "*pencerahan yang bisa melembutkan hati*" (enlightenment that softens the heart), suggest active engagement with the content at the level of meaning reconstruction. Comments referencing intellectual depth and humility, including "*ilmunya tinggi, rendah hati dan sederhana*" (knowledge is high, yet humble and simple) and "*pembahasannya sederhana tapi sungguh dalam*" (the discussion is simple but genuinely profound), indicate that perceived legitimacy is grounded in epistemic trust rather than performative attributes. Audience responses can be categorized into seven recurring interpretive clusters: emotional relief, self-reflection, religious learning, intentionality, humility-based authority, community affiliation, and interpretive negotiation. Instances of critical engagement, including questions regarding the implications of expanded worship definitions, indicate that authority is negotiated through dialogic interaction rather than passive acceptance. This observation is consistent with findings that digital religious audiences act as active agents in meaning production (Campbell, 2013). Authority is thus maintained through the perception that the religious figure enables recognition and articulation of inner piety.

Symbolic Autonomy, the Reversal of Power Relations and Comparative Logics of Authority in Digital Contexts

The findings indicate that the absence of explicit alignment with political power and institutional symbolism contributes to the construction of religious authority. Within Bourdieu's framework, symbolic autonomy supports the persistence of cultural authority without dependence on political or economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Maintaining distance from institutional power and performative religious norms appears to foster perceptions of independence and trustworthiness. This pattern is evident in both discourse and audience reception data, where distance from power is interpreted as a

marker of integrity. Anti-performativity thus operates across media, piety, and power relations, forming authority through strategic distance from centers of validation.

The analysis identifies a consistent contrast between the non-performative model observed in this study and established patterns of performative religious authority in digital da'wah scholarship. Performative models typically associate authority with visibility, algorithmic reach, and strategic content management, linking legitimacy to attention metrics and audience engagement (Bunt, 2018; Echchaibi, 2018). In contrast, the non-performative model is defined by audience-mediated circulation, discursive depth, and symbolic autonomy. Audience engagement is predominantly reflective, with participants articulating personal interpretations rather than responding to entertainment-oriented content. This contrast indicates a reversal in the logic of symbolic power: performative authority relies on sustained visibility within competitive attention economies, while non-performative authority derives stability from relative independence from these dynamics. In contexts saturated with performative religiosity, non-performative discourse may provide an alternative basis for legitimacy grounded in trust, interpretive resonance, and epistemic credibility, as evidenced by recurring patterns in both sermon content and audience reception.

Re-situating Empirical Data as Social Practice

The circulation of Gus Baha's sermons through secondary channels on YouTube cannot be reduced to mere digital content; rather, it constitutes a form of social practice mediated by audience dynamics. Contrary to dominant narratives in digital religion studies that assume online visibility automatically generates religious legitimacy, this case demonstrates an inverse pattern: authority is constructed precisely through the absence of personal branding strategies and reliance on collective recognition mechanisms. Sermon recordings are not disseminated through centrally managed personal accounts with professional content scheduling, but through community-based channels such as *santri gayeng*, and local mosque or *pesantren* uploads platforms that depend on organic audience resonance for distribution.

This pattern of audience-driven dissemination is not confined to YouTube comment data alone. Public documentation corroborates this finding: Hamdi (2021) notes that Gus Baha does not maintain a personal YouTube channel, does not use WhatsApp, and has explicitly permitted audiences to freely record and redistribute his sermons without copyright restrictions. This open dissemination policy has generated what Hamdi describes as a massive social-religious movement driven entirely by audience initiative rather than institutional or personal media management. The scale of this reach is substantiated by independent survey data: a 2019 survey by the East Java Regional Unity and Politics Agency in collaboration with Universitas Airlangga found Gus Baha ranked eighth among Islamic role models among 1,000 high school students across East Java, surpassing senior figures from PBNU and Muhammadiyah, while a 2020 INFID survey across six major Indonesian cities placed him second among young Muslims aged 18–30 with 18.1% of 1,200 respondents identifying him as a prominent religious reference (Hamdi, 2021). These figures are particularly significant given that they were

achieved without any personal digital strategy, reinforcing the central argument that anti-performative authority can generate substantial social reach through audience mediation alone.

This finding shifts the analytical focus from platform affordances to social mediation practices. Within the mediatization of religion, digital platforms do not operate as neutral conduits but rather reshape the conditions under which religious authority is recognized (Hjarvard, 2011; Hoover, 2016). However, in this case, YouTube's algorithm functions less as an architect of authority and more as a passive amplifier of discourses that already possess social resonance. Legitimacy emerges from audience agency, where acts of sharing, commenting, and recirculating content generate what can be understood as networked recognition (Couldry, 2008; Campbell, 2013).

This study challenges a methodological tendency in digital religion research to equate authority with visibility metrics such as subscriber counts or reach. Instead, Gus Baha's authority is shaped through what may be described as the invisible labor of audiences the selection, curation, and dissemination of content by communities that experience affective resonance with discourses of inner piety (Abidin, 2016). The absence of a self-managed digital presence contributes to a perception of authenticity that is difficult to replicate within highly branded religious content, thereby avoiding the fatigue associated with attention-driven religious performance (Han, 2017).

Theoretically, this configuration extends Weberian notions of charisma into the digital domain. Charisma is no longer dependent on symbolic expansion through public exposure, but can emerge through strategic withdrawal from the digital symbolic marketplace. Secondary circulation thus demonstrates that religious authority can be sustained through relational recognition, recognition that arises through intersubjective engagement rather than self-exposure (Weber, 1978).

Rational Language vs. Moral Panic

The rational language employed in Gus Baha's sermons functions as a strategic counter-discourse to performative piety that relies on moral panic as a mechanism of social control. In contrast to normative preaching that reinforces discipline through narratives of punishment and visible ritual compliance, this discourse de-escalates religious fear into reflective ethical understanding. At the textual level, linguistic choices consistently shift the focus from external compliance to internal intentionality, aligning with broader critiques of performative religiosity in digital environments (Echchaibi, 2018). Everyday activities are reframed as meaningful religious acts when grounded in intention, thereby destabilizing rigid hierarchies between formal and informal worship.

Importantly, this resistance does not operate through overt confrontation. Instead, it functions through linguistic restraint, subtly refusing dominant idioms of fear-based religiosity. From a Foucauldian perspective, this can be understood as a form of discursive subversion, in which power is negotiated through the reconfiguration of meaning rather than direct opposition (Foucault, 1978). This counter-discourse also responds to audience fatigue with fear-based religious messaging, a phenomenon increasingly identified in studies of digital religion and online piety (Bunt, 2018; Campbell & Evolvi,

2020). By enabling cognitive and emotional reinterpretation, the discourse positions authority as emerging from interpretive capacity rather than coercive enforcement.

Normative vs. Inner Piety Revisited

The findings extend Mark Woodward's framework of inner piety by positioning it not merely as a private religious orientation, but as a legitimate basis of public authority within digital space. Unlike normative piety, which relies on visible ritual performance, the discourse analyzed here emphasizes that religious value is grounded in intention rather than external display (Woodward, 1989; 2011). Conceptually, this expansion moves beyond the traditional dichotomy between normative and inner piety. In an algorithmic environment, inner piety becomes a form of publicly mediated virtue, circulating through digital infrastructures without being fully subsumed by their logic of visibility. This aligns with broader transformations in religious authority, where legitimacy is increasingly negotiated in mediated public spheres (Campbell, 2013). Audience reception reflects this shift, suggesting that inner piety functions as a form of emotional and cognitive recalibration in response to the pressures of performative religiosity. This dynamic resonates with Mahmood's (2005) argument that religious practice cannot be reduced to external compliance, but must be understood through embodied and interpretive dimensions. Theoretically, this contributes to digital religion studies by introducing the concept of mediated inner piety a form of religiosity that engages digital platforms without fully adopting their performative imperatives. This challenges the assumption that digitalization necessarily intensifies religious visibility and instead demonstrates the possibility of alternative modes of presence within mediated environments.

Anti-Performative Authority as Discursive Outcome

Anti-performative authority emerges not as an incidental phenomenon, but as the outcome of a coherent discursive configuration integrating inner piety, rationalization of everyday practice, and distance from algorithmic validation. This configuration produces a form of symbolic legitimacy that does not depend on visibility. From a Weberian perspective, this represents a reinterpretation of charismatic authority in digital contexts. Charisma is sustained through symbolic restraint, rather than expansion, aligning with contemporary critiques of visibility regimes in digital culture (Han, 2015). This characterization is independently corroborated by Indonesian Islamic public discourse. Yusuf (2020), writing in Arrahim.id, explicitly frames Gus Baha as an "*anti-mainstream*" ulama-scholar whose authority derives from deliberate resistance to dominant norms of religious self-presentation, one who does not need formal credentials, institutional validation, or visibility-driven communication to sustain public legitimacy. This convergence between empirical audience reception data and independent public commentary strengthens the claim that anti-performativity is not merely an analytical attribution imposed by this study, but a socially recognized characteristic that circulates across multiple discursive spaces beyond the YouTube corpus analysed here.

At the same time, authority is relationally constituted. In Bourdieusian terms, it reflects the accumulation of symbolic capital through instantiation from dominant fields of validation, including algorithmic metrics, political alignment, and institutional affiliation (Bourdieu, 1991). Anti-performative authority emerges not as an incidental phenomenon, but as the outcome of a coherent discursive configuration integrating inner piety, rationalization of everyday practice, and structural distance from algorithmic validation. This configuration produces a form of symbolic legitimacy that does not depend on visibility. However, to avoid conceptual conflation, it is necessary to distinguish anti-performative authority from three related but analytically distinct concepts: authenticity, symbolic authority, and charismatic authority.

Authenticity, as theorized in digital media studies, refers to the perception of genuine self-presentation, a quality audiences attribute to communicators who appear unmediated or transparent in their self-disclosure (Enli, 2015). While anti-performative authority may produce effects that audiences read as authentic, authenticity remains an audience attribution focused on perceived sincerity of presentation. Anti-performative authority, by contrast, is a structural condition that describes a mode of religious communication defined by its systematic distance from algorithmic media logics, irrespective of whether audiences explicitly frame it as authentic. The distinction is between a reception effect and a discursive structure.

Symbolic authority, in Bourdieu's framework, refers to the capacity to impose legitimate meanings by accumulating and deploying symbolic capital within a field (Bourdieu, 1991). Anti-performative authority is not opposed to this formulation it operates within it. The analytical contribution of this study is to identify *algorithmic distance* as a specific mechanism through which symbolic capital is accumulated in digital religious fields. What Bourdieu's framework does not account for is the particular logic of digital platforms, in which the refusal to optimize for algorithmic visibility can itself function as a form of field-specific capital accumulation. Anti-performative authority thus extends rather than replaces the Bourdieusian framework by specifying the field conditions of algorithmic culture.

Charismatic authority, in Weber's classical formulation, refers to authority grounded in the exceptional personal qualities of an individual, recognized and sustained through the devotion of followers (Weber, 1978). While Gus Baha's authority shares structural similarities with charismatic authority particularly in its relational constitution through audience recognition it diverges in two significant respects. First, Weberian charisma typically requires symbolic expansion through public exposure and the active cultivation of a following. Anti-performative authority, by contrast, is sustained through symbolic restraint and the deliberate minimization of self-presentation. Second, charismatic authority in Weber's framework is inherently unstable and dependent on continuous reaffirmation. The anti-performative model observed here derives stability precisely from its independence from the attention economy dynamics that make performative authority vulnerable to algorithmic volatility. In this sense, anti-performative authority represents a reconfiguration of charismatic logic under conditions of digital mediatization, rather than a straightforward instantiation of it. A critical rejoinder must be acknowledged. From a Bourdieusian standpoint, the deliberate refusal of digital branding may itself constitute a performance of non-performance. In this case, symbolic capital is accumulated precisely through the conspicuous absence of self-promotion (Bourdieu, 1991). This reading is theoretically coherent but conflates structural conditions with intentional strategic calculation. The evidence examined here

includes the absence of personal digital infrastructure, the open redistribution policy, and audience-driven circulation. These do not indicate deliberate field positioning. Authority emerges as a relational outcome of audience recognition rather than calculated self-presentation. The distinction lies in the locus of agency. A performance of non-performance assumes the religious figure's intentionality. Anti-performative authority, by contrast, locates legitimacy in audience mediation and discursive resonance. Whether or not anti-performativity is consciously cultivated, its effects on symbolic legitimacy remain empirically demonstrable in audience reception patterns. These are analytically distinct from performative authority dynamics.

These distinctions clarify the analytical specificity of anti-performative religious authority as a concept. It is not reducible to authenticity as a reception effect, nor fully captured by symbolic authority as field logic, nor equivalent to charismatic authority as personal magnetism. Rather, it names a structurally distinct mode of legitimacy production specific to algorithmically mediated religious spaces, in which authority is constructed through discursive restraint, audience-mediated circulation, and systematic distance from dominant platform logics.

Social Implications: Trust and Autonomy

At the societal level, this model of non-institutional legitimacy offers a relatively stable alternative within Indonesia's fragmented digital religious landscape. Authority is grounded in affective trust, which emerges through sustained audience engagement rather than formal endorsement. This stability depended on keeping a clear distance from algorithm-driven trends and avoiding self-promotion. Gus Baha showed this by not building a digital brand. He also allowed others to freely share his content. As a result, audiences took full responsibility for distributing his material (Hamdi, 2021). Such autonomy enables the formation of durable symbolic capital that remains resilient amid shifts in digital infrastructures (Bourdieu, 1991).

The findings reflect a broader transformation in how religious authority is recognized, now increasingly measured by the capacity to guide audience meaning-making in complex social realities rather than by visibility or institutional ties (Hoover, 2016). Whether this trust can withstand disinformation and platform volatility remains an open empirical question and warrants further investigation. Nonetheless, the model addresses the fragmentation of contemporary religious experience by offering religiosity that is reflective, contextual, and less dependent on performative validation. Together, these findings critically reconfigure how religious authority is conceptualized in digital contexts, showing that authority may emerge through strategic non-visibility and audience-driven circulation. Here, anti-performativity becomes not just a personal stance, but a discursive and relational mechanism of legitimacy.

Furthermore, the analysis advances the concept of mediated inner piety, showing that inner-oriented religiosity can operate as a publicly recognized source of authority within digitally mediated environments. This challenges the prevailing assumption in digital religion studies that mediatization necessarily intensifies performativity. Instead, it suggests that digital platforms may also enable alternative modes of religious presence grounded in restraint, interpretive depth, and symbolic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study introduces an analytical framework for examining how non-performative authority may emerge within algorithmic environments, rather than proposing an ideal model of preaching. The framework is designed to support

comparative analysis across multiple digital religious contexts. For instance, future research could investigate anti-performative religious authority among digital figures who maintain distance from self-branding logics. This includes Indonesian Islamic figures associated with pesantren-based scholarship, as well as religious leaders in other traditions where institutional credibility and digital restraint intersect, such as Catholic clergy, Buddhist teachers, or Jewish rabbinical figures active on social media. Platform-comparative analysis represents a further direction. The current study focuses on YouTube, but the dynamics of anti-performative authority may differ on platforms with distinct algorithmic architectures, such as TikTok, Instagram, or Telegram, where short-form content and visual performance are structurally emphasized. Evaluating whether anti-performative authority is sustained or undermined across these platforms would provide additional evidence for the framework's analytical generalizability. The concept also has implications beyond digital religion studies. It may inform research on credibility, trust, and legitimacy in mediated environments within broader communication studies. Anti-performativity as a communicative stance could be relevant in political communication, academic public engagement, or activist movements, where maintaining distance from visibility regimes may function as a source of symbolic capital. These potential extensions indicate that the framework developed here contributes to a broader analytical discussion about the conditions under which restraint, rather than exposure, generates authority in algorithmically mediated public spheres.

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