Al'Adālah Journal of Islamic Studies
Vol. 29, No. 1 (2026)
P-ISSN 1410-7406 | E-ISSN 2684-8368
Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat (LP2M)
Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq of Jember, Indonesia
https://aladalah.uinkhas.ac.id

# Managed fragmentation of religious authority: Intra-organizational fatwa contestation within Nahdlatul Ulama in the digital age

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OPEN ACCESS

Received: March 27, 2026
Revised: June 28, 2026
Accepted: July 12, 2026
Published: July 30, 2026

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## Abstract

This article examines how digital platforms mediate fatwa contestation within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and reshape the relations among organizational, epistemic, charismatic, and digital capital. It compares two disputes: a vertical disagreement between PBNU and PCNU Jember over Friday (*Jumu'ah*) prayers on public roads, and a horizontal disagreement between PWNU East Java and PWNU Yogyakarta over cryptocurrency. Using qualitative digital ethnography, document analysis, and manual sentiment coding, the study traces the circulation of fatwa texts, media reports, and Facebook discussions across institutional and digital settings. The dataset comprises eight public online sources—two news reports and six Facebook posts—which generated 5,716 visible interactions: 3,594 reactions, 871 comments, and 1,251 shares. Sentiment was coded in 453 relevant comments from three cryptocurrency threads, while the remaining threads were examined qualitatively. The findings show that digital platforms make internal disagreements publicly visible while allowing them to remain institutionally manageable. Cryptocurrency discussions fostered relatively neutral and constructive inquiry, whereas the street *Jumu'ah* dispute produced sharper contestation over textual authority, organizational loyalty, *adab*, identity, and affective legitimacy. The article conceptualizes this condition as managed fragmentation within algorithmic digital authority and argues that increased digital visibility does not necessarily confer religious legitimacy.

**Keywords:** managed fragmentation; algorithmic digital authority; Nahdlatul Ulama; *Bahtsul Masail*; fatwa contestation.

## Introduction

Digital platforms have changed the way Islamic authority is produced, circulated, challenged, and recognized (Zaid et al., 2022; Raya, 2025). Fatwas are no longer encountered only as printed documents, organizational decisions, or scholarly pronouncements delivered through formal forums. They now travel through Facebook posts, screenshots, online news reports, short explanations, comments, tags, shares, and affective reactions. This transformation does not simply expand the audience of Islamic

To cite this article (APA Style 7th Edition): Rahman, F., Pujiono, Khumaidah, S., & Harisudin, M. N. (2026). Managed fragmentation of religious authority: Intra-organizational fatwa contestation within Nahdlatul Ulama in the digital age. *Al'Adalah: Journal of Islamic Studies, 29*(1), 75–100. https://doi.org/10.35719/aladalah.v29i1.685

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legal reasoning. It also changes the conditions under which audiences recognize an actor, a forum, or a legal argument as authoritative. In a platformed environment, formal institutional positions must interact with visibility, responsiveness, emotional resonance, and the capacity to sustain dialogical engagement with publics that are increasingly critical and technically literate (Bunt, 2003; Campbell, 2007; Hjarvard, 2008).

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) offers a particularly important case for examining this transformation. NU is not a single-layered body of religious authority. Its authority is distributed across "Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama" (PBNU) at the national level, "Pengurus Wilayah Nahdlatul Ulama" (PWNU ) at the provincial level, "Pengurus Cabang Nahdlatul Ulama" (PCNU) at the branch level, *pesantren* networks, *Kiai*, *Lajnah Bahtsul Masail* (LBM), affiliated media institutions, and lay *Nahdliyyin* publics. Its legal reasoning is also plural, drawing on verbal (*qauli*), analogy (*ilhaqi*), and methodology (*manhaji*) modes of extracting legal rulings from primary text (*istinbath*) that allow jurists to preserve the authority of classical Shafi'i scholarship while responding to contemporary problems (Asa'ari, 2017; Moqsith, 2017; Riza, 2011; Wijaya, 2025). This institutional and epistemic plurality has long enabled NU to manage internal diversity. However, digital media makes this diversity visible to broader audiences and exposes internal disagreement to the logics of virality, commentary, and public evaluation.

Previous studies have examined NU's fatwa methodology (Asa'ari, 2017; Moqsith, 2017), the authority of *Bahtsul Masail* (Wijaya, 2025), and specific instances of disagreement within NU (Bahri, 2018; Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Hannan et al., 2024). However, it has not given as much sustained focus to how such disagreements are handled in digital public spheres. To fill this gap, this article examines two cases that are analytically complementary. The first is the vertical dispute between PBNU and PCNU Jember regarding the validity of Friday (*Jumu'ah*) prayers being held on public roads during the December 2016 mobilization. This case concerns a ritual matter of great visual and symbolic significance and demonstrates how a local branch can function as an epistemic challenger to the official position of the central organization. The second case is the horizontal disagreement between LBM PWNU East Java and LBM PWNU Yogyakarta over cryptocurrency (Anwar et al., 2025; Burhanudin, 2025; Rahman et al., 2020; Umihani, 2023). This case concerns an economic-technological issue and illustrates how the two provincial NU bodies can employ the same methodological terminology while arriving at different rulings and drawing in digital commentary from *Kiai*, activists, and technical experts.

The article raises two questions. The first concerns the function of digital platforms in the circulation, framing, and contestation of disagreements among NU members regarding the fatwa. The second examines how digital visibility alters the relationships among organizational capital, epistemic capital, charismatic capital, and digital capital in relation to claims of religious authority. The main point put forward is that digital platforms do not simply spread fatwas; they transform internal disagreements into what may be described as managed fragmentation, a situation in which institutional differences become publicly visible yet are at least partly contained within clear discursive, ethical, and organizational limits. Managed fragmentation is the article's key empirical and conceptual conclusion. The larger theoretical framework utilized to explain how visibility, engagement, scholarly recognition, and organizational containment function in online religious publics is that of algorithmic digital authority.

The article makes three contributions. First, from an empirical perspective, it provides a balanced description of both vertical and horizontal intra-NU fatwa disputes in digital environments. Second, in terms of methodology, it combines document analysis with digital ethnography and sentiment-oriented coding to analyze public interactions on Facebook, while also outlining the ethical boundaries of this approach. Third, conceptually, it differentiates between digital visibility and religious legitimacy and demonstrates that online authority only arises when visibility is based on identifiable forms of scholarly, institutional, and ethical accountability.

## Literature Review

The research relevant to this study may be divided into three main areas of focus. The first examines NU's legal reasoning and the function of *Bahtsul Masail* as an institutional mechanism for arriving at collective Islamic legal decisions. The second area concerns disagreements and challenges to the fatwa among individuals, institutions, and different levels of organizations affiliated with NU. The third focuses on digital religion, platform visibility, and the transforming contexts in which religious authority is conveyed and acknowledged. This body of literature shows that religious authority within NU is simultaneously institutional, epistemic, personal, and communicative. Yet these fields of research have mostly developed separately; work on NU's jurisprudence generally focuses on legal methods and institutional rulings, while research on digital religion emphasizes individual preachers, religious influencers, and networked publics. It is important to bring these approaches together if we are to understand how internal legal disputes go beyond deliberative settings, enter digital public spaces, and are then assessed by a broader range of religious figures and the general public.

The first strand of literature emphasizes *Bahtsul Masail* as a deliberative process based on Islamic textbooks (*kutub al-turats*), in the scholarly education received in the *pesantren*, in collective discussion, and in the organizational practices of the NU. Within the organization, legal authority is neither entirely centralized nor completely dispersed among separate scholars; rather, it operates at the national, provincial, and branch levels, as well as through *pesantren* networks, the *Kiai*, and the *Lajnah Bahtsul Masail* (LBM) forums. Research into the juristic methodology of NU generally identifies three kinds of reasoning: *qauli*, *ilhaqi*, and *manhaji*. *Qauli* reasoning gives priority to the established opinions found in authoritative legal sources, *ilhaqi* reasoning links current issues to earlier legal cases that have already been discussed, and *manhaji* reasoning is used when there are no direct textual precedents by applying more general methodological principles (Asa'ari, 2017; Moqsith, 2017; Riza, 2011; Wijaya, 2025). Because of these methods, NU scholars can remain in line with the Shafi'i tradition while navigating changing social circumstances. It therefore follows that internal diversity should not be seen as a sign of institutional disorder, since the differences might still be based on recognized sources, procedures, and scholarly conventions.

Other research examines intra-organizational disagreement as a regular feature of the legal and intellectual environment at NU. For instance, Bahri (2018) demonstrates that NU-associated individuals may reach different conclusions about non-Muslim political leadership due to their varied approaches to Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) and differing interpretations of the relationship between normative texts and political contexts. In the case of female leadership, studies show that institutions linked to NU can reach contradictory results yet still refer to the school of thought/jurisprudence (*madzhab*), contextual reasoning, and the established procedures of Islamic legal discussion (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Hannan et al., 2024). The same kind of pattern is seen in discussions about cryptocurrency. Analyses of the PWNU East Java, PWNU Yogyakarta, and *pesantren* deliberations show that NU scholars may use the same legal terminology but still differ in determining the effective cause, the extent of ambiguity (*gharar*) and gambling (*maysir*), and the legal status of non-physical digital assets (Anwar et al., 2025; Burhanudin, 2025; Rahman et al., 2020; Umihani, 2023). Although this research accounts for the production of conflicting rulings, it mainly focuses on legal arguments and doctrinal outcomes, rather than on the way these rulings are circulated, interpreted, and contested in digital public spaces.

The third area of research concerns digital religion and how religious authority is transformed by media and platform infrastructures. The scholars working in this area

claim that online environments do not merely reproduce offline religious practices; rather, they produce interconnected settings in which institutional status, personal charisma, audience engagement, and the possibilities offered by technology interact (Campbell, 2007, 2010; Hine, 2000). According to mediatization theory, the media are not neutral channels but actively shape how religion is presented, communicated, and recognized by the public (Hjarvard, 2008). Platform studies also assert that digital visibility is shaped by systems of ranking, recommendation, circulation, and engagement; these systems tend to promote content that draws in and maintains public attention (Azap Öztemel, 2025; Gillespie, 2017). This state of affairs presents a major challenge for religious individuals since although official academic and organizational qualifications are still important, public influence now largely relies on posting habits, promptness in responding, interaction with the audience, and the ability to explain complex religious topics in an accessible manner.

The present situation reveals a significant gap in the analysis. Although research on *Bahtsul Masail* focuses on the institutional and methodological aspects of NU's legal pluralism, it often fails to account for how internal disagreements surface on social media. Studies concerning intra-NU disagreements do point out differences in legal reasoning but generally regard fatwas as final doctrinal conclusions rather than as arguments that are circulated, elicit responses, and are reinterpreted after publication. On the other hand, work on digital religion offers useful insights into platformed authority but tends to concentrate on individual preachers, influencers, and informal religious networks; it has given less continuous attention to large, multilayered organizations in which authority is held by central, provincial, branch, *pesantren*, and media-based actors. As a result, the existing body of literature does not adequately account for how the visibility offered by social media interacts with the institution's hierarchy, the scholars' competence, personal reputation, and the organization's norms when disagreements arise within a religious organization.

To fill this gap, this article draws on Bourdieu's (1989) theory of fields and symbolic capital, modifying it to suit NU's institutional and digital environment. Religious authority is understood as resulting from the interaction between four kinds of capital. Organizational capital means the formal position one holds within NU's structure, for instance, positions linked to PBNU, PWNU, PCNU, and LBM. Epistemic capital includes in-depth knowledge of the Islamic legal sources, skill in *qauli*, *ilhaqi*, and *manhaji* reasoning, familiarity with the Islamic textbooks (*kutub al-turats*), and the ability to apply classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) to current issues. Charismatic capital consists of the

personal recognition given to *Kiai*, *pesantren* scholars, writers, and public intellectuals whose reputations can go beyond their official capacities. Digital capital refers to the ability to spread one's arguments, draw attention, maintain engagement, respond to criticism, and convert scholarly authority into forms that are acknowledged by digital audiences. These different types of capital do not always function smoothly. For example, a person might have a strong organizational standing but little digital engagement, while another may attain a high level of visibility even though they hold a less prominent formal position.

The way in which these different forms of capital interact is mediated by what the present study calls algorithmic visibility. This term describes the conditions under which content about fatwas becomes publicly visible, shareable, and open to discussion on digital platforms. Indicators that can be observed include reactions, comments, shares, tagging, reply chains, and repeated forwarding. Although these traces show us something about how people participate, they do not offer any direct insight into the ranking and recommendation algorithms used by Facebook. Therefore, algorithmic visibility is deduced from the observable interactions and not taken as definitive knowledge of how the algorithms function. Digital ethnography allows for a contextual analysis of such communications by examining the language, tone, references, and relationships that audiences use when responding to religious arguments (Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2020; Pink et al., 2016). It is also important to make a distinction between visible interaction and religious legitimacy. A post that is widely circulated may attract attention even if it is not accepted doctrinally, while a less visible ruling can still retain authority within the relevant epistemic and organizational communities.

The main empirical-conceptual contribution of this article is the concept of managed fragmentation, situated within the broader context of algorithmic digital authority. Managed fragmentation refers to situations in which disagreements within an organization become publicly visible yet remain partly limited by common legal references, organizational language, the *Bahtsul Masail* procedures, the norms of *adab*, and the ongoing declaration of NU affiliation. The term 'managed' does not mean that there is full central control by the institution over the way these disagreements are circulated; instead, it shows that the parties in conflict still use a familiar NU framework consisting of *kutub al-turats*, *madzhab* reasoning, *pesantren* scholarship, verification and clarification (*tabayyun*), and organizational responsibility. Algorithmic digital authority involves the various interactions between organizational, epistemic, charismatic, and digital capital in the light of platform visibility. It includes the regular expression of

religious views, reciprocal interaction between actors and audiences, and the practical literacy needed in order to present legal arguments on digital platforms. Thus, the study moves from a simple focus on the existence of internal disagreement to an examination of how such disagreement is spread, publicly assessed, and in part contained by the institutional, scholarly, and ethical boundaries of NU.

## Method

This study uses a qualitative design that combines document analysis and digital ethnography. The design is appropriate because the object of analysis is not a single fatwa text, but the movement of fatwa claims across formal institutional documents, online news reports, public Facebook posts, comments, and audience reactions. The study follows the contestation of formal or semi-formal legal claims into digital publics, where authority is reframed through interaction and visibility.

**Table 1**

*Empirical Materials and Analytical Functions*

| Material | Scope | Analytical function |
|---|---|---|
| Official/organizational texts | PBNU, PCNU Jember, LBM PWNU East Java, LBM PWNU Yogyakarta, and related NU materials | Reconstruct legal reasoning, institutional claims, and formal authority |
| Online media and NU-affiliated publications | Two audited online media items, supplemented by public explanatory writings | Reconstruct chronology, framing, and public circulation |
| Facebook interaction corpus | Six unique public posts; 3,594 reactions, 871 visible comments, 1,251 shares, and 5,716 visible interactions | Analyze visibility, reception, tagging, reply chains, and discursive patterns |
| Sentiment-oriented coding and field notes | 453 eligible comments coded in three cryptocurrency threads; remaining threads read qualitatively | Identify pro, contra, and neutral-constructive patterns while interpreting affective and authority claims |

*Note*. Interaction totals refer exclusively to the six public Facebook posts. Online media items and other documentary materials were used for contextual, chronological, and legal analysis and were not included in the interaction totals.

The two cases were selected because they allow comparison across different forms of intra-NU contestation. The street *Jumu'ah* case represents vertical contestation between PBNU–PCNU Jember. It is a ritual issue involving public space, visual symbolism, and the validity of worship. The cryptocurrency case represents horizontal contestation between two provincial bodies, PWNU East Java and PWNU Yogyakarta. It is an economic-technological issue involving digital assets, financial risk, and contemporary market practice. Together, the cases allow the article to examine how digital visibility operates across central–local and provincial–provincial disagreement.

Table 1 summarizes the empirical materials and their analytical functions. The broader documentary materials comprised official or semi-official fatwa-related texts, organizational decisions, online media reports, NU-affiliated publications, and public explanatory writings. Within these materials, the source audit identified eight unique public online items directly used to reconstruct the two cases: two online media items and six public Facebook posts. Interaction metrics were recorded only for the Facebook posts, which generated 5,716 visible interactions, consisting of 3,594 reactions, 871 comments, and 1,251 shares. Qualitative field notes were prepared through close reading of the posts and comment threads. Private WhatsApp groups and closed social media spaces were excluded. References to WhatsApp circulation were treated only as contextual information when they appeared in publicly accessible reports or discussions.

The public online materials were collected and archived between 5 January and 15 March 2026. Because exact archive timestamps were not preserved separately for each item, the study reports the verified archival window rather than claiming precise post-level collection dates. The Facebook posts were selected because they were publicly accessible during the archival period, directly related to one of the two fatwa contestations, and contained materials relevant to the circulation and reception of religious arguments. The street *Jumu'ah* corpus included posts by KH. Muhammad Shiddiq Al-Jawi and Nur Hasyim S Anam II. The cryptocurrency corpus included two posts by Abdul Wahab Ahmad and one post each by Fajar Abdul Bashir and Anis Mashduqi. All interaction figures represent visible counts recorded within the observation period. They should not be interpreted as permanent totals, backend reach, platform impressions, or direct measures of doctrinal acceptance. The final audit found no duplicated sources in the interaction totals. A since-deleted post by Abdul Moqsith Ghazali was used only as contextual background reconstructed through publicly accessible responses and was excluded from the interaction corpus.

The research team analyzed the materials collaboratively in three stages. First, document analysis identified each actor's legal arguments, institutional position, and use of *qauli*, *ilhaqi*, *manhaji*, or contextual reasoning. Second, digital ethnography traced patterns of circulation and participation, including reactions, comments, shares, tagging, reply chains, and interaction between the original posters and other users. Third, sentiment-oriented manual coding was applied to 453 eligible comments from three cryptocurrency threads: 197 of the 257 visible comments in Abdul Wahab Ahmad's first clarification, 15 of the 18 comments in Fajar Abdul Bashir's post, and all 241 comments in Abdul Wahab Ahmad's second clarification.

A comment was considered eligible when it contained intelligible and substantive text directly related to the issue under discussion. Emoji-only responses, standalone account tags without substantive text, duplicate or spam comments, deleted or inaccessible comments, and comments that could not be interpreted reliably were excluded. Replies by the original poster were examined qualitatively as evidence of responsive engagement but were not treated as independent sentiment observations when they merely repeated or restated the original post. The remaining Facebook threads were analyzed qualitatively because their limited number of comments or their complex combination of legal argument, satire, identity labels, affective expressions, and nested replies did not permit consistent classification into the three sentiment categories.

**Table 2**

*The Facebook Data and Analytical Treatment*

| Case and source | Reactions | Comments | Shares | Total | Analytical treatment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al-Jawi, street *Jumu'ah* post | 155 | 2 | 125 | 282 | Qualitative reading |
| ***Source**: https://www.facebook.com/mshiddiqaljawi/photos/592071104311785/* | | | | | |
| Nur Hasyim S Anam II, street *Jumu'ah* post | 167 | 332 | 46 | 545 | Qualitative analysis of legal arguments, satire, identity labels, affective expressions, and nested replies |
| ***Source**: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EqQphunhN/* | | | | | |
| Abdul Wahab Ahmad, first cryptocurrency clarification | 1,765 | 257 | 487 | 2,509 | 197 eligible comments coded: 65 pro, 5 contra, and 127 neutral-constructive |
| ***Source**: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10209379518601128&id=1718970307* | | | | | |
| Fajar Abdul Bashir, cryptocurrency post | 160 | 18 | 22 | 200 | 15 eligible comments coded: 9 pro, 2 contra, and 4 neutral-constructive |
| ***Source**: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1D5E8zvvCD/* | | | | | |
| Anis Mashduqi, cryptocurrency discussion | 53 | 21 | 0 | 74 | All comments examined qualitatively |
| ***Source**: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1L2AvuHEaz/* | | | | | |
| Abdul Wahab Ahmad, second cryptocurrency clarification | 1,294 | 241 | 571 | 2,106 | All 241 comments coded: 45 pro, 43 contra, and 153 neutral-constructive |
| ***Source**: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10209383433939009&id=1718970307* | | | | | |
| Total | 3,594 | 871 | 1,251 | 5,716 | 453 eligible comments coded in three cryptocurrency threads |

*Note.* The posts were publicly accessible and archived between 5 January and 15 March 2026. Each post was counted once. Interaction figures represent visible counts during the archival window, not permanent totals, backend reach, or platform impressions. Complete post titles, publication details, and URLs are provided in the reference list and corpus audit sheet.

The coding matrix was prepared and reviewed collaboratively by the research team. The interaction metrics and initial coding sheet were organized before the legal and discursive classifications were reviewed and the consistency of the categories and numerical totals was audited. Ambiguous comments were discussed collectively until interpretive consensus was reached. No formal intercoder reliability coefficient was calculated because the coding was interpretive and was intended to identify visible discursive patterns rather than establish statistical reliability or population-level representativeness.

The study analyzed only publicly accessible materials, involved no interaction with social media users, and did not access private or restricted digital spaces. Ordinary commenters were neither named nor quoted in an identifiable form. Comment patterns were reported through aggregate figures and paraphrased descriptions. Screenshots reproduced only public posts by figures directly involved in the disputes and excluded the names, profile photographs, usernames, and other identifying details of ordinary users. The archived materials, field notes, and coding sheets were accessible only to the research team.

## Results

### Vertical Contestation: PBNU–PCNU Jember and *Jumu'ah* Prayers on Public Roads

The *Jumu'ah* prayers street case shows how digital platforms have turned a local dispute over interpretation into a broader public discussion about authority, *adab*, and loyalty to institutions. The situation emerged in relation to the demonstration on 2 December 2016, when holding *Jumu'ah* prayers on public roads became both a matter of ritual validity and a politically symbolic act. The position taken by PBNU, conveyed through statements by senior figures of the NU and by LBM PBNU, was that *Jumu'ah* prayers should be held in an appropriate location based on the community settlement and that using the public roads could lead to mischief (*mafsadah*), such as the disruption of public facilities, traffic congestion, and the neglect of mosques. The rationale given combined Shafi'i legal requirements, concerns about public order, and the organization's duty to prevent public harm (Kurniawan, 2016).

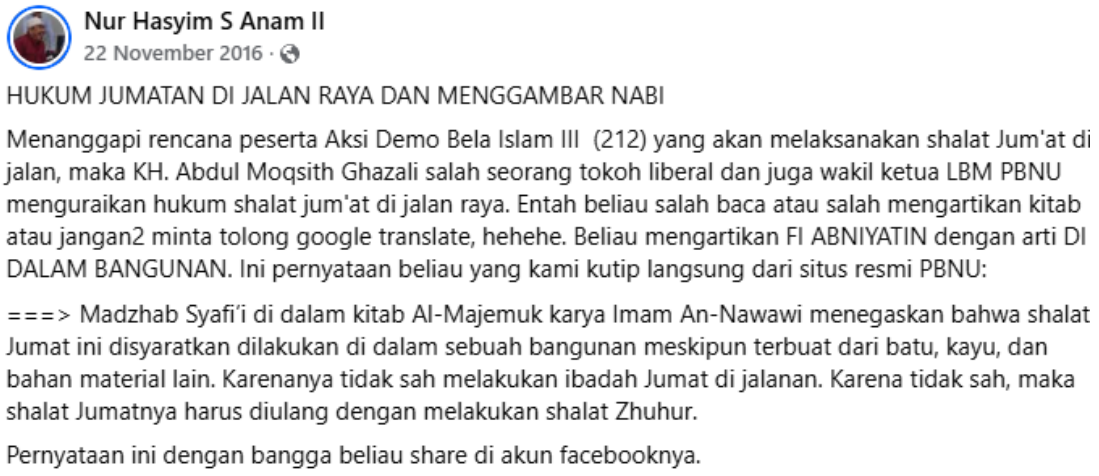
PCNU Jember put forward an alternative view. It stated that the validity of *Jumu'ah* prayers should not be limited to the presence of a mosque building and that the traditional debates concerning buildings (*abniyah)*, settlements, and places of congregation needed to be interpreted more carefully. Furthermore, it held that a public road temporarily and legally used for a large gathering should not be treated the same as a normal obstruction

of public facilities (Mulyono, 2016). Thus, the local decision relied on contextual reasoning and drew on different *madzhabs* while still grounding itself in the language of classical *fiqh*. This divergence led to vertical contestation since the branch-level forum did not merely reject the authority of PBNU; instead, it asserted its own epistemic autonomy by providing a more context-sensitive interpretation of the legal sources.

The spread of digital communication increased the level of controversy as the issue did not concern only the technical question of the validity of the ritual. It turned into a public discussion concerning who had the right to interpret the *kutub al-turats*, who was entitled to correct the organization's published materials, whether it was ethically acceptable to criticize a national figure or a website affiliated with the NU, and whether Facebook could serve as a legitimate platform for religious debate. The posts published by NU Online, detik.com, and KH. Muhammad Shiddiq Al-Jawi's Facebook account caused only a relatively small amount of visible discussion (KH. Muhammad Shiddiq Al-Jawi, 2021). The most extensive debate took place in a post by Nur Hasyim S Anam II (2016), in which he criticized Abdul Moqsith Ghazali's post — which has since been deleted — on the validity of *Jumu'ah* prayers being held on public roads. During the archival period, Nur Hasyim's post received 167 reactions, 332 comments, and 46 shares. The reactions were mainly composed of 155 likes, followed by 7 "*haha*" reactions, 2 "*love*" reactions, 2 "*wow*" reactions, and 1 "*sad*" reaction. Even though this reaction pattern was mostly positive, the comments showed a much more contested pattern of response.

**Figure 1.**

*Public Facebook Framing of the Intra-NU Disagreement over Friday Prayers on Public Roads*




*Note.* Screenshot of a public Facebook post by Nur Hasyim S Anam II (2016), archived between 5 January and 15 March 2026. The interaction figures represent visible counts recorded during the archival window.

The number of comments was about twice that of reactions, indicating the post had sparked ongoing discussion rather than just eliciting passive approval. The comments covered a variety of registers: they included affirmations of the correction of a supposed legal error; arguments in defense of PBNU and NU Online (Kurniawan, 2016); textual arguments backed up by references to the *kutub al-turats*; ethical arguments stressing *tabayyun* and *adab*; and satirical or emotionally charged replies conveyed through jokes, labels, and ridicule. The fact that this pattern existed shows that the audience's responses cannot be simplified as merely being either approval or rejection. The comment thread thus became a place where different kinds of religious authority competed for recognition.

The *Jumu'ah* street discussion identified five types of fragmentation. The first was epistemic fragmentation, which occurred in the disagreements about the meaning of classical legal terms relating to buildings, settlements, roads, and places of congregation. The second was institutional fragmentation, which appeared when the participants made a distinction between NU as a cultural and pesantren-based tradition, PBNU as a formal organizational structure, NU Online as an affiliated publication platform, and MUI as an alternative source of religious rulings. The third was communicative fragmentation, since Facebook acted as an informal Bahtsul Masail-style environment where textual references were mixed with quick responses, emotion, and humor. The fourth was identity fragmentation, as shown by the use of labels such as NU, liberal, *pesantren*, *santri*, "Front Pembela Islam" (FPI), demonstrator, and organizational loyalist. The fifth was affective fragmentation, which was demonstrated through the use of emojis, laughter, sarcasm, and emotionally charged labels that affected the way legal arguments and their proponents were received.

This example shows a key aspect of managed fragmentation. Although a branch-level forum had the opportunity to publicly challenge the central position by using clear legal arguments, and audiences took part by supporting, opposing, correcting, or rephrasing the arguments put forward by both sides, the debate did not completely move outside NU's symbolic and ethical framework since the participants kept on referring to the kitab, kiai, pesantren, Bahtsul Masail, tabayyun, and adab. As a result, fragmentation became openly evident yet remained in part constrained by references to NU's legal, scholarly and ethical traditions.

### Horizontal Contestation: PWNU East Java–PWNU Yogyakarta on Cryptocurrency

The situation with cryptocurrency is an example of horizontal intra-organizational disagreement. This is in contrast to the street *Jumu'ah* case, which was a matter of vertical disagreement between a branch-level forum and a central authority, whereas the debate

over cryptocurrency involved a divergence between two provincial NU bodies. On November 2, 2021, LBM PWNU East Java published a decision holding that cryptocurrency did not satisfy the *shari'a* conditions of commodity (*sil'ah)* and that its trading was banned (LBM PWNU Jawa Timur, 2021). The decision also stated that using cryptocurrency as a means of exchange violated Indonesian monetary law and recommended that Muslims exercise caution when engaging in digital financial transactions. Shortly afterward, LBM PWNU Yogyakarta expressed a more tolerant view by considering crypto assets as possibly legitimate commodities under certain conditions and placing greater emphasis on the utility of blockchain (Febriyanto, 2021).

The dispute soon found its way into the digital public sphere. Imam Jazuli criticized the decision made in East Java in an online article in which he described it as proof of intellectual stagnation (Jazuli, 2021). Abdul Wahab Ahmad replied via NU Online and on Facebook by supporting the view taken in East Java and by explaining why cryptocurrency did not satisfy the legal requirements for being a valid object of exchange (Abdul Wahab Ahmad, 2021a, 2021b). Salamun Ali Mafaz, Anis Mashduqi, Dimaz Ankaa Wijaya, Fajar Abdul Bashir, Ma'ruf Khozin, and other figures associated with NU also took part in the broader discussion (Fajar Abdul Bashir, 2021; Fawaz, 2021; Khozin, 2021; Mashduqi & Wijaya, 2021). This sequence of responses and counter-responses demonstrates that controversy over fatwas does not cease with the publication of an organizational decision. Rulings come to have a digital afterlife in which scholars, writers, activists, and audiences linked to the organization continue to interpret, translate, defend, question, or challenge them.

The Facebook statement issued by Abdul Wahab Ahmad had the highest number of visible interactions of any of the cryptocurrency posts in the audited corpus. It attracted 1,765 reactions, 257 comments, and 487 shares, giving a total of 2,509 visible interactions. Out of the 257 comments that were visible, 197 fulfilled the criteria for sentiment-oriented coding. Sixty-five of the comments, which is 33.0%, supported the East Java position; five comments, or 2.5%, opposed it; and 127 comments, representing 64.5%, were regarded as neutral-constructive. The other 60 comments were discarded because they contained only non-substantive tags, were made up entirely of emojis, were duplicates or resembled spam, or consisted of text that could not be interpreted reliably. The fact that so many of the comments were neutral-constructive is analytically important. Rather than merely picking between the halal and haram positions, many users asked questions, tagged other users, asked for technical clarification, and talked about the connections between blockchain, commodity status, volatility, and Islamic legal categories.

The comments in support of the decision were usually short, pleasant, and supportive of one's identity. Phrases such as “agreed”, “excellent”, and “clear” were used often. The comments opposing the ruling were fewer in number but tended to be longer and more technically detailed, using terms like blockchain, smart contracts, decentralization, utility, network value, and digital commodities. Neutral and constructive comments consisted of questions, tagging of accounts, requests for clarification, and comparisons with other technological or legal examples. This pattern indicates that some part of the thread served as a place for inquiry and clarification. It does not, though, show that the wider NU public has developed a stable attitude towards learning.

**Figure 2.**

*Contrasting Public Facebook Framings of PWNU East Java and PWNU Yogyakarta Positions on Cryptocurrency*




*Note.* The figure shows Abdul Wahab Ahmad's public Facebook explanation of the LBM PWNU East Java position on cryptocurrency (Abdul Wahab Ahmad, 2021a, 2021b), and Fajar Abdul Bashir's public Facebook presentation of the more permissive LBM PWNU Yogyakarta position (Fajar Abdul Bashir, 2021). Both posts were archived between January 5 and March 15, 2026. Interaction figures represent visible counts recorded during the archival window; the complete audited metrics and analytical treatment are reported in Table 2.

The post by Fajar Abdul Bashir in 2021, the one linked to the more lenient Yogyakarta interpretation, attracted 160 reactions, 18 comments, and 22 shares. Of the comments, fifteen were found to meet the criteria and were therefore coded: nine were in favor, two were opposed, and four were neutral and constructive. Three comments were excluded since they were not substantive or could not be interpreted reliably. The fact that

Fajar took part in the comment section meant that he was not just the person who had posted the article but also functioned as an unofficial interpreter of the Yogyakarta decision. This indicates that digital authority can be enhanced when religious figures respond to questions, explain complicated issues, and adopt a teaching style in their public interactions.

The post by Anis Mashduqi in 2021 attracted 53 reactions, 21 comments, and no shares, resulting in a discussion that was smaller in scale but highly analytical. Unlike the more polarizing conversations seen in posts with higher engagement, this thread included requests for religious advice from individuals who had practical experience in investing in cryptocurrency. Some participants spoke about the profits they had made from investing in Bitcoin and then asked whether such gains were considered religiously allowable. These responses demonstrate that digital publics do not simply discuss abstract religious principles; they also seek religious justification for economic decisions that have already become an integral part of their daily lives.

In his second clarification (2021a), Abdul Wahab Ahmad looked more closely at the various forms of cryptocurrency in question and it received 1,294 reactions, 241 comments, and 571 shares. All 241 visible comments met the eligibility criteria. The coding resulted in a more balanced distribution of supportive and opposing comments compared to the first thread: 45 were in favor, 43 were against, and 153 were neutral and constructive. Even though the neutral-constructive comments were still the majority, the nearly equal number of pro and contra comments shows that disagreement became more evident as the discussion moved from a general ban to a focus on the technical features of digital assets. The comments in support of cryptocurrency stressed that blockchain has the potential to become future infrastructure, that it offers greater efficiency in cross-border transactions, that it is useful as an investment, and that it includes smart-contract mechanisms. The comments opposing cryptocurrency highlighted speculation, price volatility, *gharar*, *maysir*, consumer protection, and the lack of a stable underlying asset.

These patterns show that managed fragmentation was sustained through technical discussion and dialogical engagement. The dispute between the two provincial bodies of the NU did not discredit either forum. On the contrary, parts of the online discussion became public arenas where Islamic legal reasoning, technological knowledge, and economic risk were all discussed together. The provincial authorities and the scholars linked to them competed for recognition, yet their arguments still depended on the common repertoire of the *kutub al-turats*, LBM procedures, *Sharia* caution, scholarly accountability, and the idea of public benefit.

### Comparative Patterns of Authority in Vertical and Horizontal Fatwa Contestation

There were differences between the two cases regarding the matters at issue, the relationships between the institutions concerned, and public participation. The dispute over the street Jumu'ah concerned ritual validity and public order and featured a vertical conflict between PBNU and PCNU Jember. The discussions on Facebook showed more contention regarding loyalty to the institution, identity labels, textual authority, and adab. In contrast, the debate about cryptocurrency focused on economic and technological change and involved a horizontal disagreement between PWNU East Java and PWNU Yogyakarta. The digital discussions in this case placed greater emphasis on blockchain, commodity status, financial risk, consumer protection, and the practical consequences of Islamic legal rulings.

Despite these differences, in both instances, digital circulation caused intra-organizational disagreement to spread beyond the formal organizational and Bahtsul Masail forums. Through Facebook posts, online media reports, comments, tagging, and reply chains, affiliated scholars and audiences were able to explain, defend, question, and reframe the competing legal positions. In each case, engagement on the platforms increased the public visibility of the disagreement, but on its own, did not determine the religious legitimacy. The participants still assessed the competing claims by referring to legal sources, judging on the basis of scholarly competence, taking institutional affiliation into account, considering ethical conduct, and assessing responsiveness to questions and criticism.

The comparison further shows that NU's authority operated through interactions among national, provincial, branch-level, pesantren-based, and media-affiliated actors, as well as digitally engaged publics. These participants did not occupy equal positions of authority, and ordinary commenters did not acquire the same standing as recognized scholars or organizational bodies. Nevertheless, their questions, endorsements, objections, and circulation practices influenced how competing positions were publicly received. These shared patterns provide the empirical basis for the subsequent discussion of managed fragmentation, digital visibility, and the changing configuration of religious authority within NU.

## Discussion

### Managed Fragmentation and the Governance of Internal Difference

The results indicate that it is incorrect to assume that any form of public disagreement within NU necessarily signals the breakdown of religious authority. In both

instances, disagreement became apparent at various levels of the organization: PBNU and PCNU Jember expressed different views on *Jumu'ah* prayers on public roads, while PWNU East Java and PWNU Yogyakarta reached opposite conclusions on cryptocurrency. The digital audience also challenged, supported, and reinterpreted the arguments put forward by institutional and academic figures. Yet the disagreements still took place within a common legal and ethical framework; the participants referred to the *kutub al-turats*, *madzhab* reasoning, *Bahtsul Masai*l procedures, *pesantren* scholarship, *tabayyun,* and *adab*. This result aligns with previous studies that show that diversity is built into NU's jurisprudential culture and that differences among NU-related actors do not always amount to an institutional rupture (Asa'ari, 2017; Bahri, 2018; Hannan et al., 2024; Moqsith, 2017; Riza, 2011).

The present study goes beyond prior work by demonstrating that internal plurality changes when it enters digital publics. Previous research has mainly accounted for disagreement in terms of differences in legal method, institutional position, or contextual interpretation. The current results show that disagreement also has a digital afterlife, in which judgments are passed, simplified, defended, criticized, and assessed by broader audiences. Therefore, managed fragmentation involves not just the coexistence of different legal opinions, but also the public dissemination of disagreement that stays partly bound by common scholarly references, organizational membership and ethical expectations. The disagreement is described as "managed" not because central institutions have full control over it, but because the individuals continue to debate using a clear NU language of authority.

Such management is still incomplete and demands constant attention. The *Jumu'ah* street case illustrates how legal disagreement can be linked to political symbolism, institutional loyalty, identity labels, humor, and affective conflict. The case involving cryptocurrency presents a different kind of problem; when established legal categories are applied to rapidly changing technologies, the public finds them difficult to understand. The terms such as *sil'ah*, *gharar*, *maysir*, *'illah*, and public welfare/benefits (*maslahah*) need to be explained in relation to blockchain, digital assets, volatility, and financial risk. Therefore, managed fragmentation should be seen as an ongoing process of keeping the boundaries of legitimate disagreement rather than as a stable institutional state.

### Digital Visibility, Religious Capital, and Community Work

The field in which religious authority is publicly acknowledged was transformed by digital circulation. The position of PCNU Jember gained greater visibility as the dispute spread through online news and discussions on Facebook. In a similar way, the provincial

participants in the cryptocurrency debate influenced public understanding through their posts, replies, and explanatory comments, reaching audiences who were not originally part of the *Bahtsul Masail* forums. This aligns with research on digital religion and mediatization, which holds that the media do not simply pass on religious messages but also shape the conditions under which religious claims become visible, discussable, and recognizable (Campbell, 2007, 2010; Hjarvard, 2008). Although digital visibility did not replace NU's organizational hierarchy, it did change the public environment in which the organization's positions were interpreted and assessed.

The study also shows how organizational, epistemic, charismatic, and digital capital interact during fatwa contestation. PBNU had considerable organizational capital due to its central position within the institutional structure. PCNU Jember and the provincial LBM bodies were at different levels of the organizational hierarchy, yet they used epistemic capital through legal texts, methodological arguments, and interpretations set in the context. Religious figures, writers, and public intellectuals relied on charismatic capital since people linked their personal reputations with a sense of scholarly reliability. Digital capital was developed through the ability to spread arguments, draw public attention, respond to questions, and keep the discussion going. In Bourdieusian terms, authority was the result of the relative value and the interactions of these various resources within the overlapping fields of organizational, epistemic, and digital capital (Bourdieu, 1989).

These examples show that formal rank alone did not determine public influence. A body at the branch or provincial level could gain influence greater than might be expected from its place within the organization when its epistemic credibility and digital visibility supported each other. On the other hand, a formally authoritative position could be challenged by the public if they believed the legal reasoning had not been adequately explained, lacked appropriate context, or was not ethically conveyed. Digital capital thus did not function on its own; its impact depended on whether visible actors could link public engagement with clear scholarly methods, institutional accountability, and ethical behavior.

The cryptocurrency debates also highlight the value of an active and responsive community in the context of digital authority. It is not enough for some participants to issue a decision and then leave the discussion; they have instead answered questions, dealt with technical objections, clarified the various legal categories, and moderated the participants' exchanges. Through these responses, they have provided clear evidence of scholarly accountability while also maintaining audience involvement. In the wider

context of algorithmic digital authority, this kind of interaction can be described as algorithmic reciprocity; audience engagement leads to more detailed explanations, and when an actor is responsive, it in turn creates further opportunities for interaction and for the spread of content. This description does not claim knowledge of Facebook's internal algorithm; rather, it points out a relationship that can be observed publicly between posting, audience response, and ongoing communicative activity.

Community work in digital publics goes beyond simply keeping the face-to-face religious networks going. It requires translating complex arguments into simple language, answering questions promptly, correcting misapprehensions, moderating disagreements, and observing adab even under public scrutiny. As shown in the case of cryptocurrency, those individuals who combined traditional scholarly ability with a responsive attitude towards digital communication were more likely to be seen as credible interpreters. In this sense, digital literacy is not just a technical skill in communication; it has become an integral part of the practical activities through which religious authority is presented, defended, and made understandable to today's publics.

### The Limits of Visibility and the Conditions of Religious Legitimacy

A central theoretical consequence of the results is that digital visibility should be distinguished from religious legitimacy. Visibility can be seen from the number of reactions, comments, shares, tags, and reply chains. In contrast, legitimacy is more relational and normative, as it depends on whether appropriate audiences and scholarly communities accept the actor's legal competence, methodological credibility, ethical behavior, and institutional accountability. As studies of digital platforms show, digital visibility is not neutral, as the spread of content is affected by engagement, networks, and the platform's ranking practices (Gillespie, 2017). Yet high levels of engagement cannot be taken as clear proof of doctrinal acceptance or of religious authority.

These two examples show the distinction in different ways. In the case of the street *Jumu'ah* debate, there was a generally positive reaction profile alongside a highly contested comment section. The number of likes by themselves did not show that there were disagreements regarding the interpretation of the text, loyalty to the organization, or the ethics of criticism. In the case of cryptocurrency, the fact that neutral-constructive comments were predominant did not prove that the wider NU public had developed a stable attitude towards learning. It showed only that some of the threads examined served as spaces for inquiry, clarification, and technical discussion during the period under review. Social media metrics should thus be seen as visible traces of participation and not as permanent indicators of religious attitudes or legitimacy.

Algorithmic digital authority should therefore not be regarded as involving the substitution of classical Islamic authority by popularity on the platforms. It refers to a more extensive kind of interaction between organizational position, epistemic competence, personal recognition, digital visibility, and audience participation. In both situations, traditional scholarly sources and institutional procedures remained important, but the extent of their public influence depended on how clearly the actors presented their reasons, addressed criticism, and handled disagreement. The authority that resulted was not entirely institutional nor simply populist; it arose out of the interaction between institutions, texts, scholarly reputations, platforms, and the participating publics.

The way this interpretation is presented advances the field of digital religion by demonstrating that platformed religious authority does not always have a uniform effect in weakening existing institutions. Although digital media can increase the visibility of individuals who are outside the top levels of organizations, their visibility still depends on forms of recognition that are based on offline scholarly and institutional practices. The results thus indicate that online and offline authority should be seen as interdependent rather than as separate entities. Digital publics broaden the range in which authority is discussed and negotiated, even though the criteria used to assess authority still rely heavily on legal methodology, pesantren formation, organizational identity, and religious ethics.

### Institutional Implications for Digital Fatwa Governance

The results have several consequences for how NU handles the communication of fatwas in digital public spaces. NU bodies and affiliated media should make a clear distinction between formal fatwas, news reports, personal opinions and explanatory commentaries. Such a distinction is necessary since audiences might regard content posted through platforms associated with NU as an official position of the organization, even if the material in fact expresses only an individual's interpretation or constitutes a journalistic report. Providing clear labels will help reduce confusion about the institutional status and legal authority of specific statements.

The accessible explanations of the legal reasoning behind the *Bahtsul Masail's* decisions on modern issues should also be provided. People do not only need to know whether a certain practice is considered permissible or prohibited, but they also need to understand how the decision was arrived at, what legal categories were used, and how the relevant social or technological circumstances were evaluated. This is especially important in cases such as those involving cryptocurrency, where technical knowledge and Islamic legal reasoning must continuously engage with each other. An accessible explanation does

not involve simplifying the scholarly method; rather, it makes the logic of that method more understandable to the general public.

NU would also benefit from clearer ethical guidance on digital disagreement between affiliated parties. This advice should cover the distinction between scholarly criticism and personal delegitimation, the use of identity labels, the treatment of organizational publications, the obligation to perform *tabayyun*, and the ethical handling of comment threads. The example of the street Jumu'ah case demonstrates that if there is uncertainty about the nature of criticism and institutional loyalty, focus can be diverted from the legal issues to conflicts based on emotion and identity. Digital ethics should therefore be seen as an aspect of scholarly accountability and not merely as a minor issue relating to communication style.

NU is under no obligation to put down internal disagreement. The evidence shows that disagreement can still be intellectually productive if it is accompanied by methodological clarity, institutional humility, responsive explanation, and ethical restraint. It is therefore possible to see managed fragmentation as an organization's ability to allow for diverse legal interpretations while making sure that disagreement does not turn into destructive delegitimation. The effectiveness of such fragmentation lies not in eliminating differences, but in maintaining the legal, scholarly, and ethical conditions under which differences can be publicly expressed without causing the common tradition—which gives the disagreement its meaning—to break down.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how digital platforms mediate intra-organizational fatwa contestation within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Through the PBNU–PCNU Jember street *Jumu'ah* case and the LBM PWNU East Java–LBM PWNU Yogyakarta cryptocurrency case, it shows that digital media make internal differences more visible, invite wider public participation, and redistribute authority among central, provincial, local, *pesantren*, and digital actors. The main finding is managed fragmentation: public disagreement becomes visible but remains partially contained through shared references to *kutub al-turats*, *pesantren* authority, LBM procedure, *tabayyun*, *adab*, and organizational belonging.

The article contributes to the study of Islamic authority by situating managed fragmentation within the broader framework of algorithmic digital authority. Religious authority in the digital era is not produced by visibility alone. It emerges from the interaction of organizational capital, epistemic competence, charismatic recognition, digital engagement, and ethical accountability. In the cryptocurrency case, the prevalence

of neutral-constructive comments suggests that portions of the coded threads operated as spaces of inquiry and clarification around complex technological issues. The street *Jumu'ah* case shows how the same digital public sphere can intensify identity, institutional, and affective contestation when ritual validity and political symbolism are intertwined.

The study has limitations. Its digital corpus is centered on Facebook and does not systematically analyze WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, or closed-group circulation. Its two-case design provides analytical depth rather than generalizability across all NU controversies. Its sentiment-oriented coding is manual, interpretive, and limited to 453 eligible comments in three cryptocurrency threads; it captures visible discursive patterns during the archival window, not stable attitudes among the wider NU public. The study has no access to platform backend data and does not infer reach, impressions, or proprietary algorithmic causality. It also does not use direct interview material in this revised version. Future research should expand platform comparisons, include longitudinal observation, examine ordinary *Nahdliyyin* reception in everyday contexts, and assess whether managed fragmentation and algorithmic digital authority appear in other Muslim organizations and religious traditions.

## Author Contribution Statement

Fathor Rahman contributed as initiator, lead drafter, conceptual developer, and reviewer of legal and discursive classifications. Pujiono contributed to data organization, metric auditing, preparation of the initial coding sheet, and interpretation. Sofkhatin Khumaidah contributed to data validation, methodological review, auditing of analytical categories, and consistency checks. Muhammad Noor Harisudin contributed to collecting documentary materials, reviewing NU legal reasoning, reviewing coding interpretations, and critically revising the manuscript. All authors discussed ambiguous cases and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

## Statement of Interest

The authors declare that there are no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest related to this research.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Declarations

We confirm compliance with the Al'Adalah: Journal of Islamic Studies AI policy. Generative AI tools were used during manuscript preparation for language editing and clarity only. The tool used was ChatGPT, OpenAI, version GPT 5.5. No content generation, data analysis, interpretation, or scholarly argumentation was produced by AI. Full responsibility for the content rests with us, the authors.

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