

Cyber-Religion and the Issue of Religious Authority: How Indonesian Youth Learn Religion through Social Media?

Badrul Munir Chair^{1*} (D, Wawaysadhya² (D, Tri Utami Oktafiani³ (D)



Abstract

Received: February 24, 2024 Revised: July 18, 2024 Accepted: August 10, 2024

*Corresponding Author:

Badrul Munir Chair, Walisongo State Islamic University, Semarang, Indonesia

badrul_munir_chair@ walisongo.ac.id

About Author

¹ Walisongo State Islamic University, Semarang, Indonesia;

² Walisongo State Islamic University, Semarang, Indonesia;

³ Walisongo State Islamic University, Semarang, Indonesia. In recent years, there has been a high increase in social media activity for religious purposes. The abundance of social media activity based on a religious theme excessively emerged, namely online preaching, virtual worship, and a new term called Ngaji Virtual. This paper uses the phenomenological research method to analyze religious phenomena in social media as a new form of cyberculture, grown excessively during and after the pandemic. Data for this study were collected from 150 respondents who were followers of online religious recitations or lectures on social media platforms, particularly on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. This study aims to explain the motives of faith-based social media users, with an additional appraisal of their impact on their daily lives. The results showed numerous motives of faith-based social media users, namely the necessity of information about religion and spiritual enlightenment, and even emphasizing that their worship is valid. Social media as a source of information about religion became more widespread after the pandemic, making social media the primary source for obtaining religious knowledge and growing into a new culture. The emergence of this new cyberculture renders disruption in the religious field, from ethical problems to the problem of obscuring religious authority.

Keywords: Cyber-religion, social media, religious authority, disruption.

Introduction

The role of religious authority among Indonesian youths has diminished due to the widespread use of internet-based social media for religious purposes. Modernization and information technology have reshaped how they perceive and acquire religious knowledge (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; Kluver & Cheong, 2007). This shift has led to a new pattern of religious engagement, moving from traditional face-to-face interactions to online participation through social media (Oktavia et al., 2021). This transformation allows individuals to explore various religious expressions without physical attendance or direct interaction with religious experts (Malik, 2021; Wijaya et al., 2021; Wan-Chik et al., 2011). Consequently, religious life in the 21st century has migrated from places of worship to the internet, where youths increasingly seek information tailored to their needs (Lerner, 2010). However, this trend raises concerns about misinformation, religious fanaticism, and the erosion of authoritative religious guidance (Brasher, 2001; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Campbell, 2013). The vast availability of online religious resources contributes to the blurring of religious identities and highlights the lack of authoritative oversight in filtering information (Dawson, 2000; Lynn et al., 2011). With Indonesia's internet penetration reaching

To cite this article (APA Style 7th): Chair, B. M., Wawaysadhya, W., & Oktafiani, T. U. (2024). Cyber-religion and the issue of religious authority: How Indonesian youth learn religion through social media? Al'Adalah: Journal of Islamic Studies, 27(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.35719/aladalah.v27i1.440



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79.5% in 2024, the adverse effects of cyber-religion are increasingly alarming (APJII, 2024).

Previous studies on cyber-religion have been conducted by several researchers. Anggini & Jamiati (2023) explore the forms of religious expression by Habib Jafar in various preaching content on YouTube. The findings indicated that Jafar's forms of religious expression fall into the file-sharing category, enabling millennials to engage in complete, easy, and flexible religious lectures. Another study on cyber-religion was conducted by Toni et al. (2021). The research aimed to identify forms of religious expression within the Shift Community. The results showed that YouTube channel subscribers' interest in Shift was due to Hanan Attaki's appealing packaging of religious studies, which is becoming popular among the younger generation as an alternative to seeking information about religion. Meanwhile, Malik (2021) studied the anxiety of the digital generation who worship virtual gods. The study results show that cyber religion conceptually suggests new opportunities and challenges for Islamic da'wah activists. Unfortunately, this study uses a literature study, so it needs to be more convincing. It contrasts with Wijaya et al. (2021), who proved that cyber religion is common among teenagers in Semarang City, where they seek knowledge and deepen their understanding of Islam. However, this study tends to focus on the response to the general phenomenon of online preaching.

Based on the exploration of previous research related to cyber-religion mentioned above, most studies on cyber-religion, investigated by earlier researchers, predominantly explore forms of religious expression in various preaching accounts on social media. However, this research aims to emphasize the motives of social media users for religious purposes and further highlight issues concerning religious authority in cyber-religion—a topic overlooked by previous studies with similar themes. Hence, this research is crucial and warrants investigation. So before describing the study results, it is also essential to discuss virtual piety and religious exploration on social media, as well as cyber-religion and the issue of religious authority, which will be helpful as the theoretical foundation of this research.

Therefore, this research examines the phenomenon of religious searching on social media as a new emerging culture that has rapidly developed, especially during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. The purpose of this research is to explore the motives of participants in religious activities on social media and the impact of these studies on their daily lives, particularly in the realm of religion. Furthermore, it aims to formulate whether this new internet-based religious diversity (cyber-religion) can disrupt religious scholarship and highlight issues regarding the status of religious authority within cyber-religion.

Literature Review

Religiosity, a profoundly personal journey, constitutes formal, institutional, and outward expressions connected to an individual's relationship with the 'Divine.' It is the quest for life's meaning in connection with a transcendent reality (Cotton et al., 2006; Zaman, 2008). Religiosity is the degree of commitment of an individual or a group to their religion. It is distinct from religion, which refers to formal aspects concerning rules and obligations. Religiosity, on the other hand, refers to the internalized aspects of religion. When the teachings of a religion are internalized in an individual's life, they influence every action and perspective (Ghufron & Suminta, 2010).

Religiosity integrates religious knowledge with religious practices. There are five dimensions of religiosity: the ideological dimension, the ritualistic dimension, the intellectual dimension, the experiential dimension, and the consequential dimension (Ancok & Suroso, 2015). These five dimensions of religiosity are found in various aspects of a community's religious life. In other words, these religiosity dimensions can also be found in cyber-religion. The outcome of an individual's religiosity is piety, which refers to avoiding evil and actions prohibited by the religion. In cyber-religion, this terminology transforms into virtual piety, which entails compliance with religious practices utilizing various internet-based virtual media. Expression of virtual piety includes engaging in religious activities on social media platforms. Social media, a powerful instrument for acquiring information and deciding the issue, plays a significant role in religious exploration and expression (Husein & Slama, 2018).

The five dimensions above of religiosity will form the basis for the development of this research. The belief dimension in this research includes seeking legal justifications or verifying daily religious practices and transactions. The ritualistic dimension in this research encompasses non-obligatory acts of worship or transactions, such as online almsgiving/donations and maintaining social ties through social media. The knowledge dimension includes following religious lectures or speeches on social media or reading articles/writings about Islam. The next dimension is experience or internalization. According to Glock and Stark (as cited in Ancok & Suroso, 2015), religious internalizations are feelings of closeness to God, tranquillity or happiness, being moved when hearing verses from the Quran and others.

Cyber-religion is a relatively new phenomenon within society. It harnesses new internet-based media that offer interactivity, allowing users to choose the information they consume (Yu, 2022). These new media enable users to select and control the information output they desire (Flew, 2007). In the context of information openness, the emergence of such new media is a breath of fresh air, democratizing the public's information flow. However, in the religious context, the presence of new media, such as social media, is highly vulnerable to bringing adverse effects, as religious information circulating on social media is almost without a filter. Social media presents abundant chances for Indonesian Muslims to exhibit their devotion online and engage in religious activities through mediated means. However, significant risks and difficulties emerge within these demonstrations and activities, along with their permanent digital imprints (Husein & Slama, 2018). It leads to issues related to religious authority (Pribadi, 2020).

Religious authorities face numerous challenges in filtering religious information circulating on social media. The religious experiences of individuals obtained online through the internet would undoubtedly differ significantly from experiences gained conventionally through direct interaction with the religious authority, whose scholarly lineage and authority can be accounted for. Conflicts between virtual piety and reality in the physical world become likely when boundless choices influence faith formation. According to Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), unrestricted choices and the lack of religious authority are prone to causing religious conflicts in the digital context. Claims of truth can quickly arise, and the construction of religious identities obtained online becomes increasingly ambiguous. Religious authority highlights three constitutive elements that makeup authority: the notion of and connection to a temporal foundation, the capacity to transform that foundation into examples, and the ability to effect obedience without coercion (Alatas, 2021). Even though those three elements are easily found in society nowadays, several challenges still shadow religious authority.

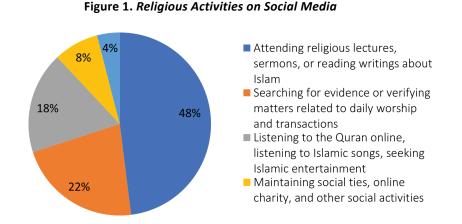
Method

This study is qualitative research employing a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach was chosen to comprehend the essence or nature of respondents' experiences related to the research topic. Data for this study were collected from 150 respondents who were followers of online religious recitations or lectures on social media platforms, particularly on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Data collection was conducted by distributing questionnaires randomly from mid-August to September 2022. The data restriction determines the change in the pattern of religious communities after the Pandemic period. The selection of informants in this study utilized a purposive technique involving specific considerations of research subjects according to the expected characteristics. The informant selection criteria included active internet users for at least five hours per day, aged between 20 and 45 years old, who are students, teachers, or academics, and actively engaged in religious studies on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube. Secondary data sources such as books, videos, and online articles were used as supplementary material supporting this research.

Results and Discussion

Religious Activities and Exploration on Social Media

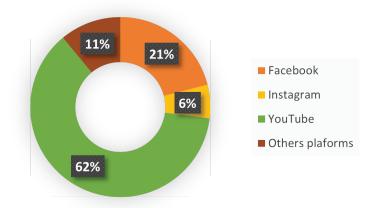
The religious internalization on the internet in the context of this research includes listening to Quranic verses online, listening to Islamic songs, seeking religious entertainment, and others. Meanwhile, the dimension of practice involves propagating religion using social media, such as conducting online preaching, sharing knowledge through writings or videos, and others.

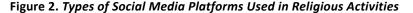


Note. Data collected by author on August-September 2022.

Based on the Figure 1 obtained by the researcher, the most frequently performed religious activity by respondents utilizing the internet was seeking knowledge (knowledge dimension), i.e., following religious lectures or speeches on social media or reading articles/writings about Islam, with a percentage of 48% (72 respondents). While respondents who chose the belief dimension as the dominant religious activity on social media accounted for 22% (33 respondents). The internalization dimension ranked third among the most performed religious activities, with a percentage of 18% (27 respondents). Some respondents utilized social media for non-obligatory acts of worship, such as maintaining social ties, making online donations, etc. This worship dimension was chosen by 8% (12 respondents). Meanwhile, other religious activities performed online were for Islamic propagation or preaching. A total of 4% of respondents (6 individuals) practiced their knowledge using social media.

This data was obtained from the question: "Which religious activity do you perform most/frequently using social media?" The most widely used social media for religious activities on the internet were YouTube 62%, Facebook 21%, Instagram 6%, and other platforms such as Islamic websites or other social media platforms, accounting for 11%.

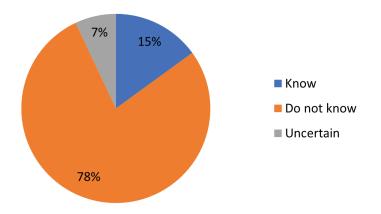




Note. Data collected by author on August-September 2022.

This research confirms the concerns expressed by Hojsgaard and Warburg above. Regarding religious authority on social media, for instance, based on a survey conducted by the researchers among the respondents, the results revealed that the intensity of internet usage for religious activities far exceeds conventional religious activities undertaken by the respondents. The average time spent by respondents engaging in religious activities on social media was approximately 28.7 hours per week, while the average time spent on conventional religious activities (face-to-face interactions, direct religious teachings) was only 1.9 hours per week. What is more concerning about the intensity of using social media for religious activities is that 78% of the respondents were unaware of the scholarly background of the speakers, website managers, or channels they watched. In contrast, only 15% of respondents claimed to know the scholarly background of the speakers or website managers used as reference sources for their online religious activities. Seven percent of the respondents responded ambiguously.

Figure 3. Knowledge of the Scholarly Background of the Preacher/Source Used as a Reference



Note. Data collected by author on August-September 2022.

The Issue of Religious Authority on Cyber-religion: Virtual Piety and Disruptive Religiosity

Accoring to the figure 3, it indicates that cyber-religion is highly susceptible to the erosion of expertise or the fading of religious authority on social media. Society tends to consider only proximity, accessibility, and someone's popularity as references for obtaining religious knowledge on the internet. Scholarly background, expertise, or status of proficiency possessed by someone is not the primary consideration. It is when the 'death of expertise' occurs (Nichols, 2018). At this point, asserting the authority of religious figures on social media becomes crucial because the blurred religious authority allows individuals lacking competence in religious matters to disseminate religious knowledge freely.

The consequence of this negligence is severe-society becomes vulnerable to acquiring inaccurate information or knowledge regarding the religious discourse they

seek. This can lead to a distorted understanding of religious principles and beliefs. Regarding society's vulnerability to obtaining erroneous information on social media, Nichols (2018) elaborates that truth in the digital era is based on the strength of arguments or tends to seek justification rather than a pursuit of absolute truth. Individuals are inclined to wander through the virtual world until they reach their desired conclusion.

The pattern of religiosity, as observed in cyber-religion, inevitably disrupts conventional religious patterns. Religious knowledge obtained from the internet is applied daily and is believed to be conclusive and final. The lack of digital religious literacy is one of the reasons why people turn to new sources of knowledge from social media as a shortcut for references regarding religious issues and knowledge without verifying the truthfulness of the content (Wawaysadhya et al., 2022). The shift of activities from the virtual world to the real world gives rise to disruption. Fukuyama (1999) defines "disruption" as disturbances or chaos caused by technological advancements. He state that the negative impact of technology results in the weakening of social bonds and the erosion of values collectively embraced by society (common values). In traditional life, before the widespread use of technology, these shared values were social values that enabled a community to face various dynamics of the times.

Based on the above explanation, cyber-religion is a religious phenomenon that can be disruptive. As Kasali (2017) states, disruption in the digital world is characterized by four indicators: easier, cheaper, more accessible, and faster. Society tends to prioritize ease of access to religious references in the context of religiosity. When searching for religious evidence for a religious practice or transactional activity, for instance, religious authority is no longer the primary consideration; the pursuit is for convenience, accessibility, and speed of access.

People who use social media as a reference in finding information about religion tend to ignore the background of the ulama as long as the delivery of the ulama is easy to understand can answer their fundamental questions, and the profile or social media account appears on the top pages of search sites on the internet. One of our informants described as follows. "If there are questions about religion that I do not understand, I will search on YouTube and click on the top profile in the search column. Usually, there will be many short videos that answer my questions. If the short video I feel is interesting (especially the way Submission of the scholars), I will explore the video further and watch a more complete explanation" (Zaky, personal communication, 2022, August 3). Our other informants also follow the trend of watching the top videos in the search column. He outlines, "Usually the video that appears most above in the search column is the video most watched by others; in other words, the video can answer the questions of many people" (Aulia, personal communication, 2022, September 17). According to other informants, "I need a fast answer, so the easiest way is to watch short videos that appear at the top in the YouTube search column" (Hasanah, personal communication, 2022, August 5).

Rather than looking for answers from the scholars they already know popularly on social media, most of our informants choose the fastest way to get answers to their questions about religion. They will receive answers provided by the social media algorithm. While the social media algorithm ignores a person's expertise, it prioritizes popularity and the number of viewers. Most of our respondents have approved the answers submitted by the three informants above. They tend to choose a fast and easy way to obtain religious information rather than considering the background and knowledge capacity of the ulama. It is where there is a disruption in religion (Rashid, 2019). People tend to choose the fastest and easiest way to obtain information about religion.

Aside from being potentially disruptive, the blurring of religious authority on social media can also result in a phenomenon known as "post-truth" in religion. Post-truth is a condition where facts and objectivity have less influence in capturing public attention than emotional factors and personal inclinations. Post-truth societies tend to disregard systematic thinking methods in obtaining information and are more drawn to information that appeals to their emotions and has personal relevance (Gobber, 2019). Based on this understanding, the inclination of the respondents in this study to consider the closeness, accessibility, and popularity of a religious speaker to obtain religious information can make them susceptible to post-truth. Furthermore, the realm of religion is particularly susceptible to exposure to post-truth because religion, in a broad sense, is highly connected to the emotions and personal beliefs of its adherents. The lack of clarity about religious authority on internet-based technological media plays a significant role in shaping post-truth in the realm of religion (Chair & Adzfar, 2021).

Conclusion

The emergence of social media offers convenience in various dimensions of life, including religious life. Religious life in the era of social media has brought about a phenomenon known as cyber-religion, where the cyber or internet world serves as a reference for obtaining religious knowledge. The impact of this phenomenon is the unlimited accessibility of reference sources for the public, resulting in almost no filtering of religious information. Authoritative religious sources are no longer considered the primary consideration. Consequently, internet users are susceptible to obtaining inaccurate and misleading information regarding religion.

The findings of this research indicate that the motivations of followers engaging in religious studies on social media are diverse, encompassing five dimensions of religiosity: belief, ritual, knowledge, experience, and practice. The main religious activity most frequently conducted by respondents is seeking knowledge (knowledge dimension) at 48%, followed by seeking references for religious beliefs and daily practices (belief dimension) at 22%, seeking spiritual fulfillment or tranquillity (experience dimension) at 18%, engaging in social interaction and charity (ritual dimension) at 8%, and propagating or spreading Islam at 4%. Concerning the scholarly background of the

figures referenced on social media, 78% of respondents claimed they were unaware of the scholarly backgrounds of the individuals used as references. These findings indicate that cyber-religion is susceptible to disrupting religious practices by undermining authoritative religious authority and making communities more vulnerable to receiving misinformation about religion.

This study is an initial exploration that requires further development and deeper investigation. This study has limitations related to the age range of respondents, which is too broad, and their domicile needs to be narrower. Suppose this research is limited to specific religious communities and a particular scope. In that case, a more accurate picture will be obtained by describing problems of religious authority in society that use social media. Regarding respondents, future research should encompass a broader range of participants, aiming not only to read percentage figures but also to understand societal tendencies in utilizing internet-based social media for religious activities. Consequently, the adverse effects of using social media for religious purposes can be minimized.

Author Contribution Statement

Author contributions to this article: Badrul Munir Chair contributed as initiator and drafter of the article, as well as data analyzer and interpreter; Wawaysadhya and Tri Utami Oktafiani contributed as validators of data and analysis results, collecting data, and critically revising the article. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of this work.

Statement of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding

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

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