

Digital Religion and the Viral Spread of Religious Rhetoric: The Case of Mama Gufron on Indonesian Social Media

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Abstract

Digital platforms are reshaping how religious authority is performed, circulated, and encountered, yet increased online visibility cannot be assumed to constitute religious legitimacy. This study examined how religious rhetoric and platform visibility intersected in the negotiation of religious authority through the case of Mama Gufron, a controversial Indonesian preacher whose sermons gained substantial social media attention. Using qualitative content analysis combined with rhetorical analysis, the study analyzed six purposively selected videos from the official Pondok Pesantren Uniq Nusantara YouTube channel, focusing on argumentative structures, speech acts, and metaphorical expressions. The findings revealed four interrelated rhetorical patterns: the invocation of lineage, sanad, and kiai status; performative use of distinctive linguistic expressions; claims of supernatural authority; and emotional dramatization. These patterns showed how established markers of Islamic authority were rearticulated through digitally mediated performance and intensified platform visibility. The study interpreted this process through performative-mediated authority and advances viral piety as an analytical proposition linking religious performance, digital circulation, and authority negotiation without equating visibility with legitimacy. The findings contribute to international digital religion scholarship by explaining how culturally embedded religious authority interacts with transnational infrastructures of digital visibility.

A. Introduction

Religious authority is increasingly produced where public attention can travel faster than scholarly recognition. In 2022, American pastor Michael Todd became globally visible after a controversial sermon performance circulated widely on social media (Lawrence, 2022; Hasanudin et al., 2024). That year, Sister Cindy similarly gained viral attention through provocative campus preaching and later built a TikTok presence exceeding 400,000 followers (Gutierrez, 2026). These cases reveal a critical transformation: religious figures may acquire exceptional visibility not only through institutional credentials or theological authority, but also through performative rhetoric that generates digital circulation. This emerging “preacher-influencer” phenomenon (Johnson, 2025) challenges conventional assumptions about religious influence because digital platforms can convert rhetorical performance, controversy, and public attention into communicative capital with consequences for contemporary religious authority.

This transformation is central to digital religion, where religious practice, media, and authority increasingly intersect across online and offline environments (Campbell, 2012, 2013). Castells’ (2011) network society perspective explains how networked communication reorganizes visibility and power, while Eickelman and Anderson (2003) show how new media opened a “new Muslim public sphere” beyond conventional religious authorities. As digital religion has developed into an interdisciplinary field (H. A. Campbell & Tsuria, 2022), online engagement increasingly complements offline practice (H. A. Campbell & Bellar, 2023), expanding religious expression and reshaping its social and cultural consequences (Helland, 2005, 2016; Hasanudin et al., 2024). The critical question is therefore no longer whether religion exists online, but how digital circulation changes the conditions under which religious actors become visible and potentially authoritative.

Yet visibility is not legitimacy. Virality denotes intensified circulation across digital networks (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017a), while viral visibility refers to heightened exposure generated through that circulation (Franck, 2019; Thompson, 2005). Attention may arise from controversy, ridicule, negative affect, or curiosity rather than acceptance of religious claims (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Grabosky, 2016). Legitimacy instead requires socially conferred recognition of credibility or appropriateness (Suchman, 1995), whereas religious authority concerns recognized influence grounded in religious roles, traditions, texts, structures, or expertise (H. A. Campbell, 2007; Burmansah et al., 2025). In digital environments, authority is relationally negotiated rather than automatically

produced by visibility (Andok, 2024). Thus, virality may facilitate negotiations of legitimacy and authority, but cannot itself prove either.

Studies of Islam and digital media in Indonesia have primarily approached this transformation through the pluralization of religious authority. Setianto (2026) traces mediatization from print to digital platforms, while Akmaliah (2025) shows how prominent preachers cultivate substantial social-media audiences. Yet digitalization does not simply displace traditional authority. Hidayati (2022) demonstrates how Sufi figures reproduce established charisma through online networks; Rusli et al., (2020) show younger ulama incorporating digital sources into fatwa production; and Ichwan et al., (2024) identify digital-literacy inequalities that may weaken traditional ulama. Alongside observations on personal charisma and mediated visibility (Birchok, 2023; Echchaibi, 2011), these studies depict religious authority as increasingly plural, contested, and technologically mediated.

A second strand examines digitally mediated religiosity and piety. Husein and Slama (2018) and Nisa (2018) show how Facebook, WhatsApp, and BBM enable semi-virtual communities such as One Day One Juz, where collective Qur'anic practice intersects with performative piety and *riya'*. Fakhruroji (2025) similarly demonstrates the expansion of virtual study circles, online prayer, Islamic applications, and internet-mediated religious learning. A third strand addresses discursive contestation and *da'wah*. Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2019) identify religious populism through simplified and emotionally mobilizing messages, while Zuhriyah and Rohimah (2024), Rohmatulloh et al., (2022), Sikumbang et al., (2023), and Salik (2019) show how digital platforms, traditionalist networks, and popular communication styles transform digital spaces into competitive arenas of Islamic discourse.

This contestation also encompasses mobilization and institutional adaptation. Rohid et al., (2025) and Ahyar (2019) show how digital activism and Islamic clicktivism mobilize collective identities and religious solidarity. Kholili et al., (2024) and Mahzumi et al., (2025) highlight problems of digital preaching regulation and actors whose visibility is not necessarily supported by strong scholarly authority, while Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama renegotiate their positions within a decentralized digital public sphere (Akmaliah, 2020; Kurniawan et al., 2025). However, certain digital religious practices—such as virtual Friday prayers resulting from technological advancements—still fail to meet the requirements for valid religious observance (Ilyas, 2025). Despite this extensive scholarship, analysis remains concentrated on established preachers, organized *da'wah*, digital piety, institutional adaptation, and deliberate mobilization. Less understood is

how actors outside organized influencer strategies acquire exceptional visibility when fragments of unconventional religious rhetoric circulate spontaneously across platforms.

This blind spot matters because viral visibility creates a pathway to religious prominence not adequately captured by the preacher-influencer category. Some actors become prominent not by strategically cultivating audiences but because controversial or unusual rhetorical fragments are repeatedly circulated by networked publics. Mama Gufron illustrates this problem in Indonesia. Around June–July 2024, fragments of his unconventional sermons circulated widely across TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms and attracted national media attention, including *Catatan Demokrasi* on tvOne (Catatan Demokrasi, 2024). The case is consequential amid concerns that internet-mediated learning may challenge established ulama authority (Ichwan et al., 2024) and potentially reduce the depth of religious understanding among younger audiences as learning shifts from text-based traditions toward virtual environments (Pabbajah et al., 2021).

This study therefore shifts analytical attention from deliberate digital preaching to the relationship between religious rhetoric and viral circulation. Rather than equating visibility with legitimacy, it treats virality as a condition through which claims to authority become visible, circulated, and negotiated. Its contribution lies in connecting rhetorical performance with digital visibility and changing religious authority. Its novelty lies in conceptualizing the Mama Gufron phenomenon not merely as online preaching, but as religious prominence emerging through rhetorical fragments circulating beyond organized *da'wah* networks. We argue that digital platforms are not simply channels of religious communication but contested arenas where rhetoric, circulation, public attention, and established markers of authority interact to shape religious visibility.

Accordingly, this study examines how Mama Gufron's religious rhetoric contributes to his visibility within Indonesia's digital religious landscape and operates within broader negotiations of religious authority under conditions of social-media virality. By distinguishing viral visibility from legitimacy and authority, it explains how unconventional rhetoric acquires resonance through digital circulation without assuming that popularity constitutes religious recognition. The article thereby offers an empirically grounded account of a distinctive pathway through which religious actors enter contemporary digital public spheres and contributes to broader debates on digital religion, mediated religious authority, and the changing relationship between rhetorical performance and public attention.

B. Method

This study employed qualitative content analysis combined with rhetorical analysis to examine how Mama Gufron's religious rhetoric operates within the dynamics of digital religion and social media virality in Indonesia. Qualitative content analysis enabled systematic and context-sensitive interpretation of communicative materials (Krippendorff, 2004), while rhetorical analysis provided an analytical framework for examining argumentation, speech acts, and metaphorical expressions within the sermons (Leach, 2000). The primary data consisted of sermon videos published on the official YouTube channel of Pondok Pesantren Uniq Nusantara (@ponpesuniqnusantara). Data were collected between June and August 2024, when fragments of Mama Gufron's sermons were circulating across Indonesian social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

Six videos were purposively selected from the channel as information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015) based on three criteria: Mama Gufron was the principal speaker; the video contained explicit religious statements or rhetorical claims concerning spiritual authority or supernatural narratives; and it demonstrated relatively high platform visibility based on views recorded during data collection. Views were treated only as descriptive indicators of platform visibility, consistent with social media popularity metrics (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), rather than evidence of audience acceptance or religious legitimacy (Baym, 2013). Likes and comments reported in the Results were supplementary descriptive information and were not selection criteria, because viewing, liking, and commenting represent different modes of YouTube engagement (Khan, 2017). Table 1 presents the six videos included in the corpus.

Table 1. Analyzed videos of Mama Gufron's sermons

No.	Video Title	Channel	Number of Views
1.	<i>Abuya Ghuftron Menghentikan Hujan, Jamaah Heran</i>	<i>Ponpes</i>	<i>> 1,1 juta</i>
2.	<i>Ceramah Abuya Mama Gufron Al Bantani pada Acara Haul Akbar Indonesia</i>	<i>Uniq</i>	<i>> 700.000</i>
3.	<i>Siapa Waliyullah Sebenarnya!!! Simak Penjelasan Abuya Mama Ghuftron</i>	<i>Nusantara</i>	<i>> 579.000</i>
4.	<i>Tagih Saya di Akhirat Abuya Mama Ghuftron al-Bantani</i>		<i>> 347.000</i>
5.	<i>Bukti Pengukuhan Stempel Sanad TQN dari Abuya Mama Armin kepada Abuya Mama Ghuftron</i>		<i>> 255.000</i>
6.	<i>Mengungkap Sejarah Hidup Abuya Mama Ghuftron Al Bantani</i>		<i>> 241.000</i>

Note: View counts were recorded from the official Ponpes Uniq Nusantara YouTube channel during data collection and were used solely as descriptive indicators of platform visibility.

The unit of analysis comprised segments of religious rhetoric within the six videos. Each video was repeatedly viewed and fully transcribed before relevant rhetorical statements were identified and coded. Following Leach (2000), analysis employed three deductive categories—argumentative structure, speech acts, and metaphorical expressions—while allowing additional subthemes to emerge inductively from the data. Interpretive validity was strengthened through repeated examination of the material and documentation of analytical decisions in an audit trail (Bowen, 2009).

The study involved no recruitment or direct interaction with human or animal participants and relied exclusively on publicly accessible YouTube content. Nevertheless, online materials were treated as ethically situated data rather than ethically unrestricted public information (British Psychological Society, 2021; Franzke et al., 2020). The analysis therefore prioritized privacy, responsible interpretation, avoidance of unnecessary personal disclosure, and minimization of stigmatizing representations, focusing on publicly circulated religious rhetoric and patterns of digital visibility rather than evaluating the preacher's personal character.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings from the analysis of six of the most popular sermon videos on the official YouTube account of Pondok Pesantren Uniq Nusantara. Based on content and rhetorical analysis, this study finds that the virality of Mama Gufron on social media is shaped by at least four main rhetorical patterns: (1) strategies of legitimation through lineage, *sanad* (chains of religious authority), and *kiai* status; (2) the performativity of the “Suryani” language or the expression *maqoli inna*; (3) claims of supernatural authority and *karomah*; and (4) the intensification of emotion and the dramatization of preaching.

1. Results

The analysis of the six selected sermon videos identified four recurring patterns in Mama Gufron's religious rhetoric: the presentation of lineage, *sanad*, and *kiai* status; the performative use of “Suryani” expressions, particularly *maqoli inna*; claims involving supernatural authority and *karomah*; and the intensification of emotion and dramatization in preaching. These patterns were identified through repeated examination and coding of rhetorical segments in the selected videos. Although presented thematically below, the patterns frequently overlap within individual sermons, particularly through references to

sanad, spiritual figures, supernatural knowledge, and *maqoli inna*. The platform metrics reported in this section indicate the visibility of the analyzed videos at the time of data collection and are not treated as evidence of audience acceptance or religious legitimacy.

a. Lineage, *sanad*, and *kiai* status

The first recurring pattern concerns the presentation of genealogy, religious transmission, and *kiai* status. This pattern is particularly visible in the video *Mengungkap Sejarah Hidup Abuya Mama Gufron Al Bantani* (Revealing the Life History of Abuya Mama Gufron Al Bantani). Uploaded on 26 April 2020, the video lasts slightly more than eight minutes and had accumulated more than 241,000 views, approximately 2,300 likes, and 483 comments. Four elements are prominent in its biographical narrative: the origin of Mama Gufron's name and educational background, family genealogy, the *sanad* of his religious knowledge, and his stated religious mission.

The video identifies Mama Gufron's birth name as Iyus Sugiman, born on 25 December 1963 in Cibadak, Bandung, West Java. It states that he had been called "Raden" since childhood and associates this designation with noble ancestry. His name was subsequently changed to Muhammad Abdul Gufron by his teacher, Abuya Mama Armin, following a forty-day *khalwat* (spiritual retreat) at the tomb of Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani in Baghdad (Yusuf, 2020). The designation "Al-Bantani" is associated in the video with his period of study under Abuya Mama Armin in Cibuntu, Pandeglang, Banten.

The genealogical account is similarly detailed. Mama Gufron is presented as the second child of H. Endang Musthofa and Hj. Suntari. Through his maternal lineage, the video traces his genealogy through Aki Isa, his grandfather, who is described as a descendant of Mbah Sajidan, a disciple of Sunan Ampel. His grandmother, Ibu Ade, is described as a seventh-generation descendant of Raden Ardiwinata and Nyai Ibu Sarminah. The genealogy is subsequently connected to Prabu Siliwangi through Sultan Hasanuddin of Banten and Sultan Syarif Hidayatullah Sunan Gunung Jati. Genealogical references therefore constitute a substantial component of the biographical presentation rather than appearing as isolated background information.

A further cluster of statements concerns the *sanad* of knowledge. Abuya Mama Armin is identified as Mama Gufron's teacher and described as an *Ulama Hikmah*. The video narrates an unconventional process of spiritual formation that emphasizes service to the teacher rather than formal instruction in *kitab kuning*, the Qur'an, or hadith. It also

recounts that Mama Gufron was once buried alive for forty-one days and nights, subsequently undertook a spiritual journey, received an *ijazah* in the Qadiriyyah and Naqshbandiyyah orders (TQN), and performed a forty-day *khalwat* at the tomb of Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani in Baghdad. The video further states that his life mission is to establish *pesantren* and disseminate his Islamic views with the stated aim of uniting humanity physically, in the heart, and in the soul.

The prominence of *sanad* also appears in *Bukti Pengukuhan Stempel Sanad TQN dari Abuya Mama Armin kepada Abuya Mama Gufron* (Proof of the TQN Sanad Seal Confirmation from Abuya Mama Armin to Abuya Mama Gufron). The video lasts more than thirty-six minutes and, after being uploaded on 7 July 2022, had accumulated more than 255,000 views, approximately 1,700 likes, and 1,500 comments. The visual documentation accompanying this account is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Proof of the TQN sanad seal confirmation by Abuya Mama Armin
Source: youtu.be/a0mal5L5HtI?P2hRAWYdPxRAgAk

The video states that Abuya Mama Armin appointed only six *mursyid* of the TQN from among his disciples. This account is delivered by Mama Gufron's student, Ubadullah, representing Umi Hj. Fathum, the daughter of Abuya Mama Armin. Mama Gufron is described as the last and youngest of the six appointed *mursyid*. The *sanad* is presented sequentially from Mama Gufron to Abuya Mama Armin, Shaykh Asnawi Caringin, Shaykh Abdul Karim Banten, and Shaykh Ahmad Khatib Sambas, identified in the video as the founder of the TQN order.

Other claims occur alongside this *sanad* narrative. Mama Gufron declares his readiness to assume responsibility as the "guardian of hell," states that the Syriac language he uses comes directly from Allah, asserts that all languages originally derive from Syriac, and claims to have written more than 500 books. The video concludes

with his use of *maqoli inna* while leading a collective prayer. Across these two videos, therefore, lineage, teacher-disciple transmission, *tarekat* affiliation, *kiai* status, and spiritual claims repeatedly appear within the presentation of Mama Gufron's religious identity.

b. The performativity of "Suryani" language and *maqoli inna*

The second pattern concerns the recurrent use of expressions described as "Suryani," particularly *maqoli inna*. This feature is prominent in *Tagih Saya di Akhirat* || *Abuya Mama Ghuftron al-Bantani* (Hold Me Accountable in the Afterlife || Abuya Mama Ghuftron al-Bantani). Uploaded on 27 August 2020, the sermon lasts more than one hour and had accumulated more than 354,000 views, approximately 2,900 likes, and 2,900 comments. It forms part of a regular Wednesday-night religious study session and addresses *tawhid*, particularly *maqolah* in relation to *syariat* and *hakikat*.

Within the sermon, Mama Gufron states that he understands the languages of angels, devils, *jinn*, and *genderuwo*, a mystical being in Javanese folklore. The sermon also addresses the practice of *tawhid* at Ponpes Uniq Nusantara, including the principles of not harming others and maintaining purity of heart and mind. Mama Gufron additionally refers to a *sanad* of knowledge that, according to his account, enables him to continue and develop this knowledge. He associates this mandate with figures including Prabu Siliwangi, Sunan Gunung Jati, and Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani.

The sermon itself begins approximately twenty-nine minutes into the video and repeatedly incorporates variants of *maqoli* and *maqoli inna*. Coding of these expressions identified different sources of rhetorical reference, types of reference, and rhetorical functions. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Rhetorical expressions of *maqoli inna* in Mama Gufron's sermon

No.	Expression/ Quotation	Source of Rhetorical Reference	Type of Reference	Rhetorical Function
1.	" <i>rabbana qoli innakal ya ma fi inna rahmatan la dhani adhakal ya ma fa'lai ya ma fiima Allah</i> " and " <i>maqali innakal fiima Allah</i> "	General sermon discourse	Theological expression	Introduces the discourse of <i>tawhid</i> and religious teaching
2.	" <i>maqali inna hasyabal innakal ya maqoli ya ma fa'ali innakal ya ma fiima Allah</i> "	Sunan Giri	Wali (Islamic saint) reference	Connects the sermon to the authority of a respected saint
3.	" <i>rabbana qal inna qal ya hatta ya fiima allah</i> "	God	Divine speech claim	Reinforces sacred authority through

No.	Expression / Quotation	Source of Rhetorical Reference	Type of Reference	Rhetorical Function
				attribution to God
4.	" <i>maqal innakal ya ma fidi innakal ya ma fiima 'ala fiima dunia</i> "	Angelic language	Supernatural reference	Suggest communication with angels
5.	" <i>ushalli fardha adhakal ya misi innakal yamad</i> "	Opening prayer	Ritual expression	Functions as a liturgical or prayer introduction
6.	" <i>rabbana qal innakal ya ma fa'allay ya ma fii ma allah</i> " and " <i>la fa'aliy innaka fii ma allah</i> "	General sermon discourse	Theological expression	Reinforces religious narrative in the sermon
7.	" <i>rabbana qal innaha asyadaka ya ma fa alaiya ma fiima allah</i> " and " <i>la qal inna ashadaka ya ma fii minna allah</i> "	Sheikh Kholil Bangkalan	Ulama reference	Links the sermon to a respected Islamic scholar
8.	" <i>qal innakal ya ma fa'alaiya ma thahi, ma maqoli innakal ya ma tanah jawi, maqali hadzal ya fiima allah</i> "	Sunan Bonang Tuban	Wali reference	Associates the discourse with historical Islamic authority
9.	" <i>qafa'i fii innakal yama fii ma allah, rabbanakal hatta ya ma fii innakal ya ma filam takhif</i> "	Sunan Giri	Wali reference	Strengthens spiritual legitimacy
10.	" <i>rabbana qal inna wa qal ji innaka ya ma allah</i> "	Sunan Ampel	Wali reference	Connects the discourse to revered Islamic figures

Table 2 shows that *maqoli inna* occurs in multiple rhetorical contexts. The coded expressions are associated with general theological discourse, God, angelic language, ritual prayer, Sunan Giri, Sheikh Kholil Bangkalan, Sunan Bonang, and Sunan Ampel. They occur in statements concerning *tawhid*, divine speech, prayer, supernatural communication, and references to *wali* and *ulama*. Thus, *maqoli inna* is not restricted to one section of the sermon or one type of religious reference.

An extended passage demonstrates how *maqoli* expressions are interwoven with Indonesian-language religious speech:

"Tagih (saya) nanti. Saya ikut ngaji samawi ke Gufron, saya minta, 'ma qal innaka hadza yama fiima allah', kalo saya tidak dikasih oleh allah, kejar gusti allahnya pun karena saya perintah allah, betul atau tidak? 'rabbana qal inna sya'am aliyyi innakal ya ma fa'alayya qal innakal ya ma fiima allah, rabbana qal inna qal ya ma hadzal ya ma fii ma dunia, maqali hadzal ya ma fa'alayya ya ma ba bumi. Suhanallah, maqali innakal ya mal langit, maqal innakal ya air, hadzal ya masili innakal ya mabumi ala ya ma fii ma allah'. Hayo kawan, ini kita harus sadar, harus sadar bahwa kita akan kembali pada allah."

[“Hold me accountable later. I join the divine teachings of Gufron, and I ask, ‘ma qal innaka hadza yama fiima Allah.’ If Allah does not grant it to me, then even pursue Allah Himself because I act His command, right or not? ‘rabbana qal inna sya’am aliyyi innakal ya ma fa’alayya qal innakal ya ma fiima allah, rabbana qal inna qal ya ma hadzal ya ma fii ma dunia, maqali hadzal ya ma fa’alayya ya ma ba bumi. Suhanallah, maqali innakal ya mal langit, maqal innakal ya air, hadzal ya masili innakal ya mabumi ala ya ma fii ma allah.’ Friends, we must realize, we must understand that we will all return to Allah”].

The passage shows an alternation between recognizable Indonesian religious statements and *maqoli* formulations. Mama Gufron does not provide direct translations or systematic explanations of these formulations within the sermon. Similar expressions recur in the closing prayer and are accompanied by emphatic vocal delivery and repeated references to *sanad* and lineage. The empirical pattern is therefore characterized by the repeated insertion of *maqoli inna* into theological explanation, prayer, references to religious figures, and claims concerning supernatural communication.

c. Claims of supernatural authority and *karomah*

The third pattern consists of recurrent references to supernatural knowledge, spiritual figures, unseen beings, and extraordinary events. This pattern is particularly evident in *Siapa Waliyullah Sebenarnya!!! Simak Penjelasan Abuya Mama Ghuftron* (Who is the True Waliyullah!!! Listen to Abuya Mama Gufron’s Explanation). Uploaded on 13 September 2020, the approximately forty-seven-minute video had accumulated more than 601,000 views, approximately 6,100 likes, and 3,000 comments.

The video begins with an introduction by Ubadullah, who explains that a *waliyullah* receives spiritual knowledge directly from Allah. When Mama Gufron begins the sermon, his discussion of *waliyullah* repeatedly incorporates *maqoli* expressions that are not translated or explained in Indonesian. He opens with:

“Bissmillahirrahmanirrahim, rabbanakal inna rahmatan dunia wal akhirat laqal innakal yama dunia, maqali asyidi innakal yama dunia, rabbana qal inna hafa alayyaha ma fima allah, rabbana alhaqqal yama ummati masyqat alayyama fima allah.”

The expression appears within a discussion of spiritual journeys and the life and death of *waliyullah*, whom the sermon presents as receiving a direct mandate from Allah. Because no translation of this *maqoli* passage is provided in the source material, no additional semantic translation is imposed here.

Coding of the sermon identified recurring references to God, prophets, saints, divine knowledge, unseen beings, and mystical encounters. These findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Supernatural authority claims in the "Waliyullah" sermon

No.	Expression/ Quotation	Referenced Figure or Entity	Type of Supernatural Reference	Rhetorical Function
1.	"maqali innakal yama fa'alay yama fima allah"	Prophet Khidr	Mystical encounter	Suggests spiritual encounter with a prophetic figure.
2.	"rabbana alayyama fima allah"	God	Divine authority	Asserts that spiritual light originates from God
3.	"rabbanakal innakal ya qali inna fa'ila dunia wal akhirat..."	Prophet Muhammad	Prophetic reference	Connects the sermon to prophetic authority
4.	"bissmillahirrahmanirrahim maqali inna hafash..."	Prophet Khidr	Mystical guidance	Frames spiritual knowledge through prophetic narrative
5.	"laduniyyah alkal yama fima allah"	Divine knowledge (laduni)	Esoteric knowledge	Suggests knowledge granted directly by God
6.	"masqad innakal yama khali yama fa'alyyama fima allah"	God	Divine selection	Emphasizes that only God knows the true waliyullah
7.	"rabbanakal innakal yama fa'alayyama yama fima allah"	God	Spiritual emergence	Describes the emergence of saints through divine will
8.	"maqali innakal yama hadzal yama fima allah"	Prophet Musa and Khidr	Scriptural narrative	Links discourse to prophetic teaching tradition
9.	"mashqad innakal yama hatal yama fima allah"	God	Divine affirmation	Reinforces spiritual legitimacy
10.	"alhazi da hazib qad dahakal ya ba..."	Jinn, devils, and satan	Supernatural encounter	Suggests interaction with unseen beings
11.	Closing prayer containing "maqali inna rahmatan wali-walinya allah"	God and Prophet Muhammad	Liturgical invocation	Concludes sermon with sacred authority

Table 3 records eleven coded instances involving God, Prophet Muhammad, Prophet Khidr, Prophet Musa, divine knowledge (*laduni*), mystical encounters, *jinn*, devils, Satan, and liturgical invocation. Mama Gufron repeatedly presents *waliyullah* as selected directly by Allah and states that variants of *maqoli* were also used by Prophet Muhammad, Prophet Khidr, *jinn*, devils, and Iblis. He further claims to have written books in Syriac or a heavenly language that, according to his account, originates from divine guidance and revelation. These supernatural and religious-cosmological references recur throughout the analyzed sermon rather than appearing as isolated statements.

A related form of extraordinary claim appears in *Abuya Ghufron Menghentikan Hujan, Jamaah Heran* (Abuya Ghufron Stops the Rain, Astonishing the Congregation). Uploaded on 24 February 2022, the approximately one-minute video had accumulated more than 1.1 million views, more than 5,900 likes, and approximately 1,800 comments. In the video, Mama Gufron raises his voice and directly addresses the rain:

"Hujan berhenti atuh, ini kasian ibu-ibu sama bapak-bapak jauh loh naik sepeda motor, sudah berhenti!" ["Rain, please stop. Have mercy on these mothers and fathers who have traveled far by motorcycle. Stop now!"]

Following this statement, the video shows the rain appearing to subside, while members of the congregation respond with applause and laughter. The video therefore documents a rhetorical claim directed toward a natural event and the congregation's immediate observable response. It does not, however, independently establish a causal relationship between the statement and the subsequent change in rainfall. Together with the *Waliyullah* sermon, the material demonstrates that supernatural references in the analyzed videos encompass divine knowledge, prophets and unseen beings, heavenly language, *waliyullah*, mystical encounters, and a claimed capacity to influence a natural phenomenon.

d. Emotional intensification and dramatization of preaching

The fourth pattern concerns heightened vocal intensity, emotionally charged statements, warnings, and dramatic spiritual narratives. This pattern is particularly visible in *Ceramah Abuya Mama Gufron Al Bantani pada Acara Haul Akbar Indonesia* (Abuya Mama Gufron Al Bantani's Lecture at the Indonesian Grand Commemoration Event). The sermon was delivered at the *Haul Akbar Indonesia* event at Pesantren Uniq Nusantara and lasts more than forty-eight minutes. Uploaded on 4 August 2013, the video had accumulated more than 706,000 views, over 7,100 likes, and approximately 3,200 comments.

At the beginning of the sermon, Mama Gufron employs *maqoli inna* while mentioning the *Haul Akbar*, Dampit, Malang, East Java, and Indonesia:

"Laqolli inna rahmatan khaul alyamal fil akbar, wa maqoli inna rahmatan dampit, wama qasidi inna rahmatan la ya ma'dal yamasil dulaamin wa maqoli inna rahmatan malang jawa timur indonesia."

He subsequently refers to heroes, veterans, Banser, Fatayat, congregants, the army, air force, navy, police, civil authorities, and public officials:

"Wamaqali inna rahmatan para pahlawan alaikali inna rahmatan veteran, alhakal ya masyidi inna rahmatan banser wa maqoli inna rahmatan fatayat wa maqoli inna jamaah wa maqali inna rahmatan angkatan darat, udara, laut, polisi, sipil, alakal yamal fiil ma atal ya fima allah,"

and later:

"Faql inna rahmatan RT, RW, lurah, camat, bupati, gubernur, menteri, dan RI 1, RI 2 dikatakan Presiden dan Wakil Presiden Indonesia."

No independent English translation of the *maqoli* components of these passages is provided in the source material; therefore, they are retained in their original form. The recognizable Indonesian portions show that the sermon moves rapidly across religious, social, military, and governmental referents while being delivered with heightened vocal intensity.

The emotional and dramatic character of the sermon becomes particularly visible when Mama Gufron describes the organization of the *haul*:

"Ini saya mengadakan ini, apakah kata Allah? Turun di Sunan Ampel kemarin disaksikan oleh Banser-Banser, disaksikan oleh ulama Ampel, disaksikan oleh ruhnya Sunan Ampel, Walisongo. Ini Indonesia harus diadakan khaul, kalo ndak ini akan musibah besar. Allahu Akbar, saya takut, saya nekad, berapa biayanya... gak usah bingung kata saya, mari kita Jumat Kliwon kita rapat, ternyata apa, ngak ada yang menghiraukan, Allahu Akbar. Saya menangis kepada Rasulullah, ya Rasul, alqal inna rahmatan ummati indonesia, faql innaka yama fi'il akal yama fiil innaka yama fima allah, ahqal yamasidi innakal yama fima allah."

["I organized this – was it the word of Allah? It descended at Sunan Ampel yesterday, witnessed by the Banser members, witnessed by the ulama of Ampel, witnessed by the spirit of Sunan Ampel, the Walisongo. Indonesia must hold this khaul, otherwise there will be a great disaster. Allahu Akbar, I was afraid, I was determined, how much would it cost... I said there is no need to worry, let us hold a meeting on Friday Kliwon, but what happened? No one paid attention, Allahu Akbar. I cried to the Rasulullah, oh Rasulullah, alqal inna rahmatan ummati Indonesia, faql innaka yama fi'il akal yama fiil innaka yama fima Allah, ahqal yamasidi innakal yama fima Allah"].

The passage contains several empirically identifiable features: a claim that the organization of the *haul* derived from divine instruction; references to Banser members and Ampel *ulama* as witnesses; references to the spirit of Sunan Ampel and Walisongo; a warning of a major disaster if the *haul* were not held; and explicit expressions of fear, determination, and crying to Prophet Muhammad. Across the sermon, these features

recur alongside raised vocal intensity, emotionally charged statements, warnings, and references to communication with spiritual figures. Together, they constitute the pattern of emotional intensification and dramatization identified in the analyzed preaching material.

2. Discussion

The findings show that Mama Gufron's digital religious presence is significant not merely because of its platform visibility, but because that visibility intersects with recognizable claims to religious authority (Afriansyah, 2021; Ichwan et al., 2024). Lineage, *sanad*, *kiai* status, distinctive linguistic expressions, supernatural narratives, and emotional dramatization form a rhetorical repertoire through which religious distinction is publicly performed (Hayatunnur Taqwa & Lubis, 2025; Zaid et al., 2022). Rather than demonstrating a simple shift from traditional to digital authority, these findings indicate that established symbols of Islamic authority can be rearticulated through digitally mediated performances (H. A. Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Social media therefore transforms not only the circulation of religious discourse but also the conditions under which claims to authority become visible, encounterable, and open to public negotiation (Peterson, 2020).

This interaction is particularly important because Mama Gufron does not abandon conventional symbols of religious recognition when entering the digital sphere. His sermons repeatedly invoke genealogy, *sanad*, teachers, saints, *tarekat* transmission, and spiritual knowledge, while simultaneously presenting them through distinctive language, supernatural narratives, and emotionally intensified preaching. Digital mediation therefore does not necessarily displace traditional authority; it can repackage its symbolic resources into communicative performances suited to a platform environment. This finding complicates narratives of a simple replacement of traditional religious elites by digital actors. It is closer to Andok's (2024) argument that digital authority operates "under technology," where attention, identity, authenticity, choice, and voluntariness reshape recognition, and to Lövheim and Hjarvard's (2019) account of the fragmentation of singular authority under conditions of mediatization.

What becomes visible in this process is a form of authority claim that can be understood as *performative-mediated authority*: authority is articulated through recognizable religious symbols and rhetorical performances and subsequently rendered visible and circulable through digital media. This interpretation builds on Campbell (2007), Hjarvard (2016), and Andok (2024), who show that mediated environments alter the conditions

under which religious authority is produced and recognized. It also resonates with studies demonstrating that religious actors construct mediated personas through visual, discursive, and rhetorical strategies (Febrian, 2024; Sheldon, 2024). In Mama Gufron's case, however, the relevant performance combines inherited markers such as lineage and *sanad* with unconventional linguistic expressions, supernatural claims, and emotional dramatization. The analytical value of the term therefore lies in identifying how different resources of authority are assembled and performed rather than proposing another general theory of digital religious authority.

Such performances become particularly consequential when they enter platform environments organized around visibility and attention. The distinctive language, supernatural narratives, emotional delivery, and repeated invocation of sacred figures observed in the videos make Mama Gufron's preaching recognizable as a particular mediated persona. Comparable transformations are visible across religious traditions: evangelical celebrities and online church ministries employ mediated self-presentation to cultivate religious presence (Evolvi, 2018; Jung, 2023; Sheldon, 2024); Jewish rabbis and *Haredim* communities negotiate authority through internet engagement (Cohen, 2015; Golan, 2024; Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2019); and Muslim preacher-influencers similarly operate within platform cultures of visibility (Evolvi & Giorda, 2021; Harry, 2024; Zaid et al., 2022). Together with broader evidence on digitally mediated religious actors (Euchner et al., 2026; Marei, 2024), these comparisons indicate that communicative performance increasingly interacts with inherited religious credentials in shaping public religious presence.

The Mama Gufron case nevertheless introduces a more specific analytical problem: religious performance becomes significant not only because it is mediated but also because heightened circulation can reshape the public conditions under which authority claims are encountered (H. Campbell, 2007; Hjarvard, 2016). Eickelman and Piscatori's (2018) concept of "new religious intellectuals" illuminates how expanded public spheres enable religious actors to participate in religious discourse beyond established institutional structures. The present findings suggest an additional platformized dynamic in which distinctive religious performances acquire intensified visibility through digital circulation, reflecting the growing importance of attention and content diffusion in networked environments (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017). This intersection is conceptualized here as *viral piety*: an analytical proposition describing how performed religious claims acquire intensified visibility through platform circulation and thereby enter broader processes of religious authority negotiation (Andok, 2024; H. Campbell, 2007).

Understood in this way, *viral piety* connects three processes that are often examined separately. Religious performance provides the symbolic and rhetorical material through which piety and authority are displayed, as demonstrated in studies of online Muslim identity and mediated religious personas (Baulch & Pramianti, 2018; Febrian, 2024; Hew, 2018; Sheldon, 2024). Platform circulation creates conditions of intensified visibility and attention, consistent with research on mediated visibility and the characteristics associated with digital diffusion (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017; Franck, 2019; Thompson, 2005). These processes then intersect with changing conditions of authority negotiation documented in digital religion scholarship (Andok, 2024; H. Campbell, 2007; Hjarvard, 2016). The conceptual contribution lies precisely in this intersection: performance becomes analytically connected to circulation, while circulation becomes relevant to authority without being treated as authority itself.

This distinction differentiates *viral piety* from neighboring concepts without isolating it from the literature from which it develops. Digital or online piety encompasses broader practices through which religious identities and pious selves are expressed and negotiated online (Husein & Slama, 2018; Lengauer, 2018), including digital *da'wa*, Muslim identity formation, and networked religious practice (Baulch & Pramianti, 2018; Hew, 2018; Nisa, 2018). Campbell's (2012) *networked religion* addresses a still broader transformation involving networked communities, storied identities, convergent practices, multisite realities, and shifting authority. Research on religious influencers emphasizes mediated personas and strategies of authority projection (Febrian, 2024; Sheldon, 2024), while virality scholarship examines why particular content receives intensified circulation (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). *Viral piety* links these conversations by foregrounding the movement from religious performance through circulation to authority negotiation.

That relationship, however, must remain analytically conditional because visibility does not demonstrate legitimation. Content may circulate because audiences admire it, but circulation may equally arise from novelty, curiosity, controversy, criticism, or ridicule (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Grabosky, 2016; Vosoughi et al., 2018). The present data establish rhetorical patterns and substantial platform visibility, but they do not reveal how individual viewers evaluate Mama Gufron's religious claims. The distinction is consistent with Campbell (2007) and Sheldon (2024), for whom mediated performance creates possibilities for negotiating authority rather than guaranteeing recognition. It also

finds an instructive parallel in Syarahmalia and Huda (2026) and Lubis and Sulaiman (2022): although their studies concern different institutional contexts, both demonstrate that social acceptance or recognition cannot simply be equated with normative, legal, or institutional legitimacy.

Seen from this perspective, the case contributes to a broader understanding of how Indonesian digital religion is being reconfigured. Campbell's (2012) account of *networked religion* explains how connectivity and shifting authority connect online and offline religious life, while Castells (2011) situates networked visibility within transformations of communicative power. Hjarvard's (2008) mediatization perspective is particularly relevant because media logics can privilege dramatization and popularization, features strongly visible in the rhetorical material analyzed here. Helland's (2005, 2016) distinction between religion online and online religion likewise points to the changing relationship between established religious forms and digitally constituted religious practices. Read together, these perspectives suggest that platforms do more than distribute pre-existing religious messages: they create communicative environments in which rhetorical distinctiveness, religious symbolism, emotional performance, and visibility increasingly interact.

The consequences extend beyond the organization of religious communication. As platform visibility brings unconventional religious claims beyond their original congregational settings, audiences increasingly encounter competing markers of religious credibility within the same digital environment (H. A. Campbell, 2012; Hjarvard, 2016). The issue is therefore not simply whether social media produces "new authorities," but how users navigate scholarly expertise, institutional recognition, spiritual lineage, charismatic performance, and platform popularity when these forms coexist online (Andok, 2024; Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). This condition underscores the growing importance of digital religious literacy for audiences and religious institutions operating within attention-driven media environments (H. A. Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). The findings suggest that responding to platformized religion requires understanding how emotional communication, rhetorical distinctiveness, and digital circulation shape the conditions under which religious knowledge and authority are publicly encountered and evaluated (Castells, 2011; Hjarvard, 2008; Ichwan et al., 2024).

The wider significance of this argument becomes clearer when the Indonesian case is placed alongside transformations documented in other religious traditions. Christian digital ministries and evangelical celebrities (Evolvi, 2018; Jung, 2023; Sheldon, 2024),

Jewish rabbis and *Haredim* communities (Cohen, 2015; Golan, 2024; Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2019), and Muslim preacher-influencers (Evolvi & Giorda, 2021; Harry, 2024; Zaid et al., 2022) operate within different theological and institutional traditions, yet all confront platform conditions in which visibility and communicative performance matter. The contribution of the Indonesian case is therefore not that Mama Gufron represents a universal trajectory, but that it reveals a potentially comparative mechanism: inherited religious symbols can be combined with platform-sensitive performance, amplified through digital circulation, and subsequently exposed to broader processes of recognition, contestation, and authority negotiation.

This comparative potential gives viral piety relevance beyond Indonesian Islam while preserving its contextual origin. Rather than assuming that platformization homogenizes religious authority globally, the concept directs attention to how different traditions supply different symbolic resources—*sanad* and *kiai* status in one setting, clerical office, rabbinic standing, celebrity ministry, or other forms of religious recognition elsewhere—that may interact with similar infrastructures of visibility and circulation. In Indonesia itself, religious authority is likewise continuously negotiated through its interaction with scientific legitimacy and political contexts (Aseri et al., 2025). In this respect, the findings contribute to international digital religion scholarship by shifting attention from whether religion “moves online” toward how platform infrastructures reorganize the relationship between culturally specific authority claims and transnational logics of attention. The resulting pattern is simultaneously local and global: the symbolic content of authority remains contextually embedded, while the technological conditions through which that authority becomes visible increasingly operate across religious and national boundaries (H. A. Campbell, 2012; Hjarvard, 2016; Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019; Mursyid et al., 2024).

This study acknowledges that its interpretation is necessarily shaped by the scope of the empirical material, which comprises six purposively selected videos from Mama Gufron’s official YouTube channel. While this corpus provides sufficient material for identifying recurring rhetorical patterns, it does not represent the wider circulation and reception of his religious discourse across the broader social media environment, particularly TikTok and Instagram. Consequently, the platform metrics examined here should be understood as indicators of visibility rather than evidence of how audiences interpret, accept, contest, or ridicule the content. The absence of systematic audience-

reception data further means that religious legitimacy cannot be inferred from circulation alone. Within these empirical boundaries, performative-mediated authority should therefore be understood as an interpretive category and viral piety as an analytical proposition for explaining how religious performance, platform visibility, and digital circulation intersect in the negotiation of authority, rather than as evidence of established audience recognition or religious legitimacy.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transformation of religious authority in digital environments cannot be adequately understood as a simple displacement of traditional authority by social media popularity. The case of Mama Gufron shows how established markers of Islamic authority—including lineage, *sanad*, *kiai* status, spiritual transmission, and references to sacred figures—can be rearticulated through distinctive linguistic expressions, supernatural narratives, and emotionally intensified preaching. When these elements circulate within platform environments, religious authority becomes increasingly shaped by the interaction between inherited religious credentials, communicative performance, and digital visibility. The significance of the case therefore lies not in demonstrating that virality produces religious legitimacy, but in showing how digitally mediated visibility creates expanded conditions in which claims to religious authority can be encountered, contested, and negotiated.

The study contributes to digital religion scholarship by clarifying two related analytical dimensions of this transformation. *Performative-mediated authority* provides an interpretive category for understanding how religious authority claims are assembled and publicly performed through the interaction of traditional religious symbols and mediated rhetorical practices. Building on this interpretation, *viral piety* offers an analytical proposition that connects religious performance with intensified platform visibility and the negotiation of authority. This perspective extends existing discussions of digital piety, networked religion, religious influencers, and mediated authority by emphasizing that circulation matters not because visibility itself constitutes legitimacy, but because it changes the communicative conditions under which religious claims enter public religious discourse. This distinction also makes the Indonesian case relevant to broader international debates on how culturally specific forms of religious authority interact with increasingly transnational infrastructures of digital visibility.

These findings underscore the importance of digital religious literacy for audiences and religious institutions navigating environments in which scholarly expertise, institutional recognition, spiritual lineage, charismatic performance, and platform visibility may coexist and compete for attention. Religious institutions and educational actors therefore need to engage digital religion not merely as a matter of online presence, but as a changing environment for evaluating religious knowledge and authority.

Future research should examine larger and more diverse corpora across YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, trace the temporal and cross-platform circulation of religious content, and incorporate audience-reception data to determine how visibility is interpreted as support, curiosity, criticism, contestation, or other forms of engagement. Comparative studies across religious traditions and national contexts would further test the analytical reach and contextual limits of *viral piety*. Ultimately, digital platforms do not simply transfer religious authority into new media spaces; they reshape the conditions under which authority becomes visible, circulates, and is publicly negotiated.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly and QuillBot solely to improve grammar, clarity, readability, and linguistic consistency. These tools were not used for conceptualization, data generation or analysis, interpretation of findings, or development of the study's arguments and conclusions. All AI-assisted suggestions were critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the originality, integrity, accuracy, and academic content of the manuscript.

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