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Algorithmic Piety and the Reconfiguration of Islamic Authority: Humor, Mobilization, and Digital Dakwah in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how the algorithmic logics of Instagram are reshaping Islamic religious authority in Indonesia, with particular attention to the role of humor as a vehicle of contemporary dakwah. While much of the literature on digital dakwah celebrates humor and creative communication as legitimate adaptations of Islamic preaching, this study offers a more critical reading: the visibility of religious figures on digital platforms is not a function of their depth of knowledge or sanad, but of their compatibility with those platforms' optimization metrics. Drawing on a netnographic analysis of 1,567 Instagram posts from three contrasting figures — Habib Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar (digital-native humor-intellectual preacher), Felix Siauw (mobilization-through-moral-salience preacher), and KH. Bahauddin Nursalim or Gus Baha (traditional pesantren scholar, mediated through the @gayengco account) — the analysis reveals a striking asymmetry: Habib Ja'far's median post receives roughly 52 times as many likes as Gus Baha's, and his median video receives 88 times as many plays. The article advances and applies the concept of algorithmic piety, which differs analytically from digital religion (a field of study) and networked religion (focused on what communities do with platforms) by naming what platforms do to religious communities: a regime in which engagement-optimised algorithms preferentially amplify content through three interlocking mechanisms — moral arousal, durational compression, and friction-free shareability — that gradually reshape what counts as authoritative, visible, and legitimate. Three templates of algorithmic piety are identified: humor-intellectual (Habib Ja'far), mobilization-through-moral-salience (Felix Siauw), and traditional-marginal (Gus Baha). The findings suggest that the celebrated democratization of religious voice via digital platforms simultaneously enacts a more subtle centralization — not in the hands of ulama, but in the opaque hands of recommendation algorithms.

1. Introduction

On a Monday afternoon in mid-January 2026, a 47-second Instagram Reel uploaded by Habib Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar—captioned "At Least, Kita Berbeda Tapi Bersama. Stak!" and drawn from his appearance on Deddy Corbuzier's podcast Close The Door—accumulated more than 25 million plays and 1.9 million likes within months of upload. The clip captures a moment of warm, intelligent banter on the theme of being different yet together. On the same platform, in the same week, the account @gayengco—which disseminates excerpts of pengajian by KH. Bahauddin Nursalim, popularly known as Gus Baha and operates with explicit authorization from his family and the Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar network (Rohmatulloh, As'ad, & Malayati, 2022; Hefner, 2021) posted eight clips that together attracted a tiny fraction of that engagement. The asymmetry is jarring. Gus Baha's classical mastery of tafsir, hadith, and Arabic grammar is not in question; his ijazah and silsilah link him directly to one of Indonesia's most revered ulama, the late Mbah Maimoen Zubair, under whose tutelage at Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar Sarang he completed advanced study across hadith, fiqh, and Qur'anic exegesis (Rohmatulloh, As'ad, & Malayati, 2022)—precisely the kind of genealogically-anchored, transmission-based authority that Alatas (2021) identifies as constitutive of the dominant articulatory mode within the NU pesantren ecosystem. Yet on Instagram, his digital footprint is dwarfed not only by Habib Ja'far—who, while serious in his own right, has cultivated a comedic-intellectual style attuned to the rhythms of digital youth culture

(Akmaliah, 2020a; Slama, 2017)—but also by Felix Siauw, a former Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) ideologue (Fealy, 2010; Osman, 2018) whose contemporary content veers between fiqh micro-lessons, business motivation, and sharp geopolitical commentary.

Why does this asymmetry exist, and what does it tell us about Islamic religious authority in contemporary Indonesia? The dominant narrative—articulated by both academic scholars (e.g., Hew, 2018; Slama, 2017; Nisa, 2018) and the preachers themselves (e.g., Qudratullah et al., 2025)—frames the rise of stand-up dakwah, humor-based preaching, and digital religious content as a creative ijtihad: a contextual adaptation of Islamic preaching to the communicative habits of younger generations, drawing legitimacy from prophetic precedent and from the long Indonesian tradition of fusing Islam with local cultural forms (most famously by the Wali Songo). On this reading, the success of figures like Habib Ja'far is a story of democratization: Islam, once mediated primarily by formally trained ulama and the institutional infrastructure of pesantren and madrasah, has become more accessible, more relatable, and —crucially—more participatory.

This article advances a different reading. Without denying the genuine pedagogical value that figures like Habib Ja'far bring to public discourse, the argument here is that the celebratory framing of digital dakwah systematically misses a structural fact: the platforms on which contemporary Islamic communication unfolds are not neutral conduits, and their algorithmic logics are not indifferent to the kind of religious content they circulate. What looks like the natural triumph of an engaging, contextually attuned preaching style over outdated formats is, on closer inspection, a contest stacked from the start —one in which optimization for short-form video, emotional valence, recognizable faces, and rapid hooks privileges certain kinds of religious speech over others. The classical scholar who speaks for forty minutes in measured Javanese-inflected prose, layering tafsir over fiqh over Arabic etymology, is not losing a fair competition to the Reels-savvy habib. He is competing in a game whose rules he did not write and which his form of authority cannot win without being dismantled. Where existing literature has mapped how new religious actors emerge through digital comedy and entertainment (Echchaibi, 2011; El Naggar, 2018; Thonnart, 2023; Michael, 2013), the focus here shifts to the algorithmic infrastructure that conditions such emergence: not who speaks, but what the speaking platform makes possible to be heard. Bunt's (2018, 2024) coinage of the authority algorithm gestures toward this infrastructural turn but treats algorithmic mediation as a metaphor for cumulative cultural influence rather than as a quantifiable structural mechanism — a gap this article addresses empirically.

The term proposed for this regime is algorithmic piety: the mechanism by which platform optimization gradually reshapes what counts as authoritative, visible, and legitimate within Muslim publics. The concept is analytically distinct from two adjacent terms in the digital religion literature. Digital religion, as theorized by Campbell (2015) and elaborated by Campbell and Evolvi (2020), describes the broad field of inquiry into how religious practice has become embedded in online and offline contexts; it is a field of study, not an analytical tool for describing how platforms shape piety. Networked religion (Campbell 2012) describes how religious communities use digital networks to extend their reach and negotiate authority, emphasizing user agency in appropriating technology. Algorithmic piety, by contrast, names

what platforms do to religious communities: where Nisa (2018) observes that visibility has become a component of religious authority, and Asriadi et al. (2025) document five forms of digital piety produced through algorithmic mechanisms such as confirmation bias and echo chambers, algorithmic piety identifies the underlying logic—platform infrastructure does not merely amplify pre-existing piety but actively determines which forms of faith, and which faces of authority, become normative.

A third framework requires explicit demarcation. Lohlker's (2024) algorithm cultures approach, empirically extended in Lohlker and Wahid (2026) through platform mapping of seven digital Islamic figures, offers the closest theoretical neighbor: it treats algorithms as non-human actors that mediate Islamic authority and analyzes how technocultural mediation produces hybrid configurations of legitimacy. The present account shares this premise but diverges in two ways. First, where Lohlker and Wahid map authority through semantic search data (AnswerThePublic) across seven transnational figures, this study draws on engagement-level data from a focused Instagram corpus to pose a distributive question their descriptive frame leaves open: why certain configurations systematically prevail over others. Second, where their analysis remains analytically neutral about the resulting hybridity, algorithmic piety advances a critical claim—that the contest between competing forms of religious authority is structurally tilted in ways that disadvantage the epistemic norms of classical scholarship, regardless of the scholar's actual competence.

Algorithmic piety operates along two interlocking dimensions. First, platform metrics—likes, plays, completion rates, share counts—come to function as proxies for religious legitimacy in the everyday perception of Muslim audiences, particularly younger ones: the figure with millions of followers is presumed to be saying something true; the figure with thousands is presumed marginal. Second, the optimization imperatives of the platform infiltrate the very production of religious content, as dai who wish to be heard increasingly internalize platform logics and structure their utterances accordingly, even when those logics conflict with the epistemic norms of the tradition they claim to transmit.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Religious Authority in the Digital Era

The transformation of religious authority under conditions of mass media has been a central concern of scholars of Islam since at least Eickelman and Anderson’s (1999) influential New Media in the Muslim World. Their core thesis—that the proliferation of cassette sermons, satellite television, and printed pamphlets has fragmented the monopoly previously held by classically trained ulama—has been extended into the internet age across Bunt's quartet (2003, 2009, 2018, 2024), with Hashtag Islam (2018) introducing the notion of the authority algorithm and Islamic Algorithms (2024) extending the concept across a wider survey of contemporary Muslim influencers — including a substantial section on Indonesian figures. Bunt's later work thus moves the field beyond the broadly optimistic register of Eickelman and Anderson (1999), who emphasised democratisation and pluralisation, toward a more guarded recognition that algorithmic mediation actively reshapes religious discourse. Yet even in Bunt

(2024), the analysis remains primarily descriptive and ethnographic, with the algorithm functioning as a metaphor for 'subsets of influences' rather than as a quantifiable distributive mechanism — an empirical and analytical gap this article seeks to address.

Bunt's project finds its most recent collective extension in Rozehnal's (2022) edited volume *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Internet Age*, which assembles fifteen case studies spanning authority, community, piety, and visual representation across Muslim digital landscapes. Three contributions in that volume are particularly germane to the present argument. Bunt's own opening chapter on the "Net Imam Effect" extends his earlier framework by tracing how hashtag practices and platform-specific affordances generate new contestations of religious authority, sharpening but not yet operationalizing the *authority algorithm* he had earlier named. Alatas's Chap. (2022) on a Sufi shaykh in multiple media is more directly consequential: it represents Alatas's own first sustained move into the digital domain that his (2021) monograph had explicitly bracketed, examining how the Bā Alawī figure Habib Luthfi bin Yahya is mediated across print magazines, television, and online platforms. Yet Alatas's analytical attention there remains on the *human* articulatory labor of curators and disciples who manage the shaykh's mediated presence, rather than on the non-human optimization systems through which platform-mediated visibility is unequally distributed — the precise infrastructural layer the present article isolates. Hoesterey's (2022) chapter on religious satire in contemporary Indonesia, meanwhile, documents how online meme cultures associated with NU and Islamist publics weaponize humor in ongoing struggles over Indonesian Islamic public discourse; his analysis establishes humor as a politically consequential modality but, like Qudratullah et al. (2025), treats its circulation as primarily a function of communicative strategy rather than algorithmic format. Taken together, these contributions confirm both the disciplinary maturity of digital Islam scholarship and the specific gap this article addresses: a sustained empirical demonstration of how platform optimization mechanisms — not merely platform availability — systematically redistribute religious authority within a single national context.

In the Indonesian context, this literature has matured into a robust subfield. Hew (2018) examines the rise of celebrity preachers (dai selebritis) in television and social media, with particular attention to Felix Siauw's deliberate construction of a personal brand infrastructure—comprising AlFatih Studio, the Yuk Ngaji community, and the Hijab Alila brand—that was loosely coupled to Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) as a formal institution. Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati (2022) document the parallel response from the traditionalist NU camp through Santri Gayeng — the Rembang-based curatorial collective that manages @gayengco — arguing that its adoption of Indonesian subtitles, professional production, and explicit authorization from Gus Baha's circle constitutes a deliberate 'Da'wah 2.0' counter-strategy to Islamist online preaching. The broader phenomenon of 'new santri' — preachers with limited classical credentials who rise through television and social media — has been mapped by Saat and Burhani (2020), with dedicated chapters on Ustadz Abdul Somad (Hamdani 2020) and on the Pemuda Hijrah movement around Ustadz Hanan Attaki (Akmaliah 2020b), and more recently surveyed within a wider Cyber Islamic Environments framework by Bunt (2024). This article re-examines several of these same figures through an algorithmic lens, shifting the question from who appears online to how unequally the platform

distributes their visibility. Slama (2018) analyzes the affective economies of Islamic Instagram, showing how piety becomes performative and commodified. Nisa (2018) focuses on the female preachers of social media and observes that visibility has itself become a component of religious authority, while Hoesterey (2016) provides a longitudinal study of the rise and fall of Aa Gym as a televisual phenomenon. More recently, Hadiyanto et al. (2025) document how religious moderation is performed on Instagram, and Muthohirin (2025) identifies three competing patterns in online Islamic spaces—scripturalist, popular, and progressive piety—arguing that social media has become a marketplace of competing religious visions. The broader category of Pop Islam, articulated by Fealy and White (2008) and developed by Hasan (2009) captures how Islamic messages are increasingly woven into lifestyle commodities, modest fashion, popular music, and halal consumerism, producing youth publics where faith, aesthetics, and cultural aspiration intersect.

Most directly adjacent to the present argument within this Indonesian-specific literature is Raya's (2025) recent contribution in this journal, which examines the "new space for authority and religious commodification" produced as Indonesian preachers migrate from textual transmission to digital media transmission. Drawing on case studies of preachers from traditional, local (kyai kampung), and celebrity backgrounds, Raya (2025) traces how digital platforms enable preachers to package preaching narratives, expand their business operations, and establish personal trademarks — treating digital media as a space within which preachers actively construct branded religious identities through personal branding, visual aesthetics, and audience segmentation. The framework Raya develops is, in this sense, a *commodification-and-branding* frame: it foregrounds the agency of the preacher as a producer who curates a religious-commercial persona for circulation in a digital marketplace, with platforms figuring as the arena in which such curatorial labor unfolds. The present article advances a complementary but analytically distinct frame — an *algorithmic-infrastructure* frame — that shifts the locus of analytical attention from the preacher's curatorial agency to the platform's structural agency. Where Raya asks how preachers package and commodify religious content for digital distribution, this article asks what the recommender system does to the distribution of religious content *independently* of the preacher's curatorial choices. The two frames address different questions and yield different findings. A commodification-and-branding analysis of Gus Baha would observe, accurately, that he and the Santri Gayeng curators have not constructed the kind of branded persona that drives commercial digital performance — an explanatory move that locates the cause of his marginalization in the absence of effective branding. An algorithmic-infrastructure analysis observes something different: even where curatorial labor *is* exerted (gayengco edits, subtitles, schedules, and brands its 60 gigabytes of pengajian footage with deliberate care), the platform's optimization function still discounts that content by an order of magnitude relative to formats it metabolizes more easily. The 52:1 engagement asymmetry documented in this article cannot be fully accounted for as a branding deficit because the curators' branding labor is itself substantial; what the asymmetry registers is the residual structural pressure exerted by the recommender system on content that resists durational compression and emotional intensification regardless of how it is packaged. The two frames are therefore not in competition. Raya (2025) tracks the labor through which preachers adapt themselves to digital visibility; this article tracks

the structural field within which such adaptation must take place, and the disproportionate cost paid by classical epistemic forms whose constitutive features — duration, layered citation, slow argument — are precisely what algorithmic optimization most consistently filters out.

Beyond this digital-focused literature, Alatas (2021) offers what is arguably the most theoretically developed recent account of religious authority in Indonesian Islam. Through an ethnographic and historical study of Bā ʿAlawī sayyids in Java, Alatas argues that Islamic authority is the contingent outcome of articulatory labor—the ongoing work of connecting a community to the Prophetic past through available conceptual and material infrastructure. Crucially, Alatas insists that "different infrastructures shape divergent contours of hierarchical relationship and open up distinct articulatory possibilities" (Alatas, 2021, p. 6), explicitly anticipating—though not pursuing—the question of what happens when the relevant infrastructure becomes a platform recommendation system: "What infrastructure do they employ? Texts, YouTube, Twitter, Zoom?" (Alatas, 2021, p. 20). Alatas (2022) has himself begun to address this question through a study of Habib Luthfi bin Yahya's mediation across print, television, and online platforms, but his analytical lens there remains fixed on the human curatorial labor that orchestrates such mediation rather than on the non-human optimization systems whose role this article seeks to isolate. The present article takes up precisely this question that Alatas posed but bracketed. Where his analysis maps the labor through which figures like Habib Luthfi Bin Yahya cultivate durable Islamic communities through tombs, congregational centers, Sufi orders, and state alliances, this article asks what becomes of articulatory labor when its dominant infrastructure is no longer a mosque, a manuscript, or a tariqa, but an opaque optimization system that rewards certain affective and formal properties over others.

A parallel literature on Muslim minority contexts has documented the emergence of comedian-preachers as new authoritative figures. El Naggar (2018, 2017) analyzes Baba Ali as a 'homemade televangelist' whose authority derives precisely from the playful informality that traditional ulama eschew. Echchaibi (2011) traces the 'delocalisation of authority' from cassette tapes to video blogs. Most comprehensively, Thonnart (2023) studies four American Muslim 'halal comedians' as 'non-clerical authoritative figures' who participate in the proliferation of religious authority through ethicist comedy, while Michael (2013) maps the trajectories of Muslim American stand-up in this very journal. These works have established that comedy can constitute a legitimate site of religious authority. What they have not asked, and what this article seeks to address, is how the platforms hosting such comedy systematically format which kinds of religious-comedic speech achieve visibility in the first place.

Most directly relevant to the present study, Lohlker and Wahid (2026) have recently advanced an Actor-Network Theory framework for analyzing digital Islamic authority, examining seven authoritative figures —Buya Yahya, Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, Zakir Naik, Mufti Menk, Omar Suleiman, and Nouman Ali Khan—to demonstrate how clerical authority emerges from technocultural mediation in which the cleric becomes simultaneously a figure and a machine-calculated representation validated by audience participation (Lohlker & Wahid, 2026). Their work is significant in two respects: it explicitly theorizes platforms as agential non-human actors, and it documents how authority is now distributed

across websites, recommendation systems, and aesthetic representation rather than residing in individual scholars. Yet Lohlker and Wahid's selection of figures shares a common feature: all seven are already algorithmically visible figures with substantial digital infrastructures (institutes, apps, multi-platform ecosystems). Their analysis maps the *winners* of the digital authority game; it does not address what becomes of scholars whose authority is rooted in classical pesantren transmission but who lack—or refuse—the aesthetic and infrastructural strategies that algorithmic systems reward. Gus Baha presents precisely this case, and his absence from the existing analytical canon (alongside the absence of Habib Ja'far and Felix Siauw, whose digital strategies differ sharply from each other and from Gus Baha's) marks the empirical gap this article addresses.

What unites most of these studies, with the partial exception of Bunt (2018) and Lohlker and Wahid (2026), and what this article seeks to push beyond, is a tendency to treat the platforms themselves as relatively transparent media—channels through which various preachers compete on more or less equal terms, with audiences sorting them according to taste, perceived authenticity, or theological conviction. The platforms are described, but rarely theorized as actors in their own right. Even where Bunt gestures at the authority algorithm and Lohlker and Wahid invoke non-human agency through Actor-Network Theory, neither moves from theoretical recognition to systematic empirical demonstration of how platform architecture distributes visibility unequally across competing modes of religious speech. The dai gains followers; the dai loses followers. The rise of one figure and the marginalization of another is read as an outcome of human choices: communicative skill, charisma, theological positioning. What is rarely asked is whether the architecture of the platform itself systematically advantages certain modes of religious speech over others, regardless of the speakers' intentions or their audiences' theological preferences.

2.2 Platform Studies, Algorithmic Culture, and the AI Turn

A parallel literature in media and communication studies has developed precisely the conceptual tools needed to address this gap. Gillespie (2014, 2018), van Dijck (2013), Bucher (2018), and Striphas (2015) have built a theoretical apparatus for thinking about platforms as sociotechnical systems whose recommendation algorithms, ranking systems, and content moderation policies actively shape the visibility, circulation, and meaning of communicative artifacts. Bucher's notion of the threat of invisibility—the disciplinary power exerted by the possibility that one's content will simply not be shown—captures a structural condition that any contemporary content producer, including religious preachers, must navigate. More technically, Brady et al. (2023) demonstrate experimentally that moral-emotional content evoking harm, care, and injustice spreads significantly further and faster across social media than affectively neutral content, while Boler and Davis (2018) show that affectively intense visual content operates through what they term 'feeling rules' that make certain images culturally compulsory to acknowledge. Rader (2017) further documents how engagement velocity in the first hours after posting triggers Instagram's preferential amplification cascade, structurally privileging content designed to provoke immediate emotional response.

Recent work has begun to bring these tools into conversation with religious studies. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) survey what they call digital religion, while Campbell and Evolvi (2020) review three decades of scholarship and identify four successive waves culminating in a fourth-wave focus on everyday digital practice and the recognition that online and offline religious life must be understood as integrated rather than separate. Yet, as I argue below, this fourth-stage perspective—while indispensable—still treats platforms primarily as media through which integrated practice flows, rather than as actors that actively format which forms of practice can become widely visible. The most recent turn in the field, exemplified by Singler (2017) and Singler and Watts's (2024) Cambridge Companion to Religion and Artificial Intelligence, has begun to examine how AI and machine learning systems are themselves becoming sites of religious negotiation. Algorithmic piety builds on this foundation but redirects attention from what religions think about AI to what platform algorithms actively do to devotional practice.

Within the Indonesian-specific literature, this article enters a conversation already underway. Faiz (2025) documents the 'digital metamorphosis' of HTI-aligned networks following the movement's 2017 dissolution. Aswar (2022) theorizes this from a social movement perspective as a dual strategy of changing the arena of resistance and changing group identity, with Felix Siauw's Yuk Ngaji community explicitly identified as part of HTI's post-dissolution adaptation infrastructure for reaching young audiences. Bibliometric mapping by Samudra et al. (2024) confirms that algorithmic authority in Indonesian Islamic contexts has emerged as a distinct area of scholarly inquiry. SAFEnet's most recent situation report (2026) provides empirical grounding for this scholarly trajectory: Indonesia in 2025 saw a 164% increase in policy-related digital disruptions and the takedown of more than 2.8 million pieces of "negative" content, with platform behaviour shaped by what SAFEnet explicitly names algorithmic censorship—the active filtering and removal of content through the combined operation of state pressure and platform optimisation logics. Yet this body of work has largely focused on what algorithmic systems do to the visibility of religious actors, rather than theorising the mechanism by which platform logic becomes constitutive of devotional form itself, a gap that algorithmic piety is designed to address.

Most recently, Chayka (2024) has synthesized this body of platform-studies work into a unified diagnostic he terms *Filterworld*: the cultural condition produced when algorithmic gatekeepers replace human curators, generating a structural pressure toward what he calls *flattening*—the homogenization and reduction-to-simplicity of content that survives within recommendation systems. Chayka's argument that "the rule of culture in Filterworld is: go viral or die" (Chayka, 2024, p. 49) crystallizes the structural mechanism this article identifies in the religious domain: the marginalization of Gus Baha is not a contingent failure of communication but the predictable outcome of a system in which cultural production that resists *flattening* loses both audience and the financial incentive to continue.

2.3 The Question of Religious Humor

A third strand of scholarship, less well integrated with the first two, concerns religious humor. The classical theories of humor—superiority (Hobbes, Gruner), relief (Freud), incongruity-resolution (Kant, Schopenhauer, Suls)—have been thoroughly catalogued by Mulder and Nijholt (2002). Within Islamic studies specifically, Mir's (1991) pioneering essay Humor in the Qur'an and Tamer's (2009) edited volume

on humor in classical Arabic literature have established that humor is by no means foreign to the Islamic tradition. Rosenthal's (1956) Humor in Early Islam remains a foundational reference. More recently, Schweizer and Molokotos-Liederman's (2022) edited volume Muslims and Humour: Essays on Comedy, Joking and Mirth in Contemporary Islamic Contexts has surveyed contemporary practices, including Abdel-Fadil's (2022) analysis of comedic engagements with extremism. Within Indonesian-specific scholarship, Hoesterey (2022) traces how meme cultures from NU-affiliated and Islamist publics deploy religious satire as political work, demonstrating that humor in Indonesian digital Islam is never merely entertainment but always already a contested mode of public theology — though, as with Qudratullah et al. (2025), the analysis stops short of asking why the algorithm rewards some satirical registers over others.

In Indonesian scholarship, the recent chapter by Qudratullah, Fattah, and Haruna (2025) offers a defense of stand-up dakwah as a contemporary form of dakwah bil hikmah. Their argument is largely apologetic and pedagogical: humor is not only theologically permissible but pragmatically necessary in an era of distracted, mobile audiences. While I share their view that humor is theologically defensible, their analysis remains within the methodological frame of dakwah strategy. It does not ask why some humorous preachers reach millions while equally humorous others remain niche; it does not interrogate the platform architectures that determine which humor circulates.

The argument of this article, then, is positioned as both an extension of and a corrective to existing scholarship. With the digital-religion literature, I take seriously the disruptive significance of online communication. With the platform-studies literature, I insist that platforms are actors. With the humor literature, I acknowledge the legitimacy and effectiveness of religious humor, but insist that not all humor is created equal in the eyes of the algorithm—and that the same is true for non-humorous content.

2.4 Historical Context: Three Disruptions of Indonesian Islamic Authority

The literature reviewed above describes a global pattern of digital transformation in religious authority. To understand how this pattern manifests in Indonesia specifically, the present moment must be situated within a longer historical trajectory in which the current algorithmic disruption represents the third—not the first—major reconfiguration of religious authority in the archipelago.

To grasp what is at stake in the digital turn, it helps to view it as the third in a series of disruptions to Indonesian Islamic authority. The first disruption was the long-standing dominance of the pesantren-based ulama complex, organized around recognized lineages of transmission (sanad) and authorized through ijazah granted by acknowledged masters. As Alatas (2021) demonstrates through his study of the Bā ʿAlawī tradition, this mode of authority was sustained by an elaborate ensemble of conceptual and material infrastructure—genealogies (silsila, nasab), texts (kitab kuning), congregational centers, ritual practices, and pilgrimage networks—through which connections to the Prophetic past were continuously labored into being. Authority, on Alatas's account, was never simply possessed; it was articulated through ongoing relational work anchored to specific infrastructures. This system, deeply

rooted in the institutional matrix of Nahdlatul Ulama (founded 1926) and Muhammadiyah (1912), was relatively stable from the early twentieth century through the 1970s. Authority was personal, embodied, and tied to demonstrated mastery of classical texts. Even reformist challengers, who sought to bypass certain forms of taqlid, did so by appealing to the same epistemic universe of textual authority.

The second disruption arrived with broadcast media, particularly the explosive growth of radio and television preaching from the 1980s onward. The figure of KH. Zainuddin MZ, often called the dai sejuta umat (preacher of a million followers), exemplified this moment. Zainuddin retained classical training but adapted its delivery to mass-media formats, incorporating Betawi humor, dramatic narrative, and the rhythms of popular performance. Critically, however, the broadcast era still operated within a relatively centralized media economy: a limited number of TV channels and radio stations curated which preachers reached the public. The gatekeepers were producers, station managers, and ultimately the regulatory regime of the Suharto state. Authority was being commercialized and aestheticized, but it was not yet algorithmically governed.

The third disruption is the present one. Beginning seriously around 2010 with the popularization of YouTube, accelerated by Instagram's rise after 2015, and intensified by TikTok's algorithmic feed since 2018, religious authority in Indonesia is now being reconstituted under platform logics. The crucial difference is not just that more people can speak—Eickelman and Anderson saw this coming a quarter century ago—but that what determines which speech reaches whom is no longer a human gatekeeper applying institutional or commercial criteria, but a recommendation system optimizing for engagement. The algorithm is, in some loose sense, the new gatekeeper. But it is a gatekeeper of a peculiar kind: opaque, agnostic to theological content, attuned to behavioral signals that have little or no correlation with religious validity.

This third disruption coexists with, rather than replaces, the previous two. NU and Muhammadiyah retain enormous institutional power. Television preachers still operate. But the symbolic and demographic weight of religious life has shifted decisively toward digital platforms, particularly for Indonesians under forty. According to APJII (2024) data, approximately 78% of Indonesian internet users access Instagram, with the heaviest use concentrated in the 18–34 age cohort that is also the prime audience for religious content. To say that someone is a major dai today without specifying that they are a major dai on Instagram or TikTok is increasingly to mistake nostalgia for description.

What this article documents is the precise mechanism by which the third disruption operates—not in the abstract, but in the empirical patterns of three contrasting figures whose Instagram footprints reveal how algorithmic logic systematically favors certain kinds of religious speech.

2.5 Algorithmic Piety: Conceptual Coordinates

The literature reviewed above provides both the empirical terrain and the conceptual resources within which the present argument is positioned. *Algorithmic piety* — the central analytic this article develops — names what happens to religious authority when platform recommender systems become its primary

distribution infrastructure: when visibility, reach, and over time form itself, are shaped not by communities or curators but by optimization logics indifferent to religious content.

The concept can be located along two questions. Who shapes religious visibility — humans or platforms? Some frameworks emphasize what people do with technology: communities appropriating digital tools, curators orchestrating mediation, performers blending registers. Others emphasize what technology does to people: how recommendation systems, ranking algorithms, and engagement metrics structure visibility independently of, and sometimes against, human intention. And how religion-specific is the framework? Some accounts theorize dynamics particular to Islamic or religious life. Others diagnose general cultural patterns, with religious cases as one application among many. Mapping the five adjacent frameworks against these two questions reveals where algorithmic piety sits — and why no existing framework occupies the same position.

Campbell's *digital religion* (2015; Campbell and Tsuria 2021) and *networked religion* (2012) sit firmly on the human-agency side. Both are religion-specific, but they treat platforms primarily as media through which religious life flows, not as actors shaping that flow. They describe what religious communities do with platforms. Algorithmic piety reverses the question: what do platforms do to religious communities? The shift is from user appropriation to platform optimization — while remaining grounded in religious specificity.

The literature on *religio-tainment* (El Naggar 2018; Echchaibi 2011; Thonnart 2023) sits in adjacent terrain on both questions. It is religion-specific, with agency distributed between performer and audience, and it documents how comedian-preachers and entertainment-style devotional content have emerged as legitimate sites of religious authority. Algorithmic piety asks a structural question this literature does not pursue: under what conditions do *only certain forms* of religio-tainment become widely visible while others remain marginal? The marginal forms — including non-entertainment ones whose absence is itself analytically significant — point toward the platform mechanism rather than the performance.

Bunt's (2018, 2024) authority algorithm is the closest precursor on the platform-agency axis. It shares the recognition that platform infrastructure — not merely platform availability — actively reshapes religious discourse. The term, however, gestures toward a mechanism Bunt's ethnographic survey does not isolate; even in Islamic Algorithms (Bunt 2024), which surveys Indonesian influencers including Hanan Attaki, Felix Siauw, Adi Hidayat, and Ustadz Abdul Somad, the algorithm remains a metaphor for cumulative cultural influence rather than a measurable distributive mechanism. Algorithmic piety specifies what the authority algorithm names: a triple amplification mechanism demonstrated through quantified engagement asymmetries within a single national context — the precise content of which the empirical analysis in Section 5 unpacks.

The most consequential demarcation concerns Alatas's (2021) framework of *articulatory labor*, given its theoretical depth and Indonesian focus. Alatas argues that religious authority is produced through ongoing labor connecting communities to the Prophetic past via available infrastructures. These infrastructures, drawing on Latour, both enable transmission and "transform, translate, distort, and

modify" what they carry (Alatas, 2021, p. 6). Algorithmic piety extends this infrastructural sensibility into a domain Alatas brackets. Where Alatas studies the human articulatory labor of curators, disciples, and shaykhs, algorithmic piety asks what happens when much of the infrastructural work is done by non-human optimization systems. Their objective functions are indifferent to the Prophetic past that articulatory labor seeks to make present. The labor of articulation continues, but it now unfolds within a structural field whose contours are set, in part, by recommendation algorithms.

Chayka's (2024) *Filterworld* offers the diagnostic vocabulary algorithmic piety inherits and extends — but operates at the opposite pole on the second question. It is platform-agency centered yet domain-agnostic. Chayka argues that algorithmic gatekeepers produce a structural pressure toward *flattening*: the homogenization of cultural production that survives in recommendation systems. Creators must conform to *templates* the algorithm rewards or accept marginalization. The diagnostic, however, does not distinguish among domains. When a café conforms to the global Instagram aesthetic, what is lost is aesthetic distinctiveness. Algorithmic piety extends the diagnostic into terrain Chayka does not address: when classical Islamic exposition cannot fit the templates Filterworld provides, what is lost is an entire mode of epistemic transmission — one whose legitimacy depends on continuity with the Prophetic past, not on contemporary cultural appeal. Chayka's mechanism is necessary but not sufficient. Algorithmic piety names what flattening becomes when the tradition being flattened is one whose epistemic norms depend on resisting precisely the compression the platform rewards.

Algorithmic piety, then, occupies a coordinate no existing framework has fully claimed: maximally platform-agency centered (like Filterworld, beyond Bunt) and maximally religion-specific (like articulatory labor, beyond Campbell). It names what existing literature has gestured toward but not systematically demonstrated: the mechanism by which platform optimization redistributes religious authority unequally across competing modes of religious speech. How this mechanism manifests in the engagement asymmetries between three contrasting Indonesian preachers — and what its operation reveals about the trajectory of Indonesian Islamic authority — is the empirical question to which this article now turns.

3. Methodology

3.1 Netnographic Approach

The study adopts a netnographic methodology following Kozinets (2020). Netnography is a qualitative–quantitative approach to digital traces that combines systematic data collection with the interpretive sensibility of ethnography. It is well suited to the present inquiry because it enables both pattern detection across a large corpus of posts and close reading of individual artefacts. Three principles of netnographic rigor guided the study throughout: data were collected only from publicly accessible accounts; figures were identified by their publicly known names; and interpretations were anchored, where possible, in specific and traceable posts.

3.2 Case Selection

Three Indonesian Islamic figures were selected to capture contrasting modes of digital dakwah. First, Habib Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar (b. 1988; @husein_hadar) is a Sayyid intellectual with doctoral training in Islamic philosophy whose public persona combines humour, theological literacy, and interfaith accessibility. Closely associated with the podcast *Login*, he situates his digital presence within inherited Hadrami authority through his identification as a "penyambung lidah" of Habib Jindan. Second, Felix Siauw (b. 1984) is an ethnic-Chinese convert to Islam and former Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia affiliate who has successfully repositioned himself as a digital-first preacher. His content blends fiqh micro-lessons, entrepreneurial motivation, and politically charged commentary, especially on Palestine and global Muslim affairs. His trajectory exemplifies the authority shift analysed here: from controversial cleric in earlier scholarship to highly platform-adapted producer in the present dataset. Third, KH. Bahauddin Nursalim (b. 1970), widely known as Gus Baha, is a leading traditional scholar and disciple of KH. Maimoen Zubair, recognised for mastery of tafsir, hadith, and Arabic philology. Reluctant to cultivate a personal media presence, his Instagram visibility is mediated through @gayengco — a formally independent but authorized curatorial account (Rohmatulloh, As'ad, & Malayati, 2022). This mediated presence is analytically significant, reflecting how classical authority enters platform ecosystems indirectly. These cases were selected not for representativeness but for analytical contrast. As extreme cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006), they illuminate three competing pathways through which Islamic authority is being reconfigured under contemporary digital conditions.

3.3 Data Collection and Preparation

Instagram post data were collected via a public web-scraping service in late April 2026. The collection covered all posts publicly visible on each account within the chosen window. For Habib Ja'far, the window was November 19, 2024, through April 29, 2026 (n = 667 posts). For Felix Siauw, the window was January 16, 2024, through April 30, 2026 (n = 497). For Santri Gayeng (Gus Baha), the window was January 1, 2024, through April 30, 2026 (n = 403). The total corpus comprises 1,567 posts.

For each post, the following fields were retained for analysis: post type (image, video/reel, sidecar/carousel), timestamp, caption text, hashtags, mentions, video duration where applicable, total likes, total comments, video play count where available, and the URL of the post for reference and possible re-examination. All numeric fields were normalized; timestamps were converted to UTC and supplementary fields for hour-of-day in Western Indonesian time (WIB, GMT + 7) were derived for cadence analysis.

3.4 Analytic Strategy

The analysis proceeded along four strategies that together produced the quantitative figures in Sections 4.1–4.3. First, distributional analysis characterized each account through medians, interquartile ranges, and Lorenz-style cumulative curves of engagement concentration. The headline ratios in Section 4.1 (52:1 for likes, 88:1 for video plays) are direct ratios of medians across all eligible posts in each account's window.

Second, format-correlate analysis examined how video duration and caption structure relate to engagement. Each video post was assigned to one of five duration buckets (< 30s, 30–60s, 60–90s, 90–120s, 120–180s), with median likes computed per bucket per account. The Pearson correlations reported in Section 4.2.1 (r = − 0.13 for Habib Ja'far and Gus Baha; r = + 0.04 for Felix Siauw) were calculated between raw duration in seconds and raw like count, video posts only. Cadence figures in Section 4.2.2 were derived by aggregating posts into monthly windows and 24 hour-of-day buckets on WIB-converted timestamps; the "15-fold increase" for Felix Siauw compares his first and most recent 30 days in the dataset window. Caption and hashtag statistics in Section 4.2.3 were computed after standard text cleaning, with hashtags extracted by regular expression match.

Third, thematic mapping employed a keyword-based multi-label classification of caption text against a custom dictionary of eight categories relevant to Indonesian Islamic discourse (Politik & Geopolitik, Ibadah & Fikih, Akhlak & Tasawuf, Toleransi & Kebangsaan, Keluarga & Gender, Cinta Nabi & Habaib, Pop Culture & Selebritas, and Tradisi Pesantren; full keyword lists in Appendix A). Classification used whole-word regular expression matching on lower-cased text; a post was assigned to any category whose keywords matched, allowing assignment to multiple categories simultaneously, which is why category counts within an account can exceed total post count. The median likes per category in Section 4.3 (Fig. 4) were computed only over posts assigned to that category within that account.

Fourth, qualitative close reading of the top-five most-liked posts in each account triangulated the quantitative findings with attention to framing and rhetorical strategy. The reach-versus-engagement-rate scatter (Fig. 5) was built for video posts only, with engagement rate defined as (likes ÷ plays) × 100 and plays on a logarithmic axis. Computation pipelines are available from the corresponding author on request.

3.5 Limitations and Reflexivity

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study relies on publicly visible Instagram metrics such as likes, comments, and play counts. These capture outcomes of platform distribution but not the internal recommendation signals that shape visibility, including watch time, retention, skip behaviour, or secondary circulation. The analysis therefore infers algorithmic effects indirectly from observable engagement patterns rather than from direct access to ranking mechanisms. Second, the keyword-based classification was adopted for transparency and replicability across a large corpus. However, dictionary coding necessarily reduces semantic nuance. Some posts may be misclassified, and category boundaries reflect analytical judgment. The thematic findings should therefore be read as indicative patterns rather than exact semantic measures. Third, the comparative design includes both personal creator accounts (Habib Ja’far and Felix Siauw) and a mediated third-party account (@gayengco) representing Gus Baha. This creates asymmetries in authorship, branding, and audience formation, while also reflecting how traditional scholarly authority enters platform ecosystems. Future research may extend the comparison through additional official and community-managed accounts. Finally, the article adopts a critical perspective on platformed visibility and its implications for religious authority. This

stance is stated explicitly as a matter of reflexive transparency. Nevertheless, the descriptive patterns reported here remain grounded in publicly traceable empirical data.

4. Findings

The empirical analysis is organized around three analytic axes that move from the most surface-level pattern to the most structural. Section 4.1 documents the gross asymmetry of visibility across the three accounts. Section 4.2 traces how this asymmetry is mediated by the formatting properties that the platform rewards. Section 4.3 demonstrates how, beyond format, the algorithm also shapes which topics achieve circulation within each account.

4.1 The Asymmetry of Visibility

Across nearly any reasonable measure, the three accounts inhabit dramatically different orders of magnitude in the attention economy of Indonesian Islamic Instagram. Figure 1 displays the median likes per post (left panel) on a logarithmic scale, alongside the full distribution of likes (right panel) for all posts in the dataset.

Habib Ja'far's median post receives 69,780 likes; Felix Siauw's, 16,132; Gus Baha's, 1,335. Restated as multiples: Habib Ja'far's typical post is approximately 4.3 times more visible than Felix Siauw's and approximately 52 times more visible than Gus Baha's. The boxplot in panel (b) confirms that this is not driven by outliers: the entire distribution of Habib Ja'far's posts sits substantially above Felix Siauw's, which in turn sits substantially above Gus Baha's. Even Gus Baha's most viral post in the entire dataset (17,236 likes) does not reach the median of Habib Ja'far's (69,780) or Felix Siauw's (16,132).

When we shift to video plays — a metric that captures the algorithm's active distribution work rather than just users' active engagement — the asymmetry sharpens. Habib Ja'far's median video receives 1,559,885 plays; Felix Siauw's, 279,558; Gus Baha's, 17,720. The Habib Ja'far / Gus Baha plays ratio is approximately 88:1. Habib Ja'far's single most-liked post in the entire dataset (2,530,182 likes) is a meditation on the Prophet Muhammad; for context, this single post exceeds the combined likes of Gus Baha's entire 403-post archive several times over. The order is, importantly, not a comparison of scholarly weight within the Islamic tradition. Within the NU pesantren ecosystem, Gus Baha is unambiguously the most authoritative — having written, taught, examined ijazah, and trained students in the classical disciplines for decades, none of which Felix Siauw has done. Yet on Instagram, the order is inverted to a near-vertiginous degree.

4.2 The Formatting Power of Platform Logic

Three structural patterns illustrate this formatting power: duration, posting cadence, and caption-hashtag architecture.

4.2.1 Duration

Figure 2 plots median likes by video duration bucket for each of the three accounts (panel a) alongside the cumulative concentration of attention within each account (panel b).

For Habib Ja'far, videos under 30 seconds receive a median of 79,178 likes, while videos of 120–180 seconds receive a median of 23,074 — a roughly 3.4-fold drop within a single account. For Gus Baha, short videos perform poorly relative to mid-length content (n = 10 in the under-30-second bucket), and the longer-form excerpts that gayengco extracts from full pengajian sermons cluster in the 30–60 and 120–180 second ranges. The correlation between duration and likes is significantly negative for both Habib Ja'far ($r = -0.13$) and Gus Baha ($r = -0.13$). For Felix Siauw, the correlation is essentially flat ($r = +0.04$), masking a bimodal pattern: very short clips (< 30s) reach a median of 22,233 likes, mid-length content underperforms, and longer-form rants on geopolitical themes (120–180s) achieve the highest median engagement of any Felix bucket (41,680 likes).

The median video duration mirrors these dynamics. Habib Ja'far's median video runs 52.5 seconds — the shortest of the three. Felix Siauw's runs 64.7 seconds. Gus Baha's runs 75.7 seconds, partly because gayengco edits down longer pengajian recordings to fit Reel constraints but cannot compress further without losing substantive content.

Panel (b) of Fig. 2 displays the cumulative concentration of likes within each account. The top 10% of posts captures 49.2% of all likes for Felix Siauw, 47.1% for Habib Ja'far, and 35.5% for Gus Baha. Felix Siauw shows the most concentrated distribution, indicating a hit-driven dynamic in which a minority of viral political posts carry the entire account. Gus Baha's distribution is the most equal of the three.

4.2.2 Posting Cadence

Figure 3 displays the posting cadence over time and the time-of-day distribution.

Habib Ja'far averages 1.27 posts per day (8.9 per week); Felix Siauw, 0.60 (4.2/week); Gus Baha, 0.47 (3.3/week). The temporal trajectory is more revealing than the average. Felix Siauw's monthly volume has intensified dramatically, from approximately 3 posts in his first 30 days of the dataset window to 45 posts in his most recent 30 days — a 15-fold increase. Habib Ja'far began at high intensity and shows a more variable pattern with a notable spike in early 2025 (115 posts in March 2025 alone). Gus Baha's account shows the opposite trajectory: a gradual decline from 26 posts in the first 30 days to 21 in the last.

Posting time also varies sharply. Habib Ja'far and Felix Siauw distribute posts broadly across the day, with Felix Siauw peaking at 19:00 WIB. Gus Baha (via gayengco) shows a far more concentrated distribution, with 76.9% of all posts appearing in a tight 18:00–20:00 WIB window — nearly half of all posts in the single 19:00 hour alone. While this could reflect deliberate post-Maghrib targeting, the extreme concentration is more consistent with a less optimized scheduling regime: posting bunched at convenient hours rather than systematically spread across the platform's circadian engagement curve.

4.2.3 Caption Architecture and Hashtag Strategy

Captions and hashtags do additional work in the platform's discoverability machinery. Habib Ja'far's median caption runs to 21 words and 143 characters; Felix Siauw's, 45 words and 308 characters; Gus Baha's, 12 words and 94 characters. Habib Ja'far uses 239 hashtag instances, with leading tags including #NipponPaint (10 instances), #NPBestInClass (10), #NPSignature (5), and #SentuhanWarnaBaru (5) — commercial sponsorship hashtags for the paint brand Nippon Paint. Felix Siauw's 393 hashtag instances are more eclectic, dominated by self-branded tags (#KitaSharingLagi: 25; #felixsiauw: 15) alongside #HeritageOfOttoman (14) and collaborations such as #raymondchin (10). Gus Baha's 601 hashtag instances are minimal in vocabulary, dominated by #gusbaha (280) and #santrigayeng (279) — self-referential identifiers without commercial partnership.

4.3 The Thematic Incentives of the Algorithm

Beyond format, the algorithm shapes what religious content gets said. Figure 4 displays the median likes per post for each thematic category in each account. Categories were operationalized through keyword matching on caption text; a single post can fall into multiple categories.

For Habib Ja'far, the highest-performing category is Tradisi Pesantren (119,514 median likes, n = 51) — pesantren-tradition content drawing on classical texts and ulama — followed by Cinta Nabi & Habaib (103,493, n = 147), Keluarga & Gender (101,639, n = 111), and Akhlak & Tasawuf (99,085, n = 32). Toleransi & Kebangsaan reaches 82,443 likes (n = 100) and Politik & Geopolitik 67,460 (n = 36), while Ibadah & Fikih trails at 34,905 (n = 64) — less than a third of his top category's engagement despite a substantial post count.

For Felix Siauw, the pattern is different but equally consistent. His best-performing categories are Toleransi & Kebangsaan (34,489, n = 92) and Politik & Geopolitik (27,754, n = 106), followed by Keluarga & Gender (14,506, n = 122), Akhlak & Tasawuf (14,363, n = 19), and Tradisi Pesantren (10,668, n = 49) — all well above his Ibadah & Fikih content (9,146, n = 77). His top single post in the entire dataset (857,909 likes) critiques Donald Trump's invocation of peace while bombing Iran; his second-top non-personal post critiques regional recognition of Israel. Cinta Nabi content reaches only 5,934 median likes for Felix Siauw — the lowest of any of his categories, and orders of magnitude below Habib Ja'far's engagement on the same theme (103,493).

For Gus Baha, the categorical pattern documents marginalization across the board. Tradisi Pesantren dominates his archive (n = 331) — the substantive theological content for which he is most celebrated within santri culture — yet reaches only 1,496 median likes. Cinta Nabi & Habaib (1,450, n = 39), Akhlak & Tasawuf (1,443, n = 22), Keluarga & Gender (1,664, n = 28), Ibadah & Fikih (1,410, n = 30), and Politik & Geopolitik (1,191, n = 4) all cluster within a similarly narrow band, with Toleransi & Kebangsaan (483, n = 4) the sole outlier below it — a category with too few posts to sustain interpretation. Even his highest single-category median — Keluarga & Gender at 1,664 — does not reach 2,000 likes; none of his categories crosses 5,000. The algorithm rewards no Gus Baha category with the kind of viral lift it routinely confers on comparable content from either of the other two accounts.

4.3.1 Reach versus Engagement Rate

Figure 5 plots, for every video post in the corpus, absolute reach (plays, log scale) against engagement rate (likes per play, expressed as a percentage).

The three accounts occupy strikingly distinct regions of this space. Gus Baha's posts cluster in the upper-left: 96.8% of his videos receive fewer than 100,000 plays, and the median engagement rate is 8.6% (interquartile range 7.4–9.5%). Habib Ja'far's posts cluster in the lower-right: 74.8% of his videos receive over 1,000,000 plays, with the median engagement rate at 3.5% (interquartile range 1.9–5.3%). Felix Siauw's cluster bridges the two regions, with median plays of 279,558 and a median engagement rate of 5.8% (interquartile range 4.0–7.5%).

5. Discussion

5.1 The Triple Mechanism of Algorithmic Amplification

By *algorithmic amplification* I refer to the process through which platform recommender systems selectively elevate the visibility and reach of certain content while suppressing others — not as a neutral aggregation of user preferences but as a systemic property of how engagement-optimised algorithms operate. Three interlocking mechanisms drive this process.

The first mechanism is moral arousal — a condition in which emotional responses are triggered when content activates widely shared moral intuitions around harm, injustice, care, and loyalty (Haidt 2012; Brady et al. 2023). Content activating these intuitions provokes an immediate evaluative response that converts passive consumption into active participation within the critical first hours after posting, precisely the window in which Instagram's ranking logic assigns distributional weight (Rader 2017). Figure 4 makes this mechanism visible across all three accounts with unusual clarity because the design holds confound constant. Felix Siauw's two best-performing categories are Toleransi & Kebangsaan (34,489 median likes, n = 92) and Politik & Geopolitik (27,754, n = 106) — roughly 3–4 times the engagement of his Ibadah & Fikih content (9,146, n = 77). His single most-liked post (857,909 likes) critiques Donald Trump's invocation of peace while bombing Iran; his second top non-personal post critiques regional recognition of Israel. Same preacher, same ideological framework, same follower base: what varies is exclusively the emotional register activated — precisely the pattern Brady et al. (2023) predict.

The same logic explains Habib Ja'far's engagement architecture. His highest-performing category is Tradisi Pesantren (119,514 median likes, n = 51), followed by Cinta Nabi & Habaib (103,493, n = 147), Keluarga & Gender (101,639, n = 111), Akhlak & Tasawuf (99,085, n = 32), and Toleransi & Kebangsaan (82,443, n = 100) — all substantially above his Ibadah & Fikih content (34,905, n = 64), less than a third of his top category despite a substantial post count. Devotional love, collective religious identity, care in the

register of national belonging: each operates through a different affective channel, but all generate the immediate, legible moral-emotional response the algorithm rewards. Detailed jurisprudence does not.

The Gus Baha data provide the sharpest test. Tradisi Pesantren dominates his archive (n = 331) yet reaches only 1,496 median likes. No category crosses 2,000; none crosses 5,000. His content does not lack moral seriousness — classical jurisprudence and theology are saturated with ethical argument. What it lacks is immediate affective legibility: the rapid signal of outrage, devotion, or solidarity that triggers engagement in the algorithm's critical window. Gus Baha's content asks audiences to think carefully; the algorithm rewards content that makes them feel immediately.

The second mechanism is durational compression — a condition in which platform optimization systematically rewards shorter content, creating structural pressure to reduce video length regardless of the substantive complexity of the material being communicated (Bucher 2018; Chayka 2024). Figure 2 panel (a) plots median likes by duration bucket and reveals a consistent decay, while panel (b) shows attention concentrating on a small fraction of posts. The negative correlation between video duration and engagement ($r = -0.13$ for both Habib Ja'far and Gus Baha) is the dataset's empirical signature of Instagram's dwell-time logic. Habib Ja'far's videos under 30 seconds receive a median of 79,178 likes; videos over two minutes receive 23,074 — a 3.5-fold drop within a single account. His median video runs 52.5 seconds; Gus Baha's runs 75.7 seconds, longer because @gayengco edits down full *pengajian* recordings but cannot compress further without dismantling the substance of the lecture. The dilemma is structural: classical scholarly preaching — measured exposition, layered citation, careful qualification — does not survive compression into a 30-second clip. What survives is the quotable line, the memorable analogy, the punchline. Bunt (2018, p. 142) documented an early form of this imperative in American imam Suhaib Webb's "snapwas" — religious responses condensed into eight-second Snapchat videos; what Bunt observed as emergent in the mid-2010s, the Reels-era data document as a structurally enforced default. Chayka (2024) generalizes the same dynamic as *flattening*: content that cannot be compressed into platform-legible templates simply ceases to circulate. The cost of curatorial rescue — @gayengco's Rembang-based team segments and subtitles 60 gigabytes of recorded *pengajian* into algorithmically tolerable Reels (Rohmatulloh, As'ad, & Malayati, 2022) — is that the rescued content is no longer the same content.

The third mechanism is friction-free shareability — a condition in which content that requires minimal cognitive effort and carries no contested theological commitment circulates more widely, as platform recommendation systems preferentially amplify material that travels across weakly-tied audiences without generating resistance (Boler & Davis 2018; Brady et al. 2023). Figure 5 documents the reach-versus-engagement-rate trade-off with unusual clarity. Gus Baha's posts cluster in the upper-left: low reach (96.8% under 100,000 plays) but high engagement rate (median 8.6%, IQR 7.4–9.5%) — a small but proportionally devoted audience. This combination is not a consolation prize: a high engagement rate at negligible absolute reach is precisely the signature of content the algorithm has declined to amplify beyond its existing followers, confirming that the platform withholds distributional momentum regardless of audience loyalty. Habib Ja'far's posts cluster in the lower-right: 74.8% over 1,000,000 plays

but median engagement rate of 3.5% (IQR 1.9–5.3%) — the signature of algorithmic broadcast distribution to weakly-tied audiences who reshare without commitment. His tolerance and humor content travels across Muslims and non-Muslims, NU and Muhammadiyah, conservative and progressive viewers, without committing any of them to a contested theological position. Felix Siauw's cluster bridges the two regions (median plays 279,558, engagement rate 5.8%, IQR 4.0–7.5%): his outrage reaches followers reliably but does not achieve comparable cross-cutting shareability. Gus Baha's content faces a different friction: dense classical exposition requires cognitive effort most Instagram users will not commit during a scroll session.

The 52:1 engagement asymmetry between Habib Ja'far and Gus Baha — with Felix Siauw occupying a structurally intermediate position — is the cumulative outcome of all three mechanisms operating simultaneously on content that, by the epistemic norms of classical pesantren scholarship, was never designed to optimize for any of them.

5.2 Three Substantive Effects on Religious Authority

The triple mechanism documented in 5.1 explains how algorithmic amplification produces three substantive effects on Indonesian Islamic public discourse. The first is that visibility substitutes for legitimacy. The 88:1 ratio between Habib Ja'far's and Gus Baha's median video plays inverts the order of authority within the NU pesantren ecosystem, where Gus Baha — through decades of teaching, examining *ijazah*, and training students in classical disciplines — is unambiguously the more authoritative figure. Within the classical Islamic tradition, as Alatas (2021, pp. 110–111) demonstrates, the legitimacy of a religious teacher rests on channels of Prophetic transmission — bloodline (*nasab*), Sufi genealogy (*silsila*), licensed textual mastery (*ijāza*), and peer recognition — infrastructural connections that "facilitate the inheritance of Prophetic teachings and blessings, thereby making [them] a prerequisite of authority" (Alatas, 2021, p. 111). None of these are observable to the average Instagram user. What is observable is follower count, viral frequency, and production quality. The 52:1 engagement asymmetry is not merely a description of distribution; it is a perception machine: a traditional scholar with two thousand followers becomes invisible; a charismatic communicator with two million is presumed authoritative even when classical training is shallow or absent.

The second effect is that engagement metrics approximate a new *ijma'*. Felix Siauw's single critique of Donald Trump accumulated 857,909 likes; classical *ijma'* — the consensus of qualified scholars on a question of law — was a slow, deliberative, credentialed process. The digital simulacrum operates instantaneously and without credentialing. The observation concerns the structure of the act, not the sincerity of the actors: the like is a behavioral trace produced in seconds while scrolling, and aggregating millions of such traces into a metric that resembles consensus performs a kind of semiotic alchemy. The 857,909-like artifact circulates as if it carried the weight of mass affirmation; what it carries is the trace of platform optimization rewarding outrage at injustice as the most reliably amplifiable emotional register.

The third effect is that the three-second hook displaces the *hujjah*. The categorical pattern in Habib Ja'far's account — Tradisi Pesantren at 119,514 median likes and Cinta Nabi & Habaib at 103,493, against Ibadah & Fikih at 34,905 — is the empirical evidence of this displacement. *Hujjah*, in classical Islamic argumentation, is the demonstrative proof: a structured argument from text and reason that compels assent through its logical adequacy, requiring duration — citation, distinction, qualification. The hook, by contrast, is the opening device that captures attention before the user can swipe, requiring compression. Platform incentives push the hook to expand and the *hujjah* to contract until what remains is a sequence of hooks unconnected to any underlying argument. The 3.4:1 ratio between Habib Ja'far's most algorithmically rewarded category (Tradisi Pesantren) and his most jurisprudentially substantive category (Ibadah & Fikih) is the structural signature of this pressure within a single account.

One finding within this pattern deserves particular attention. Habib Ja'far is himself a *sayyid* — a descendant of the Prophet — for whom Cinta Nabi & Habaib content might be expected to constitute his primary algorithmic strength. Yet Tradisi Pesantren outperforms it despite the latter being his most voluminous category (n = 147) against the former's more selective output (n = 51). Two dynamics converge. The volume asymmetry produces diminishing returns: a frequently posted category generates a lower median as the threshold for viral lift rises with audience familiarity. More analytically consequential, the finding suggests that what Habib Ja'far's audience responds to most strongly is not his *nasab* — the genealogical connection to the Prophet that constitutes the infrastructural basis of *habaib* authority within the classical Bā Alawī tradition (Alatas, 2021) — but his capacity to perform and embody *pesantren* scholarly legitimacy. The algorithm rewards not what he *is* by lineage but what he *demonstrates* by learning: the very credential that defines his inherited religious authority is less algorithmically legible than the scholarly competence he has cultivated independently of it.

This same incentive reshapes production itself. Bunt (2018, p. 77) documented an early form in what he called 'cut-and-paste Islam' — materials deployed sometimes by preachers reading texts they have not fully understood. Felix Siauw's 15-fold cadence increase and Gus Baha's categorical ceiling below 5,000 likes are its contemporary empirical signatures. Algorithmic piety is not a charge of bad faith: Habib Ja'far, Felix Siauw, and the Santri Gayeng curators are by all available evidence sincere actors doing the best they can within an environment they did not design. The critique is aimed at the structure — what happens when a tradition built on patience, transmission, and detailed exposition is asked to compete in an attention market built on speed, novelty, and emotional arousal.

5.3 Three Templates of Algorithmic Piety

The three figures examined in this study do not represent free-standing communicative choices but the limited templates Filterworld makes available for Indonesian Islamic religious speech. Chayka (2024) argues that algorithmic feeds actively prescribe the categories within which production becomes legible to the recommendation system; creators who do not fit must reformat, accept marginalization, or disappear. The 52:1 visibility asymmetry, the durational compression pattern, the categorical concentration of engagement, and the cadence trajectories together describe precisely this: not independent strategies competing on equal terms but structurally distinct settlements with the same

algorithmic field — humor-intellectual (Habib Ja'far), mobilization-through-moral-salience (Felix Siauw), and traditional-marginal (Gus Baha via @gayengco). A fourth possibility — unmediated transmission of classical *pesantren* scholarship in its native duration, register, and density — is not a template Filterworld offers.

Each template differs sharply in what it preserves and what it sacrifices. The humor-intellectual mode retains substantial classical content but reformats it through humor, narrative warmth, and pop-cultural intertextuality — achieving wide reach (median 69,780 likes, video median 1,559,885 plays) at the cost of compression and topical selection. Humor here functions both as a substantive theological resource (Mir 1991; Tamer 2009; Schweizer and Molokotos-Liederman 2022) and as a platform-compatible compression mechanism, precisely the dual function Echchaibi (2011) identifies in the delocalisation of Islamic authority through entertainment registers. The mobilization-through-moral-salience mode drifts toward politicization at the expense of ritual and ethical detail — Politik & Geopolitik at 27,754 median likes against Ibadah & Fikih at 9,146 — with the 15-fold cadence increase in Fig. 3 suggesting an account that has learned, through observation of its own performance, that volume of moral-emotional content pays off (Brady et al. 2023). Crucially, Felix Siauw's highest-performing category is not Politik & Geopolitik but Toleransi & Kebangsaan (34,489, n = 92), whose moral register is national solidarity rather than outrage — consistent with Chayka's (2024) argument that Filterworld rewards content legible to the widest possible weakly-tied audience. What the algorithm rewards is not outrage per se but moral stakes claimable across the widest possible audience — hence the label mobilization-through-moral-salience rather than mobilization-through-outrage.

The traditional-marginal mode preserves classical exposition through curatorial intermediaries at dramatically reduced reach (median 1,335 likes, no category crossing 5,000) — and even this preservation is partial, as @gayengco's edits necessarily compromise the durational form on which classical teaching depends (Rohmatulloh, As'ad, & Malayati, 2022). The invisibility of classical *pesantren* content is not a function of its absence. Tradisi Pesantren is present in all three accounts — it is Gus Baha's most voluminous category (n = 331) and simultaneously Habib Ja'far's highest-performing one (119,514 median likes, n = 51). What differs is not the content but the affective register in which it arrives. The 80:1 engagement gap between them on the same category is the most precise demonstration in this dataset of what algorithmic infrastructure does to classical religious knowledge: it does not erase it, but systematically filters out the form in which that knowledge is most authentically transmitted. One pattern within this template is worth noting with appropriate caution. Gus Baha's Toleransi & Kebangsaan category reaches only 483 median likes from four posts — his lowest-performing category, though the small n limits interpretation. What the pattern nonetheless suggests is a structural limit of algorithmic infrastructure that Alatas's (2021) framework helps to name. Alatas argues that religious authority is only ever as visible as the infrastructure through which it is articulated — and that different infrastructures open up distinct articulatory possibilities while foreclosing others. The algorithmic infrastructure examined here forecloses precisely the articulatory channels through which Gus Baha's authority on tolerance is constituted: his *sanad* through Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar Sarang, his institutional embeddedness within the NU tradition, and the slow accumulation of peer recognition

that Alatas identifies as prerequisite to authority. None of these are behavioral signals the algorithm can read. What it reads instead is engagement velocity — and on that metric, Felix Siauw, a former HTI ideologue whose organizational formation was explicitly anti-pluralist, outperforms Gus Baha on Toleransi & Kebangsaan by a substantial margin (34,489 against 483). The algorithm does not register the difference between inherited institutional authority on tolerance and performed civic solidarity optimized for engagement; it registers only which content generates the most immediate moral-emotional response. None of these settlements is theologically dictated; each is a structural response to the same algorithmic field, and no preacher can transcend that field through better choices alone.

This template-based reading clarifies why the celebrated democratization narrative misreads the situation. The templates available on Instagram are not neutral containers within which theological positions compete on equal terms; they are pre-formed slots whose shape was determined by an optimization function indifferent to the epistemic norms any of these positions claims to transmit. Habib Ja'far and Felix Siauw do not succeed because their theological positions are stronger than Gus Baha's. They succeed because their communicative styles happen to be metabolizable by templates the algorithm rewards, while Gus Baha's epistemic mode — built on duration, layered citation, and the slow accumulation of trust through demonstrated mastery — happens not to be. Algorithmic piety is the regime in which religious authority is mediated, and increasingly produced, through such templates. Traditions whose epistemic forms predate the templates face an impossible choice: dismantle themselves to fit, or accept the structural invisibility that this study has documented in the 52:1 asymmetry between a Reels-savvy *habib* and one of Indonesia's most learned classical scholars.

6. Conclusion: What Is at Stake

This article has documented and theorized a structural transformation in how religious authority circulates in Indonesia. The current algorithmic disruption is the third in a sequence, after pesantren transmission and broadcast media, and reorganizes authority around platform recommender systems whose optimization functions are agnostic to the epistemic norms of any tradition they amplify. I have named that regime algorithmic piety and located it on a conceptual map no existing framework has fully claimed: maximally platform-agency centered, maximally religion-specific. The empirical case rests on 1,567 Instagram posts from three figures whose theological standing within the Islamic tradition runs in nearly the opposite direction of their algorithmic visibility. Habib Ja'far's median post receives 52 times the engagement of Gus Baha's; his median video, 88 times the plays. Felix Siauw occupies the intermediate position, approximately 4.3 times less visible than Habib Ja'far but 12 times more visible than Gus Baha, confirming that the asymmetry is not binary but structural across all three templates. This asymmetry is not the trace of audience preference. It is the cumulative outcome of a triple mechanism, moral arousal, durational compression, and friction-free shareability, operating on content never designed to optimize for any of them. Indonesian Muslim public figures who wish to be visible on Instagram must occupy one of three templates: humor-intellectual (Habib Ja'far), mobilization-through-moral-salience (Felix Siauw), or traditional-marginal (Gus Baha via @gayengco). The platform, in short,

does not offer a slot for what classical pesantren scholarship most essentially is: patient, durational, transmission-based exposition that resists the compression algorithmic visibility requires.

The stakes of this reorganization fall into three domains. The intergenerational transmission of classical knowledge becomes precarious: Gus Baha's 1,335 median likes, set against a corpus celebrated for decades within santri culture, suggest that the modes of religious knowledge hardest to optimize for Reels, careful exegesis, layered argumentation, slow textual competence, risk becoming generationally inaccessible. The politicization of religious speech acquires a structural incentive: Felix Siauw's geopolitical content reaches roughly three times the engagement of his fiqh content within the same account, and his single most viral post (857,909 likes) is a critique of US-Iran geopolitics rather than jurisprudence. Indonesian Islam's traditions of measured, multi-vocal pluralism rooted in NU and Muhammadiyah may find this incentive structure progressively corrosive. And the very category of religious authority shifts: where Alatas's (2021) framework of articulatory labor describes authority as constituted through channels of Prophetic transmission (nasab, silsila, ijāza) recognized by peers, the algorithmic model produces a different figure: broadly visible and individually charismatic, but unembedded in the institutional structures that traditionally checked, corrected, and slowly improved religious teaching. Visibility begins to substitute for legitimacy; engagement metrics begin to perform the semiotic function ijma' once served; the three-second hook displaces the hujjah not by argument but by attention budget.

What might be done? Three trajectories of response are conceivable. Institutional adaptation would have NU, Muhammadiyah, and other classical authorities invest in platform-native production, training their scholars in optimization techniques their would-be competitors have already mastered — extending the reach of classical authority at the cost of accepting algorithmic logics on their own terms. Platform critique would press, intellectually and possibly through regulation, the question of whether religious speech can be granted any structural protection from optimization regimes designed for entertainment; this is hard work that has had limited success in Western contexts. Platform-resistant communities would deliberately continue pesantren-style learning for those who recognize that algorithmic visibility is not the same as religious value, and who choose, in something like a digital-age *zuhud*, to learn from whom the algorithm does not amplify.

The point of this article has not been to lament the rise of digital dakwah, nor to dismiss the genuine pedagogical work figures like Habib Ja'far accomplish within the templates available to them. It has been to insist on a structural reading of the religious mediascape: the platform is not a neutral channel; the algorithm is not a democratic referendum; visibility is not legitimacy. To name *algorithmic piety* is to reopen the question of what religious authority should rest upon, and to recognize that, in the present moment, much of the answer is being supplied not by ulama, not by audiences, but by recommendation systems whose objectives have nothing to do with the truth or wisdom of what they amplify. Whether Indonesian Muslims, scholars, and institutions can take that recognition seriously may shape the trajectory of Islam in the archipelago for a generation to come.

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Author Contributions

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Declarations

Use of AI Tools The authors confirm that AI tools were used solely for language editing and structural assistance during manuscript preparation. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and intellectual contributions were performed by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Clinical Trial Number Not applicable.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This study analysed publicly available Instagram content and did not involve direct human participants. No ethics approval was required.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests

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Figures

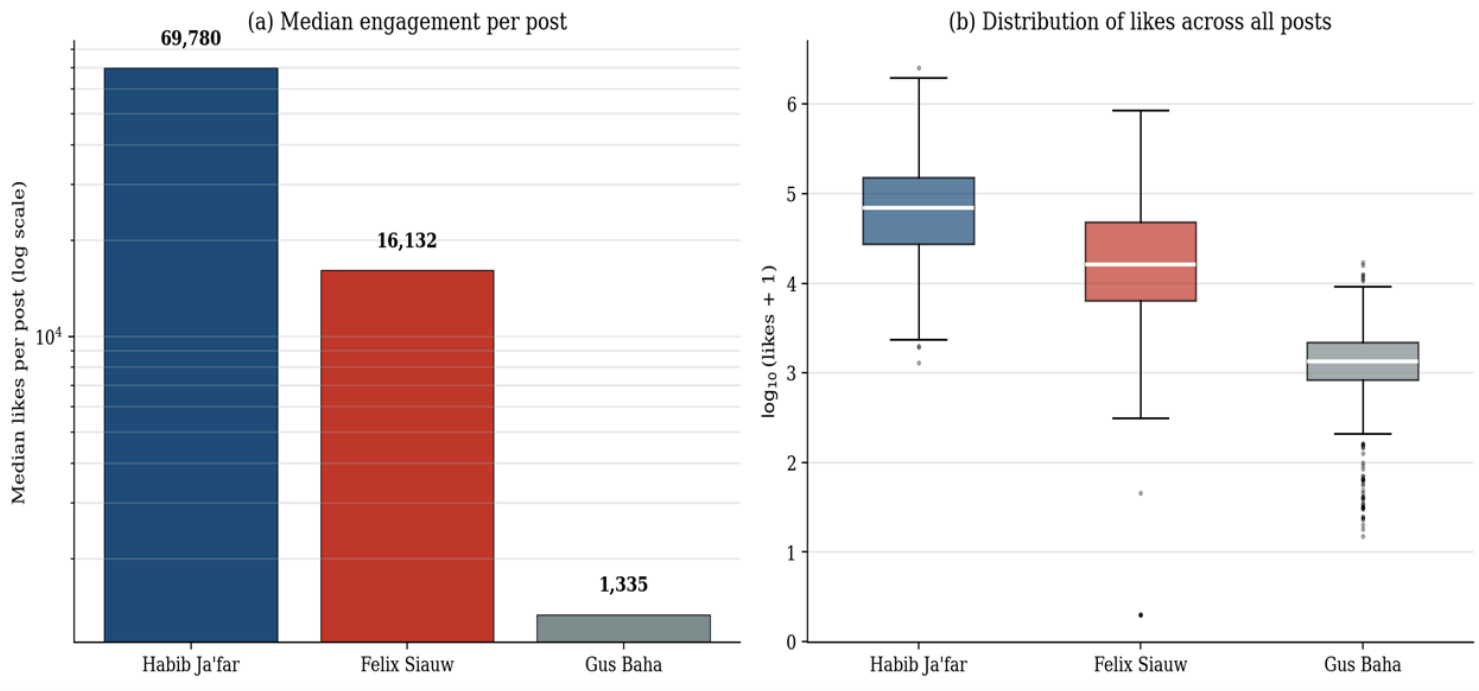


Figure 1

Asymmetry of algorithmic visibility: median likes and full distribution across three Indonesian Islamic figures.

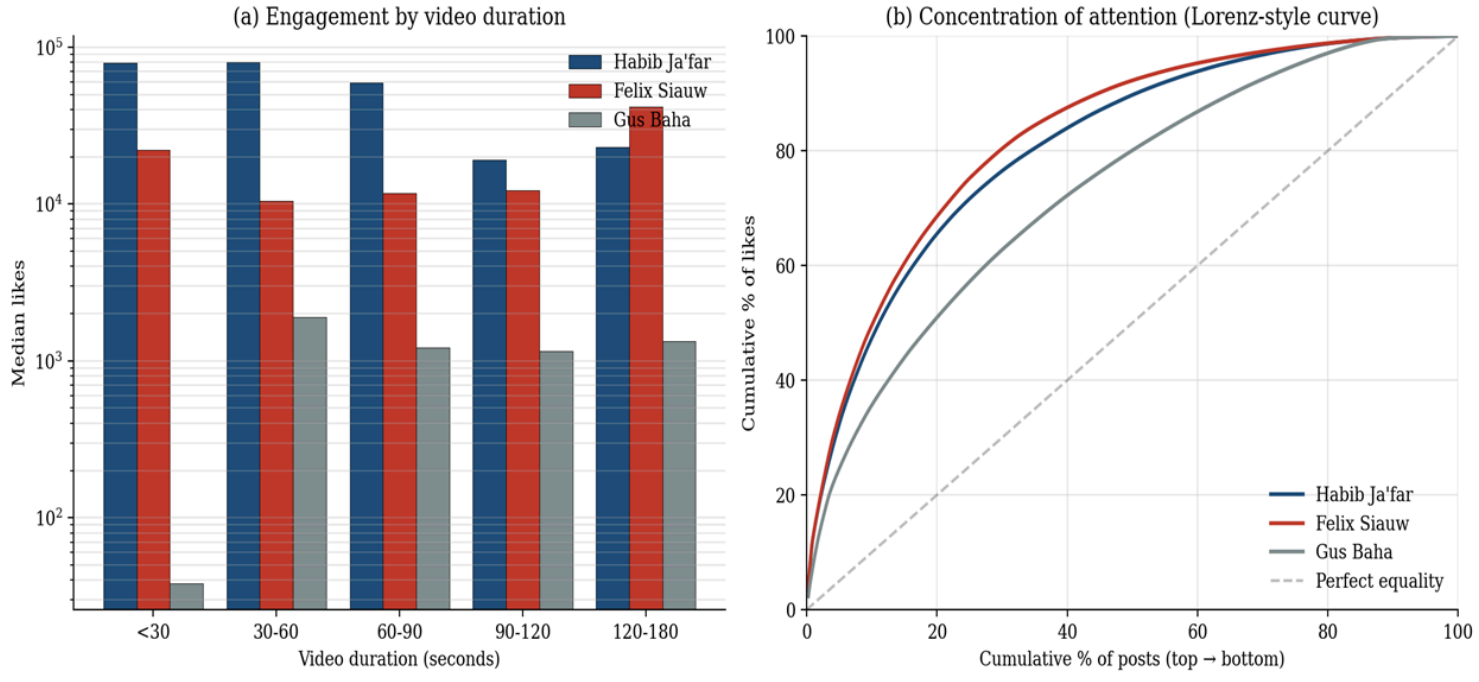


Figure 2

Algorithmic format optimization: shorter videos are more viral; attention concentrates on a few posts.

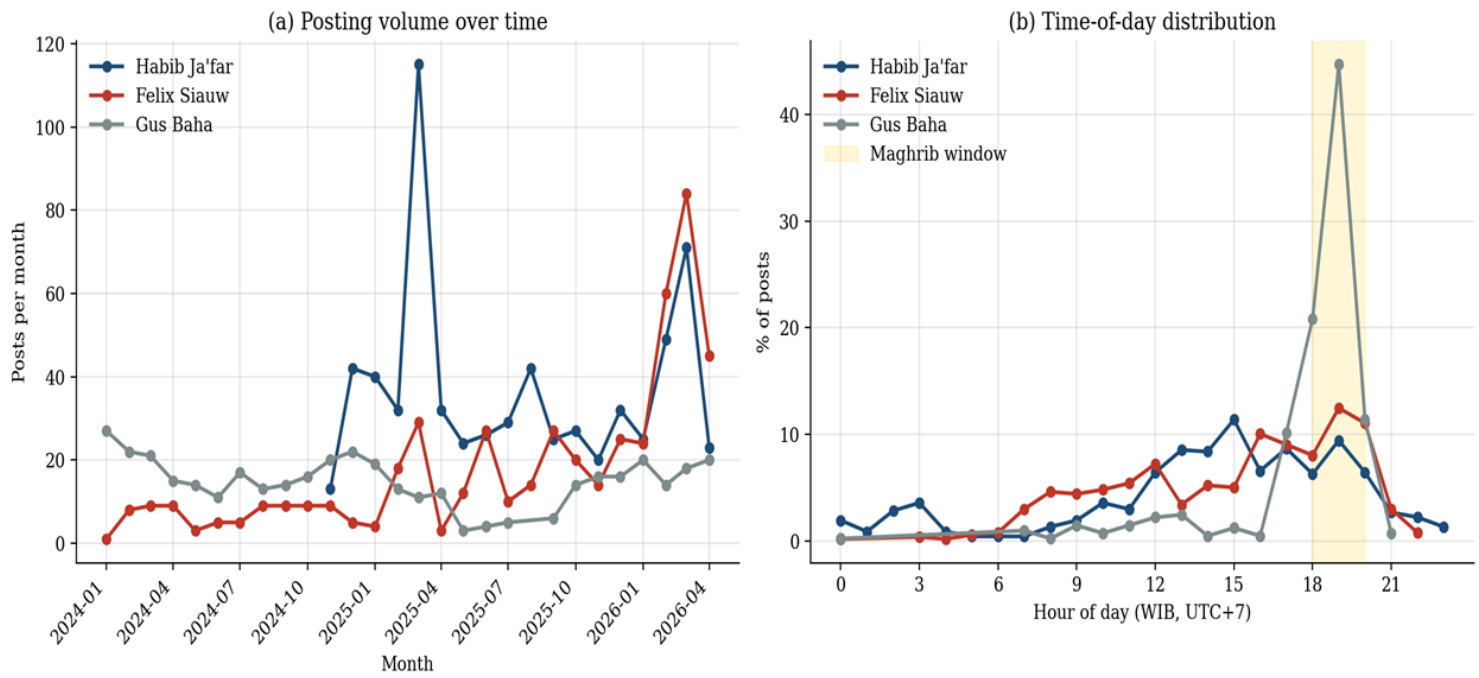


Figure 3

Production rhythms — feeding the algorithm.

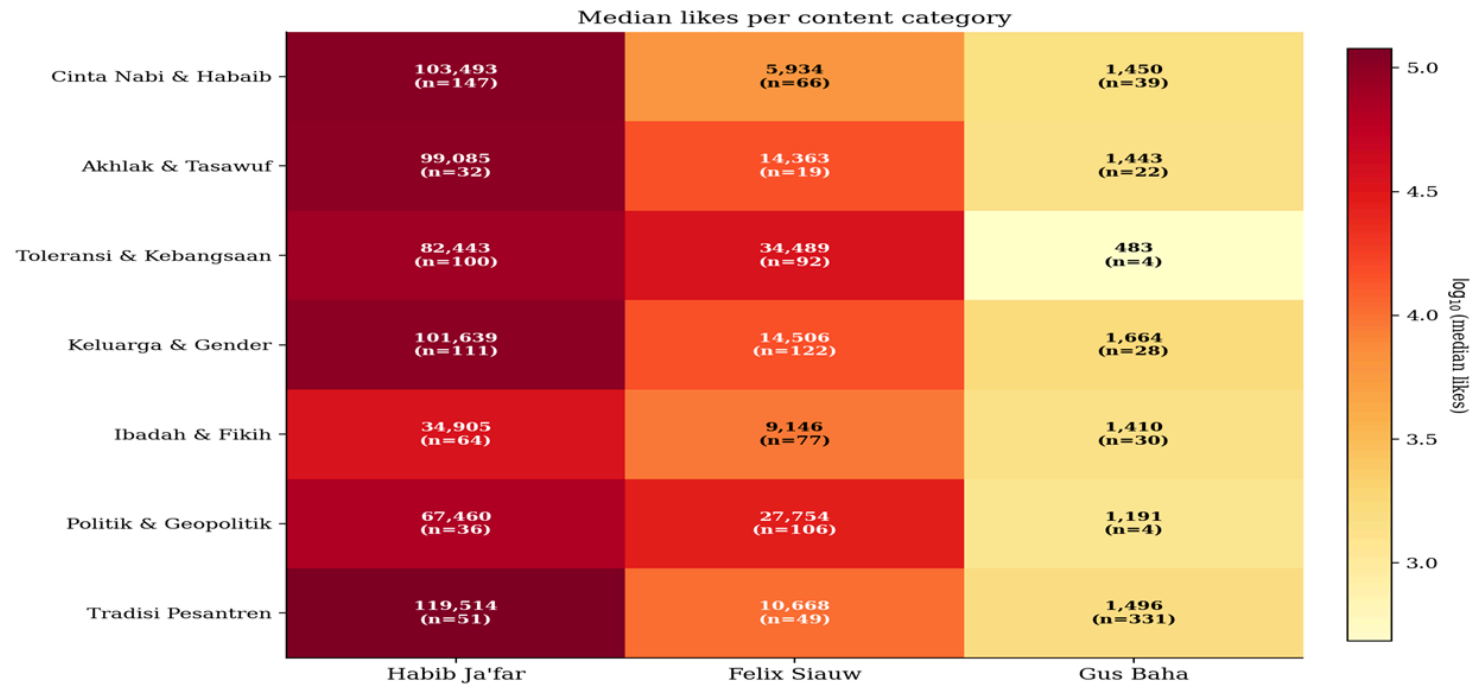


Figure 4

Median likes per content category. Numbers in cells are median likes; n indicates post count in that category.

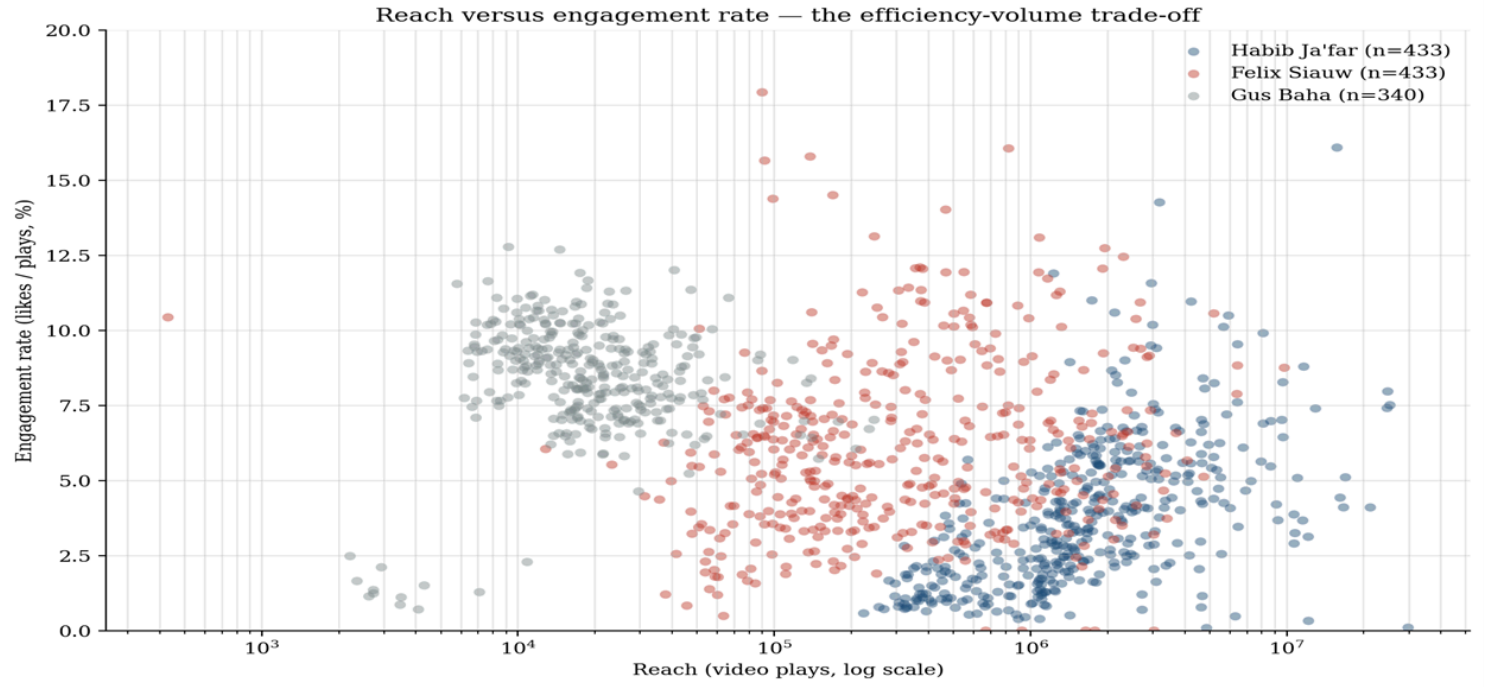


Figure 5

Reach versus engagement rate — the efficiency-volume trade-off.