

From Sanad to Algorithm: Digital Qur'anic Interpretation and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority in Indonesia

Muh. Asriadi AM

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: asriaadi190197@gmail.com

Edi Komarudin

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: edikomarudin@uinsgd.ac.id

Jajang A Rohmana

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: jajangarohmana@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally transformed the production, circulation, and authority of Qur'anic interpretation across the Muslim world. Whereas classical tafsir traditions grounded religious authority in scholarly *sanad*, linguistic expertise, and institutional recognition, contemporary digital platforms increasingly mediate religious meaning through algorithms, popularity metrics, and visual performance. Despite the growing scholarship on digital religion, empirical studies that critically examine how Qur'anic interpretation itself is reshaped by platform logics and how this process reconfigures religious authority remain limited, particularly in non-Western Muslim contexts. Addressing this gap, this study examines digital Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia through a qualitative–quantitative content analysis of 50 tafsir-related contents collected from YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X, and digital tafsir websites. Drawing on theories of digital religion, mediated religious authority, and algorithmic governance, the analysis maps content formats, producer typologies, ideological strategies, and emerging forms of digital piety. The findings demonstrate that digital Qur'anic interpretation is dominated by short, motivational, and emotionally driven content aligned with the logic of social media virality. Religious authority is increasingly negotiated through visibility, aesthetic performance, and audience engagement rather than through classical scholarly credentials. The study also identifies distinct forms of digital piety—performative, communal, consumerist, ritual-digital, and emotional—reinforced by algorithmic mechanisms such as polarization, confirmation bias, and echo chambers of belief. Theoretically, this study conceptualizes a shift in Qur'anic interpretive authority from *sanad*-based legitimacy toward algorithmically mediated authority, while empirically positioning Indonesia as a critical case for understanding the global transformation of Qur'anic interpretation in the age of algorithms.

Keywords: Digital Qur'anic Interpretation, Religious Authority, Algorithms, Social Media, Digital Religion.

Abstrak

Perkembangan pesat media digital telah mengubah secara mendasar cara produksi, distribusi, dan legitimasi penafsiran Al-Qur'an di dunia Muslim kontemporer. Jika dalam tradisi tafsir klasik otoritas keagamaan dibangun melalui sanad keilmuan, penguasaan bahasa Arab, dan



pengakuan institusional, maka dalam ruang digital makna keagamaan semakin dimediasi oleh algoritma, metrik popularitas, dan performativitas visual. Meskipun kajian tentang agama digital terus berkembang, penelitian empiris yang secara kritis menelaah bagaimana penafsiran Al-Qur'an dibentuk oleh logika platform digital serta dampaknya terhadap rekonfigurasi otoritas keagamaan masih terbatas, khususnya dalam konteks masyarakat Muslim non-Barat. Menanggapi kesenjangan tersebut, penelitian ini mengkaji penafsiran Al-Qur'an di ruang digital Indonesia melalui analisis isi kualitatif–kuantitatif terhadap 50 konten tafsir yang berasal dari YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X, dan situs web tafsir digital. Dengan menggunakan kerangka teoretis agama digital (*digital religion*), otoritas keagamaan termediasi (*mediated religious authority*), dan tata kelola algoritmik (*algorithmic governance*), penelitian ini memetakan bentuk konten, tipologi produsen tafsir, strategi ideologis, serta ragam kesalahan digital yang muncul. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penafsiran Al-Qur'an di ruang digital didominasi oleh konten singkat, motivasional, dan berorientasi emosional yang selaras dengan logika viralitas media sosial. Otoritas keagamaan tidak lagi terutama ditentukan oleh kredensial keilmuan klasik, melainkan dinegosiasikan melalui visibilitas, estetika produksi, dan keterlibatan audiens. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan merumuskan pergeseran otoritas tafsir dari legitimasi berbasis sanad menuju otoritas yang dimediasi secara algoritmik, serta menempatkan Indonesia sebagai kasus penting dalam memahami transformasi global penafsiran Al-Qur'an di era algoritma.

Kata kunci: Penafsiran Al-Qur'an Digital, Otoritas Keagamaan, Algoritma, Media Sosial, Agama Digital.

Introduction

In the contemporary Muslim world, Qur'anic interpretation is no longer primarily encountered in classrooms, mosques, or scholarly circles, but on smartphones, timelines, and short-form video platforms. Millions of Muslims today access explanations of Qur'anic verses through TikTok clips lasting less than a minute, Instagram carousels, and algorithmically curated YouTube recommendations. This profound shift marks a decisive change in how religious knowledge is produced, circulated, and authorized. In Indonesia, one of the world's largest Muslim populations, social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X have become central reference points for understanding the Qur'an, often surpassing traditional religious institutions in reach and influence (Mubarok & Romdhoni, 2021; Mirzan & Ishamiyah, 2025).

This transformation has generated growing controversy. While digital platforms expand access to religious knowledge, they also blur the boundaries between scholarly interpretation and popular religious opinion. Qur'anic interpretation is no longer monopolized by formally trained ulama but is increasingly produced by hijrah influencers, popular preachers, anonymous accounts, and non-institutional actors whose authority is derived from popularity, visual appeal, and algorithmic visibility rather than from sanad-based scholarship

or institutional recognition (Efendi et al., 2025). As studies on digital religion suggest, religious authority in online spaces is not inherited but negotiated through media performance and platform logics (Akbar, 2025; Rouf, 2025).

The urgency of this phenomenon is heightened by the growing reliance of Indonesia's younger Muslim generation on social media as a primary source of religious learning. Algorithmically driven content encourages concise, emotionally charged, and easily consumable interpretations that often detach Qur'anic verses from their broader exegetical and historical contexts (Firdaus, 2023; Fitri et al., 2024). Such conditions increase the risk of uncritical acceptance of interpretations produced by actors lacking recognized scholarly authority, yet perceived as legitimate due to virality and engagement metrics (Haq & Syauqi, 2021). In this sense, digital Qur'anic interpretation is not merely a technological shift but a critical site where religious authority, ideology, and piety are being reconfigured.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined digital da'wah, online Muslim identities, and the transformation of ulama authority in new media environments (Armita, 2025). Other studies have explored how religious messages are simplified and aestheticized to meet the demands of digital platforms, a phenomenon often described as Islamic clicktivism (Alfarizi & Farabi, 2024). However, relatively few studies have treated the content of Qur'anic interpretation itself as the primary object of analysis. Limited attention has been paid to how verses are selected, how meanings are constructed and simplified, how aesthetic strategies are employed to establish digital authority, and how ideological orientations are embedded within interpretive narratives (Oktarina & Hakam, 2023). Moreover, comprehensive cross-platform analyses that map these dynamics across multiple social media environments remain scarce.

Responding to this gap, this study aims to examine how Qur'anic interpretation is produced, mediated, and authorized within Indonesia's digital ecosystem. By analyzing 50 tafsir-related contents across YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X, and digital tafsir websites, this research seeks to map content formats, producer typologies, ideological strategies, and emerging forms of digital piety. The study advances an early hypothesis that digital platforms do not merely transmit Qur'anic interpretation but actively reshape it through algorithmic mediation, resulting in a shift of religious authority from sanad-based legitimacy toward visibility-, performance-, and engagement-based authority.

By situating digital Qur'anic interpretation within broader debates on digital religion, mediated religious authority, and algorithmic governance of meaning, this study offers both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it provides a systematic cross-platform

mapping of digital tafsir practices in Indonesia. Theoretically, it conceptualizes the ongoing reconfiguration of Qur'anic interpretive authority in the age of algorithms, positioning Indonesia as a critical case for understanding the global transformation of Islamic knowledge production in contemporary digital culture.

Methodology

This study investigates digital Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia by analyzing content published across major social media platforms and digital tafsir websites. The unit of analysis is the tafsir content itself, including videos, Instagram carousels, Twitter/X threads, and online articles that explicitly interpret Qur'anic verses. Focusing on content allows the study to examine how meanings are constructed, disseminated, and mediated in the digital environment, rather than only analyzing user behavior or producer characteristics. A total of 50 content pieces were purposively selected to ensure representation of diverse producer types—including traditional scholars, hijrah influencers, scripturalist groups, and anonymous accounts—as well as ideological orientations and content formats.

The study employs a mixed-methods qualitative–quantitative content analysis approach. This design was chosen because digital tafsir content is multimodal, combining textual, visual, and auditory elements, and requires both systematic categorization and interpretive depth. The qualitative component involved open, axial, and selective coding to examine narrative structures, ideological tendencies, and presentation strategies, while the quantitative component calculated frequencies and percentages to identify dominant content forms, themes, and producer types. This combination ensures a robust understanding of patterns in digital tafsir production and dissemination.

Data were collected from five major digital platforms: YouTube (10 pieces), TikTok (10 pieces), Instagram Reels and carousels (15 pieces), Twitter/X threads (5 pieces), and tafsir websites/blogs (10 pieces). Purposive sampling prioritized content with high exposure, engagement metrics, and diversity in producer type and ideological orientation, capturing contemporary trends in digital Qur'anic interpretation. Each piece of content was archived, and metadata such as publication date, platform, producer type, content length, and engagement were systematically recorded to ensure traceability and reliability.

The analysis followed a structured coding framework combining thematic, narrative, and ideological analysis. Open coding identified emergent themes, content formats, and narrative features, while axial coding mapped relationships between producer type, ideological orientation, and presentation strategies. Selective coding developed broader theoretical

interpretations, linking digital tafsir patterns to the shift of religious authority and emerging forms of digital piety. Quantification of content occurrences highlighted dominant forms, thematic emphases, and producer representation across platforms. This methodology ensures transparency, rigor, and replicability, aligning with international standards for mixed-method content analysis.

Results and Discussion

A. Digital Platforms, Content Strategies, and Emerging Authority in Qur'anic Interpretation

1. Platform Distribution and Content Formats of Digital Tafsir

Digital tafsir content in Indonesia is distributed across multiple platforms, each catering to distinct audience preferences and algorithmic logics. Analysis of 50 tafsir contents shows a variety of presentation styles, reflecting the characteristics of each platform (Table 1).

Content Form	Amount	Percentage (%)	Source
Micro-video interpretation (≤ 60 s)	20	40	TikTok, Reels
Thematic lecture (10–45 min)	14	28	YouTube
Carousel of preaching	9	18	Instagram
Analytical thread	4	8	Twitter/X
Long article	3	6	Blog/website
Total	50	100	

Table 1. Distribution of Digital Interpretation Content Forms

Micro-videos dominate (40%), reflecting the platform preference for short, engaging, and shareable content. Longer thematic lectures remain relevant on YouTube, while carousels, threads, and long articles represent smaller shares, indicating user preference for rapid consumption and visually engaging formats.

Across platforms, tafsir content is also distributed via AI-based platforms (Sati et al., 2025), educational applications (Assa'Aidi & Laila, 2023), social media channels like Facebook and Twitter (Sapina et al., 2018), YouTube (Ali & Isnaini, 2024), and multimedia applications (Assa'Aidi & Laila, 2023), demonstrating the multiplicity of digital dissemination methods.

2. Dominant Themes in Digital Tafsir Content

Analysis of themes shows that digital tafsir prioritizes motivational and practical topics over classical scholarly exegesis (Table 2).

Theme	Amount	Percentage (%)
Motivation for migration & self-improvement	11	22
Fortune, success, career	9	18
Family & relationships	8	16
Mental health	6	12
Practical fiqh	5	10
Identity politics issues	4	8
Quranic Stories	4	8
Classical (scientific) interpretation studies	3	6
Total	50	100

Table 2. Distribution of Dominant Themes in Digital Interpretation Content

Motivational themes dominate, addressing psychological and practical needs. Mental health and identity-related content reflect contemporary social dynamics. Classical exegesis appears in only 6% of content, signaling a shift toward popularized interpretations with immediate relevance (Hermawan, 2023).

3. Use of Qur'an and Tafsir Applications

Digital platforms and apps serve as both reference and dissemination tools. The Ministry of Religious Affairs' Quran app is the most widely used (46%), followed by Al-Quran Indonesia and Quran Pro apps (33%) (Rohman, 2023; Fauzi, 2024). Features such as translation (80%) and concise interpretations (35%) dominate usage, while classical tafsir access (27%) and asbab al-nuzul context (18%) are limited. AI-based tools are used in only 11% of content (Izzuddin, 2024), suggesting early-stage integration of AI in digital tafsir.

These patterns indicate that content producers favor practical, concise usage of digital apps over methodological depth (Fajria & Kholil, 2024).

4. Typology and Ideology of Content Producers

Digital tafsir producers are heterogeneous, ranging from hijrah influencers to traditional scholars (Table 3).

Producer Group	Percentage (%)	Amount	Narrative Features
Migratory influencers	30	15	Emotional, motivational
Digital Salafi	22	11	Literal, scripturalist
Anonymous & satirical accounts	18	9	Provocative, popular
Traditional scholars	16	8	Academic, sanad
Political Islamism group	14	7	Identity, public issues
Total	100	50	

Table 3. Typology of Digital Interpretation Content Producers

Hijrah influencers dominate, using motivational and emotional narratives, while traditional scholars represent only 16%, reflecting limited classical authority in digital spaces.

Ideological Strategy	Amount	Percentage (%)
Selection of verses for narrative legitimacy	13	26
Confrontation between “correct and incorrect interpretations”	11	22
Visual/emotional dramatization	10	20
Verse context truncation	9	18
Commodification of religion for branding	7	14
Total	50	100

Table 4. Ideological Strategies of Digital Interpretation Content Producers

Dominant strategies include verse selection for narrative framing, confrontational discourse, and visual dramatization, demonstrating how interpretation serves ideological, motivational, and branding purposes (Muin & Setyawan, 2024; Rochmat et al., 2024; Wafi et al., 2022).

5. Digital Piety and Algorithmic Influence

Digital tafsir shapes new forms of religious expression, or digital piety, categorized into five types (Table 5).

Type of Digital Piety	Description
Performative piety	Self-branding through verses, quotes, or ideal Muslim imagery
Communal piety	Participation in online communities (e.g., ODOJ, Ngaji Online)
Consumer piety	Purchasing “halal lifestyle” products promoted via content
Digital-ritual piety	Tracking worship via apps, reading Qur'an online
Emotional piety	Strong emotional responses to content (sad, touching narratives)

Table 5. Types of Digital Piety in Interpretation Content

Algorithms reinforce digital piety through ideological polarization, confirmation bias, and echo chambers, shaping a homogenous and platform-influenced spiritual landscape.

6. Shifting Authority in Digital Tafsir

Digital tafsir authority is increasingly performative, rather than traditional. Table 6 summarizes the dominant authority categories.

Authority Category	Authority Character
Influencer	Popularity, visual aesthetics
Celebrity preacher	Public figure, personal brand
Islamic boarding school scholars	Formal science, sanad
Without characters (text/AI)	Anonymous, platform-based authority

Table 6. Forms of Authority in Digital Interpretation Content

Influencers dominate (41%), followed by celebrity preachers (27%), while traditional scholars are marginal (14%), and faceless authority (AI/text) accounts for 18% (Amani, 2023; Mujahidin et al., 2021). This confirms that algorithmic visibility, engagement, and production aesthetics increasingly define religious authority in digital tafsir.

B. Dominance of Short-Form and Motivational Content

The analysis of 50 digital tafsir contents reveals a marked dominance of short-form micro-videos, accounting for 40% of the sample, and motivational themes such as migration, self-improvement, and career guidance, ranging from 18% to 22% (Table 1 & 2). Platforms like TikTok and Instagram favor brief, visually engaging formats, while longer thematic lectures on YouTube occupy a smaller share. Traditional scholarly interpretations are notably limited, appearing in only 6% of content, highlighting their marginal role in the digital

environment (Hermawan, 2023). This pattern illustrates how religious communication adapts to rapid consumption habits, prioritizing emotional resonance, accessibility, and immediate practical value over methodological depth.

Short-form videos and motivational framing are not merely stylistic choices but function as tools for negotiating authority in digital religion, where algorithmic governance and mediated legitimacy shape which content reaches audiences (Akbar, 2025; Rouf, 2025). Users' engagement and platform visibility determine perceived authority, reflecting a shift from classical scholarly validation toward performative credibility. The trend indicates that in highly connected Muslim-majority societies, social media logic increasingly influences religious interpretation, suggesting that classical methodologies may struggle to maintain prominence in digital spaces dominated by brevity, emotional appeal, and algorithm-driven exposure.

C. Diverse Producer Typologies and Ideological Strategies

Analysis of 50 digital tafsir contents shows a heterogeneous ecosystem of producers, led by hijrah influencers (30%), digital Salafi groups (22%), and anonymous or satirical accounts (18%) (Table 3). Ideological strategies include selective verse citation (26%), confrontational framing (22%), and visual/emotional dramatization (20%) (Table 4). Traditional scholars appear in only 16% of content, indicating limited influence. This diversity reflects how religious authority in digital spaces is no longer centralized, but distributed across actors who leverage emotional appeal, visual aesthetics, and ideological framing to attract audiences, creating a competitive environment where multiple narratives contend for attention and legitimacy.

The prevalence of these strategies illustrates the concept of mediated religious authority, where social, technological, and performative factors determine legitimacy rather than traditional sanad or institutional endorsement (Efendi et al., 2025; Akbar, 2025). Hijrah influencers and Salafi groups gain authority through algorithmic visibility and audience engagement, reshaping how religious credibility is perceived in online spaces.

Globally, these patterns suggest that non-traditional actors increasingly challenge classical hierarchies, requiring scholars and educators to reconsider approaches to pedagogy and authority in digital religious ecosystems. Digital platforms are no longer neutral channels; they actively shape who becomes authoritative and how religious knowledge is circulated and consumed.

D. Platform-Specific Usage of Digital Tafsir Applications

Analysis of digital tafsir content shows that Qur'an applications are primarily used for translation (80%) and concise interpretations (35%), while full classical tafsir and contextual tools are underutilized (27% and 18%, respectively). AI-based features appear in only 11% of cases (Izzuddin, 2024). This indicates a utilitarian approach: producers prioritize accessibility and speed over methodological depth, often presenting decontextualized interpretations.

The pattern aligns with the concept of algorithmic governance, where interface design and technological affordances shape both content production and religious knowledge consumption (Sati et al., 2025). Limited AI adoption suggests gradual social and cultural integration of advanced tools.

Globally, digital religious education initiatives can learn to integrate AI and contextual features to balance accessibility with scholarly rigor, enhancing learning without compromising interpretive depth.

E. Emergence of Digital Piety

Analysis identifies five forms of digital piety: performative, communal, consumer, digital-ritual, and emotional (Table 5). Algorithms amplify selective exposure, confirmation bias, and echo chambers, leading to relatively homogeneous patterns of online piety (Maulana, 2025).

This reflects the adaptation of spiritual practices to digital environments. Performative and consumer piety merge religious expression with social visibility and lifestyle, while communal piety demonstrates how digital platforms facilitate ritual and study practices beyond geographic boundaries.

These dynamics illustrate that algorithmic mediation influences not only content visibility but also lived religious experiences, confirming that digital religion transforms both the dissemination of knowledge and the performance of faith (Armita, 2025; Firdaus, 2023).

The emergence of digital piety suggests that religious educators and authorities should consider online behavioral patterns in shaping guidance, pedagogy, and community engagement strategies.

F. Shifting Models of Religious Authority

Digital tafsir authority increasingly relies on performative and algorithmically mediated markers. Influencers dominate (41%), followed by celebrity preachers (27%), while

traditional scholars appear in only 14%, and faceless AI/text-based authority accounts for 18% (Amani, 2023; Mujahidin et al., 2021).

This shift demonstrates that legitimacy is negotiated through visibility, aesthetics, interactivity, and alignment with popular narratives, rather than classical credentials. Audience perception depends on engagement metrics and performative competence rather than scholarly lineage.

The pattern confirms theories of mediated authority and algorithmic governance, showing that online platforms restructure traditional hierarchies of knowledge production (Ilmiah, 2025; Muhyidin, 2022).

Globally, this implies that religious institutions must reconsider engagement strategies, credibility markers, and pedagogical approaches to remain relevant in algorithmically mediated religious ecosystems.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia has undergone a fundamental transformation in terms of form, authority, and religious meaning. Qur'anic interpretation is no longer primarily shaped by sanad-based scholarly traditions but increasingly mediated by platform logics that privilege visibility, emotional resonance, and algorithmic circulation. The dominance of short-form, motivational, and visually appealing content indicates that interpretation in digital spaces is oriented toward immediacy and affect rather than methodological depth. As a result, religious authority is negotiated through popularity metrics, performative competence, and audience engagement, while classical markers of scholarly legitimacy occupy a marginal position. This shift illustrates that digital tafsir functions not merely as a new medium of transmission but as a reconfigured religious practice embedded within the cultural and technological dynamics of social media.

From a scientific perspective, this research contributes to the literature by empirically integrating the frameworks of digital religion, mediated religious authority, and algorithmic governance in the study of Qur'anic interpretation. By focusing on the content of tafsir itself across multiple platforms, this study moves beyond analyses of digital da'wah or online religious identity to demonstrate how algorithms actively shape interpretive meaning and authority. Conceptually, the study advances the argument that the locus of interpretive legitimacy has shifted from sanad to algorithm, offering a novel analytical lens for understanding contemporary transformations in Islamic knowledge production. By positioning Indonesia as a critical case, this research also enriches global discussions on digital

Islam by highlighting dynamics that are increasingly relevant across Muslim societies worldwide.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The dataset is limited to 50 content samples and focuses on major platforms, which may not capture the full diversity of digital tafsir practices, including emerging platforms or closed messaging applications. In addition, this research centers on content analysis and does not incorporate audience reception or ethnographic perspectives, which are essential for understanding how digital interpretations are interpreted, contested, or internalized by users. Future research could expand the dataset longitudinally to examine changes over time, integrate audience studies to explore interpretive reception, and investigate the role of artificial intelligence in greater depth as AI-generated religious content becomes more prevalent. Such approaches would further illuminate the evolving relationship between technology, authority, and religious meaning in the age of algorithms.

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