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The Hyperreality of Nahdlatul Ulama on Social Media: Dynamics of Ulama Representation, the Labelling of Religious Traditions, and Challenges to Religious Authority

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Abstract

Social media has given rise to new forms of religious identity representation that often differ from the actual reality. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, has undergone an image transformation through digital content that is often satirical in nature, such as the comedic portrayal of clerics, the characterization of the sholawat tradition as concert entertainment, and memes that parody NU symbols. This study aims to examine how power relations and discourse in the digital space shape the hyperreality of NU's identity, as well as how this influences the position of its religious authority. The research method employed is qualitative, utilizing a critical discourse analysis approach to viral social media content, supported by in-depth observation and literature review. Using the netnography method, primary data was collected from content and interactions on three Instagram accounts: @guss_icikk, @pixmenleonard, and @andripul_, while secondary data was obtained from scholarly literature on religious discourse and digital media. The analysis was conducted by utilizing Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse, knowledge-power, and regimes of truth, combined with Jean Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality. The research findings indicate that the negative image of NU is formed through the production of digital discourse that emphasizes humor and performativity to serve the logic of virality. Content creators act as new agents of power who reframe NU's symbols and traditions, while netizens affirm these labels through comments that reproduce stereotypes. This process gives rise to a new regime of truth in cyberspace, where the hyperreal image of NU is more trusted by the public than its traditional reality. Consequently, NU's traditional religious authority rooted in scholarly lineage and the charisma of religious leaders is being displaced by a digital authority grounded in popularity and online user engagement. This study underscores the importance of digital literacy and discourse strategies for NU in negotiating its religious identity and authority in the era of social media.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama; Hyperreality; Digital Discourse; Religious Authority.

Abstrak

Media sosial telah melahirkan bentuk baru representasi identitas keagamaan yang seringkali berbeda dari realitas aslinya. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) sebagai organisasi Islam terbesar di Indonesia mengalami transformasi citra melalui konten-konten digital yang kerap bersifat satir, seperti penggambaran ulama dengan gaya komedi, pelabelan tradisi sholawat sebagai hiburan konser, hingga meme yang memparodikan simbol-simbol ke-NU-an. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji bagaimana relasi kuasa dan wacana di ruang digital membentuk hiperrealitas identitas NU, serta bagaimana hal itu memengaruhi posisi otoritas keagamaannya. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis wacana kritis terhadap konten-konten media sosial yang viral, didukung oleh pengamatan mendalam dan telaah literatur. Dengan menggunakan metode netnografi, data primer dikumpulkan dari konten dan interaksi di tiga akun Instagram, yaitu @guss_icikk, @pixmenleonard, dan @andripul_, sedangkan data sekunder diperoleh dari literatur ilmiah terkait diskursus keagamaan dan media digital. Analisis dilakukan dengan memanfaatkan konsep wacana, kuasa-pengetahuan, dan rezim kebenaran dari Michel Foucault, yang dipadukan dengan gagasan hiperrealitas Jean Baudrillard. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa citra negatif NU terbentuk melalui produksi wacana digital yang menonjolkan aspek humor dan performativitas demi logika viralitas. Konten kreator berperan sebagai agen kuasa baru yang membingkai ulang simbol dan tradisi NU, sedangkan netizen mengafirmasi labeling tersebut melalui komentar yang mereproduksi stereotip. Proses ini melahirkan rezim kebenaran baru di ruang maya, di mana citra hiperreal NU lebih dipercaya publik dibandingkan realitas tradisionalnya. Implikasinya, otoritas keagamaan tradisional NU yang berbasis sanad keilmuan dan kharisma kiai mengalami pergeseran oleh otoritas digital yang bertumpu pada popularitas dan interaksi warganet. Kontribusi penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya literasi digital dan strategi wacana bagi NU dalam menegosiasikan identitas serta kuasa keagamaannya di era media sosial.

Kata Kunci: Nahdlatul Ulama; Hiperrealitas; Wacana Digital; Otoritas Keagamaan.

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which people interact, communicate, and construct religious identities. Social media no longer functions merely as a space for information exchange; it has become a symbolic arena in which meanings, discourses, and forms of authority are continuously contested (Zaid et al., 2022). Within this environment, religion has increasingly shifted from predominantly spiritual and institutional domains toward forms of expression that are more fluid, visual, and performative (Amin et al., 2024). The emergence of digital *da'wah*, for example, has introduced preachers who adopt popular and interactive communication styles while strategically responding to platform algorithms and users' preferences (Roslan et al., 2025). At the same time, these developments raise critical questions concerning how religious identities are constructed, represented, and circulated within digital spaces shaped by the logics of entertainment and commodification.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisations and a major representative of the classical Islamic tradition of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah an-Nahdliyah* (Mibtadin, 2022), has not remained unaffected by this transformation. NU identity is no longer produced exclusively through formal institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and religious study circles, but also through numerous social media accounts that circulate NU symbols, expressions, and cultural styles in digital environments (Hoesterey, 2021). These representations, however, are not always authentic or contextually grounded. In recent years, social media has witnessed the proliferation of satirical and humorous content depicting figures identified as "Gus" as comedic preachers (Prasetyo et al., 2025) or portraying the tradition of *sholawat* as concert-like entertainment accompanied by dancing (Juliandini et al., 2025). Such representations have generated public controversy and contributed to the perception that NU is closely associated with entertainment, humour, and eccentric religious rituals. Consequently, social media representations may function as an "alternative reality" that appears to embody the authentic identity of NU.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the representation of NU identity on social media has entered what Jean Baudrillard conceptualises as *hyperreality*, a condition in which signs and

images no longer merely represent reality but actively produce reality itself (Wolny, 2017). Within social media *hyperreality*, religious symbols are endlessly reproduced and gradually detached from their original meanings (Le, 2020). The tradition of *sholawat*, historically practised as an expression of spirituality and devotion, is increasingly presented as mass entertainment. Similarly, the figure of the "Gus," traditionally associated with religious scholarship and *pesantren* authority, is increasingly evaluated through digital indicators such as numbers of likes and followers. This process illustrates how social media has become a new arena for constructing religious images that can no longer be fully controlled by established religious institutions.

From Michel Foucault's perspective, these dynamics can be understood as manifestations of power relations and discursive production within digital spaces (Lillqvist et al., 2016). In this context, power does not operate primarily through repression; rather, it works productively by creating categories, labels, and new forms of truth about NU that circulate through algorithms and user interactions. Content creators function as discursive actors who produce narratives of NU religiosity through humour, satire, and visual symbols. Meanwhile, users participating in comment sections become part of the mechanisms through which these discourses are affirmed, circulated, and reproduced. Such interactions contribute to negative labelling of the *sholawat* tradition and to the construction of NU identity as unserious, intellectually deficient, or socially eccentric. Within a Foucauldian framework, such labelling cannot be reduced to individual opinion. Instead, it constitutes a practice of power through which new social truths concerning the meaning and identity of NU are produced in digital environments.

Previous studies have examined digital *da'wah*, young religious figures, and the use of social media by Islamic organisations. However, most have concentrated on communication practices and *da'wah* strategies rather than on the power-discourse relations through which religious images and identities are constructed. These orientations are evident in the studies conducted by Pratama (2024), Yusuf (2024), and Khasanah (2022). Other studies have addressed digital *da'wah* (Syuhudi et al., 2024), the use of memes in *dakwahtainment* (Rafiansyah, 2023), and social media content related to *sholawat* (Masyitoh & Majid, 2024). Nevertheless, at least three important research gaps remain. First,

relatively few studies have examined representations of NU on social media through Foucault's framework of power and discourse. Second, research integrating netnographic analysis of specific content creators with an examination of comment interactions as mechanisms for affirming negative labelling remains limited. Third, insufficient attention has been given to the relationship between digital labelling of religious traditions, such as sholawat, and its consequences for traditional religious authority. These gaps provide a critical space for both theoretical and empirical contributions.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how representations and labels associated with NU identity are produced, circulated, and rendered consequential through social media. It combines Foucault's concepts of power and discourse with Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. Accordingly, the study is guided by three research questions: (1) How do content creators and netizen interactions in comment sections construct and affirm negative labels attached to the sholawat tradition? (2) How do power relations and discursive practices on social media contribute to the formation of a hyperreal identity of Nahdlatul Ulama? and (3) What are the implications of this hyperreal identity for NU's religious position and authority, which have traditionally been grounded in scholarly traditions and the transmission of religious knowledge through recognised intellectual lineages?

This study offers a critical account of how algorithms, content creators, and netizens collectively construct a simulated representation of NU that may exert greater public influence than its traditional religious reality. It also provides contextual netnographic evidence by examining both the production of digital content by prominent content creators and the circulation of meanings through users' interactions in comment sections. Theoretically, the study contributes to scholarship on digital religion by connecting the production of discourse with the emergence of religious hyperreality and the transformation of religious authority. Practically, its findings are expected to inform the development of strategic communication and critical digital literacy among religious organisations, including NU, as they seek to negotiate their identities and authority within increasingly complex digital environments.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using netnography, an adaptation of

ethnography designed to investigate cultural practices, symbolic representations, and social interactions within digital environments. This approach enabled the researchers to examine how the identity of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) was constructed on social media through digital content, narratives, and user interactions without directly intervening in the observed setting. Primary data were collected through systematic digital observation and documentation of three Instagram accounts—@guss_icikk, @pixmenleonard, and @andripul—selected because they represented NU-related identities through satire and entertainment. The analysis focused on visual content, captions, and comment interactions containing religious symbols, humour, and representations of NU traditions. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly literature and previous studies on digital da'wah, religious representation, digital religion, and discourse theory. The data were analysed thematically by integrating principles of Foucauldian discourse analysis with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. This analytical framework was used to examine how power relations, algorithmic mechanisms, and digital communication practices contributed to the labelling of NU traditions and the production of a mediated religious reality that could become detached from its original social and spiritual contexts. The trustworthiness of the findings was maintained through source triangulation and researcher reflexivity. Interpretation was directed toward identifying the mechanisms through which NU's digital image was constructed and examining the resulting transformation of its religious authority within social media environments.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Michel Foucault's theory of power relations and discourse. At its core, this theory argues that power is not exclusively possessed by the state, institutions, or particular individuals, nor does it operate solely through coercion, prohibition, or repression. Rather, power is dispersed across social relations and functions productively through language, knowledge, classification, norms, and discourse, all of which shape how individuals and societies understand reality. Foucault further emphasises that power and knowledge are inseparable: every exercise of power produces particular forms of knowledge, while knowledge recognised as truth reinforces specific power relations. This process gives rise to what Foucault terms a regime of

truth, namely, the set of discourses, procedures, and mechanisms through which certain statements are accepted as true within society (Syafiuddin, 2018). In the context of social media, power is therefore not confined to religious institutions and clerical authorities but is also exercised by content creators, platform algorithms, and users through the production, dissemination, repetition, and commentary surrounding particular narratives (Lillqvist et al., 2016; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Accordingly, Foucault's framework is employed to explain how satirical content, parodies, memes, and user comments produce and reinforce particular labels attached to religious scholars, the sholawat tradition, pesantren ethics, and the broader identity of Nahdlatul Ulama.

The second theoretical foundation is Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality. Baudrillard argues that in media-saturated societies, signs and images no longer merely represent reality; rather, they may become detached from their original referents and generate new realities of their own. He uses the term simulacrum to describe an image or representation that no longer maintains a clear relationship with its original reality, while hyperreality refers to a condition in which media-generated images, symbols, and representations are perceived as more real, more convincing, and more credible than reality itself (Wolny, 2017). Under such conditions, individuals may find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between lived reality and media construction. In the context of this study, representations of religious scholars, the title "Gus," the sholawat tradition, and pesantren ethics may undergo significant transformations when presented through humour, parody, edited video clips, visual manipulation, and satirical captions. These symbols are no longer necessarily interpreted through their scholarly, spiritual, and pesantren-based contexts but through repeatedly circulated images that gain visibility and virality on social media. As such representations continue to be produced, shared, and amplified by algorithms and user interactions, the social-media version of NU may come to be regarded as more authentic than NU's actual social and religious reality (Le, 2020; van Kessel et al., 2025).

Conceptually, Foucault's and Baudrillard's theories are applied sequentially and complementarily. Foucault's framework is used to analyse the process through which discourse is produced: who creates the content, how algorithms circulate it, how users affirm it

through comments, and how particular labels become normalised as digital truths. Baudrillard's theory is subsequently employed to explain the consequences of this process, particularly the formation of a hyperreal NU identity in which satirical, partial, and distorted digital representations become more influential and credible than traditional religious realities. The analytical trajectory of this framework therefore moves from content production, discursive circulation, and user affirmation to the formation of a regime of truth, the emergence of simulacra, the construction of hyperreality, and, ultimately, the transformation of religious authority. This transformation becomes evident when traditional authority grounded in scholarly lineage, religious knowledge, clerical charisma, ethical conduct, and pesantren legitimacy confronts forms of digital authority based on follower counts, views, popularity, and user engagement (Aslam, 2025; Nurhamidin et al., 2025; Zaid et al., 2022). Thus, the integration of these two theories explains not only how NU's digital image is produced but also how that image shapes public perceptions and affects the position of NU's religious authority within contemporary digital environments.

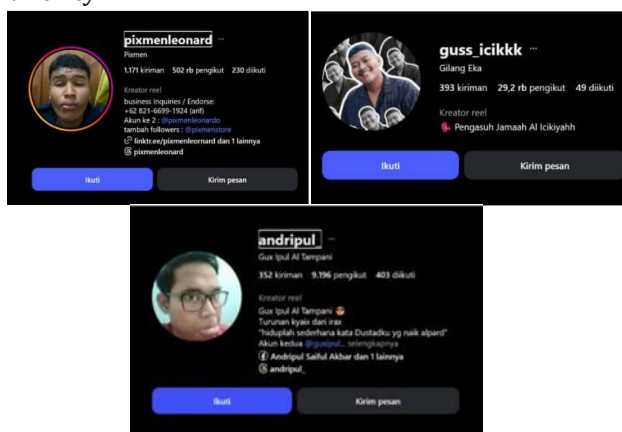
4. Results and Discussion

The Spectrum of Satire and the Representation of NU Identity: A Portrait of Three Instagram Accounts

Religious phenomena on social media have introduced new ways in which the public understands and evaluates the identity of Nahdlatul Ulama. In digital spaces, representations of NU are no longer shaped exclusively by the NU authority of charismatic religious scholars or official institutions; they are increasingly constructed through popular, humorous, and viral content. Distinctive NU religious traditions, including the recitation of sholawat, religious gatherings, and the ethical conduct of santri, have been transformed into visually appealing and easily consumable forms of entertainment. Religious preaching is frequently presented through comedy, spontaneous performances, and parodies of everyday life, making such content accessible and appealing to online audiences. However, critics argue that these representations may obscure the spiritual significance and pesantren ethics that have historically constituted the core of NU religiosity (Faisal & Abdullah, 2025). Digital media therefore function not merely as channels for religious preaching but also as contested arenas in which NU values encounter the logics of the

entertainment industry, platform algorithms, and popularity.

Within this context, several Instagram accounts provide important sites for examining how NU identity is digitally constructed. The accounts @guss_icikk, @pixmenleonard, and @andripul_ exemplify an emerging form of religious expression that combines comedy, parody, and traditional NU symbols. Their content frequently features humorous representations of figures referred to as “Gus,” parodies of sholawat rituals, and dramatisations of pesantren life presented through entertainment-oriented narratives and social-media editing techniques. Through informal and humorous modes of communication, these accounts have rapidly attracted public attention and contributed to the emergence of a new perception of NU as an organisation closely connected to digital culture. Social media thus operates not only as a space in which identity is represented but also as a mechanism through which identity is actively produced. It gradually reshapes how the public recognises NU through visuality, comedy, and virality.



The three accounts examined in this study demonstrate distinctive yet interconnected patterns in the construction of NU identity on social media. The account @guss_icikk, for example, explicitly incorporates satirical elements associated with NU religious symbols. The use of “Gus” as part of the account name is particularly significant. Traditionally, the title is attributed to the sons of kiai or respected figures within pesantren communities; however, the account transforms it into a humorous and flexible digital identity. Its profile description, “Pengasuh Jamaah Al Ickiyyah” [leader of the Al Ickiyyah congregation], further reinforces the parody of traditional religious institutions by imitating the conventional language of a religious study group while presenting it in a playful manner. The content is characterised by cheerful

expressions, informal language, and humorous gestures, contributing to its popularity as a form of “comedic da’wah.” At the same time, such representation creates ambiguity between respect for and the profanation of symbols traditionally associated with religious authority.

By contrast, @pixmenleonard does not explicitly display religious symbols in its profile description, yet it plays an important role in the commodification of NU identity. With thousands of followers and clearly displayed business contact information, the account demonstrates how religious humour and NU traditions can be transformed into entertainment content as well as sources of visibility and economic value. Much of its content consists of memes and satirical video clips that appropriate Islamic symbols and representations of pesantren life. However, these elements are primarily organised around the pursuit of popularity, audience engagement, and algorithmic visibility. The account therefore illustrates how religious symbols may acquire exchange value within the attention economy of social media.

Meanwhile, @andripul_ presents a more explicit form of satire through the deliberate distortion of identity symbols. The name “Gux Ipul Al Tampani” clearly parodies the honorific title “Gus,” while profile statements such as “Turunan kyaix dari irax” and “hiduplah sederhana kata ustadku yg naik alpard” employ linguistic distortion and irony to criticise religious actors whose behaviour is perceived as inconsistent with the santri value of modesty. The latter statement may be translated as “live modestly, said my religious teacher who drives an Alphard,” thereby exposing the perceived contradiction between religious discourse and material display. The account predominantly uploads parodies of religious life and sholawat performances, accompanied by sarcastic and humorous captions.

Taken together, the three accounts demonstrate that digital spaces have become arenas for reproducing NU identity outside the direct control of pesantren institutions and kiai authority. Instead, the production of identity is increasingly governed by the logics of audience engagement, humour, and algorithmic visibility. The title “Gus,” the tradition of sholawat, and pesantren ethics no longer appear exclusively within their spiritual and educational contexts. They are transformed into cultural signs that can be appropriated, modified, and parodied according to audience preferences. Within this process, representations of NU on social media move between reverence and profanation, as well

as between religious heritage and popular culture. This tension ultimately contributes to the formation of what may be conceptualised as the hyperreality of NU identity.

The Construction and Representation of NU Identity in Digital Spaces

Digital transformation has significantly altered the ways in which religious communities express, produce, and negotiate their religious identities (Zuhri, 2021). The traditions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which were historically rooted in pesantren, religious study circles, and locally based communal religious activities (Mutakin, 2018), have increasingly migrated into digital spaces through various social media platforms. Within this context, values such as *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawassuth* (moderation), respect for religious scholars, and the tradition of *sholawat* undergo processes of mediation, through which they are rearticulated in visual, humorous, and popular narrative forms that conform to the algorithmic logic of social media. This shift marks the emergence of a new mode of Islamic expression that is no longer associated solely with ritual practices or theological discourse, but also with style, aesthetics, and digital performativity.

More broadly, digital spaces function as arenas in which religious authority is no longer monopolised by formal institutions or charismatic religious scholars, but is increasingly produced in decentralised ways through the creative practices of media users (Nurhamidin et al., 2025). In this environment, content creators operate not merely as entertainers but also as mediating actors who repackage NU symbols through accessible visual and satirical forms. This phenomenon demonstrates that NU identity is no longer transmitted exclusively through genealogical traditions or pesantren education, but is also constructed through the recontextualisation of piety, a process in which religious devotion and symbols are reproduced within digital entertainment formats. Digital spaces therefore constitute important sites for examining how the image of NU is reinterpreted, reconstructed, and negotiated within the broader currents of popular culture.

The first dimension of NU identity examined in this study concerns charismatic religious scholars and *kiai*. In digital spaces, representations of NU scholars and *kiai* have undergone significant shifts in meaning. Within pesantren traditions, these figures are generally positioned as revered authorities and moral

exemplars. On social media, however, they are frequently represented in more fluid, profane, and even parodic forms. Accounts such as @gus_icikk, @pixmenleonard, and @andripull_ circulate edited video clips of religious scholars framed through humour and symbolic criticism. Through montage, parody, and the strategic use of captions, religious scholars are no longer presented solely as central and unquestionable sources of authority, but as human figures who may be subjected to irony and public scrutiny within digital culture. This phenomenon illustrates how traditional religious authority is increasingly mediated by the logics of entertainment and algorithmic virality, in which the sacred status of religious scholars can be transformed into material for both humour and critical reflection.



One illustrative example appears in a video uploaded by @gus_icikk featuring Gus Miftah. The opening segment shows him discussing the importance of proper conduct and prayer, whereas the subsequent clips depict behaviour that appears inconsistent with this message. Through the caption, “selalu ngakak part dedek bayi” [“the baby part always makes me laugh”], the account transforms a religious message into humorous material that renegotiates the meaning of piety. A similar pattern is evident on @pixmenleonard, which features a large-scale religious gathering in which Mama Gufron and Gus Malik dance or interact spontaneously with the audience. Meanwhile, @andripull_ presents Habib Zaidan dancing during a religious forum, juxtaposed with footage of women dancing at a pesantren event. All three accounts employ satirical humour that creates ambiguity between sacredness and entertainment, as well as between religious preaching and public performance. Within this context, religious scholars no longer function solely as transmitters of religious teachings; they also become objects of cultural representation shaped by algorithmic preferences and digital comedy.

Such representations mark a fundamental shift in how NU identity is understood on social media. Piety and authority, which were previously grounded in pesantren charisma, are increasingly

mediated through visual logic and online popularity. Through humour and irony, digital spaces become new arenas in which NU religious identity is reconstructed, not necessarily to negate traditional Islamic values, but to demonstrate how piety and entertainment have become intertwined within a fluid symbolic landscape. Similar patterns can also be observed in other digital practices, particularly in representations of the sholawat tradition and pesantren ethics, both of which undergo symbolic commodification and semantic transformation when incorporated into the ecosystem of social media popular culture.

The second dimension of NU identity examined in this study concerns the tradition of sholawat. Within NU religious culture, sholawat traditionally functions as a spiritual medium connecting aesthetic expression with devotion. In digital spaces, however, the practice is transformed into a symbol of entertainment and an arena of contested meanings. Originally understood as an expression of love for the Prophet and a means of cultivating communal spirituality, sholawat is increasingly remediated through parody and remix formats that blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated in content uploaded by @andripull_, who edited footage of a sholawat gathering by overlaying it with parody music related to the “boycott Trans7” campaign and satirically modified lyrics. Through video-overlay techniques, the creator appears to position himself within the gathering, generating visual irony between the religious atmosphere and a parodic narrative that mocks the surrounding social controversy.

The broader social context further intensifies the meaning of the video. When NU-affiliated groups called for a boycott of Trans7 following a broadcast perceived as demeaning pesantren, various forms of digital solidarity emerged, including sholawat groups that modified song lyrics as a form of symbolic resistance. In the hands of @andripull_, however, this oppositional narrative was recontextualised as satire directed at the NU community itself. The caption, “Maaf ya blm apal” [“Sorry, I have not memorised it yet”], reinforces the humorous and ironic tone, shifting the spiritual meaning of sholawat into a commodity of digital entertainment. Digital space thus becomes an arena of representational power in which religious values are exchanged for algorithmic value: the more humorous and absurd a piece of

content appears, the greater its potential to become viral.

This phenomenon demonstrates how NU religious traditions undergo symbolic desacralisation when incorporated into the social media ecosystem. The spiritual purpose of sholawat, which is intended to cultivate inner peace and reverence for the Prophet, is displaced by a form of collective identity expression marked by satire and irony. From a Foucauldian perspective, this practice can be interpreted as a form of discursive production through which power is negotiated. Content creators appropriate religious symbols not primarily to cultivate piety, but to shape public perceptions of NU religiosity. Digital spaces therefore function not merely as sites of virtual ritual, but also as contested fields in which religious authority and meaning are negotiated through humour, distortion, and hyperreality.

The third dimension of NU identity examined in this study concerns adab within pesantren culture. In NU pesantren traditions, the proper conduct of santri toward their teachers or kiai is not merely a form of social etiquette, but a spiritual foundation that structures the hierarchical relationship between students and their spiritual guides. Values such as tawadhu’ or humility, respect, and obedience are regarded as pathways to the blessing and meaningful acquisition of knowledge. In digital spaces, however, these values undergo symbolic displacement and repression. Representations of kiai-santri relationships in parodic social media content demonstrate how pesantren moral authority has become the object of ridicule, thereby undermining the sacred character of adab. This pattern is visible, for example, in videos posted by @pixmenleonard and @gus_ickkk showing a kiai kicking fruit toward his students. Within the context of parody, the scene is no longer interpreted as a symbol of familiarity or a distinctive pesantren pedagogical practice. Instead, it is constructed as an absurd power relationship between an eccentric caretaker and submissive students who appear unable to resist.

The transformation of adab reaches its most critical point in content uploaded by @andripull_, which satirises the collapse of an Islamic boarding school in Sidoarjo. Through sarcasm, the account invokes the public narrative that “it was destiny” and then mocks the ways in which such religious reasoning may obscure the moral and legal responsibility of those involved. In this context, pesantren, as a symbol of NU’s collective piety, is reconstructed as an object of

social criticism that challenges the moral legitimacy of its religious figures. The video is fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, it demonstrates a willingness to question feudal reasoning within pesantren culture. On the other hand, it reveals how digital criticism may lose ethical sensitivity by transforming tragedy and spiritual values into comedic material, thereby producing a form of moral irony.

These phenomena demonstrate that digitalisation has created a new threshold for interpreting pesantren morality. In online spaces, *adab* is no longer treated as an uncontested normative order, but as a discourse negotiated through humour, satire, and visual distortion. Content creators such as @gus_icikkk and @andripull_ reproduce *kiai*–*santri* relations and religious symbols according to the algorithmic logic of entertainment: the more provocative a narrative becomes, the greater its potential circulation. Consequently, pesantren, long regarded as a source of moral legitimacy, is increasingly represented as an institution vulnerable to irony and the abuse of authority. This shift indicates that *adab* and morality in the digital age are assessed not only through adherence to religious values, but also through the ways in which the public interprets and consumes religious symbols within fluid and competitive digital environments.

Taken together, the representations of the three dimensions of NU identity religious scholars, the *sholawat* tradition, and pesantren ethics demonstrate that religious symbols once regarded as sacred have undergone processes of desacralisation through parody, visual editing, and semantic manipulation. Content creators do not merely display religious figures or rituals; they reproduce and transform their meanings through the logics of entertainment and social media algorithms. In environments governed by clicks, laughter, and virality, religious scholars are transformed into entertainment figures, *sholawat* becomes material for musical comedy, and pesantren ethics are reduced to satire concerning allegedly unequal power relations and moral inconsistencies. This process marks a shift from representation to simulacra, in which religious images no longer refer directly to NU's traditional reality, but instead constitute new constructions that circulate independently in digital spaces. Digital media therefore function not merely as mirrors of social reality, but as new fields of power in which religious symbols are negotiated, parodied, and reconstructed into forms of hyperreality.

Discourse, Power, and the Production of Hyperreality: Satire as a Mechanism of Representation

Digital space is not inherently neutral. It is an arena in which discourses compete and power over meaning is continuously contested. In the context of this study, accounts such as @guss_icikk, @pixmenleonard, and @andripul_ do not merely present religious humour or satire; they also function as producers of new discourses that reframe the image of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through mechanisms of symbolic power. The content they create is therefore not simply entertainment, but also an exercise of power, because representation directs the public toward accepting a particular version of NU one that is no longer grounded in empirical reality, but in digitally constructed hyperreality.

Within Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, power and knowledge are inseparably connected: those who control discourse also influence what is accepted as true (Syafiuddin, 2018). In digital environments, content creators occupy a strategic position as initial producers and organisers of meaning (Leitch & Merlot, 2018). They possess a form of technological power that enables them to exploit platform algorithms, visual language, and the timing of uploads to shape public opinion. Significantly, this power does not operate coercively, but persuasively (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Satirical content, parody, and wordplay concerning NU may appear as light-hearted humour, yet they may simultaneously normalise negative perceptions of the religious organisation.

This phenomenon demonstrates how algorithmic power reinforces the circulation of particular discourses. Controversial, satirical, and sensational content generally attracts higher levels of interaction than informative or reflective material. Consequently, content creators may strategically employ negative narratives about NU to increase engagement rates and expand their algorithmic reach. The observations conducted in this study indicate that the accounts initially had relatively limited numbers of followers and views. However, after producing satirical content that parodied NU symbols—such as the organisation's flag, dancing during *sholawat* performances, or *kiai* represented in comic ways—their audience reach and follower counts increased substantially. This pattern suggests that digital power increasingly operates through the logic of virality rather than through the validation of truth.

Discursive power does not remain exclusively in the hands of content creators.

Netizens also play a significant role in expanding and reproducing the forms of knowledge generated through these discourses. In comment sections, users frequently reproduce more extreme interpretations. Some comments, for example, stigmatise NU as a whole, as though the behaviour of particular individuals or isolated parodic content accurately reflected the organisation in its entirety. Such comments constitute a form of “new knowledge-power”: knowledge that is not produced through scholarly inquiry, contextual understanding, or verification, but through immediate perceptions and emotional responses. From a Foucauldian perspective, this constitutes a new regime of truth in the digital age—a form of truth grounded not in recognised scholarly lineages, but in the logic of likes, shares, and comments.

Social media comment sections therefore function not merely as spaces for public expression, but as arenas for the reproduction of digital knowledge that shape how particular groups are perceived. When negatively stigmatising comments dominate these spaces, they generate a prevailing narrative that disregards the complexity, diversity, and intellectual traditions of NU. This form of public power over knowledge may become destructive because it reduces social understanding to the version of reality that gains the greatest visibility. As a result, the image of NU becomes distorted: rather than being understood as a moderate and intellectually grounded religious community, it is represented as an absurd entity considered appropriate for ridicule.

Baudrillard conceptualises this condition as social hyperreality, in which media-generated representations displace the realities to which they ostensibly refer (van Kessel et al., 2025). In this context, the social-media version of NU may appear more “real” to the public than NU’s actual social and religious existence. Religious scholars, traditions, and santri, which previously carried sacred and moral significance, become confined within digital images produced to satisfy the demands of the attention economy. Religious discourse in digital spaces therefore no longer revolves exclusively around spiritual truth, but increasingly concerns the power to determine who deserves credibility and who becomes an object of ridicule.

The hyperreality produced through these mechanisms of discourse and digital power gradually undermines traditional religious authority. Authority that was once derived from religious knowledge, scholarly lineage, and

clerical charisma is increasingly confronted by authority based on follower counts, views, and online visibility. In this process, content creators and netizens function simultaneously as producers and consumers of knowledge, collectively reinforcing the appearance of truth. Social media thus operates as a machine for producing hyperreality: it generates a “new truth” that appears authentic and persuasive, despite being primarily constituted through digital selection, repetition, distortion, and representation.

The Transformation of Religious Authority and the Challenge of Digital Literacy for NU

The hyperreal representation of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) identity on social media cannot be separated from the influential role of algorithms as a new mechanism of power in the digital age. Algorithms do not operate according to standards of truth but prioritise the attractiveness, emotional intensity, and viral potential of content (Ejue & Etim, 2024). In this context, posts that satirise NU authority often receive greater algorithmic visibility because they are sensational, provocative, and capable of eliciting strong public reactions. Content such as parodies of kiai, satirical adaptations of sholawat, and memes featuring the NU flag is treated by algorithmic systems as “high-value” material because of its capacity to generate substantial user engagement. Consequently, despite containing bias, distortion, or even misinformation, such content may achieve extensive visibility and reinforce negative perceptions of NU within the digital public sphere.

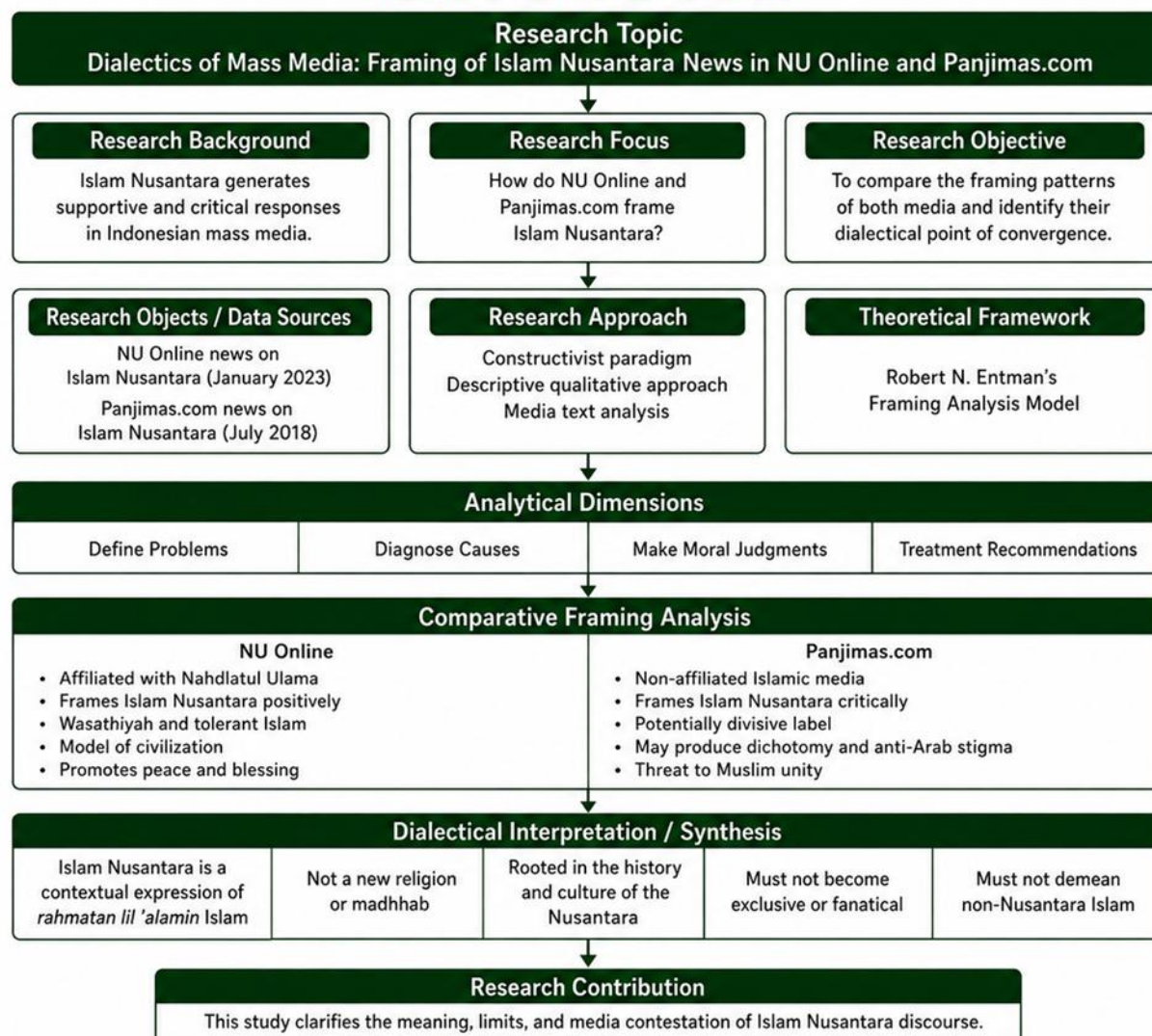
This process contributes to a transformation of religious authority, understood as a shift in the sources of reference, exemplary figures, and interpretive frameworks through which people understand and practise religion (Aslam, 2025). Within NU’s Islamic tradition, religious authority has historically been grounded in scholarly lineage, ethical conduct, and spiritual legitimacy. In digital environments, however, this authority increasingly shifts towards algorithmic authority, in which influence is determined by the ability to manage interaction patterns, select effective posting times, and produce sensational narratives. Content creators therefore acquire considerable control over how the public interprets religious symbols. They effectively become “digital kiai” who communicate a social-media version of NU identity based not on religious knowledge or spiritual experience, but on views, followers, likes, and other engagement

metrics. Such authority is fluid, populist, and heavily dependent on the logic of the attention economy.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon cannot be attributed entirely to forces external to NU. From the perspective of social causality, many satirical representations circulating on social media originate in the conduct of particular individuals

This condition suggests that NU indirectly contributes to the construction of its own hyperreal identity. When the actions of particular members become negatively viral and institutional actors fail to respond promptly with credible counter-narratives, digital space becomes dominated by external actors who are more adept at manipulating religious symbols.

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associated with NU whose actions are perceived as excessive or inconsistent with organisational values. Examples include exaggerated forms of religious expression, internal conflicts exposed to public scrutiny, and individual conduct that fails to reflect the values of *tawadhu'* or humility and moderation traditionally associated with NU. Such incidents inadvertently provide material that content creators can transform into satire. The hyperreality surrounding NU is therefore not solely an external construction, but also reflects internal weaknesses in maintaining institutional reputation and the ethical discipline of its members.

Digital literacy is therefore crucial for NU communities. Without the ability to understand algorithmic logic and the dynamics of digital discourse, NU members are likely to remain in a defensive position—as objects of representation rather than active subjects capable of shaping meaning.

One of NU's most pressing challenges is consequently to renegotiate its authority within an increasingly open and competitive digital ecosystem. Traditional authority grounded in the charisma of *kiai* and the institutional legitimacy of *pesantren* is not automatically recognised in online environments. It must be rearticulated

through digital forms of communication, particularly through the active participation of younger religious scholars, competent religious content creators, and official NU accounts capable of engaging the public in intelligent, responsive, and adaptive ways. Without such efforts, representations of NU will continue to be shaped by actors who appropriate religious symbols for satire, provocation, and commercial visibility.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this situation illustrates the emergence of a new regime of truth in digital spaces, in which “truth” is no longer produced primarily by recognised scholarly authority but through the circulation of discourse governed by algorithms and collective emotion (Tanoyo, 2024). From Baudrillard’s perspective, the resulting hyperreality represents an extreme crisis of representation: the social and religious reality of NU is displaced by a digital version constructed through the accumulation of stigma, parody, selective representation, and distortion.

For this reason, discursive strategy and critical digital literacy have become essential for NU to reclaim control over its public representation.

Digital literacy should not be understood merely as the technical ability to use social media, but as the critical capacity to distinguish reality from hyperreality and satire from verified information. NU needs to develop an approach that is not merely defensive, but communicative, reflective, and strategically responsive. This requires producing counter-discourses that are respectful yet critical and capable of restoring the dignity of religious scholars and the values of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah* in formats accessible to digital audiences. Through such efforts, NU’s religious authority need not be displaced by algorithmic power; instead, it may engage constructively with digital culture while reaffirming the authenticity of its religious identity.

5. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that content creators and netizen interactions play an active role in constructing and affirming negative labels attached to the sholawat tradition and NU identity. Satire, parody, edited video clips, memes, visual manipulation, and humorous captions shift sholawat from a spiritual expression into a spectacle perceived as entertainment or an excessive form of religious practice. These labels are reinforced by comments that generalise the behaviour of particular individuals as

representative of NU as a whole. Comment sections consequently become arenas in which stereotypes are reproduced, normalised, and consolidated. The hyperreality of NU identity is produced through power relations involving content creators, social media algorithms, and netizens. Content creators select, edit, and frame NU symbols according to the logics of humour and virality; algorithms then amplify provocative content, while users reinforce it through comments, likes, and shares. This process generates a digital regime of truth in which perceptions of NU are shaped more by content popularity than by verification, contextual understanding, or religious knowledge. As a result, partial and distorted representations of NU may be perceived as more real and credible than its complex social and religious reality. This hyperreality also contributes to a transformation of NU’s religious authority. Traditional authority, historically grounded in scholarly lineage, clerical charisma, pesantren ethics, and institutional legitimacy, increasingly confronts digital authority based on follower counts, views, popularity, and user engagement. Although this transformation does not eliminate traditional authority, it requires NU to renegotiate its legitimacy through critical digital literacy, credible counter-narratives, a stronger institutional presence on social media, and the production of creative and contextually relevant content that remains grounded in religious knowledge and ethical conduct. Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating Michel Foucault’s theory of power relations and discourse with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and hyperreality. Foucault’s framework explains the production, circulation, and legitimation of discourse, whereas Baudrillard’s framework clarifies how such discourse develops into hyperreal representations that may displace the realities to which they refer. Methodologically, the study extends the application of netnography by combining the analysis of visual content, captions, religious symbols, editing techniques, and interactions in comment sections. Practically, the findings provide a foundation for NU and other religious organisations to strengthen digital literacy, understand algorithmic mechanisms, verify information, and develop communication strategies capable of preserving the authenticity of religious traditions and authority in digital environments.

6. Declaration

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