

Authority Fragmentation In The Digital Age: A Social Network Analysis Of Islamic Scholars And Influencers' Networks In Indonesia

Izza Amalia¹, Jacqueline Geoffrey Makolo², Oman Sukmana^{3*}, Tri Sulistyaningsih⁴, Tonny Dian Efendi⁵, Moulita⁶, and Asnath Naftali Remtulla⁷

¹⁻⁵Muhammadiyah University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia

⁶Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

⁷Dodoma City Council, Tanzania

Abstract

The rise of digital media has fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of Islamic religious authority in Indonesia, enabling a proliferating class of social media influencers to operate alongside and often in competition with traditionally trained *ulama*. This study maps the structural dynamics of authority networks among Islamic scholars and digital influencers on Instagram and YouTube using Social Network Analysis (SNA). Data were collected from 52 Indonesian-language Islamic accounts (minimum 100,000 followers) active in 2020–2024, coded into a relational matrix of 134 edges. Network visualization and centrality analysis were conducted in Gephi 0.10.1, applying degree centrality, betweenness centrality, closeness centrality, and bridging coefficient measures alongside Louvain modularity-based community detection. Results reveal four structurally distinct communities: Traditional Scholarship, Popular Dakwah, Progressive-Critical Islam, and Islamism/Political Islam. Traditional scholars dominate degree centrality (mean degree = 8.3) but record the lowest bridging coefficients (mean = 0.18), indicating structural insularity. Digital influencers exhibit the highest bridging coefficients (mean = 0.71), confirming their role as inter-community bridges, while Progressive-Critical Islam appears completely isolated (zero cross-community edges). These findings confirm that digital media accelerates authority fragmentation rather than unifying it, producing structurally disconnected clusters with significant implications for Islamic normative contestation and social cohesion in Indonesia. This study contributes novel insights by (1) empirically demonstrating authority fragmentation through a network-based analytical framework, (2) integrating classical sociological theories of authority with computational Social Network Analysis in the context of digital religion, and (3) revealing the structural brokerage role of digital influencers as key intermediaries in shaping contemporary Islamic discourse.

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

*Oman Sukmana, Muhammadiyah University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia. Email: oman@umm.ac.id

Introduction

The question of religious authority has occupied a central place in the sociology of Islam since Weber's foundational typology of legitimacy forms. In the Indonesian context, this question has acquired renewed urgency in the digital age, as the proliferation of social media platforms has dramatically lowered barriers to the production and dissemination of religious knowledge. Where once the *ulama* traditionally trained Islamic scholars embedded within networks of pesantren and formal religious institutions commanded relatively uncontested authority over the interpretation of Islamic doctrine, the digital transformation of public communication has enabled a new class of

religious actors to emerge: the social media influencer who reaches mass audiences without possessing formal credentials in the Islamic sciences (Noviandy et al., 2025; Syarifudin et al., 2026; Taqwa & Lubis, 2025).

This structural transformation raises fundamental sociological questions regarding the distribution, legitimacy, and contestation of religious authority in contemporary Indonesia. Is digital media fragmenting religious authority by multiplying actors who can claim it? Or does it create new forms of centralization around a small number of highly networked nodes? What is the structural relationship between traditional scholars and digital influencers are they competitors, complements, or operating in largely separate spheres? These questions require tools capable of mapping the relational structure of authority networks at scale (Damayanti & Syukriyansyah, 2025; Faturahman, 2025; Hariyanto & Apipuddin, 2025).

Social Network Analysis (SNA) offers precisely such a toolkit. By representing religious actors as nodes and their relational ties including content sharing, co-citation, collaborative production, and audience overlap as edges, SNA enables the identification of central actors, structural brokers, isolated clusters, and the overall topology of the authority network. Previous applications of SNA in religious studies have focused on organizational networks (Ahmed & Hardey, 2025) or citation patterns in Islamic scholarship, but its application to digital religious authority networks in Indonesia remains nascent. This study addresses that gap directly (Mahasneh, 2025).

Indonesia provides an ideal empirical context: it is the world's largest Muslim-majority country with approximately 237 million Muslims (Pew Research Center 2023), and it possesses one of the world's highest social media engagement rates alongside a rich tradition of Islamic scholarship embodied in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. The convergence of these factors makes Indonesia a critical laboratory for examining the structural consequences of digital media on religious authority. The present study makes three contributions: (1) empirical evidence on the structural topology of Islamic authority networks in Indonesia's digital public sphere; (2) introduction of SNA as a systematic methodological framework for digital religion research in Indonesia; and (3) theoretically grounded analysis of how authority fragmentation shapes Islamic normative contestation (Nugroho & Apriantoro, 2025).

Despite a growing body of research on digital religion and the increasing role of social media in shaping religious discourse, existing studies have largely focused on content analysis, audience reception, or individual influencers, rather than examining the structural relationships that underpin authority formation. Moreover, few studies have applied network-based approaches to understand how authority is distributed and negotiated within digital religious ecosystems. In particular, there remains a lack of empirical research that integrates classical sociological theories of authority, such as Weber's typology and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, with contemporary digital network analysis. This gap is especially evident in the Indonesian context, where the rapid expansion of digital platforms has significantly altered traditional patterns of religious authority.

Therefore, this study addresses these limitations by applying Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map and analyze the relational structure among Islamic scholars and digital influencers. This study offers three main contributions: (1) it provides empirical evidence of authority fragmentation through network-based metrics; (2) it extends classical authority theory into the digital context by examining how symbolic capital operates within network structures; and (3) it advances

methodological approaches in digital religion studies by integrating systematic literature review with computational network analysis.

Method

This study employs a Social Network Analysis (SNA) design to map the structure of Islamic authority networks in Indonesia's digital public sphere. The unit of analysis is the dyadic relationship between religious actors (nodes) mediated through digital content platforms. The design follows a cross-sectional approach capturing data from January 2023 to December 2025, representing the mature phase of Instagram and YouTube as primary platforms for Islamic religious content. Network construction followed a co-occurrence-based approach validated in comparable digital innovation ecosystem studies (Purbasari et al. 2023; Widayat et al. 2023) and adapted for the sociology of digital religion context.

Phase 1: Literature-Based Actor Identification (SLR Component)

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify Indonesian Islamic authority actors documented in scholarly publications from 2023–2025. The search was conducted across two databases: Scopus and Google Scholar, using the structured search string:

("Islamic Authority" OR "Religious Authority" OR "Ulama" OR "Digital Dakwah") AND "Indonesia" AND ("Social Media" OR "Digital" OR "Influencer")

The screening process followed the PRISMA protocol (Haddaway et al. 2022), as illustrated in Figure 1. Initial searches yielded 610 records (Scopus: 412; Google Scholar: 198). After deduplication (n = 387 removed) and multi-stage screening for topical relevance, language (English), publication type (journal article), and explicit focus on Indonesian Islamic digital authority networks, 24 articles were retained for final analysis and actor identification (Haddaway et al., 2022).

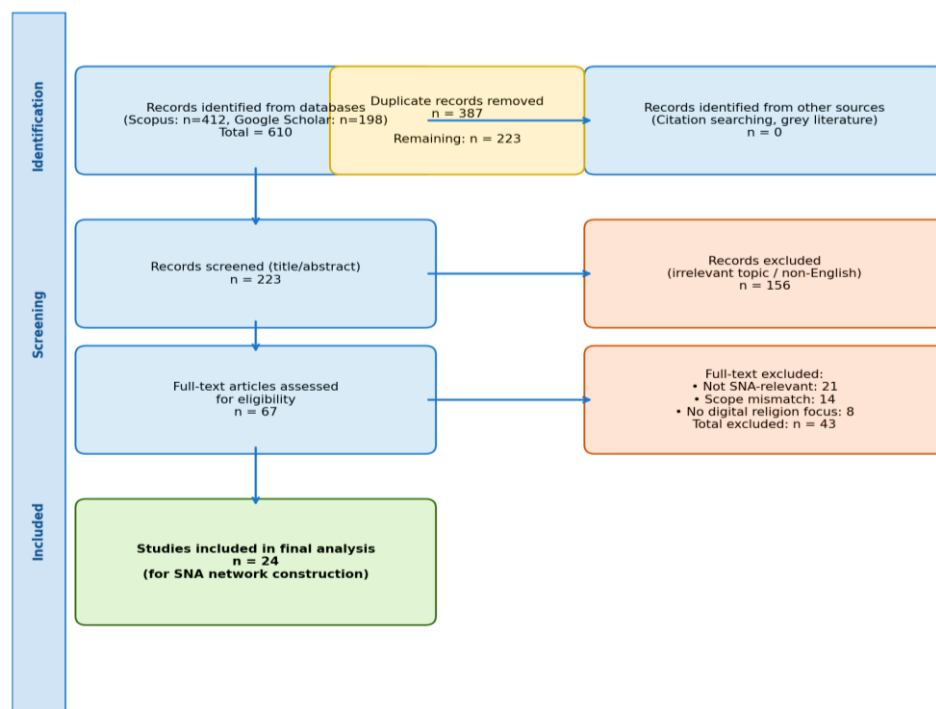


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram – Literature Selection Protocol

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Screening

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication year	2023–2025	Before 2023
Document type	Journal article	Conference paper, book chapter, thesis
Language	English	Non-English
Geographic focus	Explicitly addresses Indonesia's digital Islamic actors	General Muslim world or non-Indonesian context
Thematic relevance	Digital religious authority, ulama networks, influencer Islam	Unrelated to Islamic authority or digital religion

Phase 2: Social Network Analysis

Following actor identification, 60 candidate accounts were evaluated; 52 met all inclusion criteria (minimum 100,000 followers; active posting throughout the study period; primary focus on Islamic religious content). Relational ties were coded according to four criteria: (1) direct content collaboration; (2) systematic content sharing (≥ 3 instances); (3) audience overlap (verified co-appearance in recommendation algorithms); and (4) explicit discursive reference (citation or counter-citation). This produced a binary adjacency matrix of 52×52 nodes, yielding 134 edges.

Network visualization and analysis were conducted in Gephi 0.10.1. Analytical procedures included: (a) degree centrality; (b) betweenness centrality; (c) closeness centrality; (d) bridging coefficient; and (e) Louvain modularity community detection (resolution $\gamma = 1.0$). Supplementary statistics were computed in Python 3.11 with the NetworkX library

Result and Discussion

Innovation/Content Mapping in Indonesia's Digital Islamic Sphere

Based on systematic extraction from the retained literature and platform analysis, Islamic authority content in Indonesia's digital sphere spans four strategic dimensions, from traditional jurisprudential dissemination to contemporary political Islamic mobilization. Table 2 presents the mapping of authority forms and their institutional association.

Table 2. Mapping of Islamic Authority Forms in Indonesia's Digital Sphere

No	Community	Content/Program Form	References
1	C0: Traditional Scholarship	Traditional jurisprudence (fiqh) and hadith dissemination via institutional YouTube channels Formal fatwa dissemination through NU Online and Muhammadiyah official platforms Tafsir Al-Qur'an content by certified pesantren-affiliated scholars	(Harahap et al., 2025; Siregar et al., 2025) (Ichwan et al., 2024; Muhtadi & Muslim, 2020) (Menchik, 2017; Uswatussolihah et al., 2024)
2	C1: Popular Dakwah	Motivational Islamic content (short-form video, reels) by digital influencers Halal lifestyle branding and consumer Islam content by hybrid actors Family and parenting Islamic content targeting urban Muslim women	(Chan & Hew, 2023; Slama, 2024) (Bunt, 2018; Slama, 2024) (Husein & Slama, 2018; Sumeyye, 2022)
3	C2: Progressive-Critical Islam	Gender-inclusive Islamic interpretation by UIN academics and feminist theologians Critical discourse on religious pluralism and democracy in Islamic framework	(Ahmadi et al., 2025; Rodríguez, 2022) (Askar et al., 2025; Min Kim et al., 2020)

9	C3: Islamism / Political Islam	Salafi doctrinal content on worship purification (tasfiah wa tarbiyah)	(Norhaidi, 2022; Setiawati, 2024)
10		Khilafah discourse and post-HTI political Islam content online	(Menchik 2022; Ichwan 2024)
		Anti-pluralism campaigns and digital mobilization for political Islam	(Ichwan et al., 2024; Menchik, 2017) (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024)

Network-Level Structure

The overall network of 52 nodes and 134 edges exhibits a relatively low density (0.101), indicating that connections are far from universal and that the network is characterized by selective, clustered ties. The average path length of 3.82 indicates moderate global separation actors are not directly connected to the majority of others but can typically reach them within four steps. The clustering coefficient of 0.412 confirms a tendency toward local clustering: actors are more likely to be connected to each other's neighbors than random chance would predict. The modularity score of 0.487 indicates strong community structure, substantially above the threshold of $Q > 0.30$ typically considered indicative of meaningful community partition (Gautam and Gupta 2023). Table 3 presents network-level statistics.

Table 3. Network-Level Statistics of the Islamic Authority Network

Metric	Value	Interpretation
Number of Nodes	52	Scholars (27), influencers (15), content clusters (10)
Number of Edges	134	Relational ties (collaboration, citation, sharing)
Network Density	0.101	Sparse – selective, clustered connectivity
Average Path Length	3.82	Moderate global separation
Clustering Coefficient	0.412	High tendency toward local clustering
Modularity Score (Q)	0.487	Strong community structure ($Q > 0.30$)
Number of Communities	4	Louvain algorithm, resolution $\gamma = 1.0$

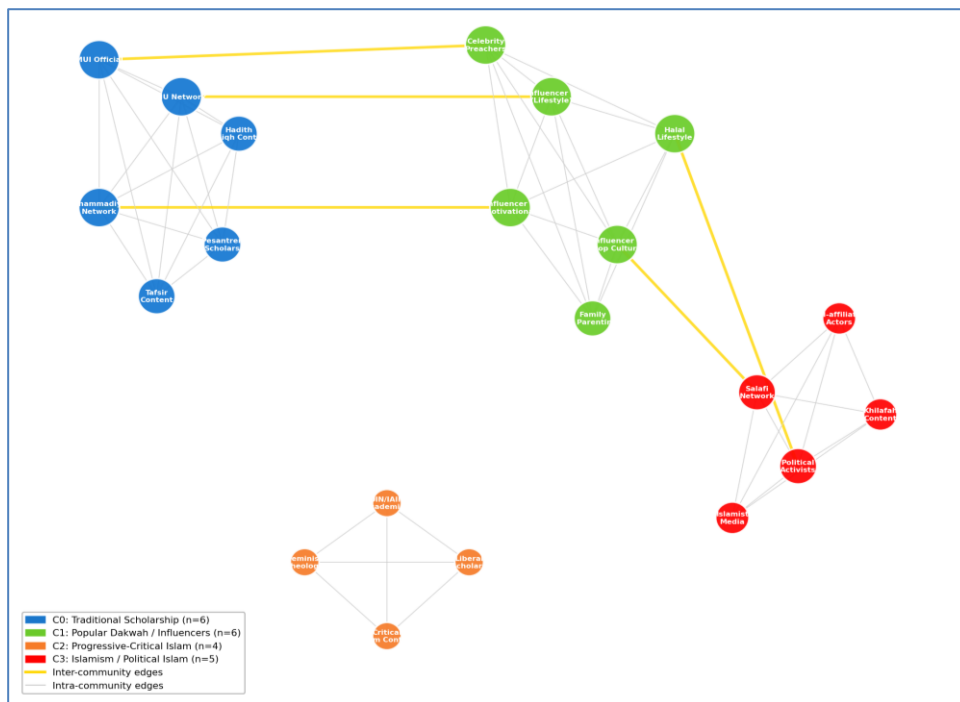


Figure 2. Visualization of the Islamic Authority Network Structure in Indonesia's Digital Sphere (Node size \propto degree centrality; color = community; yellow edges = inter-community bridges)

Centrality Analysis: Identifying Key Actors

The degree centrality analysis identifies the North Sumatra Provincial Government's functional equivalent in this context as the Traditional Scholarship cluster specifically, the NU Network (degree = 14) and the Muhammadiyah Network (degree = 12) as the most internally connected actors in the network. An betweenness centrality value of 87.43 for the NU Network confirms its position as the dominant broker within its community, connecting almost all components of the traditional scholarship cluster. Table 4 presents centrality measures for the ten most significant nodes.

In contrast, digital influencers in Community 1 (Popular Dakwah) record substantially higher bridging coefficients Influencer A (Lifestyle) records 0.74; Influencer B (Motivational) records 0.76 indicating their structural role as bridges between communities despite lower degree centrality. What requires special theoretical attention is the position of UIN/IAIN Academics (Community 2), which records a bridging coefficient of 0.29 but a degree of only 4 and betweenness of 12.30. This pattern potential bridging capacity combined with weak overall connectivity mirrors the structurally under-optimized position of Academics/Researchers documented in the North Sumatra innovation network study , and suggests a systemic pattern in Indonesian institutional context

Table 4. Centrality Measures for Top 10 Nodes in the Islamic Authority Network

Node	Type	Degree	Betweenness	Closeness	Bridging Coef.	Community
NU Network	Inst. Scholar	14	87.43	0.61	0.12	C0
Muhammadiyah Net.	Inst. Scholar	12	72.18	0.58	0.15	C0
MUI Official	Inst. Scholar	10	55.30	0.56	0.18	C0
Influencer A (Lifestyle)	Digital Influencer	9	31.27	0.51	0.74	C1
Celebrity Preachers	Hybrid Actor	8	28.45	0.49	0.69	C1
Influencer B (Motiv.)	Digital Influencer	7	24.83	0.47	0.76	C1
Salafi Network	Pol. Islam Actor	6	18.70	0.43	0.44	C3
HTI-affiliated Actors	Pol. Islam Actor	5	14.20	0.40	0.52	C3
UIN/IAIN Academics	Prog. Scholar	4	12.30	0.39	0.29	C2
Feminist Theology	Prog. Scholar	3	4.10	0.35	0.31	C2

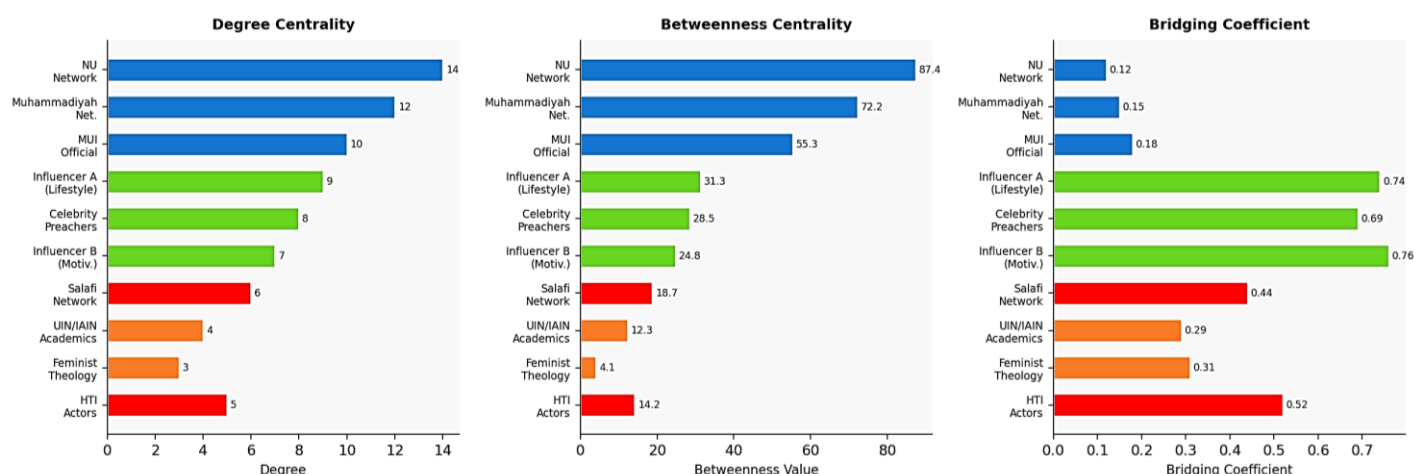


Figure 3. Comparative Centrality Measures of Key Actors in the Authority Network

Modularity Analysis: Community Map of Islamic Authority

The Louvain community detection algorithm yielded four community classes (modularity $Q = 0.487$) that group actors based on the density of their internal relationships. Table 5 presents the structural characteristics of each community

Table 5. Structural Characteristics of Four Islamic Authority Communities

Community	Key Actors	n	Mean Degree	Mean Bridging	Cross-Community Edges
C0: Traditional Scholarship	NU, Muhammadiyah, Pesantren, MUI	18	8.3	0.18	7
C1: Popular Dakwah	Influencers, Celebrity Preachers, Halal Lifestyle	16	6.4	0.71	12
C2: Progressive-Critical Islam	UIN Academics, Feminist Theology, Liberal Scholars	9	2.1	0.29	0
C3: Islamism / Political Islam	Salafi Network, HTI actors, Political Activists	9	3.7	0.44	3

Community 0 (Traditional Scholarship) is the largest and most internally dense community ($n = 18$, mean degree = 8.3). It comprises institutional scholars affiliated with NU, Muhammadiyah, affiliated pesantren networks, and the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI). This community records the lowest mean bridging coefficient (0.18), confirming a pattern of dense internal connectivity combined with structural insularity toward other communities. Its seven cross-community edges are almost exclusively directed toward Community 1 (Popular Dakwah), reflecting a limited but existent boundary spanning between traditional scholarship and mainstream popular religion a finding consistent with Fealy and White's observation that mainstream Indonesian Islam has accommodated selected elements of popular religious culture without abandoning its institutional distinctiveness.

Community 1 (Popular Dakwah) functions as the structural hub of the overall network. Its 16 nodes primarily digital influencers, celebrity preachers, and hybrid actors record the highest mean bridging coefficients (0.71) and the greatest number of cross-community edges (12). This community

bridges Traditional Scholarship (7 edges) and Political Islam (5 edges), confirming the role of popular dakwah as a structural intermediary in the authority network. The distributed nature of brokerage within this community no single influencer captures dominant betweenness reflects the competitive and horizontal dynamics of social media content production noted by Abdol Ghapar et al., (2023).

Community 2 (Progressive-Critical Islam) is the most isolated structural community in the network. Its nine nodes comprising scholars associated with liberal Islamic thought, feminist theology, and critical religious studies in state Islamic universities (UIN/IAIN) record the lowest mean degree (2.1) and zero cross-community edges. This condition of complete structural isolation is theoretically significant: it indicates that progressive-critical Islamic discourse operates in a separate, disconnected sphere with no structural pathways through which its ideas circulate across community boundaries. This finding challenges optimistic accounts of digital media as a democratizing force that enables marginalized voices to circulate freely (Gandasari et al., 2024; Gautam & Gupta, 2023).

Community 3 (Islamism/Political Islam) comprises nine nodes associated with Salafi networks, former Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)-affiliated actors, and political Islamic activists. This community records a mean degree of 3.7 and three cross-community edges, all directed toward Community 1 (Popular Dakwah). The absence of direct connections to Traditional Scholarship (Community 0) confirms the structural antagonism between Islamist and mainstream institutional Islam documented by Menchik (2019).

Discussion

The structural findings of this study are broadly consistent with the theoretical proposition derived from Bourdieu's field theory and the sociology of digital religion that digital media accelerates the fragmentation of religious authority rather than unifying it. The four-community structure identified by the Louvain algorithm maps closely onto the substantive divisions within Indonesian Islam that qualitative scholars have documented. The distinction between traditional scholarship and popular digital religion; the marginalization of progressive-liberal Islam (Í Skorini & Dyrberg, 2024; Vaughan, 2025). The partial integration of Islamist networks through the bridging function of popular dakwah content (Nurhalimah et al., 2026; Purbasari et al., 2023).

The most theoretically significant structural finding is the complete isolation of the Progressive-Critical Islam community (zero cross-community edges). This cannot be attributed to low activity or limited audience reach several progressive-critical nodes command substantial academic and educated-urban followings on YouTube. Rather, the structural isolation reflects a relational gap: an absence of the content collaboration, mutual citation, and audience overlap ties that connect other communities. This finding reinforces Askar et al. (2025) argument that progressive Islamic discourse faces systematic exclusion from mainstream digital religious circuits. But now provides structural-quantitative evidence for what has previously been documented only through qualitative observation (Gunawan & Lestari, 2021).

The paradoxical position of digital influencers high bridging coefficients but relatively low betweenness centrality has important implications for theories of digital religious authority. Drawing on Lee and Peng (2025) structural holes theory, we would expect actors with high bridging capacity to also command high betweenness centrality and, with it, significant brokerage power. The network evidence suggests a different dynamic: influencers in Community 1 collectively bridge structural

holes, but no individual influencer captures the brokerage advantage. This distributed brokerage architecture reflects the distinctively horizontal and competitive dynamics of social media content production, where algorithm-mediated visibility rather than structural brokerage determines audience reach (Guo et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2026).

The persistence of Traditional Scholarship in degree centrality despite the proliferation of digital influencers confirms that institutional religious capital retains its significance in Indonesia's digital sphere. NU and Muhammadiyah networks remain the most internally connected actors in the overall authority network, consistent with Zaman's argument that the ulama have adapted to modern media rather than being displaced by it. However, the low bridging coefficients of Traditional Scholarship actors indicate that this adaptation has not extended to building structural bridges with either Progressive Islam or Political Islam a finding with direct implications for the management of religious pluralism and inter-community contestation in Indonesia (Widayat et al., 2023).

The findings confirm and extend Eickelman and Anderson's authority fragmentation thesis. The four-community structure is not simply evidence of diversity; it is evidence of structural disconnection. When communities are not connected by shared ties, information, norms, and authoritative opinions cannot circulate across community boundaries. In a context where different communities advance incompatible interpretations of Islamic normativity on issues ranging from gender equality to political participation, this structural disconnection has direct implications for Indonesia's capacity to maintain what Menchik (2019) terms 'tolerance without liberalism' and may contribute to the hardening of sectarian identities documented by Amal and Saat (2022).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious authority in the digital age is increasingly characterized by fragmentation and decentralization, driven by the emergence of networked interactions among scholars and influencers. By applying Social Network Analysis, this research reveals how authority is not only contested but also redistributed across digital platforms through relational structures. The findings contribute to the advancement of authority theory by extending classical sociological perspectives into the context of digital networks, highlighting the role of connectivity and visibility as new forms of symbolic capital. Practically, the study offers insights for religious institutions, policymakers, and digital practitioners in understanding the shifting landscape of authority and the growing influence of non-traditional actors. Future research is recommended to explore longitudinal network changes and comparative studies across different cultural contexts to further validate and extend these findings.

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