

The Crisis of Expertise? Digital Religious Authority in Islamic Political Discourse on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of religious authority in digital media through Islamic political discourse on YouTube, focusing on the content produced by Guru Gembul. Employing Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, this research analyzes selected YouTube videos published between December 2024 and April 2025, using video transcripts and visual elements as primary data. The study investigates how religious authority is discursively constructed in the absence of formal religious or academic credentials. The findings reveal that authority is produced through casual language, emotional appeals, and trend-responsive narratives that prioritize audience engagement over epistemic depth. Rather than presenting systematic theological arguments, book references function as symbolic markers of intellectual credibility. It indicates a shift in how expertise is evaluated in digital religious spaces, where visibility, affectivity, and resonance with audiences become central sources of authority. This study contributes to scholarship on digital religion and media discourse by demonstrating how religious authority is reconfigured through platform-mediated discursive practices, extending Critical Discourse Analysis beyond traditional institutional contexts. In practice, the findings highlight the importance of digital literacy for critically assessing religious authority in online environments.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital media platforms has fundamentally transformed how authority, knowledge, and credibility are produced and circulated in contemporary society. Social media platforms such as YouTube do not function merely as neutral channels of information but actively shape discourse through platform logic, mediated visibility, and audience engagement metrics. Within this digital environment, authority is increasingly constructed through communicative performance, affective appeal, and media visibility rather than institutional or academic credentials. Consequently, Islamic political discourse on YouTube must be understood as a media-driven phenomenon in which religious authority is mediated, negotiated, and normalized through digital communication practices (Febrian, 2024; Lim, 2017; Lubis & Nasution, 2023). In Indonesia, this shift enables individuals without formal religious or academic credentials to gain discursive power and influence public debates, particularly in Islamic political discourse (APJII, 2020; Rachmad, 2023; Rahmawati, 2021). From a critical discourse perspective, this transformation reflects

not merely technological change, but a restructuring of power relations embedded in discourse. According to Fairclough (2023), discourse operates simultaneously as text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice, shaping and being shaped by broader social structures. Within digital media environments, authority is increasingly produced through discursive strategies such as narrative framing, personalization, emotional appeal, and platform-mediated visibility rather than through institutionalized expertise.

A notable example of this phenomenon is Guru Gembul, a YouTube content creator with over 1 million subscribers who frequently discusses social, psychological, and Islamic political issues. Despite lacking formal education in religion or Islamic politics, Guru Gembul has positioned himself as an authoritative voice through a casual, narrative-driven, and relatable communication style (Sholikhin et al., 2024). His content demonstrates how discursive authority can be constructed through language choices, performativity, and audience alignment rather than scholarly legitimacy. Previous studies have shown that his content influences public debates on religion and politics, which is often interpreted as reflecting a broader crisis of expertise in contemporary Islamic political discourse (Isbah & Faisal, 2023; Nichols, 2021). However, these studies have not sufficiently examined how such authority is discursively produced, circulated, and normalized within digital media environments.

Traditionally, religious authority in Indonesian Islam has been rooted in formal institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, universities, and religious organizations, where legitimacy is derived from scholarly lineage, textual mastery, and institutional recognition (Van Bruinessen, 2013). Drawing on Weber's (1978) typology of authority, religious leadership has historically combined traditional and charismatic legitimacy (Haugaard, 2017; Burge, 2018; Lipková, 2025). In the digital era, however, these foundations are increasingly complemented and challenged by new forms of legitimacy grounded in popularity, visibility, and communicative competence (Mesalina et al., 2024). This shift signals a reconfiguration of sociocultural practices surrounding religious authority, positioning discourse as a key site of power negotiation.

The mediatization of religion further explains this transformation by emphasizing how media logic reshapes religious meanings and authority structures (Hjarvard, 2011). Media do not merely transmit religious messages but actively recontextualize them, producing popular forms of religiosity detached from institutional oversight. Studies show that digital media foster new modes of religious authority based on affective resonance, consensus, and individual experience (Hjarvard, 2015; Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019; Martino, 2020). Within Fairclough's framework, this process represents a shift in discursive practice, in which the production and consumption of religious discourse are increasingly governed by platform routines and audience interaction rather than by clerical institutions.

To analyze how figures such as Guru Gembul operate within this discursive environment, this study draws on the concept of bricolage. Baker and Nelson (2005) define bricolage as the creative recombination of available resources to generate meaning and value under conditions of constraint (Baker & Nelson, 2005). In discursive terms, Guru Gembul functions as a bricoleur, assembling popular knowledge, personal narratives, religious symbols, humor, and everyday language to construct persuasive Islamic political discourse without formal academic backing. This aligns with Carstensen's (2011) view of bricolage as a pragmatic discursive strategy and with Gbadegeshin's (2019) emphasis on adaptability in competitive digital ecosystems.

Despite the growing body of research on religious influencers and Islamic political discourse on social media, existing studies have largely focused on audience reception, popularity metrics, or ideological influence. Much of the literature examines how religious content circulates and shapes public opinion, but pays limited attention to how authority itself is discursively constructed. In particular, the linguistic, representational, and narrative strategies through which non-institutional actors gain legitimacy remain underexplored.

Moreover, the interaction among media logic, platform affordances, and discursive practices in the normalization of alternative forms of religious authority has not been sufficiently theorized. This gap highlights the need for a critical discourse-oriented analysis of digital religious authority.

Addressing this gap, this study critically examines how Guru Gembul constructs religious authority in Islamic political discourse on social media through language, representation, and discursive strategies. Employing Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, this research examines the textual features of Guru Gembul's content, the discursive practices that shape its production and consumption, and the broader sociocultural conditions that enable the normalization of non-institutional authority. Rather than focusing solely on popularity or audience reception, this study foregrounds discourse as a central site of power negotiation. The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the discursive mechanisms that legitimize digital religious authority. By doing so, this study contributes to media and digital religion studies by extending Critical Discourse Analysis beyond traditional institutional contexts.

METHOD

This study employs Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the construction of digital religious authority in Islamic political discourse. CDA is used because it conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice through which power, ideology, and knowledge are produced and contested. This approach allows the study to analyze how authority is constructed not only through language but also through representation and media practices. Rather than measuring audience effects quantitatively, this research focuses on the discursive processes shaping authority in digital media. Consequently, CDA provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining power relations in online religious discourse (Fairclough, 2013b).

The object of analysis consists of 20 (twenty) YouTube videos produced by Guru Gembul that discuss Islamic political issues. The videos were purposively selected based on three criteria: high view counts indicating significant audience reach, thematic relevance to Islamic political discourse, and publication between December 2024 and April 2025. These criteria were applied to ensure that the selected videos represent influential content circulating in contemporary digital Islamic discourse. The platform analyzed in this study is YouTube, which functions as a key space for the production and circulation of religious-political narratives. This selection strategy emphasizes discursive influence rather than statistical representativeness.

Data collection was conducted through systematic observation and documentation of video content. Spoken language was transcribed manually to preserve contextual nuances such as emphasis, pauses, and emotional expressions. Visual elements, including facial expressions, gestures, on-screen text, and symbolic imagery, were documented through analytical notes. Audience interaction was examined by reviewing the comment sections of each video. The analysis of comments focused on recurring patterns of affirmation, contestation, and alignment with the creator's discourse rather than on quantitative metrics.

The collected data were analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework. The first stage involved textual analysis focusing on linguistic features, narrative structures, and visual representations used to construct authority. The second stage examined discursive practices, including content production, distribution, and audience consumption within the platform environment. The third stage analyzed sociocultural practices by situating the discourse within broader media, cultural, and ideological contexts shaping Islamic political communication in Indonesia. These stages were applied iteratively to ensure analytical coherence across levels.

The analysis followed a systematic coding process guided by CDA concepts rather than predetermined categories. Interpretations were continuously compared across videos to identify recurring discursive patterns and minimize subjective bias. Reflexivity was applied by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive position and CDA's critical orientation. This approach recognizes that discourse analysis is inherently interpretive and shaped by a theoretical standpoint. Such reflexive practice strengthens the credibility and transparency of the analysis without claiming statistical generalizability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Textual Construction of Authority through Consistent Content Production

In the digital media environment, authority is not only established through formal credentials but also through discursive visibility and continuity. Guru Gembul builds his authority on YouTube primarily through consistent content production, which serves as a textual strategy to normalize his presence in Islamic political discourse. By frequently uploading videos, Guru Gembul can maintain relevance with his audience, increase follower engagement, and strengthen his influence in shaping public opinion (Hjarvard, 2011). Regular uploads position him as a constantly available interpretive voice, reinforcing the perception that he is a reliable and relevant source of commentary on religious and political issues. Within Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, such consistency operates at the textual level as a mechanism of discourse dominance, where repeated exposure contributes to the naturalization of authority in everyday media consumption (Fairclough, 2013b).

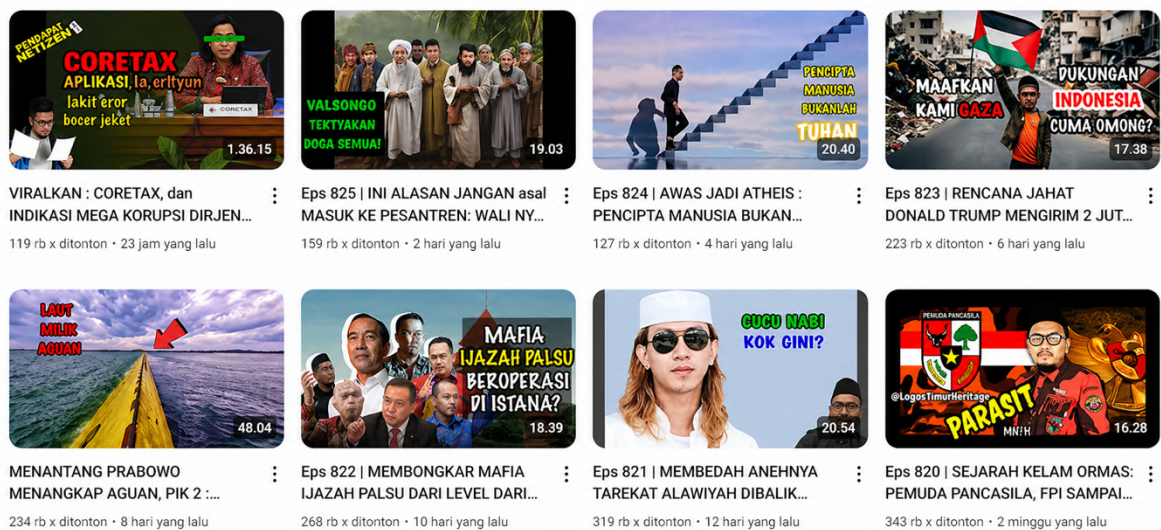


Figure 1. Thumbnails of several uploads on Guru Gembul's YouTube account
Source: Guru Gembul's YouTube (2025)

Guru Gembul uploads videos almost daily, with recurring themes related to religion, politics, psychology, and social critique. This high frequency of content production strengthens audience familiarity and reinforces discursive continuity across videos. Rather than presenting isolated arguments, his discourse unfolds as an ongoing narrative, allowing audiences to perceive his interpretations as part of a coherent worldview. As illustrated in Figure 1, the thumbnails and titles of his uploads exhibit thematic repetition and stylistic uniformity, further consolidating his discursive identity. From a CDA perspective, this repetition functions as a textual strategy that stabilizes meaning and strengthens ideological positioning.

At the linguistic level, Guru Gembul employs informal language, conversational expressions, and rhetorical questions that invite the audience to align. Phrases such as collective pronouns and evaluative statements position viewers as co-thinkers rather than passive recipients of knowledge. This linguistic accessibility reduces the hierarchical distance between the speaker and the audience, allowing authority to emerge implicitly rather than through explicit claims of expertise. As Van Dijk (2017) argues, such discursive positioning enables speakers to exercise influence while appearing egalitarian, thereby increasing persuasive effectiveness. This consistency is evident in the topics and frequency of content uploaded. Consistency in content production enhances perceptions of credibility among figures who shape discourse on social media. Similar to the theory of self-entrepreneurship, where individual discipline in the digital space results in consistent branding (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022; Thomas et al., 2022). This is also supported by Abidin's (2018) research, which found that continuous content production helps build trust among audiences and strengthens the influence of public figures in the digital space. Discourse analysis views linguistic accessibility as a tool for establishing and maintaining authority, with familiar, straightforward language enhancing credibility within online communities.

Humor and casual storytelling further reinforce this textual construction of authority. Unlike traditional religious figures who rely on formal and normative language, Guru Gembul frames Islamic political issues through everyday anecdotes and emotionally resonant narratives. Guru Gembul's primary strategy in building authority is his light, relaxed, and humorous communication style. Unlike the traditional approach of clerics, who tend to be serious and normative in conveying their views, Guru Gembul chooses a more personal and entertaining communication style. This strategy aligns with digital communication norms that privilege intimacy and affectivity over formality (Tsuria & Campbell, 2021). By embedding political and religious commentary within relatable experiences, Guru Gembul transforms complex issues into accessible moral narratives, enhancing audience trust and engagement. This communication style also helps the audience feel closer to the message, ultimately strengthening trust and acceptance of the ideas expressed.

Within digital platforms, these textual strategies are amplified by algorithms that favor frequent, engaging, and emotionally resonant content. Consequently, Guru Gembul's consistent production and accessible language function as mechanisms that sustain authority through visibility and repetition, supporting Abidin's (2018) argument that continuous content production builds perceived credibility in digital cultures. Authority is thus shaped not through institutional validation but through familiar, routinized discourse. Social media also blurs public and private boundaries, creating a sense of closeness between communicator and audience (Lünenborg & Maier, 2019). Through YouTube, personal and emotional content becomes easily accessible, reinforcing intimacy (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Guru Gembul uses this condition by presenting himself as a "chat buddy" who discusses serious issues casually, thereby fostering trust and loyalty.

Intertextuality and Symbolic Legitimacy in Digital Religious Discourse

In the construction of digital religious authority, intertextuality plays a crucial role in legitimizing discourse beyond institutional frameworks. Although Guru Gembul lacks formal academic credentials in religion or Islamic politics, he strategically incorporates references to books in his YouTube content to build symbolic legitimacy. These references function not primarily as sources of rigorous scholarly engagement, but as discursive resources that signal intellectual credibility to a broad, non-academic audience. He creates the impression that his analysis is based on substantial literature, even though his approach is more popular and light-hearted than that of traditional scholars (Gramsci, 2021). Within Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, such practices are understood as intertextual processes through which external texts are selectively incorporated to reinforce the authority of the primary discourse (Fairclough, 2023).

Guru Gembul frequently displays book covers, mentions authors, or verbally cites reading materials while discussing Islamic political issues. These intertextual elements create the impression that his arguments are grounded in established knowledge traditions, even when the referenced texts are popular rather than academic. By invoking books as authoritative symbols, Guru Gembul aligns himself with the cultural prestige of written knowledge. As shown in Figure 2, the visual presence of books in his videos operates as a recognizable marker of intellectual seriousness for audiences who may not critically evaluate the academic rigor of the sources themselves.

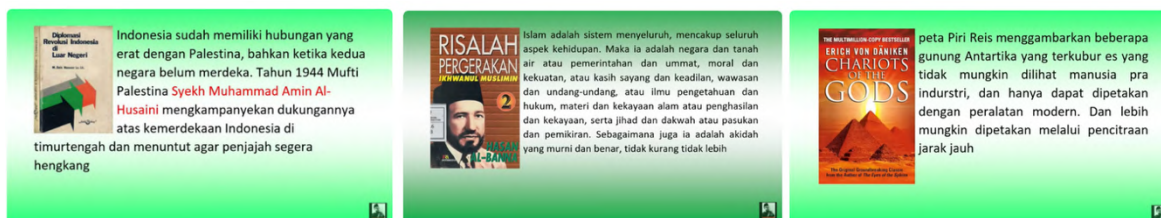


Figure 2. References Used by Guru Gembul in Some of His Content
Source: Guru Gembul's YouTube (2025)

From a discourse-analytical perspective, the function of these references lies less in their epistemic depth than in their symbolic value. Books operate as objectified cultural capital that can be mobilized to construct authority in the digital public sphere. Rather than engaging in systematic textual analysis of the referenced works, Guru Gembul selectively extracts narratives or ideas that resonate with contemporary social concerns and audience expectations. This selective appropriation reinforces his position as a knowledgeable interpreter while maintaining accessibility and emotional appeal. Essentially, the use of book references in Guru Gembul's videos is not merely an academic reference but a strategy to create an impression of intellectualism among a largely non-academic audience.

This practice reflects what Baker & Nelson (2005) conceptualize as bricolage, namely the strategic recombination of available resources to generate meaning under conditions of constraint. In this case, the absence of formal academic legitimacy becomes a condition that encourages creative discursive assembly. Guru Gembul functions as a discursive bricoleur, assembling popular books, personal narratives, religious symbols, and humor into a coherent communicative performance. These intertextual references are not deployed at random. Still, they are carefully chosen to maximize resonance within the logic of social media, where credibility is often measured by familiarity and relatability rather than by scholarly validation.

Guru Gembul's practice of bricolage can also be seen as part of power negotiations in the digital age. Carstensen (2011) explains that bricoleurs do not simply assemble ideas haphazardly but strategically select and combine the most effective elements to achieve their goals in specific situations (Carstensen, 2011). Guru Gembul fully understands the logic of social media, which demands fast, light, and easy-to-digest content. He uses narratives from books as "raw material," then polishes them with a casual communication style, simple language, and humor to create content that is both informative and entertaining. The book references he uses serve as a kind of "symbolic legitimacy attribute," functioning more to strengthen his image as a credible figure in the digital space than as a scientifically tested one.

Furthermore, the use of intertextuality in Guru Gembul's discourse reflects a shift in how audiences evaluate credibility in the digital era. External references serve as visual and rhetorical cues that simplify complex processes of knowledge verification. For many viewers, the mere presence of books is sufficient to signal seriousness and responsibility, reducing the need for deeper scrutiny. As Metzger et al (2010) argue, in digital

environments, heuristic cues often replace systematic evaluation of information quality. Within Fairclough's framework, this indicates a transformation in discursive practice, where legitimacy is increasingly constructed through symbolic representation rather than institutional endorsement.

In this context, intertextuality functions as a mechanism of symbolic legitimation rather than epistemic grounding. Guru Gembul's discourse demonstrates how authority can be constructed through the strategic display of cultural symbols easily recognized and trusted by audiences, in which book references function as intertextual signifiers that enhance perceived credibility without requiring adherence to academic norms. This finding illustrates how digital religious authority is discursively produced through symbolic alignment with knowledge traditions, while simultaneously adapting to the affective and accessibility-oriented logic of social media platforms.

Discursive Practices of Authority in Post-Fordist Digital Media

This subsection examines the construction of authority at the level of discursive practice, focusing on the processes of production, circulation, and consumption of Guru Gembul's content on YouTube. In Fairclough's framework, discursive practice emphasizes how texts are produced and distributed within specific institutional and technological conditions, and how audiences interpret and respond to them. In the context of social media, authority cannot be separated from platform mechanisms that prioritize visibility, repetition, and engagement. Therefore, Guru Gembul's authority emerges not solely from textual strategies but from their alignment with the operational logic of digital platforms.

The findings indicate that Guru Gembul's content production follows patterns consistent with post-Fordist cultural logic, characterized by flexibility, speed, and responsiveness to audience attention. Rather than developing sustained, cumulative arguments grounded in scholarly debate, his videos address trending Islamic political issues in short, accessible, and emotionally engaging formats. This mode of production aligns with Lash & Urry's (1993) description of post-Fordist culture, where symbolic value, immediacy, and adaptability outweigh depth and permanence. In this environment, authority is constructed through the ability to remain relevant and responsive, rather than through institutional continuity or academic specialization. On social media, post-Fordism is reflected in audience behavior that is more interested in fast, light, easily accessible content than in the depth of the message or the sender's academic background.

Guru Gembul strategically selects topics already circulating widely in public discourse, such as controversies over religion, nationalism, or ideology. He strategically references popular books to give the impression of being "knowledgeable" or intellectual, even though he has not always studied them in depth. It is where symbolic consumption in the post-Fordist era works in reality. In the digital post-Fordist era, audiences are likelier to choose content that is quick to consume, personal, and easily accessible, where speed and relevance are considered more important than accuracy or depth of analysis (Annisa, 2022). These topics are then reframed through a personal and conversational narrative that invites audience participation. From a discursive practice perspective, this strategy enables rapid circulation and repeated engagement, increasing the likelihood that the content will be algorithmically amplified. Importantly, this study does not claim direct access to platform algorithms but analyzes how discursive forms that emphasize accessibility, affect, and controversy are better suited to platform-driven circulation mechanisms. This demonstrates how digital authority can be built not through formal processes but through creative ability to follow trends and utilize flexible communication styles.

Audience interaction plays a central role in legitimizing authority at this level. Metrics such as views, likes, comments, and shares function as visible indicators of acceptance and validation. Through continuous engagement, audiences actively reproduce Guru Gembul's authority by reaffirming his relevance and credibility within the digital public

sphere. As previous studies on digital visibility suggest, popularity operates as a symbolic marker of trustworthiness in online environments (Hearn, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In this sense, authority is co-constructed through interactions among content creators, audience practices, and platform affordances. Additionally, Guru Gembul's strategy can be analyzed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. In his theory, Bourdieu (1986) refers to objectified cultural capital as a material form of cultural capital, such as books, works of art, or other intellectual objects recognized as symbols of knowledge (Annisa et al., 2025; Bourdieu, 1986)

Within post-Fordist digital culture, consumption patterns further reinforce this process. Audiences tend to favor content that offers immediate interpretive clarity and emotional resonance rather than complex analytical depth. Guru Gembul's communicative style responds effectively to these preferences by simplifying complex Islamic political issues into digestible narratives. This does not imply the absence of meaning, but rather reflects a reconfiguration of how meaning is packaged and consumed. Discursively, authority becomes associated with communicative efficiency and relatability rather than epistemic rigor.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, these findings suggest that discursive practices on social media restructure traditional hierarchies of expertise. The validation of authority through engagement metrics and circulation visibility reflects a broader shift in how knowledge is legitimized in digital environments. Authority in Guru Gembul's discourse is produced through repeated interaction, algorithm-compatible content forms, and audience participation. This supports the argument that in post-Fordist digital media, authority is increasingly shaped by media logic and consumption patterns rather than by institutional or scholarly credentials.

Sociocultural Symbolism and the Mediatization of Religion

At the level of sociocultural practice, the construction of Guru Gembul's authority is reinforced through the strategic use of religious symbols widely recognized in Indonesian Muslim culture. One of the most prominent symbols is the consistent use of the "*peci*", a traditional cap commonly associated with Islamic piety and religious leadership. From a semiotic perspective, such symbols operate as signifiers that activate culturally shared meanings and expectations (Barthes, 1977; Fadhli et al., 2025). In digital contexts, these visual cues function as shortcuts that enable audiences to quickly identify a speaker as religiously legitimate, even in the absence of formal institutional credentials.

Guru Gembul's visual self-representation is not fixed to a single formal style. He appears in various forms of attire, ranging from sarongs and formal shirts to casual t-shirts, while consistently maintaining the *peci* as a core symbol. This combination produces a hybrid visual identity that bridges traditional religious imagery with contemporary, everyday aesthetics. As illustrated in Figures 5–7, the *peci* operates as a stabilizing symbol that anchors religious identity, while variations in clothing communicate flexibility and relatability. Within Critical Discourse Analysis, such visual strategies are understood as part of multimodal discourse that contributes to the normalization of authority through repeated visual representation.

The effectiveness of these symbols cannot be separated from the broader process of the mediatization of religion. As Hjarvard (2008) argues, media do not simply transmit religious messages but actively reshape religious practices, meanings, and authority structures. In Guru Gembul's case, religious symbols are recontextualized within the logic of digital media, where visibility, accessibility, and audience appeal are prioritized. The *peci*, traditionally associated with institutional religious authority, is transformed into a media-friendly symbol that can circulate across algorithm-driven platforms without the institutional constraints typically attached to clerical roles.

This mediatized use of religious symbolism contributes to the reconfiguration of authority by making religious identity appear compatible with informal communication and popular culture. Guru Gembul's visual presentation allows him to embody both religious familiarity and everyday authenticity, thereby reducing the symbolic distance between speaker and audience. This aligns with Hall's (1997) argument that representation plays a central role in the production of meaning and identity. In this context, authority is constructed not through doctrinal depth but through the ability to visually resonate with audience expectations of what a "credible" religious figure should look like in digital spaces.



Figure 3. The Symbolism of Wearing a *Peci* and a Suit in Guru Gembul's Video Content
Source: Guru Gembul's YouTube (2025)

The clothing and accessories Guru Gembul wears in each video are part of his self-representation and include Islamic symbolism. As seen in Figure 3, he is wearing distinctive elements, such as a *peci* (traditional cap) and a sarong, creating an image of a figure associated with Islamic values. These symbols reinforce the impression that he is a suitable figure to deliver content related to Islam and Islamic politics, despite lacking a formal academic background in these fields. The attire associated with *santri* or *ulama* culture also helps increase audience acceptance of his perspectives. A discourse analysis perspective shows that this symbolism is not merely an aesthetic choice but an effective communication strategy to build authority and legitimacy in the public's eyes.

Furthermore, the sociocultural effectiveness of these symbols is amplified by platform-specific conditions. On YouTube, visual cues are often consumed quickly through thumbnails, short clips, and repeated exposure. The consistent presence of the *peci* across Guru Gembul's content reinforces symbolic recognition and familiarity, contributing to the accumulation of trust over time. From a CDA perspective, this repeated visual signification functions as symbolic capital that supports discursive authority at the sociocultural level. Thus, using *peci* and sarong is not merely an expression of culture but also part of a broader communication strategy to establish authority within the discourse of Islamic politics on social media. Research by Goffman (2023) on self-representation shows that using certain symbols in the media helps shape identity and increases the appeal of public figures to their audiences (Goffman, 2023).

The use of religious symbols in Guru Gembul's content illustrates how authority in digital Islamic discourse is increasingly mediated through visual representation and platform logic. Rather than relying solely on institutional legitimacy, non-institutional figures can appropriate culturally embedded symbols to construct credibility and acceptance within the digital public sphere. This finding highlights the role of mediatization in reshaping religious authority, where symbols are detached from institutional structures and rearticulated within the dynamics of digital media and popular culture. Overall, the combination of consistent content production, use of book references, effective communication strategies, and symbolism helped Guru Gembul establish his authority on social media.

Reconfiguring Religious Authority: A Critical Discourse Analysis

The findings demonstrate that religious authority in Islamic political discourse on social media does not stem from a single source, but emerges through the interaction of textual strategies, discursive practices, and broader sociocultural transformations. As synthesized in Table 1, this study shows that Guru Gembul’s authority is discursively constructed rather than institutionally granted. Authority is not explicitly claimed, but negotiated and normalized through everyday language, repeated media exposure, and symbolic alignment with audience expectations. This reflects a broader reconfiguration of how authority is produced and recognized in the digital public sphere (Fairclough, 2013).

Table 1. Critical Discourse Analysis of Digital Religious Authority in Islamic Political Discourse

CDA Dimension	Analytical Focus	Empirical Findings	Interpretative Discussion
Text (Textual Analysis)	Linguistic features, rhetoric, narrative style, modality, and representation	Guru Gembul predominantly employs informal language, humor, storytelling, rhetorical questions, and inclusive pronouns such as “we” to position himself as equal to the audience. Authority is conveyed implicitly rather than asserted through doctrinal or scholarly claims.	These textual strategies function to naturalize authority by framing knowledge as common sense and experiential rather than expert-based. Consistent with Fairclough (2013), ideological power operates subtly through familiarity and emotional resonance, allowing authority to be accepted without explicit legitimization.
Discursive Practice	Production, circulation, and consumption of discourse within digital platforms	Content production is shaped by platform logic emphasizing engagement, visibility, and algorithmic amplification. Audience interaction (likes, comments, shares) plays a central role in validating Guru Gembul’s authority and extending its reach.	Authority emerges as a co-constructed outcome between the content creator, audience, and platform. Popularity functions as symbolic legitimacy, aligning with the “death of expertise” phenomenon, in which credibility is increasingly measured through engagement rather than epistemic credentials (Nichols, 2021).
Sociocultural Practice	Broader social, cultural, and ideological context	The rise of non-institutional religious authority reflects the mediatization of religion and the erosion of traditional epistemic hierarchies in Indonesian Islam. Institutional religious authority is no longer the sole source of legitimacy in political Islamic discourse.	This shift indicates a structural transformation of religious authority shaped by digital capitalism, attention economy, and participatory culture. Rather than eliminating ulama authority, digital discourse reconfigures legitimacy toward performative, affective, and media-driven forms of authority (Hjarvard, 2008; Van Bruinessen, 2013).
Cross-Dimensional Synthesis	Interaction between text, discourse, and social structure	Textual strategies gain authority through discursive circulation, enabled and normalized by the sociocultural conditions of mediatization and fragmented expertise.	Authority is not inherent to the speaker but produced through discursive alignment with platform logic and audience expectations. This confirms Fairclough’s view that discourse both reflects and reshapes power relations within specific historical contexts (Fairclough, 2023).

Source: Primary Data (2025)

At the textual level, Guru Gembul constructs authority through linguistic accessibility, storytelling, humor, and self-positioning as equal to his audience. Expressions such as “we are learning together” and rhetorical questions inviting viewers to judge moral or political issues soften hierarchical distance while simultaneously legitimizing his voice. Rather than relying on doctrinal authority or scholarly credentials, he draws on familiarity and emotional resonance to establish credibility (Marwick & Partin, 2024). This supports Fairclough’s

argument that ideological power often operates most effectively when presented implicitly as common sense rather than expert domination.

At the level of discursive practice, authority is reinforced through platform-mediated processes of production, circulation, and engagement. Guru Gembul's visibility is sustained by consistent content production and interaction metrics, including views, comments, likes, and shares. These metrics function as symbolic indicators of legitimacy, transforming popularity into a proxy for credibility. Authority, therefore, becomes a co-constructed outcome among creator, audience, and platform logic. This finding aligns with studies showing that digital visibility increasingly shapes perceptions of trustworthiness (Hearn, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). It also supports Hjarvard's (2015) argument that mediatized religion redistributes authority from institutions to media users and platforms.

However, this participatory process is not neutral. Platform algorithms privilege emotionally engaging, accessible, and controversial content, shaping which forms of Islamic political discourse gain prominence. As a result, authority becomes increasingly dependent on affective appeal rather than epistemic validation. This dynamic reflects what Nichols (2021) terms the "death of expertise," in which formal education, scholarly rigor, and institutional affiliation lose centrality in public discourse. In Indonesia, where religious authority has historically been grounded in institutions and scholarly lineages (Van Bruinessen, 2013), this shift marks a significant transformation of epistemic hierarchies.

At the sociocultural level, the rise of non-institutional figures such as Guru Gembul reflects broader processes of mediatization and digital capitalism. Religious symbols, including the *peci*, are recontextualized within media environments where visibility and affective appeal often outweigh institutional affiliation. As Hjarvard (2008) argues, media do not merely transmit religion but reshape religious meanings, practices, and authority structures (Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). Authority is therefore detached from traditional institutions and rearticulated through performative and symbolic forms resonant with popular culture (Mesalina et al., 2024). This does not signal the disappearance of religious authority, but its transformation into media-oriented forms shaped by attention economies and algorithmic environments.

The concept of bricolage helps explain this transformation. Guru Gembul operates as a discursive bricoleur, strategically combining popular knowledge, book references, personal narratives, and religious symbolism to compensate for the lack of formal scholarly legitimacy. Rather than being a limitation, this recombination produces an image of authenticity and independence from institutional authority. This supports the argument that digital religious authority is increasingly assembled through creative combinations of discursive resources rather than linear credential-based pathways (Carstensen, 2011; Gbadegeshin, 2019).

Nevertheless, this reconfiguration carries ambivalent consequences. While Guru Gembul's discourse increases accessibility and engagement, it may also simplify complex Islamic political issues. Emotional narratives and moral framing can replace systematic theological or political analysis. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, this reflects neoliberal discursive tendencies that privilege efficiency, consumption, and immediacy over analytical depth. Consequently, audiences may evaluate credibility through emotional proximity rather than epistemic rigor. Hamdani (2021) notes that the proliferation of competing authoritative voices on social media can weaken collective frameworks for evaluating religious knowledge. This raises questions about accountability, responsibility, and the long-term implications for Islamic political thought in Indonesia.

Importantly, this study does not view the rise of digital religious figures as a simple decline of traditional ulama authority. Instead, authority in the digital age is pluralized and fragmented across institutional and non-institutional spaces. Traditional institutions retain symbolic and doctrinal power, but now compete with media-driven legitimacy shaped by different logics. Non-institutional actors gain authority not by directly opposing scholars, but

by occupying discursive spaces shaped by algorithmic visibility, affective communication, and participatory culture. This study also reveals shifting foundations of religious legitimacy in contemporary Indonesia. The key issue is no longer only who speaks authoritatively, but how language, media logic, and power relations define legitimate knowledge in the digital public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that religious authority in Islamic political discourse on YouTube is no longer grounded solely in formal religious credentials but is discursively constructed through language strategies, media practices, and sociocultural symbolism. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings show that Guru Gembul's authority emerges through informal language, affective communication, and his positioning as an equal participant rather than a traditional religious authority. These textual strategies make authority appear authentic, relatable, and accessible to audiences. At the level of discursive practice, authority is further reinforced through platform mechanisms such as algorithmic visibility and audience engagement. Views, likes, comments, and shares function as symbolic indicators of credibility, shifting legitimacy from epistemic expertise toward popularity, visibility, and emotional resonance. In this sense, authority is co-produced by content creators, audiences, and platform infrastructures, reflecting broader transformations often associated with the "death of expertise."

At the sociocultural level, the findings highlight how mediatization and digital capitalism are reshaping Islamic authority in Indonesia. Religious symbols, popular knowledge, and personal narratives are strategically assembled through bricolage to construct legitimacy outside institutional frameworks. Rather than indicating the disappearance of traditional ulama authority, this study shows a reconfiguration in which institutional and media-driven forms of legitimacy coexist and compete. Overall, this research contributes to scholarship on digital religion by demonstrating that authority in contemporary Islamic political discourse is fluid, negotiated, and deeply embedded in media logic. It also raises important questions about credibility, accountability, and the future of religious knowledge production in the digital public sphere.

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