

The Politics of Public Piety in Contemporary Muslim Societies: Religious Symbolic Representations, Social Media, and the Production of Moral Legitimacy

Zaid Al-Bustami

Leiden University, Netherlands

email: z.al.bustami@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Article history: Received: 12 April 2026; Revised: 27 April 2026;
Accepted: 15 June 2026; Published: 30 August 2026;

Abstract

The digitalization of religious life has transformed piety from a private spiritual affair into a performative public politics. This study explores the politics of public piety in contemporary Muslim society by analyzing how religious symbols are represented on social media to produce moral legitimacy. Using a qualitative method with a digital discourse analysis approach, this research examines religious content, digital symbols, and moral narratives across platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The findings reveal that public piety has become a form of symbolic capital, where the curation of visual aesthetics, sartorial attributes, and lifestyle-based religious narratives are strategically utilized to construct an image of moral authority. This study identifies that moral legitimacy is increasingly produced through digital validation such as engagement metrics rather than traditional institutional certification. This shift signifies a democratization of authority that paradoxically creates new social stratifications based on religious lifestyle aesthetics. Theoretically, this research reinforces the concepts of symbolic power and discursive regimes in the digital religious sphere. The implications of this study suggest that the performativity of piety on social media shifts the focus from substantive spiritual transformation to image-based representation, leading to a fragmentation of traditional religious structures. Consequently, this research emphasizes the need for a more critical understanding of how

Author correspondence email: z.al.bustami@umail.leidenuniv.nl

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digital platforms reshape authentic religious authority and social power relations in modern Muslim communities.

Keywords

Public Piety, Social Media, Moral Legitimacy, Symbolic Power, Contemporary Muslim Society.

Introduction

In the last decade, the religious landscape of contemporary Muslim societies, particularly in Indonesia, has undergone a profound transformation. Religion is no longer confined to private, quiet, and sacred spaces such as family prayer rooms or personal prayer mats; instead, it has overflowed into highly open public spheres. This phenomenon of increasing expressions of piety in the public square marks the rise of what is known as public piety politics. Piety is now displayed through various attributes, ranging from fashion choices and consumption patterns to social behaviors intentionally showcased to communicate a specific religious identity. The proliferation of religious symbols in modern social life is not merely a reflection of increased spiritual devotion but also serves as an identity strategy amidst an increasingly competitive and fragmented society (Hasan, 2019).

This transformation is accelerated by the massive role of social media, which has changed the way individuals express their religiosity. Digital platforms allow religious expressions to transcend traditional geographical and sociological boundaries. Religious symbols, which once held static theological meanings, have become dynamic and highly visual. Social media is not just an information channel but has become a primary instrument in expanding the reach of religious expression into areas previously considered secular. Consequently, piety has transformed into a performative social practice. Piety is no longer measured solely by the consistency of hidden ritual worship but by the extent to which that piety can be witnessed, recognized, and validated by the wider community in the public sphere (Nisa, 2022).

The shift from private religiosity to public religiosity carries

significant implications for how society perceives moral legitimacy. In contemporary Muslim societies, an individual is often regarded as having high authority or morality if they can consistently represent symbols of piety in public. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook act as arenas of representation that accelerate the production of these images of piety through attractive visual features. This digitally produced image of piety creates new standards for the ideal Muslim. This triggers individuals to continuously produce religious self-representations to gain social recognition or what is termed as religious symbolic capital (Slama, 2021).

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be dissected through Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts on symbols and moral power. According to Bourdieu, social practice is the result of capital accumulation, where religious symbols function as symbolic capital that can be converted into social power or moral legitimacy. In the politics of piety, the use of religious attributes is not just a matter of fashion but an effort to dominate the space of moral discourse in society. Those most capable of convincingly displaying an image of piety on social media will possess the power to define morality standards for others (Haryanto, 2021). This aligns with Michel Foucault's perspective on discursive practices and social power. Foucault observed that power does not always work through formal institutions but through discourse produced continuously. Public piety in this sense becomes a "regime of truth" that compels individuals to follow certain norms of piety to remain considered legitimate members of the moral community (Muzakki, 2024).

Despite the numerous studies on digital da'wah and the "hijrah" phenomenon, there is a significant research gap in the current literature. Most previous studies tend to focus their analysis on da'wah content or the profiles of specific preachers on social media. Few studies sharply analyze how piety is operated as a political tool to produce moral legitimacy amidst a society experiencing a disruption of authority (Fakhruroji & Mansur, 2022). This research intends to fill this void by examining how the representation of religious symbols on social media is not just a matter of expressing faith but a power practice aimed at building moral hegemony in the public sphere. Based on this background, this study aims to explore the mechanisms of producing

moral legitimacy through digital piety symbols.

The research objective is to examine how social media constructs public piety standards and how this affects the structure of moral power in contemporary Muslim societies. The research questions proposed are: first, how are religious symbol representations on social media used to produce moral legitimacy? Second, how does the politics of public piety affect social power relation patterns in the digital space? Third, to what extent does this performativity of piety change public understanding of authentic religious authority? This research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the study of the sociology of religion, especially regarding religious dynamics in the digital age. Practically, it provides a reflection for the Muslim community to be more critical in distinguishing between the substance of piety and mere image performativity.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative method with a digital discourse analysis approach to dissect how the politics of piety is constructed across social media platforms. The use of this method aims to uncover the latent meanings behind visual and textual communication practices displayed by Muslim digital actors. The data sources for this research focus on religious social media posts, the use of digital religious symbols such as sartorial attributes and Arabic linguistic markers and public moral narratives produced within virtual spheres. Data were gathered through digital documentation by archiving relevant posts and conducting extensive online observations of the interaction patterns and self-representation of social media users who intensively demonstrate performative piety.

The data analysis process is conducted systematically through several key stages, beginning with the identification of the most dominant symbols of piety emerging within digital discourse. Subsequently, a narrative analysis is performed to map how these symbols are utilized as instruments of moral legitimacy to build an image of religious authority in the eyes of the audience. The researcher then conducts an in-depth interpretation of the relationship between religious expression and the resulting social power, examining the

extent to which these discourses influence public perceptions of morality standards. To ensure the validity and scholarly integrity of the findings, data validation is performed through digital data triangulation, comparing various types of content across different social media platforms and cross-referencing textual narratives with the visual representations found in the digital field.

Result

The findings of this study reveal that the dominant forms of public piety symbols on social media are characterized by a blend of visual aesthetics and linguistic markers, such as the consistent use of modern-syar'i attire, Arabic-infused captions, and the strategic placement of ritualistic activities in the background of digital content. Religious representation patterns tend to be highly curated, where religious expressions are no longer merely spontaneous acts of devotion but are transformed into a performative lifestyle that aligns with digital trends. Religious actors and influencers utilize moral image production strategies by narrating personal hijrah (spiritual transformation) journeys and consistently sharing bite-sized moral advice, which serves to establish a persona of spiritual expertise and ethical superiority. This curated piety functions as a new form of digital religious capital, where the aesthetics of the post are often as important as the theological substance of the message.

Furthermore, the data indicates that the audience plays a crucial role in reinforcing moral legitimacy through digital validation mechanisms such as likes, shares, and affirmative comments, which act as a collective moral consensus. This interaction creates a feedback loop where high engagement metrics are perceived by the public as a sign of authentic religious authority and moral credibility. The study also finds a significant correlation between public piety and social status, where the display of religious symbols on social media serves as a tool for upward social mobility and the acquisition of symbolic power. In this context, public piety is not just an expression of individual faith but has become a social currency used to gain trust, influence, and a privileged position within the contemporary Muslim social hierarchy.

Discussion

Public Piety as a Symbolic and Social Practice

The transformation of piety from a private spiritual endeavor into a public performance signifies a major shift in the sociology of contemporary Muslim societies. In the digital age, piety is no longer exclusively defined by internal theological conviction but is increasingly mediated through symbolic and social practices that are visible and measurable in the public sphere. Following Pierre Bourdieu's framework, religious symbols such as specific dress codes, linguistic markers, and ritualistic displays act as symbolic capital that individuals accumulate to gain social recognition. In the context of social media, the representation of these symbols is not merely an expression of faith; it is a strategic social practice aimed at establishing moral distinction. Those who can most effectively navigate the aesthetics of digital piety often acquire a higher degree of social standing, as their curated religious lifestyle resonates with the aspirations of the urban middle-class Muslim community (Hasan, 2019).

Furthermore, this phenomenon illustrates how the public sphere has become a site for the performativity of faith, where religious identity is continuously constructed and negotiated through digital discourse. Michel Foucault's concept of discursive power is highly relevant here, as social media platforms create a regime of truth regarding what constitutes a good Muslim. The constant production of piety related content ranging from daily prayers to moral aphorisms establishes a set of norms that regulate social behavior. This discourse does not only reflect religious values but actively shapes them, exerting a form of soft power that compels individuals to align their public personas with dominant religious aesthetics to remain morally legitimate (Nisa, 2022). Consequently, piety becomes a social currency; it is traded for trust, influence, and authority within the digital ecosystem (Haryanto, 2021).

The shift toward public religiosity also reflects the commodification of religious symbols in the modern economy. Piety is often intertwined with consumption, where religious identity is expressed through halal lifestyles and branded religious attire. This

politics of piety suggests that moral legitimacy is now produced through the intersection of religious symbolism and media visibility. As individuals curate their religious lives for an audience, the boundary between the sacred and the profane becomes blurred. The audience, in turn, acts as a validating body, where engagement metrics (likes and follows) serve as a form of digital ijma or collective consensus that reinforces the practitioner's moral authority (Slama, 2021). Thus, public piety in the contemporary Muslim world is a complex social practice where spiritual expression, symbolic power, and digital media converge to redefine the foundations of moral legitimacy (Fakhruroji & Mansur, 2022).

Social Media as an Arena for the Politics of Religious Representation

Social media platforms have transcended their role as mere communication tools to become the primary arena for the politics of religious representation. In this digital space, religious identity is no longer an inherited or static trait but a continuously curated project that demands visibility. The architecture of platforms like Instagram and TikTok which prioritizes visual aesthetics and engagement metrics compels Muslim actors to engage in a highly selective representation of their religiosity. This phenomenon creates a digital marketplace of piety, where symbols of faith are strategically deployed to build a specific public persona. As individuals navigate this space, they are not only expressing personal belief but are also competing for moral visibility in a crowded digital landscape (Muzakki, 2024).

The politics of this representation lies in the power to define what is considered authentic or ideal within the modern Muslim discourse. By utilizing high-quality cinematography, trending soundtracks, and carefully crafted captions, digital religious actors can exert a significant influence over public perception. This curated representation often functions as a mechanism of social exclusion and inclusion; those who successfully mirror the dominant digital aesthetics of piety are granted moral legitimacy, while those who do not are often marginalized in the digital religious discourse. Consequently, social media does not merely reflect existing religious realities but actively reshapes them through the logic of algorithmic popularity and visual persuasion (Razi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the performative nature of digital piety facilitates the rise of micro-celebrity preachers and influencers who derive their authority from their ability to resonate with the lifestyle aspirations of their followers. In this context, moral legitimacy is produced through a constant stream of lifestyle-based religious content that blurs the line between sacred guidance and lifestyle branding. The audience's engagement acts as a decentralized form of validation, reinforcing the influencer's standing as a moral role model. This shift indicates a broader transformation in religious authority, where the power to influence communal moral standards has moved from traditional, institution-based experts to digital actors who master the art of symbolic representation in the virtual arena (Zamroni, 2024).

The Production of Moral Legitimacy in the Muslim Digital Sphere

The production of moral legitimacy in the digital age has shifted from institutional validation to a more decentralized, engagement-based consensus. In the Muslim digital sphere, moral legitimacy is no longer solely the byproduct of deep theological mastery or formal certification from traditional religious institutions; instead, it is produced through the consistent visibility and aesthetic appeal of religious personas. This process involves the strategic alignment of an individual's digital lifestyle with the moral expectations of the virtual community. When digital actors successfully portray a life that appears both modern and deeply pious, they acquire a form of moral trust from their followers. This trust is then converted into social authority, allowing these actors to set standards for ethical behavior and religious correctness within their digital networks (Fauzi & Muttaqin, 2021).

This production of legitimacy is inherently tied to the logic of digital platforms, where truth and authority are often conflated with popularity. The mechanism of social validation manifested through likes, comments, and shares functions as a contemporary form of *ijma* (consensus) that bestows a sense of righteousness upon certain digital actors. This creates a feedback loop: high engagement reinforces an actor's moral standing, which in turn attracts more followers seeking spiritual guidance. Consequently, those who master the art of digital storytelling and moral branding find themselves holding significant

power over the communal conscience. They become moral gatekeepers who can define which social issues are religiously urgent and which behaviors are deemed deviant, often bypassing traditional religious hierarchies (Hosen, 2019).

Furthermore, the production of moral legitimacy in the digital sphere serves as a tool for social positioning and class distinction. By associating themselves with certain influential religious influencers or by adopting specific digital piety aesthetics, ordinary users can also claim a share of that moral legitimacy. This vicarious piety allows individuals to enhance their own social status within their peer groups. However, this shift also carries risks, as the foundation of moral authority becomes increasingly fragile and dependent on public image rather than long-term ethical consistency. In this volatile digital environment, moral legitimacy must be constantly reproduced and defended through continuous content creation, leading to a perpetual cycle of religious performance that prioritizes outward symbolism over inward spiritual transformation (Rohman, 2020).

Implications of Piety Politics on the Social Structure of Contemporary Muslim Society

The rise of piety politics in the digital sphere carries profound implications for the social stratification and cohesion of contemporary Muslim communities. One of the most visible impacts is the emergence of a new religious middle class that utilizes piety as a marker of social distinction. This group does not only seek spiritual fulfillment but also uses religious symbols to signal their modern, urban, and pious identity. This phenomenon creates a new hierarchy where social status is no longer determined solely by economic wealth or traditional lineage, but by the ability to perform a standardized version of piety that is validated by digital audiences. Consequently, individuals who cannot afford or access this specific lifestyle of digital piety often feel socially excluded from the ideal religious community (Burhani, 2020).

Furthermore, the politics of piety leads to the fragmentation of traditional religious authority structures. As digital actors gain moral legitimacy through their large followings, the role of traditional local institutions, such as rural mosques or classic Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), is often bypassed or marginalized. This creates a democratization of authority that is paradoxically centralized in the

hands of a few highly visible digital influencers. Socially, this results in a shift from communal-based religious consultation to individualistic consumption of religious content. The social structure of the community becomes more polarized as followers align themselves with different digital camps, often leading to a lack of consensus on social and moral issues that were previously mediated by recognized local leaders (Zamhari & Arifianto, 2023).

Finally, the performative nature of piety politics shifts the focus of social activism from transformative action to symbolic representation. When piety is measured by public displays and social media engagement, there is a risk that religious practice becomes hollowed out, prioritizing image over substance. This shift can weaken the social fabric by promoting a culture of moral surveillance, where community members constantly monitor and judge each other's public personas based on digital standards of piety. To maintain social harmony and the authenticity of religious life, contemporary Muslim societies must find a balance between the inevitable influence of digital representation and the preservation of substantive ethical values that foster genuine social justice and communal solidarity (Nurdin & Bakri, 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the politics of piety in contemporary Muslim society is no longer a mere expression of individual faith but has evolved into a sophisticated symbolic and social practice mediated by digital platforms. The findings indicate that the representation of religious symbols on social media serves as a strategic instrument for producing moral legitimacy and acquiring symbolic capital. Through the curation of visual aesthetics, hijrah narratives, and lifestyle branding, digital religious actors construct a new regime of truth that defines the standards of a modern pious identity. This process has shifted the foundation of religious authority from traditional, institutional expertise toward a decentralized, engagement-based consensus, where moral credibility is often measured by digital visibility and algorithmic popularity rather than theological depth alone.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the sociology of religion by demonstrating how the public sphere has become a competitive arena for the performativity of faith, reinforcing Pierre Bourdieu's and Michel Foucault's concepts of symbolic power and discursive regimes within a digital context. The implication of this dualistic authority is the fragmentation of the traditional social structure, creating new social stratifications based on religious lifestyle choices. Practically, this study urges religious institutions and the Muslim community to develop higher digital literacy to distinguish between substantive spiritual transformation and mere image-based performativity. Future research should further explore the impact of algorithmic echo chambers on the potential for ideological polarization and how traditional authorities can adapt their discursive strategies to remain relevant in an increasingly visual and fragmented religious landscape.

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