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Authority, Agencies, and the Digital Public Sphere: The Dynamics of Female Clerics' Leadership on Social-Media

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Abstract

Background Study: *The digital leadership of female religious scholars on social media is a rapidly growing phenomenon alongside the transformation of Indonesia's religious ecosystem in the digital age; however, the intersection of agency, patriarchal structures, and digital religious public spheres remains underexplored. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of the digital leadership of Indonesian female religious scholars by bringing together three dimensions that have traditionally been studied separately: individual agency, structural-patriarchal challenges, and the construction of the digital religious public sphere.*
Methods: *Using the Literature Review method, this study analyzes the data through thematic analysis, comparative analysis, and theoretical synthesis.*
Key Findings: *The study identified three key findings: (1) social media functions as an alternative public sphere that expands female religious scholars' access to religious authority; (2) effective digital leadership by female religious scholars requires three simultaneous forms of capital—traditional scholarly knowledge, institutional networks, and digital literacy; and (3) the agency of female religious scholars unfolds through strategic navigation within the system, rather than frontal resistance.*
Contribution*: integrated analytical framework that brings together Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, Eickelman's Religious Authority, and Mahmood's Agency, as well as the introduction of the concept of hybrid digital religious authority as a new construct.*
Conclusion: *strengthening female ulama's digital leadership depends on interventions at individual, institutional, and platform levels: strengthening individual digital literacy, fostering inclusivity within religious institutions, and implementing gender-sensitive platform regulations.*

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A. INTRODUCTION

The digital era has transformed the religious landscape, marked by the emergence of women as actors vying for religious authority in the social media sphere. This phenomenon represents a renegotiation of religious hierarchies that have long been dominated by patriarchal constructs, in which women remain structurally marginalized from the religious public sphere (Hefner, 2022)

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(Hefner, 2022; Muttaqin, 2020). Digital platforms present a new arena that enables female religious scholars to build influence across geographical boundaries while challenging traditional religious authorities that are exclusive in nature (Zaid et al., 2022). Data indicates that Indonesian social media users are predominantly female at 51.3%, with a daily usage rate of 81% (We Are Social, 2024). However, empirical studies demonstrate that male religious leaders continue to maintain higher authority even in online spaces (Oloba & Blankenship, 2024), while *gender-biased* sermon content on social media continues to perpetuate discrimination against women (Muttaqin, 2020), although female Muslim bloggers have proven capable of serving as a distinct voice through their unique da'wah approach (Kurmanaliyev et al., 2024). The tension between emancipatory opportunities and structural barriers underscores the urgency of a critical examination of female religious scholars' digital leadership in reshaping Indonesia's contemporary religious public sphere (Hefner, 2022; Zaid et al., 2022).

Research on women, religion, and digital media can be categorized into three main clusters. First, studies on women's religious authority in the digital sphere. Muttaqin (2020) demonstrates that *gender-biased* sermons on social media continue to reproduce the marginalization of women, while Ibahrine (2022) argues that digital influencers can challenge traditional religious authority. Hefner (2022) also asserts that young women in Islamic boarding schools can establish new forms of authority through digital literacy. Second, studies on the institutional movements of female religious scholars in Indonesia. Ma'ruf et al. (2021) view KUPI as an arena for contesting gender interpretations in the post-reform era, while Jannah (2019) and Panigoro (2025) highlight the process of renegotiating religious authority in new media. Third, cross-contextual studies on women's leadership on digital platforms. Blankenship (2025) and Amankul (2024) demonstrate that digital spaces open new opportunities, though male dominance remains strong. Existing studies tend to focus either on women's agency, institutional movements such as KUPI, or digital religious authority separately. Consequently, little is known about how female ulama simultaneously negotiate patriarchal constraints, construct religious legitimacy, and mobilize digital public spheres in contemporary Indonesia.

Based on the identified issues, this study aims to conduct an integrative analysis of the dynamics of Indonesian female religious scholars' digital leadership on social media by bringing together three dimensions that have previously been studied separately: individual agency, structural-patriarchal challenges, and the construction of the digital religious public sphere. Specifically, this study addresses three unanswered questions in the existing literature: *first*, how do Indonesian female religious scholars utilize social media as an alternative public sphere to build religious authority; *second*, what structural challenges do they face within a digital ecosystem still dominated by patriarchal narratives (Blankenship, 2025; Muttaqin, 2020); and *third*, what agency strategies do they

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develop to negotiate these obstacles (Hefner, 2022; Amankul, 2024). This study employs Habermas's Public Sphere framework, Eickelman's Religious Authority framework, and Mahmood's Agency framework, applied simultaneously to analyze the phenomenon of digital leadership among Indonesian female religious scholars. Thus, this study not only contributes theoretically to enriching research on digital Islam and gender in Indonesia but also offers practical implications for strengthening the role of female religious scholars in contemporary religious public spheres.

This study focuses on a review of the scholarly literature regarding the digital leadership of female religious scholars, female religious authority on social media, and gender dynamics within the digital religious public sphere. The research analysis is directed at three main aspects: the strategies and content of female religious scholars' digital da'wah across various social media platforms; patterns of religious authority formation through digital interactions with audiences; and the structural challenges and opportunities for agency faced within a media ecosystem still influenced by patriarchal constructs. The study was conducted as an integrative review of various literature published between 2015 and 2025, with Indonesia as the primary focus, given its position as the largest Muslim-majority country and one of the most dynamic digital ecosystems in Southeast Asia. This research employs the Literature Review method with the literature selection and analysis processes are systematic, transparent, and minimized for subjective bias. Despite the growing body of literature on female ulama and digital religion, no systematic review has synthesized the existing evidence, identified thematic trends, and mapped theoretical developments in this field.

The research data sources consist of secondary scientific literature, including articles from reputable journals, theses and dissertations, documents from religious institutions such as KUPI, as well as relevant survey reports and digital statistics. Data collection was conducted through the stages of identification, screening, and eligibility using keywords such as "female ulama," "digital-leadership," "religious authority," "social media," and "gender bias." The selected literature was then analyzed through thematic analysis to identify dominant themes, comparative analysis to compare findings across contexts, and theoretical synthesis to integrate the study's results with Habermas's Public Sphere theory (De Angelis, 2021; Pfister, 2015), Eickelman and Anderson's Religious Authority (1999), and Mahmood's Agency (2009).

B. DISCUSSION

1. Social Media as an Alternative Digital Religious Public Sphere

Women, particularly female scholars, face a fundamental paradox in various contexts: while their scholarly capacity is recognized, their structural access to religious authority remains limited by patriarchal constructs. This situation arises because historically androcentric religious institutions

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have monopolized the right to interpret religious texts and issue fatwas, positioning women as subjects of the law rather than producers of it, even though they possess the intellectual qualifications to do so (Assri, 2022; Ismah, 2016). In Indonesia, women are extremely rare as formally recognized ulama, even though they are active as organizational leaders and muballighah in various social contexts (Ismah, 2016). In pesantren, women's access to digital media is strictly regulated because they are considered vulnerable to moral dangers (Hefner, 2022). Globally, female religious scholars face layered socio-cultural barriers in realizing their potential as agents of religious change (Fitriani et al., 2024), while in South Africa, religious scholar bodies remain exclusively led by men even though Muslim women have received extensive education in Islamic studies (Essop, 2025). This data confirms that the marginalization of female scholars is not merely a local cultural phenomenon, but rather a global structural pattern rooted in patriarchal constructs within Islamic religious institutions.

There are five intertwined analytical dimensions that collectively form a comprehensive landscape of female religious scholars' digital leadership. This mapping is essential to avoid a fragmented interpretation of a phenomenon that is inherently multidimensional, as each dimension—from authority to agency—cannot be understood in isolation from the others. The following table presents a thematic map of the key findings:

Dimension	Key Findings	Reference
Authority & Legitimacy	Female ulama are rarely formally recognized despite having equivalent scholarly capacity	Ismah (2016); Essop (2025)
Digital Access	Digital platforms open new spaces, yet gender bias persists online	Hefner (2022); Yaqin (2025)
Collective Movements	KUPI builds a non-patriarchal epistemology through an inclusive fatwa methodology	Kloos & Ismah (2023); Nisa (2019)
Structural Challenges	Socio-cultural, theological, and algorithmic barriers limit reach	Fitriani et al. (2024); Tahiiev (2024)
Local Agency	The transformation of digital da'wah strategies expands the influence of female scholars	Zain et al. (2023); Yaqin (2025)

Table 1: Women on public Sphere

Simply put, the table 1 above shows that although the digital space is technically open without geographical boundaries, female religious scholars still face two layers of barriers simultaneously: *offline* barriers in the form of patriarchal structures within religious institutions, and *online* barriers in

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the form of the reproduction of gender bias within the digital ecosystem itself. Thus, digital technology does not automatically level the gender imbalance in religious authority; rather, it presents a new arena where the long-standing struggle over gender and legitimacy continues in more complex forms.

Four dominant patterns consistently shape female religious scholars' digital leadership across contexts. Their identification enables systematic analysis of shared structural mechanisms through which women respond to patriarchal dominance in digital religious spaces. *First*, the *capacity-recognition gap*: despite academic qualifications, female scholars encounter barriers to formal recognition within male-dominated religious institutions (Essop, 2025; Ismah, 2016; Tahiiev, 2024). *Second*, the *ambivalence of digital spaces*: social media expands audience reach (Norlaila et al., 2025; Zain et al., 2023), while reproducing gender-biased narratives that subordinate women in religious discourse (Fitriani et al., 2024; Nisa, 2019). *Third*, *collective agency as resistance*: institutional alliances, particularly KUPI, establish alternative fatwa epistemologies challenging patriarchal authority (Kloos & Ismah, 2023). *Fourth*, *theological barriers through androcentric interpretation*: male-centered interpretations perpetuate inequality, making hermeneutical struggle essential (Assri, 2022). These patterns validate theoretical triangulation: Habermas's Public Sphere explains alternative deliberative arenas, Eickelman's Theory of Authority elucidates legitimacy shifts from traditional transmission to digital popularity, while Mahmood's Theory of Agency illuminates strategic navigation of structural barriers from within the system.

Female religious scholars' digital leadership is a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon shaped by persistent tensions between digital technology's emancipatory potential and entrenched patriarchal barriers. Beyond technological effects, it represents agency within complex power structures, where women negotiate, adapt, and reclaim religious spaces through digital competencies, institutional networks, and religious discourse reinterpretation (Assri, 2022; Kloos & Ismah, 2023). Indonesian female scholars in Madura (Zain et al., 2023), South Kalimantan (Norlaila et al., 2025), and the KUPI movement (Nisa, 2019) utilize YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok Live as alternative public spheres, establishing inclusive and adaptive religious authority. Nevertheless, male-dominated religious institutions continue to hinder formal recognition (Essop, 2025; Ismah, 2016), while gender bias in online content systematically perpetuates women's subordination (Fitriani et al., 2024). Transforming this leadership therefore demands systemic support beyond technological advancement, encompassing institutional reform, gender-sensitive platform policies, and strengthened female religious scholars' movements as catalysts for change in contemporary Indonesian religious discourse.

2. Negotiating Patriarchal Structures and Religious Authority

Digital leadership is an evolving construct and essential for effective influence in technology-driven public spaces, including female religious scholars' social media engagement. Digitalization

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transforms leadership beyond traditional or institutional authority, emphasizing platform navigation, online community building, and narrative management within fluid, transnational virtual spaces (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Lin, 2025). In digital Islam, this transformation presents opportunities and challenges, requiring female scholars to balance digital competencies with entrenched religious gender norms. Bibliometric research shows digital leadership encompasses e-leadership, virtual leadership, and technology leadership, demanding vision, motivation, empowerment, innovation, collaboration, and adaptability (Benlian et al., 2018; Lin, 2025). Digital leadership competencies significantly influence organizational transformation (Ongena et al., 2024), while contemporary leaders require vision, agility, data awareness, and openness to change. Female scholars developing a "digital edge"—social agility in navigating online moral, regulatory, and social oversight while respecting gender norms—can establish religious authority beyond institutional boundaries (Hefner, 2022). Thus, digital leadership actively transforms religious authority through digital mastery within an evolving public sphere.

The dimensions of digital leadership relevant to female religious scholars can be systematically mapped to demonstrate the alignment between general digital leadership frameworks and the specific needs of social media-based religious leadership. This mapping is necessary because the literature on digital leadership, which has developed within the context of business and government organizations, needs to be critically adapted to the context of religious authority, which has fundamentally different dynamics of legitimacy, audience, and challenges. The following table presents a mapping of the dimensions of digital leadership to the context of female religious scholars' leadership on social media:

Dimensions of Digital Leadership	General Indicators	Relevance for Female Ulama	Reference
Vision and Motivation	Digital-based strategic vision	Inclusive, cross-platform da'wah	Lin (2025); Sacavem et al. (2025)
Digital empowerment	Online community empowerment	Digital congregational networks & online KUPI	Ongena et al. (2024); Müller et al. (2024)
Cross-boundary collaboration	Cross-boundary collaboration	Transnational women scholars' movement	Tagscherer & Carbon (2023)

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Dynamic adaptation	Algorithm & platform adaptation	Cross-platform content migration	Cortellazzo et al. (2019)
Digital insights	Data literacy & analytics	Understanding trends in digital religious issues	Malik et al. (2025)

***Table 2*:** Digital leadership

In summary, the table 2 above shows that the five dimensions of digital leadership identified in management literature have concrete counterparts in the leadership practices of female religious scholars on social media. Female religious scholars who succeed in the digital space are not merely producers of religious content, but true digital leaders who manage communities, build narratives, and negotiate with technological structures strategically. Thus, the digital leadership framework originally developed in the context of business organizations proves relevant and adaptable for analyzing the phenomenon of female religious scholars' leadership in the digital public sphere, with the caveat that the dimensions of religious legitimacy and gender negotiation must be added as distinct layers of analysis.

The literature synthesis reveals four dominant patterns shaping female religious scholars' digital leadership on social media. These patterns provide a structural understanding of leadership amid technology's emancipatory potential and persistent patriarchal barriers. *First*, authority hybridization combines traditional pesantren-based scholarly legitimacy with digital popularity through relevant, relatable content, renegotiating rather than replacing established authority (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Lin, 2025). *Second*, public sphere transformation makes religious discourse more pluralistic and participatory, opening previously inaccessible spaces while intensifying gender-based scrutiny and online attacks (Malik et al., 2025; Tagscherer & Carbon, 2023). *Third*, digital competence as agency capital enables independence from male-dominated institutions through digital literacy, content production, algorithmic understanding, and geographically diverse community networks (Ongena et al., 2024; Rakovic et al., 2024). *Fourth*, platform ambivalence reflects simultaneous empowerment and control, as algorithms favor established male narratives over female scholars' da'wah content (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Rakovic et al., 2024). These dynamics require integrating Habermas's Public Sphere, Eickelman's Authority, and Mahmood's Agency theories.

Female religious scholars' digital leadership represents more than technological adaptation; it constitutes a socio-religious transformation shaped by digital competence, authority negotiations, and gender agency. This process is dialectical: digitalization expands previously inaccessible public spaces while generating algorithmic bias, gender-based online violence, and amplified patriarchal

narratives (Rakovic et al., 2024; Tagscherer & Carbon, 2023). Effective digital leadership requires technical proficiency, strategic thinking, and trust-building within virtual communities (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Sacavém et al., 2025). For female religious scholars, these competencies must accompany the ability to navigate entrenched gender norms through agency, understood by Saba Mahmood as strategic engagement within, rather than outright rejection of, patriarchal structures (Hefner, 2022). Institutionally, KUPI exemplifies effective leadership through supportive networks, alternative religious methodologies, and inclusive digital deliberation (Kloos & Ismah, 2023). Its future requires gender-just digital ecosystems through individual digital literacy, institutional inclusivity, and gender-sensitive platform policies, addressing inequalities across individual, institutional, and structural levels.

3. Female Ulama's Agency and the Emergence of Hybrid Digital Religious Authority

The transition from traditional to digital leadership and the development of gender-inclusive digital ecosystems involve three interconnected dimensions, synthesized through an integrated application of Habermas's Public Sphere, Eickelman's Religious Authority, and Mahmood's Agency frameworks. *First*, social media serves as an alternative public sphere (counter public sphere), allowing female religious scholars to establish religious authority beyond conventional male-dominated institutional channels (Ismah, 2016; Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Nisa, 2019). *Second*, their digital leadership is hybrid, combining traditional scholarly legitimacy with digital popularity while navigating tensions between technological emancipation and digitally reproduced patriarchal barriers (Lin, 2025; Muttaqin, 2020; Oloba & Blankenship, 2024). *Third*, digital agency involves strategic engagement rather than direct confrontation with patriarchy, utilizing institutional collaboration, platform adaptation, and progressive religious discourse reinterpretation (Fitriani et al., 2024; Hefner, 2022; Zain et al., 2023). Together, these findings reveal a paradox: digital technology simultaneously empowers and constrains, while online spaces offer both liberation and surveillance.

The paradox of female religious scholars' digital leadership stems from power reproduction across technological and religious domains. Despite equivalent academic qualifications, women encounter authority disparities because social media is not gender-neutral: algorithms reflect existing interaction patterns, favoring male religious content with historically larger audiences and reinforcing established inequalities (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Rakovic et al., 2024). Meanwhile, religious institutions, including the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and pesantren-based fatwa bodies, retain androcentric interpretive frameworks that position women as regulatory objects rather than interpretive subjects (Assri, 2022; Tahiiev, 2024). Consequently, successful digital leadership requires three complementary forms of social capital: pesantren-based scholarly legitimacy, institutional networks such as KUPI or Rahima, and digital literacy for navigating platform ecosystems (Norlaila et al., 2025; Ongena et al.,

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2024; Zain et al., 2023). Without any component, authoritative and sustainable digital leadership becomes substantially constrained. Thus, women's digital leadership barriers are structural, emerging from mutually reinforcing institutional gender bias and technological algorithmic bias.

This study both confirms and extends previous research on digital leadership and religious authority. Consistent with earlier studies, Cortellazzo et al.(2019) and Qin Lin(2025) finds that effective leadership in digital environments requires a combination of technical, social, and communicative competencies. However, female religious scholars must also navigate gender norms and patriarchal expectations, a dimension often overlooked in mainstream leadership literature. The findings further support evidence that men continue to dominate authority structures in digital spaces despite increasing female visibility (Oloba and Blankenship, 2024). Unlike Ismah's study (2016) focused on offline religious institutions, this study shows that digital platforms create new forms of authority based on community engagement, content visibility, and transnational networking. Its primary contribution lies in its theoretical innovation: the integration of Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, Eickelman's Theory of Religious Authority, and Mahmood's Theory of Agency. This multidimensional framework captures the interconnected dynamics of public participation, religious authority, and gendered agency, offering a transferable model for studying digital religious leadership across diverse Islamic contexts.

The technical, structural, and algorithmic barriers identified in this study reflect broader historical and ideological transformations in Islamic religious authority. The digital leadership of Indonesian female religious scholars is part of a long-term shift from authority rooted in sanad and pesantren traditions, to mass organizations, print and broadcast media, and now social media (Panigoro, 2025; Rachmadhani, 2021). Across these transitions, women have consistently faced greater challenges in gaining recognition because established forms of authority have traditionally been dominated by men. Unlike earlier media, social media requires fewer resources, less institutional gatekeeping, and offers direct access to global audiences, creating greater opportunities for women's participation (Kurmanaliyev et al., 2024; Zaid et al., 2022). Nevertheless, algorithmic and cultural constraints continue to limit this potential. The growing influence of female religious scholars online demonstrates that inclusive and gender-just interpretations of Islam respond to genuine community needs rather than solely academic concerns (Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Muttaqin, 2020). Consequently, their digital leadership represents not only individual achievement but also the emergence of an alternative religious epistemology within Indonesia's contemporary Islamic public sphere.

These technical, structural, and algorithmic barriers reveal both the opportunities and challenges of female religious scholars' digital leadership. While digital platforms expand access to religious authority, technology alone cannot eliminate gender inequality without broader structural change. Positively, digital leadership enables wider dissemination of inclusive and gender-sensitive da'wah

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(Norlaila et al., 2025), supports alternative religious communities for Muslim women (Hefner, 2022), encourages accountability through public debate (Nisa, 2019), and strengthens transnational networks of female scholars (Fitriani et al., 2024). However, significant risks remain, including online harassment and gender-based violence (Muttaqin, 2020), pressure to prioritize viral content over substantive religious messages (Zaid et al.,2022), fragmentation of religious authority (Panigoro, 2025), and potential exploitation by political interests. These challenges demonstrate that effective digital leadership requires more than technological access. Sustainable progress depends on an integrated ecosystem that combines digital capacity building, institutional support, protection from online violence, and ethical guidelines that preserve the integrity of religious engagement in increasingly platform-driven environments.

This study proposes three complementary policy recommendations to strengthen the digital leadership of female religious scholars in Indonesia. First, at the individual level, targeted digital literacy programs should enhance skills in content creation, community engagement, algorithm awareness, and protection against online harassment, as digital competence is essential for effective leadership (Lin, 2025; Ongena et al., 2024). Second, at the institutional level, organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia should integrate women's digital leadership into communication strategies, provide technological support, and establish mechanisms to protect female scholars from online attacks. Third, at the structural level, governments and platform regulators should promote gender-equitable representation of religious content and strengthen legal protections against digital gender-based violence (Sacavém et al., 2025; Tagscherer & Carbon, 2023). These interventions must be implemented simultaneously, as sustainable and transformative digital leadership can only emerge when capable individuals are supported by responsive institutions and an equitable digital ecosystem.

C. CONCLUSION

This study generates three key findings that offer an integrated understanding of the digital leadership of female religious scholars in Indonesia. *First,* social media has expanded women scholars' access to religious authority by creating alternative public spaces; however, persistent patriarchal structures continue to shape digital environments through algorithmic bias and gender-based online violence. *Second,* sustainable digital leadership relies on the interaction of three forms of capital: scholarly capital for legitimacy, institutional network capital for collective support, and digital literacy capital for effective platform engagement. The absence of any of these elements significantly constrains leadership influence and reach. *Third,* female religious scholars exercise agency through strategic adaptation rather than direct confrontation, employing progressive reinterpretations of religious discourse, fostering inclusive digital communities, and strengthening collective movements

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through institutions such as KUPI. Overall, these findings demonstrate that female religious scholars' digital leadership represents a complex socio-religious transformation shaped by the tension between technology's emancipatory potential and the enduring presence of patriarchal barriers.

This study makes four key contributions. *First,* it develops an integrative analytical framework that combines Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, Eickelman's Theory of Religious Authority, and Mahmood's Theory of Agency, offering a more comprehensive approach to understanding female religious scholars' digital leadership than previous studies. This theoretical integration represents a methodological innovation in the study of Indonesian female ulama. *Second,* it introduces the concept of hybrid digital religious authority, which merges traditional scholarly legitimacy with digital influence derived from audience engagement. *Third,* the study provides a comparative thematic synthesis of research on female religious scholars from Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria, the United States, and Europe, extending analysis beyond single-case perspectives. *Finally,* it offers practical recommendations at the individual, institutional, and structural levels to support more inclusive and gender-responsive policies for religious organizations, policymakers, and digital platforms.

This study has three main limitations. *First,* as a Literature Review, it relies exclusively on published sources and cannot capture the lived experiences of female religious scholars, which require primary data collection through interviews, digital ethnography, or participant observation. Future studies should incorporate empirical data from female ulama active on social media to validate and enrich these findings. *Second,* although the review includes evidence from several regions, its primary focus is Indonesia; therefore, the applicability of the findings to other contexts, such as the Middle East, South Asia, or West Africa, should be approached cautiously. Comparative cross-national research is needed to assess the transferability of the proposed framework. *Third,* this study does not examine platform-specific differences across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. Future research using digital content analysis or computational social science methods could provide a more detailed understanding of leadership dynamics and effective strategies within different digital ecosystems.

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