

Negotiating Religious Truth Claims in the Digital Era: A Communication-Ethics Perspective on Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

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Abstract:

The development of digital technology has transformed religious communication patterns from conventional spaces to open and interactive virtual public spaces. Social media has become not only a means of disseminating religious teachings but also an arena for contesting various truth claims involving perspectives of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This condition often gives rise to religious tensions due to differing perspectives on religious truth, reinforced by the logic of algorithms and the culture of digital virality. This study aims to analyze how religious truth claims are constructed and negotiated in the digital space, identify the factors that give rise to tensions between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, and examine the role of communication ethics in managing these tensions. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data sources consisting of religious communication content in digital media and various relevant academic literature. Data were collected through digital observation, documentation, and library research, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model. The results show that the digital space has become a primary arena for the construction and negotiation of religious truth claims, influenced by digital authority, media algorithms, and audience participation. This research also uncovered the phenomenon of digital performative exclusivism, namely the aggressive use of religious truth claims to gain legitimacy and popularity. Furthermore, communication ethics plays a crucial role as a bridge for dialogue through the principles of moral responsibility, information verification, and respect for diversity. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy and religious communication ethics is necessary to create a more inclusive, tolerant, and constructive digital space.

Keywords: claims of religious truth; communication ethics; digital space; exclusivism; inclusivism; pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in recent decades has brought significant changes to the way humans communicate, including in the religious sphere. While previously religious communication largely took place in conventional spaces such as houses of worship, religious study groups, religious educational institutions, and limited, hierarchical and controlled forums, this pattern has now shifted drastically to a virtual public space that is open, fast, and transcends geographic boundaries. The presence of social media, video-sharing platforms, blogs, and various online discussion forums allows individuals and religious groups to directly convey teachings, interpretations, and truth claims to a much wider audience, bypassing the filter of formal institutions that previously served as the primary authority. In the context of this transformation, the construction of religious truth claims no longer takes place within a framework of limited, structured dialogue supervised by specific religious institutions. Instead, it now exists within a highly dynamic and complex digital ecosystem, where platform

algorithms, the logic of virality, and competition for public attention are key determinants of message dissemination. This situation has serious consequences for the quality of religious discourse developing in the digital space. Instead of generating in-depth and reflective dialogue, digital spaces often encourage the simplification of religious teachings, the strengthening of polarization, and the emergence of symbolic conflicts that pit various theological positions against each other (Huda, 2022).

In this situation, various forms of religious understanding, such as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, are not only present as theological discourse but also emerge in more confrontational forms of social interaction in the digital space. Exclusivism, which emphasizes a single truth claim, often emerges in narratives that negate other groups. Inclusivism, while more open to the existence of others, maintains a certain superiority within the framework of its adopted truth. Meanwhile, pluralism seeks to place various religious traditions on a more equal footing in understanding truth and spiritual reality. These three perspectives, when interacting in a digital space lacking adequate communication control mechanisms, often clash, giving rise to tensions that have the potential to escalate into social conflict and hate speech. This phenomenon is further complicated by the emergence of digital *da'wah* practices, which in some cases are oriented not only toward spreading religious values but also toward capturing public attention. In many cases, religious narratives are used aggressively to assert certain truth claims, even by blaming or discrediting other views. This shows that digital space not only functions as a medium for spreading religious teachings, but also as an arena for competition for identity, legitimacy, and religious authority which is greatly influenced by the algorithmic dynamics of digital platforms (Sumbulah, 2012).

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the digital space also opens up vast opportunities for interfaith dialogue and strengthening the values of tolerance. Open access to information allows individuals from various religious backgrounds to interact, discuss, and understand each other's differences. However, this openness also presents new challenges, particularly in balancing freedom of expression and ethical responsibility in religious communication. Without adequate ethical awareness, this freedom can become vulnerable to the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and social fragmentation based on religious identity. Within this framework, exclusivism tends to uphold the belief that salvation and truth belong only to certain groups. Inclusivism seeks to provide space for recognition of others, but remains within a framework of specific theological dominance. Pluralism, on the other hand, seeks to build a more open paradigm by positioning religious diversity as a reality that must be respected and valued equally. These three approaches, when present simultaneously in the digital space without healthy and ethical communication mechanisms, often create tensions that lead to conflicting opinions, the spread of hate narratives, and increased social polarization in society (Zuhri, 2021).

A more comprehensive approach is needed to understand how religious truth claims are constructed, negotiated, and contested in the digital space. This approach is communication ethics, which serves not only as a normative guideline for interaction but also as an analytical framework for examining how religious messages are produced and consumed in a digital ecosystem heavily influenced by algorithms and a culture of virality. Communication ethics is important because it offers fundamental principles such as moral responsibility, information verification, and respect for diverse beliefs, which can help mitigate potential conflict in religious communication in the virtual public sphere. Thus, communication ethics is understood not only as moral rules for speaking or conveying messages, but also as a strategic approach to building a healthier, more inclusive, and dialogical digital space. Through the application of these principles, it is hoped that religious interactions in the digital space will no longer be dominated by the logic of conflict and competition, but can instead be directed toward more constructive communication oriented toward peaceful coexistence (Waston, 2025).

Various previous studies have made important contributions to understanding the relationship between religious truth claims, pluralism, and social communication. Research conducted by Umar et al. emphasized that exclusive truth claims have the potential to become an obstacle to peace in multicultural societies. Therefore, a reinterpretation of the exclusivist perspective is needed to prevent it from developing into a source of prolonged social conflict. Meanwhile, Rustriningsih, in her study with Saad, explained that inclusivism and pluralism play a crucial role in reducing the potential for interreligious conflict through the recognition of universal moral values found in various religious traditions (Rustriningsih & Saad, 2024). This approach emphasizes the importance of dialogue and openness as the foundation for building more harmonious interfaith relations (Umar et al., 2024).

Research by Atoi and Ewere Nelson also addresses the epistemological aspects of religious truth claims in multireligious societies. The study's findings suggest that pluralism seeks to offer a non-exclusive approach to truth, where truth is not monopolized by one particular religious tradition but can be understood through diverse perspectives (Atoi, 2018). Furthermore, Kramer's research links the concept of pluralism to media ethics in the context of modern society (Kramer, 2021). He points out that the development of digital media demands a new

ethical framework capable of accommodating the increasingly complex diversity of religious beliefs and perspectives in the digital public sphere. Furthermore, Owolabi highlights the ethical dimension of religious pluralism in the context of global society. He emphasizes the importance of communication that respects diversity as a foundation for building a more inclusive and peaceful social life amidst increasingly visible differences in belief in the era of globalization (Owolabi, 2021). Although these studies have made significant contributions to understanding the relationship between exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and social communication, most studies still focus on the philosophical, theological, or general social dimensions. Studies specifically linking these three concepts to the dynamics of contemporary digital communication are still relatively limited. In other words, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how claims to religious truth are negotiated in a digital space heavily influenced by algorithms, viral culture, and rapid and massive public interaction. Furthermore, the current phenomenon of digital da'wah (preaching) demonstrates a growing tendency toward mutual blame, claims of absolute truth, and attempts to gain legitimacy through popularity on social media.

This situation demonstrates that algorithmic logic not only influences the distribution of information but also shapes how individuals and groups produce and negotiate religious truth in the digital public sphere. Meanwhile, pluralism theory, which has largely addressed the recognition of religious diversity, has yet to deeply examine the ethical aspects of communication in the digital sphere. Similarly, studies linking pluralism to digital communication ethics are still relatively limited, thus failing to comprehensively explain how religious communication practices occur within the highly complex social media ecosystem (Rusmiati et al., 2025). Based on this situation, this study seeks to fill the existing academic gap by analyzing in more depth how the tensions between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism play out in digital communication. Furthermore, this study aims to explore how communication ethics can serve as an alternative approach to bridging these tensions, so that religious communication in the virtual public sphere can develop toward a more dialogical, inclusive, and harmonious life.

The study of religious truth claims has long been a focus of study in the philosophy of religion, theology, and the social sciences. In classical contexts, religious truth claims are generally understood as normative statements affirming a religious tradition's position on ultimate truth or salvation. However, the development of digital technology has significantly changed the way these claims are communicated, negotiated, and contested in the public sphere. The digital era presents an open, rapid communication space that is no longer tied to formal religious authority, making the process of producing religious meaning increasingly fluid and pluralistic. In this context, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are no longer merely theological categories but also communication practices that occur within the digital ecosystem. Therefore, a communication ethics approach is crucial for understanding how religious truth claims are negotiated in a digital space influenced by algorithms, viral culture, and audience participation. The existing literature shows that although these three perspectives have been extensively studied, there remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics operate in the algorithmic and participatory nature of the digital space (Ahwady & Kafabihi, 2025).

The study of religious truth claims has traditionally been rooted in discourses on the epistemology of religion and comparative theology. In classical literature, truth claims are often understood as exclusive assertions that a religion possesses the final truth regarding God, salvation, and morality. The Philosophy of Religion explains that religious truth claims cannot be separated from the internal belief structure of a tradition, which is normative and absolute. In this approach, truth is viewed as something objective within the framework of a particular faith. Subsequent developments have led to criticism of this exclusive approach. Pluralist thinkers such as John Hick offer the perspective that religious truth cannot be monopolized by a single tradition but is instead a human response to the same Transcendent Reality. This view allows for the relativization of truth claims without eliminating the dimension of faith. Meanwhile, the inclusivist approach attempts to bridge the two by acknowledging the existence of truth in other religions while maintaining the superiority of one's own tradition. Thus, these three paradigms form an epistemological spectrum that continues to be debated in the study of religion (Salle et al., 2025).

In contemporary theological literature, exclusivism is understood as the view that salvation or truth can only be found within a particular religious tradition. This perspective is often associated with strong religious authority structures and literal interpretations of sacred texts. Inclusivism, as described in various modern theological studies, seeks to maintain the core truth claims of a religion while acknowledging the possibility of salvation or truth in other traditions. This approach is compromising, yet hierarchical. Pluralism, on the other hand, developed in response to increasing interreligious interaction in global society. According to a study in Religious Pluralism Studies, pluralism emphasizes epistemological equality between religions and rejects the monopoly of absolute truth. Paul F. Knitter, for example, emphasizes the importance of interreligious dialogue

that is not only tolerant but also transformative. Meanwhile, Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposes that "religion" is more accurately understood as a living process of faith rather than a closed system of truth (Hutahaeen, 2021). However, this literature remains largely within the philosophical and theological realms, with little attention to the dimensions of digital communication, which has now become a primary arena for contesting truth claims.

The biggest change in recent decades has been the shift of religious communication to digital platforms. Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram have become primary platforms for the dissemination of religious narratives. In digital communication studies, this space is referred to as an algorithmic public sphere, where information distribution is determined not only by humans but also by algorithmic systems. This has transformed the way religious truth claims are constructed and disseminated. Research in Digital Religion Studies shows that religion in the digital era is undergoing a process of mediatization, where religious practices are influenced by media logic. In this context, religious messages are judged not only by their theological content but also by levels of engagement such as likes, shares, and views. Consequently, there has been a shift from traditional authority to digital authority. Religious influencers, digital preachers, and religious content creators have become new actors in the production of truth claims. Recent literature shows that social media algorithms play a significant role in shaping the polarization of religious opinion. Algorithmic systems tend to prioritize content that is controversial, emotional, and highly engaging. In this context, religious truth claims are often packaged in simple and confrontational forms to facilitate virality. This reinforces the tendency towards exclusivism in digital communication (Widodo & Pangaribuan, 2025).

Research in Media Sociology shows that algorithms are not neutral but rather possess structural biases that can reinforce echo chambers and filter bubbles. As a result, users are more frequently exposed to views that align with their own beliefs, thus reinforcing polarization between exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist groups. Communication ethics is an important framework for understanding how religious interactions can be managed more healthily in the digital space. In communication literature, communication ethics emphasizes the principles of responsibility, honesty, and respect for others. Communication Ethics emphasizes that communication is not only related to message delivery but also its impact on social relations. In the digital context, communication ethics becomes increasingly important because the digital space allows for the rapid dissemination of information without adequate controls. Therefore, the principles of information verification, moral responsibility, and respect for diversity are necessary. Several researchers also emphasize the importance of digital literacy as part of communication ethics so that users can distinguish between valid and invalid information (Wahid & Martianto, 2026).

From a communication ethics perspective, exclusivism is often criticized for its potential to produce non-dialogic communication and its tendency to close off space for difference. However, exclusivism can also be understood as a strong form of religious identity. Inclusivism in communication ethics is seen as more open because it still allows for dialogue, even though it remains within a hierarchical structure. Meanwhile, pluralism is considered most in line with the principles of ethical communication because it promotes equality and recognition of differences. However, in digital practice, these three approaches do not always operate ideally. Exclusivism often turns into digital aggression, inclusivism becomes ambiguous in communication, and pluralism is often considered weak in the context of competing digital narratives. The concept of negotiating truth claims refers to an interaction process in which various social actors compete for the meaning of truth. In the digital space, this process occurs openly, quickly, and often without mediators. The literature shows that this negotiation is not only theological in nature but also influenced by factors such as the attention economy, platform algorithms, and participatory culture (Pomalingo, 2016). Thus, religious truth claims are no longer static but are dynamic and continuously negotiated in digital interactions.

Although the literature on exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and communication ethics has grown, several important gaps remain: First, most studies still focus on philosophical and theological dimensions without directly linking them to the digital context. Second, the study of digital religion is often separated from the study of communication ethics, resulting in a lack of strong integration between the two. Third, there is little research specifically addressing how social media algorithms influence the negotiation of religious truth claims. Fourth, the study of pluralism remains more normative than analytical in the context of digital communication. Based on the existing literature, it can be concluded that the study of religious truth claims has developed in three main domains: theology, pluralism, and communication. However, the development of digital technology has fundamentally changed the way these claims are produced and negotiated. Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are now not only theological concepts but also communication practices influenced by algorithms and digital culture (Kasse, 2025). In this context, communication ethics is a crucial approach for understanding and

managing these dynamics to prevent them from leading to conflict and sharper polarization. Thus, research on the negotiation of religious truth claims in the digital era becomes very relevant to fill the gap between classical theory and contemporary communication realities.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply understand the phenomenon of negotiating religious truth claims in the digital era, particularly those related to exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in religious communication. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study is oriented towards understanding the meaning, narrative, and social dynamics that emerge in religious interactions in the digital space. Meanwhile, the descriptive nature is used to systematically describe communication patterns, forms of discursive tension, and ethical communication practices that develop on social media and other digital platforms (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Through this approach, the study seeks to explain how religious truth claims are constructed, maintained, and negotiated in a virtual public space influenced by digital culture and the logic of virality. The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from various forms of religious communication in digital media, such as social media posts, digital preaching videos, religious podcasts, internet user comments, and online discussions containing religious truth claims or responses to other religious groups. The platforms examined included YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X/Twitter. Data selection was conducted purposively based on its relevance to the research theme, particularly regarding exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and communication ethics. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through literature review in the form of books, scientific journals, academic articles, and previous research findings related to the theory of religious pluralism, digital communication, communication ethics, and religious studies in the digital age. This secondary data was used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and support the research data interpretation process (Creswell, 2018).

Data collection techniques were conducted through digital observation, documentation, and literature review. Digital observation was conducted by observing religious communication activities in digital spaces to identify patterns of truth claims, forms of interaction, and communication practices that reflect exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. Furthermore, documentation techniques were carried out by collecting various digital documents, such as screenshots, social media posts, comments, online articles, and videos relevant to the research focus. Literature review was conducted by reviewing various scientific literature to gain a conceptual understanding of the theories used in this study. The data analysis technique in this study used the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). In the data reduction stage, researchers selected and focused on data relevant to the research problem formulation. Next, the data were presented in the form of descriptive descriptions and theme categorizations to facilitate the interpretation process. The final stage was carried out by drawing conclusions through data interpretation based on the perspective of communication ethics and the theory of religious pluralism to understand how religious truth claims are negotiated in digital spaces. To maintain data validity, this study uses source triangulation techniques by comparing digital data, academic literature, and theoretical interpretations to produce a more comprehensive and objective analysis (Sugiyono, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development of digital technology has brought about significant changes in the patterns of religious communication in contemporary society. Observations of various social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X/Twitter show that the digital space now functions not only as a medium for disseminating information but has also become a primary arena for the production, distribution, and negotiation of claims to religious truth. Within this space, digital da'wah practices have undergone a significant transformation, with religious activities no longer limited to conveying spiritual teachings or values but also encompassing efforts to build group identity, strengthen positions of authority, and compete for moral legitimacy before a wider public. In this context, claims to religious truth have undergone a fundamental shift from a relatively limited, hierarchical, and controlled theological space to a virtual public space that is open, competitive, and heavily influenced by the logic of virality. This shift demonstrates that religious authority no longer rests solely with formal institutions but is also distributed among digital actors such as religious influencers, da'wah content creators, and online communities actively producing religious narratives. As a result, religious truth is not only understood as a

normative doctrine, but also as a result of social interactions influenced by social media algorithms (Yusuf & Musyafa, 2026).

Research findings indicate that the logic of digital media has a strong influence on how religion is constructed, understood, and communicated. Digital platforms tend to prioritize content that generates high levels of engagement, such as views, comments, and shares. This situation encourages the emergence of simpler, more emotional, and often provocative forms of religious communication, as this presentation model more easily attracts users' attention. As a result, religious discourse in digital spaces often experiences simplification of meaning, amplification of polarity, and a tendency to present absolute truth claims. Furthermore, digital spaces also create situations where differences in religious views are more easily exposed and publicly displayed. Interactions between users from different religious backgrounds often take place not within a framework of constructive dialogue, but rather in the form of emotional and competitive debates. In many cases, this can strengthen polarization between groups and increase the potential for symbolic conflict based on religious identity (Suhtratun & Al-Athiriyah, 2026).

On the other hand, the digital space also provides opportunities for the emergence of new, more creative and inclusive forms of religious expression. However, these opportunities are often accompanied by challenges such as the spread of disinformation, fragmentation of religious interpretations, and the dominance of viral narratives that are not always theologically accurate. Therefore, it is important to understand that the dynamics of religious communication in the digital era cannot be separated from the influence of technology, algorithms, and participatory culture, which shape how individuals consume and produce information. Thus, the digital space can be understood as a complex arena, where claims to religious truth are negotiated not only theologically, but also socially, culturally, and technologically. This confirms that the digital transformation has fundamentally changed the landscape of religious communication, from centralized to more distributed, from hierarchical to more horizontal, and from stable to highly dynamic and constantly changing (Ribeiro et al., 2020).

Construction and Negotiation of Religious Claims in Digital Space

The research results show that the construction of religious claims in the digital space is shaped by three main, interconnected elements: digital authority, media algorithms, and audience participation. These three elements work simultaneously and create a religious communication ecosystem that differs significantly from the patterns of religious communication in the pre-digital era.

First, religious authority in the digital era no longer rests solely on formal institutions such as religious institutions, traditional clerics, or religious organizations with structural legitimacy. Instead, authority is now also shaped by digital public figures, da'wah influencers, and content creators with extensive reach on social media. In this context, digital popularity often transforms into a new source of legitimacy in conveying religious interpretations to the public. The greater the number of followers, views, or interactions an individual attains, the greater their influence in shaping public religious perceptions. As a result, religious authority has undergone a significant process of decentralization, as each individual has the potential to convey religious interpretations to the wider public without undergoing rigorous scientific verification mechanisms (Lövhheim & Campbell, 2017a). This situation opens up space for the democratization of religious information, but at the same time also raises challenges related to the validity and credibility of religious messages.

Second, social media algorithms play a significant role in reinforcing the segmentation of religious understanding in the digital space. The content personalization systems implemented by digital platforms tend to favor users receiving information that aligns with their pre-existing preferences, beliefs, or ideological views. This situation fosters the formation of religious echo chambers, closed information spaces that reinforce existing views without presenting many alternative perspectives. Under these conditions, content containing absolute claims, confrontational narratives, or emotional provocations is more likely to garner engagement than narratives that are moderate, reflective, and dialogical (Lövhheim & Campbell, 2017b). This suggests that digital media is not neutral, but rather possesses an algorithmic structure that can indirectly reinforce polarization in religious discourse.

Third, audience participation is a crucial factor transforming the nature of religious communication from one-way to interactive and dynamic. Through comment features, reposts, live streaming, and various online discussion forums, claims of religious truth are no longer final but are continually negotiated in the digital public sphere. Research shows that social media comment spaces often become an arena for debate between exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist groups, each bringing their own theological perspectives. In some cases, these spaces can be a platform for educational and constructive interfaith dialogue. However, they also often turn into a battlefield of verbal conflict characterized by hate speech, attacks on the beliefs of other groups, and

attempts at symbolic delegitimization. These findings demonstrate that the digital space has transformed religious communication into an open, rapid, and simultaneous process of identity negotiation (Ergen, 2023).

In addition to these three main elements, this study also identified the emergence of a new phenomenon known as performative religiosity, namely the practice of openly displaying religious piety and claims of truth in digital spaces with the aim of gaining social validation, recognition, and popularity. In this pattern, religion is understood not only as a system of beliefs and spiritual practices, but also as a performative symbol used to construct self-image on social media. Violent, confrontational, and controversial religious content tends to spread more quickly and go viral because it fits the logic of the attention economy that dominates today's digital platforms (Jannah & Al Ayubi, 2025). Thus, the digital space is not only changing the way religion is communicated but also influencing the motivations behind the production of religious messages themselves.

The Tension between Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism in Digital Communication

The tension between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is increasingly intense in the digital space, as each perspective has a distinct way of understanding and constructing religious truth. These epistemological differences extend beyond the theological realm and are also manifested in everyday communication practices on social media, which are open and rapidly disseminating information. In this context, the digital space becomes an arena where various claims to truth simultaneously converge, thus increasing the potential for conflict, negotiation, and the fragmentation of religious meaning in the virtual public sphere. Exclusivism, as a primary approach to understanding religious truth, holds that only one religion offers a legitimate path to salvation, while other traditions are viewed as lacking equal legitimacy (Nurjaman, 2025). In the digital space, exclusivism often manifests itself in preaching content that emphasizes the superiority of a particular religion, while simultaneously critically assessing or even rejecting other beliefs. This communication pattern tends to receive significant attention because it aligns with the nature of social media, which prioritizes emotional and controversial content. The viral culture that has developed on digital platforms has also strengthened the spread of exclusive narratives, where sensation and visual appeal are often prioritized over the depth of academic substance or in-depth theological reflection (Boiliu et al., 2025).

On the other hand, inclusivism offers a more moderate approach, acknowledging the existence of other religions while maintaining the belief that one's own religion holds the most perfect or normatively correct position. In digital communication practices, inclusivism often manifests itself in calls for harmonious living, building social tolerance, and avoiding interfaith conflict. However, this approach does not completely eliminate the boundaries of theological identity, so a hierarchical structure of truth remains that can indirectly create symbolic tension in interactions between groups. In other words, inclusivism occupies a middle ground, attempting to balance the recognition of differences with the maintenance of internal religious identity (Rustriningsih & Saad, 2024). Meanwhile, pluralism presents itself as a more radical approach to recognizing diversity, as it places religions on an equal footing in the search for meaning, moral values, and human experience. In the digital space, the narrative of pluralism generally develops within academic communities, interfaith activists, and religious moderation movements that seek to foster interfaith dialogue and understanding. However, pluralism is often viewed critically by exclusivist groups, as it is perceived to blur the boundaries of normative religious truth. This has led to the digital space becoming a tug-of-war between efforts to maintain an exclusive identity on the one hand and the need to build social tolerance on the other. This tension demonstrates that theological debates are not confined to academic settings but have also migrated into the broader, more open digital public sphere (Kramer, 2021).

A key finding in this study demonstrates a phenomenon known as "digital performative exclusivism," a form of religious communication that aggressively displays truth claims, not merely as an expression of theological belief, but also as a strategy to gain social legitimacy, public attention, and increased engagement on social media. In this context, religious tensions are not only triggered by differences in doctrine or theological views alone, but also by the dynamics of competition for popularity and capitalizing on attention within the digital ecosystem. Thus, religious conflict in the digital space cannot be understood solely as an ideological issue, but also as a consequence of a highly competitive, algorithm-based, and virality-oriented digital communication culture (Harianto et al., 2026).

Communication Ethics as a Bridge to Religious Tensions in the Digital Space

This study found that communication ethics plays a strategic role in bridging the tensions between three major paradigms in understanding religiosity: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, particularly in the

increasingly complex context of the digital space. Communication ethics, in this context, is not intended to erase or obscure the religious identities or theological beliefs held by individuals or groups. Instead, communication ethics serves as a normative and practical guideline that directs interactions while respecting human dignity, minimizing the potential for symbolic violence, and opening up a space for healthier, more equal, and more constructive dialogue amid differing religious views. In the context of digital communication, which is rapid, open, and without geographical boundaries, communication ethics becomes increasingly important because every online interaction has the potential to spread widely in a short time and significantly influence public opinion. This condition makes the digital space vulnerable to misunderstandings, identity conflicts, and even religious-based polarization. Therefore, communication ethics are needed as a social control mechanism that is able to maintain the quality of interactions so as not to be trapped in the logic of provocation, hate speech, or absolute claims of truth that exclude other parties (Parawansah et al., 2026).

The results of this study also identified the emergence of a new communication practice known as digital ethical dialogue, a model of religious communication based on empathy, digital literacy, and social responsibility in media use. This practice has been found to be developing in various interfaith communities that actively utilize digital platforms for the purposes of tolerance education, clarifying misinformation or hoaxes related to religion, and campaigning for religious moderation. The presence of this practice demonstrates that digital space is not always synonymous with conflict or division, but also has great potential as a space for productive social collaboration if managed with appropriate ethical principles (Setiawan et al., 2025). In this context, this study also formulated three main principles of religious communication ethics in the digital era that are considered relevant to managing the dynamics of religious truth claims. The first principle is moral responsibility, namely the awareness that every form of religious speech or content produced and disseminated in the digital space has broad social impacts, both directly and indirectly. This principle requires every digital actor to be more careful in conveying religious messages to avoid causing social harm or horizontal conflict.

The second principle is information verification, which emphasizes the importance of ensuring the accuracy of information before disseminating it, especially regarding sensitive religious issues. In a digital space that is highly susceptible to the spread of hoaxes, misinformation, and disinformation, the ability to verify information is a crucial element of communication ethics. Without adequate verification, claims of religious truth can easily be distorted and used for provocative purposes. The third principle is respect for diversity, which is the primary foundation for building dialogical, inclusive, and non-discriminatory communication. This principle emphasizes that differences in belief are not grounds for hostility but rather a social reality that must be managed through mutual respect and understanding. In this context, these principles of communication ethics align with the concept of communicative rationality developed by Jürgen Habermas and Thomas McCarthy, which emphasizes the importance of equal, open, and understanding-oriented dialogue in the public sphere. Thus, the findings of this study demonstrate that the process of negotiating claims of religious truth in the digital space cannot be understood solely from a theological perspective but must also involve a communicative and ethical approach. Communication ethics serves as both a conceptual and practical bridge in managing religious differences more constructively. Through this approach, the digital space is viewed not only as an arena for competing claims to truth and identity, but also as a potential space for social learning, strengthening tolerance, and establishing a more inclusive, reflective, and peaceful life together amidst diversity (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

The development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the structure of religious communication in contemporary society. The digital space no longer merely serves as a medium for conveying religious messages, but has evolved into the primary arena where claims to religious truth are openly produced, distributed, and negotiated. This transformation marks a major shift from the traditional hierarchical and centralized model of religious communication to a more horizontal, participatory, and decentralized one. In this context, social media such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X/Twitter play a crucial role as new communication infrastructures that reshape religious authority. Whereas previously religious authority was predominantly vested in formal institutions such as religious institutions or religious organizations, in the digital space, this authority has been redistributed. Every individual now has the potential to become a producer of religious narratives and an actor influencing the public's interpretation of religious truth. This change is not only technological but also epistemological. Claims to religious truth are no longer understood solely as normative doctrines derived from a single authority, but also as the result of social interactions influenced by algorithms, audience responses, and the dynamics of virality. Thus, religious truth becomes more fluid, open, and continuously negotiated (Fatkhullah et al., 2026).

One of the key findings of this study is the emergence of a new form of religious authority known as digital authority. This authority no longer relies on formal institutional legitimacy, but rather on popularity, audience reach, and engagement levels on social media. This phenomenon indicates that religious legitimacy is shifting from "traditional science-based authority" to "digital visibility-based authority." In practice, religious influencers, da'wah content creators, and religious public figures have significant influence in shaping public perceptions of religious truth. The greater the number of followers and interactions they have, the greater their influence in framing religious narratives. This aligns with the logic of the attention economy, where public attention is a primary resource contested in the digital space. However, this process of decentralizing authority has two contradictory sides. On the one hand, it opens up space for the democratization of religious knowledge by increasing access to discourse production. However, on the other hand, it also raises serious issues regarding the validity, credibility, and authenticity of religious messages, as not all digital actors possess adequate scientific capacity. This research analysis also shows that social media algorithms play a central role in shaping patterns of religious information consumption (Hörl, 2012).

Personalization-based recommendation systems tend to expose users to content that aligns with their pre-existing preferences and beliefs. This results in the formation of what's known as an echo chamber, an information space that reinforces existing views without presenting alternative perspectives. In a religious context, this situation is particularly significant because it exacerbates the fragmentation of religious understanding. Emotional, confrontational, and sensational content is more easily distributed than moderate or reflective content. This suggests that algorithms are not neutral but rather possess structural biases that can reinforce social polarization. The impact of this mechanism is increased tension between religious groups with differing perspectives, particularly between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The digital space ultimately becomes an arena for competing narratives, heavily influenced by the logic of virality, not solely by the quality of theological argumentation. This research also demonstrates that audience participation has transformed the nature of religious communication, making it more interactive and open. Comments, live streaming, and sharing features enable two-way dialogue that was previously impossible in traditional models of religious communication. However, this democratization of participation also has the consequence of increasing fragmentation of religious interpretation. Claims of truth are no longer final but are continually debated in the digital public sphere. This creates a situation where religious interpretations become very plural, but at the same time are also prone to conflict (Bakshy et al., 2015).

In many cases, social media comment spaces become arenas for debates between various theological perspectives, often not conducted rationally. Instead, interactions are often dominated by emotions, identity, and even symbolic attacks on other groups. This suggests that audience participation does not always result in healthy dialogue but can also exacerbate religious-based social conflict. One crucial finding in this research is the emergence of the phenomenon of performative religiosity, the practice of displaying religious identity and claims as a form of social performance in digital spaces. In this phenomenon, religion functions not only as a belief system but also as a symbol of identity that is commodified to gain attention, recognition, and social validation. Controversial, emotional, and confrontational religious content tends to go viral more easily because it conforms to the algorithmic logic of digital platforms. This suggests that religion in the digital space is not only experiencing mediatization but also commodification in the form of an attention economy. The implication is a shift in motivations in the production of religious messages. While previously the primary goal of da'wah was the transmission of spiritual values, in the digital context, this goal is often mixed with the need for popularity and social presence. This research analysis also shows that digital spaces exacerbate tensions between three major paradigms in religious understanding: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. These three serve not only as theological frameworks but also as communication practices that interact dynamically on social media (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Exclusivism tends to present absolute truth claims and is often packaged in confrontational narratives. In the digital space, this approach is highly susceptible to growth because it aligns with the nature of algorithms that favor emotional and controversial content. Inclusivism occupies a middle ground, maintaining theological identity while allowing for tolerance of others. However, this position is often considered ambiguous in the highly competitive digital context, as it lacks strong viral appeal. Meanwhile, pluralism offers a more open and equal approach, but often faces resistance from exclusivist groups who consider it to undermine the principles of religious truth. These three approaches ultimately conflict not only theologically but also communicatively in the digital space. This research also identifies the phenomenon of digital performative exclusivism, a form of religious expression that aggressively promotes truth claims not only as an expression of faith but also as a strategy to

gain public attention. This phenomenon demonstrates that the logic of the attention economy has a significant influence in shaping how religion is communicated (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

In this context, religious conflict is not only fueled by doctrinal differences, but also by the competition for visibility in the digital space. The more controversial a narrative, the greater its chance of going viral, ultimately reinforcing incentives for the production of extreme content. In the face of this complexity, communication ethics emerges as an important analytical and normative framework. Communication ethics offers basic principles such as moral responsibility, information verification, and respect for diversity as a foundation for managing religious differences in the digital space. This approach does not aim to erase theological differences, but rather to direct communication to be more dialogical, reflective, and non-destructive. In this context, communication ethics can be understood as a social mechanism capable of curbing the rate of polarization triggered by algorithms and the culture of virality. Furthermore, the practice of digital ethical dialogue demonstrates that digital space also has constructive potential as a space for education, information clarification, and strengthening tolerance. This demonstrates that digital space is not entirely destructive, but rather ambivalent—it can be both a space for conflict and dialogue (Ardiansyah & Setiyani, 2025). The results of this study indicate that digital space has fundamentally changed the way claims to religious truth are constructed and negotiated. This process involves a complex interaction between digital authority, media algorithms, and audience participation, forming a new, highly dynamic communication ecosystem. The tension between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is intensified by the logic of virality and the attention economy. In this situation, communication ethics becomes crucial as a framework for constructively managing differences. Thus, digital transformation not only changes the medium of religious communication but also the structures of authority, patterns of interaction, and motivations for producing religious truth claims.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that digital space now serves as a primary arena for the formation and debate of religious truth claims. Within this space, a complex interaction occurs between traditional religious authorities, the algorithmic mechanisms of social media platforms, and the active involvement of users. This situation means that the determination of religious truth is no longer solely in the hands of formal religious institutions, but is also influenced by digital actors who are able to utilize social media to build new legitimacy, influence, and authority in the virtual public sphere. This research finds that this dynamic exacerbates tensions between various approaches to religion, such as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The working logic of algorithms that emphasize popularity, engagement, and virality tends to amplify the spread of controversial content. As a result, polarization of views and conflicts over religious identity are increasingly prevalent and widespread in the digital space. Furthermore, a phenomenon called digital performative exclusivism has emerged, namely the practice of aggressively and provocatively presenting religious truth claims not solely for theological conviction, but also to attract attention, increase visibility, and gain popularity on digital platforms. This phenomenon indicates a shift in motivations for religious expression online. In situations like this, communication ethics becomes crucial as a foundation for building a healthy dialogue space. Communication ethics acts as a bridge, helping to manage differences in belief more constructively. Through the application of principles of moral responsibility, careful verification of information, and respect for diversity, the digital space can be directed towards a more inclusive, tolerant environment that supports peaceful coexistence amidst differences.

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