



Islamic Apologetics and Social Construction: Framing Bang Zuma's YouTube Content via James Thrower

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Abstract: Social media has emerged as a critical arena for religious discourse, reshaping the dynamics of Islamic apologetics in contemporary Indonesia. This study aims to analyze the framing strategies employed in the digital content of Bang Zuma, a popular Muslim apologist on YouTube, particularly known for his polemical videos on Islam-Christianity debates. Drawing upon Robert Entman's framing theory and James Thrower's perspective on the social construction of religion, this research investigates how Bang Zuma's content contributes to the reconstruction of Islamic identity and discourse within digital spaces. Using qualitative content analysis on three viral video transcripts, the study identifies four key framing strategies: (1) constructing a binary between the "authentic Jesus" and the "false Jesus"; (2) selectively appropriating Biblical texts; (3) positioning Islam as the true heir of monotheism; and (4) delegitimizing Christian theological authority. These strategies not only serve apologetic purposes but also enact a performative reconstruction of Islamic identity tailored to the logic of social media platforms. The findings reveal that Bang Zuma's digital apologetics represent a transformation of traditional *munazara* practices, illustrating what Thrower describes as the "reconfiguration of religious authority" in the digital age, where legitimacy is increasingly built through visibility, engagement, and performativity rather than institutional credentials. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital religious actors utilize platform-based affordances to shape public perceptions of Islam, negotiate interfaith boundaries, and reconstruct theological narratives in a fragmented, algorithm-driven media ecosystem.

Keywords: apologetics; authority; digital media; framing; Islam; social construction; YouTube.

Introduction

The digital era has brought about a significant transformation in the landscape of religious discourse. Social media, especially video sharing platforms such as YouTube, have now become an arena for the contestation of religious discourse that allows the dissemination of religious messages beyond conventional boundaries (Muchtar & Ritchey, 2014). This phenomenon provides space for the emergence of digital religious apologists who build religious authority through rhetorical performativity on social media platforms. In Indonesia, one of the popular Islamic apologetics contributors on YouTube is Bang Zuma, whose videos about comparative Islamic-Christian discussions often reach millions of views. Bang Zuma's content presents Islamic apologetics in a format that is adaptive to the characteristics of digital platforms, presenting direct debates with a confrontational feel and simplified arguments for wide public consumption (Hew, 2018).

The phenomenon of Bang Zuma's digital apologetics is interesting to study because it

demonstrates a paradigmatic shift in the practice of traditional Islamic apologetics to a new digitalized form, which has implications for the construction of Islamic identity and inter-religious relations in Indonesia. Bang Zuma's content presents a distinctive format in which he uses extensive knowledge of Biblical texts to critique Christian doctrines and substantiate Islamic truth claims. This approach differs from the more common format of digital Islamic da'wah, which tends to focus on strengthening internal identity or teaching Islamic doctrines without directly confronting other religious traditions (Machendrawaty et al., 2022).

Bang Zuma's comparative apologetics not only exemplifies new developments in digital Islamic preaching in Indonesia but also reflects the broader dynamics of how religious authority, identity, and inter-religious dialogue are constructed and negotiated in the digital era. As observed by (Bruinessen, 2013), Islamic discourse in contemporary Indonesia is characterized by fragmentation of authority and increasingly intensive contestation of interpretations. Although there is a number of studies on Islamic preaching on social media (Fakhrurroji, 2019), studies that specifically examine comparative Islamic apologetics on YouTube, especially using James Thrower's social construction of religion perspective, are still limited. Previous studies tend to focus on the social impact (Nisa, 2018), or theological implications (Sirry, 2020) of digital preaching, but have not comprehensively analyzed how the social construction of religion is performed through framing strategies in the context of digital apologetics.

The social construction of religion perspective developed by James Thrower offers a productive theoretical framework for analyzing the phenomenon of Bang Zuma's digital apologetics. Thrower (Thrower, 1999) views religion not as a static entity, but as a meaning system that is socially constructed through interaction, narrative and discourse contestation. In this perspective, apologetics not only functions as a doctrinal defense mechanism but also as a social practice that actively shapes and reshapes religious identities in specific historical and cultural contexts. Social media, by democratizing access to the production of religious discourse, creates new possibilities in the social construction of religion, enabling a more dynamic and participatory reconfiguration of authority and reconstruction of identity.

Discourse analysis of digital religious media benefits from the framing approach developed (Entman, 1993). According to Entman, framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more prominent in a communicative text to encourage problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or specific treatment recommendations. Entman's framing model provides a structured analytical framework to identify how Bang Zuma constructs certain religious realities through the strategic selection of discursive elements that support his apologetic narrative.

Novelty This research lies in the integration of Entman's framing theory with James Thrower's social construction of religion perspective to analyze Islamic apologetics on YouTube. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how digital apologetics not only functions as a doctrinal defense mechanism but also as a social practice that actively shapes and reshapes understandings of Islam through the contestation of discourse in digital spaces. This research also contributes to the literature on contemporary religious authority by identifying new patterns in the construction and legitimation of religious authority on digital platforms.

More specifically, the original contributions of this research include: (1) systematic analysis of the framing strategies used in comparative Islamic apologetics on YouTube Indonesia; (2) interpretation of the results of framing analysis within the framework of Thrower's social construction of religion to understand how Islamic identity is constructed through contestation with "others"; (3) exploration of how social media as a platform influences the form and substance of contemporary Islamic apologetics; and (4) understanding the implications of digital apologetics for inter-religious dialogue and social cohesion in the pluralistic Indonesian context.

Islamic apologetics has a long history that can be traced to the classical period of Islam, when the practices of *munazara* (debate) and *jadal* (polemic) became an integral part of Muslim intellectual discourse (Griffel, 2018). At this time, apologetics functions in two main domains, as stated (Waardenburg, 1999), namely a defensive function aimed at defending Islamic teachings from

external criticism, and an offensive function aimed at highlighting inconsistencies in the teachings of other religions. These two functions are clearly visible in classical intellectual works such as *Al-Radd 'ala al-Nasara* work (Al-Jahiz, 1984) and *Al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal* work (Hazm, 1996), which shows a polemical and didactic character in strengthening Islamic identity.

Over time, significant transformations have occurred in the form and substance of Islamic apologetics, especially in the contemporary context marked by the emergence of digital media. Research shows that digital media not only expands the reach of apologetic messages but also creates new forms of expression and argumentation that are more interactive and responsive to the audience (Larsson, 2017; Wheeler, 2006). In Indonesia, this phenomenon is reflected in the emergence of popular or celebrity preachers, which combines Islamic messages with popular culture in conveying da'wah material (Hoesterey, 2016). In addition, Teguh (Teguh, 2019) noted the increasing trend of comparative apologetics content on digital platforms such as YouTube, which is more focused on strengthening the internal beliefs of Muslims rather than persuading non-Muslims.

In the new landscape shaped by digital technology, social media acts as a dynamic and plural arena of religious contestation. Campbell (Campbell, 2013) introduced the concept of *networked religion* to understand how religious practices are being reconfigured in the context of widely connected digital communications. These changes also influence religious authority, so that social media gives rise to new forms of authority through active public participation and the redefinition of authoritative figures (Hoover, 2016; Knoblauch, 2014). In Indonesia, social media has become a new terrain for the polarization of religious discourse, and virtual communities based on religious affiliation and collective identity (Lim, 2013; Nisa, 2018; Schmidt, 2018).

The YouTube platform, in particular, provides an expressive space that supports the development of digital apologetics. Mosemghvdlishvili (Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz, 2013) observed that YouTube encourages the production of confrontational and emotional content in order to increase audience engagement. This was confirmed (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018) in their study of Indonesian YouTubers, who used this platform to build a public persona and gain authority in various fields, including religion. Fakhruroji (Fakhruroji, 2019) further identifies the emergence of the phenomenon of YouTube teachers, namely religious figures who achieve public legitimacy through digital preaching content that is popular, argumentative and visual.

To understand these dynamics of digital apologetics in more depth, James Thrower's theoretical perspective on the social construction of religion offers a relevant analytical framework. In his view, religion is not a static entity, but rather a system of meaning that is socially constructed through interaction, narrative and discourse contestation (Thrower, 2007). He emphasizes the importance of understanding the process of reconstructing religious authority in a changing social context, where claims to knowledge become the main symbolic capital in building legitimacy. Apart from that, Thrower also differentiates between external apologetics, which is aimed at convincing outsiders, and identity apologetics, namely, mechanisms used to strengthen the identity and internal cohesion of religious communities.

Other concepts of Thrower, such as strategic intertextuality—where religious traditions interpret the texts of other traditions to confirm their own truth claims—as well as the importance of interpretive communities in producing religious meanings, are important foundations in reading the discursive dynamics of digital apologetics on social media. In this context, content such as that produced by Bang Zuma on YouTube can be understood as part of a process of religious reconstruction through discursive practices that are public, collaborative, and responsive to dominant discourse.

Finally, the framing analysis approach as formulated (Entman, 1993) enriches the interpretive framework for this phenomenon. With four main functions—defining problems, diagnosing causes, providing moral judgments, and suggesting solutions—framing allows us to see how religious reality is constructed through the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of discourse. In previous studies such as (Stout & Buddenbaum, 2003), framing has proven useful in exploring the representation of religious groups or issues in the media. The integration of Thrower's social construction perspective with Entman's framing model provides a comprehensive approach to analyzing how digital Islamic

apologetics, including content from Bang Zuma, constructs Islamic-Christian reality selectively and strategically in a competitive and fragmented digital public space.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a framing analysis framework developed (Entman, 1993) to examine how Bang Zuma frames religious discussions in his YouTube content. A qualitative approach was chosen because of its ability to explore in depth the meanings constructed in media texts, as well as allowing contextual analysis of the dynamics of discourse and meaning production (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This research not only aims to identify communication patterns, but also to understand how message delivery strategies help shape religious perceptions and identities in digital spaces (Fairclough, 2013).

The data analyzed is in the form of transcripts from three Bang Zuma YouTube videos selected based on three main criteria: *First*, a video that explicitly discusses comparisons between Islam and Christianity; *second*, videos that show a high level of audience engagement, either through comments, number of views or other interactions; And *third*, videos uploaded within the last year, to be relevant to the context of contemporary religious discourse. The three videos analyzed are entitled: *"This Oten also gave up but came back challenging..Who came out of the grave..?"*, *"Franciskus lost..Oten is a follower of the false prophet..."*, and *"Al Ktp"*.

The transcripts of the three videos were analyzed systematically using four main dimensions in the framing model (Entman, 1993), namely: defining problems, identifying the causes of problems (diagnosing causes), providing moral judgment (making moral judgments), as well as suggesting solutions or recommendations for action (treatment recommendations). Each of these dimensions is explored to reveal the linguistic, rhetorical and discursive strategies used by Bang Zuma in building his apologetic arguments. This includes choosing diction, using metaphors, conveying examples and analogies, quoting religious texts, and other rhetorical devices that strengthen the narrative he builds.

Furthermore, the results of this framing analysis are interpreted using James Thrower's social construction of religion perspective, in order to understand how Bang Zuma's framing practices contribute to the construction and reconstruction of Islamic identity as well as the formation of religious discourse in digital public spaces. Thus, this methodological framework not only captures the textual dimension of the content analyzed, but also links it to broader social dynamics in religious practices in the new media era.

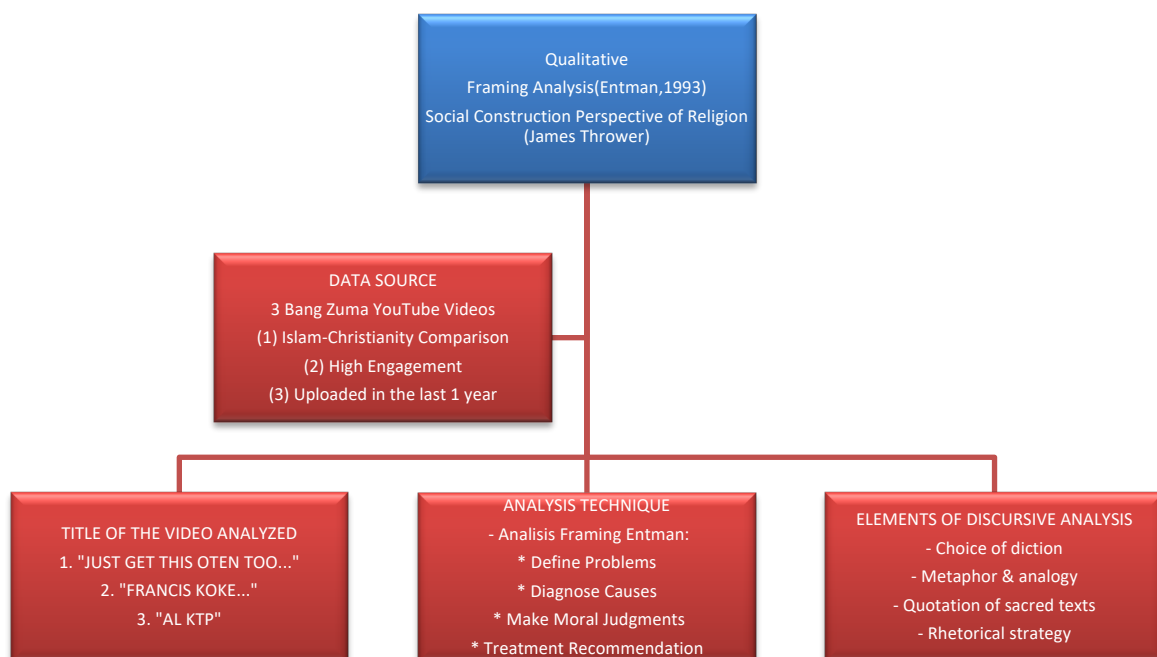


Figure 1. Article's Theoretical Framework

Results and Discussion

Framing Strategy in Bang Zuma Content

Analysis of the content of Bang Zuma's YouTube channel through the framing theory framework developed by Robert Entman reveals a consistent narrative strategy in forming negative perceptions of Christianity. One of the most prominent patterns is in dimensions *defining problems*, where Bang Zuma systematically reconstructs Christianity as a “misleading religion”, especially because it is considered to have undergone fundamental distortions since the beginning of its development. In the narrative he constructed, Christianity is no longer seen as a continuation of the monotheism brought by the Prophet Jesus, but rather as a deviation resulting from the intervention of post-Jesus figures, especially Paul. Through terms such as “false prophet” and “false Christ”, he deconstructs the foundations of Christian theology, while at the same time carrying out a historical reduction of the complexity of the development of that religion. The emphasis on the dichotomy between the “real Jesus” and the “Pauline version of Jesus” serves as a way to disqualify the entire edifice of the Christian faith by casting doubt on the authenticity of the divine figure at the center of their faith (Entman, 1993).

This narrative, if studied further, is not just polemical rhetoric, but reflects practice *boundary maintenance* as James Thrower explains. In this theoretical framework, religion does not merely exist as a belief system, but rather as a symbolic system that reproduces collective identity through differentiation towards “others” (Thrower, 2007). Bang Zuma not only identifies Christians as others but also constructs the religion as an ideological threat that needs to be fought. By attaching the label “false prophet” to the Christian version of Jesus, he emphasizes the exclusivity of Islam as the sole heir to true monotheism. This is a performative form of identity articulation: through denying the validity of other religions, the majority community actually strengthens its own theological position and superiority. Thrower emphasizes that the process of forming religious identity often does not occur in an empty space, but is always in a competitive relationship with different and conflicting belief systems (Thrower, 2007).

Further, in the dimensions of diagnosing *causes*, Bang Zuma framed Paul as the main cause of “apostasy” in Christian teachings. He presents an alternative narrative that repositions Paul not as an apostle, but as a figure responsible for the Christian theological shift from pure monotheism to the worship of humans as God (Carpenter, 2023). In this narrative, Paul's mystical experience in Damascus is positioned as the starting point for the destruction of Christian theology (Avila Kaminski, 2022). Bang Zuma not only highlights Paul's non-involvement in the circle of the twelve main disciples of Jesus, but also uses texts from Paul's letters to show that his teachings are not compatible with the Torah law or the teachings of Jesus, which he claims to be authentic. Quotes like “*Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law...*” interpreted as a justification for deviant theological practices, even paralleled with the concept of the Devil, thus symbolizing how radical his rejection of Pauline authority in Christianity was.

This causal framing is very relevant when read through a lens *narrative delegitimization* in the study of religious studies, as introduced (Thrower, 1999). This delegitimization does not merely target doctrine, but rather targets *genealogical authority*— namely the historical roots and main sources that support the existence of a religious tradition. By discrediting Paul, Bang Zuma effectively tore down the epistemological pillars of Christianity, then replaced them with an alternative narrative that supports a certain version of Islamic truth. Thrower notes that in religious polemics, the struggle for origin narratives is the main field of contestation, because it is from there that the moral and spiritual legitimacy of a religion is built. So the strategy used by Bang Zuma is not only apologetic, but also ideological: he offers a single interpretation of complex religious history, and frames it as an “objective truth” that justifies the rejection of theological plurality (Thrower, 1999).

It is in this framework that it can be understood that Bang Zuma's content does not just randomly criticize other religions, but rather operates as part of *hegemonic discourse*, which tries to affirm religious identity through strategies of exclusion and demonization. Criticism of Christianity becomes a means to form a stronger self-narrative amidst the complexity and ideological competition

in the digital space. As scholars of religious communication have shown, the modern religious public sphere has increasingly become a battleground for representation, where “truth” is not only proven theologically, but also contested symbolically and rhetorically (Casanova, 1994). In this context, Bang Zuma's framing needs to be seen as an articulative effort that not only functions at the level of argument, but also at the level of emotion, community affiliation, and the formation of an exclusive and militant religious habitus (Asad, 2003).

Make Moral Judgments: Islam Glorifies Jesus Correctly

In making *moral judgments*, Bang Zuma conveyed a firm and dichotomous moral assessment of two major religious traditions: Islam and Christianity (Entman, 1993). Islam is described as a religion that truly glorifies Jesus ('Isa), while Christianity is accused of insulting and degrading Jesus through the doctrine of atonement. Statements like “*a noble man died damned for our sins*” was held up as evidence that Christians, subconsciously, had attributed disgrace to the figure they worshipped. In contrast, Islam is presented as a tradition that consistently attaches the title ‘*alayhissalam* on Jesus and guards his honor and glory as a prophet of God (Gentile, 2018).

This moral judgment does not stand alone. It operates as part of logic, *narrative moralization*, where theological positions are folded into ethical and emotional dimensions (Hansen, 2025). By imaging Islam as the guardian of Jesus' honor, Bang Zuma is strengthening *moral high ground*, which became the basis for his apologetic position. This strategy works persuasively because it places Muslim audiences in a position of moral superiority, while creating an ethical dilemma for Christians: do they truly honor Jesus, or instead condemn him through beliefs about the crucifixion, inherited sin, and redemption (Smeaton, 2022).

In Thrower's perspective, this reflects what is referred to as *appropriation of sacred figures*—namely, a strategy in which important figures from other traditions are taken over in meaning and inserted into the symbolic system of one's own tradition, with a higher claim to authenticity (Thrower, 2007). In this case, Jesus is no longer a universal figure shared by the two Abrahamic traditions, but is fully reclaimed by Islam as the only tradition that truly understands and glorifies him. Claims like this, even though they appear to be a form of respect, are actually forms of *implicit delegitimization* towards other faith traditions. This strategy is dialectical: on the one hand, praising Jesus as a noble prophet, on the other hand, denigrating religious adherents who are deemed to have distorted the prophet's teachings. Thrower emphasizes that in theological conflict, sacred figures are often the site of a tug-of-war between historical legitimacy and doctrinal validity. Whoever is deemed to best “understand” the figure will be morally positioned as the more “correct” tradition (Thrower, 2007).

Statements like “*You weep because a noble man died accursed for your sins*,” also serve as a form of *emotive framing*, namely narrative framing that involves affective aspects to direct sympathy, guilt, or even ridicule towards other groups (Schmid & Schmid, 2021). Through this rhetoric, Bang Zuma does not just convey rational arguments, but also constructs emotions as a means of moral judgment. He positions Muslims as a community that respects and loves Jesus, while Christians are depicted as a community that manipulates Jesus' suffering for theological justification. Framing like this is very effective in strengthening internal solidarity and moral justification for exclusive attitudes towards other religions.

Furthermore, Bang Zuma associated Christian followers with moral labels such as “followers of false prophets” and “doers of evil”. This indicates the usage of *moral polarization*, namely, a technique in which theological opponents are not only criticized intellectually, but also assigned an ethically negative character. In this case, moral judgment becomes a strategy to confirm internal truth and build antagonism towards external parties. This is in line with observations (Casanova, 2024) about how religion in the public sphere often experiences a “republishing of moral values” which positions religious identity not only as a belief, but as an ethical superiority that must be maintained amidst symbolic competition with other religions.

Thus, Bang Zuma's moral framing cannot be separated from a broader theological-political project: building Islam as the only true, rational and moral belief system, while simultaneously delegitimizing the Christian belief system through criticism of its doctrines, figures and history. This

strategy reflects not only an apologetic position, but also a form *symbolic contestation* which occurs in the digital era, where platforms such as YouTube become a new battlefield for competing narratives of truth (Yusuff et al., 2023).

Treatment Recommendation: Accepting Islam as the True Monotheistic Religion

In the level *treatment recommendation* according to the framing model (Bennett & Entman, 2000), Bang Zuma directed a direct solution to the theological and moral problems he had constructed in the previous narrative. The solution is firm: leave Christianity, convert to Islam. He does not suggest reform in Christian teachings or interfaith dialogue, but instead presents an absolute solution, namely changing beliefs from Christianity to Islam.

The statement is like "If I was still a Christian, it would turn out I was a follower of a false prophet" is a form of faith transition rhetoric that emphasizes the importance of conversion as a response to theological awareness. In this case, Bang Zuma not only criticizes Christianity, but also constructs a narrative about Islam as a continuation natural, logical, and authentic from the true teachings of Jesus. He frames Islam not as "another religion," but as a reconstruction of the monotheistic teachings of Jesus before it was "corrupted" by the doctrine of the trinity and atonement. This is what James (Thrower, 1999) calls a continuity claim, namely the claim of authentic continuity over previous traditions, which is used by religious apologetics to show that only its tradition inherits the original truth from a central figure such as Jesus (Thrower, 1999).

Strategy continuity claim: This has major rhetorical implications. By placing Islam as a continuation and not as a rival, Bang Zuma does not need to compete head-on in the realm of rationality of faith. Instead, he shifted the debate to the realm of restorative justice: Islam did not come to cancel Jesus, but to straighten out the legacy of his teachings, which had been "perverted" by the dogmatic structure of Christianity. In this framework, Christian followers are not only doctrinally wrong, but also historically, because they have followed traditions that are considered to deviate from the monotheistic roots of Jesus (Adeoye, 2024).

This narrative is also supported by the urge to study the Bible properly, which in this context means reading the Bible through an Islamic lens (Hakim, 2024). This is a form of reframing hermeneutics, namely the process of reading opposing religious texts through one's own interpretation and epistemology. Thus, the Bible was not ignored or rejected, but "Islamized"—selectively reread to confirm Islamic narratives about Jesus, monotheism, and Muhammad's prophethood. This strategy positions Islam as epistemically superior because it is able to "read" opposing texts more authentically than the owners of its own tradition. Thrower considers that this kind of approach is one of the key aspects of religious apologetics: it acts not only to defend internal doctrine, but also to invite other traditions into the horizon of truth of one's own tradition (Thrower, 1999).

What Bang Zuma did also reflect the practical function of apologetic discourse in the digital public sphere: he not only explains religious differences, but also encourages identity transition. In the context of da'wah on social media, the affirmation of Islam's theological superiority also becomes an open invitation for the audience to re-identify themselves within the Islamic framework (MacKellar & Stammers, 2022). This shows that videos like this are not just criticism, but also performative intervention in the religious identity of the audience.

As a framing strategy, the treatment recommendations conveyed are exclusivity, no inclusive. There is no place for plurality or co-existence between religions; there are only two choices: Islamic truth or Christian error (Ayodele, 2021). In this case, Bang Zuma reproduces a preaching narrative binary absolutism, which is a sharp separation between the true and the false, between monotheism and polytheism, between the true Prophet and the false prophet.

Rhetorical and Performative Strategies in the Construction of Authority

Beyond the framework of framing analysis that has been outlined through Entman's approach, in-depth observation of Bang Zuma's videos shows that the construction of his religious authority is not only formed through the content of the message, but is significantly mediated by complex rhetorical

and performative strategies. In the context of hyper-visual and dialogical digital spaces, rhetoric becomes not just a communication tool, but the main means for building and reproducing authoritative legitimacy in front of a wide audience (Lorea et al., 2024). This strategy can be seen in three main layers: the mastery of the Biblical text as symbolic capital, the strategic use of intertextuality through reverse hermeneutics, and the performativity of dialogue that emphasizes discursive dominance.

First, Bang Zuma demonstrated deep mastery of Biblical texts, not only by quoting verses correctly, but also by mentioning terms in Greek and Hebrew that show the depth of religious literacy across traditions. In one of his videos, he said, "Try reading Galatians 3 number 13. It makes you sad. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Torah. By becoming Katara. The Greek word is Curse." (Video 3). This kind of expression not only shows his familiarity with the Christian Scriptures, but also creates the impression of epistemic superiority—that is, that he has interpretive authority even over the texts of other traditions. Thrower (Thrower, 2007) calls this phenomenon a form of appropriation of authoritative knowledge, namely when knowledge of other religious traditions is used as a source of authority in religious polemics. In this context, Bang Zuma does not present himself as an outsider to Christianity, but rather as a figure who is able to reveal hidden meanings in his texts, as well as exposing the epistemological weaknesses of his debating opponents (Edwards, 2021).

Second, Bang Zuma's rhetorical strategy also involves the use of strategic intertextuality, namely the practice of reading and reinterpreting authoritative texts from other traditions through an Islamic theological framework. This is apparent in what (Thrower, 1999) terms interpretive appropriation, namely, the taking over of the text through reinterpretation, not rejection. In one of his characteristic quotes, Bang Zuma stated, "Jesus outlined. John 17 number 3. Eternal life is that they know you. Not knowing me. Knowing you. The only Theos. The only Father. The only Elohim." (Video 3). This text is reread to support the claim of Islamic monotheism, as if placing Jesus himself as the defender of the concept of pure monotheism. Thus, the Bible is not positioned as a completely false text, but rather as a document containing hidden truths that can only be revealed through Islamic hermeneutics (Suwandi et al., 2021). This strategy presents an epistemological dilemma for opponents of the debate: if they reject the interpretation, they must admit that there are inconsistencies in their own understanding of the text; if they accept, then they are faced with theological implications that shake the foundations of their faith. Therefore, this intertextual strategy not only strengthens Bang Zuma's position argumentatively but also emphasizes Islam as a leader's hermeneutical master tradition in interreligious discourse.

Third, the performative dimension plays an equally important role in the construction of Bang Zuma's digital authority. In every debate or open dialogue session, he shows strong discursive control, determining the direction of the conversation, interrupting arguments that are considered deviant, and using the rhetoric of closed questions to pressure opponents in the debate. For example, in one of his videos, he says, "*I asked whether Jesus was risen or not, just answer yes or no.*" (Video 1). This sentence structure not only confirms his argumentative position but also forms a communicative framework that forces the opponent to play in the discursive arena he sets. In this case, performativity is not only stylistic but also an instrument of dialogical domination. Thrower (Thrower, 2007) calls this phenomenon ritualized confrontation, namely, when theological confrontation becomes a venue for the display of rhetorical and symbolic power. Tradition discussion of classical Islam emphasizes the importance of rhetorical skills in proving ideological superiority, and in the digital space, performative elements such as facial expressions, intonation, and video editing techniques strengthen the theatrical aspect of this confrontation (Al Harthi, 2024). Thus, Bang Zuma's authority is not only built from the content of the discourse, but also from the way the discourse is demonstrated.

In the contemporary preaching landscape, this kind of authority does not depend entirely on formal religious institutions, but rather on their ability to appear convincing, dominate the debate arena, and present themselves as authentic epistemic figures (Rosidi, 2021). By utilizing the algorithmic logic of digital platforms and the sensibility of Islamic pop culture, Bang Zuma

succeeded in producing and reproducing figures *public theologian* which is relevant in the mediatic era of faith.

Digital Apologetics as a Practice for the Social Construction of Religion

The digital apologetics phenomenon represented by Bang Zuma can be read as a reflection of deep changes in the structure of religious authority. (Thrower, 1999) argues that changes in communication media always have an impact on the reconfiguration of religious authority. In traditional societies, religious authority is often hierarchical, centralized, and legitimized through official institutions such as religious educational institutions, senior clerics, or established religious organizations. However, the emergence of digital media has enabled the birth of new actors who build their authority through different mechanisms—namely, performativity, popularity, and mass involvement in online spaces (Honari & Alinejad, 2022).

In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon marks a significant shift from the traditional model of religious authority, which is rooted in institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, Islamic boarding schools, or Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (Azra, 2004), towards a more open and pluralistic field. Apologists like Bang Zuma do not need endorsement from formal institutions to gain influence; their authority is established performatively before the digital public, through the accumulation of viewers, likes, and comments that strengthen their position as a representative "defender of religion".

However, democratization of access to media does not necessarily give rise to democratization of discourse (Thrower, 2007). On the contrary, discourse formations that are populist, confrontational and exclusive often emerge. In this framework, digital apologetics has the potential to become a new space for the formation of religious authority that is no longer subject to traditional epistemological or methodological principles, but rather is subject to the logic of visibility and virality (Kaldas, 2024). As a result, the most "authoritative" is not the most knowledgeable, but the one most able to attract the emotional engagement of a digital audience.

To understand further the dynamics of digital apologetics, it is necessary to explore its relationship with classical Islamic intellectual practices, especially the *munazara* tradition - namely, the theological debates that took place in Islamic intellectual spaces from the classical to the early modern era (Alak, 2023). *Munazara* in Islamic history is not just an argument, but is also a form of intellectual praxis that is full of discursive ethics, logical structure and scientific accountability (Suddahazai & Manjoo, 2022). In its classic form, debates between ulama take place in limited forums, using the tools of kalam science, logic (*mantiq*), and rhetoric within the ethical boundaries of scientific etiquette.

However, as explained by (Thrower, 2007), the process of transposing religious practices into a new communication medium is not neutral. The medium not only conveys the message, but also shapes and even redefines the content and character of the message itself. In this case, platforms such as YouTube act as agents of substantive transformation of the *munazara* tradition. Bang Zuma's apologetic content, although in form it resembles a theological debate, has actually undergone several characteristic mutations as a result of interaction with digital "platform logic" (Laksmono, 2025).

First, there is a simplification of complex theological arguments into easily digestible and dichotomous narrative forms. Concepts such as the trinity, prophecy, and revelation, which in theological discourse require in-depth elaboration, are often condensed into rhetorical phrases intended to instantly demonstrate the superiority of Islam (Cherry, 2022). *Second*, there is an emphasis on the confrontational dimension, where the narrative of the "victory of the debate" becomes the center of the performance, rather than a process of collective truth-seeking. *Third*, digital platforms encourage the use of emotional and visual rhetoric, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and graphic effects, to maximize audience appeal and engagement (Wang et al., 2023). *Fourth*, the main orientation of this practice is no longer rational persuasion or academic discussion, but rather the formation of collective identity within the frame of religious identity conflict (La Torre et al., 2022).

Thus, in the Bang Zuma phenomenon, it is not just an adaptation of *munazara*, but a mutation

of *munazara* into a form “pop apologetics” that operates within a performative, emotional, and identity logic. This is an example of how new media reconstruct old discursive forms, not only in form, but also in meaning and social function (Thrower, 1999).

More than just a battle of arguments, digital apologetics content also plays a role in shaping interpretive community which is virtual. Thrower (Thrower, 1999) introduced the concept of an interpretive community as a social group that collectively builds and maintains a system of meaning for a religious tradition. In pre-digital society, this community was formed through direct interaction in spaces such as mosques, Islamic boarding schools, or Islamic centers (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2023). But in the digital era, such communities are migrating to cyberspace, where participation in watching, commenting and sharing content becomes a new mechanism for the formation of religious solidarity.

In the context of Bang Zuma, the formation of a virtual interpretation community that is actively involved in affirming content and reproducing narratives of Islamic truth vis-à-vis other religions, especially Christianity. The comments column on Bang Zuma's videos is a vital space in this practice: there, Muslim viewers collectively affirm the truth of the arguments presented, praise Bang Zuma's rhetorical style, and often ridicule or demean the theological positions of their opponents. This phenomenon reflects what (Thrower, 2007) calls virtual community—that is, spiritual bonds and identities formed through collective engagement in interpretive practices, even without direct physical contact.

This interpretive community is not passive. They do not simply absorb meaning from content, but actively participate in the production of that meaning. Through endorsements, comments, and reshared content, they reinforce collective narratives about the superiority of Islam, the truth of the faith, and even the legitimacy of apologist figures. In many cases, these communities also function as “cognitive resonance” that strengthens internal biases and weakens the possibility of openness to other views. In other words, the practice of consuming apologetic content in digital spaces creates a space that simultaneously strengthens religious identity and limits the possibility of constructive dialogue across faiths (Rifat et al., 2024).

Within the framework of the theory of social construction of religion, what we see in Bang Zuma's digital apologetics phenomenon is a concrete manifestation of the dialectical interaction between media, ideology and religious practice. Digital technology is not just a neutral medium, but an active agent that changes authority structures, forms of expression, and the way religious communities understand and defend their beliefs (Hine, 2023). Bang Zuma, in this context, is not only an individual apologist but also a product and producer of a digital landscape that mediates and reconfigures contemporary religious discourse.

Through the framework, we can see how the framing in Bang Zuma's content creates certain narratives: Islam as the single truth, Christianity as an ideological opponent, and apologists as heroes defending the faith. This framing is not without consequences (Entman, 1993). It shapes digital public opinion, directs interpretations of religious identity, and in the long term, can strengthen religious polarization in the public sphere.

To a certain extent, this phenomenon shows that digital apologetics can no longer be understood only within the framework of classical apologetic discourse (Bertovich, 2024). It has become a social, cultural and political practice that reflects the dynamics of power, identity and the construction of meaning in the information age. In this context, the study of media and religion must continue to expand its analytical framework, not only to understand religious content, but also the structures, mediums and communities that shape and are shaped by that content (Tsuria & Yadlin-Segal, 2021).

Conclusion

This research reveals how the Islamic apologetic content produced by Bang Zuma on YouTube reflects the transformation of religious praxis in the digital era. By utilizing Entman's framing analysis and James Thrower's social construction of religion approach, this study shows that Bang Zuma is not just defending Islam, but is forming a new religious reality that is confrontational, performative, and heavily influenced by platform algorithms. Here, the Islamic *munazara* tradition

not only changes form, but also its substance—from discussion to spectacle, from scholarly-based authority to digital popularity. Social media has also been proven to be not just a neutral medium, but a space that is active in shaping meaning, authority and religious identity. This phenomenon marks a shift in authority from formal institutions to digital figures, creating a new model of legitimacy that is both democratic and prone to fragmentation. In the context of a multicultural society like Indonesia, this confrontational style of apologetics opens up opportunities for religious expression but also risks strengthening polarization and exclusivism. The main contribution of this research is to show that digital media not only transmits religious messages, but also creates new epistemic spaces that change the way people understand and live their beliefs. Although limited to video text analysis, this study paves the way for more comprehensive follow-up research into the visual, interactive, and cross-platform dimensions of digital apologetics. In the end, the Bang Zuma phenomenon is a mirror of the times: when religion, algorithms and audiences shape each other in a religious landscape that is now more viral than sacred.

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