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Seeking Baraka: Transformation of Ngaji from Virtual to Conventional among Gen-Xers

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Abstract: This study aims to reveal the transformation of ngaji practices among Generation X audiences, specifically followers of Gus Baha, from virtual to conventional formats. The rapid development of the internet and social media has significantly influenced religious practices, including the proliferation of virtual ngaji. However, despite the convenience of digital platforms, conventional ngaji remains prevalent. This research employs fieldwork and qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and observations, to investigate why individuals prefer attending traditional ngaji sessions despite the availability of virtual alternatives. The study finds that the cultural concepts of baraka (blessing) and sanad (chain of transmission) are crucial motivators for followers to seek in-person ngaji. Additionally, the research identifies the dual impact of unintended online ngaji—while it extends the reach of Gus Baha's teachings and bolsters his religious authority, it also poses risks due to the potential for misinterpretation and unauthorized dissemination of content. This study contributes to understanding the dynamics between digital and conventional religious practices and highlights the enduring significance of direct spiritual engagement in contemporary Muslim communities.

Keywords: Digital transformation; ngaji; religious authority; virtual worship

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap transformasi praktik *ngaji* di kalangan generasi X, khususnya para pengikut Gus Baha, dari format virtual ke konvensional. Perkembangan pesat internet dan media sosial telah mempengaruhi praktik keagamaan, termasuk proliferasi *ngaji* virtual. Namun, meskipun platform digital menawarkan kemudahan, *ngaji* konvensional tetap diminati. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian lapangan dan kualitatif, termasuk wawancara mendalam dan observasi, untuk menyelidiki mengapa individu lebih memilih menghadiri sesi *ngaji* tradisional meskipun ada alternatif virtual. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa konsep budaya *baraka* (berkah) dan *sanad* (rantai transmisi) adalah motivator penting bagi pengikut untuk menghadiri *ngaji* secara langsung. Selain itu, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi dampak ganda dari *ngaji* online yang tidak disengaja—meskipun memperluas jangkauan ajaran Gus Baha dan memperkuat otoritas keagamaannya, hal ini juga menimbulkan risiko karena potensi kesalahpahaman dan penyebaran konten yang tidak sah. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dalam memahami dinamika antara praktik keagamaan digital dan konvensional serta menyoroti pentingnya keterlibatan spiritual langsung dalam komunitas Muslim kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Transformasi digital; *ngaji*; otoritas keagamaan; ibadah virtual.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of the internet and social media platforms in this modern era has had a remarkable influence on whole aspects of human life, Muslim is no exception. The Internet is a significant channel for diverse forms of Muslim communication integrated into other forms of dialogue

and interaction (Cooke & Lawrence, 2005). The topic of Islam and its relation to the virtual world has been largely discussed before. The issues examined include the expression of Islam in the online world (Bunt, 2003), the expansion of Islamic authority (Hoesterey, 2015; Lengauer, 2016; Watson, 2005) including from men to women (Nisa, 2018; Saenong, 2016, 2020), and the economic transformation of Indonesian preachers due to the influence of their da'wa on social media (Rudnyckyj, 2011; Slama, 2017b). Bunt (2003) introduced the term Cyber-Islamic Environments (CIEs), an umbrella concept encompassing an array of online activities, even in worship. Social media platforms provide new spaces where people can publicly express their spiritual and religious identities and perceive online worship as part of their pious endeavors (Howell, 2008; Slama, 2017a). Nisa (2018) showed that religious teachings uploaded on social media increased significantly.

One of the important phenomena about Muslim life and the internet recently is online *ngaji*. *Ngaji*—reciting classical books and analysing their contents preached by *kiais* (leaders of *pesantren* or Islamic boarding schools) or *ustadz* (Islamic clerics)—has become virtual and adaptive as a result of digitalisation (Bunt, 2003). Preachers utilise social media to grasp enormous audiences effectively. Conversely, the audiences who need to improve their religiosity but are trapped in the hurly-burly life will be helped with this convivial virtual preaching. Online *ngaji* has become a beneficial medium for preachers to build their authority. They usually organise *ngaji*, where they recite Islamic texts and classical books (*kitab kuning*) and preach on topics related to the theme. They spread their preaching through social media and get wider outreach to extend their reputation. Social media is a tool for *da'wa* because it can transmit religious messages to enormous audiences more effectively and efficiently. In its development, there are two classifications of online *ngaji*. First, the intended online *ngaji*, originally meant to be online, has no audience on the spot. An example is the online *ngaji* by Gus Ulil Abshar Abdalla (see https://shorturl.at/eQT89). Second, the unintended online *ngaji*. This *ngaji* model is conventional preaching in a particular place that is recorded and disseminated through several digital platforms initiated by the followers. An example of this category is Gus Baha's *ngaji*, which will be discussed in this study.

Meanwhile, for viewers, social media facilitates worldwide communication and convivial access at affordable cost, which helps them to worship and get religious information and guidelines. Muslims nowadays tend to express their piety on social media, worship, and learn Islamic tenets from social media, and so on. For instance, digital technology helps Muslims to worship easily, such as reading Qur'an on the app, doing charity in just one click, and even praying online during the pandemic. They can listen to their favorite preachers' da'wa in one click. Cosmopolitan Muslims tend to need religious information that is instant, fresh, practical, and easily accessible (Zamhari, Han, & Zulkifli, 2021). Muslims can connect with the preachers at home without directly meeting them. With the convenience offered by social media, it will not be surprising whether virtual *ngaji* is preferred more.

However, these advantages of online *ngaji* apparently cannot beat the appeal of conventional *ngaji*. Based on our observation, many followers from various cities directly attend routine *ngaji* in the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). Most of them know the preachers from social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp community and whenever they have a chance, they attend the *ngaji* on the spot. Hence, we want to scrutinise why they are motivated to join the offline *ngaji* rather than keep on online *ngaji*, which is easy to access; is there any motive that encourages them to engage in offline *ngaji* instead of online *ngaji*; and how does the online *ngaji* transform to offline *ngaji*. Subsequently, we are supposed to figure out the implications of unintended online *ngaji* conducted by Gus Baha.

To answer this question, we research KH. Baha'uddin Nur Salim—hereinafter called Gus Baha. He is a scholar from Rembang, Central Java. He is known for his intelligent, communicative, and tolerant *ngaji*. The audiences are very diverse, from youths to adults. However, after preliminary research, the audience is dominated by those aged 40 to 50. These audiences can be classified as Generation X or Gen-Xers born between 1965 and 1980 (Strauss & Howe, 1991). They are mostly depicted as low-tech people and digitally illiterate people if they are compared with the subsequent

generation, but they are perceived as getting familiar with social media, especially after the pandemic. After *ngaji* is held again conventionally, they tend to come directly to the *pesantren*.

Previous studies have explored both online and offline preaching and *ngaji*. Saenong (2020) examines how Khalid Basalamah's online preaching resonates with audiences, assessing their comprehension and acceptance of his messages. Additionally, Qudsy and Muzakky (2021) investigate the impact of Gus Baha's Qur'anic online *ngaji*, focusing on the responses of netizens who use the hashtag #gusbaha. They emphasise that online *ngaji* is positively received when conducted by the knowledgeable and reputable ulama, preventing potential misinterpretations. The hashtag #gusbaha is seen as an innovative approach to enhancing accessibility to Qur'anic interpretation and improving the perception of Islam on social media.

Finally, Fitriana and Ridlwan (2021) focus on shifting from traditional face-to-face *ngaji* kitab (Islamic classical book recitation) to digital platforms. They argue that this transition represents a significant social change, emphasising the importance of tailored content control. The emergence of online *ngaji* kitab reflects a contextual adaptation to local social conditions, where most people are deeply engaged in the online realm. The digital era has made religious information readily accessible, developing a new habitus for *kiais* who respond to evolving societal needs. Their research underscores how *pesantren* and figures like *kiai* and *santri* (students residing in Islamic boarding schools), traditionally known for their traditionalism, adapt to benefit a wider audience. While technology has facilitated the shift from offline to online *ngaji*, it is important to note that this transformation is not universal. As we will explore later, instances of reverse transformation, from online back to offline, also occur.

This study is based on qualitative descriptive research. The process of gaining primary data uses observation and in-depth interviews with 20 interlocutors who attend the routine *ngaji* from various backgrounds, while the secondary data is obtained from library research, documentation, and YouTube videos that present Gus Baha in conducting virtual *ngaji*. We analyse the collected data and information by using qualitative methods. In addition, we utilise a sociological approach to identify the implication of conventional *ngaji* for gen-Xers audiences. Given that the current research is largely exploratory and is committed to an inductive approach, the data analysis requires an open and reflexive engagement with some existing literature. The article is concerned with comparing audiences' responses toward Gus Baha's proselytisation offline and online. The object of research comprises audiences classified as gen-Xers who are mostly digital illiterate people or so-called "digital immigrants" (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). Gen-Xers are those born between 1965 and 1980 after the Baby Boomers generation and developed a distinctive unity of style (Edmunds & Turner, 2005; Pilcher, 1994; Strauss & Howe, 1991). We chose this generation as the object of study because most of Gus Baha's followers are those in the Gen-Xers category. The rapid growth of the internet and social media platforms in this modern era, which has pervaded everyday lives, forces Gen-Xers to adapt to digitalisation. However, based on our research, most of them admit that they do not face any hardship in accessing social media.

In a nutshell, this paper begins with an explanation of offline and online *ngaji*, followed by unintended online *ngaji* and its relationship with establishing religious authority. Subsequently, it discusses *baraka* and *sanad* culture as motives encouraging followers to join conventional *ngaji* and the implication of da'wa via offline for the attendees.

2. The Culture of Offline *Ngaji*

In Indonesia, offline *ngaji* is one of the popular ways to spread Islam. Historically, *ngaji* dates back to the early arrival of Islam in Indonesia. Before the advent of the internet and the digital era, almost all *ngaji* activities were done conventionally (offline) through direct teaching and learning sessions. *Ngaji* is the transmission of knowledge related to the Islamic religion from teachers to students, which takes place in *pesantren*, mosques, *madrasas* (Islamic schools), *surau* (a building similar to a mosque but in smaller size), and other locations (Majid, 1997). In the early era, *ngaji* was conducted traditionally by attending some forums (*halaqah*/pengajian) facilitated by the ulama, *kiai*, as well as *ustaz* who served as the lecturers. This activity was typically conducted through various models of recitation, such as

bandongan—where *santris* listen to the recitation of religious texts by the *kiai*—and *sorogan*—where *santris* read religious texts in front of the *kiai* (Sudrajat, 2018).

In many cases, *ngaji* is used to study the Qur'an and the Islamic classical books and deliver sermons and preaching related to the specific theme. It is an essential activity that is conducted in a *pesantren* environment. *Ngaji* in *pesantren* focuses on specific Islamic texts known as *kitab kuning* (classical textbooks written in Arabic without vowels or punctuation marks). Hence, proficiency in Arabic is required to understand the content. Santris reciting the *kitab kuning* write their translations beneath the Arabic sentences, a practice known as *njenggoti* (Irhamni, 2011). *Ngaji* is usually held at *pesantren* or the residence of the *kiai*/*ustaz* and attended by *santris* in face-to-face (offline) meetings. *Ngaji* and preaching are intertwined. While the *ngaji* tradition primarily revolves around the recitation of the *kitab kuning*, it is also inseparable from the oral sermons delivered by the preachers. Due to technological advancements, *ngaji* is now also conducted online. Online *ngaji*, chosen for accessibility, includes online religion, cyber-religion, digital religion, and digital Qur'an computing. The transmission of Islamic religious knowledge in online *ngaji* is not confined to physical gatherings but is accomplished through online platforms such as websites and content in cyberspace (Fitriana & Ridlwan, 2021).

Meanwhile, the delivering methods employed by Gus Baha in *ngaji* follow the same conventional model as described above. The process of transmitting religious knowledge is carried out through the study of the *kitab kuning*, with participants in *ngaji* being *santri* and members of the general public. This *ngaji* began in 2007 following the passing of Gus Baha's father, Nur Salim. It commenced with *ngaji* sessions at his residence in Narukan, Rembang, Central Jawa, and then extended to *ngaji* in Bantul, Special Region of Yogyakarta. Both *ngaji* sessions have continued to this day, drawing visitors from various cities in Indonesia. The *ngaji* at Narukan was the focus of our data collection for this research.

3. The Rise of Online *Ngaji*

Islamic da'wa in the media must prioritise Islamic values themselves. The use of media in da'wa, whatever the form of the medium, must not distort the essential messages of Islam. If we use the teachings of Said Nursi, it is clear that the media must be able to prove the majesty of the Quran (Adeni, Koroglu, & Hasanah, 2022). This is where Islamic communication gets its place in the context of discussion of today's media progress.

Online *ngaji* is a new phenomenon emerging in the millennial digital era. Traditionally, *ngaji* was conducted in physical gatherings, but in today's world, it can be done virtually. This dynamic evolution showcases the adaptability of *ngaji*. One of the notable online *ngaji* phenomena is the use of the hashtag #gusbaha, which originated from a session led by the esteemed Quranic scholar, KH. Bahauddin Nursalim. Online *ngaji* can positively impact when it is delivered by scholars with clear integrity and authentic knowledge, mitigating potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations (Qudsy & Muzakky, 2021).

In Indonesia, communal culture is deeply ingrained, often reflecting religious values or local customs. For instance, in Islam, the practice of *silaturahim* (social visits) is emphasised by *kiai* and *ustaz*. This communal tradition has transcended to the digital realm, evident in the active participation of Indonesians on various online platforms, especially social networks such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Line. Online platforms facilitate the creation of groups based on shared backgrounds and interests. Hence, online *pesantren* and *ngaji* provide spaces for people to come together in pursuit of Islamic knowledge and collective study. The choice of online *pesantren* as a communal space is rooted in the ability for *santris* to connect with like-minded individuals. Additionally, *pesantren* is viewed as an Islamic educational institution that aligns with students' daily lives (Ilaihi, 2019).

From the followers' perspective, online *ngaji* offers an avenue to access Islamic knowledge from authoritative sources and esteemed religious leaders. Social media platforms enable individuals to engage in religious learning amidst their busy lives, allowing flexible time and place arrangements (Muttaqin, 2020). While *ngaji* through the internet presents challenges and opportunities, it is a powerful tool to address global issues related to Islam. Topics such as Islamophobia, terrorism, gender

equality, and interpersonal relationships can be addressed by disseminating clarifications, corrections, and justifications of core Islamic values. It is imperative to consider spatial justice, even as internet access continues to expand in the country. Consequently, employing the internet for *ngaji* in Indonesia holds promise for spreading Islamic messages (Adeni et al., 2022; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019).

Gus Baha's online *ngaji* is a testament to the devotion of his followers to the traditional form of *ngaji*. They document these sessions in digital videos, reaching a wider audience. While Gus Baha's offline *ngaji* began in 2007, it gained prominence after a documented session in Bantul in 2015. Additionally, he is associated with the renowned scholar KH. Maimoen Zubair, also known as Mbah Moen, elevated his status in the eyes of Indonesian Muslims. Gus Baha's preaching style is characterised by its relaxed and humorous yet impactful approach, often drawing from insights of scholars found in various books. It has solidified his reputation as a role model scholar in Indonesia across diverse circles.

4. Unintended Online *Ngaji* and the Construction of Religious Authority

When we collected data, hundreds of Gus Baha's *muhibbin* (disciples) gathered around the main venue at 9 a.m. They are excited to listen to Gus Baha's recitation of *kitab kuning*, specifically Tafsīr al-Jalālain. The offline *ngaji* is held every Wednesday twice a month in his institution, Pondok Pesantren LP3IA (The Institute of Qur'anic Studies Cultivation, Education, and Development) in Narukan, Kragan, Rembang, Central Java. The audience grew larger until the *ngaji* started at 11 a.m. Few women come, as the *pesantren* does not permit them, and the majority of attendees are men.

Gus Baha's *ngaji* was presented offline, videotaped, and immediately broadcast on LP3IA's official YouTube channel. Some videos on YouTube are originally offline events that get online through the filming process and can later be played frequently, much like the *ngaji* that was live-streamed then. The recorders, who are the officials and the disciples, set them apart. Since the officials do not intend to make the latter type of *ngaji* available online, we classify it as unintended online *ngaji*.

The unintended online *ngaji* by Gus Baha is significant in attracting many of his followers and constructing his religious authority. Compared to the LP3IA official YouTube channel, which only has 45.7k subscribers, unofficial channels developed by Gus Baha's followers reach a higher audience. As of 9 December 2022, Pengajian Gus Baha channel has 193k subscribers, Narukan TV channel gains 79.2k subscribers, Hamima TV channel obtains 701k subscribers, Sahabat Orchid TV collects 101k subscribers, Dakwah Digital channel acquires 51.7k subscribers, and many other channels that cannot be mentioned here attain tremendous subscribers in total. Gus Baha's *ngaji* was initially taped in 2008 when he regularly gave *ngajis* in Yogyakarta. Still, it did not invite a massive reaction from the public until the speech was shared online in the 2010s, and finally, it obtained huge attention in 2015 and beyond. Since *santri*'s learning forum was not publicly shared, the online videos were only available when Gus Baha presented his *ngaji* outside the *pesantren*. However, starting the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the *pesantren* began to establish official accounts primarily for live-streaming Gus Baha's *ngaji*, not for the intention of disseminating video of *ngaji* massively (Mefvin, personal communication, August 30, 2022).

Most of the Gus Baha's Wednesday routine public *ngaji* attendees acknowledge him from his unintended online *ngaji* on YouTube. They appreciate the online content a lot as they can listen to Gus Baha's *ngaji* repeatedly whenever they have the occasion. The vast demand for Gus Baha's content makes it possible for people to supply and provide many videos of him giving speeches. Although the *pesantren* itself restricts documentation in the Wednesday forum and some events in which Gus Baha proselytises, the videos provided by those content creators become a means through which the disciples encounter and learn about Gus Baha's thoughts. It shows that despite the *pesantren* regulation, the disciples can still manage to get around the rules to record and disseminate the *ngaji*. There is no official response to this action, but the *pesantren* reminds those who share Gus Baha's *ngaji* to be mindful of how they choose to cut some parts from the full video version and how they put the title for each online video as it may be raising pros and cons (Mefvin, personal communication, August 30, 2022).

> Perhaps for responding to his (Gus Baha's) *ngaji* being shared online, if (it is) positive, it is good since (it is) *ngaji*, but if (the *ngaji*) has been exploited by certain persons, we do not take any action because if something happens later, the responsibility will be handed to the individuals concerned. After all, the *pesantren*'s warning is previously said, for the YouTubers or certain persons who contribute to sharing his (Gus Baha's) *ngaji* to be wiser (Mefvin, personal communication, August 30, 2022).

As far as the disciples of Gus Baha are concerned, the unintended online *ngaji* differs from another one that can be called intended. We identify Gus Ulil Abshar-Abdalla's *Ngaji* Ihya (*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*) as the latter since he aims his *ngaji* for online audiences whom he called *santri* online while only reading the book without any listener in front of him (Akmaliah & Saat, 2022). With the distinction in the aim and disciples, the unintended online *ngaji* by Gus Baha has played a role in reaching wider audiences and even popularising him, given that the *pesantren* itself is not open to the general public. It is the converse of what Turner (2007) contends that the new media could lead to corroding the traditional forms of authority based on oral transmission or print-based forms of textual learning that are linear, hierarchical, imitative, and repetitive. On the other hand, social media can amplify traditional authority, which adapts to technological advances. This ongoing process amplifies his religious authority and makes him stand out among other preachers on social media. The disciples' endeavor to record and share Gus Baha's *ngaji* vastly constitutes what Richard Dyer (1998) calls the labor of 'star texts' which builds *kiai*'s and ulama's charisma to be the leaders to whom people listen (Dyer, 1998). Politics of exceptional authority place them as the only true sources of Islamic authority or the star (Schmidt, 2018). On the other hand, online videos are misused by individuals who recklessly edit and distribute them, such as framing Gus Baha's speech into a specific issue, which is a vulnerability that corrodes his religious authority.

5. *Baraka* Hunters: Offline *Ngaji* on the Top

Before the research, we assumed that Gen-Xers accustomed to attending offline *ngaji* in *pesantren* would adapt to virtual *ngaji* as digital media developed. The findings, however, show that this transformation does not always happen. Interviews with attendees of the Wednesday routine *ngaji* in Narukan, Rembang, revealed that most of them first learned of Gus Baha through social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp communities. They were inspired by his teachings and personality, and many became his *muhibbin* (followers or admirers). They regard him as a credible preacher because his sources are popular classical books and his language is simple and easy to understand, which makes his religious authority solid among followers and lay people alike. This popularity drives them to attend his *ngaji* in person, whether at his *pesantren* or in places such as Tangerang, Yogyakarta, Kudus, and Demak. They are willing to travel long distances, and even to listen from outside a full hall. Thus, there is a shift from watching *ngaji* online to participating on-site, reflecting a broader preference for in-person religious experiences. The tangible, immersive qualities of offline *ngaji* are valued more than the convenience of online platforms.

The main reason is *baraka*. Although online *ngaji* is accessible anytime, anywhere, and by anyone, most people still try to attend on Wednesdays. Baedi (43), for example, discovered Gus Baha on social media five years ago and then began attending offline, because being present means being closer to the source of knowledge and thus having a greater chance of receiving *baraka*. Likewise, Ruqayyah (57) says her *majlis ta'lim* group deliberately comes to the *pesantren* for *baraka*, even though they cannot enter the hall or meet Gus Baha. Most attendees also combine the *ngaji* with a pilgrimage (*ziyara*) to saints' graves.

In the Qur'an, *baraka* means fertility, prosperity, and well-being (Demirel & Sahib, 2015), and it is often associated with miraculous, non-rational phenomena surrounding saints. The concept of *tabarruk* (seeking blessings) is closely tied to *pesantren* life and covers everything related to the *kiai*: his personal qualities, deeds, teachings, and guidance. *Santri* therefore eagerly emulate the *kiai* and *bu nyai*, for instance by kissing the *kiai*'s hand as a sign of respect for a knowledgeable person (Tammulis, Galib M,

& Abubakar, 2021). Today, *tabarruk* traditions are continued by both *pesantren* communities and lay people, including by meeting preachers in person.

Baraka is sacred and sometimes mystical, yet its existence is accepted on the basis of repeated experience. The tradition of seeking blessings through devotion to a teacher has been passed down across generations through institutionalisation by its elite members, so that values, morals, customs, and sacred teachings are preserved through socialisation and enculturation. Grounded in a deep theological and historical foundation, it endures in the modern era (Djakfar & Permatasari, 2020). *Baraka* is an embedded belief that a *kiai*'s blessing eases all affairs, and it forms a strong bond between teacher and disciple.

This belief motivates people to seek out the *kiai* in person. Most of Gus Baha's audience believe that the physical presence of the *kiai* and the community in offline *ngaji* attracts blessings, such as spiritual growth, peace, and closeness to God, creating a more immersive and personal atmosphere. In short, conventional on-site *ngaji* remains massively attended, and many even shift from online to offline for *baraka* and a fuller understanding of the content. The *sanad* culture also remains important: disciples must meet their teachers directly to receive *ijaza*, which protects the authenticity of knowledge by transmitting it without a medium. Technology and digitalisation are seen as unable to replace religious rites rooted in classical times, so people continue to uphold *sanad* and *baraka* even when an easier option is available.

6. *Sanad* as the Determinant of Offline and Online *Ngaji*

The followers of the *ngaji* can be classified into three groups based on their opinions regarding online and offline *ngaji*. First, those who consider online *ngaji* the same as offline *ngaji*. Second, those who can be more focused on listening and opt for which topic of *ngaji* directly on the online platform, while in offline *ngaji* they barely attain the whole message of *ngaji* since there have always been obstacles such as the limitation of the space, the less-heard voice of Gus Baha', and the inability to choose their topic preferences. Third, those who prefer offline *ngaji* because its vibe is different: the surroundings full of enthusiastic *muhibbin*. Despite the variety of opinions, the main reason that motivates those disciples to attend the offline *ngaji* is to seek *baraka* or blessings, as they cannot find them through online *ngaji*. It shows that their reception toward *ngaji* is deeply connected to Islamic values, so they perceive the Islamic learning forum as a part of Islamic worship that cannot be replaced by performing it via online media. In this case, the followers have different roles in the online and offline realms (Sakila, 2019). It is in line with the 'illusory datascape' that van Doorn (2011) defines as a sphere distinct from reality's physical appearance (van Doorn, 2011).

The circle where the followers can encounter Gus Baha as their *kiai* and role model is a reality that enables them to be spiritually transcended through *baraka*. The traditional Islamic way of teaching in *pesantren* involves the teacher and the pupil facing each other (talaqqī), which remains the basic element to achieve *baraka* and access the *sanad* (thread) of knowledge, both of which online media cannot provide. The term *sanad* in Islam is mostly mentioned in the study of hadith, where the narrators are linked to each other and in the education sphere. It is a pivotal tool to preserve the true teaching of Islam. *Sanad* means a person-to-person knowledge transmission in learning circles, where the student's disposition or character is emphasised, and the teacher's physical presence represents the actualisation of Islamic religiosity. Besides gaining more knowledge, this method asserts its authority under the traditional licensing (*ijāza*) system based on a chain of person-to-person knowledge transmission (*sanad*) (Wright, 2015). Reflecting on this statement, Gus Baha's followers liven up transcendental values by attending to the offline *ngaji* as they attain a 'license' to gain valid knowledge from truthful sources. They embody the feeling of receiving a reward from worship that cannot be obtained through media (Sakila, 2019).

Sacred values transmitted in *ngaji* show that they manifest not only through the body (McGuire, 2008) but also on the place (Radde-Antweiler, 2012). The followers' impression of Gus Baha also affects how they recognise his charismatic authority, which mobilises them into the *ngaji*. It is how Gus Baha cultivates the doctrine of *baraka*. Suppose most people believe that visiting a *kiai* directly (*sowan*) is one

of the ways of attaining *baraka*. In that case, Gus Baha teaches that just participating in the *ngaji* is just as valuable. Apart from the sanctified relics or attitudes that are deemed to contain blessings (Alatas, 2021), the experiences acquainted by the disciples themselves are meaningful thing that indicates a desire to preserve *sanad* tradition. Imah, our interlocutor, enthusiastically shared with us her dream of being personally studied by Gus Baha and her subsequent attempt to contact him (Imah,personal communication, August 31, 2022).

The attendees agree to uphold their connection to Gus Baha through *Sanad* and feel safe that his propagation is enlightening because his *ngaji* is not fearmongering. The concept that Islam is simple and Muslims are adaptable in practicing their faith is transmitted through the *sanad* tradition, which is based on peaceful teachings derived from reliable sources, such as *kitab kuning*, by a respected individual like Gus Baha'.

> In Gus Baha's *ngaji*, his explanation is easy to understand. If it is practiced in everyday life, it is not complicated. Religion is easy. In terms of religious problems, if their differences are seen, there must have been, but in my opinion, it is only on several hadith. One agrees, and the other does not, but their core is the same, except for the hardliner streams, who often label others as infidels. I think it is not suitable here (in Narukan, Gus Baha's village). I am active in Muhammadiyah, but I listen to *ngaji* from NU (Nahdlatul Ulama). In practicing religious worship, it is not necessarily Muhammadiyah. If NU does not contradict the logic, it does not mind (Toha, personal communication, Augus 31, 2022).
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> I am interested in Gus Baha because of his knowledge, logic, and piety. Those who admire him are people who drink and never pray. He never blames others (Qosim, personal communication, August 31, 2022).

Even though the disciples can acquire the same meaning as in online *ngaji*, the sense of being present near the teacher allows them to be involved in the circle of knowledge itself. They can validate the consistency of both Gus Baha's teachings in online and offline *ngaji* and foster the chain of Islamic knowledge for the next generations. In essence, while social media has ushered in a new era of virtual *ngaji* accessibility and enhanced the authority of religious figures, it cannot fully replace the holistic experience of conventional *ngaji*. The latter encompasses not only the transfer of knowledge but also the intergenerational connection, the spiritual blessings, and the sacred tradition of *sanad*. As individuals navigate this digital age, they strongly believe in the sanctity of *baraka* and *sanad*, recognising them as integral components of their spiritual journey that warrant preservation and reverence. They perhaps know the preachers from online platforms, but they are urged to meet the preachers directly to create a deeper connection to the divine and a sense of spirituality, bringing a blessing.

7. Conclusions

The existence of social media gives convenience in access to virtual *ngaji* indeed. It can be watched anytime, anywhere, and by anyone. It also amplifies the clergy's authority and extends their reputation as reliable in religious matters, whether intended or unintended. In the case of Gus Baha, the broadcasting of his *ngaji* is conducted by his disciples, which significantly impacts his authority as a preacher. The efforts made by his students to disseminate Gus Baha's teachings can enhance his image in society, turning him into an admired star by many people. However, this effort can also be a boomerang if the disciples provide inaccurate information about him, thereby diminishing his level of authority.

Furthermore, while virtual *ngaji* through social media offers unprecedented access and exposure, it cannot completely replace the profound appeal of conventional *ngaji* deeply rooted in ancestral traditions. Conventional *ngaji* is not solely about transferring knowledge; it encompasses a rich cultural heritage that connects generations to their forebears. This tradition emphasises the significance of "*baraka*," the blessings that flow through generations, and the "*sanad*," the lineage or chain of transmission central to Islamic knowledge dissemination. They both become important motives that encourage the audiences to attend conventional *ngaji* on-site.

The concept of "*baraka*" holds immense importance in transmitting religious teachings. It symbolises a spiritual essence, an unseen blessing accompanying knowledge transfer from generation to generation. This intangible quality enriches the learning experience and infuses the teachings with a deeper meaning and authenticity. Within the context of virtual *ngaji*, the challenge lies in replicating this spiritual essence through a digital medium. Similarly, the tradition of "*sanad*" plays a pivotal role in the authenticity of Islamic knowledge. It represents an unbroken chain of transmission connecting contemporary scholars to the Prophet Muhammad. This lineage provides credibility to the teachings and ensures their alignment with the sources. The virtual *ngaji* experience, while valuable, may struggle to uphold the sanctity of this tradition due to the intangible and deeply personal nature of the *sanad*.

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