Constructing Religious Legitimacy in the Digital Public Sphere: A Study of Islamic Discourse on Social Media

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyse how Akmal Sjafril constructs religious authority through narrative framing, linguistic strategies, and value integration in his social media engagement. **Methodology**: This research employed a qualitative approach using virtual ethnography (netnography) to examine Akmal Sjafril's digital narratives on Twitter. Data were collected through virtual observation, documentation of tweets, and semi-structured interviews, and were analysed using an interactive model of qualitative analysis. **Findings**: The study reveals that Akmal Sjafril systematically builds religious authority by constructing narratives that defend Islamic teachings against liberal and secular reinterpretations, using adaptive linguistic styles to engage a diverse digital audience, and embedding core Islamic values—such as interfaith tolerance, noble character, and critical thinking rooted in faith—into his digital communication. His approach demonstrates how religious figures can sustain both credibility and audience engagement in a fragmented digital public sphere, blending theological consistency with communicative adaptability. **Research Implications**: These findings contribute to the broader understanding of religious authority in the digital era by showing how figures can negotiate credibility through adaptive digital strategies without compromising doctrinal authenticity. The research suggests the need for digital literacy initiatives, ethical guidelines for religious communication, and institutional support for promoting comprehensive religious narratives in online spaces. **Originality/Value**: This study provides a unique contribution by integrating narrative construction, linguistic adaptation, and value-based communication into the analysis of digital religious authority, offering new insights into how Islamic figures navigate legitimacy within the networked dynamics of social media environments.

Keywords: digital religious authority; Islamic communication; narrative strategy; religious discourse; social media.

Abstrak

Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Akmal Sjafril mengkonstruksi otoritas agama melalui narasi narasi, strategi linguistik, dan integrasi nilai dalam media sosialnya. media sosialnya. **Metodologi:** Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif menggunakan etnografi virtual (netnografi) untuk meneliti narasi digital Akmal Sjafril digital Akmal Sjafril di Twitter. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi virtual, dokumentasi tweet, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif analisis kualitatif. **Temuan:** Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa Akmal Sjafril secara sistematis membangun otoritas agama dengan membangun narasi yang membela ajaran Islam dari reinterpretasi liberal dan liberal dan sekuler, menggunakan gaya bahasa yang adaptif untuk melibatkan audiens audiens digital yang beragam, dan menanamkan nilai-nilai inti Islam - seperti toleransi antaragama toleransi antar agama, akhlak mulia, dan pemikiran kritis yang berakar pada keimanan - ke dalam komunikasi digitalnya. Pendekatannya menunjukkan bagaimana tokoh-tokoh agama dapat mempertahankan kredibilitas dan keterlibatan audiens di tengah masyarakat digital yang terfragmentasi, memadukan konsistensi memadukan konsistensi teologis dengan kemampuan beradaptasi yang komunikatif. **Implikasi Penelitian:** Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas tentang otoritas keagamaan di era digital dengan menunjukkan bagaimana tokoh-tokoh dapat menegosiasikan kredibilitas melalui strategi digital yang adaptif tanpa mengorbankan keaslian doktrinal. keaslian doktrinal. Penelitian ini menyarankan perlunya inisiatif literasi digital, pedoman etika untuk komunikasi keagamaan, dan dukungan kelembagaan untuk untuk mempromosikan narasi agama yang komprehensif di ruang daring. **Orisinalitas/Nilai:** Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi unik dengan mengintegrasikan narasi konstruksi naratif, adaptasi linguistik, dan komunikasi berbasis nilai ke dalam analisis otoritas

keagamaan digital, menawarkan wawasan baru tentang bagaimana tokoh-tokoh bagaimana tokoh-tokoh Islam menavigasi legitimasi dalam dinamika jaringan media sosial media sosial.

Kata Kunci: Otoritas keagamaan digital; komunikasi Islam; strategi naratif; wacana keagamaan; media sosial..

INTRODUCTION

Today, the development of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed the ways people access information and interact. Among these technologies, social media has emerged as a central platform where individuals across different age groups communicate, share ideas, and build communities. By early 2022, there were 4.62 billion social media users worldwide, with Indonesia contributing 210 million users (Riyanto, 2022; We Are Social, 2022). This surge has facilitated not only social and political exchanges but also religious expressions. Social media platforms, due to their openness and accessibility, have become primary sources for seeking religious knowledge among Muslim students and university students in Indonesia, surpassing traditional sources like books and television (Saputra, 2018). As technology increasingly penetrates religious life, it reshapes how religious teachings are transmitted, consumed, and adapted within society (Muhammad, 2021).

In this context, the rise of religious influencers on social media platforms has significantly reshaped traditional structures of religious authority. Digital creatives and influencers increasingly challenge established religious leaders by leveraging their communication skills and online visibility rather than formal religious credentials (2020, 2022). Some anonymous religious pages also gain influence by presenting themselves as neutral and impartial sources of religious truth (Astor, Khir-Allah, & Martínez-Cuadros, 2024). In the Muslim world, social media influencers are actively reimagining Islam and religious practices among young audiences, reshaping authority dynamics (Zaid, Fedtke, Shin, El Kadoussi, & Ibahrine, 2022). In Indonesia specifically, religious influencers strategically use visual elements on platforms like Instagram to construct approachable yet respected images of authority (Febrian, 2024). These transformations have decentralized religious messaging (Andok, 2024), allowing followers to selectively choose digital religious authorities based on personal preference, thereby hybridizing religious authority in digital spaces (Abusharif, 2023). A notable case in the Indonesian context is Akmal Sjafril, an academic, activist, and preacher, who actively uses multiple platforms, especially Twitter, to disseminate religious narratives and engage in public religious discourse. This shift highlights the urgent need to critically analyse how digital media redefines religious legitimacy, moving it from institutional frameworks to dynamic, networked environments.

The emergence of digital platforms has significantly transformed the landscape of religious authority, as documented in various strands of existing research. First, studies on Religious Authority on the Internet show that digital media has both affirmed and challenged traditional religious authority structures. Campbell (2010a; 2022) highlights how religious bloggers and digital creatives utilize the internet to either reinforce or disrupt conventional religious leadership, while Berger et al. (2023) observe the rise of "Ask the Rabbi" platforms as new venues for legitimizing non-traditional figures. In Muslim contexts, Scholz et al. (2008) and Marcotte (2016) examine how podcasts and online fatwa platforms have enabled the rise of cyber-muftis, negotiating Islamic norms across digital spaces. However, while these studies illustrate shifts in authority construction, they often focus on general platforms or collective phenomena without specific attention to how individual influencers strategically build religious legitimacy within localized socio-religious contexts.

Second, research on Virtual Religious Communities emphasises how online environments facilitate religious identity construction, community-building, and social support. Scholars such as George (2005) and Chopra (2023) demonstrate how digital spaces bridge geographical divides to create meaningful religious communities. Hughes and Robinson (2009) and Borowik (2018) further explore issues of authenticity and social belonging in virtual religious environments. Although this body of work highlights the collective dynamics of online religious engagement, it tends to prioritise communal structures over the individual agency of religious figures who leverage such communities to build personal authority.

Third, studies focusing on Religious Figures and Social Media Influence examine how individual religious actors employ digital strategies to engage audiences and establish legitimacy. Sheldon (2024) and Febrian (2024) analyse how Christian and Islamic influencers use visual and rhetorical strategies on Instagram, while Sholihah and Rohmatulloh (2023) and Ibahrine (2016) reveal communicative tactics adopted by Muslim preachers on Twitter. Additionally, Vail et al. (2023) discuss the broader sociocultural impacts of religious influencers on belief formation and community solidarity. Nevertheless, much of this research predominantly addresses either Christian or general Islamic digital contexts, with limited exploration of Indonesian Muslim figures who simultaneously function as activists, academics, and religious voices in highly dynamic digital ecosystems.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Akmal Sjafril constructs his religious authority in the digital public sphere, particularly on the Twitter platform. Specifically, this research aims to identify and analyse the strategies he employs to defend Islamic teachings against liberal and secular reinterpretations, the variation of linguistic styles he uses to engage diverse audiences while maintaining intellectual credibility, and the ways he consistently integrates core religious values into his digital narratives. By focusing on these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious authority is actively negotiated, constructed, and sustained within contemporary digital media environments, providing insights into the evolving role of religious figures in shaping public discourse in the age of networked communication.

This study argues that religious authority in digital spaces, particularly on Twitter, is constructed not solely through the possession of formal religious credentials, but through the strategic utilisation of digital affordances such as narrative framing, interactivity, and visual communication. It is hypothesised that Akmal Sjafril's authority emerges from his ability to integrate religious knowledge, activism, and personal branding within the interactive structure of Twitter, allowing him to foster trust and influence among a networked audience. This process reflects a shift where religious legitimacy is no longer monopolised by traditional institutions but is increasingly negotiated through engagement metrics, responsiveness to followers, and the use of platform-specific strategies. Consistent with prior findings on digital creatives and religious influencers (H. A. Campbell, 2020; Febrian, 2024; Zaid et al., 2022), this study anticipates that the hybridisation of religious authority—combining scholarly, activist, and online influencer elements—becomes a defining feature of how religious leadership is perceived and legitimised in contemporary Indonesian Muslim contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on the construction of religious authority through social media narratives, with specific attention to the Twitter account of Akmal Sjafril (@malakmalakmal). The unit of analysis consists of digital artefacts (tweets, threads) and online interactions originating from the account, representing expressions of religious messaging and engagement with followers. To enrich the findings and validate interpretations, the study also considers direct perspectives from Akmal Sjafril himself and a selection of

his followers through virtual interviews. The primary objective is to understand how religious authority is constructed, perceived, and negotiated within the digital environment of Twitter.

The research employs a qualitative approach using a virtual ethnography (netnography) design. The choice of virtual ethnography is based on its effectiveness in capturing complex patterns of social interaction and identity construction within online environments. This method enables the researcher to understand how religious communication strategies adapt to and operate within the specific affordances of digital platforms. Given the fluid and mediated nature of digital religious spaces, virtual ethnography provides a robust framework for analysing behaviours, symbols, and interactions without relying on direct physical observation. It allows a nuanced exploration of both the content and context of religious narratives shared online.

Data for this study were obtained from two primary sources: (1) primary data, including content analysis of Akmal Sjafril's Twitter posts related to religious topics from January to August 2023 and interviews with the account owner and three followers; and (2) secondary data, consisting of supporting materials such as academic articles, books, previous research, and content from Akmal Sjafril's personal website (Sjafril, 2024). The combination of these sources ensures triangulation, enhancing the reliability and depth of the analysis regarding the construction of religious authority in digital spaces.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: (1) Virtual observation by following and interacting with Akmal Sjafril's Twitter account, recording religious messages disseminated through tweets and threads; (2) Semi-structured virtual interviews with Akmal Sjafril (via his administrative contact) and three selected followers, conducted through WhatsApp chat, due to platform limitations on direct messaging; and (3) Documentation by capturing screenshots of relevant Twitter posts. These techniques provided a rich set of textual and contextual data necessary to explore the dynamics of online religious authority formation.

The data were analysed using an interactive model of qualitative data analysis, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The process involved continuous data reduction, where relevant themes and patterns were identified; data display, through narrative description of findings; and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction focused on isolating key religious themes and communication strategies. Data display was conducted through detailed textual narratives. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the patterns of digital religious authority construction based on the interactions observed and the insights gained from interviews. This iterative process allowed the researcher to derive credible and well-supported findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Construction of Religious Authority on Twitter

In establishing his religious authority on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril consistently uses narrative as his primary tool. Through various tweet formats, such as direct statements, news quotes, retweets, and quote retweets, he constructs a religious narrative that reflects the Islamic values he espouses. This narrative is not presented randomly but is carefully crafted to shape his image as a knowledgeable figure, concerned about communal issues, and actively defending Islamic values. The use of varied language styles, ranging from casual to formal, further strengthens his efforts to communicate these messages to diverse audiences on the Twitter platform.

In constructing his religious narrative on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril frequently expresses strong criticism towards the rise of liberalism within Islam. One instance of this critique is evident in his tweet,

Cerdas itu butuh proses. Saya sulit percaya kalau ada anak yg biasa2 saja dr SD sampe SMA, tau2 jd 'pintar' setelah gabung Islam liberal [Intelligence requires a process. I find it hard to believe that a child who was just average from primary to secondary school suddenly becomes 'smart' after joining liberal Islam] (Sjafril, 2017).

Through this statement, Akmal questions the authenticity and depth of intellectual understanding claimed by individuals associated with the liberal Islamic movement. He emphasises that true intellectual maturity, particularly in matters of religion, necessitates a gradual and sincere learning process rather than an instant transformation. This critique reveals his concern over the emergence of individuals who, after associating with liberal Islamic circles, feel authorised to reinterpret core religious doctrines without proper scholarly foundation. Within the context of constructing religious authority on Twitter, this narrative forms part of his broader effort to safeguard the purity of Islamic teachings against the influences of liberal ideologies.

Furthermore, Akmal Sjafril challenges the tendency of some groups to first define an external standard of 'moderation' according to liberal values and subsequently compel Islam to conform to that standard. This point is encapsulated in his tweet,

Sumber kesalahannya adalah standar moderatnya dibikin dulu, trus Islamnya disuruh menyesuaikan. Padahal yg sebenarnya, Islam itulah yg moderat, baru kita menyesuaikan [The root of the mistake is that the standard of moderation is created first, then Islam is forced to adjust. In reality, Islam itself is moderate, and we should adjust ourselves to it] (Sjafril, 2021).

In this commentary, Akmal rejects the inversion of value structures, asserting that Islam inherently possesses the principle of moderation (*wasathiyah* [Arabic: balance or moderation]), and should not be forced to comply with external constructs. This narrative strengthens his argument that Islam's internal values are authentic and do not require validation or adjustment from externally imposed liberal frameworks.

Another major theme in Akmal Sjafril's construction of religious authority on Twitter is his criticism of the misuse of religious tolerance discourse by groups he perceives as hostile towards Islam. In one of his tweets, he asserts, *"Orang kalo benci Islam memang suka 'berlindung' di balik topik-topik toleransi, pluralisme, dan semacamnya. Kita disuruh toleran sama mereka, sementara mereka sama sekali nggak toleran sama kita. Tipikal sih* [People who hate Islam often 'hide' behind topics like tolerance, pluralism, and such. We are asked to be tolerant towards them, while they are not tolerant towards us at all. Typical]" (Sjafril, 2024). Through this statement, Akmal highlights what he perceives as a double standard in discussions of religious tolerance. He points out that Muslim communities are often pressured to demonstrate tolerance towards others, even when reciprocal respect is not extended to them. His critical stance is further strengthened by quoting another user's observation, which comments on the inconsistency of defending pluralism while tolerating actions offensive to Muslims, such as the publication of cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad. By drawing attention to these contradictions, Akmal positions himself as a defender of Islam against narratives that, under the guise of tolerance and pluralism, marginalise or undermine Islamic values. This narrative serves to solidify his religious authority among his followers by reinforcing a collective sense of injustice and the need for a robust defence of Islamic teachings in the public sphere.

Another important theme in Akmal Sjafril's narrative construction of religious authority is his critique of the misuse and manipulation of religious discourse for political and social agendas. Akmal frequently expresses concern over how religious values are distorted either to justify deviations or to serve

opportunistic interests. This is captured in his tweet where he states, "*Di Barat, yang beragama udah diperlakukan begini sama #mereka. Di Indonesia, masih ada aja yang pelintir-pelintir dalil agama untuk membela penyimpangan. Di era informasi begini, kenapa masih ada aja yang kurang apdet?* [In the West, those who are religious are already being treated like this by #them. In Indonesia, there are still those who twist religious principles to defend deviance. In this information era, why are there still those who are outdated?]" (Sjafril, 2023). Through this remark, Akmal highlights how religious teachings are deliberately misinterpreted to justify behaviours he considers contrary to Islamic values, warning of the risks such manipulations pose to the integrity of religious understanding.

Furthermore, Akmal critiques the inconsistency and hypocrisy evident among certain groups in the socio-political domain. He observes, "*Tempo hari: 'Jangan gunakan agama dalam politik!' Hari ini: 'Kalo milih capres yang itu, bid'ah!' Semua yang dikerjain sekarang adalah yang kemarin dilarang-larangnya sendiri. Pentingnya memelihara akal* [Some time ago: 'Don't use religion in politics!' Today: 'Choosing that presidential candidate is a heresy!' Everything they do today was previously prohibited by them. It shows the importance of preserving common sense]" (Sjafril, 2023). In this statement, Akmal criticises the selective application of religious arguments, especially when political interests are at stake. He underscores the need for critical thinking ('memelihara akal' [preserving the intellect]) among Muslims to guard against such manipulations.

Additionally, Akmal warns of a broader cultural trend where religious upbringing is increasingly vilified. He notes, "*Kalangan pendukung penyimpangan seksual sekarang lagi gencar menyerang para orang tua yang menanamkan nilai-nilai agama, menuduh mereka telah mendoktrin ajaran diskriminatif. Padahal mereka juga diskriminatif terhadap orang yang taat beragama kan* [Supporters of sexual deviation are now actively attacking parents who instil religious values, accusing them of indoctrination with discriminatory teachings. Yet they themselves are discriminatory against devout believers]" (Sjafril, 2024). Through this tweet, Akmal sheds light on what he perceives as a double standard where advocacy for certain liberal ideologies simultaneously suppresses traditional religious values under the guise of promoting non-discrimination. In constructing his religious authority, these critiques serve not only to defend Islamic teachings but also to portray himself as a guardian of moral clarity amidst an environment of ideological confusion.

The third major theme in Akmal Sjafril's construction of religious authority is the defence of Islamic tolerance and justice. Contrary to accusations often directed at Muslims as being intolerant, Akmal emphasises that true Islamic teachings promote fairness, respect for other religions, and appropriate boundaries without unnecessary provocation. In one tweet, he states, "*Terus aja memelihara kemunafiqan. Kita dibilang intoleran karena menganggap agama lain salah, padahal dia sendiri dari dulu nyalah-nyalahin Islam. Apa belum jelas bahwa relativisme itu adalah self-destructing argument?* 😂 [They keep nurturing hypocrisy. We are called intolerant because we consider other religions wrong, while they have been blaming Islam all along. Isn't it clear that relativism is a self-destructing argument?]" (Sjafril, 2023). Here, Akmal criticises the double standards of those who accuse Muslims of intolerance while themselves exhibiting clear bias and hostility towards Islam.

Further reinforcing the Islamic principle of respecting the religious boundaries of others, Akmal comments, "*Ternyata nikah beda agama juga dilarang di agama Kristen. Di sisi lain, perlukah umat Muslim tersinggung setelah membaca ayat dalam kitab suci mereka ini? Tentu tidak. Itu urusan agama lain. Beginilah toleransi yang baik; tidak saling lompat pagar* [Apparently, interfaith marriage is also forbidden in Christianity. On the other hand, should Muslims be offended after reading verses from their holy book? Of course not. That is their religious matter. This is true tolerance: not overstepping boundaries]" (Sjafril,

2023). In this statement, Akmal advocates for an understanding of tolerance that respects the internal religious tenets of each faith without the need for mutual interference, illustrating a model of co-existence based on Islamic ethics.

Moreover, Akmal critiques the prevailing biases he observes in secular and atheist circles, noting, "*Bikin akun anonim, ngaku-ngaku ateis tapi semua agama diperlakukan baik kecuali Islam. Kira-kira agama asli dari pemilik akun ini apa coba? Nggak usah jawab di reply. Cukup diingat aja siapa yang sebenarnya intoleran* [They make anonymous accounts, claim to be atheists, but all religions are treated fairly except Islam. Guess what the true religion of this account owner is? No need to reply, just remember who is truly intolerant]" (Sjafril, 2023). Here, Akmal points to the selective hostility directed specifically towards Islam under the guise of secularism, reinforcing the necessity of defending the Muslim community against such prejudice.

Lastly, Akmal warns about the broader social implications of liberal ideologies dominating public discourse, tweeting, "

> *Ini keliatannya konyol tapi realitanya ya begitu. Kaum menyimpang sekarang lagi galak bener. Kalau mereka dominan, gak ada toleransi sama kita-kita yang berusaha taat sama agama. Anak-anak dipaksa belajar sex ed yang vulgar, dipaksa ketemu drag queen dll. Di Barat sudah terjadi.* [This may seem ridiculous, but that's the reality. Deviant groups are now extremely aggressive. If they dominate, there will be no tolerance for those of us trying to be devout. Children are forced to learn vulgar sex education, meet drag queens, etc. It has already happened in the West.]" (Sjafril, 2024).

Through this warning, Akmal reinforces the urgency of defending Islamic moral values against what he perceives as societal decay and intolerance towards religious observance.

In constructing this narrative, Akmal Sjafril positions Islamic tolerance not as passive acceptance of everything but as a principled stance rooted in justice, self-respect, and respect for the rights and beliefs of others. His firm but reasoned approach to defending Islamic values against both external attack and internal distortion is key to consolidating his religious authority in the digital public sphere.

In summary, Akmal Sjafril's construction of religious authority on Twitter revolves around three major narrative themes: first, a critique of liberalism and pluralism in Islam; second, a critique of the misuse and manipulation of religion for political and ideological purposes; and third, a defence of Islamic tolerance and justice rooted in authentic Islamic teachings. Each theme reflects Akmal's consistent effort to safeguard Islamic principles and respond critically to contemporary challenges facing the Muslim community. To present these findings more systematically, the summary of his narrative construction is visualised in the following table 1.

Tabel 1. Key Themes and Narrative Expressions in Akmal Sjafril's Construction of Religious Authority on Twitter

No.	Theme	Description	Key Narrative Expression
1	Critique of Liberalism and Pluralism in Islam	Criticism of the spread of liberal and pluralist interpretations within Islamic thought, asserting that Islam itself is inherently moderate.	Questions the sudden 'intellectualism' after joining liberal circles; asserts that Islam defines moderation, not external ideologies.
2	Critique of Misuse of Religion	Highlights how religious values are manipulated for political or ideological purposes, pointing	Criticises selective application of religion in politics; warns against ideological distortion and loss of critical thinking.

		out inconsistencies and hypocrisy.	
3	Defence of Islamic Tolerance and Justice	Advocates for principled Islamic tolerance based on respecting boundaries and defending religious values against double standards.	Emphasises fair interfaith relations without overstepping boundaries; exposes biases against Muslims under secularism.

In constructing his religious authority on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril deliberately selects these three dominant themes to reinforce his position as a credible Islamic thinker. By addressing liberalism, the misuse of religious discourse, and the defence of Islamic tolerance, Akmal strategically frames contemporary issues through an Islamic lens. His narrative choices are not incidental; they are carefully curated to assert the authenticity of Islamic teachings amidst the challenges posed by modern socio-political currents. Through this thematic focus, he not only strengthens his own authority but also provides his followers with a structured Islamic perspective to interpret and respond to the complexities of the modern world.

The findings demonstrate that Akmal Sjafril's strategic use of narrative on Twitter effectively reinforces the construction of digital religious authority by combining ideological consistency, critical engagement with contemporary issues, and a principled defence of Islamic teachings. These narrative patterns affirm the argument presented in the Introduction that religious figures in the digital era must not only possess religious knowledge but also actively shape public discourse to maintain their authority, in line with Heidi Campbell's theory of *religious authority in the digital age* (H. Campbell, 2010b). Akmal's focus on resisting liberal reinterpretations, exposing ideological manipulations, and advocating for true Islamic tolerance reflects a conscious effort to offer an Islamic counter-narrative in a pluralistic and often secular digital environment, as similarly noted by Cheong and Ess (2012) regarding the proactive role of religious leaders in digital media contexts. Thus, the data enrich the understanding of how religious authority is negotiated and sustained in cyberspace, showing that digital religious actors like Akmal Sjafril are not passive participants but active constructors of religious meaning and legitimacy within modern public spheres.

Linguistic Strategies in Building Religious Authority

In constructing his religious authority on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril deliberately employs a variety of linguistic styles. The strategic use of language styles on social media enables him to adapt to the diverse characteristics of his audience, amplify the power of his messages, and increase their overall reach and engagement. Prior research has highlighted that adapting linguistic styles to suit platform norms and audience expectations significantly enhances message resonance and user participation (Al-Badawi, 2024; Amer, 2024; Chen et al., 2022). Moreover, the incorporation of emotional, complex, or discrepancy-highlighted language is proven to strengthen message impact and encourage higher levels of interaction (Barcelos & Munaro, 2022; Deng, Hine, Ji, & Wang, 2021, 2020; Pezzuti, 2023). In Akmal's case, this approach manifests through three main styles: a casual tone characterised by informal, accessible language; a formal style utilising precise, academic expressions; and subtle satire, employing refined humour to deliver critical commentary. By thoughtfully varying his linguistic approach, Akmal not only strengthens the clarity and appeal of his narratives but also sustains a wide engagement base, thereby reinforcing his position as a credible religious voice in the digital public sphere.

In constructing his religious authority on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril frequently employs a casual language style, characterised by the use of everyday speech, conversational tones, and occasional informal expressions or abbreviations (Febrianti, Westin, Vu, & Yang, 2019; Sundaram, Subramaniam, Hamid, & Nor, 2023). This style enables Akmal to communicate in a way that feels approachable and relatable, making religious messages more accessible to a general audience without appearing overly didactic or rigid.

The function of adopting a casual style lies in its ability to create intimacy with followers, reduce communication barriers, and increase message acceptance among readers who might not be accustomed to formal religious discourse. Casual language reduces psychological distance, fostering a sense of familiarity and inclusivity that encourages engagement.

One example of Akmal's use of casual style can be seen in his tweet:

Misalnya, fitrah manusia butuh makan. Tapi ada ajaran agama untuk hanya makan yang halal dan thayyib, jangan berlebihan dsb. Aturan-aturan ini perlu jaga. Kalau tidak, manusia sendiri yang rugi. Misalnya kebanyakan minum minuman manis, jadinya diabetes [For example, it is natural for humans to need food. However, religious teachings instruct us to eat only what is halal and wholesome (thayyib), and not to overindulge, among other guidelines. These rules must be maintained. Otherwise, it is humans themselves who will suffer the consequences. For instance, excessive consumption of sugary drinks can lead to diabetes] (Sjafril, 2023).

In this tweet, Akmal employs a straightforward, conversational tone ("*fitrah manusia butuh makan*," "*kalau tidak*," "*jadinya diabetes*") that mimics natural spoken Indonesian. The use of everyday vocabulary ("*butuh makan*," "*minuman manis*") and informal connectors ("*tapi*," "*kalau tidak*") makes the message easy to grasp. Instead of presenting religious dietary rules in a rigid doctrinal way, Akmal casually frames them around relatable daily experiences, such as overconsumption leading to diabetes. This approach not only makes the content less intimidating but also reinforces the relevance of religious teachings to ordinary life situations, thus enhancing audience receptiveness.

In illustrating his casual language style, Akmal Sjafril often adopts an informal, conversational tone to foster a sense of closeness with his audience. For instance, in his tweet, "*Ini keliatannya konyol tapi realitanya ya begitu. Kaum menyimpang sekarang lagi galak bener. Kalau mereka dominan, gak ada toleransi sama kita-kita yang berusaha taat sama agama. Anak-anak dipaksa belajar sex ed yang vulgar, dipaksa ketemu drag queen dll. Di Barat sudah terjadi* [It looks ridiculous, but that's the reality. The deviant groups are now extremely aggressive. If they dominate, there will be no tolerance for those of us who try to be religious. Children are forced to learn vulgar sex education, forced to meet drag queens, etc. It has already happened in the West]" (Sjafril, 2024), Akmal employs everyday expressions such as *keliatannya* ("it seems"), *ya begitu* ("that's how it is"), *gak ada* ("there is no"), and *kita-kita* ("us all"), which reflect natural spoken Indonesian. The use of relaxed diction and colloquial phrases like *galak bener* ("extremely aggressive") creates an impression of a spontaneous conversation rather than a formal lecture. This casual approach makes his message more relatable and accessible to a broader audience, especially to everyday users of Twitter who are accustomed to informal interactions, thereby strengthening the emotional connection and engagement with his followers.

In constructing his religious authority on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril also frequently adopts a formal language style. Formal style is characterised by the use of standard language, academic terms, logical structure, and a serious tone (Biber, 2023; Bui, 2018; Liardét, Black, & Bardetta, 2019). This style serves to create a scientific and credible impression while simultaneously emphasising Akmal's intellectual authority. In formal communication, writers carefully structure their ideas to maintain coherence and clarity (Heath, 2003; Pollock, 2023), avoiding colloquial expressions and instead employing precise

academic vocabulary that enhances professionalism and trustworthiness (Bui, 2018; Liardét et al., 2019). The serious and objective tone, often achieved through the use of passive voice or third-person narration, helps maintain an impersonal stance that is critical in academic and intellectual discourse (Akbas & Hardman, 2017; Neenan, 2022). By employing this formal style in his tweets, particularly when discussing complex theological or socio-political issues, Akmal not only underscores the credibility of his religious arguments but also positions himself as an authoritative voice within the digital religious landscape. This strategic choice aligns with studies showing that formal language enhances perceptions of credibility, objectivity, and intellectual leadership, particularly in fields where scientific and theological precision is highly valued (Pustovoit, 2017; Regan and Pietrobon, 2010).

One clear example of Akmal Sjafril's use of a formal language style can be seen in his tweet:
Agama ini mengajari manusia caranya menjadi manusia yang sebenarnya, karena seringkali manusia itu lupa, termasuk lupa dengan jati dirinya sendiri [This religion teaches humans how to truly become human, because often they forget, including forgetting their own true nature]" (Sjafril, 2023).

In this tweet, Akmal employs standard and formal Indonesian language, using structured, declarative sentences without colloquial expressions. The choice of words such as "*mengajari manusia*" (teaches humans), "*jati dirinya sendiri*" (their true nature), and the logical explanatory flow contribute to a serious and scholarly tone. This aligns with key characteristics of formal writing, where standard language, logical structure, and objective tone are prioritised to enhance credibility (Biber, 2023; Heath, 2003; Liardét et al., 2019). By presenting religious teachings within a philosophical and introspective framework, Akmal strengthens his image as an intellectual authority in religious discourse, making his messages more persuasive and respected among audiences seeking depth and seriousness.

Another clear example of Akmal Sjafril's use of a formal language style can be found in his statement: "*Dalam semua bidang ilmu ada otoritas, dan hal itu adalah common sense. Anehnya, ada aja yang gak pake common sense saat bicara soal agama* [In every field of knowledge, there is authority, and that is common sense. Strangely, there are still those who fail to use common sense when speaking about religion]" (Sjafril, 2023). This tweet exemplifies a formal style through its logical structure and serious tone, introducing a general principle about knowledge ('authority in every field') and then applying it to the topic of religion. Although there is a slight casual phrase ("*ada aja*"), the overall message is constructed with rational reasoning and appeals to universal principles, reflecting Akmal's effort to assert intellectual authority and position himself as a knowledgeable and credible figure in religious discourse.

In constructing his religious authority on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril also occasionally employs a subtle satire style, characterised by sharp criticism delivered with humour or mild sarcasm. This style enables him to convey critique without direct confrontation, thereby maintaining engagement while preserving politeness. Subtle satire is a literary and rhetorical device that uses humour and mild sarcasm to address serious issues, making the criticism more palatable to audiences (Skalicky, 2019; Watson, 2011). It often relies on indirect criticism—such as irony, allusions, and juxtapositions—to avoid provoking defensive reactions, enabling the satirist to critique sensitive subjects while maintaining social acceptability (Sha, 2023; Watson, 2011). In Akmal's case, subtle satire functions strategically: it not only sustains audience interest but also softens the reception of strong critiques against religious or social issues, ensuring a broader reach. The linguistic complexity of subtle satire—rich in irony and context-dependent meaning—further reinforces the speaker's intellectual depth and wit (Olaniyan et al., 2023; Ramprasath et al., 2024; Teh, Ooi, Chan, & Chuah, 2018). As demonstrated in both literary criticism and social research, this style is particularly effective for engaging critical reflection without alienating readers (Sanga, 2022; Sha, 2023;

Watson, 2011). Akmal's subtle use of humour and irony on sensitive topics enhances his persuasive power while safeguarding the civility of his discourse, consistent with broader traditions of satire used for social and political commentary (Carstocea, 2017; Greenberg, 2020).

One example of Akmal Sjafril's use of subtle satire can be seen in his tweet, "*Negara lain dah jadi zombie, di sini masih aja ngomongin agama!* [Other countries have already become zombies, but here we're still talking about religion!]" (Sjafril, 2023). This statement humorously contrasts the chaotic conditions of so-called "advanced" countries with the perceived stability of a religious society like Indonesia. By portraying other nations as "zombies," Akmal uses mild sarcasm to highlight the moral decay he attributes to secularisation, while simultaneously affirming the ongoing relevance of religion in Indonesia. His use of subtle humour enables him to criticise the blind imitation of foreign values without direct confrontation, maintaining a polite tone and enhancing audience engagement. This style aligns with scholarly observations that subtle satire conveys sharp critique through humour and irony, allowing for critical reflection while preserving social acceptability . It strengthens Akmal's position as a defender of Islamic values while broadening his appeal to audiences who might otherwise be resistant to overtly critical messages.

The variation of language styles serves as a crucial strategy in building religious authority in the age of social media. Akmal Sjafril's flexible use of casual, formal, and subtle satire styles enables him to adapt his messages to a wide range of audiences without compromising his scholarly character. By alternating between approachable, intellectual, and critical tones, he successfully broadens his reach, sustains engagement, and reinforces his intellectual credibility. This linguistic versatility reflects an acute awareness of the dynamics of online communication and the expectations of a diverse digital audience. A summary of the key characteristics and functions of each language style employed by Akmal Sjafril is presented in Table 2, highlighting their respective contributions to the construction of his religious authority.

Table 2. Summary of Language Styles and Their Functions in Building Religious Authority

Language Style	Characteristics	Functions
Casual Style	Everyday speech, conversational tone, informal expressions, abbreviations	Enhances approachability, strengthens emotional connection with a general audience
Formal Style	Standard language, academic terms, logical structure, serious tone	Establishes scholarly credibility, intellectual authority, and trustworthiness

Akmal Sjafril constructs his religious authority on Twitter by employing three main language styles: casual, formal, and subtle satire. The casual style uses everyday language to foster a closer connection with the audience, while the formal style adopts an academic structure to reinforce intellectual credibility. Meanwhile, the subtle satire style employs light humour to deliver criticism without direct confrontation. As summarised in Table 2, these three styles are applied strategically to adapt to the diverse characteristics of his social media audience, strengthen the impact of his messages, and enhance both their reach and user engagement.

A clear pattern emerges from Akmal Sjafril's use of language on Twitter. First, the casual language style is primarily utilised to build rapport and foster a sense of closeness with his audience, making complex religious teachings feel more approachable. Second, the formal style is predominantly employed

when addressing serious or complex theological and socio-political issues, allowing him to assert his intellectual authority and maintain credibility. Third, the subtle satire style is used occasionally, serving as a powerful tool to reinforce his criticisms without appearing confrontational. Overall, his linguistic approach remains highly adaptive to the context of the topic being discussed, ensuring that his message delivery aligns with the sensitivity, seriousness, or informality of each subject.

The strategic variation in Akmal Sjafril's linguistic styles significantly enhances his image as both a relatable and credible intellectual figure in the digital space. By alternating between casual, formal, and subtly satirical tones, Akmal successfully bridges the gap between scholarly authority and everyday accessibility, allowing him to resonate with a wider audience across different social and intellectual strata. This flexibility not only broadens his influence but also sustains audience engagement without alienating followers — a phenomenon supported by research indicating that linguistic adaptation to audience expectations fosters stronger emotional connections and perceived authenticity (Al-Badawi, 2024; Barcelos & Munaro, 2022; Deng et al., 2021). Moreover, the ability to maintain a credible persona while using humour and accessible language mirrors best practices in online communication, where balancing authority and approachability is key to sustaining long-term impact (Skalicky, 2019; Watson, 2011). Thus, Akmal's mastery of linguistic strategies positions him as an influential religious voice in the contemporary digital public sphere.

Integration of Religious Values into Digital Narratives

In constructing his narratives on Twitter, Akmal Sjafril does not only employ a range of language styles but also consistently integrates religious values into his communication. His narratives reflect key religious principles such as interfaith tolerance, noble character (*akhlak*), and critical thinking grounded in faith. Through this approach, Akmal demonstrates that religion should not merely be perceived as rigid dogma, but rather as a dynamic principle of life capable of responding to the complexities of the digital age. Studies on digital religiosity show that social media platforms have become essential arenas for constructing and negotiating religious identities and values, making them increasingly relevant to contemporary human existence (Moinuddin, 2023; Peterson, 2020). Moreover, the use of digital storytelling enables religious messages to promote human dignity, relationality, and ethical reflection amidst global cultural flows (Fader, 2023; Hess, 2011). By embedding religious values into his digital narratives, Akmal effectively positions Islam as a guiding framework that engages with the modern world, thereby affirming the evolving role of religion in shaping attitudes, behaviours, and social realities within the digital public sphere (Chakim, 2022; Pihlaja, 2023).

In embedding religious values into his digital narratives, Akmal Sjafril consistently promotes the principle of interfaith tolerance. A notable example appears in his tweet: "*Ternyata nikah beda agama juga dilarang di agama Kristen. Di sisi lain, perlukah umat Muslim tersinggung setelah membaca ayat dalam kitab suci mereka ini? Tentu tidak. Itu urusan agama lain. Beginilah toleransi yang baik; tidak saling lompat pagar* [It turns out that interfaith marriage is also prohibited in Christianity. On the other hand, should Muslims be offended after reading verses from their scripture? Of course not. That is the concern of another religion. This is true tolerance; not trespassing into the boundaries of others' faiths]" (Sjafril, 2023). In this statement, Akmal asserts a firm commitment to respecting religious differences while simultaneously upholding his own faith values. The choice of phrasing—"*tidak saling lompat pagar*" (not trespassing into others' boundaries)—illustrates a metaphorical yet respectful portrayal of religious coexistence. His tone remains courteous yet resolute, allowing him to convey a strong message of principled tolerance without sounding confrontational. This approach mirrors broader findings that effective digital religious

narratives emphasise relational ethics and maintain civility while addressing sensitive interfaith issues (Moinuddin, 2023; Hess, 2011). By embedding such values into his discourse, Akmal frames religion not as a cause of conflict but as a foundation for respectful coexistence in the digital public sphere.

Another clear example of Akmal Sjafril's promotion of interfaith tolerance can be found in his tweet: "This is so disrespectful. *Itu makam, ditambah lagi makam umat lain. Muslim nggak boleh merendahkan agama lain seperti ini, sebagaimana hal yang sama tak boleh dilakukan kepada Islam* [This is so disrespectful. That is a grave, and moreover a grave of another religious community. Muslims must not belittle other religions in this way, just as the same must not be done to Islam]" (Tweet, 7 February 2024). Through this statement, Akmal firmly reminds his audience of the Islamic ethical imperative to respect the sanctity of other faiths. The use of direct, serious language ("*Muslim nggak boleh merendahkan agama lain*") reinforces the idea that genuine religious commitment includes respecting religious others, not engaging in mockery or hostility. His respectful but assertive tone reflects a mature understanding of tolerance, aligning with research highlighting that religion in digital spaces can foster human dignity and ethical coexistence when framed appropriately (Peterson, 2020; Hess, 2011). Thus, Akmal's narrative bridges doctrinal loyalty with ethical respect for religious plurality in the public discourse.

In addition to promoting tolerance, Akmal Sjafril frequently weaves messages of noble character (*akhlak mulia*) into his Twitter narratives. One notable example is his tweet:

> *Ini jadi catatan tersendiri ya. Yang berkewajiban mendidik anak adalah ortunya. Guru, asatidz, kyai hanya membantu. Kalau ortu gak bisa handle, jangan lempar tanggung jawab ke orang lain. Pesantren itu untuk yang ingin belajar agama, bukan untuk yang nakalnya gak ketulungan* [This is worth noting. Parents are responsible for educating their children. Teachers, religious instructors, and clerics are only there to help. If parents are unable to handle it, they should not pass the responsibility onto others. Islamic boarding schools are for those who want to learn religion, not for those who are incorrigibly naughty]" (Sjafril, 2023).

In this tweet, Akmal emphasises the importance of personal responsibility and honesty in fulfilling one's duties, particularly in parenting and religious education. His reminder that parents, not institutions alone, are fundamentally responsible for a child's moral upbringing reflects a core ethical teaching in Islam — that of *amanah* (trust) and accountability. Rather than blaming external factors, individuals are encouraged to embody sincerity and patience in fulfilling their roles. The tone is assertive yet educative, underscoring that religious practice should not only focus on rituals but must be manifested in everyday ethical conduct. By integrating such ethical reminders into his digital discourse, Akmal strengthens the understanding that Islam is a comprehensive way of life that governs not only acts of worship but also moral character and social responsibility. This approach aligns with broader findings in digital religion studies, which show that online religious narratives are increasingly emphasising character formation alongside ritual adherence (Moinuddin, 2023; Pihlaja, 2023).

Another example is the following tweet,

> *Beberapa kasus perundungan, kekerasan dan pelecehan yang terjadi di lingkungan pesantren perlu mendapat perhatian lebih, sebab para santri yang intens belajar agama semestinya paling siap untuk melawan kemunkaran* [Several cases of bullying, violence and abuse that have occurred in Islamic boarding schools need more attention, because students who are intensively studying religion should be the most prepared to fight against immorality] (Akmal, Sjafril, 2024).

In this tweet, Akmal calls for integrity and consistency between religious knowledge and behaviour. He highlights that those who intensively study religion should embody higher moral standards, particularly in opposing wrongdoing (*kemunkaran*). The message implies that religious education is not merely about mastering doctrines but about internalising virtues such as justice, compassion, and ethical

conduct. By criticising misconduct like bullying and abuse, even within religious environments, Akmal reinforces the idea that true religious identity must be reflected in noble character (akhlak mulia), not just ritual compliance. This approach aligns with contemporary understandings that authentic religiosity integrates ethical excellence with doctrinal knowledge (Fader, 2023; Hess, 2011).

In addition to promoting tolerance and noble character, Akmal Sjafril also embeds the value of critical thinking rooted in faith within his digital narratives. One clear example can be found in his tweet:

> *Kalau ada orang bilang sejarah membuktikan bahwa agama dan sains harus pisah jalan, pasti dia cuma tau renaissance tanpa pernah mengkaji Al-Andalus. Belajar sejarah hasil propaganda* [If someone says that history proves that religion and science must be separated, they only know about the Renaissance and have never studied Al-Andalus. Learning history from propaganda] (Sjafril, 2023).

In this statement, Akmal challenges the widespread secular narrative that religion and science are inherently incompatible. By citing historical references such as the civilisation of Al-Andalus, he invites his audience to critically re-evaluate dominant historical interpretations that marginalise the contribution of Islamic civilisation to scientific advancement.

In this statement, Akmal challenges the widespread secular narrative that portrays religion and science as inherently incompatible. By referencing the civilisation of Al-Andalus, he invites his audience to critically reassess dominant historical interpretations that have marginalised the contributions of Islamic civilisation to scientific advancement. The civilisation of Al-Andalus (711–1492) played a pivotal role in the global history of science, particularly through its significant achievements in medicine, pharmacy, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and translation activities. Scholars such as Ibn Wafid, Averroes, and Maimonides made notable contributions to dietetics and medical science (Salas-Salvadó, Huetos-Solano, García-Lorda, & Bulló, 2006; Shamsaei, Hamedi, & Yousefi, 2022), while mathematicians and astronomers furthered scientific knowledge, with figures like Al-Khawarizmi leading the indigenisation of mathematical sciences within Islamic civilisation (Sidik, Sidek, & Abu Bakar, 2012). The intellectual tradition of Al-Andalus, nurtured by philosophers such as Ibn al-Sīd al-Batalyawsī and Ibn Bājja, integrated Greek philosophy with Islamic thought, advancing logical reasoning and the scientific method (Bueno & Vallejo, 2017; Forcada, 2006). Through the establishment of libraries and translation centres in Cordoba and Toledo, the works of ancient Greece, Persia, and India were preserved, expanded, and ultimately transmitted to Europe, laying critical foundations for the European Renaissance (Halilović, 2017; Koç, 2018). Furthermore, advancements in optics and mechanics from the Islamic Middle Ages significantly shaped classical physics (Kheirandish, 2012).

His emphasis is not merely on critical scepticism but rather on critical reflection rooted in religious understanding. Through this approach, Akmal encourages his followers to cultivate critical thinking skills without severing them from the epistemological foundation of faith. This method resonates with the broader intellectual tradition within Islamic thought, where reasoning (*'aql*) and revelation (*wahy*) are understood as complementary rather than contradictory sources of knowledge. Historically, Islamic scholars have maintained that the exercise of rational inquiry should reinforce, not undermine, religious conviction, as demonstrated in the works of thinkers from Al-Andalus and beyond. Akmal's approach thus revitalises this tradition in the contemporary digital context, promoting a model of critical engagement that upholds intellectual integrity while remaining deeply anchored in religious principles.

To provide a clearer understanding of how Akmal Sjafril integrates religious values into his digital narratives, Table 3 summarises the key religious principles he promotes, the representative examples from his tweets, and the core messages conveyed. This will be followed by a restatement for clarity, a

description of emerging patterns, and an interpretation of their broader significance within the context of digital religious communication.

Table 3. Summary of the Integration of Religious Values in Akmal Sjafril's Digital Narratives

Religious Value	Tweet Example	Core Message
Interfaith Tolerance	"Tentu tidak. Itu urusan agama lain. Beginilah toleransi yang baik; tidak saling lompat pagar [Apparently, interfaith marriage is also forbidden in Christianity. On the other hand, should Muslims be offended after reading verses from their holy book? Of course not. That is their religious matter. This is true tolerance: not overstepping boundaries]" (Sjafril, 2023)	Respect boundaries between faiths and maintain principled tolerance without compromising beliefs.
Respect for Other Religions	" Muslim nggak boleh merendahkan agama lain seperti ini, sebagaimana hal yang sama tak boleh dilakukan kepada Islam [This is so disrespectful. That is a grave, and moreover a grave of another religious community. Muslims must not belittle other religions in this way, just as the same must not be done to Islam]" (Sjafril, 2024)	Uphold dignity and avoid mocking other religions as part of ethical religious practice.
Noble Character (Akhlak Mulia)	"Yang berkewajiban mendidik anak adalah ortunya... Pesantren itu untuk yang ingin belajar agama, bukan untuk yang nakalnya gak ketulungan [Parents are responsible for educating their children. Teachers, religious instructors, and clerics are only there to help. If parents are unable to handle it, they should not pass the responsibility onto others. Islamic boarding schools are for those who want to learn religion, not for those who are incorrigibly naughty]" (Sjafril, 2023)	Emphasise parental responsibility and personal accountability in moral education.
Moral Integrity and Justice	"Beberapa kasus perundungan, kekerasan dan pelecehan yang terjadi di lingkungan pesantren perlu mendapat perhatian lebih, sebab para santri yang intens belajar agama semestinya paling siap untuk melawan kemunkaran [Several cases of bullying, violence and abuse that have occurred in Islamic boarding schools need more attention, because students who are intensively studying religion should be the most prepared to fight against immorality]" (Sjafril, 2024)	Religious knowledge must lead to higher ethical standards and active opposition to wrongdoing.
Critical Thinking Rooted in Faith	"Kalau ada orang bilang sejarah membuktikan bahwa agama dan sains harus pisah jalan... Belajar sejarah hasil propaganda [If someone says that history proves that religion and science must be separated, they only know about the	Encourage critical historical analysis while remaining rooted in Islamic epistemology.

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Renaissance and have never studied Al-Andalus. Learning history from propaganda]" (Sjafril, 2023)

Based on the data presented in Table 3, it is clear that Akmal Sjafril consistently integrates core religious values into his digital narratives on Twitter. These values include promoting interfaith tolerance by respecting religious boundaries, encouraging the cultivation of noble character through personal responsibility, and fostering critical thinking that remains rooted in faith. Akmal carefully selects his words and tone to deliver messages that are firm yet respectful, combining moral reminders with calls for intellectual engagement. This consistent integration shows that his approach to digital communication is not random but strategically directed to reinforce religious principles in everyday online interactions.

Several recurring patterns emerge from Akmal's integration of religious values into his narratives. First, there is a consistent emphasis on respect for religious others, showing that tolerance must coexist with firmness in one's own faith. Second, noble character (*akhlak mulia*) is frequently highlighted, where moral responsibility and integrity are prioritised over mere ritual observance. Third, Akmal consistently promotes critical reflection, urging his followers to question dominant secular narratives while staying anchored in Islamic epistemology. Finally, his tone remains educative yet assertive, balancing between being relatable and upholding high ethical standards. These patterns suggest that Akmal's religious communication strategy is not only about defending faith but also about shaping ethical, thoughtful, and resilient Muslim identities in the digital era.

The integration of these religious values into Akmal Sjafril's digital narratives implies that religion, when articulated appropriately in digital spaces, can serve as a dynamic, guiding framework for public life. His method shows that religiosity in the digital age is not confined to ritual expressions but extends to ethical engagement, social responsibility, and critical reasoning. This finding supports broader research indicating that digital media can enhance the role of religion as a force for ethical reflection and community formation (Fader, 2023; Moinuddin, 2023; Peterson, 2020). Akmal's approach contributes to contemporary understandings of digital religiosity by demonstrating how Islamic principles can be creatively mobilised to navigate modern societal challenges while maintaining theological depth and ethical integrity.

Discussion

This research explored how Akmal Sjafril constructs his religious authority on Twitter and identified three key strategies underpinning his approach. First, he systematically builds narratives that defend Islamic teachings against liberal and secular reinterpretations. Second, he employs a strategic variation of language styles—casual, formal, and subtle satire—to effectively engage diverse audiences while maintaining his intellectual credibility. Third, he consistently integrates core religious values such as interfaith tolerance, noble character (*akhlak mulia*), and critical thinking rooted in faith into his communications. These strategies collectively enable Akmal to position himself as a credible and relatable Islamic thinker in the digital public sphere, offering a structured Islamic response to contemporary socio-political challenges.

The findings of this study can be explained through the theoretical lens of digital religious authority proposed by Campbell (2010b), which emphasises that in the digital era, religious authority is increasingly negotiated rather than automatically granted by traditional institutions. In such a context, Akmal Sjafril's

success in building religious authority on Twitter stems from his strategic adaptation to the fragmented nature of social media, where credibility must be continually demonstrated. His focus on narrative defence against liberal reinterpretations aligns with Campbell's notion that religious figures must actively frame their messages to maintain legitimacy. Simultaneously, the variation of his language styles — ranging from casual to formal and subtle satire — corresponds with the audience's expectation for communicators to be both intellectually credible and emotionally relatable (Cheong & Ess, 2012). Furthermore, Akmal's consistent embedding of religious values, such as tolerance, noble character, and critical faith-based thinking, addresses the audience's demand for moral guidance amidst the rapid flow of conflicting digital information. Thus, the relationship between narrative construction, linguistic strategy, and value integration emerges because the digital public sphere rewards figures who can harmoniously blend doctrinal integrity with adaptability, in accordance with contemporary theories of digitally mediated religious authority.

The findings of this study align with previous research emphasising the importance of defending Islamic teachings from liberal and secular reinterpretations through consistent narrative construction on social media. Studies such as Simamora and Farid (2024) and Mamalipurath (Mamalipurath, 2022) highlighted the necessity of maintaining theological integrity and avoiding secular translations of Islamic concepts in digital spaces. Similar to these findings, Akmal Sjafril also prioritises consistency by building narratives that defend traditional Islamic teachings. However, this study adds novelty by showing how Akmal not only defends Islamic orthodoxy but also creatively combines theological defence with language style variation (casual, formal, and satirical), an aspect less explored in prior studies focused mainly on content orthodoxy rather than delivery style.

In terms of the integration of religious values into digital narratives, the results of this research correspond with broader findings in digital religion studies. Campbell and Cheong (2022) as well as Hess (2011) found that successful digital religious engagement blends theological content with broader societal values like dignity, ethical responsibility, and relationality. Akmal Sjafril's consistent embedding of religious values—particularly interfaith tolerance, noble character, and faith-based critical thinking— confirms this integration trend. Nevertheless, this study offers a new contribution by specifically mapping how these values are embedded not merely at a conceptual level but through carefully curated tweets that balance assertiveness and respect, addressing real-time socio-political issues on a highly public platform like Twitter.

Furthermore, the active construction of religious authority observed in this study parallels the observations of Golan and Martini (2020) and Salam-Salmaoui et al. (2024), who noted that religious figures increasingly build their authority through digital image management and adaptive communication. Similar to their findings, Akmal adapts his communication style according to audience needs, blending scientific credibility with emotional relatability. However, this study advances the discourse by demonstrating that Akmal's approach does not merely adapt to algorithms or trends, but remains grounded in doctrinal integrity. His strategic use of adaptive language styles reinforces religious authority while preserving authenticity, addressing concerns raised by Siler and Karsli (2024) regarding the ethical challenges of religious discourse in networked societies. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in its demonstration of how digital religious authority can be actively constructed without diluting core Islamic values, offering a more nuanced understanding of religious leadership in contemporary digital environments.

The findings of this study carry significant social, historical, and ideological implications for understanding the transformation of religious authority in the digital age. Socially, Akmal Sjafril's approach

demonstrates that religious engagement on social media is not merely reactive but can be proactively structured to cultivate ethical communities grounded in doctrinal authenticity. This aligns with Campbell's (2010b) theory of *networked religion*, which emphasises that religious actors in digital spaces can consciously curate religious identity and community through adaptive and strategic communication. Historically, Akmal's method reflects the enduring Islamic tradition of harmonising reason ('aql) and revelation (wahy), a synthesis deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship, particularly during the Golden Age of Islamic civilisation as described by Halilović (2017). His practice signals a digital continuation of this tradition, asserting that critical reflection and faith are not mutually exclusive even in modern virtual arenas.

Ideologically, Akmal's strategy challenges dominant secular-liberal narratives that advocate the privatisation of religion and the marginalisation of theological voices in public spaces. By actively integrating religious principles into public digital discourse, he reclaims space for Islamic epistemology within contemporary sociopolitical conversations, resonating with the argument proposed by Bunt (2018) that *cyber Islamic environments* can serve both as spaces of resistance and revival against global secular homogenisation. This study thus extends previous research by illustrating that religious authority today is not solely inherited from traditional institutions but can be reconstituted digitally through narrative framing, linguistic versatility, and consistent ethical anchoring (Cheong & Ess, 2012; Whyte, 2022). Ultimately, the findings enrich broader academic discussions on digital religion by showing that strategic and principled digital engagement can sustain and even revitalise religious legitimacy amidst the challenges of globalised digital modernity.

The findings of this study reveal both the functions and dysfunctions inherent in the digital construction of religious authority. On the positive side, Akmal Sjafril's strategic use of narratives, linguistic adaptability, and ethical consistency demonstrates that religious figures can effectively maintain doctrinal authenticity while engaging dynamic digital publics. This fosters greater accessibility to Islamic teachings, revitalises religious literacy among younger audiences, and provides a principled counter-narrative to secular or liberal interpretations that may otherwise dominate online spaces (H. A. Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hess, 2011). However, the study also highlights potential dysfunctions: the emphasis on defensive narrative construction, while necessary, may risk reinforcing in-group biases and diminishing opportunities for broader interfaith dialogue if not balanced carefully (Hashmi, Rashid, & Ahmad, 2021). Moreover, the demand for constant content production and audience engagement in digital media environments may pressure religious figures to simplify complex theological ideas into more digestible, slogan-like formats (Siler & Karsli, 2024), potentially diluting intellectual depth over time. These reflections suggest that while digital platforms offer powerful tools for sustaining religious authority, they also present challenges that require continuous ethical vigilance, critical reflexivity, and strategic adaptation to preserve the integrity and richness of religious discourse in the long term.

Based on the findings and identified dysfunctions, it is crucial to formulate strategic actions to optimise the positive impact of religious authority construction in the digital sphere while mitigating potential risks. First, religious communicators should be encouraged to develop balanced digital literacy training, enabling them to maintain theological depth while adapting to the rapid and simplified nature of social media (H. A. Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Second, there is a need for ethical communication guidelines specifically designed for religious figures engaging in digital spaces, emphasising responsible discourse, the avoidance of polarising language, and the promotion of dialogical openness (Siler & Karsli, 2024; Wang, 2023). Third, Islamic institutions and community leaders should invest in creating collaborative digital platforms that foster critical engagement, where religious education is presented comprehensively and

inclusively rather than through fragmented narratives. Finally, regular evaluative monitoring should be conducted to assess whether the digital activities of religious figures truly promote intellectual growth, interfaith respect, and societal cohesion, thus ensuring that the construction of religious authority in the digital era remains aligned with the broader mission of Islamic ethics and public good (Cheong & Ess, 2012; Hashmi et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study found that Akmal Sjafril constructs his religious authority on Twitter through three main strategies: the systematic construction of narratives defending Islamic teachings against liberal and secular reinterpretations; the strategic variation of linguistic styles—casual, formal, and subtle satire—to engage a diverse digital audience; and the consistent integration of core religious values such as interfaith tolerance, noble character (akhlak mulia), and faith-rooted critical thinking within his digital narratives. These findings illustrate that in the digital era, religious authority is no longer static but must be actively negotiated and constructed through adaptive communication strategies while maintaining doctrinal authenticity.

The principal scholarly contribution of this research lies in presenting an integrative model that combines theological narrative, linguistic strategy, and value integration in the construction of religious authority on social media. This study advances understanding by showing how religious figures can maintain their credibility and authenticity in highly dynamic digital environments. Furthermore, it highlights a new approach by emphasising not only the content of religious messages but also how linguistic adaptability and the strategic embedding of values can strengthen a figure's position within the competitive landscape of digital public discourse.

Nonetheless, this research has certain limitations. It focuses on a single case study—Akmal Sjafril on Twitter—which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other religious figures operating across different platforms or cultural contexts. Moreover, the study adopts a primarily qualitative approach to analysing narrative and linguistic strategies without quantitatively measuring the impact on audience perception. Future research is therefore encouraged to explore a wider range of religious figures across multiple digital platforms and employ quantitative methods to assess the effectiveness of these communication strategies in constructing and maintaining religious authority in digital spaces.

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