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**DIGITAL RELIGION:  
THE PACKAGING AND PERSUASION OF CELEBRITY PREACHERS IN  
CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA**

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**Abstract:** Digital platforms and social media development have brought major changes in mediating religion with technology. This makes new means and even new methodologies of digital religion in the contemporary era. The emergence of Islamic da'wah applications and the proliferation of Islamic social media have created a new form of universal religious involvement in Indonesia's digital space. This article examines the use of digital platforms and social media created and managed by two celebrity preachers, Aa Gym and Das'ad Latif. Focusing on the Islamic application 'Aa Gym Apps' and social media on Instagram and YouTube, these two celebrity preachers created a new, broader religious authority. In addition, the packaging and persuasion of the two preachers, who have different characteristics, have attracted millions of followers from upper elite segments of society and urban millennial Muslims who are untouched by other preachers. By using Shusterman's analysis of aesthetic arguments and persuasive perception, this research highlights the intimacy and visibility of two preachers articulating Islam on digital platforms and social media. This study argues that using digital platforms and social media has enabled celebrity preachers to continue to exist in the contemporary era and create visibility for preaching that transcends the boundaries of space and time.

**Keywords:** Digital religion, celebrity preachers, religious authorities, virtual preaching, aesthetic arguments and perceptual persuasion.

## 1. Introduction

*Gasspol Ustadz!* is the jargon of an Islamic da'wah program organized by Metro TV (one of the private TV stations in Indonesia). This jargon which attracted the attention of the upper-middle-class segment of society in urban areas and public officials in this country. Another previous preacher, KH—Abdullah Gymnastiar, popularly known as Aa Gym, also filled these segments. I attended sermons delivered by these two preachers in Surabaya and Jakarta, whose speeches showed different sides as celebrity preachers. Das'ad Latif entertained the audience with his humorous lectures accompanied by jokes laced with elements of sensible advice. Meanwhile, Aa Gym's lectures touched the hearts of the audience by including elements of wisdom in each narrative of his lectures. One of Das'ad Latif's brands is *Police Ustadz*, where his segment is mostly for security forces such as the Police and Indonesian National Army (TNI) and officials at the level of Ministers and Presidents.

By utilizing digital technology, Aa Gym can attract the millennial segment and introduce them to a platform called 'Aa Gym Apps. It can be downloaded for free on the Apps Store and @aaqym as its Instagram social media. He created Aa Gym apps in 2012 through MQ Digital, a digital service owned by his company, Management Qolbu Corp, which provides various religious service needs for the community. On this platform, there are Aa Gym lecture services, constructive quotes, inclusion of official Aa Gym social media accounts, exclusive event updates, event reminders, and an “ask the Ustadz” service. Watson considered Aa Gym to be a lecturer (at that time) who was a “celebrity kyai”, which meant that his popularity and flying hours exceeded those of celebrities (Watson 2005).

The two trends in celebrity preachers above are a phenomenon of religion entering a new dimension in the digital spaces provided and created for socializing. Hjarvard said that digital platforms and social media always mediate the calls for goodness and religious teachings proclaimed by Islamic preachers. Preachers use social issues and popular cultural genres to be framed into material suitable for sacred religious texts (Hjarvard 2011, Stout and Buddenbaum 2003). This becomes the most preferred material by followers and listeners who consume their lectures on various digital platforms. The presence of the public flooding the consumption of lectures on social media is a massive effect of technological and communication developments. However, there are still conservative Islamic preachers who continue to use traditional ways of promoting themselves, such as *kyai* or *'ulamā*, in Islamic educational institutions. They interact more with their students than the wider community (Mughtar and Ritchey 2014). However, this strategy does not reach urban communities and millennials enough.

I argue that the emergence of digital platforms and social media into the world of preaching allows Muslims from various group backgrounds

and various levels of social strata to spread their ideas openly and have passed through editorial filtering interventions. In his thesis, Clarke calls social media a 'new religion' in Western society to express the idea of 'New Age Californian Counterculture'. They use smartphones and digital platforms to substitute for holy books and expand their devotional preaching with social media (Clarke 2020). This phenomenon occurs in Indonesia, where the two preachers are creating a new religious authority in contemporary Indonesia. Many similar phenomena have developed regarding how social media platforms are filled with conservative preachers and traditionalist Islamic discourse (Halim 2018, Husein and Slama 2018, Nisa 2018, Zaid et al. 2022, Hudgins 2019, Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati 2022, Rivero 2019, Latepo, Suharto, and Nurdin 2021), but these studies only consider a narrow segment. What is happening in contemporary Indonesia is that the Islamic market is filled with traditionalists and modernists who have long maintained their old authority and are unable to configure religion to be produced and consumed in broad digital spaces by lower and upper-middle-class Muslim segments.

This article highlights the visualization of Islamic preaching on social media as the new face of 'Contemporary Indonesian Islam'. This research explores the involvement of digital platforms and social media used by Das'ad Latif and Aa Gym, who have established themselves as celebrity preachers. By focusing on the packaging of Islamic da'wah narratives and their contents, I use Richard Shusterman's analysis of aesthetic arguments and perceptual persuasion as an aesthetic argument built on the genre of 'beautiful' sentences with a certain mimetic style (Shusterman 1983).

This study argues that the two preachers use digital platforms and social media as well as visualization of preaching with different patterns. Aa Gym's use of the digital platforms 'Aa Gym Apps and @aagym (Instagram) and the joke-rationalist narratives used by Das'ad Latif on social media have increased the visibility of its popularity in untouched market segments. They consider that both followers come from millennials, elite circles of state officials and academics. Both have shaped public opinion on solutions to various religious, social and political problems by beautifying digital content with pictures, funny videos and text filled with wisdom. Beautifying digital content with jokes and a touch of the heart is important for Das'ad Latif and Aa Gym because it is to convince their followers to let religious messages enter the dimensions of their minds with easy-to-digest language that are monopolized by examples of the reality of life. In short, both represent a combination of traditional and modernist preachers who can attract followers from various circles. This article suggests that Islamic applications and social media are new ways for Indonesian Muslims to consume religious material from the internet. These two platforms have created new forms of religious involvement in the technological landscape for the expansion of

religious authority, making religious interaction increasingly easy to obtain and making Islamic da'wah more desirable than studying at formal religious institutions.

## **2. From Sacred Texts to Digital Platforms: Trends in Contemporary Indonesian Religious Authority**

Indonesian people have a high interest in internet use. Survey results from the Indonesian Internet Service Users Association (APJII) in 2022-2023 saw Indonesian internet users reach 215.63 million users or 78.19% of Indonesia's total population of 275.77 million. This number increased by 2.67% in the 2021-2022 period to 210.03 million users from the total population of Indonesia (APJII 2023). Meanwhile, Pinem, in his research, said that since 2017, Indonesia has experienced a drastic increase from 143 million users (54.68%) to almost 74% in 2020 (Pinem et al. 2020). Of this number, Jurriens and Tapsell said 85% of users use smartphones to access the internet (Jurriens and Tapsell 2017, 235). This number makes Indonesia the fourth largest country of active smartphone users worldwide after China, India and America (Kominfo 2019). Urban areas are the areas with the most internet penetration because internet use is the primary lifestyle of urban people (Jiang 2019, Qiu et al. 2021, Zhou, Wen, and Lee 2022). Moreover, the number of millennial Muslims spread across urban and rural areas has reached almost 207 million people, indicating a new religious trend in digital media (Raharjo et al. 2020). So Flynn and Nysse call these "digital religious believers", a term for religious people who live and interact with religion with digital technology (Flynn 2021, Nysse 2011). In other words, religion becomes a meeting point between technological platforms, religious expression and contemporary culture (Campbell and Tsuria 2021, Peterson 2020, 4).

In a social context, religion is seen as a rule that binds and controls human behaviour through a set of human textual norms, rituals and values (Guo and Metcalfe 2019, Stark and Bainbridge 2013). The power of religion can force people and society massively and collectively to produce new authorities based on the narratives created (Cheong 2021). Therefore, Eickelman suggests two reasons why religious authority was created. First, religion is domination to coerce, and secondly, religion is naturally recognized openly and with full awareness as a set of needs that humans need (Eickelman 1980). These two creations of authority exist in Islam, where the texts of the holy books (Qur'ān and Ḥadīth) serve as guidelines for controlling human behaviour, either by "force" or consciously of religious needs (Dabashi 2017). Eickelman's first authority was created in the early days of Islam (the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions). Later, new authorities emerged from among the *Tābi'in* (the generation after the Prophet Muhammad and his companions) and the *Tābi' Tābi'in* (the generation after the *Tābi'in*), and they made efforts to

explore Islamic law independently (*ijtihad*) based on the assumption that there was no law. They are Stated in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth (Rahman 1962). In the twentieth century, *ijtihad* as a juridical decision is still used to meet the increasingly complex demands of modern life. No longer following the pattern of the *Tābi' Tābi'in* generation, Muslim scholars in the 20th century developed a new instrument called *al-ijtihad al-jamā'i* (Makhlouf 2020). *Al-ijtihad al-jamā'i* is an instrument to deepen Islamic law using independent and collective legal reasoning methods. This method is a new pattern where the creation of religious authority is very important and dynamic in the Islamic world.

However, contemporary digital culture has disrupted the essence of traditional religion and the conservative ways religionists produce religious authority. They were well established in conveying ideas through ancient rituals and strict worship (Campbell and Connelly 2020, 482). Even though they are involved in online recitation, they still sit behind tables wearing ritual clothing, perform Arabic prayers, and repeat the actions they received through religious education at Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) or offline recitation (*taklim*). Digital religion allows followers to attend offline recitations no longer; in other words, they have to behave with high politeness and unreasonableness, as is done in *pesantren*. For preachers like 'Aa Gym and Das'ad Latif, *tabligh* or religious lectures are no longer delivered openly and take much time and money. They can both use their digital applications or their official social media. With these two platforms, they firmly state that online recitation is of the same value as offline recitation or *tabligh akbar*. „Aa Gym said: “The Qur'ān is the same, the Ḥadīth is the same. The only difference is the media. While you can convey to people even just one verse”” [says the Prophet Muhammad PBUH in his Ḥadīth].

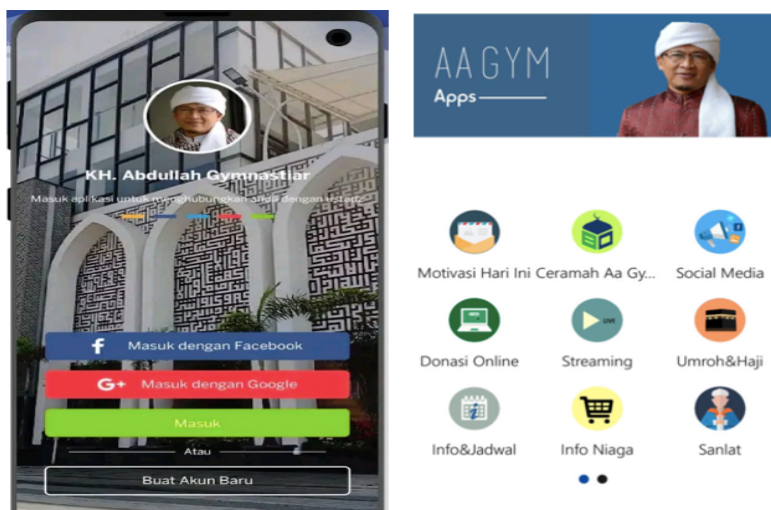
The transformation of print media to digital media has shifted the traditional authority held by '*ulamā' sepuh*' (old '*ulamā'*') to '*ulamā' gaul*' or millennial '*ulamā'*'. This makes the relationship between religion and popular culture increasingly less distant (Herbert 2011; Solahudin and Fakhruroji 2020). Cheong gave an example: tweets on digital media platforms make reference material for Muslims in studying religion. Even though long explanatory texts accompany these tweets, they are a mixture of sacred texts and their opinions, which are packaged with pearls of wisdom to attract legitimacy from readers (Cheong 2014). Finally, we have found a new way to convey all the knowledge and values contained in sacred texts into a new digital platform that allows everyone to access it massively, anywhere and anytime. Religion is no longer exclusively enjoyed by educated religious groups (such as *pesantren* students) but can also be enjoyed by urbanites and people in peripheral areas.

### 3. Islamic Digital Platform: 'Aa Gym' Apps

Introducing themselves through popular media channels, Das'ad Latif and 'Aa Gym proclaimed themselves as celebrity preachers. In contrast to Das'ad Latif, who started his preaching career at university, Yan Gymnastiar, better known as 'Aa Gym, first entered the world of preaching on one of the national private television stations in the *Hikmah Pagi* program. Through this event, Aa Gym is the only junior preacher who is directly involved in the world of national preaching. Aa Gym was able to reap profits of billions of Rupiah from the development of the Pesantren Business Unit (UUP) in the form of PT. MQs, PT. MQ magazine, and several radio broadcasting companies such as *Radio Ummat* and *Radio Bening Hati*. On this basis, 'Aa Gym dared to appear as a preacher on national television in 2000. Not long after, thanks to his skills in public speaking and his educational background in engineering, Aa Gym quickly became known throughout the country thanks to him creating an Islamic preaching application platform named 'Aa Gym' Apps under his company, namely PT. MQ Digital (see Figure 1). After becoming famous, he admitted that he had high grades. 'Aa Gym receives 1,200 invitations as a lecturer every month with a sales value of USD. 100,000 per hour.

Meanwhile, Das'ad Latif debuted as a local preacher when he was a student at a university in Makassar. During his travels, Das'ad Latif then spread his wings into the world of politics. In 2013, he ran as a candidate for Mayor of Makasar, accompanying Tamsil Linrung, who was supported by three national parties. The votes of Das'ad Latif and Tamsil Linrung were defeated, only reaching 93,868 votes or only finishing third in one round of elections. After failing in politics, Das'ad Latif returned to pursue his skills as a preacher and intensively campaigned for Islam through his social media *DasadLatif* (YouTube) and *dasatlatif1212* (Instagram). Like 'Aa Gym, Das'ad Latif also wants himself to be known to the national public and then spread to national private television in several programs, including *Ngopi* (*Ngobrol Perihal Iman*), SCTV in the *Barakallah* program, Metro TV in the *Gaspoll* event with Ustadz Das'ad Latif, and on NET.TV in the *Hikmah di Balik Kisah* and *Syiar Akbar* programs. After actively appearing on television, he became better known as a 'celebrity ustadz' rather than a 'popular ustadz', as with Felix Siauw (Latifah and Romario 2019).

Figure 1. Digital Platform 'Aa Gym Apps Along with the features of Islamic da'wah



Ameer Ali believes that this is unlike traditional conservative preachers who preach Islam behind closed doors in classical Islamic institutions (Ali 2007). However, in the context of the authority given by Aa Gym, this battle was won by *ijtihad*, where he has opened an open space to the people's problems through the latest features of 'Aa Gym's Apps. This can trigger inner satisfaction in followers where they feel directly the sensation of being responded to by the character they are interested in.

#### 4. Das'ad Latif's Virtual Da'wah

Known as the *Police Ustadz* since his funny video lectures made the police officers laugh, Das'ad Latif's name skyrocketed until it went viral on all social media. Through the official accounts of two social media, *DasadLatif* (YouTube) and *dasatlatif1212* (Instagram), they have gained 2.93 million subscribers on YouTube and 1.6 million followers on Instagram. With that amount, Das'ad Latif expanded to national television platforms such as Aa Gym.

Because of the humorous view of his preaching, Das'ad Latif is more easily accepted by all groups than other preachers who look serious. Even though this is not the main goal in Islamic preaching, playing with the rhythm of the people so that the religious message is easily digested is a way of marketing da'wah that many preachers often need to remember. Syamsul Rijal looks at this physical appearance, religious factors, persuasion skills, and social media as four important points for a preacher to use this strategy (Rijal 2020).



The fall of the New Order regime and the rise of the press and social media were important developments that allowed preachers such as Das'ad Latif to take over this position as celebrity preachers quickly. Proclaiming Islamic orthodoxy using digital platforms and social media is a renewable strategy that is more efficient and effective than literary genres through classical Islamic studies, such as in pesantren (Hoesterey 2020, Muzakki 2010). Like 'Aa Gym, Das'ad Latif quickly won the hearts of the upper elite segments of society. With the help of the upper elite segment, Das'ad Latif's preaching spread quickly and attracted millions of viewers among Muslim youth. In November 2023, his YouTube platform was followed by 2.593 million followers (up 2.45%) from the previous year and had more than 357.3 million views from the 1,1058 videos he shared. More than 1.6 million followers have liked his followers on Instagram @dasadlatif1212 with 2,818 posts. He mostly displays funny preaching videos and provides intriguing narratives to attract visitors interested in listening to his preaching.

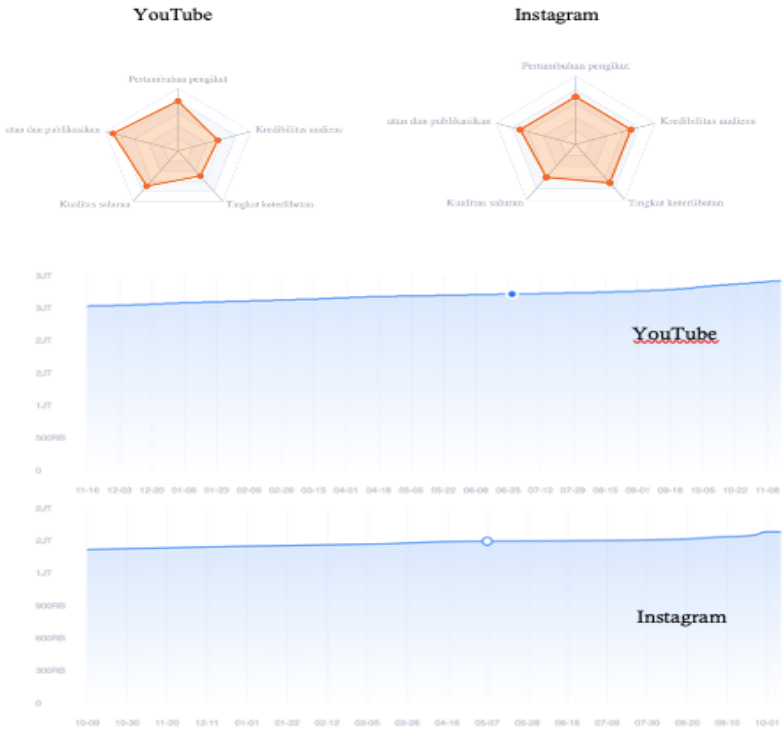


Figure 2: Das'ad Latif's NexScore and Social Media Measurement Metrics for Youtube and Instagram as of November 17, 2023

Table 1: Youtube and Instagram Channel Statistics and Analytics as of



November 2023

Metric Components	YouTube	Instagram
Number of videos	1.058	2.818
Number of followers	2,93 Million (↑+2.45%)	1,6 Million (↑+3.40%)
Number of views	357,3 Million times	-
Average views*	140.8K (↓-32.30%)	1,2 Million (↓-10.59%)
Engagement rate**	2.48% (↑+0.08%) (Intermediate)	6.53% (↑+5.53%) (Very high)
Views on followers	4.81% (High)	74.15% (Very high)
NoxScore***	3.68/5 (High)	2.99/5 (Intermediate)
CPM****	USD 9.5	USD 9.5
Integration	USD 288-807	USD 379-830
Advertising revenue	USD 3.84K-13.45K	-

*Notes*

\*&\*\* for every ten videos

\*\*\* NoxScore is a 1-5 measurement that combines five components: follower growth, content creation and publication, channel quality, audience credibility and engagement level. The five components are assessed based on subscriber and channel growth (35% of the total score), frequency of video content publication (15% of the total score), analysis of video content quality (35% of the total score), interaction with followers (10% of the total score), and usage connections with other social media (5% of total score).

\*\*\*\* Calculation of costs for every thousand impressions obtained from advertising

After becoming famous as a celebrity preacher, Das'ad Latif took advantage of this momentum to establish a Hajj and Umrah travel business to Mecca and Madina. He founded PT. Gelora Indah Perdana is located on Jalan Kakatua, number 30, Pa'batang Village, Mamajang sub-district, Makassar City, South Sulawesi, and received accreditation from the Ministry of Religion in 2019 with Decree Number 529. This company serves Hajj Plus, Umrah and Umrah trips—religious tourism to Turkey. Das'ad Latif also offers VVIP Umrah trips for customers who want to carry out the Umrah with him full-time. Like the Wawan Gold Family, a conglomerate family in Makasar has a luxury wedding boutique. With a luxury concept, it offers several conglomerate class facilities, including Garuda Indonesia Business Class aircraft, luxury accommodation at Raffles Makkah Palace, which directly faces the Kaaba at close range, and trips to various historical places in the two holy Islamic cities.

## 5. Digital Religion: Opportunities for the Commodification of Religion in the Contemporary Islamic Market

In Indonesia and elsewhere in the Muslim world, the attitudes of religious communities have changed rapidly. The use of religious symbols in public spaces, such as Islamic fashion, religious tourism, and the actualization of Muslims on social media, confirms that in the contemporary era, the opportunities for the commodification of religion are increasingly wide open and increasingly uncontrolled (Hassan and Harun 2016, Norbo'tayevich 2023, Törnberg and Törnberg 2016). Researchers rarely study the commodification of Islam, where the Islamic market is currently increasingly opening itself up. Muslims today are

starting to abandon the traditional lifestyle of their parents and ancestors in expressing their faith in public spaces.

Elite-class Muslims and urban Muslims are examples of the many community groups who are isolated by traditional and conservative religious education. Celebrity preachers then exploited this opportunity to appear prime and take a role in the Islamic Market. The emergence of young preachers such as Jefri al-Buchori (ustadz Uje), Yusuf Mansur (ustadz YM), Aa Gym, Felix Siau, Hanan Attaki and Das'ad Latif. Gradually, these young preachers began to be displaced and abandoned by their followers due to various factors. Felix Siau, a young preacher of Chinese descent affiliated with the transnational Islamic group HTI, created counter-public Islamic preaching. Felix Siau's scientific and realistic persuasion is not supported by the packaging of Muslim popular culture that reaches a wide audience (Wai Weng 2022). Even though he uses social media as his strategy to reach urban Muslim youth, the packaging of pro-caliphate Islamic propaganda makes him a controversial preacher (Hew 2018b).

Uje, for example, this celebrity preacher, is very popular with young people, especially former deviants. As a former drug addict who repented, Uje decided to emigrate and study Islam. By visualizing the aspect of his melodious voice, Uje appears as a celebrity preacher who always speaks the Qur'an with his distinctive *qiro'ah*. A book written by Uje entitled "God, I am Back" shows stories of Uje from his past as a drug addict until he became a Muslim (preacher). Unlike preachers from pesantren who are clean from a dark past, Uje's background can attract people to become interested in Islam. The use of the slang articulations 'gue' and 'elu' makes Uje close to young Muslims.

Like the late Uje, Yusuf Mansur has a background as an ex-convict and bankrupt businessman. Before becoming a preacher, he struggled to rise and study Islam in prison. After becoming a preacher, Ustadz YM (his nickname) has a brand of *berkah* used as material for his preaching in philanthropy. He founded a pesantren devoted to memorizing the Qur'an to strengthen his position as a celebrity preacher. Like 'Aa Gym with the Management Qolbu Corp business company, Ustadz YM is famous for its *kun-fayakun* product, which is based on the belief that those who give alms will be rewarded with material and multiple rewards. This *kun-fayakun* brand then made him increasingly popular. It dominated the world of celebrity preachers invited on various national television (Mansur 2007).

Another young preacher who has reaped material benefits from his popularity is Aa Gym, the focus of this study. Like Ustadz YM, Aa Gym also achieved popularity as a celebrity preacher and dominated the world of Islamic business from 2005 to 2006. The digital platform brand he created under his company, MQ Digital, has made 'Aa Gym famous today with its preaching spread everywhere. Where 'Aa Gym has succeeded in bringing

the brand of Islamic preachers to IT literacy and optimizing digital platforms as a means of preaching. This triggered him to instantly attract millions of followers, including urban Muslims close to the world of technology. However, his popularity faded after he decided to have polygamy with a widow, a former model whom he married at the end of 2006. After fixing his family problems, Aa Gym became a celebrity preacher and optimized his digital platform for preaching acts. Aa Gym holds a live broadcast after *Fajr* daily to provide live online studies on all its digital platform channels and social media.

The several examples of celebrity preachers above confirm that digital platforms have changed the face of traditional and conservative Islam towards a sophisticated Islam. Currently, religion has been converted from a spiritual object to a more material object, and religion has been able to bring promising business benefits through promotion with digital platforms and social media. Preachers who successfully persuade the public will always be rewarded with the support of *likes* and *viewers*. In the real world, this business profit can occur in the founding of large companies by preachers after they become popular. In contemporary Indonesia, celebrity speakers are attracted by political and business elites to increase their position and popularity. From here, the commodification of religion has become a necessity for Islamic teaching in public spaces that are different from Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren and Islamic schools. Seeing Wai Weng Hew's criticism, middle-class Muslims need this phenomenon for their religious consumption in urban areas (Hew 2018a). Shusterman's analysis is needed to see how big the impact is on the Muslim community's perception of Islamic preaching, which is promoted massively and widely by celebrity preachers (Shusterman 1983).

## 6. Conclusion

This article finds important findings not previously discussed, namely that the digital world has poisoned religion and created a new world as a digital religion. Religion is closely linked to the creation of authority, and digital religion has created new forms of religious authority through digital platforms and social media. In contrast to conservative preachers who use Islamic educational institutions to preach, celebrity preachers use digital platforms and social media to spread their ideas in more expansive public spaces. Digital platforms such as *'Aa Gym Apps* and social media Instagram and YouTube have created a new form of religious authority through the involvement of technology to put Islamic ideas from sacred texts into an open space to transmit the tradition of dialogue and critical thinking on religious issues and the problems of life faced by the people. Das'ad Latif's aesthetic arguments and his humorous lectures accompanied by jokes have attracted enthusiastic followers from upper

elite circles. Meanwhile, *manajemen qolbu*, which is Aa Gym's jargon, has attracted the persuasive perception of its followers from urban millennial Muslims. This study argues that celebrity preachers can re-transform the consumption of religion in the broader public sphere by segments of society that are difficult to touch. This confirms that digital religion has created the visibility of preaching that penetrates the boundaries of space and time.

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