

CONSTRUCTING THE AUTHENTIC MUSLIM: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi Narratives

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Abstract: The growing mediation of religious life through digital platforms has intensified contestation over how Muslim authenticity, piety, and legitimate religious authority are defined in contemporary urban Indonesia. This study examines how selected Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi narratives construct the figure of the “authentic Muslim” and how these constructions shape moral boundaries, authority, and religious subjectivity. Employing a qualitative, exploratory-critical design, the analysis draws on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis of 48 publicly accessible digital materials, comprising 26 Urban Hijrah and 22 Neo-Sufi items, supplemented by three semi-structured interviews. The findings show that Urban Hijrah narratives more frequently frame religious transformation through moral reorientation, disciplined practice, and publicly recognizable change, whereas Neo-Sufi narratives more often emphasize continuous ethical cultivation, reflexivity, and regulation of the inner self. These tendencies, however, are internally differentiated. Urban Hijrah also contains critiques of superficial piety, while Neo-Sufi discourse can reproduce normative expectations and hierarchical spiritual authority. Religious authenticity therefore emerges not as a fixed property of either formation but as a contested discursive achievement shaped by representation, legitimation, and digital mediation. The findings highlight the need to understand contemporary Muslim subjectivity beyond binary distinctions between formalism and spirituality.

Keywords: Authentic Muslim Identity, Urban Hijrah Movement, Neo-Sufism, Digital Islam.

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Introduction

Religious expression in contemporary urban Indonesia is increasingly embedded in a rapidly expanding digital environment in which Islamic knowledge, identity, and authority are produced and negotiated across interconnected online and offline spaces.¹ Indonesia's internet penetration reached 79.5% in 2024, representing approximately 221.6 million users,² while in January 2025 the country had approximately 143 million social media user identities, equivalent to 50.2% of the national population.³ This scale of connectivity has consequences beyond the technological expansion of religious communication. Digital platforms have become important arenas in which religious teachings are reformulated into sermons, short videos, visual symbols, testimonials, podcasts, and lifestyle narratives that make particular understandings of Islam publicly visible and socially recognizable.⁴ Religious identity in this environment is therefore not simply communicated through digital media; it is increasingly negotiated through the discursive and symbolic conditions that digital media enable.

Within this broader transformation, Urban Hijrah and contemporary Neo-Sufi expressions have gained visibility among urban Muslims seeking religious orientation, ethical transformation, community, and spiritual meaning.⁵ Although both engage questions of Muslim self-transformation, they should not be treated as homogeneous or inherently opposing formations. Urban Hijrah encompasses diverse communities, preachers, media initiatives, and forms of digitally mediated *dakwah*, while contemporary urban Sufism likewise incorporates heterogeneous modes of spiritual learning, *tariqa*-based practice, informal religious gatherings, scholarly authority, and digitally circulated teachings.⁶ Their analytical significance lies precisely in this diversity: both participate in contemporary debates over what religious improvement entails, how Muslim identity should be cultivated, and whose interpretations of piety acquire legitimacy. The increasing visibility of such religious formations also intersects with broader changes in Islamic authority, whereby established scholarly and institutional credentials coexist, compete, and combine with charismatic communication, community affiliation, and digital visibility.

Existing scholarship provides important but largely separate accounts of these developments.⁷ Studies of *hijrah* have examined conversion narratives, youth religiosity, digitally mediated *dakwah*, lifestyle practices, and the reconfiguration of piety through popular media.⁸ Fansuri, for example, situates *hijrah* within changing trajectories of religious transformation in post-Suharto Indonesia, while more recent research demonstrates how platform formats and digital circulation participate in reorganizing Islamic youth culture and religious authority. Research on urban Sufism, meanwhile, has emphasized the adaptation of Sufi practices to modern urban conditions, the search for spiritual and emotional orientation, and transformations in the institutional and cultural expression of *tasawwuf*.⁹ Importantly, Sodik and Sujibto demonstrate that young urban Sufism in Yogyakarta cannot simply be characterized as an inclusive antithesis to

religious formalism: its practitioners negotiate both external formalist tendencies and forms of exclusivity within Sufi traditions themselves.¹⁰ Taken together, this literature shows that contemporary Muslim piety is internally differentiated and mediated by changing configurations of religious knowledge, social experience, and communicative practice.

Nevertheless, an important analytical gap remains. Existing studies have tended to examine Urban Hijrah and urban or Neo-Sufi religiosity within separate conceptual frameworks, with greater attention to their communities, practices, spiritual orientations, or media strategies than to the discursive mechanisms through which they construct criteria of legitimate Muslim selfhood.¹¹ Consequently, less is known about how selected narratives associated with these formations define religious transformation, establish moral boundaries, authorize particular religious voices, and position Muslims as specific kinds of religious subjects.¹² This gap is particularly important because analytical categories such as “formalist,” “conservative,” “spiritual,” or “inclusive” can themselves reproduce overly stable distinctions if they are imposed on religious movements prior to examining the language and practices through which those distinctions are produced.¹³ A comparative analysis therefore requires attention not only to differences between the two corpora but also to internal variation, overlap, and countervailing tendencies within each.

The central problem addressed in this study is thus the discursive production of Muslim authenticity under conditions of urban and digital religious transformation.¹⁴ The study investigates how selected Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi narratives construct meanings of piety and religious change, how these meanings acquire legitimacy through particular configurations of religious authority and digital mediation, and how they make available different positions through which Muslims may recognize and evaluate themselves. “Authenticity” is not treated here as an objectively measurable theological quality or as a fixed property possessed by either religious formation.¹⁵ Rather, it is approached as a contested discursive achievement through which particular practices, dispositions, authorities, and modes of selfhood are rendered more or less recognizable as legitimate expressions of Muslim piety.¹⁶ This approach also avoids presuming that Urban Hijrah is intrinsically formalist or exclusionary, or that Neo-Sufism is inherently inclusive or emancipatory; such interpretations must instead be demonstrated, qualified, or challenged through empirical analysis.

Examining these processes is significant for understanding a broader transformation in contemporary Indonesian Islam. As digital platforms expand the range of actors capable of producing and circulating religious discourse, struggles over authenticity increasingly concern not only doctrinal interpretation but also visibility, authority, recognition, and the formation of religious subjects. A Critical Discourse Analysis of Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi narratives therefore provides a means of connecting linguistic representation

to the wider social conditions through which particular models of Muslim life become intelligible and authoritative. By bringing these discursive formations into a comparative framework while preserving their internal heterogeneity, this study contributes to scholarship on digital Islam and urban religiosity in three respects: it conceptualizes authenticity as a process of discursive boundary-making rather than a predetermined religious category; it demonstrates how established and emerging forms of religious authority are reconfigured through digital mediation; and it identifies the differentiated forms of Muslim subjectivity made possible by competing, overlapping, and internally contested narratives of religious transformation. The urgency of this analysis lies not in determining which formation represents a more authentic Islam, but in explaining how claims to authenticity acquire social force in an increasingly mediated and plural field of Muslim life.

Method

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory-critical design to examine how representations of the “authentic Muslim” are discursively constructed within selected Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi narratives in contemporary Indonesia. Rather than treating the two formations as homogeneous or inherently oppositional, they are approached as analytically comparable discursive fields in which piety, religious transformation, authority, and Muslim subjectivity are articulated and negotiated. The study applies Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (CDA), examining discourse across three interconnected dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice.¹⁷

The empirical corpus comprised 48 publicly accessible digital items, consisting of 26 Urban Hijrah materials and 22 Neo-Sufi materials, published or circulated between 2020 and 2025 and collected between 12 January and 25 March 2025. The Urban Hijrah corpus included materials associated with Shift Media, Hijrahfest, and selected popular dakwah figures, while the Neo-Sufi corpus included materials associated with Gus Ali Masyhuri, Gus Baha, and the Nurul Mustafa Dzikr Assembly. The dataset included YouTube sermons, Instagram posts and captions, podcast segments, and digitally circulated religious texts or recorded gatherings. Materials were purposively selected based on their relevance to religious transformation, piety, moral conduct, authority, and Muslim identity, while duplicate, decontextualized, and substantively irrelevant materials were excluded.

The digital corpus was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with three informants: an Urban Hijrah community activist, an urban tariqa follower, and a scholar of contemporary Islamic social issues. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were used as contextual and triangulatory evidence. Participants were anonymized as INT-H, INT-S, and INT-A.

Each digital item was coded as UH01–UH26 or NS01–NS22. At the textual level, analysis examined lexical choices, modality, pronouns, imperatives, metaphors, categorization, presuppositions, intertextuality, and relevant visual symbols. At the discursive practice level, attention was given to production, circulation, audience positioning, religious citation, and forms of authority. At the social-practice level, recurrent patterns were interpreted in relation to digital religiosity, symbolic power, exclusion, and Muslim subject formation. Comparative analysis focused on religious transformation, moral boundary-making, authority, subjectivity, and digital mediation. Negative cases were retained to capture internal variation and minimize binary interpretation.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and theoretical triangulation and researcher reflexivity. Interpretations were tested across multiple texts, actors, platforms, and interview perspectives to reduce evaluative asymmetry between the two corpora. All digital materials were publicly accessible, and interview confidentiality and participant privacy were maintained.¹⁸

Results and Discussion

Discursive Boundaries of Piety and Religious Transformation

Across the two corpora, religious authenticity is constructed less through explicit definitions of the “authentic Muslim” than through recurring distinctions between desirable and undesirable modes of becoming Muslim. The central difference lies in how religious transformation is temporally and morally organized.¹⁹ In several Urban Hijrah texts, transformation is articulated as a decisive rupture between a morally deficient past and a religiously ordered present.²⁰ By contrast, the Neo-Sufi corpus more frequently frames transformation as an unfinished process of ethical and spiritual cultivation.²¹ These patterns, however, are neither uniform nor mutually exclusive. Their significance lies not in establishing two fixed models of Islam, but in showing how different linguistic resources make particular forms of piety appear more legitimate, urgent, or spiritually meaningful.

A recurrent feature of the Urban Hijrah corpus is the use of temporal and moral contrasts that divide religious biography into “before” and “after” states. Terms such as *hijrah*, *kaffah*, *syar’i*, *fithrah*, and, in some texts, *jâhiliyyah* function as more than theological vocabulary.²² They organize religious transformation through evaluative classifications. When a speaker urges audiences to “leave” a former life, “return” to *fithrah*, or become Muslim “completely,” the lexical structure presupposes that the existing self is religiously insufficient and requires reorientation.²³ The force of such discourse therefore lies not simply in prescribing conduct but in producing a recognizable subject position: the Muslim who understands the present self through the moral inadequacy of the past.

This mechanism is particularly visible when imperatives and high-obligation modalities occur alongside transformation narratives. Expressions equivalent to “you

must change,” “do not return to the old life,” or “Islam should be practiced completely” narrow the range of legitimate responses available to the audience.²⁴ In Faircloughian terms, modality is consequential because it encodes the speaker’s commitment to what is presented as necessary, appropriate, or morally non-negotiable. The relevant analytical point is therefore not that Urban Hijrah discourse is inherently coercive, but that some texts construct religious commitment through relatively strong modalities of obligation and categorical differentiation.

Table 1. Representative Discursive Patterns in the Construction of Piety

Data ID	Source and Context	Empirical Excerpt	Linguistic Feature	CDA Interpretation
UH04	Hanan Attaki / Shift Media, Instagram @shiftmedia.id, “Memperbaiki Diri,” 21 March 2020. Short-form sermon video, 52 seconds; Instagram post ID: B9hleSJinQ. Excerpt from spoken audio.	Original: “Allah itu suka banget sama orang yang bertaubat lalu belajar memperbaiki diri.” Translation: “Allah deeply loves those who repent and then learn to improve themselves.”	Positive evaluation; process verb; affective intensification	Constructs <i>hijrah</i> not simply as a completed break with the past, but as an ongoing process of repentance and ethical self-improvement. The affective formulation reduces punitive distance while still establishing moral transformation as desirable.
UH11	Hanan Attaki / Shift Media, Instagram @shiftmedia.id, “Selalu Libatkan Allah,” 29 October 2020. Short-form sermon addressing occupational <i>hijrah</i> , religiously prohibited income, and perseverance during transition. Excerpt from spoken audio as documented in the archived transcription.	Original: “Allah tolong hatinya. Dikuatkan kesabarannya, itulah pertolongan paling ajaib yang Allah berikan kepada hambanya.” Translation: “Allah helps the heart by strengthening its patience; this is the most remarkable form of help given to His servant.”	Affective vocabulary; passive construction; evaluative intensification	Complicates a purely external reading of Urban Hijrah. Transformation is represented through inward endurance and divine assistance, indicating that ethical and affective cultivation can accompany behavioral reorientation.

INT-H	Urban Hijrah community activist, semi-structured interview, conducted on 12 February 2025.	“For me, hijrah was never only about clothes. The harder part was changing habits, becoming consistent in prayer, and learning how to behave toward other people.”	Negation; contrastive construction; process verbs	Challenges the reduction of <i>hijrah</i> to visible transformation by locating authenticity in sustained behavioral and ethical change. The account also demonstrates internal variation between symbolic visibility and lived self-discipline.
NS05	KH Agoes Ali Masyhuri, Progresif TV, YouTube, “Kiat Menuju Hidup Bahagia,” uploaded 13 January 2023; recording of the weekly <i>pengajian</i> held on 9 January 2023. Excerpt reproduced from the quotation attributed to Gus Ali in the official video description.	Original: “Masa depanmu sangat ditentukan oleh apa yang menjadi isi pikiran dan hatimu pada hari ini.” Translation: “Your future is strongly determined by what fills your mind and heart today.”	Interiorizing metaphor; temporal orientation; evaluative causality	Locates religious and ethical transformation within the cultivation of thought and the heart. The discourse shifts the primary site of moral evaluation from visible status to an internally regulated ethical disposition.
NS12	KH Agoes Ali Masyhuri, Progresif TV, YouTube, “Kiat Menuju Hidup Bahagia,” uploaded 17 November 2023; recording of the weekly <i>pengajian</i> held on 13	Original: “Meski manusia adalah ciptaan Allah yang paling sempurna, faktanya tidak ada kehidupan yang sempurna bagi manusia.” Translation: “Although	Concessive structure; qualification; anti-perfectionist evaluation	Constructs religious subjectivity through incompleteness rather than attained moral perfection. Authenticity is thereby framed as an unfinished process of ethical and spiritual cultivation rather than a status that

INT-S	Urban tariqa follower, semi-structured interview, conducted on 07 March 2025.	“Following a spiritual path does not automatically make us better than others. The difficult part is watching the ego and remaining disciplined in learning from the teacher.”	Negation; reflexive modality; self-regulatory vocabulary	Demonstrates that inward spirituality does not eliminate normativity. Instead, discipline is relocated toward regulation of the self and a pedagogical relationship with spiritual authority, complicating assumptions that Neo-Sufi subjectivity is inherently autonomous or non-hierarchical.
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The countervailing example represented by UH11 is analytically important. It prevents the recurrent emphasis on visible transformation from being interpreted as evidence that Urban Hijrah uniformly reduces piety to appearance. Internal critique within the corpus indicates that outward symbols may themselves become objects of reflexive negotiation. The distinction is therefore better understood as one between different configurations of outward and inward piety rather than a simple opposition between formalism and spirituality.

The Neo-Sufi corpus exhibits a different dominant temporal logic. Terms associated with *tazkiyah al-nafs*, *ikhhlâsh*, *shabr*, *syukr*, and the regulation of the *nafs* tend to position religious development as continuous and incomplete.²⁵ Metaphors of purification, journeying, veiling, illness, or cultivation shift attention from a singular conversion moment toward repeated practices of self-examination. Such lexical choices construct authenticity as something that cannot be conclusively displayed or achieved. The religious subject is instead positioned as perpetually engaged in ethical work upon the self.²⁶

Yet this inward orientation should not be equated automatically with discursive openness. The language of spiritual refinement can itself establish normative hierarchies.²⁷ Distinctions between a purified and an ego-dominated heart, sincerity and ostentation, or spiritual maturity and negligence also define desirable and undesirable forms of Muslim subjectivity.²⁸ NS18, for example, illustrates how an apparently inward-centered discourse can reinstate obligation and discipline. Neo-Sufi discourse therefore does not eliminate moral boundaries; it relocates many of them from highly visible markers toward assessments of intention, character, and spiritual disposition.

This comparison reveals a more consequential distinction than the binary of “formalist Hijrah” versus “inclusive Sufism.” Both corpora participate in boundary-making,

but they tend to locate the boundary differently.²⁹ In parts of the Urban Hijrah corpus, authenticity becomes particularly legible through narratives of decisive change, explicit moral reorientation, and recognizable practices. In much of the Neo-Sufi corpus, authenticity is rendered less externally decidable because spiritual legitimacy is tied to the ongoing regulation of the self.³⁰ Neither mode is ideologically neutral: each privileges particular criteria through which Muslims are invited to evaluate themselves and others.

The findings therefore suggest that religious transformation functions as a technology of differentiation as much as a narrative of personal change. The crucial question is not simply whether one discourse is more restrictive than another, but what each discourse makes visible as evidence of becoming a better Muslim, what it renders morally insufficient, and what forms of self-scrutiny it normalizes. At the textual level, these distinctions establish the discursive conditions under which particular models of piety can subsequently acquire authority and circulate as credible representations of Muslim authenticity.

Reconfiguring Religious Authority in Digital Space

If the preceding analysis demonstrates how particular forms of piety become discursively intelligible, the next question concerns who acquires the authority to define, circulate, and legitimate those meanings. Across the two corpora, religious authority does not operate independently of digital mediation.³¹ Rather, it is produced through different combinations of scriptural competence, institutional or genealogical legitimacy, charismatic performance, platform visibility, and relations with audiences. The contrast between Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi materials is therefore not adequately captured by a simple opposition between “new” digital authority and “traditional” religious authority. Both are digitally mediated, but they mobilize different resources to make religious claims credible.³²

Within the Urban Hijrah corpus, authority is frequently articulated through the convergence of scriptural reference and communicative accessibility. Selected preachers position religious claims through citations of Qur’anic verses, hadith, and normative Islamic terminology, while simultaneously translating them into motivational, testimonial, and lifestyle-oriented formats suited to digitally connected audiences.³³ This combination is significant because religious legitimacy is not derived from visibility alone. Rather, visibility amplifies particular performances of textual authority by making them repeatable, shareable, and recognizable across platforms. The digital environment thus does not simply distribute pre-existing authority; it contributes to determining which performances of authority become publicly salient.

The communicative genres associated with this corpus further reshape the relationship between preacher and audience. Testimonies of personal change, question-and-answer formats, short motivational clips, and visually curated posts reduce the

distance between doctrinal instruction and everyday experience.³⁴ Such formats position the preacher not only as an interpreter of religious norms but also as a mediator of practical transformation.³⁵ Authority consequently becomes relational: audiences are invited to recognize the relevance of religious instruction through narratives that connect scripture to personal anxiety, lifestyle decisions, and moral self-reconstruction.

This should not, however, be reduced to a claim that Urban Hijrah authority is merely “celebrity-based.” Such a characterization risks replacing analysis with a normative judgment.³⁶ The corpus instead indicates a hybrid form of legitimacy in which scriptural claims, communicative skill, community affiliation, and digital visibility reinforce one another. The critical issue is that platform visibility can alter the conditions under which authority is recognized. Repetition, algorithmically intensified exposure, and cross-platform circulation may enable particular interpretations to acquire a degree of familiarity that can be mistaken for religious consensus.

Table 2. Patterns of Authority Formation and Digital Mediation

Data ID	Source and Context	Authority Mechanism	Representative Evidence	CDA Discursive-Practice Interpretation
UH13	Hanan Attaki / Shift Media, originally circulated through YouTube Shift Media as “ <i>Islam & Spirit Nasionalisme</i> ” and subsequently redistributed as a podcast episode by Hijrah Bareng on 19 August 2021. The republished episode explicitly identifies YouTube Shift Media as its original source.	Cross-platform circulation; recognizable preacher identity; remediation of digital <i>dakwah</i>	The same religious lecture circulates beyond its original YouTube setting through a podcast format while retaining explicit attribution to Hanan Attaki and Shift Media.	Authority is reinforced through remediation rather than simple repetition. Attribution preserves the preacher’s identity while cross-platform circulation extends the communicative reach of the original discourse. Digital authority therefore depends partly on the portability and recognizability of religious content across media environments.

UH06	Hijrahfest, official digital ecosystem linking Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, and its TAKWA application.	Institutional branding; platform convergence; community-based authority	Religious messages are embedded within an integrated digital network in which events, speakers, community interaction, and religious content are circulated through multiple official platforms.	Religious authority is not produced solely by an individual preacher. It can also be institutionally organized through a branded digital infrastructure that connects religious instruction, community belonging, and recurring mediated participation.
INT-H	Urban Hijrah community activist, semi-structured interview, conducted on 13 February 2025.	Audience recognition; accessibility; practical relevance; scriptural credibility	“I usually listen to preachers who can explain the dalil clearly but also connect it to problems we face every day. Social media makes them easier to follow because the message feels close to our lives.”	Authority is recognized through an interaction between scriptural legitimacy and communicative accessibility. The informant’s account indicates that digital visibility alone is insufficient; legitimacy depends on whether religious knowledge can be translated into an intelligible and practically relevant form.
NS08	KH Agoes Ali Masyhuri / Progresif TV, YouTube, “ <i>Kiat Menuju Hidup Bahagia</i> ,” uploaded 13 January 2023;	Pesantren affiliation; scholarly-spiritual reputation; institutional mediation	The official description identifies the content as a weekly religious lecture by KH Agoes Ali Masyhuri and	The speaker’s authority is mediated through an institutionally anchored digital channel. Rather than replacing pesantren-based legitimacy,

	recording of the weekly <i>pengajian</i> held on 9 January 2023. Progresif TV identifies itself as the official broadcaster of Pesantren Progresif Bumi Shalawat.		presents guidance concerning the cultivation of thought and the heart.	digital circulation extends it by translating an established teacher-centred pedagogical relationship into an accessible online format.
NS19	KH Agoes Ali Masyhuri / Progresif TV, YouTube, “ <i>Cerdas Membagi Waktu</i> ,” uploaded 29 December 2023; recording of the weekly <i>pengajian</i> held on 25 December 2023. The description presents a series of religious lessons derived from the lecture.	Pedagogical authority; institutional continuity; devotional instruction	The video description summarizes several lessons, including the importance of avoiding what is unbeneficial and directing one’s time toward remembrance of God and ethically meaningful conduct.	Digital mediation preserves the pedagogical structure of the <i>pengajian</i> while repackaging it for asynchronous consumption. Authority is thus remediated rather than detached from its institutional origin, allowing pesantren-based instruction to circulate beyond face-to-face participation.
INT-S	Urban tariqa follower, semi-structured interview, conducted on 13 February 2025.	Scholarly lineage; continuity of learning; relational trust	“I may first encounter a lecture on YouTube, but I do not trust someone only because the video is popular. I want to know who	The account distinguishes visibility from legitimacy. Digital media facilitate initial access, but authority is evaluated through perceived continuity of learning

			the teacher learned from and whether there is continuity in the knowledge being taught.”	and relational credibility, demonstrating that digital exposure does not automatically displace genealogical criteria of religious authority.
INT-A	Scholar of contemporary Islamic social issues, semi-structured interview, conducted between 16 February 2025.	Hybrid authority; interaction of credentials and visibility	“Today it is difficult to separate traditional credentials from digital visibility. A scholar may already possess strong religious legitimacy, but digital platforms determine how widely that authority becomes recognizable to younger audiences.”	The observation complicates an opposition between “traditional” and “digital” authority. Contemporary legitimacy is better understood as hybrid and relational, emerging from interaction among prior credentials, institutional recognition, communicative performance, and platform-mediated visibility.

The Neo-Sufi corpus reveals a different, but equally mediated, configuration. Here, authority is more frequently connected to scholarly formation, *sanad*, the standing of the *kiai* or *mursyid*, and a reputation for spiritual or ethical credibility.³⁷ Yet these sources of legitimacy should not be treated as external to digital culture. Once sermons, religious reflections, and devotional teachings circulate through YouTube, Instagram, or podcast formats, established authority undergoes processes of remediation.³⁸ Audiences may encounter the authority of a *kiai* without participating directly in the institutional or teacher–disciple settings from which that authority historically derives.³⁹

This produces an important tension. Digital circulation may extend the reach of genealogically grounded authority, but it can simultaneously detach religious utterances from their original pedagogical context. A short excerpt from an extended lecture, for instance, may become independently shareable and acquire meanings shaped by captioning, editing, audience commentary, or platform-specific circulation. Neo-Sufi authority is therefore not simply preserved online; it is selectively reconstructed through digital forms.

The interviews provide an additional layer to this comparison. The *hijrah* informant's emphasis on accessibility and practical relevance, the *tariqa* follower's emphasis on trust and continuity of learning, and the academic informant's observation that scholarly credentials and digital visibility increasingly overlap suggest that audiences do not recognize authority through a single criterion.⁴⁰ Instead, legitimacy emerges from the interaction of knowledge claims, affective trust, communicative performance, and mediated visibility. These perspectives caution against treating either popularity or lineage as sufficient explanations of contemporary religious authority.⁴¹

The comparison thus points to a broader reconfiguration of authority in urban digital Islam.⁴² Urban Hijrah actors may derive communicative advantage from formats compatible with rapid circulation, while Neo-Sufi actors may mobilize inherited forms of scholarly and spiritual legitimacy that are increasingly translated into digital environments. Yet neither configuration is stable. Visibility does not automatically produce legitimacy, and traditional credentials do not guarantee influence beyond established networks.⁴³

From a Faircloughian perspective, the analytical significance lies in the relationship between textual production, circulation, and conditions of reception. Religious authority is not merely possessed by particular speakers; it is continually reproduced through discursive practices that authorize some voices, formats, and interpretive repertoires more effectively than others. Digital platforms consequently function not as neutral channels but as environments in which religious legitimacy is reformatted, amplified, and contested. This reconfiguration provides the institutional and communicative conditions through which particular constructions of piety can become socially consequential, setting the stage for examining how they position Muslims as specific kinds of religious subjects.

Negotiating Muslim Subjectivities and Ideological Effects

The significance of the discursive differences identified above lies ultimately in the kinds of Muslim subjects they make available, credible, and desirable. If textual choices establish criteria of legitimate piety and discursive practices authorize particular speakers to articulate those criteria, their ideological force emerges when individuals are invited to recognize themselves through these categories.⁴⁴ Muslim subjectivity, in this sense, is not simply expressed through discourse but partially constituted by it.⁴⁵ The relevant question is therefore not whether Urban Hijrah or Neo-Sufism produces a singular type of believer, but how recurrent discursive patterns offer different positions from which Muslims may understand, evaluate, and discipline themselves.

Within the Urban Hijrah corpus, one recurring subject position is the transforming Muslim: a believer encouraged to understand religiosity as an intentional movement away from an insufficient past toward a more ordered religious life.⁴⁶ The ideological significance of this position lies in the relationship it establishes between self-recognition and moral change.⁴⁷ Once the past is narrated as something to be left behind, the subject

is invited to reinterpret previous practices, relationships, appearances, or habits through a new evaluative framework. Religious transformation therefore involves more than behavioral change; it reorganizes the narrative through which the self becomes morally intelligible.⁴⁸

This process may produce disciplinary effects without necessarily implying coercion. The subject who seeks consistency after *hijrah* is encouraged to monitor whether everyday practices correspond to an increasingly explicit religious orientation. Such self-monitoring can generate commitment, coherence, and a sense of moral direction, particularly for individuals navigating uncertainty in urban life. Yet the same mechanism can narrow the range of practices recognized as signs of legitimate transformation when specific forms of conduct become disproportionately visible as evidence of religious seriousness.⁴⁹ The ideological question is thus not whether discipline is intrinsically oppressive, but when particular forms of discipline acquire normative authority to define what successful religious change should look like.

This distinction is crucial for interpreting exclusion. The analyzed materials do not justify treating Urban Hijrah communities as uniformly exclusionary. Rather, exclusion is better understood as a potential discursive effect of boundary-making. When particular practices, vocabularies, or transformation narratives are repeatedly privileged as signs of religious commitment, alternative ways of inhabiting Muslim identity may become comparatively less legible.⁵⁰ Exclusion may therefore operate without explicit condemnation: it can occur through differential recognition, whereby some forms of Muslim self-presentation are rendered more readily identifiable as serious, transformed, or religiously committed than others.

At the same time, countervailing materials within the Urban Hijrah corpus complicate any interpretation of the subject as merely compliant or externally regulated.⁵¹ Texts that criticize superficial transformation, emphasize character, or warn against judging others demonstrate reflexive tensions within the discourse itself. These moments indicate that Urban Hijrah also contains resources for questioning the reduction of religious commitment to outward markers.⁵² The subject positions produced within this field are consequently heterogeneous, ranging from visibly disciplined and norm-oriented selves to more ethically reflexive models of transformation.

Neo-Sufi discourse organizes subjectivity through a different dominant logic. Rather than emphasizing a decisive transition between morally distinct stages of life, it more frequently constructs the believer as an unfinished ethical and spiritual subject.⁵³ The self remains vulnerable to ego, pride, insincerity, distraction, and moral failure, making spiritual authenticity less a status to be achieved than a condition requiring continuous cultivation.⁵⁴ This positioning can destabilize claims to visible moral superiority because the decisive object of scrutiny is relocated toward intention, disposition, and the ongoing management of the self.

Yet such inwardness should not be romanticized as liberation from normativity. The injunction to purify the *nafs*, cultivate sincerity, submit to spiritual guidance, or develop particular ethical dispositions also constitutes a regime of self-regulation.⁵⁵ Neo-Sufi discourse may replace immediately visible criteria of piety with subtler standards of spiritual maturity, but it does not eliminate distinctions between desirable and undesirable religious subjects.⁵⁶ Categories such as sincerity and ostentation, humility and egoism, or spiritual awareness and heedlessness continue to organize moral evaluation. The principal difference is therefore not the presence versus absence of discipline, but the location and mode of discipline.

This point also complicates assumptions about autonomy. The reflective Muslim subject constructed through Neo-Sufi discourse may appear more individually open because authenticity cannot easily be verified through outward symbols. However, spiritual subject formation may remain structured by relations of pedagogical and charismatic authority.⁵⁷ The emphasis on the guidance of a *kiai*, *mursyid*, or recognized teacher can produce forms of dependence that are not necessarily repressive but nevertheless shape the boundaries of legitimate spiritual interpretation. Interiorization, therefore, should not be confused with complete individual autonomy.

Viewed comparatively, the two corpora reveal distinct but overlapping technologies of the religious self. Urban Hijrah discourse more frequently renders transformation publicly narratable through recognizable changes in orientation and practice, whereas Neo-Sufi discourse more often makes authenticity contingent upon continuing ethical-spiritual work that resists definitive public verification. Both nevertheless invite subjects to evaluate themselves against normative ideals. The ideological difference lies partly in what becomes the primary object of scrutiny: observable consistency and religious reorientation in one configuration, and the condition of the ethical-spiritual self in the other.⁵⁸

These findings complicate the notion of hegemony. The evidence does not support the claim that either corpus exercises uncontested dominance over contemporary urban Islam. Hegemony is more appropriately understood here as a process of normalization through which particular definitions of piety may acquire common-sense status when repeatedly articulated by recognized authorities and circulated through accessible communicative forms.⁵⁹ The analytical concern is therefore not to identify a single hegemonic movement, but to examine competing projects of normalization that seek to make particular Muslim subjectivities appear natural, credible, and religiously compelling.

Digital environments intensify this struggle because recognition is unevenly distributed. Some forms of religiosity are more readily condensed into visible narratives of transformation, while others depend on extended interpretive or pedagogical contexts. This asymmetry affects what can become publicly recognizable as evidence of religious authenticity.⁶⁰ Yet visibility should not be equated with ideological success: audiences

interpret, negotiate, resist, and combine religious repertoires rather than simply internalizing them. The three interview perspectives reinforce this point by indicating that contemporary Muslims may value accessibility, scholarly credibility, spiritual depth, and practical relevance simultaneously rather than treating these as mutually exclusive sources of orientation.⁶¹

The broader implication is that the contest over the “authentic Muslim” is not adequately understood as a confrontation between externally formalist and internally spiritual models of Islam.⁶² The analyzed corpora instead reveal multiple and internally differentiated projects of Muslim self-formation, each organizing relations among discipline, ethical aspiration, authority, and recognition in distinct ways.⁶³ Their ideological effects emerge not because they mechanically determine Muslim identity, but because they structure the interpretive resources through which individuals can understand what religious improvement entails, whose guidance can be trusted, and which forms of Muslim life become socially recognizable as legitimate.

Accordingly, authenticity operates less as a stable religious essence than as a contested discursive achievement. Urban Hijrah and Neo-Sufi narratives participate in this contest by making different dimensions of Muslim selfhood visible and normatively consequential. The critical contribution of this comparison is therefore not to establish which discourse offers the more authentic, inclusive, or liberating Islam, but to show how competing regimes of religious meaning produce differentiated possibilities for becoming and being recognized as a Muslim within contemporary digitally mediated urban life.

Conclusion

The construction of the “authentic Muslim” in contemporary urban Indonesia is best understood as a contested process of discursive normalization rather than as the expression of two coherent and opposing religious models. Across the selected corpora, Urban Hijrah more often renders religious transformation publicly legible through moral reorientation, disciplined practice, and recognizable narratives of change, while Neo-Sufi discourse more frequently locates authenticity in continuous ethical cultivation, reflexivity, and the regulation of the inner self. Yet these tendencies remain internally uneven. Urban Hijrah materials also contain reflexive critiques of superficial piety, whereas Neo-Sufi discourse may reproduce normative expectations and hierarchical forms of spiritual authority. The analytical significance of this comparison therefore lies not in reproducing a binary between formalism and spirituality, but in demonstrating how different discursive formations establish distinct criteria through which piety becomes visible, credible, and morally consequential.

More broadly, the findings show that religious authenticity is produced at the intersection of discourse, authority, and digital mediation. Scriptural citation, scholarly

lineage, charismatic credibility, communicative accessibility, and platform visibility operate not as isolated sources of legitimacy but as intersecting resources through which particular models of Muslim selfhood acquire social force. This reframes authenticity as a relational and unstable achievement, continuously negotiated through processes of representation, recognition, and self-discipline. Such a perspective also shifts attention from asking which religious formation is more authentic or inclusive to examining how competing regimes of meaning shape the conditions under which certain forms of Muslim life become normalized, contested, or marginalized. Given the purposive corpus of 48 digital materials and three contextual interviews, these findings should be read as identifying patterned discursive tendencies rather than as representing the full diversity of Urban Hijrah or Neo-Sufism in Indonesia. Future research should therefore extend the analysis to audience reception, regional variation, and cross-platform dynamics in order to examine how these competing constructions of authenticity are appropriated, negotiated, or resisted in everyday religious life.

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