Building Algorithmic Religious Authority Through Different Religious Networks

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Kata kunci	Abstrak
Otoritas algoritmik, Otoritas keagamaan, Ustadz Dennis Lim, Dakwah, Penceramah Muslim	*Studi-studi yang ada terkait otoritas keagamaan Islam selama ini hanya fokus pada bagaimana otoritas itu dibangun dalam komunitas ataupun jaringan Muslim. Studi ini menawarkan sebuah persepektif yang kontras dengan argumen bahwa otoritas keagamaan Islam bisa dibangun dalam jaringan keagamaan yang berbeda, yang dimungkinkan melalui algoritma media sosial. Studi ini mengadopsi konsep otoritas algoritmik yang digagas oleh Clay Shirky, di mana otoritas diberikan kepada individu berdasarkan pengaruh dan jejak digital. Studi ini menggunakan metode Netnografi untuk mengamati visibilitas online Ustadz Dennis Lim melalui podcast milik influencer non-Muslim. Temuan studi ini mengungkap bahwa kehadiran Dennis dalam podcast-podcast tersebut memainkan peran penting dalam membungan otoritas keagamaannya. Temuan ini diperkuat dengan data dari Google Trends yang menunjukkan kenaikan signifikan terhadap pencarian Dennis di Google yang bertepatan dengan dirilisnya podcast-podcast itu. Selain itu, wawancara dengan Dennis, tim media, manajer, dan jama'ahnya juga dilakukan untuk memahami pandangan mereka terkait podcast tersebut. Dari wawancara yang dilakukan terungkap bahwa podcast antara Dennis dengan influencer non-Muslim tidak selalu merepresentasikan pandangan pluralisme Muslim Indonesia. Sebaliknya, mereka tertarik dengan podcast tersebut dengan harapan bahwa influencer non-Muslim yang mereka idolakan pada akhirnya akan memeluk Islam melalui interaksi berulang dengan seorang penceramah Muslim dalam podcast.*
Keywords *Algorithmic authority, Religious authority, Ustadz Dennis Lim, Da'wah, Muslim Preachers*	**Abstract** *Existing studies on Islamic religious authority have been focusing on its construction within Muslim communities and networks. This study offers a contrasting perspective, arguing that Islamic religious authority can be built within a network of different religions, which has been possible thanks to social media algorithms. This study adopts the concept of algorithmic authority coined by Clay Shirky, which is grounded on individuals based on their influence and digital footprint. This study employs Nethnography method to observe the online visibility of Ustadz Dennis Lim through non-Muslim influencers' podcasts. The findings show that Dennis's presence in the podcasts has played a significant role in building his religious authority. The findings are reinforced by Google Trends data, which indicate an increase in Google searches related to Dennis, aligning*

with the release of these podcasts. Furthermore, interviews with Dennis, his media team, manager and offline congregants were conducted to understand their views on the podcasts. The interviews reveal that such podcasts do not always reflect the pluralist views of Indonesian Muslims. Rather, they engage with such content in the hope that their idolized non-Muslim influencers will eventually embrace Islam through repeated interactions with a Muslim preacher in the podcasts.

Introduction
Background

The scholarly discourse on the intersection of digital media and religious authority has been a long-running and compelling topic. Many have acknowledged that new media has contributed to the phenomenon that they call as the fragmentation of religious authority (Echchaibi, 2011a; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Turner, 2007). The fragmentation challenged Ulama dominance over religious interpretation and teachings. This phenomenon gave birth to new types of religious authorities, which Olivier Roy calls *lumpen-intelligentsia* or new intellectuals (Roy, 1994, p. 90). Other scholars refer to them as *tele-dai* (Hoesterey, 2015), media preachers (Hermansen, 2013), media *da'ias* (Echchaibi, 2011b, p. 35), celebrity preachers (Dallam, 2009), and televangelists (Hadden & Swann, 1981). They are generally lay people without strong credentials of religious teachings or education. However, they become popular and are able to gain what Hoesterey names as "innovative claims to religious authority" (Fealy, White, & Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, p. 97). The popular preachers are equipped with fascinating communication skills and very good at leveraging information and communication technology.

Does the emergence of new intellectuals undermine traditional authority? Cheong categorizes existing studies on this issue into three distinct groups (Cheong, 2012, p. 89). First, some early studies argue that traditional authority has been displaced, as digital media merely amplifies new forms of authority adept at harnessing digital technologies. This conclusion is evident in the works of scholars such as Eickelman and Piscatori (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996), Turner (Turner, 2007), Echchaibi (Echchaibi, 2011b), and Hosen (Fealy & White, 2008, p. 159). On the other hand, a second group of research, including studies by Zaman,(Zaman, 2002) Kailani & Sunarwoto,(Hasan, 2019) and Alatas (Rozehnal, 2022), present an opposing thesis, suggesting that traditional authority persists and adapts within the digital realm. While fragmentation has indeed occurred, traditional authority continues to play pivotal roles. Third, latest research on the issue demonstrates that digital media simultaneously challenges and reinforces traditional authority. In other words, while new media allow both established and emerging authorities to be heard, they also introduce competition from various other sources of influence. This view is supported by scholars such as Rajan (Rajan,

2015), Kołodziejska and Neumaier (Kołodziejska & Neumaier, 2017), and Giorgi (Giorgi, 2019).

Despite the significance of these studies, there is a tendency to portray new religious authorities merely as an epiphenomenon of new media technologies, embedded within broader structural forces (Hoesterey, 2015). While these perspectives offer valuable insights, they do not fully address why certain preachers gained widespread popularity and authority despite lacking formal religious training. As a result, later studies shifted focus to specific new authority figures, exploring how they cultivated their religious authority. In this context, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing debates by investigating Ustadz Dennis Lim, a former casino boss turned preacher with over a million social media followers.

As an enthusiast of *da'wah* content on social media, I was immediately intrigued when first seeing a podcast video with an eye-catching thumbnail, *"Tobat di Meja Judi Kasino Karena Nonton Kajian Islam"* (Repenting at the Casino Gambling Table after Watching an Islamic Preaching) on my YouTube homepage. The podcast featured an unfamiliar face who was apparently known as Ustadz Dennis Lim. He told a story of his spiritual journey from being a casino boss to be a devout Muslim. Uploaded in February 2023, the podcast gained two million views within a week, and more than twelve million views up to now (CURHAT BANG Denny Sumargo, 2023). Interestingly, the video was uploaded on a platform belonging to Denny Sumargo, known as a popular Christian influencer. It is unusual for a practicing Christian to share his influential platform with a Muslim preacher of a different religion.

Figure 1 Ustadz Dennis Lim podcast with Denny Sumargo

In the following days, the algorithms of my social media accounts were noticeably altered. Dennis Lim's face frequently popped up on my social media, especially on YouTube. It could have happened as social media platforms have algorithms that function as tools to analyse user data for personalizing and optimizing the displayed content to each user. Algorithms allow a social media platform to provide relevant and interesting content to users, which improves user experience and increases platform engagement (Mitchell, 1997). These algorithms are heavily influenced by users' viewing behaviour and interaction patterns. When users access or watch social media content, several aspects are recorded and analysed by the algorithm, including the type of content viewed, the length of viewing, the number of interactions such as likes and comments, and the interaction frequency with similar content (Cui et al., 2017).

More and more podcast videos featuring Dennis keeps showing up on my YouTube recommendations. Again, the podcasts were uploaded on the YouTube channels of Indonesian non-Muslim influencers such as Richard Lee, Daniel Mananta, Boris Bokir, and Mongol. These podcasts triggered some puzzles; "Why does Ustadz Dennis Lim as a new preacher, appeared in podcasts with non-Muslim influencers more frequently compared to Muslim influencers? Conversely, why are these non-Muslim influencers willing to provide their influential platforms to a Muslim preacher? How do the Indonesian Muslim viewers perceive these podcasts? How have social media algorithms influenced the notion of religious authority in the Digital Age?" These are the puzzles that this study seeks to solve. This study argues that doing consistent podcasts with non-Muslim influencers can rapidly increase the online visibility and reinforce religious authority of a Muslim preacher. The reasons why such podcasts become successful in attracting viewers and enhancing a preacher's algorithmic authority will be analysed and explained in the main discussion later.

The main argument of this study stands in stark contrast to and directly opposes the findings presented in previous scholarly studies, which contend that Islamic religious authority can only be constructed within Muslim communities and networks. In a study on Habib Luthfi bin Yahya, for example, Alatas argued that the most important factor in constructing religious authority is not merely intellectual competence but also continuous work in fostering *jama'ah* (congregants) or what he called Articulatory Labor (Alatas, 2021). The term suggests how a religious leader strives to articulate a particular understanding of Islam in accordance with the context of locality and resonates with the congregation he has been establishing. This is what Habib Luthfi has been doing as he successfully cultivated his religious authority in the tariqa community where he served as a *murshid* (Sufi master of the *tariqa*).

In the same vein, Rijal argued that Habib Munzir al-Musawwa and Habib Hasan Assegaf established their authority by forming a religious community in the form of Majelis Shalawat; Majelis Rasulullah and Majelis Nurul Musthofa, two largest Majelis

Shalawat in Jakarta. (Rijal, 2017). Another study by Nisa on two *habibah* preachers (female descendants of Prophet Muhammad), Halimah Alaydrus and Khadijah Al-Junayd, revealed that the two figures successfully cultivated their authority by being regularly active in organizing the *majelis taklim* (Islamic study circles) they formed. Akin to Habib Munzir and Habib Hasan, both Halimah and Khadijah capitalize on their religious capital and cultural capital as descendants of the Prophet and graduates of Islamic educational institution in Hadhramaut. In combination with the two capitals, their success in cultivating authority is due to the fact that their sermons are in response to the needs of the congregation in the gathering they foster (Nisa, 2012).

Elsewhere, in the case of Abdullah Gymnastiar or Aa Gym, Watson found that the rise popularity of Aa Gym was due to his ability to package moral advices coupled with direct practical instruction on good management practices that attracted Muslim congregations (Watson, 2005, pp. 773–792). In another study, Hoesterey stated that Aa Gym gained his authority through a good marketing strategy aimed at building an image of himself as a modern Muslim idol among his community of religious followers (Hoesterey, 2015). In the case of Ustadzah Peggy Melati Sukma, Lyansari reveals that Peggy's success in building her authority is due to her capability to establish and organize a religious community called *Akhwat Bergerak* (Muslims women movement) (Lyansari, 2022). In legitimizing her *da'wah* agendas and authority among community members, Peggy regularly invites other female preachers to share their spiritual journey and to encourage the congregants to be devout Muslims. Beyond these studies, in the context of Indonesia, a substantial body of literature on religious authority similarly highlights these findings, including works on Ustadz Felix Siauw, (Hew, 2018), Ustadz Abdus Somad (Hamdani, 2020), and Ustadz Arifin Ilham (Burhani, 2020).

The construction of Islamic religious authority within Muslim communities or networks is not a phenomenon unique to the Indonesian Islam. Studies on Muslim preachers across different parts of the world similarly indicate this pattern. In the North American context, Sana Patel investigated how Muslim youth in North America perceive religious authority. Focusing on four prominent preachers; Yasir Qadhi, Suhaib Webb, Mufti Menk, and Omar Suleiman, she found that these four Muslim preachers were able to capitalize on the difficulties of young North American Muslims in accessing local religious authorities. She argues that the accessibility and personal style of celebrity imams are crucial factors in attracting young Muslims in the regions (Rozehnal, 2022, p. 34). In the context of Egypt, Amr Khaled has become the most popular Muslim preacher in the Arab world (Rock, 2010). His popularity has skyrocketed since 2001 where he hosted a television show *"Kalam min al-Qalb"* (Words from the Heart) on a private Egyptian TV station. He gives sermons dedicated to his congregants on trivial issues or personal piety such as dating, hijab, internet use, leisure, family relationships, manners, and love of God (Wise, 2003). Following the rise of Amr Khaled, other Muslim preachers also began to emerge in other Muslim-majority

countries such as Ahmad al-Shugairi in Saudi Arabia and Tariq al-Suwaidan in Kuwait (Tuve Buchmann, 2016).

In sum, the existing studies on the issue indicate a similar finding: that Islamic religious authority is established through Muslim communities and networks. Accordingly, this study offers a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse by presenting a distinct argument that challenges or expands upon previous research.

Method

To study the construction of religious authority within the digital world, it is inadequate to employ conventional approaches such as Weber's role-based authority, Foucault's power-based authority, or relational authority. The problem is that, as Campbell noted, the traditional approaches were formulated in the offline contexts.(Campbell, 2020, p. 28) In the Pre-Digital Era, traditional authorities still held religious authority based on their abilities and mastery of religious teachings. Nevertheless, after the advent of the internet, religious authority changed and shifted. Hence, studying religious authority in today's context requires an innovative approach, which is algorithmic authority.

The concept of algorithmic authority has been attributed to a media scholar, Clay Shirky. In his article "A speculative Post on the Idea of Algorithmic Authority" (2009), Shirky elucidated how algorithms on digital platforms make authoritative decisions that could alter public perception and trust. He argued that trust on institutions has diminished over time within society. It leads individuals to turn to what they consider more neutral and unbiased systems of verification such as Google's PageRank algorithms (Boyd, 2016). Network society structures relied more on the idea of algorithms-based authority. The phenomenon marks a shift from seeing authority as a purely human or socially imposed category, to showing that technology and digital environments are based on a distinct logic whereby computer systems and individuals assert influences and create power structures.(Campbell, 2020, p. 30)

Academic discussions on algorithmic authority have gained increasing interest within Internet and digital religion studies. The ongoing debates centre on how individuals garner authority in certain digital contexts. Algorithms-based authority focuses on information structures as authoritative to determine what data is true or trustworthy. This type of authority states that authority is based on numerical algorithms, which are used to filter and organize online information and communication. Therefore, rankings and computer-based formulas have been transformed into a new way to evaluate and drive human actions. (Campbell, 2020, p. 30). Authority is awarded to individuals based on their digital influence and footprint, determined by the amounts of followers, likes, comments, and shares generated by their content.(Bellar & Campbell, 2022, p. 151)

This qualitative study uses the Netnography method coined by Robert V. Kozinets. It is a specialized form of ethnographic research that has been adapted to the

unique contingencies of different types of computer-mediated social interactions. This approach posits that the online world is a social and cultural world, and scholars may benefit by understanding online interactions using a cultural frame of reference. It recognizes that these social worlds are vastly different in embodiment and thus require new, specific approaches to the collection of data and research engagement. It involves observation and analysis of online content, interactions, and contexts (R. Kozinets, 2010; R. V. Kozinets, 2012). Using this method, this study observed and analysed social media content related to the podcasts between Dennis Lim and non-Muslim influencers, particularly on YouTube. Furthermore, this study observes Google search trends related to Dennis by the Google Trends tool, focusing on a two-year timeframe following his first podcast with the non-Muslim influencer, Sumargo. This analysis is crucial in illustrating the development of Dennis's online visibility throughout his podcast collaborations with non-Muslim influencers.

To perform a comprehensive investigation, semi-structured interviews were also conducted. The semi-structured format was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for more exploration and accommodating the natural flow of conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2019). There are three kinds of interviewees in this data collection process. First, interview with Ustadz Dennis Lim himself as primary subject of research. The interview aimed to gain first-hand insights into his strategies in preaching, motivations, and experiences in doing podcasts with non-Muslim influencers. Second, interviews with his *da'wah* team, i.e. Dinda as a scheduling manager, and Cantika as a media team. These individuals share valuable data on Dennis's *da'wah* schedules and his social media insights which cover demographics of his followers. Third, interviews with ten congregants who regularly follow Dennis's offline *da'wah*. The purpose is to understand their engagement with the *da'wah*, motivations, and perspectives on Dennis and his podcasts with non-Muslim influencers. Most interviews were conducted via online zoom over a two-month period (from May to June 2024).

Result and Discussion
From Casino Tables to Islamic Pulpits

Ustadz Dennis Lim, popularly known as Koh Dennis Lim, was born on November 26, 1991, in Bogor, West Java. As is common among Chinese descendants in Indonesia, he possesses both a Mandarin name, Lin Jin Fu, and an Indonesian name, Dennis Setiawan. Although born a Muslim, Dennis grew up with no exposure to Islamic teachings since he was raised in his father's predominantly Buddhist family. As the eldest child, Dennis worked hard in a stock and investment company to help his family. This position enabled him to achieve financial stability and repay his family's debts. Due to his significant progress, the company president later offered him a higher-paying position in the online casino industry in Thailand. Dennis flew to Thailand in 2015 and commenced his career as an IT administrator in the casino. After two years, he launched his own casino and reached considerable success. However, the luxury of life and

wealth failed to provide Dennis with happiness and tranquility. He realized that the root of his anxiety and fear was his distance from God. In the state of perplexity, he came across a sermon by a popular preacher in Indonesia, Aa Gym, on YouTube. Inspired by the sermon, he made decision to leave the casino and returned to Indonesia on March 15, 2017 to start a new life as a devout Muslim (Lim, 2023).

Dennis embarked on a new chapter of his spiritual journey and was re-born as a Muslim. He studied Islam in various places including at the Islamic boarding school owned by Aa Gym. After spending a few years deepening his understanding of Islam, Dennis decided to begin preaching. During the interview, Dennis conveys three reasons why he decided to become a preacher. First is the motivation from his teachers and inspiration from a Qur'anic verse (QS 88:21-22). Second, he hopes that his preaching activities will serve as a means of atonement for his past mistakes. Third, he believes that his role as a preacher will help prevent him from relapsing into his former lifestyle. In his confession, he acknowledges that during difficult times, he has occasionally been tempted to return to his past as a wealthy casino boss. However, since embracing his role as a preacher, he feels a deep sense of shame at the thought of contradicting his own teachings (interview with Dennis via zoom on May 14, 2024). In appearance, Dennis does not look like a typical Muslim preacher who wears turban with any charismatic Arab accessories. He admitted that dressing like a young man with casual attires with Gucci cap and cool shoes when preaching was kind of gimmick to attract audiences. It can close the distance between him as a preacher with his audiences who are mostly youths.

Podcasting with Non-Muslim Influencers

As mentioned in the introduction, this study departs from digital social phenomena on Ustadz Dennis Lim's podcast with Indonesian non-Muslim influencers. After the podcast with Sumargo went viral and garnered millions of views, Dennis continued podcasting with another non-Muslim influencer, Daniel Mananta. Six videos were produced and uploaded consecutively from March 27 to April 1, 2023, which gained a viewership of 3.8 million in total. The following day, April 2, 2023, a podcast video was uploaded featuring Dennis and another non-Muslim influencer, Richard Lee, and attracted 1.6 million views (dr. Richard Lee, MARS, 2023). Still within the same month, Dennis podcasted with another influencer, Boris Bokir, a popular Christian comedian. The podcast was uploaded on a YouTube channel "Kuy Entertainment" on April 24, 2023. It blew up even bigger than the previous podcast with Richard Lee. With a provocative thumbnail, "*Boris Siap Login Dibantu Koh Dennis*" (Boris Bokir is Ready to Convert with the help of Koh Dennis), the video gained 3.3 million views (KUY Entertainment, 2023). It means that only within three months, Dennis had podcasted with four non-Muslim influencers and produced nine videos, gaining more than 20 million views.

Dennis stated that the podcast with Sumargo was not the first podcast with an influencer. He previously podcasted with a YouTube channel, "Rukun Indonesia," on January 14, 2023. Rukun Indonesia is a channel founded by a group of Muslims in 2019 (Rukun Indonesia, 2023). This channel is known for inviting converts or those who have experienced *hijrah*. However, Dennis said his appearance on the Rukun Indonesia podcast had little impact on his online visibility. His popularity increased since his podcast with Denny Sumargo.

"From that podcast with Denny Sumargo, it eventually led to other podcasts with non-Muslim figures, and some TV programs such as "Islam itu Indah", and "Hafidz RCTI" (interview with Dennis via zoom on May 14, 2024).

To strengthen this statement, I traced the Google searches for Dennis Lim through the tools of Google Trends, an online service from Google that displays data and graphs on the frequency of searches for a specific keyword, topic, or phrase over a certain period, including popularity comparisons and regional analysis. Google Trends has several features, such as customization of the search time range, search by region, and search by specific categories. It uses algorithms to analyze and process search data from Google users worldwide. The rise and fall of keyword searches in Google Trends are the result produced by using algorithms. I search for a keyword most associated with Dennis, i.e. Koh Dennis Lim, with restricted search time range from January 1, 2022 where he commenced podcasting with a non-Muslim influencer, to April 30, 2024. The keyword "Koh Dennis Lim" was picked as this name seems to be the most popular among the other keywords associated with him, such as Dennis Lim or Ustadz Dennis Lim. The keyword "Koh Dennis Lim" is also used for his social media usernames on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.
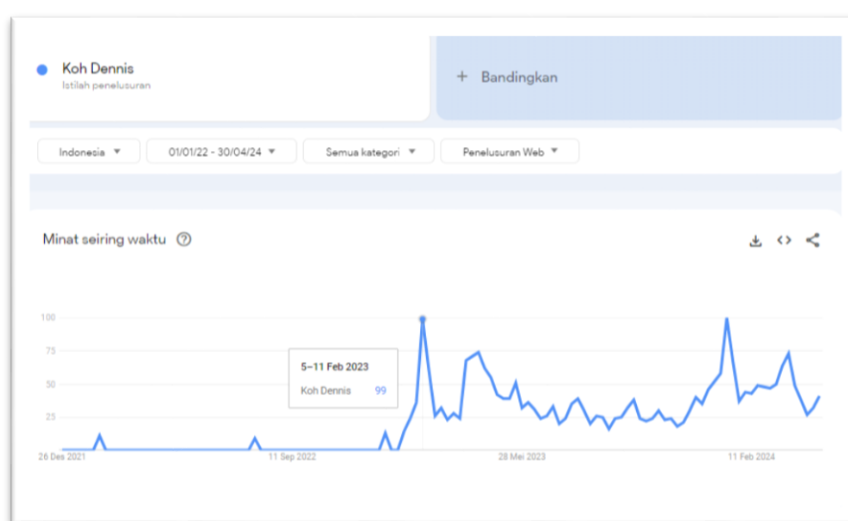

Figure 2 The first significant increase in search of Koh Dennis Lim on Google

The graph illustrates the keyword searches for Koh Dennis Lim over a two-year period (2022-2024). Some conclusions can be drawn from the graph. First, before February 2023, searches for Koh Dennis Lim were nearly non-existent, indicating that he was largely unknown to the online public before that time. Second, Google searches for Dennis surged significantly between February 5 and 11. What triggered this spike? The sharp increase in search interest during this period was driven by his podcast with Sumargo, which was uploaded on YouTube on February 3, 2023—just two days before the surge. There were no other podcasts featuring Dennis with any influencers during that period.

However, there is a significant downward trend after February 11, which reached its lowest point between March 5 and 11 (**see figure 3**). What caused the drop? As stated before, the podcasts between Dennis and non-Muslim influencers other than Denny Sumargo reoccurred from March 25 to April 1, 2023, which was with Daniel Mananta. There was not a single podcast featuring Dennis and non-Muslim influencers during that timeframe. The searches for Dennis rebounded for the second time in this period. Furthermore, search interest surged again for a third time between April 9 and 15, 2023, coinciding with his podcasts featuring other non-Muslim influencers, namely Richard Lee and Boris Bokir (**see figure 4 and 5**).
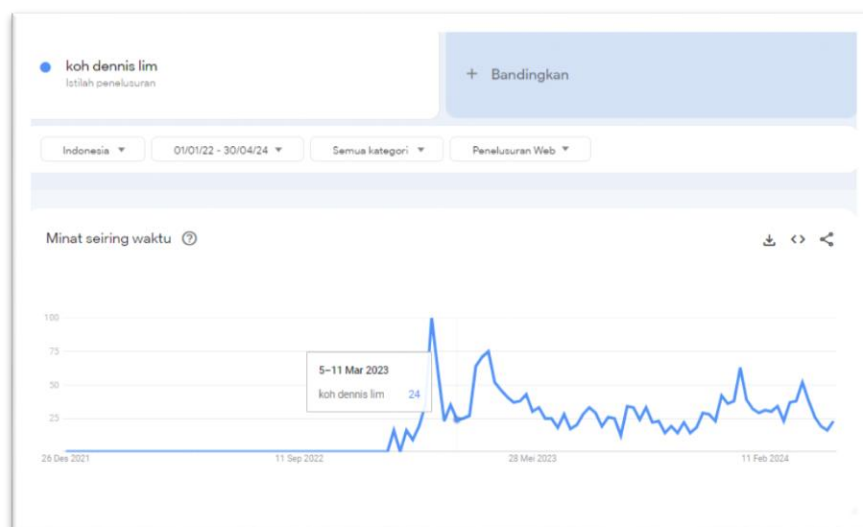

Figure 3 A significant drop during the absence of Dennis podcasts with non-Muslim influencers
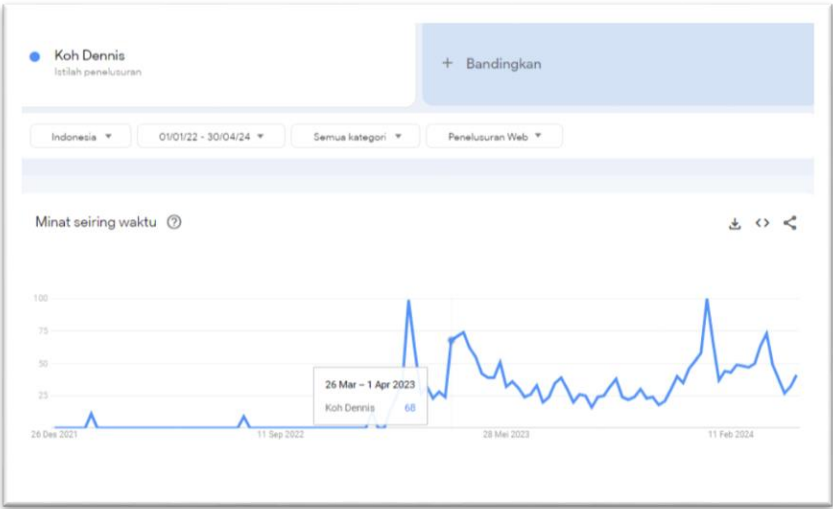
Figure 4 The second significant increase in search of Koh Dennis Lim on Google
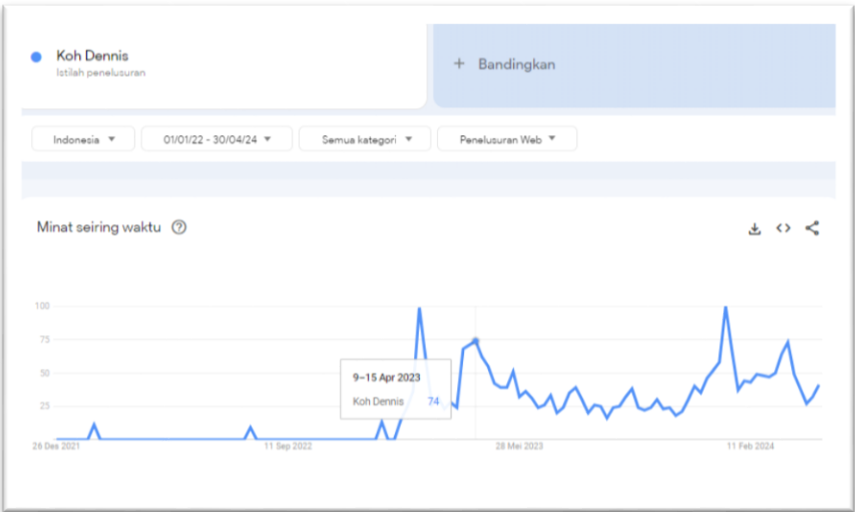

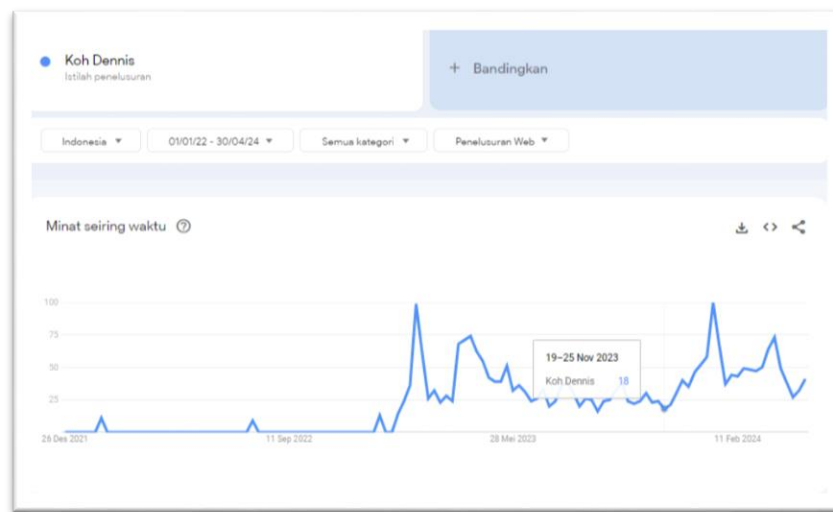Figure 5 The third significant increase in search of Koh Dennis Lim on Google

Figure 6 The lowest point in search of Koh Dennis Lim on Google by the end of 2023

Following the third surge, the Google search trend for Koh Dennis Lim experienced a sustained decline that continued until the end of the year (**see figure 6 above**). Why did the downward trend occur? Suppose we see the podcast table between Dennis Lim and non-Muslim influencers below. In that case, we will find that Dennis did not create any podcasts with non-Muslim influencers after the end of April 2023. He only podcasted again with non-Muslim influencers in November and at the end of December 2023 with Richard Lee and Boris Bokir. Therefore, this study contends that the decline indicates that Dennis's algorithmic visibility increased only when his podcasts with non-Muslim influencers were uploaded consistently and continuously. We will amplify this argument later with Google search data on Dennis and his podcasts with non-Muslim influencers in 2024.

Dennis Podcasts with Non-Muslim Influencers during 2023

No	Influencer	Upload Date	Views
1	Denny Sumargo	3rd of February 2023	12.076.570
2	Daniel Mananta	27th of March 2023	755.832
3	Daniel Mananta	28th of March 2023	334.208
4	Daniel Mananta	29th of March 2023	261.986
5	Daniel Mananta	30th of March 2023	214.216
6	Daniel Mananta	31st of March 2023	139.094
7	Daniel Mananta	1st of April 2023	2.044.543
8	Dr. Richard Lee	2nd of April 2023	1.634.393
9	Boris Bokir	24th of April 2023	3.380.627

10	Dr. Richard Lee	10th of Nov 2023	2.198.980
11	Dr. Richard Lee	14th of Dec 2023	481.552
12	Boris Bokir	31st of Dec 2023	1.068.814

Dennis and the non-Muslim influencers he podcasted with appear to be aware of how their content has successfully attracted significant viewership and enhanced their algorithmic visibility. The podcasts benefit both parties; on the one hand, non-Muslim influencers enjoyed significant viewership, increased platform social traffic, and new subscribers; on the other hand, as a newly emerging preacher, Dennis gained extensive exposure, increased social media traffic, significant follower growth, and popularity, and elevated his personal branding as a Muslim preacher. This algorithm-driven advantage may have motivated Dennis and the non-Muslim influencers to produce additional podcasts.

The frequency of podcasts featuring Dennis and non-Muslim influencers increased at the beginning of 2024. Rather than producing standalone episodes, they launched a dedicated podcast series specifically for Ramadan. These non-Muslim influencers recognized that during Ramadan, Indonesian Muslims experience heightened spirituality. As a result, Islamic content is consistently in high demand throughout the month. There are three podcast series produced during Ramadan: **First,** with Daniel Mananta and Brian Siawarta, a famous young pastor. Five podcast videos were uploaded between January 7 and February 8, 2024. **Second,** with Mongol, a Christian comedian, in a podcast series program called *Ruang Tengah*. A total of eight episodes from this series were uploaded between March 15 to April 6, 2024. **Third,** with Richard Lee and Young Lex, a Christian rapper, and Felix Siauw, in a podcast series named *Download*. In this series, Dennis and Felix served as interviewees, while Richard Lee and Young Lex served as hosts. The program produced a total of thirty-one episodes throughout the month of Ramadan, accumulating over 17 million views. Refer to the table below for detailed insights!

Dennis Podcasts with Non-Muslim Influencers during 2024

No	Influencer	Upload Date	Views
1	Serial Podcast with Daniel Mananta (**Five videos**)	7th of January to 8th of February 2024	832.687
2	Denny Sumargo	12th of March 2024	2.000.214
3	Serial Podcast "Ruang Tengah" with Mongol	15th of March to 6th of April 2024	991.669

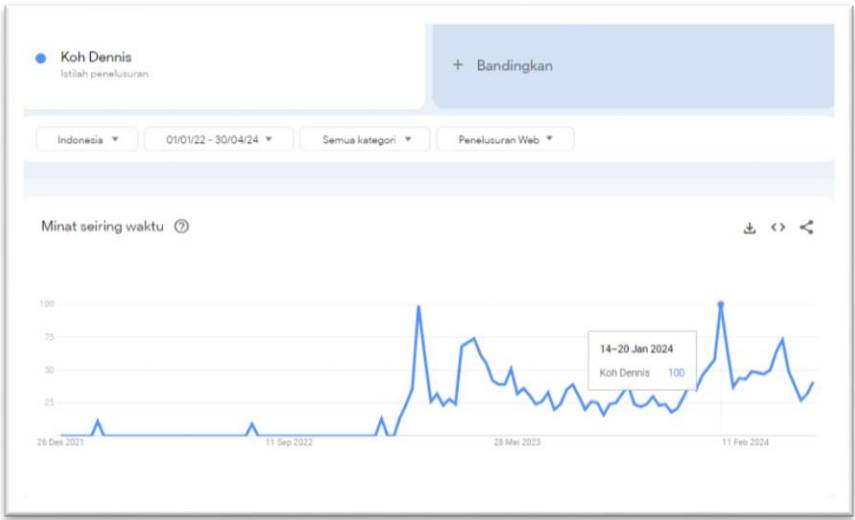|	(**Eight videos**)		
4	Serial Podcast "Download" with Dr. Richard Lee (**Thirty-one videos**)	11th of March to 10th of April 2024	More than 17 million

Figure 7 The fourth significant increase in search of Koh Dennis Lim on Google
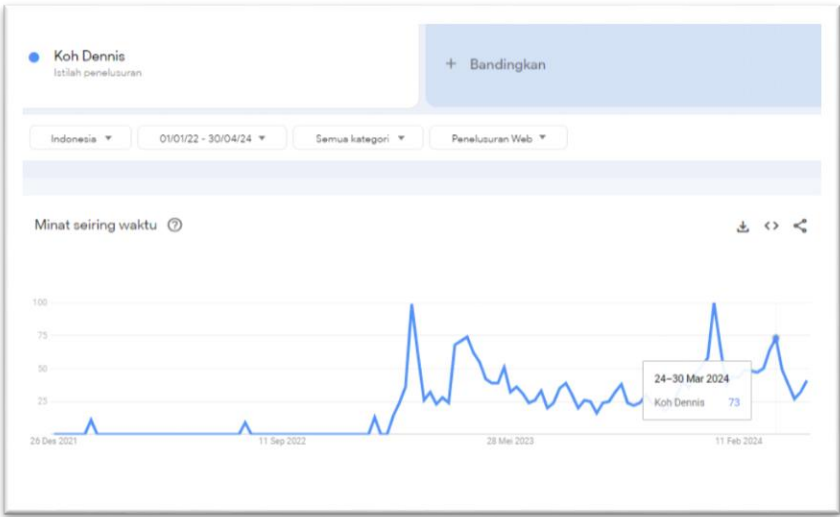

Figure 8 The fifth significant increase in search of Koh Dennis Lim on Google

The Ramadhan podcast series achieved significant success, garnering millions of views. Despite the previous significant algorithm drop at the end of 2023, the beginning of 2024 witnessed two rises between January 14 to 20 and March 24 to 30 due to the Ramadhan podcasts. The first rise occurred when Dennis podcasted with Daniel Mananta and Brian Stewart (**see figure 7**). The second surge occurred during the podcast featuring Richard Lee and Young Lex (**see figure 8**).

To validate this argument, it is essential to compare Dennis's podcasts with non-Muslim influencers and Muslim influencers to examine their differing impacts on the rise and decline of his online visibility. Although the number of podcasts with non-Muslim influencers is higher, Dennis has also podcasted with a significant number of Muslim influencers. In total, there are eleven podcast videos featuring Dennis alongside eight prominent Muslim influencers as shown in the table below.

Dennis Podcasts with Muslim Influencers

No	Influencer	Upload Date	Views
1	Cerita Untungs (Arie)	15th of February 2023	365.967
2	The Sungkars (Shiren and family)	3rd of March 2023	3.059.126
3	Habib Ja'far	17th of April 2023	2.091.497
4	Sandiaga Uno	20th of April 2023	379.936
5	Kasisolusi (Dery)	5th of May 2023	3.133.054
6	Novel Baswedan	9th of May 2023	1.350.961
7	Cerita Untungs	28th of June 2023	399.467
8	Deddy Corbuzier	1st of July 2023	3.616.239
9	Habib Ja'far	11th of July 2023	1.277.599
10	Rhoma Irama	21st of July 2023	2.988.271
11	Cerita Untungs	29th of January 2024	67.483

We skip the two podcast videos with Arie on the Cerita Untungs channel (February 15, 2023) and Shiren on The Sungkars channel (March 3, 2023) for two reasons. **First**, the data overlaps as during this period (February to mid-April), Dennis also appeared on the non-Muslim channels, i.e. Sumargo, Mananta, and Richard Lee. **Second**, the podcasts with Sumargo, Mananta, and Richard Lee are significantly higher in quantity (eight videos) and views than the podcasts with Muslim influencers (**look back at the table of Dennis podcasts with non-Muslim influencers during 2023**). Therefore, if there was a rise in Google searches pertaining to Koh Dennis Lim in this time span, it is more reasonable to conclude that the rise was the effect of Dennis' podcast with non-Muslim influencers. Dennis' podcast with Arie, which was uploaded

on January 29, 2024, is also excluded due to the very low number of views. Thus, the analysis will primarily focus on Dennis's podcasts with Muslim influencers from mid-April to late July 2023.

The table above shows that Dennis appeared in eight podcasts featuring seven prominent Muslim influencers. The first podcast featured Habib Ja'far, one of Indonesia's most influential preachers, with two episodes uploaded—one on April 17, garnering 3 million views, and another on July 11, attracting 1.2 million views. Second, a podcast with Dery on the Kasisolusi channel, which has 1.26 million subscribers, was uploaded on May 5 and garnered 3.1 million views. Third, a podcast featuring Rhoma Irama, a legendary Indonesian musician known for conveying Islamic messages through his songs, was uploaded on July 21 and garnered 2.9 million views. Fourth, a podcast on Deddy Corbuzier's channel, Indonesia's leading YouTuber with 23 million subscribers, received 3.6 million views. Meanwhile, the podcasts featuring Sandiaga and Arie attracted relatively low viewership, with each receiving approximately 300,000 views. Overall, Dennis's podcasts with Muslim influencers during this period accumulated over 14 million views.

In terms of views, both podcasts with Muslim and non-Muslim influencers have significant numbers. However, do they have the same impact on Dennis' online visibility? Suppose we observe the podcasts with Muslim influencers from April 17 with Habib Ja'far (**number 3 in the table**) to July 21 with Rhoma Irama (**number 10 in the table**) and compare it with Google Trends search results below. In that case, we will find a discrepancy between the high number of views of their podcast videos and the decreasing trend of Google searches on Dennis. Based on the two Google Trends graphs below, Google searches for Dennis continued to experience a downward trend from April 16 to 20 (**figure 9**) to its lowest point in the period of September 3 to 9 (**figure 10**).
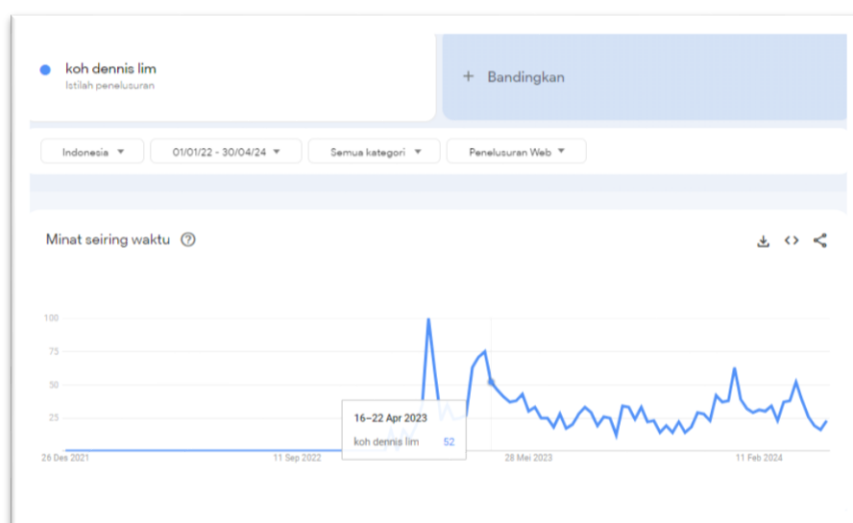

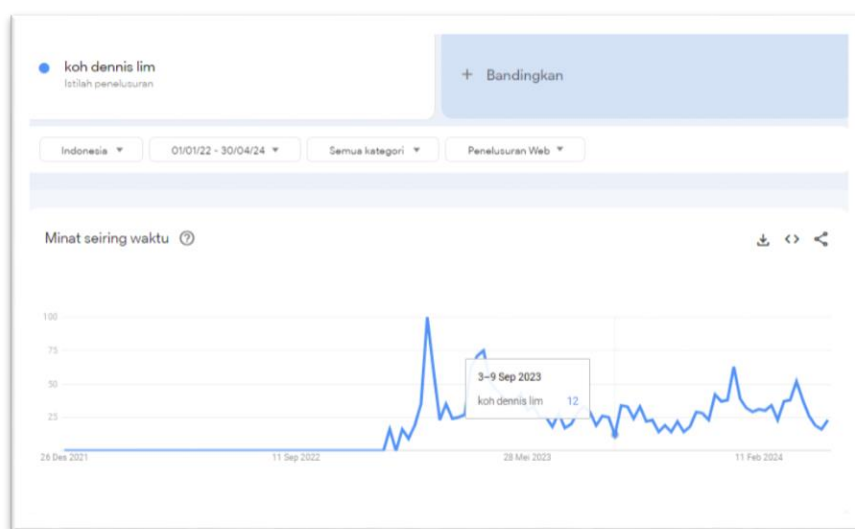Figure 9 The Google search of Koh Dennis saw a downward trend since April 16, 2023

Figure 10 The ever-declining trend of Google searches of Koh Dennis Lim

To put it differently, the high viewership of Dennis's podcasts with Muslim influencers did not lead to an increase in Google searches about him. These Muslim influencers' high number of subscribers and followers greatly influenced the significant views of their podcasts with Dennis. Nevertheless, relatively few of these viewers subsequently searched for or sought further information about Dennis, as evidenced by the decline in search trends related to him. This contrasts with Dennis' podcasts with non-Muslim influencers, where high viewership consistently led to a notable increase in Google searches about him. These findings reinforce the central argument of this study that Dennis religious algorithmic authority has been successfully built through his consistent presence in podcasts with non-Muslim influencers. In addition, this shows that online engagement with different religious communities can expand the network and reach of *da'wah* messages. Dennis's podcasts with non-Muslim influencers allowed him to expand the reach of messages to a broader audience, including those who are not actively involved in the Muslim community This strategy granted him access to platforms and audiences that would have otherwise remained beyond the reach of traditional Muslim networks. In an era where online interactions dominate communication, this approach becomes instrumental to expanding influence and authority of a religious preacher.

The influential podcasts of Dennis with non-Muslim influencers are inseparable from the growing popularity of podcasts among internet users, including Indonesia. In a survey titled "Podcast Trends Unveiled: Indonesia's Podcast Streaming Habits," Populix found that most respondents access podcasts 4-6 times a week. In this survey, YouTube and Spotify are the most frequently used platforms for Indonesians to enjoy podcast content (Marketeers, 2023).The data is reinforced by We Are Social's January 2024

report on the high number of internet users who listen to the podcast. Of the 26 percent of global internet users who consume podcasts, Indonesia is the second most active in listening to podcasts with 38.2 percent participation rate during a week (Annur, 2024).
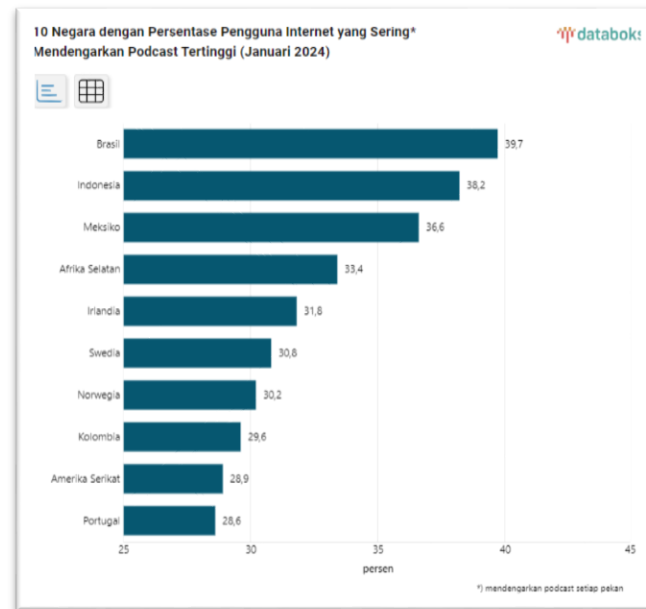

Figure 11 List of top ten countries with the most podcast listeners

Pluralist View or Islamic Missionary?

What appeals to Indonesian viewers from the podcasts between Dennis and non-Muslim influencers? This study discovered that the audience enjoyed watching the podcasts between Muslim preachers and non-Muslim influencers as they believe that Islamic preaching should penetrate non-Muslim communities. They hope that their idolized non-Muslim influencers will receive divine guidance (*hidāyah*) to accept Islam through their frequent interactions with Muslim preachers such as Ustadz Dennis Lim. It shows how strong the belief of Islamic missionaries is in the minds of the Indonesian Muslims that Islam has to be preached to everyone, especially to those who do not believe, and that Islam is the only religion of salvation. From the interview with Dennis' congregants, when asked a question why such podcasts caught their interest, they answered that Islamic propagation is not only for fellow Muslims but also for non-Muslims. The methods of propagating Islam can vary, including through podcasts, as Dennis has done with non-Muslim influencers. This was expressed by Dita and Dinah

"In my opinion, the podcast can be a short cut to log in (to convert the non-Muslim influencers to Islam). The podcast to me is very positive since many of the viewers are probably non-Muslims as well. We never know if those who watched the podcast can get Allah's guidance to convert, we'll never know. So, in my point of view,

the podcast is good as long as Koh Dennis does not justify non-Muslim religions, right?'' (interview with Dita on May 23, 2024).

"To me, there is no problem with such podcasts. More than that, I feel proud because it's like teaching Islam to the people who have no idea about what Islam actually is. So, I'm feeling proud. Besides, the podcasts between non-Muslim influencers with Muslim preachers had happened many times before with Koh Dennis. It's like sharing different views with non-Muslims. No one knows that through the podcasts the non-Muslims feel moved to convert to Islam from Koh Dennis' explanations about Islam" (interview with Dinah on June 3, 2024).
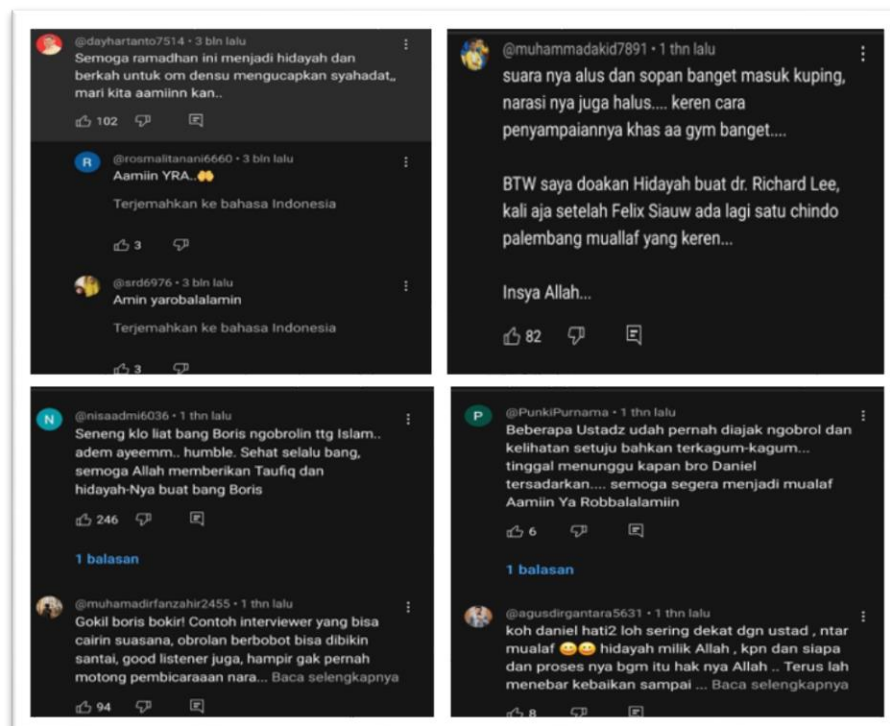

Figure 12 Viewers' comments hoping for *hidāyah* for non-Muslim influencers

The non-Muslim influencers seemed to be well aware of their subscribers and viewers. They capitalize on the Indonesian demographics, where the majority of the population, 87 percent, of Indonesians are Muslims (Kemenag, 2022). In combination, Indonesia is one of the most religious countries in the world. In a survey titled The Global God Divide released in July 2020, the Pew Research Centre reported that 96 percent of Indonesian respondents thought that belief in God was necessary to be moral and have good values. The survey results, which covered 34 countries, placed Indonesia alongside the Philippines as the two countries with the highest percentage equating belief in God with having good values (Salazar, 2020) . This fact indicates a strong interest in religious discourse among Indonesians, especially Muslims as the majority

religion, and the non-Muslim influencers are taking full advantage of this reality by creating "Islamic podcasts" with Muslim preachers.

On several occasions, to attract Muslim audiences, these influencers also wear typical Muslim attributes in the podcast such as wearing *koko* shirts, caps, and turbans. Dressing like Muslims seemingly gives the audience the impression that they are approaching the point of "log in" (converting to Islam). The same phenomenon occurs in the podcasts between Dennis and non-Muslim influencers. The term "log in" has been frequently used as a title or thumbnail for the podcast videos. The podcasts proved to be successful and beneficial for both parties. On one hand, the non-Muslim influencers experienced a surge in online traffic, video views, and potential subscribers to their YouTube channels. Dennis, on the other hand, enjoyed an impressive growth of social media engagement, number of followers and viewership of his social media accounts, which in turn boosted his popularity and religious status as a Muslim preacher.

Figure 13 The use of term "Log in" for podcast title and thumbnail on YouTube

From Algorithmic to Real-World Authority

The significant Google searches on Dennis has significantly impacted his social media insights and engagements, especially on Instagram and TikTok. From only having fifty thousand followers before the podcasts with non-Muslim influencers, today, he has more than one and a half million followers on TikTok and more than a million followers on Instagram. The fast growth of social media can be seen from his social media insights below. The first graph shows his follower growth on Instagram

throughout May. It shows that his Instagram posts reached over four million accounts during the thirty days of May, divided into two parts: 13.1 percent of his followers and 86.9 percent of his non-following accounts. The second graph shows the interactions generated by his content in the form of likes, comments, and shares. The statistics display more than three hundred thousand account interactions during May. While the third graph demonstrates the number of followers on Instagram until May. It also reveals the growing number of followers his Instagram has gained. The figures show that Dennis' Instagram gained 38,371 new followers within a month, although 12,328 later unfollowed. On average, Dennis' Instagram account gains around a thousand new followers daily.

Meanwhile, his TikTok account growth shows even more impressive numbers, as evidenced by the insight graphs above. The first graph shows Dennis's follower count as of May, which is 1.5 million. It also shows Dennis' net followers, which stand at 47 thousand. Net followers are the sum of new followers minus those who unfollowed within a certain period of time. The second graph covers the number of post impressions from April to May, which is 20 million. The third graph displays the total unique viewers of Dennis' posts during April and May, which are 16 million. Total Unique Viewers is a metric that measures the number of distinct individuals who have viewed a TikTok video, regardless of how many times they have watched it. The Instagram and Tik Tok insights were shared by Cantika, Dennis' media team.
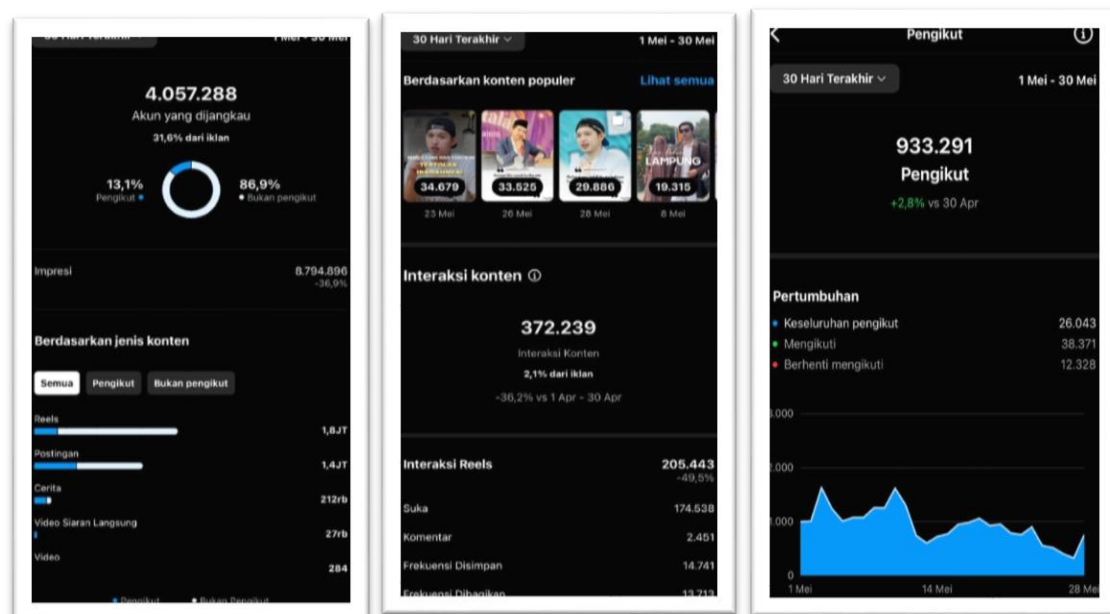

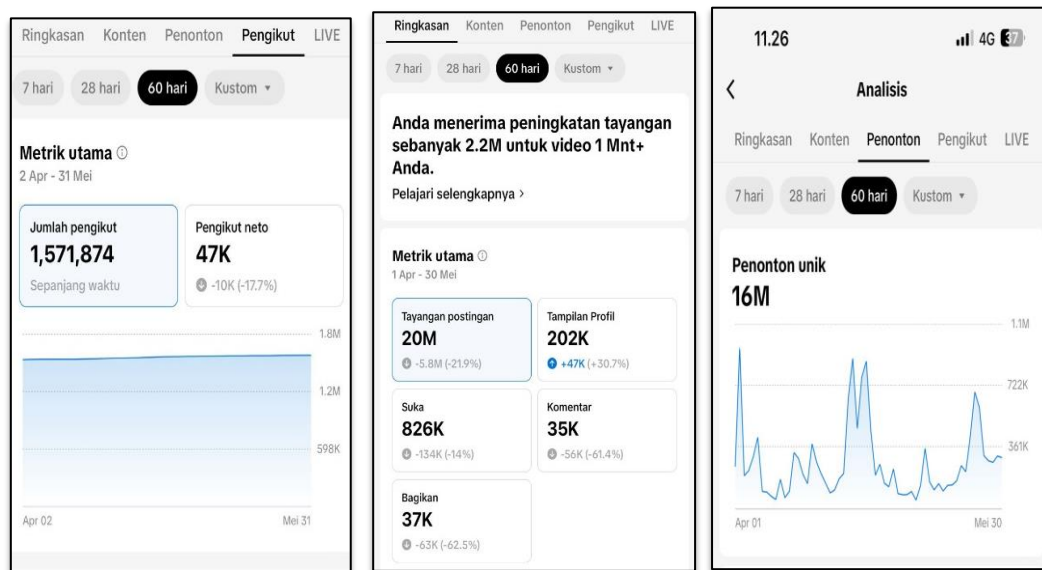Figure 14 Dennis's Instagram Insights

Figure 15 Dennis's Tik Tok insights

The podcasts with non-Muslim influencers did not only impact his online visibility but also offline preaching activities. After the successful podcasts with non-Muslim figures, some offers and invitations to preach in distant places came from many areas in Indonesia and even from Asian countries, from neighboring countries to Japan and Korea. The busy schedule of offline *da'wah* brought some challenges for Dennis in managing his *da'wah* activities, including communicating with the event organizers, documenting his preaching, managing schedules, and operating his social media accounts. Therefore, he hired Koh Dio to be his scheduling manager. Around a month later, Dio could not handle everything Dennis needed for his *da'wah* activities, including managing his social media accounts. He then recruited Cantika in 2023 to handle the social media accounts. Cantika's job mainly focused on creating content in the form of images, videos, and reels, including replying to DM's and comments from followers (interview with Cantika on May 30, 2024).

Conclusion

This study presented an exploration of how religious authority can be constructed through a community or network of different religions. It takes the case of Ustadz Dennis Lim, a Muslim preacher who rose to prominence through his podcasts with non-Muslim influencers in Indonesia. It began by situating the study within the broader scholarly discourse on the shifting nature of Islamic religious authority in the digital age. Existing literature has documented how the spread of mass education, literacy, and access to online religious content has empowered diverse voices to challenge traditional

clerical monopolies on religious knowledge and interpretation. However, as this study points out, these studies have tended to focus on the structural factors enabling this transformation, rather than closely examining the specific mechanisms by which individual preachers are able to build authority and influence.

This study employed the innovative approach of "algorithmic authority" coined by Clay Shirky, to investigate how Ustadz Dennis Lim leveraged social media algorithms and podcasts to gain a widespread following. This study argues that despite lacking extensive formal religious training, Dennis was able to construct a firm religious authority through his strategy of networking with non-Muslim influencers. This study makes a significant contribution to the scholarly debates on how religious authority is being redefined and reconfigured within modern, digitally-connected Muslim societies. In conclusion, this study offers a new perspective that challenges conventional assumptions about the sources and manifestations of religious authority. Its findings open up new avenues for exploring the evolving landscape of Islamic religious authority in an increasingly interconnected world. Nevertheless, further studies should be conducted with various preacher figures, using either similar or different approaches, to validate or challenge the argument presented in this study.

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