

Silent agency and symbolic authority: negotiating piety and representation among urban Salafi women in Indonesia's digital sphere

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Abstract

This article proposes *silent agency* as a framework for understanding how urban Salafi women in Indonesia negotiate piety and religious authority within the visibility-driven landscape of social media. Drawing on reflective digital ethnography and narrative-visual analysis of forty-five Instagram posts from three Salafi-oriented accounts, the study demonstrates how these women cultivate a religious presence through anonymity, textual discipline, and non-figurative aesthetics. They do not rely on personal visibility or affective expression. Authority is articulated through scriptural citations, standardized templates, and restrained visual fields grounded in collective norms and standards. These practices reveal a representational logic in which concealment becomes a deliberate epistemic stance, reconfiguring agency beyond the liberal assumptions that link to visibility. By identifying the intertwined operations

of visual modesty, symbolic authority, and digital piety, the article demonstrates how Salafi women construct a coherent mode of online participation that aligns with shar'i commitments while resisting self-exposure. The findings contribute to debates on Muslim women's digital subjectivities, the aesthetics of Islamic authority, and the politics of non-visibility in the contemporary Islamic public sphere.

Artikel ini mengembangkan konsep *silent agency* untuk menjelaskan bagaimana perempuan Salafi perkotaan di Indonesia menegosiasikan kesalehan dan representasi dalam ruang digital. Dengan menggunakan etnografi digital dan analisis visual naratif dari empat puluh lima postingan Instagram dari tiga akun bertema Salafi, studi ini menunjukkan bahwa bagaimana perempuan Salafi ini menumbuhkan kehadiran agama melalui anonimitas, disiplin tekstual dan estetika non-figuratif. Mereka tidak mengandalkan visibilitas pribadi atau ekspresi afektif. Otoritas diartikulasi melalui kutipan teks-teks suci, standarisasi template, dan visual yang selalu terkendali dan berdasar pada norma-norma kolektif. Praktik ini mengungkapkan logika representasional, di mana penyembunyian menjadi sikap epistemik yang disengaja, mengkonfigurasi ulang agency di luar asumsi liberal yang menghubungkan visibilitas. Dengan mengidentifikasi ada saling keterkaitan antara *visual modesty*, *symbolic authority*, and *digital piety*, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa perempuan Salafi membangun partisipasi online yang koheren dengan komitmen shar'i, sambil menolak eksposur diri. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan tentang subjektivitas digital perempuan Muslim, estetika otoritas Islam, dan politik non-visibilitas dalam ruang publik Islam kontemporer.

Keywords: *Salafi women, silent agency, symbolic authority, digital piety.*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital developments have reshaped religious authority and expressions of piety within Muslim societies. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become symbolic arenas where religious identity is negotiated¹ through visual strategies,

¹Mónika Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority", *Religions*, Vol. 15, no. 9 (2024): 1103, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103>; Juan Narbona, "Sacred Cyberspaces: Catholicism, New Media, and the Religious Experience", *Church, Communication*

curated aesthetics, and a communal form of engagement.² These digital dynamics create new participatory spaces for Muslim women, particularly in Urban Indonesia, where piety and representation are increasingly mediated through symbolic visual practices rather than personal visibility.

In this context, religion is no longer confined to formal institutions or traditional authorities; instead, it increasingly relies on visual strategies. Muslim women, particularly Urban Salafi communities in Indonesia, emerge as key actors in shaping contemporary Islamic authority by engaging in disciplined and symbolically charged visual practices, without necessarily revealing their personal identities.³ This challenges the dominant logic that equates women's empowerment with visibility and affective narratives, highlighting that concealment and symbolism can serve as legitimate foundations for religious authority.⁴ Through online platforms and curated social spaces,⁵

and Culture, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2023), 330–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2023.2237072>.

²Sahar Khamis, "The Paradoxes of Modern Islamic Discourses and Socio-Religious Transformation in the Digital Age," *Religions*, Vol. 15, no. 2 (2024), 207, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020207>.

³G. R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority, Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks*, University of North Carolina Press, 2018; S. Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, SAGE Publications, 2021.

⁴Claire-Marie Hefner, "Morality, Religious Authority, and the Digital Edge", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 49, no. 3 (2022), 359–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13088>; Fatimah Husein, "Negotiating Salafism: Women Prayer Groups and Their Preachers in Indonesia's Islamic Digital Mediascapes", *CyberOrient*, Vol. 15, no. 1 (2021), 119–45, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cyo2.9>.

⁵Leila Ahmed and Kecia Ali, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, 2021; Ahmad Barizi et al., "Islam, Visual Morality and Gender Identity in Cyberspace: The Agency, Controversy and Popular Piety of Ria Riris", *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2024), 20–42, <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-bja10113>; Jean M. Kane, *Muslim Textualities*, New York: Routledge, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003189299>; Asya Dwina Luthfia, "Navigating Compliant Agency in Cyberspace: Muslim Womanhood Through the Lens of Oki Setiana Dewi", *Afkaruna: Indonesian Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.18196/afkaruna.v20i2.24127>; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, 2005; J. Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, *Studies in Feminist Philosophy*, OUP USA, 2013; Nur Shazlin Abdul Rahman, "Hijabi Vloggers: Muslim

such as hijabi avatars in Second Life,⁶ Salafi study circles in Yogyakarta,⁷ and communities like Telaga Sunnah Muslimah.⁸ Similarly Sunesti shows that Salafi-niqabi women negotiate hijrah, identity, and agency through everyday religious discipline.⁹ They perform a form of *silent agency* rooted in texts and shariah aesthetics, rather than personal figures. This approach expands our understanding of Muslim women's agency in the digital age, highlighting that concealment and symbolism can serve as legitimate and effective foundations for religious authority.¹⁰

Several studies have explored the dynamics of digital Islam in Indonesia, particularly focusing on hijrah movement and the religious practices of urban Muslim women on social media. Beta highlighted how hijabers' communities reconstruct Islamic identity by blending shariah and popular aesthetics, making visibility and personal branding key mediums of religious expression.¹¹ Slama demonstrated that social media serves as an

Women's Self Expression and Identity Articulation on YouTube", May 23, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14657598.v1>; Minako Sakai and Samina Yasmeen, "Narratives of Muslim Womanhood and Women's Agency", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 27, no. 4 (2016), 371-77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2016.1227046>.

⁶Marlyn Tados, "E-Hijab: Muslim Women in the Metaverse", *International Journal of Learning and Media*, Vol. 2, no. 2-3 (2010), 45-61, https://doi.org/10.1162/ijlm_a_00050.

⁷Marhumah, Iffah Khoiriyatul Muiyassaroh, and Rosalia Sciortino, "Public Expressions of Religion among Yogyakarta's Salafi Muslimah", *KARSA Journal of Social and Islamic Culture*, Vol. 32, no. 2 (2024), 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v32i2.15440>.

⁸Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca, "The Sunnah Lake of Muslimah: Salafi Women, the Manhaj and Online Media", *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (2019): 67-71, <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2018.6310>.

⁹Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca. "Young Salafi-niqabi and Hijrah: Agency and Identity Negotiation." *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2018): 173-198. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v8i2.173-198>.

¹⁰Avi Astor, Ghufuran Khir-Allah, and Rosa Martínez-Cuadros, "Anonymity and Digital Islamic Authority", *Religions*, Vol. 15, no. 12 (2024), 1507, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121507>; Prima Ayu Rizki Mahanani, "Perempuan Salafi Memaknai Jilbab: Antara Alternatif Dan Oposisional", *Jurnal Sosial Politik*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (2017), 123, <https://doi.org/10.22219/sospol.v2i1.4760>.

¹¹Annisa R. Beta, "Hijabers: How Young Urban Muslim Women Redefine Themselves in Indonesia", *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 76, no. 4-5 (2014), 377-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220819.2014.944444>.

effective space for openly performing piety in visual form.¹² Nisa examined the rise of new Islamic authorities within the One Day One Juz (ODOJ) movement, which is built upon digital rhythms and emotional intimacy among its members.¹³ Kusumalestari introduced the term “hijrahtainment” to describe religious entertainment based on personal narratives and the commodification of women’s bodies in da’wah industries.¹⁴ Additionally, Juliansyahzen analyzed the ideologization of the hijrah movement, which puts Muslimah celebrities as focal points of conservative visual expression.¹⁵ Akmaliah also demonstrates that new media has become a crucial arena for contesting and reclaiming Islamic authority in Indonesia.¹⁶ Although these studies offer valuable insights, they share a common epistemic tendency: visibility, personality, and affection remain positioned as core prerequisites for Muslim women’s religious agency. Such approaches often overlook anonymous, symbolic, and anti-figurative religious expressions as practiced by Salafi women’s communities. To date, these expressions have remained largely unexplored in academic discourse. This article builds on broader scholarship on Islamic digital media, including early analyses of

doi.org/10.1177/1748048514524103.

¹²Martin Slama, “Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, no. 134 (2018), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416798>.

¹³Eva F. Nisa, “Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, no. 134 (2018), 24–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2017.1416758>.

¹⁴Ratri Rizki Kusumalestari, “Hijrahtainment: Composing Piety and Profane as Commodification of Religion by Media,” *Mediator: Jurnal Komunikasi*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (2020), 290–306, <https://doi.org/10.29313/mediator.v13i2.6610>.

¹⁵Muhammad Iqbal Juliansyahzen, “Ideologization of Hijrah in Social Media: Digital Activism, Religious Commodification, and Conservative Domination,” *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 22, Issue 1 (2023), 155–80, <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol22.iss1.art6>.

¹⁶Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2020): 1-<https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i1>. 1-24.

online religious authority and mediated da'wah networks.¹⁷

Despite the growing participation of Muslim women in the digital sphere, their representation remains shaped by tensions between norms of piety and the platform, driven by the expectation of visual openness. In this environment, the body, voice, and personal narrative are treated as markers of authenticity, making agency appear inseparable from visibility and self-exposure.¹⁸ This tension becomes more pronounced for conservative Muslim women, including Salafi women, who reject the logic of visibility yet still seek to be active in the digital sphere. Studies of Muslim women's online activism show similar paradoxes. Initiatives such as #MuslimWomensDay gain traction, yet cultural pressures to display figurative authenticity persist.¹⁹ In this context, many Muslim women are developing anonymity as a conscious, normative, and strategic form of religious agency.²⁰ The choice to conceal faces, names, or personal narratives is not a sign of passivity, but rather an alternative to negotiating religious presence through the logic of concealment. This aligns with studies that Salafi women exercise agency through normative and community based practises.²¹

¹⁷Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*, Pluto Press, 2003). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs6ck>; Gary R. Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

¹⁸Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Harvard University Press, 2013; Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, "Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram's Authenticity Bind", (2019), <https://doi.org/10.32376/3f8575cb.3f03db0e>.

¹⁹Inaash Islam, "Redefining #YourAverageMuslim Woman: Muslim Female Digital Activism on Social Media", *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (2019), 213–33, https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00004_1; Rosemary Pennington, "Making Space in Social Media: #MuslimWomensDay in Twitter", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (2018), 199–217, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859918768797>; Camille Point, "MosqueMeToo: Islamic Feminism in the Twittersphere", *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 2019, no. 15 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5399/uo/ada.2019.15.3>.

²⁰Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

²¹Abubakar, Fatum, Euis Nurlaelawati, and Ahmad Bunyan Wahib: "Interpreting

While scholarship on digital Islam has expanded, a significant gap remains in explaining how conservative Muslim women, particularly Salafi women They built an alternative agency and rejected visibility. This article addresses this gap by proposing silent agency, an agency marked by anonymity, symbolic submission to religious authority, and disembodied presence in the digital sphere. Unlike traditional feminist paradigms,²² which emphasize visibility and personal expression, silent agency challenges the notion that empowerment must be tied to visibility. It offers a new lens through which we can understand how urban Salafi women emphasized their authority and constructed their digital presence,²³ prioritizing discipline, modesty,²⁴ and textual adherence over individual self-expression.²⁵

These are questions about how agency is constructed in the digital era, particularly in conservative Muslim societies, where visibility, personal narratives, and emotional expression are often viewed as markers of empowerment. This study investigates how urban Salafi women negotiate piety and representation in the digital sphere. This analyzes how these women assert their religious identity and authority through the strategic use of anonymity and symbolic representation, rather than conventional

‘Bulugh’: Enhancement of Women’s Right through Management of Marriage within Salafi Community in Wonokerten Yogyakarta.” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 12, no.1 (2022): 139-163, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i1.139-163>.

²²Ahmed and Ali, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*; M Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Oneworld, 2009; A Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam, Islam in the Twenty-First Century*, Oneworld Publications, 2006.

²³R Gajjala, *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women*, AltaMira Press, 2004; Niels van Doorn, “Digital sphere s, Material Traces: How Matter Comes to Matter in Online Performances of Gender, Sexuality and Embodiment”, *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 33, no. 4 (2011), 531–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711398692>.

²⁴Jeanette S. Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety...*

²⁵J. Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance...*

visibility.

To address this gap, the article engages three interrelated frameworks: silent agency, symbolic authority, and digital piety. In this study, silent agency refers to the deliberate anonymity of urban Salafi women, who eschew personal visibility and communicate through religious symbols, textual references, and visual modesty, thereby asserting authority while remaining aligned with their *shar‘i* commitments. Instead, *silent agency* expands the debate on Muslim women’s religious agency, building upon prior concepts such as compliant agency,²⁶ embodied piety,²⁷ and post-secular feminism.²⁸ Symbolic authority is constructed through standardized symbols, religious texts, and visual aesthetics. With religious quotations and simple visuals, these women offer a collective, communal authority.²⁹ The final framework, digital piety, focuses on how religious devotion is performed and represented online.³⁰ Salafi women embody modest, communal values through a disciplined mode of religious representation that is consistent, visually curated, and rooted in religious texts, rather than personal performances.

This article argues that through silent agency, urban Salafi women articulate religious authority without relying on figurative visibility. Through strategic anonymity and disciplined self-representation, they align digital participation with *shar‘i* norms. By positioning silent agency as a lens for interpreting non-figurative religious authority. This article provides

²⁶M. Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*, Taylor & Francis, 2004.

²⁷L. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi‘i Lebanon*, ACLS Fellows’ Publications, Princeton University Press, 2006; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety...*

²⁸Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 25, no. 6 (2008), 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095542>; Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints...*

²⁹van Doorn, “Digital Spaces, Material Traces...”

³⁰D. F. Eickelman and J W Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Indiana University Press, 2003.

empirical insight into the digital practices of urban Salafi women and demonstrates a narrative-visual analysis in symbolic forms of online piety.

This study draws on a qualitative dataset of forty-five Instagram posts from three public accounts affiliated with urban Salafi women in Indonesia: @muslimah.salafy, @fiqihwanita, and @muslimahindonesiaid. The posts were purposively curated from August 2024 to March 2025, selected for their consistent visual aesthetics, strong *shar'i* symbolism, and the absence of personal narratives or figurative representation. The study employs a reflective ethnography approach,³¹ combined with narrative-visual analysis.³² Focusing on recurring symbolic patterns, normative aesthetics, and forms of concealment that serve as the foundations of collective agency. Through manual open coding, the analysis identifies how anonymity,³³ textual references,³⁴ and standardized visuals are used to construct collective religious authority in the digital sphere. Data collection employed a reflective digital ethnography approach, in which the

³¹C. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015; Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*; N. M. Underberg and E. Zorn, *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media*, University of Texas Press, 2013.

³²Simon et al., "Drawing on Knowledge: Visual Narrative Analysis for Critical Environment and Development Research", *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (2022), 293–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620975340>.

³³Anique Scheerder, Alexander van Deursen, and Jan van Dijk, "Determinants of Internet Skills, Uses and Outcomes: A Systematic Review of the Second- and Third-Level Digital Divide", *Telematics and Informatics*, Vol. 34, no. 8 (2017), 1607–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.07.007>; Hong-Chi Shiau, "Networked Collective Symbolic Capital Revisited," in *Research Anthology on Inclusivity and Equity for the LGBTQ+ Community*, IGI Global, 2022, 426–40, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3674-5.ch022>; Eugen Tănăsescu, "The Demands of Cultural-Missionary Communication in the Media", *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, Vol. 39 (2023), 765–71, <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v39i1.8249>.

³⁴Radhika Gajjala, "South Asian Digital Diasporas and Cyberfeminist Webs: Negotiating Globalization, Nation, Gender and Information Technology Design", *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (2003), 41–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0958493032000123362>; Gajjala, *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women*; Niels van Doorn, Sally Wyatt, and Liesbet van Zoonen, "A Body of Text", *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 4 (2008), 357–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770802420287>.

researcher engaged with the platform over an extended period, attending to the textures, rhythms, and visual patterns that shape everyday religious expression online.³⁵ Screenshots, screen recordings, and chronological archiving were employed to document not only individual posts but also the repetition of templates, color schemes, captions, and scriptural citations.

To study used narrative-visual analysis, which treats images, verses, and captions as interlinked symbolic narratives rather than isolated media objects.³⁶ Coding across three dimensions: visual modesty, symbolic authority, and digital piety. These categories were refined iteratively across posts. Ethical considerations were central to the process, although all accounts were public and no personal information was accessed. It was taken to avoid identifying individuals in line with the community's commitment to anonymity.

Visual modesty as silent agency

Visual modesty functions as an expression of silent agency. Avoiding personal image, body visibility, and self-narrative. These women use hidden representation, aesthetic discipline, and symbolic minimalism. This non-figurative visual strategy reflects epistemic modesty, conveying moral authority through organized symbols, scriptural references, and a neutral visual field.³⁷ In this context, the absence of faces, bodies, and individualized markers is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference. By foregrounding symbols over selves, urban Salafi women articulate agency through controlled anonymity, transforming visual modesty into a mode of religious authority rather than a sign of passive withdrawal.

The visual discipline of Salafi women's platforms is characterized

³⁵Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography...*

³⁶Birgit Bräuchler, *Cyberidentities at War: The Moluccan Conflict on theInternet*, New York: Berghahn, 2013.

³⁷Mahmood, *Politics of Piety...*

by the consistent absence of individual faces, bodies, and personalized poses. These accounts use neutral or monochromatic backgrounds, text-only templates, and stylized non-figurative illustrations. Posts from @muslimahindonesiaid feature brief Qur’anic or hadith-based reminders on plain fields, while @fiqihwanita presents concise prophetic or scholarly admonitions in similarly restrained layouts. @muslimah.salafy introduces monochromatic graphics and faceless cartoon figures that maintain shar‘i norms by avoiding identifiable features. Across these cases, visual modesty functions as a symbolic discipline in which authority rests not in the visible self but in the textual and symbolic forms that place. Through these standardized, non-figurative aesthetics, Salafi women cultivate a mode of presence aligned with silent agency, transforming concealment into a structured form of epistemic and moral authority.³⁸

Table 1 summarizes the dominant visual elements, text styles, and conceptual orientations of the posts. This description provides an empirical foundation for further analysis of visual decorum, symbolic authority, and the curated forms of digital piety.

Table 1. Visual and Textual Representation Patterns in Urban Salafi Instagram Posts

Account	Dominant Visual Elements	Caption Style	Key Conceptual Orientation
@fiqihwanita	Plain backgrounds; text-only templates; occasional mushaf imagery	Hadith quotations; scholars’ fatwas; concise normative admonitions	Epistemic modesty (textual authority emphasized over personal identity)

³⁸Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

@ muslimahindonesiaid	Neutral backgrounds; minimalist layouts; non- figurative text fields	Qur’anic phrases and short moral reminders; no narrative elaboration	Ritualized textuality (repetition of scriptural messages as impersonal presence)
@muslimah.salafy	Monochrome graphic templates; standardized layouts; no human figures	Shar‘i advice; ethical injunctions; brief doctrinal reminders	Aesthetic discipline (regulated visuals as moral positioning)

As Mahmood and Jouili note, piety in conservative Islamic traditions is cultivated through disciplined bodily aesthetics and repeated acts of self-discipline.³⁹ In the digital sphere, this discipline is characterized by the avoidance of faces, the use of scriptural calligraphy, and neutral backgrounds. Symbolic gestures that must be reiterated to sustain a religious habitus. Deeb likewise shows that piety arises from ongoing habituation rather than from fixed inner states.⁴⁰ Within this framework, the visual monotony of Salafi posts becomes a ritualized expression of modesty that reaffirms communal norms and positions invisibility as an ethically charged mode of religious presence.⁴¹

Through this aesthetic regulation, visual modesty becomes a means of consolidating collective rather than individual authority. By eliminating personal figures and highlighting textual and symbolic content, Salafi women shift legitimacy from the self to the normative structures of religious

³⁹Mahmood, *Politics of Piety...*
⁴⁰Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern...*
⁴¹Samuli Schielke, “Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life,” *Zentrum Moderner Orient Working papers* 2, (2010). <https://doi.org/10.22394/2073-7203-2023-41-3-4-304-342>.

texts. As Tarlo demonstrates in the context of Islamic fashion, concealment functions not only as a sharia compliance but also as a political and epistemic act shaping the religious public sphere.⁴² This is evident in posts composed solely of scriptural quotations or brief normative reminders, such as a January 2025 post from @muslimah.salafy titled “Obey the evidence; guard your intentions,” set against a monochrome graphic background. Such representation asserts authority through disciplined alignment with sharia, moral norms, and textual tradition.⁴³ In this sense, visual modesty is an epistemic stance grounded in communal values, symbolic purity, and the pursuit of invisibility.

Symbolic authority in digital representation

Symbolic authority does **not** rely on personal visibility or charismatic self-presentation. Instead, it is anchored in stable symbols, scriptural citations, and normative textual repetition. Legitimacy is stable symbols, scriptural quotations, repeated normative texts, and linguistic signs.⁴⁴ Salafi media practices in Indonesia also demonstrate that religious authority is constructed through mediated repetition, not through personal visibility.⁴⁵ Within this framework, messages embodied in s, verses, and normative reminders become a power, allowing these women to assert authority while remaining invisible. This symbolic authority extends silent agency by replacing the personal figure with a textualized and collectively recognized source, a dynamic evident in the visual patterns of their posts.

⁴²E. Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, Berg Publishers, 2010.

⁴³Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith...*

⁴⁴Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>.

⁴⁵Masduki, Masduki, Akh Muzakki, Imron Rosidi, and Toni Hartono, “Islam on the Air: The Struggle for Salafism through Radio in Indonesia.” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 12, no 1 (2022): 59-84, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i1.59-84>.

Figure 2. Normative Reminder on Prioritizing the Qur'an over Digital Distractions, @fiqihwanita (Januari 2025)



A text-based post quoting from Ustadz Firanda Andirja Hafizahullah advised Muslims to prioritize the Qur'an over digital distractions. Presented in a plain, text-centered template with a neutral background, it illustrates how Salafi-affiliated accounts convey scholarly authority through restrained, non-figurative visuals that obscure individual visibility while emphasizing normative religious instruction.

In both posts, symbolic authority is constructed through standardized, text-centered templates that foreground scriptural and scholarly messages while suppressing personal visibility. The hadith post from @muslimahindonesiaid and the admonition from Ustadz Firanda on @fiqihwanita employ the same minimalist visual grammar, plain backgrounds, simple typography, and the absence of figurative elements—allowing the text to function as a self-standing source of legitimacy. In this shared representational logic,

authority is not conveyed through the figure of the poster but through the disciplined presentation of prophetic and scholarly guidance, positioning the message itself as the locus of religious presence.

The texts and symbols reflect a broader epistemic logic through which religious authority is produced in conservative Islamic publics. As Tarlo notes, practices of concealment and symbolic regulation function not only as markers of piety but also as political and epistemic acts that shape who may speak within religious spaces. In the digital realm, this logic becomes a visual practice in which the authority of the message supplants the messenger's presence. Eickelman and Anderson also note that symbolic forms in Muslim communities often serve as mechanisms for generating normative consensus, allowing groups to assert religious legitimacy without relying on personal charisma.⁴⁶ In this context, the use of Quranic verses, neutral calligraphy, and standardized aesthetic gestures becomes a way of producing what Medina describes as epistemic authority through strategic refusal, an authority grounded in the deliberate withholding of the self.⁴⁷

The operation of symbolic authority also requires the creation of representational boundaries, regulating how religious messages can appear in the digital realm. By limiting visual forms to scriptural quotations, neutral designs, and non-personal imagery, these accounts delineate a normative framework that dictates what may be displayed and what must remain concealed.⁴⁸ This boundary is evident in posts that explicitly avoid personal imagery, such as a December 2024 post by @muslimah.salafy featuring a cartoon illustration of a man pointing his finger against a

⁴⁶Nisa, "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement...; Martin Slama, "Social media and Islamic practice: Indonesian ways of being digitally pious," in Jurriens E, Tapsell R (eds.), *Digital Indonesia: Connectivity and Divergence*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute; 2017, 146-162.

⁴⁷Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance....*

⁴⁸Mahmood, *Politics of Piety...*

maroon background. The caption reads: “A Generation of *Latah* Muslims Loses Its Muslim Identity,” referencing the hadith about *tasyabbuh* (imitating non-Muslims). This post serves as a moral reminder, emphasizing the importance of maintaining Islamic identity and avoiding practices that resemble those of non-Muslims. It serves as a gesture of collective regulation and participation, and legitimacy is based on adherence to textual values. Salafi women maintain a form of authority that is communal, depersonalized, and bound by shared epistemic commitments.⁴⁹

These symbolic practices demonstrate that authority within the Salafi digital community is constructed through disciplined texts, symbols, and normative cues. Based on scriptural references and aesthetic consistency, it demonstrates a form of collective authority that is not dependent on individual identity. This authority also serves as a buffer against the affective and algorithmic pressures of digital culture,⁵⁰ namely the pressure to present oneself emotionally, personally, and expressively, a pressure reinforced by platform recommendation systems. Thus, symbolic authority represents a second layer of silent agency, a form of religious power that is textual, communal, and intentionally depersonalized.⁵¹

Table 2 summarizes the dominant symbolic patterns, scriptural orientations, and textual strategies. These patterns illustrate how authority is constructed through repetition, textual anchoring, and normative alignment. These symbolic patterns form the basis upon which curated modes of digital piety emerge, linking textual authority with the disciplined aesthetics of online devotion.

⁴⁹Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape...*

⁵⁰Beta, “Hijabers: How Young Urban Muslim Women Redefine Themselves in Indonesia”; Nicky van Es, Stijn Reijnders, Leonieke Bolderman, Abby Waysdorf (eds.), *Locating Imagination in Popular Culture: Place, Tourism and Belonging*, London: Routledge, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003045359>.

⁵¹Mahmood, *Politics of Piety...*

Table 2. Symbolic Patterns and Textual Strategies in Salafi Women’s Instagram Posts

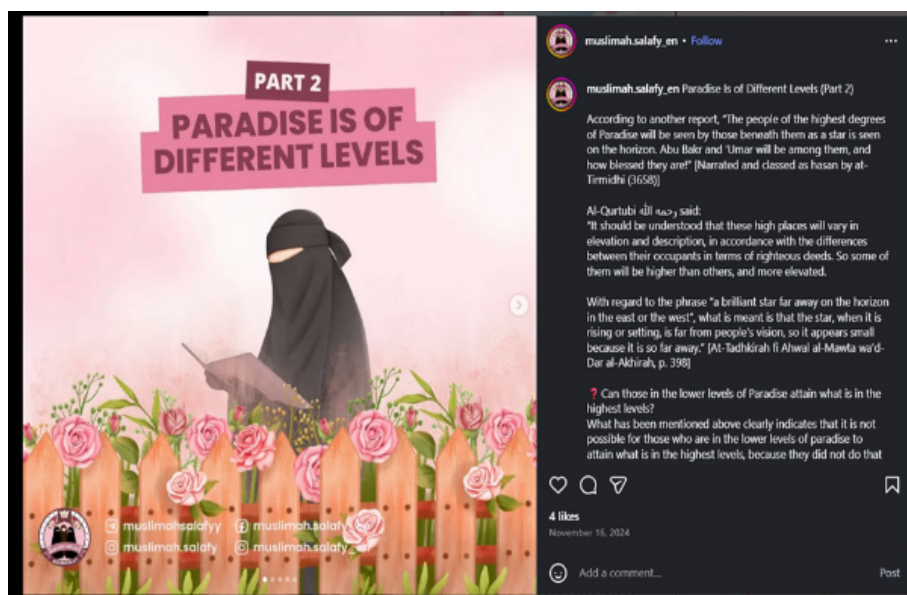
Symbolic Form	Textual Source	Representational Function
Qur’anic excerpts in plain text templates	Qur’an; classical tafsir	Establishes divine authority; centers revealed guidance over personal presence
Hadith quotations in standardized layouts	Sunni canonical collections	Grounds moral instruction in prophetic authority; signals doctrinal alignment
Scholars’ admonitions and fatwas	Contemporary Salafi scholars; online fatwa repositories	Provides institutional legitimacy; frames piety through recognized scholarly voices
Non-figurative sacred references (e.g., mushaf silhouettes)	Qur’anic manuscripts; devotional symbols	Visualizes sacredness without personalization; substitutes bodies with sacralized signs
Neutral backgrounds (beige/white/grey)	Aesthetic norms of modesty	Creates an atmosphere of restraint; suppresses affective self-expression
Standardized text-centered templates	Internal page-style conventions in Salafi media	Ensures visual consistency; produces a recognizable communal identity

Digital piety as curated representation

Digital piety represents a third layer through which urban Salafi women employ articulate, yet silent agency. It emerges as a curated form of religious representation that emphasizes fidelity to text, visual restraint, and normative consistency. They do not express their piety through personal narratives or affective storytelling, but rather develop repetitive

symbolic practices. These practices involve selecting, organizing, and circulating religious texts and neutral aesthetics in a manner that prioritizes sharia values over individual experience. In digital piety, it's more of a representational discipline than an emotional expression. The methodical curation of images, verses, and reminders maintains a moral atmosphere consistent with Salafi epistemology. Piety emerges as a visible yet non-figurative presence. This presence is constituted by carefully crafted visual and textual compositions that reaffirm collective religious norms, such as those employed by @muslimah.salafy, which utilize pastel palettes and faceless cartoon figures to convey a modest presence.

Figure 3. Stylized Non-Figurative with Faceless Cartoon
@muslimah_salafy



The image is a form of visual modesty, as seen in @muslimah.salafy; its feminine aesthetics are combined with non-figurative representation to maintain shar'ī norms while fostering a sense of communal piety. The

format expands the digital aesthetics and maintains a personal presence. Digital piety is expressed through stylized idioms, such as soft pastel templates and faceless cartoon figures, which maintain a non-figurative discipline and create a community-oriented visual. Although visually softer and more stylized than the strictly minimal formats of @fiqihwanita or @muslimahindonesiaid, this post remains simple and impersonal, pairing a concise reminder of on adab, intention, or everyday moral comportment. These hybrid forms suggest that Salafi digital piety is not limited to textual forms. It reinforces ethical restraint and shared religious identity.

The aesthetic patterns observed in these posts reflect a broader understanding of piety as a disciplined and cultivated practice. Pious subjectivity is formed through structured acts of habituation, including rituals, bodily regulation, and aesthetic discipline that align with normative religious values. The repeated use of Quranic verses, the emphasis on neutral templates, and the strict avoidance of personal narratives serve as ritualistic gestures through which devotion is continuously enacted. Within this framework, the curated aesthetic patterns employed by Salafi women operate as repeated acts of devotion. These practices produce a form of digital piety grounded in discipline, repetition, and self-management.

This curated form of digital piety also functions as a regulatory system that sets representational boundaries for women's participation in the digital sphere. It aligns with Salafi norms; the exclusion of faces, personal context, and affective storytelling reflects the expectation that devotion should be expressed through disciplinary neutrality rather than individual experience. This regulatory dimension is evident in posts that prescribe proper conduct, such as a February 2025 upload from @muslimah.salafy, featuring a faceless niqab-wearing figure in pink and maroon alongside QS. An-Nahl: 97, framed by the reminder to "be sharia-compliant without selfies." Such posts offer spiritual instruction while delineating ethical

limits for digital participation, framing visibility as a threat to sincerity. Through these regulated practices, digital piety becomes a mechanism for communal moral order, shaping how piety is displayed and interpreted.

The practices demonstrate that digital piety among urban Salafi women is not an expressive display of personal devotion but a disciplined and curated mode of religious representation that situates piety within collective norms rather than individual sentiment. Through repeated textual reminders, standardized visual templates, and the strategic refusal of personal visibility, these women cultivate a devotional atmosphere grounded in epistemic modesty and symbolic consistency. Digital piety thus forms the third and final layer of silent agency: an enactment of religious subjectivity that privileges moral discipline over self-expression, and communal authority over personal affect. By sustaining a visual-textual environment where devotion is curated rather than personalized, these practices extend the representational logic of silent agency into a fully realized mode of religious participation in the digital sphere.

These practices demonstrate that digital piety among urban Salafi women is not a personal expression, but a disciplined and curated form of religious representation rooted in collective norms. Through repeated textual reminders, standardized visuals, and the refusal of personal visibility, they cultivate a devotional atmosphere shaped by epistemic modesty and symbolic consistency. Digital piety thus forms the final layer of silent agency, privileging moral discipline and communal authority over individual affect, and extending silent agency into a coherent mode of online religious participation.

The three analytic strands—visual modesty, symbolic authority, and digital piety—reveal a layered architecture in the digital practices of Salafi women. Visual politeness governs how the body is concealed, symbolic authority shapes the circulation of scriptural values, and digital piety

instills religious meaning in a repetitive and curated form. These practices demonstrate that the agency is silent. There is normative aesthetics, anonymity, and textual stability. According to Mahmood and Jouili, there was deliberate piety. Similarly, Medina's reading of epistemic rejection is the strategic withholding of the self as a mode of asserting moral clarity and reshaping the conditions under which one may appear. Through this synthesis, silent agency emerges not merely as a representational strategy but as a reconfiguration of digital subjectivity, one that positions concealment, symbol, and discipline at the center of religious participation. These insights lay the groundwork for understanding the broader implications of silent agency, particularly in how urban Salafi women redefine devotional presence and religious authority within contemporary digital public spheres. This point becomes clearer when considering the article's concluding reflections.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the digital agency of urban Salafi women in Indonesia is shaped by practices that prioritize concealment, symbolic discipline, and textual consistency over the visibility-centered norms of social media culture. By tracing how visual modesty, symbolic authority, and digital piety intersect, the analysis reveals a mode of religious participation in which scripture, standardized templates, and neutral aesthetics displace the body as the primary site of authenticity. In this sense, silent agency offers an alternative grammar of participation, reframing concealment not as absence but as a productive epistemic stance through which religious presence is structured.

The findings challenge visibility, based on assumptions about Muslim women's empowerment. Showing that anonymity can operate as a strategic and disciplined form of religious self-fashioning. Empirically, the

study foregrounds a segment of Indonesia's urban Salafi women whose digital practices have received limited scholarly attention, yet whose representational strategies reveal much about the shifting textures of Islamic authority online.

For further research into how the conservative Muslim community negotiates digital publics in ways that both resist and reconfigure platform expectations. Exploring similar patterns across other Salafi or conservative networks may clarify how non-figurative selections are made under different platform conditions. Ultimately, by situating concealment, discipline, and symbolic precision at the center of digital religious practice, this study underscores the need to approach Muslim women's digital subjectivities on their own epistemic and ethical terms

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