

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION  
IN THE ERA OF CYBER PROSELYTISM IN INDONESIA:  
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Social Media  
Religious Content

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**Abstract:** The proliferation of social media has transformed online spaces into arenas of active religious persuasion, as evidenced by conversion movements organized around hashtags such as #hijrah and #SaveMaryam. This study addresses religious conversion in the era of cyber through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of 68 purposively sampled content items drawn from Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp, published between 2021 and 2025, encompassing both Islamic da'wa and Christian cyber evangelism. The analysis integrates Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, and Wodak's discourse-historical framework with digital religion theory and Rambo's model of religious conversion. Four principal discursive strategies are identified: authenticity discourse; accessibility discourse; community discourse; and crisis discourse. These strategies constitute an integrated "persuasive ecology" in which each reinforces the others to address the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of religious persuasion simultaneously. The findings demonstrate that cyber proselytism is not traditional religious persuasion transposed into digital form but a qualitatively new discursive formation shaped by platform affordances and algorithmic logics.

**Keywords:** Religious conversion; cyber proselytism; critical discourse analysis; digital religion; social media; persuasive ecology.

## Introduction

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population, with approximately 275 million inhabitants, of whom roughly 87% identify as Muslim and 10.5% as Christian, with the remainder comprising Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian communities.<sup>1</sup> This extraordinary degree of religious pluralism is increasingly shaped by the country's rapid digital transformation: Indonesia consistently ranks among the world's most active social media populations, with internet penetration exceeding 78% of the total population.<sup>2</sup> The expansion of digital infrastructure and the widespread use of social media platforms have fundamentally reconfigured how Indonesians encounter, understand, and practice religion, transforming digital space into an arena for religious participation, identity formation, and spiritual community. Scholars have observed that the mediatization of religion through social media has generated a distinctive hybrid space that dissolves the boundary between online and offline religious practice and opens new pathways for individuals to negotiate their relationship with faith.<sup>3</sup>

Within this evolving digital environment, new forms of religious authority and influence have emerged.<sup>4</sup> These conditions have proven particularly conducive to cyber proselytism or, in the specifically Islamic context, online da'wa.<sup>5</sup> Across platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp, religious actors ranging from credentialed clerics to lay influencers disseminate sermons, personal testimonies, and conversion narratives to mass audiences. The emergence of new media does not simply extend existing

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<sup>1</sup> Paelani Setia and Mohammad Taufiq Rahman, "Socializing Religious Moderation and Peace in the Indonesian Landscape," *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas* 2, no. 3 (2022): 333–40, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v2i3.17916>.

<sup>2</sup> "Digital 2024: Indonesia — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights," accessed March 2, 2026, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-indonesia>.

<sup>3</sup> Hanung Sito Rohmawati et al., "Mediatization and Hypermediation in Digital Religion and the Transformation of Indonesian Muslim Religious Practices through Social Media Usage," *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 18, no. 2 (2025): 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jsa.2024.182-01>.

<sup>4</sup> Mónica Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1103, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103>.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kholili, Ahmad Izudin, and Muhammad Lutfi Hakim. "Islamic Proselytizing in Digital Religion in Indonesia: The Challenges of Broadcasting Regulation." *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 2357460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2357460>.

religious communication but fundamentally expands and pluralizes the public sphere of Islam, multiplying the voices and interpretive positions available to ordinary believers.<sup>6</sup> This dynamic is particularly visible in Indonesia, where social media fluency and platform-native storytelling have come to constitute forms of religious authority that compete with, and in some contexts displace, those derived from traditional institutional credentials,<sup>7</sup> generating new discursive conditions in which the cultivation of influence and the construction of online followings become primary mechanisms of religious conversion at scale.<sup>8</sup>

Empirical studies illuminate a recognizable pattern: the most effective online religious communicators are those who master the intersection of platform logic, emotional storytelling, and community cultivation. Slama has demonstrated how Indonesia's Islamic preacher economy has been transformed by social media, shifting the basis of religious authority from scholarly credentials toward responsiveness and digital visibility.<sup>9</sup> Nisa similarly shows how movements such as One Day One Juz (ODOJ) leveraged WhatsApp to construct semi-virtual Qur'anic communities generating forms of belonging that extend well beyond traditional institutions.<sup>10</sup> Research on Indonesian celebrity preachers further reveals that emotionally resonant content consistently outperforms doctrinal exposition, with effective practitioners combining personal narrative, accessible language, and aesthetic packaging to reach young, urban audiences.<sup>11</sup> Indonesian studies confirm this pattern at the local level: individuals without

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<sup>6</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 1–18.

<sup>7</sup> Hew Wai Weng, "The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siauw," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416757>.

<sup>8</sup> Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 1–30.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Slama, "A Subtle Economy of Time: Social Media and the Transformation of Indonesia's Islamic Preacher Economy," *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (2017): 94–106, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12075>.

<sup>10</sup> Eva 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* 46, no. 134 (2018): 24–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2017.1416758>.

<sup>11</sup> Moch. Khafidz Fuad Raya, "Digital Religion: The Packaging and Persuasion of Celebrity Preachers in Contemporary Indonesia." *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 23, no. 67 (Spring 2024): 80–82. [thenewjsri.ro](https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2024.2314167).

formal religious qualifications can become highly influential communicators if they demonstrate strong narrative skill and cultivate relatable online personas.<sup>12</sup>

This reorganization of religious authority is among the most consequential dimensions of the digital religion phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Bunt has documented across Cyber-Islamic Environments globally that audience participation, algorithmic visibility, and communicative competence now function as significant sources of religious credibility, operating independently of formal institutional recognition.<sup>14</sup> Algorithms are not neutral distributors of information: they encode evaluative logics that determine which content rises to visibility, and on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, emotional resonance and visual appeal are rewarded by design.<sup>15</sup> Within this algorithmically curated space, hashtags such as #hijrah and #SaveMaryam, networks of online preachers, and dedicated devotional channels have created expansive arenas for spiritual expression in which conversion journeys are narrated publicly and communities of belonging are assembled across geographic and social boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Scholars designate this emerging formation as “online religion,” a mode of religiosity distinctly shaped by digital media’s affordances of interactivity, multimodality, and algorithmic curation.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the growing body of scholarship on digital religion, existing work predominantly offers descriptive mapping—identifying types of religious communication, the actors who produce it, and the platforms through which it circulates—rather than a critical analysis of the discursive mechanisms through which such communication

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<sup>12</sup> Ni Made Yuliani, “Relasi Agama dan Media Digital Transformasi Otoritas Keagamaan di Era Komunikasi Virtual,” *Jurnal Penelitian Agama Hindu* 10, no. 1 (2026): 104–16, <https://doi.org/10.37329/jpah.v10i1.4942>.

<sup>13</sup> Sonny Eli Zaluchu, “Theological Insight of Digital Religion,” *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/03/Zaluchu>.

<sup>14</sup> Bunt, *Hashtag Islam*, 45–78.

<sup>15</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “The Relevance of Algorithms,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 167–193.

<sup>16</sup> H. A. Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 70–78, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfr074>.

<sup>17</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, “Looking Backwards and Forwards at the Study of Digital Religion,” *Religious Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2024): 83–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17062>.

persuades.<sup>18</sup> Studies of Indonesian online da'wa document organizational and communal dimensions with notable depth, yet stop short of systematic analysis of the discursive strategies through which such movements attract, engage, and ultimately persuade potential converts.<sup>19</sup> This gap is especially pronounced in the Indonesian context, given its exceptional combination of religious pluralism, digital connectivity, and the simultaneous presence of Islamic da'wa and Christian cyber evangelism as active and competing proselytizing forces. This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis as its central framework precisely because CDA enables researchers to examine how discourse constructs social reality, with particular attention to the relationship between language, power, and ideology in the production of religious identity and transformation.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, the following research question guides this study: How does cyber proselytism discursively construct and legitimize the concept of religious conversion through linguistic, narrative, and rhetorical strategies in Indonesian social media communication?

### **Cyber-Proselytism and Digital Conversion**

This article integrates three theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), digital religion theory, and religious conversion theory. CDA supplies the methodological tools for examining how language constructs social reality and legitimizes ideological positions. Digital religion theory contextualizes how platform architectures, mediatization processes, and algorithmic logics

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<sup>18</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies," *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.149>.

<sup>19</sup> Nisa, "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement," 39–40; Slama, "A Subtle Economy of Time," 102–104.

<sup>20</sup> Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen, "Critical Discourse Analysis," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (2000): 447–66, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.447>; Teun A. Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 1st ed., ed. Deborah Tannen et al. (Wiley, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch22>; Heidi A. Campbell and Forrest Rule, "The Practice of Digital Religion," in *Handbuch Soziale Praktiken und Digitale Alltagswelten*, ed. Heidrun Friese et al. (Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2020), 363–71, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-08357-1\\_38](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-08357-1_38); Taina Bucher, *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3–5.

shape online religious communication. Religious conversion theory furnishes the substantive framework for understanding what kind of transformative experience cyber proselytism is oriented toward producing. Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis of how language use in digitally mediated contexts constructs and legitimizes religious conversion.

#### A. Critical Discourse Analysis (Theoretical Framework)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) proceeds from the foundational premise that language is not a neutral medium of expression but a form of social practice through which social reality is actively constructed.<sup>21</sup> Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model operationalizes this premise by analyzing discourse simultaneously at the level of text, discursive practice, and social practice.<sup>22</sup> At the textual level, the analyst examines the specific linguistic and rhetorical features of a communicative act — its vocabulary, grammar, modality, and narrative structure. At the level of discursive practice, attention shifts to the conditions of production, circulation, and consumption of texts, including the intertextual chains through which meanings travel across platforms and communities. At the level of social practice, the analysis situates discourse within the broader relations of power and ideology that it both reflects and reproduces. Applied to religious discourse on social media, this three-dimensional model makes it possible to identify how certain religious truths are being constructed as self-evident, how certain beliefs are being delegitimized, and how certain religious identities are being promoted as desirable and attainable.

This study further draws on Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, which extends CDA's analytical reach by foregrounding the role of mental models in mediating between discourse and social reality.<sup>23</sup> For van Dijk, discourse does not act directly on social structures but shapes the cognitive frameworks through which individuals perceive and interpret the world around them. His concept of the "ideological square" is particularly productive for the analysis of proselytism discourse: it describes how communicative actors systematically emphasize positive representations of the in-

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<sup>21</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (Longman, 1989), 1–34.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Polity, 1992), 63–64.

<sup>23</sup> Teun A. Van Dijk, "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis," *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 249–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>.

group while foregrounding negative representations of the out-group. In the context of cyber proselytism, this structure is clearly operative in conversion testimonies where the believing community is consistently presented as fulfilled, purposeful, and socially connected, while the pre-conversion self or the non-believing world is depicted as hollow, anxious, and spiritually adrift.<sup>24</sup> Van Dijk's model thus provides the analytical vocabulary for understanding not merely what cyber proselytism says, but how it works cognitively to reshape the audience's perception of available religious identities.

The analytical framework is further enriched by Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach, which insists on the importance of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and historical context in any adequate critical analysis of discourse.<sup>25</sup> In the Indonesian context, this historical dimension is indispensable: contemporary cyber proselytism does not emerge in a vacuum but carries the discursive traces of Christian missionary activity during the colonial period, the post-colonial consolidation of Islamic revivalism and the institutional authority of organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, and the present landscape of interfaith relations shaped by the Pancasila framework. Wodak's approach directs analytical attention to how these historical sediments shape the rhetorical strategies available to contemporary online proselytizers and how they constrain or enable particular constructions of religious conversion. While CDA has been productively applied to religious discourse in traditional media and televangelism contexts, its systematic application to social media-based religious communication, and to cyber proselytism specifically, remains underdeveloped, representing the methodological space this study seeks to occupy.<sup>26</sup>

#### B. Digital Religion Theory (Contextual Framework)

Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization provides the primary contextual framework for understanding how the structural logic of

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<sup>24</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, 1st ed, Communication (SAGE Publications, 1998), 190–226.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>.

<sup>26</sup> Giulia Evolvi, "Hybrid Muslim identities in digital space: The Italian blog *Yalla*," *Social Compass* 64, no. 2 (2017): 220–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617697911>.

digital media shapes religious communication.<sup>27</sup> Hjarvard argues that media do not simply serve as neutral channels through which religious messages pass unchanged, but function as secular agents of cultural transformation that actively reshape the content, form, and authority structures of religion itself. Consequently, media logic converts religious content into entertainment-oriented material that must compete for audience attention.<sup>28</sup> Indonesian online da'wa influencers illustrate this second form with particular clarity: their content is typically calibrated not to the standards of theological accuracy or institutional authorization but to the engagement metrics of Instagram and TikTok, where likes, shares, and algorithmic amplification determine visibility. In this environment, the basis of religious authority shifts from institutional qualification to digital engagement, and the form of religious communication is reshaped by the platform logic of the medium through which it travels.

A critical refinement of the mediatization framework for the purposes of this study lies in its integration with the emerging scholarship on algorithmic power. Gillespie has argued that algorithms are not passive sorting mechanisms but active knowledge logics that encode specific assumptions about what content is relevant, credible, and worthy of amplification.<sup>29</sup> Bucher extends this insight by demonstrating that algorithms generate what she calls an “algorithmic imaginary”, a set of beliefs and assumptions about how the algorithm works that shapes users’ communicative behavior even in the absence of direct knowledge of the algorithm’s actual criteria.<sup>30</sup> In the context of cyber proselytism, this concept is analytically productive, as it clarifies why conversion testimonies on TikTok and Instagram assume a specific form characterized by personal, emotionally intense, and visually compelling narratives organized around a dramatic before-and-after contrast. These features are not inherently persuasive; rather, they align with the types of content that platform algorithms consistently reward with visibility. The discursive

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<sup>27</sup> Stig Hjarvard, “The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change,” *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook* 6, no. 1 (2008): 9–14, [https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9_1).

<sup>28</sup> Stig Hjarvard, “Three Forms of Mediatized Religion: Changing the Public Face of Religion,” *State Religion and Church in Russia and Worldwide* 38, no. 2 (2020): 21–28, <https://doi.org/10.22394/2073-7203-2020-38-2-41-75>.

<sup>29</sup> Gillespie, “The Relevance of Algorithms,” 172–79.

<sup>30</sup> Bucher, *If...Then*, 113–17.

strategies of cyber proselytism are therefore shaped not only by ideology but also by algorithmic conditioning.

Heidi Campbell's distinction between "religion online" and "online religion" provides a further conceptual clarification that is essential to positioning cyber proselytism within the digital religion landscape.<sup>31</sup> Religion online refers to the use of digital media to extend and communicate the practices and institutional structures of established religious traditions, typically through formats comparable to mosque or church bulletins. Conversely, online religion denotes a mode of practice shaped by digital affordances, one that produces novel forms of community, authority, and experience that are inseparable from the internet. Cyber-proselytism belongs firmly to the second category because its emphasis on networked community, multimedia production, algorithmic curation, and audience co-construction produces a qualitatively distinct form of religious transformation. This transformation operates through several mechanisms: algorithms circulate conversion content beyond intentional audiences, parasocial relationships with digital influencers displace face-to-face mentorship, and public declarations of conversion, often articulated through hashtags such as #hijrah, generate novel forms of communal validation.<sup>32</sup> Religious communication increasingly becomes, in this environment, a blend of sacred and profane, of expert and lay, as the logic of convergence culture dissolves the boundaries that once separated institutional religious authority from popular religious expression.<sup>33</sup> Indonesian hijrah influencers represent a particularly vivid illustration of this convergence.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Heidi Campbell, "Internet and Religion," in *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, 1st ed., ed. Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess (Wiley, 2011), 232–50, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444314861.ch11>.

<sup>32</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2013), 89–115.

<sup>33</sup> Mia Lövheim, *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*, in *Media, Religion and Culture* (Routledge, 2013), 15–33; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1–24.

<sup>34</sup> Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia et al., "Hijrah and the Articulation of Islamic Identity of Indonesian Millennials on Instagram," *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 2 (2021): 154–70, <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2021-3702-10>.

### C. Religious Conversion Theory (Substantive Framework)

Lewis Rambo's seven-stage model of religious conversion, which consists of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences, provides the substantive framework through which this study interprets religious transformation as it unfolds in digital environments.<sup>35</sup> Rambo developed this model primarily in reference to face-to-face, institutionally mediated conversion processes, and its stages are conventionally understood as broadly sequential and interpersonally grounded. In the digital context, however, each stage undergoes significant reconfiguration. The context is no longer defined solely by the individual's immediate social and cultural environment but by a condition of digital saturation in which religious content is continuously and algorithmically present, accessible at any moment, regardless of physical location or social circle. The crisis that catalyzes spiritual seeking may be exacerbated or even algorithmically mediated, as platforms that track user behavior can identify emotional vulnerabilities and deliver targeted religious content in response.

The later stages of Rambo's model are similarly transformed in the digital context. The encounter with religious ideas, which in offline settings requires physical proximity or institutional access, can now be initiated entirely through social media influencers, creating parasocial relationships that do not require reciprocal personal acquaintance. Interaction with religious communities is conducted through comments sections, private messages, and WhatsApp groups, enabling continuous engagement at the individual's own pace. The commitment stage acquires a distinctive public dimension: the declaration of conversion through hashtags such as #hijrah functions not merely as a private spiritual act but as a performative statement generating communal validation and social accountability simultaneously.<sup>36</sup>

Rambo's sequential model is further complicated in digital environments by the concepts of virtual emotional ties and algorithmic filter bubbles, which together create conditions for a

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<sup>35</sup> Lewis Ray Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 1993), 12–17.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadlan, *The Oxford handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–22.

more fluid and non-linear conversion process.<sup>37</sup> The individual navigating potential religious conversion online may move back and forth between stages, engage in extended private exploration before any public commitment, and accumulate exposure to religious content gradually through recommendation algorithms rather than through deliberate seeking. In this context, the possibility of what Gooren calls “religious traveling,” a pattern of gradual and negotiated involvement rather than a single decisive turning point, is structurally enabled by digital platforms, which facilitate low-commitment forms of participation such as following an account, watching a video, or joining a WhatsApp group without requiring formal affiliation.<sup>38</sup> In the Indonesian context specifically, these dynamics intersect with a syncretic cultural tradition in which the boundaries between nominal and committed religiosity have historically been fluid, making the digital amplification of gradual, experiential conversion pathways particularly resonant with existing cultural dispositions.<sup>39</sup> Nisa’s account of how ODOJ members enter the movement, most often through informal digital encounters rather than formal recruitment, provides empirical support for this pattern and demonstrates that digital platforms do not simply replicate offline conversion processes but produce qualitatively distinct pathways of religious transformation.<sup>40</sup>

Taken together, CDA, digital religion theory, and religious conversion theory constitute a complementary and mutually reinforcing analytical apparatus. CDA reveals the linguistic and ideological mechanisms through which religious conversion is discursively constructed. Digital religion theory, enriched by mediatization and algorithmic power scholarship, contextualizes these mechanisms within platform architectures and media logics. Religious conversion theory grounds the analysis in a substantive account of the

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<sup>37</sup> John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2090965>.

<sup>38</sup> Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), 41–67, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230113039>.

<sup>39</sup> Robert W. Hefner, “Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (1998): 83–104, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.27.1.83>.

<sup>40</sup> Nisa, “Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement,” 35–38.

transformative process that cyber proselytism facilitates. The integration of these perspectives makes possible not only a description of what cyber proselytism does in Indonesian social media but a critical account of how it does it, and why its discursive strategies take the specific forms they do across Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp.

### **A Critical Discourse Analysis of Cyber-Proselytism in Indonesia**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological framework.<sup>41</sup> The choice of qualitative methodology is motivated by the nature of the research question itself: the study seeks not to measure the frequency or reach of cyber proselytism content but to understand how language, narrative, and visual communication in such content construct and legitimize religious conversion as a desirable and accessible transformation. Qualitative research is uniquely suited to this purpose because it attends to meaning, context, and the socially constructed nature of human experience, enabling the researcher to examine how language creates significance persuasively and to reveal the ideological strategies embedded in that process.<sup>42</sup>

This study is grounded in Fairclough's understanding of language as a form of social practice that simultaneously represents, constructs, and legitimizes ideological positions and power relations.<sup>43</sup> Discourse, on this view, is not merely a vehicle for pre-existing ideas but an active site of ideological production, a space in which certain religious truths are naturalized, particular identities are rendered desirable, and specific forms of authority are established as credible. Accordingly, the analytical procedure of this study extends beyond content description to a critical examination of how ideology and power relations operate within processes of religious persuasion in digital environments. The study also adopts a reflexive stance toward the research process. This research portrays religious landscape under analysis and offers interpretive advantages such as familiarity with the

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<sup>41</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (Jossey-Bass, 2016), 13–26.

<sup>42</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2017), 41–68.

<sup>43</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2023), 2–9.

cultural, linguistic, and theological conventions of Indonesian Islamic discourse, while also introduces potential limitations, particularly in the analysis of Christian cyber-evangelism content, where the research standpoint is more external. These challenges are addressed through the consistent application of a uniform CDA coding protocol to all content, regardless of religious orientation.

The corpus for this study is drawn from four major Indonesian social media platforms, each selected for its distinct affordances and its prominence within Indonesia's digital religious communication landscape.<sup>44</sup> Instagram was selected for its centrality to visual religious communication, particularly through posts, stories, and reels organized around hashtags such as #hijrah and #SaveMaryam, which function as discursive entry points into broader conversion-oriented communities. YouTube was selected for its capacity to host long-form religious content—lectures, testimonies, and documentary-style narratives—that allows for sustained engagement with conversion discourse across extended formats. TikTok was selected for its distinctive short-form video affordances and its particular reach among younger Indonesian audiences, where algorithmically amplified emotional content has created a significant and rapidly growing arena for conversion-oriented religious material. WhatsApp was selected for its role as a semi-private platform through which religious content circulates within closed community networks, producing a form of community discourse that complements the more publicly visible content of the other three platforms. The platform-specific affordances of each medium are treated in this study not merely as contextual background but as analytically significant variables that shape the discursive strategies available to proselytizers on each platform.

Content items were selected through purposive sampling according to five criteria: use of the Indonesian language, explicit proselytizing intent aimed at conversion or intensified religious commitment, a minimum engagement threshold indicating audience reach, publication between 2021 and 2025, and representation of either Islamic da'wa or Christian cyber evangelism as the dominant proselytizing traditions in Indonesia's digital landscape. Applying these criteria across the four platforms yielded a final corpus of 68 content items, distributed across platform types, content formats, and

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<sup>44</sup> José van Dijck et al., *The Platform Society* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 45–72.

religious orientations to ensure analytical diversity. The sampling process proceeded iteratively until reaching thematic saturation, the point at which additional content yielded no new discursive categories or analytical themes.<sup>45</sup> The corpus was archived systematically with full metadata including platform, creator profile, date of publication, content format, and engagement statistics at the time of collection.<sup>46</sup>

The analytical procedure followed a three-stage protocol operationalizing Fairclough's three-dimensional model across a corpus of 68 content items. At the textual dimension, each item was coded for key linguistic and semiotic features, including pronoun use and deixis, modal and epistemic markers, nominalization, and transitivity patterns, as well as visual and multimodal elements based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design.<sup>47</sup> At the discursive practice dimension, analysis focused on conditions of production, including platform context, creator profile, and intertextuality, alongside conditions of reception such as audience engagement patterns and platform-specific mechanisms of circulation and amplification.<sup>48</sup> At the social practice dimension, findings were situated within Indonesia's broader socio-historical context, including post-Reformasi political dynamics and interfaith regulatory frameworks, following Wodak's discourse-historical approach.<sup>49</sup> Thematic categories were developed inductively through iterative coding, with saturation reached when no new categories emerged from the final fifteen content items.

### **Discursive Strategies in Indonesian Cyber Proselytism**

This study examines a corpus of 68 online religious conversion content items drawn from the four most prominent Indonesian social media platforms, published between 2021 and 2025. The corpus reflects the current distribution of digital religious communication across platform types: Instagram and TikTok each contribute 25% of

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<sup>45</sup> Greg Guest et al., "How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability," *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 59–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>.

<sup>46</sup> Tracy Karner, "Salmons, Janet E., Doing Qualitative Research Online.," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 2 (2017): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs29343>.

<sup>47</sup> Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–44.

<sup>48</sup> Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2–9.

<sup>49</sup> Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 63–94.

the total content, reflecting their dominance as visual and short-form video platforms respectively, while YouTube accounts for 20% and WhatsApp for the remaining 15%, the latter representing the semi-private community communication dimension of the corpus. In terms of religious orientation, Islamic da'wa content constitutes 60% of the corpus and Christian cyber evangelism 40%, a distribution that broadly reflects the demographic composition of Indonesia's religious landscape while acknowledging the disproportionately high digital activity of certain Christian evangelical communities relative to their population share.

Across the corpus, personal testimony emerges as the dominant genre of online religious conversion content, consistently outperforming religious doctrine, lifestyle content, and question-and-answer formats in terms of audience reach and engagement. This finding is consistent with platform-specific algorithmic logics: TikTok and Instagram systematically reward emotionally resonant, personally grounded narratives with greater visibility, amplifying testimony-based content over more doctrinally oriented material regardless of the theological credentials of its producer.<sup>50</sup> The comment sections of conversion-oriented content show high levels of engagement, with users not merely consuming but actively participating in the discursive construction of conversion by asking questions, sharing experiences, and offering communal validation to those narrating their spiritual journeys. This participatory dynamic indicates that Indonesian cyber proselytism operates not as a one-directional broadcast but as a dialogically constructed process in which engagement itself functions as a persuasive mechanism.

The analysis identifies four principal discursive strategies operative across the corpus: authenticity discourse, accessibility discourse, community discourse, and crisis discourse. These strategies are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined. In practice, individual content items typically deploy two or more strategies simultaneously, and the specific combination varies according to the platform's affordances and the religious tradition from which it originates. The four strategies are presented sequentially below for analytical clarity, with the understanding that their interdependence is theorized in the synthesis that concludes this section.

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<sup>50</sup> Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," 175–79.

## 1. Authenticity Discourse: Constructing Genuine Transformation

Within Indonesian online proselytism, authenticity functions as the primary basis for the legitimacy of the conversion experience, framing it as a profoundly personal and voluntary transformation rather than institutional compliance or social conformity. This framing is strategically significant in a context where online religious expression is frequently subject to skepticism regarding its performative or commercially motivated dimensions. By constructing conversion as a deeply interior and self-directed process, authenticity discourse positions itself against this skepticism and invites its audience to identify rather than to suspect. The individualistic emphasis of authenticity discourse resonates strongly with late-modern cultural values of self-actualization, personal authenticity, and spiritual sovereignty, particularly among young, urban, educated Indonesian audiences, who constitute the primary demographic of cyber proselytism content.

First, linguistic features. The discourse of authenticity is produced through a range of interrelated linguistic devices, which can be analyzed through the lens of Goffman's dramaturgical framework. Rather than offering a perfected "front stage" version of flawless piety, creators strategically present their vulnerabilities, failures, and doubts in order to construct believable "backstage" identities that signal unmediated access to genuine inner experience.<sup>51</sup> This deliberate staging of authenticity is itself a discursive accomplishment, a carefully constructed performance of non-performance that inverts the conventional logic of religious authority, which typically demands the display of knowledge, virtue, and certainty rather than the confession of weakness and doubt.

### A) Personal Narrative Structure

Conversion testimonies consistently employ a first-person narrative format organized around temporal contrast between a pre-conversion and post-conversion self: "Previously I was...", "Now I am...", or "My hijrah journey..." This temporal structure performs several discursive functions simultaneously: it establishes the speaker as a credible witness to their own transformation, creates a narrative

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<sup>51</sup> Susie Scott, "Dramaturgical Traditions: Performance and Interaction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism*, 1st ed., ed. Wayne H. Brekhus et al. (Oxford University Press, 2022), 146–61, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190082161.013.6>.

arc that mirrors the audience's own potential journey, and presents conversion as a process with a legible before-and-after structure rather than an abrupt or arbitrary event. A representative Instagram testimony illustrates this structure with particular clarity.

B) A Representative Illustration

“I used to feel hollow inside, despite having everything in the world. Designer bags, travels abroad, etc. However, my heart was not at peace. After my hijrah, I found peace that money cannot buy.”

The materialist vocabulary of the pre-conversion self, including references to branded goods and international travel, functions ideologically to construct secular success as spiritually insufficient, while the affective language of the post-conversion self, exemplified by *ketenangan* (peace or tranquility), constructs religious commitment as the only adequate response to this insufficiency. This contrast is deliberately legible to aspirational middle-class Indonesian audiences for whom the tension between material achievement and spiritual fulfillment is culturally resonant.

Second, discursive functions. Authenticity discourse constructs the speaker as a trustworthy witness precisely through the strategic display of vulnerability and relatability. The speaker who confesses past failures and ongoing struggles presents as someone with nothing to gain from deception, and this apparent transparency functions as a powerful credibility mechanism — what rhetorical theory identifies as the construction of *ethos* through demonstrated honesty rather than through institutional authority or demonstrable expertise.

At the level of audience positioning, authenticity discourse invites identification through the implicit proposition, “That could be me.” Emphasizing the ordinariness of the conversion journey, including its struggles, doubts, and gradual character, it minimizes the psychological distance between speaker and audience. Conversion is thereby framed not as a path to sainthood but as a relatable human process, reducing perceived costs and risks while enhancing its perceived rewards.

Third, ideological functions. Authenticity discourse, though presented as arising from individual experience, performs a significant but largely covert ideological function. By framing conversion as personal decision-making and self-actualization rather than a response to social or institutional forces, it aligns religious transformation with

late-modern ideals of individual sovereignty and choice. Its effectiveness lies in disavowing its ideological character, recasting a socially mediated process as a freely chosen personal transformation. In van Dijk's terms, this reflects ideological naturalization, whereby social constructions appear as personal truths and institutional interests are obscured through the language of individual experience.<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, variations by platform. Authenticity performances are calibrated to the affordances of each platform, with creators adapting their discursive strategies to maximize credibility within each medium. On Instagram, authenticity is constructed through what may be described as "aesthetic vulnerability," combining imperfect and candid visual imagery with extended captions that convey emotional transparency and self-reflection. On YouTube, longer-form content allows for more elaborately structured vulnerability narratives, typically organized around a dramatic arc moving through crisis, searching, encounter, and resolution. This structure maps directly onto Rambo's conversion stages and gives the testimony the coherent shape of a completed spiritual journey. Across platforms, authenticity discourse functions as the primary source of legitimacy for Indonesian cyber proselytism, grounding its persuasive appeal in the apparent sincerity of the individual speaker rather than in institutional authority.

## 2. *Accessibility Discourse: Democratizing Religious Authority*

Indonesian cyber proselytism deploys accessibility discourse to subvert the traditionally elitist structures of religious authority by simplifying theological content, reducing barriers to participation, and positioning conversion as an individualistic act that requires no institutional mediation or specialist expertise. This democratizing move reflects the broader processes of religious mediatization described by Hjarvard, whereby digital media logic transforms religious content by prioritizing accessibility, emotional engagement, and practical relevance over theological precision and institutional legitimacy.<sup>53</sup> Slama's analysis of the transformation of Indonesia's Islamic preacher economy is directly relevant here: the shift from credential-based to visibility-based religious authority that social media has produced creates the structural conditions within which accessibility discourse thrives, rewarding those who can communicate

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<sup>52</sup> Van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, 190–226.

<sup>53</sup> Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion", 9–14.

religion in the most immediately comprehensible and emotionally resonant terms regardless of their formal qualifications.<sup>54</sup>

First, Linguistic Features.

1) Simplified Theological Language

Online religious content consistently translates complex theological concepts into everyday Indonesian language, removing the Arabic technical vocabulary and classical Islamic scholarly terminology that have historically marked religious authority and restricted access to specialized knowledge. An illustrative example from the Islamic corpus demonstrates this translation strategy: “*Tawakal* (reliance on God) is not passive surrender, but the act of making one’s utmost effort while trusting that Allah determines the outcome.”

This formulation, while theologically defensible, strips the concept of *tawakal* of the rich debates within classical Islamic jurisprudence concerning the precise relationship between human agency and divine determination, transforming a subject of sophisticated scholarly discussion into a motivational proposition accessible to any audience. The discursive effect is not merely simplification but a fundamental reorientation of what counts as valid religious knowledge, from the accumulated learning of the scholarly tradition to the lived experience and communicative competence of the digital creator.

2) Question-Answer Format:

A significant portion of online proselytism content adopts a question-and-answer structure that positions the audience as legitimate questioners whose concerns warrant respectful consideration: “Is that allowed...?”, “How do I...?”, and “How is / What is the difference between ...?”

This format performs a significant ideological function beyond its surface accessibility: by positioning religious questions as answerable by any digitally fluent communicator rather than only by credentialed scholars, it implicitly delegitimizes the institutional gatekeeping of religious knowledge while simultaneously constructing the content creator as a sufficient and trustworthy guide.

3) Practical Focus

The emphasis on practical, actionable guidance over abstract theological reflection is particularly pronounced in the corpus's

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<sup>54</sup> Slama, “A Subtle Economy of Time,” 96–102.

Christian evangelical content. A representative example demonstrates this orientation toward what might be termed “spiritual self-help”: “Five steps to begin living a Christian life: (1) Read the Bible for 15 minutes daily, (2) Pray morning and evening, (3) Join a small group, (4) Serve in church, (5) Share your faith with friends.”

The numbered list format, borrowed from self-help and productivity culture, imposes the logic of personal optimization on the process of religious conversion, presenting faith formation as a manageable, sequential, and individually executable project. This framing resonates with the broader culture of digital self-improvement within which much Indonesian online proselytism is embedded, as digital platforms consistently restructure religious knowledge into practical, immediately applicable guidance that aligns spiritual transformation with contemporary digital culture.<sup>55</sup>

Second, Discursive Functions.

1) Barrier Reduction:

The primary discursive function of accessibility discourse is to reduce the psychological, intellectual, and social barriers to conversion by constructing religious transformation as achievable for any ordinary person without specialist preparation. This function is particularly significant in the Indonesian context, where religious authority has historically been closely associated with *pesantren* education, Arabic literacy, and affiliation with established Islamic organizations. By presenting conversion as a process requiring only personal sincerity and a willingness to learn, accessibility discourse implicitly repositions these institutional qualifications as unnecessary rather than simply unavailable to most people, a subtle but consequential ideological move.

2) The legitimization of new digital authority:

Alongside the apparent decentralization of religious authority, accessibility discourse produces new forms of concentrated power. As Hew’s analysis of Felix Siauw demonstrates, mega-influencer reach can rival and displace institutional authority.<sup>56</sup> The democratization of religious discourse thus produces what appears on the surface as an elimination of hierarchy while in practice generating new and less

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<sup>55</sup> Liang Zhang, “The Digital Age of Religious Communication: The Shaping and Challenges of Religious Beliefs through Social Media,” *Studies on Religion and Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2025): 29–35, <https://doi.org/10.71204/de63mn10>.

<sup>56</sup> Hew, “The Art of Dakwah,” 75–77.

visible concentrations of religious power, which this study terms “hidden hierarchies of visibility.”

Third, Ideological Function. In line with van Dijk’s theory of ideological discourse, accessibility-oriented narratives of cyber proselytism subtly redefine religious conversion as a personal choice and self-directed process rather than a product of communal tradition or institutional authority.<sup>57</sup> This ideological reframing is consequential, as it constructs the individual as the sovereign agent of their religious life while obscuring the social, institutional, and algorithmic forces that shape the conditions under which such apparently free choices are made. More specifically, platform logics shape how this discourse is mediated, with Instagram favoring visual infographics, YouTube emphasizing tutorial formats, and TikTok relying on compressed propositions. Across these contexts, it reconfigures rather than eliminates religious authority, rendering its asymmetry less visible by recasting it as friendship or peer solidarity rather than institutional power.

### 3. *Community Discourse: Creating Inclusive Digital Spaces*

Cyber proselytism mobilizes community discourse to construct welcoming online spaces in which potential converts experience a sense of belonging before formal commitment. This strategy targets the social dimension of conversion, extending beyond cognitive persuasion to relational embedding within a supportive community, and produces what Turner describes as *communitas*, a liminal social space characterized by equality, solidarity, and the temporary suspension of hierarchy.<sup>58</sup> The construction of this communal space serves a strategic role in the conversion process, offering belonging prior to belief and thereby reducing the perceived social risk of religious exploration while normalizing doubt and questioning as integral to a shared spiritual journey. This dynamic aligns with Campbell and Garner’s notion of “networked theology,” in which digital communities do not merely support individual conversion but actively function as sites of theological production, where beliefs are formed, tested, and affirmed through networked interaction rather than individual study or institutional instruction.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, 190–226.

<sup>58</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94–130.

<sup>59</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 15–45.

First, Linguistic Features. Community discourse constructs collective identity through the strategic use of inclusive pronouns that dissolve the distinction between established believers and those still on the periphery of the community: “All of us”, “fellow believers”, “the wider family of...”, and “hijrah companions”.

Second, A representative invitation exemplifies this inclusive framing. The following example illustrates the inclusive framing characteristic of community discourse: “Come join us! No one’s perfect here; we’re all learning together.”

The first-person plural pronoun *kita* performs a significant discursive function: it presupposes a pre-existing connection between speaker and hearer, positioning potential converts within the community before they have made any commitment to join. This presuppositional use of inclusive language is among the most subtle and effective mechanisms of community discourse, as the addressee is grammatically positioned within the group prior to choosing to enter it.

Third, Welcoming Language. Across the corpus, community-building content consistently employs a therapeutic register to address anticipated fears of judgment or exclusion: “our door is always open”, “a safe space to ask questions”, “No judgment zone.” And “You belong here”.

The adoption of therapeutic language—“safe space,” “no judgment” —borrowed from contemporary mental health discourse signals the community’s self-positioning as a space of unconditional acceptance, which is particularly resonant for younger Indonesian audiences navigating religious identity formation in a context of competing social pressures.

Fourth, Shared Experience Emphasis. Community discourse consistently foregrounds shared experience over doctrinal difference, normalizing doubt and uncertainty as common aspects of spiritual journeying: “We have all been there”, “I used to be the same”, or “It is normal to feel that way”.

This approach to community construction, which Lövheim identifies as characteristic of online religious communities that prioritize relational solidarity over doctrinal conformity, functions to reassure potential converts that their doubts and questions are not disqualifying but are instead recognized as normal and expected

aspects of the spiritual journey.<sup>60</sup> Nisa's account of ODOJ members' entry through informal digital encounters rather than formal recruitment demonstrates that the sense of normalized belonging, evident prior to formal commitment, is a structurally embedded feature of Indonesian Islamic digital communities rather than a mere rhetorical construction.<sup>61</sup>

#### A. Discursive Functions

Community discourse reduces the social barriers to conversion by providing a sense of belonging that precedes and enables belief. Rather than requiring potential converts to first adopt doctrinal positions and subsequently join a community, cyber proselytism reverses this sequence, offering community first and treating doctrinal commitment as something that develops naturally within a supportive relational context. This reversal is strategically significant because it substantially lowers the perceived cost of initial engagement, as participation requires only joining the conversation rather than adopting a creed.

Social proof mechanisms embedded in community discourse further reinforce this dynamic. Visible indicators of community size, including follower counts, active comment threads, and shared testimonials, construct participation in the religious community as a normal and widely chosen option rather than a marginal or countercultural one.

#### B. Ideological Function

Community discourse performs a crucial ideological function by embedding the individualism of authenticity discourse within a collective framework. Conversion is presented as simultaneously a personal choice and a communal journey, resolving the tension between late-modern values of individual sovereignty and the essentially social character of religious commitment. The individual's authentic self-transformation is affirmed and witnessed by the community, and the community's collective identity is constituted and reinforced through the accumulation of individual transformation narratives. This mutual constitution of individual and community constitutes, in Fairclough's terms, a form of discursive identity

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<sup>60</sup> Lövheim, "Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges", 15–33.

<sup>61</sup> Nisa, "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement," 35–39.

construction in which the social practice of community building produces the very religious subjects it purports merely to welcome.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4. *Crisis Discourse: Conversion as Solution*

Crisis discourse presents contemporary existence as characterized by a pervasive condition of existential, psychological, moral, and social insufficiency, while positioning religious conversion as the coherent and sufficient response to this condition. Following Rambo's model of conversion, in which crisis functions as the catalyst that initiates the quest for religious meaning, crisis discourse manufactures and amplifies a sense of spiritual emergency that motivates the audience to seek resolution.<sup>63</sup> The theoretical framework for this discursive strategy is further illuminated by Berger's concept of the "sacred canopy," the idea that religious systems provide the overarching structures of meaning, security, and purpose that shield individuals from the terror of chaos and meaninglessness.<sup>64</sup> In discursive terms, crisis discourse functions to delegitimize secular equivalents of the sacred canopy, such as material success, social achievement, and digital connectivity, by presenting them as structurally incapable of providing meaning, thus creating the conditions under which a religious alternative becomes necessary.

First, *Linguistic Features*. Crisis discourse constructs the inadequacy of secular life through rhetorical questions and declarative statements that presuppose rather than argue for the problematic character of ordinary modern existence: "Why feels empty?", "Always stressed, no way out", or "Materialistic life does not bring happiness".

A representative Instagram example illustrates this strategy of presuppositional problem definition: "Worldly success, but an anxious heart? Have everything, but still empty? Maybe it's time to look for something a little more."

The rhetorical questions here are not genuine inquiries but presuppositional assertions: they take for granted that worldly success produces anxiety and that material possession leaves one hollow, normalizing these experiences as universal rather than contingent, and framing them as problems that require a religious rather than psychological, social, or material solution. This presuppositional

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<sup>62</sup> Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 62–86.

<sup>63</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 44–55.

<sup>64</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 19–51.

structure is central to the ideological operation of crisis discourse: by treating the insufficiency of secular life as a given rather than an argument, it positions religious conversion as a logical response to a widely shared condition rather than as a choice that requires justification.

Temporal language further intensifies the crisis by creating a sense of urgency that compresses the time available for reflection: “Now or never”, “Do not be too late”, “Life is short”, or “Tomorrow is never promised.”

Following Reisigl and Wodak’s analysis of scaremongering discourse, this urgency rhetoric functions to increase pressure on the audience by foregrounding the vulnerability and finitude of human life, reducing the psychological space available for deliberation, critical evaluation, or the exploration of alternatives.<sup>65</sup> The discursive effect is to transform the decision to convert from a considered choice made in conditions of reflective freedom into an urgent response to an existential emergency that brooks no delay.

Second, Crisis Types Addressed. The corpus reveals four interconnected categories of crisis that cyber proselytism content consistently constructs and addresses. The *existential crisis* centers on questions of meaning, identity, mortality, and the purpose of human life, the classic terrain of religious concern. The *psychological crisis* addresses anxiety, loneliness, and the erosion of self-worth in a hyperconnected digital environment where social comparison is continuous and performative self-presentation is exhausting. The *moral crisis* invokes the experience of guilt, shame, and the difficulty of navigating ethical life in a relativistic cultural context where traditional moral frameworks have lost their self-evident authority. The *social crisis* addresses the disconnection, fractured family bonds, and erosion of genuine community that many Indonesians experience in the context of rapid urbanization and digital substitution for face-to-face social life.

Third, Discursive Functions. Crisis discourse creates a “felt need” by articulating the diffuse discontents of contemporary life as symptoms of a specific underlying spiritual deficiency that has a specific religious cure. This discursive move is analytically significant because it performs a diagnostic function: it names what is wrong

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<sup>65</sup> Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 44–89.

with secular life, explains its cause, and prescribes its remedy in a single coherent narrative.

Fourth, Ideological Function. The ideological function of crisis discourse is to support religious commitment by constructing secular modernity as constitutively crisis-ridden—empty, anxious, and disconnected—while positioning traditional religious commitment as the progressive and fulfilling antidote to modernity’s failures rather than a retreat from them. This constitutes a significant discursive inversion of the secularization narrative: rather than presenting religious decline as the natural outcome of modernization, crisis discourse presents religious commitment as the solution to modernization’s consequences. Conversion is thus framed not as a regression to pre-modern forms of life but as the most sophisticated and self-aware response available to the contemporary individual who has recognized the insufficiency of secular alternatives. This framing is ideologically powerful precisely because it appropriates the language of personal growth, rational choice, and self-actualization, the dominant value vocabulary of late modernity, in the service of religious commitment.

Fifth, Platform Variations. Crisis discourse is mediated differently across platforms, reflecting each platform’s affordances. On Instagram, crisis and resolution are compressed into the visual grammar of the before-and-after image, often presented through a split-screen aesthetic that renders the entire conversion narrative at a glance. On TikTok, problem–solution videos open with a moment of crisis, typically framed as a rhetorical question or confessional statement, before moving rapidly to a religious resolution and compressing the entire conversion argument into fifteen to sixty seconds. As Bucher demonstrates, platforms reward content that generates emotional engagement, and crisis-oriented material is structurally favored by the algorithmic logics of all four platforms.<sup>66</sup>

### **Closing Synthesis: The Persuasive Ecology of Cyber Proselytism**

The four discursive strategies identified in this analysis, namely crisis, authenticity, accessibility, and community discourse, do not operate as isolated rhetorical devices but function together as what this study terms a “comprehensive persuasive ecology,” an integrated discursive system in which each strategy performs a specific role

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<sup>66</sup> Bucher, *If...Then*, 113–17.

within the overall conversion process while simultaneously reinforcing the others. The interrelation among these strategies can be understood in light of Fairclough's argument that discourse analysis should attend to discourse as part of interrelated systems rather than as a collection of discrete texts.<sup>67</sup>

Within this ecology, crisis discourse performs the foundational function of establishing the problem by constructing the existing world as characterized by existential, psychological, moral, and social insufficiency, thereby generating a felt need for transformation that the other three strategies subsequently address. Authenticity discourse, in turn, addresses the problem of credibility by establishing that the transformation on offer is real, personally grounded, and freely chosen rather than institutionally coerced, thus positioning the speaker as a trustworthy witness to genuine change. Accessibility discourse focuses on feasibility, presenting religious transformation as achievable for ordinary individuals without specialist preparation and thereby removing perceived barriers such as expertise, institutional affiliation, and formal knowledge. Community discourse addresses issues of sustainability and social risk by providing the relational embedding through which individual transformation can be supported, witnessed, and maintained, offering the social scaffolding that renders conversion not only desirable and possible but also socially secure.

Together, these four strategies constitute a discursive system that addresses the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of persuasion simultaneously and comprehensively. The potential convert is offered a coherent account of what is wrong with their current situation (crisis), a credible witness to the possibility of genuine transformation (authenticity), a reassurance that the path to transformation is navigable without special expertise (accessibility), and a community within which to undertake and sustain that transformation (community). This multi-dimensional persuasive architecture, which operates simultaneously across the individual's inner experience, relational world, and broader social environment, constitutes a form of religious persuasion that is qualitatively more sophisticated than any single rhetorical strategy could achieve in isolation and is specifically calibrated to the affordances of digital platforms, where emotional resonance, visual aesthetics, and

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<sup>67</sup> Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 75.

community engagement are structurally rewarded by algorithmic design.

## Conclusion

This study has examined how cyber proselytism in Indonesian social media constructs religious conversion as desirable, legitimate, and accessible through the systematic deployment of discursive strategies. Drawing on a corpus of 68 content items collected from Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp between 2021 and 2025, and analyzed through the three-dimensional CDA framework of Fairclough, the socio-cognitive model of van Dijk, and the discourse-historical approach of Wodak, the analysis has identified four principal discursive strategies: authenticity discourse, which constructs conversion as a genuine and personally transformative experience; accessibility discourse, which democratizes religious knowledge by simplifying theological content and removing institutional barriers; community discourse, which constructs inclusive digital spaces in which belonging precedes belief; and crisis discourse, which frames secular life as constitutively insufficient and positions conversion as its resolution. These four strategies constitute a “persuasive ecology,” an integrated discursive system in which each strategy reinforces the others to address the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of religious persuasion simultaneously.

This study makes three contributions to intersecting fields. First, it advances CDA methodology by demonstrating that Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, extended through van Dijk and Wodak, constitutes a productive and replicable analytical framework for examining persuasive discourse in algorithmically curated religious environments, offering a three-stage protocol that future researchers can adopt and adapt. Second, it contributes to digital religion scholarship by demonstrating that platform affordances actively shape the discursive strategies available to proselytizers: TikTok’s algorithmic preference for emotionally resonant content amplifies crisis discourse; Instagram’s visual grammar enables authenticity’s before-and-after aesthetic; WhatsApp’s semi-private architecture permits community discourse to simulate intimate belonging at scale. This extends the mediatization thesis by showing that specific platform affordances produce specific and predictable discursive effects in conversion-oriented

communication. Third, it contributes to conversion theory by demonstrating that Rambo's sequential model undergoes structural reconfiguration in digital environments: context is algorithmically curated; crisis is platform-amplified; and commitment is publicly performed through hashtag declaration. This suggests the need for a revised account of digital conversion sensitive to platform affordances as active participants in the conversion process.

Several limitations should inform the interpretation of these findings. The corpus is limited to publicly accessible content, excluding the most intimate conversion interactions occurring in closed groups and private messages. The analysis is synchronic rather than longitudinal, unable to track strategic evolution over time. The focus on content rather than reception leaves audience meaning-making outside its scope. These limitations point directly to productive directions for future research: longitudinal studies tracking discursive strategy evolution; reception studies examining how audiences actually engage with and are persuaded by the strategies identified here; and comparative studies testing whether the four-strategy "persuasive ecology" is specific to the Indonesian pluralist context or characteristic of digital proselytism more broadly. For media literacy education in Indonesia, identifying these four strategies provides a concrete framework for developing critical awareness of the persuasive mechanisms embedded in online religious content, an awareness that is particularly urgent given the documented relationship between digital religious radicalization and the binary crisis framings this study identifies.

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