



THE DIALECTIC OF GENDER AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF DISCOURSE ON WOMEN IN NING IMAZ'S DIGITAL DA'WAH

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Abstract

Keywords:

digital da'wah;
gender dialectics;
religious authority;
women's discourse
construction

Previous research on gender discourse in digital da'wah has not thoroughly analysed the mechanisms of gender discourse construction through a sophisticated critical discourse analysis approach on digital platforms. This study analyses the construction of women's discourse in Ning Imaz's digital da'wah on YouTube NU Online using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis model on five da'wah videos from the 2022-2023 period. The findings reveal that Ning Imaz successfully builds personal religious authority through digital platforms, transforming the authority mechanism from a hierarchical-institutional model to a participatory-digital one. However, this discourse construction operates within the 'Digital Islamic Feminism Paradox' – a fundamental dialectic between the empowerment and restriction of women through the naturalisation of the concept of 'fitrah' that legitimises gender hierarchy and the redefinition of terminology from "equality" to 'gender justice.' The transformation of digital religious authority does not result in radical gender emancipation but creates a space for negotiation that allows women to build influence while operating within theological boundaries. The implications are that female preachers need to develop more emancipatory discursive strategies, religious institutions must integrate critical gender perspectives, and audiences need to develop critical literacy for more progressive participation in the construction of contemporary religious meaning.

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| Kata kunci: dakwah digital; dialektika gender; otoritas keagamaan; konstruksi wacana perempuan | Abstrak Penelitian sebelumnya tentang wacana gender dalam dakwah digital belum menganalisis secara mendalam mekanisme konstruksi wacana gender melalui pendekatan analisis wacana kritis yang <i>sophisticated</i> pada platform digital. Penelitian ini menganalisis konstruksi wacana perempuan dalam dakwah digital Ning Imaz di YouTube NU Online menggunakan analisis wacana kritis model Sara Mills terhadap 5 video dakwah periode 2022-2023. Temuan mengungkap bahwa Ning Imaz berhasil membangun otoritas keagamaan personal melalui platform digital, mentransformasi mekanisme otoritas dari model hierarkis-institusional menuju <i>participatory-digital</i> . Namun, konstruksi wacana ini beroperasi dalam " <i>Digital Islamic Feminism Paradox</i> " - dialektika fundamental antara pemberdayaan dan pembatasan perempuan melalui naturalisasi konsep "fitrah" yang melegitimasi hierarki gender dan redefinisi terminologi dari "kesetaraan" menjadi "keadilan" gender. Transformasi otoritas keagamaan digital tidak menghasilkan emansipasi gender radikal, melainkan menciptakan ruang negosiasi yang memungkinkan perempuan membangun influence sambil tetap beroperasi dalam batasan teologis. Implikasinya, pendakwah perempuan perlu mengembangkan strategi diskursif yang lebih emansipatoris, institusi keagamaan harus mengintegrasikan perspektif kritis gender, dan audiens perlu mengembangkan <i>critical literacy</i> untuk partisipasi yang lebih progresif dalam konstruksi makna keagamaan kontemporer. |
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INTRODUCTION

Background Of The Study

Contemporary Indonesia presents an intriguing structural paradox in gender relations and economic participation. The latest data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2024 shows that although 49.7% of the population is women, and 61.2% of them are of productive age, their participation in the workforce has stagnated at 55.3% compared to men, who reach 83.7% (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi DKI, 2024). Furthermore, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection reported in its 2024 performance report that the gender wage gap reached 17.8%, with women earning an average of Rp 2.9 million per month while men earned Rp 3.5 million (Laporan Kinerja KPPPA RI, 2025). The Global Gender Gap Report 2024 ranks Indonesia 87th out of 146

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countries with a score of 0.679, marking a decline from its previous ranking of 85th (Pal, Piaget, Zahidi, & Baller, 2024).

This gap is not merely a statistical figure, but a manifestation of gender discrimination ingrained in patriarchal sociocultural structures. This patriarchal society establishes men as dominant figures. At the same time, women remain confined to domestic roles; this limitation, as per Javanese tradition, is known as *konco wingking* (the companion behind). This concept places women as companions who operate in the private sphere and support male dominance in the public sphere, thereby limiting the actualisation of their potential in social, economic and political participation (Blackburn, 2004).

This phenomenon of gender inequality validates Connell's theory of gender as a complex social structure that is maintained through institutionalised practices (Connell, 2005). Gender inequality operates as a dominant binary code in social systems that construct hierarchies based on gender (Butler, 2015). This structure not only limits women's access to economic resources but also creates social norms that naturalise women's subordination. In line with this, Risman (2018) states that the reproduction of this inequality occurs through various social institutions, including the family, education, and the media, which consistently reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

In the digital age, social media has transformed the landscape of gender construction into a more dynamic and complex arena for contesting meaning. Platforms such as YouTube no longer function as passive media but as active infrastructure that operates what Castells refers to as a '*space of flows*' (Castells, 2015). This hybrid social space allows ideas and discourses to circulate beyond conventional geographical boundaries, creating new opportunities for the reconstruction of gender identity (van Dijck, 2013). This transformation provides opportunities for women to become active subjects in producing discourse, rather than merely objects of discourse, as dictated by traditional patriarchal structures.

In the context of Indonesian Muslim society, gender discourse faces a complex interpretive dialectic and operates in constant tension between conservative and progressive perspectives. Conservative interpretations tend to legitimise gender hierarchies based on Q.S. An-Nisa verse 34, which is often understood as legitimising male leadership (*qiwamah*) (Wadud, 2006). On the other hand, progressive

interpretations emphasise the fundamental principle of equality in Islam based on Q.S Al-Hujurat verse 13, which asserts that there is no superiority based on gender (Barlas, 2002). This interpretive dialectic does not operate in a vacuum but in an arena of negotiation involving traditional religious authorities and new agents emerging in the digital space.

Sara Mills' paradigm offers a pertinent analytical framework for examining the discursive power dynamics involved in the formation of female speech, considering the intricate interplay of interpretive gender dialectics and religious authority. Mills developed a critical discourse analysis approach that specifically focuses on how gender discourse operates through subject-object positioning mechanisms and the contestation of authority in discursive spaces (Mills, 2004).

Mills' paradigm is particularly relevant for analysing digital *da'wah* because of its ability to identify how women are positioned in religious discourse – whether as subjects who speak or objects who are spoken about – and how religious authority is constructed, negotiated, and challenged in the digital space. Furthermore, Mills' framework allows for an in-depth analysis of the hidden operations of power in discursive practices, including how religious terminology is used to legitimise or challenge gender hierarchies. The relevance of this paradigm is increasingly significant in the context of digital *da'wah*, where traditional religious authority is experiencing fragmentation and democratisation, this creates a new space of contestation where women can negotiate their position within the authority structure while still operating within established theological boundaries (Mills, 2004).

The tension between conservative and progressive interpretations creates a space for contestation, allowing young female preachers to emerge as active agents in producing religious discourse. They challenge the traditional paradigm that places women as passive objects while negotiating with established authority structures (Rinaldo, 2013). The emergence of female preachers on digital platforms not only changes the landscape of contemporary preaching but also opens up opportunities for redefining women's positions within religious authority structures. This process reflects the fragmentation of religious authority, enabling democratisation of access to the production of religious discourse (Mukhlis et al., 2025).

The emergence of Imaz Fatimatuz Zahra (Ning Imaz) as a young preacher from the Al-Ihsan Lirboyo Islamic boarding school ecosystem who is active on YouTube NU Online represents a significant phenomenon in the dialectic between traditional religious authority and digital modernity. The selection of Ning Imaz as the research subject is based on several academic criteria that distinguish her from other female preachers, such as Oki Setiana Dewi or Halimah Alaydrus. First, her unique institutional positioning as the official representative of Nahdlatul Ulama—the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia—through the NU Online YouTube platform, which has 1.45 million subscribers and 110 million views (NU Online - YouTube, n.d.), grants her religious authority distinct from that of individual preachers.

Second, her background in traditional pesantren education, combined with digital activism, creates an intriguing dialectic between traditional authority and digital modernity. Third, her specific focus on gender and family issues in the playlists '*Suara Muslimah*' and '*Keluarga Sakinah*' provides rich data for analysing gender discourse construction. Fourth, the representative demographics of young Indonesian Muslims with high engagement rates indicate a significant influence on the formation of contemporary religious opinion. Fifth, the moderate approach reflects mainstream Indonesian Islamic thought, differing from the more conservative or liberal approaches of other figures, thus providing a more accurate representation of the dynamics of gender discourse in contemporary Indonesian Islam.

Literature Review

Research on social media and contemporary Islamic learning shows significant transformations in digital *da'wah* practices. Solahudin & Fakhruroji (2019) identify how the use of the internet has transformed Islamic learning practices, with various Islamic study groups and communities emerging on social media alongside religious leaders who are active on digital platforms. This phenomenon has created a growing religious populism in Islamic learning practices, which are spread across various social media platforms. This transformation has not only changed the way religious messages are conveyed but has also created a fragmentation of religious authority, enabling the democratisation of religious knowledge. This research shows that social media plays a

significant role in breaking down traditional authority structures and creating new spaces for the negotiation of religious meaning.

Beta's research on young Muslim women as religious influencers reveals how groups of young Muslim women based on social media operate as transformative agents in socio-political analysis (Beta, 2019). Although this transformative role is often invisible in a broader context, Beta's research shows that young Muslim women are able to build influence and construct religious discourse through digital platforms. They employ sophisticated communication strategies to negotiate a modern Muslim identity that integrates traditional values with contemporary aspirations. These findings suggest that social media is not merely a medium for conveying messages but also an arena for identity construction and the negotiation of religious meaning (Beta, 2019).

Hannan & Mursyidi (2023) analyse the fragmentation of religious authority among contemporary Indonesian Muslims, showing how social media creates new spaces for contesting religious meaning. This fragmentation not only changes how religious authority is constructed but also opens opportunities for new actors to emerge as authoritative figures in religious discourse. Hannan & Mursyidi's research shows that digital religious authority no longer depends on traditional institutional legitimacy but on communication skills and intellectual credibility built through interaction with the audience. This process creates democratisation of access to religious authority, which was previously dominated by patriarchal hierarchical structures (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023).

Uyuni et al. (2025), in their research on virtual majelis taklim, show how women negotiate power and shape religious discourse in digital spaces. This research reveals that women not only interact with audiences online through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and TikTok, but also actively construct religious discourse that is responsive to contemporary needs. These findings show that digital spaces provide opportunities for women to build personal religious authority that is not limited by traditional hierarchical structures. This transformation reflects a paradigmatic shift in the construction of religious authority that enables women's active participation in the production of religious discourse (Uyuni et al., 2025).

Research Gap

Previous research on gender discourse in digital *da'wah* has revealed significant methodological and theoretical gaps in understanding its construction. Rosyidah & Nurwati (2019), who analysed gender construction on Instagram, remained focused on a general content approach without exploring the operational mechanisms of deeper meaning construction. This research did not analyse how subject-object positioning operates in gender discourse construction, thus failing to reveal the complexity of power operations in meaning production. This methodological limitation creates a gap in understanding how social media operates as a more sophisticated arena for gender identity construction (Rosyidah & Nurwati, 2019).

Muhammad (2004), in his study of the Islamic perspective on women, focuses too much on the traditional context without integrating the dynamics of digital media that have changed the landscape of contemporary *da'wah*. This study does not analyse how the transformation of religious authority through digital platforms influences the construction of gender discourse in Islam (Muhammad, 2004). Slama's study on young preachers emphasises the modernity-tradition dichotomy without critically analysing gender construction, thus failing to reveal the complexity of gender dialectics in digital *da'wah* (Slama, 2018). Even Nisa's study examining women and *da'wah* on social media has not applied critical discourse analysis specifically to the YouTube platform (Nisa, 2018).

Studies using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis in the Indonesian context reveal diverse and contradictory trends in research findings. Nur & Riyadi (2023) in their study of the Muslim.or.id preaching text, reveal that the choice of words or phrases used tends to show a strong patriarchal tendency, evident through gender issues in the text and male superiority (Nur & Riyadi, 2023). Conversely, Triana et al. (2021), who used Sara Mills' approach on online news texts, showed a more positive representation of women, where women not only took on the position of objects but also that of subjects in equal proportion (Triana et al., 2021). These contradictory findings indicate significant variations in gender construction across various digital platforms, reinforcing the need to specifically analyse how gender discourse is constructed in the context of digital *da'wah* on YouTube.

Novelty Of The Study

The novelty of this study can be identified through systematic comparison with previous studies in three crucial dimensions. First, in terms of research focus, Rosyidah and Nurwati's study analysed gender construction in Instagram content in general without specifying a particular subject (Rosyidah & Nurwati, 2019), while Beta focused on young Muslim women as religious influencers without analysing the mechanisms of discourse construction in depth (Beta, 2019). In contrast, this study specifically focuses on analysing gender discourse construction in Ning Imaz's digital *da'wah* on YouTube NU Online, which represents the interpenetration between the traditional religious authority of Nahdlatul Ulama and modern digital infrastructure.

Second, from a methodological approach perspective, Nur and Riyadi's research uses Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis on Muslim.or.id *da'wah* texts with a conventional textual paradigm (Nur & Riyadi, 2023), while Triana et al. applied Sara Mills' model to online news texts using a descriptive-analytical approach (Triana et al., 2021). Unlike these studies, this research operates a constructivist paradigm with Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis. It specifically integrates subject-object positioning in the context of digital *da'wah* on the YouTube audiovisual platform, creating a more comprehensive analytical framework for uncovering the operational mechanisms of gender meaning construction.

Third, from a theoretical positioning perspective, Hannan and Mursyidi's research analyses the fragmentation of religious authority without a specific focus on gender construction (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023), while Uyuni et al. studied virtual religious study circles with an emphasis on the negotiation of women's power in general (Uyuni et al., 2025). This research repositions female preachers as active subjects who engage in gender discourse within the dialectics of traditional NU religious authority, rather than merely as objects discussed in religious discourse. This positioning allows for a more in-depth analysis of how women use digital platforms to build personal religious authority and construct gender discourse that is responsive to contemporary needs within the framework of established religious traditions.

Research Questions

Based on the identified research gaps, this study proposes three interrelated research questions in analysing the construction of gender discourse in digital preaching. First, this study seeks to understand how subject-object positioning operates in the construction of gender discourse in Ning Imaz's digital *da'wah* on YouTube NU Online. It examines the discursive mechanisms in positioning women both as subjects who speak and as objects who are talked about in the context of digital *da'wah*.

Second, this study analyses how the reader-writer relationship positions the audience in constructing meanings about contemporary Muslim women's identity, focusing on the dynamics of interaction between preachers and audiences in negotiating gender meaning through digital platforms. Third, this study explores how the dialectic between women's empowerment and restriction is constructed within the framework of NU religious authority through digital platforms, analysing the structural paradox in discourse construction that can simultaneously empower and restrict women's agency in theological and social contexts.

Purposes Of The Study

Based on the identified research gaps, this study aims to analyse the construction of gender discourse in Ning Imaz's digital preaching on YouTube NU Online through Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis framework. This main objective is operationalised through three specific and interrelated research questions: first, analysing how subject-object positioning operates in gender discourse construction; second, examining how reader-writer relationships position audiences in constructing meanings about contemporary Muslim women's identity; and third, revealing how the dialectic between women's empowerment and restriction is constructed within NU's religious authority framework through digital platforms.

This research aims to contribute theoretically to understanding the transformation of religious authority in the digital age and to provide an analytical framework that integrates gender studies with critical discourse analysis in Indonesian Islamic contexts. This research is expected to offer practical insights into digital *da'wah* communication strategies that respond to women's empowerment needs within religious value frameworks. Methodologically, this study offers innovative applications

of Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis to digital audiovisual platforms, serving as a reference for future research in digital media and Islamic gender studies.

Rationale Of The Study

The urgency of this research arises from the pressing need to understand the implications of digital transformation on gender discourse construction in religious contexts, as social media platforms have become primary arenas for contemporary Muslim identity formation. Without a comprehensive understanding of these mechanisms, problematic gender discourses risk becoming normalised and institutionalised through digital religious authorities with unprecedented reach and influence. Nisa identifies that digital platforms possess the capacity to reinforce traditional gender constructions that limit women's agency on previously unimaginable scales (Nisa, 2018), while Solahudin and Fakhruroji demonstrate that superficial interpretations lacking solid theological foundations can generate confusion and polarisation within Indonesian Muslim communities (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019).

Failure to address these research gaps will perpetuate negative consequences, including lost momentum for substantive gender transformation in Indonesian Islam and continued methodological limitations in digital gender studies. Rinaldo argues that windows of opportunity for gender reform depend critically on identifying contradictions within dominant discourse; without sophisticated research approaches, progressive reinterpretation opportunities may be missed or rendered counterproductive (Rinaldo, 2013).

Beta demonstrates that young Muslim women's transformative potential as digital religious influencers requires strategic navigation of complex structural constraints. Without a thorough understanding through critical discourse analysis, these constraints may remain unrealised or trigger counterproductive backlash (Beta, 2019). Hannan and Mursyidi emphasise that without methodological advancement, academic understanding of gender discourse in Islamic digital spaces will remain superficial and incapable of providing actionable insights for policy development or practical implementation (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023).

METHODS

Research Design

This study operates a constructivist paradigm with a qualitative approach that emphasises the interpretation of meaning and the social construction of reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research design uses critical discourse analysis with Sara Mills' framework, which specifically examines the positioning of subjects and objects in the construction of gender discourse. As Mills states, 'power and knowledge operate in the construction of meaning, as well as the mechanisms of subject-object positioning in discourse' (Mills, 2004).

Data Collection Technique

Primary data consists of five videos of Ning Imaz's sermons on NU Online YouTube in the playlists 'Suara Muslimah' (Muslim Women's Voices) and 'Keluarga Sakinah' (Sakinah Family) for the period 2022-2023, selected through purposive sampling with the criteria of videos featuring Ning Imaz, explicitly discussing gender issues, with a minimum duration of five minutes, high engagement with a minimum of 5,000 views, and representativeness of the variety of topics in the construction of gender discourse.

Tabel 1.

Video Data Source

| No | Title | URL | Viewer | Comments | Likes |
|----|--|---|--------|----------|-------|
| 1 | <i>Keadilan Gender dalam Islam</i> | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giQzjcg2zSY | 20.000 | 51 | 1.000 |
| 2 | <i>Motivasi Sukses dari Gus Rifqil dan Ning Imaz</i> | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwHYRG1FuAo | 15.000 | 6 | 558 |
| 3 | <i>Kisah Inspiratif Fatimah Al Fihri: Berani Mendirikan Universitas Pertama di Dunia Ning Imaz</i> | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8y3tca7k8A | 6.000 | 5 | 125 |
| 4 | <i>Suami Minta Jatah Istri Tapi Ditolak Gus Rifqil x Ning Imaz Keluarga Sakinah</i> | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLKYQfT8fi0 | 98.000 | 72 | 1.000 |
| 5 | <i>Suami Tidak Bekerja, Istri Harus Bagaimana? Gus Rifqil x Ning Imaz</i> | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSbqXk9oYwg | 74.000 | 26 | 249 |

Data collection techniques included verbatim transcription of all selected videos, documentation of the production context, and collection of secondary data for

contextualising the analysis. Data analysis used Sara Mills' framework, which operates at two levels: subject-object positioning, examining who is speaking and how the subject's position is constructed, and reader-writer relations, analysing how the text positions the reader. As Fairclough states, 'critical discourse analysis requires a comprehensive understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which discourse is produced and consumed' (Fairclough, 2013).

Data Validity Technique

Data validity is ensured through source triangulation, member checking with discourse analysis experts, and peer debriefing with other researchers specialising in gender studies and digital media. Source triangulation is implemented by confirming the findings of the video analysis with official NU documents on the position of women, related articles on the NU Online website, and secondary literature on gender thought in the NU tradition. Member checking was conducted by consulting the analysis results with three discourse analysis experts from different universities to verify the interpretations and research findings. Peer debriefing was conducted through regular discussions with two other researchers, who have publications in the field of Islamic gender studies and digital media, to obtain alternative perspectives and constructive criticism of the analysis process. This multiple validation strategy follows the principles of qualitative research trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

This study analyses five videos of Ning Imaz Fatimatuz Zahro's sermons uploaded on the NU Online YouTube channel. Data in the form of quotations from the sermons are presented narratively and interpreted to understand the construction of gender discourse in contemporary sermons.

Video 1: 'Gender Justice In Islam'

In the first video, titled 'Gender Justice in Islam,' Ning Imaz positions herself as a source with the authority to convey the organisation's views. This is evident when she states at the beginning of the video:

"On this occasion, I will convey a view..." (NU Online, 2022a).

The phrase 'I will present a perspective' indicates Ning Imaz's position as a subject with the authority to speak on behalf of a particular perspective. The term '*perspective*' indicates that what is being presented is not merely a personal opinion but a systematically constructed viewpoint representing a specific institution.

One of the main focuses of this video is the effort to redefine terminology in gender discourse. Ning Imaz repeatedly emphasises the change in terminology by stating that:

"From the beginning, the more appropriate term has been gender justice, not gender equality..." (NU Online, 2022a).

This emphasis is continued with the explicit statement that:

"Women should not demand equality but justice' and 'what is being fought for is not equality, but justice" (NU Online, 2022a).

The repetition of the terminology '*justice*' versus "*equality*" indicates a systematic effort to control meaning in gender discourse. The use of the word 'should' indicates the normativity that is being established, while the repetition serves as an ideological emphasis to ensure the audience understands and accepts this redefinition.

The construction of gender differences in this video is built through the dichotomy of traits considered inherent to men and women. Ning Imaz states that:

"Men are created more rational and women are created more emotional, should not be used as a benchmark for judging better or worse, because it is not a shortcoming for a woman to have more dominant emotions" (NU Online, 2022a).

This quote constructs a gender dichotomy based on rational-emotional traits while attempting to avoid a hierarchy of values. However, the use of the phrase '*women are created more emotionally*' perpetuates essentialist gender stereotypes and indicates acceptance of problematic gender-based categorisation.

Theological legitimisation forms the foundation of Ning Imaz's argument in rejecting the concept of full equality. She asserts that

“If we are equal, it means we are going against nature. However, (not being) equal does not mean we are not entitled to justice” (NU Online, 2022a).

The concept of ‘nature’ is used as a theological legitimacy to reject full equality while still claiming justice. The phrase ‘against nature’ creates an unnegotiable boundary in gender discourse and positions equality as something contrary to divine will.

Video 2: The Inspiring Story Of Fatimah Al-Fihri: Daring To Found The First University In The World’

The second video employs a historical empowerment strategy to inspire female audiences through compelling narratives. Ning Imaz begins with the statement that

“We know that our civilisation was not only established by men, but also built by women. Women do not only take care of their children at home...” (NU Online, 2022c).

The use of ‘we know’ creates shared knowledge with the audience about women's contributions to civilisation. The phrase ‘not only’ indicates that domestic roles are still considered the primary role of women, despite acknowledging contributions outside that domain.

A cross-cultural comparison strategy is used to reinforce the narrative of Islam's superiority in empowering women. Ning Imaz states that:

“As a comparison, women in the Netherlands are still represented when it comes to inheritance, and some have not received their inheritance. They are unable to obtain their own inheritance because of customs or cultures that marginalise women” (NU Online, 2022c).

The strategy of comparison with Europe is used to create a pride narrative about the superiority of Islam in empowering women. This demonstrates a technique of delegitimising Western models of feminism while building a positive identity around Islamic traditions. At the end of the video, Ning Imaz explicitly directs her audience by stating that

“So that women now and in the future can be motivated by the stories of women in the past who turned out to have more progressive mindsets and ideas that can be solutions to existing problems” (NU Online, 2022c).

The female audience is positioned as recipients of inspiration, expected to follow historical examples. The phrase *'are expected to be motivated'* suggests that the audience is seen as objects needing motivation and guidance, rather than as subjects with full agency to determine the direction of their lives.

Video 3: 'Husband Not Working, What Should The Wife Do?'

The third video discusses women's economic role in the household context with a fairly progressive approach, yet it remains within a hierarchical framework. Ning Imaz states that:

"At least we can contribute to helping the family economy' and 'wives can take part in the family economy" (NU Online, 2022e).

Women's economic participation is framed as *'helping'* and *'contributing,'* rather than as a right or equal contribution. The word *'may'* indicates that this is a permission granted, not an inherent entitlement of women as individuals with economic capacity.

Although it provides space for women's economic participation, the hierarchy within the household is firmly maintained. Gus Rifqil, who is also a source in this video, emphasises that:

"No matter how wealthy, noble, or capable a wife may be, within the context of family relations, she must respect her husband" (NU Online, 2022e).

While acknowledging the wife's capabilities in various aspects (*'no matter how wealthy, noble, or accomplished she may be'*), the hierarchy within the household is maintained through the obligation to *'respect the husband.'* This reflects conditional recognition of women's agency – acknowledged as long as it does not threaten the existing power structure.

The concept of mutuality is introduced as a solution to balance household dynamics. Ning Imaz states that:

"In all life's problems, whether within the household or elsewhere, we should adopt a solution-oriented approach to the issues that affect us" (NU Online, 2022e).

The concepts of *'solutions'* and *"reciprocity"* are used to balance gender hierarchies by emphasising mutual understanding. However, the use of *'we'* in this context tends to

refer to female audiences who are expected to be adaptive and accommodating to family needs.

Video 4: 'Husband Asks Wife For Sex, But She Refuses'

The fourth video shows Ning Imaz's critical awareness of the use of objectifying language in the context of sexuality. She criticises the use of certain terminology by stating that:

"The use of the word "share" in the context of sexual relations depicts male power over women and places them as mere objects who are expected to be ready to serve their husbands' sexual needs at any time" (NU Online, 2022d).

Ning Imaz demonstrates critical awareness of objectifying language and its impact on women's dignity. This shows her positioning as an advocate concerned with the representation of women in the discourse on sexuality.

The recognition of equality in sexual desire is a progressive point in this video. Gus Rifqil states that

"Sexual instincts are given by the Almighty equally, not only to men but also to women" (NU Online, 2022d).

The recognition of equality in sexual desire shows an effort to challenge the assumption that sexuality is solely a masculine domain. Theological legitimisation (*'the Almighty'*) is used to strengthen the argument that women also have legitimate sexual rights and needs.

However, the fiqh framework regarding the obligations of wives is still maintained, albeit in a more humanistic form. Ning Imaz explains that

"I might look into the fiqh law, there is indeed the term nusyuz for women who are disobedient to their husbands, especially in matters of the bedroom. Here it is stated that when a woman refuses her husband without a valid reason, and without any good compromise or communication, it should not be allowed and is considered nusyuz" (NU Online, 2022d).

Despite criticising the term *"quota"*, the fiqh framework on *nusyuz* is maintained. This reflects an ambivalence: rejecting objectification while upholding a hierarchical structure of obligations.

Efforts to prevent abuse of power by husbands are also addressed in this video. Gus Rifqil emphasises that religious teachings

“Should not be used as a tool or weapon for husbands to pressure their wives to comply” (NU Online, 2022d).

Efforts to limit abuse demonstrate a positioning as a moderator striving to balance rights and obligations in marital relations. However, the foundational framework regarding a wife's obligations is not fundamentally questioned.

Video 5: ‘Motivation For Success From Gus Rifqil And Ning Imaz’

The fifth video shows Ning Imaz in her most vulnerable position as she shares her personal experiences about her motivation in preaching. She reveals that her *da’wah* activities.

“Actually began out of concern. My concern stems from seeing women being marginalised, their lives and potential buried, and ultimately their lives becoming completely insignificant” (NU Online, 2022b).

Ning Imaz positions herself as an empathetic advocate for marginalised women. The use of the word ‘*concern*’ indicates an emotional investment in gender issues, while ‘*their potential is buried*’ criticises the system that limits women's self-actualisation.

Criticism of the limited life cycle of women confined to domestic roles is conveyed vividly. Ning Imaz describes that

"Women who marry at a young age then become housewives, raising children. Once her children are grown and her role as a mother is complete – meaning the constant 24/7 care required for raising children is over because her children have become adults – she loses the meaning of life, wondering, “What am I supposed to do now?” Eventually, she ends up gossiping with neighbors, seeking solace in idle chatter" (NU Online, 2022b).

Criticism of the limited life cycle of women confined to domestic roles is presented realistically. The phrase ‘losing the meaning of life’ acknowledges that a woman's identity should not be reduced solely to motherhood. However, the role of ‘*mother*’ remains naturalised as an expected phase.

Despite criticising marginalisation, the naturalisation of women's role as educators is maintained. Ning Imaz states that:

“We know ourselves that women have a very heavy humanitarian duty, because they are the educators of the next generation” (NU Online, 2022b).

Despite criticising marginalisation at the structural level, women's role as educators remains naturalised as a *'humanitarian duty.'* The use of *'we know ourselves'* creates a consensus about gender roles that are essentialist and unquestionable.

Conditional empowerment is a characteristic of the empowerment offered in this video. Ning Imaz explains that women become

"Less useful, less beneficial because they are not given motivation or space to optimise and actualise themselves according to their capabilities" (NU Online, 2022b).

Women's empowerment is constructed as conditional – dependent on being *'given space'* by others. This indicates that women's agency still depends on permission from existing structures rather than being an inherent right.

Justification for women's education is presented through an intriguing institutional metaphor. Ning Imaz explains that

"Just as a madrasah or university cannot produce the best graduates or children of high quality without first having quality within the institution itself, women, if given the freedom to pursue higher education, will be able to become quality mothers and have quality children as well" (NU Online, 2022b).

The institutional metaphor of education is used to legitimise women's education, but the ultimate goal remains focused on the role of motherhood. This reflects an instrumental view of women's education – not for full self-actualisation, but for enhancing quality in fulfilling the traditional role of educating the next generation.

Overall, the five videos show a complex and ambivalent pattern of discourse construction. On the one hand, there is recognition of women's abilities and potential, criticism of marginalisation, and genuine efforts toward empowerment. On the other hand, the hierarchical gender structure is maintained through theological legitimisation, naturalisation of roles, and conditional empowerment that limits women's agency within boundaries set by tradition and specific religious interpretations.

Subject-Object Positioning In Digital Gender Discourse Construction

An analysis of subject-object positioning within Sara Mills' framework reveals the complexities of positionality operating within Ning Imaz's digital *da'wah* discourse. Mills emphasises that *'the positioning of subjects and objects in discourse is not fixed, but rather a social construction that can change depending on the context of power'* (Mills, 2008). This

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concept aligns with Foucault's idea of subjectivity as a product of dynamic and contextual power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1982). Contemporary studies demonstrate that positioning in digital media is increasingly complex. Female subjects experience *contradictory subject positioning* that allows them to occupy multiple positions simultaneously within the same discursive structure (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024). In this context, Ning Imaz experiences a paradoxical dual positioning: as a subject producing religious discourse while also being an object of established patriarchal authority structures.

As a subject, Ning Imaz positions herself as an authoritative voice capable of interpreting religious texts and providing guidance to her female audience. Her statement, *'I will present a perspective,'* reflects what Mills refers to as a *'subject position'* – that is, a position where an individual possesses agency to speak and define reality (Mills, 2004). Fairclough asserts that positioning in discourse analysis involves the negotiation of identity and social relations through specific discursive practices (Fairclough, 2013).

Current findings confirm that women in digital spaces experience greater pressure regarding self-representation. They more often discuss gender perspectives and associate gender with the importance of appearance and image in social media (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024). However, this positioning does not operate in a neutral space. Mills explains that power operates through the determination of who is entitled to speak, when, where, and about what (Mills, 2005). Within this framework, Ning Imaz can speak as a subject only within the boundaries deemed legitimate by traditional religious authority structures.

This paradox of positioning becomes even more complex when analysing how Ning Imaz positions other women in her discourse. The female audience is simultaneously constructed as subjects with the potential to be empowered (*women have buried potential*) and as objects who require guidance and motivation from authority figures. Mills identifies this phenomenon as *contradictory subject positioning*, where individuals can occupy multiple positions simultaneously within the same discursive structure (Mills, 2004). This positioning reflects what Spivak (1988) refers to as *strategic essentialism*—the use of essentialist identities as a political strategy to achieve

emancipatory goals within the context of power structures that cannot be radically transformed.

Butler (2015) adds that gender identity is a performative act that is repeated and creates the illusion of stability through repetition. In this context, this allows Ning Imaz to perform religious authority while still operating within patriarchal gender expectations. Emerging studies reveal that gender construction in digital media does not operate through simple cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, it functions through complex interactions between personal experience and social context, platform design, and online experience (Diepeveen, 2024).

The construction of objects in Ning Imaz's discourse operates through the naturalisation of essentialist gender characteristics. The statement '*women are created to be more emotional*' demonstrates a subtle process of objectification where women are defined based on characteristics considered inherent. Mills asserts that 'objectification does not always operate through explicit dehumanisation, but also through categorisation and definitions that limit the agency of the subject' (Mills, 2016). Connell explains that the construction of masculinity and femininity operates through institutional practices that categorise and normalise gender differences (Connell, 2005).

Contemporary analyses of gender bias in social media discourse confirm that the objectification of women in digital platforms often operates through more subtle mechanisms. Persistent beauty standards and stereotypical roles are reinforced through platform algorithms and content curation practices (Yin & Abdullah, 2024). Furthermore, this phenomenon reflects how media representations play a significant role in producing sociocultural pressures. These pressures can lead to the internalisation of rigid beauty standards, particularly for young women (Santonnicolo et al., 2023). Within this framework, although Ning Imaz claims that emotionality 'is not a flaw,' such categorisation still positions women as objects defined by inherent characteristics.

Reader-Writer Relations In Digital Meaning Construction

The second dimension of Sara Mills' analysis – the reader-writer relationship – reveals the complex mechanisms through which meaning is constructed via interactions between discourse producers and consumers in a digital context. Mills explains that text

does not have inherent meaning; rather, meaning emerges through negotiation between the writer's intentions and the reader's interpretations within a specific sociocultural context (Mills, 2004).

Contemporary research confirms that in the digital context, the reader-writer relationship does not occur uniformly. Instead, it varies depending on linguistic granularity, developmental phase, and methods of measuring communication (Kim et al., 2024). In the context of YouTube as a digital platform, this relationship becomes more complex because it involves multiple layers of mediation and real-time feedback mechanisms that create what Castells refers to as a *space of flows* (Castells, 2015). Furthermore, studies demonstrate that communication in electronic media allows for *person-medium fit* where individual factors play different roles in different electronic media, creating dynamic subject positioning (Lipp & Mohnen, 2024).

An analysis of audience comments on Ning Imaz's videos reveals response patterns that reflect the preacher's successful positioning. Comments such as, “*Alhamdulillah, very inspiring, may I be like Ning Imaz.*” (NU Online, 2022b) and “*Masya' Allah 🥰 what Neng Imaz said is absolutely true 👍 continue to inspire young mothers today 🙌🙌.*” (NU Online, 2022a) indicate that the audience adopts the subject position constructed by Ning Imaz. Mills identifies this as ‘successful interpellation’ – the process by which individuals identify with the positioning offered by the text and adopt it as part of their identity (Mills, 1995). This phenomenon is reinforced by findings that in digital communication negotiations, there is a dynamic relationship between individual characteristics and communication medium, whereby *a better fit produces better outcomes* (Lipp & Mohnen, 2024).

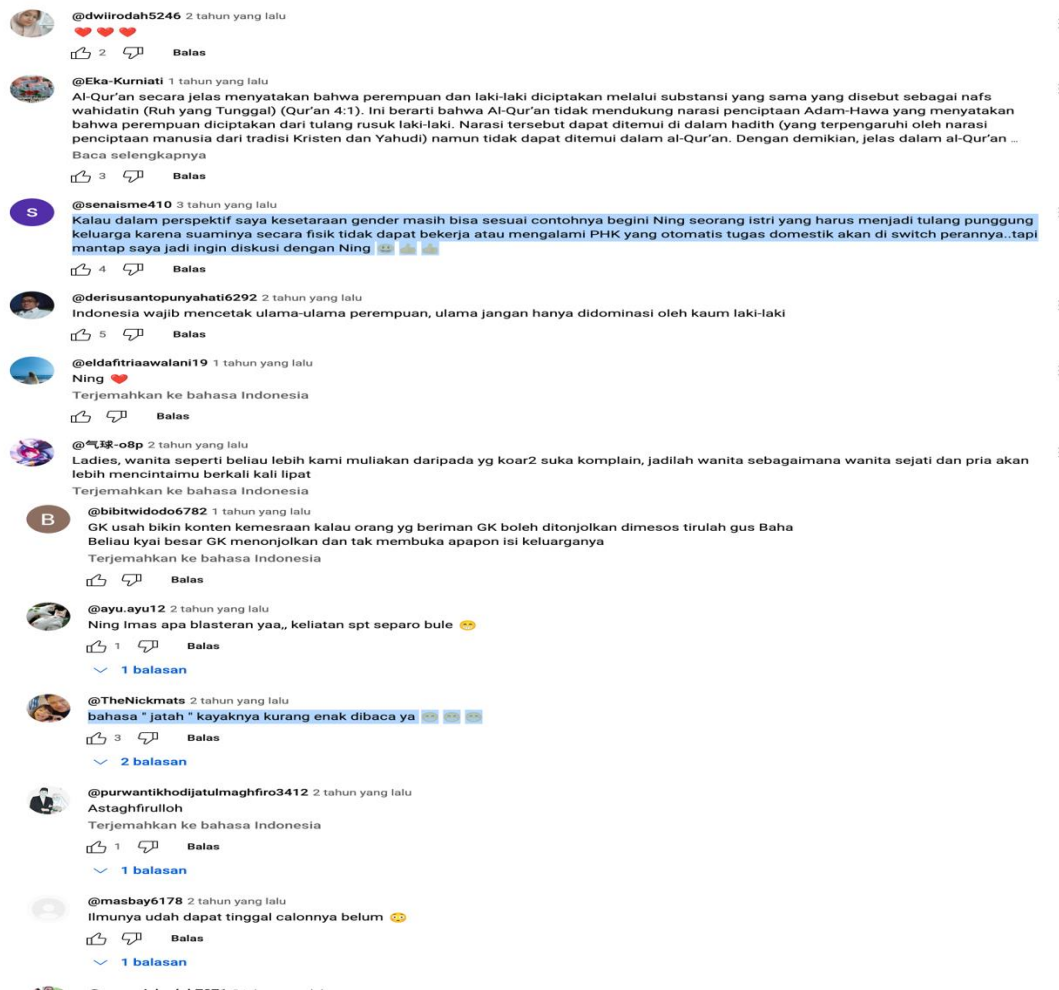


Figure 1. Screenshot Of The Comments Column From Youtube (2)

These responses demonstrate what Mills refers to as resistant reading—interpretations that reject or modify the positioning offered by the text (Mills, 2004). Wodak & Meyer (2001) emphasise that critical discourse analysis must consider how readers can resist or negotiate dominant meanings. Current findings reveal that in digital communication, reader resistance is influenced by individual factors such as personality traits and gender. Women tend to use fewer words in digital interactions, which can affect communication outcomes (Lipp & Mohnen, 2024).

Mills emphasises that reader resistance is not always entirely oppositional, but can involve negotiation and modification of meaning according to the context and needs of the reader (Lewis & Mills, 2003). Contemporary studies confirm that in the digital age, audiences can no longer be categorised as passive consumers. Rather, they function as *prosumers* who actively produce and consume content simultaneously (Chan & Yi, 2024). In this context, some of the audience did not completely reject Ning Imaz's authority as

a preacher but selectively accepted certain aspects of her discourse while criticising others considered problematic. This reflects the complexity of agency in the digital context, where the audience has the ability to perform multiple readings and construct hybrid meanings.

Recent research on critical discourse analysis reveals that in the digital context, interpretive analysis involves three main approaches: discourse analysis, framing, and narrative analysis. These enable a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed through digital interactions (van Hulst et al., 2025).

Digital platforms also enable dialogical interaction that is not possible in traditional communication mediums. Ning Imaz occasionally responds to audience comments and provides clarification or elaboration on specific points. This interaction creates what Mills refers to as dynamic subject positioning, where the subject-object position can change during the interaction process (Mills, 2004). This phenomenon reflects what scholars term 'communicative reciprocity' in digital media, where the boundaries between producer and consumer become increasingly blurred (Lipp & Mohnen, 2024). On several occasions, Ning Imaz can position herself as a listener receiving feedback from her audience, demonstrating the fluidity of positioning in the digital context.

Moreover, studies show that in electronic communication, individual factors such as extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness influence communication outcomes differently depending on the medium used. This creates *medium-specific communication patterns* (Lipp & Mohnen, 2024). This is in line with findings that, in the digital context, interpretive policy analysis involves collaborative meaning-making processes where discourse, framing, and narrative analysis work synergistically to transform meaning construction from a linear to a circular process, in which audience feedback and interaction help shape the discourse through negotiated interpretation and dynamic framing (van Hulst et al., 2025).

The Dialectic Of Empowerment And Restriction In Sara Mills' Framework

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of a fundamental dialectic between empowerment and restriction that operates simultaneously in Ning Imaz's discourse. Mills conceptualises this phenomenon as *productive power* – power that

is not only repressive but also productive in generating subjectivity and identity (Mills, 2008). This concept adopts Foucault's thinking about power as a productive force that not only says no, but produces discourse, knowledge, bodies, and pleasures (Foucault, 1982).

Contemporary studies confirm that in collaborative design contexts, empowerment and disempowerment are 'two sides of the same coin.' The intention to empower is often accompanied by disempowerment and struggle, and empowerment efforts can create new relationships of dependency (Wang et al., 2023). In this context, Ning Imaz's discourse simultaneously empowers women through recognition of their capacities and contributions, while limiting their agency within a hierarchical theological framework. Current research demonstrates that the empowerment process involves a paradox where full participation is not always practical or optimal for achieving empowerment. The best effects of empowerment may require maximising the expertise of various actors (Wang et al., 2023).

This productive power operation is evident in the discursive strategies Ning Imaz employs to legitimise women's participation in public spaces. Through the reconstruction of historical figures such as Fatimah Al-Fihri and Sayyidah Khadijah, she creates precedents that enable contemporary women to claim legitimacy for activities beyond the domestic domain. Mills explains that power operates through the creation of categories and classifications that enable certain forms of subjectivity while limiting others (Mills, 2004). Furthermore, findings reveal that characteristics associated with women's empowerment include independence, active participation in decision-making, and the freedom to choose their own path (Lopes et al., 2024).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps to understand how dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion but through consent and common sense (Gramsci et al., 1985). In this case, the category of Muslim women who contribute to civilisation becomes an available subject position that can be accessed by female audiences while maintaining the fundamental hierarchical structure.

However, Mills also emphasises that empowerment in the context of fundamentally unchanged power structures tends to result in incorporation rather than transformation (Mills, 1995). Contemporary analyses confirm that 'the impact of individual factors on e-negotiations appears to be limited, even though this impact is

intuitively assumed by many negotiators,' demonstrating the complexity of the empowerment process in a digital context (Lipp & Mohnen, 2024).

This phenomenon is evident in the way Ning Imaz constructs women's economic participation as '*assisting*' their husbands rather than as an equal contribution or independent economic agency. The terminology '*assisting*' indicates that although space for economic activity is opened up, the basic framework still positions men as the primary economic agents and women as supplementary.

In transformative social innovation contexts, studies show that empowerment can occur in multiple layers and involve complex processes where 'empowering intentions are often accompanied by disempowerment and struggle (Avelino et al., 2019). This reflects the fundamental dialectic in the empowerment process where empowerment efforts can create new dependencies or produce unexpected forms of disempowerment (Wang et al., 2023).

The most sophisticated mechanism of power operation in Ning Imaz's discourse is the redefinition of terminology from '*equality*' to '*gender justice*.' Mills analyses this phenomenon as '*discursive colonisation*' – a process where potentially subversive meanings are neutralised through redefinition and incorporation into the existing framework (Mills & Mullany, 2011). Said explains how discourse operates through representational strategies that naturalise power relations (Said, 1978).

Evidence shows that in reproductive empowerment contexts, empowered women are perceived as those who are financially and socially independent, free to choose their own path, and active participants in household decision-making processes (Lopes et al., 2024). By shifting the discourse from equality to justice, Ning Imaz successfully accommodates progressive gender aspirations while maintaining the fundamental hierarchical structure.

Mills asserts that discursive control is the most effective form of power because it operates at the level of common sense and taken-for-granted assumptions (Mills, 2005). This strategy allows the audience to feel empowered and progressive while still operating within predetermined boundaries. This redefinition also creates an illusion of choice where women can choose between *demanding equality* (which is constructed as going against nature) or *demanding justice* (which is constructed as being in accordance with religious teachings). Research findings align with this pattern, indicating that the

negotiation process sometimes involves obtaining 'consent' or *permission* from a partner. In cases of disagreement, the partner's opinion often prevails (Lopes et al., 2024).

Although many women view negotiation as fundamental for reproductive decision-making, this process sometimes requires obtaining a partner's consent or permission, highlighting the importance of understanding negotiation processes and resulting empowerment. This phenomenon reflects what scholars term the 'dialectic discussion of empowerment'. Ideal empowerment requires extensive participation; however, full participation is often impractical and suboptimal, necessitating a strategic mixture of *in situ* and *ex situ* approaches that optimizes diverse actors' expertise while balancing endogenous and exogenous elements (Wang et al., 2023).

Digital Authority And The Transformation Of Women's Religious Authority

An analysis of Ning Imaz's positioning in the context of the transformation of religious authority reveals the emergence of new forms of religious authority specific to the digital age. Mills conceptualises authority as a discursively constructed phenomenon that depends on recognition from an interpretive community (Mills, 2004). Castells (2015) adds that authority in the network society operates through flows of information and the capacity to process information effectively.

Recent research by Zaid et al. (2022) explains that digital platforms have empowered individuals and communities to re-negotiate long-established notions of religion and authority. This phenomenon has created a *new generation of social media influencers* who are 'western-educated, unique storytellers, and savvy in digital media production'. Muttaqin (2020) reinforces this perspective by identifying the emergence of 'new religious authority (new micro intellectual) whose religious knowledge is garnered from independent learning and technological media that challenges old traditions. In this context, Ning Imaz's religious authority does not depend on traditional institutional legitimacy, such as certificates from senior clerics or appointments by religious organisations, but rather on her communication skills, intellectual credibility, and responsiveness to the needs of her digital audience.

The YouTube platform creates what Mills (2005) refers to as a *democratised space of discourse* where traditional gatekeepers lose their monopoly over the production and distribution of knowledge. Febrian (2024) explains how religious influencers build *visual*

authority through a close-up approach characterised by a friendly and informal appearance, contrasting with the rigid, more distant style of traditional religious figures.

Ning Imaz can build a massive following and significant influence without relying on traditional authority channels historically dominated by men. However, Mills (2004) also warns that the democratisation of access does not automatically result in the democratisation of power relations. Van Dijk (2008) reinforces this perspective by stating that the digital divide is not only about access to technology, but also about differential capacity for meaningful participation.

Contemporary research by Alsalloum & Gainous (2025) confirms this, showing that although female social media influencers expand the scope of social and political actors, they still operate within a *blend of emotional and rational marketing* that emphasises ‘authenticity, confidence, and interactivity’ in a different way from their male counterparts. Raya (2025) points to the added complexity whereby *digital media platforms* have become a new way for Indonesian Muslims to reproduce, consume and reconceptualise religious material, but also face *religious commodification* where ‘business actors could determine the massively particular religious discourse on social media’.

In the case of Ning Imaz, although she has successfully built significant digital authority, her positioning as a woman within a patriarchal religious structure continues to influence how she constructs and legitimises her discourse. Frequent references to male clerics, an emphasis on humility and deference, and careful navigation of potentially controversial issues demonstrate that women's digital authority operates within constraints that differ from those faced by their male counterparts.

Mills identifies this phenomenon as *conditional authority*—a form of authority dependent on compliance with expectations and norms predetermined by existing power structures (Lewis & Mills, 2003). Mills & Mullany (2011) explain that gendered discourse practices often require women to balance assertiveness with femininity in ways not demanded of men.

Zaid et al. (2022) add that in the digital context, there has been a shift ‘from a regime of orthodoxy towards a regime of orthopraxy *where* religious conformity is tied to doctrine and creed (orthodoxy) to a regime where religious conformity is to practice and experience (orthopraxy). Muttaqin (2020) revealed that massive religious lectures

with gender bias on social media are not only dealing with the textual understanding of religious texts but also a matter of religious commodification.

Ning Imaz's authority as a female preacher is legitimate as long as she does not challenge fundamental assumptions about gender roles and hierarchical structures in Islam. When she criticises the marginalisation of women, her criticism must be framed in terms that are acceptable and not threatening to the status quo.

Unique Findings: The Paradox Of Digital Empowerment In An Islamic Context

The most unique finding of this study is the identification of the Digital Islamic Feminism Paradox—a phenomenon whereby digital platforms enable Muslim women to build influence and authority unprecedented in Islamic history. However, this influence continues to operate within a fundamentally hierarchical and limiting framework. This paradox has not been identified in existing literature because most studies on digital religion or Islamic feminism do not use an analytical framework sophisticated enough to uncover the simultaneous operation of empowerment and constraint.

Hirji (2021) identifies a similar phenomenon in the context of Muslim women's activism. She argues that digital space is, like any other form of media, fundamentally structured by racism and patriarchy, but also notes the crucial potential for resistance exhibited by Muslim activists. This demonstrates the complexity of navigating between empowerment and restriction. Oloba & Blankenship (2024) add that digital platforms have introduced a new paradigm, offering both male and female leaders avenues to expand their communication, authority, and influence, but still within complex gender boundaries.

Mills (2004) provides theoretical tools to understand this paradox through the concept of *productive constraint*—the idea that power not only limits but also enables certain forms of agency and subjectivity. Spivak (2003) adds that agency and subjugation often operate simultaneously in postcolonial contexts. In the context of Ning Imaz, the constraints imposed by the theological framework on gender roles are paradoxically productive, as they enable the construction of new forms of Islamic feminine authority that were previously unavailable. From a digital *da'wah* perspective, Ain (2024) explains that contemporary *da'wah* embraces technology and education to foster understanding,

allowing a diverse array of voices and perspectives within the Muslim community to be heard.

This paradox manifests specifically in the strategies Ning Imaz employs to legitimise empowerment discourse while avoiding confrontation with patriarchal religious authority. She uses what can be conceptualised as *stealth feminism*—the advancement of women's rights and agency through religious language and precedents acceptable within the Islamic framework. This strategy demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how power operates and effectively navigates constraints to achieve meaningful empowerment despite limitations.

From a contemporary Islamic perspective, Digital Islamic Studies identifies that 'academic attention to Islam and digital technologies has increased since the early 2000s with a shift towards online platforms for religious expression and community building (Wahid, 2024). This indicates a transformation in religious practices. Moreover, Baulch & Pramiyanti (2018) add that hijabers use Instagram to *perform middle-classness, but also for dakwah*. This reinforces the complexity of navigating Muslim women's identities in digital spaces, where they employ Instagram as a stage for performing while maintaining a *coherent identity* as Muslim women.

This research also reveals the 'Audience Complicity Phenomenon'—a situation where female audiences participate in the construction of discourse that is simultaneously empowering and constraining to them. Analysis of comments shows that the majority of audiences express gratitude and appreciation for Ning Imaz's message, despite potentially limiting aspects like the emphasis on domestic roles and male authority. This indicates the internalisation of complex discourse and an ambivalent relationship with conditional empowerment.

Mills (2008) explains this phenomenon as *hegemonic participation*—a process where subordinated groups actively participate in reproducing discourse and practices that maintain their subordination, as this discourse also provides certain forms of recognition and empowerment. Gramsci's analysis of hegemony helps understand how consent is manufactured through cultural and ideological means (Gramsci et al., 1985). In this context, female audiences find value in Ning Imaz's message because she provides meaningful spiritual guidance and community belonging, even within a structurally limiting framework.

Implications For Understanding Digital Religious Authority

The findings of this study have significant implications for the theoretical understanding of religious authority in the digital age, particularly in the context of gendered religious discourse. Mills' framework reveals that the digital transformation of religious authority does not operate in a political vacuum, but within a constellation of pre-existing and persistent power relations (Mills, 2004). Fairclough asserts that social change and discourse change are dialectically related (Fairclough, 2013).

Khamis (2024) confirms this complexity by explaining that the paradoxical impacts of the internet became particularly visible in the shifting of Islamic religious authority and gendered Muslim identities. Parekh adds that while influencers are increasingly playing a significant role, the impact of family on religious behaviour appears to be more substantial than epistemic sources on social media (Missier, 2025).

The most significant transformation is the shift from *institutional authority* to *performative authority*—where legitimacy does not depend on formal credentials or institutional appointment, but on the ability to effectively perform knowledge, credibility, and spiritual guidance in the digital space. Ning Imaz exemplifies this new form of authority, where academic credentials, charismatic presentation, and responsive engagement with the audience become powerful sources of legitimacy.

However, Mills (2005) also shows that performative authority remains subject to constraints similar to traditional authority structures, particularly in terms of gendered expectations and theological boundaries. Mills (2016) explains that gendered discourse practices create different expectations for male and female speakers. Female religious authorities in the digital space still have to navigate expectations about appropriate feminine behaviour, deference to male religious authorities, and careful avoidance of topics that are potentially controversial or threatening to existing hierarchies.

This research also reveals the emergence of *hybrid authority*—a combination of traditional Islamic scholarship with modern communication skills and digital literacy. Ning Imaz combines classical references (Ibn Rushd, historical Islamic figures) with contemporary communication strategies and responsiveness to modern concerns. This hybrid approach enables the construction of authority that is both authentic in Islamic terms and relevant to contemporary Muslim women.

Limitations Of The Research

This research has several limitations that must be acknowledged in contextualising the findings. First, the focus on a single case study (Ning Imaz) limits generalisability, although it allows for in-depth analysis, necessitating comparative research on multiple female Islamic digital preachers. Second, the temporal limitations of the data (2022–2023) do not capture the long-term evolution of this rapidly developing discourse. Third, while analysing audience comments, limited access to comprehensive demographics data and audience interpretation processes restricts a full understanding of reader-writer relations within Sara Mills' framework. Fourth, the focus on the YouTube platform limits the applicability of findings to other digital platforms with different characteristics.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

This study reveals that the construction of gender discourse in Ning Imaz's digital *da'wah* operates within a fundamental paradox, reflecting the complexity of negotiations between the empowerment and restriction of women in the context of digital religious authority. Through Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis, it was found that Ning Imaz successfully built personal religious authority on the NU Online YouTube platform by employing a stealth feminism strategy. This approach enables the advancement of women's rights through language and religious precedents acceptable within the framework of Islam. The positioning of subject-object in her discourse reveals a paradoxical dual positioning, where she positions herself as both the subject producing religious discourse and the object of an established patriarchal authority structure. The reader-writer relationship reveals successful interpellation, with the majority of the audience adopting the constructed subject position, although some audience members resist and criticise certain aspects. The transformation of religious authority from a hierarchical-institutional model to a participatory-digital model enables women to build influence without traditional institutional legitimacy, yet still operate within constraints determined by existing power structures.

The most significant finding is the identification of the Digital Islamic Feminism Paradox, where digital platforms enable Muslim women to build unprecedented

authority and influence. Nevertheless, they still operate within a fundamentally hierarchical framework. The operation of discursive power through the redefinition of terminology from “equality” to ‘gender justice’ demonstrates sophisticated control over discourse, allowing for the accommodation of progressive aspirations while maintaining the fundamental hierarchical structure. The naturalisation of the concepts of ‘*fitrah*’ and ‘*kodrat*’ functions as a theological legitimisation that creates non-negotiable boundaries in gender discourse, positioning equality as something contrary to divine will. The conditional empowerment offered through this discourse allows women to access certain spaces in public life, yet within predetermined boundaries and dependent on permission from existing structures. This study concludes that the transformation of digital religious authority does not result in radical gender emancipation. Instead, it creates a space for negotiation that allows women to build influence while maintaining religious authenticity and not threatening the patriarchal status quo.

Suggestions

Based on the research findings, female preachers need to develop more emancipatory discursive strategies by exploring alternative theological interpretations that can support the fundamental reconstruction of the gender framework without neglecting religious authenticity. Further research is recommended to conduct comparative studies of multiple female Islamic digital preachers from diverse institutional and geographical backgrounds, aiming to enhance the generalisability of findings regarding gender discourse construction in digital preaching. Religious educational institutions need to integrate critical gender perspectives into digital preaching curricula to prepare a generation of preachers capable of balancing religious authenticity with substantive gender justice. Digital platforms such as YouTube and religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama need to develop guidelines that encourage more inclusive and emancipatory discourse in the *da’wah* content they produce. Audiences or congregations need to develop critical literacy in consuming digital *da’wah* content to be able to engage in resistant reading of potentially limiting discourse and actively participate in the construction of more progressive and emancipatory meanings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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