CONTRASTING NARRATIVES OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION: STUDY OF "*KISAH MUALAF*" VERTIZONE TV AND "*LOG IN*" HUSEIN JAFAR

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Abstrak

Sejak meningkatnya tren mediatisasi agama, topik konversi agama menjadi sorotan di layar media sebagai konten berita dan narasi dakwah Islam di Indonesia. Narasi ini makin masif terdistribusi berkat arus media baru dan internet. Narasi konversi agama ini muncul dalam berbagai konten video dakwah Islam di internet, yang digemari oleh banyak penonton. Artikel ini mengkaji segmen "Kisah Mualaf" di kanal Vertizone TV dan program Log In di kanal Deddy Corbuzier. "Kisah Mualaf" menayangkan narasi perubahan dramatis, narasi validasi biblikal, serta narasi keterancaman antara Islam dan Kristen, menjadi formula konten dakwah yang menjadi representasi pendakwah baru. Di sisi lain, program Log In yang dipandu oleh Husein Jafar, membingkai narasi konversi agama melalui gimik komedi dan mengedepankan realitas keindonesiaan, yang mewakili narasi kelompok Islam moderat. Melalui artikel ini, penulis menelusuri perkembangan diskursus konversi agama sebagai sebuah narasi di arena dakwah digital Indonesia. Dengan metode analisis konten dan netnografi, serta penelusuran kajian literatur, penulis berpendapat bahwa dua narasi besar konversi agama di tengah para pendakwah digital menjadi arena kontestasi dalam perebutan – tidak hanya audiens, tapi juga – kontestasi wacana dalam konten dakwah digital Islam di Indonesia.

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Abstract

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of Religion,
Contesting
Narratives

With the increasing trend of religious mediatization, the topic of religious conversion has gained significant attention in the media, both as news content and as part of Islamic *dakwah* narratives in Indonesia. This narrative has been widely disseminated through new media and the internet, where religious conversion stories are frequently featured in Islamic *dakwah* videos that attract a large audience. This article examines the *"Kisah Mualaf"* segment on the Vertizone TV channel and the *"Log In"* program on Deddy Corbuzier's channel. *"Kisah Mualaf"* presents narratives of dramatic transformation of the converts, biblical validation, and the perceived mutual threat between Islam and Christianity, shaping a *dakwah* content formula that represents a new generation of convert preachers. On the other hand, *"Log In",* hosted by Husein Jafar, frames religious conversion narratives through comedic gimmicks while emphasizing Indonesian pluralism, reflecting the perspectives of moderate Islamic groups. Through this study, the author explores the contrasting discourses on religious conversion as a prominent narrative within Indonesia's digital *dakwah* sphere. Employing content analysis, netnography, and a review of existing literature, the author argues that two dominant religious conversion narratives have emerged among digital preachers, constituting not only a competition for audience engagement but also a contestation of discourse within Indonesia's Islamic digital *dakwah* landscape.

Introduction

As a country with deeply rooted godly nationalism,[1] religion plays a central role in the lives of Indonesian society. Likewise, in the consumption of information and narratives circulating in various media, religion has been a necessity for the Indonesian Muslim population to fulfill their symbolic needs of religiosity. Including in fulfilling access to media information, symbols of religiosity become a practice of ideological choice for the audience and at the same time a choice for the media industry for the reality of Indonesia which is religious.[2]

Along with the flow of globalization and ease of technology, religion

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[1] Jeremy Menchik, "Godly Nationalism," in *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316344446.004.

[2] Iswandi Syahputra, "Agama di Era Media: Kode Religius dalam Industri Televisi Indonesia," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 125, https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v17i1.1283.

has become a large market that provides the consumption needs of Indonesian Muslims in search of spiritual and religious meaning. Greg Fealy[3] highlights this by using the term 'spiritual market'. Before this spiritual market phase was formed, most of the religious identification patterns of religious adherents were formed through being part of a certain cultural environment or social bond that would follow the same spiritual path, to then be replaced by more widespread practices in the current phase, because religious adherents explore the variants of religion that best suit their needs. So that religious teachings in this spiritual market can be interpreted more as a 'product' of the spiritual marketplace that can be 'sold' to people. Therefore, in consuming religious teachings, a person's personal taste and choice become the driving force rather than collective loyalty or institutional or cultural norms. This situation is beneficial for innovative religious or cultural entrepreneurs, because they are able to create new attractions or develop market niches that address shifts in consumer tastes and desires for new religious products. Moreover, this niche is driven by the growth of the Muslim middle class in urban Indonesia.[4] Fealy calls this as a "volatility" in religious consumption because religious believers can get bored with old religious commodities and continue to seek out new trends.

In this landscape, the topics of religious conversion and the aspiration to become more devout within the hijrah movement have emerged as significant trends in Indonesia's religious discourse, particularly in the post-New Order era.[5] Religious conversion, whether presented as news, personal narratives, or as part of preaching performative, has garnered widespread public attention. This public

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[3] Greg Fealy, "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia," in *Expressing Islam* (ISEAS Publishing, 2008), 15–39, https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812308528-006.

[4] Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "Kelas Menengah dalam Bingkai Middle Indonesia," *Jurnal Politik*, 2016, https://doi.org/10.7454/jp.v1i2.20.

[5] Hamzah Fansuri, "Transforming Faith: Mualaf and Hijrah in Post-Suharto Indonesia," *Entangled Religions* 15, no. 2 (August 23, 2024), https://doi.org/10.46586/er.15.2024.11748.

response intensifies when such narratives involve celebrities or public figures who are already in the spotlight. Budiawan[6] examines the case of Lukman Sardi, whose decision to leave Islam sparked intense controversy among Indonesian netizens and audiences, leading to heated debates on social media. Furthermore, Budiawan highlights how media coverage of celebrities converting to Islam is generally framed with positive sentiment, whereas those who leave Islam (murtad) often become subjects of controversy, eliciting negative commentary and debate on social media platforms.

The phenomenon of religious conversion, which should ideally remain within the private domain of the individual, has increasingly become a media commodity consumed by the public. One of the contributing factors is the proliferation of content narrating personal conversion journeys to Islam, which are prominently showcased and circulated through digital media. Converts (*mualaf*) often share their experiences and spiritual journeys toward their new faith on platforms such as YouTube, further amplifying public engagement with these narratives.[7]

Several celebrities who have converted to Islam, such as Deddy Corbuzier, Marcell Siahaan, and Roger Danuarta, have had their conversion stories widely circulated through digital media, attracting millions of viewers. Conversely, public figures who have converted out of Islam (murtad), including Asmirandah, Lukman Sardi, and Salmafina Sunan, have also garnered significant public attention, with their stories being viewed by millions and sparking intense public debate.[8] These public

[6] Budiawan, "New Media and Religious Conversion Out of Islam Among Celebrities in Indonesia," *IKAT: The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (March 23, 2020): 189, https://doi.org/10.22146/ikat.v3i2.51048.

[7] Lala Nur Pratiwi, "Analisis Sikap dan Pendapat Netizen Terhadap Video Perubahan Keyakinan Beragama Oleh Lima Mualaf: Analisis Isi Kualitatif pada Media Sosial Channel YouTube" (Thesis, Universitas Hasanuddin, 2021), https://repository.unhas.ac.id/id/eprint/5319/.

[8] Budiawan, "New Media and Religious Conversion Out of Islam Among Celebrities in Indonesia."

figures have long been in the spotlight within the entertainment industry. Consequently, their status as celebrities amplifies audience interest in religious conversion as a content-driven narrative. Such content easily captures the attention of urban Indonesian society, where sensational experiences are often consumed as a form of entertainment. This phenomenon highlights how religious conversion is widely discussed on social media and further disseminated to broader audiences through popular digital platforms such as YouTube.

As a media-circulated narrative, religious conversion also plays a crucial role in shaping new Islamic religious authority in Indonesia. This is evident in the work of Najib Burhani[9] who examines the cases of four prominent Indonesian preachers: Abdullah Gymnastiar, Yusuf Mansur, Jefri Al-Bukhori, and Arifin Ilham. These preachers share a common approach in crafting conversion narratives, presenting their spiritual transformation in a highly dramatic manner. Burhani applies the concept of *personal conversion* rather than *religious conversion*, emphasizing an internal transformation from a sinful individual to a newly pious and devout figure. With the rapid expansion of television media and the increased religious freedom following the Reformasi era, these conversion narratives have become defining features of a new mode of Islamic preaching in Indonesia. At the same time, they serve as a justification for these preachers' evolving roles as religious leaders, enabling them to gain both religious authority and large followings.

Beyond its association with celebrities and entertainers-turned-preachers, the narrative of religious conversion has also become an integral part of the rising trend of *mualaf* (converts to Islam) gaining prominence as preachers (*da'i*) or religious teachers (*ustaz/ustazah*). The content produced by these preachers, along with their personal conversion stories, has garnered significant interest among the Indonesian public.

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[9] Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Muslim Televangelists in the Making: Conversion Narratives and the Construction of Religious Authority," *The Muslim World* 110, no. 2 (June 25, 2020): 154–75, https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12327.

Over time, the term *mualaf* has evolved into a distinct identity frequently linked to Islamic preachers, giving rise to labels such as *ustaz mualaf* or *pendakwah mualaf* (convert preachers). This has transformed into a recognizable brand with a broad audience. Notable figures emerging from this trend include Felix Siauw, Irena Handono, Steven Indra Wibowo, Charis Bangun Samudra[10] and Agus Tan—individuals who have become well-known for actively propagating Islam through digital and social media platforms, amassing substantial followings.

Method of Study

Building upon the aforementioned phenomenon, this article seeks to observe and conduct a digital ethnographic exploration of religious conversion narratives as a medium for *dakwah* (Islamic preaching), as disseminated through content on digital media platforms, specifically via two YouTube channels. The central research questions of this study are as follows: How is religious conversion narrated within digital *dakwah* content? and What typologies of religious conversion narratives are presented by the YouTube channels Vertizone TV and Husein Jafar through digital media platforms?

A narrative is a textual construct that recounts events or occurrences in a detailed and chronological manner. It may take the form of fiction or non-fiction and is intended to entertain or provide insight to its audience. Narratives are commonly found in novels, short stories, biographies, and other literary forms. From this definition, it can be inferred that narration serves as a mechanism, process, or storytelling technique employed in the construction and presentation of *dakwah* content. In the context of this study, the term "narrative" specifically refers to *dakwah* content in the form of video (audio-visual) materials that are primarily disseminated through digital platforms, with YouTube as the main medium of circulation.

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[10] Abraham Silo Wilar, "Fenomena Christian Prince dan Ustaz Charis Bangun Samudra," *Theologia in Loco* 3, no. 1 (April 30, 2021): 90–108, https://doi.org/10.55935/thilo.v3i1.209.

The research methodology applied in this study is digital ethnography or netnography. Netnography is an anthropological approach that examines human behavior and interactions within digital spaces, particularly in online communities. This method enables researchers to analyze the ways in which individuals engage with digital content, form virtual communities, and construct meaning through online interactions. By employing netnographic techniques, this study aims to explore how religious conversion narratives are shaped, circulated, and received within the digital *dakwah* landscape.[11] Netnography enables researchers to explore the cultural dynamics and social interactions that emerge within virtual environments, including social media platforms, discussion forums, and community-based websites. This method emphasizes the collection of qualitative data through observational research and content analysis of user-generated materials within digital spaces. By examining online discourse and interactions, netnography provides valuable insights into how narratives, identities, and social meanings are constructed and disseminated in the digital realm.

In the context of this study, netnography serves as a methodological tool to examine various narratives emerging in discussions about religious conversion on digital platforms. This approach allows researchers to understand how users construct identities, convey *dakwah* messages, and engage in diverse discourse contestations. By employing netnographic methods, researchers can analyze interactions and narratives within *dakwah* content, including videos, memes, and textual posts. This analysis helps uncover underlying motives, communication patterns, and rhetorical strategies used to deliver messages about religious conversion in digital media. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how religious conversion is framed, negotiated, and disseminated in the contemporary digital landscape.[12]

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[11] Robert Kozinets, Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online, 2010.

[12] Leesa Costello, Marie-Louise McDermott, and Ruth Wallace, "Netnography: Range of Practices, Misperceptions, and Missed Opportunities," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (December 4, 2017): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917700647.

The discussion above highlights two key points that form the focus of this study. First, religious conversion narratives remain a popular form of *dakwah* content among Indonesian digital media audiences. The widespread interest in such narratives suggests that they continue to play a significant role in shaping religious discourse in the digital space. By analyzing how these narratives are constructed and consumed, this study aims to understand their impact on audience and their role in the broader landscape of Islamic preaching in Indonesia.

Second, religious conversion narratives serve as a space for discourse contestation within Indonesia's digital *dakwah* sphere. These narratives are not merely personal or spiritual stories but also arenas where different ideological, theological, and cultural perspectives intersect and compete. The digital *dakwah* space allows for the negotiation of religious identity, authority, and legitimacy, making conversion narratives a dynamic and contested discourse within the online Islamic preaching community.

Using digital ethnography, this study seeks to classify different typologies of religious conversion narratives in digital *dakwah* content. On one hand, religious conversion is often narrated through dramatic personal life stories and biblical validation, particularly by *convert preachers* who emphasize a transformative journey from their previous beliefs to Islam. These narratives tend to follow a structured format that highlights personal struggles, divine intervention, and ultimate spiritual enlightenment.

On the other hand, a new form of conversion narrative has emerged that incorporates Indonesian socio-cultural realities, utilizes gimmicks and comedy, and prioritizes interfaith dialogue. This approach presents religious conversion as a more relatable and engaging subject for digital audiences, moving beyond traditional frameworks of *dakwah* and embracing a more inclusive and interactive style of religious discourse.

The Mediatization of Religion and the Digital *Dakwah* Landscape in Indonesia

It is undeniable that the internet has transformed patterns of human relationships, including those within the domain of religion. Scholars refer to this phenomenon as mediatization, a term that describes the evolving relationship between religion and media—a process that, as I would describe it, has been intermediated by the presence of new media.[13] The mediatization of *dakwah* has given rise to a Muslim public sphere that not only serves as a foundation for the formation of political constituencies but also establishes a new market for Muslim identity. The entanglement of political interests and economic capital has increasingly rendered *dakwah* susceptible to being used as a tool of propaganda. Moreover, this phenomenon has facilitated the emergence of a 'fandom' culture, where the commodification of Islam operates within the logic of neoliberal market forces.[14]

Just like religious practices themselves, the use of digital media has become inevitable in shaping and expressing Islamic subjectivity and collective identity, manifesting both in offline spaces and within the digital sphere.[15] The religious process is always mediated, making it essential to explore how transitions from one mode of mediation to another—marked by the adoption of new mass media technologies—reconfigure specific religious mediation practices.

In addition to having a large Muslim population, Indonesia also ranks among the countries with the highest number of social media users globally. According to a report by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), as cited by *Tempo,*[16] the number of internet

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[13] Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, "Social Mediatization of Religion: Islamic Videos on YouTube," *Heliyon* 8, no. 3 (March 2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09083.

[14] Arie Setyaningrum Pamungkas, "Mediatisasi Dakwah, Moralitas Publik dan Komodifikasi Islam di Era Neoliberalisme," *MAARIF* 13, no. 1 (June 20, 2018): 55–75, https://doi.org/10.47651/mrf.v13i1.12.

[15] Jon W. Anderson, "Online and Offline Continuities, Community and Agency on the Internet," *CyberOrient* 7, no. 1 (January 31, 2013): 4–33, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.cyo2.20130701.0001.

[16] Berapa Banyak Pengguna Internet di Indonesia? | Tempo.co," accessed February

users in Indonesia has reached 220 million, a significant increase from the pre-pandemic figure of 175 million. As a result, social media has become an integral part of daily life, serving as a primary platform for accessing information and knowledge, including religious discourse and education.

This opportunity has driven the emergence of a new generation of *dakwah* preachers in Indonesia who are technologically adept and highly skilled in utilizing digital media as their preaching platform. The rise of these new preachers challenges the established Islamic religious authorities traditionally rooted in study councils and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools),[17] positioning them as new actors within a society increasingly mediated by digital platforms—especially following the widespread adoption of social media and the internet. Furthermore, the internet has transformed into a stage and a site of contestation, where competing claims to Islamic authority actively engage and compete for influence.[18]

The surge of new preachers flooding social media has even posed challenges for Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), historically the two most influential Islamic organizations in Indonesia. As dominant religious authorities, both organizations have struggled to adapt to the rapidly evolving digital *dakwah* landscape. Akmaliah[19] highlights how Muhammadiyah, with its urban-modernist orientation, has been more receptive to these emerging religious authorities, recognizing their role in the contemporary media ecosystem. In contrast, Nahdlatul Ulama, which remains deeply rooted in traditionalist communities, has maintained a preference for face-to-face religious engagement, reflecting its strong

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12, 2024, https://www.tempo.co/data/data/berapa-banyak-pengguna-internet-di-indonesia--991924.

[17] James Bourk Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru*, *Rebranding Islam* (Stanford University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804796385.

[18] John Postill and Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, "Indonesian Religion as a Hybrid Media Space: Social Dramas in a Contested Realm," *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5, no. 1–2 (February 14, 2018): 100–123, https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340086.

[19] Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies 10, no. 1 (May 29, 2020): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i1.1-24.

connection to traditional Islamic networks and learning methods.

Hew Wai Weng[20] highlights three key aspects of how social media and digital platforms have transformed the contemporary dynamics of *dakwah* in Indonesia. First, social media platforms provide a space where Muslims from diverse backgrounds can freely and widely disseminate their ideas, bypassing editorial interventions, censorship, or restrictions imposed by state authorities. This shift has democratized religious discourse, allowing new voices to emerge without institutional gatekeeping. Second, to enhance their online popularity, preachers are no longer required solely to possess religious knowledge but must also develop strong communication skills and employ sophisticated media strategies. The ability to engage audiences effectively and navigate digital platforms has become an essential aspect of contemporary *dakwah.* Third, within the logic of social media communication, preachers pay significant attention to visual presentation and aesthetic refinement, which have become crucial factors in Islamic preaching. Beyond increasing visibility and audience engagement, these visual enhancements serve to reinforce credibility and persuade viewers to trust and accept the messages being conveyed.

In his study, Hew Wai Weng cites a statement from Felix Siauw, who asserts that "anyone can preach, and preaching is as easy as tapping a thumb on Facebook."[21] This quote implicitly suggests that *dakwah* is accessible to everyone, implying that anyone can become a preacher. However, in practice, this phenomenon has led to new challenges. A notable development is the rise of preachers who produce *dakwah* content without having undergone formal Islamic scholarship through traditional institutions such as pesantren, madrasah, or Islamic universities. This shift

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[20] Hew Wai Weng, "On-Offline Dakwah: Social Media and Islamic Preaching in Malaysia and Indonesia," in *Mediatized Religion in Asia* (Routledge, 2018), 89–104, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315170275-9.

[21] 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 (January 2, 2018): 61–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416757.

has introduced figures such as Steven Indra Wibowo, Agus Tan, and Charis Bangun Samudra—mualaf preachers whose prominence has sparked reactions from established Islamic authorities like Nahdlatul Ulama.[22] Their rise has not only challenged traditional structures of religious authority but has also been accompanied by controversies surrounding the content of their sermons.[23]

Historically, *mualaf* preachers have long been present in Indonesia's *dakwah* landscape, even dating back to the New Order era. Some of the pioneering figures in this field include Irena Handono. Irena Handono, for instance, built her religious identity around her past as a former Catholic nun who converted to Islam in 1983 at the age of 26. She became widely known for her seminars, interfaith debates on Islam and Christianity, and lectures on *kristologi* (Christian theology from an Islamic perspective).

Felix Siauw can be considered a pioneer of the modern ustadz *mualaf* trend, particularly with his statement cited in the previous paragraph, which promotes the idea that anyone can engage in *dakwah*. Siauw creatively presents his preaching in a casual and engaging manner while maintaining a conservative ideological stance. However, unlike many *mualaf* preachers who emphasize their personal religious conversion stories, Siauw gradually shifted away from this narrative. Instead, he became more widely recognized for advocating political ideology and promoting the revival of the Islamic caliphate, aligning with his affiliation with Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)—a movement later banned by the Indonesian government.[24]

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[22] Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.18326/IJIMS.V10I1.1-24; TVNU, "(LIVE) Bahaya Ngaji Ke Ustadz Muallaf," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjaiXLiueTg, June 15, 2020.

[23] "Kekacauan Nalar Ustadz Mualaf: Glorifikasi Islam Berujung Caci Maki Agama Lain - Islami[Dot]Co," accessed March 12, 2024, https://islami.co/kekacauan-nalar-ustadz-mualaf-glorifikasi-islam-berujung-caci-maki-agama-lain/.

[24] Nor Latifah and Romario Romario, "Trendsetter Muballigh di Medsos: Analisis Framing Instagram Felix Siauw dan Hanan Attaki," *Jurnal Studi Agama dan Masyarakat* 15,

The *Kisah Mualaf* Content on Vertizone TV: Narratives of Threat and Dramatic Personal Transformation of the Converts

Religious conversion narratives have become highly popular digital content, often garnering significant viewership. In this context, conversion narratives are understood as personal stories of individuals transitioning from other religions to Islam. This article specifically focuses on the religious conversion narratives presented in the *"Kisah Mualaf"* segment on the Vertizone TV YouTube channel, which serves as the official platform of Mualaf Center Indonesia (MCI). MCI was founded by Steven Indra Wibowo, a Chinese-Indonesian Islamic preacher who passed away in 2022. His emergence as a dakwah figure was accompanied by a personal narrative in which he was described as a former Catholic pastor. However, this claim sparked controversy and was later clarified by the official media of the Archdiocese of Semarang.[25]

In addition to Steven Indra Wibowo, another preacher featured on Vertizone TV is Wendy Lofu, who has also gained recognition under the *mualaf* branding. Similar to Steven, Wendy Lofu is often narrated as a former drug dealer and an ex-hater of Islam[26] who ultimately found the truth and converted to Islam. Both Steven and Wendy continue to use the honorific ''Koh,'' a common Chinese-Indonesian term, as part of their public identity. This reflects their effort to maintain cultural ties while establishing themselves as prominent figures in the Islamic *dakwah* landscape.

Hew Wai Weng[27] highlights how their Chinese-Indonesian identity

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no.1 (June 26, 2019): 36–48, https://doi.org/10.23971/jsam.v15i1.1150.

[25] "Fakta: Tidak Ada Nama Rm. Steven Indra Wibowo SJ Di Gereja Katedral Jakarta - YouTube," accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfXIt7dY5kY.

[26] "Sampai Buat Tim Untuk Fitnah Islam - Kisah Mualaf Wendy Lofu - YouTube," accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RokY6PCQNRg&list=PLF9vi9yfVBd_CiBHuA7PTXmIuy_AF2xWq&index=48.

[27] Hew Wai Weng, "Expressing Chineseness, Marketing Islam: Hybrid Performance of Chinese Muslim Preachers," in *Chinese Indonesians Reassessed: History, Religion and Belonging*, ed. Chang Yau Hoon and Siew Min Sai (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 179–99.

serves as a unique appeal and a strategic branding mechanism within Indonesia's oversaturated *dakwah* sector. In a highly competitive religious market, their distinct background allows them to stand out and attract a broader audience, further reinforcing the intersection of religious conversion narratives with identity politics and media branding.

The religious conversion narratives presented in the *Kisah Mualaf* segment on Vertizone TV are framed as dramatic personal religious experiences, often contrasting the individual's former religion (Christianity) with their new faith (Islam). These narratives are frequently accompanied by sensationalized titles designed to attract audience engagement. The *Kisah Mualaf* playlist on the channel features 85 videos, comprising sermon excerpts, personal testimonies from mualaf (converts to Islam), and talk-show discussions about their conversion journeys and the challenges they faced in the process.

For instance, several titles from the *Kisah Mualaf* segment reflect this trend. It is important to note that these titles have been modified from their original wording to prevent potential bans from YouTube. This practice, known as self-censorship, is employed to avoid triggering content moderation policies and to ensure the videos remain accessible despite addressing potentially sensitive or controversial topics.

Some of the observed video titles include *"PERNAH MURT4DKAN MUSLIM!!! - Kisah Mualaf Mantan Pemudi GERE74"*[28] (*Pernah Murtadkan Muslim! – Kisah Mualaf Mantan Pemudi Gereja*), which portrays a dramatic shift from opposing Islam to embracing it. Another example is *"Kisah Mualaf Keluarga 80% PEND33T44 (Pendeta) Semua,"*[29] emphasizing the high percentage of Christian clergy within the convert's family, creating a sense of tension and contrast. Additionally, *"KISAH MUALAF DARI TAK DIANGGAP KELUARGA, DIB3NCI,*

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[28] "PERNAH MURT4DKAN MUSLIM!!! - Kisah Mualaf Mantan Pemudi GERE74 - YouTube," accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hstZklvSax0.

[29] "Kisah Mualaf Keluarga 80% PEND33T44 Semua - YouTube," accessed February 02, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEeOM1s-l-k.

BAHKAN MAU D1TU5UK 0B3NG SAMA SUAMI"[30] (*Kisah Mualaf dari Tak Dianggap Keluarga, Dibenci, Bahkan Mau Ditusuk Obeng Sama Suami*) highlights themes of rejection and conflict within familial relationships, further intensifying the dramatic appeal of the conversion story.

Content featuring Steven and Wendy as preachers follows a similar pattern. A video titled *"Ketika Koh Wendy Diminta MURT44DD, Bagi-bagi Hadiah 10 Juta"* (When Koh Wendy Was Asked to Apostatize, Giving Away 10 Million Rupiah) portrays Wendy as a mualaf who continues to face pressure and coercion to leave Islam. Another video, *"Sampai Buat Tim untuk Fitnah Islam - Kisah Mualaf Wendy Lofu"[31]* (Even Formed a Team to Slander Islam – Wendy Lofu's Conversion Story), highlights Wendy Lofu's past, depicting him as someone who once opposed Islam before ultimately embracing the faith. These narratives emphasize themes of struggle, resistance, and redemption, reinforcing the dramatic framing of religious conversion stories.

A study by Damayanti and Yunanto[32] argues that Muslims and Christians in Indonesia have perceived each other as mutual threats since their earliest interactions. This perception arises when each group believes that the other possesses the power and capacity to undermine their interests. Several historical factors have contributed to this sense of threat. First, the Christianization efforts during the colonial era led to concerns among Muslims about the dominance of another religion. Second, the emergence of proposals to establish an Islamic state in the early years of Indonesia's independence created tensions with Christian communities,

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[30] "KISAH MUALAF DARI TAK DIANGGAP KELUARGA, DIB3NCI, BAHKAN MAU D1TU5UK 0B3NG SAMA SUAMI - YouTube," accessed February 02, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86J_y1IUWkE.

[31] "Sampai Buat Tim Untuk Fitnah Islam - Kisah Mualaf Wendy Lofu - YouTube," accessed February 02, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RokY6PCQNRg&list=PLF9vi9yfVBd_CiBHuA7PTXmIuy_AF2xWq&index=48.

[32] Angel Damayanti and Sri Yunanto, "From Evangelization to Worship Restrictions: The Changing Characteristics of Threat Perception between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 33, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 329–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2022.2158608.

who feared that their rights would be compromised. Third, the increase in the Christian population during the New Order era under President Soeharto further deepened suspicions between the two religious groups. Fourth, towards the end of Soeharto's rule, the rise of radicalism and terrorism exacerbated Muslim-Christian relations, as both sides became increasingly suspicious of each other's involvement in various social and political conflicts. This persistent sense of mutual threat has shaped the often-tense relationship between Islam and Christianity in Indonesia, particularly in the post-New Order era.[33] This period has also witnessed a growing trend of religious conservatism, commonly referred to as the "Conservative Turn," [34] further influencing interfaith dynamics in the country.

The *Kisah Mualaf* segment on Vertizone TV also employs narratives of miraculous experiences alongside theological debates and comparative religious discourse between Islam and Christianity. Putra[35] argues that *mualaf* preachers frequently engage in theological validation, emphasizing divine truth claims and biblical arguments. One of the aspects that captivates Indonesian audiences is the way these preachers frame theological validation and religious norms as central themes in their *dakwah*.

The debate over the validation of the Bible in relation to the Qur'an, and vice versa, has long been part of Indonesia's theological discourse. This Qur'an-Bible validation model often sparks widespread debate, especially when *mualaf* figures play a prominent role in these discussions, attracting significant public attention. Much of this content revolves

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[33] Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened. Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order* (Leiden/ Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

[34] Yahya Fathur Rozy, "From Feeling Threatened to Conservative Turn: Challanges toward Promoting Moderate Islam through New Media," *Majalah Ilmu Pengetahuan Dan Pemikiran Keagamaan Tajdid* 26, no. 1 (August 30, 2023): 46–58, https://doi.org/10.15548/TAJDID.V26I1.6207.

[35] D.I. Ansusa Putra, "Qura-Bible Validation in Contemporary Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Conversion, and Theological Debate," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora* 20, no. 1 (July 29, 2022): 111, https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v20i1.5541.

around theological arguments, critiques, and comparisons, particularly focusing on the oneness of God (*Tauhid*), prophethood, and the concept of the Trinity. The theological validation presented by these preachers is largely a personal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Bible, framed in contrast to one another.[36] These preachers analyze religious doctrines and draw conclusions based on their personal experiences. Their approach combines rational analysis and reasoning, where Qur'an-Bible validation is not only conducted through textual comparison but also through alignment with socio-historical realities and personal life experiences.

Log In Content: Religious Conversion Narratives Through Gimmicks and Comedy

Husein bin Ja'far al-Hadar (hereafter referred to as Husein Jafar) is a young and widely popular preacher known for his *dakwah* content on social media. As a Hadrami descendant carrying the title *habib*, he holds religious authority within Indonesian society, where the lineage of Hadrami *habaib* has historically played a significant role in the country's Islamic preaching landscape.[37]

Through his own YouTube channels, *Jeda Nulis* and *Cahaya untuk Indonesia*, Husein Jafar had amassed 1.31 million subscribers as of February 2024. While this number may seem modest, it does not fully reflect his broader influence in the digital *dakwah* sphere. His presence extends beyond his own platforms, as he frequently appears on major celebrity-hosted podcasts in Indonesia.

One of the most notable expansions of his reach occurred during Ramadan in 2022 and 2023, when his Log In program was broadcast on the #*CloseTheDoor* YouTube channel owned by Deddy Corbuzier, which boasts a substantial 20.7 million subscribers. This collaboration significantly amplified Husein Jafar's presence in Indonesia's digital

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dakwah landscape, allowing his content to reach a much wider and more diverse audience.

The significant role of Husein Jafar in digital *dakwah*—particularly among Indonesia's urban middle class—earned him recognition in March 2023 when *Fortune Magazine Indonesia* included him in its "40 Under 40" list.[38] His appeal among younger audiences is also reflected in his selection as a brand ambassador for the online game *Free Fire* (FF) during its special Ramadan edition.[39]

While many Hadrami figures or *habaib* have been closely involved in political movements, particularly in the protests surrounding the blasphemy case of Ahok during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election,[40] Husein Jafar has taken a different approach. Instead of aligning with traditional or politically charged *dakwah*, he employs a creative and unconventional preaching style through YouTube and engagement with comedy communities. His involvement in the growing stand-up comedy scene[41] demonstrates his ability to connect with contemporary audiences by blending religious discourse with humor, making *dakwah* more relatable and accessible in Indonesia's evolving digital landscape.

Quoting Husein Jafar from his appearance on the comedy podcast *Plus26*, he stated, *"Saya jadi badut pun tidak apa-apa demi suksesnya dakwah Islam"* (I don't mind being a clown if it means the success of Islamic dakwah).[42] True to his words, he has fully embraced comedy as a core

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[38] Profil Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar | Fortune Indonesia 40 Under 40," accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.fortuneidn.com/40-under-40/social/awardee/husein-ja-far-al-hadar.

[39] "Mabar Tau Waktu di Ramadan Bikin Main Free Fire Makin Seru! | Garena Free Fire - YouTube," accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAa-jQ-JG3I.

[40] Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Prashant Waikar, "Fear and Loathing: Uncivil Islamism and Indonesia's Anti-Ahok Movement," *Indonesia*, no. 106 (2018): 89–109, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5728/indonesia.106.0089.

[41] Lambok Hermanto Sihombing et al., "Indonesian Stand-Up Comedy: A New Developing Industry of Youth Culture," *Humaniora*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v14i1.8381.

[42] Adu Mekanik Habib Husein Ja'far vs Boris Bokir, Siapakah yang Menang? | Dunia Tipu-Tipu Eps. 15 - YouTube," accessed February) 02, 2024,

approach in his preaching style. His initiative in the program *Pemuda Tersesat* became a defining moment in his *dakwah* career, solidifying his presence within the comedy scene. In this program, he collaborated with stand-up comedians Tretan Muslim and Coki Pardede, incorporating humor into religious discussions. [43] *Pemuda Tersesat* uniquely positions religion as a central theme in their comedic material, making it a distinctive platform for engaging younger audiences.

Tretan Muslim, a comedian from Madura, builds his stage persona around the image of a devout Muslim, often reinforcing the religious identity commonly associated with Madurese communities. In contrast, Coki Pardede presents himself as a rebellious figure with an agnostic-leaning perspective, frequently using religious themes as comedic material. The title *Pemuda Tersesat* itself plays on Coki's persona and the nature of the audience, who actively pose unconventional and sometimes absurd questions for Husein Jafar to answer from an Islamic perspective.

A new chapter in Husein Jafar's *dakwah* popularity unfolded with the launch of *Log In*, a Ramadan 2023 podcast series on Deddy Corbuzier's YouTube channel, which boasts 20 million subscribers. In this program, he co-hosted alongside Onadio Leonardo, a Catholic musician and former vocalist of the indie rock band *Killing Me Inside*. Onadio's persona as a tattooed rock musician of Catholic faith presented a stark contrast to Husein Jafar, a traditional Islamic preacher wearing a *peci* and carrying the noble lineage of the Prophet.

Throughout the month of Ramadan, *"Log In"*, led by Onadio and Husein Jafar, invited religious leaders and public figures from diverse faiths, fostering interfaith dialogue. Guests included Pastor Yerry Pattinasarany from the Protestant Christian community, Bhante Dhirapunno representing Buddhism, Father Reynaldo Antoni from the Catholic Church, and Aldi Destian from the Confucian tradition. Notably,

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJ-s4piQAo4.

[43] Moch Firmansyah and Moch Fuad Nasvian, "Dakwah 'Pemuda Tersesat: Gaya Bahasa Dakwah Habib Ja'far Al Hadar,'" *JIIP - Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pendidikan* 5, no. 5 (May 21, 2022): 1525–33, https://doi.org/10.54371/jiip.v5i5.599.

one episode featured religious leaders from six different religions in a single discussion, emphasizing the reality of Indonesia's religious diversity and the spirit of tolerance.[44]

Log In became Husein Jafar's platform for redefining religious conversion narratives in a way that diverged from conventional portrayals. Instead of framing conversion as a dramatic personal struggle fraught with existential threats—an approach common in other *mualaf* narratives—*Log In* employed semantic creativity, offering a fresh and nuanced way to discuss religious transitions. Through this approach, the program moved beyond sensationalism and instead explored faith, belief, and identity through open dialogue and humor, marking a shift in how conversion is narrated within Indonesia's digital *dakwah* landscape.

Semantic creativity serves as Husein Jafar's primary tool in framing religious conversion narratives as an engaging form of *dakwah*, particularly appealing to Gen Z audiences.[45] The term *Log In* itself is borrowed from internet terminology, referring to the action of entering specific data to gain access to a computer or digital system. Unlike traditional religious vocabulary, this term is deeply embedded in modern technological and digital idioms, making it highly relatable to contemporary audiences. From a semantic perspective, Husein Jafar redefines Log In within the same discursive framework as religious conversion—specifically, the process of embracing Islam or becoming a *mualaf*.[46]

Beyond *Log In*, Husein Jafar further expands his creative semantic approach by incorporating other technology-related terms that resonate with younger generations, such as *"logout"*, *"password"*, and *"server"*. The term *"logout"*, which literally refers to exiting a computer system, is

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[44] Siti Mir'atul Fausiyah, "Representasi 'Toleransi Beragama' pada Konten Youtube Deddy Corbuzier Program *Log In* Season 2 Episode 30" (Kediri: IAIN Kediri, 2024).

[45] Puput Lestari and Jihan Inayah, "Trend of the Term 'LOG IN' Religious Moderation Education Style among Gen Z," in *Proceeding of ICROM 2024*, 2024.

[46] Alifatul Maula, "Implikatrur Percakapan dalam Siniar *Log In* Habib Ja'far dan Onad Edisi 2023 pada Kanal Youtube Deddy Corbuzier" (Semarang: Universitas Islam Sultan Agung, 2024).

recontextualized in his discourse to signify leaving a religion. Within this framework, *"logout"* is understood by his audience as an act of apostasy (*murtad*) from an Islamic perspective.

Similarly, the term *"password"* is cleverly repurposed within a comedic framework. Traditionally, a password refers to a secret phrase or code required to gain access to a system. In several *Log In* episodes, Husein Jafar uses *"password"* as a metaphor for the *"shahada"*, the Islamic declaration of faith, portraying it as the key that grants access to Islamic teachings. This is complemented by the term *"username"*, which he employs to represent the idea of adopting a new identity when someone *"logs in"* to Islam. Through these creative linguistic adaptations, Husein Jafar successfully bridges religious discourse with digital culture, making *dakwah* more accessible and engaging for younger audiences.

The term *"server"*, which in its literal sense refers to a computer or program that manages access to centralized resources or services within a network, is also repurposed in Husein Jafar's discourse. He uses *"server"* metaphorically to refer to religion, as seen in his conversation with Christian comedian Boris Bokir, where he jokingly suggests that Boris would *"switch servers."* Instead of using conventional terms like *converting to Islam*, *changing religion*, or *becoming a mualaf*, Husein Jafar strategically employs tech-savvy language that resonates with younger audiences and active internet users.

This semantic creativity reinforces the effectiveness of humor as a tool for communication in *dakwah*. By integrating digital-era terminology into religious discourse, Husein Jafar makes complex theological concepts more accessible and engaging, particularly for a generation accustomed to online interactions and technology-driven communication. His approach highlights how humor and modern linguistic adaptations can enhance audience engagement and facilitate religious discussions in contemporary digital spaces.

Humor and comedy have long been recognized as powerful tools for effective communication, particularly in delivering complex or

sensitive messages. The use of humor can break psychological barriers, making audiences more receptive to new ideas while reducing resistance to challenging or controversial topics.[47] In the Indonesian context, where discussions on religion, politics, and social issues can be highly sensitive, comedic elements serve as a means of softening criticism and fostering engagement. Humor allows for difficult conversations to take place in a more relaxed manner, enabling individuals to reflect on issues without feeling directly attacked.

In Indonesia, humor also serves as a medium for representing and negotiating social realities. Given the country's diverse cultural and religious landscape, comedic narratives help bridge differences by highlighting shared experiences and values. Comedians often use satire and parody to critique social and political issues while maintaining relatability and inclusivity. For example, in digital da'wah content, figures like Husein Jafar blend humor with religious teachings to present Islam in a more approachable and relatable manner. This approach counters rigid or extremist interpretations of religion by promoting a moderate and contextualized understanding of Islamic teachings. This is particularly evident, where Islam and comedic content often garners higher viewership and social media engagement, reinforcing the effectiveness of humor as a mode of persuasion. Rather than merely entertaining, it functions as a fundamental narrative that highlights societal flaws and disparities. Additionally, it can cultivate a sense of solidarity, strengthen Muslim identity, and promote religious devotion.[48]

Hew Wai Weng argues that preaching on the internet requires more than just religious knowledge; it also demands strong public communication skills and effective media strategies.[49] In the context of

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[47] Rod A. Martin, "The Social Psychology of Humor," in *The Psychology of Humor* (Elsevier, 2007), 113–52, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012372564-6/50024-1.

[48] Husni Mulyawati, "Between Taboo and Virtue: Islamohumorism in the Reconstruction of Muslim Identity and Piety through Social Media," *Islamic Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (December 29, 2023): 275–98, https://doi.org/10.56529/isr.v2i2.179.

[49] Weng, "On-Offline Dakwah: Social Media and Islamic Preaching in Malaysia and

digital *dakwah* narratives, Husein Jafar redefines religious conversion not merely as a medium for sharing inspirational personal religious experiences or as a means of contrasting Islam with Christianity and other faiths. Instead, he integrates religious conversion narratives into gimmicks and comedy, using them as a tool for *dakwah* while emphasizing the realities of Indonesian society.

By adopting this approach, conversion narratives in *Log In* moves beyond conventional *mualaf* storytelling, which often highlights personal struggles and theological debates. Instead, he leverages humor, relatable digital-era language, and interactive dialogue to make religious discourse more engaging and accessible, particularly for younger audiences. His method not only modernizes *dakwah* but also aligns it with the evolving dynamics of Indonesia's multicultural and digitally connected landscape.

Conclusion

The mediatization of religion has emerged as a significant phenomenon, contributing to the widespread popularity and consumption of *dakwah* content on the internet, particularly among Indonesian Muslim audiences. One of the most frequently engaged topics within this digital religious landscape is the narration of religious conversion stories, encompassing experiences from celebrities, preachers, and individual converts.

This study identifies two contrasting approaches to religious conversion narratives on YouTube. The *Kisah Mualaf* content on the Vertizone TV channel predominantly employs an emotive and sensationalized storytelling style, often incorporating elements of mystical spiritual journeys and stark contrasts between an individual's pre- and post-conversion phases. This narrative framework appears to perpetuate a longstanding discourse of religious tension, reflecting the historically fraught relationship between Islam and Christianity in Indonesia.

Conversely, the *Log In* program, hosted by Husein Jafar—a preacher

Indonesia."

of Hadrami descent—presents a markedly different approach. Utilizing his religious authority, Jafar reframes religious conversion narratives through a lens of semantic creativity, integrating *tech-savvy* terminology that resonates with contemporary audiences. Rather than juxtaposing religious identities in opposition to one another, *Log In* foregrounds the realities of Indonesian pluralism and fosters interfaith dialogue, positioning conversion as a subject of humor and engagement rather than conflict. This approach diverges from the conventional *mualaf* storytelling tradition, which often emphasizes dramatic personal experiences, existential threats, and theological testimonials.

From this analysis, the study concludes that religious conversion narratives have become a site of discourse contestation within Indonesia's digital *dakwah* landscape. This contestation, in turn, reflects broader socio-political tensions in the digital religious sphere, illustrating how Islamic discourse in Indonesia remains highly dynamic and fragmented. The evolving nature of these narratives, particularly in the context of the ongoing "conservative turn," underscores the complex and often volatile intersections between religion, media, and digital culture in contemporary Indonesia.

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