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Religious Exclusivism on YouTube: Truth Claim, Absolutization of Interpretation, and Reconstruction of the Demythologization of the Qur'an

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Abstract: Digital transformation has made YouTube not only a medium for the distribution of da'wah, but also an arena for contesting authority, religious truth, safety, and the boundaries of group identity, while research on digital exclusivism still tends to explain these issues from the perspective of communication, algorithms, or moderation without sufficiently unraveling the hermeneutical mechanisms that transform human interpretations into seemingly absolute claims of truth. This research analyzes how truth claims develop into absolutizations of interpretation and subsequently form religious exclusivism in Indonesian-language religious content on YouTube, and reconstructs the concept of demythology as a critical tool to distinguish the absoluteness of revelation from the limits of human understanding of revelation. The study used a qualitative approach through *qualitative content analysis* and critical hermeneutics on a purposively selected corpus of 10 YouTube videos, consisting of five main videos and five comparative videos, and was combined with the study of the Qur'an, interpretations, and literature on digital religion and exclusivism. The results of the study show that exclusivism does not arise solely from the existence of the claim that Islam is true, but especially when the claim moves towards a monopoly of interpretation, claims of salvation, and the construction of "we–them" boundaries; on the contrary, comparative data show that the same theme can result in a more open religious articulation. This study concludes that demythologizing should be understood not as eliminating the sacred elements of the Qur'an, but as criticizing the sacralization of human interpretation, to build hermeneutical humility in digital religiosity.

Keywords: religious exclusivism; digital religion; demythologization of the Qur'an; truth claim; YouTube.

1. Introduction

Digital changes in religious life are most evident in how religious knowledge is produced and consumed, shifting from institutional spaces to open, networked media environments that depend heavily on visible communication (Campbell, 2007; Campbell, 2010). YouTube plays an important role in these changes because lectures, religious question-and-answer sessions, interpretation studies, theological debates, and responses to social issues are accessible to the public without going through conventional religious authority structures (Pranoto, 2023; Zaid et al., 2022). In such an environment, religious authority is shaped not only by institutional legitimacy but also by an actor's ability to produce content, gain audience attention, and become a continuous reference in digital communication networks (Campbell, 2010; Zamhari et al., 2021). The corpus of this study shows that this problem concretely appears in videos that discuss whether Islam is the only true religion, who obtains salvation, and who can be called infidels or heretics (Islam, 2016; Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). Thus, the issue of digital religiosity to be examined is not just the transfer of discourse from the pulpit to the screen, but a change in the epistemic environment in which claims of religious truth are produced, exchanged, and gain social legitimacy.

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The literature on *digital religion* shows that the internet changes religious authority, identity, community, and experience, while studies on social media show that digital communication structures can strengthen interactions with like-minded views and limit exposure to alternative perspectives (Campbell & Bellar, 2022; Cinelli et al., 2021). Research on digital religious authority in Indonesia also shows that religious figures can build legitimacy through media performativity, audience affordability, and the ability to articulate religious issues in platform-suited formats (Pranoto, 2023; Zaid et al., 2022). At the same time, research on digital da'wah by Buya Syakur and Buya Yahya shows that YouTube is not only a space for reproducing uniform religious views, but also an arena for contestation over the meaning of *infidels*, non-Muslim safety, tolerance, and religious boundaries (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). These findings matter because the same theme can produce different interpretive positions, so the relationship between religious content and exclusivism cannot be assumed to be automatic (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). However, conceptual gaps remain in the relationship between *truth claims*, absolutization of interpretation, and exclusivism, because previous digital research has more often explained polarization through media structures, while religious theology research has more often discussed exclusivism as a doctrinal position (Grube, 2024; Race, 1993). Therefore, this study shifts the question from "does a religion claim truth?" to "when and how does human interpretation of such claims acquire the status of as if absolute?", which also serves as an entry point for hermeneutical analysis.

This study aims to explain the interpretive mechanism that links claims of religious truth with the formation of exclusivism in religious content on Indonesian-language YouTube, without equating theological claims of truth with exclusivism as a social practice (D'Costa, 2009; Grube, 2024). This distinction matters because believing that religion itself is true is an inherent part of religious life, while exclusivism becomes problematic when that belief is used to obscure others' legitimacy or monopolize interpretations of truth (Knitter, 2002; Race, 1993). Based on these questions, this study asks three interrelated questions, namely how *truth claims* are expressed in YouTube content, how they move towards safety claims and the formation of "we–them" boundaries, and how the process can be criticized through the reconstruction of demythologization as a hermeneutical method (Campbell & Bellar, 2022; Grube, 2024). The research corpus, consisting of five main videos and five comparative videos, allows analysis not only of cases that support the alleged exclusivism but also of *negative cases* that show the possibility of different interpretations of the same theme (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). By design, the study is not intended to determine the correctness of preachers' religious doctrines, but rather to identify the change in the epistemological status of an interpretation when it is presented as the only valid representation of God's will.

The main argument of this study is that religious exclusivism in the digital space is not primarily born from the existence *of truth claims*, but rather from the process by which human understanding of revelation loses epistemological distance from the revelation it understands, so that historical and contextual interpretations are treated as the final truth (Congdon, 2017; Grube, 2024). The distinction between revelation and interpretation is fundamental because every understanding of a text involves language, context, methodological tools, scientific traditions, and the interpreter's experience horizon, so that the product of interpretation is not simply identical to the object of revelation itself (Roberge, 2011; Kholik et al., 2023). In the YouTube corpus, the process can be seen gradually as the conversation about religious truth moves toward the question of who survives and, subsequently, toward categorizing who is within or outside the boundaries of the true community (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Grube, 2024). This research further reconstructs Rudolf Bultmann's demythologized principle in a limited and critical way, not by moving the Bultmannian framework literally into the study of the Qur'an, but by maintaining its critical function of human tendency to objectify the historical form of religious language as the final representation of theological meaning (Congdon, 2017; Rakhman, 2025). Thus, the demythologization of the Qur'an in this study is positioned as a critique of the sacralization of interpretation, which aims to maintain the absoluteness of revelation while developing hermeneutical humility towards every human understanding of revelation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Religious Exclusivism and the Problem of Truth Claim

Religious exclusivism needs to be understood more precisely because the term is not synonymous with the belief that religion itself has normative truths that its adherents believe in (Knitter, 2002; D'Costa, 2009). In the study of religion, exclusivism generally refers to a theological position that gives a particular religious tradition a special status of truth or salvation, but the intensity and social consequences of such a position can differ significantly (Race, 1993; Grube, 2024). Thus, *the truth claim* that Islam is the true religion cannot, in itself, be categorized as problematic exclusivism if it stops at an internal articulation of faith commitment (Ellethy, 2022; Grube, 2024). Epistemic and social problems arise when the truth claim develops into *interpretive absolutization*, that is, when a particular interpretation is positioned as the only valid reading, and the possibility of other interpretations is closed without adequate argumentation (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). This distinction is important because research on digital da'wah risks equating normative beliefs with exclusive practices that delegitimize different groups or readings (Campbell, 2007; Zaid et al., 2022). Therefore, this study uses exclusivism not just to designate the content of beliefs, but to analyze how *truth claims* are translated into epistemic boundaries, identities, and legitimacy in digital religious discourse.

Distinguishing religious exclusivism, exclusivist discourse, and exclusivist practice matters because they refer to different levels of analysis (D'Costa, 2009; Race, 1993). *Religious exclusivism* primarily refers to theological or epistemological positions on truth, while exclusivist discourse refers to how these positions are represented through language, categories, arguments, and identity constructs (Khalid et al., 2022; Grube, 2024). Meanwhile, *exclusivist practice* refers to the consequences of actions that can take the form of delegitimization, discrimination, restriction of interaction, or the establishment of social boundaries between "right" and "wrong" groups (Knitter, 2002; D'Costa, 2009). This distinction helps research avoid the exaggerated conclusion that any statement about religious superiority automatically leads to intolerant practices (Grube, 2024). In the context of YouTube, the most direct object that can be observed is *discourse*, as videos present analyzable language, arguments, categorizations, and rhetorical patterns (Campbell, 2007; Pranoto, 2023) textually. Frame possible practical consequences as interpretive implications, not direct empirical findings, unless the research observes audience actions or social impact (Zaid et al., 2022; Rohmatin et al., 2025). This framework underpins this study: not to label all truth claims as exclusivist, but to identify when truth claims close off possible interpretations and establish "we–them" boundaries.

Truth claims are an inherent element in many religious traditions because religion offers not only ritual practices, but also propositions regarding reality, salvation, God, man, and the afterlife (Knitter, 2002; Kar, 2026). From the perspective of religious philosophy, the problem lies not in the existence of the claim of truth itself, but in how the claim is justified and how the owner of the claim treats possible objections to it (Grube, 2024; Ellethy, 2022). In the Islamic context, belief in the truth of revelation is a fundamental part of the structure of faith, so research on exclusivism cannot begin by considering all normative claims as problematic (Ellethy, 2022). The problem becomes more complex when normative texts and human interpretations are given the same epistemic status, so that the results of interpretation are treated as identical to God's will (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). Distinguishing revelation as a normative source from interpretation as a human activity allows for diverse interpretations without negating a commitment to religious truth (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). Therefore, this study treats truth claims as the starting point for analysis, while interpretive absolutization is an epistemological process that must be demonstrated through argumentative structures in digital da'wah materials (Grube, 2024; Rohmatin et al., 2025).

2.2. Digital Religion, Echo Chamber, and the Formation of Interpretation Boundaries

Religious digitalization does not simply move da'wah from physical to online spaces; it changes how religious authorities are produced, negotiated, and consumed (Campbell, 2007, 2010; Zaid et al., 2022). The internet allows religious actors who previously had limited access to formal institutions to gain visibility and build direct

relationships with a wider audience (Campbell, 2007; Pranoto, 2023). For Indonesian Muslims, YouTube is an important space for producing religious knowledge because its video format allows the delivery of lectures, question-and-answer sessions, studies, and theological arguments in a relatively accessible form (Zaid et al., 2022; Pranoto, 2023). Digital authority is thus determined not only by institutional legitimacy, but also by communicative ability, visibility, reputation, and connectedness with the audience (Campbell, 2010; Zamhari et al., 2021). These changes do not mean that traditional clerics' authority disappears, as research on new media shows negotiation and contestation between old authorities and digital forms of authority (Zamhari et al., 2021; Pranoto, 2023). In this study, YouTube is therefore treated as a space for the circulation of discourse and the contestation of authority, rather than as the sole cause of the emergence of religious exclusivism.

The concepts *of echo chambers*, *filter bubbles*, and *algorithmic personalization* are often used in close proximity in digital media research, but they do not refer to the same mechanism (Cinelli et al., 2021; Pariser, 2011). *Echo chambers* describe a communication environment in which individuals interact primarily with information and actors that reinforce existing views, making alternative views less visible or less trusted (Cinelli et al., 2021). *Bubble filters* emphasize the personalization of information, which can lead users to different information environments through digital filtering systems based on user behavior or preferences (Pariser, 2011). Meanwhile, *algorithmic personalization* refers to the technical and computational processes when platforms use user interaction data to determine prioritized or recommended content (Kitchin, 2017; Zaid et al., 2022). All three can interact but are not conceptually interchangeable because echo chambers have a social-communicative dimension, bubble filters have an information-experience dimension, and algorithmic personalization has a technological dimension (Cinelli et al., 2021; Pariser, 2011). This distinction matters for the study because the analyzed YouTube corpus does not allow researchers to conclude directly how the personalization algorithm works for individual users (Rohmatin et al., 2025). Therefore, this study uses the digital environment as the context for discourse circulation, rather than claiming a causal relationship between the YouTube algorithm and exclusivism.

Confirmation bias is an epistemic tendency to give greater attention, acceptance, or weight to information consistent with existing beliefs than to information that contradicts them (Nickerson, 1998; Cinelli et al., 2021). This concept differs from *echo chambers* because confirmation bias describes a *tendency at the level of individual information processing*, while *echo chambers* refer to interaction structures that reinforce the homogeneity of views (Cinelli et al., 2021). In a digital environment, these mechanisms can reinforce each other because user preferences and communication network structures can lead to repeated exposure to similar views (Cinelli et al., 2021; Zaid et al., 2022). However, this relationship does not mean that every YouTube user who consumes lectures with a particular perspective automatically experiences confirmation *bias* or is in an *echo chamber* (Cinelli et al., 2021). Video corpus-based research also cannot measure audience cognitive bias without adequate data on reception, commentary, interviews, or experiments (Dorsten, 2019; Nicmanis, 2024). Therefore, the concept *of confirmation bias* in this study serves as a theoretical context to explain the possibility of interpretive reinforcement, rather than as a psychological variable that is claimed to have been empirically measured.

2.3. Demythologizing, Hermeneutics, and Absolutizing Interpretation

The concept *of myth* has a long history in religious studies and cannot be reduced to a false story or lie, as the modern popular understanding of the term suggests (Eliade, 1963; Congdon, 2017). In religious studies, myth can function as a symbolic narrative that articulates meaning about the origin, existence, world, and man's relationship with transcendent reality (Eliade, 1963). Rudolf Bultmann then developed a *demythologization project* in New Testament hermeneutics, aiming to reinterpret mythological language so modern readers can understand the text's existential message (Bultmann, 1953; Congdon, 2017). Therefore, *demythologization* cannot be equated with erasing stories or rejecting revelation, but is a hermeneutical attempt to distinguish the historical and symbolic forms of the theological message to be communicated (Congdon, 2017). Several contemporary studies have attempted to apply or adapt Bultmann's ideas to reading the stories of the Qur'an, but such application still requires methodological

justification because the textual history, theological structure, and hermeneutical tradition of the Qur'an differ from the New Testament context (Rakhman, 2025). Therefore, this study does not transfer Bultmann's theory directly to the study of the Qur'an, but uses demythologization as a starting point to critique the mythologization of interpretation.

Expanding the concept of demythologization from the text's narrative to the process of interpretation is a conceptual step that requires limits to avoid giving the impression that this study treats the Qur'an as a mythological text (Congdon, 2017; Rakhman, 2025). In this study, the so-called "mythologization of interpretation" is not a myth in the anthropological sense, but rather a process in which human interpretive constructions acquire a status as if absolute, final, and identical to an unquestionable divine meaning (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). The concept allows demythologization to target not revelation itself, but human claims about revelation that have lost sight of the interpreter's historical and epistemological limitations (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). With this framework, the "demythologization of the Qur'an" in this article should be understood as a hermeneutical reconstruction of how humans produce interpretive certainty, not as an attempt to eliminate the Qur'an's transcendence (Rakhman, 2025; Ellethy, 2022). This distinction matters because criticizing the absolutization of interpretation is not the same as relativism that denies the truth of revelation (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Grube, 2024). Thus, the conceptual contribution of this study lies in shifting the focus from "demystifying sacred texts" to "demystifying human interpretive certainty of sacred texts".

In this study, *interpretive absolutization is defined as the process by* which a result of human interpretation is positioned as the only valid meaning, not open to correction, and used to assess the legitimacy of readings or other groups (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). The definition is built from the confluence of hermeneutical authoritarianism theories, criticism of excessive epistemic claims, and the literature on religious exclusivism (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Grube, 2024). This concept has at least three analytical indicators: eliminating alternative interpretations, equating human interpretation with God's normative will, and using such interpretations to delegitimize others (Khalid et al., 2022; Kholik et al., 2023). These three indicators allow the study to distinguish between theological assertiveness that still leaves room for argument and absolutization that closes epistemic space to other possibilities (Grube, 2024; Ellethy, 2022). In the coding stage, the concept is treated as an initial deductive category that can then be sharpened through textual findings from the video corpus (Nicmanis, 2024). This position was chosen because the research already had a conceptual definition before reading the data, but still provides room for the data to correct or expand the indicators used (Nicmanis, 2024). The framework serves as an analytical bridge between truth claims and exclusivism, so the research does not stop at identifying "true Islam" statements but assesses how the claim is constructed and used hermeneutically.

The literature on digital religion has shown that social media and video platforms play a role in changing authority, da'wah patterns, and contestation of religious knowledge, but studies that specifically link *truth claims*, absolutization of interpretation, and exclusivism through hermeneutical reading of the Qur'an are still relatively limited (Campbell, 2007; Zaid et al., 2022; Rohmatin et al., 2025). Studies on *echo chambers* show that the digital environment can reinforce the homogeneity of views, but the concept does not in itself explain how religious texts are used to establish epistemic legitimacy (Cinelli et al., 2021; Rusmiati et al., 2025). Research on Muslim digital authority has also shown the emergence of preacher figures who gain legitimacy through media visibility and interaction, but the boundary between interpretive authority and the absolutization of interpretation has not always been the main focus (Zamhari et al., 2021; Pranoto, 2023). The study of Bultmann's demythologization in Qur'an studies has opened up the possibility of hermeneutical dialogue, but its application still requires caution so as not to equate the theological structure of the Qur'an with the context of the New Testament (Rakhman, 2025; Congdon, 2017). This research fills this space by bringing together the study of digital religion, philosophy of religion, hermeneutics, and interpretation to read how the claim of truth can turn into the absolutization of interpretation in YouTube discourse (Campbell, 2007; Grube, 2024). The novelty of the research lies in proposing "demythologizing

interpretation" as a critical tool to maintain a commitment to the truth of revelation while limiting the absolutization of human interpretations.

3. Methods

3.1. Material Objects

The research corpus consists of ten YouTube videos: five main videos and five comparative videos (Islam, 2016; Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). The five main videos discuss Islamic truth, non-Muslim salvation, heretical criteria, and internal deviations in Islam, while the comparative videos mainly present alternative articulations of salvation, *infidel* terms, and religious tolerance (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). The unit of analysis is not the entire video, but segments that contain theological or hermeneutical propositions relevant to the research question (Nicmanis, 2024). The segments are then read using the initial four categories: *truth claim*, *interpretive absolutization*, identity boundary construction, and response to possible alternative interpretations (Grube, 2024; Kholik et al., 2023). The division between the main video and the comparison is used to see whether the pattern of exclusivism is the only way to articulate Islamic truth, or whether another discourse model maintains theological commitment through more dialogical language (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Ellethy, 2022). The corpus is not intended to represent all Islamic da'wah on YouTube because the number and selection of videos do not allow statistical generalization across platforms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The corpus matters because of the argumentative relevance and presence of preacher figures with digital visibility, not solely the number of viewers.

3.2. Design and Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach with a discourse-hermeneutical analysis design on religious da'wah content on YouTube (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nicmanis, 2024). The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses not on word frequency alone, but on the structure of argumentation, the construction of meaning, the use of religious categories, and the relationship between normative texts and interpretive claims (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roberge, 2011). Hermeneutical analysis is used to read how speakers build relationships between Qur'anic verses, religious doctrines, Muslim and non-Muslim identities, and the concepts of salvation and truth (Roberge, 2011; Saeed, 2006). Discourse analysis is used to identify language patterns that produce epistemic boundaries between groups that are considered correct and groups that are considered deviant or outside the truth (Khalid et al., 2022; Kholik et al., 2023). The design was not intended to statistically measure intolerance in Muslim communities because the research corpus was not a population survey (Dorsten, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research focuses on how certain religious discourses construct exclusivism through the relationship between *truth claims*, interpretive authority, and other parties' representations (Campbell, 2007; Grube, 2024). Thus, the main unit of analysis is the argumentative segment in the video that contains a truth claim, a category of salvation, an identity limit, or legitimacy for a religious interpretation.

3.3. Selection and Purposive Sampling Criteria

The corpus was selected purposively by considering the video content's suitability to the themes of truth claim, non-Muslim safety, infidel categorization, religious deviance, and tolerance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nicmanis, 2024). Videos are included when the title, description, or main content explicitly addresses one of these issues, allowing researchers to identify religious arguments for textual analysis (Nicmanis, 2024). Comparative videos were chosen to provide a variety of discourse so that the study did not assume from the outset that all preachers produce the same pattern of exclusivism (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). The exclusion criteria include videos that mention related terms only cursorily without substantive argumentation, videos that do not allow verification of the speaker's or source's identity, and material that does not allow adequate identification of the unit of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive selection also aligns with the goal of qualitative research, which prioritizes data depth and relevance over

statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ten videos should therefore be read as a limited analytical corpus that allows for an in-depth reading of the discourse structure, rather than as a sample representing the full content of YouTube's da'wah (Dorsten, 2019). This strategy also addresses the need for reviewers to explain why a particular video was chosen and its relevance to digital exclusivism.

3.4. Data Collection and Processing Procedures

Data were collected by documenting YouTube videos in the corpus and noting titles, speakers, channels, publication dates, and publicly available information at the time of data collection (Dorsten, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because YouTube viewership can change over time, view counts are treated as contextual data tied to the time of observation, not as a permanent measure of a video's influence (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Pranoto, 2023). The verbal material is then treated as textual data and analyzed through repeated reading to identify claims, categories, and argumentation patterns relevant to the study's focus (Nicmanis, 2024). The data obtained from the comparator video were used to test whether the category of exclusivism remained valid when the speaker used tolerant language or offered an alternative reading of religious terms (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). The study did not treat the number of views as evidence that an argument was true, but used it as an indicator of digital visibility context when the data were available (Campbell, 2007; Pranoto, 2023). Any direct excerpts from the video in the final manuscript should be re-verified against the original footage or transcript to avoid attribution errors or contextual displacement of the argumentation (Nicmanis, 2024). This principle matters because video-based findings must include traceable textual evidence, including the video's identity and, if available in the final transcript, the time position of the quoted statement.

3.5. Interpretation Analysis and Validation Techniques

Data analysis is carried out through *reflexive content analysis*, which allows researchers to systematically reduce, categorize, interpret, and reflect on the meaning of data (Nicmanis, 2024). The first stage involves reading the entire corpus to identify segments related to *truth claims*, safety, *infidel terms*, deviations, interpretive authority, and tolerance (Nicmanis, 2024). The second stage involves deductive coding based on the first four categories: truth claims, interpretation absolutization, identity boundary construction, and opening or closing alternative interpretations (Grube, 2024; Kholik et al., 2023). The third stage is reflexive and allows the emergence of additional categories when the data show patterns that cannot be fully explained by the initial category (Nicmanis, 2024). The fourth stage involves a hermeneutical reading of the relationship between video arguments and Qur'anic verses that ground legitimacy, especially QS. al-Baqarah [2]:111–113, QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:48, and QS. al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13 (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). Interpretation validation is carried out through a comparison between primary and comparative data as well as dialogue with the interpretive literature and academic studies on exclusivism and religious authority (Khalid et al., 2022; Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). This procedure allows the study to distinguish between what the video material actually says and the theoretical interpretation the researcher applies to it.

4. Results

4.1. Truth Claim and the Construction of Religious Superiority

The first findings show that *truth claims* are a main entry point for constructing exclusivist discourse in the corpus of videos studied (Islam, 2016; Grube, 2024). In the YT-01 video, the question of whether only Islam is correct places religious truth at the center of the argument, shifting the discourse from religious identity to epistemological issues of truth (Islam, 2016; Ellethy, 2022). This structure shows that truth claims do not stand alone because they are always related to the source of legitimacy used to justify them (Grube, 2024; Kar, 2026). In this context, the Qur'an and interpretive authorities are important sources to provide certainty to the position conveyed by preachers (Khalid et al., 2022; Kholik et al., 2023). However, the existence of such truth claims is not enough to conclude problematic

exclusivism because commitment to religious truth is part of the structure of religious beliefs (Ellethy, 2022; Grube, 2024). Exclusivism becomes more relevant when the claim results in an epistemic closure to other possible readings or establishes a moral hierarchy against different groups (D'Costa, 2009; Grube, 2024). These findings therefore direct subsequent analysis from the question of "what is considered right" towards the question of "how the claim is made absolute and used to set boundaries between oneself and the other".

The theme of non-Muslim salvation appears prominently in several major videos and comparators, thus becoming an important arena for testing the relationship between religious truth and exclusivism (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Ellethy, 2022). YT-02 and YT-03 explicitly make the possibility of entering heaven for non-Muslims a theological question that is then answered through the normative framework of Islam (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). In contrast, YT-06 and YT-08 offer a more problematizing reading by considering the dimensions of goodness, context, and the meaning of religious categorization (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). These differences show that the issue of salvation does not produce a single interpretive pattern, even though all speakers draw from the same Islamic tradition (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). These findings matter because they show that exclusivism cannot be explained solely by the doctrine of "who goes to heaven"; it must be analyzed in terms of how the doctrine is interpreted and applied to a particular individual or group (Ellethy, 2022; Grube, 2024). In other words, the difference between videos lies not primarily in the existence of normative texts, but in the degree of hermeneutical openness in connecting texts with concrete cases (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). These variations show that commitment to Islam as a true religion can operate through more than one discourse model and does not always lead to the absolutization of interpretation.

Exclusivism is also constructed through the use of *the category of kafir* as an instrument to form the identity boundary between "Muslims" and "non-Muslims" (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Khalid et al., 2022). YT-07 and YT-09 show that the term has not only a theological function but also linguistic, conceptual, and social dimensions when applied to specific individuals (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). The discussion of the meaning of *kafir* in the comparison video shows that one Qur'anic term can take on different meanings across languages, interpretations, and social relations (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). These findings show that religious categories are not always neutral because their use can determine how other parties are positioned in the "inside" and "outside" structures of the community (Khalid et al., 2022; Grube, 2024). At the same time, the analysis should not conclude that using the term kafir is itself a form of intolerance, because the term has a conceptual history and textual function in the Islamic tradition (Saeed, 2006; Ellethy, 2022). The problem of exclusivism lies in transforming textual categories into social labels that close the complexity of the individual and the absolute judgment of others' status (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). Therefore, the category of *infidels* in this corpus is best understood as a site of negotiation between fidelity to the normative language of the Qur'an and the need to maintain hermeneutical humility in a plural social context.

4.2. Absolutization of Interpretation and Delegitimization

The second finding suggests that exclusivism becomes clearer when *truth claims* no longer stop at theological affirmations, but evolve into the determination that only one particular interpretation is valid (Grube, 2024; Kholik et al., 2023). This pattern can be called interpretive absolutization because the interpreter not only conveys conclusions but also removes the possibility that the text can be understood through alternative arguments that retain scientific or theological legitimacy (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Roberge, 2011). This finding matters because two people can accept the truth of the same revelation yet reach different conclusions because of differences in methods, contexts, language devices, and hermeneutical assumptions (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). Thus, differences in interpretation do not automatically indicate relativism, just as interpretive certainty does not automatically indicate a higher fidelity to revelation (Grube, 2024; Ellethy, 2022). Problems arise when the results of interpretation are presented as if they lack a human and historical dimension, so that criticism of interpretation is treated as criticism of God or revelation itself (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). These findings strengthen the argument that the critical point of exclusivism lies not solely in doctrinal content, but in how interpretive authority is constructed and maintained

(Grube, 2024; Campbell, 2010). In the digital space, this issue grows more important because preachers can gain legitimacy through public visibility that is not always synonymous with formal scientific authority.

The next pattern suggests that absolutizing interpretation can work by delegitimizing groups seen as deviating from predetermined boundaries of orthodoxy (Khalid et al., 2022; Kholik et al., 2023). YT-04 on the criteria for heresy according to the MUI and YT-05 on the existence of heresy in Islam show that the issue of truth also moves at the internal level of the Muslim community, not only in the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). The findings expand the notion of exclusivism because boundaries between "we" and "them" can form within the same religious community through orthodox and deviant classifications (Khalid et al., 2022). From a hermeneutical perspective, the problem becomes more complex when certain authorities reduce textual interpretation to a single measure to determine another group's legitimacy (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). However, the existence of heretical categories in Islamic discourse cannot be taken as direct evidence of exclusivism without examining the arguments, context, and consequences of using such categories (Grube, 2024; Ellethy, 2022). The analysis therefore distinguishes between doctrinal criticism of a view and epistemic delegitimization that excludes the possibility that the other side has arguments worth considering (Roberge, 2011; Grube, 2024). These findings show that the absolutization of interpretation works horizontally and vertically, i.e., by regulating relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as relationships between interpretations within the Muslim community.

An equally important finding is the internal variation in the corpus that shows that the digital da'wah space does not produce a uniform form of exclusive discourse (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Zaid et al., 2022). The YT-06, YT-07, YT-08, YT-09, and YT-10 videos serve as comparisons showing that issues of safety, infidel terms, and tolerance can be discussed with different levels of interpretive openness (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). This variation is important because research on digital exclusivism is easily trapped in the assumption that all da'wah that affirms the truth of Islam must produce intolerant discourse (Grube, 2024). Instead, the data show that commitment to religious identity and truth can coexist with efforts to expand interpretive space and avoid overly simplistic social categorizations (Ellethy, 2022; Uswatussolihah et al., 2024). Thus, a more productive distinguishing factor is not "whether the speaker believes Islam to be true", but "how the speaker articulates the consequences of those beliefs on different parties" (Grube, 2024; D'Costa, 2009). These findings also challenge an approach that sees exclusivism solely as a doctrinal characteristic, as the data show hermeneutical differences in applying the same doctrine (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). Therefore, this study presents interpretive variation as a main finding that supports developing alternative models to the absolutization of interpretation.

4.3. Demythologize the Qur'an and Hermeneutical Reconstruction

QS. al-Baqarah [2]:111–113 is important because the verse records the exclusive claim of salvation attributed to a certain religious group while criticizing the form of the claim that is not accompanied by an adequate epistemic basis (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; Ibn Kathīr, 2000). The structure of the question "*tilka amāniyyuhum*" shifts the focus from the claim's content to its epistemic status, because a statement of salvation is not enough with desire or recognition of identity alone (al-Zamakhsharī, 2009; al-Rāzī, 2000). The verse also shows that the Qur'an criticizes exclusivism not only on the basis of group identity, but also on the demand for proof of normative claims made by human beings (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; al-Qurṭubī, 2006). This reading provides a hermeneutical basis for questioning the pattern of da'wah that makes group identity the final proof of salvation status, without attending to the complexity of the Qur'anic argument (Saeed, 2006; Ellethy, 2022). However, the verse cannot be used simplistically to cancel the doctrine of salvation in Islam because its textual context must still be read with other verses about faith, charity, and interreligious relations (al-Rāzī, 2000; Shihab, 2002). Thus, the function of verse in this study is not to replace one exclusive claim with an a priori inclusive claim, but to show that the Qur'an itself demands epistemic accountability for the claim of salvation (Ellethy, 2022; Saeed, 2006). This reading becomes the foundation for the demythologization of interpretation

because human claims about the meaning of revelation must not acquire absolute status without an argumentative process that can be accounted for.

QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:48 offers a different dimension because the verse acknowledges communities with different shari'a or paths while placing that diversity within the horizon of God's will and test (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; al-Qurṭubī, 2006). The phrase "*li-kullin jaʿalnā minkum shirʿatan wa-minhājan*" suggests that community differences are not merely a social fact, but are placed within a normative structure that must be understood theologically (al-Zamakhsharī, 2009; al-Rāzī, 2000). At the same time, the verse is not synonymous with religious relativism because it still affirms the Qur'an's position as *muhaymin* over the previous books and directs people to compete in virtue (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; Shihab, 2002). The tension between recognizing differences and the Qur'an's normative affirmation suggests that the relationship between truth and plurality in the Qur'an cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between exclusivism and relativism (Saeed, 2006; Ellethy, 2022). This reading shows that a commitment to Islamic truth need not be realized by rejecting differences or by absolutizing any human interpretation of the text (Grube, 2024; D'Costa, 2009). In the digital context, the verse provides a hermeneutical basis for constructing a discourse that still has a normative commitment while acknowledging the complexity of human plurality (Shihab, 2002; Ellethy, 2022). Therefore, QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:48 is one of the Qur'anic bases for reconstructing demythologized interpretations that reject the equivalence between the truth of revelation and the certainty of human interpretation.

QS. al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13 expands on the criticism of exclusivism by affirming that human diversity in the form of nations and tribes is part of the structure of human social creation (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; Ibn Kathīr, 2000). The verse's structure connects diversity to the purpose of li-taʿārafū, so identity differences are not positioned as a basis for constructing an inherent hierarchy of humanity (al-Qurṭubī, 2006; Shihab, 2002). The verse then shifts the measure of glory from genealogical and social categories to *taqwā*, so group identity cannot automatically serve as evidence of moral superiority (al-Rāzī, 2000; Shihab, 2002). In the context of digital exclusivism, the principle is relevant to distinguish between the theological identity that is believed to be and the claims of social superiority that are given to the owner of that identity (Ellethy, 2022; Grube, 2024). Such a reading does not erase theological differences between Islam and other religions, but limits the possibility of making such differences a basis for degrading the dignity of others (D'Costa, 2009; Saeed, 2006). This verse also supports criticism of the absolutization of social categories such as "Muslim", "infidels", "heretics", or "righteous groups" when such categories are used to remove the complexity of the individual and absolute human moral judgment (Khalid et al., 2022; Kholik et al., 2023). Thus, QS. al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13 provides the ethical principle that identity differences should be directed toward recognition, not automatically toward closing communication or delegitimization (Shihab, 2002; Ellethy, 2022). This principle reinforces the need for hermeneutics that can maintain the identity of faith while preventing identity from becoming epistemic and social absolutization.

The synthesis of findings suggests that the demythologization offered by this study is not aimed at eliminating the transcendent elements of the Qur'an, but at dismantling man's tendency to treat his own interpretation as the final representation of God's will (Congdon, 2017; Rakhman, 2025). If *mythologization*, in a conceptual sense, means giving absolute status to human constructions, then demythologization means restoring awareness that interpretation always involves subjects, language, history, and context (Roberge, 2011; Saeed, 2006). The framework lets research connect Bultmann's theory to contemporary problems critically, without claiming that the New Testament and Qur'anic contexts are identical (Congdon, 2017; Rakhman, 2025). In the context of YouTube's corpus, demythologization becomes relevant when religious claims move from "this is our reading of the text" to "this is the only meaning God wants" (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kholik et al., 2023). Such a small change in the epistemic structure has major consequences because criticism of interpretation can be perceived as a rejection of revelation itself (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Grube, 2024). These findings lead to the idea that hermeneutical humility is not a form of weakness of faith, but rather an epistemic mechanism for distinguishing revelation that is believed to be true from human interpretation that is always open to evaluation (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). Thus, demythologizing interpretation becomes a tool for correcting exclusivism without falling into theological relativism.

5. Discussion

The results of the study show that the main problem of digital exclusivism is not sufficiently explained through the doctrinal category of which religion is right or wrong, but needs to be seen through the process by which human interpretation acquires an epistemic status that is too absolute (Grube, 2024; Abou El Fadl, 2001). The findings expand the study of exclusivism by positioning interpretive absolutism as a mechanism that connects claims to truth with the delegitimization of the other party (Kholik et al., 2023; Khalid et al., 2022). This perspective matters because one can maintain the belief that Islam is the true religion while acknowledging that human understanding of Islamic texts has epistemological and historical limits (Ellethy, 2022; Saeed, 2006). Instead, one can use highly normative religious language but treat its interpretation as a final authority that closes the space for alternative readings (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Grube, 2024). Thus, the most relevant distinguishing line is not between "assertive" and "unassertive" in religion, but between theological commitment and epistemic absolutization (Grube, 2024). These findings also show that exclusivism can operate through a subtler mechanism than a call for outright rejection of other groups, i.e., by determining that only one interpretive authority is valid (Campbell, 2010; Pranoto, 2023). Therefore, this study argues that digital exclusivism includes a hermeneutical dimension as an integral part of the analysis, not just doctrinal and sociological dimensions.

The study's findings also need to be placed carefully within the theory of digital religion because the data analyzed do not support the conclusion that YouTube's algorithm directly causes religious exclusivism (Campbell, 2007; Cinelli et al., 2021). YouTube is more appropriately understood as a platform environment that provides affordances for the production, distribution, repetition, and visibility of religious discourse (Campbell, 2010; Zaid et al., 2022). In such an environment, preacher figures can build authority through a combination of religious competence, communication style, reputation, and audience connection (Pranoto, 2023; Zamhari et al., 2021). A video's ability to gain millions of views does not automatically prove that its content is true or exclusive, since popularity is a social phenomenon with many causal factors (Uswatussolihah et al., 2024; Zaid et al., 2022). Because this study did not conduct algorithmic or experimental analysis of recommendation systems, terms such as algorithmic amplification should be used sparingly and not presented as causal findings (Cinelli et al., 2021; Kitchin, 2017). The corpus shows that YouTube provides a space where diverse constructions of authority and religious interpretations circulate side by side and in opposition (Campbell, 2007; Rohmatin et al., 2025). This perspective strengthens the analysis because it does not make technology a single cause, but instead places platforms, preachers, texts, audiences, and authority structures in mutually influential relationships (Campbell, 2010; Zaid et al., 2022). Thus, digital exclusivism is better understood as the result of contestation of discourse in an environment that allows the visibility and circulation of interpretation at large, rather than as an automated product of technology.

The main theoretical contribution of this research lies in the merging of the study of digital religion with Qur'anic hermeneutics to develop a critique of the absolutization of interpretation (Campbell, 2007; Roberge, 2011). This approach shifts the study of digital interpretation from who has authority to how that authority constructs the certainty of meaning (Zamhari et al., 2021; Pranoto, 2023). In this perspective, religious authority is judged not only by the preacher's identity, but also by how he or she treats the text, context, interpretive differences, and the interpreter's epistemological limitations (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Saeed, 2006). The model is relevant to the conditions of digital media because audiences are often confronted with pieces of argument that have been packaged in a concise and communicative manner so that the complexity of the interpreting process can become less visible (Zaid et al., 2022; Rohmatin et al., 2025). Therefore, demythologizing interpretation can serve as a critical tool for restoring awareness that claims about the meaning of the Qur'an always require argument, context, and openness to evaluation (Roberge, 2011; Nicmanis, 2024). Such contributions differ from hermeneutical relativism in that research does not claim all interpretations are equally true, but that no human interpreter can claim full identity with God's will without testable arguments (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Grube, 2024). Thus, the hermeneutics offered seeks to balance fidelity to revelation with *epistemic humility* in digital public spaces (Ellethy, 2022; Saeed, 2006). The framework can serve as a

basis for developing a more responsible digital hermeneutical ethics in the production and consumption of religious da'wah.

This study suggests that digital religious literacy is not enough to teach only the ability to distinguish true from false information; it also needs to develop the ability to recognize how an interpretation acquires authoritative status (Rohmatin et al., 2025; Zaid et al., 2022). This literacy needs to include the ability to distinguish between revelation texts, scholarly interpretations, preachers' opinions, and personal claims packaged in an authoritative format (Saeed, 2006; Abou El Fadl, 2001). However, this study has limitations because the corpus consists of only ten videos, so it cannot be used to make generalizations about the entire Islamic da'wah on YouTube (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study also did not analyze audience comments, dissemination networks, algorithmic recommendations, or changes in user behavior, so it did not directly prove the relationship between exclusive discourse and social effects (Cinelli et al., 2021; Dorsten, 2019). These limitations actually show the need for further research that combines discourse analysis with network analysis, audience studies, interviews, and observations of the digital recommendation ecosystem (Zaid et al., 2022; Rohmatin et al., 2025). Subsequent research can also expand the corpus to TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and other da'wah platforms to see if the pattern of interpretive absolutization has a cross-platform character (Campbell, 2010; Zaid et al., 2022). Thus, the findings of this study should be understood as an interpretive model that opens up a broader research agenda, not as a final claim regarding the entire phenomenon of religious exclusivism in the digital space (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nicmanis, 2024). These limitations also reinforce the importance of methodological transparency so research on digital religion does not go beyond what its empirical corpus can actually prove.

Based on the overall findings, this study proposes *digital hermeneutic ethics* as a normative orientation to distinguish loyalty to the faith from the absolutization of interpretation in the production of digital da'wah (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Roberge, 2011). The ethics depart from the principle that a commitment to religious truth can be maintained without giving absolute status to all human interpretation results (Ellethy, 2022; Grube, 2024). The first principle is to distinguish explicitly between revelation and interpretation so the text's authority does not automatically pass to the interpreter (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Saeed, 2006). The second principle is to present context and argumentation when a verse is used to make a claim about another group so that the verse is not reduced to a legitimate slogan (Saeed, 2006; Roberge, 2011). The third principle is to acknowledge alternative interpretations without equating them as equally correct (Grube, 2024; Ellethy, 2022). The fourth principle is to avoid transforming theological categories into a delegitimization of human dignity because of religious or interpretive differences (Shihab, 2002; D'Costa, 2009). The fifth principle is to place digital authority in an epistemic accountability mechanism so that popularity, audience size, or rhetorical ability are not automatically treated as proof of truth (Campbell, 2007; Pranoto, 2023). Thus, *digital hermeneutic ethics* can be a practical framework for building a da'wah space that remains normative but not absolutistic, remains committed but does not close dialogue, and remains an identity but does not turn identity into a tool of delegitimization.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that religious exclusivism on YouTube is not sufficiently explained as a direct result of the existence of *truth claims*, because the claim that Islam is the true religion is part of a theological commitment and is not in itself synonymous with intolerance. A more significant finding is that problems arise when truth claims move towards *interpretive absolutization*, i.e., when human interpretation is positioned as the only valid meaning and used to decriminalize readings or other groups. The research also shows variation in digital da'wah discourse, so not all articulations of truth, salvation, or religious identity share the same exclusivist structure. The findings show that the main problem is not just the doctrine's content, but how it is interpreted, contextualized, and positioned as the final authority in the digital public space. The research's novelty lies in proposing to demythologize interpretation as a way of re-reading the process when human interpretation acquires a status as if it were identical to God's will. Thus, this

research shifts from a critique of "exclusive religion" to a critique of the "absolutization of religious interpretation" as a more specific epistemic mechanism.

Theoretically, this study brings together digital religion, philosophy of religion, hermeneutics, and Qur'anic interpretation to explain how religious authority works in a digital media environment. This integration leads to the argument that religious authority must be judged not only by who is speaking, but also by how the speaker builds relationships among revelation, interpretation, context, and different parties. In practical terms, this research offers *a digital hermeneutic ethic* that emphasizes the distinction between fidelity to revelation and the absolutization of human interpretation. The framework can be used by preachers, educators, platform managers, and digital media users to develop forms of religious communication that remain normative commitments but do not turn differences of interpretation into social delegitimization. The contribution also shows that plurality of interpretations does not have to end in relativism because hermeneutical humility can go hand in hand with a commitment to the truth of revelation. At the epistemological level, this research therefore offers a middle position between interpretive absolutism and interpretive relativism by placing humans as responsible but still limited interpreters. This position becomes increasingly important as digital media accelerates the circulation of religious claims and increases the visibility of figures with public communication skills. The final contribution is a conceptual model to assess the epistemic quality of digital da'wah without requiring researchers to reject da'wah's underlying theological commitment.

This study remains limited because it uses a limited corpus and focuses on video material, so it cannot be certain how the entire audience receives, negotiates, or rejects the exclusivist messages found. The study also has not empirically tested the relationship between algorithmic recommendation structures, user consumption patterns, and changes in religious attitudes, so claims about the effects of algorithms should still be treated as contextual possibilities rather than cause-and-effect relationships. Further research can develop *mixed-methods designs* that combine discourse analysis, commentary analysis, audience interviews, network analysis, and experimental research on how people receive religious messages. This agenda is important to test whether the *patterns of interpretive absolutization* found at the text level are truly correlated with the formation of exclusive social attitudes at the audience level. Further research also needs to expand comparative studies across platforms and religious traditions to determine whether the demythologization of interpretation has universal relevance or aligns especially with certain hermeneutical problems in Islam. Thus, the "surprising finding" of this study is not that digital media makes religious people exclusive, but that the more fundamental source of the problem lies in the transformation of human interpretation into a certainty that no longer recognizes itself as interpretation. At this point, demitologization does not mean reducing the sacredness of the Qur'an, but rather preserving the sacredness of revelation from human claims that are too quick to speak on behalf of God. Therefore, the main challenge of digital da'wah is not choosing between steadfastness of faith and openness, but building a form of religiosity that maintains both through hermeneutical humility.

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