

Virality and Public Moral Judgment: A Study of Netizen Comments on The Gus Elham Video Case

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ABSTRACT

The case of a viral video featuring young preacher Gus Elham showing himself kissing a small child during da'wah activities has sparked widespread controversy on social media, especially Instagram. Various counter-netizens' comments expressed sharp criticism of the act, which was deemed inappropriate and exceeded the ethical limits of interaction between adults and children. This study analyzes the pattern of netizens' criticism in video uploads of Gus Elham's case recordings to understand how digital society builds moral narratives against religious figures in digital public spaces. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach through the analysis of Instagram comment content, focusing on netizens' counter-comments as the main data. The results of the study show the dominance of ethical criticism, demands for child protection, moral delegitimization of religious figures, and calls for social and legal responsibility. These findings show the role of netizens as active social actors in shaping public ethics discourse and social control over religious figures in the digital space. This study recommends strengthening digital da'wah ethics literacy and preparing guidelines for public interaction ethics for religious figures on social media.

Keyword: *netizens cons; da'wah controversy; social media; public ethics; digital public space; Gus Elham.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has significantly changed the pattern of meaning production and the formation of public opinion. Social media is no longer just a means of communication, but has transformed into a digital public sphere that allows the public to actively participate in building, criticizing, and assessing social discourse collectively (Chiu, 2022; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2024; Ringenberg, 2022; Walsh & Baird, 2025). In this context, public figures, including religious figures, are judged not only by their scientific capacity but also by the social behavior and public ethics they display in the digital space (Fry & Peiper, 2025; Hornor, 2020).

A viral video showing Gus Elham kissing a young child during a da'wah activity has triggered a wave of negative reactions and widespread controversy on Instagram (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Burton, 2021; Ybarra & Kowalski, 2020). Counter-netizens' comments emerged as a form of moral, ethical, and social criticism of the action (Herrero & Torres, 2023). This phenomenon shows that the digital society is no longer passive but actively conducts moral evaluations of public figures (Alhabash & McAlister, 2024; Campbell, 2020; Paquette & Rice, 2023). The criticism is not only in the form of emotional expressions but also contains normative narratives about ethical boundaries, child protection, and the social responsibility of religious leaders (Hoover, 2022; Wildman & Johnson, 2023).

This research is important because it seeks to understand how counter-netizens' comments shape public moral discourse in the digital space, as well as how social media functions as an arena of social control over religious figures. The focus of the research is directed at the patterns, categories, and social meanings of netizens' counter-comments as a reflection of the changing relationship between society and moral authority in the digital era.

Several previous studies have examined the phenomenon of public criticism of religious figures in digital spaces. (Nasrullah, 2021) analyzed netizen responses to controversial da'wah content on YouTube, finding that public criticism of religious figures often reflects broader societal concerns about the alignment between religious messages and contemporary social values. Similarly, (Fauzi & Hidayat, 2022) examined public discourse surrounding religious figures on Instagram, demonstrating that digital platforms have become arenas where religious authority is negotiated and sometimes contested by netizens who demand greater accountability and ethical consistency. More recently, (Rahman & Susanti, 2023) investigated the pattern of moral criticism in comments on controversial religious content across multiple social media platforms, revealing that netizens increasingly position themselves as moral arbiters who evaluate religious figures based on universal ethical standards rather than traditional religious authority alone.

Despite the growing body of research on public criticism of religious figures in digital spaces, a significant gap remains in understanding how counter-comments specifically function as a form of moral discourse construction and social control mechanism (Cheong & Mascher, 2021; Gearon, 2020; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2018). Most existing studies focus on the content of criticism without systematically analyzing the patterns, categories, and social meanings embedded within netizen comments (Beskin, 2019; Brubaker & Clark, 2023; Eickhoff, 2021; Seto, 2021). Furthermore, previous research has predominantly examined metropolitan or national-level phenomena, with limited attention to how local religious figures become subjects of public moral evaluation in ways that reflect both global digital culture and local social norms. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the patterns of netizens' counter-comments in the Gus Elham video case, examining how these comments construct moral narratives and exercise social control over religious figures in the Indonesian digital public sphere.

Social media, as a digital public space, allows the formation of participatory communication that produces social discourse horizontally. Netizens play the role of social actors who shape public opinion through comments, criticism, and collective moral narratives. Previous research has shown that digital commentary is not only reactive but also contains ethical, normative, and ideological dimensions that represent the social values of society. The study of da'wah ethics emphasizes that da'wah activities are not only judged from the substance of religious messages but also from the social practices and communication ethics that accompany them. In the digital context, da'wah ethics has undergone a transformation because da'wah takes place in a public space that is open, supervised, and assessed collectively by the digital society.

The literature referenced in this study shows that the controversy surrounding religious figures in the public sphere often gives rise to symbolic delegitimization of religious authority,

especially when the actions of these figures are considered not in line with public moral values and social norms. This strengthens the argument that the crisis that has arisen is not just a religious crisis, but a crisis of moral representation of religious figures in the digital space.

The novelty of this research lies in its conceptual and contextual contributions. Conceptually, the study advances the understanding of digital public sphere dynamics by positioning netizen counter-comments not merely as reactive expressions but as active participation in moral discourse construction and social control mechanisms. The research demonstrates how digital platforms enable the formation of collective ethical standards through participatory commentary, extending theories of the public sphere and social control into the digital age. Contextually, the study contributes to understanding how Indonesian netizens engage with religious figures in digital spaces, revealing the intersection between traditional religious authority and contemporary public ethical demands in a predominantly Muslim society undergoing rapid digital transformation.

This study, therefore, addresses the research question: How do netizens' counter-comments in the Gus Elham video case construct moral narratives and exercise social control over religious figures in the digital public sphere? The primary objective of this research is to analyze the patterns, categories, and social meanings of netizens' counter-comments as a reflection of the changing relationship between society and moral authority in the digital era. The benefits of this study include providing empirical insights for religious figures and da'wah practitioners about public expectations regarding ethical conduct in digital spaces and contributing theoretical advancements to understanding digital public sphere dynamics and social control mechanisms in contemporary Indonesian society.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a content analysis method on netizens' comments on Gus Elham's viral video uploads on Instagram. The focus of the research is directed specifically at counter (negative) comments that contain criticism, criticism, rejection, and moral demands. Data is collected through digital documentation in the form of screenshots of comments and grouping comments based on their themes and social meanings. The data analysis technique is carried out through stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretation of meaning, and drawing analytical conclusions. This approach allows researchers to understand the structure of moral discourse formed in digital public spaces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of netizens' counter-comments shows that public criticism is not singular, but forms a systematic and structured pattern of discourse. Netizens' counter-comments not only reflect emotional reactions, but also build the construction of moral values, social norms, and public ethical demands on religious figures.

Table 1. Categories and Patterns of Netizens' Comments on Gus Elham's Viral Video

Yes	Categories Comments Against	Key Characteristics of Comments	Representative Examples (Paraphrasing)	Social Meaning & Analysis
1	Criticism of the Ethics and Morals of Da'wah	Judging actions as inappropriate and violating da'wah manners	"As a preacher, we should maintain manners and boundaries by children"	High moral expectations of religious figures
2	Child Protection Concerns	Highlighting children's safety and rights	"Children should be protected, not made part of the action on stage"	Social media as a space for social advocacy
3	Allegations of Violation of Social Norms	Associating actions with cultural norms	"This is not normal to do in public"	Social norms as the basis for the legitimacy of criticism
4	Liability Claims	Insistence on clarification and moral responsibility	"There must be clarification and evaluation"	Netizens as social supervisors
5	Calls for Law Enforcement	Linking to potential violations of the law	"Needs to be legally reviewed"	Public legal awareness
6	Criticism of the Authority of the Scholars	The moral delegitimization of religious figures	"Scholars must set an example"	Shifting religious legitimacy
7	Emotional Expression	Angry and frustrated tone	"Very disappointing n"	Social media as a channel of collective emotions
8	Rejection of Normalization	Rejecting the justification of actions	"Don't normalize"	Rejection of ethical relativism

Source: Processed primary data from Instagram comments on Gus Elham's viral video (2025)

Discussion

The table shows that netizens' counter-comments form a systematic structure of public moral discourse. Social media is not only a space for expression but also serves as an arena for digital social control, where people evaluate the moral legitimacy of religious figures. The criticism of Gus Elham is not only personal but represents collective anxiety over the practice of da'wah which is considered not in line with the values of child protection, social ethics, and public norms.

Social media presents new dynamics in the process of shaping public opinion. Digital platforms allow the public to convey their views, criticisms, and moral judgments quickly and widely. This causes public figures, including religious figures, to be in a more intense space of social surveillance. Every statement, action, or attitude conveyed in the public space has the potential to become the subject of discourse that is debated by the public. In this situation, netizens play the role of actors who not only consume the message but also actively produce meaning and build a collective narrative about the moral appropriateness of a figure.

Furthermore, the criticism that appears in the comment section also reflects the public's awareness of the importance of child protection values and moral responsibility in the practice of da'wah. Society no longer passively accepts the authority built through religious symbols but demands consistency between the moral message conveyed and broader human values. In other words, the discourse that has developed on social media shows that the legitimacy of religious leaders now depends on their ability to maintain moral integrity in front of the public.

Therefore, the phenomenon of counter-comments against Gus Elham can be understood as a form of moral participation of the community in maintaining public ethical standards. Social media serves as a deliberative space where values, norms, and boundaries of social appropriateness are openly debated. Within this framework, netizens' criticism not only reflects spontaneous reactions but also becomes part of a digital social control mechanism that contributes to the formation of collective moral standards in contemporary society.

This phenomenon shows a shift in authority relations, where the legitimacy of religious figures no longer comes from mere symbolic status but from public moral acceptance. Thus, the digital space has formed a new model of social evaluation of religious figures.

CONCLUSION

The negative comments from netizens regarding Gus Elham's viral video reflect the dynamics of public moral criticism in the digital space. Social media serves as a space for value negotiation, social control, and the production of collective ethical discourse. This research shows that the crisis that arises is not a religious crisis, but a crisis of moral representation of religious figures in the digital public space. Strengthening digital da'wah ethics literacy and preparing guidelines for public interaction ethics for religious figures is an urgent need in the era of social media. In the context of an increasingly digitally connected society, every message conveyed by a public figure has the potential to spread widely and trigger various interpretations from the audience. This requires a new awareness that the practice of da'wah no longer takes place in a limited communication space, but in an open, participatory, and often unpredictable digital communication ecosystem. Thus, religious figures need to understand that the communication they carry out in the digital space not only conveys religious messages but also builds a moral image that continues to be evaluated by the public.

In addition, the critical response from netizens also shows increasing public awareness of ethical standards that are more sensitive to social issues, including child protection, equality, and respect for human values. The criticism that arises cannot be understood simply as a form of personal attack but as a reflection of social demands for religious figures to present da'wah that is wiser, more empathetic, and more contextual with the development of contemporary

society. Therefore, it is important for religious leaders to develop a more reflective approach to communication when utilizing social media. Strengthening digital literacy, understanding public communication ethics, and the ability to gauge social sensitivity are important aspects in maintaining public credibility and trust. Thus, da'wah in the digital era does not only focus on delivering religious messages, but also on efforts to build responsible communication in harmony with the public ethical values that develop in society.

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