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# EXPLORING DIGITAL LITERACY PRACTICES IN INDONESIA: A CONTESTATION ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE ON PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S DESCENT ON YOUTUBE CHANNEL

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**Abstract;** The publication of KH. Imaduddin Utsman al Bantani's book on the disconnection of the Indonesian Arab lineage from the Prophet Muhammad (May 2023) has elicited a diverse range of reactions, even in the neighboring country of Malaysia. The merits and demerits of responding to the contents of the book are currently being debated on news platforms in Indonesia, including both traditional and digital media, as well as on social media platforms such as Tiktok, IG, and YouTube. This article examines the public's views on the pros and cons of YouTube. The YouTube content to be analyzed was released on several channels between July 2023 and June 2024. As one of the world's most significant social media platforms, YouTube boasts 137 million users in Indonesia as of October 2023, making it an ideal platform for disseminating certain understandings and views in Indonesia. This study aimed to address two key questions. First, how is the discourse on the Prophet's descendants constructed on YouTube channels? Second, how is the response and counter-discourse on the Prophet's descent carried out? To address these two research problems, a qualitative research approach was employed, specifically critical discourse analysis. This research focuses on efforts to understand and study discourse as an element that forms power and ideology in society, particularly with regard to the issue of fighting over the Prophet's descendants, which forms a unique relationship within a discourse.

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**Keyword:** contestation, Prophet Muhammad's Descent, critical discourse analysis, domination relations

## Background

Based on the findings of KH Imaduddin Utsman al Bantani's literary research, entitled *Measuring the Validity of Habib in Indonesia* (2022), with the hypothesis that Ba'alawi are not connected to the descendant order of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, it has generated significant public reactions in Indonesia. The resulting discourse went viral on all Indonesian news platforms, both mass media and social media, and several forums were held in response to the research results. Two years after the book's publication, the debate continues to persist with no signs of abating. The long history of the genealogy and lineage polemic reflects numerous theological, political, historical, and social issues that have contributed to the emergence of this controversy.

The discourse surrounding this issue has identified two contrasting viewpoints: those that endorse the proposal and those that refute it. The controversial matter at hand pertains to the habib title, which purportedly signifies ancestral ties to Prophet Muhammad's family. Consequently, this title symbolises an affluent social standing and is widely regarded as a noble rank. In Indonesia, there exists an institution known as Rabithah Alawiyah that verifies an individual's lineage connection to the Prophet Muhammad. This institution seeks to safeguard the public from becoming victims of fraudulent claims made by individuals who falsely assert their habib status. However, despite the esteemed status accorded to the title habib, it has been subject to manipulation for personal gain (Tempo, April 2024).

The ongoing debate among Muslims about the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad is not a new phenomenon. As Prof. Dr. Quraisy Sihab noted, disagreements over the validity of the Prophet's descendants have persisted for centuries, leading to the development of lineage science (YouTube Kupas Channel, May 2023). Consequently, the differences in views that exist in Indonesia reflect this historical context, with a growing complexity in issues. This can be attributed to the country's social dynamics and the advancement of information technology, which facilitates the dissemination of the spiritual atmosphere through video captions on various social media platforms, particularly YouTube.

## **YouTube: Between Dystopia and Utopia**

New technology, characterised by the extensive use of electronic media, has presented the most significant opportunities for religious actors to communicate directly with adherents and followers via radio, television, and various social media platforms. The phenomenon of globalisation facilitates the transfer of ideas and opinions that can lead to tension and polarisation within society. The intersection of digital technology and tradition has formed common social groups that serve as a new arena for the dissemination of digital culture. This development undoubtedly impacts the manner in which religion is defined, practiced, and interacted within a global network society. This state of affairs not only transforms religious practices but also alters the ways in which meaning-making practices and reciprocal transactions can be executed swiftly (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021)

The impact of social media on people's viewpoints and ways of life is no longer a subject of doubt (Chugh 2017). Social media has become a top priority for Internet consumption owing to its provision of various platforms that are considered highly profitable (Chugh, 2017; Obermeyer). Currently, YouTube is the most widely used social media platform in the world. Indonesia ranks fourth after Brazil as the country with the highest number of YouTube users, reaching 139 million as of April 2024 (Statista, accessed 15/06/2024). Apart from its entertainment value, the primary reason for accessing YouTube is its informative content, with an extensive scope that offers inspiration (Simatupang et al., n.d.).

YouTube plays a valuable strategic role in its ability to disseminate information to a targeted group within a social structure. It serves as a point of reference for forming and verifying opinions, enabling individuals to achieve celebrity status and to establish their own communities (Rogers, 2014). Furthermore, YouTube provides entertainment as well as educational content (Hjarvard, 2013), and facilitates the development of ideological impressions that aid social groups in preserving their identity (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Social media platforms have become increasingly significant, as they encompass various aspects and dimensions of social life. Among these platforms, YouTube plays a crucial role in fostering a transcommunity, which refers to the interconnection and mobilisation of trans people in expressing togetherness as a social group. Virtual communities, such as WELL (Whole Earth Electronic Link), represent

virtual social groups that actively engage in public conversations electronically, show commitment, and provide mutual support and intense discussions (Raun, 2016a). YouTube has emerged as a new space for producing and consuming culture. For YouTubers, including amateurs, YouTube serves as a battlefield that presents numerous events to be interpreted and represented (Strangelove 2010).

### **YouTube and Cultural Activism**

The ongoing debate concerning the legitimacy of connecting the lineages of Indonesian Arab descendants remains a contentious issue, with opposing groups expressing differing viewpoints on video broadcasts on the social media platform YouTube. While YouTube appears to facilitate these divergent viewpoints, it also tends to amplify and exacerbate them in video content. Apart from serving as a significant visual medium, YouTube offers opportunities for expanding social contact, which can promote awareness, foster stereotypes, or engage in image comparison.

YouTube, with its contestation with the breed legalisation narrative, spurred virtual activism with extraordinary video upload intensity. One video upload invites and provokes reactions from other uploads. Post after post presents the spider web theorem characterized by amplifications. This tendency is closely related to many dimensions of social space, such as economic, religious, political, and cultural. The demands of market tastes and affirmation of group identity are part of what is also being fought for. Mobile phones, which cannot be separated from the lifestyle of contemporary society, have become a feature of modern society, with activities that are always filled with content. Views and understanding of an upload will be responded to with subsequent uploads in a very simple way and with technology as it is. Cultural production apparatus increasingly dissolves virtual reality and places the issue of breed as a sexy discourse.

The controversy surrounding the race of Prophet Muhammad has been amplified by YouTube. This platform provides an opportunity for a broader audience to engage in social experience and potentially foster a more democratic environment. The discourse surrounding the Hadrami-Indonesian breed has reached a wider audience because of the ability of producers to utilise YouTube as a large-scale platform for sharing their views. With the ability to contribute to and create a visual narrative, YouTube has demonstrated

the potential of the IoT to bring about significant changes in society (Burgess & Green, 2018). However, a limitation of technological determinism is that it can lead to a cycle of sharing similar views. This is due to the position of subscribers (viewers) in a dominant and hegemonic space who see the upload as an authoritative and professional source of news (Dirks et al., 1994, Chapter Hall). Consequently, obedient subscribers reproduce this hegemonic atmosphere by sharing content in ideological terms.

Simultaneously, subscribers or viewers engage in negotiation by identifying and recognising disparities and discrepancies in perception through comparison with specific circumstances. Subsequently, the subscriber distances themselves from the prevailing dominant hegemonic position and opposes its logic. This situation clarifies the reason for the contentious Hadrami-Indonesian discourse giving rise to two opposing thought patterns and polarised views.

YouTube serves as a significant cultural production platform that offers extensive information. Content broadcast on the platform can result in a wider range of social interactions and participation, which reflects a diverse array of individual perspectives. The influence of a particular upload can be estimated by considering the number of subscribers on a specific channel. For instance, the official YouTube channel of Rhoma Irama, Bisikan Rhoma, generated a discourse space for negotiation when it hosted a discussion podcast with KH Imaduddin Uthman, thereby balancing the dominance of Hadrami-Indonesian discourse. When an official upload is processed and transformed into products with framing patterns, the ensuing contestation becomes more pronounced. Webinar uploads in the Nasab study series by Padasuka TV form part of the content that aims to encourage greater public engagement.

The above phenomenon is reminiscent of the old concept of people watching. The binary opposition of the two groups (supporters and rejecters of KH Imaduddin's thesis) encourages an attitude of monitoring each other, correcting each other, and criticising each other. YouTube appears to act as a cultural institution that regulates the ongoing circulation of discourse, ideology, and relations of domination. From a perception analysis perspective, an upload can be managed by the audience or viewers according to their experience. This condition then influences the media experience and audience's level of media consumption (Downing, 2007). YouTube has created a new

forum for expression and exploration. YouTube users have direct, decentralised, and distributed control over when, what, why, and with whom they exchange information. This reality then forms a hyperlinked society (Turow and Tsui, 2008).

Tobias Raun highlighted that the paradoxical nature of YouTube consistently generates a binary dilemma between commercial cultural engagement and digital literacy practices. The prevalence of disputes indirectly prompts YouTube vloggers to independently utilize basic tools to enhance their technical and aesthetic abilities in producing straightforward videos. In addition to serving as a medium for expression, YouTube functions as a tracking device to foster the development of communities based on the emotional inclinations of a group, where anyone can join based on commonalities and unity. YouTube has evolved into a cultural convergence characterized by intricate interactions and collaborations (Raun, 2016b). Incidents of breed debates disseminated through the social media platform YouTube create a novel space for the production and consumption of digital literacy in Indonesia. Both professional and amateur vloggers influence how events are interpreted and represented.

The effect of the tsunami on the breed polemic on YouTube is uncertain. However, it is clear that the polemic is becoming more polarised and denies one group while privileging another using mainstream terms and idioms in each group. For instance, the terms used are "cross-country robbers" against "cross-country infiltrators", "pug Jews" against "Yemeni immigrants", and "Wahhabis" against "DNA tests". This confrontational atmosphere can endure for a considerable period as long as the state does not perceive it as a threat, and YouTube has become an alternative medium to build consolidation and coordination between each group. Nonetheless, YouTube also entails warring parties in a series of complex sociopolitical, religious, and cultural issues. The scent of racial segregation continues to intensify as posts proliferate on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

## Conclusion

The migration of racial concerns from offline to online realms can be perceived as a participatory culture that fosters a contentious relationship through digital technology, content generation, and social interactions. YouTube has played a pivotal role in shaping global

discourse on transcommunity issues by eliciting unseen shifts that reverberate in everyday social exchanges. The platform has prompted extensive digital literacy practices, and as a commercial venture, serves as a vital and pervasive communication tool. Its user-friendly format and person-to-person connectivity have facilitated unprecedented communication, discourse, and civic engagement. By integrating user-friendly social functions with a video player application, YouTube allows swift and simple video uploads, enabling rapid dissemination of knowledge and information. This streamlined process accelerated the flow of information and knowledge.

Open access to polemics through YouTube social media platform indirectly institutionalises various initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue and the involvement of various parties. YouTube's digital literacy intensity enables audiences and subscribers to subscribe, comment, share, favourite, update, and rate specific video uploads. These actions lead to a continuous chain of events that can build feelings of sympathy and empathy, or instill feelings of antipathy and apathy. YouTube has become an effective means of managing public perceptions and shifting people's dependence on traditional media.

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