

Constructing Religious Identity in Social Media: A Sociolinguistic Study of Spoken Discourse among Islamic Preachers and Influencers

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Abstract:

This research studies the background of the formation of religious identity, especially through spoken language on social media by Islamic preachers and influencers. Through the uploaded video content, currently, social media is the main place for someone to express themselves, including showing their religious identity. This research uses a qualitative approach in sociolinguistic studies, by using language style theory from Martin Joos and identity concepts from Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall. Data in the form of speech transcribed from several videos of Islamic preachers and influencers on social media. This research focuses on language style, level of formality, and communication methods used in forming religious identity. Research results show that Islamic preachers tend to use more formal and assertive language, while influencers use language that is more relaxed and closer to the audience. This shows that differences in language styles affect the way someone displays their religious identity on social media.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; religious identity; spoken discourse; language style; social media

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mempelajari latar belakang terbentuknya identitas religius khususnya melalui bahasa lisan di media sosial oleh penceramah dan *influencer* Islam. Melalui konten video yang diunggah, saat ini media sosial menjadi wadah utama bagi seseorang untuk mengekspresikan diri termasuk dalam menunjukkan keagamaannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dalam kajian sociolinguistik dengan menggunakan teori gaya bahasa dari Martin Joos dan konsep identitas dari Mary Bucholtz dan Kira Hall. Data berupa tuturan yang ditranskripsikan dari beberapa video penceramah dan *influencer* Islam di media sosial. Penelitian ini fokus pada gaya bahasa, tingkat formalitas, dan cara berkomunikasi yang digunakan dalam membentuk identitas religius. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penceramah Islam cenderung menggunakan bahasa lebih formal dan tegas sedangkan *influencer* menggunakan bahasa lebih santai dan dekat dengan audiens. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan gaya bahasa berpengaruh dalam cara seseorang menampilkan identitas religius di media sosial.

Kata kunci: sociolinguistik; identitas religius; wacana lisan; gaya bahasa, media sosial

Introduction

Currently, social media has become one of the primary platforms for individuals to communicate

and express themselves. Through platforms such as TikTok and other digital media platforms, people not only share information but also construct and display their identities through spoken interaction in video content. Religious discourse is also widely distributed across these platforms, including formal lectures that were originally broadcast on television, later uploaded to digital platforms such as Dailymotion, and eventually reposted as short clips on TikTok. This phenomenon shows how religious messages continue to circulate and adapt across different forms of digital media to reach broader audiences. In this context, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a way to represent social identity within online communities.

In this development, religious discourse has also changed, especially with the emergence of Islamic preachers and influencers who are active on social media. Both of these groups convey religious messages, but have different delivery styles. Islamic preachers tend to use more formal and structured language, while influencers use language that is more relaxed and closer to the audience.

In sociolinguistic studies, language is understood as part of social practices related to the formation of identity (Holmes, 2013). According to Bucholtz & Hall (2004), identity is not fixed, but built through the use of language in certain social contexts. In other words, the way someone speaks can reflect as well as form the identity that they want to show to the audience.

In addition, variations in the use of language can be seen through the language style used in communication. According to Joos (1967), language styles can be classified based on the level of formality, such as frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate, which are used according to the situation and the relationship between the speakers. This difference in language style is one of the important aspects in understanding how identity is displayed in communication.

Although there have been many studies that discuss religious communication on social media and digital da'wah, studies that specifically highlight the purpose of language in the development of religious identity through oral discourse are still limited, especially those that compare the language style between Islamic preachers and influencers.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how different levels of language formality based on the Joss framework are used by Islamic creature and influencers. Through a sociolinguistic approach, this study is expected to provide a deeper insight into the role of language in shaping religious identity in the digital age.

Literature Review

The study of the construction of religious identity in the context of social media has grown rapidly alongside the increasing role of digital space as a medium for social interaction. From social identity, social media not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a space for the production and reproduction of identity through discursive practices carried out by users.

However, research by Abanoz (2022) primarily focuses on interaction without examining how language style contributes to identity construction on social media platforms, especially YouTube, which plays a significant role in the process of forming Muslim identity through interaction between users. Through the analysis of comments on the interview video, it was found that there was a dichotomous construction between the in-group ("us") and the out-group ("them"), which reflects how religious identity is built and negotiated in the digital space. This confirms that language and social interaction are the main instruments in the process of forming identity on social media.

In line with that, research on digital da'wah also highlights the importance of communication strategies in delivering religious messages. Roslan et al. (2025) found that the effectiveness of da'wah on social media, especially Instagram, is greatly influenced by the use of creative content, attractive visuals, and contextual language that is easy to understand by the audience, especially the younger generation. This finding shows that the religious communication style in social media tends to be adapted to be more relevant to the characteristics of digital platform users.

In the field of sociolinguistics, language style variation is one of the important aspects in understanding communication practices. Mieyrendha et al. (2026), through the analysis of the dialogue in the film *Bride Wars*, show that the language style is dynamic and influenced by social

relations, emotional closeness, and interaction context. The results of the study indicate that casual language style is more dominantly used in situations involving interpersonal closeness, while formal style tends to appear in a more institutional context.

Although these various studies have made important contributions in understanding religious identity, social media, and language style, there are still limitations in the study that specifically connect these three aspects simultaneously. Previous research tends to focus on audience interaction, communication strategy, or the use of language style in general, without directly comparing how spoken language is used by Islamic preachers and influencers in shaping religious identity on social media.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap by analyzing the construction of religious identity through the use of spoken language on social media, as well as examining the differences in language styles between Islamic preachers and influencers in the context of digital.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method within a sociolinguistic framework. The qualitative approach is used to analyze language styles and to interpret how language use reflects an individual's identity. The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the selected video clips from an Islamic preacher, Zakir Naik, on TikTok and from an Islamic influencer, Akhi Ayman, on his TikTok account (@akhi.ayman), were transcribed into written text. Second, the linguistic features and communication patterns used by both speakers were identified. Third, the language styles were classified based on the theory of language style introduced by Joos (1967), such as frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate, including the level of formality used in the speech. Fourth, the data were interpreted using the identity framework proposed by Bucholtz & Hall (2004) to examine how language use contributes to identity construction. In addition, the concept of social identity formulated by Tajfel & Turner (1979) was used to analyze how speakers position themselves as part of a particular social or religious group through language use. The data were also supported by the Image Schema Theory proposed by Johnson (1987), to examine how everyday language expressions in social media communication,

The data collection process involved selecting a video clip of Zakir Naik discussing “What is Islam?” on TikTok, as well as a video by Akhi Ayman addressing the importance of reminding fellow Muslims. The original lecture of Zakir Naik was delivered during the Live Islam Convention 2012, organized by Reformus in Mauritius, and was broadcast live by Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation on February 18–19, 2012. The complete recording was later uploaded digitally to Dailymotion in 2014 by a community archive account. A shortened clip from the lecture was subsequently reposted on TikTok by the account @aayattiktok1 with a duration of 2 minutes and 56 seconds and had reached 9,431 views at the time of data collection. Meanwhile, the TikTok video uploaded by Akhi Ayman on April 24, 2026, had a duration of 48 seconds and gained approximately 24.3 thousand views. Both videos were then transcribed into written text, after which the language styles and communication patterns were identified and compared to highlight their differences.

Finding

The findings show clear differences in the language styles used by Zakir Naik and Akhi Ayman in constructing religious identity on social media. In the speech delivered by Zakir Naik, the language tends to be formal, structured, and authoritative. One example can be seen in the statement, “Islam in short means peace acquired by submitting your will to Almighty God.” This utterance explains the definition of Islam using complete sentence structures and formal vocabulary. Furthermore, Zakir Naik also states, “For any source which gives you the solution for anything, you would surely like to know what is the source, what is the credential of the source. For example, if someone wants to treat you if you’re suffering from a disease, you’d like to know who is this person, is he a doctor, is he qualified.” Through this statement, the speaker explains religious understanding by using an everyday example related to trusting a doctor’s qualifications before accepting medical treatment.

In contrast, the speech of Akhi Ayman reflects a more casual and interactive communication style. Expressions such as “let me tell you something, yeah” and “nah, bro” demonstrate informal language commonly used in everyday conversation and social media interaction. His sentences are generally shorter and more direct, creating a more relaxed atmosphere for the audience. Another example appears in the statement, “Brothers need to start warning other brothers about brothers.” The repeated use of the word “brothers” emphasizes solidarity and group identity

within the Muslim community. In addition, the statement, "So the least you could do for the sake of Allah is warn me, you, or the brothers that you love about other brothers that can't be trusted no more," directly involves the audience by referring to personal relationships and shared responsibility within the community.

Discussion

Based on Joos (1967), the speech of Zakir Naik can be categorized as a formal or consultative style because it uses structured sentences, formal vocabulary, and detailed explanations commonly found in lectures or formal religious teachings. Through this communication style, the speaker positions himself as a knowledgeable and credible religious authority.

Meanwhile, the speech style used by Akhi Ayman reflects casual and intimate style characteristics. Informal expressions such as "yeah" and "bro" reduce social distance between the speaker and the audience, creating a conversational and emotionally engaging interaction. The repeated use of the word "brothers" also builds solidarity and closeness within the Muslim community. This communication style is commonly associated with peer interaction and social media discourse.

The findings also support the identity construction theory proposed by Bucholtz & Hall (2004), which explains that identity is actively constructed through language use. In this case, Zakir Naik constructs an identity as an authoritative religious scholar through formal and structured language, while Akhi Ayman constructs a more approachable and relatable identity through casual and interactive communication.

Furthermore, the findings can also be understood through the perspective of Tajfel & Turner (1979), which explains how individuals position themselves within a social group. In this context, Zakir Naik represents an authoritative religious figure, while Akhi Ayman positions himself as a peer who builds closeness and solidarity with the audience through informal interaction.

In addition, the casual communication style used by Akhi Ayman is closely related to the audience's everyday experiences. According to Johnson (1987), language that is closer to daily life

and concrete experiences tends to be easier for audiences to understand than highly formal or abstract expressions. This explains why informal expressions and conversational language on social media are often more engaging and relatable, especially for younger audiences. Overall, the differences in language style demonstrate that communication on social media is not only used to deliver religious messages but also to construct and display identity in digital spaces.

Table 1. Comparison of Language Style and Identity Construction between Islamic Preachers and Influencers

Aspect	Islamic Preachers (Zakir Naik)	Islamic Influencers (Akhi Ayman)
Language Style	Formal/consultative	Casual/intimate
Tone	Authoritative, structured	Conversational, emotional
Vocabulary	Religious, academic	Informal, slang ("bro", "yeah", "nah")
Sentence Form	Complex and extended	Short and direct
Identity Display	Authority and expertise	Closeness and relatability

CONCLUSION(S)

Language has an important role in shaping religious identity on social media, particularly through spoken discourse. The comparison between Zakir Naik and Akhi Ayman shows how different language styles influence the way religious figures present themselves in digital spaces.

The analysis reveals that Zakir Naik frequently uses formal, systematic, and authoritative language. This communication style reinforces his image as a credible Islamic preacher with strong religious knowledge. Through structured explanations and formal expressions, he presents himself as a figure of authority in delivering Islamic teachings. On the other hand, Akhi Ayman tends to use a more informal and conversational communication style. Expressions such as "bro" and other casual language forms create a sense of familiarity and emotional connection with the audience. This style allows him to appear more relatable and approachable, particularly to younger audiences on social media.

The findings suggest that language is not only used to deliver messages but also to shape identity and social positioning in online platforms. Formal language style tends to establish authority and expertise, whereas casual language style helps develop closeness and solidarity with the audience. In general, the discussion highlights how language style contributes to the representation of

religious identity in online platforms. Future research may expand this topic by investigating audience responses or examining other communicative elements, such as visuals, gestures, or editing styles in digital religious content.

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