

## **Digital Sufi Epistemology and the Mediation of *‘Ilm, Qalb, and Ṭahārah*: Al-Ghazali’s Framework in Indonesian Instagram Sufism**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study aims to examine how Al-Ghazali’s Sufi epistemology can be reconstructed as an analytical framework for understanding the mediation of Sufi knowledge on Indonesian Instagram. It focuses on how the core concepts of *‘ilm, qalb, and ṭahārah* are reconfigured within platform-based religious communication. **Methodology:** This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic-content analysis design. The primary textual data were drawn from Al-Ghazali’s *lḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, especially *Kitāb al-‘Ilm* and *Asrār al-Ṭahārah*. The digital data consisted of 150 top-engaged Instagram posts from three Indonesian accounts: @rumiisme, @ngajitasawuf, and @nuonline\_id, observed from January to March 2024. The data were analyzed through Gadamerian hermeneutics, mediatization theory, and digital religion theory. **Findings:** The study found three major patterns: the scarcity of classical source citation, the higher engagement of aesthetic and easily consumable Sufi content, and the limited visibility of *mujāhadah*-centered discourse. These findings show that Instagram’s media logic tends to privilege visual appeal, affective immediacy, and short-form accessibility over sustained textual engagement, sanad-based authority, and disciplined spiritual formation. **Implications:** The findings suggest that digital Sufism should not be assessed only through access, popularity, or audience reach, but also through epistemic integrity, ethical discipline, and spiritual authenticity. **Originality/Value:** This study proposes a Digital Sufi Epistemology Framework and introduces analytical concepts such as Digital *Taqīd*, Thumb Ethics, mediated barakah, and *Zuhd al-Raqmī* to explain how classical Sufi epistemology can critically engage with algorithmic religion.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali; digital religion; digital Sufism; Digital *Taqīd*; Instagram; Sufi epistemology.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of digital religion has radically transformed the landscape of contemporary religious practice, shifting from sacred physical spaces toward dynamic and decentralized virtual ecosystems (Campbell, 2012). In this context, Sufism as the esoteric dimension of Islam that has traditionally placed great emphasis on embodied authority and intimate master-disciple relationships faces both existential challenges and expansive opportunities as it enters the realm of social media. The digitalization of Sufism is not merely a matter of transferring classical texts into PDF formats or short videos; rather, it involves a reconfiguration of meaning, authority, and spiritual experience mediated by platform logic (de Diego Gonzalez, 2025; Mannerfelt, 2022). This transformation encompasses aesthetic adaptation, the hybridity of da’wah practices in digital Islamic boarding schools (pesantren digital), and the emergence of a more fluid "vernacular Sufism" accessible to wide audiences without traditional geographical or institutional boundaries (Campbell, 2020).

However, beneath this ease of access, the presence of Sufism on social media carries profound epistemological consequences. Religious authority, once rooted in sanad (chains of scholarly transmission) and local community recognition, is now often supplanted or contested by algorithmic visibility metrics such as follower counts, likes, and system recommendations. This creates what has been termed "platformized religious authority," wherein a figure's spiritual legitimacy is frequently measured by their ability to adapt to social media logic emphasizing short duration, appealing visuality, and instant

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emotional engagement (Campbell, 2020). This shift raises critical questions regarding the extent to which the epistemic substance of Sufi teachings remains preserved when compelled to compromise with algorithms that tend to prioritize sensation over contemplative depth (Hjarvard, 2008, 2011).

The central problem emerging in current studies of digital Sufism is the significant research gap between traditional interpretive categories and the highly fragmented reality of digital practice. Most contemporary literature tends to focus on the sociological and communicative aspects of digital religion such as how online communities form or how Muslim identities are portrayed on social media (Campbell, 2012). Conversely, analyses that systematically connect classical epistemological frameworks particularly from the medieval Islamic intellectual tradition with the dynamics of modern algorithms remain exceedingly limited. There is an urgent need to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional knowledge categories to render them analytically relevant for dissecting phenomena of algorithmically mediated spirituality (de Diego Gonzalez, 2025; Qadir & Arshad, 2024).

As the primary source, *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* within Al-Ghazali's magnum opus *Ihyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* posits knowledge not merely as an accumulation of information, but as light (*nūr*) cast into the heart (*qalb*) to guide humanity toward gnosis (*maʿrifah*). Al-Ghazali emphasizes that the efficacy of knowledge is profoundly dependent on the authenticity of intention and a gradual process of self-purification. In the authoritative *Dār al-Minhāj* edition, Al-Ghazali details four systematic levels of purification (*marātib al-ṭahārah*): first, purifying the outward from impurities (*taṭhīru al-zāhiri min al-akhdāth wa al-akhabāth*); second, purifying the bodily organs from sins and transgressions (*taṭhīru al-jawārihi ʿan al-jarāʾim wa al-āthām*); third, purifying the heart from blameworthy morals and evil traits (*taṭhīru al-qalbi ʿan al-akhlāqi al-madhmūmah*); and fourth, purifying the innermost secret from everything other than God (*taṭhīru al-sirri ʿammā siwā Allāh*) (Al-Ghazali, 2021). This fourfold structure constitutes the epistemological scaffold of the present study's critical framework.

This concept becomes a sharp instrument of critique against the phenomenon of digital Sufism, where religious performance is often reduced to outward aesthetics in pursuit of algorithmic validation which, from Al-Ghazali's perspective, only touches the first level (*taṭhīru al-zāhir*). This shift reflects what has been termed the crisis of epistemic agency in the age of artificial intelligence, where dependence on algorithmic authority creates a form of Digital Taqlīd that neglects the depth of contemplation (Anam, 2025). Therefore, the reconstruction of Sufi epistemology becomes imperative to restore the function of digital media as a boundless *zawiya* space that maintains the esoteric integrity of the tradition amidst the massive tide of mediatization (de Diego Gonzalez, 2025).

To dissect the complexity of Sufism on social media, this study integrates three intertwined theoretical frameworks in a multidisciplinary manner. First, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* or fusion of horizons, was employed to facilitate a dialogical encounter between the horizon of 11th-century classical Islamic texts and the horizon of 21st-century digital realities (Gadamer, Marshall, & Weinsheimer, 2004). Second, Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2013) is applied to analyze how "media logic" which prioritizes visibility, virality, and short duration reconfigures the essence of Sufi teachings and religious authority in cyberspace. Third, Heidi A. Campbell's Digital Religion theory (Campbell, 2012, 2020) is utilized to dissect how Sufi practices are negotiated through the concept of Networked Religion. This theory explains the process of adaptation between esoteric tradition and platform logic, wherein religious authority transforms into hybrid authority combining traditional legitimacy (*sanad*) with the effectiveness of digital performance (Campbell, 2020; Mannerfelt, 2022). This creates a networked religious ecosystem with fluid community

boundaries, which in turn redefines contemporary Sufi epistemology through the integration of spiritual values into the dynamic structure of social media (de Diego Gonzalez, 2025).

Given the comprehensive context and scholarly background provided, and to address this research gap, the principal objective of this study was to systematically answer the following three research questions: (1) How can the reconstruction of Al-Ghazali's Sufi epistemology in *Kitāb al-‘Ilm* serve as an analytical framework to critique Sufi practices on social media? (2) How do mediatization and platform affordances reconfigure the core concepts of *‘ilm* (knowledge), *qalb* (heart), and *ṭahārah* (purification) within digital Sufism? And (3) What are the implications of this epistemic shift for the authority of classical texts and the spiritual authenticity of contemporary digital users?

This study offers a theoretical contribution in the form of a "Digital Sufi Epistemology Framework" capable of bridging classical Islamic thought with modern media studies. Empirically, the findings provide new insights for scholars of digital religion regarding the operation of traditional authority in cyberspace. Practically, these findings can serve as a guide for religious educators and Sufi practitioners in designing digital content that preserves the epistemic integrity of the tradition. Furthermore, this research contributes to the methodology of religious studies by offering a synthesis between textual hermeneutics and the analysis of media phenomena.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic-content analysis design that integrated classical textual interpretation with systematic non-participant observation of digital religious content. Rather than being framed solely as library research, the study combined two complementary analytical procedures: first, an interpretive-hermeneutic reading of Al-Ghazali’s epistemological concepts in *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*; and second, a directed qualitative content analysis of selected Instagram posts containing Sufi, tasawuf, or Islamic spiritual themes. This design was chosen because the study aimed not only to reconstruct Al-Ghazali’s Sufi epistemology conceptually, but also to examine how its core categories are reconfigured within algorithmically mediated digital environments. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the concept of the fusion of horizons, was used to mediate the encounter between the classical textual horizon and the contemporary digital horizon (Gadamer et al., 2004).

The study operated within two interacting contextual settings (Campbell, 2012; Gibson, 1985). The first was the textual horizon of classical Islamic epistemology, specifically the intellectual and spiritual milieu in which Al-Ghazali formulated his critique of knowledge, intention, purification, and religious authority. Within this horizon, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* was treated as the primary source for reconstructing the epistemological structure of Sufi knowledge. The second was the contemporary Indonesian digital religious landscape, particularly Instagram, where Islamic spiritual messages are increasingly circulated through visual quotes, short videos, reels, lecture clips, and institutional religious posts. Indonesia was selected as a relevant context because of its large Muslim population, the rapid expansion of Islamic digital content, and the increasing incorporation of Sufi themes into mainstream social media discourse (Shadiqin & Jamil, 2024; Sulthon, Musthofa, & Zuhri, 2025).

The textual data were drawn from Al-Ghazali’s epistemological and ethical discussions in *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, especially *Kitāb al-‘Ilm* and *Asrār al-Ṭahārah*. These two books were selected purposively because they contain the foundational concepts most relevant to this study, namely *‘ilm*, *qalb*, *ṭahārah*, *mujāhadah*, *al-qishr*, *al-lubāb*, and *al-sirr*. *Kitāb al-‘Ilm* provides the epistemological basis for understanding knowledge not merely as information, but as transformative illumination, while *Asrār al-Ṭahārah* provides the ethical-spiritual framework for understanding purification as a graded process

involving the outward body, bodily organs, the heart, and the innermost secret. The *Dār al-Minhāj* edition of *Ihyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn* was used to ensure textual reliability and consistency (Al-Ghazali, 2021).

For the digital data, three Instagram accounts, namely @rumiisme, @ngajitasawuf, and @nuonline\_id, were selected purposively as illustrative cases. These accounts were not treated as a statistically representative sample of Indonesian Sufi Instagram, but as analytically relevant cases that represent different models of digital religious authority. @rumiisme represents an aesthetic-individual model that frequently circulates Sufi aphorisms and spiritual quotations; @ngajitasawuf represents a pedagogical model that disseminates lecture-based tasawuf content; and @nuonline\_id represents an institutional Islamic authority that periodically publishes Sufi, ethical, and broader Islamic spiritual content. The inclusion criteria were: (1) regular publication of Sufi, tasawuf, or Islamic spiritual content; (2) significant public visibility and audience engagement; (3) active posting during the observation period; and (4) representation of different forms of digital religious authority, ranging from individual creators to institutional accounts.

Data collection was conducted through documentation, close reading, and systematic non-participant observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018). For the textual horizon, the researcher used a text analysis guide based on Gadamer's principle of effective-historical consciousness, allowing the interpretation of Al-Ghazali's concepts to remain sensitive to both their classical context and their contemporary analytical relevance. For the digital horizon, systematic non-participant observation was conducted from January 1 to March 31, 2024. The unit of analysis was the "top-engaged post," defined as posts ranking among the fifty highest in combined likes and comments for each account during the observation period. A total of 150 posts were analyzed, consisting of 50 posts from each account.

Each post was documented using a structured observation sheet. The recorded variables included account name, date of posting, post format, content category, caption length, visible likes, visible comments, presence or absence of classical text citation, type of attribution, and dominant epistemic theme. Engagement rate was calculated using the formula: combined likes and comments divided by the number of followers, multiplied by 100. The ranking of top-engaged posts was prepared manually by recording visible engagement metrics through Instagram's native interface during the observation period and organizing them in a spreadsheet. This procedure was used to identify which types of Sufi or Islamic spiritual content received the strongest algorithmic and audience response.

The digital posts were classified into five mutually exclusive categories: Aesthetic Quotes, Lecture Clips, Infographics or Explainers, Devotional or Liturgical Posts, and Institutional or News Posts. Aesthetic Quotes referred to visually designed posts containing Sufi aphorisms, poetic fragments, or short spiritual messages. Lecture Clips referred to reels or short videos featuring kyai, ustadh, or religious teachers explaining Sufi or Islamic ethical teachings. Infographics or Explainers referred to structured visual content explaining concepts, terms, or religious teachings. Devotional or Liturgical Posts referred to content containing dhikr, wird, shalawat, or devotional encouragement. Institutional or News Posts referred to organizational announcements or event-based religious content. To strengthen coding consistency, the classification of posts was reviewed by the co-authors, and differences in categorization were resolved through consensus discussion.

Data analysis was conducted in four stages. First, the study reconstructed Al-Ghazali's key epistemological categories through close reading of *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* and *Asrār al-Ṭahārah*. Second, the Instagram posts were coded according to content type, citation practice, engagement pattern, and dominant epistemic theme. Third, the textual and digital findings were brought into a dialectical analysis using Gadamerian hermeneutics (Gibson, 1985), mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2011), and digital

religion theory. This stage examined how the classical concepts of *‘ilm*, *qalb*, and *ṭahārah* were transformed by platform affordances such as visibility, brevity, visuality, and engagement metrics. Fourth, thematic synthesis was conducted to generate the main analytical categories of the study: the aestheticization of Sufi knowledge, the weakening of *mujāhadah*-centered discourse, the emergence of hybrid religious authority, and the crisis of epistemic agency conceptualized as Digital *Taqlīd*.

## RESULTS

### Systematic Observation of Three Indonesian Sufi Instagram Accounts

This study conducted a systematic non-participant observation of three Indonesian Instagram accounts curating Sufi content @rumiisme, @ngajitasawuf, and @nuonline\_id over a three-month period from January 1 to March 31, 2024. Accounts were selected purposively on the basis of three criteria: (1) a primary focus on Sufi or tasawuf content; (2) a minimum of 50,000 followers, ensuring sufficient public reach to constitute a meaningful field of digital religious discourse; and (3) operational continuity, with posts published consistently throughout the observation window.

The unit of analysis was the "top-engaged post," defined as posts ranking among the fifty highest in combined likes and comments per account during the observation period. A total of 150 posts were analyzed (50 per account), accessed via Instagram's native interface between January 1 and March 31, 2024, and documented in a structured observation sheet recording: post type (static image, carousel, Reels video, or text graphic); caption length (word count); primary content category; visible engagement metrics (likes and comments); and the presence or absence of a classical text citation or scholarly attribution. Table 1 presents the account profiles as documented at the start of the observation period.

Table 1. Profile of Observed Instagram Accounts

Account	Account Type	Followers (Jan 1, 2024)	Following	Posts Published (Jan-Mar 2024)	Posts Analyzed	Last Accessed
@rumiisme	Personal/Creator	87,400	312	124	50	March 31, 2024
@ngajitasawuf	Personal/Creator	214,600	1,200	89	50	March 31, 2024
@nuonline_id	Institutional (NU Online)	1,230,000	8,400	312	50	March 31, 2024

**Note.** Follower counts and following figures are point-in-time snapshots recorded on January 1, 2024. Posts Published refers to all posts made to each account within the three-month observation window

### Content Patterns Across 150 Observed Posts

Posts were classified into five mutually exclusive content categories. Aesthetic Quotes are single-image or carousel posts presenting Sufi aphorisms or poetry with decorative typography and illustrative visuals. Lecture Clips are video excerpts (Reels or short-form video) of *kyai* or *ustadh* delivering classical text commentary or Q&A sessions. Infographics/Explainers are structured

visual content summarizing Sufi concepts or classical terminology. Devotional/Liturgical posts contain dhikr, wurd, or shalawat content. Institutional/News posts cover organizational events or announcements. Table 2 presents the distribution across the three accounts.

**Table 2. Distribution of Content Types Across 150 Analyzed Posts**

Content Category	@rumiisme (n=50)	@ngajitasawuf (n=50)	@nuonline_id (n=50)	Total (n=150)
Aesthetic Quotes	34 (68%)	8 (16%)	6 (12%)	48 (32%)
Lecture Clips	4 (8%)	27 (54%)	12 (24%)	43 (29%)
Infographic/Explainer	8 (16%)	9 (18%)	19 (38%)	36 (24%)
Devotional/Liturgical	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	5 (10%)	15 (10%)
Institutional/News	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	8 (5%)

**Note.** Percentages are calculated within each account's analyzed set (n=50 per account). Cells may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

### Epistemic Indicators in the Observed Content

Three findings directly relevant to the epistemological framework are reported here. First, 78 posts (52%) contained no citation of a classical text source. A further 47 posts (31%) included only a general attribution (e.g., "Al-Ghazali" or "Rumi") without specifying a title or edition, while only 25 posts (17%) provided a specific textual reference with a title or chapter indication. Citation density was highest on @nuonline\_id and lowest on @rumiisme. Second, Aesthetic Quotes generated a mean engagement rate of 3.2% (combined likes and comments relative to follower count), compared to 1.1% for Lecture Clips and 0.9% for Infographic/Explainer content confirming an inverse relationship between content depth and algorithmic reward. Third, content explicitly addressing *mujāhadah* (inner spiritual discipline) appeared in only 9 of 150 posts (6%), all from @ngajitasawuf. Median caption length varied substantially: @rumiisme averaged 43 words per post, @ngajitasawuf averaged 127 words, and @nuonline\_id averaged 178 words.

These three empirical observations citation scarcity, an engagement premium favoring shallow content, and the near-absence of *mujāhadah*-centred material constitute the empirical foundation from which the interpretive analysis in the Discussion section proceeds, directly addressing RQ2 regarding how mediatization reconfigures the three epistemic pillars of the Sufi tradition.

## DISCUSSION

### Al-Ghazali's Epistemological Framework and the Evidence of Digital Mediation

The empirical patterns documented above acquire their interpretive weight when read through Al-Ghazali's epistemological architecture in *Kitāb al-‘Ilm*. The finding that 52% of analyzed posts carry no classical source citation and that citation-free Aesthetic Quotes generate threefold higher engagement than content requiring sustained reading maps directly onto Al-Ghazali's foundational warning in the opening of *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Al-Ghazali, 2021): "...*wa uḥaqqiqu mayla*

*ahl al-ʿaṣr ʿan shākilat al-ṣawāb, wa inkhidāʿahum bi-lāmiʿ al-sarāb, wa iqtanāʿahum min al-ʿulūm bi-l-qishr ʿan al-lubāb.*"

Al-Ghazali addressed this critique to the scholars of his own era, who mistook the external form of knowledge for its substance. The contemporary equivalent is structurally analogous: an account that publishes 34 Aesthetic Quote posts for every 4 Lecture Clips and observes the former outperform the latter threefold in engagement operates under conditions that systematically reward *al-qishr* (the shell) over *al-lubāb* (the core). The algorithm does not intend this; it simply reflects what audiences engage with, which in turn reflects what they have been habituated to seek. The result, however, is epistemically equivalent to what Al-Ghazali described: seekers satisfied with the shimmer of mirages (*lāmiʿ al-sarāb*) rather than with the substance of knowledge. This dynamic resonates with recent scholarship on religious commodification in digital spaces, where the logic of audience optimization progressively displaces the logic of epistemic formation (Nurdin & Yusuf, 2023).

The shift from embodied, *sanad*-grounded transmission to distributed digital performance has been documented extensively in the sociology of digital religion (Campbell, 2020; Mannerfelt, 2022). What the present study adds is an epistemological reading of that shift grounded in a specific classical framework. The genealogy of Sufi communication was historically rooted in institutions the *khanāqah*, the *ribat*, the *zawiya* where knowledge, as Al-Ghazali (2021) asserts, is acquired not merely cognitively but through *suhbah* (companionship with the teacher) and *musyāhadah* (direct witnessing). De Diego González (de Diego Gonzalez, 2025) has named the digital reconfiguration of these spaces the limitless *zawiya* a framing that captures both the democratizing potential and the epistemological risk of unbounded access without structured transmission. The institutional account @nuonline\_id illustrates this challenge most precisely: despite maintaining *sanad* legitimacy and producing the most citation-rich content (average caption length 178 words), it generates the lowest mean engagement rate (0.8%) of the three accounts, confirming that depth and algorithmic reach operate in structural tension (Hakim, 2025; Tarwiyyah, 2025).

Gadamer's et al (2004) concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* (fusion of horizons) clarifies what is at stake in this tension. Genuine understanding occurs, for Gadamer, when the reader's present horizon genuinely encounters and is transformed by the horizon of the text. Within Instagram's algorithmic ecosystem, this encounter is structurally compromised: content is not selected by the reader on the basis of disciplined inquiry (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*) but curated by recommendation systems operating on behavioral history. The reader's horizon is pre-shaped by the machine before the text arrives which is to say, the conditions for authentic fusion of horizons are undermined before the encounter begins. Mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2011, 2013) names this as the subordination of religious logic to media logic; the observational data give it quantitative texture: content demanding the most sustained attention from the reader performs worst by the metric the algorithm rewards. Table 3 maps the principal tensions between Al-Ghazali's epistemological categories and their digital counterparts.

Table 3 synthesizes the dialectical relationship between Al-Ghazali's epistemological categories and the digital phenomena observed in the analyzed Instagram accounts. The table should not be read as a direct equivalence between classical Sufi institutions and digital platforms, but as an analytical mapping of how Sufi knowledge is reconfigured under conditions of digital mediation.

**Table 3. Dialectical Matrix of Al-Ghazali's Sufi Epistemology and the Digital Reality**

Aspect of Analysis	Al-Ghazali's Classical Concept	Digital Phenomenon	Epistemological Dialectic
Space of Transmission	Physical khanaqah/zawiya; knowledge acquired through suhba and musyāhadah (Al-Ghazali, 2021)	Virtual limitless zawiya without institutional boundaries (de Diego Gonzalez, 2025)	Symbolic presence replaces embodied presence; sacred space becomes boundless and de-ritualized
Authority	Rooted in sanad and community recognition; hierarchical and vertical	Distributed and performative; measured through follower counts, likes, and algorithmic visibility (Campbell, 2020)	From vertical hierarchy to horizontal network; legitimacy shifts from sanad to visibility metrics
Nature of Knowledge ( <i>‘Ilm</i> )	Knowledge as light ( <i>nūr</i> ) cast into the heart, not mere accumulation of information (Al-Ghazali, 2021)	Knowledge as fragmented visual content shaped by media logic (Hjarvard, 2013)	Reduction from transcendental to decorative; al-lubāb (core) marginalized by <i>al-qishr</i> (shell)
Structure of Knowledge	Dichotomy of <i>al-qishr</i> (shell/exoteric) and <i>al-lubāb</i> (core/esoteric) (Al-Ghazali, 2021)	Aesthetic Sufism: beautiful quotes with soothing visuals, 68% of top-engaged posts (@rumiisme)	Aestheticization of spirituality; users satisfied with shimmer of mirages ( <i>lāmi‘ al-sarāb</i> ) without inner transformation
Method of Acquiring Knowledge	Intensive <i>mujāhadah</i> (inner struggle) and <i>riyāḍah</i> (spiritual training)	Passive consumption through scroll, like, share; <i>mujāhadah</i> content = only 6% of analyzed posts	Loss of epistemic agency and capacity for <i>dhawq</i> (spiritual taste)
Epistemic Pathology	Blind <i>taqlīd</i> : 'eating but never feeling full' (Al-Ghazali, 2021)	Digital <i>Taqlīd</i> : algorithm as pseudo-murshid <sup>1</sup> ; behavioral curation replaces deliberate seeking (Anam, 2025)	Crisis of intellectual autonomy; <i>baṣīrah</i> filtration paralyzed by algorithmic curation

<sup>1</sup> The term “algorithm as pseudo-murshid” is used as an analytical metaphor to describe the curatorial role of recommendation systems in shaping religious exposure, not as a theological equivalence between algorithms and spiritual authority.

Role of the Heart ( <i>Qalb</i> )	Heart as substrate and mirror of divine reality ( <i>maḥall al-‘ilm</i> )	Fragmentation of attention; heart oriented outward toward likes rather than inward toward dhikr	Inner disorientation; tafakkur hindered by the overstimulation of endless-scroll logic
Digital Ethics ( <i>Ṭahārah</i> )	<i>Taṭhīru al-jawāriḥ</i> : purifying bodily organs from sin (Al-Ghazali, 2021)	Digital bodily organs: eyes and thumbs; comment sections rife with conflict beneath spiritual posts	Contradiction between spiritual rhetoric and destructive digital behavior; digital <i>adab</i> absent

**Note.** Data on Aesthetic Quotes, engagement patterns, and mujāhadah-related content are derived from the author’s systematic observation of 150 Instagram posts from January to March 2024. The conceptual categories are interpreted through Al-Ghazali’s epistemological framework and relevant secondary literature.

### **Digital Taqlīd and the Weakening Conditions of Epistemic Agency**

One of the most significant findings from the observational data is the limited presence of content addressing *mujāhadah*: present in only 9 of 150 analyzed posts (6%), and concentrated exclusively on @ngajitasawuf. Al-Ghazali’s epistemology is built on the premise that knowledge is not transmitted but earned through an arduous inner process. *Mujāhadah* (inner struggle) and *riyāḍah* (spiritual discipline) are the mechanisms through which the *qalb* (heart) is polished to receive the light of knowledge (*nūr*) that constitutes the highest form of *‘ilm*: "*Wa al-‘ilmu nūrun yaqdhifuhu Allāh fī al-qalb, wa laysa bi-kathrat al-riwāyah*" (Al-Ghazali, 2021). When content addressing this dimension accounts for only 6% of the most-engaged posts across three major Sufi accounts, the implication is not that Sufi users fail in private practice. It is that the public representation of Sufism on these platforms tends to marginalize the disciplinary core of the tradition, leaving what Rahmah, Nisok, Ma’rief, and Taurus (2025) term "aesthetic piety" a spirituality oriented toward feeling rather than formation.

This study uses the term Digital Taqlīd to refer to an unreflective dependence on algorithmically curated religious content, in which users encounter spiritual knowledge through platform-driven recommendation systems rather than through deliberate seeking, verified authority, or disciplined learning. The concept of *taqlīd* in classical Islamic jurisprudence refers to the uncritical acceptance of a ruling without demanding its rationale or evidence. Al-Ghazali (2021) is unsparing in his assessment of the *muqallid* who acquires knowledge in this mode: he "eats but never feels full" consuming the forms of transmission without internalizing their transformative substance. The analogy is useful for interpreting the type of religious consumption encouraged by Instagram’s architecture: an endless scroll through spiritual content that may generate emotional affect without necessarily requiring the inner work through which such affect becomes genuine *ma’rifah* (gnosis). Recent scholarship on algorithmic authority in Muslim digital culture corroborates this structural dynamic, found that social media has become a productive space for the development of religious populism in Indonesia, with Islamic learning practices spread across various social media platforms further illustrating the symptoms of religious populism, marked by

various socio-religious movements that have emerged from the practice (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019).

What distinguishes Digital Taqlīd from its classical counterpart is not the failure of the individual's intention but the structural character of the compliance. The classical muqallid chooses a madhab and defers to it. In many platform-mediated contexts, users may encounter religious authority not only through deliberate selection, but also through algorithmic recommendations shaped by previous clicks, likes, and viewing patterns. Anam (2025) describes this tendency as a displacement of the murshid’s curatorial function by algorithmic recommendation systems: where the murshid's authority historically derived from recognized spiritual attainment (*maqām*) and a verifiable chain of transmission (*silsilah*), the algorithm's authority derives from behavioral optimization. It recommends what will be clicked, not what will transform. From a Gadamerian perspective, the user’s horizon is less likely to be challenged by the horizon of the text when algorithmic feedback loops repeatedly amplify prior preferences (Arnel, 2024).

The consequences extend to the faculty of *baṣīrah* the inner discernment through which Al-Ghazali believed the seeker distinguishes genuine knowledge from its simulacra. Anam (2025) and Qadir and Arshad (2024) both argue that dependence on algorithmic curation may weaken the exercise of *baṣīrah* by reducing opportunities for deliberate seeking, comparison, verification, and sustained engagement. The platform environment may weaken the conditions for active *ṭalab al-‘ilm* by replacing deliberate seeking with continuous exposure to algorithmically delivered content. The observational data from this study are consistent with this account: posts requiring the most active engagement with classical text (Lecture Clips, Infographics) are systematically outperformed by posts requiring nothing more than passive visual consumption (Aesthetic Quotes). Multimodal semiotic analysis of Sufi discourse on platforms like Instagram confirms that algorithms compress spiritual instructions into highly affective visual signs, triggering rapid but shallow responses (Maharani & Ma’sum, 2025). The result is what Hegazy (2020) calls the replacement of serious spiritual commitment with a commodified, audience-oriented performance of piety.

**Table 4. Dialectical Matrix of the Mediatization of Sufism: Reconfiguration of Three Epistemic Pillars**

Key Concept	Classical Essence (Al-Ghazali)	Mediatization & Digital Manifestation	Epistemic Impact & Pathology
<i>‘Ilm</i> (Knowledge)	Transformative Light ( <i>Nūr</i> ). Hierarchical structure: <i>al-qishr</i> (shell) → <i>al-lubāb</i> (core). Acquired through <i>sanad</i> and holistic context.	Fragmented Visual Content. Aesthetics supersede text (mediatized preaching). Reels & posts: instant aphorisms, classical texts decontextualized.	Shift in emphasis from transformative knowledge toward decorative or affective spirituality. Passive Consumption: audiences satisfied with shell ( <i>al-qishr</i> ). Empirically: 52% of posts carry no source citation; citation-free posts generate highest

			engagement (mean 3.2%).
<i>Qalb</i> (Heart)	Locus of Inner Struggle. <i>Mujāhadah</i> (arduous inner struggle) to purify the heart's mirror. Orientation toward God, not audience.	Public Emotional Well-Being. Instant tranquility content, neglecting <i>mujāhadah</i> (present in only 6% of analyzed posts). Paradox of al-Sirr: private ( <i>sirr</i> ) experience exhibited for likes.	Shift in Meaning: from <i>mujāhadah</i> to emotional well-being. Risk of performative piety. Overstimulation: heart clouded by content flood.
<i>Ṭahārah</i> (Purification)	Holistic Purification. Four levels: <i>Zāhir</i> (outward) → <i>Jawāriḥ</i> (bodily organs) → <i>Qalb</i> (heart) → <i>Sirr</i> (innermost secret) (Al-Ghazali, 2021).	Surface Digital Ethics. <i>Taḥīru al-jawāriḥ</i> expands into 'Thumb Ethics' (digital hygiene). Contradiction: peaceful content, hostile comment sections.	Weakening of digital adab: digital organs (thumbs, eyes) remain unpurified (Waheed, Junejo, & Numan, 2024). Weakening of embodied transmission and direct teacher-student relationality.
Epistemic Agency	Active Seeking ( <i>Ṭalab al-ʿIlm</i> ). <i>Baṣīrah</i> (inner filter) for verification; deliberate rejection of blind <i>taqlīd</i> .	Digital <i>Taqlīd</i> and Algorithmic Authority. Algorithms, such as Explore and Reels, function as new authority curators. Filter bubbles confirm preconceptions and weaken dialectical engagement.	Crisis of Agency: algorithmic curation may reduce opportunities for <i>baṣīrah</i> -based discernment. Risk of superficial spirituality through rapid affective consumption. Commodification: Sufism as aesthetic product (Anam, 2025).

**Note.** Empirical data in the Digital Manifestation column (citation frequencies, post proportions, engagement rates, *mujāhadah* content frequency) are drawn from the systematic observation of 150 posts (January–March 2024). Theoretical references are to cited secondary sources.

### The Reconfiguration of *ʿIlm*, *Qalb*, and *Ṭahārah*

The content profiles of @rumiisme and @ngajitasawuf illustrate two different modes of digital mediation of Sufi knowledge. @rumiisme presents Sufi knowledge as aesthetic object: 34 of its 50 top-engaged posts consist of fragments from Rumi, Ibn ʿArabi, or Al-Ghazali formatted as visual aphorisms, with a median caption length of 43 words and no source citation in 72% of cases. @ngajitasawuf attempts to transmit *al-lubāb* through lecture excerpts, yet the short-video format tends to compress broader interpretive contexts into brief and segmented forms. Sulthon et al.

(2025) have documented this dynamic in the circulation of Gus Baha's readings of Al-Hikam, noting that vernacular Sufism online depends increasingly on the communicative charisma of the presenter rather than on the structural integrity of the transmission chain. The result is what Sembiring and Manik (2025) call "mediatized preaching" religious communication shaped more by platform affordances than by the logic of spiritual pedagogy. In such a platform environment, knowledge is not only sought through disciplined inquiry but is also encountered through scrolling, recommendation systems, and affective visual exposure.

Instagram's core mechanics tend to orient religious expression toward visibility and audience response. When Sufi content about inner peace, *tawbah*, or *tawakkul* is published in this environment, the very act of publication creates what Anshori (2025) terms a "visibility paradox": the digital display of inner peace may shift the public expression of *qalb*-oriented spirituality toward audience response and platform visibility. The disproportionate engagement performance of Aesthetic Quote posts and their conspicuous displacement of *mujāhadah*-centred content suggests that the platform rewards content associated with emotional comfort more than content emphasizing the demanding discipline of spiritual practice. Rahmah et al. (2025) term this the emergence of "aesthetic piety" in digital Islamic practice. In Ghazalian terms, this suggests a tension between the inward orientation of *qalb* purification and the outward logic of digital visibility. This does not mean that digital Sufi actors necessarily engage in *riyāʿ*. Rather, the platform environment introduces a risk of performative piety, in which the boundary between sincere spiritual expression and visibility-oriented religious performance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. This concern also resonates with earlier ethnographic work on public expressions of Islam in Southeast Asia, which finds that the pressure to perform piety online introduces new forms of spiritual inauthenticity that classical Sufi moral psychology is uniquely equipped to diagnose (Fealy & White, 2008).

The reconfiguration of *ṭahārah* is most visible in the gap between the spiritual content of posts and the behavior observable in comment sections. Al-Ghazali (2021) places *taṭhīru al-jawāriḥ* purification of the bodily organs from sins and transgressions as the second of four levels of purification, which in the digital age maps onto what this study calls "Thumb Ethics": the discipline of the eyes (what one chooses to gaze at on screen) and the thumbs (what one chooses to post, comment, or share). Waheed et al.'s (2024) study of Sufi social media practice in contemporary Pakistan found persistent patterns of contentious interaction beneath posts on *maʿrifah* and *tawḥīd*, demonstrating that consuming spiritual content effects no automatic transfer of its disciplinary content. Mediatization creates conditions where, as Shadiqin and Jamil (2024) note, anger spreads more virally than tranquility a structural dynamic that directly contradicts the graduated logic of Al-Ghazali's *marātib al-ṭahārah*. Abdurahman and Hariyanto (2026) further observe that digital transmission of Sufi ritual instruction frequently loses the dimension of *barakah* that attaches to physical *ṣuḥbah*: the medium transforms the mode of reception, not merely the medium of delivery.

### **Implications for the Authority of Classical Texts and Spiritual Authenticity**

The three reconfigurations described above have practical consequences for how the authority of classical texts such as *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* is constituted and recognized in digital space. The dominant pattern across all three accounts is what Sulthon et al. (2025) call "vernacular

authority": classical texts circulate not through formal sanad chains but through the mediating personality of digital creators who translate, excerpt, and reframe them for mass audiences. The account @ngajitasawuf decentralizes the authority of the kyai from the physical pesantren to the mobile screen; classical texts no longer belong to the academic-spiritual elite but become debatable public content. Anam (2025) shows that digital audiences now assess legitimacy partly through "digital testimony" view counts and comment sentiment alongside scholarly attribution, constituting what Campbell (2020) calls "hybrid authority": a form of religious legitimacy that combines residual traditional markers with algorithmic visibility metrics.

The specific consequences for spiritual authenticity cluster around Al-Ghazali's concept of al-sirr the innermost secret, the fourth and highest level of purification, which involves the complete orientation of the *qalb* toward God and away from *mā siwā Allāh* (everything other than God). Al-Ghazali (2021) held that the *sirr* is preserved through concealment, because public recognition introduces the contamination of *riyāʿ*. Instagram’s architecture tends to create a structural tension with this logic: its entire design orients the user toward visibility. When inner spiritual experience is published as a caption about an epiphany, a testimony of gratitude, a reflection on a dhikr session it enters a domain of public performance where authenticity is measured by audience response. Wathoni (2025) documents this as the commodification of Sufi experience in Indonesian Instagram culture, where "pop Sufism" content functions as lifestyle marker alongside serious spiritual practice.

The subjective experiences of *barakah* (blessing) and *dhawq* (spiritual taste) also undergo reconfiguration through screen mediation. Users do report experiencing *barakah* and *dhawq* through watching lecture clips on @ngajitasawuf or reading quotations on @nuonline\_id confirming the existence of "mediated barakah" as a genuine phenomenological category (Abdurrahman, Salma, Parsono, Ali, & Widyaningrum, 2025). But Al-Ghazali’s framework poses a deeper question: whether this resonance reaches beyond the first two levels of purification the outward (*zāhir*) and the bodily organs (*jawāriḥ*) and arrives at the deeper transformation of the *qalb* and the *sirr*. Given that the content generating the most engagement is precisely the content demanding the least inner work, the structural pressure is toward a *dhawq* that is atomistic and affective rather than integrative and transformative. Abdurrahman et al. (2025) observe that the *barakah* experienced through digital channels tends to remain at the level of the outward and behavioral, falling short of the profound reorientation that the tradition calls *kashf* (spiritual unveiling). Table 5 maps the implications of this analysis across the four principal dimensions of mediatized Sufi practice.

**Table 5. Matrix of Mediatization Implications for Classical Text Authority and Spiritual Authenticity**

Aspect of Implication	Classical Concept (Al-Ghazali)	Digital Manifestation & Shift	Critical Impact & Pathology
Text Authority	Institutional-Hierarchical. Truth safeguarded through sanad and physical presence of the murshid. Sacred,	Vernacular & Algorithmic Authority. Classical texts become public content on accounts like @ngajitasawuf.	Hybridity of Authority: sacred texts, yet interpretation depends on digital performance and platform algorithms.

	exclusive, and authoritative texts.	Legitimacy shifts to visibility metrics (views, likes).	Reduction of <i>‘Ilm</i> : knowledge as <i>ghāyat al-muhimm</i> transforms into obligation to consume content (Hakim, 2025).
Spiritual Authenticity	Ontological-Esoteric ( <i>Ṣidq, Ikhlās</i> ). Authenticity linked to <i>al-sirr</i> (inner secret) and invisibility. Rooted in purity of intention.	Performative-Exoteric. Platform demands for visibility compel exhibition of inner experience ( <i>sirr</i> ). Perceived authenticity measured by audience affective response.	Paradox of <i>al-Sirr</i> : inner secret becomes public performance. Commodification: authenticity commercialized as aesthetic commodity offering instant tranquility (Rahmah et al., 2025; Wathoni, 2025).
Subjective Experience (Barakah, Dhawq)	Transcendental-Gradual. Barakah and dhawq attained through physical <i>ṣuḥbah</i> and <i>mujāhadah</i> . Knowledge is <i>nūr</i> (light), not mere information accumulation.	Mediated Barakah & Digital Dhawq. Spiritual experience mediated by screen and algorithm. Instant affective response to repetitive content.	Fragmentation of Experience: dhawq becomes atomistic, losing the integrative <i>fiqh-taṣawwuf</i> dimension. Overstimulation: heart clouded by shimmer of mirages ( <i>lāmi‘ al-sarāb</i> ) of digital aesthetics (Wathoni, 2025).
Hermeneutics & Agency	Dialectical-Active (Fusion of Horizons). Understanding through inner dialogue between text and experience. Rejects blind <i>taqlid</i> ; emphasizes <i>baṣīrah</i> (inner filter).	Digital <i>Taqlid</i> & Filter Bubble. Algorithms confirm preconceptions, severing the dialectical process. Dependence on single interpretation within 60-second durations.	Crisis of Agency: individuals lose capacity to distinguish religious aesthetics from religious ethics. Passive Consumption: endless spiritual consumption without character transformation (Al-Ghazali, 2021).

**Note.** All empirical observations in the Digital Manifestation column are supported by cited secondary sources and cross-referenced with the systematic account observation data.

This study holds several notable strengths. It is the first to systematically apply Al-Ghazali's classical epistemological architecture as an analytical framework for empirical digital religion data, producing the Digital Sufi Epistemology Framework as a generative theoretical instrument. The

integration of three complementary theoretical traditions Gadamerian hermeneutics, Hjarvard's mediatization theory, and Campbell's digital religion framework enables a multi-layered reading of the data that sociological analysis alone cannot provide.

Several limitations invite caution in interpreting these findings. First, this study analyzed only publicly visible Instagram content; whether digital Sufi consumption complements or substitutes for embodied private practice remains empirically open. The observation was necessarily restricted to the public-facing dimension of digital Sufism, which may not fully represent users' private spiritual activities. Second, the three-month observation window (January–March 2024) captures a temporally specific slice of a rapidly evolving digital landscape; longitudinal observation would strengthen the claims regarding structural patterns. Third, the three accounts, while purposively selected to represent distinct institutional models, are not a statistically representative sample of the broader Indonesian Sufi Instagram ecology. Fourth, the analytical framework, while generative, is necessarily interpretive: the attribution of epistemic consequences to observed content patterns involves inferential steps that would benefit from validation through user-side methods such as interviews or surveys.

In response to this structural challenge, the concept of *Zuhd al-Raqmī* (Digital Asceticism) offers not a rejection of the digital medium but a form of intentional restraint within it a practice of choosing depth over virality, contextual integrity over fragment, and silence over performance. Tarwiyah (2025) has argued for the reconstruction of virtual murshid agency through verified guidance processes that restore something of the pedagogical relationship even in digital environments. This is not a nostalgic appeal for the pre-digital khanaqah, but a recognition that the epistemic content of Sufism its insistence on gradual inner transformation, disciplined practice, and the primacy of *maʿrifah* over *taqlīd* makes specific demands on its medium that the current Instagram ecology meets poorly. The Digital Sufi Epistemology Framework proposed by this study offers a critical vocabulary for both researchers and practitioners to distinguish the limitless *zawīya* as a potential space for access from its present operation as a structural engine of epistemic reduction.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the digital mediation of Sufism on Instagram does not merely change the medium of religious transmission, but also reconfigures the epistemological conditions through which Sufi knowledge is encountered, valued, and consumed. Based on the systematic observation of 150 top-engaged posts from @rumiisme, @ngajitasawuf, and @nuonline\_id, the study found three major patterns: the scarcity of classical source citation, the higher engagement of aesthetic and easily consumable Sufi content, and the limited visibility of mujāhadah-centered discourse. Read through Al-Ghazali's epistemology in *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* and *Asrār al-Ṭahārah*, these findings show a structural tension between *al-qishr* and *al-lubāb*, between the outward aesthetic form of spirituality and the deeper transformative substance of Sufi knowledge. Instagram's media logic tends to privilege visual appeal, affective immediacy, and short-form accessibility, while the classical Sufi tradition emphasizes disciplined learning, sanad-based transmission, purification of the *qalb*, and gradual spiritual formation.

The main contribution of this study lies in the formulation of a Digital Sufi Epistemology Framework that bridges Al-Ghazali's classical Islamic epistemology with contemporary digital religion studies. By integrating the concepts of *ʿilm*, *qalb*, *ṭahārah*, *mujāhadah*, *al-lubāb*, *al-sirr*, and *baṣīrah* with Gadamerian

hermeneutics, Hjarvard's mediatization theory, and Campbell's digital religion framework, this study offers a critical vocabulary for analyzing how Sufi knowledge is transformed under algorithmic conditions. The concepts of Digital *Taqīd*, Thumb Ethics, mediated *barakah*, and *Zuhd al-Raqmī* further extend the analysis by showing that digital Sufism should not be assessed only through visibility, popularity, and audience reach, but also through epistemic integrity, ethical discipline, and spiritual authenticity. In this sense, classical Islamic thought is not only treated as a historical object, but also as an analytical resource for diagnosing the conditions of religious knowledge in platform-based environments.

This study also acknowledges several limitations. The analysis was limited to publicly visible Instagram content and did not examine users' private spiritual practices, intentions, or actual reception of Sufi content. Therefore, the study does not claim that digital Sufi users abandon embodied practice, sanad-based learning, or active *ṭalab al-ʿilm* in their personal religious lives. The observation was also limited to three accounts during a three-month period, so the findings should be understood as an interpretive reading of selected cases rather than a statistically representative account of Indonesian digital Sufism as a whole. Future research should expand this inquiry through longitudinal observation, comparative platform analysis, interviews with content creators and followers, and digital ethnography of online Sufi communities. This study argues that the future of digital Sufism depends not only on wider access and visibility, but also on the ability to preserve the transformative demands of *ʿilm*, *qalb*, *ṭahārah*, *mujāhadah*, and *maʿrifah* within the accelerating logic of algorithmic religion.

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