How Social Media Affects the Image of Religious Figures: The Virality of Habib Bahar bin Smith and Harsh Da'wah Style

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Abstract:
The focus of this research is to understand how the public reaction to Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah style shapes his image in the eyes of the public, as well as how social media plays a role in strengthening or damaging the perception of religious figures. This research uses a qualitative approach with content analysis techniques, where the analysis unit includes text, images, and interactions on social media. Data was collected from various social media platforms and articles relevant to the phenomenon, which were then analyzed to identify emerging patterns, themes, and narratives. The results of the study show that although Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah style has attracted sharp criticism, this phenomenon actually strengthens his visibility and image in the eyes of his supporters. However, it also created a deep polarization among the public, with most audiences supporting his assertive approach, while others deemed the style not reflective of the morals of a religious figure. The implications of this study show that social media has an important role in shaping public perceptions, both positively and negatively, of religious figures, and the importance of balancing freedom of speech and social responsibility in communicating on digital platforms.
Keywords: *Social Media, Image, Religious Figures*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media in recent years has changed the way people interact and obtain information (Aichner et al., 2021; Farsi, 2021; Wang, 2021). This phenomenon creates a wider public space, where public communication and opinion are formed quickly and often without restrictions (Dong & Lian, 2021; Habermas, 2022; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). In Indonesia, platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have become places where social, political, and cultural discussions are thriving. For example, the harsh preaching style of religious figures such as Habib Bahar often triggers debates involving very diverse audiences. Social media not only serves as a means to express opinions, but also creates polarization among the public (Arora et al., 2022; Lim & Bentley, 2022; Törnberg et al., 2021). Here, the message spread can influence people's views of religious figures and their image in the eyes of the public, both in positive and negative contexts (Gimpel et al., 2021; Roth et al., 2024; Tkáčová et al., 2021). This phenomenon is becoming increasingly complex along with the development of technology and the ability of social media to spread information quickly.

Research on public perception of religious figures on social media has been attracting more attention in recent years. Previous studies have shown that social media plays an important role in shaping public opinion about religious figures,

especially in the context of controversy. According to research by Ahmad Rizal et al. (2022), social media can worsen or improve a person's image, depending on how the messages are presented and received by the audience. Furthermore, research on similar themes also reveals that polarization on social media often arises in response to statements or actions that are considered controversial, especially from public figures who have great influence (de Rosa et al., 2021; Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2020). Social media allows for the rapid dissemination of information, but it also creates space for more intensive public debate. Several studies have also highlighted the importance of understanding how religious figures communicate on these platforms to maintain their image without neglecting freedom of speech.

This study aims to analyze the public perception of Habib Bahar on social media after the phenomenon related to his harsh da'wah style. The main focus of this research is to explore how the da'wah style affects Habib Bahar's image in the eyes of the public and how social media plays a role in shaping public opinion. With a qualitative approach and content analysis techniques, this study will analyze comments, uploads, and interactions that occur on social media platforms related to this phenomenon. The formulation of the problem raised in this study is: How does the public react to Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah style on social media? What is the impact of this phenomenon on Habib Bahar's image as a religious figure? How does social media play a role in shaping public perception of religious figures in a controversial context?.

This research assumes that social media plays a key role in shaping public perception of Habib Bahar, both in supporting and criticizing his harsh da'wah style. The hypothesis proposed is that the emerging phenomenon will strengthen Habib Bahar's image among his supporters, but it can damage his image in the eyes of critics. Social media, through interaction features such as comments, hashtags, and content sharing, magnifies polarization among audiences. The provisional answer that can be put forward based on this analysis is that although Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah style has a negative impact in the form of sharp criticism, it also introduces himself to a wider audience and strengthens his visibility. This research is expected to provide further insight into how the dynamics of public perception work in the era of social media, especially in the context of religious figures involved in controversy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research method uses a qualitative approach with content analysis techniques. The unit of analysis in this study is text, images, or media content related to the topic being researched. The research will analyze material published on social media, news articles, or other platforms to see how certain information is communicated and received by the public. This approach aims to explore the meaning and context behind the message conveyed, as well as how the content affects public perception. The design of this study is exploratory and descriptive, where the collected data will be analyzed in depth to identify patterns, themes, and narratives relevant to the study topic (Aurini et al., 2021; Frazer et al., 2023; Prosek & Gibson, 2021). This technique allows researchers to understand the depth of meaning contained in messages conveyed through a variety of media and broader social contexts.

The sources of information in this study come from content published on various social media platforms and related articles, which are selected based on

their relevance to the research topic. The sources of information used are not limited to individual sources, but rather focus on texts or materials that can describe the phenomenon that occurs. Therefore, a unit of analysis is content produced by individuals or groups involved with the research subject. Data will be collected from digital platforms that are considered representative to capture the dynamics that occur, be it in the form of text, images, or videos. The selection of the right data source is very important to provide an accurate picture of the public perception formed on social media related to the topic being studied.

Data collection in this study was carried out through documentation techniques, where researchers collected relevant content from various sources such as articles, social media posts, or videos available on the internet. The collected data will be analyzed using content analysis techniques that include data reduction, data display, and data verification. The analysis process begins with the selection of relevant content, followed by the preparation of categories and themes, as well as the interpretation of the meaning contained in them. The results of the analysis will be used to describe and conclude the main patterns that emerge from the researched content. This process will provide insight into how messages spread on social media can shape public perception and create a social narrative related to the topic being studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Result
Public Perception of Habib Bahar on Social Media

The harsh da'wah style applied by Habib Bahar bin Smith triggered various reactions on social media, especially on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. In the analysis of a number of posts and comments that have developed, it can be seen that there are two very different poles of opinion. On the one hand, a number of supporters expressed praise for Habib Bahar's courage in voicing criticism of sensitive and often controversial social issues. Positive comments such as "We need more scholars who dare like this" colored his da'wah video uploads, which often received enthusiastic responses from the audience who agreed. These supporters see Habib Bahar as a firm figure who is not afraid to speak out about social injustice, which is considered important in the midst of an increasingly complex political and social situation. They consider this style of da'wah as something necessary to awaken collective awareness of issues that are considered sensitive and urgent to be discussed openly.

However, on the other hand, sharp criticism of Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah style also appeared in various comments. Many critics feel that such an approach further exacerbates social tensions and can create deeper polarization in society. Some comments expressed concern that this style of da'wah that tends to be harsh actually distances many people from religious messages that are supposed to emphasize peace and brotherhood. "This kind of approach is only divisive, not unifying," said one of the comments that is quite representative of the feelings of some of the audience who disagree with the way the da'wah is delivered. Other criticisms highlight that the emotional and provocative style of da'wah risks causing greater misunderstandings among the public, especially among those who do not fully understand the context or purpose of the message conveyed.

Observations of interactions on social media show that the majority of Habib Bahar's supporters emphasize the importance of courage in telling the

truth, even if it challenges existing views or norms. One interesting comment mentioned, "Habib Bahar is an example of a leader who is not afraid to speak out," describing the view that many of his supporters uphold. They see Habib Bahar as a figure who is able to speak out about issues that are often avoided by other religious figures. However, on the other hand, the criticism that has emerged is also quite strong, with some comments stating, "This style actually distances people away from religious messages," indicating disagreement with the way da'wah is delivered which is considered too harsh and controversial. From a series of findings found, content analysis was then carried out as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of Public Perception of Habib Bahar on Social Media

| Aspects	Supporter	Critics
Key Thoughts	Appreciate Habib Bahar's courage in voicing criticism of sensitive social issues.	Assessing Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah style risks exacerbating social tensions and deepening polarization.
Views on Da'wah Style	Mentioning that hard da'wah is needed to awaken social and political awareness.	Considering this approach is too emotional and can lead to misunderstandings.
Interested Comments	"We need more scholars who are brave like this," "Habib Bahar is an example of a leader who is not afraid to speak up."	"This kind of approach only divides, not unifyes," "This kind of style keeps people away from religious messages."
Response to Social Issues	Seeing Habib Bahar's da'wah style as the right way to respond to social justice issues.	Considering this style of da'wah is too provocative and does not reflect the values of peaceful religion.
Polarization Occurs	Reinforcing the view that there needs to be more courageous religious leaders like Habib Bahar.	Reinforce the view that da'wah should be wiser and less emotional, avoiding division.
Social Media Interaction	Habib Bahar's da'wah video upload received thousands of likes and supportive comments.	Criticism of Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah has also been widely found, with some getting more attention after going viral.

From the presentation of the table above regarding the analysis of interaction on social media, there is a sharp polarization between two major groups: supporters who appreciate Habib Bahar's courage in voicing social criticism, and critics who worry that this style of hard da'wah actually worsens the image of Islam and deepens social divisions. This phenomenon also highlights the important role of social media as a public arena where open debate about controversial religious figures can flourish. These findings illustrate how social media is a space to shape public opinion, as well as provide a more complex and dynamic view of how society responds to the actions and approaches used by religious leaders such as Habib Bahar.

Discussion Patterns and Reactions to the Habib Bahar Controversy

The second theme found in this study is the pattern of discussion and reaction to controversies that arise on social media, especially through comments, uploads, and conversations between users. The data collected shows that the conversation about Habib Bahar has been intense, with many discussions leading to moral judgments regarding his often controversial style of hard preaching. This reaction is mainly spread among two major groups: those who support Habib Bahar's freedom of opinion as a religious figure, and those who

demand wiser and more polite behavior from a religious leader. Some posts used hashtags such as #KebebasanBerbicara and #DakwahKerasNamunBijaksana to frame their views, while others emphasized the importance of polite norms when speaking in public spaces. This shows how polarizing the discussion on social media is, which further underscores the difference in views regarding what is or is not appropriate for a religious figure to say on public platforms.

Much of the discussion seems to center on the question of the restriction of a religious figure's freedom of speech on social media. One of the prominent comments reads, "A religious figure should be more careful in using words, because it can affect many people," which indicates that the use of harsh or harsh words is considered inappropriate in the context of da'wah that prioritizes religious messages. On the other hand, there are also comments that consider that Habib Bahar is only voicing the truth in a firm style, as written, "Habib Bahar is not afraid to reveal the reality even if it is controversial." This theme comes up clearly in many conversations that question whether a religious leader's freedom of speech should be restricted or even respected. This discussion also led to the question of how much influence religious leaders have on their followers and whether their actions on social media can have a greater impact, both positive and negative. Some consider Habib Bahar's assertiveness to be part of his leadership style, while others feel that religious leaders should set a better example in public speaking. The findings related to the Pattern of Discussion and Reaction to the Habib Bahar Controversy on social media are as shown in figure 2.
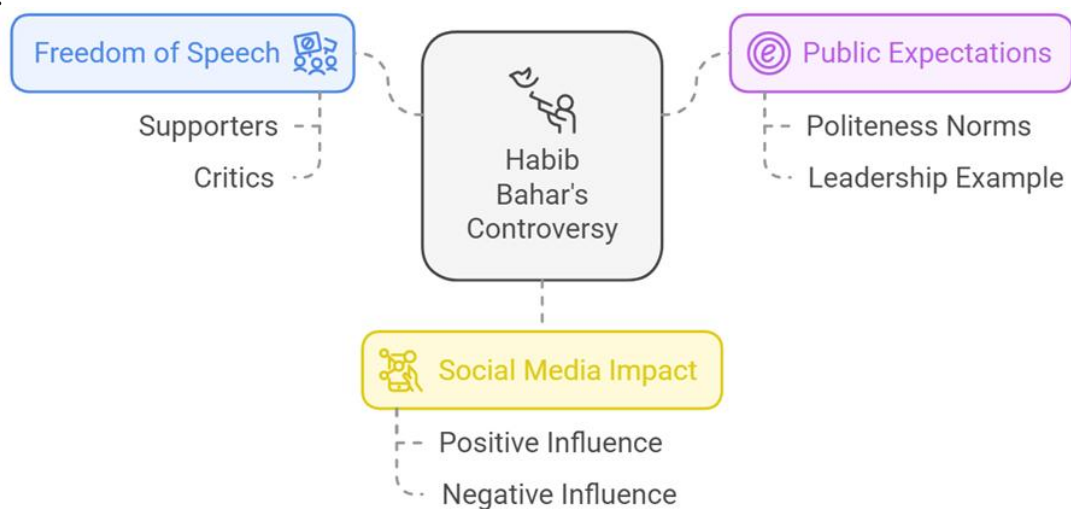
From figure 2. It is clear that public discussion is heavily influenced by moral views on free speech. One group demanded a more cautious and thoughtful attitude from religious leaders, while the other group defended Habib Bahar's right to voice his views without restrictions. This creates a polarization that is very visible in conversations on the Instagram and Twitter platforms, which illustrates the social dynamics that are developing on social media. The reactions that are formed indicate how social media can reinforce certain views in society, shape understanding of social norms, and influence how the public assesses an action or speech of a religious figure. This polarization also shows the importance of the role of social media in exploring and displaying differences of opinion in society related to social and religious issues.

The Impact of Controversy on Habib Bahar on Social Media

One of the main findings in this analysis is the impact of controversy on Habib Bahar's image on social media, especially on Instagram and Twitter platforms. Data shows that after Habib Bahar's controversial statement, there was a significant spike in the amount of attention given to him. Content that previously did not receive much attention is now going viral. This can be seen from the increase in the number of interactions, either in the form of supportive or critical comments. The graph below illustrates the sharp surge in interest in Habib Bahar on social media after the controversy. This phenomenon shows that despite sharp criticism that has arisen, the controversy has actually succeeded in introducing Habib Bahar to a wider audience. Despite the diversity of opinions, the growing attention shows that social media has a great influence in shaping and expanding the reach of a religious figure's public image
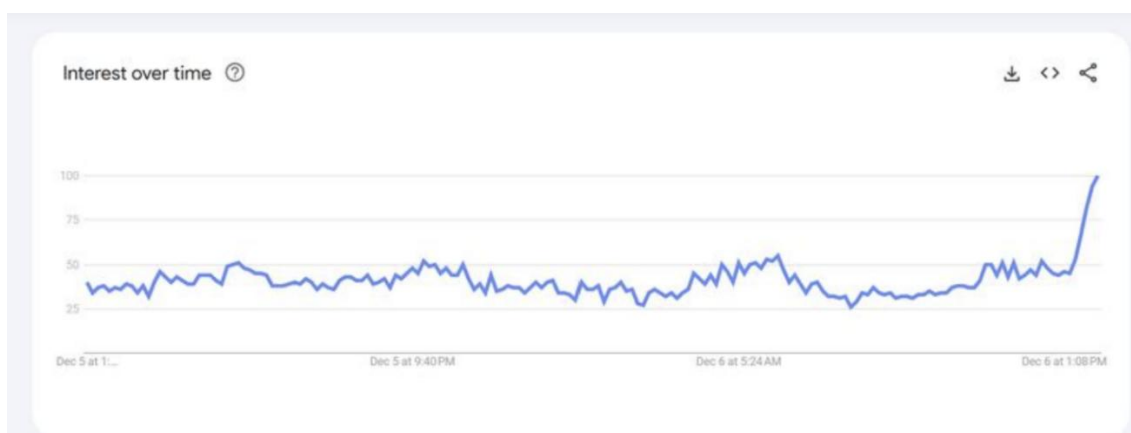
Graph 1. Google Trends graph related to Habib Bahar's Viral Phenomenon on Social Media

Based on the graph presented, it can be seen that although there is a lot of criticism that Habib Bahar has received regarding his controversial statements, it does not reduce his visibility. Instead, this controversy instead introduced itself to a wider audience and increased its exposure on social media. In this context, the phenomenon that occurs reflects the characteristics of social media itself, where controversial issues often attract more attention than neutral issues. The increase in recorded interactions shows that social media is not only a space for criticism, but can also provide opportunities for a figure to strengthen his position in society. One of the clearest indications of this increased visibility is the number of users who continue to follow Habib Bahar's account on Instagram, which is reflected in the significant follower growth data after the controversy. This suggests that while controversy can be risky, it also has the potential to bring benefits in the form of greater audience reach.

These findings show that although Habib Bahar's statement received sharp criticism, the controversy served to strengthen his public image. The significant surge in interest in Habib Bahar seen from the graph illustrates how great the influence of social media is in expanding the reach of a figure's image. Social media has the power to not only create challenges but also provide great opportunities to increase exposure. The increase in the number of followers and interactions on Habib Bahar's account after the controversy shows that despite the criticism, many people are interested in following further developments

regarding him. This phenomenon shows that social media has an important role in influencing public perception of famous figures, especially in situations full of tension or controversy.

The findings that show that there are differences in public perception of Habib Bahar on social media have very important implications in understanding how social media forms opinions about religious figures. This polarization illustrates two opposing attitudes in society: one side supports unlimited freedom of speech, while the other considers that religious leaders should be more careful in speaking. The implication of these results is that social media not only serves as a channel of information, but also as a space where various moral and social views meet, influence each other, and shape public opinion. This indicates that religious leaders, such as Habib Bahar, need to be well aware of the big role of social media in shaping the way people view them, which will have an impact on their credibility and public image.

The results regarding the polarization of public perception are very relevant to previous studies that state that social media has an important role in shaping public opinion, especially in controversial issues. Research by Johnston et al. (2022) shows that social media functions as an open arena for the public to discuss each other and influence common perceptions. In the context of Habib Bahar, his controversial remarks have triggered mixed reactions, which show the active involvement of the audience. Correlation with previous studies is that this polarization creates space for the public to shape social discourse outside of the control of traditional media which generally have greater control over narratives. Therefore, these results confirm the role of social media in accelerating the process of spreading opinions and in shaping how the public judges public figures.

Results related to discussion patterns and public reactions show the importance of balancing freedom of speech and social responsibility on social media. These findings illustrate that, although freedom of speech is a personal right, religious leaders should carefully consider the social impact of their statements. The public reaction to Habib Bahar's statement shows that freedom of speech on social media must be balanced with an understanding of existing social and moral norms. This is important, because religious figures are often considered role models in society, so their words have a greater impact than other individuals. The implication of these results is that social media, while providing freedom, also demands a high degree of caution in the delivery of messages.

This result is closely related to the theory of mass communication which explains the importance of ethics in communication, especially for public figures who have great influence. This is as several previous studies have been conducted which have confirmed that although freedom of speech is an individual's right, responsible messaging is essential, especially for figures with large followings (Evers & Chen, 2022; Helm & Nasu, 2021; Norris, 2023). The results of this study confirm that while freedom of speech should not be restricted, religious leaders need to consider the impact on society and their followers. Social media provides space for freedom of speech, but it also carries a moral responsibility to ensure that the message conveyed does not harm prevailing social values. Therefore, these results show that communication on social media must be carried out with caution to maintain the image of religious figures.

The findings that show the impact of the controversy on Habib Bahar's image show that despite sharp criticism, this phenomenon actually introduced

Habib Bahar to a wider audience. The implication of these results is that social media has two sides: in addition to being a platform for criticism, it also provides an opportunity for public figures to expand their audience reach. While controversy can damage a figure's image in the short term, in the long run, it can provide opportunities to increase exposure and visibility. This shows that social media is not only a space for criticism, but also a space to build or strengthen a figure's public profile.

This has a correlation with previous studies that have shown that controversy on social media often leads to increased interest and greater exposure for the characters involved (Balietti et al., 2021; Bozzola et al., 2022; Donaldson et al., 2022). These results confirm that, while a controversial statement can provoke criticism, it also introduces the figure to a larger audience. This phenomenon highlights the characteristics of social media that are able to turn negative impacts into opportunities to increase visibility, thanks to the very high reach and speed of information. Therefore, these results show the importance of understanding the dynamics of social media that can play a dual role: detrimental but also beneficial in terms of visibility and influence.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the dynamics of public perception of Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah in the era of social media, which is influenced by his controversial statements. The main finding of the study is that social media, especially Instagram, plays a huge role in shaping public opinion about religious figures. Public perception is divided into two broad groups: those who support Habib Bahar's freedom of speech and those who criticize the impropriety of the speech for a religious figure. This phenomenon shows how social media can magnify an issue, introduce public figures to a wider audience, but also create deep polarization. The lesson that can be learned is the importance of balancing freedom of speech and moral responsibility in the digital public space, especially for religious leaders who have a great influence in society.

The contribution of this research lies in an in-depth discussion of how social media, especially Instagram, can affect public perception of religious figures in the context of controversy related to Habib Bahar's harsh da'wah. This research enriches the existing literature by adding a new perspective on the impact of controversy on social media on the public image of a religious figure. However, this study has limitations, such as the limited number of cases analyzed and does not take into account other variables such as age and gender differences. Further research is needed to develop a broader understanding, including by using more varied survey methods and taking into account other demographic aspects to describe more comprehensively the dynamics of public perception on social media towards religious figures.

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