

KARĀMA IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUFISM: RESPONSE TO THE MAGIC COMMODIFICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

Social media has facilitated the proliferation of Muslim magicians who showcase magical performances as Islamic spiritual healing, obscuring the distinction between authentic *karāma* and commercialized supernatural claims. This study examines how such practices misrepresent the Sufi concept of *karāma* on YouTube. Employing a qualitative netnographic approach, the data were collected from the YouTube channels of Gus Samsudin, Ningsih Tinampi, Ustadz Dhanu, and Ujang Busthomi. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was applied to examine their construction of algorithmic authority. In addition, semiotic analysis was used to examine the motives behind the visualizations in their social media content. Meanwhile, to assess whether these performances reflect the authentic concept of *karāma*, data triangulation was performed by comparing video content with classical and modern Sufi texts, media reports, and insights from Sufism experts. The findings reveal that these performances constitute pseudo-*karāma* rather than genuine saintly miracles, commodifying Islamic symbols and exploiting vulnerable audiences for commercial purposes. This study contributes to digital religion scholarship by distinguishing authentic Sufi *karāma* from

pseudo-spiritual performances and highlighting the importance of strengthening religious and digital literacy to counter misleading supernatural claims in the digital era.

Keywords: *Karāma, Magic Commodification, Sufism, Alternative Healing, Social media.*

A. Introduction

In the last ten years, religion has become more commercialized, notably through the expansion of Muslim preachers and missionaries on social media (Chang, 2019; Raya, 2025). They often emphasize their appearance rather than their deep religious knowledge to attract audiences and establish credibility as religious experts (Porter et al., 2017). Their notable appearances include head coverings, clothing, and hand accessories. Ironically, these styles often attract large audiences, gain thousands of followers, generate profits, become trendy, and offer additional benefits (Qurashi, 2017). A recent trend in religious commodification involves Muslim magicians offering non-medical services using their magical abilities. They often reference public figures who identify as Muslims and promote supernatural healing through digital media. These services include treating diseases, exorcising spirit-possessioned individuals, asserting control over supernatural entities, selling medicinal products, and providing various religiously symbolic services, all of which generate profit (Knight, 2016; Dols, 2004). These practices are evident on the YouTube channels of Gus Samsudin, Ningsih Tinampi, Ustadz Dhanu, and Ujang Busthomi. They promote alternative healing through magic tricks and share this content on their social media accounts. Additionally, they also employ religious symbols to draw viewers and openly claim to possess the *karāma* of saints (Muttaqin, 2020). This has misled the public, especially those with limited religious knowledge, into misunderstanding the concept of *karāma* and immediately seeking solutions to their issues.

Nowadays, individuals who seek shamans or magicians for alternative healing often have already seen a doctor. Nonetheless, dissatisfaction with medical diagnoses frequently motivates them to explore alternative treatments. Cost considerations may also influence their choices (Melvin-Koushki, 2019). Many people believe that alternative healing is less expensive or even free. This is a common belief, particularly among low-income families. The fame of magicians also influences this perception. Well-known magicians are seen as more trustworthy and attract more people seeking treatment. Their popularity is now easily verifiable and often spreads rapidly on social media.

Many researchers have focused on the issue of religious commodification in various forms. For example, Hidayah (2021) examines shifts in pesantren management and debates whether efforts to serve the middle-class are better understood as commodification or as acts of pious neoliberalism. Then, Harun (2021) examines signs of Islamic commodification in advertisements and explores how semantic noise influences interpretation, considering the visual communication design used. Again, Lubis et al. (2024) examine how Islam is commercialized in Indonesia's democratic setting, emphasizing religious symbols, forms of commodification, and their broader impacts. In contrast, Nurfudiniyah et al. (2024) examine how Zavilda TV's YouTube Channel repurposes Islam into a content strategy focused on women, turning it into a commodity to attract viewers. Religion and spirituality are no longer solely personal or sacred; they now function as marketable products and public broadcasts, acting as commodities and capital within the media's political economy. Lastly, Raya's (2025) research shows that digital media platforms provide Indonesian Muslims with novel ways to reproduce, consume, and reinterpret religious content. Rather than simply promoting Islam, digital Islam has shifted from being a religious authority to a business authority, leading to the emergence of a culture called 'digital Islamization.

In summary, the existing scholarship has examined whether the changing of pesantren management is considered as

commodification (Hidayah, 2021), Islamic commodification in advertisements (Harun (2021), Islamic symbolism within a democratic context in Indonesia (Lubis et al., 2024), a YouTube Channel that employs Islam as a commodity to draw more viewers (Nurfudiniyah et al., 2024), and digital media platforms that have turned religious authority into a business authority. However, these studies primarily examined Islamic or religious symbols used in commerce and did not explore spiritual or Sufi perspectives on commodification, particularly in the digital context.

This study fills this gap by combining the perspectives of Sufism, digital religion, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to differentiate authentic *karāma* from pseudo-*karāma*. It explores Islamic healing as a form of economic commodification. This study proposes a conceptual framework that demonstrates how Muslim magicians create algorithmic authority through the strategic use of Islamic symbols, Sufi terminology, and YouTube's platform mechanics. Therefore, the supernatural healing performed by Muslim magicians on social media does not constitute genuine *karāma*, since it conflicts with fundamental Sufi principles; it should instead be considered pseudo-*karāma*.

Commodification originates from 'commodity' and 'modification'. While commodities are goods and services with economic value, modification pertains to changes in their function or form. The process of commodification transforms the value and purpose of goods or services into commodities (Banindro, 2018). Furthermore, commodification means transforming something into a marketable product or package for commercial purposes, making it available for purchase and sale. In religious contexts, it involves converting religious values, practices, and symbols into commodities for sale to generate revenue. This process includes incorporating religious beliefs, symbols, or rituals into advertisements, products, or services to appeal to consumers. When sacred religious objects are secularized, they become commodities with market value (Sinha, 2011).

The commodification of religion has increased considerably with the advent of social media. In the past, it was primarily commercialized through TV programs such as soap operas, reality shows, and Islamic broadcasts to generate corporate income. Currently, social media has expanded this process, enabling both corporations and individuals to benefit financially from it (Mawani & Mukadam, 2011; Jahan & Shabir, 2021). It is a public digital platform where anyone can appear and create content related to their interests. Many users include religious symbols in their content to reach a larger audience. Carrette and King (2005) often refer to this concept as a "spiritual supermarket"; it involves using spirituality or religion for personal and organizational advantage through media and advertising. Religion remains the most accessible way to attract people and provide validation; anything rooted in religion is considered truthful. Moreover, Indonesian society is largely religious, leading to the commercialization of religion in various forms to support economic interests in the digital era.

Social media has changed how people seek information and establish authority, including in religious contexts. Nowadays, many rely on platforms like YouTube for their diverse content and ease of access. As a result, individuals and religious content creators can now build authority through unconventional methods that often differ from traditional norms (Turner & Nasir, 2013). This phenomenon is known as "algorithmic authority," in which individuals gain reputation and influence through social media rather than traditional religious institutions. This authority often comes from religious digital creatives, a new type of religious leader who attains public influence online by strategically leveraging digital media. These digital creatives influence not through traditional leadership, formal training, or religious expertise, but through their digital communication skills. Their rise challenges conventional notions of authority within contemporary religious communities and organizations (Campbell, 2024). For instance, it includes people who gain popularity on social media through their preaching (da'wah) or

celebrities who suddenly step into preaching roles. They often lack deep Islamic knowledge, unlike a *kiai* (Muslim cleric) or an ulama, who gain authority through years of study at a pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding school) and similar institutions. As a result, their religious authority largely depends on their digital communication skills, as demonstrated by their large online followings.

Similarly, Muslim magicians perform similar acts to assert their authority (Urban, 2022). Their digital communication skills and use of religious symbols are often believed to aid in curing diseases. Social media, functioning as a marketplace, enables them to leverage viewers' interest in alternative healing by performing magical tricks (Karanja et al., 2019; Maola & Al-Hasani, 2023). Unfortunately, as people's interest increased, many came to believe in these figures. Consequently, they draw thousands to millions of viewers and subscribers, turning into alternative channels for healing. This misuse of religious symbols, combined with magical tricks, has altered the role and importance of religion. Sacred religion has been reduced to a materialistic pursuit driven by the desire for financial profit (Chang, 2019).

Among notable Muslim magicians are Gus Samsudin, Ningsih Tinampi, Ustadz Dhanu, and Ujang Busthomi, who promote alternative healing on their social media. Samsudin, also known as Gus Samsudin Jadab from Lampung, moved to East Java. The title "Gus" usually indicates a son of a *kiai* in Javanese Muslim tradition; however, he is not from a *kiai* family lineage and uses it to mean being a good son. His claims about studying religious science are unconvincing. Samsudin manages Padepokan Nur Dzat Sejati in Blitar, called Pesantren Nurusy Syifa' Nusantara (Ponpes Nuswantoro). His YouTube channel, Mbah Den (Sariden), has 1.88 million subscribers and over 763,115,672 views on 3,827 videos since 2019 (Mbah Den (Sariden), 2025). Meanwhile, Ningsih Tinampi from Lebaksari, Pandaan, Pasuruan, East Java, claims to have supernatural powers after her husband's infidelity (Ningsih Tinampi, 2019a). She was told she had unique abilities after consulting shamans for her household issues (Fitria et al., 2024).

She is now known for curing various diseases and has become popular on social media. Since launching her YouTube channel on August 7, 2018, she has posted 10,230 videos with 874,647,407 views and 3.69 million subscribers (Ningsih Tinampi, 2025).

Then, Ujang Busthomi, also known as Muhammad Ujang Busthomi, was born in Cirebon. In 2013, he founded a Padepokan Anti Galau in his hometown. He is known as a spiritual expert specializing in addressing supernatural issues, including black magic and sorcery (Huda & Bustomi, 2024). Busthomi often uploads videos about the supernatural on his YouTube channel, Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon. Some videos show him performing *ruqyah* (Islamic exorcism) on patients. Since January 12, 2020, he has attracted 7,610 subscribers, produced 3,660 videos, and garnered over 2.24 billion views (Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon, 2025a). Lastly, Djoko Ismanu Herlambang, known as Ustadz Dhanu, was born in Pati and studied civil engineering at the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) in Yogyakarta. He often appears on the TV show *Siraman Qalbu*, discussing topics beyond healing treatments, including incurable diseases, spiritual issues, and chronic illnesses linked to poor moral conduct. His official YouTube channel has attracted 1.57 million subscribers and features 1,033 videos with more than 193,863,076 views since it started on January 18, 2016 (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2025a).

Miracle is a concept deeply ingrained in Islam, especially in Sufism. *Karāma*, meaning "the ability to perform miracles," represents a divine blessing bestowed upon God's chosen servant. The Arabic term *karāma* derives from *karuma*, meaning "noble," and denotes being endowed with virtue, protected, and free from immorality (Ma'luf, 1986). It derives from one of Allah's names (*asmā' al-husnā*), specifically *al-Karīm*, meaning "the Most Glorious." In technical terms, it refers to a privilege granted to a devout Muslim, endowing them with supernatural powers and exceptional abilities to perform unusual or illogical actions (Webb et al., 2014). *Karāma* is generally recognized by the public as a miraculous sign attributed to a saint, which helps promote the

spread of Islam (Masduki, 2016). It is exclusively granted to those who enjoy performing good deeds, follow the Prophet's sunnah, and possess qualities highly esteemed by Allah. The Muslim endowed with *karāma* is regarded as a chosen individual, akin to a *wālī*, a lover of Allah (Richardson, 2021). The five senses of ordinary people limit their ability to understand *karāma* (Hakiki & Kesuma, 2018). A Muslim endowed with *karāma* is considered a revered figure filled with divine glory. Thus, *karāma* arises from two foundations: preserving faith (taqwā) in Allah and following the Prophet's teachings both physically and spiritually (al-Randī, n.d.; al-Syarqāwī, n.d.; al-Sakandarī, 1998).

Ibn 'Athāillāh (d. 1309 AD), a renowned Sufi, describes various saints' *karāma*, including instant movement, walking on water, flying, foretelling future events, revealing unseen matters, producing out-of-season fruit, emitting water without digging, taming animals, praying for rain, and fasting (al-Sakandarī, 1974). These privileges beyond human laws come from an obedient servant (ṣālih) who follows the sharia and the Prophet's sunnah, supported by sincere beliefs ('aqīda) and good deeds (al-Bājūrī, 1983). However, ulama warn against deception by extraordinary events. Mahmūd Syaltūt (d. 1963 AD) criticizes those who misinterpret *karāma*, stating that claiming to see the unseen, predict the future, or use shamanism or evil spirits is not *karāma* but magic or sorcery (Syaltūt, n.d.; Muhammad et al., 2021). *Karāma* for saints should not be revealed or commercialized but serve to help individuals draw closer to God. Abū Yazīd al-Buṣṭāmī (d. 874 AD) advises not to be impressed by supernatural feats until we see how they obey Allah and avoid His prohibitions (Taymiyyah, 2001).

In addition, Shaykh Abū al-'Abbas al-Mursī (d. 1287 AD) said greatness is not about folding the earth to reach Mecca quickly, but about inwardly aligning one's qualities with Allah. Thus, *karāma* does not come from ordinary people. Such miracles were granted only to the pious Muslims and should not be disclosed unless urgent. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166 AD) says Muslims should distrust claims of walking on water or flying, since

birds can fly and fish can swim. People should understand that extraordinary phenomena can occur beyond ordinary understanding, so as not to be misled by magic (al-Sakandarī, 2000; al-Randī, n.d.).

However, *karāma* differs from *muʿjizah* (prophetic miracle), which are extraordinary events granted to prophets by Allah as proof of their prophethood. While every *muʿjizah* is extraordinary, not all extraordinary events are *muʿjizah*. For instance, Prophet Musa and Prophet Isa raised the dead by Allah's permission. Another phenomenon is *istidrāj*, which may resemble *karāma* but leads away from God by fostering pride, deception, and corruption rather than spiritual closeness. Likewise, *siḥr* (magic) involves supernatural acts achieved through learned practices, often involving jinn or other malevolent entities, primarily for deception, manipulation, or material gain. Therefore, *siḥr* is explicitly forbidden in Islam. However, Islam approves legitimate spiritual healing, such as *ruqyah*, which uses Qur'anic verses, authentic prophetic supplications, and other Islamic invocations (Muhtaroğlu, 2009). In both ancient and modern Indonesia, *kiai* were believed to possess supernatural powers, such as healing, in addition to their roles in religious teaching.

Furthermore, *pesantren*, which are usually managed by *kiai*, served as a center for Islamic learning and spreading authoritative Islam, legitimizing *kiai*'s supernatural abilities used to oppose the Dutch colonialists (Bruinessen, 1995). In Indonesia, a *kiai* is regarded as someone capable of addressing issues ranging from Fiqh to healing (Huda, 2013). Overall, any extraordinary phenomenon that violates Islamic teachings or sharia principles cannot be considered genuine *karāma*; rather, it should be interpreted as pseudo-*karāma*.

Table 1. *Comparison of extraordinary phenomena in Islam*

Concept	Source	Recipient / Practitioner	Sharia Viewpoint	Purpose
<i>Muʿjizah</i>	Allah	Prophets	Aligned with sharia principles.	Confirmation of the prophetic mission
<i>Sihr</i> (Magic)	Human practice, often involving jinn	Magicians	Explicitly forbidden in Islam.	Deception, manipulation or pursuit of worldly benefits
<i>Istidrāj</i>	Allah	Sinful individuals	Disobedience despite exceptional ability	A trial rather than divine approval
Legitimate Islamic healing practices	Qur'an, Sunnah, and permissible medical knowledge	Qualified practitioners	Fully consistent with sharia	Physical and spiritual well-being
<i>Karāma</i>	Allah	Pious Muslims (<i>awliyāʾ</i>)	Fully consistent with sharia	Deepening faith and fostering a closer relationship with Allah
Pseudo- <i>karāma</i>	Human manipulation or disputed claims	Self-proclaimed spiritual healers	Frequently not aligned with sharia	Popularity, influence, or monetary benefit

B. Method

This study examines Muslim magicians who showcase supernatural healing on their YouTube channels and are often misunderstood as practicing the saint's *karāma*. Using the netnography approach, data were gathered primarily through observation of social media activity, focusing on four YouTube channels of Gus Samsudin, Ningsih Tinampi, Ustadz Dhanu, and Ujang Busthomi that feature content on alternative healing.

Netnography was employed to analyze online interactions and socio-cultural dynamics (Kozinets, 2002). The data were selected based on purposive sampling, using three criteria: (1) videos with more than 150,000 views, (2) explicit focus on healing via supernatural or spiritual powers, and (3) accessibility during the collection period. The results found 25 videos published between 2019 and 2025. The analysis included video content, verbal narratives, thumbnails, and audience comments.

Table 2. *Muslim magicians showcasing supernatural healing*

Channels	Number of Videos	Observation Period	Selection Criteria	Types of Data
Gus Samsudin	5	2019 – 2025	≥150,000 views	Video, comments, thumbnails
Ningsih Tinampi	7	2019 – 2025	≥150,000 views	Video, comments, thumbnails
Ustadz Dhanu	8	2019 – 2025	≥150,000 views	Video, comments, thumbnails
Ujang Busthomi	5	2019 – 2025	≥150,000 views	Video, comments, thumbnails

The data were analyzed through Van Dijk's (2015) CDA in three stages. First, all videos were carefully watched and transcribed multiple times. Next, the information was thematically coded into five categories: constructing religious authority, performing supernatural healing, monetizing Islamic symbols, audience vulnerability, and distorting Sufi concepts. Finally, these themes were interpreted using Van Dijk's (2015) CDA to explore how Muslim magicians employ communication strategies, language, and visuals to establish what Campbell calls "algorithmic authority" (Campbell, 2024). CDA views power as control over the structures of context, text, or talk, thereby indirectly influencing people's minds (Van Dijk, 1993; Van Dijk,

2015). This study also employs semiotic analysis to examine the visualization used by those Muslim magicians. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing video content with classical and modern Sufi texts, media reports, and expert opinions from Sufism and Islamic theology scholars to determine whether these performances align with the theological traits of genuine *karāma*.

Table 3. *Coding framework*

Theme	Indicators	Data Source
Construction of religious authority	Using Islamic accessories, reciting Qur'anic verses, Arabic/Islamic expressions, communication with angel/prophet, etc.	Video transcript and observation
Performing supernatural healing	Subduing jinn, black magic, sorcery	Spoken discourse
Monetization of Islamic symbols	Selling staff, such as prayer beads, agate rings, <i>ijazah</i> , proving their efficacy by themselves	Video transcript and observation
Patient and audience engagement	Likes, comments, crying, testimonials, gratitude	Video content and comments
Distortion of Sufi concept	Showing off (<i>riyā</i>), seeking profit (monetization), excessive claims (communicating with angels and prophets), exposing women's sensuality, etc.	Video observation

C. Results and Discussion

1. Muslim Magicians' Construction of Religious Authority

The landscape of religious authority in the digital age has shifted dramatically. Traditionally, religious authority was rooted

in long-established institutions such as schools, universities, and pesantren, culminating in figures with deep religious expertise. Today, however, religious authority is often determined by social media metrics such as followers, views, or likes. Algorithms tend to prioritize popularity over factual accuracy, making it easy for anyone to gain prominence regardless of their religious knowledge or intellectual capacity. Those with digital performing skills can quickly go viral, while even knowledgeable but less creative individuals may be overshadowed. The rise of suddenly prominent Islamic preachers (da'i) exemplifies this trend. Sadly, the public often consumes viral content indiscriminately, struggling to distinguish between credible religious figures and merely popular digital personalities (Raya, 2025).

Muslim magicians use a similar strategy to justify their religious legitimacy. With over a million followers, their content, including healing services, can easily go viral. They do not need extensive religious knowledge; simply appearing religious suffices. They often use religious symbols such as robes, prayer beads, caps, agate rings, and Quranic calligraphy, as displayed by Busthomi, which are popular among Muslims not only as jewelry but also as signs of piety. By displaying these items, they present themselves as devout. Additionally, to show their connection to a spiritual teacher, they might display pictures of notable scholars or ulama. For instance, Samsudin displayed a picture of Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama, in his content, implying a spiritual lineage, though it is unclear whether he is under Kiai Hasyim's guidance and teaching (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab), 2021). In the digital realm, there is no space for such clarifications; the audience focuses solely on the visual presentation. Consequently, Muslim magicians employ visual images as a strategy to assert their religious authority and influence viewers.

Using religious language further affirms their spiritual authority. Samsudin, for instance, claims to possess the *karāma* of Shaikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. Their practices also include beginning with *ṣalawāt* (blessing supplication) for the Prophet,

reciting Surah al-Fatiha, and reciting the *shahāda* or Islamic testimony of faith (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab), 2021). These elements elevate them beyond mere healers to figures with spiritual legitimacy, rooted in religious authority rather than medical expertise. Additionally, these practices suggest that the magicians are devout Muslims. From an algorithmic perspective, repeated visualizations and linguistic rituals enhance audience trust and reinforce the perceived authenticity of their supernatural claims.

2. Audience Vulnerability

Many people are quickly attracted to alternative healing methods promoted on social media because they are often vulnerable in multiple ways. Firstly, they tend to distrust or doubt conventional medical treatments (Styers, 2004; Webb et al., 2014). Patients frequently experiment with medical treatments without achieving tangible results, fostering skepticism towards conventional healing. Chronic illnesses that endure over time demand quick solutions, making alternative therapies highly attractive. Furthermore, many people consider traditional or alternative options to be more cost-effective than standard medical care (Pradipta et al., 2023). This option is more practical for low-income families. Additionally, alternative healing is thought to cause fewer side effects and is strongly connected to cultural traditions handed down through generations.

Second, the presence of Muslim magicians on social media may offer hope to ordinary people with limited religious knowledge who seek quick solutions to their problems (Lone, 2022). Their performances, featuring religious symbols such as caps, turbans, prayer beads, and robes, emphasize their healing powers. This approach works particularly well for audiences who have limited knowledge of religious texts. Phrases like 'with Allah's permission' or the concept of *karāma* help strengthen the audience's trust in Muslim magicians' abilities.

Third, individuals also experience spiritual vulnerability. Situations like serious illness, personal failure, or deep depression often led them to seek spiritual explanations. This is especially common among those believed to be affected by black magic. Malinowski suggests that magic emerges from emotional stress during critical times, especially when people feel uncertain or powerless about important life issues such as death, hidden suffering, or hatred. He notes that magic offers a sense of agency and control, helping to fill the gaps left by limited rational understanding and practical skills (Malinowski, 1948). Furthermore, in an era of mechanistic routines characterized by complex and interconnected human problems (Hodgson, 2000), a focus on rational and empirical aspects has left the human spiritual side vulnerable to exploitation (Archer, 1991).

Fourth, positive experiences and testimonials shared among family, relatives, and close friends strengthen the impact of alternative healing. Moreover, social media has further increased the popularity of this trend in today's digital age (Febriyanti et al., 2024). The popularity of viral videos on alternative healing across digital platforms shapes public perceptions and beliefs about their effectiveness. High-view videos with thousands of subscribers, comments, and trending status often lead audiences to trust their accuracy. Nevertheless, the algorithm primarily measures engagement metrics rather than the content's correctness or truthfulness.

Finally, psychologically, some individuals prefer alternative treatments because they tend to offer more personal and intimate interactions between practitioners and patients. This differs from conventional medical environments, which are typically more formal and less adaptable (Kimura & Nakamura, 2020). The sounds of patients crying, families recovering quickly, and dramatic music influence a person's psychological state. Religious symbols and claims of supernatural powers strengthen their spiritual and religious authority. Simultaneously, healing stories such as quick recoveries, testimonials, and emotional appeals build trust and hope in audiences. Together, these elements

motivate vulnerable individuals to seek alternative healing methods promoted on social media.

Audience comments reveal a highly positive reaction, showing strong admiration for Muslim magicians' capabilities. One viewer admitted they could learn a great deal from Tinampi, gaining valuable knowledge and confidence in handling supernatural entities. Another commented that, with God's blessing, Tinampi will always be able to treat patients affected by black magic, and prayed for her long, healthy life (Ningsih Tinampi, 2023a). A follower from Samsudin's channel mentioned that his shop has become busier and more popular since he started practicing the *ṣalawāt* taught by him. Additionally, a supporter of Samsudin shared that since following his content, he has experienced more kindness, increased knowledge, a peaceful heart, and unexpected good fortune (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab, 2024). These varied responses highlight the audience's admiration and affection for Muslim magicians' content, with thousands of mostly positive comments on each piece. At the same time, the comments indicate that people were vulnerable to supernatural healing and believed in the effectiveness of their healing method.

In addition, AM, a professor and scholar specializing in Sufism, shares his opinion on those beliefs within society.

Our society is still largely uneducated. Many view occultism as a link to the source, but this source can be divine or demonic. Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between *nūr* and *nār*, which are ontologically distinct and have opposite effects. *Nār* is destructive, while *nūr* is beneficial. *Nūr* embodies angelic qualities, whereas *nār* is linked to demonic forces. (AM, personal communication, November 2025)

3. Muslim Magicians' Performance of Supernatural Healing

Muslim magicians conduct supernatural healing to gain public trust. Their services include assisting individuals affected

by black magic, sorcery, witchcraft, or other spiritual problems. For example, Samsudin performs *ruqyah* to exorcise jinn or black magic and claims to have *Ilmu Kulhugeni* for treating chronic illnesses and spiritual issues. Similarly, Ningsih Tinampi states her ability to heal various conditions, such as black magic, sorcery, jinn disturbances, headaches, chest and stomach problems, cancer, shortness of breath, and domestic trauma (Ningsih Tinampi, 2019b). Through her *'Ilm Ghaib al-Fatihah*, she asserts she can instantly cure diseases (Ningsih Tinampi, 2023a; Ningsih Tinampi, 2020a). Meanwhile, Busthomi performs prayers using Quranic verses such as Surah Al-Falaq and An-Nas to remove jinn or black magic, combining spiritual rites with wisdom. He provides an *ijāzah* (authorization) used to invite good luck and to identify spirits (*khodam*) within sacred objects. The ritual involves reciting the *shahāda* three times, *ṣalawāt*, and reciting Surah Al-Ikhlās while holding the object in one breath. He claims that those who receive this *ijāzah* will gain authority or attraction (Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon, 2020a).

In contrast, Dhanu adopts a different perspective, highlighting the theological belief that sin directly causes adversity and illness. He explains that all suffering and health problems stem from a person's past wrongdoings, linking various illnesses to immoral behavior. Essentially, he sees these health issues as consequences of sin, making direct links between particular diseases and specific sins (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2023c). He argues that harmful behaviors can cause a range of health problems like hemorrhoids, strokes, infertility, delayed marriage, cancer, hypertension, diabetes, and kidney failure. It is noted that kidney failure may result from persistent anger, regardless of age, especially anger directed toward a parent (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2023b).

Instead of traditional therapeutic sessions, healing rituals are now being adapted into digital performances for online viewers. Strategic camera angles, emotional expressions, and narrative flows craft an impression of genuine supernatural intervention. Scenes often depict the patient crying, screaming, or

in a trance. To emphasize their supernatural authority, Muslim magicians typically claim the patient is influenced by black magic, jinn interference, or malevolent others. Close-ups of the patient's face, combined with evocative music, heighten the viewer's emotions. This is the emotional core, where viewers' feelings are stirred, often followed by supportive narration in the comment section, such as "Hopefully Ustadz is always healthy," "Oh Allah, I have goosebumps," or "Oh Allah, pity the patient" (Ningsih Tinampi, 2019b).

During the healing process, healers frequently use religious language as mantras, such as reciting Surah Al-Fatihah, Quranic verses, *ṣalawāt*, dhikr (remembrance of God), or phrases like "with Allah's permission." These expressions serve to reinforce religious credibility. The video content will ultimately depict patients recovering, emphasizing that no patient is beyond cure (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2020). Regardless of the illness, all can be healed. Consequently, the videos will always feature scenes showing the patient's condition before and after treatment. Patients often share testimonials about their recovery, but there is no scientific proof that these individuals had the disease and recovered. All claims are based solely on patients' confessions and testimonials. All the healing scenes aim to demonstrate the abilities of Muslim magicians and to influence the audience, so that they are also interested and consider Muslim magicians as a reference for treatment.

4. Monetization of Islamic Symbols

The monetization strategy employed by these Muslim magicians is the sale of Islamic accessories or heirlooms, such as a turban, prayer beads, perfume, honey, and a *keris* or traditional asymmetrical dagger (Hua, 2022). These objects are believed to possess supernatural powers, often blessed through prayers or blessings from magicians. They are advertised as tools to cure illnesses, enhance business success, attract wealth, and bring good luck. For example, Samsudin promotes red oil, claiming it can

activate supernatural abilities in sacred heirlooms like rings and turbans, and even in people. He says that when these objects are anointed with the oil, and with Allah's permission, they become more potent. Additionally, he mentions that rubbing oil on money can help attract wealth more easily, suggesting that the oil helps attract sustenance (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab), 2025b).

Samsudin also sells a prayer bead called *Tasbih Asma Sir*, which he often gives to his students to emphasize its spiritual significance. His collection of sacred items includes the *Tasbih Liwung Macan*, *Tasbih Terompah Macan Putih*, *Tasbih Galih Kelor*, and a *Galih Kelor* ring believed to protect against misfortune, relieve physical discomfort, and ward off evil spirits or jinn. Besides, participating in the spiritual practice or *amalan* authorized by Samsudin requires a fee of over IDR 5 million, which covers the cost of the sacred items involved. He states that these fees are not only for himself but also to support his disciples at his lodge, *padepokan* (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab), 2025a).

Furthermore, Samsudin said that he is willing to offer his services whenever invited, even if it is by only one person. He said:

My services do not have to be performed at home. I am willing to visit your residence for those who seek spiritual practices (*amalan*). For example, if a group of five or ten people contributes, I am prepared to come to Lombok, Bali, or other locations. The oils I provide are intended for that purpose (*amalan*). (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab), 2025b)

Similar to Samsudin, Busthomi also offers unique prayer beads believed to ward off anxiety, prevent disasters, and detect spirits. He also sells rings and necklaces with mantras that can be used to identify *khodam* and to attain either authority (for strong energy) or compassion (for weak energy). He sells *keris* for supernatural protection. These items are usually sold as a package

with a *khodam ijāzah* for IDR 500.000 to IDR 2.000.000 (Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon, 2020a).

Contrary to selling heirlooms or spiritual accessories, Dhanu emphasizes prayer and *ijāzah* in his practice. In addition to producing content for his YouTube channel, he hosts a TV show, *Siraman Qolbu*, which airs every morning, and where he claims to cure various illnesses. One case involved a woman experiencing symptoms such as excessive sweating, shortness of breath, and body aches, which he attributes to supernatural interference or jinn possession. He asserts that these symptoms will vanish after the jinn is expelled, demonstrating his ability to communicate with the jinn within her and to perform an exorcism. The woman is declared healed immediately afterward (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2020).

Overall, these Muslim magicians employ similar strategies, using religious symbols to attract followers. They ensure their audience sees them wearing these items, not just selling them. They also claimed to have personally proven the efficacy of those objects (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2023a). Their ability to elicit positive reactions from netizens indicates a shift in how religious authority is perceived in the digital age. Unlike traditional methods, where authority was rooted in formal religious institutions and extensive scholarly training, such as *kiai* in pesantren, digital platforms now allow individuals to quickly and independently establish authority. As noted by Campbell (2024), the digital realm allows anyone to claim authority, even in religious contexts. Muslim practitioners use Islamic terminology and symbols strategically to legitimize their knowledge by linking it to Islamic teachings.

According to CDA, this practice can be seen as an effort to shape viewers' perceptions (Van Dijk, 2015). This phenomenon also reflects a widespread interest in religious matters. However, such commodification of religion ultimately alienates people from the core teachings of Islam. Adam (2019) argues that this process of religious commodification reduces Islamic teachings to mere

commodities, manipulated for personal or commercial gain. In the absence of adequate religious literacy, people are unable to distinguish between authentic and fabricated information, making them vulnerable to exploitation by those Muslim magicians.

5. Distortion of Sufi Concepts of *Karāma*

The supernatural healing by Muslim magicians contradicts the Sufi concept of *karāma*. Samsudin claims to own *Asmā' Karāmah Sultān Awliyā'* of Sheikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, which he says is used for protection, such as guarding homes and shops, and for healing. He often issues authorization online or via streaming sessions. His followers usually reply with comments like "Qabiltu", meaning "I accept" (Mbah Den 2 (Gus Samsudin Jadab), 2025a). Additionally, Samsudin frequently exhibits unusual habits; for example, he consistently avoids wearing sandals or shoes, even in scorching weather. This behavior reflects the *karāma* of Shaikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, as he claims.

Meanwhile, in one of her claims, Tinampi stated she could communicate with angels and prophets. She also claimed that during each healing session, angels always accompanied and protected her (TransTV Official, 2020). She also demonstrated her alleged ability to communicate with the followers of the *Dajjāl* (Ningsih Tinampi, 2023b; Ningsih Tinampi, 2020b). Similarly, Busthomi's controversy stems from his claims of abilities, such as the ability to subdue *jinn* (Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon, 2020b). Much of his content focuses on supernatural abilities and mystical competitions, including encounters with sorcerers such as Nyai Roro Kidul and Queen Bilqis (Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon, 2025b). Busthomi's content is unique, frequently featuring themes of female sensuality and scenes often deemed inappropriate for their explicit portrayal of women's bodies (Kang Ujang Busthomi Cirebon, 2023). It might be his deliberate strategy to attract viewers.

Similar to Busthomi, Dhanu demonstrates his skill in communicating with the *jinn* within his patients. He also claims to

be able to guide and convert these jinn to Islam effortlessly (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2025b). Another debate revolves around whether Imam Mahdi already exists. Dhanu said that al-Mahdī is currently in Madinah but has not publicly revealed himself, choosing to stay hidden. He is said to be forty years old. Dhanu explains that this information was received from a friend who saw a bright light fall onto a mosque on a specific night during Ramadan. Dhanu sees this as a sign of al-Mahdī's presence. One follower even believes Dhanu personally witnessed this event, but he humbly credits his friend for the account (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2022). Finally, in his TV show, he revealed to his audience that *Dajjāl* was present inside Dhanu's patient (Ustadz Dhanu - Official Channel, 2021).

Despite widespread praise, the concept of *karāma*, as popularly understood, contradicts Sufi principles. In Sufism, first, *karāma* is not meant for public showcase or social media attention. A true *wālī* or Sufi conceals their *karāma* to avoid self-glorification and stresses genuine devotion, steering clear of any personal cult (Kurniawan et al., 2019). The so-called Muslim magicians often showcase their magic (*riya*), frequently decorated with religious symbols, and claim it as *karāma*. They seek fame rather than the quiet, sincere journey of a genuine spiritual seeker (*sālik*). Their social media followers indicate their craving for popularity. Dhanu's TV program, *Siraman Qolbu*, on MNCTV mainly aims to increase TV ratings. In 2020, KPI (Indonesian Broadcasting Commission) warned it for being misleading and unscientific (Wulandari, 2020).

Second, true *karāma* should not be exploited for monetary profit (Kurniawan et al., 2019). These Muslim magicians, offering alternative healing, earn large profits. They charge for treatments and sell Islamic accessories such as oils, rings, prayer beads, turbans, and *keris*, claiming that these bring good luck. Their persuasive rhetoric convinces followers that these items can influence wealth and safety, making purchases seem worthwhile. Followers, impressed by their skills, respond favorably.

Third, their excessive claims undermine both logical and religious validity. While *karāma* is beyond reason, assertions that one can summon prophets or angels today, something even pious Muslims cannot do, are illogical (Kurniawan et al., 2019). Examples include Tinampi claiming she is always with angels. They can summon prophets, Dhanu communicating with *jinn* and recognizing al-Mahdī, Samsudin claiming Sheikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī's *karāma*, and Busthomi using women's bodies in his content, conflicting with Sufi ethics. SM, the caretaker of Pesantren Roudlotus Saidiyyah Kalialang, shares his opinion about Samsudin.

I knew Samsudin when he was at Pesantren Condromowo in Ngawi. Mbah Hamid did not recognize him as a disciple because of his bad behavior. Additionally, SM said that *karāma* results from *riyāda* (spiritual discipline), fasting, and persistent worship. It should not be showcased or used to boast. Anyone claiming to have *karāma* should be scrutinized, as such a claim must depend on others' testimony. Usually, one should not brag about it; others will mention it instead. What goes viral on social media is often a camera trick or a scheme to make money. This might be a deception by satan, *ghurūr*. (SM, personal communication, November, 2025)

Some ulama and Muslim leaders have also criticized them. K.H. Ahmad Fahrur Rozi of Nahdlatul Ulama advised caution in trusting magicians, emphasizing that they are different from *wālī*. Magicians perform tricks, while *wālī* have *karāma*, shown through knowledge and righteous deeds, not strange displays. Those with *karāma* follow the Prophet's sunnah and shari'ah, with proper religious practice being the key criterion. The Prophet instructs *ṣalāt* and virtuous conduct, not bizarre phenomena. Actions not aligned with the sunnah do not make someone a saint, even if they perform miracles (Patoni, 2025). A similar opinion comes from Kiai Cholil Nafis, Vice Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), who says those Muslim magicians are straying from Islamic teachings, as no one can knowingly communicate with Prophet

Muhammad. Even close companions could not contact him after his death. Prophet Muhammad cannot be seen in reality; if he could, he would have appeared to his companions, such as Umar ibn al-Khattab, who doubted his death (Saputra, 2020). AM, a professor and scholar specializing in Sufism, also shares his opinion.

Karāma differs from witchcraft as it signifies a dignity bestowed upon a beloved servant. Those endowed with *karāma* must conceal it once it is known; openly demonstrating it, such as on live streams, disqualifies it from being genuine. *Riyā*, or showing off, ranks among the most harmful traits (*ummahātul muhlikat*), along with pride and jealousy. According to *Tuḥfat al-Murīd*, a person whose *karāma* is not as evident after death as during life is not considered a true *wālī* (*fa laysa bi ṣādiqin*). It is impossible to verify *karāma* while the person is alive. Not every act of special dignity qualifies as *karāma*, especially those motivated by commercial interests. *Karāma* is a mark of nobility and a gift from Allah. The highest form is steadfastness (*istiḳāma*), demonstrated through piety (*taqwā*). As Allah says, *inna akramakum 'indallāhi atqākum* (Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous [God-conscious] among you). (AM, personal communication, November, 2025)

Further, MLH, the caretaker of Pesantren Az Zuhri Salafiyah Ketileng Semarang and the Chief of the Martial Arts Organization (Pagar Nusa) affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama of Central Java, also commented on this matter.

In Sufism, *karāma* is a well-known concept that strengthens faith. However, in today's digital age, many have deviated, being misled, disrespecting *kiai*, or using tricks for profit. Genuine *karāma* appears naturally and does not depend on extra rituals, mantras, or recitations; it occurs instantly. As the Javanese saying goes: "sabdo tanpa dongo". However, many current practices involve digital content with mantras. Crucially, *karāma* requires *istiḳāma*; pursuing supernatural powers or specific rituals does not fulfill this. Therefore, *istiḳāma* is preferable to a thousand

karāma, for *al-istiqāma khoirun min alfi karāma* (being consistent in faith and obedience is better than a thousand *karāma*). (MLH, personal communication, November, 2025).

The commodification of magic and *karāma*, discussed in this study, resembles practices in Christianity and Hinduism. In Christianity, the American televangelist Peter Popoff is known for promising "miracle healing" and selling "miracle water" to protect followers and bring prosperity, often advising them to drink the water only after divine guidance (Carrier, 2009). Similarly, in India, spiritual guru Asaram Bapu claimed supernatural powers (*siddhis*) to attract followers but was later jailed for rape and fraud (Copeman et al., 2023; Lucia, 2022). Practices such as faith healing and *siddhis* are recognized and openly practiced in Christianity and Hinduism, whereas *karāma* is a secret, fundamental aspect of Sufism. However, those concepts have been misunderstood today.

The widespread use of alternative healing practices and the public's preference for them indicate a decline in trust in the *ulama* and *kiai* (Setiyani, 2020). Influential figures like Ningsih Tinampi, Gus Samsudin, Ustadz Dhanu, and Ujang Busthomi, who derive authority from social media, divert attention from the traditional scholarship of the *ulama* or *kiai*. These social media-savvy magicians generate engaging non-medical healing content that attracts more viewers than conservative *kiai*, who rarely produce such content and often avoid it. These magicians offer quick fixes for complex problems, attracting many, especially the desperate or those without access to healthcare. Javanese mystical traditions support their claims by blending Islam with local customs, unlike the more strictly sharia-following *kiai* (Rubaidi, 2019; Smith, 2020). Again, limited digital literacy also makes it difficult for the public to distinguish genuine *ulama* from magicians, who rely on tricks.

D. Conclusion

This study shows that Muslim magicians on social media build religious authority by strategically using Islamic symbols, supernatural healing performances, and algorithm-driven audience engagement. Instead of aligning with the traditional Sufi idea of *karāma*, these digital acts are better described as pseudo-*karāma*, since they depend on public supernatural claims, emotional appeals, and commercial spiritual narratives. This study also reveals how platform algorithms boost religious legitimacy by turning visibility, engagement, and popularity into perceived spiritual authority. It offers a modern theological distinction between *karāma* and pseudo-*karāma* in online settings. Additionally, it extends digital religion studies by illustrating how algorithmic authority shapes Islamic religious authority beyond traditional institutions, and by discussing the commodification of religion, showing how Islamic symbols and spiritual stories gain economic value within platform-based digital ecosystems.

The results underscore the importance of Islamic institutions, scholars, and educators in improving digital religious literacy. They should assist Muslim communities in differentiating authentic Islamic teachings from unverified supernatural claims online. Additionally, religious figures and organizations ought to strengthen their online presence to provide trustworthy theological guidance and encourage responsible engagement with religious content. Raising awareness of traditional Islamic concepts such as *karāma*, *siḥr*, *istidrāj*, and *ruqyah* can help curb the spread of false spiritual narratives and promote more critical digital consumption. Nonetheless, this study examines only selected YouTube channels and primarily focuses on public digital content. Future research could analyze multiple social media platforms, explore audience responses through interviews or surveys, and study how algorithms influence the spread and trustworthiness of digital spiritual authority across various Muslim communities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Ethic Statement

This study reviews accessible content on official YouTube channels, avoiding direct interaction with creators or viewers. It adheres to ethical standards for internet research by using online materials only for academic reasons. To minimize reputational risks, it analyzes publicly shared narratives, religious claims, and media practices instead of personal judgments or private traits. The aim is to critically examine publicly available content through the lenses of digital religion, Sufism, and CDA frameworks. Terms like "Muslim magicians" and "pseudo-*karāma*" are used as research categories, not judgments about beliefs or character.

Funding

The authors did not receive any grant to conduct this research.

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