

Hadrah Group Leader Strategy in Disseminating the Selawat Concert Model in Indonesia Through Digital Media

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Abstract

This article examines the strategies of hadrah group leaders in disseminating sholawat concert models in Indonesia via digital media, focusing on three central figures based on their popularity and most high followers in digital media: Habib Syech bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf (Ahbaabul Musthofa), Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf (Az-Zahir), and KH. Hafidzul Hakim Noer (Syubbanul Muslimin). Utilizing content analysis and theories of self-presentation and mediatization, the study identifies three primary strategies employed by these leaders to expand their religious influence. First, leaders utilize Instagram for self-presentation, employing consistent visual patterns—specifically signature close-up shots in religious attire—to cultivate a charismatic “idol image” and maintain a symbolic distance that fosters “idol worship” among followers. Second, they establish stage stardom through YouTube live broadcasts, positioning themselves as “religious superstars” within professionally managed, high-production concert environments that attract massive digital fandoms. Third, consistency is reinforced through weekly regular assemblies (rutinan), which are broadcast online to solidify their status as stable religious authorities. The research concludes that sholawat concerts have transitioned from traditional pesantren spaces into a contemporary Islamic culture industry driven by the logic of social media. By blending traditional spiritual values with celebrity performance and digital aesthetics, these leaders create a form of “networked religion” where spiritual authority is negotiated through intense visual interaction, making them strategic actors in Indonesia's modern religious ecosystem.

Keywords: sholawat concert, digital media, networked religion

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Introduction

Sholawat musical performances began to be popularized by Habib Syech in 1998 through the Ahbaabul Musthofa hadrah group. This concert model features colorful lighting, balanced sound systems, and a sequence of songs with almost no breaks, making it more akin to a popular music concert than a conventional religious gathering. At that time, religious music was divided between Sufi and popular styles, with figures like Haddad Alwi, Snada, and Rhoma Irama coloring the pop-religious realm. Previously, the group Bimbo was known for turning religious poetry into songs during the 1970s–1980s. Unlike them, hadrah developed locally in pesantren and communal village spaces, rarely appearing as a main performance outside those contexts. Habib Syech successfully brought hadrah into the public sphere with a modern package while still sourcing from traditional books like *Al-Barzanji*. Songs became the center of the performance, while sermons were only minor interludes. The popularity of Ahbaabul Musthofa prompted other pesantren hadrah groups to follow this pattern. Since 2010, a “franchise-based” system has begun to be implemented, and groups such as Syubbanul Muslimin, Az-Zahir, and others have risen to prominence through digital distribution on social media platforms and the active participation of fans in disseminating selawat concert content (Rohmanda & Budiman, 2025).

Habib Syech’s official Instagram account regularly uploads concert recaps. Meanwhile, Syubbanul Muslimin and Az-Zahir conduct live broadcasts via YouTube for every performance. These three groups are the focus of this study due to their significant social media fandoms. The “Syekher Mania” (fans of Habib Syech) are influenced by his status as the founder and the franchise system. “Syubban Lovers” (fans of Syubbanul Muslimin) mostly consist of productive youths aged 15–20, influenced by the popularity of Gus Azmi, the group’s vocalist. The Az-Zahir ensemble is led by Al Habib Ali Zainal Abidin bin Assegaf, whereas Syubbanul Muslimin is headed by KH. Hafidzul Hakiem Noer.

The closeness between the leader and the group is vital to the sholawat concert ecosystem. These leaders typically have pesantren as their home base, meaning they already possessed a mass following before their groups became popular. Research by Edmond J. and Rijal suggests that “barokah” (blessings) is the primary reason thousands attend these concerts. Through these concerts, the habib (descendant of the Prophet) acts as a medium between God and the congregation due to their direct bloodline to Prophet Muhammad. However, Tambunan and Simon (2022) explain this more rationally, stating that in the modern era, the centrality of a charismatic figure is no longer tied to any moral discourse but rather their ability to negotiate individual and communal interests. Dillon (2001) also argues that postmodern thought creates space for a plurality of meanings and interpretations, thereby shifting authority from religious institutions to individuals or smaller communities. In this context, religious leaders emerge as actors who possess considerable authority and autonomy (2014, pp. 3–6). Accordingly, these actors—namely, the leaders of hadrah groups—undoubtedly employ particular strategies in promoting and disseminating selawat concerts, which this article seeks to examine and explain.

Digital media has enlivened the sholawat ecosystem, with leaders using it as a strategy to spread their ideology. As Agha (2019) notes, these concerts are not just tradition preservation but the creation of contemporary Islam facilitated by social media. Campbell (2012) describes this as the “mediatization of religion”, where digital media shapes how religion is understood and practiced, resulting in “networked religion”, a concept that encompasses virtual spaces as sites of worship and community formation, participatory rather than hierarchical engagement, fluid and flexible religious identities, the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the profane,

and global connections among individuals and communities. This article examines more closely how Habib Syech, Al Habib Ali Zainal Abidin bin Assegaf, and KH. Hafidzul Hakim Noer navigate social media in disseminating a model of selawat concerts that extends beyond mere efforts at maintaining visibility or public presence.

Methods

The author conducted content analysis on the Instagram accounts of Habib Syech, Syubbanul Muslimin, and Az-Zahir. Patterns were analyzed using Goffman's Self-Presentation, Giddens' perspective on identity, and theories regarding stardom.

Results and Discussion

After exploring the content of the three accounts designated as study objects, I identified three strategies employed by the three hadrah group leaders. This pattern appears repeatedly and has become a template that is now characteristic of the sholawat concert community in Indonesia. The sources define these three specific strategies as follows:

Self-Presentation Through Instagram

The study analyzed the personal accounts of Habib Syech (@syaikhassegaf) and Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf (@bidin_segaf_assegaf). While KH. Hafidzul Hakiem Noer does not have a public personal account, the Syubbanul Muslimin group account (@syubbanulmuslimin) follows a similar pattern in displaying his figure. The use of these accounts refers more to personal branding than promoting the hadrah groups themselves.

The first post on the @syaikhassegaf account was uploaded in 2013, while the @bidin_segaf_assegaf account dates back to 2015. However, it is not certain that they actually activated their accounts in those specific years, because the "delete post" feature allows for the possibility that earlier posts were indeed deleted. The use of these accounts by these actors refers more to their personal branding rather than promoting their respective hadrah groups. I will discuss this further using examples of the posts I have selected.

Figure 1

Habib Syech's Post in 2020



Source: Instagram account @syaikhassegaf

Figure 2
Habib Bidin's Post in 2020



Source: Instagram account @bidin_segaf_assegaf

Until 2024, this style of figures still existed, as did in Syubbanul Muslimin's account.

Figure 3
Hafied Hakim in Syubbanul Muslimin Account, September 2021



Source: Instagram account @syubbanulmuslimin

Figure 4
Hafied Hakim in Syubbanul Muslimin Account, November 2022



Source: Instagram account @syubbanulmuslimin

Post styles emphasize close-up shots of the leaders on stage. The primary focus is their “self-demeanor”—wearing white religious attire (baju koko) and head coverings while holding a wired microphone—a signature look of sholawat concerts. This consistency creates a specific pattern used to build an “idol image”. According to Giddens, identity is a “project” created to shape how others perceive an agent. Instagram serves as a pillar for this strategy, creating a boundary between the leader and fans that results in “idol worship” rather than simple parasocial relationships. Fans use the comment section to express admiration and awe (Masyaallah, Barakallah) toward a figure that appears distant from everyday life.

In the context of the self-persona displayed through close-up photos, the leaders of hadrah groups strive to engage in self-presentation. Self-presentation (Goffman, 1977) is an effort to project an image of oneself in response to external situational demands. This undertaking requires specific effort and attention from the individual.

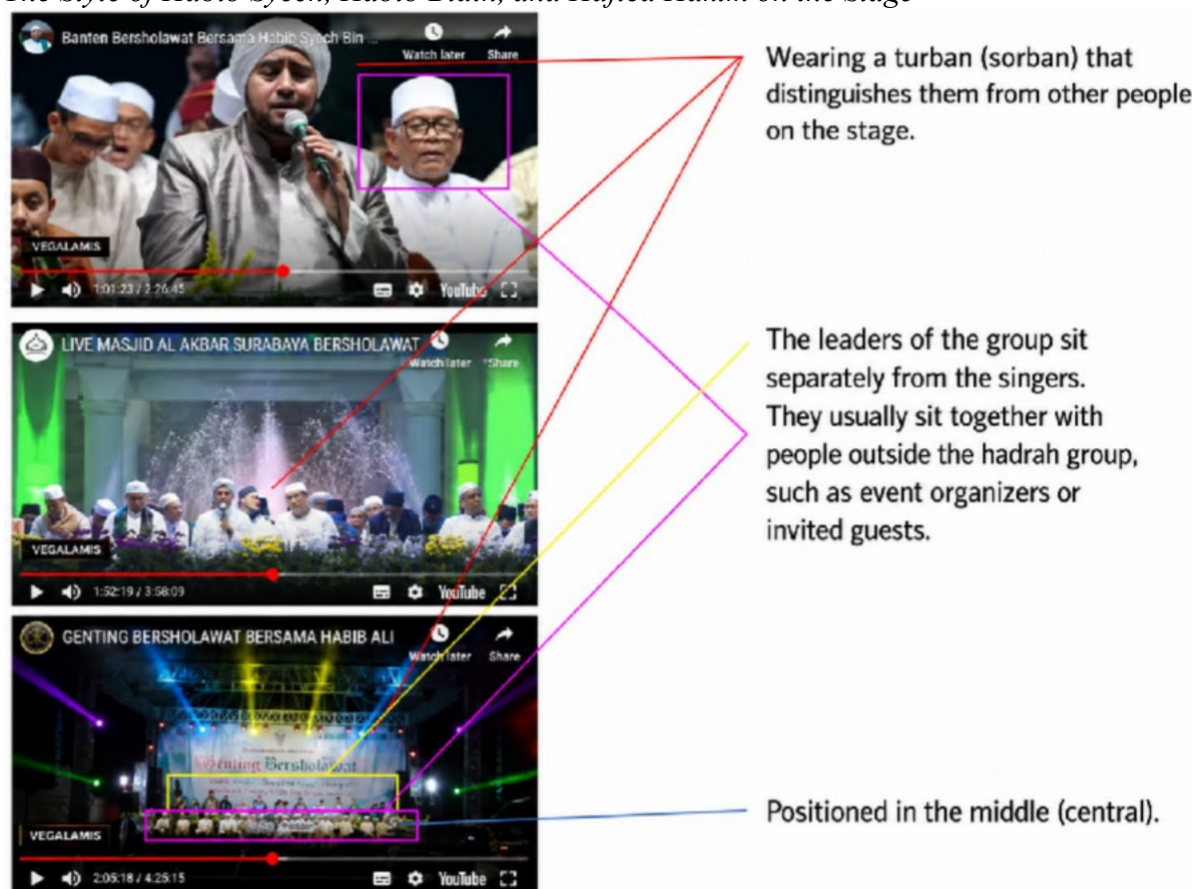
The objectives of self-presentation vary widely, potentially including intimidating others, petitioning, ingratiating, self-promoting, or providing an example (role modeling). In practicing self-presentation, the three figures discussed in this article portray themselves as an agency, projecting an image characterized by power, competence, and intelligence. This relates to the discussion of the expression-impression relationship in social communication. When someone is present in the space of others, information about them is gathered and extracted as an impression. That person may attempt to employ (verbal) deception and/or pretenses (acts). When an individual is present before others arrive, they control their activities so that the resulting impression matches their desired outcome (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2014). Thus, the agency performs impression management. Through impression management, these leaders maintain the authority constructed in physical spaces and preserve it in digital spaces. This supports the idea that the power of a *habib's* charisma influences the masses to follow their activities.

Introduction of Stage Style Through YouTube Live

Stage performances were observed through nine (9) YouTube videos from the three groups. The title of those videos are “Banten Bersholawat Bersama Habib Syech Bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf”, “Magelang Bersholawat Bersama Habib Syech Bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf”, “Wonogrio Bersholawat Bersama Syubbanul Muslimin”, “Karangsari Bersholawat dalam Rangka Memperingati Tahun Baru Islam”, “Genting Bersholawat Bersama Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf dan Majelis Az-Zahir”, “Rocket Chicken Bersholawat Bersama Habib Syech bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf”, “Darul Ehsan Bersholawat Bersama Majelis Syubbanul Muslimin”, “Masjid Al Akbar Surabaya Bersholawat Majelis Syubbanul Muslimin”, and “Azzahir Bersholawat bersama Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf Ponpes Al Fadlu 2 Kendal”. These 2–3 hour videos show the entire concert from the MC's opening to the closing. A typical concert sequence includes:

1. Opening by the MC.
2. Quranic recitation (optional).
3. Welcoming the hadrah group.
4. The group takes their positions and begins playing rebana (percussion).
5. Glamorous lighting accompanies the songs.
6. The leader (Habib/KH) enters the stage during the song “Tola'al Badru”, causing the audience to stand and cheer
7. The leader takes a central position.
8. Short sermons are given between songs.
9. The Mahalul Qiyam procession (standing to honor the Prophet's presence).
10. Closing with the national anthem, Indonesia Raya.

The entry during “Tola'al Badru” distinguishes the leaders from the rest of the group, making them “celebrity figures” and creating stardom. The stage is used to display greatness and superiority. Leaders often wear more striking clothing than the other performers and occupy a central, spotlighted position. Rose (1984) in Barry (1985) said that “*A common argument is that the stage is an actor's medium, in the sense that it is on the stage that the actor is best placed to realise his or her 'creative intentions' in character portrayal*”.

Figure 5*The Style of Habib Syech, Habib Bidin, and Hafied Hakim on the Stage*

Source: YouTube

The central position occupied by the three of them is also consistently applied. The difference in positioning between the hadrah group leader and the accompanists is sometimes very contrastive—distant in terms of physical space—and at times the accompanists do not receive a festive spotlight. In this regard, the three hadrah group leaders serve as the main actors. Their presence is the most crucial element. Mixion (1983) states that actors must be able to perform as convincingly as possible and maintain their character, ensuring all stage actions are believable even without being prompted.

This “religious superstar” phenomenon, as criticized by Rojek (2001), results from social democratization, the decline of organized religion, and commodification of daily life. Organizers benefit from these concerts through brand promotions (e.g., Rocket Chicken) and business opportunities like tenant rentals. This stardom creates a fandom that views attending these grand concerts as a “need” to be met repeatedly, turning it into a culture industry.

Reinforcing Consistency Through Regular Assembly Live Streams

Beyond invited concerts, leaders use regular weekly assemblies (*rutinan*) as a dissemination strategy. These are usually smaller, held at a fixed location (e.g., Pekalongan for Az-Zahir, Surakarta for Ahbaabul Musthofa), and focus more on traditional readings and sermons.

However, digital branding remains prominent; YouTube titles for these sessions always highlight the leader's name (e.g., “Live Regular Assembly... with Habib Syech”). This

reinforces their legitimacy and ownership of the group. The author notes that the leaders are often highlighted so much that they seem separate from the group, even though they are a single entity. This centrality is essential to maintaining the “extraordinary” impression required to keep the audience as fans.

Figure 6

Rutinan Ahbaabul Musthofa, 2025



Source: [YouTube.com/HabibSyechBinAbdulQadirAssegaf](https://www.youtube.com/HabibSyechBinAbdulQadirAssegaf)

Figure 7

Rutinan Azzahir, 2025



Source: [YouTube.com/MajelisAzzahir](https://www.youtube.com/MajelisAzzahir)

Figure 8*Rutinan Syubbanul Muslimin, 2025*

Source: YouTube.com/SyubbanulMuslimin

I will provide an analogy: imagine Jade forms a dance group named J'dance. Jade and J'dance always dance together in a performance, whether it is one they organize themselves or when someone invites J'dance for a specific purpose. However, Jade always labels himself in every J'dance performance. Thus, mentioning J'dance alone seems insufficient to represent both J'dance and Jade in a single show, even though Jance would not perform without Jenny.

There are several reasons why Jade includes his name in every J'dance performance. It might be a subjective reason, as he founded J'dance on his own initiative. It could also be a regulatory reason within the J'dance team to ensure J'dance is invited more often or becomes more famous because Jade's name carries higher prestige. In the context of this discussion, the most likely reason is the centrality of the kiai (pesantren leader) in the management of Islamic boarding schools.

E.A. Shils, in "Charisma, Order and Status", explains that:

The charismatic quality of an individual as perceived by others, or himself [sic] lies in what is thought to be his connection with (including possession by or embedment in) some very central feature of man's existence and the cosmos in which he lives. The centrality, coupled with intensity, makes it extraordinary.

There must always be a central figure in the sholawat concert model who possesses more authority than the others, ensuring the "extraordinary" impression successfully influences the audience or the public to remain fans. The dissemination of the sholawat concert formula must always involve a charismatic actor. As S.N. Eisenstadt stated in the introduction to Max Weber's *Charisma and Institution Building*, charismatic appeal is particularly effective when the social order is uncertain, unstable, and ambiguous, and when a charismatic figure or group offers values, order, or stability to offset this. This social order is also maintained through weekly sessions, demonstrating consistency and an effort to preserve the sholawat concert model—at least on a small scale—which then encourages external parties to invite them for large-scale concerts.

Conclusion

The dissemination of sholawat concerts by leaders like Habib Syech, Habib Bidin, and KH. Hafidzul Hakim Noer reflects a deep transformation of religious practice in the digital era. They have formed a new da'wah landscape where digital media is not just a tool but a space where religious identity and spiritual authority are negotiated. Sholawat has shifted from traditional pesantren spaces to a digital aesthetic on Instagram and YouTube, utilizing the logic of the stage, celebrity, and intense visual interaction. Religion is no longer an “ivory tower” institution but appears in the language of popular culture familiar to the younger generation. Social media shapes a simultaneous religious experience: personal yet communal, local yet global, and spiritual yet visual. These strategies show that spiritual authority is now constructed within networked religion, making sholawat concerts part of a contemporary Islamic culture industry that adapts and negotiates within a media-influenced era.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that NotebookLM, an AI-powered research and synthesis collaborator, was used to translate, analyze, and extract deep insights from the original manuscript. The author further declares that, apart from NotebookLM, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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