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From Visual Similarity to Religious Signification: Mediatization, Negotiation of Religious Signification, and Religious Representation on Instagram @bangfaiq_batu

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Abstract

Religious mediatization reshapes not only how religious messages circulate but also how religious meanings are produced, framed, and interpreted in digital environments. This study examines how Instagram shapes the production and circulation of religious representations and how visual resemblance generates divergent religious meanings in the case of @bangfaiq_batu. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through digital observation and documentation from September 9 to 30, 2026. The descriptive mapping covered all 112 posts on the account, classified according to their dominant themes and communicative functions. In-depth analysis focused on one purposively selected post, namely the account's first Reel, 200 purposively selected comments on that Reel, and five online news reports published between 19 and 23 July 2026. The analysis was guided by Hjarvard's three forms of mediatized religion: religious media, journalism on religion, and banal religion. The findings show that Bang Faiq presents his long hair, beard, and attire as expressions of following the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. However, journalistic framing and some audience interpretations associate the same visual configuration with conventional representations of Jesus. These findings suggest that religious signification emerges from the interaction among representational intentions, media framing, and audience interpretations rather than from visual resemblance alone. This case study demonstrates that control over the production of religious representations does not necessarily entail control over their subsequent signification, demonstrating the relational and negotiable character of religious meaning in digital media.

Keywords: Mediatization of Religion; Religious Representation; Visual Resemblance; Religious Signification; Bang Faiq

Abstrak

Mediatisasi agama tidak hanya mengubah cara pesan-pesan keagamaan disebarluaskan, tetapi juga bagaimana makna-makna keagamaan diproduksi, dibingkai, dan ditafsirkan dalam lingkungan digital. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana Instagram membentuk produksi dan penyebaran representasi keagamaan, serta bagaimana kemiripan visual dapat menghasilkan makna keagamaan yang berbeda-beda, sebagaimana terlihat dalam kasus akun @bangfaiq_batu. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi digital dan dokumentasi dari tanggal 9 hingga 30 September 2026. Pemetaan deskriptif mencakup seluruh 112 unggahan pada akun tersebut, yang diklasifikasikan berdasarkan tema dominan dan fungsi komunikatifnya. Analisis mendalam difokuskan pada satu unggahan yang dipilih secara purposif-yakni Reel pertama di akun tersebut-beserta 200 komentar yang juga dipilih secara purposif, serta lima laporan berita daring yang diterbitkan antara tanggal 19 hingga 23 Juli 2026. Analisis ini merujuk pada tiga bentuk agama yang termediatisasi menurut Hjarvard: media keagamaan, jurnalisme tentang agama, dan

agama banal (banal religion). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Bang Faiq menampilkan rambut panjang, janggut, dan pakaiannya sebagai bentuk pengamalan Sunnah Nabi Muhammad. Namun, pembingkaian jurnalistik dan interpretasi sebagian audiens justru mengaitkan konfigurasi visual yang sama dengan representasi konvensional sosok Yesus. Temuan ini mengisyaratkan bahwa pemaknaan keagamaan muncul dari interaksi antara niat representasional, pembingkaian media, dan interpretasi audiens, bukan sekadar kemiripan visual semata. Studi kasus ini menunjukkan bahwa kendali atas produksi representasi keagamaan tidak serta-merta menjamin kendali atas pemaknaan yang muncul kemudian, yang menegaskan sifat relasional dan dapat dinegosiasikan dari makna keagamaan dalam media digital.

Kata Kunci: Mediatisasi Agama; Representasi Keagamaan; Kemiripan Visual; Signifikansi Keagamaan; Bang Faiq

Introduction

Social media not only expands the dissemination of religious messages but also transforms how religious representations are produced, circulated, and interpreted. From the perspective of the mediatization of religion, media is not merely a communication channel; its logic also shapes religious representations and practices (Hjarvard, 2008, 2020). In Indonesia, this process is visible in the adaptation of religious communication to digital media, including changes in da'wah, authority, and audience participation (Hazim and Musdholifah, 2023; Rohmawati, Zulkifli and Hakiem, 2025; Setianto, 2026). These developments raise a further question: what happens when a representation produced within one religious framework acquires different symbolic associations as it circulates? This question emerges in the case of Instagram account @bangfaiq_batu, where Bang Faiq's appearance, which he explains as following the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, has also been associated by some users with Jesus.

Studies of the mediatization of religion have examined how religious communication and practices adapt to media environments (Arafah, Fitriani and Rahman, 2023; A'yun, 2023; Cholillah and Arju, 2024). Setianto (2026) situates these developments within the historical relationship between Islam and media in Indonesia, while Effendi et al., (2026) offer a conceptual account of religious reconfiguration in the digital era. Other studies address the implications of digital media for religious authority and learning, including spaces for religious knowledge and legitimacy beyond conventional institutions (Hidayatullah, 2025; Solahudin and Fakhruroji, 2019). Akmaliah (2020); and Syatar et al., (2024) in turn, examine contestation surrounding religious discourse and Islamic authority in digital spaces. This scholarship explains changes in religious communication and authority, while the present case raises a related question about how visual representations acquire additional symbolic references through media circulation and public interpretation.

Research on religious representation has examined how visuality contributes to identity, persuasion, piety, and legitimacy. Hew (2018) discusses visual persuasion in digital preaching, while Febrian (2024) examines visual strategies in constructing religious influencer authority. Studies of clothing and appearance consider their role in representing and negotiating Muslim identity Lestari, 2022; Prasetia, Nurdiyansah, Sarbini and Setiawan (2026), while Maulina et al., (2026) examine the reconfiguration of piety through Instagram. Other work indicates that religious identity on social media may be multiple or subject to negotiation rather than fixed (Mulyanto 2022; Anshori et al., 2025). These studies explain how visual representation participates in identity formation and the presentation of religious legitimacy. The present case directs attention to a further

dimension: how a visual configuration produced in one religious context may be read through symbolic references associated with another religious tradition. This issue becomes concrete in the case of @bangfaiq_batu. Bang Faiq presents his appearance-particularly his robe, long hair, and beard-in the context of Islamic preaching and explains it as an effort to follow the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. Some Instagram users, however, associate the same visual configuration with Jesus. Such associations should be understood in relation to historically developed conventions of Christian iconography, rather than treated as evidence of objective physical resemblance. Chavannes-Mazel (2003) discusses differing traditions in the depiction of Christ, including representations of a beardless youth and a bearded adult, while Hogeterp (2020) examines the relationship between Jesus as a Jew and his iconographic construction. These studies contextualize the visual references through which audiences may interpret Bang Faiq's appearance, while distinguishing those references from his original representational context.

The literature reviewed above offers complementary perspectives: mediatization research explains how media shapes religious communication and circulation; studies of visuality examine appearance in the construction of identity, piety, and authority; and research on Christian iconography demonstrates that images of Jesus are formed through historically situated conventions. Rather than claiming that these fields have never addressed cross-religious interpretation, this study brings them together to examine a specific process: how a visual representation produced within an Islamic framework acquires additional associations drawn from another religious tradition after circulating through digital media. This process is referred to here as cross-religious re-signification. The term describes the attribution of a different religious reference to an existing visual representation; it does not imply that the original meaning disappears or that the resulting interpretations necessarily produce theological conflict.

Accordingly, this study examines @bangfaiq_batu through two questions: (1) how are the production and circulation of Bang Faiq's religious representations shaped by Instagram's communicative practices and journalistic media framing? and (2) how does his visual appearance acquire different religious significations through the interaction of representational intentions, media framing, and some audience interpretations? The study draws on Hjarvard's (2008, 2020) framework of mediatization of religion, particularly religious media, journalism on religion, and banal religion. These forms serve as overlapping analytical categories for examining representations produced by religious actors, their framing in news coverage, and the circulation of religious references in popular communication. The study thus offers an empirical account of how the production of a religious representation does not necessarily determine its subsequent signification in digital circulation.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the mediatization of religious representation and the negotiation of religious signification on Instagram, focusing on the account @bangfaiq_batu. Data collection was conducted through digital observation and documentation during the period of 9-30 September 2026. The data consisted of three sources: Instagram posts, audience comments, and online news articles. First, all 112 posts published on the @bangfaiq_batu account were documented and classified by dominant themes and communicative functions into five categories: religious preaching and education, personal activities, sharing activities, question-and-answer sessions, and other content. For in-depth analysis, one post was purposively selected: Bang Faiq's first Instagram Reel, uploaded on 17 July 2026,

because it became the primary site where his visual appearance elicited various audience interpretations. Although the Reel displayed a total of 45,653 comments, this figure reflected the total number shown on Instagram, not the number analyzed in this study. Using purposive sampling, 200 comments were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, particularly comments expressing interpretations, associations, affirmations, humor, or criticism concerning Bang Faiq's appearance. The selected comments were subsequently classified into five interpretive tendencies: identification with Jesus, identification with Nabi Isa, humor and parody, affirmation of Islamic identity, and contestation and criticism. These categories were used to identify the different ways in which users interpreted and responded to Bang Faiq's visual representation, without assuming the religious identities of the commenters. Second, five online news articles published between 19 and 23 July 2026 were identified through exploratory searches on Google using the keyword Bang Faiq. The articles were encountered during the researcher's search for news coverage concerning Bang Faiq and were included for their relevance to the representation and circulation of the case in online journalism; the search was not based on a predetermined systematic protocol. The articles were analyzed by examining how Bang Faiq's appearance, public responses, and explanations of his religious practices were presented and framed. All data classification and interpretation were conducted independently by the researcher, who acted as the sole coder. The analysis was guided by Stig Hjarvard's concept of the mediatization of religion, particularly its three forms: religious media, journalism on religion, and banal religion. The Instagram posts, selected comments, and news articles were examined in relation to this framework to understand how religious representations were produced, circulated, and assigned different meanings. The findings concerning audience interpretations are limited to the selected comments on the first Reel and therefore should not be regarded as representative of all Bang Faiq's followers or Instagram users.

Result and Discussion

1. Profile of @bangfaiq_batu And The Visual Configuration Associated With Jesus by Some Audience

The Instagram account @bangfaiq_batu uses the display name Bang Faiq and includes information about a BSI donation account and an administrator's WhatsApp contact labeled *Tolong Bareng* in its bio. Based on observations conducted on September 30, 2026, at 12:05 p.m. Western Indonesian Time (WIB), the account had 281,233 followers, followed two other accounts, and contained 112 posts. Although the number of followers indicates the account's visibility within the Instagram environment, it should not be considered, by itself, evidence of religious influence or authority. The account's characteristics are better understood by examining its published content, which combines religious messages, personal representation, sharing activities, and interactions with followers.



Picture 1. Instagram Profile @bangfaiq_batu

To provide a descriptive overview of the account, the 112 posts were classified into five categories according to their dominant content orientation. The classification resulted in 34 posts (30.36%) categorized as religious content, 24 posts (21.43%) as personal-life content, 22 posts (19.64%) as sharing-oriented content, six posts (5.36%) as interactive content, and 26 posts (23.21%) as other content. Religious content refers to posts whose primary purpose is to communicate Islamic teachings, religious advice, educational material, or religious quotations. Examples include posts that present preaching messages and explain religious matters. Personal-life content comprises posts primarily depicting Bang Faiq's everyday activities, personal experiences, or activities outside the direct delivery of religious messages. Sharing-oriented content refers to posts primarily presenting activities or messages related to sharing and giving to others. Interactive content includes posts whose main purpose is to facilitate communication with followers, particularly through question-and-answer sessions. Other content comprises posts that do not predominantly correspond to the four preceding categories. Each post was assigned to only one category based on its most prominent content orientation. When a post contained several elements, the classification was determined by the element that most clearly represented its primary purpose. This procedure was intended to maintain consistency across the classification of the account's content. The distribution indicates that the account's activity is not exclusively centered on religious preaching; it also encompasses personal presentation, sharing practices, and audience interaction. The26se different forms of content provide the broader context in which Bang Faiq's religious and visual representations circulate.

Content Category	Number of Posts	Percentage	Operational Definition
Religious content	34	30.36%	Posts primarily containing teaching, Islamic praching (*dakwah*), religious explanations, or quotiations related to Islamic values and practices
Personal-life content	24	21.43%	Posts primarily depicting Bang Faiq's personal activities, daily experiences, routines, or the aspects of his life outside the direct communication od=f religious teachings
Sharing-oriented content	22	19.64%	Post primarily emphasizing charitible activities, assistance, donations, or the distribution of non-material support to others
Interactive content	6	5.36%	Posts primarily designed to facilitate direct engagement with followers, particularly through question-and-answer session, responses to audience inquiries, or other forms of audience participation
Other content	26	23.21%	Posts that do not fall clearly into the four categories above, including content with miscellaneous themes or purposes that cannot be classiefied under the other categories
Total	112	100%	

The account's first post was uploaded in Reels format on July 17, 2026. At the time of observation, the Reel had received 525,393 likes, 46,676 comments, and approximately nine million views. In the 29-second video, Bang Faiq opens with an Islamic greeting, recites the basmalah and shalawat, and explains that he is starting his account with zero followers, intending to sharing goodness together. Its caption similarly introduces the account as a space for sharing positive messages. This initial post is significant because it establishes the account's communicative orientation within an Islamic and *da'wah* context while presenting Bang Faiq as an individual engaging directly with Instagram users.



Picture 2: Comparison Of the Visual Representations of Jesus and Bang Faiq (a. Leonardo da Vinci, The Last Supper (1495-1498); b. Christus Medium (2020); c. Otto A. Stemler, The Good Shepherd, via 4000 Jesus Pictures; d-f. Instagram @bangfaiq_batu.)

The visual comparison presented in Figure 2 juxtaposes three representations of Jesus from Christian visual traditions with three photographs of Bang Faiq. Several visual elements can be observed across the two groups of images, particularly shoulder-length hair, a beard and mustache, and loose clothing that covers much of the body. The representations of Jesus depict these elements through variations of long robes and garments draped over the shoulders. At the same time, Bang Faiq appears wearing a robe and, in one photograph, a dark red cloth draped over one shoulder. Nevertheless, the images belong to different representational contexts: the images of Jesus are artistic representations developed within Christian visual traditions, whereas the photographs of Bang Faiq document his appearance in the context of Islamic activities and communication. As discussed by Chavannes-Mazel Chavannes-Mazel (2003) and Hogeterp Hogeterp (2020) representations of Jesus are shaped by historically and culturally situated iconographic conventions. Accordingly, the observed similarities should not be treated as evidence of an inherent or objective religious resemblance. Rather, they constitute visual elements through which some audiences may associate Bang Faiq's appearance with familiar representations of Jesus.

The profile and content composition of @bangfaiq_batu therefore provide an empirical context for understanding the relationship between religious self-representation and audience interpretation. Bang Faiq's appearance is presented within an account that combines Islamic preaching, personal activities, and social engagement. However, the visual elements of that appearance may also be interpreted through symbolic references

beyond the religious framework intended by the account owner. The association with Jesus is consequently understood as an interpretation expressed by some audiences, rather than as an inherent characteristic of Islamic visual representation. This distinction provides the basis for examining how Bang Faiq's visual representation is produced, circulated, and assigned different religious significations through Instagram and other media.

2. Visual Analysis of Bang Faiq's Da'wah Within The Framework of Mediatization Religion

The analysis of this research operationalizes Hjarvard's Hjarvard (2008); Hjarvard (2020) perspective on the mediatization of religion through three forms of mediatized religion, namely religious media, journalism on religion, and banal religion. The three are used as overlapping analytical categories, not as linear stages in the change of religious representation. Religious media is used to identify the production of religious representations through posts, preaching narratives, and Bang Faiq's explanation of his appearance as part of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Journalism on religion is used to examine how five media reports frame the appearance through visual similarity and virality. Meanwhile, banal religion is used to read how religious symbolic references are reused in popular interpretations that associate Bang Faiq with the figure of Jesus. Through analysis of Instagram content, journalistic reporting, and documented audience responses, the analysis aims to explain the relationship among the production of representations, media circulation, and the negotiation of religious signification. Although the three forms are discussed separately for analytical clarity, their sequence in the following discussion reflects the analysis's organization rather than a chronological progression.

a. Religious Media: The Production of Religious Representation on Instagram

Hjarvard (2020) distinguishes religious media as one form of mediatized religion, in which religion still holds a primary position in controlling the production and content of media. This form is characterized by the dominance of content in the form of the delivery of religious teachings or advice, the involvement of religious actors as producers or performers of representation, and the communicative function of persuasion and the formation of religious communities. In this framework, the media have not yet fully taken control of religious representation because religious actors still determine the content, purpose, and manner of its display.

The character appears on the Instagram account @bangfaiq_batu. Based on observations of 112 posts, 34 posts (30.36%) were religious sermons, education, and religious quotes; 24 posts (21.43%) were personal activities; 22 posts (19.64%) were sharing content; six posts (5.36%) were QnA; and 26 posts (23.21%) fell into other categories. The categorization is based on the dominant theme and communicative function of each post. This composition shows that the account not only serves as a channel for delivering religious material but also combines religious messages with personal and social activities. Thus, religion is represented alongside Bang Faiq's personal identity as an actor present both within and outside the context of preaching.

The context has been evident since the first post on July 17, 2026. In a 29-second video uploaded from a goat pen, Bang Faiq introduced his newly created account and expressed his desire to share goodness together. He used greetings, the phrase Bismillah, and blessings as part of the opening of the message. In a report by detikJatim, Bang Faiq also explained that the initial purpose of creating the account was to spread the message and use social media to invite people to goodness, especially the younger generation. He stated that preaching does not always have to be delivered through sermons, but can be conveyed through content formats that align with the habits of the younger generation.

Thus, at the initial production stage, Bang Faiq's representation can be interpreted as a form of religious media. Religious actors are still the main producers of representation; the messages conveyed are within the framework of Islam, and the media is used as a means to carry out the function of preaching. In fact, Bang Faiq gives a religious context to his own appearance. Long hair, beard, and the clothes he wears are not positioned by him as an attempt to present a figure from another religious tradition, but are associated with the effort to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. He explained that he maintains his long hair and beard because they are considered part of that Sunnah.

This finding shows that the initial meaning of Bang Faiq's representation is actually relatively clear from the producer's perspective. The visual representation is situated within the framework of Islamic identity and religious expression. However, this position does not mean that Bang Faiq can fully determine how the representation will be interpreted once it enters the realm of social media. This is where mediatization begins to show its ambivalent character. Hjarvard (2008) explains that media not only function as a conduit or message carrier, but also as a language that helps shape how messages are packaged and as an environment that provides the social conditions for interaction and meaning formation.

b. Journalism on Religion: Bang Faiq as an Object of Media Framing

In Hjarvard's (2020) typology of mediatized religion, journalism on religion shows a condition where religion and religious actors become the subjects of news coverage represented through journalistic logic and practices. This condition is evident when Bang Faiq's representation is no longer produced solely through his Instagram account, but is also framed by the media as a public phenomenon. The five analyzed articles come from (Disway, 2026; Ketik.com, 2026; DetikJatim, 2026; and VIVA, 2026). In the process, Bang Faiq's position shifted from being the producer of his own representation to becoming a news object that is selected, described, and given meaning through a journalistic framework. This shift does not immediately erase the initial religious context, but rather expands the possibilities for interpreting his appearance.

Journalistic framing is particularly evident through the emphasis on visual similarity as a news value. Harian Disway used the title Profile of Bang Faiq, Goat Seller from Batu Viral for Resembling Isa Al Masih, while Ketik.com displayed the title Bang Faiq, Goat Seller in Batu Viral, His Face is Said to Resemble Jesus, Leading to a Flood of Followers. Both news articles place physical appearance and virality at the center of attention. The visual elements highlighted include shoulder-length hair, beard, mustache, robe, and turban. That configuration serves as the basis for the emergence of associations with the representation of Jesus known in visual culture. Thus, the appearance that in the context of personal accounts is associated with the preaching and sunnah of Prophet Muhammad receives a different emphasis when it enters the news. The shift from religious framing to journalistic framing shows that the media has a role in determining which aspects of religious representation gain public visibility.

The similarity cannot be reduced to the likeness of a single physical element, but is formed through the reading of the overall visual configuration. Long hair, beards, loose clothing, and other physical attributes do not inherently refer to the figure of Jesus, but take on significance when connected to iconographic references known to the audience. Studies by Hew (2018); Febrian (2024); and Maulina et al., (2026) show that visuality in religious communication plays a role in the construction of identity, piety, and symbolic authority. However, the case of Bang Faiq shows that visual representations can also acquire references beyond the religious framework intended by their producers. In this context, visual similarity is understood not as an objective physical resemblance, but as a

result of interpretation that brings together appearance, the audience's symbolic knowledge, and media framing. Although it emphasizes the visual resemblance, the reporting does not completely overlook Bang Faiq's explanation of his identity and appearance. The detikJatim article on July 21, 2026, for example, linked his appearance to depictions of Jesus in classical paintings, but also provided space for the explanation that his long hair and beard were maintained as part of an effort to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. The news report brought together two frameworks of signification in a single narrative: appearance as an expression of Islam, according to Bang Faiq, and appearance as a resemblance to the figure of Jesus, according to some in the audience. This shows that journalism on religion does not always replace the initial religious meaning, but can instead become an arena for negotiation when several symbolic references are presented simultaneously.

Negotiation of representation is also evident in the detikJatim news on July 23, 2026, regarding the use of the greeting Bang as a choice of identity. Bang Faiq explained that he does not want to be labeled as an ustaz because he feels he does not yet have the scholarly capacity to bear that title, even though he still uses Instagram to preach. This explanation shows the actor's effort to limit the attribution of religious identity to himself. However, when his representation circulates through news coverage and gains public attention, that identity is also shaped by others' judgments and categorizations. Thus, mediatization is not only related to changes in the delivery of religious messages but also to the negotiation of actors' identities and social positions within the media space.

Overall, journalism on religion in the case of Bang Faiq shows how journalistic framing expands the reference of meaning regarding religious representation. The performances produced in the context of Islamic preaching do not lose their original meaning, but become open to other significations when visual similarities are highlighted as news value. The process affirms that Bang Faiq's control over the production of representation is not identical to control over its interpretation after it circulates. Meaning is formed through the relationship between the actor's intention, media selection and framing, and the audience's symbolic references. Thus, journalistic framing becomes an important mechanism that connects visual similarities to the negotiation of religious significance in the digital public space.

c. Banal Religion: When Religious Representations Gain New References

The third form in Hjarvard's (2020) typology, banal religion, helps explain the condition when religious symbols, narratives, and representations circulate beyond the direct control of religious institutions and acquire new functions or references in the media environment. In this form, religious elements can undergo bricolage, which is the mixing or repurposing of various religious symbols and representations in a broader context, including popular culture, entertainment, and everyday life.

The case of Bang Faiq cannot simply be categorized as banal religion. The initial production of his content is closer to religious media because Bang Faiq himself positioned the account as a means of preaching. However, the concept of banal religion is useful for explaining changes in the position of visual representation as it circulates outside the initial context provided by its producer. When Bang Faiq's appearance became the subject of news and public discussion, the visual element, originally within the context of the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, became open to new associations with the figure of Jesus.

In the process, religious representation undergoes decontextualization and recontextualization. In the initial context, Bang Faiq's appearance was within the narrative of Islamic preaching. After going viral, that appearance was separated from the initial narrative and became an object of visual attention. The media then packaged it

using the terms resembling Jesus or resembling Isa Almasih. For example, the Disway Daily explicitly made the resemblance the main part of the headline and explained that Bang Faiq's appearance was one of the reasons for the increased public attention.

The process shows that when religion enters the media environment, religious symbols can gain wider circulation and references than intended by the original producers. This does not mean that the Islamic meaning of Bang Faiq's appearance is lost. On the contrary, both meanings coexist. Bang Faiq continues to explain his appearance through the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, while some of the audience use visual references of Jesus to understand the same appearance.

Thus, banal religion in this study is used not to label Bang Faiq's account but to explain the mediatized condition in which religious representations become open to symbolic use and interpretation beyond their initial framework. In this context, Instagram and journalistic media expand the circulation space of representations so that the actors producing the symbols are no longer the only parties determining the symbolic references of those symbols.

Based on these three forms of mediatized religion, Bang Faiq's visual representation shows that religious signification is not formed by a single communication mechanism, but rather by the relationship among the production of representation, journalistic framing, and audience interpretation. The appearance, which, in the context of preaching, is interpreted as an effort to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, takes on different symbolic meanings when associated with the figure of Jesus in media circulation. This difference does not immediately indicate a theological conflict, but rather shows how a single visual configuration can become an object of meaning negotiation in different communication environments. The findings underscore the difference between the actor's control over the production of representations and the control over the signification that develops after the representations circulate. On that basis, the subsequent discussion section engages these empirical findings in dialogue with previous studies to clarify their contribution to understanding mediatization, visual representation, and the negotiation of religious meaning in digital space.

Table 1. Analytical Matrix Of The Three Forms Of Mediatized Religion

Analytical dimension	Religious Media	Journalism on Religion	Banal Religion
Form of mediatization	Religious Media	Journalism on Religion	Banal Religion
Producer	Bang Faiq as the religious actor and producer of his own representation	Online journalists and news media organizations	Instagram users and audiences who reuse religious references in popular interpretations
Medium	Instagram account @bangfaiq_batu, particularly posts, Reels, and captions	Five online news reports published between 19 and 23 July 2026	Instagram comments and the wider circulation of Bang Faiq's visual representation in popular communication
Dominant logic	Religious communication and the actor's control over the production of *dakwah* content	Journalistic selection, newsworthiness, virality, and emphasis on visual distinctiveness	Popular interpretation, symbolic association, and the reuse of religious references beyond the producer's initial framework

Representation	Bang Faiq's appearance is presented within the context of Islamic preaching, including his long hair, beard, and attire as expressions of following the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad	Bang Faiq is represented as a viral public figure whose appearance is associated with visual depictions of Jesus, while some reports also present his own explanation	Bang Faiq's visual configuration is interpreted through references to Jesus and Nabi Isa, as well as through humour, affirmation, and contestation
Religious signification	Islamic self-representation and religious expression	The coexistence of the Islamic meaning intended by Bang Faiq and the association with Jesus foregrounded in media coverage	The emergence of additional religious references without necessarily displacing the original Islamic meaning
Source of evidence	112 Instagram posts, particularly the first Reel uploaded on 17 July 2026, captions, and Bang Faiq's explanation reported by detikJatim	Five news reports from Harian Disway, Ketik.com, detikJatim, and VIVA, published between 19 and 23 July 2026	The 200 purposively selected comments on Bang Faiq's first Reel, particularly comments expressing identification with Jesus or Nabi Isa, humour, affirmation of Islamic identity, and contestation

The matrix illustrates that the three forms of mediatized religion operate through interconnected yet analytically distinct mechanisms. Religious media highlights Bang Faiq's role in producing a religious self-representation within an Islamic framework. Journalism on religion demonstrates how news organizations select and frame particular aspects of that representation, especially its perceived visual association with Jesus. Banal religion, in turn, helps explain how religious references are reused and reinterpreted by popular audiences beyond the producer's initial intention. These mechanisms do not constitute separate chronological stages; rather, they intersect in the circulation of the same visual representation. Their interaction reveals that the production of religious meaning is distributed across religious actors, journalistic media, and audience interpretation, rather than being determined exclusively by the original producer.

3. Mediatization and Negotiation of Visual Religious Meaning

The case of Bang Faiq demonstrates that the mediatization of religion involves not only changes in the production and circulation of religious representations but also a distinction between control over representation and control over signification. Hjarvard (2008); Hjarvard (2020) explains that media increasingly shapes the ways in which religion is communicated, represented, and understood in public life. This process is reflected in the relationship between media logic, religious visibility, and changing forms of authority, as discussed by (Setianto, 2026; and Effendi et al., 2026). In the case examined here, Bang Faiq maintains control over the initial production of his visual

representation by presenting his appearance in the context of Islamic preaching and explaining his long hair and beard as expressions of adherence to the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. However, this control does not extend entirely to the meanings subsequently attributed to his appearance. Once circulated through Instagram and online journalism, the same visual representation becomes available for interpretations that extend beyond the framework established by its producer. This distinction suggests that the authority to produce a religious representation does not necessarily confer the authority to determine its subsequent signification.

This distinction also provides a further perspective on the negotiation of religious meaning. In this study, negotiation refers to the process through which a single visual representation acquires different meanings through the interaction of representational intentions, media framing, and audience interpretations. The process does not necessarily involve direct confrontation or theological disagreement between religious communities. Rather, it concerns the possibility that different symbolic references may be attached to the same representation without one interpretation automatically eliminating the others. Bang Faiq's explanation of his appearance within an Islamic framework remains present, while its circulation allows some audiences and media reports to associate the same visual configuration with Jesus. Accordingly, negotiation is not understood as an effort to establish a single or universally accepted interpretation, but as a process through which the meaning of a religious representation remains open to different readings.

A second contribution concerns the possibility of cross-religious symbolic referencing in digital religious communication. Previous studies have examined visuality as a means of constructing religious identity, piety, persuasion, and authority in digital environments (Febrian, 2024; Hew, 2018; Maulina et al., 2026). Research on Muslim appearance and identity has also demonstrated that visual representations are performative and open to negotiation (Lestari, 2022; Mulyanto, 2022; Prasetia et al., 2026). The case of Bang Faiq extends these discussions by showing that visual elements do not necessarily remain confined to the religious framework in which they are initially produced. His long hair, beard, and attire, which he associates with the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, are also interpreted by some audiences through references to Jesus. The association emerges not because these visual attributes inherently belong to a particular religious tradition, but because audiences connect them with visual conventions familiar from other religious contexts.

The notion of cross-religious re-signification helps explain this process. As discussed in this study, the term refers to the attribution of an additional religious reference to an existing visual representation without necessarily displacing its initial meaning or changing the religious identity of the person represented. The visual association with Jesus, for example, draws upon historically and culturally developed conventions of Christian iconography. Chavannes-Mazel (2003) discusses variations in the representation of Christ, while Hogeterp (2020) examines the relationship between Jesus as a historical Jewish figure and his iconographic construction. These studies demonstrate that visual representations of Jesus are shaped by particular historical and cultural conventions rather than functioning as transparent depictions of an objectively fixed appearance. In this context, the association some audiences make between Bang Faiq and Jesus is better understood as an interpretive connection between visual attributes and familiar iconographic references. It does not establish an inherent religious resemblance, nor does it indicate that Bang Faiq's original Islamic self-representation has been replaced by a Christian one. Instead, the same visual configuration becomes a site where references from different religious traditions may intersect.

A third contribution concerns the relational character of religious meaning in digital media. Religious signification in this case cannot be attributed exclusively to the intention of the individual who produces the representation. It emerges through the relationship between the producer, the media that circulate and frame the representation, and the audiences who interpret it through their own symbolic references. Bang Faiq provides an initial Islamic framework for understanding his appearance, while journalistic coverage foregrounds its perceived resemblance to Jesus, and some audience members reproduce or negotiate that association through their comments. These forms of interpretation are not necessarily identical, nor do they have to converge into a single meaning. Rather, they demonstrate that religious meaning is formed through interactions among different actors and communicative contexts. In this sense, digital media does not simply provide a space in which pre-existing religious meanings are transmitted; it also facilitates encounters and the circulation of different symbolic interpretations.

This relational perspective also distinguishes itself from discussions that primarily understand digital religious communication through the lens of religious authority and legitimacy. Studies by Akmaliah (2020); Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2019); and Syatar et al., (2024) examine how digital media becomes an arena for the contestation and negotiation of religious authority. Husein and Slama (2018) likewise discuss questions of authenticity and public judgment in online piety. Although these perspectives are relevant to understanding the broader dynamics of digital religion, the case of Bang Faiq does not primarily concern a contest over religious knowledge or the legitimacy of religious leadership. Rather, it reveals a negotiation over the symbolic meaning attributed to a visual representation. The distinction is important because the circulation of religious representations may generate interpretive differences even when no explicit competition for religious authority takes place. Some audience responses may involve humor, affirmation, or criticism, but these should not be automatically interpreted as evidence of theological confrontation or of a broader conflict between religious communities.

Taken together, these three aspects clarify this study's contribution to discussions of mediatization and religious representation. First, it demonstrates that control over the production of religious representations should be distinguished from control over their subsequent signification. Second, it identifies cross-religious re-signification as a process by which a visual representation produced within one religious framework acquires additional symbolic references from another tradition. Third, it shows that religious meaning in digital environments is relational, emerging through the interaction of representational intentions, media framing, and audience interpretations. These contributions extend existing discussions of digital religious communication beyond questions of visibility, identity construction, piety, and authority by drawing attention to the movement of religious references across representational contexts. Nevertheless, because this study examines a single Instagram account, five online news reports, and 200 purposively selected comments from one Reel, its findings do not establish the interpretation patterns of Bang Faiq's entire audience. Rather, they provide a case-based explanation of how a single visual representation can acquire multiple religious significations through digital circulation. The journey from visual similarity to religious signification therefore illustrates the open, relational, and continuously negotiated character of religious meaning in digital media.

Conclusion

This case study shows that the production and circulation of Bang Faiq's religious representation on Instagram @bangfaiq_batu are shaped by the interaction of Islamic preaching practices, social media communication, and journalistic framing. While Bang

Faiq presents his long hair, beard, and attire as expressions of following the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, media coverage and some audience interpretations associate the same visual configuration with conventional representations of Jesus. These different readings suggest that visual resemblance does not arise from an inherent or objective religious similarity but from the interaction among visual attributes, media framing, and audiences' symbolic references. The overlapping forms of mediatized religion identified by Hjarvard help explain how this representation is produced within an Islamic framework, circulated through journalistic media, and reinterpreted in popular communication. The central contribution of this case study is to highlight the distinction between control over the production of religious representations and control over their subsequent signification. It also introduces the notion of cross-religious re-signification to describe how a visual representation produced within one religious context may acquire additional symbolic references associated with another tradition without necessarily displacing its original meaning or generating theological conflict. These findings suggest that religious meaning in digital media is relational and open to negotiation among producers, media institutions, and audiences. Nevertheless, given its focus on a single Instagram account, five online news reports, and 200 purposively selected comments from one Reel, this case study offers a context-specific account rather than a generalizable explanation of audience interpretations or digital religious communication.

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