

Commodified Compassion: Platform Capitalism and Moral Giving in Indonesian Digital Philanthropy

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Abstract

This article examines how platform capitalism mediates the emotional and moral experiences of donors within Indonesia's digital philanthropy ecosystem. Drawing on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews with active donors across platforms such as Kitabisa, Instagram, and TikTok, the research identifies three interrelated dynamics: immediate empathic resonance triggered by visual content, a sense of moral urgency shaped by platform logics, and emotional fatigue that often results in selective disengagement. Findings show that while emotionally charged narratives effectively mobilize donations, they also risk commodifying compassion and exhausting donors psychologically, raising concerns about the sustainability of affective giving. The study foregrounds how digital empathy is not merely a spontaneous emotion, but a socially structured and platform-mediated practice shaped by religious norms, user interface design, and algorithmic incentives. By framing empathy as a collective ethical engagement, this study contributes to critical debates on emotional labor, platform governance, and the moral economy of digital giving. It also calls for platform architectures that support donor well-being, ensure ethical representation, and foster more equitable forms of digital solidarity within Indonesia's evolving philanthropic landscape.

Keywords: digital philanthropy, affective labor, empathy economy, platform capitalism, emotional fatigue

Introduction

Research on digital philanthropy demonstrates that the convergence of social media, crowdfunding platforms, and digital payment systems has transformed charitable giving from localised, relational practices into highly visible, algorithmically mediated activities (Bhati & McDonnell, 2019; Grenfell & Wardana, 2021). Scholars have highlighted the influence of platform technology in shaping both visibility and participation through features such as donation leaderboards, gamified challenges, and personalised recommendations (Banerjee, 2021). In this context, emotions function not only as psychological states but also as social and technological forces that circulate and acquire value, forming an economy of affect in which compassion is mediated by cultural scripts, religious norms, and platform architectures (Ahmed, 2004).

Visual storytelling serves as a primary mechanism through which digital platforms generate empathy and prompt moral action. Emotionally charged images, including close-up depictions of sick children or grieving families, act as powerful triggers for moral proximity, producing the identified victim effect, in which donors are more likely to respond to individual suffering than to abstract causes (Slovic, 2007). Platforms such as Kitabisa and TikTok amplify this content through

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algorithmic prioritisation, reinforcing a visual hierarchy of suffering that privileges stories with the greatest emotional resonance (Shi & Wu, 2023). Interface features, such as progress bars, donate now buttons, and colour-coded urgency cues, further accelerate decision-making, exemplifying affective engineering, where design elements are strategically employed to evoke emotional responses and increase participation (Feng & Zhang, 2019).

Conversely, research on the affective dimension of digital philanthropy highlights the significance of affective publics, which are networked communities bound by shared emotional intensities that mobilise collective participation (Moore, 2008; Papacharissi, 2014). These publics not only drive viral campaigns but also foster enduring digital communities where religious values and emotional resonance converge. For example, rituals such as Sedekah Subuh on TikTok Live and YouTube integrate fundraising with communal worship, transforming donations into visible acts of shared piety (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

These dynamics cannot be fully understood through technological design or behavioural psychology alone. In Indonesia, digital philanthropy is closely intertwined with Islamic moral and cultural frameworks, where charitable giving constitutes a religious obligation grounded in *zakat*, *sadaqah*, and *waqf*. Platforms such as Kitabisa have responded to these expectations by incorporating Sharia-compliant payment systems, transparent reporting mechanisms, and real-time updates, thereby aligning platform governance with religious ethical imperatives (Adinugraha et al., 2023). (Habib, 2025; Kolan et al., 2018). This convergence of Islamic moral values and platform capitalism demonstrates how religious norms and technological infrastructures can mutually reinforce one another in shaping digital philanthropic behaviour (Chetioui et al., 2022; Koch & Buchanan, 2013).

Nevertheless, the existing literature has seldom addressed the commodification of empathy, wherein emotions in late modernity are increasingly monetised through market and platform logics (Leach et al., 2023; Lee, 2019). Few studies have explored how this commodification functions within Islamic moral frameworks such as *ikhlas* (sincerity) and *niyyah* (intention). Platform architectures that prioritise visibility, including public donation leaderboards and shareable campaign links, risk transforming acts of giving into performative piety that seeks social recognition rather than spiritual sincerity (Banerjee, 2021; Winterich et al., 2013). These concerns are substantiated by research on moral signalling, which indicates that donors often oscillate between genuine generosity and the desire for public validation (Jones & Koenig, 2018).

Platforms further reinforce these dynamics through moral nudges, which are subtle design features and prompts that guide users toward prosocial behaviour without overt coercion, often merging spiritual incentives with technological mechanisms (Capraro et al., 2019). However, the heightened emotional intensity of this environment can produce unintended consequences. Continuous exposure to distressing narratives may result in psychic numbing or a gradual decline in affective capacity, manifesting as compassion fatigue and collective emotional burnout (Berlant, 2014; Gu & Chen, 2021; Tang & Hou, 2024).

In response to these challenges, alternative approaches to digital philanthropy have emerged. The rise of digital benevolence, particularly on platforms such as TikTok, illustrates how smaller-scale, personalised acts of giving can foster relational intimacy rather than overwhelming emotional pressure (Kurniawan et al., 2025). Similarly, long-term impact narratives that emphasise empowerment and development, rather than crisis-driven appeals, support a more sustainable model of slow giving, privileging reflection and ethical continuity over algorithmically driven emotional immediacy (Adinugraha et al., 2023). By integrating empathy-driven appeals with credibility-based trust-building, digital philanthropy can move beyond emotional exploitation toward a more balanced model of sustained care, ethical representation, and long-term donor commitment (Balaskas et al., 2024).

This article advances the literature by synthesising theories of affect and emotional economy

to explain how empathy is constructed, circulated, and monetised in digital spaces. It also examines platform governance to reveal how algorithms and interface design generate moral urgency, and explores Islamic ethical frameworks to illuminate how values such as ikhlas, rahmah, and amanah are negotiated within the logic of online visibility and performativity. Accordingly, this article addresses the following research question: How do affective economies, platform governance, and Islamic ethical frameworks interact to shape digital philanthropic practices in Indonesia, and what ethical tensions arise from this intersection?

This study contributes by integrating insights from technology, affect theory, and Islamic ethics into a unified analytical framework, while also offering practical implications for aligning platform governance with Islamic moral norms. By positioning digital philanthropy at the intersection of affect theory, platform studies, and the Islamic moral economy, this research reframes digital compassion as a socially constructed, technologically mediated, and religiously influenced practice rather than a spontaneous feeling. In doing so, it advances debates on the ethics of platform governance, the sustainability of affect-driven giving, and the preservation of sincerity within an algorithmically accelerated moral economy.

Digital philanthropy can also be conceptualised as a negotiation between tradition and modernity in charitable practice. It is rooted in the values of shadaqah and ta'âwun (mutual assistance) derived from classical Islamic teachings, while simultaneously mediated by the logic of digital platforms and the moral-capitalist algorithm that emphasises efficiency, transparency, and public visibility. The interaction between these domains creates a space for moral dialogue, not as theological interfaith engagement, but as an ongoing negotiation between traditional and contemporary forms of doing good.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a digital ethnography approach, complemented by semi-structured interviews, to explore the emotional experiences, ethical reflections, and meaning-making processes of Muslim donors engaged in digital philanthropy. Digital ethnography is appropriate for analyzing mediated moral experiences, as it captures the affective, performative, and interactional dimensions of users' engagements across platforms such as Kitabisa, Instagram, and TikTok (Pink et al., 2016).

Data were collected between April and June 2024 through sustained digital observation of fifteen viral philanthropic campaigns. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball. Initial participants were purposively identified through their public interactions (comments, shareable posts) within the observed campaigns, and were then contacted to request an interview. Subsequent participants were recruited via referrals (the snowball technique) from this initial group. This strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015), aimed to ensure a diverse sample based on donation frequency, platform preferences, and socio-economic background.

The interview included private-sector employees, BUMN staff, teachers, NGO workers, freelancers, architects, software engineers, and community organizers.

Table of Informants

| Pseudonym | Age | City | Occupation | Platform |
|-----------|-----|------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Ridwan | 33 | Pamulang | employee | Kitabisa, Instagram |
| Siti | 29 | Depok | Freelancer | Instagram |
| Aminah | 30 | Depok | Civil servant | Instagram |
| Rahman | 31 | Jakarta | BUMN Staff | Kitabisa |
| Marissa | 26 | Bandung | Graphic designer | Instagram |
| Farah | 34 | Yogyakarta | Freelancer | TikTok, Instagram |
| Rico | 30 | Tangerang | Software engineer | Kitabisa |
| Laras | 28 | Jakarta | employee | Instagram |
| Hafiz | 27 | Bandung | Junior architect | TikTok |
| Syifa | 32 | Yogyakarta | Community organizer | Instagram, Kitabisa |
| Dina | 33 | Yogyakarta | Teacher | TikTok, Instagram |
| Gifari | 28 | Jakarta | BUMN employee | Kitabisa |

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. An inductive coding approach allowed themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives and online interactions. Coding was conducted manually to organize and retrieve themes related to emotional labor, moral intensity, and spiritual self-performance. These were then organized into main categories reflecting the dynamics of digital philanthropy: emotional engagement, moral consumption, reflexivity and fatigue, and the aesthetics of piety. The integration of visual and verbal data enriched the findings and provided a holistic understanding of the moral and emotional dimensions of platform-based giving.

Results and Discussion

Visual Power and the Hierarchy of Suffering

Digital donation platforms foster affective resonance primarily through visual strategies that highlight individual suffering, making certain lives more emotionally salient and morally urgent. On platforms such as Kitabisa, Instagram, and TikTok, campaigns displaying close-up facial expressions, visible injuries, or distressed children consistently generate higher engagement. These images function as affective triggers that reduce psychological distance, eliciting what respondents described as "a pull," "rasa tidak tega," or a sudden compulsion to donate. One participant articulated this dynamic when recalling his initial encounter with a viral campaign:

"At first it was because I saw images of starving children or families who had just lost their homes. It made me feel sad. That feeling pushed me to do something to ease their burden and donating felt like the quickest and easiest way to respond." (Ridwan, Personal interview, Pamulang, 2025)

The emotional immediacy of these visuals frequently prompts users to donate impulsively, driven more by the imagery's intensity than by an assessment of structural need. Another respondent echoed this affective response: "When the image is powerful, especially a sick child or an elderly person who looks helpless. I'm immediately moved. It feels like a call I can't ignore." (Siti, Personal interview, Depok, 2025).

These accounts illustrate how visual cues function as moral accelerators, prompting nearly automatic acts of giving. This visual regime establishes a hierarchy of suffering, privileging individuals who appear fragile, innocent, or severely harmed. Respondents often reported donating "without thinking too much" when confronted with emotionally charged images, while neglecting campaigns addressing chronic poverty, community development, or gradual structural issues. These less visually striking forms of suffering are also less likely to be amplified by algorithms (Slovic, 2007). Within this hierarchy, affect operates as a moral filter: what is visible becomes urgent, while what remains unseen is rendered morally distant (Deng & Zhang, 2019).

Platform-level curation further intensifies this stratification. Emotionally charged thumbnails, high-contrast visuals, and depictions of tears or wounds are often algorithmically promoted, appearing earlier in users' feeds and circulating more widely. This process exemplifies what scholars term platform emotional governance, where emotional intensity, rather than objective need, determines visibility. Consequently, campaigns that achieve aesthetic intensification gain prominence, while slow, systemic forms of suffering remain marginal within the moral economy of digital giving (Feng & Zhang, 2019).

This process produces a visual hierarchy of suffering in which certain victims, particularly children and women, are featured more frequently due to their presumed capacity to evoke empathy. Women are typically portrayed as sorrowful and vulnerable, while children are depicted as innocent and helpless (Chouliaraki, 2010). These curated representations construct a moral economy that selectively assigns worthiness to specific narratives and populations (Cowden et

al., 2025). In contrast, issues such as structural poverty and social injustice are often overlooked because they do not conform to the platform's logic of emotional clarity and visual appeal.

These affective encounters produce morally ambivalent experiences among donors. Some interpret the emotional pull as an opportunity to demonstrate virtue, while others experience guilt for prioritizing visually dramatic cases. Many also report emotional saturation resulting from repeated exposure to catastrophic imagery. As one respondent noted: "Sometimes I get really exhausted from seeing sad content all the time. When it gets too overwhelming, I avoid opening the app for a few days." (Andri, 31, *Personal interview*, South Jakarta, 2025).

This oscillation between emotional resonance and withdrawal highlights a central paradox of digital philanthropy: empathy is persistently solicited, visually constructed, and algorithmically intensified, yet these same mechanisms that mobilize moral action also generate emotional fatigue and selective disengagement. Some donors have expressed discomfort with repeated exposure to vulnerable imagery, particularly involving children, reflecting a growing demand for ethical storytelling that upholds consent, dignity, and agency (Kurniawan et al., 2025). In response, some campaigners have begun anonymizing sensitive visuals, emphasizing narratives of recovery and resilience, and representing recipients as active participants in their own stories.

Although visual storytelling remains a powerful instrument in digital philanthropy, its dependence on emotionally charged, selectively curated depictions of suffering exposes deeper contradictions. The continual prioritization of identifiable victims, especially children and women, exemplifies the commodification of empathy, privileging visibility over justice. These practices risk transforming humanitarian appeals into spectacles that obscure the structural and political origins of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2010). Over time, this cycle of affective consumption may lead to emotional exhaustion, described as slow death, the gradual depletion of affective capacity under the persistent demand for care (Berlant, 2014).

The Role of Platforms in Shaping Moral Urgency

Digital philanthropy platforms not only facilitate acts of giving but also construct affective environments that shape the production, circulation, and intensification of moral urgency. On platforms such as Kitabisa, Instagram, and TikTok, users encounter a deliberately curated emotional architecture, including visual cues, interface design, algorithmic repetition, and temporal prompts, all of which influence perceptions and prioritization of suffering. Features like countdown timers, progress bars, "urgent" badges, and real-time donation notifications accelerate the sense of urgency, framing charity as both time-sensitive and morally immediate. These interface elements serve as affective technologies that amplify users' perception of crisis. As one participant remarked:

"When I see the 'urgent' label or the countdown timer going down, it feels like I have to act right now. Even if I'm not sure about the details, the platform makes it feel like waiting is not an option." (Nadia, 27, Bandung, *Personal interview*, 2025).

Emotional architecture describes how digital platforms structure user experiences to regulate affective flows, shape perceptions of urgency, and guide moral action through visual design, algorithms, and social interaction (Adinugraha et al., 2023). Each platform actively shapes users' emotional responses through its unique design and operational logic. For example, TikTok's short-form videos, which integrate audio, facial expressions, and text, facilitate rapid emotional resonance and encourage impulsive donations through immediate affective intensity. In contrast, Instagram presents a more curated aesthetic of suffering, eliciting reflective empathy as donors browse multiple campaigns while being influenced by compelling visual content (Habib, 2025).

Algorithms reinforce emotional momentum by amplifying campaigns that generate high engagement, particularly those featuring dramatic visuals or highly affective narratives. After users interact with a single campaign, similar content repeatedly appears in their feeds, resulting

in emotional saturation and a narrowed moral focus. Respondents frequently characterized this algorithmic repetition as overwhelming, observing that platforms adapt to promote increasingly emotional content. One participant described the experience as follows:

“After I clicked one video, suddenly my whole feed was full of similar cases, injured kids, families in crisis. It becomes a loop of sadness, like the app wants me to stay in that emotional state.”
(Rahman, 31, South Jakarta, Personal interview, 2025)

Algorithms actively shape and reinforce affective cycles underlying these user experiences. Several participants observed that donation-related content frequently appears as algorithms adapt to their prior emotional responses. This demonstrates that algorithms not only present content but also direct users’ emotional dynamics through repetitive exposure. In digital spaces, emotion serves as a connective tissue, forming affective publics, communities united not by rational discourse but by shared emotional experiences (Papacharissi, 2014).

Through this amplification system, platforms subtly determine which cases attain moral visibility and which recede into obscurity. The sequence of posts, thumbnail arrangements, and micro-interactions embedded within the interface collectively choreograph users’ moral responses. The temporal pacing of notifications such as “X people just donated,” “only 2 hours left,” and “target almost reached” further compresses the interval between witnessing suffering and responding, rendering hesitation ethically fraught. While some users perceive these prompts as motivating, others interpret them as emotional pressure. One respondent articulated this ambivalence:

“Sometimes I donate because I genuinely want to help, but other times it feels like the app is pushing me. The constant notifications make me feel guilty if I don’t respond immediately.”
(Farah, 34, Yogyakarta, Personal interview, 2025)

By targeting users’ affective states, platforms create a persuasive environment in which giving is framed as both a rational choice and an emotionally charged response. Donation becomes embedded in a feedback loop between emotional stimulus and symbolic reward, reinforcing the donor’s perception of moral action and social value (Kolan et al., 2018).

The concept of soft religious surveillance in the Indonesian digital context underscores how users internalize both divine accountability and communal observation within online environments. Acts of giving on digital platforms are frequently undertaken with an awareness of being observed not only by God but also by fellow Muslims who engage with donation posts through sharing, liking, and commenting. This dual surveillance fosters moral performativity, as public visibility reinforces spiritual identity and piety. Emotional gratification from donating is thus closely linked to the affirmation of religiosity within a digitally mediated community. This dynamic is particularly evident during religious periods such as Ramadan, when platforms introduce leaderboards, real-time donation trackers, and Islamic reminders to encourage charitable giving as part of spiritual practice.

Continuous exposure to emotionally intense religious appeals can result in fatigue. In response, some users employ affective coping strategies that combine spiritual and digital reflexivity, such as selectively engaging with content, unfollowing accounts that are overwhelming, or reframing donations as a private act of worship rather than a public social gesture. These practices illustrate an emerging form of religiosity shaped by both faith and algorithmic influence, as individuals navigate sincerity, spiritual aspiration, and the moral expectations of the digital ummah.

Within the digital philanthropy ecosystem, altruism is embedded in social interactions and reinforced through public signaling. When users share, like, or comment on campaigns, they not only participate personally but also communicate the value of empathy to their communities. As Indri (25) noted, “When your name shows up after donating, and you see others too, it feels like you are part of something good. That makes you want to donate again.” This visibility fosters

altruistic signaling, transforming contributions into elements of collective performance.

This emotional architecture encompasses not only technical but also social and religious dimensions. On platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, religious content creators, micro-preachers, and lifestyle influencers increasingly assume roles of moral authority. Posts including motivational reminders (tausiyah), Qur'anic verses, and personal testimonials about giving circulate widely, serving as affective cues that inform users' perceptions of virtuous, urgent, and righteous actions. Respondents frequently described the influence of these religious voices on their emotional and moral orientations online. One participant noted:

“Sometimes I donate because an ustadz on Instagram encourages it. It feels like a religious reminder, even if it's just a short reel or story.” (Aminah, 30, Depok, civil servant; Instagram-based donor)

This example demonstrates how digital authority is embedded within platform architecture, generating a sense of urgency and framing charitable acts as immediate and normative expressions of Islamic virtue.

However, this logic of visibility also produces a subtle form of social surveillance. Sincerity is no longer evaluated solely in private but is negotiated within digital spaces shaped by social expectations (Chetioui et al., 2022). Unlike repressive surveillance, soft surveillance operates through participation and social relationships, instilling a subtle yet influential moral pressure. As one participant stated, “Sometimes I feel guilty for not donating, especially when I see my friends helping out in their stories.” In this context, algorithms and online communities generate an environment charged with moral impulses, driven not only by the belief that “God is watching,” but also by the awareness of communal observation. Digital platforms thus do more than transmit moral messages; they actively construct affective conditions that demand immediate responses. Moral urgency emerges not only from internal awareness but from an emotional architecture that shapes how users feel, act, and express care in public digital spaces.

Repeated exposure to manufactured urgency results in both moral activation and emotional fatigue. Several users reported intentionally muting notifications or avoiding specific platforms due to the psychological strain caused by constant crisis portrayals. This highlights a central paradox in platform-mediated compassion: the same emotional infrastructure that encourages generosity also leads to affective exhaustion and selective disengagement. These dynamics indicate that moral urgency in digital philanthropy is not a spontaneous emotional response but a platform-mediated phenomenon, shaped by algorithmic amplification, interface cues, and the temporal orchestration of affect. Through their emotional architectures, platforms do not merely facilitate giving; they orchestrate how users feel, when they feel it, and toward whom their compassion is directed.

Between Sincere Intent and Performative Piety

The ethical dilemma inherent in digital philanthropy centers on the tension between ikhlas (sincere intention) and performative piety shaped by platform visibility. While Islamic ethics prioritizes inward sincerity, digital environments such as Kitabisa and Instagram promote public displays of charity, which can blur the distinction between genuine devotion and virtue signalling. Donors must navigate emotional and social pressures, including being observed by others or appearing on donation leaderboards, which raises questions about authenticity (Capraro et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021). In this context, charitable giving is transformed from a private moral act into one mediated by algorithms, social feedback, and communal expectations, thereby rendering piety a visible performance.

Several respondents reported discomfort with the perception that their actions were being observed or tracked, even when they opted to give anonymously. One participant explained:

"I want to donate quietly, but the platform always asks if I want my name shown. Even when I choose 'anonymous,' I still feel like I'm being seen somehow. It makes me question whether I'm doing this for God or for the platform." (Hasan, 29, Jakarta, NGO staff; active Kitabisa donor)

These observations demonstrate that donation behaviors in digital environments often fluctuate between subjective preference and the ideals of effective altruism (Gu & Chen, 2021). Rather than being guided solely by rational assessments of impact, donors frequently support causes that resonate with their personal identity, emotional responses, or cultural familiarity. In this context, charitable giving functions not only as an act of compassion but also as a form of self-representation and moral signalling. The ethical tension between emotional sincerity and strategic utility is intensified by platform architectures that prioritize visibility, such as public donation lists, shareable links, and viral rankings. Consequently, emotionally evocative campaigns with compelling visuals or relatable narratives tend to attract greater attention, even if they do not address the most urgent or structurally significant needs. Charitable behavior thus becomes intertwined with digital popularity and symbolic recognition, raising critical questions about the mediation of generosity, the visibility of suffering, and the moral salience of causes within algorithmically curated spaces (Tang & Hou, 2024).

This tension underscores a broader shift from private moral intention to a visibility-oriented moral economy mediated by digital infrastructures. Features such as public comment sections, recent donor lists, and personalized badges subtly encourage users to signal generosity, whether intentionally or not. For some donors, these features raise concerns about *riya'*, the Islamic concept of outward displays that risk undermining sincere intention. Others, however, interpret visibility as a form of *dakwah* or moral encouragement, viewing it as a means to normalize giving and inspire broader participation. Even donors who value these communal aspects acknowledge moments of self-scrutiny. As one respondent reflected: "Sometimes I wonder if posting a donation link on my Instagram story is really about helping, or if it's about showing that I'm a caring person. The line gets blurry." Marissa, 26, Bandung, graphic designer; Instagram-based donor

This tension reflects the economy of affect, a system in which moral actions circulate through networks of emotion, recognition, and visibility (Ahmed, 2004). In such an economy, piety is evaluated not only by internal intention but also by its public display and social validation. Acts of devotion, including donating, sharing religious content, or promoting charitable campaigns, are increasingly influenced by digital aesthetics, algorithmic amplification, and the emotional expectations of online audiences. In the Islamic context, these dynamics intersect with enduring ethical concerns regarding *ujub* (self-admiration) and *sum'ah* (seeking praise from others). Performative morality is not only possible in this setting but is often incentivized, as moral visibility becomes a form of symbolic capital (Jones & Koenig, 2018). The growing commodification of compassion risks reducing moral action to algorithmically optimized gestures, driven more by visibility metrics than by ethical deliberation (Leach et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2020).

However, this performativity does not necessarily undermine sincerity (Bhati & McDonnell, 2019). As digital spaces expand, expressions of religiosity coexist and negotiate meaning (Chingwere et al., 2025). The effectiveness of digital fundraising is closely linked to social media engagement and network size, indicating that the moral urgency of giving is now deeply connected to interactional visibility. In Indonesia, platforms such as Kitabisa exemplify this phenomenon, as campaigns that gain the most attention often feature emotionally compelling narratives, viral video formats, and endorsements from religious influencers. Nevertheless, this dynamic also introduces the risk of moral disengagement, where the act of giving becomes detached from its ethical substance and diluted by the pursuit of metrics and public validation.

This ambiguity is intensified by the algorithmic environment of social media, where visibility frequently determines a campaign's reach and success. Donors reported feeling responsible for amplifying campaigns by sharing them, while also experiencing discomfort about transforming

compassion into content. The moral significance of “being seen” becomes entangled with platform metrics such as likes, reposts, and engagement rates, generating subtle pressure to perform generosity in accordance with the logic of digital visibility.

Participants also observed that emotional triggers can sometimes overshadow reflective intention. During moments of heightened urgency, donors may act impulsively and subsequently question whether their donation reflected genuine solidarity or was a response to algorithmically induced moral pressure. As one participant explained:

“There are times I donate because I truly mean it, but other times the emotion from the video is so strong that I act before thinking. Later I’m not sure if it was sincerity or just the platform playing with my feelings.” (Dina, 33, Yogyakarta, teacher; occasional TikTok donor)

These ethical dilemmas illustrate the complex interplay among *ikhlas*, emotional immediacy, and digital visibility. Although donors strive to maintain sincerity, platform architectures increasingly complicate the separation of pure intention from the affective and social cues embedded in digital giving environments. Rather than viewing these tensions as contradictions, they signal a broader transformation in the expression, negotiation, and embodiment of piety within algorithmically mediated moral economies. In this context, sincerity becomes a relational and situational practice shaped by technological infrastructures, social expectations, and the emotional dynamics of the digital environment. The dilemma between sincere intent and performative piety thus reflects a structural consequence of participating in a visibility-driven charitable ecosystem, rather than a failure of individual morality.

This new configuration of authority contributes to the emergence of instant piety, a mode of ethical self-formation characterized by rapid moral gestures driven by affect. Many participants described the emotional impulse to donate as both an altruistic act and a means of affirming their moral identity within the digital public sphere. As one respondent expressed:

“Giving online sometimes feels like part of what it means to be a good Muslim today. Fast, visible, and it feels like I’m doing my part, even if it’s small.” (Hafiz, 27, Bandung, junior architect; occasional TikTok donor)

Instant piety thus functions as both an ethical aspiration and a platform-mediated performance, shaped by religious messages that emphasize rapid response, emotional resonance, and the spiritual rewards of immediate action. However, this accelerated mode of piety also raises questions about authenticity. Respondents expressed concerns regarding whether their actions were genuinely rooted in sincere faith or influenced by the social expectations embedded within their digital communities. One participant reflected:

“Sometimes I worry—am I doing this because it’s the right thing to do, or because everyone in my online circle is doing it? The pressure to appear religious is real.” (Nabila, 33, Jakarta, marketing consultant; active Instagram donor)

These tensions underscore the role of digital platforms in mediating both acts of giving and the formation of religious subjectivity.

Political donations may serve as substitutes for charitable giving, enabling individuals to express their values through civic alignment rather than altruistic action (Yýldýrým et al., 2024). This dynamic complicates the landscape of moral intent, as expressions of solidarity can shift from communal responsibility to identity signaling. On Muslim digital platforms, identity-based signaling is particularly prominent, with acts of giving often accompanied by religious language, symbols, and hashtags such as #SedekahSubuh, #BerbagiItuIbadah, or #WakafProduktif, which allow donors to affirm their piety and moral identity before a like-minded audience. Donations thus function as both acts of compassion and public declarations of belonging to a virtuous Islamic community. Platform interface designs, which frequently display donor names and messages, reinforce this performativity by facilitating social recognition and spiritual branding.

Simultaneously, narrative strategies such as “urgent help needed” or “one click saves a life” manipulate emotional responses to prompt immediate action, raising ethical concerns about the instrumentalization of affect in religious giving (Gu & Chen, 2021; Tang & Hou, 2024).

At the organizational level, non-profits must balance emotional appeal with ethical integrity. Corporate giving is frequently aligned with branding strategies rather than genuine altruism, reflecting a commodification of care that can undermine public trust (Zhao et al., 2020). To address this, maintaining transparency, accountability, and clear alignment with the organization’s mission is essential for sustaining donor confidence and institutional credibility. This challenge is particularly significant for Islamic philanthropic institutions, where governance encompasses both managerial accountability and religious legitimacy. In Indonesia, Dompot Dhuafa exemplifies how Islamic philanthropic organizations seek to institutionalize *amanah* (trust), *adl* (justice), and *maslahah* (public benefit) within a professional and sharia-compliant framework, employing strategies such as annual financial audits, public reporting, digital tracking of zakat distribution, and the use of digital platforms for donor engagement.

Moral foundation theory adds further nuance: individualistic moral intuitions tend to support out-group beneficiaries, while binding intuitions favor in-group solidarity, shaping both the scope and direction of charitable giving (Nilsson et al., 2020). Likewise, perceived trust and the legitimacy of charity organizations are critical factors in shaping donor decisions, especially when donations are publicly tracked (Ferrara & Missios, 2019). Islamic philanthropic institutions such as Dompot Dhuafa are perceived not only as professionally managed but also as spiritually legitimate, often due to their close affiliation with recognized religious authorities or Islamic movements. Donors frequently cite clarity of distribution, Islamic values, and transparent reporting as key reasons for choosing one platform over another. The combination of moral trust, religious symbolism, and digital transparency forms a powerful triad that guides Muslim donors toward institutions they perceive as both *amanah* and effective. Public-facing features such as real-time donation updates, beneficiary testimonies, and fatwa-based operational standards further reinforce these preferences, shaping an ecosystem in which legitimacy is negotiated through both religious discourse and platform performance. Digital philanthropy unfolds within a morally intricate landscape, where genuine compassion and performative display often coexist in uneasy tension (Shaquila, 2023).

The Emotional Dynamics of Digital Philanthropy

Constant exposure to distressing narratives on digital platforms imposes a substantial emotional burden on users. This phenomenon, termed compassion fatigue, denotes a reduced capacity for empathy resulting from repeated exposure to others’ suffering (Chen et al., 2021). Although donors frequently begin with authentic empathy and a willingness to assist, the persistent influx of emotionally charged content leads to what respondents identified as *rasa lelah*, emotional saturation, and eventual disengagement. This progression exemplifies a shift from individual empathy fatigue to collective burnout within digitally connected moral communities. Numerous participants reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed after extended exposure to suffering in their social media feeds. One respondent recounted:

“Some days it feels like every scroll has another tragedy. At first I felt moved, but after a while it becomes too heavy. I just shut down emotionally.” (Laras, 28, Jakarta, private-sector employee; active Instagram donor)

To maintain balance, some donors develop coping strategies. One such method is emotional reflexivity, the conscious decision to set limits on emotional engagement. As Yusuf said, “Now I limit myself to three campaigns per month, otherwise I’ll burn out.” Others adopt forms of quiet resistance, such as unfollowing charity accounts, muting donation hashtags, or turning off notifications. These actions are not signs of apathy, but rather protective tactics to reclaim emotional autonomy from the demands of algorithmic and social expectations.

This exhaustion can extend beyond the individual, evolving into collective burnout as emotional fatigue disseminates across social networks. As more users become overwhelmed, responsiveness to donation appeals declines, cynicism intensifies, and digital solidarity erodes. This pattern reflects the concept of psychic numbing (Slovic, 2007), in which repeated exposure to suffering reduces empathetic responsiveness. If unaddressed, collective burnout may undermine public trust and threaten the sustainability of digital philanthropic ecosystems.

In this context, the dual-process perspective is pertinent, as online giving is influenced by both cognitive trust in institutions and emotional concern for beneficiaries (Chen et al., 2021). Emotional marketing strategies, including storytelling and visual narratives, are effective but may also induce fatigue if not balanced with opportunities for reflection (Kurniawati et al., 2021). This phenomenon corresponds with affective heuristics, in which individuals make rapid emotional judgments—such as empathy, urgency, or guilt—rather than engage in deliberate reasoning when deciding to donate. Although these affective shortcuts can prompt swift prosocial behavior, they may also intensify selective giving, favoring causes that elicit strong emotions over those with broader structural significance. Furthermore, excessive emotional arousal can result in donation anxiety, which may discourage participation or prompt withdrawal from charitable activities (Balaskas et al., 2024).

This emotional shutdown reflects a protective mechanism in which users regulate their mental states by limiting exposure or avoiding platforms altogether. Respondents noted that such avoidance is not rooted in indifference but rather in emotional exhaustion. As one participant explained:

“I know I can’t help everyone, but the platform makes it feel like I should. When I can’t donate, I feel guilty, and when I donate too often, I feel drained. It’s exhausting either way.” Rico, 30, Tangerang, software engineer; frequent Kitabisa donor

A growing number of donors, therefore, adopt selective engagement as a coping strategy, consciously avoiding campaigns they anticipate will be emotionally heavy. The repeated circulation of tragic imagery not only overwhelms users but also narrows their capacity for empathetic response. As another respondent shared: “Now I’m more selective—I don’t click on every campaign. Sometimes I just feel tired seeing donation posts all the time.” Gifari, 28, South Jakarta, BUMN employee; regular Kitabisa user

This pattern is symptomatic of empathy fatigue: a diminishing emotional responsiveness brought on by persistent affective stimulation. Over time, the burden of repeated moral demands contributes not only to individual disengagement but also to a shared emotional depletion as donors observe similar coping behaviors among their peers. One participant captured this collective dimension succinctly: “It’s not just me—my friends also say they can’t handle the emotional weight anymore. We talk about how tiring it is to see suffering all the time. It feels like a collective burnout.” Syifa, 32, Yogyakarta, community worker; occasional donor

This collective burnout highlights a structural paradox: digital platforms rely on sustained emotional engagement to encourage generosity, yet excessive emotional exposure reduces users’ ability to respond effectively. Consequently, the emotional economy of digital philanthropy fluctuates between activation and depletion, challenging the long-term sustainability of compassion.

Within this environment, empathy emerges as a scarce resource, continually solicited, expended, and depleted through algorithmic repetition. The psychological effects of digital giving are thus not incidental but rather structural outcomes of the affective architectures these platforms employ. Recognizing this dynamic is crucial for evaluating the long-term viability of digital philanthropy and for protecting the emotional well-being of the communities involved.

Certain Indonesian charities have begun to address these challenges. For example, Dompet Dhuafa does not rely exclusively on emergency visual appeals, but also emphasizes long-term

impact narratives through initiatives such as Sekolah Literasi Indonesia, Kampung Ternak, and Tebar Hewan Kurban. These campaigns focus on empowerment and community transformation, promoting a more sustainable model of slow giving—an approach rooted in reflection, continuity, and long-term responsibility. Such efforts represent a deliberate shift away from emotional exploitation toward a pedagogy centered on hope and development.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. In digital ecosystems governed by visibility algorithms, emotionally intense content is more likely to go viral, often eclipsing slower, context-rich narratives (Banerjee, 2021). The integration of intimate technologies is crucial for cultivating authentic emotional connections in crowdfunding, providing an avenue to transcend purely transactional interactions. In Indonesia, platforms such as Kitabisa increasingly employ voice notes, WhatsApp updates, and short video messages from beneficiaries to foster emotional proximity. For example, a mother sending a voice message to thank donors for her child's surgery, or a student recording a video to express gratitude for a scholarship, personalizes the giving experience and reinforces trust.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital philanthropy among Indonesian Muslims has developed into a morally complex ecosystem shaped by the interaction of platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and Islamic ethical values. Empathy, previously regarded as a spontaneous and deeply personal emotion, is now increasingly curated, accelerated, and commodified within affective infrastructures that prioritize visibility over sincerity. Charitable practices, once rooted in private devotion and communal solidarity, are mediated through visual aesthetics, moral branding, and algorithmically driven emotional appeals. The design architecture of platforms such as Kitabisa, Instagram, and TikTok is instrumental in constructing moral urgency and encouraging affective engagement through persuasive interfaces and symbolic recognition. This emotionally saturated environment has also produced psychological repercussions, including compassion fatigue, silent resistance, and collective emotional exhaustion. The shift toward performative piety and social validation, rather than reflective ethical deliberation, raises critical concerns regarding the sustainability, authenticity, and spiritual integrity of digital giving. Despite these contradictions, digital philanthropy also opens new pathways for solidarity and moral subject formation, in which acts of giving represent both religious devotion and digitally mediated self-representation.

In light of these findings, this study recommends a reorientation of digital philanthropy toward more ethical, reflexive, and sustainable practices. Platform architects and philanthropic organizations should move beyond transactional metrics and prioritize the affective well-being of donors, the dignified portrayal of beneficiaries, and the cultivation of enduring trust. Storytelling strategies ought to focus on empowerment, resilience, and long-term transformation, rather than exploitative depictions of vulnerability and immediacy. Religious authorities and digital influencers have a significant responsibility to foster a culture of intentional (*niyyah*-based) giving, while philanthropic institutions must maintain transparency, accountability, and the moral principle of *amanah* in their operations. Policymakers and technology developers are encouraged to collaborate in establishing normative frameworks that reduce emotional exploitation and support ethically grounded digital solidarity. Future research should include the perspectives of aid recipients, platform designers, and religious practitioners to comprehensively examine the relationships among digital infrastructures, emotional labor, and contemporary Islamic philanthropic ethics. Through such multi-stakeholder engagement, digital charity may be preserved as a practice rooted in sincere care, social justice, and ethical piety in an era increasingly shaped by algorithmic acceleration.

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Declaration on the Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In accordance with academic integrity standards, we declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies were used exclusively to support the writing and language refinement of this manuscript. These tools were not employed for data collection, data generation, coding, interpretation, or analysis. All empirical findings, thematic interpretations, and analytical insights presented in this article are based solely on our independent research, including digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative data analysis. We remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the content.

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