

## **Between Reality and Virtuality: A Study of Muslim Perceptions of Metaverse Hajj as a Religious Practice**

**Hasse Jubba<sup>1\*</sup>, Henky Fernando<sup>2</sup>, Yuniar Galuh Larasati<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Rifai Darus<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1,4</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

<sup>2-3</sup>Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Email: [hasse@umy.ac.id](mailto:hasse@umy.ac.id)

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study explores Muslim perceptions and evaluations of virtual Hajj within the metaverse, focusing on its acceptance as a religious practice. **Methodology:** Utilising a qualitative descriptive approach, data were sourced from online news articles identified using the search term "Metaverse Hajj Discourse" on Google. These articles were analyzed to understand the diverse perspectives within the Muslim community regarding virtual Hajj. **Findings:** The research reveals that while Muslims acknowledge the educational and preparatory benefits of virtual Hajj, it is largely rejected as a legitimate form of fulfilling the religious obligations of Hajj, due to its failure to encapsulate the physical and spiritual elements of the pilgrimage. **Research Implications:** This study highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of virtual religious practices, suggesting that while such technologies can augment the educational aspects of religious rituals, they cannot replace the physical acts prescribed by religious doctrines. **Originality/Value:** The research contributes to the emerging discourse on religious practices within digital spaces, offering insights into the intersection of technology and traditional religious practices, and setting a foundation for future theological discussions on virtual reality's role in religion.

**Keywords:** Digital Religion; Hajj; Metaverse; Muslim Perceptions; Virtual Pilgrimage.

### **Abstrak**

**Tujuan:** Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi persepsi dan evaluasi Muslim terhadap haji virtual dalam metaverse, dengan fokus pada penerimaannya sebagai praktik keagamaan. **Metodologi:** Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data bersumber dari artikel berita daring yang diidentifikasi menggunakan istilah pencarian "Wacana Haji Metaverse" di Google. Artikel-artikel ini dianalisis untuk memahami beragam perspektif dalam komunitas Muslim mengenai haji virtual. **Temuan:** Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun umat Islam mengakui manfaat pendidikan dan persiapan haji virtual, namun sebagian besar ditolak sebagai bentuk yang sah untuk memenuhi kewajiban agama haji, karena kegagalannya untuk merangkum elemen fisik dan spiritual dari ibadah haji. **Implikasi Penelitian:** Penelitian ini menyoroti perlunya pemahaman yang bernuansa tentang praktik-praktik keagamaan virtual, yang menunjukkan bahwa meskipun teknologi semacam itu dapat menambah aspek pendidikan dari ritual keagamaan, mereka tidak dapat menggantikan tindakan fisik yang ditentukan oleh doktrin-doktrin agama. **Originalitas/Nilai:** Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana yang muncul tentang praktik keagamaan dalam ruang digital, menawarkan wawasan tentang persimpangan antara teknologi dan praktik keagamaan tradisional, dan menetapkan landasan untuk diskusi teologis di masa depan tentang peran realitas virtual dalam agama.

**Kata Kunci:** Agama Digital; Haji; Metaverse; Persepsi Muslim; Ziarah Virtual.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The advancement in simulating human intelligence within machines has sparked a discussion on virtual pilgrimages within the metaverse. The term 'metaverse' combines 'meta' (beyond) and 'universe', denoting a virtual reality environment. In this digital space, interactions and communications are facilitated through avatars—digital personas that mimic human appearance (Park & Kim, 2022). Dionisio et al. (2013) noted that the development of the metaverse is grounded in four pillars: immersive realism,

\*Corresponding Author

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access and identity, interoperability, and scalability, all enhancing virtual knowledge and experiences. Consequently, the metaverse frequently offers nearly authentic virtual experiences to its users (Siyarov & Jo, 2021). As a virtual world, the metaverse also showcases simulations of various social activities, including religious practices, illustrating the complex patterns and meanings attributed to these activities by Muslims (Lombardi & Lombardi, 2010).

Prior to the emergence of the metaverse, Second Life pioneered the concept of virtual reality. Launched by Linden Labs, Second Life introduced users to a three-dimensional virtual world where they could interact, socialise, and even inhabit virtual spaces (Irwin & Coutts, 2015). In Second Life, individuals are represented by avatars—digital representations that facilitate directional movements, gestures, speech, and text chat, all synchronised with their real-life behaviours (Ayiter, 2018). This platform made it easier for users to apply previously acquired knowledge in a virtual setting (Klein et al., 2017). Thus, Second Life established a dynamic and accessible virtual reality model, enabling users to engage with digital experiences that closely mimic real-world interactions (Gallego, Bueno, & Noyes, 2016).

Second Life provided the initial blueprint for technology and digital interaction that would later evolve into the metaverse. In the metaverse, individuals are represented by avatars—digital personas that not only represent identity but also serve as mediums for self-expression within cyberspace (Litvinova, Rilke, & Guenther, 2023). As a virtual realm, the metaverse offers superior visualisation and the capability to simulate reality in a much more vivid and detailed manner (Shwedeh, 2024). Thus, the metaverse is recognised as a new facet of media. As a pioneering form of media, it has various implications for its users, influencing their emotions and behaviours in the real world. The metaverse plays a pivotal role in enhancing user experiences, facilitating interaction, and unlocking the potential of their environments.

The complexity of Muslims' interpretation of the virtual Hajj discourse within the metaverse provides a crucial context for examination and reflection. Over the past five years, the virtualisation of religious practices has emerged as a significant topic of discussion in the fields of religious studies and technology (Andok, 2018). However, research into the phenomenon of virtual religion, particularly those exploring the discourse of virtual Hajj in the context of Muslim interpretations, has not been extensive. To date, scholarly investigations into the nexus between religion and the metaverse have predominantly concentrated on three areas: firstly, studies exploring the interaction between religion and the metaverse in the context of *fiqh* (*Islamic jurisprudence*) (Hegazy, 2020; Schlosser, 2013; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020); secondly, research focusing on educational aspects (Bolger, 2021; Campbell & Rule, 2020; Yiğitoğlu, 2022); and thirdly, studies addressing issues of access within this virtual space (Allal-Chérif, 2022; Leone, 2011; Surip et al., 2022). These studies underscore the intricate and context-dependent relationships between religion and the metaverse.

The relationship between religion and the metaverse, as explored in prior studies, has demonstrated a multifaceted dynamic. Mann (2019) highlighted that the interplay between religion and the metaverse has elicited contextual meanings from religious individuals, which are critical to explore and reflect upon. Nevertheless, existing research on this relationship has not been exhaustive, particularly concerning the interpretation by Muslims of the virtual Hajj within the metaverse. The intricate dynamics between religion and the metaverse necessitate comprehensive studies, such as those advocated by Fernando (2022), to achieve a thorough and reflective understanding of how Muslims perceive the discourse of virtual Hajj within this digital realm. Therefore, this study not only addresses the gaps identified in previous research but also aims to elucidate the nuances of virtual Hajj practices within the metaverse to foster a deeper understanding among Muslims.

The discourse surrounding virtual Hajj within the metaverse has engendered a spectrum of interpretations and meanings among Muslims, influencing both practice and ideology. To establish an analytical framework, this study poses three pivotal questions: First, how does the virtual pilgrimage in the metaverse diverge from traditional Hajj practices? Second, what are the driving factors behind the emergence of virtual Hajj discourse within the metaverse? Third, how do Muslims respond to and interpret this virtual Hajj discourse? The premise of this study is that the discourse surrounding virtual Hajj in the metaverse not only generates diverse interpretations from Muslims but also serves as a critical evaluation of the practices and ideologies associated with virtual Hajj, which are perceived as at odds with the fundamental and spiritual values of conventional Hajj. In essence, the Muslim response to the virtual Hajj discourse within the metaverse is an evaluative reception, scrutinising its alignment with traditional religious tenets.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study was conducted amidst the growing dissemination of virtual Hajj discourse within the metaverse space through online media. The focus of this study centred on the interpretation by Muslims of this virtual Hajj discourse, based on three considerations: firstly, the significance of Muslim interpretations concerning virtual Hajj in the metaverse is a central issue that has not been thoroughly explored. Secondly, this interpretation reflects valuable insights from the Muslim community that warrant detailed examination. Thirdly, the perspectives of Muslims on this virtual Hajj discourse possess critical attributes that merit reflection.

The methodology employed was qualitative and descriptive, utilising both primary and secondary data. Primary data comprised excerpts from online news texts, gathered by searching for the keyword "Metaverse Hajj Discourse" on the Google search engine. Data collection and analysis were conducted by three researchers from October 25 to November 10, 2022. The examination of online news was rapid, focusing on titles related to Hajj practices in the metaverse, the factors driving the emergence of this discourse, and Muslim reactions to these developments. This approach yielded three dominant themes regarding Muslim perspectives on virtual Hajj, which were reported as novel findings in this study. Secondary data were sourced from websites, books, and scholarly articles.

The data analysis was structured into three phases, as outlined by Fernando et al. (2022): initially, the data reduction process involved organising data into a more systematic format for ease of identification. Following this, the data display phase entailed describing the data within tables that included images and excerpts from the news summaries collated. This step helped distinguish between virtual and conventional Hajj models, facilitating a comparative analysis. The final phase, data verification, involved drawing conclusions based on the data trends identified. This stage culminated in the narrative and visual presentation of the findings. The inductive descriptive analysis performed subsequently allowed for the articulation of conclusions regarding the perception of virtual Hajj discourse by Muslims within the metaverse space.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Virtual Hajj vs. Conventional Hajj**

The discourse surrounding virtual Hajj through the metaverse space reveals pronounced differences from traditional Hajj practices. These distinctions are evident in aspects such as the ritual of

tawaf, and the representations of the Grand Mosque and the Kaaba, pivotal elements in the Hajj context. These differences are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Virtual Hajj vs. Conventional Hajj Discourse**









Discourse	Virtual Hajj	Conventional Hajj
Tawaf		
	<p>Image A. Virtual tawaf (Kurniawan, 2022)</p>	<p>Figure B. Conventional tawaf (Kumparan, 2022)</p>
Hajar Aswad (Black Stone in English; an Islamic relic located in the Kaaba)		
	<p>Image C. Hajar Aswad virtual (Rachmatika, 2022)</p>	<p>Image D. Hajar Aswad conventional (Rohim, 2022)</p>
Masjidil Haram		
	<p>Image E. Masjidil Haram virtual (Noorca, 2022)</p>	<p>Image F. Masjidil Haram konvensional (Kurnialam &amp; Nashrullah, 2022)</p>
Kaaba		

Image H. Kaaba virtual  
(Qothrunnada, 2022)

Image I. Kaaba conventional.  
(Sodikin, 2017)

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This structured comparison underscores the essential differences in the representation and perception of key Hajj rituals in virtual versus conventional settings. The virtual Hajj offers a digital representation, which while visually similar, lacks the physical and spiritual engagement inherent in the conventional practices observed in Mecca. This comparative analysis provides a clear visual distinction between the digital simulation of Hajj rituals and their traditional execution, highlighting the challenges and discussions related to the authenticity and validity of virtual religious practices.

Table 1 illustrates the distinctions between virtual Hajj conducted through metaverse space and traditional Hajj practices. By emphasising the concept of virtual reality in practice, it delineates the differences between a virtual Hajj and the conventional Hajj. Concurrently, from the depiction in Figure 1, two trends are evident:

Firstly, the difference in practice between the virtual Hajj and the conventional Hajj. Virtual Hajj through the metaverse space often presents a practical approach throughout the entire Hajj procession, unconstrained by physical limitations of space and time, unlike conventional Hajj practices, which are tangible and systematic. This virtual Hajj discourse through the metaverse space reflects an immersive concept of imagination, contrasting sharply with the real and methodical nature of traditional Hajj practices. These differences are also visible through Image A and Image B in Figure 1.

Secondly, the symbolic differences between virtual Hajj and conventional Hajj are pronounced. The virtual pilgrimage, facilitated through the metaverse, provides alternative means to visually and tactually engage with Hajj symbols such as the *Kaaba* and *Hajar Aswad* (the Black Stone), immersively, without the need to physically travel to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina as required in traditional Hajj. This virtual Hajj discourse through the metaverse space embodies a pragmatic concept of imitation, diverging from the systematic procedures characteristic of conventional Hajj. This divergence is illustrated through Image H and Image I in Figure 1.

These two trends demonstrate that the discourse surrounding virtual Hajj through the metaverse space exhibits significant symbolic and practical differences from conventional Hajj. By leveraging the concept of virtual reality, virtual pilgrimage through the metaverse space can be executed immersively, without the constraints of physical space and time. Conversely, traditional Hajj places greater emphasis on a systematic reality in its execution, hence relying on predefined spatial and temporal conditions. Aligning with this, Van Der Merwe (2021) also notes that the notion of virtual Hajj within an immersive metaverse space often conflicts with the collective experience and understanding of Muslims practising Hajj traditionally. In the shared perspective of Muslims, Hajj is an act that integrates divine values with human ethics (Fernando & Larasati, 2022), a concept that underscores the fundamental disparity between virtual and conventional Hajj.

### Factors for the emergence of virtual Hajj discourse through the metaverse

As discussions regarding the implementation of religious practices in digital spaces intensify, the concept of a virtual Hajj within the metaverse has emerged as a focal point for both scholars and practitioners. This shift towards a digital pilgrimage is reflective of broader technological advancements that are reshaping traditional religious experiences. The move to explore these possibilities has not been arbitrary; it is underpinned by a confluence of educational, promotional, health-related, and economic factors that collectively drive the discourse surrounding virtual Hajj. As the following analysis will show,

each of these factors contributes uniquely to the evolving landscape of religious practices in the digital age, offering new opportunities and challenges for the faithful. These influences, crucial to understanding the shift towards a metaverse-based Hajj, are systematically outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. Factors in the emergence of virtual Hajj**

Factor	Statement
<b>Education</b>	Saudi Arabia included Mecca and the Kaaba in detail into the Metaverse. In fact, you can carry out the Hajj virtually. The initiative allows Muslims to view Hajar Aswad virtually before the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi officials said in a statement (Syahry, 2022).
<b>Promotion</b>	To avoid misunderstandings, Ramzi explained, Saudi Arabia included the Kaaba in the Metaverse for promotion. Like making a virtual museum visit. He said the Saudi initiative might be launched only for promotional purposes, such as the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul (Syahry, 2022).
<b>Socialisation</b>	The Kaaba in the Metaverse is an informative initiative. The project was socialized by the Saudi Arabian Exhibition and Museum agency in collaboration with Umm Al-Quran University (Syahry, 2022).
<b>Health</b>	The Kaaba in the Metaverse was initiated by the Saudi government through the Exhibition and Museum Affairs Agency in collaboration with Ummul Quro University. The goal is to provide an opportunity for Muslims to touch Hajar Aswad virtually. Because during the pandemic we cannot touch Hajar Aswad at all (Detik News, 2022).
<b>Economy</b>	Metaverse Hajj is becoming a hot topic lately. The kingdom plans to make the Hajj pilgrimage possible in the Metaverse or a kind of virtual space created as a digital version of various aspects of real life, including human interaction and economic functions (Afifah, 2022).

Table 2 shows that the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space is significantly influenced by factors outside traditional worship activities. In line with that, three key trends emerge from the analysis:

First, the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space is significantly influenced by educational factors. The development of the virtual Hajj discourse aims to provide Muslims with knowledge before they perform Hajj in Mecca and Medina directly. For instance, Saudi Arabia has detailed Mecca and the Kaaba within the Metaverse, allowing for a virtual performance of the Hajj. This initiative lets Muslims view the *Hajar Aswad* (Black Stone) virtually before their actual pilgrimage to Mecca, as stated by Saudi officials (Syahry, 2022).

Second, health factors also significantly shape the virtual Hajj discourse. The modern Hajj discourse through the metaverse aims to provide opportunities for Muslims to virtually touch the *Hajar Aswad* during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative was started by the Saudi government through the Exhibition and Museum Affairs Agency in collaboration with Ummul Quro University to offer virtual interaction with the *Hajar Aswad* during times when physical contact is restricted (Detik News, 2022).

Third, economic factors influence the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse. The development of virtual Hajj discourse, besides aiming to provide interaction functions between humans, also incorporates economic functions. For example, the kingdom has recently highlighted the potential of performing the Hajj in the Metaverse—a virtual space created as a digital version of real-life interactions and economic activities (Afifah, 2022).

These trends illustrate that factors beyond the religious sphere profoundly influence the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space. The metaverse overlooks the integral and transcendental functions of the pilgrimage, focusing instead on educational, health, and economic functions. Lee & Kim (2022) note that the transformation of the digital world is a dominant factor in the evolution of virtual Hajj discourse. By emphasising virtual experiences, virtual Hajj discourse can enhance the efficiency of knowledge for prospective pilgrims, such as virtually touching the *Hajar Aswad*, circumambulating the Kaaba, and viewing the *Masjidil Haram*. However, according to Fernando and Larasati (2022), this context cannot validate virtual pilgrimage through metaverse space as a legitimate practice in accordance with *sharia* and traditional rites.

Moreover, the development of virtual Hajj discourse might delegitimise the practices, *sharia*, and guidance of conventional Hajj. The characteristics of the virtual Hajj ritual discourse, which stress the concept of virtual reality, cannot replace the conventionally established ways of Hajj, potentially leading to the desacralisation of rituals and values stipulated by the Qur'an and Hadith. Although Hajj performed through metaverse space offers a solution to overcome distance and time (Xu et al., 2022), it cannot legitimise the practice of virtual Hajj in an integral and transcendental context.

### Muslim interpretation of the virtual Hajj discourse through the metaverse

The Muslim interpretation of the virtual Hajj discourse through the metaverse space manifests in a dichotomous form, both ideologically and practically, as illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3. Muslim meanings and statements**

Imposition	Statement
Legitimate in a tourism context	As released by Saudi Arabia at the launch of the Metaverse, this is so that Muslims can experience and even feel kissing Hajar Aswad virtually before carrying out the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. So, the launch was a means of promoting religious tourism from Saudi Arabia (Okezone, 2022).
Legitimate in an educational context	Digitalization efforts are part of technological developments in <i>Muamalah</i> . The positive impact is to make it easier for prospective pilgrims to explore places that will be used as places of worship. However, this does not mean that we are enough and can only go through virtual media because if the pilgrimage through the Metaverse is not legal (Raharjo & Sari, 2022).
Legitimate in an educational context	Metaverse Hajj can be used only for educational purposes that are beneficial to prospective pilgrims. This means that Metaverse Hajj is only allowed to get to know more about which locations will be visited. That is, what must be done in order to carry out the pilgrimage perfectly (Nafi'an, 2022).
Invalid in the context of worship	Hajj is essentially <i>wukuf</i> in Arafat; whoever encounters <i>wukuf</i> in Arafat then encounters Hajj. That is, if there are pilgrims who cannot be present in Padang Arafat at the specified time, then the person concerned by religious law cannot be recognized as having performed the Hajj especially only with the Metaverse (Michella, 2022).
Invalid in Islamic teaching ( <i>rukun Islam</i> )	Nahdlatul Ulama, according to the view of fiqh scholars of the Shafi'i school, the pilgrimage requires the physical implementation of <i>tawaf</i> in the Grand Mosque as one of the pillars of Hajj. From this, it can be concluded that harmoniously, the implementation of Hajj requires physical presence. Thus, virtual Hajj is legally invalid (Farisi, 2022).
Not legally valid in practice	Alhafiz Kurniawan from the <i>Bahtsul Masail</i> institution, Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board of PBNU, explained that in Islamic law, Hajj and Umrah

	pilgrimages are carried out virtually, the law is not valid in practice (Saptohutomo, 2022).
Imposition	Statement
Legitimate in an educational context	A visit to the Kaaba virtually can be optimized to explore and recognize closely with 5 dimensions so that there is complete and adequate knowledge before the Hajj (Saptohutomo, 2022).
Invalid in sharia	Faozan Amar, secretary of the Special Da'wah Institute of PP Muhammadiyah (LDK PP Muhammadiyah), explained that the law of Hajj in the Kaaba Metaverse is invalid. Because the pilgrimage (Hajj) cannot be transferred to a fictional world like the Kaaba Metaverse (Arsyam, 2022).
Unconstitutionally valid	Hajj is a worship that has been determined by time and place, namely in the month of Dhulhijah in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, so it cannot be replaced with another time and place. For this reason, the Metaverse Hajj is not legal because it does not meet the requirements and pillars that have been stipulated in Islamic law (Fiqi, 2022).
Legitimate in a tourism context	If the Metaverse Hajj is intended as a means of religious tourism and learning for young children who learn Hajj <i>manasik</i> , then it is fine. So that when carrying out the actual Hajj, it is expected to be able to understand it properly and correctly (Wulansari, 2022).

Table 3 shows that the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space has elicited a range of dichotomous interpretations from Muslims, both ideologically and practically, as interpreted by major Islamic organisations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah. This complexity is further illustrated in Figure 3, which outlines three predominant views:

Table 3 shows the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space has given rise to various kinds of dichotomous meanings from Muslims ideologically and practically. As interpreted by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah. In line with that, from the appearance of Figure 3 also appears three tendencies, including:

Firstly, virtual pilgrimage through the metaverse is regarded as legitimate within an educational framework. The discourse surrounding virtual Hajj, as endorsed by Muslims, highlights its potential benefits for prospective pilgrims by familiarising them with the sacred sites of Mecca and Medina before their actual pilgrimage. This aligns with the Indonesian Ulema Council's (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) stance that the Metaverse Hajj should be utilised solely for educational purposes, aiding pilgrims in gaining a preliminary understanding of the locations they will visit, which is essential for performing the Hajj rituals effectively.

Secondly, the virtual Hajj is also deemed appropriate within the context of religious tourism. This perspective, supported by the Muhammadiyah group, suggests that virtual Hajj can enhance religious tourism infrastructure and offer educational insights for young learners about the Hajj *manasik* (rituals), thereby ensuring a more informed and impactful experience when they undertake the actual pilgrimage.

Thirdly, the acceptance of virtual Hajj in religious practices encounters limitations, particularly in the context of formal worship. The virtual Hajj is considered invalid by Muslims adhering to traditional beliefs about the pilgrimage, especially those from the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) group. Following the Shafi'i *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), they argue that the Hajj necessitates a physical presence for *tawaf*



(circumambulation) around the Kaaba within the Grand Mosque, a fundamental pillar of the Hajj. Consequently, any virtual representation falls short of fulfilling the obligatory rites, rendering the virtual Hajj legally invalid for worship purposes. This highlights a significant ideological divide within the Muslim community regarding the integration of virtual reality into religious observances, illustrating the complexity of adapting traditional practices to modern technological contexts.

These three trends demonstrate that the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space has elicited a variety of contextual meanings among Muslims. This interpretation emerges in the context of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of practising virtual Hajj via the metaverse. Metaverse Hajj is considered legitimate by Muslims if it serves solely for religious and educational tourism purposes. Conversely, in the context of worship, virtual Hajj through the metaverse space is deemed invalid in terms of practice, law, harmony, and *sharia* (Islamic law), which Muslims conventionally uphold. According to Cheong, Poon, Huang, & Casas (2009), the interpretation by community groups of ideas, policies, and the implementation of certain norms, is not merely a form of social expression but also an evaluation of social discourse, such as the virtual Hajj discourse in the metaverse space, which is dichotomously assessed by Muslims.

The dichotomy in the interpretation of the virtual Hajj discourse through the metaverse space is also shaped by the conservative knowledge of Muslims in responding to social discourse. In essence, the Muslim perspective on the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space is an evaluation of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the practice. This stance further suggests that the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space is viewed as contradictory to the collective knowledge of Muslims in practising Hajj conventionally. Within this collective understanding, the ideology and practice of Hajj are oriented towards the integral values of God and humanity. Therefore, in both practice and ideology, the discourse of virtual Hajj through the metaverse space is interpreted as a practice that contradicts the fundamental values of Muslims in the context of worship.

The discourse around virtual Hajj rituals in the metaverse has elicited diverse responses from the Muslim community. Essentially, this form of Hajj is not in alignment with *Sharia* law and is therefore not considered a fulfilment of the fifth pillar of Islam (Nurherviyanti, Rani, Apriani, & Devrianti, 2022). Central to the Hajj is the rite of standing (*wukuf*) at Arafah, which is regarded as the most significant and essential part of the pilgrimage. For anyone who does not perform *wukuf*, their pilgrimage is deemed invalid. This is because the standing at Arafah is recognised by scholars as the greatest pillar of Hajj, a consensus based on a *hadith* narrated by Abdurahman Bin Ya'mur and reported by Tirmidzi, Ahmad, Abu Daud, Nasai, and Ibn Majah, which states, "Hajj is (*wukuf*at) Arafah. Whoever arrives (at Arafah) on the day of Nahar before dawn breaks then has performed *wukuf*." In this context, the pilgrimage is intrinsically tied to specific physical locations and times. Thus, when Hajj is conducted virtually, its profound dimension is lost.

Those who accept this practice of virtual Hajj primarily rely on certain realities faced by Muslims, particularly in Indonesia. Firstly, the lengthy wait times for Muslims to perform Hajj can extend to about 40 years in some regions, and even longer in others. Secondly, despite being the most expensive religious obligation, there is a high demand among Muslims to perform Hajj. For instance, a regular Hajj pilgrimage can cost tens to hundreds of millions of Rupiah, making it feasible only for those who can afford it. Thirdly, the Hajj can only be performed at a specific place and time—namely, in Mecca during the month of Dzulhijjah annually. These factors make it exceptionally challenging for many Muslims to fulfil this religious pillar as readily as the other pillars of Islam. Therefore, if the aim is to enhance religious experience and remembrance of Allah, then this model of Hajj is permissible as it seeks to enrich understanding of the Hajj before undertaking it in reality (Salleh et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the discourse around virtual Hajj through metaverse space diverges significantly from the conventional collective knowledge of Muslims. This is reflected in the perception of Muslims who deem the practice of virtual Hajj via metaverse space invalid in terms of harmony and *Sharia* as applicable to traditional Hajj practices. Consequently, the interpretation of virtual Hajj by Muslims is not merely a form of reception but also an evaluation of the discourse, which potentially undermines the integral and transcendental values of conventional Hajj in both practice and ideology.

Globally, discussions about the virtual phenomenon of religion within the context of religion and the metaverse often do not portray the subject as passively perceiving the phenomenon. However, the empirical findings of this study indicate that the subject is actively engaged in interpreting the virtual Hajj discourse through metaverse space, demonstrating complex and contextual patterns of meaning. This empirical contribution is anticipated to inform policymakers and religious authorities in understanding and interpreting the virtual Hajj discourse due to the development of human intelligence simulations in machines.

The study also acknowledges a particular limitation in its data collection process, which relied solely on reading online news via Google's platform. Consequently, the data presented in this study comprises only excerpts from online news articles. Despite this limitation, it is expected that the findings will serve as a foundation and reference for future studies, especially those aiming to explore the perceptions of Muslims regarding virtual Hajj through the metaverse space by directly interviewing groups and individuals to obtain a more reflective explanation and understanding.

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