Ghancaran
Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia
P-ISSN 2714-8955 | E-ISSN 2715-9132
https://ejournal.uinmadura.ac.id/index.php/ghancaran/index
https://doi.org/10.19105/ghancaran.v20i2.26337
OPEN ACCESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ritual language and selective digital adaptation in maintaining Javanese sufi identity: Ethnography of communication and cultural continuity in the makrifatullah community in Gresik

Edy Santoso[1]*, Septi Ariadi[2], Yuyun Wahyu Izzati Surya[3]

[1] Doctoral Program in Social Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
[1] Department of Development Studies, Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember, Surabaya, Indonesia
[2] Department of Sociology, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
[3] Department of Communication, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

***Corresponding Author**
edy.santoso-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id

ABSTRACT
This study examined how ritual language and selective digital media use sustained Javanese Sufi identity in the Makrifatullah Community in Gresik, Indonesia. Research on digital religion has concentrated on communities that seek public visibility, and little is known about how the vocabulary of a local spiritual tradition sets limits on media use. We applied the ethnography of communication, drawing on restricted participant observation, ethnographic interviews with nine of 21 informants, informal conversations, field notes, and community documents collected over a field period that began in June 2025 and is planned to end in December 2026. Data were analysed through the four analytic stages proposed by Spradley. Six terms, namely makrifat, laku, dzikir, lungguh, daim, and suluk, worked as referential, regulatory, relational, and identificational resources whose meaning depended on the speaker, addressee, setting, and bodily action. Face-to-face encounters remained the main context in which meaning was taught and corrected, whereas WhatsApp and Zoom were accepted for scheduling, reminders, and limited internal meetings, and public platforms were restricted. We conceptualised this pattern as selective digital adaptation, in which media choice is filtered by communicative function, social access, and representational control. The study offers a sociolinguistic account of language vitality as the survival of contextual function rather than of word frequency, and it shows that cultural continuity can depend on regulating circulation. The findings come from a single community and should not be generalised to other Sufi groups without comparison.

Keywords: Ritual Language; Selective Digital Adaptation; Javanese Sufism; Ethnography of Communication; Language Vitality

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: September 30, 2026
Accepted: October 28, 2026
Published: November 17, 2026

LICENSE

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) License. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

How to Cite This Article

Santoso, E., Ariadi, S., & Izzati S, Y. W. (2026). Ritual language and selective digital adaptation in maintaining Javanese sufi identity: Ethnography of communication and cultural continuity in the makrifatullah community in Gresik. *Ghancaran: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, Special Edition Lalongèt VII, 1118-1140. https://doi.org/10.19105/ghancaran.v20i2.26337

INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation is turning religious communication, once centred on physical proximity, into a hybrid arrangement that links offline and online spaces. Digital platforms shape how messages are presented, circulated, measured, and interpreted. The visibility of content depends on algorithms, engagement metrics, and the appeal of the content itself, so media do not work as neutral channels (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). In religious life, these conditions can affect ritual practice, the formation of communities, religious identity, and the authority of spiritual guides. Research on digital religion first documented the presence of religion on the internet and later grew into analyses of how online and offline practices are connected in everyday life (Campbell, 2017, 2024; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

The effects of digital media on religious communities are uneven. Some communities move activities and rituals onto online platforms, while others take over only certain functions. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that media can support social and devotional continuity, although digital participation is not always treated as equal to physical presence or to established religious authority (Kühle & Larsen, 2021). Müller and Friemel (2024) argue that media choices in religious communities depend on the need for meaning-making, on social relations, and on the fit between a technology and the value system of the community. The religious-social shaping of technology framework developed by Campbell (2017) points the same way: communities assess technology through their history, core beliefs, and discourses. Religious responses to technology are therefore better understood as processes of selection, domestication, negotiation, and restriction than as simple acceptance or rejection.

The question becomes more pressing when digital media meet ritual language. In this article, ritual language means the communicative practices a community uses to regulate social knowledge, participation, and the limits of the sacred. The ethnography of communication places language choice in relation to speaker, participants, place, purpose, sequence of acts, norms of interaction, and genre (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2003). Meaning, in this view, arises from the communicative situation. Keane (1997) shows that in religious settings the source of words, identity, authority, and even the presence of the participants in speech are often contested, and that religious practice alters the formal and pragmatic features of everyday language according to what a community believes about the unseen world. Speech may be accompanied by silence, intonation, repetition, gesture, precise timing, and the standing of the speaker, and all of these take part in making

meaning. When ritual language is reduced to a text fragment, an image, or a video clip, those contextual relations narrow or drop out of view.

Studies of ritual language show that language can carry values across generations and shape collective identity. Nasri et al. (2024) found that the Sasak language in rituals and traditions in Lombok plays a role in communication, cultural knowledge, and social cohesion. Tuti and Safitri (2024) found that ritual communication in the Nyadran tradition works through symbols, processions, and intergenerational participation to keep collective cultural memory alive. Hakim et al. (2025) reported a similar pattern in the revitalisation of the Limola language, where ritual, family, community, and digital media are linked in the preservation of local identity. In Java, the relation between ritual language and identity has been shaped by the meeting of Islam with local culture. Simuh (1996) traced the transformation of Islamic tasawuf into Javanese mysticism through its encounter with Javanese literature and mystical thought. Mawardi (2022) showed that outward and inner laku shape spiritual identity in the Rinjani Tarekat, and Mibtadin and Habib (2022) found that Javanese-language sholawat expressions can be a spiritual expression and also a medium for passing on Islamic-Javanese identity.

In Indonesia, studies of digital Islam report that social media change how people learn religion, widen the circulation of messages, and encourage authority that is more media-oriented and publicly visible (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). Muslim influencers develop a personal and visual style of religious communication that connects with global culture, and in doing so they negotiate religious authority (Zaid et al., 2022). Andok (2024) concluded that online media can weaken, strengthen, or hybridise authority, depending on how a community arranges the relation among technology, legitimacy, and user choice. Ibrahim (2024), drawing on ethnographic and netnographic research in Northern Nigeria, showed that Salafi groups turn digital infrastructure into Islamic infrastructure, which produces figures such as cyber imams and a form of algorithmic religiosity.

As far as our search could establish, this literature leaves three connected gaps. First, studies of digital religion usually examine communities that seek public visibility, so media are treated as the driver of change in authority and practice. The ritual vocabulary of a local community is seldom discussed as a criterion that decides which media may be used for which purposes. Second, studies of language maintenance and cultural preservation usually judge success by language choice, habit, and the growing number of speakers (Hakim et al., 2025; Hidayati et al., 2025; Mawarsih & Febriani, 2022), and the communication medium appears only as the setting, outside the environment in which a language is used. Third, the

speaking framework in the ethnography of communication includes the channel as a component of speech, but it seems to have been applied little to communities that set access rights over the content of speech and the forms in which it is documented. The framework of Campbell (2017) and the model of Müller and Friemel (2024) explain that communities assess technology according to values and the need for meaning-making, but they do not spell out the role of particular language forms in that assessment. This study addresses the three gaps with one claim: in communities that restrict the circulation of their knowledge, ritual language becomes a criterion for selecting media. The novelty lies in three things: a unit of analysis consisting of communicative events that involve face-to-face encounters and digital media together, ritual language as a criterion for media selection, and a measure of language vitality that rests on contextual function and not on frequency of use.

This claim is formulated as the concept of selective digital adaptation, defined as the acceptance of technology according to communicative function, degree of sacredness, relational need, and the risk that a message will come loose from the context of guidance. Adaptation is selective when a community separates logistical communication from substantive spiritual transmission, internal spaces from public ones, and the documentation of activities from the disclosure of the full meaning of a ritual. The concept is close to the social-shaping approach in digital religion studies, but it places ritual language at the centre of media selection.

The *Makrifatullah* Community in Gresik was chosen because its ritual practice and internal communication use the terms *makrifat* (knowing God), *laku* (spiritual discipline), *dzikir* (remembrance), *lungguh* (sitting in stillness), *daim* (continuity, as in salat daim), and *suluk* (spiritual journey), while its members live in an environment that offers *WhatsApp*, *Zoom*, YouTube, and TikTok. These terms cannot be treated as mere lexical items, since their meaning is tied to guidance, experience, conduct, and the standing of members. Gresik also offers a relevant social setting, with a history of coastal Islam and varied expressions of Islamic-Javanese spirituality. Field observation indicates that *WhatsApp* and *Zoom* are used mainly for coordination and for keeping in touch, whereas spiritual guidance and the main rituals remain centred on face-to-face meetings. Not every term, teaching, document, or internal conversation is considered fit to circulate in public. For locality-based language and literature education, the case is relevant because learning a local language also means learning the rules for its use, including rules about which media may be used.

This article aims to (1) analyse the function of ritual language in forming and maintaining Javanese Sufi identity in the *Makrifatullah* Community in Gresik, (2) explain how the community uses digital media selectively according to communicative function and the limits of the sacred, and (3) formulate the implications of the findings for the ethnography of communication, digital religion studies, and locality-based language education. The research questions are (1) how ritual terms and speech practices acquire meaning within relations of guidance and community life, (2) how *WhatsApp*, *Zoom*, and other digital media are negotiated so that they do not automatically replace the ritual context and spiritual authority, and (3) what these findings show for the ethnography of communication, digital religion, and the vitality of local languages.

METHOD

Research approach and site

This study uses a qualitative ethnography of communication approach. Ethnography was chosen because the object of analysis is language use in ritual situations, spiritual guidance, internal interaction, and digital communication, and isolated vocabulary is not the target. The main unit of analysis is the communicative event in which a term is used, a unit made up of speaker, addressee, place, purpose, sequence of acts, channel, and norms, following the SPEAKING framework (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2003). A digital ethnography sensibility was adopted so that the meeting of face-to-face activity and platform-based communication could be studied as one social environment (Airoldi, 2018; Gobo & Molle, 2017; Pink et al., 2016). The research site is the *Makrifatullah* Community in Gresik. Its physical space includes community meetings, spiritual guidance sessions, and ritual activities that can be observed with permission. Its digital space includes a *WhatsApp* group and *Zoom* meetings, and its written material consists of community documents that the community allowed us to read. The distinction between the two spaces is analytic, because community life runs through face-to-face relations and mediated relations that are closely linked.

Informants and research period

Informants were selected purposively according to their involvement, experience, and knowledge of ritual practice and internal communication. Purposive selection means that informants were chosen deliberately because they could provide information relevant to the research questions, so not every member had an equal chance of being selected. The inclusion criteria followed the five informant criteria of Spradley (1980): thorough enculturation, current involvement, an unfamiliar cultural setting, adequate time, and a

non-analytic way of speaking. Additional requirements were direct involvement in ritual activities or in managing internal communication, and willingness to take part voluntarily. Informants were traced further through recommendations from the first participants, provided that the candidates met the criteria. The study involved 21 informants in four categories: spiritual guide, permanent or long-standing members, prospective new members, and managers of internal digital communication (Table 1). This article draws on nine of the 21 informants, namely those whose interviews had been transcribed when the manuscript was prepared: one successor guide, five senior members, one new member who took the baiat in 2025, and two prospective members. Data collection began on 15 June 2025 and is planned to end on 12 December 2026, while the interviews analysed here took place between 22 July and 23 October 2026. The number of informants was determined by the sufficiency of information and by access to the field.

Informant category	Code	Number	Characteristics
Spiritual guide	PS	1	Leader and spiritual guide. In this article represented by S, the successor to the previous guide after the latter died, who has followed the community since 2000
Permanent or long-standing members	AL	15	Permanent or long-standing members. Six of them were interviewed for this article: five senior members (J, A, NH, W, HS), who joined between the late 1980s and the 2000s according to their own recollection, and one member who took the baiat in 2025 (D)
Prospective new members	CA	4	Prospective new members who have not yet undertaken the core laku. Two of them were interviewed for this article (E and L)
Managers of internal digital communication	PK	1	Manages the internal digital communication of the community. Not included in the nine interviews analysed in this article
Total		**21**	

Table 1. Categories and characteristics of informants (source: research data)

Data and collection techniques

Data were collected through limited participant observation, ethnographic interviews, informal conversations, field notes, documentation, and community documents that the community permitted. Observation focused on language, gesture, silence, the sequence of activities, the positions of participants, the arrangement of space, and the relation between guide and members, over six meetings of one to two hours each, or six to 12 hours in total. Interviews began with descriptive questions and moved on to structural and contrast questions to trace the meaning of ritual terms and the differences among ritual, every day, and digital communication. Probing was used to ask for clarification,

examples, experiences, and reasons without steering the answers.

Digital media practices were not collected as a corpus of messages. Conversation in the *WhatsApp* group is limited to incidental matters, so its content was not treated as data. The picture of media use was assembled from interviews, field notes, and the observation of the researcher during community activities that involved the *WhatsApp* group and *Zoom* sessions. Digital visibility was also not treated as consent to be studied or published. The community documents we read are the *Wirid Hidayat Jati* and the *Buku Hijau* (Green Book), handbooks of the community written directly by the *mursyid* (spiritual master), and neither is quoted directly in this article. The type and span of each kind of data are summarised in Table 2.

Type of data	Number and time span	Selection criteria
Limited participant observation	Six meetings of one to two hours each (6 to 12 hours in total), since 15 June 2025	Rituals and meetings that could be observed with the permission of the guide
Ethnographic interviews	Nine informants in eight sessions, 22 July to 23 October 2026: six face-to-face sessions and two *Zoom* sessions	Informants who met the inclusion criteria and gave consent
Informal conversations and field notes	Field journal since 15 June 2025; 57 informal conversations	Conversations containing communicative events with ritual terms
Use of the *WhatsApp* group	Message content was not collected as a corpus. Group conversation is limited to incidental matters, for example arranging to meet, and deeper discussion takes place in face-to-face meetings or over *Zoom*	Observation by the researcher and informant accounts of the function of the group; message content is not quoted and the identities of others are not shown
Zoom sessions	Used in urgent circumstances when members cannot attend in person, and for two research interview sessions in October 2026	Sessions that involved the researcher or were described by informants
Community documents	*Wirid Hidayat Jati* and *Buku Hijau*, handbooks of the community written directly by the *mursyid*	Books that serve as the reference of the community; not quoted directly in this article

Table 2. Types of research data (source: research data)

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Analysis followed the four ethnographic stages set out by Spradley (1980): domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and cultural theme analysis. An example of how each stage was applied to the data is given in the Results and Discussion section (Table 3). The analytic work was iterative. Initial interpretations were reread after comparison with observation notes, conversations, and the permitted community documents, and recurring patterns were then tested against differences between situations and between participants. This caution matters because selective digital adaptation cannot be assumed to exist merely because a community uses online and offline media at the same time. The concept has to rest on differences observed in communicative practice, for

example the kinds of messages that move easily into digital media and the kinds that stay tied to interpersonal and ritual contexts.

Trustworthiness was supported by triangulation of sources, techniques, and time, rereading of field notes, limited clarification with informants, and analytic memos. The researcher separated empirical description, the interpretation of participants, and theoretical interpretation so that each claim can be traced to its evidence. The position of the researcher in the field is also explained so that readers can judge its influence on the data: the researcher was present as an observer involved only as far as the community allowed, and held the status of a non-permanent member who had been a participant in the community long before the research began. This involvement was deliberately limited to protect independence. Such closeness can make it easier to understand the terms and atmosphere of the community, but the requirement of an unfamiliar cultural setting is met only in part. The effect of the presence of the researcher, the assumptions arising from it, and the limits on access were recorded in a reflective journal.

Research ethics

Audio recordings were made after consent was given. Activities regarded as confidential, sacred, or not to be recorded were documented only as far as the community permitted. Informant identities were disguised with codes, and *WhatsApp* material, *Zoom* material, photographs, and internal documents are not displayed in any form that would allow particular people to be identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that the relation between ritual language and digital media cannot be explained by a simple opposition between the traditional and the modern. The community maintains its identity by separating elements that can be adapted from elements that depend on direct meeting, and no practice is frozen in its old form for the sake of preservation. Change is most visible in coordination, the speed of information exchange, and the ability to keep in touch when members live far apart. Interpretation of ritual terms, spiritual guidance, laku, and ritual experiences that involve the body stays within a social context governed by community norms. Four themes organise the discussion: ritual language as a carrier of knowledge and identity, face-to-face meetings as an authoritative context, selective digital adaptation, and the restriction of circulation as a strategy for protecting identity. A model, a theoretical discussion, implications for education, and limitations close the section.

Applying the Spradley stages of analysis to the data

Table 3 shows how the four stages of Spradley (1980) were applied to the data of this study. In the domain stage, field notes and transcripts were read to find the cover terms that informants used when explaining community activities. Six domains emerged: ritual language, guidance, internal communication, digital media, sacredness, and identity. Next, the taxonomic stage arranged the content of each domain. Digital media, for example, divided by function into coordination, learning, documentation, and public dissemination, and each function was paired with the medium used. Componential analysis then compared terms and practices along contrast dimensions: face-to-face and online, internal and public, recordable and not recordable, and logistical and spiritual messages. After these contrasts recurred among informants and in situations that differed from one another, the cultural theme was formulated in two patterns: ritual language becomes a criterion for media selection, and restricting circulation preserves the function of terms.

Stage	Analytic question	Result in the research data	Example of evidence
1. Domain analysis	Which cover terms do informants use to describe community activities?	Six domains: ritual language, guidance, internal communication, digital media, sacredness, and identity	The teaching of the community is described as a teaching about laku (S, 22 October 2026) and as applied knowledge (NH, 25 July 2026)
2. Taxonomic analysis	How is the content of each domain organised?	The digital media domain divides by function: coordination, learning, documentation, and public dissemination	Coordination through *WhatsApp* (D, 22 July 2026); discussion over *Zoom* (A, 24 July 2026); recording of rituals not permitted and no social media accounts (S, 22 October 2026)
3. Componential analysis	Which contrast dimensions distinguish terms and practices?	Face-to-face and online; internal and public; recordable and not recordable; logistical and spiritual messages	Face-to-face meeting is obligatory because the knowledge is applied knowledge (NH, 25 July 2026); questions left unanswered on YouTube (D, 22 July 2026)
4. Cultural theme analysis	Which pattern links the domains?	Ritual language becomes a criterion for media selection; restricting circulation preserves the function of terms	The core of the teaching is not uploaded in order to protect the stability of members (S, 22 October 2026)

Table 3. Application of the Spradley stages of analysis to the research data

Ritual language as a carrier of knowledge and identity

The ritual language of the Makrifatullah Community is marked by terms whose

meaning is acquired through practice and guidance. The terms makrifat, laku, dzikir, lungguh, daim, and suluk appear as markers of spiritual orientation, forms of discipline, states to be reached, or ways of describing experience. Their meaning does not stop at a dictionary definition, because it is shaped by the explanations of the guide, repetition in meetings, bodily experience, and comparison between conduct regarded as proper and conduct regarded as improper. One informant explained laku as follows.

> The motto of these people is *sampurnani ilmu ing laku* [translation by the authors: perfect knowledge through practice]. So we perfect our knowledge, we perfect our laku, we perfect our knowledge of the divine through laku. We have to practise *sampurnani ilmu ing laku* properly. (S, successor guide, interview, 22 October 2026)

The quotation shows four related pragmatic functions that often occur together in a single communicative event. A term performs a referential function when it points to a practice, experience, or concept that members recognise. It performs a regulatory function when it directs members toward particular forms of behaviour, sequence, bodily posture, etiquette, and limits. Relational function appears when the use of a term marks the relation among the guide, senior members, and members who are still learning. Identificational function works when internal vocabulary helps members recognise the community as a spiritual space with its own history, value orientation, and communicative style. Table 4 sets out these functions for the six terms, with examples of utterances and their contexts.

Term	Example of speech and context	Pragmatic function	Contribution to identity	Treatment in digital media
Makrifat	Asked what makrifat means in the community, J answered knowing, that is, knowing God (J, 22 July 2026), and W answered knowing oneself completely (W, 26 July 2026)	Directs members toward spiritual understanding and experience	Marks the goal and worldview of the community	Not reduced to a public definition without context
Laku	S explained the motto sampurnani ilmu ing laku as knowledge that must be practised properly (S, 22 October 2026)	Regulates process, discipline, and habituation	Connects knowledge with action	Substantive explanation is given priority through direct guidance
Dzikir	D linked dzikir with suluk and said that dzikir without letters and without sound is still dzikir (D, 22 July 2026)	Practice of remembrance that creates the ritual atmosphere	Strengthens solidarity and inner orientation	Information about activities may be shared; meaning and rules of conduct need context

Lungguh	D described the direct practice as sitting still without sound (D, 22 July 2026). Asked whether one has to sit, A answered that salat can be performed in any position (A, 24 July 2026)	Marks a practice or position in a particular context	Connects body, space, and ritual order	Visual documentation is limited according to permission
Daim	W said that salat daim is the most telling because it trains the ability to keep the rhythm of the breath amid the dynamics of life (W, 26 July 2026)	Relates to spiritual experience or continuity	Marks the depth of internal meaning	Not turned into short content or slogans
Suluk	Asked about suluk, J answered that suluk points more to a journey (J, 22 July 2026)	Marks a spiritual journey, discipline, or learning process	Connects personal process with community tradition	Discussion follows the level of access and the authority of the guide

Table 4. Ritual terms, context of speech, pragmatic function, contribution to identity, and treatment in digital media

One term can carry different pragmatic implications depending on the speaker, addressee, situation, and accompanying action, so what is analysed is the communicative event and not the isolated word. The first event examined is the meeting on Tuesday, 21 July 2026, on the eve of Wednesday Kliwon in the Javanese calendar, when 12 members observed the Kliwon fast. Following the SPEAKING components (Hymes, 1974), this event can be read by time and setting (the pasaran day of the Javanese calendar and the shared fast), participants (12 members and the researcher), and purpose (carrying out the Kliwon fast). The framework directs the analysis to who speaks, to whom, at which stage of the activity, and with what bodily action.

The implications for continuity are considerable. Language maintenance in this community means keeping the social rules that allow words to be used meaningfully, and a word that is still spoken does not guarantee that its meaning is alive. If terms are repeated without context, their surface form may survive while their function weakens. Conversely, a term that seldom circulates in public can remain socially vital because members keep tying it to practices, relationships, and forms of teaching they recognise. This distinction between the survival of form and the survival of function is the core of our understanding of sustainable cultural identity.

These findings agree with Nasri et al. (2024), who presented ritual language as a symbol of identity and a means of cultural transmission, and with Mibtadin and Habib

(2022) on devotional expressions in Javanese. In the Makrifatullah Community, transmission does not depend on the grammatical use of the Javanese language. It takes place through a repertoire of terms, styles of explanation, symbolic expressions, etiquette, and laku within an Islamic-Javanese cultural field. In the framework of Keane (1997), these terms also mark who is authorised to deliver words and in which situations words are present. From the viewpoint of the ethnography of communication, the terms are part of the register of the community, and their meaning depends on speaker, listener, place, and communicative purpose. A measure of preservation has to go beyond the presence of terms in conversation. It has to include whether members recognise the context of use, the form of response expected, and the relation between an expression and the action that accompanies it.

Face-to-face meetings, bodily involvement, and the authority of guidance

The second theme concerns the dependence of ritual language on bodily presence and on the relation of guidance. In a direct meeting, members can attend to intonation, pauses, gesture, sitting position, the sequence of activities, and the response of the guide to particular circumstances. These elements become part of the context in which meaning is learned and corrected. In ritual interaction, silence can carry communicative meaning, repetition builds attention, and correction can be delivered through example without verbal explanation. The following field note excerpt is dated 21 July 2026 and conveys the atmosphere of a direct meeting.

> The meeting was very relaxed, and the researcher became very close to several members of the community. (Field notes, 21 July 2026)

The note can be read as a sign that direct meetings open room for personal closeness that is hard to carry in written messages, and also as a reminder that the closeness of the researcher to members helps shape the data (see the Method section). Dependence on context distinguishes ritual communication from the delivery of ordinary information. Logistical messages can often be detached from the speaker and read later without losing much function. Spiritual messages are understood to require a relation among speaker, recipient, situation, readiness, and time. Authority does not end with formal status. It is exercised through the ability to place language appropriately in interaction and through recognition of that ability by the community. This agrees with the account by Mawardi (2022) of outward and inner laku in a Javanese tarekat, namely that spiritual identity forms through practice, relations, journey, and action. A copied message can keep the words, but it does not necessarily carry the mechanisms of correction and pedagogy that accompany

direct guidance.

This distinction is useful when compared with authority on social media. Public religious communication tends to be shaped by visibility, production capacity, audience attention, and platform circulation. Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2020) showed that social media open a wider space for learning Islam while pushing communication toward forms that suit media logic, and Zaid et al. (2022) showed how Muslim influencers negotiate authority through personal narratives and lifestyle presentation. Ibrahim (2024) described cyber imams who build authority through digital infrastructure. In the Makrifatullah Community, public visibility is not regarded as a measure of communicative success. Legitimacy is tied more closely to source, context, and the relation of guidance.

The community uses online communication and keeps access to information distinct from the legitimacy of knowledge. Members may receive schedules, announcements, or reminders through WhatsApp and are still expected to gain a deeper understanding of ritual language through a longer process. Technical convenience does not automatically produce epistemic equality. Media can widen access to an activity without becoming the institution that determines the meaning of the ritual. From the standpoint of the continuity of identity, this distinction yields a three-tier model of communication. At the first tier is information that can move quickly and is relatively easy to detach from context, such as schedules and announcements. At the second tier is internal communication that depends on knowledge of the participants, membership, and norms of interaction. Spiritual transmission, tightly bound to guidance, experience, and direct participation, occupies the third tier. A community can be highly digital in logistical matters and still meet face to face in the core processes of forming meaning.

Selective digital adaptation: function, medium, and access

The third theme concerns the limited use of digital media, which differs by function. WhatsApp serves mainly as the infrastructure of internal communication for scheduling, changes in meeting times, reminders, and coordination among members. Zoom may be used to keep communication going when physical meetings are difficult. Neither platform is automatically treated as a public space for publishing the teaching or as a replacement for the whole of ritual activity. Table 5 compares face-to-face and digital practice by accepted function, limits that are kept, and practices that are refused.

Medium	Accepted function	Limits maintained	Practices refused	Implications for identity
Face-to-face	Ritual, guidance, correction, interpretation, and building relationships	Permission, etiquette, and limits on documentation	Recording or photographing rituals (S, 22 October 2026)	Main space for the production and transmission of meaning
WhatsApp	Schedules, announcements, coordination, reminders, and internal communication	Group membership, forwarding of messages, screenshots, and sensitive content	Spreading the principles of the teaching and the procedures of fasting outside the group of members (S, 22 October 2026)	Keeps members connected without opening the whole teaching
Zoom	Internal meetings when members cannot attend in person in urgent circumstances	Recording, participant identity, limits on content, and quality of interaction	Discussion at a deep level through digital media; only light matters are considered possible (NH, 25 July 2026)	A supplement that does not automatically replace direct ritual
Public social media	General information approved by the community	Decontextualisation, commodification, public comment, and virality	Uploading or spreading the teaching through YouTube or TikTok; the community has no social media accounts (S, 22 October 2026)	Used selectively so that identity is not reduced to an image

Table 5. Functions and limits of media in selective digital adaptation

Use of WhatsApp in this community is limited to ordinary matters, for example arranging to meet. For in-depth discussion, members meet in person or use Zoom. One online communicative event examined, as told by A, occurred when members who could not attend still joined the discussion over Zoom (A, 24 July 2026). One informant explained the rule for using media as follows.

> [Delivering it through digital media] is not quite right, and I worry it would only cause misunderstanding. There is no prohibition, but it is more a matter of anticipation so that the message that is delivered actually arrives. The way is face to face, it has to be face to face, it is obligatory. That knowledge is applied knowledge [*ilmu terapan*], not theoretical knowledge [*ilmu pengetahuan*]. (NH, senior member, interview, 25 July 2026)

The comparison in Table 5 shows three main gaps between face-to-face and digital practice. Correction is the first. A guide can correct posture, speech, and sequence directly in a physical meeting, whereas a written message carries no comparable mechanism of correction. Traces are the second. WhatsApp stores messages and allows them to be forwarded, so a single utterance can travel far from its original situation, whereas face-to-

face speech vanishes with its situation unless a permitted recording exists. Audience is the third. In a physical meeting the guide knows who is present, and this control shrinks in large digital groups and public media. These gaps explain why the community accepts digital media for logistical functions and limits them for spiritual functions.

The difference in practice can be understood through communicative function. Logistical messages have low dependence on context, so they move easily into digital media. Guidance, correction of laku, interpretation of symbols, and forms of ritual communication regarded as sacred have high dependence on context. The more strongly a message depends on the body, atmosphere, relations, sequence, and authority, the stronger the tendency to keep it in face-to-face settings or in digital environments that are tightly controlled.

Selection takes place along three dimensions. Functional selection separates coordination from substantive spiritual transmission. Social selection determines who is in a channel and at what level of access. A message for active members is not the same as a message fit for the public, because an internal group is a communication space with membership and norms, whereas public platforms allow content to be copied, cut, commented on, and circulated beyond the control of the community. Representational selection determines what may be recorded, quoted, stored, or published. The risks include leaks of information and changes of context. A short clip can become a doctrinal claim, an object of entertainment, or a visual commodity, although it was originally only one part of a long process of learning.

The pattern fits the model of Müller and Friemel (2024), which stresses the relation among systems of meaning, community relations, and media choice, and the framework of Campbell (2017), which treats the history and core values of a community as the standard against which technology is judged. This case adds that ritual language and sacredness act as specific criteria that make media selection observable. It also differs from forced digitalisation: Kühle and Larsen (2021) showed that pandemic restrictions pushed religious communities to use digital media for continuity, and that questions about the authenticity and sufficiency of ritual arose there. Makrifatullah shows a more measured pattern, in which technology is kept for functions regarded as useful and activities that demand deep presence continue to take place physically. Ibrahim (2024) showed that digital infrastructure shapes users and authority as much as religious actors shape technology. Wariness toward platform logic marks the Makrifatullah pattern, since public

visibility is not a main goal. Limited public activity therefore does not automatically mean exclusion from modern communication. In this case, the limitation is part of a strategy for keeping a recognised way of transmission.

Restricting circulation as a strategy for maintaining identity

The fourth theme shows that restricting circulation keeps the relation between language and context intact. As long as certain terms stay tied to experience, guidance, and conduct, the community maintains the conditions under which their meaning is recognised. A message that can be copied without explanation raises the chance of misinterpretation, so restricting access can be understood as part of communicative responsibility. One informant stated the reason as follows.

> The core of that teaching really is not allowed [to be uploaded]. The reason is to protect the stability of the members themselves. For example, if we upload this teaching, people might call it a deviant teaching [*ajaran sesat*]. (S, successor guide, interview, 22 October 2026)

This strategy has a cultural dimension. Javanese Sufi identity is lived through an orientation toward depth, discipline, etiquette, perseverance, and relationships, in addition to being represented by Javanese symbols and recognisable vocabulary. This orientation can be in tension with platform logic, which stresses speed, novelty, visibility, engagement, and circulation. The organisation of platforms has been described through datafication, commodification, and selection by van Dijck et al. (2018), and Nieborg and Poell (2018) defined platformisation as the entry of platform infrastructures, economic models, and governance mechanisms into cultural production. If that logic is accepted without limit, ritual may come under pressure to fit short durations, visually attractive formats, simplified language, and presentation that circulates easily. Selective digital adaptation limits this process by keeping most of the production of meaning outside environments governed by metrics.

Restricting circulation also concerns the right of a community to represent itself. In digital research, visibility does not automatically give an ethical right to quote, reproduce, or publish. Airoldi (2018) and Pink et al. (2016) stress that digital ethnography must attend to context, the presence of the researcher, and the expectations of users. In a spiritual community the obligation is stronger, because messages can touch on personal experience, the reputation of the community, and the social safety of participants. Some material is important analytically but unfit for publication.

The pattern resembles language revitalisation, but its aim differs. Hakim et al. (2025) showed that digital media can be used creatively to widen the use of the Limola language.In

the *Makrifatullah* case, the main interest is to keep transmission accurate within the community, and the number of public users is not maximised. Different aims lead to different strategies: revitalisation may widen circulation, and the protection of sacred knowledge may restrict it. Mawarsih and Febriani (2022) showed that maintenance of the Javanese language is related to language choice in group communication, including loyalty, habit, and communicative environment. This case adds the choice of medium as an element of maintenance. The question then covers which language or term is used, in which medium, with whom, and for what purpose.

A model of the relation among ritual language, media, and identity

Synthesis of the findings produces a model that links ritual language, authority, media selection, and the continuity of identity (Figure 1). Each relation in the model is supported by particular evidence. The link from ritual language to guidance and authority rests on the pragmatic functions of terms (Tables 3 and 4) and on the quotations of the first and second themes, which show that meaning is formed within relations of guidance. The link from guidance to media selection rests on the componential contrast between logistical and spiritual messages (Table 3) and on the comparison of accepted, limited, and refused practices (Table 5). The link from media selection to the continuity of identity rests on the quotation of the fourth theme and the analysis of restricted circulation. Face-to-face ritual practice forms the basis of the model because it is the source of legitimacy for substantive meaning. This placement does not mean that all communication must be physical. WhatsApp and Zoom hold supporting positions because they widen social relations, coordination, and limited internal interaction.

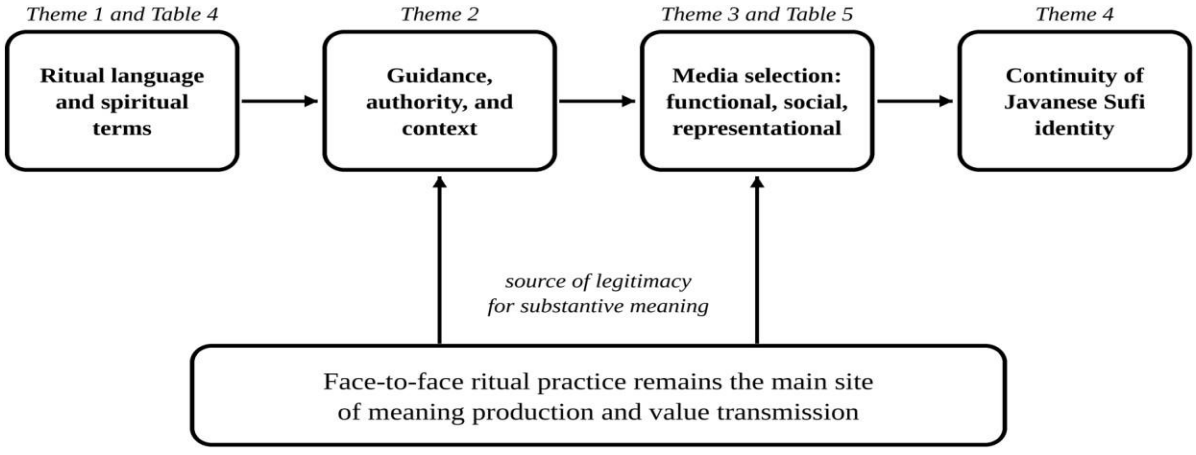


Figure 1. Model of selective digital adaptation in maintaining Javanese Sufi identity

Theoretical discussion and contribution

For the ethnography of communication, these findings support the idea of Hymes (1974) that meaning arises from the speech situation, and extend it on one component. In the SPEAKING framework, the channel is often treated as a description of means. In this community, the channel becomes a normatively regulated component: the community decides who may use which channel for which content, and which forms of documentation are permitted. The finding challenges the assumption that a change of channel only alters how a message arrives. A change of channel alters the conditions of correction, bodily presence, and control over the audience, so each medium carries different pragmatic implications for ritual language. Face-to-face meeting allows direct correction and control over who is present, WhatsApp allows messages to be stored, repeated, and forwarded, Zoom changes the form of presence, and public social media brings an audience that is hard to control.

For digital religion studies, the findings support the view that the response of a community to technology is a process of negotiation (Campbell, 2017; Müller & Friemel, 2024). They extend that view by showing that the criteria of negotiation can be linguistic, namely the classification of terms and their level of sacredness. Andok (2024) holds that online authority can be layered or hybrid, and this case shows another strategy: authority is kept by limiting the functions that may be moved into online space. The findings also challenge an assumption often implicit in research on religious media, that public visibility is a goal or a measure of success. In this community, limited digital participation does not signal backwardness.

For language studies, the contribution lies in understanding the preservation of ritual language as contextual preservation, so that frequency of use is no longer the only measure. A term that rarely appears in public can stay alive socially because it holds an important position in the practices of the community. The frequency of public postings is an inadequate measure of language vitality in communities of this kind. Vitality also concerns the ability of a term to organise experience, conduct, relations, and identity.

The three contributions depend on one another. Recognising that the channel is normatively regulated explains why the function of terms can survive without public circulation, and that explanation in turn calls for a measure of vitality that is sensitive to context.

The model should not be viewed romantically. Media arrangements can protect sacredness and authority, but they can also create unequal access when the basis of the

arrangements is unclear or uneven. The critical questions are who sets the limits, how the rules are explained, how members learn them, and whether participants can ask questions or voice disagreement. Cultural continuity needs to be treated as a social process involving power, legitimacy, responsibility, and negotiation. Further research should trace the views of less active members, whose voices may be underrepresented in these data.

Implications for locality-based language education

This study did not evaluate school learning, but its findings are relevant to locality-based language education. Instruction can introduce local vocabulary together with the context, relations, and cultural values attached to it. Students can be trained to tell a word as a lexical item from a word as part of a communicative practice, in line with findings that preservation grows stronger when language is attached to socially meaningful practice (Hidayati et al., 2025; Mawarsih & Febriani, 2022). In digital environments, a literacy is needed that separates access to information from the right to reproduce an entire cultural context. Local cultural material may appear online, but that visibility gives no unlimited permission to copy, remix, or redistribute it. Class projects on local language and culture can go beyond collecting words and making illustrated glossaries. Students can document communicative situations, analyse speakers and audiences, observe how language relates to behaviour, and reflect on changes of meaning when local expressions are moved into digital media. Holders of local knowledge are treated as subjects who have the right to classify which forms of communication may be mediated, and teachers who work with local cultural material emphasise contextual interpretation, consent, the origin of the material, and respectful representation.

Limitations

This study has three limitations. First, the interpretation of spiritual terms depends on the level of access to the field and on the permission of the community, so claims about the function of particular terms need continued triangulation with the spiritual guide, senior members, observation of rituals, and permitted documents. Second, WhatsApp and Zoom communication could not always be observed fully for privacy reasons, and the content of WhatsApp messages was not collected as a corpus, so the picture of their use rests on interviews, field notes, and the observation of the researcher. The lack of access was not compensated for by asking for screenshots that contain other participants without their consent. Interviews about media practices, field notes, and anonymised examples are a proportionate basis. Third, the study focuses on one community in Gresik, so the concept

of selective digital adaptation cannot yet be generalised to all Sufi communities. Comparison with groups that are more open to public social media, formal tarekat communities, and other local spiritual organisations would help assess whether media selection is shaped mainly by doctrine, authority structure, generation, access to technology, or social experience. The claim that ritual language is a criterion for media selection therefore needs to be retested in communities with different authority structures.

CONCLUSION

This study answered two main questions. First, the terms makrifat, laku, dzikir, lungguh, daim, and suluk acquire meaning within relations of guidance and community life, and they work as referential, regulatory, relational, and identificational resources. Their meaning depends on the relation among speech, body, space, time, and authority, so these terms cannot always be moved into digital media without a change in contextual meaning. Second, the community negotiates *WhatsApp*, *Zoom*, and public media through functional, social, and representational selection. *WhatsApp* and *Zoom* are accepted for coordination, scheduling, reminders, and limited internal relations, guidance and the main rituals remain face to face, and public media are restricted.

On the third question, the findings support the ethnography of communication in its view that meaning arises from the speech situation, and extend it by treating the channel as a normatively regulated component. For digital religion studies, the findings support the view that communities negotiate technology, and add that the criteria of negotiation can be linguistic. For studies of language vitality, the findings challenge measures that rest on frequency of use, because a term that rarely appears in public can stay alive as long as its contextual function is kept.

The original contribution of this study lies in three things. Conceptually, it formulates selective digital adaptation, a pattern of accepting technology that is shaped by communicative function, social access, and control of representation. Theoretically, it places ritual language as a criterion of media selection and offers a measure of language vitality based on contextual function. Practically, it supports a digital literacy that respects context, privacy, the right of representation, and the authority of the community. For community managers and others who work with cultural documentation, the findings suggest that digital documentation of ritual language be prepared together with the community, with access limits, the origin of material, and the context of interpretation kept in place. For language educators, the findings suggest that the teaching of local languages

include the ethics of digital circulation.

The findings come from one community in Gresik and from field access limited by community permission. They stand as an analytic explanation of the case studied and not yet as a generalisation about all Sufi communities. Further research can compare several communities with different authority structures and degrees of media openness, trace the views of less active members, and test whether the three dimensions of selection hold outside the Javanese context. Such testing could use a multiple case study design with the same criteria of media selection, so that differences between communities can be traced to authority structure, generation, or access to technology. A community that restricts the circulation of its knowledge shows that cultural continuity can depend on regulating circulation, and that maximising visibility is not always necessary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the Makrifatullah Community in Gresik for its openness and the permission given during the research. The authors also appreciate the academic guidance and the help related to research preparation and ethical procedures. This research received no specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit institutions.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical considerations

This study applied participant consent before recording, disguise of informant identities, and restrictions on sacred, confidential, or internal data not permitted for publication. Digital material such as WhatsApp or Zoom conversations, photographs, and internal documents was used only when permission had been obtained from the relevant authorities and participants. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, through certificate number 15343/B/DST/UN3.FISIP/III/PT./2026 dated 28 September 2026. Data collection before that date, namely observation and informal conversations since 15 June 2025 and interviews in July 2026, took place with verbal consent from each informant.

Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors state that the generative AI tools ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) were used to help draft the outline of the manuscript, translate, edit the language, and assist with the initial coding of interview transcripts. These tools were not used to create or falsify research data. All decisions on research design, source verification, field data, codes,

quotations, interpretation, revision, and final conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no financial support.

REFERENCE

Airoldi, M. (2018). Ethnography and the digital fields of social media. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 21*(6), 661–673. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1465622

Andok, M. (2024). The impact of online media on religious authority. *Religions, 15*(9), Article 1103. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103

Campbell, H. A. (2017). Surveying theoretical approaches within digital religion studies. *New Media & Society, 19*(1), 15–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649912

Campbell, H. A. (2024). Looking backwards and forwards at the study of digital religion. *Religious Studies Review, 50*(1), 83–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17062

Campbell, H. A., & Evolvi, G. (2020). Contextualizing current digital religion research on emerging technologies. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies, 2*(1), 5–17. https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.149

Gobo, G., & Molle, A. (2017). *Doing ethnography* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Hakim, M. N., Hidayat, W., & Jusrianto, J. (2025). Language, identity, and survival: An ethnographic study on the revitalization of the Limola language in South Sulawesi. *Frontiers in Sociology, 10*, Article 1686828. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1686828

Hidayati, L., Mu'is, A., Prayogi, R., & Kiram, S. (2025). Program Sarigabah (Satu Hari Tiga Bahasa) sebagai upaya pelestarian budaya dan penguatan multibahasa: Studi kasus di SDN 1 Mangkujayan [The Sarigabah program (One Day, Three Languages) as an effort to preserve culture and strengthen multilingualism: A case study at SDN 1 Mangkujayan]. *Ghancaran: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, Edisi Khusus Lalonget VI, 681–690. https://doi.org/10.19105/ghancaran.vi.21751

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ibrahim, M. (2024). Islam in the digital infrastructure: The rise of Islamic cyber practices in Northern Nigeria. *Religion, State & Society, 52*(2–3), 114–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353956

Keane, W. (1997). Religious language. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 26*, 47–71. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.47

Kühle, L., & Larsen, T. L. (2021). 'Forced' online religion: Religious minority and majority communities' media usage during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Religions, 12*(7), Article 496. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070496

Mawardi, K. (2022). Nationalism and spiritualism of Javanese tarekat: Study of Tarekat Rinjani in Banyumas Central Java. *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies), 10*(1), 75–108. https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v10i1.12509

Mawarsih, P. B., & Febriani, I. (2022). Pemertahanan bahasa Jawa dalam komunikasi anggota organisasi Ikatan Mahasiswa Bidikmisi Universitas Trunojoyo Madura

(Kajian sosiolinguistik) [Javanese language maintenance in the communication of Bidikmisi Student Association members at Trunojoyo University Madura: A sociolinguistic study]. *Ghancaran: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia, 3*(2), 197–213. https://doi.org/10.19105/ghancaran.v3i2.4857

Mibtadin, M., & Habib, Z. (2022). Community religious expression through sholawat in Bangunrejo Kidul Kedunggalar Ngawi village. *Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah, 42*(1), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.21580/jid.v42.1.10922

Müller, J., & Friemel, T. N. (2024). Dynamics of digital media use in religious communities—A theoretical model. *Religions, 15*(7), Article 762. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070762

Nasri, U., Indinabila, Y., & Rasyidi, A. H. (2024). Sasak language in rituals and traditions: An anthropological analysis of communication in the Lombok community. *Sabda: Jurnal Kajian Kebudayaan, 19*(2), 89–99. https://doi.org/10.14710/sabda.19.2.89-99

Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society, 20*(11), 4275–4292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694

Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. SAGE Publications.

Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The ethnography of communication: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Blackwell Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470758373

Simuh. (1996). *Sufisme Jawa: Transformasi tasawuf Islam ke mistik Jawa* [Javanese Sufism: The transformation of Islamic Sufism into Javanese mysticism]. Yayasan Bentang Budaya.

Solahudin, D., & Fakhruroji, M. (2020). Internet and Islamic learning practices in Indonesia: Social media, religious populism, and religious authority. *Religions, 11*(1), Article 19. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010019

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Tuti, S. N. T., & Safitri, R. (2024). Ritual communication as a medium for cultural preservation and collective identity: Study on Nyadran Sonoageng tradition. *Sangkép: Jurnal Kajian Sosial Keagamaan, 7*(3), 423–439. https://doi.org/10.20414/sangkep.v7i3.11820

van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190889760.001.0001

Zaid, B., Fedtke, J., Shin, D. D., El Kadoussi, A., & Ibahrine, M. (2022). Digital Islam and Muslim millennials: How social media influencers reimagine religious authority and Islamic practices. *Religions, 13*(4), Article 335. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040335