

## Social Media Utilization by Preachers to Shape Religious Perceptions among Indonesian Youth

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**Abstract** The development of digital technology has changed the way religious teachings are disseminated, with social media becoming the main channel for preaching to the younger generation. This phenomenon illustrates the transformation of religious authority from physical to virtual spaces, shaping the way Indonesian youth understand and internalize religious values. This study aims to analyze how digital da'wah communication strategies shape religious perceptions among Indonesian youth. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this study examined 150 da'wah contents from five popular preachers on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The data were analyzed using NVivo 14 software, which helped identify da'wah themes, communication styles, and audience responses. The results show that the personal storytelling approach and creative visualization are the main strategies in shaping religious perceptions that are more personal and contextual. Most of the content focuses on the themes of morals and worship, although intolerance-themed content still has high emotional appeal. This research confirms the importance of faith-based digital literacy to strengthen youth resilience against extreme religious content. The implications of this research underscore the need for collaboration between religious institutions, academics, and digital platforms in building a moderate and inclusive da'wah ecosystem in the social media era.

**Keywords:** Social media; digital da'wah; religious perceptions; indonesian youth; digital literacy

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### 1. Introduction

The development of digital technology has fundamentally altered human communication patterns, including the dissemination of religious teachings. Social media has become one of the primary platforms where religious figures, including preachers, disseminate their messages to a broader audience and across geographical boundaries. In various parts of the world, the use of social media by preachers has given rise to a new phenomenon: the transformation of religious authority from conventional spaces, such as mosques and Islamic boarding schools, to virtual spaces, including YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Campbell, 2013). This phenomenon suggests that people's religiosity, particularly among the younger generation, is now

increasingly shaped through digital interactions, indicating a paradigm shift in global religious practice.

In Indonesia, as the world's most populous Muslim country, social media usage has reached a very high penetration rate. According to a report by *We Are Social & Hootsuite* (2023), 77% of Indonesians are active social media users, with the 16-24 age range dominating the demographic. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are the main media accessed by the younger generation for various needs, including the consumption of religious content. A study conducted by Nisa (2018) shows that around 65% of Indonesian Muslim youth obtain their religious understanding through digital sources rather than formal religious institutions. This data confirms the significant influence of social media on shaping the religious perceptions and identities of young people in Indonesia.

Although social media offers excellent opportunities for da'wah, it also creates new challenges. One of these issues is the concern over authenticity, message moderation, and the potential spread of extreme religious ideologies through social media. Some preachers tend to adapt their messages to appeal more to young audiences, potentially sacrificing theological depth for popularity (Lim, 2013). Additionally, many individuals utilize digital platforms to reinforce narratives of religious exclusivism. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how the communication strategies of preachers on social media influence the development of religious perceptions among young people in Indonesia.

Various studies have highlighted the phenomenon of digital da'wah in Indonesia. Nisa (2018) examines the emergence of "Islamic Preachers 2.0" on Instagram and YouTube, showing the increasingly personalized and commercialized nature of modern da'wah. Meanwhile, Slama (2017) analyzed the adaptation of Islamic preaching in Indonesia's digital ecosystem, finding that the use of a casual and entertaining communication style can effectively attract the attention of young people. However, most previous studies have focused on the communication strategies of preachers and the characteristics of da'wah content, without directly examining its impact on the perception and internalization of religious values among young audiences.

A review of the existing literature reveals that research on digital da'wah primarily focuses on the production aspect of the message, rather than its impact on the audience. Few studies systematically connect the communication style of preachers on social media with the changes or formation of youth religious perceptions. This leaves a gap in the scientific literature, particularly in understanding how exposure to online da'wah influences the mindset, religious attitudes, and behavior of the younger generation in Indonesia. Therefore, this research is important to fill this void.

The urgency of this research becomes even more evident considering that youth are the main agents shaping the future of religious communities and the nation. The religious perceptions formed today will influence the way they interact in a multicultural society, address differences, and participate in the nation's life. In the midst of the rise of religion-based social polarization in the digital space, understanding the dynamics of digital da'wah and its impact is significant to prevent the development of radicalism, increase tolerance, and encourage the creation of moderate and inclusive religious discourse (Howard & Parks, 2012).

The novelty of this research lies in its approach that combines content analysis of digital da'wah with perception surveys of young audiences. This research not only examines how religious messages are packaged and delivered by preachers but also assesses the actual impact of such content on young people's understanding of religion, attitudes, and identity. As such, this research offers an interdisciplinary approach, combining media studies, religious studies, and youth sociology to gain a more holistic understanding.

This research aims to analyze how the use of social media by preachers shapes religious perceptions among Indonesian youth. More specifically, this study aims to identify the dominant communication style, the religious themes that are often raised, and examine how preaching content affects the internalization of values, religious orientation, and patterns of religious behavior among young people in the digital era.

Theoretically, this research will enrich the literature on digital da'wah and religious communication studies by providing empirical evidence of the effects of digital da'wah on young audiences. Practically, the results of this research will be helpful for preachers, religious institutions, educators, and policymakers in designing more effective, relevant, and positively impactful religious communication strategies that shape the religious character of the younger generation.

This research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of a religion-based digital literacy program for youth, enabling them to be more critical and discerning in their online consumption of religious content. In addition, this research can also serve as a reference for the formulation of digital da'wah ethics policies that encourage responsible and moderate da'wah practices, thereby contributing positively to social harmony in Indonesia.

## 2. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study method, aiming to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of social media use by preachers in shaping the religious perceptions of Indonesian youth. The data population in this study comprises all digital da'wah content published by Indonesian preachers on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok from January 2022 to December 2024.

Data samples were taken using a purposive sampling technique, which selected five popular preachers based on the number of followers (at least 500,000) and the intensity of religious content production. A total of 150 digital da'wah contents were collected for analysis, focusing on variations in communication styles, da'wah themes, and audience responses.

The research instrument was a content analysis guide developed from media communication theory and social construction theory of religiosity, with categories such as message framing, language use, content visualization, and audience engagement. To test validity, source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various social media platforms. Reliability was assessed through an intercoder reliability test conducted by two independent researchers to minimize subjective bias. Data collection techniques included digital documentation (video archives and posts) and non-participatory observation of audience interactions. The research procedure consisted of account identification, content collection, data coding using software, narrative pattern analysis, and interpretation of results.

During the analysis process, NVivo 14 software was utilized to facilitate theme coding, word frequency analysis, and the visualization of audience interaction patterns. The data analysis technique employs Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model, which comprises three levels of analysis: text (da'wah content), discursive practices (content production and consumption), and social practices (the social context of religiousness). The results of this analysis aim to reveal the relationship between digital da'wah communication styles and changes in religious perceptions among Indonesian youth.

### **3. Result & Discussion**

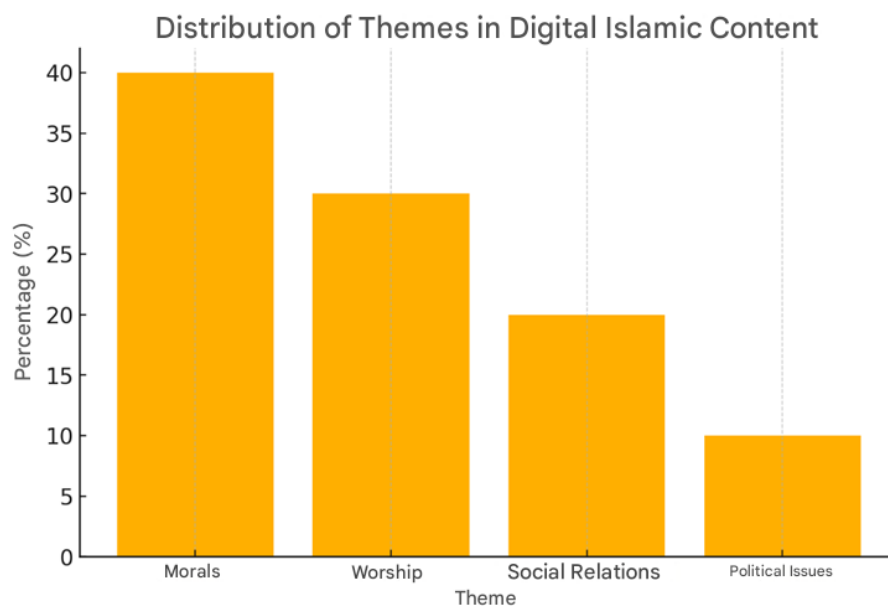
This study analyzes 150 digital da'wah contents uploaded by five popular preachers in Indonesia through YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok platforms during the period 2022-2024. Based on the analysis results, it was found that the most dominant communication style is the personal storytelling approach, accounting for 60% of all content. Meanwhile, 30% of the content uses an educative approach based on Islamic classics, and only 10% of the content is confrontational, discussing sensitive issues such as politics or intolerance.

Additionally, the distribution of themes that appear in this digital da'wah also exhibits a positive trend. Moral themes dominate, accounting for 40% of the total content, followed by themes of worship (30%), social relations (20%), and political issues (10%). This suggests that most preachers tend to prioritize messages of individual and social morality, rather than addressing controversial issues that have the potential to divide young audiences.

**Table 1. Digital da'wah contents**

Da'wah Approach	Number of Content	Percentage (%)
Personal Storytelling	90	60%
Kitabiyah Education	45	30%
Confrontational (Sensitive Issues)	15	10%

Furthermore, the main themes that appear in digital da'wah content can be seen in the following graph:



**Figure 1. Theme Distribution in Digital Da'wah Content**

### Data Analysis

Of the total content analyzed, 60% used a personal storytelling approach. This indicates that digital preachers often establish emotional connections with their audiences through personal experiences, daily narratives, and reflections on life. The kitabiyah educational approach (30%) is more prevalent on YouTube, while confrontational content related to political issues or intolerance occupies a smaller portion (10%) and is more often found on TikTok.

The data obtained shows a pattern in which the personal approach is used more frequently on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. In contrast, the kitabiyah educational approach is more commonly found on YouTube, which allows for more extended and in-depth content formats. Confrontational-themed content, although few in number, received a higher level of engagement, as evidenced by comments and emotional reactions, both positive and negative. This aligns with the characteristics of

social media algorithms, which tend to amplify controversial content, making it more widely accessible to users.

The analysis also showed that the use of colloquial language, humor, and narration of personal experiences were the main factors in increasing audience engagement. Meanwhile, content that is educational and rich in classical references tends to attract audiences who are more serious or have a stronger background in religious education. This confirms that communication style largely determines the reach and impact of digital da'wah on youth.

### **Data Interpretation**

The interpretation of this data reveals that the success of digital da'wah in shaping youth religious perceptions is highly dependent on the preacher's ability to establish emotional closeness with the audience. A storytelling approach that utilizes personal or relatable stories enables audiences to internalize religious messages in a more natural and non-patronizing manner. This supports the hypothesis that a personalized communicative approach is more effective than conventional lectures based on one-way instructions.

Furthermore, while political-themed content represents only 10%, its presence is still significant in shaping audience perceptions and emotions. Audience engagement with political content indicates sensitivity to broader social themes. This shows that digital da'wah is not only shaping private religious perceptions but is also beginning to influence the socio-political views of Indonesia's younger generation.

In moral-themed content, values such as honesty, patience, empathy, and social cooperation are often conveyed through real-life stories, either from the preacher's own experience or inspirational stories from others. This approach makes religious values feel close to the reality of young audiences' lives. This type of content elicits a more reflective audience reaction, as evidenced by comments sharing similar experiences.

In the context of worship, preachers often employ an instructive approach, providing tutorials on prayer, fasting, or almsgiving in an engaging, short video format. The theme of social relations primarily emphasizes the importance of maintaining brotherhood, respecting differences, and fostering communication between religious communities. This illustrates the efforts of preachers to convey Islam as a religion that is welcoming and inclusive of social diversity.

The results of this study reinforce the findings of Nisa (2018), who stated that social media preachers in Indonesia are increasingly adopting a personalized and visual approach in delivering religious messages, rather than formalistic lectures. As this study reveals, preachers tend to employ humor, storytelling, and creative

audiovisual elements to engage young audiences who are accustomed to digital culture.

In addition, this result aligns with Slama's study (2017), which emphasizes that the success of digital da'wah is highly dependent on adapting to the characteristics of social media. Preachers who can effectively convey their religious messages without compromising theological substance tend to be more effective in shaping the religious perceptions of the younger generation. Thus, this research not only confirms the relevance of previous studies' findings but also expands our understanding of the specific impact of preaching styles on young audiences.

Based on these findings, one suggested solution is the development of a digital literacy program for youth, focusing on religious aspects. This literacy includes not only the technical ability to use social media, but also the critical ability to evaluate proselytizing content. This literacy is important for avoiding radicalization through biased or intolerant religious content and for strengthening inclusive and moderate religious perceptions.

In addition, preachers and religious institutions should be encouraged to develop a code of ethics for digital da'wah, emphasizing the principles of honesty, justice, non-discrimination, and respect for differences. This code of ethics can serve as a guideline, ensuring that digital da'wah not only focuses on popularity but also remains oriented towards moral and social character building in accordance with universal Islamic values.

This research confirms the validity of **Cultivation Theory** (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) in the context of religious social media. Long-term exposure to positive and moderate proselytizing content will form a more inclusive and tolerant perception of reality in youth. Conversely, exposure to intolerant content, even if slight, still has the potential to form exclusive perceptions that are harmful to social cohesion.

In addition, this finding is closely related to **Framing Theory** (Entman, 1993), which posits that the way information is presented in digital da'wah influences the audience's interpretation of religious values. Preachers who use positive frames about tolerance, noble morals, and brotherhood among human beings prove to be more effective in shaping peaceful and productive religious perceptions among young people.

## **Discussion**

In general, the results of this study show that social media has become a new arena for Islamic preaching in Indonesia, where the dynamics of religious authority have become more democratic and decentralized. Youth are no longer passive audiences, but actively choose, criticize, and even reproduce religious messages according to their values and life context.

In this context, the primary challenge is to ensure that the digital space remains a platform for the exchange of healthy, moderate, and constructive religious discourse. Without adequate ethical control and digital literacy, there is a risk that digital proselytization spaces can be used to reinforce exclusivism, intolerance, or even religion-based radicalism.

### **The Role of Social Media in Shaping Identity**

Social media now serves not only as an information channel, but also as a platform for the formation of religious identities. Youth use social media to search for religious meaning, build faith-based communities, and negotiate their Islamic identity in the context of modernity. This aligns with McLuhan's concept of "the medium is the message," where the medium's form also shapes the content and meaning received by the audience.

Through engagement on social media, youth can choose from a variety of religious expressions, from conservative to progressive. This flexibility reflects the dynamic development of contemporary Islam in Indonesia, which is more plural and multifaceted than in previous eras. However, this dynamic needs to be balanced with critical guidance to avoid being trapped in extreme ideological polarization.

### **Risks of Digital Preaching**

While digital da'wah presents significant opportunities for spreading moderate and peaceful religious values, it also poses serious risks that should not be overlooked. Da'wah content that carries narratives of intolerance, exclusivism, or even radicalism, although comprising only 10% of the overall sample in this study, still shows a high level of engagement (in terms of comments, likes, and shares). This shows the tendency of social media algorithms to prioritize content that triggers strong emotions, regardless of whether the content is positive or negative. This phenomenon reinforces Lim's (2013) analysis of how social media can amplify the voices of extreme groups even when they are minorities.

In the context of multicultural and multi-religious Indonesia, the spread of intolerant preaching content on social media has the potential to trigger social polarization. This risk is even greater if young audiences with low digital literacy are unable to discern and critically understand the religious messages they consume. Therefore, maintaining a moderate digital da'wah space is not only the task of preachers, but also the collective responsibility of the community, digital platforms, and the government in preserving the nation's social integrity.

### **Ethical Responsibility of Preachers**

Digital preachers, as producers of religious content, hold a great ethical responsibility in shaping the religious perceptions and behavior of the younger generation. They are not only responsible for delivering religious messages accurately, but are also obliged to consider the social impact of the narratives they build. Messages that encourage tolerance, openness, and compassion should be prioritized in every digital da'wah content production. Conversely, narratives containing hate speech, discrimination, or religious exclusivism need to be avoided as they can exacerbate social fragmentation.

The basic principles of da'wah that prioritize wisdom and *mau'izhah hasanah* (good advice) as taught in the Qur'an (QS. An-Nahl: 125) must be the foundation of da'wah in the digital era. Preachers also need to understand how social media algorithms work, so they can strategize the delivery of messages that remain attractive without compromising religious integrity. With this approach, digital da'wah can become a transformative force that strengthens social cohesion in Indonesia.

### **Digital Literacy Education**

The urgency of developing faith-based digital literacy becomes clearer in light of the study's results. Digital literacy is not just about the technical ability to access and use social media, but rather the ability to assess the validity, credibility, and ethics of the content consumed. The younger generation needs to be equipped with the skills to distinguish between constructive proselytizing and manipulative or provocative proselytizing. This initiative can be integrated into the religious education curriculum in schools as well as in community training programs.

In addition, social media platforms can play an active role by providing verification features for credible preacher accounts and tightening regulations on the spread of extreme religious content. Religious digital literacy must also be participatory, where youth are invited to become agents of change, producing and disseminating positive, creative, and educational religious content. With this approach, the digital da'wah ecosystem is expected to be healthier and contribute to the development of a religious and inclusive society.

### **Collaboration Opportunities**

The results of this study also reveal significant opportunities for collaboration among various parties in enhancing the quality of digital da'wah. Religious institutions, universities, governments, civil society organizations, and digital platforms must collaborate in establishing a da'wah ecosystem centered on moderation, tolerance, and peace. Digital da'wah training programs, for example, can

involve academics in the fields of communication and religion to provide training in creative content and da'wah ethics for young preachers.

Social media platforms can also work with religious institutions to flag quality da'wah content, provide incentives for positive creative content, and detect and take swift action against da'wah content that violates religious ethics or national laws. This collaboration will not only improve the quality of da'wah in the digital space but also strengthen the position of Islam as a religion that is rahmatan lil 'alamin in the reality of Indonesia's pluralistic modern society.

### **Future Research Directions**

This study opens up opportunities for more comprehensive follow-up research. Longitudinal studies that observe changes in youth religious perceptions after continuous exposure to digital da'wah over a period of time would provide a fuller picture of the dynamics. In addition, experimental approaches, such as testing the effect of various da'wah styles on youth religious attitudes, tolerance, and social engagement, would greatly enrich the research results.

Future research should also expand the scope of platforms analyzed, for example, examining the role of Telegram, religious podcasts, or Islamic clubhouses, which are also gaining traction among young people. Similarly, audience segmentation based on geographical, socio-economic, and religious education backgrounds would open up insights into the varied impacts of digital da'wah in different contexts. All of this will contribute to efforts to build a more inclusive and resilient digital religious space that is responsive to the dynamics of the times.

### **Implications**

Practically, this research provides a strong basis for da'wah institutions, individual preachers, educational institutions, and policy makers to formulate more effective and ethical digital da'wah strategies. Digital da'wah training programs, based on the principles of moderate communication, storytelling techniques, and creative visuals, are needed to optimize the reach of da'wah among young people. Dawah materials need to be formatted to remain in line with Islamic teachings, yet relevant and appealing to the lifestyles of Generation Z and millennials.

Furthermore, this research serves as a foundation for the development of ethical regulations for digital da'wah content, including a verification mechanism for preacher accounts, religious literacy education for social media users, and the strengthening of moderate Islamic narratives in the digital space. If implemented correctly, these results will not only strengthen individual religiosity but also strengthen Indonesia's social harmony and national integration in the midst of an era of rapid digital transformation.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that social media has become the primary medium through which preachers influence religious perceptions among Indonesian youth. The personal storytelling approach and the use of creative visuals have proven to be the most effective strategies in attracting attention and shaping the internalization of religious values in the younger generation. Although the majority of the content focuses on themes of morals and worship, employing a positive and moderate communication style, there is also a small portion of da'wah content that carries a narrative of intolerance, which has a high emotional appeal on digital platforms. This finding highlights the importance of preachers prioritizing the principles of communication ethics and moderation in the creation of religious content on social media. The practical implications of this research encourage the strengthening of religion-based digital literacy programs, the development of a digital da'wah code of ethics, and cross-sector collaboration to maintain a productive, moderate, and inclusive digital da'wah arena. For future research, it is recommended to develop longitudinal studies that observe changes in youth religious perceptions over a long period of time, as well as explore the dynamics of digital da'wah on new platforms such as Telegram, religious podcasts, and application-based virtual communities, so that the mapping of the influence of digital da'wah on the formation of young people's religious identity can be understood more comprehensively.

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