
The Role of Religious Influencers in Contemporary Islamic Communication towards the Formation of Religious Authority in Digital Media

Meesuwan harahap^{1*}, Badar Almamari², Rosemary Madzore³

¹ Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, Thailand

² Sultan Qaboos University Muscat, Oman

³ University of South Africa, Muckleneuk Campus, Pretoria, South Africa

*Corresponding Author: meesuwan41@gmail.com

Key Words:

Digital Da'Wah,
Religious Influencers,
Religious Authority,
Social Media

Abstract: The rapid expansion of digital media has transformed da'wah practices by shifting religious authority from institutional structures toward decentralized digital environments. Social media platforms facilitate the production, circulation, and legitimation of religious messages through visibility and audience engagement, giving rise to religious influencers as key actors in contemporary digital da'wah. This study analyzes the role of religious influencers in da'wah communication and examines how religious authority is constructed within digital media. Using a qualitative library research approach, the study reviews recent national and international scholarly literature on digital religion, religious influencers, and religious authority. Data are analyzed through qualitative content analysis to identify key themes and patterns. The findings show that religious influencers employ personalized communication, storytelling, and interactive platform features to cultivate authenticity and audience trust. Religious authority in digital media is increasingly shaped by digital performativity, algorithmic visibility, and audience participation rather than formal credentials. The study concludes that digital religious authority is fluid and continuously negotiated, highlighting the need for ethically grounded digital da'wah practices.

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology over the past decade has brought fundamental changes to religious communication practices across the globe. Digital media no longer function merely as channels for information dissemination but have evolved into new social spaces where meanings, identities, and religious authority are dynamically constructed and negotiated. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) enable individuals to produce, distribute, and consume religious messages without relying on formal religious institutions. This transformation marks a significant shift in the landscape of contemporary da'wah, in which religious authority is no longer hierarchical and

centralized but increasingly decentralized and embedded within digital networks (Campbell, 2021).

In the global context, the emergence of religious influencers has become a prominent phenomenon in contemporary da'wah communication. Religious influencers refer to individuals with high visibility in digital media who actively produce religious content consumed by wide audiences. They combine religious messages with popular communication styles, personal narratives, and visual aesthetics that align with the logic of digital platforms. Recent studies indicate that audiences, particularly younger generations, tend to place greater trust in religious figures perceived as authentic, communicative, and relevant to everyday experiences rather than distant formal religious authorities (Abidin, 2021; Duffy & Hund, 2023).

Research developments over the past five years demonstrate increasing scholarly attention to the relationship between religion, digital media, and authority. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) argue that digital media have generated new forms of religious practice shaped by participatory culture and the attention economy. Other studies highlight the significant role of social media algorithms in determining the visibility of religious messages and figures, thereby influencing the construction of religious authority in digital public spaces (Bucher, 2021; Cotter, 2023). Consequently, religious authority is no longer constructed solely through scholarly legitimacy but also through digital performance, audience interaction, and popularity metrics.

The academic urgency of this topic is further intensified when the phenomenon of religious influencers is situated within the dynamics of religious life in multicultural and multireligious societies. On the one hand, religious influencers have the potential to serve as agents of religious moderation by disseminating inclusive and contextual religious messages. On the other hand, several studies suggest that authority based on popularity is vulnerable to the simplification of religious teachings, the commodification of religion, and even the dissemination of problematic religious interpretations (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2022). These conditions underscore the need for more critical and in-depth academic inquiry into the role of religious influencers in shaping religious understanding and authority in the digital era.

The state of the art in research over the last five years reveals three major trends. First, international studies predominantly examine religious influencers from the perspectives of digital culture and the attention economy. Abidin (2021) and Duffy and Hund (2023) demonstrate that influencers construct credibility through performances of authenticity and

emotional proximity to audiences. Second, scholarship on religion and media emphasizes the shift of religious authority from institutions to individual actors in digital spaces (Campbell, 2021; Cotter, 2023). Third, research in Indonesia largely focuses on the effectiveness of digital da'wah and the communication strategies of preachers on social media, particularly in engaging younger generations (Hidayat, 2020; Rakhmawati & Fatimah, 2021).

Nevertheless, these studies exhibit notable limitations. International research often discusses religious influencers in general terms without explicitly linking them to the concept of da'wah and the dynamics of religious authority within Muslim societies. Meanwhile, national studies tend to frame digital da'wah primarily as a media innovation, without sufficiently analyzing how religious influencers construct, reproduce, and negotiate religious authority in digital media. In other words, a disconnection remains between studies of da'wah communication and analyses of religious authority within the digital ecosystem.

The research gap of this study lies in the limited number of comprehensive investigations that specifically analyze the role of religious influencers in contemporary da'wah communication and their impact on the formation of religious authority in digital media. There is a lack of research examining the communication mechanisms employed by religious influencers to build religious legitimacy, how audiences interpret such authority, and how digital media characteristics—such as algorithms, interactivity, and visualization—mediate the relationship between da'wah and religious authority. This gap highlights the need for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from communication studies, da'wah, and digital religion.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyze the role of religious influencers in contemporary da'wah communication in shaping religious authority in digital media. Specifically, this research seeks to identify the da'wah communication strategies employed by religious influencers, examine the process of constructing religious authority in digital spaces, and understand audience responses and reception toward the religious authority established by these influencers.

The contribution of this study is expected to provide both theoretical and empirical insights into the development of communication and da'wah studies. Theoretically, it enriches da'wah communication scholarship by incorporating perspectives on digital religious authority and influencer studies. Empirically, the findings may serve as a reference for preachers, religious institutions, and policymakers in formulating digital da'wah strategies that are adaptive, credible, and oriented toward strengthening moderate religious values amid the growing complexity of digital communication environments..

Research Methods

Types and Approaches of Research

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach. This approach is selected because the primary objective of the study is to conduct a conceptual and critical analysis of the role of religious influencers in contemporary da'wah communication and its implications for the formation of religious authority in digital media, based on existing scholarly findings. Library research enables researchers to systematically examine, compare, and synthesize diverse theoretical perspectives and previous research outcomes in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Snyder, 2019; Booth et al., 2022).

This approach is particularly relevant to studies of da'wah communication and digital religion, as the phenomenon of religious influencers constitutes a multidimensional issue that has been extensively discussed across communication studies, media studies, and religious studies, yet still requires interdisciplinary conceptual integration. Accordingly, library research functions not merely as an inventory of prior studies, but also as an analytical tool for identifying patterns, trends, and research gaps within the existing body of literature.

Research Data Sources

The data sources for this study consist of secondary data obtained from relevant and credible scholarly literature. The primary data include articles from reputable national and international academic journals published within the last five to ten years, particularly those addressing da'wah communication, religious influencers, religion and digital media, and religious authority. Journal articles were retrieved from academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and nationally accredited journal portals.

In addition to journal articles, this study also draws on recent scholarly books that discuss theories of digital communication, digital religion, and contemporary religious authority as supporting sources to strengthen the conceptual framework. Official documents, such as reports from research institutions or policy documents related to digital literacy and social media, are selectively utilized to provide empirical context for the development of da'wah in digital spaces. The selection of data sources is guided by considerations of topical relevance, publisher credibility, and their theoretical and empirical contributions to the focus of the study (Campbell, 2021; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2022).

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is conducted through several systematic stages. The first stage involves

literature identification, which entails searching for relevant scholarly sources using keywords such as *religious influencers*, *digital da'wah*, *religious authority*, and *digital media*. This process aims to obtain an initial overview of the scope and development of research related to the study topic.

The second stage is literature selection, which involves filtering the identified sources based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria comprise: (1) scholarly publications relevant to the research focus, (2) publications issued within the last five to ten years, and (3) sources published by reputable journals or academic publishers. Conversely, literature that is not directly relevant, is popular in nature, or has not undergone a peer-review process is excluded from the analysis.

The third stage is literature classification, which consists of grouping the selected sources into major thematic categories, such as the concept of religious influencers, digital da'wah communication strategies, the construction of religious authority, and the role of social media algorithms. This stage is intended to facilitate thematic and conceptual data analysis and synthesis (Snyder, 2019).

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data are analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is employed to systematically examine meanings, patterns, and trends emerging from the analyzed scholarly texts, particularly concerning how religious influencers are positioned within da'wah communication practices and how religious authority is constructed in digital media (Krippendorff, 2021).

The analysis process involves several stages: (1) in-depth reading of all selected literature, (2) thematic coding of key concepts related to da'wah communication and religious authority, (3) comparison of findings across studies to identify similarities and differences in perspectives, and (4) synthesis of the analytical results into a coherent conceptual framework. This approach enables the researcher to draw reflective and critical analytical conclusions regarding the development of studies on religious influencers within the context of digital da'wah.

Through the application of library research and content analysis, this study is expected to generate an in-depth understanding of the role of religious influencers in contemporary da'wah communication and their contribution to the formation of religious authority in digital media at both conceptual and theoretical levels.

Research Results

Based on a review of various relevant national and international scholarly literatures, this study identifies several key findings regarding the role of religious influencers in contemporary da‘wah communication and its implications for the construction of religious authority in digital media. These findings are organized into several analytical subthemes as follows.

Religious Influencers as New Actors in Digital Da‘wah Communication

The literature indicates that religious influencers have emerged as significant new actors in da‘wah practices within digital spaces. Unlike conventional preachers who operate within formal religious institutions, religious influencers utilize social media platforms to disseminate religious messages directly to broad and heterogeneous audiences. Digital media enable individuals to construct symbolic authority through visibility, consistency in content production, and the intensity of audience engagement (Campbell, 2021; Cotter, 2023).

Several studies also demonstrate that religious influencers are often perceived as more approachable and accessible, particularly among younger generations. This sense of proximity is developed through informal communication styles, the use of popular language, and the contextualization of religious messages within the everyday experiences of audiences (Abidin, 2021; Hidayat, 2020). These findings suggest that religious influencers function not only as transmitters of da‘wah messages but also as mediators between religious teachings and the social realities of digital audiences.

Communication Strategies of Religious Influencers in Digital Media

The literature review reveals that religious influencers adopt da‘wah communication strategies that are adaptive to the characteristics of digital media. Several studies highlight the use of personal narratives, religious storytelling, and content visualization as key strategies to attract attention and foster audience engagement (Duffy & Hund, 2023; Rakhmawati & Fatimah, 2021). These strategies contribute to the construction of perceived authenticity and trust, which constitute essential capital in digital da‘wah communication.

Moreover, interactivity emerges as a central element in the communication strategies of religious influencers. Features such as comment sections, live streaming, and direct messaging facilitate two-way communication between influencers and audiences. Such interactions strengthen symbolic relationships and enhance the legitimacy of influencers as religious references in digital spaces (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Consequently, digital da‘wah is no longer unidirectional but becomes dialogical and participatory.

The Construction of Religious Authority in Digital Media

The reviewed literature demonstrates a shift in the patterns of religious authority formation in the digital era. Religious authority is no longer determined solely by formal educational credentials or institutional affiliations but is increasingly shaped by digital performativity, follower counts, and levels of audience engagement. Social media algorithms also play a significant role in amplifying the visibility of particular religious influencers, thereby influencing public perceptions of religious authority in digital public spheres (Bucher, 2021; Cotter, 2023).

Several studies further emphasize that religious authority constructed through digital media is fluid and contextual. Audiences tend to grant legitimacy based on message relevance, value consistency, and alignment with their spiritual needs rather than relying exclusively on traditional forms of authority. These findings indicate that religious authority in digital media results from ongoing negotiations among influencers, audiences, and the logics of digital platforms (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2022).

Audience Responses and Reception of Religious Influencers' Authority

The literature suggests that audiences play an active role in shaping and sustaining the authority of religious influencers. Levels of audience trust are influenced by perceptions of authenticity, message consistency, and the influencer's ability to address contemporary religious issues (Abidin, 2021; Campbell, 2021). In this context, audiences are not merely passive recipients of messages but active participants who provide feedback and symbolic legitimation.

However, the literature also notes ambivalence in audience reception. On the one hand, religious influencers are considered capable of simplifying religious teachings and making them more accessible. On the other hand, several studies raise concerns about the potential for excessive simplification, the commodification of religion, and the reduction of religious authority to digital popularity alone (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2022). These findings suggest that audience reception of religious influencers' authority is diverse and context-dependent.

Challenges and Implications of Religious Influencer Da'wah in Digital Media

The reviewed literature also identifies various challenges faced by religious influencers in digital da'wah practices, including algorithmic pressures, demands for continuous content production, and the risk of misinterpretation of religious messages in open digital spaces. Several studies emphasize that without strong ethical and scholarly frameworks, digital da'wah risks losing its substantive depth (Campbell, 2021; Cotter, 2023).

Conversely, the literature highlights the strategic potential of religious influencers to

expand the reach of da‘wah and reinforce contextual and moderate religious values. This potential depends on influencers’ capacity to manage religious authority responsibly and reflexively. Accordingly, the role of religious influencers in contemporary da‘wah communication is understood as a complex phenomenon with significant implications for the dynamics of religious authority in digital media.

Discussion

This study examines the role of religious influencers in contemporary da‘wah communication and its implications for the construction of religious authority in digital media. Based on a systematic review of recent scholarly literature, the findings reveal significant transformations in how religious messages are produced, circulated, and legitimized in digitally mediated environments. This discussion critically interprets these findings by linking them to major theoretical frameworks in communication, digital religion, and authority studies, while highlighting the study’s novelty, scientific contributions, and theoretical and practical implications.

Religious Influencers and the Reconfiguration of Da‘wah Communication

The findings demonstrate that religious influencers function as new and influential actors in digital da‘wah communication, marking a structural shift from institution-centered to individual-centered religious communication. This transformation aligns with Campbell’s (2021) concept of *networked religion*, which emphasizes how digital media enable religious authority and practice to emerge through connectivity, visibility, and participation rather than formal hierarchy. In this context, religious influencers represent hybrid figures who combine religious messaging with the communicative logics of digital platforms.

Compared to traditional da‘wah models that emphasize top-down transmission of religious knowledge, the literature reviewed in this study suggests that influencer-led da‘wah is characterized by horizontality, accessibility, and personalization. This finding corroborates earlier research indicating that contemporary audiences, particularly younger generations, increasingly prefer religious communicators who appear relatable and embedded in everyday life (Abidin, 2021; Duffy & Hund, 2023). However, this study extends previous work by situating these communicative practices explicitly within the framework of da‘wah communication, thereby bridging influencer studies and Islamic communication scholarship.

Communication Strategies and Digital Religious Authenticity

The results indicate that religious influencers strategically employ personal narratives,

religious storytelling, and visual aesthetics to cultivate authenticity and trust. These findings resonate with authenticity theories in digital culture, which argue that perceived sincerity and emotional resonance are central to influencer credibility (Abidin, 2021). In religious contexts, authenticity becomes a key symbolic resource that substitutes for, or complements, traditional markers of religious authority such as formal education or institutional affiliation.

What distinguishes the present findings from earlier studies is the emphasis on *religious authenticity as a communicative performance*. Rather than being rooted solely in theological expertise, authenticity is constructed through consistent messaging, interactive engagement, and affective connection with audiences. This supports Campbell and Evolvi's (2020) argument that digital religion is shaped by participatory cultures, where authority is co-produced through interaction rather than imposed unilaterally.

At the same time, this study highlights a tension noted less explicitly in prior research: while storytelling and personalization enhance engagement, they also risk oversimplifying complex religious doctrines. This ambivalence reflects broader debates in the mediatization of religion, where communicative efficiency and platform visibility may come at the expense of doctrinal depth (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2022).

Digital Media and the Transformation of Religious Authority

One of the most significant findings concerns the changing nature of religious authority in digital environments. Consistent with Bucher's (2021) analysis of algorithmic power, this study shows that visibility and engagement metrics play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of religious authority. Algorithms do not merely distribute content neutrally; they actively privilege certain voices, styles, and narratives, thereby influencing which religious interpretations gain prominence.

This study confirms previous findings that religious authority in digital media is increasingly fluid and negotiated (Cotter, 2023). However, it advances the literature by explicitly linking this fluidity to da'wah communication processes. Authority emerges not only from symbolic capital or theological legitimacy but from the alignment between religious messaging, platform logics, and audience expectations. In this sense, religious authority becomes a relational and processual phenomenon rather than a fixed status.

Compared to traditional Islamic scholarship, where authority is typically grounded in recognized chains of knowledge transmission, digital religious authority operates through performative credibility and audience validation. This divergence raises critical questions about the sustainability and accountability of digital religious authority, especially in contexts where

religious interpretation carries social and political consequences.

Audience Agency and Participatory Authority Formation

The findings further emphasize the active role of audiences in constructing and sustaining the authority of religious influencers. This supports participatory communication theories, which view audiences as co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients. Through likes, comments, shares, and ongoing engagement, audiences provide symbolic legitimacy that reinforces an influencer's religious authority (Campbell, 2021).

This study aligns with earlier research highlighting audience trust as a key determinant of influencer credibility (Abidin, 2021). However, it contributes a more nuanced understanding by demonstrating that audience reception is neither uniform nor uncritical. The ambivalence identified in the literature between appreciation for accessibility and concern over commodification suggests that audiences engage in continuous evaluation of religious influencers' authority.

This finding challenges simplistic narratives that portray digital audiences as easily manipulated or wholly empowered. Instead, authority formation appears as a negotiated process shaped by trust, skepticism, and contextual interpretation. Such dynamics underscore the need to consider audience literacy and critical engagement as integral components of digital da'wah ecosystems.

Novelty and Scientific Contribution

The primary novelty of this study lies in its integrative analytical framework. While previous studies have examined religious influencers, digital religion, or da'wah communication separately, this research systematically connects these domains to analyze the construction of religious authority in digital media. By framing religious influencers explicitly as da'wah communicators, the study contributes to the conceptual development of communication and da'wah studies in digital contexts.

Additionally, this study advances theoretical discussions on religious authority by demonstrating how authority is reconstituted through platform-mediated interactions. It moves beyond descriptive accounts of influencer popularity to offer a critical interpretation of how authority is produced, negotiated, and contested within algorithmic environments. This perspective enriches existing scholarship on mediatized religion and influencer culture.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the findings suggest the need to reconceptualize da'wah communication frameworks to account for digital performativity, audience participation, and algorithmic

mediation. Traditional models that emphasize message transmission and preacher authority must be expanded to include relational and platform-based dynamics.

Furthermore, this study contributes to digital religion theory by highlighting da'wah as a specific communicative practice with distinctive theological and ethical dimensions. Integrating da'wah into broader discussions of digital religion allows for more culturally and religiously nuanced analyses of online religious communication.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings offer important insights for religious communicators, institutions, and policymakers. For practitioners of da'wah, the study underscores the importance of balancing communicative accessibility with theological responsibility. While digital platforms provide unprecedented reach, they also demand ethical reflexivity to prevent the dilution or commodification of religious teachings.

For religious institutions, the findings suggest a need to engage more actively with digital spaces rather than viewing influencers as competitors. Collaborative models that combine institutional knowledge with digital communication expertise may help strengthen credible and moderate religious discourse online.

Finally, for policymakers and educators, the study highlights the importance of digital religious literacy. Enhancing audiences' ability to critically evaluate religious content can mitigate the risks associated with unaccountable digital authority and support healthier religious public spheres.

Conclusion

This study examines the role of religious influencers in contemporary da'wah communication and their implications for the construction of religious authority in digital media. Based on a systematic review and analysis of recent national and international scholarly literature, the findings demonstrate that religious influencers have emerged as prominent actors in digital da'wah, reshaping traditional patterns of religious communication and authority formation.

The study finds that religious influencers utilize digital media platforms to disseminate religious messages in ways that are more personalized, interactive, and accessible than conventional institution-based da'wah. Through strategies such as personal storytelling, visualized content, and continuous audience engagement, religious influencers are able to cultivate perceptions of authenticity and trust, which serve as key resources in establishing

religious legitimacy in digital spaces.

Furthermore, the findings reveal a significant transformation in the construction of religious authority. In digital environments, authority is no longer determined solely by formal religious credentials or institutional affiliation, but is increasingly shaped by digital performativity, algorithmic visibility, and audience participation. Religious authority thus emerges as a fluid and negotiated process involving influencers, audiences, and platform logics rather than as a fixed hierarchical status.

The study also highlights the active role of audiences in legitimizing religious influencers. Audience responses, engagement, and trust function as symbolic forms of validation that sustain digital religious authority, while at the same time revealing ambivalence toward issues such as the simplification and commodification of religious messages. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of religious authority formation in digital contexts.

In addressing the research objectives, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the communication strategies employed by religious influencers, explains the mechanisms through which religious authority is constructed in digital media, and clarifies how audiences interpret and respond to such authority. Overall, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of digital da‘wah as a communicative practice that is both shaped by and shapes contemporary transformations in religion, media, and authority.

In conclusion, the role of religious influencers in contemporary da‘wah communication reflects broader shifts in religious life in the digital age. Recognizing the opportunities and challenges posed by these developments is essential for advancing scholarly discussions in communication and da‘wah studies, as well as for promoting responsible, credible, and ethically grounded religious communication in digital media.

References

- Abidin, C. (2021). Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies and visibility labours. *Cultural Science Journal*, 12(1), 77–103.
- Booth, A., Sutton, A., & Papaioannou, D. (2022). *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Bucher, T. (2021). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, H. A. (2021). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge.
- Campbell, H. A., & Evolvi, G. (2020). Contextualizing current digital religion research on emerging technologies. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2(1), 5–17.
- Cotter, C. R. (2023). Reconfiguring religious authority online. *Religion*, 53(2), 246–263.

- Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2023). Gendered visibility on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 9(1), 1–12.
- Hidayat, D. (2020). Dakwah digital dan perubahan pola keberagamaan generasi muda. *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam*, 10(1), 1–15.
- Hjarvard, S., & Lövheim, M. (2022). *Mediatization and religion*. De Gruyter.
- Krippendorff, K. (2021). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Rahmawati, I., & Fatimah, S. (2021). Media sosial dan transformasi dakwah Islam di Indonesia. *Jurnal Dakwah*, 22(2), 203–220.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339.