



Religious Authority Fragmentation on Social Media: Da'wah Communication among Digital Ustadz and Religious Influencers

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed da'wah communication and reshaped religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies. Digital platforms enable religious messages to circulate beyond traditional Islamic institutions, allowing digital ustadz and religious influencers to gain legitimacy through algorithmic visibility, audience engagement, and online popularity. This study analyzes the fragmentation of religious authority in social media and proposes a Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) as a framework for reconstructing ethical digital da'wah. Using a qualitative library research approach, this study synthesizes scholarly literature on digital da'wah, religious authority, prophetic communication, platform algorithms, and religious influencers. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings indicate that social media shifts religious legitimacy from institutional and epistemic authority toward algorithm-driven visibility, resulting in fragmented religious authority. To address this challenge, PDRAM integrates four interrelated dimensions: prophetic values (humanization, liberation, and transcendence) as the ethical foundation; religious legitimacy based on scholarly competence and integrity; digital communication competence for effective platform engagement; and social responsibility through accountable and inclusive da'wah practices. The interaction of these dimensions provides an operational framework for strengthening credible, adaptive, and ethically responsible digital religious authority in contemporary social media environments.

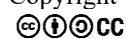
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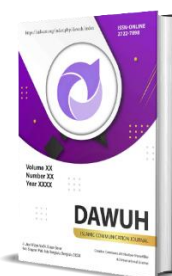


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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped da'wah communication by shifting the dissemination of Islamic messages from conventional religious settings to interactive and algorithm-driven social media platforms. As digital media expands public participation in producing and sharing religious content, da'wah is no longer dominated by formal religious institutions or traditionally recognized ulama but increasingly involves diverse digital actors. While this transformation broadens access to Islamic knowledge, it also changes the basis of religious legitimacy, creating competing sources of authority in the digital sphere. Consequently, the fragmentation of religious authority has emerged as one of the most significant challenges in contemporary digital da'wah communication (Budiantoro, 2019; Yusuf, 2024).

The fragmentation of religious authority has become increasingly visible as social media serves as the primary source of religious information for many Muslims. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X facilitate interactive communication through commenting features, live streaming, content sharing, and algorithmic recommendation systems that personalize information exposure. Unlike conventional da'wah, which primarily occurs through mosques, religious study circles, and Islamic educational institutions, digital da'wah operates within an ecosystem shaped by platform algorithms, participatory culture, and continuous audience interaction. Consequently, the effectiveness and visibility of da'wah messages are influenced not only by the quality of religious content but also by communicators' ability to adapt their messages to the dynamics of digital platforms (Anwar & Husna, 2024; Hasanah, 2024).

This development has given rise to a new phenomenon in the form of the emergence of digital ustadz (Islamic preachers) and religious influencers as actors in da'wah communication who gain significant influence through social media. Unlike traditional ulama (Islamic scholars) who build legitimacy based on their scientific chain of command, formal education, and recognition from religious institutions, digital ustadz and religious influencers tend to gain legitimacy through the number of followers, level of audience engagement, intensity of content production, and the ability to build a personal image in the digital space. This phenomenon indicates that religious authority is beginning to transform from epistemic-based legitimacy to digital visibility based legitimacy (Abdullah, 2024; Fakhruroji & Rozi, 2024).

On the one hand, this change broadens public access to religious literacy, as Islamic information can be obtained quickly and easily, reaching various age groups. Da'wah has become more inclusive and adapts to the characteristics of the digital generation, who tend to consume information in visual, audiovisual, and short video formats. Various studies have shown that social media can increase the effectiveness of da'wah messages through ease of access, flexibility of time, and high levels of interaction between communicators and audiences (Arifin, 2024; Mahmud, 2024; Budianto, 2024). Thus, digital media has become a strategic space for developing Islamic communication in the information society era.

However, this transformation also has significant consequences, particularly regarding changes in the structure of religious authority. The openness of social media allows anyone to produce religious content without the academic or institutional verification mechanisms that exist in conventional da'wah traditions. This situation has exposed society to a variety of sources of religious information, each with varying quality, methodology, and authority. In this context, religious legitimacy is no longer solely built through scholarly competence but is also influenced by digital popularity, interaction intensity, and algorithmic distribution. This phenomenon has given



rise to what this study calls the fragmentation of religious authority, a situation where religious reference sources become increasingly pluralistic, decentralized, and compete with each other in the digital space (Mubasyaroh, 2020; Kurniawan, 2024; Rahman, 2024).

The fragmentation of religious authority is further amplified by social media algorithms, which operate based on user engagement, interaction duration, and content consumption preferences. Algorithms do not select based on a communicator's scholarly authority, but rather on the likelihood of a content gaining public attention. As a result, religious messages packaged in an engaging, controversial, or emotional manner have a greater chance of widespread distribution than more in-depth but less visually appealing material. In this context, social media indirectly plays a role in shaping new structures of religious authority, heavily influenced by digital platform mechanisms (Anwar & Husna, 2024; Irawan, 2024).

The existence of religious influencers also demonstrates that religious authority in the digital era is increasingly influenced by personal branding practices, visual aesthetics, and communication strategies that adapt to the characteristics of social media. The delivery of religious messages no longer relies solely on rhetorical skill or the depth of Islamic argumentation, but also on the communicator's ability to build a self-image that is authentic, engaging, and relatable to the audience's daily lives. This phenomenon demonstrates that the digital space has brought together da'wah communication with the logic of the media industry, which places public attention as a key indicator of communication success. In this situation, da'wah practices are slowly undergoing a process of mediatization, where the form, style, and communication strategies increasingly adapt to the characteristics of the media used (Mustofa, 2024; Fealy & White, 2018).

On the other hand, this change presents a serious challenge to the authenticity of the interpretation of Islamic teachings. The ease of producing and distributing content has led to the digital space being filled with diverse religious interpretations, not all of which are based on adequate scientific methodology. This phenomenon has the potential to lead to a simplification of Islamic teachings, the spread of unverified information, and even polarization due to differing interpretations that develop through social media. Several studies have shown that algorithmic logic tends to amplify the spread of content that elicits a highly emotional response, making religious discussion spaces more susceptible to controversy than scientific argumentation. As a result, the public is often more familiar with the figure of the communicator than the scientific substance conveyed (Syam, 2024; Kurniawan, 2024; Nugraha, 2024).

This issue demonstrates that the transformation of da'wah communication is not only related to changes in media but also to changes in the structure of legitimacy in the religious life of Muslim communities. While in the previous era, legitimacy was established through institutional authority, scientific chains of narration, and recognition from the scientific community, in the social media era, legitimacy is increasingly influenced by the mechanisms of followers, likes, shares, views, and algorithmic recommendations. This shift demonstrates that religious authority is undergoing a process of both democratization and fragmentation. Democratization occurs because every individual has a relatively equal opportunity to convey religious messages, while fragmentation arises from the absence of a single central authority as the primary reference in the digital space (Mubasyaroh, 2020; Rahman, 2024; Irawan, 2024).

These changes have indeed attracted the attention of various researchers. Mubasyaroh (2020) emphasized that new media has changed the pattern of religious authority through a study of Gus Mus's da'wah on social media. Abdullah (2024) further demonstrated that Muslim

influencers play a crucial role in shaping authority in interpreting the Quran in the digital era. Other research also explains that digital platform algorithms have a significant influence on the distribution of da'wah messages and shape audience behavior in selecting sources of religious information (Anwar & Husna, 2024). Meanwhile, Lubis (2023), Ilham (2023), and Nurdin et al. (2024) developed the prophetic communication paradigm as a normative approach to addressing the development of digital communication. Meanwhile, Fakhruroji and Rozi (2024) mapped the typology of digital da'wah preachers in Indonesia, while Basit (2024) identified various digital da'wah strategies developing on social media.

Previous studies have substantially advanced the understanding of digital da'wah communication and the transformation of religious authority in social media. Existing research has examined the digitalization of da'wah media, the emergence of digital ustadz and religious influencers, the influence of social media algorithms on religious communication, and the application of prophetic communication as an ethical framework. These studies have provided important insights into how digital platforms reshape religious practices, authority, and audience engagement.

Despite these contributions, the existing literature remains conceptually fragmented. Most studies examine these issues independently, focusing either on digital da'wah media, religious influencers, platform algorithms, or prophetic communication without explaining how these elements interact to construct and transform religious authority in the digital environment. Consequently, previous research has primarily described the phenomenon of changing religious authority rather than providing an integrated theoretical framework capable of explaining the mechanisms through which religious authority is fragmented and subsequently reconstructed in contemporary digital da'wah.

To address this gap, this study proposes the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) as an integrated conceptual framework. Unlike previous studies, PDRAM systematically connects four interrelated dimensions religious authority fragmentation, algorithm-driven social media dynamics, digital da'wah communication, and prophetic communication values into a single explanatory model. By integrating these dimensions, the model explains not only why religious authority becomes fragmented in digital environments but also how prophetic values of humanization, liberation, and transcendence can reconstruct credible, ethical, and socially responsible digital religious authority. Therefore, PDRAM offers a distinct theoretical contribution by moving beyond descriptive analyses toward a conceptual model that can guide both future research and digital da'wah practices. A synthesis of previous studies and the positioning of this research is presented in Table 1.

Literature Review and Research Gap Analysis

Researcher	Research Focus	Key Findings	Research Gap
Mubasyaroh (2020)	Islamic Psychotherapy for Mental Health	Identified efficacy of Islamic psychotherapy (zikr, prayer) in reducing anxiety and depression among Muslim patients; highlighted holistic approach to well-being	Limited focus on modern psychological integration and broader diverse clinical samples beyond specific religious contexts
Abdullah (2024)	Digital Islamic Education in Higher Ed	Studied impact of online platforms on Islamic curriculum; noted increased engagement but challenges in digital literacy and consistent pedagogical quality	Lacks analysis on student perception of values-based learning in purely digital environments.
Fealy & White (2018)	Political Islam in Indonesia	Analyzed dynamics of Islamic parties and organizations in the post-Suharto era; identified trends of moderation and electoral strategies within democratic systems	Did not explore the role of digital activism and social media in shaping political narratives.
Anwar & Husna (2024)	Islamic Financial Inclusion	Evaluated factors influencing the adoption of Sharia-compliant fintech services; cited trust, religious adherence, and technological ease as critical	Ignored behavioral economics aspects and user resistance patterns in rural demographics.
Lubis (2023)	Halal Tourism Development	Investigated infrastructure and certification standards; reported significant economic growth potential and branding impact in developing regions	Primarily focused on economic aspects, neglecting the socio-cultural impact on local communities.
This Research (2024)	Integration of Islamic Principles and Mental Health (Synthesis)	Seeks to develop a modern, evidence-based model integrating traditional Islamic counseling with contemporary psychological practices for holistic mental wellness	Current research is fragmented; this study addresses the lack of a standardized, integrated framework for both secular and religious practitioners.

Based on this synthesis, this study presents a novelty in the development of the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) as a conceptual model explaining the reconstruction of digital religious authority through the integration of da'wah communication, platform algorithm logic, and prophetic communication paradigms. Unlike previous research, which focused more on describing phenomena, this study seeks to develop a theoretical model that positions the values of humanization, liberation, and transcendence as the ethical foundation for establishing the legitimacy of da'wah authority in the digital space. This model is expected to contribute to the development of da'wah communication theory and enrich the study of Islamic political communication regarding the dynamics of religious authority formation in the new media era.

Based on this, this study aims to analyze the fragmentation of religious authority in the phenomenon of digital ustadz and religious influencers on social media, identify communication factors influencing shifts in religious legitimacy, and reconstruct a model of digital da'wah authority based on prophetic communication that is relevant to the development of the Islamic communication ecosystem in the digital era.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative library research approach to develop a conceptual understanding of the fragmentation of religious authority in contemporary digital da'wah. Rather than statistically testing relationships between variables, the study synthesized scholarly literature to identify conceptual patterns, theoretical relationships, and emerging perspectives regarding digital religious authority. The literature corpus was systematically collected from Google Scholar, and accredited Indonesian journals (SINTA). The search employed combinations of keywords including "digital da'wah," "religious authority," "religious influencers," "digital ustadz," "social media algorithms," "prophetic communication," and "Islamic communication." Publications published between 2018 and 2025 were prioritized to capture recent developments in digital religion. The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and conference proceedings directly related to the research focus, while duplicate records, non-scholarly publications, opinion articles, news reports, and studies without explicit relevance to digital



religious authority were excluded. After the screening and eligibility process, 42 publications were selected as the final research corpus. Each source was evaluated based on its academic credibility, theoretical contribution, methodological rigor, and relevance to the conceptual development of the study before being included in the synthesis (Harahap et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2024; Suryani et al., 2024).

The conceptual analysis was organized around four analytically interconnected themes: (1) the transformation of religious authority, (2) digital ustadz and religious influencers, (3) da'wah communication within the social media ecosystem, and (4) prophetic communication as an ethical framework for reconstructing digital religious authority. These themes were not treated as independent categories but as sequential components of a single analytical framework. The transformation of religious authority constitutes the macro-level phenomenon generated by digital media. The emergence of digital ustadz and religious influencers represents the new actors who embody this transformation. Da'wah communication explains the communication processes through which these actors construct legitimacy within algorithm driven social media environments. Finally, prophetic communication provides the normative foundation for reconstructing fragmented religious authority into an ethical and credible model. The analytical integration of these four themes served as the conceptual basis for developing the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM).

The research data is secondary data sourced from national and international scientific articles that have been designated as the research corpus. All literature was selected based on its relevance to the research focus, encompassing studies on digital da'wah communication, prophetic communication, the transformation of religious authority, social media algorithms, Islamic communication ethics, typologies of digital preachers, and research on audience behavior in the digital space. Limiting data sources to predetermined references was intended to ensure the resulting conceptual synthesis maintains academic consistency and remains within the scope of da'wah communication and Islamic political communication studies.

Data collection was conducted using documentation techniques through several stages: literature inventory, identification of theme alignment, classification based on study focus, critical reading, recording important data, and grouping key concepts related to the research. Each article was analyzed not only based on its research findings but also considering theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and conceptual contributions to the development of digital da'wah communication studies.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data collection stage, all eligible publications were compiled into the research corpus. In the data reduction stage, each publication underwent open coding to identify concepts related to religious authority, digital da'wah, platform algorithms, religious influencers, and prophetic communication. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories, enabling the identification of recurring themes across the literature. During the data display stage, the categorized findings were organized into thematic matrices and conceptual relationship maps to facilitate comparison among previous studies and reveal patterns linking the four analytical themes. The conclusion drawing and verification stage involved interpreting these patterns through continuous comparison across data sources, re-examining the consistency of categories, and verifying conceptual relationships against the literature corpus. This iterative process produced the

Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM), representing the synthesized conceptual framework generated from the analyzed literature.

To enhance the credibility of the research findings, data validity was achieved through source triangulation by comparing various research findings with similar focuses, including those on da'wah communication, religious authority, social media, prophetic communication, and digital platform algorithms. This triangulation process enabled researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding and minimize interpretation bias that might arise from using only a single research perspective. Furthermore, the synthesis was conducted thematically so that each argument developed was the result of an integration of various scientific findings, not simply a summary of each literature.

Through these stages, this research not only mapped the development of digital da'wah communication studies but also developed a conceptual synthesis in the form of the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) as a reconstruction of religious authority that integrates scientific legitimacy, Islamic communication ethics, and the characteristics of digital media.

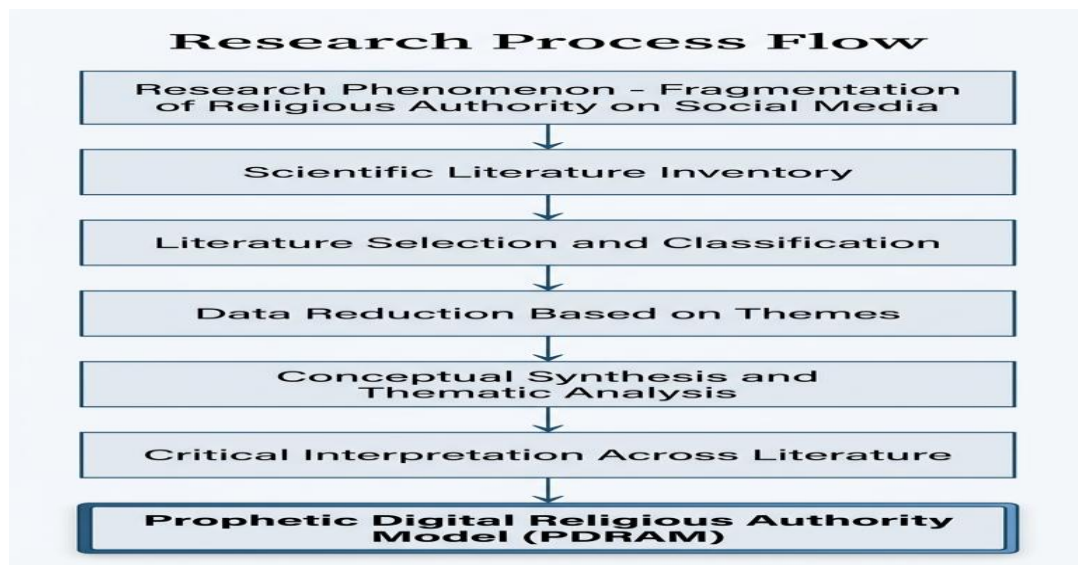
To improve methodological transparency, the research procedure is presented through complementary visual representations. Table 2 summarizes the overall research design, including the research approach, data sources, literature selection procedures, analytical techniques, and expected outputs. Figure 1 illustrates the sequential workflow from problem identification to conceptual model development, while Table 3 operationalizes each stage of the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive analysis by specifying the corresponding research activities and analytical outputs. Together, these three components demonstrate the logical integration of the research design, analytical procedures, and conceptual synthesis employed to construct the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM).

Research Methodology Framework

Component	Description
Research Approach	Qualitative
Research Type	Library Research
Study Paradigm	Islamic Political Communication and Da'wah Communication
Research Focus	Fragmentation of religious authority in digital ustaz and religious influencer phenomena
Data Sources	National and international scholarly articles according to research reference corpus
Data Collection Technique	Documentation study
Data Analysis Technique	Interactive Analysis Model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña
Data Validity	Source triangulation
Research Output	Conceptual synthesis and Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM)

Based on Table 2, this study employed a qualitative approach with library research methods, utilizing scientific literature as the primary data source. All research components were systematically

structured, from determining the research focus and documentation techniques as a data collection method to utilizing interactive analysis by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña as an analytical framework. This methodological sequence was aimed at producing a conceptual synthesis capable of explaining the dynamics of the fragmentation of religious authority and formulating the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) conceptual model as the primary research outcome. To clarify the research implementation stages, the research process is visualized in the form of a flowchart. This flowchart is intended to provide readers with an overview of the logical relationships between the research stages, from identifying the phenomenon to developing the conceptual model, which constitutes the research's novelty. The research flowchart is presented in Figure 1.



As shown in Figure 1, the research began with the identification of the phenomenon of fragmentation of religious authority in social media as the primary focus of the study. The next stage involved inventorying and selecting relevant literature before entering the data reduction process based on the research themes. The reduced data was then analyzed through conceptual synthesis to identify relationships between concepts, resulting in critical interpretations that served as the basis for the development of the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) as the research's theoretical contribution. To facilitate a more operational understanding of the data analysis process, each stage of the interactive analysis used in this study is outlined in research activities and their resulting outputs. This presentation demonstrates how the synthesis process was carried out step by step to produce the research conceptual model. Details of the data analysis stages are presented in Table 3.

Research Analysis Stages

Analysis Stage	Research Activities	Output
Data Collection	Identifying and compiling all relevant articles	Research literature corpus
Data Reduction	Selecting and grouping data based on research themes	Thematic categories
Data Display	Constructing narrative synthesis and inter-concept relationships	Conceptual mapping
Conclusion Drawing	Interpreting synthesis results and building conceptual model	PDRAM

Table 3 shows that the data analysis was conducted iteratively and interrelatedly. Each stage was not positioned as a stand-alone process, but rather took place interactively until a comprehensive conceptual synthesis was achieved. This approach enabled researchers to identify patterns of relationships between da'wah communication, social media algorithms, religious influencers, and the transformation of religious authority, resulting in a conceptual model with a strong argumentative basis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Religious Authority in the Social Media Ecosystem

The transformation of digital communication has fundamentally reconfigured the mechanisms through which religious authority is constructed, recognized, and contested in contemporary Muslim societies. This subsection examines how social media alters traditional patterns of religious legitimacy and contributes to the fragmentation of religious authority. The development of digital communication technology has brought fundamental changes to the way Muslim communities acquire, produce, and distribute religious knowledge. While previously, da'wah communication predominantly took place through formal religious institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), mosques, religious study groups (*masjid taklim*), and Islamic organizations, the development of social media has created a new communication space that is open, participatory, and no longer limited by space or time. This transformation has not only changed the medium for da'wah delivery but also reconstructed the relationship between communicator, message, media, and audience in the contemporary Islamic communication system (Budiantoro, 2019; Yusuf, 2024).

From a communication perspective, changes in media are always accompanied by changes in the structure of communication itself. Social media is not simply a means of distributing information but has evolved into a social space that forms new patterns of interaction between communicator and audience. Unlike conventional media, which tend to be one-way communication, social media enables two-way and even multidirectional communication through commenting features, live broadcasts, sharing, and user-generated content. These characteristics mean that audiences are no longer merely recipients of messages, but also act as prosumers of information, contributing to the dissemination and legitimacy of a da'wah message (Anwar & Husna, 2024).

This transformation in communication has significant implications for the construction of religious authority. In Islamic tradition, religious authority is fundamentally built through a long process involving scientific chain of transmission, intellectual capacity, moral integrity, and recognition from both the scientific community and society. A scholar gains legitimacy not solely through popularity, but through mastery of religious knowledge recognized by Islamic scholarly networks. Thus, traditional religious authority structures have a relatively structured and tiered legitimacy mechanism.

However, social media presents a different logic. Digital platforms do not recognize chain of transmission or institutional recognition as primary requirements for information distribution. Instead, platform algorithms emphasize user engagement, frequency of interaction, number of followers, watch time, and the popularity of content. Consequently, an individual can attain significant religious influence despite lacking the strong academic legitimacy of a scholar within classical Islamic scholarship (Rahman, 2024; Kurniawan, 2024).



This transformation indicates that religious legitimacy is no longer derived from a single source of authority but is increasingly negotiated through multiple forms of legitimacy. Epistemic authority is grounded in scholarly competence, mastery of Islamic sciences, and the transmission of knowledge through recognized sanad (chains of scholarship). Institutional authority derives from formal recognition by Islamic educational institutions, religious organizations, or councils of ulama, providing organizational legitimacy beyond individual expertise. Charismatic authority, by contrast, emerges from the communicator's personal appeal, emotional connection with audiences, and ability to inspire trust through communication style and public persona. In the digital environment, these traditional forms increasingly interact with algorithmic authority, whereby platform recommendation systems amplify content based on engagement indicators such as views, watch time, comments, and shares rather than scholarly credentials alone.

Algorithmic visibility does not replace epistemic or institutional authority directly; instead, it shapes public perceptions of legitimacy by repeatedly exposing certain religious figures to audiences. Frequent algorithmic recommendation increases familiarity, perceived credibility, and audience trust through continuous visibility, even when scholarly qualifications remain unequal among communicators. Consequently, religious legitimacy in social media becomes the product of interaction between scholarly competence, institutional recognition, charismatic appeal, and algorithmic amplification rather than any single dimension alone. This interaction explains why religious authority in digital environments becomes increasingly decentralized and fragmented (Anwar & Husna, 2024).

These changes are a logical consequence of the development of a digital communication culture that places public attention as a primary commodity. In the social media ecosystem, user attention has become a resource contested by all content producers, including Islamic communicators. Therefore, communication strategies are no longer solely focused on conveying Islamic content, but also on how to maximize the reach of messages through engaging titles, visual design, short videos, and editing techniques that align with the platform's algorithmic characteristics. This demonstrates that Islamic communication is beginning to interact with the logic of the digital media industry, which places a strong emphasis on visibility and audience engagement (Fealy & White, 2018).

On the other hand, these changes have also had a positive impact on the democratization of religious knowledge. People who previously had limited access to Islamic studies can now access a variety of Islamic materials through digital devices anytime and anywhere. Islamic preaching has become more inclusive, no longer limited by geographic location, space, or the time of religious study sessions. Various studies have shown that social media can expand the reach of Islamic preaching and increase public participation in religious activities through various digital platforms (Mahmud, 2024; Hasanah, 2024).

However, this democratization has also given rise to new problems in the form of an increasing plurality of religious reference sources. Every social media user has the freedom to choose figures who align with their preferences, ideology, and preferred communication style. This situation means that society no longer has a single, dominant center of authority, but is instead faced with a variety of Islamic preaching figures with widely varying approaches. In this context, the fragmentation of religious authority is beginning to take shape. Fragmentation is not always negative, but rather indicates that the structure of religious legitimacy is becoming increasingly

decentralized, resulting in a more complex process of building public trust than before (Mubasyaroh, 2020).

This fragmentation phenomenon is also closely related to changes in the characteristics of digital audiences. The younger generation tends to prefer short, visual, interactive, and easy-to-understand content over lengthy lectures with an academic approach. This shift in information consumption behavior is encouraging preachers to adapt their communication styles to remain relevant to the needs of digital audiences. As a result, da'wah communication has undergone a transformation from an expository model to a narrative, visual, and even entertainment (edutainment) model. This adaptation has indeed increased the reach of da'wah, but it also carries the risk of reducing substance if the communication orientation emphasizes popularity over the quality of the religious message (Yusuf, 2024; Budiantoro, 2019).

The above description shows that the transformation of digital media has not only changed the channels of da'wah communication but also shifted the mechanisms for establishing religious legitimacy. To clarify these changing characteristics, a comparison between conventional religious authority and digital religious authority is presented in Table 4.

CONVENTIONAL vs DIGITAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

	Aspect	Conventional Authority	Digital Authority
1	Legitimacy Basis	Scholarly chain of transmission and scientific capacity	Popularity, followers, and engagement
2	Communication Media	Mosques, Islamic boarding schools, religious gatherings	YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook
3	Recognition	Institutions and ulama community	Digital audience and platform algorithms
4	Message Distribution	Face-to-face and conventional media	Social media algorithms
5	Interaction	Limited	Interactive and real-time
6	Credibility Evaluation	Scholarly competence	Digital visibility
7	Main Challenges	Limited reach	Disinformation, polarization, authority fragmentation

Table 4 shows that the most fundamental change lies in the mechanisms by which legitimacy is established. While in conventional systems, legitimacy is built through academic processes and institutional recognition, in the digital space, legitimacy is more influenced by audience interaction and platform algorithmic mechanisms. This shift indicates that religious authority is no longer entirely hierarchical, but rather evolving into a more open and competitive system. This situation explains why social media has been able to give birth to many new preaching figures in a relatively short time, while also marking the beginning of the fragmentation of religious authority, which will be discussed in more depth in the next subsection on the phenomenon of digital ustadz and religious influencers.

Digital Ustadz and Religious Influencers as New Actors of Religious Authority

Category	Scholarly Background	Platform Strategy	Message Style	Primary Source of Legitimacy
Traditional Digital Ustadz	Formal Islamic education	Educational content	Textual and jurisprudential	Epistemic + Institutional
Popular Digital Preacher	Formal/non-formal	Short videos	Motivational	Charismatic
Religious Influencer	Mixed background	Lifestyle branding	Relatable storytelling	Algorithmic + Charismatic
Hybrid Religious Communicator	Strong scholarship + digital literacy	Multi-platform	Educational and interactive	Epistemic + Algorithmic

Based on these characteristics, digital religious communicators can be classified into four ideal types. The transformation of social media has not only changed the way da'wah messages are produced and distributed, but has also given rise to new actors acting as religious communicators. While in the conventional communication era, the position of ulama (Islamic scholars) was dominated by figures who gained legitimacy through formal education, a chain of scholars, and recognition from religious institutions, in the digital media ecosystem, a new group has emerged that gains influence through their ability to utilize communication technology, build rapport with their audiences, and effectively manage their digital identities. This group is referred to in various studies as digital ustadz (Islamic preachers) and religious influencers (Abdullah, 2024; Fakhruroji & Rozi, 2024).

This phenomenon demonstrates that the digital space has broadened the definition of da'wah communicators. Communicators are no longer understood solely as individuals with formal authority in the Islamic field, but also as figures capable of building public trust through intensive interactions on social media. In the context of communication, a communicator's legitimacy is shaped not only by source credibility but also by perceived intimacy, personal authenticity, and communication consistency perceived by the audience. These characteristics make social media a space that allows for the formation of parasocial relationships between communicators and their followers, so that trust is no longer built entirely through institutions, but rather through everyday communication experiences.

Unlike traditional da'wah communication patterns, which tend to be formal, communication fostered by digital preachers emphasizes dialogic, personal, and contextual aspects. The use of simple language, engaging visuals, short videos, and direct interaction through comment sections or live broadcasts make communication feel closer to the audience's lived experiences. This strategy has been proven to increase user engagement and expand the reach of da'wah to community groups previously relatively difficult to reach with conventional da'wah models (Budiantoro, 2019; Arifin, 2024).

The phenomenon of religious influencers also demonstrates that da'wah practices are beginning to be influenced by the logic of personal branding. A preacher's identity on social media is constructed not only through sermon material, but also through dress style, visual design, communication patterns, consistency of posts, and even personal life narratives shared with the public. From a digital communication perspective, personal branding serves to establish

differentiation while creating a perception of authenticity that strengthens the emotional connection between communicator and audience. This explains why digital preachers often have a highly loyal following despite coming from diverse religious educational backgrounds (Pradana & Sari, 2024).

At the same time, social media also demonstrates a diversification in the typology of digital preachers. Not all digital ustadz (Islamic preachers) share the same characteristics. Some maintain a scholarly literacy-based approach to preaching, while others prioritize motivational approaches, Islamic lifestyles, family counseling, Islamic economics, and even religiously nuanced entertainment content. This variation demonstrates that the digital space has expanded the forms of preaching communication to suit the needs and preferences of an increasingly heterogeneous audience. Research on the typology of digital preachers in Indonesia indicates that this diversity is a consequence of the development of social media as a communication space that is highly adaptive to changing user behavior (Fakhrurroji & Rozi, 2024).

On the other hand, the presence of religious influencers also presents challenges to religious authority structures. High popularity does not always equate to deep scholarly competence. In some cases, figures with large followings gain stronger public legitimacy than clerics with high academic credentials but less social media presence. This situation demonstrates that digital communities often use popularity as a proxy for credibility, even though the two aspects are not always conceptually linearly related. This phenomenon is one factor accelerating the fragmentation of religious authority, as society obtains religious references from a wide variety of figures with varying levels of competence (Rahman, 2024).

Beyond the issue of legitimacy, the dynamics of digital communication also demonstrate that a religious influencer's success is heavily influenced by their ability to interpret the characteristics of the platform's algorithm. The content they produce takes into account not only religious content but also upload time, video duration, hashtag usage, visual quality, and editing techniques that align with the algorithm's preferences. Thus, the strategy for da'wah communication in the digital space has expanded from simply compiling material to managing a platform-based communication ecosystem. This shift demonstrates that digital competence has become an integral part of contemporary da'wah communication practices (Basit, 2024; Mahmud, 2024).

However, not all consequences of this transformation are negative. The presence of digital preachers also opens up significant opportunities for the development of Islamic literacy, particularly among the younger generation, who frequently use social media. Creatively packaged da'wah content can increase public access to religious knowledge and expand the space for Islamic discussion on various contemporary issues. From the perspective of da'wah communication, social media can be understood as a strategic instrument that strengthens the function of preaching as long as its use remains oriented towards the ethical values of Islamic communication and the moral responsibility of the communicator (Ilham, 2023; Nurdin et al., 2024).

Based on the results of a synthesis of various studies, the author argues that the emergence of digital ustadz and religious influencers cannot be understood simply as a change in da'wah actors, but rather as a paradigm shift in the formation of legitimacy in religious communication. Authority in the digital era is increasingly shaped through the interaction between the credibility of the communicator, audience acceptance, and the logic of the platform's algorithms. Therefore, the primary issue is not the existence of religious influencers per se, but rather how digital communication mechanisms can maintain a balance between popularity, scholarly competence, and ethical responsibility in conveying Islamic messages. This synthesis forms the basis for subsequent

discussions on the role of social media algorithms as a structural factor accelerating the fragmentation of religious authority and simultaneously determining the distribution patterns of da'wah messages in the digital space.

Social Media Algorithms and the Fragmentation of Religious Authority

The literature consistently suggests that social media algorithms constitute an important mediating factor in the dissemination of digital da'wah content. Unlike conventional media, where editorial gatekeeping determines information visibility, digital platforms prioritize content through recommendation systems that consider user engagement, viewing duration, interaction patterns, and personalization mechanisms. Consequently, the visibility of religious messages may be influenced not only by their theological substance but also by platform-specific indicators of audience engagement. Because this study employs library research rather than platform analytics, these algorithmic effects are inferred from previous platform studies rather than empirically measured. Therefore, the present analysis should be understood as a conceptual interpretation of how existing scholarship explains the relationship between platform algorithms and the transformation of religious authority (Anwar & Husna, 2024).

In the context of Islamic communication, algorithms present both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, they enable Islamic messages to reach a wider audience quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, these mechanisms encourage competition among content producers for greater exposure. As a result, some Islamic content is packaged in a more sensational, provocative, or emotional manner to be more easily recommended by the platform system (Fealy & White, 2018).

This phenomenon has resulted in the fragmentation of religious authority. Audiences obtain religious information from a variety of accounts recommended by algorithms based on their individual preferences. This situation has led to an increasingly segmented da'wah space, so that society no longer shares a common religious reference. Ultimately, algorithms function not only as information distribution systems but also as actors influencing the formation of the legitimacy of da'wah communicators (Rahman, 2024).

Furthermore, algorithms also create the echo chamber phenomenon, a situation where users more frequently receive information that aligns with their own preferences and views. In the context of digital da'wah, this situation has the potential to narrow the space for dialogue, intensify polarization, and reduce openness to differing religious views. Therefore, da'wah communication in the digital era requires an approach that is not only technically effective but also oriented toward Islamic communication ethics so that the message conveyed continues to prioritize the values of unity and well-being (Hasan, 2024; Ilham, 2023).

Prophetic Communication as a Reconstruction of Digital Religious Authority

The phenomenon of fragmentation of religious authority on social media demonstrates that the effectiveness of Islamic missionary communication is no longer solely measured by the breadth of audience reach or the high level of digital interaction. Islamic missionary communication must also maintain scientific legitimacy, moral integrity, and social responsibility amidst the evolving logic of platform algorithms. Therefore, a communication paradigm is needed that integrates the effectiveness of digital media with the core values of Islamic teachings. One relevant approach is

prophetic communication, which places prophetic values as the foundation of the Islamic missionary communication process (Lubis, 2023; Harahap et al., 2023).

Prophetic communication conceptualizes communication as an ethical process of social transformation rather than merely transmitting religious information. The paradigm consists of three operational values: humanization, liberation, and transcendence that provide practical guidance for digital da'wah communication. Humanization requires digital da'wah content to respect human dignity by promoting empathy, inclusiveness, dialogue, and educational communication while avoiding hate speech, humiliation, or discriminatory narratives. In audience interaction, this value encourages respectful engagement with diverse opinions and constructive online discussion. Liberation directs communicators to produce content that empowers communities by addressing misinformation, religious extremism, digital manipulation, social injustice, and other forms of oppression. Within digital platforms, liberation emphasizes critical digital literacy and the responsible use of communication technologies to strengthen public understanding rather than exploit audience emotions for popularity. Transcendence positions all digital communication activities as acts of worship grounded in sincerity, accountability, and ethical responsibility before God. This value guides communicators to prioritize the authenticity of Islamic teachings, maintain scholarly integrity, verify information before publication, and avoid algorithm-driven practices that compromise religious ethics for online visibility (Ilham, 2023; Nurdin et al., 2024). Through the integration of these three values, prophetic communication provides an operational ethical framework for producing credible digital da'wah content, fostering responsible audience engagement, and encouraging ethical participation within algorithm-driven social media environments.

In the context of social media, these three values are highly relevant. Humanization requires da'wah communicators to build polite, dialogical interactions and respect diverse views. Liberation encourages digital da'wah to become a means of increasing religious literacy and preventing the spread of hoaxes, hate speech, and extremism. Meanwhile, transcendence reminds us that the primary goal of da'wah is not popularity or economic gain, but rather the dissemination of Islamic values that benefit society (Hasan, 2024; Basit, 2024).

The prophetic communication paradigm also provides a new perspective on the legitimacy of religious authority in the digital age. While social media tends to build legitimacy through popularity indicators, prophetic communication restores legitimacy to three main elements: scientific competence, moral integrity, and quality of communication. These three elements complement each other, so that a preacher is trusted not only because of the number of followers, but also because of the intellectual capacity and exemplary behavior they demonstrate in the digital space.

Thus, the reconstruction of religious authority in the social media era requires an integration of adaptability to digital technology and consistency with prophetic values. This integration forms the basis for the development of a conceptual model, referred to in this study as the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM). Based on a synthesis of various literature on prophetic communication, digital preaching communication, the transformation of religious authority, and the characteristics of social media, this study developed the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM). This model explains that the legitimacy of digital religious authority is built through the integration of scientific competence, prophetic communication ethics, and adaptability to the digital media ecosystem. This conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.

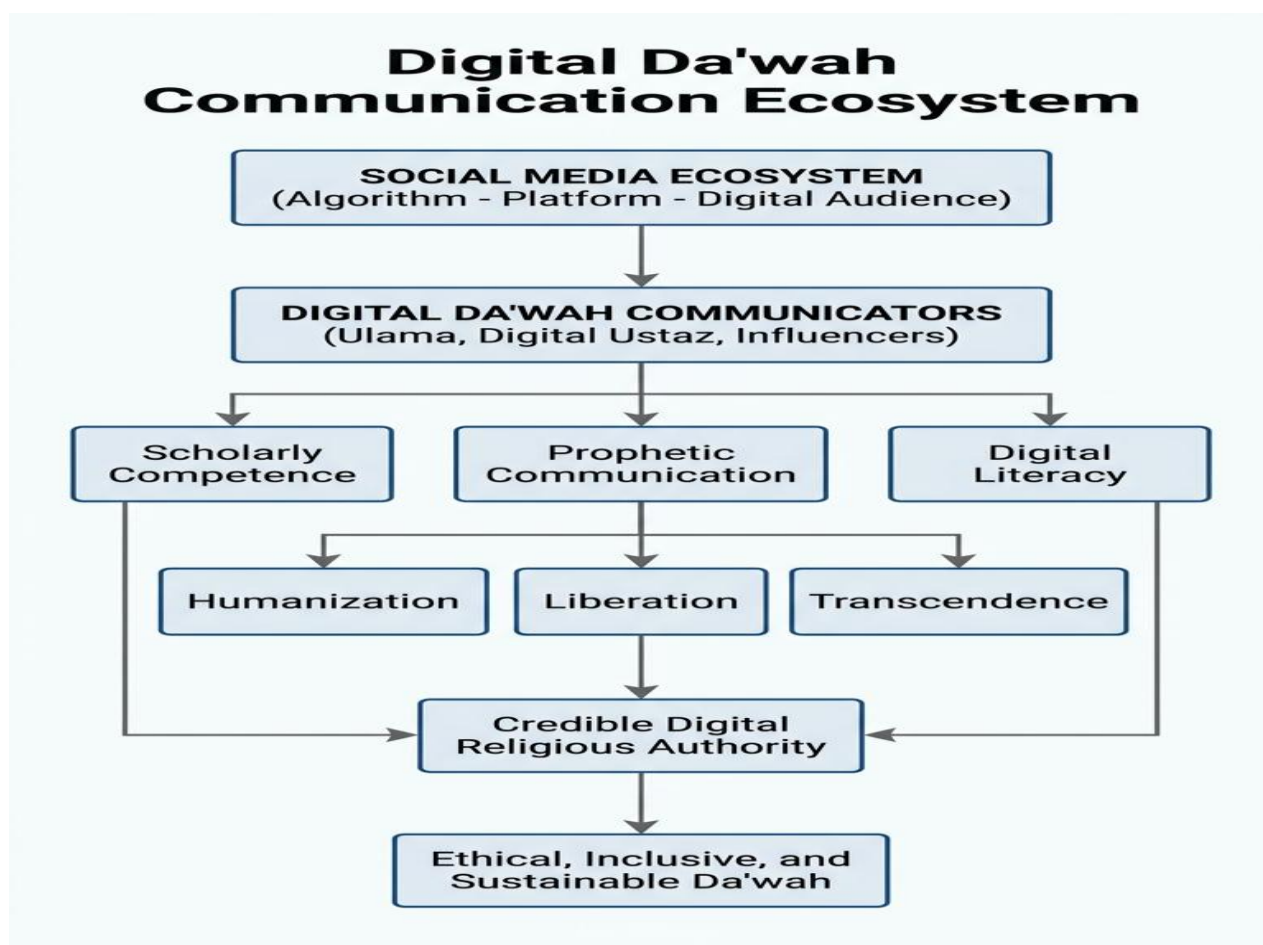


Figure 2 shows that digital religious authority is not formed solely by technological mastery or high popularity on social media. Instead, sustainable legitimacy emerges through the interaction between scientific competence, digital literacy, and the implementation of prophetic communication values. This model positions algorithms and social media as communication instruments, not as the primary determinants of religious legitimacy. Thus, the success of digital da'wah is measured not only by the number of views or followers, but also by the communicator's ability to build public trust through ethical, educational, and welfare-oriented communication.

This research produced the Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) as a conceptual synthesis that integrates theories of da'wah communication, prophetic communication, and the transformation of religious authority in social media. This model offers the perspective that the legitimacy of digital da'wah communicators needs to be built through three main dimensions: scientific competence, prophetic communication ethics, and digital media literacy. These three dimensions serve as the foundation for addressing the fragmentation of religious authority without ignoring the dynamics of communication technology. Therefore, PDRAM can be positioned as a conceptual model that enriches the study of Islamic political communication while providing a normative framework for digital da'wah practices in the social media era.

CONCLUSION

This study has several limitations due to its reliance on a qualitative library research approach. The proposed Prophetic Digital Religious Authority Model (PDRAM) was developed through a conceptual synthesis of existing literature rather than empirical observation of social media users, digital ustadz, religious influencers, or platform dynamics. Consequently, the relationships among the model's components have not yet been empirically validated across different digital communication contexts.

Future research should therefore focus on empirically testing and refining PDRAM through diverse methodological approaches. Digital ethnography and netnography may be employed to examine how digital religious authority is constructed and negotiated within online communities. Audience reception studies can investigate how users perceive and evaluate the legitimacy of digital ustadz and religious influencers in relation to scholarly competence, platform visibility, and prophetic ethics. Content analysis may be used to identify how the values of humanization, liberation, and transcendence are represented in digital da'wah content across different platforms. Furthermore, comparative case studies involving platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, as well as comparisons among different types of digital religious communicators, would provide deeper insights into how platform characteristics shape religious authority. Such empirical investigations would not only validate the proposed model but also refine its conceptual dimensions, expand its theoretical applicability, and strengthen its contribution to future studies on digital da'wah communication and religious authority.

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