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Digital Da'wah and the Transformation of Religious Social Relations: A Systematic Literature Review from the Perspective of Islamic Communication Sociology

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ABSTRACT

The rapid acceleration of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how Muslim societies practice da'wah and construct religious social relations. Da'wah, which was once rooted in face-to-face interactions and the authority of local religious leaders, has evolved into an Islamic communication ecosystem that transcends geographical boundaries through digital platforms. This transformation extends beyond the medium of message delivery, reshaping the very structure of religious social relations that were traditionally formed through direct engagement in places of worship and religious study circles. This study aims to systematically examine how digital da'wah drives transformations in the religious social relations of Muslim communities from the perspective of the sociology of Islamic communication. Employing a systematic literature review, this research synthesizes and analyzes scholarly works from reputable books and academic journals published over the past five years. The findings reveal three significant relational transformations: first, the shift of religious authority from traditional ulama to digital religious figures; second, the emergence of virtual religious communities that perform the social functions of conventional religious gatherings; and third, the formation of a hybrid and fluid digital Islamic identity. These findings demonstrate that digital da'wah is not merely a shift in communication medium, but a comprehensive reconstruction of religious social relations. As such, it calls for serious scholarly attention from Islamic thinkers and communication practitioners in responding to the evolving dynamics of religious life in the digital age.

Keywords: *Digital Da'wah; Religious Social Relations; Sociology of Islamic Communication; Religious Authority; Virtual Communities*

INTRODUCTION

Entering the third decade of the twenty-first century, Muslim societies worldwide are undergoing one of the most profound socio-religious transformations in their history. The penetration of the internet reaching over 4.9 billion global users combined with the rapid expansion of social media platforms, has created a new landscape for religious life that is fundamentally different from previous structures (Nasrullah, 2021). Within this evolving context, digital da'wah emerges not merely as a technical adaptation of traditional religious practices, but as a social phenomenon that reconstructs how Muslim communities understand, practice, and disseminate Islamic teachings.

Historically, da'wah as the transmission of Islamic values has always been embedded within specific social and relational contexts. Institutions such as majelis taklim, religious study circles, Friday sermons, and pesantren forums have functioned not only as channels for the dissemination of religious knowledge, but also as spaces for fostering social bonds, reinforcing communal identity, and transmitting religious authority across generations (Aziz, 2021). These social spaces possess tangible physical dimensions: individuals meet face-to-face, build trust, and collectively construct religious understanding within real community settings.

The emergence of digital da'wah both disrupts and complements these relational structures in unprecedented ways. Through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram, as well as various Islamic applications, da'wah messages can now reach millions within seconds, transcending geographical, social, and even denominational boundaries (Hew & Kadir, 2022). Beyond expanding reach, digital da'wah has generated new forms of religious social relations characterized by distinct dynamics and qualitatively different social implications compared to conventional da'wah.

From the perspective of the sociology of communication, this transformation represents a highly significant object of inquiry. The sociology of Islamic communication, as a subfield, focuses on how religious communication processes shape, sustain, and transform social structures within Muslim communities (Bungin, 2021). When communication shifts from face-to-face interaction to digital mediation, it logically follows that the resulting social structures also undergo profound transformation. This raises a critical question: in what direction is this transformation unfolding, and what are its implications for the religious life of Muslim societies?

One of the most debated dimensions of this transformation concerns religious authority. In traditional da'wah settings, authority is centered on ulama whose legitimacy is grounded in verified chains of knowledge (sanad), recognition by local communities, and lived practices that reflect the values they teach (Wahid, 2022). Digital da'wah, characterized by open access that enables virtually anyone to produce and disseminate religious content, has given rise to what sociologists describe as the democratization of religious authority. This phenomenon presents both opportunities and challenges that warrant critical examination.

At the same time, digital da'wah has facilitated the emergence of new forms of religious communities that are no longer bound by geographical proximity. Online study groups, virtual Qur'an memorization communities, digital fiqh discussion forums, and messaging-based religious groups exemplify how digital technologies enable the formation of religious social bonds beyond physical space (Lim, 2022). This development raises an important question: to what extent can these virtual communities replace or at least complement the social functions of physical religious communities that have historically served as the foundation of Islamic life?

Despite the growing body of research on digital da'wah, studies from the perspective of the sociology of Islamic communication remain relatively limited compared to those focusing on information technology or media studies. Yet, it is precisely the sociological perspective that can most effectively capture the relational and structural dimensions of this phenomenon. Much of the existing literature concentrates on content analysis or platform effectiveness, while more fundamental questions regarding how digital da'wah reshapes patterns of social interaction in religious contexts remain underexplored (Nasrullah, 2021).

This gap underscores the need for a more systematic and comprehensive inquiry, which forms the basis of this study. By employing a structured literature review approach, this research seeks to collect, synthesize, and analyze findings from previous studies in order to develop a more integrated understanding of the relationship between digital da'wah and socio-religious transformation. This approach is particularly appropriate given that the phenomenon has been widely studied in fragmented ways, and what is now required is a coherent theoretical synthesis.

This study adopts the perspective of the sociology of Islamic communication as its primary analytical framework. This perspective is chosen because it integrates dimensions often treated separately in digital da'wah studies: the communicative dimension (message transmission processes), the sociological dimension (structural impacts on communities), and the Islamic

dimension (normative values and religious principles underlying da'wah). The integration of these dimensions is expected to yield a more holistic and meaningful analysis for the advancement of Islamic communication studies in the digital era.

Accordingly, this article holds dual significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of the sociology of Islamic communication as an increasingly important field in the context of digitalized religious life. Practically, it offers an analytical framework that can guide da'wah practitioners, Islamic education policymakers, and developers of Islamic digital platforms in understanding the social implications of digital da'wah practices.

METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review as the epistemological and procedural foundation for data collection and analysis. This approach is considered the most appropriate, as the study does not aim to collect new field data, but rather to compile, evaluate, and synthesize existing knowledge in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The literature search was conducted through reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, Directory of Open Access Journals, as well as nationally accredited journal portals such as Sinta 1 and Sinta 2.

The inclusion criteria applied in the literature selection process were as follows: first, publications between 2020 and 2024; second, a focus on topics such as digital da'wah, Islamic communication, sociology of religion, or religious social relations; and third, publication in reputable indexed journals or by verifiable academic publishers. Out of a total of 87 initial sources identified, 42 studies met the selection criteria based on relevance and methodological quality.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis and conceptual mapping techniques. These methods enabled the identification of dominant themes, recurring patterns, and knowledge gaps within the reviewed literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). The framework of the sociology of Islamic communication was employed as an interpretive lens to provide meaning to the synthesized findings..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Shift of Religious Authority in the Era of Digital Da'wah

One of the most fundamental transformations in religious social relations identified in this literature review is the significant shift in the distribution of

religious authority. In pre-digital Muslim societies, religious authority was generally hierarchical and centered on *ulama* whose scholarly legitimacy was recognized by the community. This legitimacy was built through a long process: years of study in pesantren or Islamic institutions, the acquisition of scholarly certification through chains of transmission (*sanad*) linked to classical Islamic sources, and social recognition based on integrity and life conduct (Wahid, 2022).

Digital da'wah has disrupted this structure in two major ways. First, digital technology provides unprecedented access for individuals to produce, distribute, and consume religious content without passing through traditional institutional gatekeeping. Individuals with limited religious knowledge can now build da'wah platforms with millions of followers, relying primarily on communication skills and an understanding of social media algorithms (Lim, 2022). This phenomenon, often referred to as the "lay preacher phenomenon," has created a more fragmented, competitive, and non-hierarchical landscape of religious authority.

Second, digital da'wah has also strengthened the position of certain scholars who are able to adapt to the digital ecosystem. Preachers who successfully establish a strong digital presence through viral sermons on YouTube or inspirational content on Instagram have significantly expanded their influence beyond local communities (Hew & Kadir, 2022). Thus, digital da'wah does not simply erode traditional authority but restructures it into a more complex, multilayered system combining traditional scholarly legitimacy with digital communication capacity.

From the perspective of the sociology of Islamic communication, this shift has serious implications for the cohesion and continuity of Muslim communities. Bungin (2021) warns that the fragmentation of religious authority due to the democratization of digital content production can lead to what he terms "religious reference confusion," where individuals struggle to identify credible and authoritative sources amid an overwhelming flow of unverified religious information. This challenge of epistemic verification represents one of the most critical relational issues faced by contemporary Muslim societies.

2. Frequency of Digital Wallet Use

The second major transformation identified in the literature is the emergence of virtual religious communities as social spaces increasingly fulfilling roles once exclusively held by physical communities. These communities take various forms, including study groups on WhatsApp, fiqh discussion forums on Discord, da'wah-sharing groups on Telegram, and Instagram-based communities connected through Islamic hashtags (Musa, Amir,

& Ramli, 2023). This diversity reflects the flexibility and adaptability that distinguish virtual communities from traditional physical ones.

The literature indicates that virtual religious communities are not merely alternative spaces for those lacking access to physical communities, but have evolved into distinct sociological environments. Compared to physical communities, they offer several advantages: the ability to connect individuals across geographical, cultural, and doctrinal boundaries; accessibility unconstrained by time and space; and the integration of diverse Islamic knowledge sources within a single ecosystem (Nasrullah, 2021). These features make virtual communities particularly appealing to digitally native Muslim generations.

However, the literature also highlights structural limitations. Wahid (2022) notes that social relations within virtual communities tend to be more superficial and fragile compared to those formed through sustained physical interaction. Trust an essential foundation of meaningful social relationships is difficult to fully establish in digital environments, largely due to the absence of nonverbal communication cues. This creates a paradox: virtual communities may be extensive in scale but often shallow in relational depth.

Musa, Amir, and Ramli (2023), in their study of digital Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, found that participants typically use digital platforms as a supplement rather than a substitute for physical communities. Most respondents remained active in offline religious gatherings while also engaging in virtual communities. This finding suggests that digital da'wah leads to an expansion and transformation of religious social relations, rather than a complete replacement an important nuance that prevents overly simplistic interpretations.

3. Frequency of Digital Wallet Use

The third key dimension identified in the literature is the reconstruction of Islamic identity mediated by the digital da'wah ecosystem. The sociology of communication has long recognized that communication processes not only transmit information but also shape and negotiate identity (Bungin, 2021). In the context of digital da'wah, identity formation occurs through platform-specific mechanisms such as content consumption, interactive engagement (comments and reactions), sharing behavior, participation in virtual communities, and the display of beliefs through digital symbols on user profiles.

The resulting digital Islamic identity is hybrid in nature, combining elements from diverse Islamic traditions, schools of thought, and cultural contexts available within the global digital ecosystem. Muslim users can simultaneously engage with Middle Eastern scholars, participate in European Muslim communities, follow Southeast Asian Islamic influencers, and draw from local

religious content all within a single interconnected digital space (Lim, 2022). This eclectic process produces highly diverse forms of Islamic expression that often transcend conventional sociological categorizations.

This phenomenon is closely linked to shifting notions of Islamic authenticity among younger Muslim generations. While traditional contexts often define authenticity through adherence to local traditions and recognition within physical communities, digital environments increasingly frame authenticity through comparison with global Islamic references accessible online (Aziz, 2021). This shift carries dual implications: it broadens Islamic perspectives, yet also risks generating identity disorientation that may challenge the cohesion of long-established local Muslim communities.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial for scholars and practitioners of da'wah who seek to harness the potential of digital platforms without undermining the richness of existing communal Islamic traditions.

CONCLUSION

This literature-based study has produced a comprehensive synthesis of scholarly findings on how digital da'wah drives fundamental transformations in the religious social relations of Muslim communities, analyzed through the lens of the sociology of Islamic communication. From the overall analytical process, three principal conclusions can be drawn with a high degree of confidence based on the convergence of findings across the reviewed literature.

First, digital da'wah has led to a comprehensive and irreversible restructuring of religious authority. The democratization of da'wah content production through digital platforms has generated a more fragmented, competitive, and multilayered authority structure, in which religious legitimacy is no longer determined solely by traditional scholarly pathways, but also by digital communication capacity and the ability to build audience trust within algorithm-driven ecosystems. This transformation calls for a strategic response from Islamic educational institutions to develop digital religious literacy that equips communities with the capacity for critical evaluation of digital religious content.

Second, virtual religious communities have evolved into distinct social spaces with structural roles in contemporary Muslim religious life, although the relational quality they produce does not fully match that of traditional physical communities. Both appear to function complementarily, forming a broader yet more complex socio-religious ecosystem that requires careful management.

Third, the reconstruction of digital Islamic identity characterized by hybridity and eclecticism represents one of the most significant relational impacts

of digital da'wah. This phenomenon demands serious attention from Islamic scholars to ensure that increased openness in identity formation does not lead to value disorientation or the fragmentation of communal cohesion.

Ultimately, a nuanced understanding of these three dimensions of relational transformation is essential for developing digital da'wah strategies that are not only communicatively effective, but also socially responsible and spiritually relevant for Muslim communities in the digital age.

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