

Algorithms, Religious Authority, and Digital Da'wah: A Qualitative Study of Social Media in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped the landscape of Islamic da'wah in Indonesia, with algorithms playing an increasingly important role in the circulation of religious content. This exploratory qualitative study examines how platform algorithms influence the distribution of digital da'wah, how religious authority is renegotiated in online environments, and how Muslim users respond to algorithm-mediated religious messages. The study combines digital ethnography, social media content analysis, and an exploratory questionnaire involving seven active young social media users. The findings show that algorithms significantly shape the visibility of da'wah content and influence everyday encounters with religious messages. The study also identifies an authority paradox: although users continue to value preachers with strong religious education, the content they encounter most frequently is often determined by algorithmic visibility rather than scholarly depth. This situation produces a hybrid form of religious authority in which scholarship, communicative style, and platform performance increasingly intersect. Theoretically, this article contributes to digital religion studies by linking algorithmic mediation with the transformation of religious authority and audience reception. In practice, it highlights the need for credible digital da'wah that integrates scholarly rigor, Islamic communication ethics, and digital literacy in algorithm-driven environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, digital communication technology has significantly changed how Indonesian Muslims access, interpret, and circulate religious messages. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are no longer merely spaces of entertainment; they have become important arenas for Islamic da'wah, discussion, and identity formation. In this environment, the circulation of da'wah is shaped not only by the

message and the preacher but also by platform architecture, especially algorithms that determine visibility, repetition, and reach [1]–[4].

One important consequence of this shift is a change in the basis of religious authority. Preachers who once gained recognition primarily through institutional training, sanad, and long-term study now compete in a digital environment where visibility is strongly influenced by short-form content, emotional delivery, and engagement metrics. As a result, authority in digital da'wah is increasingly negotiated between scholarly legitimacy and platform performance [2], [4], [14], [17], [18]. At the same time, the format of social media communication—through reels, short videos, and live streaming—encourages concise, visually appealing, and emotionally resonant messages. While this expands access to religious content, it also creates risks of simplification, decontextualization, and misinformation [5], [12], [13].

Although previous studies have discussed social media as a medium of da'wah, most focus on communication strategy, audience reach, or content effectiveness. Few studies examine, within a single framework, how algorithms shape the distribution of da'wah, how that distribution affects religious authority, and how Muslim users evaluate and respond to the religious messages they encounter online. This article addresses that gap by connecting platform logic, authority transformation, and audience response in the context of contemporary Indonesian digital Islam [4]–[6], [22], [23].

This issue is especially significant in Indonesia because religious learning increasingly occurs through everyday digital encounters. Young Muslims do not only learn from mosques, pesantren, or formal religious institutions, but also from recommended content across entertainment, lifestyle, and political posts. In such hybrid spaces, the question of algorithmic mediation becomes central because platform feeds influence not only what users see, but also what they may trust, repeat, and share [4], [9], [12], [21].

This study has three objectives. First, it examines how social media algorithms influence the distribution of digital da'wah. Second, it analyzes how religious authority is renegotiated in algorithm-driven environments. Third, it explores how Muslim users respond to and evaluate digital da'wah content. In doing so, the article contributes empirically by documenting user perceptions of algorithmic influence and credibility, conceptually by linking algorithmic mediation with the sociology of religious authority, and practically by highlighting the importance of digital literacy, source transparency, and platform-sensitive communication for credible contemporary da'wah [4]–[6], [16], [23], [24].

The analysis is informed by an integrated theoretical lens consisting of mediatization of religion, digital religion, Weberian authority, and uses and gratifications. Mediatization explains how religious communication increasingly adapts to media logic; digital religion highlights the emergence of hybrid religious spaces in online environments; Weberian authority helps explain the coexistence of institutional and performative forms of legitimacy; and uses and gratifications emphasize that users actively seek religious content while remaining influenced by algorithmic recommendation systems [7]–[10]. Together, these perspectives show that digital da'wah must be understood not only as message transmission, but also as a process shaped by visibility, legitimacy, and audience evaluation [22], [25].

Accordingly, this article addresses three questions: (1) how do social media algorithms influence the distribution of digital da'wah? (2) how is religious authority renegotiated in the digital ecosystem? and (3) how do Muslim communities respond to da'wah mediated by algorithmic logic? By answering these questions, this study offers an integrated account of algorithmic mediation, authority transformation, and audience response in Indonesian digital da'wah [9], [10], [22]–[25].



Figure 1. Research framework

2. METHOD

This study employs an exploratory qualitative design that combines digital ethnography, social media content analysis, and a small-scale questionnaire. This design was chosen because digital da'wah is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by platform technology, religious communication, audience interpretation, and the negotiation of authority. The purpose of the questionnaire is not statistical generalization, but to enrich qualitative interpretation by capturing how active users describe their everyday encounters with digital da'wah [10], [11].

The study focuses on three platforms: Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These platforms were selected because they are among the most prominent spaces for contemporary digital da'wah in Indonesia and represent different but interconnected modes of circulation, especially short-form video, semi-long-form explanation, and interactive engagement [12], [13], [19], [20]. The digital ethnography was conducted over approximately three months. During this period, the researcher observed selected da'wah accounts and documented recurring patterns in content presentation, audience interaction, and algorithm-sensitive communication practices [11].

The da'wah accounts were selected purposively using three criteria. First, the accounts had to be active and publicly accessible during the observation period. Second, they had to regularly post religious content related to Islamic advice, preaching, or discussion. Third, they had to demonstrate visible audience interaction, such as comments, shares, reposts, likes, or recurring engagement indicators. These criteria were used to ensure that the selected accounts were relevant to the study's concern with algorithmic visibility, authority performance, and audience response [4], [9], [14].

The content analysis covered short videos, reels, live streams, captions, and comment sections, reflecting three central themes: algorithmic distribution, religious authority, and audience response. During observation, the researcher recorded platform features such as clip length, caption style, visual editing, audience prompts, comment interaction, use of hashtags, and topical framing. These elements were treated as part of the communicative field because they help explain how da'wah content is made visible and appealing within algorithm-driven environments.

In parallel, an exploratory questionnaire was distributed to seven active social media users aged 19–26 years. The respondents were selected purposively because they belong to a digitally active age group and regularly encounter da'wah content in daily platform use. The small number of respondents is methodologically appropriate because this study is exploratory and depth-focused rather than population-based. In qualitative inquiry, a limited number of information-rich respondents can be sufficient when the aim is to identify recurring patterns of perception, interpretation, and verification rather than to produce statistical representation. In this study, the seven respondents were treated as a focused user group whose responses helped clarify how algorithmic mediation is experienced in everyday religious consumption [11], [16].

The questionnaire was designed to collect brief but targeted qualitative and descriptive data on five aspects: platform use, perceived influence of algorithms, criteria of preacher credibility, verification practices, and perceived benefits and risks of digital da'wah. The questionnaire included a combination of closed-ended and short open-ended items. Closed-ended questions were used to identify general tendencies, while open-ended responses captured users' reasoning in their own words. This structure allowed the questionnaire to support the broader qualitative analysis without shifting the study into a survey-based design [10], [11], [17].

Data analysis was conducted in four steps. First, the researcher reduced and organized the ethnographic notes, platform materials, and questionnaire responses. Second, the data were coded into recurrent categories, including visibility mechanisms, credibility indicators, verification practices, perceived benefits, and perceived risks. Third, the coded materials were compared across the three data sources in order to identify convergences and inconsistencies. Fourth, the findings were interpreted in relation to the study's analytical concerns: algorithmic mediation, authority transformation, and audience agency.

To strengthen methodological rigor, this study used triangulation across both methods and sources. Observational notes, platform content, and respondent statements were compared to avoid reliance on a single data stream. The study also used purposive sampling, explicit coding categories, and cross-source comparison to improve interpretive trustworthiness. Although the respondent group is small, the consistency between ethnographic observation, content patterns, and questionnaire responses suggests that the findings capture meaningful tendencies within the digital da'wah ecosystem. For that reason, the results should be read as an analytical mapping of an exploratory qualitative study rather than as a final generalization about all Muslim social media users in Indonesia [11], [21].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

The findings show that algorithms function as more than technical filters; they act as gatekeepers that determine which forms of da'wah gain visibility. Of the seven respondents, six (85.7%) rated the influence of social media algorithms as the highest on the questionnaire, while one (14.3%) rated it as moderate. None of the respondents regarded the algorithm as unimportant. Even in this small exploratory sample, the pattern is clear:

visibility in digital da'wah is strongly associated with platform curation rather than with scholarship alone [9], [12], [13].

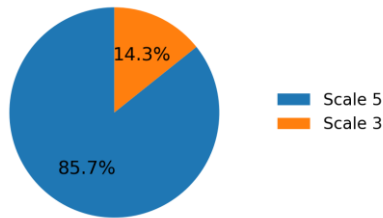


Figure 2. Perceived influence of algorithms on homepage content

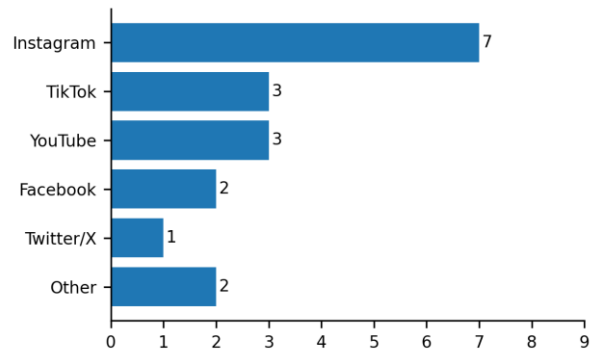


Figure 3. Social media platforms used for digital da'wah

Platform preference reinforces this conclusion. Instagram was used by all respondents as the main medium for accessing da'wah, while TikTok and YouTube were each used by 42.9% of respondents, Facebook by 28.6%, and Twitter/X by 14.3%. Visual and short-form platforms dominate because they make religious content easy to consume, repeat, and share, especially for younger users whose media habits are shaped by constant scrolling and recommendation feeds [12], [13].

Respondents also identified the features that make da'wah content travel farther online. They repeatedly pointed to likes, shares, reposts, comments, relatable themes, and delivery styles that match current audience concerns. In other words, content becomes 'viral' when it is not only religiously meaningful but also platform-friendly. This aligns with research showing that algorithmic systems tend to favor content that triggers fast reactions, emotional responses, or strong interpersonal circulation [9], [13].

This logic produces an algorithmic bias within the digital da'wah ecosystem. Content that is visually appealing, emotionally charged, or controversial can receive more distribution than content that is slow, nuanced, and academically rigorous. Several respondents were aware of this risk and highlighted the need to re-check religious material, especially when edited clips, incomplete quotations, or AI-generated material may distort the message. Such conditions can also create theological filter bubbles in which users repeatedly encounter only one style of interpretation [5], [9], [16].

The demographic profile of respondents helps explain why algorithmic literacy matters. Women constituted 57.1% of respondents; all respondents were in the 19-26 age group; most had been active in digital da'wah for less than 1 year (57.1%); and the largest educational group was senior high school/MA (57.1%). This combination suggests that many users encounter digital religion in a period of active identity formation, but without necessarily having strong formal religious training. In that setting, algorithms do not merely distribute content; they help shape what religious knowledge appears normal, attractive, and trustworthy [12], [13], [17].

The respondent statements also help clarify what "algorithmic influence" means in everyday practice. When explaining why some da'wah content goes viral, respondents repeatedly referred to engagement signals such as likes, shares, reposts, and comments, as

well as the ability of a speaker to connect a religious theme with problems currently discussed by audiences. Several respondents implicitly distinguished between scholarly (ilmiah) and engaging (menarik) content: the former may be rich in substance, but the latter is more likely to circulate if it is brief, relatable, visually compelling, or controversial. In this sense, the algorithm does not replace human choice; rather, it organizes the conditions under which certain human choices become massively amplified [9], [13]. What emerges is a platform ecology in which the form of presentation has a powerful effect on the afterlife of religious messages [10], [14].

A more detailed reading of respondent demographics helps explain why algorithmic visibility exerts such a strong effect. All respondents were aged 19-26, placing the entire sample within Generation Z. This cohort encounters religion in a media environment characterized by constant scrolling, rapid topic shifts, and convergence between education, entertainment, and identity expression. Women comprised 57.1% of the sample, and 57.1% of respondents had been actively involved in digital da'wah for less than one year, suggesting a user base that is still relatively new yet already highly conscious of how recommendation systems work. The educational profile also matters: 57.1% came from a senior high school/MA background, 14.3% from diploma level, and 28.6% from undergraduate level. This indicates that sensitivity to algorithmic influence is not limited to highly specialized users; it is present across a varied but digitally active young audience [13], [17].

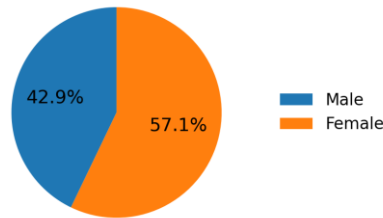


Figure 4. Respondent gender

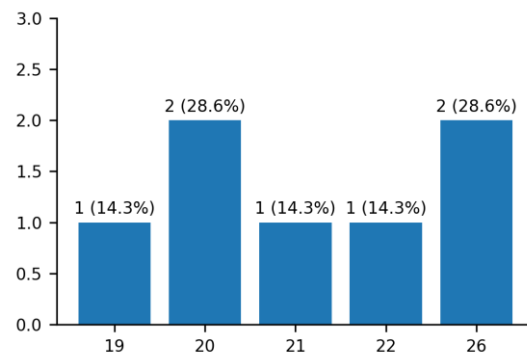


Figure 5. Respondent age profile

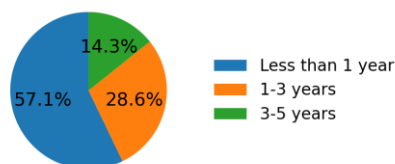


Figure 6. Duration of involvement in digital da'wah

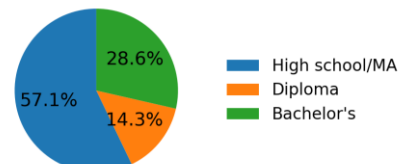


Figure 7. Respondent's educational background

Shift in religious authority in the digital da'wah ecosystem. The second major finding concerns the transformation of religious authority. When respondents were asked whom they

trusted more in religious matters, six of seven (85.7%) chose preachers with strong religious education, while one respondent (14.3%) selected 'both' between scholarly preachers and popular social-media preachers. No respondent placed popularity alone above religious learning. Normatively, therefore, scholarly authority remains strong even among digitally active users [18].

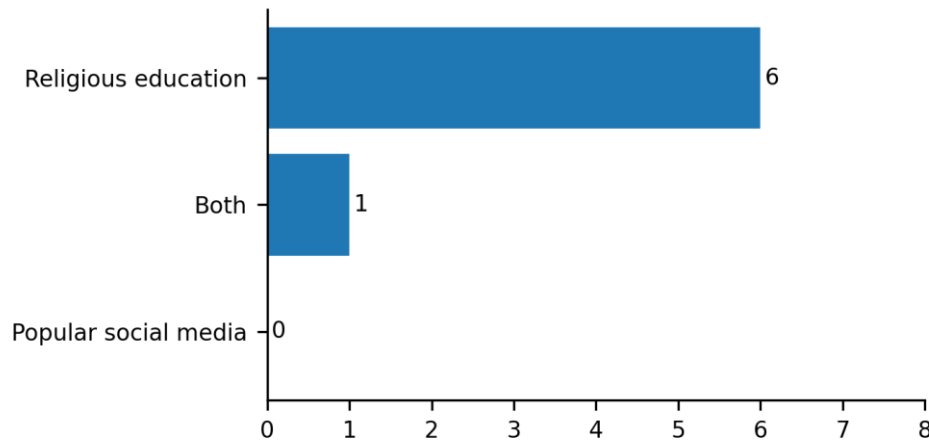


Figure 8. Trust in the authority of digital preachers

Nevertheless, daily practice reveals an authority paradox. Although respondents affirm the importance of religious learning, the content that reaches them most often is still organized by algorithmic visibility. What appears repeatedly on the screen can gradually function as authoritative, even when users know that popularity is not the same as expertise. This means that authority in digital da'wah is increasingly hybrid: it combines scholarship, communicative performance, consistency of personal conduct, and the ability to survive within platform metrics [18], [19].

Respondents described credible digital preachers as figures with clear scientific foundations, who present evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah, communicate wisely, and demonstrate consistency between online messages and offline life. They also considered track records important, including whether the preacher is known beyond social media. These criteria show that users do not evaluate authority solely on visibility; they seek to translate traditional standards of trustworthiness into the digital environment [18], [19].

At the same time, respondents acknowledged that follower counts and likes influence popularity, even if they do not guarantee truth. This tension captures a wider shift in the ecology of authority: social media decentralizes religious voice and opens room for participatory interpretation, but it also fragments epistemic control. Traditional scholars, institutions, influencers, and anonymous accounts now compete in a single marketplace of religious authority where packaging can rival substance [9], [15], [16].

Another important finding concerns the way users verify truth claims after encountering digital da'wah. Respondents reported cross-checking content with the Qur'an and Sunnah, comparing it with the explanations of trusted scholars, examining the preacher's educational background, and reviewing the preacher's wider track record before accepting a message as valid. This indicates that authority has not disappeared; instead, it has become

more decentralized and more labor-intensive for audiences. Users are compelled to perform their own evaluative work in a crowded information environment. A further tension appears in the role of follower counts and likes: around 71.4% of respondents acknowledged that popularity affects the spread and social recognition of preachers, even though it is not a reliable measure of doctrinal accuracy. Popularity, therefore, functions as a visibility cue, whereas credibility remains tied to scholarship, consistency, and ethical demeanor [18], [19].

This decentralization of authority also has a broader sociological implication. As religious guidance becomes more widely available across feeds, comment sections, and share networks, ordinary users participate more actively in sorting, endorsing, and contesting interpretations. In effect, digital da'wah encourages a more participatory religious public in which authority is increasingly negotiated in public view rather than simply inherited from an institutional position. That can be productive because it widens access and encourages critical checking, but it can also be risky because users may overestimate their own evaluative competence when faced with partial quotations, persuasive editing, or charismatic delivery. The problem is not participation itself, but the unequal quality of the informational environment in which participation occurs [9], [16].

Muslim community responses to algorithm-mediated digital da'wah. The response of Muslim communities to algorithm-mediated da'wah is neither purely celebratory nor purely resistant. Respondents consistently acknowledged the benefits of digital da'wah: it spreads faster, reaches distant audiences, allows people to study from home, and makes religious learning more accessible to younger generations. In this sense, social media expands rather than simply replaces conventional preaching by extending the reach of sermons, reminders, and study circles into everyday digital routines [12], [20].

However, respondents also recognized serious risks. They mentioned hate speech, hoaxes, slander, misleading fragments of lectures, and the difficulty of distinguishing accurate religious explanation from inaccurate or fabricated material. They were particularly concerned that technological manipulation, including AI-generated content, could be misused in the religious field. These concerns indicate that users are aware that accessibility without verification can easily lead to misunderstandings [17].

The verification strategies mentioned by respondents are significant. They reported checking whether the content aligns with the Qur'an and Sunnah, comparing it with trusted scholars, reviewing the preacher's track record, and reviewing other posts before accepting a message as credible. Such responses suggest that many Muslim users practice what can be described as critical selective consumption: they accept the convenience of digital platforms while still trying to preserve standards of religious evaluation derived from offline traditions [16], [21].

The future of digital da'wah in Indonesia, therefore, depends on more than technical mastery of algorithms. It requires content creators who are scientifically competent, ethically responsible, and capable of communicating in attractive formats without becoming misleading. It also requires audiences with both digital and religious literacy. Trust, not virality alone, becomes the central issue in sustaining a healthy digital da'wah ecosystem [12], [21].

Respondents' evaluations of benefit and risk were notably balanced. On the positive side, digital da'wah was seen as faster, broader in reach, and especially useful for users who cannot always attend face-to-face religious gatherings. It can serve as a reminder, an introductory learning tool, and a way to bring Islamic discussion into daily routines. On the negative side, respondents warned about hate speech, hoaxes, slander, decontextualized sermon fragments, and the normalization of polemical religious content. This coexistence of benefit and risk confirms that digital da'wah is not a uniformly liberating space; its value depends heavily on the quality of sources, the ethics of creators, and the critical habits of users [17], [20].

The responses about the future of digital da'wah reveal a broadly optimistic but cautious attitude. Respondents saw digital platforms as highly promising because they can reach distant communities, accommodate flexible learning schedules, and make religious reminders available in everyday life. At the same time, they emphasized the need for stricter norms of credibility. Their suggestions included citing sources clearly in every post, encouraging specialization so that preachers do not speak beyond their expertise, increasing the circulation of reliable accounts, and maintaining consistency between online content and offline conduct. These suggestions show that audiences do not merely want more da'wah content; they want more accountable da'wah content [13], [17], [18].

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Authority Transformation

One of the central findings of this study is that religious authority in digital da'wah is undergoing transformation rather than disappearance. In conventional settings, authority is commonly grounded in formal religious education, sanad, institutional affiliation, and long-term scholarly recognition. In social media environments, however, authority is increasingly shaped by visibility, communicative style, and sustained audience engagement. A preacher may remain normatively valued because of scholarly credibility, yet daily recognition is often strengthened by repeated exposure to algorithms. This creates a hybrid form of authority in which institutional legitimacy and platform performance intersect [16], [18], [19], [22], [23], [25].

This finding contributes theoretically to the study of digital religion by showing that authority in digital da'wah is not simply transferred from offline to online contexts. Instead, it is reconfigured through a process in which visibility becomes the first condition of recognition, while credibility remains a second and more contested stage of evaluation. In this sense, the study refines existing discussions of digital religious authority by demonstrating that algorithmic exposure does not replace scholarship, but changes the order in which authority is encountered, interpreted, and judged [9], [10], [22], [25]. What emerges is not the end of traditional authority, but a new ecology in which scholarly legitimacy must coexist with platform-driven visibility.

3.2.2. Algorithmic Mediation

The discussion also shows that algorithms are not neutral delivery mechanisms. They function as mediating structures that influence which kinds of da'wah content become

visible, repeated, and socially relevant. Content that is concise, visually strong, emotionally engaging, or easily shareable is more likely to gain circulation than content that is longer, more nuanced, or academically dense. This means that platform architecture affects not only how religious messages travel, but also which forms of religious communication are rewarded in practice [10], [14], [24].

The theoretical significance of this finding lies in connecting algorithmic logic with the mediatization of religion. The study indicates that da'wah in social media environments must be understood as communication shaped simultaneously by religious intention and by media logic. In other words, the authority of a message is no longer determined solely by doctrinal validity, but also by the platform conditions that make it visible [7], [8], [9]. This helps explain why algorithmic mediation has become central to contemporary digital Islam: it structures the relationship between exposure, familiarity, and credibility [22], [24].

At the same time, the findings suggest that digital da'wah requires an ethical and layered communication model. Short videos, reels, and clips may serve as effective entry points, but they should not stand alone as the final form of religious explanation. Gateway content needs to be connected to fuller materials such as extended lectures, contextual captions, references, or follow-up discussions. Brevity may be necessary for visibility, but depth remains necessary for legitimacy. This distinction is important because it clarifies that the challenge of digital da'wah is not whether to use algorithm-sensitive formats, but how to prevent circulation from overtaking understanding [20], [22], [24].

3.2.3. Audience Agency

A further important finding concerns the role of audiences. This study shows that Muslim users are not passive recipients of algorithmically curated religious content. Rather, they demonstrate what may be called critical-selective consumption. They appreciate the accessibility, speed, and convenience of digital da'wah, yet they also express concern about misinformation, decontextualized teachings, and the gap between popularity and scholarly depth. Their responses combine openness to digital religious learning with continued attention to sanad, source credibility, textual grounding, and moral consistency [16], [20], [21].

This finding adds an important nuance to debates on digital religion. The digitalization of da'wah does not produce either complete democratization or total epistemic collapse. Instead, it produces a contested middle ground in which user agency becomes more important but also more demanding. Algorithms may determine what appears in the feed, but users still engage in evaluation, comparison, and verification [10], [16], [21]. In this sense, the study contributes to theory by showing that audience agency is not external to algorithmic mediation; rather, it is shaped by it. Platform systems increase the burden of discernment, making religious literacy and digital literacy increasingly inseparable [22], [24].

The practical implication is that healthy digital da'wah cannot depend solely on preachers or platforms. It also requires audiences who can verify sources, compare interpretations, and distinguish between attention-grabbing visibility and doctrinal credibility. Educational institutions, pesantren, campuses, and Muslim community

organizations, therefore, need to treat algorithmic literacy as part of contemporary religious literacy [16], [17], [21], [24]. Training in source checking, contextual reading, and the recognition of misleading or clipped content is increasingly necessary for young users, whose first encounter with Islamic teaching often occurs through social media rather than in formal learning environments [21].

Taken together, these findings show that digital da'wah in Indonesia is organized through the interaction of three forces: algorithmic mediation, authority transformation, and audience agency. The broader theoretical contribution of this article is to demonstrate that these forces should not be studied separately. Religious authority in digital spaces is produced through a sequence in which algorithms shape visibility, visibility influences recognition, and audiences then negotiate credibility through selective evaluation [9], [10]. This integrated account helps explain why the future of digital da'wah depends not only on content production, but also on how infrastructures of visibility, legitimacy, and verification are aligned in algorithm-driven religious communication [22]–[25].

4. CONCLUSION

This study finds that social media algorithms have become important structuring forces in contemporary digital da'wah in Indonesia. They shape the visibility of religious content, influence which preachers are most frequently encountered, and affect how religious authority is recognized in everyday digital practice. The study also identifies an authority paradox: users continue to value preachers with strong religious education, yet their routine exposure to religious messages is heavily filtered by algorithmic systems that may not prioritize scholarly depth.

This article contributes to theory by showing that digital da'wah should be understood through the interaction among algorithmic mediation, authority transformation, and audience agency. It demonstrates that religious authority in digital environments is increasingly hybrid, combining scholarly legitimacy with platform-driven visibility. The study also contributes practically by highlighting that the credibility of digital da'wah depends not only on reach and engagement, but also on scholarly accountability, Islamic communication ethics, and user digital literacy.

The implications of these findings are clear. Digital da'wah requires stronger alignment between platform literacy, source transparency, and critical audience awareness. For preachers and Islamic institutions, this means developing communication strategies that remain accessible without sacrificing doctrinal depth. For future research, this exploratory study provides an analytical starting point that can be expanded through broader samples, comparative platform analysis, and deeper investigation of algorithmic circulation in digital religion.

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