

POPULAR ISLAMIC CULTURE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE REPRESENTATION OF DA'WAH AMONG GENERATION Z MUSLIMS (*GARAMOND 14 UPPERCASE*)

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has significantly transformed Islamic religious communication, especially among Generation Z, the first fully digital-native generation. This study explores how popular Islamic culture is represented and disseminated through social media platforms, focusing on the forms of da'wah consumed and produced by Muslim youth. It examines the communication strategies, digital formats, and cultural dynamics that shape contemporary Islamic messages in online spaces.

Using a systematic literature review approach, the study analyzes 20 peer-reviewed empirical articles published between 2021 and 2025 from contexts such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Qatar, and the wider global Muslim community. The analysis is grounded in theories of digital Islam, da'wah communication, popular culture, and sociology of religion.

The findings identify four major trends: *dawahtainment*, which combines Islamic messages with entertainment; the democratization of religious authority through social media influencers; the use of viral aesthetics, humor, and digital trends in conveying Islamic values; and the emergence of moderate Islamic narratives as responses to online radicalism. Generation Z actively negotiates between religious authenticity and entertainment, using digital Islamic content for identity formation, spiritual growth, and social belonging. The study concludes that popular Islamic culture on social media represents an adaptive and dynamic form of da'wah suited to the digital environment of Generation Z. (*200-250 Words*)

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A. INTRODUCTION (1000 – 1500 words)

The twenty-first century has inaugurated an unprecedented transformation in the ways religious knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed. For Islam, the world's second-largest and fastest-growing religion with approximately 1.9 billion adherents, this digital revolution has created both extraordinary opportunities and profound challenges for the practice of da'wah—the invitation to Islam and the propagation of its teachings. The emergence of social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp, has dismantled the traditional gatekeeping mechanisms of religious authority and created a vast, decentralized ecosystem of Islamic content where anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can potentially reach millions of believers.

At the epicenter of this transformation stands Generation Z—a demographic cohort born between approximately 1997 and 2012 who have never known a world without the internet. Unlike their Millennial predecessors who experienced the internet as a revolutionary novelty, Generation Z are genuine digital natives for whom online and offline existence are not distinct realms but deeply integrated dimensions of a single social reality. Their relationship with religion is therefore inseparable from their relationship with digital media. They encounter Islamic teachings not primarily in mosques or madrasas but in algorithmic feeds, through the voices of influencers they follow, and within content formats—short videos, memes, podcasts, aesthetic reels—that bear the unmistakable signature of popular culture.

This confluence of religion and popular digital culture has given rise to what scholars increasingly describe as "popular Islamic culture" on social media: a vibrant, heterogeneous, and sometimes contradictory body of content that blends Islamic doctrine, entertainment aesthetics, personal testimony, humor, celebrity, and lifestyle branding into forms of religious communication that are simultaneously sacred and spectacular. The phenomenon is global in scope but particularly pronounced in Muslim-majority societies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and countries of the Middle East and North Africa, where high smartphone penetration, youthful demographics, and strong Islamic identity intersect with extraordinary digital productivity.

Despite the growing scholarly attention to digital religion and Islamic social media, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how da'wah is specifically represented within popular cultural formats consumed by Generation Z, and what this means for Islamic epistemology, religious identity, and community formation. Most existing studies focus on single platforms or case studies of individual da'i (preachers) without situating these findings within a broader theoretical and comparative framework. Furthermore, the relationship between entertainment, authenticity, and religious authority in Gen Z's Islamic media ecosystem remains undertheorized.

This paper addresses these gaps through a systematic analysis of recent empirical literature on social media da'wah and Generation Z. It argues that popular Islamic culture on social media constitutes a new representational regime of da'wah that is characterized by the aestheticization of Islamic content, the democratization of religious authority, the gamification of spiritual practice, and the negotiation of moderate versus extremist Islamic identities in the digital public sphere. Understanding these dynamics is not merely of academic interest but carries practical implications for Islamic educational institutions, da'wah organizations, government bodies concerned with religious harmony, and the Muslims—particularly young Muslims—navigating their faith in an algorithmically mediated world.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 situates the study within relevant theoretical frameworks. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings. Section 6 concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

B. METHODOLOGY(500 - 1000 words)

1. Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines adapted for social science and humanities research. SLR was selected as the appropriate methodology given the rapidly growing body of empirical literature on digital da'wah and Generation Z, the need for a comprehensive and replicable synthesis of existing evidence, and the study's aim of developing a coherent theoretical account of a multifaceted social phenomenon. Rather than focusing on a single platform or context, SLR enables a comparative, cross-contextual analysis that yields more generalizable insights.

2. Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and specialized Islamic studies repositories. Search terms included combinations of: "da'wah" OR "dakwah," "social media," "Generation Z," "Islamic digital content," "Muslim influencer," "TikTok Islam," "Instagram da'wah," "digital Islam," and "popular Islamic culture." The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2025 to ensure relevance to the contemporary digital media landscape.

Inclusion criteria required that studies: (1) focused on Islamic religious content on social media platforms; (2) addressed Generation Z or youth Muslim demographics as a primary subject; (3) employed empirical research methods (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods); and (4) were published in English or Indonesian (with Indonesian-language studies assessed through translation and verified by a bilingual reviewer). Studies focusing exclusively on other religious traditions, older demographic cohorts, or non-social media digital platforms were excluded.

3. Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to synthesize findings across the 20 included studies. The analytical process involved six stages: familiarization with the data corpus; initial coding of key concepts and findings; searching for themes across studies; reviewing and refining themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the written synthesis. Two independent coders conducted the initial coding phase, with disagreements resolved through discussion, yielding a satisfactory inter-rater reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$). The analysis was further informed by the theoretical frameworks described in Section 2, with an iterative process between theory and data to develop nuanced conceptual categories.

4. Quality Assessment

Each included study was assessed for methodological quality using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research and equivalent instruments for quantitative and mixed-methods studies. Studies were rated on dimensions including clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of methodological design, rigor of data collection and analysis, reflexivity, and transferability of findings. All 20 studies met the minimum quality threshold for inclusion, though the analysis acknowledges variations in methodological rigor and contextual specificity.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings (can be in form of subheading) (1500 – 2500 words)

1. Overview of the Literature

The 20 studies included in this review span a diverse range of geographical contexts, methodological approaches, and social media platforms. Fourteen studies originate from Indonesia, reflecting that country's status as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy and one of the most active social media markets globally. Two studies are set in Malaysia, two in Middle Eastern contexts, and two adopt explicitly transnational or comparative frameworks. Methodologically, the corpus comprises twelve qualitative studies (employing content analysis, interviews, ethnography, and phenomenology), five mixed-methods studies, and three quantitative surveys. Platforms examined include TikTok (eight studies), Instagram (six studies), YouTube (four studies), WhatsApp (two studies), and multi-platform analyses (five studies).

Four major thematic clusters emerged from the analysis: (1) Dawahainment and the aestheticization of Islamic content; (2) The democratization of religious authority and the rise of social media da'i; (3) The politics of moderation: navigating extremism and progressive Islam; and (4) Generation Z as both consumers and producers of Islamic digital culture. These themes are elaborated in the following sections.

Table 1. Overview of the Literature

Analysis Aspect	Category	Number of Studies	Percentage	Detailed Description
Geographical Context	Indonesia	14 Studies	70%	Demonstrates Indonesia's dominance as the country with the world's largest Muslim population and one of the highest levels of social media usage globally. Most studies focus on digital da'wah, popular Islamic culture, and the behavior of Muslim Generation Z.
	Malaysia	2 Studies	10%	Highlights the development of digital da'wah based on Islamic moderation and the influence of Muslim influencers in modern urban society.
	Middle East	2 Studies	10%	Examines the dynamics of religious authority, Islamic identity politics, and the influence of social media on contemporary Islamic discourse.
	Transnational/Comparative	2 Studies	10%	Compares Islamic digital cultural practices across countries and demonstrates the global character of Muslim social media consumption.
Methodological Approaches	Qualitative	12 Studies	60%	Employs content analysis, in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, and phenomenology to understand the religious experiences of Muslim social media users.
	Mixed-Methods	5 Studies	25%	Combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of Muslim digital behavior and its impact on religious identity.
	Quantitative/Survey	3 Studies	15%	Based on statistical surveys related to social media consumption

Analysis Aspect	Category	Number of Studies	Percentage	Detailed Description
				patterns, levels of digital religiosity, and audience responses to da'wah content.
Social Media Platforms	TikTok	8 Studies	Dominant	TikTok is the most widely studied platform due to its popularity among Generation Z and its ability to spread short, visual, and viral da'wah content.
	Instagram	6 Studies	High	Used to construct religious imagery, Islamic aesthetics, and visually oriented da'wah interactions connected to Muslim lifestyles.
	YouTube	4 Studies	Moderate	Functions as an audiovisual da'wah medium featuring sermons, Islamic podcasts, and more in-depth religious discussions.
	WhatsApp	2 Studies	Low	Utilized for the dissemination of community-based da'wah messages, closed religious study groups, and group-based religious information sharing.
	Multi-Platform	5 Studies	Significant	Examines the integration of various social media platforms in shaping an interconnected Islamic digital cultural ecosystem.
Main Thematic Clusters	Dawahtainment and the Aestheticization of Islamic Content	Theme 1	—	Da'wah is packaged as engaging digital entertainment that is light, visual, and aligned with popular culture trends to appeal to young audiences.
	Democratization of Religious Authority	Theme 2	—	Social media enables the emergence of new da'i and Muslim influencers who gain religious legitimacy outside traditional religious institutions.
	Politics of Islamic Moderation	Theme 3	—	Discusses the contestation of narratives between moderate, progressive, and extremist Islam in digital spaces, as well as the role of social media in shaping Muslim public opinion.
	Generation Z as Consumers and Producers of Islamic Digital Culture	Theme 4	—	Generation Z acts not only as consumers of digital da'wah but also as active producers, modifiers, and disseminators of Islamic content through social media.

2. Dawahtainment: Aestheticization and Entertainment in Islamic Content

The geographical distribution of dawahtainment is notable. In Indonesia, the phenomenon is particularly pronounced, with major da'i such as Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar (known as Habib Ja'far) attracting millions of followers through a distinctive style that combines deep Islamic scholarship with contemporary cultural fluency, humor, and willingness to engage with challenging social issues from an Islamic perspective. Khafi et al., (2024) analyze Al-Hadar's da'wah style in detail, demonstrating that his success among Generation Z derives from his ability to speak the cultural language of young Indonesians

while maintaining scholarly credibility—a combination that traditional religious institutions have historically struggled to achieve.

3. The Democratization of Religious Authority

Wahyudi (2025) provides a detailed case study of a single Instagram da'i account (@fendirullah) to analyze the communication strategies employed to reach Gen Z audiences. The study reveals a sophisticated multi-layered strategy combining religious content with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities, strategic posting times, hashtag optimization, and consistent personal branding—demonstrating that effective digital da'wah requires not only religious knowledge but also professional social media expertise.

4. Moderation, Extremism, and the Politics of Islamic Identity Online

A third thematic cluster concerns the ideological landscape of Islamic social media and the emergence of religious moderation (wasatiyyah) as a major discursive project within digital da'wah directed at Generation Z. Multiple studies document the coexistence of diverse—and sometimes radically opposed—Islamic voices in the digital space, from progressive, feminist, and LGBTQ-affirming interpretations to strict salafi and politically Islamist positions, with mainstream moderate Islam occupying a contested middle ground.

Azisi et al. (2023) focus specifically on the role of university students in promoting religious moderation through social media, a phenomenon they describe as "smart Islam in digital space." The study documents how Muslim student associations have increasingly recognized social media as a crucial arena for promoting inclusive Islamic values and countering extremist narratives, developing organized strategies for content creation, peer amplification, and platform engagement. Kholis (2021) similarly positions virtual da'wah as an important mechanism for maintaining religious moderation among Generation Z, arguing that the absence of moderate Islamic voices in digital spaces creates a vacuum that extremist content fills by default.

5. Generation Z as Producers: Agency and Participation in Islamic Digital Culture

A fourth and increasingly prominent theme concerns the active role of Generation Z Muslims not merely as consumers but as producers of Islamic digital content. Multiple studies document the explosive growth of young Muslim content creators who are reshaping the aesthetics, topics, and communicative norms of da'wah from within Generation Z's own cultural frameworks.

6. Rethinking Da'wah in the Age of Algorithmic Islam

The findings of this systematic review collectively demand a fundamental rethinking of what da'wah means in the context of Generation Z's algorithmically mediated digital life. Classical conceptions of da'wah presuppose a relatively stable architecture of religious authority, defined audiences, and established communicative forms. The digital transformation documented across these studies has dissolved all three of these presuppositions. Authority is dispersed and contested; audiences are self-selecting and algorithmically sorted; and communicative forms are in constant, rapid evolution driven by platform affordances and popular culture trends.

D. CONCLUSION (400-500 WORDS)

This paper has examined the representation of da'wah within popular Islamic culture on social media, with particular attention to Generation Z Muslim demographics. Drawing on a systematic review of 20 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, the analysis has identified four major dynamics that characterize contemporary digital da'wah: the emergence of dawahainment as a dominant communicative form; the democratization of religious authority through social media influencers; the ideological contest between moderate

and extremist Islamic voices in digital space; and the active role of Generation Z as producers as well as consumers of Islamic digital culture.

The representation of da'wah among Generation Z Muslims through social media is ultimately a story of extraordinary creativity and adaptation in the service of enduring religious purposes. The forms are new—short videos, viral memes, algorithmic optimization—but the core impulse of da'wah, the invitation to reflect, to believe, and to live according to Islamic values, remains recognizable across these new media forms. Future research should deepen our understanding of how these digital representations of Islamic teaching shape the religious lives of young Muslims over time, and how Islamic communities can best steward the remarkable opportunity that social media provides for connecting a new generation with their faith.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Methodology; Writing – review and editing.

Author 2: Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Writing – original draft.

Author 3: Supervision; Validation; Resources; Visualization.

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