



## Negotiating Da'i Authority in the Digital Da'wah Landscape from Perspectives of Da'wah Management Students

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to explore how Da'wah Management students interpret, assess, and form religious authority criteria for da'i figures in the digital era. The change in the da'wah ecosystem from institutional space to digital space causes an epistemic shift in the construction of religious authority. This study departs from the lack of studies that specifically examine how young audiences, in this case university students, confirm da'i authority through participatory mechanisms in social media such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Using a qualitative approach with a descriptive-narrative method, data were obtained from twelve students of the Da'wah Management Study Programme through an open-ended questionnaire distributed online. The analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model which includes the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that da'i authority is formed mediatically, affectively, and interactively. Students view da'i as the main figure who not only conveys religious teachings, but also acts as a spiritual counsellor and moral guardian. Criteria for da'i authority include depth of Islamic knowledge, relevant communication style, personal consistency, and ethics in delivery. This research confirms that in the digital context, religious authority is no longer static or hierarchical, but is formed through a dynamic relationship between credibility, digital performativity, and active selection by an increasingly religiously literate audience.*

**Keyword:** Da'i authority; digital da'wah; religious authority.

### INTRODUCTION

The digital world is now not just a space for da'wah, it has become an arena that determines who is worthy of trust and who is forgotten (Hoover, 2006). Religious authority is no longer inherited through institutional

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channels, but rather clicked, assessed, and endorsed by algorithms and audiences who are increasingly active in determining the religious figures they follow (Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren, & Ess, 2012; Eisenlohr, 2016).

This change became increasingly apparent with the growing popularity of YouTube in Indonesia during the 2010s (Labas & Yasmine, 2017), which marked a new chapter in the da'wah landscape in Indonesia. With its fast-paced nature and ability to reach a wide-scale audience, YouTube became an attractive platform for da'i to spread their da'wah (Saputra, 2022). The growth of this platform, characterised by the increasing number of da'i with millions of followers, is empirical evidence that religious authority is increasingly shaped by digital interactions (Amallah et al., 2023; Saputra, 2022).

In the digital da'wah ecosystem, da'i authority is no longer solely determined by their religious educational background. Many da'wah figures have no formal affiliation with traditional religious institutions, such as alumni of Islamic boarding schools or colleges, but still have great influence on social media. The emergence of these individuals challenges the authority of established religious institutions, as they operate outside conventional religious structures.

This phenomenon shows that religious authority is no longer static and exclusive, but has undergone a transformation determined by digital dynamics and audience engagement. In this context, this research focuses on how changes in the digital da'wah ecosystem affect the structure of da'i authority as well as the legitimacy mechanisms formed in the online space.

Previous research has extensively discussed the shift of religious authority and the transformation of da'wah in the context of digital media. These studies can be classified into three main trends. First, studies on the shift of religious authority from traditional institutions to individual da'i who utilise social media to build religious legitimacy. This study highlights how the pandemic and digitalisation have given rise to a new form of authority that is based on popularity, rather than on scientific sanad or formal institutions (Fahrudin & Islamy, 2022; Husaini & Islamy, 2022; Qudsy, Fawaid, & Muzakky, 2021; Ragozina, 2022; Rusdiyanto, 2023). Second, a study that discusses the change in da'wah methods from text-based and yellow books to more interactive and populist forms of digital content (Pamungkas, 2023; Risdiana, Ramadhan, & Nawawi, 2020). The main focus of this study is the changes in communication styles and

epistemic adjustments made by da'i in responding to digital culture. Third, the study of new challenges in digital da'wah, including the commodification of authority, the "viral ustadz" phenomenon, and the emergence of da'i without formal legitimacy (Rubawati, 2018). In this context, the media becomes an arena of contestation that reframes who is considered to have religious authority.

However, studies specifically addressing the dynamics of the legitimacy of digital da'i authority from the audience's perspective, as well as how this authority is participatory in the social media ecosystem, are still relatively limited. This gap in research highlights the need for research that not only describes shifts in religious authority descriptively but also analyzes how the Muslim public produces, receives, and negotiates da'i authority through digital interactions. Previous studies have tended to focus on specific platforms, while explorations of the potential differences in authority dynamics across digital platforms still require further study. Therefore, this article seeks to offer a more participatory and contextual perspective on the formation of da'i authority in the digital space from the perspective of digitally-engaged Muslim students.

The importance of this study lies in understanding that changes in da'i authority are not simply an adaptation to technology, but are part of a broader epistemic shift in society. The digitisation of da'wah not only changes the way religious messages are delivered, but also reshapes the power relationship between da'i and audience, where authority is increasingly dependent on interaction, popularity, and the ability to build emotional resonance in digital spaces. Based on this context, this study aims to explore how digitally-engaged Muslim students construct and negotiate da'i authority within contemporary digital da'wah environments.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach to understand how Da'wah Management students who actively engage with digital media and online da'wah content, as well as prospective religious practitioners, construct da'i authority in the digital spaces they access and interpret directly. The main focus is directed at how they interpret, assess, and respond to da'i figures within the contemporary digital da'wah landscape.

Digital space was chosen as the context because it is discursive, participatory, and allows for rapid and wide distribution of religious meaning. Social media such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have

become key da'wah arenas, where authority is no longer determined solely by formal institutions, but also by audience engagement, personal narratives, and da'i visual performativity in online interactions.

The source of information came from twelve students of the Da'wah Management Study Programme who were selected by *purposive sampling*. The informants are active social media users who have accessed various digital da'wah content from various da'i figures (Muhammad et al., 2023; Nurdin & Godal, 2023). The selection of informants was based on their active engagement with digital da'wah content and their capacity to reflect critically on contemporary religious communication practices (Qadaruddin & Bakri, 2022).

The data collection technique was conducted through an open-ended questionnaire, which was distributed online through the Google Form application to facilitate informant access and engagement. Operationally, the data was analysed using the Miles and Huberman approach, which involves the process of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied several qualitative validation principles. Credibility was strengthened through the use of open-ended responses that allowed informants to elaborate their perspectives in detail, as well as through repeated reading and thematic comparison during the analysis process. Dependability was maintained by applying a consistent analytical procedure based on the Miles and Huberman framework, including data condensation, categorisation, and interpretation. Meanwhile, transferability was approached by providing contextual descriptions of the participants, research setting, and characteristics of the informants, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection process was concluded when the responses began to show recurring themes and no substantially new categories emerged (Saunders et al., 2017), indicating thematic saturation within the scope of this study.

At the condensation stage, the data obtained is collected, simplified, and identified according to certain themes, patterns and categories. Furthermore, the condensed data is presented in the form of tables and graphs to facilitate understanding. For example, the tables show the identification of sources of religious authority and factors that influence da'i selection. The presentation of this data also includes direct quotes from informants that provide deeper insights into their perceptions of da'i

authority. In the final stage, inference was drawn by identifying patterns and themes that emerged from the data. For example, it was found that students prefer da'i who have good communication skills, relevance to everyday life, and depth of Islamic knowledge. This conclusion also includes a reflection on how religious authority in the digital age is not only determined by formal scholarly status, but also by audience interaction and engagement.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The study of da'i authority in the digital era includes five main dimensions that form the basis of analysis. The first dimension relates to the identification of sources of religious authority, which includes various figures and institutions that are considered to have legitimacy in delivering religious teachings. The second dimension focuses on the factors that influence the selection of da'i as the main reference in religious practice, revealing the reasons and preferences of individuals in determining credible religious authorities. The third dimension examines temporal and situational patterns in accessing religious content, looking at when and under what conditions individuals seek da'wah material.

The fourth dimension highlights the choice of media used in the search for religious information, covering the various digital platforms that play a role in the dissemination of religious teachings. The fifth dimension discusses the urgency of having a clear source of authority and the criteria used in assessing the legitimacy of da'i as authoritative figures in digital da'wah. Finally, the sixth dimension explores the criteria used in assessing da'i authority, including aspects of congruence between speech and behaviour, validity of arguments and scientific background, da'wah and communication ethics, consistency of da'wah content, engaging delivery skills, and self-verification in filtering new teachings.

These six dimensions collectively provide a comprehensive analytical framework in understanding the dynamics of religious authority in the digital da'wah era. The following is an explanation of each dimension in more detail, starting with the source of religious authority.

### **Source of Religious Authority**

Sources of religious authority in this study refer to individuals or figures who are considered to have legitimacy and trust in conveying religious teachings to the public. This authority can come from three main groups:

da'i who traditionally play a role in guiding people through lectures and studies, religious influencers who utilise digital platforms to deliver religious messages widely and interactively, and academics who contribute through in-depth research and analysis of religious teachings. These three sources play different but complementary roles in shaping religious understanding and practice in the digital era.

As a first step, to get a clearer picture of who is considered the main source of religious authority in daily life, interviews were conducted with informants with the question "Who do you consider to be the main source of religious authority in your life?" From the results of interviews with twelve informants, all of them consistently mentioned da'i as the main figure they refer to. The full data of this finding is presented in the following table:

Table 1  
Identification of Sources of Religious Authority

No	Informant	Verbatim
1	Ocatriyanti	Da'i
2	Ely Susanti	Da'i
3	Sela Citra	Da'i
4	Normaliza Fazira	Da'i
5	Azura	Da'i
6	Tian Juantama	Da'i
7	Adly Saputra	Da'i
8	Suci rahmatul husna	Da'i
9	Rosa Linda	Da'i
10	M. Al-Haviz	Da'i
11	Fadli Juniza	Da'i
12	Sri Deswanti	Da'i

Source: Author's Observation, 2026

The findings indicate that da'i remain the dominant source of religious authority among digitally-engaged students, reflecting a shift in religious authority towards more mediatised and participatory forms. In this context, authority is not solely grounded in formal academic or institutional status, but is increasingly shaped by communicative accessibility, audience engagement, and the ability of da'i to establish emotional resonance within digital religious interactions.

### **Factors Influencing the Selection of Da'i as Religious Authority**

The shift from institutional or academic-based authority towards mediated authority is certainly not without reason. To further understand the factors that drive the selection of da'i as the main source of religious authority, informants were then asked to explain the reasons behind their preference. The question asked was: "What makes you choose da'i as a source of religious authority over other sources?". The answers to this question reveal personal, affective and communicative motives that strengthen the da'i's position in today's digital da'wah landscape.

Table 2  
Factors Influencing the Selection of Da'i as Religious Authority

No	Informant	Verbatim	Context
1	Ocatriyanti	<i>"Because preachers focus on teaching religion directly and regularly. While academics and influencers are sometimes less consistent or mixed up with the worldly. And because preachers are also often present in people's lives, they are more trusted."</i>	Social consistency and connectedness
2	Ely susanti	<i>"I choose da'i because their delivery is simple, down-to-earth, and helps me understand and practice the teachings of Islam in my daily life."</i>	Accessibility and practical application
3	Sela Citra	<i>"Because of the knowledge or understanding of religion from a da'i, not only that, a da'i also conveys the teachings of Islam in a language that is light, relevant, and in accordance with the realities of teenage life today."</i>	Relevance in the context of the younger generation
4	Normaliza Fazira	<i>"I prefer da'i as a source of religious authority because they can convey religious teachings in a way that is easy to understand and closer to everyday life. They are also often active on social media, so I can get religious knowledge quickly and practically. But I'm still careful"</i>	Practical, fast, and still selective

		<i>and make sure the information I receive is also from other reliable sources.”</i>	
5	Azura	<i>“Because they usually convey religious teachings in a way that is closer, simpler, and easier to understand. They don’t just give arguments or theories, but also give examples that relate to everyday life.”</i>	Emotional closeness and narrative application
6	Tian Juantama	<i>“Because a da’i is someone who understands more and explores which aims to smoothly deliver lectures or da’wah.”</i>	Scientific credibility
7	Adly Saputra	<i>“Da’i are chosen as a source of religious authority because they are considered to have a deep knowledge and understanding of Islamic teachings, and have the ability to deliver da’wah with wisdom and discretion.”</i>	Depth of knowledge and ethics of da’wah
8	Suci Rahmatul Husna	<i>“Because da’i is a very acceptable da’wah resource in person, or only through digital because da’i has implemented da’wah properly and correctly - da’wah conveys the truth, has learned all about the nature of da’wah”</i>	The legitimacy of da’wah and the ethos of truth
9	Rosa Linda	<i>“I chose da’i as a source of religious authority for several reasons, such as the fact that da’i convey clear and easy-to-understand teachings, the material delivered is also relevant to contextual issues faced by the community, and the accessibility of religious information is often wider than other sources. Da’i also use local language, making it easier for people to understand. However, I do not rely on just one da’i, but do further research and compare various opinions to get a more comprehensive and balanced understanding.”</i>	Contextuality and critical attitude

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10	M. Al-Haviz	<i>"In my opinion, da'is are more steeped in religious concepts, because not everyone can convey the message of Islam like da'is. In addition, da'is usually have a formal education in religious sciences, which gives them more understanding of religious concepts and Islamic history. They can relate religious principles to the realities I face, making religion easier to understand and apply. Another factor that makes me choose a da'i is their consistency in living the teachings they preach. I look for figures who not only talk about religious values, but also practise them in their own lives. This example inspires me and strengthens my trust in their message."</i>	Role modelling, integrity and applicability of teachings
11	Fadli Juniza	<i>"Because preachers are not just people who can talk. They generally go through a long process such as studying in Islamic boarding schools, studying at Islamic universities, or studying directly with scholars. So I choose preachers because they don't just talk. Every word and advice has a basis either from the Qur'an, Hadith, or the understanding of previous scholars."</i>	Scientific authenticity and validity of teachings
12	Sri Deswanti	<i>"Extensive religious knowledge and good communication skills."</i>	Scholarship and rhetoric

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Source: Author's Observation, 2026

The findings reveal that the selection of da'i as religious authorities is influenced not only by religious knowledge, but also by communicative, contextual, and affective dimensions. Factors such as accessibility, moral exemplarity, digital engagement, and the ability to relate Islamic teachings to everyday experiences indicate that religious authority in the digital era is increasingly constructed through participatory interaction and mediated

communication practices, rather than relying solely on formal scholarly status.

### Time and Situation of Accessing Religious Content

Having established why informants choose da'i as a source of religious authority, it is important to understand when they usually access religious advice or information that is widely circulated on social media. This aims to identify the spiritual or psychological moments that drive the search for religious meaning and guidance in daily life. Therefore, informants were asked a follow-up question: "When do you usually seek religious advice or information from da'i?". The answers to this question will reveal the temporal and emotional context of digital *da'wah* consumption practices, as well as show how religious needs emerge in the daily lives of students in the digital era.

Table 3  
Time and Situation of Accessing Religious Content

No	Informant	Verbatim	Context
1	Ocatriyanti	<i>"When facing life problems, wanting to deepen religious knowledge, or needing peace of mind."</i>	Emotional stress situations and spiritual needs
2	Ely susanti	<i>"I usually seek advice from da'i when I am confused, need guidance in life, or want to get closer to Allah. I usually watch videos of lectures on YouTube."</i>	Life direction confusion and spiritual longing
3	Sela Citra	<i>"I usually seek religious advice or information from da'i when I am confused, need peace, or want to improve myself. Sometimes also when there are life issues that are difficult to understand, such as problems of the heart, relationships, or life goals-because da'i often give soothing and down-to-earth answers."</i>	Inner turmoil and personal identity crisis
4	Normaliza Fazira	<i>"Sometimes on YouTube and sometimes also on tiktok, Instagram, because the social media accounts are often updated so I can watch and examine the"</i>	The need for a digital explanation of practical Islamic law

		<i>messages conveyed by da'i, and usually if I look for religious information when I am confused, such as the law of women's aurat, for example, and so on."</i>	
5	Azura	<i>"When I feel like I need a way, or a solution to what I want."</i>	Religious hope as a life problem solver
6	Tian Juantama	<i>"At night before bedtime and searching on social media."</i>	Personal time for spiritual reflection at the end of the day
7	Adly Saputra	<i>"When dealing with life's problems - such as needing calm, motivation, or direction when you're confused or down."</i>	When under psychological stress and searching for meaning in life
8	Suci Rahmatul Husna	<i>"When we are far from God or negligent of his teachings, through mosque to mosque lectures or the d'k'wah of fellow Muslims who advise each other."</i>	Spiritual guilt and the need for moral reminders
9	Rosa Linda	<i>"When I feel confused, sometimes something/ value that I have been doing for a long time is not in accordance with the Shari'ah, then that's when I seek da'i advice. What is the da'i's opinion and what is the ruling according to the Qur'an and hadith. I usually look for advice from several da'i and group the information together and draw conclusions from what the da'i says."</i>	Tensions between personal beliefs and religious law
10	M. Al-Haviz	<i>"When facing a complex moral problem or dilemma that requires a religious perspective. In these situations, da'i explanations help me find answers that are in line with religious teachings. I also often seek guidance from da'is when entering into new activities, such as when I want to start crypto stocks, so I first look into the laws."</i>	Moral uncertainty and the quest for practical Islamic law in modern life
11	Fadli Juniza	<i>"I set aside 2 hours in the evening."</i>	Evening reflective routines as a form of

12	Sri Deswanti	<i>"When there are many problems and looking for an understanding of religion."</i>	personal development Inner tension and the need for religious meaning in life	spiritual
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Source: Author's Observation, 2026

The findings demonstrate that the consumption of digital da'wah content is closely connected to the emotional, spiritual, and existential experiences of audiences. Religious content is not accessed solely for doctrinal learning, but also as a resource for coping with personal problems, seeking spiritual reassurance, and navigating contemporary life issues. This pattern reflects how digital da'wah functions as a form of affective and therapeutic religious engagement, where audiences actively turn to digital religious spaces to obtain guidance, emotional support, and moral orientation.

### Choice of Media Used in Searching for Religious Information

After knowing when students seek religious advice from da'i, the next question is directed to explore where they usually access the information. This is important to understand the digital medium or space that students prefer in interacting with contemporary da'wah. The question asked in the questionnaire was: *"Where do you usually find information from da'i?"* The answers to this question will provide insight into the digital platforms, social media, or da'wah tools that most effectively reach the younger generation audience, while also showing how *mediatization* affects the distribution of religious authority in the digital age.

Table 4

Choice of Media Used in Searching for Religious Information

No	Informant	Verbatim
1	Ocatriyanti	Social media
2	Ely susanti	Social media
3	Sela Citra	Social media
4	Normaliza Fazira	Social media
5	Azura	Social media
6	Tian Juantama	Social media
7	Adly Saputra	Social media
8	Suci Rahmatul Husna	Social media

9	Rosa Linda	Social media
10	M. Al-Haviz	Social media
11	Fadli Juniza	Social media, live lecture
12	Sri Deswanti	Social media

Source: Author's Observation, 2026

The findings indicate that social media has become a central arena for accessing religious knowledge among digitally-engaged students, reflecting the ongoing mediatization of religious authority. In this context, accessibility, emotional resonance, and interactive engagement shape the relationship between audiences and da'i, while digital da'wah increasingly functions as a personalised and participatory form of religious experience rather than merely a one-way transmission of religious teachings.

### **The Urgency of Having a Clear Source of Religious Authority**

Furthermore, after identifying the media used and the situation of searching for religious information, it is important to explore more deeply the epistemological awareness of students regarding the importance of having a clear source of authority. For this reason, the follow-up questions asked to informants were: *“Why do you feel it is important to have a clear source of authority in religious matters?”*

This question aims to explore the basis of students' normative and critical thinking in selecting and assessing the truth of religious information. The answers that emerge are expected to explain how students understand the role of authority in maintaining the purity of teachings, preventing deviations in understanding, and guiding them in living a consistent, credible, and sharia-responsible religious life.

Table 5

#### The Urgency of Having a Clear Source of Religious Authority

No	Informant	Verbatim	Context
1	Ocatriyanti	<i>“So that the teachings received are accurate, avoid confusion, and can be applied correctly in daily life.”</i>	Certainty of teaching, practical application
2	Ely susanti	<i>“Having a clear source of authority is important so that the religious teachings received are correct, consistent, and applicable to life.”</i>	Doctrinal truth and consistency

3	Sela Citra	<i>"Because a clear source of authority helps me understand the religion correctly, avoid misguidance, and gives me a strong grip in the midst of the confusing information of today. As a layperson, I don't really understand the sabih results."</i>	Protection from misinformation and confusion
4	Normaliza Fazira	<i>"I feel that it is important to have a clear source of authority in religious matters so that I don't misunderstand the teachings, can get the right information, and stay on the path that is in accordance with religious guidance. In addition, a trusted source also helps me to sort out what is in accordance with the evidence and what is just personal opinion, especially in the midst of a lot of religious information circulating on social media."</i>	Selectivity of digital content and authenticity of arguments
5	Azura	<i>"Because with a clear source of authority, I am more confident, less confused, and less prone to misunderstandings when it comes to religious teachings."</i>	Personal beliefs and clarity of interpretation
6	Tian Juantama	<i>"Because in life there are many things about religion that I do not understand and do not understand, so I refer to religious matters."</i>	Learning needs and understanding limitations
7	Adly Saputra	<i>"Avoiding religious misunderstanding. Religions have deep rules and values. If the source is unclear, it can lead to misinterpretation or even spread deviant teachings."</i>	Prevention of deviation and misinterpretation
8	Suci Rahmatul Husna	<i>"Because many da'i now deviate from their teachings, therefore we must really look for a definite source of authority, and preachers who really convey the religious teachings taught by the prophet Muhammad Saw."</i>	Critical of da'i, importance of authentic authority

9	Rosa Linda	<i>"I think that clarity on the source of authority in religion is very important to provide consistent guidance for me in understanding and practising the teachings of Islam, and to prevent misguidance. I think a clear source of authority serves as a moral and ethical foundation, while ensuring the accurate transmission of religious values and traditions. Although diversity of interpretation remains, clarity of source of authority helps me avoid the confusion and conflict that sometimes arise from differences in understanding."</i>	Ethics, stability of understanding, and social harmonisation
10	M. Al-Haviz	<i>"Because not all preachers can match the style we like, even though the lecture material is good, but the style makes us bored, it is important for us to have our own authority in religion."</i>	Appropriateness between delivery style and teaching substance
11	Fadli Juniza	<i>"My reason for having a clear source of authority in religious matters is to ensure that the teachings we follow are correct, prevent confusion from wrong interpretations, provide guidance in daily life, and maintain the unity of the ummah and avoid doubts in worship."</i>	Authority as guardian of truth, unity of the people and clarity of direction
12	Sri Deswanti	<i>"To avoid misunderstanding about religion."</i>	Avoiding religious misunderstanding

Source: Author's Observation, 2026

The findings indicate that clarity regarding sources of religious authority remains important for students in navigating the abundance of religious information circulating in digital spaces. Concerns about doctrinal accuracy, misinformation, and religious confusion encourage audiences to actively evaluate the credibility and legitimacy of da'i. This reflects the emergence of a more selective and reflexive pattern of religious engagement, where audiences not only consume religious content, but also

negotiate trust and authority within the increasingly complex digital religious environment.

### Criteria for Judging Da'i Authority

Having explained the importance of clarity of religious authority, the next step was to explore how students concretely assess or compare the authority of a da'i with other religious sources, such as academics, institutional scholars, or digital influencers. Therefore, the follow-up question in the questionnaire read: "How do you assess the credibility of da'i?"

This question aims to explore the evaluative criteria used by students in assessing the worthiness of someone's religious authority in the digital era. As such, the data will show how authority is established, negotiated and maintained amidst the narrative competition and plurality of religious authorities now available in the digital space.

Table 6

Criteria for Assessment of Da'i Authority

No	Informant	Verbatim	Context
1	Ocatriyanti	<i>"I usually look at the way he speaks. If his delivery is clear, he doesn't go off on tangents, and he uses relevant arguments, I'm more likely to believe him. Especially if he also seems to live in line with what he says."</i>	Personal consistency and communicative clarity
2	Ely susanti	<i>"I judge by his demeanor during his lectures. If he's calm, not pushy, and his language resonates with me, I feel he has strong authority. I also usually compare it to the content of the Quran and Hadiith."</i>	Tranquillity and validity of religious sources
3	Sela Citra	<i>"Honestly, I compare it with other preachers or academics too. I check his educational background, and who he studied with. There are many impromptu da'i now, so I have to be selective."</i>	Scholarly credentials and source verification
4	Normaliza Fazira	<i>"I judge by the content of his lecture. If he just talks without</i>	Argumentation and accuracy of sources

		<i>giving any basis, I skip it. But if he clearly mentions the source and can explain it in easy language, then I'll believe him."</i>	
5	Azura	<i>"I see it from his style of speaking and his attitude. If he likes to insinuate or put others down, I don't think it's wise. I trust da'i who teach calmly and invite discussion, not those who are the most righteous."</i>	Dawah ethics and gentleness in delivery
6	Tian Juantama	<i>"I just compare the content. For example, I watch da'i A, then I also find out what da'i B thinks or Islamic articles. If the explanations support each other and are logical, then they can be trusted."</i>	Comparison between sources and coherent logic
7	Adly Saputra	<i>"I trust da'i who have been actively preaching for a long time, not those who have just gone viral. Then I also see, has he been consistent from the beginning? Sometimes there are those whose words change depending on the trend."</i>	Consistency of da'wah track record and firmness of values
8	Suci Rahmatul Husna	<i>"I pay attention to where he studied religion. If he has a background in Islamic boarding school or studied at an Islamic college, that's already a plus. But still, check if his teachings are straight and not weird."</i>	Religious education background and sound faith
9	Rosa Linda	<i>"I judge by the way he responds to sensitive issues. If he can be wise and maintain adab when discussing differences of opinion, I think he has strong authority. The problem is that da'wah is not just about knowledge, but also morals."</i>	Da'wah maturity and ethical responsibility
10	M. Al-Haviz	<i>"For me, it depends on whether it's suitable or not. There are da'i whose knowledge is good, but the way they speak makes me sleepy or bored. So for me it's</i>	Relevance of delivery style and audience comfort

		<i>also important how to convey, not just the content of the material.”</i>	
11	Fadli Juniza	<i>“I usually watch him a few times first, then I can judge. I see if he is consistent with his teachings, and not just following trends. If she doesn’t sell her religion for popularity, I’d appreciate it more.”</i>	Consistency of substance and sincerity in preaching
12	Sri Deswanti	<i>“I always compare it with what I have learnt. If the da’i teaches something that feels unfamiliar or contradicts what I know from teachers or books, I find out first. The point is, I don’t believe 100% right away.”</i>	Personal verification of content and caution against new understandings

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Source: Author’s Observation, 2026

The findings show that students assess da’i authority through a combination of moral, intellectual, and communicative considerations. Authority is not accepted uncritically, but is continuously evaluated through the consistency of behaviour, credibility of religious arguments, ethical communication, and the relevance of da’wah delivery to audience conditions. This pattern reflects the increasingly reflexive character of digital religious audiences, where legitimacy is constructed not only through formal religious status, but also through perceived authenticity, integrity, and audience trust in digital interactions. Nevertheless, the increasing dependence on digital religious authority also raises important concerns regarding the credibility, ethics, and potential risks of mediatised da’wah practices.

### **Challenges and Risks of Mediatised Da’i Authority**

Despite the increasing influence of digital media in expanding the reach of da’wah, the findings also reveal critical concerns regarding the risks of mediatised religious authority. One informant, Suci Rahmatul Husna, stated, “Because many da’i now deviate from their teachings, therefore we must really look for a definite source of authority, and preachers who really convey the religious teachings taught by the Prophet Muhammad Saw.” This statement reflects growing audience awareness that popularity and visibility in digital spaces do not automatically guarantee the credibility or authenticity of religious authority.

The openness of digital platforms enables religious authority to be constructed rapidly through algorithmic exposure, audience engagement, and viral circulation (Sultan & Amir, 2023; Tomassi, Falegnami, & Romano, 2024). In many cases, algorithmic visibility tends to privilege emotionally engaging, sensational, and highly shareable content over careful and scholarly religious explanations, reflecting the broader logic of the attention economy that increasingly shapes digital communication environments (Shapiro, 2022; Walker, Thuermer, Vicens, & Simperl, 2023). As a result, the legitimacy of da'i authority in digital spaces is often influenced not only by scholarly competence, but also by metrics of visibility, interaction, and audience engagement.

However, this condition also creates the possibility of misleading authority, including the spread of superficial religious interpretations, religious disinformation, sensationalist preaching, and the commodification of da'wah content (Gisoni et al., 2022; Mahmuddin & Nasriah, 2021; Stephens, Poon, & Tan, 2023). The structure of digital platforms enables religious messages to circulate beyond traditional institutional gatekeeping, allowing individuals with strong communicative performance and algorithmic visibility to gain authority rapidly, even when their religious explanations lack depth or contextual accuracy (Sultan & Amir, 2023; Tucker et al., 2018). In such contexts, da'i authority may become increasingly performative and market-oriented, where emotional appeal and popularity frequently overshadow scholarly depth, ethical responsibility, and doctrinal accountability (Ma, 2022).

The dynamics of algorithmic amplification also intensify epistemic vulnerability within digital religious environments. As platform systems prioritise engagement and virality, audiences are continuously exposed to fragmented, emotionally charged, and simplified religious narratives that may shape perceptions of truth and credibility (Fajardo, 2020; Harris, Pärnamets, Sternisko, Robertson, & Bavel, 2022). This condition contributes to what several scholars describe as an “infodemic” environment, where the abundance of information complicates the distinction between credible religious guidance and manipulative or misleading content (Gisoni et al., 2021; Stephens et al., 2023). Consequently, the contestation of religious authority in digital spaces increasingly depends not only on theological legitimacy, but also on digital visibility and communicative performance.

In response to these risks, digital religious literacy becomes

increasingly important as a mechanism for negotiating credibility and evaluating religious authority critically. Several studies emphasise that verification practices, contextual understanding, content labelling, and critical information literacy are necessary to reduce the spread of misleading digital information and strengthen epistemic accountability in online communication (Morrow, Swire-Thompson, Polny, Kopec, & Wihbey, 2022; Onifade, 2023; Salubi, 2025). Within the context of digital da'wah, these competencies are essential for enabling audiences to assess the validity of religious messages, compare different religious sources, and critically negotiate authority within contemporary digital religious ecosystems. These findings demonstrate that religious authority in digital spaces is increasingly shaped through a dynamic negotiation between visibility, credibility, audience engagement, and critical digital literacy.

Overall, this research shows an epistemic shift in religious authority in the digital era. Whereas previously authority rested more on institutions and academics, now its legitimacy is increasingly determined by mediatic, affective and participatory mechanisms. Digital spaces allow da'i to build sustainable emotional relationships with audiences, making them central actors in the formation of people's religious beliefs and behaviours, especially the younger generation.

This change is not only structural, but also impacts the way religious authority is perceived and internalised by the audience. Preference for da'i is no longer determined solely by formal scholarly status, but rather by a combination of depth of religious understanding, effective communication style, and the capacity to create spiritual closeness. This transformation marks a shift in authority from formal-institutional structures to a more performative model based on direct interaction. In this case, students position da'i not only as conveyors of teachings, but also as sources of calm, direction, and guardians of moral values through the medium they choose consciously and actively.

Consequently, religious authority is no longer passive or taken for granted. In this context, students appear as critical evaluators who carry out selective functions towards who and what is considered worthy of trust. They cross-verify, weigh the scientific background, assess the delivery style, and compare various sources before accepting a teaching as authoritative. Thus, authority in the digital space becomes a dynamic construction, not given automatically, but built through credibility, consistency, and reciprocal relationships with an increasingly intelligent, selective, and

religiously literate audience.

This study shows that the digital world that is developing today and used by da'i has become a determinant factor in determining the legitimacy, feasibility and *trustworthiness* of da'i. The use of the digital world in da'wah reflects that there has been a change in da'i authority. This implies three things: *Firstly*, the audience co-determines and has power in determining the authority of the da'i. *Secondly*, da'i have a strong dependency on the audience. *Thirdly*, da'i must improve their digital literacy skills.

Audiences have the power to determine da'i authority in the digital era because the process of legitimising religious authority has shifted from a top-down, institutional model to a more participatory, interaction-based model. This shift can be explained through several theoretical approaches, including mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013), digital participation (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009), attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001), and social legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995).

Hjarvard (2013) asserts that digital platforms play an active role in shaping the meaning of religious authority, allowing audiences to assess, compare and even challenge traditional authorities. This shift reflects a change in the criteria for authority, which no longer relies solely on sanad or formal institutions, but rather on visibility, audience participation, and emotional resonance built through digital interactions (Kadir, Sahari, & Judi, 2019).

The consequence of this phenomenon is the transformation of religious authority from a hierarchical and exclusive structure to an open and participatory model. In this context, mediatization explains how digital media is not only a channel of communication, but also shapes and changes social structures, including religious authority. Digital media allows for the decentralisation of authority, where individuals or groups can build legitimacy through active participation and interaction with audiences. In line with the concept of "mediatised authority", religious authority is now increasingly constructed and confirmed through digital media mechanisms, rather than solely through traditional institutions (Andok, 2024).

Digital participation theory reinforces the idea that audiences are now not passive recipients, but actors who are directly involved in selecting and confirming da'i credibility through digital interaction (Jenkins et al., 2009). This change shows that the digital world does not only function as a channel for disseminating messages, but a transformative medium that contributes to shaping the legitimacy structure of da'wah (Baulch &

Pramiyanti, 2018).

Along with the development of technology, the internet has made it possible to spread religious messages widely and quickly (Gani, 2014), even across geographical and social boundaries (Castells, 2001; Nasution & Hasibuan, 2024). With this characterisation, digital media is not just a tool in da'wah, but has evolved into a new social space where religious authority is produced, confirmed and publicly assessed (Rustandi, 2020).

This change is closely related to the dynamics of attention that determine the legitimacy of a da'i in the digital era. As explained in the attention economy, religious authority depends not only on the depth of knowledge, but also on the da'i's ability to attract attention and build a connection with his congregation (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Furthermore, social legitimacy theory suggests that recognition of a da'i does not solely come from his academic status, but rather the audience's acceptance as digital communicators who actively select religious figures they trust (Suchman, 1995). As such, religious authority in the digital landscape becomes increasingly dynamic, determined by the interactive and evaluative mechanisms employed by audiences.

In addition to social factors and interactions, social media algorithms also play a crucial role in determining who gains visibility and ultimately establishes authority. These algorithms tend to prioritise content that attracts attention and gets high interaction, so it does not always come from traditional authorities, but rather from individuals who are able to present content in an interesting and relevant way to the audience (Sarker, 2021). In other words, the digital world has created a new ecosystem where religious authority is no longer solely determined by institutional structures, but also through the dynamics of interaction and participation in the digital space.

This research stands in stark contrast to studies that place religious authority within the control of formal institutions (Berglund, 2017; Hayat, 2022; Hirschkind, 2001; Nordin, 2017). Study Berglund (2017) on digital religious practices among Swedish Muslims shows that authority remains consolidated by local Islamic institutions, which utilise digital media as a means of expanding their institutional influence, rather than as an open space for alternative authorities. This finding is in line with Hirschkind (2001) in his study of audio sermons in Egypt, highlights that new media are used to reinforce established authoritative norms, where institutionalised censorship and curation continue to play an important role

in determining who has the right to speak in the religious public sphere. Furthermore, the study of Nordin (2017) shows that religious authority in the context of interfaith cooperation in Sweden remains largely determined by institutional structures, historical dominance, and the socio-political position of the majority religious community. In this context, authority is not formed horizontally through public engagement, but rather filtered through representational mechanisms controlled by hegemonic actors, such as the Church of Sweden and state institutions. Only religious figures and communities that are considered “moderate” and in line with secular norms are given space to perform, so religious authority is selective and socially curated. In the Indonesian context, similar findings were also raised by Hayat (2022) who examined digital da'wah programmes such as *Mamah and Aa Beraksi*. She shows that media is used not to create new authority, but to reproduce traditional authority. The da'i authority in this programme remains derived from literal interpretations of classical texts, particularly Islamic family fiqh, with a strong emphasis on patriarchal gender relations. Thus, digital da'wah in this context functions as a medium for perpetuating religious conservatism, not as a space for reform or renewal of religious authority.

In contrast to these findings, this article asserts that in Indonesia, the digital world has transcended the function of institutional extension and become its own arena that allows the emergence of non-formal da'i authority, which derives legitimacy not from institutional structures, but from audience engagement, digital performance, and horizontal dynamics of trust. This distinction shows that the transformation of religious authority is highly contextualised, depending on the relations between the state, religious institutions, and the social structures in which da'wah takes place.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that digital media has become a significant factor in shaping the legitimacy, credibility, and trustworthiness of contemporary da'i figures. The findings indicate that religious authority in the digital era is no longer determined solely by formal scholarly status or institutional recognition, but also by communicative ability, audience engagement, contextual relevance, and performative interaction within digital environments. This transformation reflects a shift from hierarchical and institution-centred authority towards a more participatory, affective, and

mediatised form of religious authority. At the same time, this transformation also creates new challenges related to misleading authority, religious disinformation, and the increasing dominance of performative visibility within digital religious environments.

The findings also highlight that audiences play an active role in constructing and validating religious authority in digital spaces. Rather than functioning merely as passive recipients of religious messages, digitally-engaged Muslim student participate in evaluating, selecting, and negotiating the legitimacy of da'i through patterns of interaction, engagement, and content verification. This condition indicates the growing importance of digital religious literacy, particularly among young Muslim audiences, as the abundance of online religious content requires critical skills in assessing the credibility, authenticity, and contextual relevance of religious messages circulating across social media platforms.

These findings also carry important implications for da'wah education institutions, particularly Islamic higher education programmes such as Da'wah Management. Contemporary da'i are no longer required only to master religious knowledge and public speaking skills, but also to develop digital communication competence, ethical media literacy, audience engagement strategies, and the ability to communicate Islamic teachings contextually within rapidly changing digital environments. Therefore, da'wah education curricula need to integrate digital communication studies, social media ethics, and critical digital literacy in order to prepare future da'i who are capable of building responsible and credible religious authority in the contemporary mediatic landscape.

This study remains context-specific, as the participants were limited to Da'wah Management students from one Islamic higher education institution, namely IAIN Kerinci. In addition, the study did not specifically differentiate social media platforms used by participants, since most informants referred to social media in general rather than identifying particular platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram. Consequently, future studies are encouraged to conduct comparative research across different Islamic higher education institutions and sociocultural contexts to examine whether similar patterns of authority construction emerge among broader Muslim audiences. Further research may also explore platform-specific dynamics of religious authority, longitudinal shifts in audience preferences toward digital da'i, and the development of digital religious literacy practices among Muslim youth in

navigating online religious content.

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