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Research Article

“Media Life” and Islamic Da’wah: Shifts in Religious Literacy Patterns in the Digital Space

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Abstract

Background: As media become embedded in everyday life—what scholars describe as media life—the circulation of Islamic knowledge is increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures that challenge traditional forms of authority and preaching (dakwah). **Purpose:** This study analyzes how Islamic dakwah practices evolve within media life, with particular attention to emerging forms of religious literacy shaped by digital platforms. **Method:** Using a qualitative descriptive approach through netnography, the study observes online interactions, discourse production, and audience engagement across selected digital platforms, emphasizing how media affordances and algorithms mediate the circulation and reinterpretation of Islamic messages. **Results:** The findings demonstrate three major transformations. First, dakwah content increasingly shifts from traditional oral–textual formats to algorithmically curated digital narratives, such as short-form videos and meme-based interpretations. Second, religious literacy becomes participatory, with audiences actively remixing, reframing, and redistributing Islamic messages through comments, duets, stitches, and creative digital production. Third, online environments intensify the contestation of religious authority, as nontraditional actors—including influencers, content creators, and anonymous users—gain visibility comparable to ulama, thereby destabilizing established hierarchies of Islamic knowledge. **Conclusion:** These transformations highlight the need for renewed frameworks of religious literacy that integrate digital competence, critical awareness, and ethical engagement within contemporary Islamic communication.

Keywords: digital religion; Islamic da’wah; media life; religious literacy; digital space

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital media ecosystems in the Big Data era has significantly transformed social, cultural, and religious practices worldwide. For Muslim communities, digital platforms have evolved from being mere tools of communication into dynamic arenas for the articulation, negotiation, and contestation of Islamic values. Scholars have observed that digital media not only expand the scope of *dakwah* (Islamic

preaching) but also alter its epistemological foundations, affecting how authority, authenticity, and participation are defined in Islamic discourse (Campbell and Tsuria 2021; Bunt 2000)

However, the integration of media into everyday life—what Deuze (2014) conceptualizes as media life—poses a double-edged phenomenon. On one hand, it democratizes access to religious knowledge, empowering individuals to participate in religious interpretation beyond traditional clerical boundaries. On the other hand, it risks fragmenting religious authority and diluting theological depth in favour of popularity and visibility. This duality remains central to debates on digital religion and Islamic communication. While some scholars view media integration as a form of religious renewal and inclusivity (Cheong 2012; Campbell 2010), others warn of a “mediated religiosity” where algorithms and influencer culture displace traditional authority (Echchaibi 2011; Hjarvard 2008)

Contrasting perspectives emerge regarding the implications of digitalization for Islamic authority. Bunt (2018) argues that cyberspace fosters “cyber-Islamic environments” where traditional scholars coexist with, but often lose influence to, lay preachers and digital influencers who operate within algorithmic systems of visibility. Conversely, Hepp et al. (2010) emphasize that digital technologies can serve as extensions of traditional institutions, enabling ulama and Islamic organizations to reach broader audiences without necessarily undermining their authority. This tension between decentralization and adaptation highlights that media integration is not uniformly disruptive—it can simultaneously challenge and reinforce established hierarchies, depending on how religious actors engage with digital infrastructures.

Another strand of scholarship challenges the assumption that digital media automatically democratize religious interpretation. Noble (2020) and Gillespie (2019) argue that algorithmic systems privilege certain types of content, often favouring sensational or emotionally charged messages, thus shaping public religiosity through mechanisms beyond theological control. In contrast, Campbell and Evolvi (2020) contend that believers exercise religious agency by strategically using media to preserve authenticity while engaging with modern communication forms. These divergent perspectives underscore the need to examine how Islamic communities negotiate between algorithmic logics and religious norms within specific sociocultural contexts.

Despite growing research on digital religion, the intersection of media life and Islamic religious literacy remains underexplored. Most studies focus either on institutional authority or on user participation, without fully addressing how the embeddedness of media in everyday life reshapes literacy itself—how Muslims read, interpret, and disseminate Islamic messages in digital environments. Moreover, while Western scholarship has richly discussed individualized identity negotiations in online religion (Brubaker and Haigh 2017), less attention has been paid to collective and pedagogical contexts such as *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), where media engagement is mediated by tradition and communal learning.

This study addresses that gap by examining how media life transforms Islamic *dakwah* and religious literacy among *santri* (*Pesantren* students) in digital spaces. It explores three interrelated dimensions: (1) the transformation of *dakwah* content from conventional oral and textual forms to algorithm-driven digital narratives; (2) the rise of participatory religious literacy, where audiences actively reproduce and reinterpret Islamic messages; and (3) the contestation and hybridization of religious authority in algorithmic environments. By situating these transformations within the media life framework, this

research seeks to balance optimism about digital participation with critical attention to how power, authority, and meaning are reconfigured in the age of algorithms.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive orientation to explore the transformation of Islamic *dakwah* and religious literacy within digital environments. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of meaning-making, communicative practices, and audience engagement that cannot be captured through quantitative measures. The descriptive focus allowed the researcher to portray the lived realities of Muslim university students as they engage with Islamic messages in digital spaces.

The research population consisted of Muslim students with a *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) background, hereafter referred to as *mahasantri*. They were chosen because they occupy a unique intersection between traditional Islamic education and modern higher education, thus providing a vibrant context for understanding how digital religious literacy develops. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who actively interacted with Islamic content on social media platforms, frequently participated in online religious discussions, and demonstrated familiarity with algorithmic patterns that influence the visibility of religious messages. This ensured that both content creators and consumers within the digital *dakwah* ecosystem were adequately represented.

Data were collected using a netnographic approach adapted from Kozinets (2009), which transfers the principles of ethnography into online environments. Through this method, the researcher conducted observations of digital activities and interactions occurring within platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups. In adapting Kozinets’ framework, particular attention was paid to algorithmic mediation—how recommendation systems, trending mechanisms, and platform analytics shape what content is seen, shared, and discussed. This adjustment was necessary to reflect the reality that digital *dakwah* today operates within algorithmically curated environments rather than open, neutral spaces.

As qualitative research inevitably involves the researcher as an interpretive instrument, reflexivity was a central part of this process. The principal researcher’s dual background in *Pesantren* education and communication studies created a position that was simultaneously insider and outsider. This dual perspective facilitated deep empathetic engagement with participants’ experiences while maintaining critical awareness of interpretive bias. Throughout data collection and analysis, reflexive notes were kept to record the researcher’s assumptions, emotional responses, and decision-making processes. This practice was essential in ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants’ experiences rather than shaped by the researcher’s preconceptions.

The data analysis process employed thematic coding that combined inductive discovery with theoretical framing. Initial open coding identified recurring ideas and patterns related to digital *dakwah* practices, literacy engagement, and the negotiation of religious authority. These emergent codes were then refined into broader thematic categories aligned with theoretical concepts from media life (Deuze 2014) and digital religion studies (Campbell and Tsuria 2021). Triangulation was applied across data sources—comparing insights from multiple digital platforms and participant groups—to strengthen the consistency and reliability of the findings. Validation of interpretations was conducted through member checks, in which several participants were invited to review preliminary

analyses and provide feedback on whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions with other scholars in Islamic communication and media studies were held to ensure analytical rigor and challenge potential biases. An audit trail consisting of coding records, memos, and reflexive journals was maintained to enhance transparency and allow external verification of the research process.

Despite its strengths, this methodological design is not without limitations. One limitation lies in platform dependence; the study focused primarily on YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp, thus excluding potentially relevant platforms such as TikTok or Telegram, where different audience behaviors may emerge. Another limitation concerns temporal scope, as the netnographic observation occurred within a specific period, which restricts the ability to capture the longitudinal evolution of digital *dakwah* trends. Researcher subjectivity also remains an inherent feature of qualitative inquiry; although reflexivity and triangulation were employed to mitigate bias, complete neutrality is neither achievable nor desirable in interpretive research. Furthermore, the opacity of algorithmic systems limits the depth of analysis regarding how specific platform logics influence message circulation, since the algorithms themselves are proprietary and not directly observable.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the credibility of the findings. On the contrary, the study’s commitment to methodological transparency, reflexive awareness, and rigorous validation strengthens its contribution to understanding how media life mediates religious communication. By acknowledging both the opportunities and constraints inherent in studying digital environments, this research provides a credible and contextually grounded portrayal of how *mahasantri* negotiate Islamic literacy and authority in an increasingly algorithmic and participatory digital landscape.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal three central transformations in the practice of Islamic *dakwah* among *santri* students in digital spaces. First, there has been a notable shift from conventional oral and textual preaching to algorithm-driven narratives that circulate within social media ecosystems. This finding aligns with global trends in the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard 2008), yet it also bears specific characteristics shaped by Indonesia’s vibrant digital culture. In Indonesia—the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy—digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become key arenas for religious expression, where clerics, preachers, and lay Muslims engage in the production and circulation of Islamic knowledge (Syarif and Hannan 2022). The phenomenon of “*ustadz digital*,” for instance, demonstrates how Islamic messages are increasingly structured by algorithms that prioritize engagement and virality over institutional affiliation. This supports the argument that in Indonesia’s context, *dakwah* is not only mediated but also co-produced by digital infrastructures.

Second, the study identified the rise of participatory religious literacy among *santri* students. Rather than remaining passive recipients of religious instruction, they actively reinterpret, remix, and redistribute Islamic teachings through their social networks. This finding resonates with Campbell and Evolvi’s (2020) concept of participatory digital religion but takes on distinctive forms within the Indonesian *Pesantren* milieu. In Southeast Asian contexts, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, the communal and pedagogical traditions of *Pesantren* education foster a collective mode of digital participation rather than purely individualistic engagement (Fealy et al. 2008; Rosowulan et al. 2025). For example, *santri* groups often use WhatsApp and Telegram channels to collectively discuss sermons, share

tausiyah (short religious reflections), or organize online study circles. Such practices indicate that digital participation among Indonesian *santri* maintains a strong link to traditional pedagogical ethics, where *tafaquh fi al-din* (deep understanding of religion) is pursued collaboratively rather than competitively. These findings situate participatory religious literacy not as a departure from tradition, but as an adaptive extension of the *halaqah* (study circle) ethos into digital spaces.

Third, the study highlights the ongoing contestation of religious authority within online environments. While traditional clerical figures continue to exert symbolic influence, *santri* students increasingly acknowledge alternative sources of authority, such as social media influencers and charismatic youth preachers who speak the language of their generation. This hybridization of authority mirrors Bunt’s (2018) notion of “cyber-Islamic environments” but is nuanced by Indonesia’s sociocultural context, where the coexistence of ulama *Pesantren*, dai muda (young preachers), and celebrity *ustadz* reflects both democratization and commercialization of religious discourse. Empirical studies by Husein and Slama (2018) similarly demonstrate that Indonesian Muslims navigate a pluralized authority structure where authenticity is negotiated not solely through textual mastery but also through perceived sincerity, accessibility, and online reputation. In this sense, digital authority is relational and affective, grounded in audience trust rather than institutional certification.

The intersection between media life and Islamic literacy in Indonesia also reveals broader regional dynamics within Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, for example, studies by Mokhtar et al (2023) show similar transformations where *dakwah* movements increasingly rely on algorithmic visibility, while the Philippines and Brunei illustrate varying degrees of digital adaptation shaped by linguistic and political factors. Indonesia, however, stands out for the scale of its digital religious engagement—often described as “Islamic cyber publics” (Lim 2017)—where online discussions about faith intertwine with debates on morality, identity, and nationhood. The empirical patterns observed among *santri* thus reflect a broader Southeast Asian shift toward what Nisa (2018) terms digital piety: the use of media technologies not merely to consume religious knowledge, but to embody and perform piety within algorithmic environments.

From a theoretical perspective, these empirical insights reinforce Deuze’s concept of media life, which posits that media are no longer external tools but constitutive environments that shape social and spiritual existence. For Indonesian *santri*, digital platforms are not peripheral spaces but integral arenas of religious learning and identity negotiation. Their engagement exemplifies a form of embedded religiosity, where Islamic discourse and media practices are mutually constitutive. This finding suggests that the transformation of *dakwah* in Southeast Asia cannot be understood without acknowledging how religious communities inhabit and reinterpret the media infrastructures of everyday life.

Nevertheless, the Indonesian case also highlights a critical tension between democratization and discipline. While digital media enable broader participation and alternative voices in *dakwah*, they also risk producing fragmented interpretations detached from traditional scholarly rigor. This tension echoes regional debates about the commodification of Islam in digital markets, where religious content is often packaged for attention economies (Hoesterey, 2016). Therefore, the challenge for Islamic educators and policymakers lies in fostering digital literacy that is both participatory and grounded in *adab* (ethical discipline).

Situating the study’s findings within the Indonesian and Southeast Asian context reveals that the transformation of *dakwah* under media life conditions is not merely a

technological shift but a socio-religious reconfiguration. The Indonesian experience demonstrates how traditional Islamic frameworks such as *Pesantren* culture, communal learning, and respect for ulama continue to shape digital religiosity even as new forms of authority and literacy emerge. This regional perspective affirms that Islamic communication in the digital era must be understood as both a product of global media logics and a continuation of local religious traditions that adapt creatively to the rhythms of contemporary media life.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Islamic *dakwah* in the era of media life has undergone a profound transformation. It is no longer confined to institutional or physical spaces such as mosques and classrooms, but is increasingly embedded within algorithmically mediated, participatory, and personalized digital environments. The findings reveal that *santri* students actively engage in the reinterpretation and circulation of Islamic messages online, navigate hybrid forms of authority that merge traditional and digital legitimacy, and embody a new form of participatory religious literacy shaped by both *Pesantren* values and platform logics.

Beyond its theoretical implications, these findings hold significant practical relevance for religious educators, policymakers, and designers of digital literacy programs. For educators within *Pesantren* and Islamic higher education institutions, the results underscore the importance of cultivating critical digital literacy—not merely teaching how to use technology, but guiding students to engage with digital content ethically, reflectively, and theologically. For policymakers and Islamic organizations, the findings highlight the urgent need to formulate regulatory and pedagogical frameworks that balance openness to innovation with safeguards against misinformation, commercialization, and algorithmic bias in religious communication. For digital literacy programs, this study provides empirical grounding to design initiatives that are culturally embedded, responsive to religious contexts, and aimed at strengthening interpretive skills rather than passive consumption.

Drawing from these insights, this study proposes a “Digital-Integrated Religious Literacy Framework (DIRL Framework)” for integrating digital literacy into Islamic education. The framework consists of four interrelated stages designed for long-term application and evaluation: Awareness Stage (Recognizing Media Life), Critical Engagement Stage (Evaluating Digital Content), Creative Production Stage (Participatory *Dakwah*), Reflective Integration Stage (Sustainability and Evaluation),

Institutions periodically evaluate students’ digital engagement and literacy development through reflective assessments, feedback sessions, and digital portfolios. The goal is to ensure that digital literacy is not a one-time skill but an evolving competency integrated into lifelong religious learning.

The DIRL Framework can be implemented through curriculum integration within *Pesantren*, university Islamic studies programs, or community-based *dakwah* organizations. Policymakers may use it to develop national guidelines for digital religious literacy that align with ethical media practices and the goals of religious moderation (*wasathiyah* Islam). Continuous evaluation should be carried out using mixed methods—combining surveys, content analysis, and digital ethnography—to monitor the framework’s impact on learners’ interpretive ability, ethical conduct, and civic responsibility in digital spaces.

In conclusion, the study contributes to both the theory and praxis of digital religion by situating Islamic *dakwah* within the lived realities of media life. By highlighting the active role of *santri* students in negotiating religious meaning through digital infrastructures, it

shows that the future of Islamic communication lies not in resisting technology but in humanizing it—embedding ethical, critical, and participatory values into the digital ecosystems where faith is increasingly performed. Through collaboration between educators, policymakers, and digital media practitioners, the integration of digital literacy into religious education can ensure that the next generation of Muslims navigates the digital public sphere with wisdom, integrity, and compassion.

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