

Strategic Da'wah Communication in the Digital Age: A Critical Analysis of Media Narratives in Addressing Religious Liberalism in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The digital sphere has evolved from a platform of open discourse into a contested battlefield where religious liberalism increasingly infiltrates traditional Islamic narratives. In Malaysia, this phenomenon has eroded the hegemony of institutional religious authority, creating societal friction that official bodies struggle to manage. While existing literature acknowledges this shift, there is a critical lack of strategic frameworks that dissect the communicative failures of da'wah institutions. This conceptual paper employs a rigorous, library-based critical analysis—likened to an intellectual archaeology—to examine the rhetorical strategies within state-sanctioned policy papers, digital sermons, and theological academic discourse. By synthesizing critical media theory with Islamic da'wah principles, this study diagnoses three systemic failures in current da'wah efforts: (1) a reactive *modus operandi* where institutions merely respond to liberal controversies rather than setting the agenda; (2) an epistemological mismatch between the nuance required for theological rebuttal and the superficiality rewarded by social media algorithms; and (3) a failure to navigate algorithmic echo chambers which isolate orthodox narratives from target audiences. The findings indicate that religious liberalism succeeds online not merely as an ideology, but as a sophisticated communication strategy that leverages emotional resonance and personal autonomy—elements frequently absent in the rigid, top-down approach of official institutions. Consequently, this paper argues for a paradigm shift from a purely theological critique to a socio-digital da'wah strategy. This entails adopting decentralized, platform-specific narratives that prioritize digital literacy and psychological engagement over authoritative dictation. Acknowledging the limitations of this conceptual approach, the authors strongly recommend a follow-up mixed-methods study to validate this framework. Future research must integrate quantitative content analysis of online narratives with qualitative interviews of da'wah practitioners to empirically map the barriers to effective digital engagement. This roadmap offers a theoretical foundation for policymakers to reconstruct religious authority, ensuring it is pedagogically sound and resilient against the simplistic allure of digital liberalism.

Keywords: Da'wah, Religious Liberalism, Digital Narratives, Malaysia, Media Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital landscape has evolved far beyond a mere repository of information; it has morphed into a volatile "digital agora"—an unruly battlefield where the monopoly on religious truth is fiercely contested. In the context of Malaysia, a nation that delicately navigates the intersection of rapid modernization and its entrenched Islamic identity, this struggle is particularly acute. The digital sphere, once celebrated for its potential to democratize knowledge, has increasingly become a conduit for ideological fragmentation. Within this sprawling web, religious liberalism—often articulated through the sophisticated vernacular of human rights, inclusivity, and personal autonomy—has found fertile ground. This phenomenon is not merely a fringe occurrence; it represents a seismic shift that undermines centuries of established religious authority, challenging the traditional gatekeepers of Islamic thought with unsettling ease.

The core of this crisis lies in the asymmetry of communication. The sheer velocity of information dissemination on social media platforms renders traditional mechanisms of information control obsolete. In this hyper-accelerated environment, official pronouncements from religious bodies often suffer from a "chronic latency"; they arrive too late to shape the narrative or are simply drowned out by a cacophony of alternative, often heterodox, voices. Consequently, ideas that range from the subtle reinterpretation of foundational texts to the outright questioning of immutable Islamic tenets are proliferating unchecked. This rapid spread of liberal theological currents demands a response that is far more sophisticated and agile than what current da'wah approaches appear capable of providing. (Azmi, A. S. 2020)

This begs a fundamental question: Why has the traditional da'wah apparatus—despite its resources and institutional backing—struggled so profoundly to meet this contemporary challenge?. The answer appears to lie in a systemic misalignment. Religious institutions seem caught in a precarious limbo between ossified methodologies, which were designed for a slower, hierarchical world, and an ever-evolving digital zeitgeist that prizes speed, brevity, and emotional resonance. This disconnect leaves a significant strategic void. While the official machinery continues to churn out conventional sermons and rigid statements, the digital public sphere is being actively shaped by liberal narratives that are more adaptable to the algorithmic logic of modern platforms.

Despite the urgency of this issue, the existing body of academic literature reveals a glaring oversight. While numerous studies have catalogued the rise of digital religiosity or the general challenges of online da'wah, there remains a paucity of research that offers a deep, conceptual critique of the specific strategic communication failures inherent in addressing religious liberalism. Current scholarship frequently stops short of diagnosing why counter-narratives fail to gain traction against liberal theological currents specifically within the unique socio-religious milieu of Malaysia.

Such an omission represents a critical intellectual gap. It suggests that we have adequately described the symptoms of the problem but have yet to fully interrogate the underlying structural and strategic causes. Therefore, this conceptual study aims to address this lacuna. By moving beyond descriptive analysis, this paper seeks to dissect the rhetorical and strategic deficiencies of current da'wah efforts. It argues that without a radical re-evaluation of how religious authority engages with the digital sphere, the gap between institutional Islam and the lived digital reality of Muslims will continue to widen, with profound implications for the future of religious cohesion in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse surrounding da'wah in the digital epoch frequently oscillates between techno-utopian exuberance and a weary resignation to its perceived chaos. Early studies, for instance, often celebrated the internet as an unparalleled tool for proselytisation, democratising access to Islamic knowledge and fostering global Muslim solidarity (e.g., Bunt, 2018; Mandaville & Schwedler, 2018).

These scholars, arguably, prioritised reach over impact, overlooking the critical issue of narrative contestation. They assumed, perhaps naively, that mere presence equated to persuasive power. Yet, a closer inspection reveals a more fractured reality, particularly when considering the rise of what some term 'religious liberalism'—a movement often characterised by individualistic interpretations, a questioning of traditional authority, and a syncretic approach to faith and secular values (Shahid & Van Dijk, 2019).

Here, the initial optimism regarding digital da'wah begins to fray. The notion that a straightforward transmission of orthodox teachings would suffice against sophisticated, albeit often ill-informed, liberal arguments proves laughably simplistic. Indeed, the very structure of online spaces—algorithmic curation, echo chambers, and the prioritisation of sensationalism—often works against measured theological discourse (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018).

This presents a conceptual tension: is the digital realm a platform for propagation or a theatre of ideological conflict? While several authors have explored the general challenges of da'wah in the internet age (e.g., Siraj & Ahmad, 2019; Mohd Ariffin, 2021), few have critically interrogated the strategic communication failures of official religious institutions specifically when confronted with religious liberalism's digital manifestations in a context like Malaysia. The scholarship on Malaysian religious discourse, while rich in analyses of state

Islamisation and interfaith dialogue, frequently treats digital phenomena as an exogenous variable rather than an intrinsic, shaping force (Mohamad Zain, 2020). Moreover, the conceptualisation of 'religious liberalism' itself remains contentious. Some frame it as an insidious Western import (Abu Bakar & Mohamad Kamil, 2022), others as an internal theological evolution (Jamaludin, 2023). This differing understanding, naturally, informs the prescribed da'wah responses. If it is an external threat, then a defensive, even condemnatory, posture might be deemed appropriate; if an internal shift, perhaps dialogue and intellectual engagement become the preferred, though rarely adopted, path. One might suspect that official Malaysian da'wah often defaults to the former, neglecting the deeper, often legitimate, questions that drive some towards liberal interpretations.

There is also a body of work examining social media and identity formation among Muslim youth (Ahmed, 2020), which, while valuable, often skirts the difficult terrain of how these identities are influenced by, or actively engage with, religiously liberal narratives. The question of narrative efficacy—what makes a religious message resonate or repel in the online cacophony—remains woefully under-theorised in the Malaysian context when discussing contentious theological issues. Existing frameworks for strategic communication, largely drawn from marketing or political science, are not always perfectly transferable to the sensitive, doctrine-laden realm of religious discourse (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2020).

This leaves a palpable void, a conceptual lacuna where a rigorous, critical examination of da'wah's strategic shortcomings against religious liberalism should reside. We lack a coherent framework for understanding not just what is being communicated, but how it is received, reinterpreted, and resisted within the fragmented digital public sphere. Therefore, this paper seeks to build a more robust critical analysis, stepping beyond descriptive accounts to diagnose the deeper strategic communication missteps. It contends that a superficial understanding of digital dynamics, coupled with a rigid adherence to traditional methodologies, leaves da'wah vulnerable to the agile and often persuasive arguments of religious liberalism online.

METHODOLOGY

This inquiry, by its very nature, demands a rigorous intellectual excavation rather than empirical data collection. Our methodology is purely conceptual, a meticulous library-based analysis, painstakingly constructed to forge a critical framework for understanding strategic da'wah communication in the digital age. We did not survey; we did not interview; we instead immersed ourselves in the intricate theoretical and practical underpinnings of digital religious discourse. The objective was not to quantify phenomena, but to diagnose systemic conceptual shortcomings, an exercise far more suited to sustained intellectual engagement with texts than fleeting field observations. Our approach can be likened to an intellectual archaeology, sifting through layers of academic literature, theological pronouncements, and policy documents to unearth the hidden assumptions and inherent contradictions within prevailing da'wah strategies. We deliberately discarded any notion of a 'systematic review' in the sense of rigid inclusion/exclusion criteria often found in quantitative meta-analyses; such a mechanical process would undoubtedly stifle the nuanced, interpretative work required here. Instead, our selection process was organic, informed by an iterative engagement with the literature. We commenced with seminal texts on da'wah and digital Islam, then branched out to critical theories of media, narrative, and religious authority, particularly those addressing contemporary challenges to orthodoxy. Crucially, we prioritised works that grappled with the Malaysian context, or at least provided robust theoretical tools applicable to it. We intentionally sought out contrasting perspectives, particularly those critical of mainstream religious institutions or which offered alternative readings of religious liberalism, eschewing any temptation to remain solely within a selfreinforcing echo chamber of existing theological consensus. This ensured a robust, critical dialogue with the material. The analysis itself proceeded through several cycles of reading, coding for emerging themes, and then synthesizing these themes into coherent conceptual arguments. For instance, we meticulously tracked instances where religious authorities articulated their digital strategies, comparing these stated goals with observable outcomes or criticisms levied against them. We scrutinised the language employed in digital da'wah materials, examining rhetorical devices, framing strategies, and the implicit theological stances they conveyed. This detailed textual dissection allowed us to identify patterns of engagement—or, more often, disengagement—with the tenets of religious liberalism. The process was far from linear. There were moments of intellectual frustration, false starts, and necessary re-evaluations as our understanding deepened. We continually asked: how does this author's argument illuminate the strategic communication challenge? What implicit biases might be at play? Where do the theoretical gaps lie? Our aim was to build a robust conceptual framework that not only critiques current practices but also offers a theoretical basis for more effective future interventions. This

framework is not a prescriptive 'how-to' guide; rather, it is a diagnostic tool, providing a lens through which the complexities of strategic da'wah in a digitally fragmented world can be understood, and hopefully, navigated with greater intellectual rigour and strategic foresight.

RESULTS

Erosion of Authority and Fragmentation of Religious Discourse in the Digital Ecosphere The main findings of this study reveal that the digital environment has triggered a critical phenomenon of fragmentation of religious authority, where the monopoly of official da'wah institutions over religious interpretation is now significantly eroded. Official da'wah narratives, traditionally designed for a "top-down" flow of information, are now found to be faltering under the pressure of an abundance of alternative voices in cyberspace.

This disaggregation of authority means that the image of religious institutions, once considered singular and definitive, is now continuously challenged, reinterpreted, or openly rejected, not only by rival scholars but also by "self-proclaimed experts" and anonymous commentators. The overwhelming volume of content causes the general public to fail to distinguish between genuine scholarship and ideological posturing, thereby diluting the impact of the actual da'wah message.

Consequently, the traditional hierarchy of knowledge becomes blurred, placing the views of muftis or ulama on par with social media influencers in the free market of ideas. **Reactive Modus Operandi: Delayed Response of Da'wah Institutions** Analysis of communication patterns reveals that institutional da'wah strategies are largely trapped in a reactive and defensive modus operandi, likened to "firefighters" who only act after the fire has spread.

The findings indicate the absence of a proactive narrative framework capable of shaping discourse (agenda-setting) or preempting liberal arguments before they go viral. Instead, official responses often appear as belated, rigid rebuttals lacking the agility required to compete in fast-moving online debates. These reactive campaigns often devolve into simplistic condemnations that fail to address the philosophical questions or existential doubts that attract society to liberalism. This approach not only fails to satisfy the intellectual thirst of the target audience but also risks alienating those genuinely seeking answers, thereby pushing them further into unmonitored alternative digital spaces. **Epistemological Mismatch: Theological Depth vs. Platform Superficiality** This study also identifies a significant gap, or mismatch, between the need for theological depth to counter liberal arguments and the nature of social media platforms that prioritize superficiality. Serious theological discourse requires context, mastery of turath texts, and strict hermeneutical discipline, yet these elements are difficult to translate into a digital ecosystem that rewards brevity, sensationalism, and "soundbites."

The findings indicate that sophisticated scholarly refutations often fail to gain traction due to the perception that they are too ponderous or irrelevant, whereas cynical criticisms of religious orthodoxy more easily gain attention through viral dissemination. This mismatch between medium and message causes genuine da'wah narratives to lose out in terms of visibility and appeal compared to liberal narratives packaged with more emotional and easily digestible rhetoric. **Algorithmic Traps and Failure of Cross-Ideological Dialogue** The architecture of digital platforms is found to play a fundamental role in hindering the effectiveness of da'wah communication. Through engagement optimization mechanisms, digital platforms inadvertently foster the formation of "echo chambers" where users' existing beliefs are reinforced while differing views are filtered or blocked by algorithms.

Consequently, those inclined towards religious liberalism are rarely exposed to official da'wah narratives in a meaningful way, and vice versa. This situation creates a phenomenon of "dialogue of the deaf," where interaction between the two parties is merely a clash of egos without healthy intellectual exchange. This technology, which prioritizes affinity over truth, makes ideological shifts or mutual understanding increasingly impossible to achieve, allowing liberal narratives to proliferate within target groups without effective challenge. **Neglect of Psychosocial Dimensions in Da'wah Narratives** Finally, content analysis reveals that current da'wah strategies suffer from "emotional blindness" towards the psychological and sociological drivers that make liberalism appealing to certain segments of society.

The attraction to liberalism often stems not merely from theological disagreements, but rather from a desire for autonomy, inclusivity, and the formation of a self-identity aligned with modern frameworks. However, official da'wah narratives are found to be overly focused on doctrinal corrections and religious rulings, without

acknowledging or addressing these deep human aspirations. This neglect of the emotional landscape and lived realities of the audience causes *da'wah* arguments, though factually true from a religious perspective, to fail to resonate with the target audience. This void is then easily filled by liberal narratives which, despite being problematic from a creedal standpoint, offer a more empathetic approach and celebrate individual freedom.

DISCUSSION

The Paradox of Connectivity and the Erosion of Religious Authority

The findings of this study reveal a disquieting paradox within the contemporary *da'wah* landscape: as access to religious information expands exponentially, the capacity of official institutions to guide the normative understanding of society appears to shrink dramatically. This reality signals a critical juncture for the future of religious authority in Malaysia. We are witnessing a tectonic shift from a model of "centralised authority"—where religious institutions held a monopoly on truth—to a model of "dispersed authority," where truth is openly negotiated within the marketplace of digital ideas.

This study suggests that the reactive posture frequently adopted by official *da'wah* institutions, though born of a genuine intent to safeguard creedal principles, has inadvertently ceded the strategic initiative to their ideological adversaries. By merely responding to liberal narratives, rather than proactively defining and shaping the parameters of a healthy religious discourse (*agenda-setting*), the official institutional voice remains trapped in a perpetually defensive position. This points to a fundamental misapprehension of the digital media ecosystem. Religious institutions appear to operate under the assumption that the status quo of traditional authority still commands absolute respect; whereas, in the cyber realm, respect must be earned through intellectual agility and engagement, not merely through institutional mandate.

Religious Liberalism as a Communication Strategy, Not Merely an Ideology

A critical point of discussion often overlooked is the fact that religious liberalism, in its online manifestation, is not merely a collection of problematic or deviant ideas; it is a potent communication strategy. The analysis indicates that proponents of liberal narratives understand the psychology of virality, the power of personal testimonies, and the art of framing complex issues into packages that are easily digestible and emotionally resonant. Conversely, traditional *da'wah* remains tethered to formalistic approaches—lengthy sermons, rigid media statements, and heavy textual explication—which fail to translate effectively onto platforms that demand brevity and interactivity.

This situation triggers a significant theoretical failure. Established theories of religious communication, typically predicated on a hierarchical model where learned scholars guide a passive laity, fail catastrophically when confronted with a digital public that is fragmented, decentralised, and critical. The concept of a "singular religious voice" may well be an anachronism in this new landscape. Yet, official institutions seem to cling to this obsolete model with a tenacity that borders on self-sabotage. The failure to adapt to the *Fiqh alWaqi'* (understanding of current reality) of the digital world renders the *da'wah* narrative increasingly isolated from the pulse of society.

The Intellectual Dilemma: Between Scholarly Authenticity and Digital Populism

The intellectual chasm identified in this study—between the need for nuanced theological discourse and the shallowness of online rhetoric—presents a profound challenge to any institution attempting to assert intellectual leadership in the virtual realm. It forces *da'wah* practitioners to face a difficult choice: either simplify profound theological arguments to gain traction (risking intellectual dishonesty) or maintain scholarly rigour (accepting the reality of marginalisation in popular discourse).

Evidence from the study suggests that official *da'wah* often, consciously or otherwise, opts for the former. This results in arguments that are excessively simplified or reductionist, ultimately lacking the intellectual gravitas required to convince those swayed by more "open" liberal interpretations. This process of the "dumbing down" of religion, or the "McDonaldization of Da'wah," is dangerous because it fails to build genuine creedal resilience. When social media users are presented with black-and-white answers without the philosophical discussions

underpinning the rulings, they become easily shaken when confronted with liberal critiques that employ humanistic logic or rights-based arguments that sound rational.

Algorithmic Determinism and Echo Chambers

Furthermore, this discussion is incomplete without addressing the insidious nature of algorithmic "echo chambers." This is not merely a technical detail, but a fundamental re-engineering of public discourse. If individuals are exposed only to content that reinforces their existing biases—a phenomenon known as automated confirmation bias—then the possibility of rational persuasion or intellectual shift becomes extremely slim. This means that *da'wah* efforts, regardless of the quality of their content, face a dead end in reaching their target audience if that audience is already enclosed within a filter bubble leaning towards liberalism.

The effectiveness of communication strategy now hinges entirely on the ability to penetrate these digital walls. Therefore, the discussion must pivot from merely condemning religious liberalism to understanding its digital appeal, its rhetorical sophistication, and the structural advantages it gains from platform design. *Da'wah* narratives must be designed not only to be read by the faithful but to "manipulate" or "hack" the algorithm so that they cross ideological borders and appear on the feeds of those with differing views.

Towards a Socio-Digital Approach in Da'wah

The implications of this discussion demand a paradigm shift: from a purely theological critique to a sociodigital critique. Faith formation and ideological persuasion are now deeply entangled with media literacy and algorithmic influence. The inclination towards liberalism is often driven by psychological needs for autonomy, identity, and a sense of belonging offered by online liberal communities. Official *da'wah* frequently fails to address this human dimension, focusing instead too heavily on the legalistic dimension (halal/haram).

Thus, without a radical overhaul of strategic thinking that encompasses both content (messages that are more empathetic and *maqasid*-based) and distribution methods (utilising big data and algorithmic understanding), institutional *da'wah* will continue to flounder. We will continue to witness alternative narratives dominating the public mind. This study concludes that the primary problem lies not in the "truth" of the *da'wah* message itself, but in the failure of "packaging" and "delivery" within a communicative environment that is hostile and often misunderstood. The future of *da'wah* in Malaysia depends on the ability of religious scholars (*agamawan*) to become not just guardians of sacred texts, but also strategic and authoritative architects of digital discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study has traversed the contested terrain of the digital public sphere, revealing that the proliferation of religious liberalism in Malaysia is not merely a theological challenge, but a symptom of a profound strategic communication deficit within established religious institutions. Our analysis highlights a critical misalignment: while the digital ecosystem rewards agility, emotional resonance, and decentralized engagement, official *da'wah* narratives remain tethered to a "reactive modus operandi" and an outdated model of centralized authority. We have argued that the current crisis is exacerbated by an "epistemological mismatch," where the depth of scholarly theological tradition is lost in translation when pitted against the algorithmic preference for superficial, emotionally charged rhetoric. Furthermore, the architecture of digital platforms—specifically the formation of echo chambers—serves to insulate liberal narratives from orthodox rebuttal, creating a fragmented religious landscape where meaningful intellectual exchange is stifled.

The implications of these findings are stark. A continued reliance on these ossified methodologies will not only fail to curb the rise of heterodox ideas but will actively deepen the crisis of religious authority, allowing alternative narratives to become the dominant frame of reference for the digital generation. Therefore, this paper calls for a radical paradigm shift: the transition from a purely theological critique to a "socio-digital" *da'wah* strategy. This approach prioritizes strategic ingenuity over censorship, advocating for content that is not only doctrinally sound but also pedagogically adapted to the psychological and algorithmic realities of the 21st century.

Recognizing the limitations of this conceptual inquiry, the path forward demands robust empirical validation. Future scholarship must pivot toward mixed-methods approaches to test the framework proposed here.

Specifically, researchers should pursue experimental designs to measure the efficacy of platform-specific da'wah strategies—analyzing variables such as narrative framing and emotional appeal—to determine what truly resonates with youth demographics susceptible to liberal influences. Complementing this, qualitative inquiries into the "lived realities" of these youths are essential to move beyond abstract critique and understand the genuine motivations driving their engagement with liberal religious currents.

Ultimately, the stakes extend far beyond academic discourse. If the custodians of faith persist in engaging a complex digital challenge with "20th-century analogue tools," they risk overseeing an unprecedented and potentially irreversible fracturing of religious identity in Malaysia. Adaptation is no longer optional; it is the prerequisite for the survival of authoritative religious guidance in the digital age.

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