

Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Modern Da'wah Methods in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Da'wah in Southeast Asia is undergoing a profound transformation as traditional, institution-centred modes of Islamic propagation intersect with rapidly expanding digital forms of religious communication. While pesantren, pondok schools, and ulama-led networks have historically nurtured spiritually disciplined, community embedded, and epistemically coherent models of da'wah, the rise of social media has introduced new modalities characterised by decentralised authority, algorithmic visibility, and emotionally charged micro-content. This study employs a conceptual analysis framework to compare these divergent paradigms, drawing on a comprehensive body of scholarship spanning Islamic pedagogy, digital religion, and Southeast Asian anthropology. The findings reveal a widening gap between the depth-oriented, relational pedagogy of traditional da'wah and the breadth-oriented, attention-driven logic of digital da'wah. While digital platforms democratise access and enhance outreach, they also risk theological superficiality, ideological fragmentation, and the erosion of classical scholarly authority. Conversely, traditional methods maintain doctrinal integrity and foster durable communal bonds but struggle to engage digital-native generations. To reconcile these tensions, the study proposes a Hybrid Da'wah Integration Framework (HDIF) that combines digital outreach with structured mentorship, institutional verification, and community reintegration. The research underscores the need for adaptive yet grounded da'wah models that preserve theological authenticity while responding to contemporary communicative realities. Future research is encouraged to empirically evaluate hybrid initiatives and examine their long-term effects on spiritual formation, religious literacy, and community cohesion among Southeast Asian Muslims.

Keywords: Da'wah, Southeast Asia, Islamic Propagation, Digital Islam, Religious Authority

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

For centuries, da'wah in Southeast Asia has been deeply rooted in well-established religious institutions that served as the primary vehicles for transmitting Islamic knowledge and cultivating communal piety. In Indonesia, pesantren—traditional boarding schools centred around charismatic *kyai*—functioned not only as educational hubs but also as spaces for ethical formation and community leadership, shaping religious life across the archipelago (Bruinessen, 1999; Dhofier, 1999). Similarly, pondok institutions in Malaysia and southern Thailand have long preserved classical texts, Sufi pedagogies, and Shāfi'ī legal traditions, providing a stable scaffolding for intergenerational religious continuity (Abdullah, 2018; Yusoff, 2015). Throughout the Malay world more broadly, Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandiyya and Shādhiliyya played a pivotal historical role in anchoring da'wah practices within spiritual lineages characterised by mentorship, disciplined ritual training, and embodied models of piety (Azra, 2004). These institutional forms collectively upheld a system in which religious authority was centralised, pedagogically rigorous, and embedded within local community structures.

However, the rapid expansion of digital communications—especially social media—has profoundly disrupted these longstanding modalities of Islamic propagation. The emergence of what scholars call “digital Islam” introduces new patterns of religious consumption marked by decentralised authority, algorithmic visibility, and user-driven modes of engagement that bypass traditional scholarly gatekeeping (Bunt, 2018; Lim, 2019). Online preachers, influencers, and anonymous content creators now reach audiences across Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore with unprecedented speed, reshaping how Muslims learn, interpret, and embody their faith. This transformation raises fundamental questions about the durability of traditional pedagogical structures, the fragmentation of religious authority, and the shifting dynamics of spiritual socialisation in an era where religious meaning is increasingly mediated through screens rather than through lived communal experience (Weber, 2020; Mir-Hosseini, 2021).

Problem Statement

Although traditional and modern forms of da‘wah increasingly coexist within the religious landscape of Southeast Asia, scholarly engagement with the *tensions* between these two modes remains surprisingly limited. Much of the existing literature treats them as separate analytical domains—traditional da‘wah being examined through historical, institutional, or pedagogical lenses (Azra, 2004; Bruinessen, 1999), while modern digital da‘wah is explored primarily through studies of media consumption, online authority, and youth religiosity (Bunt, 2018; Lim, 2019; Weber, 2020). This bifurcated approach obscures the deeper theoretical and practical contradictions that arise when both systems operate simultaneously in the same social environment. For instance, traditional da‘wah relies on hierarchical structures of legitimate religious authority and long-term spiritual mentorship, whereas digital da‘wah decentralises authority and privileges immediacy, visibility, and emotional resonance—conditions that scholars describe as conducive to theological simplification and ideological volatility (Kadri, 2022; Mir-Hosseini, 2021). Moreover, while traditional institutions historically fostered cohesive, embodied communities rooted in shared rituals and face-to-face instruction, digital platforms tend to produce fragmented, individualised networks of belief that lack the stabilising influence of communal accountability (Turkle, 2011). The absence of comparative studies addressing how these contrasting modalities shape spiritual formation, community cohesion, and the risk of doctrinal fragmentation represents a critical gap in contemporary scholarship—one that this study seeks to confront directly.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How do traditional and modern da‘wah methods differ in their pedagogical approaches, authority structures, and communal impact in Southeast Asia?
2. What are the social and theological implications of the increasing dominance of digital da‘wah?
3. How can traditional and modern methods be integrated into a coherent hybrid model suited for contemporary Muslim communities?

Objectives of the Study

- To compare structural, pedagogical, and ideological characteristics of traditional vs. modern da‘wah.
- To analyse their consequences on religious authority, community life, and spiritual growth.
- To propose a hybridised da‘wah model informed by regional realities.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it advances scholarly understanding at the intersection of Islamic communication, digital religion, and Southeast Asian socio-religious transformation by offering a rare, integrated analytical framework for comparing traditional and modern da‘wah practices. Existing research on Southeast Asian Islam tends to adopt either a historical–institutional perspective that emphasises pesantren, pondok networks, and Sufi lineages (Azra, 2004; Bruinessen, 1999), or a digital-era perspective that focuses on

online preachers, algorithmic visibility, and the mediatisation of religious authority (Bunt, 2018; Lim, 2019; Weber, 2020). Few works, however, interrogate how these modalities interact, collide, or reshape one another within contemporary Muslim life. By directly addressing this gap, the present study provides a theoretical bridge between descriptive accounts of da'wah practices and the normative concerns raised by scholars regarding authenticity, fragmentation, and the erosion of traditional scholarly gatekeeping in digital environments (Kadri, 2022; Mir-Hosseini, 2021). The analysis thus contributes to broader debates on the future of religious authority, the pedagogical integrity of Islamic transmission, and the sustainability of communal cohesion in an era where religious engagement is increasingly individualised and digitally mediated (Tee & Hamim, 2022; Turkle, 2011). In doing so, the study offers both conceptual clarity and practical relevance for policymakers, religious institutions, and researchers seeking to navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of Islamic propagation in Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Da'wah in Southeast Asia

Traditional da'wah in Southeast Asia has been rooted in institutional and pedagogical frameworks that emphasise hierarchical authority, long-term moral formation, and embodied religious practice. Scholarship shows that religious transmission in the Malay-Indonesian world was closely tied to ulama-led institutions such as pesantren, pondok, and Sufi orders, which functioned as integrated socio-religious ecosystems rather than mere educational centres (Azra, 2004; Bruinessen, 1999; Feener, 2007). Central to this model was personalised mentorship between santri and kyai, shaping moral conduct, spiritual discipline, and social identity beyond formal instruction (Dhofier, 1999; Lukens-Bull, 2010). Textual mastery through the *kitab kuning* tradition, combined with communal rituals such as zikir, halaqah, and Friday sermons, reinforced collective responsibility and doctrinal continuity under ulama authority (Bruinessen, 1999; Feener, 2007; Noor, 2017).

However, this model faces structural constraints in contemporary contexts. Its slow, apprenticeship-based pedagogy limits scalability and engagement with urbanised, mobile, and digitally oriented youth (Abdullah, 2018). The relatively insular reach of pesantren and pondok institutions often confines influence to specific communities, while gendered institutional norms have, in some settings, restricted women's access to classical da'wah pathways (Feillard & Marcoes, 1998).

Modern and Digital Da'wah

Digital media has significantly transformed da'wah in Southeast Asia, giving rise to what scholars term "Digital Islam", characterised by online religious expression, mediated authority, and algorithm-driven communication (Bunt, 2018; Lim, 2019; Weber, 2020). Digital da'wah proliferates across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, where visually engaging and emotionally resonant content attracts youth audiences and blends spirituality with personal branding, producing hybrid forms of religiosity (Lim, 2019).

A central shift in this context is the decentralisation of religious authority. Traditional mechanisms of scholarly certification and institutional gatekeeping are often bypassed, as visibility and influence are shaped by algorithms, virality, and audience engagement rather than credentials (Weber, 2020). This enables broader access to religious discourse but also facilitates misinformation, theological oversimplification, and ungrounded interpretations of Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2021; Kadri, 2022).

The digital environment further prioritises brevity, affect, and visual appeal, encouraging the reduction of complex Islamic teachings into simplified, shareable formats (Bunt, 2018). Such practices risk theological reductionism, where depth and contextualisation are sacrificed for viral reach, potentially leading to shallow forms of religiosity among digital-native audiences (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009).

Additionally, platform algorithms reinforce echo chambers and ideological homogeneity, limiting exposure to diverse scholarly perspectives and intensifying polarisation (Törnberg, 2018). This dynamic has been linked to identity-driven and fragmented online religiosities shaped by charismatic influencers rather than communal pedagogical traditions (Hirschkind, 2012; Tee & Hamim, 2022). Despite these challenges, digital da'wah also

expands access to religious knowledge and youth engagement, particularly during periods of social disruption, though concerns over authority, commodification, and doctrinal authenticity remain salient (Scharbrodt, 2021).

Shifts in Religious Authority

Digital technologies have significantly restructured religious authority in Southeast Asian Muslim societies. Traditionally, Islamic authority was grounded in pesantren lineages, Shāfiʿī jurisprudential training, and state institutions such as fatwa councils, ensuring hierarchical verification and disciplinary rigour (Azra, 2004; Feener, 2007). The expansion of social media, however, has disrupted these mechanisms by enabling individuals without formal scholarly training to disseminate religious interpretations widely, thereby destabilising classical modes of validation (Kadri, 2022; Mir-Hosseini, 2021).

In digital spaces, authority is increasingly shaped by charisma, visibility, and audience engagement rather than scholarly credentials or lineage (Weber, 2020). This contrasts sharply with pesantren and pondok traditions, where authority is earned through prolonged study and communal recognition (Bruinessen, 1999; Lukens-Bull, 2010). Consequently, alternative figures such as influencers and lifestyle preachers now compete with, and sometimes overshadow, traditional ulama, reshaping perceptions of authenticity and trust (Abidin, 2018).

Institutional oversight has also weakened. Established bodies such as Indonesia's Majelis Ulama Indonesia and state fatwa institutions in Malaysia and Brunei increasingly compete with digital preachers operating outside formal control, while pesantren networks face erosion of the teacher–student bond that once ensured doctrinal coherence (Dhofier, 1999; Noor, 2017; Osman, 2021). Algorithmic logics further complicate authority by privileging emotionally charged or sensational content over epistemic reliability, producing a pluralised and unstable religious marketplace with limited mechanisms of scholarly adjudication (Törnberg, 2018; MirHosseini, 2021).

These transformations contribute to polarisation, individualised religiosity, and sectarian tendencies across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Hamid, 2014; Slama & Barendregt, 2018), while simultaneously democratising religious discourse by enabling greater participation from women and youth—highlighting the ambivalent and multi-directional nature of authority in the digital age (Scharbrodt, 2021).

Community Cohesion and Identity

Community cohesion has traditionally underpinned Islamic life in Southeast Asia, where religious identity was cultivated through shared rituals, embodied relationships, and intergenerational transmission within mosques, pesantren, and neighbourhood associations (Hefner, 2001; Lukens-Bull, 2010). Traditional daʿwah operated within these communal settings, fostering belonging, moral accountability, and social solidarity through collective practices that generated emotional synchrony and cohesion (Collins, 2004).

The expansion of digital daʿwah, however, shifts religious engagement toward individualised, screen-mediated environments. Online interactions may simulate community but often lack the depth and reciprocity of physical bonds, enabling personalised religious consumption while reducing communal obligation and corrective oversight (Turkle, 2011; Campbell, 2012; Campbell, 2013). In Southeast Asia, digital daʿwah communities increasingly resemble loose, affective networks or “virtual ummah” formations detached from local mosques and pesantren, a trend reinforced by algorithmic filtering that limits exposure to diverse perspectives and intensifies fragmentation (Slama & Barendregt, 2018; Törnberg, 2018).

This shift risks eroding the social capital traditionally generated by Islamic communal life, as digital ties often remain weak or transient and fail to translate into sustained communal support (Putnam, 2000; Hampton et al., 2011). Consequently, institutions such as mosques, surau, and pesantren may lose their centrality among digitally oriented youth (Osman, 2021). At the same time, digital platforms can empower new identity-based communities, particularly for youth, women, and minorities, offering alternative spaces for religious expression and learning—though these gains coexist with the risk of thin, hyper-individualised religiosity detached from collective moral structures (Scharbrodt, 2021).

Gaps in the Literature

Despite extensive scholarship on traditional and digital daʿwah in Southeast Asia, significant gaps persist due

to their treatment as largely separate fields. Studies on traditional da‘wah—focused on pesantren, pondok, Sufi orders, and mosque-based pedagogy—emphasise historical continuity, authority, and communal formation (Azra, 2004; Bruinessen, 1999; Feener, 2007). In contrast, digital da‘wah research highlights online influencers, platform logics, and the reconfiguration of public piety, stressing democratisation and media aesthetics (Bunt, 2018; Lim, 2019; Weber, 2020). These literatures rarely intersect, leaving the tensions and contradictions arising from their coexistence underexplored.

A key gap is the lack of systematic comparative analyses examining how traditional and digital da‘wah jointly shape religious identity, authority, and learning. Few studies juxtapose the pedagogical depth and communal embeddedness of traditional models with the immediacy and algorithmic visibility of digital forms, or assess their epistemological implications for Islamic knowledge and legitimacy (Mir-Hosseini, 2021; Kadri, 2022). Consequently, questions about how Muslims—especially youth—navigate competing authorities in hybrid contexts remain unresolved.

The ideological consequences are also insufficiently theorised. While risks such as polarisation and fragmentation in digital spaces are acknowledged (Törnberg, 2018; Hirschkind, 2012), limited attention is given to how these dynamics interact with established interpretive institutions, including pesantren, fatwa bodies, and local ulama councils.

Finally, although innovations like digital pesantren and online fatwa services are documented (Osman, 2021; Tee & Hamim, 2022), the literature lacks coherent hybrid frameworks that integrate institutional mentorship, verification, and digital dissemination. Addressing these gaps, the present study advances a comparative conceptual framework that examines traditional and digital da‘wah in tandem, contributing to a more integrated understanding of religious transformation in contemporary Southeast Asia.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual analysis research design, an approach suited to examining evolving socioreligious phenomena and synthesising theoretical debates across interdisciplinary literatures. Conceptual analysis facilitates the interrogation of underlying assumptions, epistemic logics, and the development of ideas without reliance on primary empirical data (Reynolds, 2017; Pauly, 2019). Given that traditional and digital da‘wah intersect theology, pedagogy, media studies, and social change, this design provides the analytical flexibility necessary to address their multidimensional dynamics.

Accordingly, the study employs analytical synthesis, thematic categorisation, and critical interrogation of epistemic assumptions, drawing on established approaches in digital religion and Islamic communication studies (Campbell, 2013; Bunt, 2018). By juxtaposing diverse scholarly perspectives, the analysis seeks to construct an integrative framework that captures the ideological and structural tensions between traditional and modern da‘wah paradigms, an approach particularly appropriate in the rapidly transforming socio-cultural context of Southeast Asia (Slama & Barendregt, 2018).

Data Source and Selection Criteria

The data for this study consists exclusively of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles (1990–2024), academic monographs on Southeast Asian Islam, and empirical research addressing religious authority, pedagogy, and digital media in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore. The reliance on this broad temporal scope aligns with best practices for capturing long-term transformations in religious institutions and communication regimes (Noor, 2017; Feener, 2007).

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure analytical relevance and theoretical robustness:

1. Studies explicitly addressing traditional or modern/digital da‘wah.
2. Works examining religious authority, pedagogical models, community formation, or technological mediation.

3. Scholarly contributions offering conceptual, theoretical, or contextual insights, rather than purely descriptive accounts.

Exclusion criteria were similarly defined:

1. Publications prior to 1990, unless historically foundational, due to limited relevance to contemporary technological dynamics.
2. Works offering purely descriptive, anecdotal, or non-analytical narratives without interpretive depth.
3. Studies focusing exclusively on regions outside Southeast Asia without theoretical applicability to the local context.

In total, the reviewed sources reflect a diverse corpus representing Islamic studies, sociology of religion, media studies, and Southeast Asian anthropology, thereby enabling a comprehensive conceptual synthesis.

Analytical Procedure

The study followed a **structured multi-stage analytical process**, drawing on established methods of thematic and conceptual synthesis (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019):

Identification of recurrent themes

Core themes were extracted inductively from the literature, with particular attention to:

1. religious authority
2. pedagogical models and epistemologies
3. community cohesion and identity
4. emotional and affective dimensions of da'wah
5. technological mediations and algorithmic influences

Comparative mapping

Traditional and modern/digital da'wah were systematically compared across these thematic categories to expose points of convergence, divergence, and ideological tension.

Critical evaluation of societal and theological implications

Each theme was analysed to assess broader consequences for Southeast Asian Muslim communities, including effects on religious literacy, fragmentation, authenticity, and spiritual formation.

Construction of an integrated hybrid framework

Based on insights generated from comparative mapping, the study synthesised a Hybrid Da'wah Integration Framework (HDIF) that conceptualises how traditional mentorship structures and digital tools might be reconciled in practice.

This analytical sequence ensured methodological rigour while allowing for theoretical innovation.

Limitations

While conceptual analysis provides a powerful lens for examining complex ideological and structural shifts, the methodology is not without its limitations.

1. **Absence of primary empirical data:** The study's findings may not fully capture micro-level variations in da'wah practices across diverse local contexts, particularly rural communities or marginalised populations. As conceptual analysis emphasises abstraction and theoretical synthesis, its empirical generalisability is inherently constrained (Reynolds, 2017).

2. **Limited representation of informal or vernacular religious discourse:** Because the research relies on published sources, spontaneous religious expressions circulating through informal networks, oral traditions, or private digital spaces remain under-represented.
3. **Potential bias toward academic interpretations:** Scholarly literature may emphasise concerns about authority, fragmentation, or technological disruption in ways that differ from lived experiences on the ground.

Despite these limitations, conceptual analysis remains an appropriate and valuable method for generating theoretical clarity and addressing gaps in existing da'wah scholarship.

RESULTS

Pedagogical Contrasts

The analysis reveals a profound divergence in the pedagogical foundations underlying traditional and digital da'wah practices in Southeast Asia. Traditional da'wah is characterised by incremental, apprenticeship-based learning, in which students gradually internalise Islamic teachings through sustained interaction with teachers and senior practitioners. This model is embedded within institutions such as pesantren and pondok schools, where pedagogy is not confined to formal lessons but extends into daily routines, ritual practices, and ethical discipline (Bruinessen, 1999; Lukens-Bull, 2010). Spiritual formation in these contexts is inherently embodied and experiential, as learners participate in *zikir*, *halaqah*, communal prayers, and the rhythms of pesantren life, cultivating a holistic sense of religious identity and moral accountability.

In stark contrast, digital da'wah is anchored in communication logics shaped by the affordances of social media platforms. It typically emphasises rapid motivational content, concise theological framings, and highly visual branding strategies, designed to capture fleeting user attention in saturated online environments (Lim, 2019; Bunt, 2018). The pedagogical structure is therefore fragmented and episodic, privileging affective resonance over sustained contemplation or deep textual engagement. This shift reflects broader transformations in digital-era learning, where information consumption tends to be modular, emotionally charged, and algorithmically filtered, raising concerns about the depth, coherence, and long-term retention of Islamic knowledge (Weber, 2020).

Authority Structures

A second major finding concerns the reconfiguration of religious authority as da'wah transitions from traditional to digital spaces. Traditional systems rely on recognised ulama whose authority is grounded in years of rigorous study, transmission chains (*sanad*), and community endorsement (Azra, 2004; Feener, 2007). Fatwa institutions, mosque hierarchies, and pesantren networks historically functioned as regulatory mechanisms that ensured doctrinal coherence and safeguarded interpretive authenticity.

Digital da'wah, however, operates according to a vastly different logic. Authority is increasingly shaped by popularity metrics, such as follower counts, likes, shares, and algorithmic visibility (Mir-Hosseini, 2021; Kadri, 2022). These forms of "micro-celebrity" religious (Abidin, 2018) elevate visibility over scholarly credentials, allowing individuals without formal training to reach wide audiences and influence public perceptions of Islamic teachings. As a result, the religious landscape becomes increasingly pluralised and unstable, with competing interpretations circulating freely and with minimal oversight. This shift undermines the regulatory capacity of traditional institutions and generates a more chaotic interpretive environment in which users must navigate competing claims to authority without clear epistemic markers.

Community Dynamics

The findings also highlight substantial differences in how traditional and modern da'wah shape community formation and social cohesion. Traditional da'wah practices are rooted in durable communal bonds, fostered through shared rituals, face-to-face interactions, and intergenerational transmission of religious norms (Hefner, 2001). The mosque, pesantren, and community gathering spaces function as hubs of social capital, facilitating belonging, moral accountability, and collective identity formation (Noor, 2017). These embodied communities

reinforce the Islamic ethos of mutual responsibility (*takāful*) and encourage the cultivation of sustained spiritual relationships.

Conversely, digital da‘wah tends to generate virtual communities whose connections are often selective, interestbased, and temporally unstable (Slama & Barendregt, 2018). Social media platforms allow users to curate personalised religious networks, resulting in fragmented social ties and individualised spiritual identities that may lack the depth and reciprocity of offline communities (Turkle, 2011). While these digital communities can provide emotional support and access to diverse perspectives, their ephemeral nature raises questions about their capacity to replace traditional mechanisms of communal bonding, accountability, and shared ritual practice.

Measures of Da‘wah Success

The criteria by which da‘wah success is evaluated differ sharply between traditional and digital contexts. In traditional settings, success is measured through indicators such as moral reform, spiritual depth, and community responsibility, reflecting the long-term orientation of pesantren pedagogy and the emphasis on ethical cultivation (Bruinessen, 1999; Feillard & Marcoes, 1998). Success is thus tied to internal transformation and communal flourishing rather than outward visibility.

Digital da‘wah, however, aligns with metrics prized within social media ecosystems—views, likes, shares, subscriber counts, and other quantifiable signals of audience engagement (Weber, 2020). These metrics privilege performance, emotional resonance, and aesthetic appeal over doctrinal depth or transformative impact. As a consequence, da‘wah risks being reframed from a process of spiritual formation to a form of content consumption and entertainment, reflecting broader patterns of commodified religiosity in digital spheres (Mahmood, 2005; Bunt, 2018).

Risks Identified

The analysis identifies several critical risks associated with the rise of digital da‘wah. First, the theological superficiality resulting from short-form, visually driven content may weaken religious literacy and reduce complex Islamic doctrines to oversimplified narratives (Lim, 2019). Second, the proliferation of untrained preachers—empowered by algorithmic amplification and charismatic appeal—raises concerns about misinformation, sectarianism, and the erosion of scholarly verification systems (Kadri, 2022). Third, the findings reveal increasing polarisation and ideological fragmentation, as digital platforms reinforce echo chambers and encourage users to gravitate toward pre-existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse scholarly perspectives (Törnberg, 2018). Finally, digital da‘wah contributes to the commodification of religious discourse, as preachers adopt branding strategies and influencer-like personas, transforming spiritual guidance into a marketable product subject to audience demands and platform economies (Abidin, 2018; Hirschkind, 2012).

Taken together, these risks underscore the need for strategies that integrate digital outreach with traditional scholarly oversight and community-based pedagogical structures.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

The overall comparison between traditional and digital da‘wah practices reveals a widening pedagogical and epistemological divide that reflects broader transformations in how Muslims engage with religious knowledge in Southeast Asia. Traditional da‘wah—rooted in embodied practice, relational pedagogy, and disciplined spiritual formation—relies on immersive, long-term learning environments such as pesantren and mosque-based halaqah (Bruinessen, 1999; Lukens-Bull, 2010). These contexts cultivate character, ethical refinement, and doctrinal depth through sustained mentorship and communal participation. In contrast, digitally mediated da‘wah is structured around the temporal rhythms and attention economies of social media, emphasising brevity, emotional resonance, and rapid dissemination (Lim, 2019; Weber, 2020). While digital platforms excel at expanding outreach and making religious content accessible to broad and diverse audiences, they struggle to

reproduce the depth of formation, scholarly discipline, and epistemic continuity characteristic of traditional models.

This divergence suggests that contemporary Muslims increasingly inhabit a hybrid religious landscape that does not seamlessly integrate relational, experiential learning with digital consumption practices. Instead, digital da‘wah tends to augment exposure but rarely supports the deeper pedagogical objectives of Islamic tradition—an outcome consistent with studies of digital religion globally, which show a pattern of high visibility but low instructional depth (Campbell, 2013; Bunt, 2018). The implication is not merely one of differing media formats, but of competing epistemological logics shaping how religious truth, authority, and identity are constructed and internalised.

Implications for Religious Authority

The findings reveal significant implications for the structure and perception of religious authority. The shift from *ulama*-centred models to influencer-driven forms of public religious leadership represents not only a transformation in authority figures but a fundamental reconfiguration of authority itself. Traditional authority derives from scholarly training, interpretive lineage (*sanad*), and institutional endorsement (Azra, 2004; Feener, 2007). Digital authority, however, is largely shaped by visibility, charisma, and algorithmic amplification (Kadri, 2022).

This reorientation destabilises interpretive coherence by decoupling influence from expertise. Young Muslims, in particular, may struggle to differentiate between credentialed scholars and persuasive content creators—a concern echoed in wider scholarship on religious misinformation and doctrinal fragmentation online (MirHosseini, 2021). The erosion of classical gatekeeping mechanisms risks fostering interpretive pluralism unchecked by scholarly verification, potentially generating competing doctrinal claims and fragmenting the epistemic unity historically maintained through pesantren networks and fatwa institutions.

Implications for Community Cohesion

The shift toward digital da‘wah also carries profound consequences for community cohesion and the social fabric of Muslim life in the region. Traditional da‘wah fosters collective identities grounded in shared rituals, intergenerational bonds, and communal obligations (Hefner, 2001; Noor, 2017). These practices create what sociologists describe as “thick communities,” characterised by durable social ties and strong norms of mutual responsibility (Collins, 2004).

By contrast, digitally mediated religiosity is frequently individualised, episodic, and weakly reciprocal, reflecting broader patterns of networked, choice-based community structures in late modernity (Turkle, 2011; Campbell, 2013). Online religious engagement often produces “affective micro-communities” rather than stable, embodied collectives, weakening the capacity of religious institutions to cultivate sustained moral accountability and shared identity. This fragmentation is visible in Southeast Asian contexts, where virtual communities sometimes overshadow mosque-based or pesantren-based memberships (Slama & Barendregt, 2018). The resulting erosion of communal ethos risks undermining social cohesion, particularly in multireligious societies where Islamic institutions historically played integrative roles.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings further illuminate critical pedagogical implications. Digital da‘wah tends to prioritise emotional resonance, instant gratification, and highly memetic forms of theology, shaped by platform logics that reward shareability over depth (Lim, 2019; Bunt, 2018). These dynamics promote cognitive shallowness and reduce complex Islamic teachings to aesthetically appealing yet simplified fragments.

In contrast, traditional pedagogies emphasise disciplined study, ethical formation, and sustained mentorship, in line with classical Islamic educational theory, which frames knowledge acquisition as a moral-spiritual journey rather than a transactional exchange of information (Dhofier, 1999). The divergence between these pedagogical models raises questions about how younger generations will acquire the intellectual tools needed to engage Islamic tradition critically and responsibly. Without integration mechanisms, digital da‘wah risks producing religious engagement that is broad but thin, emotionally compelling but insufficiently grounded in scholarly foundations.

Proposed Hybrid Da'wah Model

To address these emerging tensions, the study proposes a Hybrid Da'wah Integration Framework (HDIF), designed to reconcile the strengths of traditional pedagogy with the affordances of digital communication. The HDIF comprises four interlocking layers:

1. **Digital Outreach Layer:** Leveraging short videos, infographics, livestreams, and podcasts to raise initial awareness and engage digitally oriented audiences, consistent with best practices in digital religious communication (Weber, 2020; Tee & Hamim, 2022).
2. **Mentorship Layer:** Linking online followers to verified local scholars, mosque programs, or pesantren based study circles, ensuring continuity between digital exposure and relational, experiential learning.
3. **Institutional Verification Layer:** Involving fatwa councils, Islamic universities, and recognised ulama networks to provide scholarly oversight, curate digital content standards, and maintain doctrinal coherence.
4. **Community Integration Layer:** Facilitating periodic offline gatherings, study circles, community service programs, and halaqah to nurture sustained relationships and strengthen communal bonds.

This hybrid model proposes a shift from competition to complementarity, positioning digital tools as gateways rather than substitutes for traditional processes of religious formation. By integrating outreach, mentorship, scholarly oversight, and communal embodiment, the HDIF seeks to ensure that da'wah retains its theological integrity, pedagogical depth, and social cohesion while adapting to contemporary communication realities.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the evolving landscape of da'wah in Southeast Asia is shaped by a profound and increasingly consequential tension between two competing paradigms of Islamic communication: the deeply relational, pedagogically rigorous, and community-embedded model characteristic of traditional da'wah, and the rapid, affect-driven, and algorithmically mediated model that defines contemporary digital da'wah. While digital platforms have democratised access to religious knowledge and enabled unprecedented reach across demographic and geographic boundaries (Weber, 2020; Bunt, 2018), they simultaneously introduce risks of theological superficiality, unregulated authority, and heightened ideological fragmentation (Kadri, 2022; MirHosseini, 2021). Conversely, traditional systems—anchored in ulama authority, disciplined study, and embodied communal practice—remain unrivalled in cultivating spiritual depth and ethical formation (Bruinessen, 1999; Dhofier, 1999), yet they face challenges in engaging digital-native generations accustomed to personalised media ecosystems and rapid content consumption.

The findings underscore that neither paradigm alone is sufficient to address the complex religious, social, and technological realities of contemporary Muslim life in Southeast Asia. There is a clear need for a hybrid da'wah model that integrates the pedagogical depth and scholarly legitimacy of traditional institutions with the accessibility, adaptability, and communicative power of digital tools. Such a model—supported by frameworks of institutional verification, digital mentorship, and community reintegration—offers a promising pathway for preserving theological authenticity while cultivating meaningful engagement with younger audiences increasingly shaped by digital culture.

Ultimately, sustaining the integrity of Islamic teaching in an era of rapidly shifting media ecologies requires not only technological adaptation but also renewed attention to the epistemic, pedagogical, and communal foundations of da'wah. Without careful integration, the risk remains that digital expansion will come at the cost of doctrinal coherence, spiritual depth, and the social cohesion that has historically underpinned Muslim communities in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study proposes several actionable recommendations for religious institutions, policy

makers, and da'wah practitioners:

1. **Strengthen Scholarly Oversight in Digital Spaces:** Islamic councils and universities should establish guidelines and verification mechanisms to ensure doctrinal accuracy in online da'wah content (Osman, 2021).
2. **Develop Hybrid Da'wah Training Programs:** Training modules for preachers should include both classical Islamic sciences and digital communication strategies, ensuring that ulama can effectively engage online audiences (Tee & Hamim, 2022).
3. **Institutional Collaboration with Influencers:** Recognised scholars and institutions should collaborate with digital preachers to create content that is both appealing and theologically sound, bridging the credibility gap between offline and online authority.
4. **Reinforce Community-Based Learning:** Mosques, pesantren, and community centres should complement digital outreach with embodied practices, mentorship, and communal rituals to maintain social cohesion.
5. **Promote Digital Literacy Among Youth:** Educational programs should equip young Muslims with critical media literacy skills to navigate misinformation, evaluate religious claims, and recognise credible sources of Islamic knowledge.

Future Research Directions

To build on the conceptual insights presented here, future research should pursue the following avenues:

1. **Empirical Evaluation of Hybrid Da'wah Models:** Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how integrated digital–traditional programs influence spiritual development, religious literacy, and identity formation among Southeast Asian youth.
2. **Audience Reception Studies:** Qualitative and quantitative research should examine how different demographic groups interpret and internalise digital da'wah content, including gender-based and socioeconomic variations.
3. **Algorithmic Impact on Religious Knowledge:** Further investigation into how platform algorithms shape visibility, authority, and ideological polarisation within Islamic discourse is necessary for understanding the structural forces guiding digital da'wah (Törnberg, 2018).
4. **Case Studies of Institutional Innovation:** Comparative studies of Islamic organisations in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore can illuminate best practices for integrating digital tools into traditional pedagogical frameworks.
5. **Ethnographic Studies of Online Religious Communities:** In-depth fieldwork examining virtual religious groups can shed light on how digital spiritual communities construct meaning, negotiate authority, and cultivate (or fail to cultivate) communal bonds.

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