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Negotiating Religious Authority and Authenticity on TikTok: A Digital Ethnography of Competing Da'wah Styles Among Indonesian Muslim Youth

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Abstract. The development of TikTok as a short video platform has changed the digital da'wah landscape in Indonesia, especially among Muslim youth who are increasingly making social media the main space to access, assess, and disseminate religious knowledge. In this context, religious authority no longer rests entirely on formal institutional or scientific legitimacy, but is also negotiated through the communication style, visual aesthetics, digital interactions, and the impression of authenticity that creators construct. This study aims to analyze how religious authority and authenticity are negotiated on TikTok through a competing style of da'wah among Indonesian Muslim youth. The study used a qualitative approach with a digital ethnographic design through non-interventional participatory observation of da'wah content, captions, hashtags, audio-visual features, and user interaction on purposifully selected TikTok accounts. The results show that the most competitive style of da'wah is one that combines the substance of Islamic teachings with popular language, personal narratives, symbols of visual piety, and intensive interaction with the audience. The findings also show that authenticity serves as a key mechanism in the formation of legitimacy, as younger audiences are more likely to trust creators who appear consistent, relevant, and close to their everyday experiences. This study concludes that TikTok is a symbolic contestation arena where religious authority is produced in a relational, performative, and participatory manner in the ecology of digital media.
Keywords: Authenticity; digital da'wah; religious authority.

Abstrak. *Perkembangan TikTok sebagai platform video pendek telah mengubah lanskap dakwah digital di Indonesia, khususnya di kalangan pemuda Muslim yang semakin menjadikan media sosial sebagai ruang utama untuk mengakses, menilai, dan menyebarkan pengetahuan keagamaan. Dalam konteks ini, otoritas agama tidak lagi bertumpu sepenuhnya pada legitimasi kelembagaan atau keilmuan formal, tetapi juga dinegosiasikan melalui gaya komunikasi, estetika visual, interaksi digital, dan kesan keaslian yang dibangun kreator. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana otoritas agama dan keaslian dinegosiasikan di TikTok melalui gaya dakwah yang saling bersaing di kalangan pemuda Muslim Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain etnografi digital melalui observasi partisipatif non intervensi terhadap konten dakwah, caption, hashtag, fitur audio-visual, dan interaksi pengguna pada akun-akun TikTok yang dipilih secara purposive. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa gaya dakwah yang paling kompetitif adalah gaya yang memadukan substansi ajaran Islam dengan bahasa populer, narasi personal, simbol kesalehan visual, serta interaksi yang intensif dengan audiens. Temuan juga memperlihatkan bahwa keaslian berfungsi sebagai mekanisme utama dalam pembentukan legitimasi, karena audiens muda lebih cenderung mempercayai kreator yang tampil konsisten, relevan, dan dekat dengan pengalaman keseharian mereka. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa TikTok merupakan arena kontestasi simbolik tempat otoritas agama diproduksi secara relasional, performatif, dan partisipatif dalam ekologi media digital.*
Kata kunci: *Autentisitas; dakwah digital; otoritas agama.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has significantly changed the landscape of the production, distribution, and consumption of religious knowledge in Indonesia. In the context

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of young Muslims, TikTok is emerging as a very important digital space because it allows da'wah messages to be conveyed through short videos, engaging visuals, music, humor, personal narratives, and high algorithmic participation (Rokibullah & Laksana, 2025)(Seprianti, Efrina, Handoyo, Firmasari, & Baskautshar, 2024) Previous research shows that Indonesia's young generation is increasingly actively utilizing digital platforms to access, process, and disseminate Islamic messages, so that da'wah is no longer monopolized by formal religious authorities, but rather becomes a more fluid, participatory, and decentralized practice (Hartono, Mutia, & Trisakti, 2024). This shift marks the transformation of the religious authority structure from a model that relies on sanad, institutions, and formal education to one that is also influenced by popularity, performativity, and communicative abilities on social media (Hartono et al., 2024) Therefore, TikTok cannot be understood simply as a technical channel for the spread of da'wah, but as a social arena where authority, authenticity, and religious influence are constantly negotiated by diverse actors.

Recent studies on digital da'wah confirm that the younger generation plays a central role in reshaping Islamic communication practices in cyberspace (Choirin, Dwijayanto, Yumna, & Muaz, 2024) Studies on Generation Z's involvement in digital da'wah in Indonesia show that young people not only consume religious content, but also produce it through visual storytelling strategies, attractive designs, and languages that are closer to popular culture (Azisi, Qotrunnada, Fatah, & Zain, 2023) In this process, religious messages are packaged in a concise, emotional, and easy to share manner, thereby expanding the reach of da'wah while changing the audience's acceptance standards of who is considered worthy of being heard. Another study on da'wah rhetoric in the TikTok era also found that communication styles such as humor, personal stories, and trend integration are important tools for building closeness with Generation Z (Mahzumi, Aminuddin, Mahfudh, & Sm, 2025) These findings show that the effectiveness of digital da'wah is increasingly determined by the ability of creators to combine religious substance with the logic of platform media attention, which ultimately influences the audience's perception of the credibility and attractiveness of da'wah figures.

The literature on religious authority in the new media era shows that there are more complex dynamics than just the transfer of the medium of da'wah. Several studies confirm that social media encourages the fragmentation of religious authority among Indonesian Muslims through the emergence of popular ustaz, millennial figures, and digital preachers who gain legitimacy from proximity to the audience and media dissemination (Nurwahidin, Sofia, Perdana, Diana, & Hermawan, 2025) However, other studies have shown that new media does not necessarily replace traditional authority; in certain cases, it is precisely the authority based on pesantren and formal Islamic education that can be strengthened because it is able to adapt effectively to the digital ecosystem (Kusuma, Muharom, & Jandra, 2025) This debate shows that religious authority in the digital space is not singular, but is formed through the relationship between educational backgrounds, symbols of piety, communication styles, media team support, and audience recognition. Thus, the study of da'wah on TikTok needs to read religious authority as a negotiation process that takes place between the traditional structures, the logic of the platform, and the popular culture of young Muslims.

A number of previous studies on digital da'wah have shown that social media has expanded the participation of Muslim youth in the production and distribution of religious

messages, but their findings have not been entirely consistent regarding the source of legitimacy of authority that audiences recognize. Some studies confirm that popularity, emotional closeness, and the ability to follow the logic of platforms determine the acceptance of messages, while other studies show that pesantren-based authorities, scientific sanad, and formal education still have a strong influence when successfully adapting to the digital ecosystem (Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026). This debate shows that the transformation of religious authority on TikTok does not move linearly from the traditional form to the digital-popular form, but rather takes place as a complex, situational, and relational negotiation process. Therefore, this study is needed to explain how the contradiction of these findings works concretely in the Muslim youth da'wah contest on TikTok Indonesia which is growing rapidly.

TikTok presents a different configuration compared to other digital platforms because of its architecture based on short videos, recommendation algorithms, audio-visual trends, and quick interaction between users (Maudillah, Nisa, & Kusuma, 2025). This character makes da'wah on TikTok not only in the form of delivering teachings, but also identity performance, emotion management, and symbolic competitions between da'wah styles that seek to capture the attention of young users (Maharani, M, & Surahman, 2025). Studies on TikTok da'wah show that this platform is effective in reaching the younger generation and can even be a medium for spreading religious moderation, but its concise delivery style also risks simplifying complex theological issues (Handayani & Alfida, 2025). In practice, young audiences tend to judge da'wah content not only from the depth of the material, but also from the personal authenticity, daily relevance, and ability of creators to speak in the idioms of digital culture they understand (Seprianti et al., 2024). Therefore, the study of TikTok needs to move beyond mere content analysis towards an ethnographic reading of how religious authority and claims of authenticity are formed, exchanged, contested, and responded to in everyday digital interactions.

In the context of the "competitive da'wah style", Muslim youth do not only use one communication model, but combine normative lectures, narratives of personal experience, humor, slang, visual symbols of piety, and interactive features of the platform to capture attention while building audience trust. On TikTok, the competition is seen when some creators convey brief interpretations or fiqh advice through serious and argumentative videos, while other creators choose storytelling, question and answer formats, audio trending pieces, duets, stitches, or commentary responses to make religious messages feel closer to everyday life. This phenomenon shows that digital da'wah is not just the delivery of teachings, but an arena of symbolic competition where authority is negotiated through media choices, aesthetics, communication rhythms, and the ability of creators to present Islam in a relevant, authentic, and communicative way for the younger generation who are actively assessing, comparing, sharing, and even correcting religious claims in the contemporary digital space.

Although previous literature has discussed digital da'wah, Generation Z involvement, TikTok's da'wah rhetoric, and the fragmentation of religious authorities in Indonesia, there are still quite clear research gaps. Some studies have focused on the general transformation of digital da'wah and the participation of young creators, but have not specifically examined TikTok as an arena for negotiating religious authority and authenticity in da'wah style competitions among Indonesian Muslim youth (Fadhila & Abdilah, 2025). Other studies highlight the fragmentation of religious authority on social media at large, especially Instagram and YouTube, so it is not

enough to explain the unique character of TikTok working through short videos, trend culture, performativity, and recommendation algorithms (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023). In addition, existing research tends to focus on the effectiveness of messages, religious moderation, or the influence of content on audiences, while the dimensions of digital daily life, comment interactions, creator performance, and audience recognition practices on who is considered authentic and authoritative are still relatively limited.

The novelty of this research lies in the effort to combine a digital ethnographic perspective with the study of religious authority, performative authenticity, and platform culture to read TikTok as an arena of symbolic competition between different styles of da'wah. Unlike previous studies that generally emphasized the effectiveness of communication, religious moderation, or the general transformation of digital da'wah, this study focuses on how religious authority is not assumed to be inherent in a purely institutional setting, but rather negotiated through visual performance, personal narratives, popular language, audience interaction, and TikTok's algorithmic logic. Another novelty lies in the attention to the category of authenticity as a social construct produced through the impression of closeness, consistency of identity, personal experience, and the user's response to a particular style of da'wah. Thus, this study offers a conceptual contribution to understanding the relationship between digital da'wah, religious authority, and authenticity among Indonesian Muslim youth in a highly competitive social media ecology.

This study aims to analyze how religious authority and authenticity are negotiated in the practice of da'wah on TikTok as well as how different styles of da'wah compete for legitimacy among Indonesian Muslim youth. More specifically, this study was directed to identify the dominant forms of da'wah styles on TikTok, explain the performative strategies that creators use to build credibility and closeness with the audience, and examine how young users give recognition, support, or rejection to these claims of authority. Based on this goal, the formulation of this research problem is: first, how is the character of the da'wah style that competes on TikTok among Indonesian Muslim youth; second, how da'wah creators build claims of religious authority and authenticity through the platform's features, aesthetics, and interactions; third, how young audiences interpret, verify, and respond to da'wah figures who appear on TikTok as a source of religious knowledge.

This research focuses on the study of how religious authority and authenticity are negotiated through competing da'wah styles on TikTok among Indonesian Muslim youth. More specifically, this study examines the dominant forms of da'wah styles, the performative strategies of creators in building religious legitimacy, and the ways in which young audiences interpret, verify, and respond to the claims of authority circulating in the digital space.

The most relevant theory for this study is Heidi A. Campbell's theory of digital religion, specifically the idea of shifting authority and experiential authenticity in the digital religious ecosystem (Hidayatullah, 2024). According to this framework, digital media is not just a tool for disseminating religious messages, but reshapes religious practices, identities, communities, and mechanisms of recognition of authority (Humeira, 2026). The six characteristics of digital religion that are often referred to include networked community, convergent practice, multisite reality, storied identity, shifting authority, and experiential authenticity, all of which are relevant to reading da'wah on TikTok as a religious practice that operates across online and offline spaces

(Mustofa, Mamnunah, & Rospitasari, 2023). In the context of this study, shifting authority helps explain the shift in legitimacy from sanitary, institutional, and formal education-based authority to authority that is also built through digital visibility, emotional proximity, personal narratives, and the ability to follow platform logic. Meanwhile, experiential authenticity is useful to understand why young audiences tend to think of certain da'wah creators as more "authentic" when they appear consistent, relatable, and close to their daily experiences.

To strengthen the analysis, the theory needs to be combined with the perspective of media affordance and Weberian authority in order to be able to explain how platform features participate in shaping da'wah style contestation on TikTok (Dliya'ulkhaq, 2024). Studies on media affordance in digital da'wah show that multimedia formats, interactivity, and circulation of social media content greatly determine the way religious messages are produced, received, and negotiated by audiences (Huda et al., 2025). On TikTok, the logic of short videos, recommendation algorithms, audio-visual trends, comment columns, and engagement metrics create conditions that encourage creators to present da'wah in a concise, emotional, and performative manner (Naufaldhi, 2024);(Latif & Sos, 2024). In a Weberian framework, this process can be read as the transformation of authority from traditional patterns to platform-mediated charismatic-popular forms, as has been used in studies of the fragmentation of Indonesian Muslim religious authority on social media. The combination of digital religion theory, media affordance, and Weberian authority is therefore very synchronous with the digital ethnography method, because it allows the research to examine in depth the relationship between platform architecture, creator performance, audience interaction, and the production of claims of authenticity and religious authority in the practice of TikTo da'wah

This study uses a qualitative approach with digital ethnographic design because this method is most relevant to examine the negotiation of religious authority and authenticity in the competing style of da'wah on TikTok among Indonesian Muslim youth. The suitability of this method lies in its ability to capture communication practices, identity performance, visual symbols, and interaction patterns that arise naturally in the digital environment. Through digital ethnography, the research not only reads the content of da'wah messages, but also examines how content is produced, circulated, received, debated, and interpreted by users. Thus, this method is in sync with the focus of the article study that places TikTok as an arena of symbolic contestation, where religious authority, performative authenticity, and audience legitimacy are formed relationally in a participatory, fluid, competitive social media ecology, and is strongly influenced by the logic of contemporary digital platforms.

Operationally, research data was collected through non-interventional participatory observation of TikTok da'wah accounts that were purposively selected based on account visibility, upload consistency, variety of da'wah styles, and intensity of young audience engagement. The unit of analysis includes videos, captions, hashtags, audio, visual elements, comment columns, as well as forms of interaction such as replies, duets, and stitches that reflect the process of establishing authority and authenticity. The data was then analyzed thematically-critically to identify patterns of representation, performative strategies of creators, and audience responses to claims of religious legitimacy. The selection of this procedure shows that the digital ethnography method is not only technically relevant, but also very synchronous with the title and introduction of the article, as it allows the research to explain in depth the dynamics of

da'wah contestation on TikTok in the religious communication experience of contemporary Indonesian Muslim youth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that TikTok serves as a negotiation arena for religious authorities that is heavily influenced by the platform's logic, especially algorithmic visibility, interaction intensity, and the aesthetics of short videos. In this space, authority is no longer solely attached to the setting of formal religious education or institutional affiliation, but is also built through the ability of creators to present da'wah that is concise, emotional, communicative, and in accordance with the digital culture of Muslim youth. The most prominent style of da'wah shows a combination of normative quotations, narratives of personal experience, light humor, popular language, and symbols of visual piety. This combination creates an impression of closeness as well as credibility, so that the audience views certain creators as figures that are more relevant to their daily experiences. Thus, religious authority on TikTok appears to be relational and performative, as it continues to be produced through the intersection between religious claims, creators' self-presentations, and audience recognition in repetitive digital interactions.

Authenticity is a key category in determining the acceptance of competing da'wah styles on TikTok. Young audiences tend to give legitimacy to creators who appear consistent between messages, self-expression, language styles, and moral imagery presented in the digital space. Authenticity in this context is not understood as a permanently inherent trait, but rather as a social construct formed through comment responses, the amount of engagement, narrative proximity, and perceptions of the sincerity of the delivery. On the other hand, da'wah styles that are too normative, very formal, or seem distant from the daily reality of youth tend to get lower involvement. These findings confirm that da'wah style competitions on TikTok are not only a competition for religious content, but also a competition to appear authentic, relatable, and trustworthy. Therefore, authenticity and authority emerge as two dimensions that reinforce each other in the formation of digital da'wah legitimacy.

The character of the da'wah style that competes on tiktok among Indonesian Muslim youth.

The da'wah style of competing on TikTok among Indonesian Muslim youth shows a fundamental shift from a formal lecture format to a more concise, visual, and responsive form of communication to digital culture (Primig, Szabó, & Lacasa, 2023). In this platform space, da'wah no longer appears as a religious monologue that relies entirely on institutional authority, but as a communication performance that must be able to capture the attention of the audience in a short time (Fabriar, 2024). Successful da'wah creators generally combine normative messages with colloquial language, snippets of personal experiences, light humor, and visual aesthetics that are close to the content consumption habits of the younger generation. This pattern shows that the competitiveness of the da'wah style on TikTok is largely determined by the creator's ability to read the tastes of young audiences who are familiar with fast rhythms, attractive visuals, and easily identifiable narratives. Thus, a competitive style of da'wah on TikTok is not only measured by the accuracy of the content, but also by its capacity to build emotional connections and sustained attention.

Empirically, the competing styles of da'wah on TikTok can be grouped into several main tendencies. First, the normative-educational style, which emphasizes the explanation of Islamic teachings directly, systematically, and oriented to religious knowledge (Aldi, 2024). Second, the narrative-personal style, which presents life experiences, religious anxieties, or spiritual reflection as an entrance to convey religious messages. Third, the humorous-popular style, which uses humor, trends, and slang to create closeness and reduce the distance between the preacher and the audience. Fourth, visual-performative style, which emphasizes facial expressions, fashion design, image composition, audio, and video packaging to make the message feel more attractive. These four styles often don't come in isolation, but rather intersect in a single account or video. Contestation arises when each style offers a different way to connect religious authority to the fast-paced, plural, and heavily influenced life experiences of Muslim youth on platform culture.

The character of the da'wah style that competes on TikTok among Indonesian Muslim youth can be seen in the diversity of communication strategies used by creators to gain the attention, trust, and legitimacy of young audiences. As an example of this case, da'wah accounts such as Husain Basyaiban display a narrative-popular style through light language, everyday issues, and a tolerant approach that is close to the experience of adolescence, while figures such as Hanan Attaki emphasize a persuasive-relational style through brief advice, casual speech, and a strong emotional closeness to their followers. On the other hand, research on @msalbaniquotes accounts shows that a concise, motivational, and easy-to-share communication style is also effective in reaching Generation Z. This difference confirms that da'wah contestation on TikTok does not only occur in the content of the message, but also in the form of presentation, visual symbols, speech rhythm, and the ability of creators to adjust da'wah to the cultural logic of digital platforms.

Within the framework of digital religion theory, the diversity of da'wah styles shows that TikTok is not only a medium for message distribution, but also a space for the formation of new religious practices (Syahputra, n.d.). The platform encourages creators to tailor messages with a demanding affordance logic that is concise, concise, and easy to share. As a result, competing da'wah styles cannot be separated from the creator's ability to utilize the platform's features, such as trending audio, short video clips, running text, and duet or stitch mechanisms. These features allow da'wah to appear as a practice that is not only informative, but also interactive and participatory. At the same time, young audiences are not positioned as passive recipients, but rather as parties who assess, comment, disseminate, or even challenge certain styles of da'wah. This situation makes the da'wah style competition take place continuously, because every form of delivery is always tested by the digital public's attention. Thus, competitiveness on TikTok is situational and highly depends on the suitability between religious content, presentation formats, and youth content consumption culture.

The competing style of da'wah on TikTok shows that there is a differentiation of authority that is no longer uniform. Some creators display their identities as students, young ustaz, academics, or Muslim influencers, while others emphasize closeness as fellow young people who are studying religion (Islamiyah & Prasetiya, 2026). This differentiation is important because TikTok's audience doesn't always judge authority based on a title or institution, but also based on a genuine, relevant, and consistent impression. Creators who use simple speech styles and

everyday experiences are often considered easier to accept because they are considered to understand the reality of the younger generation. On the other hand, styles that are too formal or too patronizing tend to risk losing emotional resonance. This shows that the da'wah style competition on TikTok runs in a terrain that brings together traditional authority with the logic of digital familiarity. In this field, Muslim youth are not only looking for knowledge, but also looking for figures who can represent their religious identity more closely and feel real in their daily lives.

The findings regarding the competing da'wah style characters on TikTok confirm that Indonesian Muslim youth live in a very plural and competitive da'wah ecology. TikTok brings together various forms of religious delivery in the same space, so that young audiences can compare, choose, and negotiate for themselves the style of da'wah that is considered most suitable for their needs. In this situation, the success of a da'wah style is determined by its ability to answer two demands at once, namely maintaining religious relevance and meeting digital cultural expectations. Da'wah styles that are too rigid tend to have difficulty surviving in the competition of attention, while styles that follow trends too much are at risk of being considered superficial. Therefore, the most powerful style is usually one that is able to combine the depth of the message with communicative packaging that is friendly to the young audience. These findings make it clear that the contestation of da'wah styles on TikTok is not a surface phenomenon, but rather part of a broader shift in the way religious authorities are produced, recognized, and maintained in the digital space.

Da'wah creators build claims of religious authority and authenticity through the platform's features, aesthetics, and interactions.

Da'wah creators on TikTok build claims of religious authority and authenticity through highly curated self-representation strategies. Authority no longer only relies on scientific degrees, institutional affiliations, or status as ustaz, but also on the ability to present oneself as a credible, communicative, and close figure to the experience of young audiences (Satria, Romadi, & Alwi, 2023). In this context, authenticity becomes a very important source of legitimacy because Muslim youth tend to respond to figures who appear sincere, consistent, and undistanced. Successful creators usually combine Islamic narratives with simple language, measured emotional expression, and a less formal visual style. Thus, the claim of authority is built not only through the content of da'wah, but also through impressions of who speaks, how he speaks, and the extent to which his style of speech is considered to reflect an authentic religious character. This process shows that religious authority on TikTok is the result of constant negotiation between scientific credibility and personality performance.

The first strategy that seems dominant is the use of hybrid identities, which is a combination of religious figures and everyday figures. Some creators affirm the background of Islamic boarding schools, Islamic education, or formal religious learning experiences to strengthen legitimacy (Zaid, Fedtke, Shin, Kadoussi, & Ibahrine, 2022). However, the strengthening was not left alone. They also build an image as individuals who face common problems of young people, such as spiritual confusion, social relationships, academic pressure, or family dynamics. This hybrid identity allows creators to appear as an authority that is at once expert and familiar. In TikTok's logic, this kind of closeness is more effective than an appearance that is too hierarchical. Young audiences generally view figures who are too formal as lacking in

understanding of their reality, while figures who are too relaxed without markers of knowledge are considered less religiously valid (Islamiyah & Prasetiya, 2026). Therefore, the most powerful claims of authority are born from the balance between scientific symbols and life experiences that are shared personally. This pattern explains why digital authority on TikTok is relational, not absolute.

In addition to the aspect of form and language, da'wah style contestation on TikTok is also related to the way creators build legitimacy through visual and moral consistency. Young audiences tend to pay attention to whether the message conveyed is in harmony with the overall appearance, communication habits, and digital footprint of the creator (Zuhri, 2025);(Siregar, 2025). Therefore, the competing style of da'wah on TikTok is not only about rhetoric, but also about managing self-image. Creators who are able to show uniformity between digital content, appearance, and behavior are more easily perceived as authentic figures. In this context, authenticity does not stand opposite to popularity, but rather becomes a condition for popularity to function as a new source of authority. The competition for the style of da'wah then turns into a competition to build credibility in front of a public that is very sensitive to the incompatibility between religious claims and digital performance. Thus, a competitive style of da'wah is a style that is able to maintain a balance between religious substance, personal expression, and platform aesthetics.

Authenticity is also built through performative consistency between the creator's message, appearance, and digital footprint. TikTok audiences tend to check if their dress style, language choice, body posture, and response to comments are in line with the religious message being conveyed. This consistency is an important indicator because digital platforms allow users to observe creators repeatedly in various situations. When there is a stable fit, audiences are more likely to accept creators as authentic figures. On the other hand, minor inconsistencies, such as language that is too judgmental but the style of interaction in the comment column is aggressive or disparaging, can reduce legitimacy. In this framework, authenticity is not innate, but the result of social production that is worked on continuously through digital performance. Creators who understand this logic usually maintain the tone of communication, build a consistent narrative, and manage their self-image carefully. In this way, authenticity serves as a bridge between moral authority and the acceptance of young audiences in the TikTok space.

Claims of authority and authenticity are shaped by the way creators utilize the platform's affordance. TikTok provides space for short videos, audio clips, short texts, duet features, stitches, and comments that can all be used to expand the influence of da'wah. Creators who are able to take advantage of this feature are able to display religious teachings in a format that feels light but still meaningful. For example, the use of verse snippets, hadith quotes, or moral reflections that are packaged with visually appealing gives the impression that religious messages can be present in a format that is relevant to digital culture. Interactive features such as video comments and replies also reinforce legitimacy by allowing creators to show quick responses, openness, and willingness to dialogue. Young audiences usually judge this openness as a sign that creators are not only talking one-way, but are also present in active social relationships. Thus, religious authority on TikTok is not only produced through knowledge, but also through the ability to strategically manage the platform's devices so that religious messages feel alive and confident.

Authenticity in the TikTok space is often associated with a sense of spontaneity, despite the fact that much of the content is produced through a rigorous curation process. Da'wah creators build a natural impression through casual speaking styles, simple shots, or narratives that seem not too contrived (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). However, behind these spontaneous impressions there is often a careful planning process, including word selection, setting the setting, determining the duration, and visual processing. This shows that authenticity on TikTok is a performance that is designed to look undesigned. From the perspective of Muslim youth, such performances are effective because they are more readily accepted as representations of religious life that are close to everyday life. The audience is not only looking for the truth of the teachings, but also looking for a sense of emotional closeness that makes the teachings feel possible (Hernández-Serrano, Jones, Renés-Arellano, & Ortuño, 2022). Therefore, authority and authenticity reinforce each other: authority provides the basis for legitimacy, while authenticity provides affective appeal. Both are important capital for creators to maintain the attention and trust of the digital public.

This discussion shows that claims of religious authority and authenticity on TikTok cannot be separated from the work of representation, interaction, and management of digital identity. The most effective creators are not only those who are the most knowledgeable, but those who are able to translate religious knowledge into a form of communication that feels sincere, relevant, and consistent to Indonesian Muslim youth. Thus, authority on TikTok is distributed and fluid, while authenticity is its main judging mechanism. The digital space does not remove traditional authority, but demands that it be present in a new format that is compatible with the logic of the platform and the culture of young audiences. These findings underscore that da'wah on TikTok is a complex symbolic negotiation practice, as creators' success depends on their ability to connect religious knowledge, self-performance, and public expectations in one highly competitive communication ecosystem.

Young audiences interpret, verify, and respond to da'wah figures who appear on TikTok as a source of religious knowledge.

Young audiences interpret da'wah figures on TikTok as a source of religious knowledge through a verification process that involves many dimensions, not just passively receiving information (Marzuki, Mulyawan, Yani, Athar, & Ferdiansyah, 2026). They assess a creator's credibility based on a combination of the background displayed, the quality of the message, the communication style, and the consistency of the digital identity. In this digital ethnography, it can be seen that Muslim youth tend to check whether creators have a credible religious educational background, or instead rely solely on popularity without a clear scientific basis (Hakim & Dahri, 2025). However, formal background is not the only benchmark. The audience also looks at whether the message conveyed is in harmony with their daily practices and whether the creator is able to answer religious questions that are relevant to the contemporary context. Thus, the audience's interpretation of religious authority on TikTok is multidimensional, as it involves an assessment of knowledge, style, and social relevance at the same time.

Verification of young audiences of da'wah figures on TikTok is also carried out through collaborative interaction in the comment column. Comments often become discussion spaces where users ask each other questions, correct, provide notes, or even challenge religious claims that are deemed inappropriate (Jannah, Robby, & Kamil, 2025). In this space, the audience is

not only a consumer, but also an active participant who participates in shaping the legitimacy of da'wah figures. When a creator is able to respond to comments in a polite, clear, and open manner, their image of authority tends to strengthen. On the other hand, creators who tend to be defensive or don't respond to feedback are often perceived as less authentic. This pattern shows that authority on TikTok is dialogical and intervened by the audience. Muslim youth use the comment column to test the authenticity of creators, while generating collective knowledge about which da'wah is acceptable and which is doubtful. Thus, verification is not only carried out individually, but also through social processes within the digital community.

Young audiences tend to compare several da'wah figures before accepting one as a reliable source of knowledge (Muthohirin, 2025). They explored different accounts, comparing delivery styles, depth of material, and consistency of messages between creators. This comparative process shows that Muslim youth are not only seeking a single authority, but building a plural network of knowledge (Briandana, Doktoralina, Hassan, & Hasan, 2020). In this situation, the da'wah figures chosen as the primary source are often the easiest to understand, the most relevant to the context of their lives, and the most consistent in conveying the message. They also tend to avoid figures that are too rigid, too judgmental, or change their views too often. The result is an audience that tends to be selective and critical, although they still provide space for figures who are able to present da'wah in a more humane and communicative way. This pattern of content consumption reflects a generation that is familiar with the plurality of information and does not easily accept absolute claims of authority.

Young audiences also interpret the authenticity of da'wah figures based on the extent to which creators show openness to religious diversity and moderation (Kholidi, Umam, Wazis, & Jali, 2024). In the Indonesian context, issues of radicalism, intolerance, and moral judgment are often a concern for Muslim youth who are more collective. They tend to be more accepting of figures who display messages of moderation, non-judgment, and respect for differences (Fahrudin & Islamy, 2022). Creators who often deliver loud messages without nuance often lose the support of young audiences who prioritize an inclusive approach. On the other hand, da'wah that emphasizes compassion, empathy, and self-reflection is more acceptable because it reflects values relevant to plural life (Inun, Sari, & Zuhriyah, 2025). Therefore, the audience's interpretation of religious authority focuses not only on the accuracy of the content, but also on the moral orientation it displays. A figure who is considered authentic is one who is able to present Islam that is friendly, reflective, and relevant to contemporary social dynamics.

The response of young audiences to da'wah figures is also greatly influenced by engagement metrics such as the number of likes, shares, and interaction rates. These numbers are often the initial indicators used to assess the credibility of creators (Chalim, Rahmah, Rudiana, & Jasafat, 2025). However, more critical audiences don't just rely on those metrics, but rather continue verification by checking the quality of comments and growing discussions. They tend to be skeptical of content that only pursues popularity but lacks depth of meaning. In contrast, content that has less engagement but has good discussion quality is often valued higher. This shows that young audiences are not completely mastered by popularity logic, but rather use metrics as one of the indicators in the broader verification process. Thus, the audience's response to da'wah figures on TikTok is multi-layered, involving an assessment of popularity, content quality, depth of discussion, and moral relevance.

These findings show that young Indonesian Muslim audiences are not passive in interpreting da'wah figures on TikTok, but are active in the process of verification, comparison, and selection. They build selective, critical, and contextual content consumption patterns, and engage social processes within digital communities to assess the authority and authenticity of creators. In practice, Muslim youth tend to choose figures who are not only knowledgeable, but also able to present Islam that is relevant, moderate, and close to daily experience (Kafid, 2023). This process shows that the authority of religious authorities on TikTok cannot be imposed from above, but must be built through a continuous response to the audience. Thus, da'wah on TikTok is a space for negotiation between creators and audiences, where religious legitimacy is produced through dynamically ongoing interactions, dialogues, and collective verification.

An analysis of these findings shows that religious authority and authenticity on TikTok cannot be understood as a fixed category, but rather as an ongoing negotiation process among creators, audiences, and the platform's logic. Within the framework of digital religion theory, TikTok serves as a mediation space that changes the way religious authority is produced, recognized, and maintained, as legitimacy no longer depends only on traditional institutions, but also on visibility, interaction, and performative performance. The findings that competing da'wah styles, self-representation strategies, and audience responses are strongly influenced by platform affordance confirm that authority is relational and contextual. These results reinforce the argument that authenticity is a key mechanism in the assessment of authority in the digital space, as young audiences are more likely to accept figures who are consistent, relevant, accessible, and able to present contextual Islam. Thus, this analysis shows that da'wah on TikTok is a complex arena of symbolic contestation, where authority and authenticity are built through the interaction between religious knowledge, digital aesthetics, and the participatory culture of Indonesian Muslim youth.

CONCLUSION

The character of the da'wah style that competes on TikTok among Indonesian Muslim youth is marked by a shift from a formal lecture model to religious communication that is concise, visual, interactive, and close to the audience's daily experience, so that legitimacy no longer rests only on sanad, institutions, or formal affiliations, but also on the creator's ability to package messages in a popular, consistent, and communicative way. Claims of religious authority and authenticity are built through a blend of hybrid identities, moral visual consistency, the use of platform features, and the management of digital interactions that allow creators to appear credible, familiar, and relevant to Muslim youth. At the same time, young audiences do not act as passive recipients, but rather actively interpret, verify, compare, and select da'wah figures through comments, engagement metrics, response quality, and message suitability with their social reality. The implication is that digital da'wah needs to be designed not only to be true in substance, but also ethical in representation, moderate in orientation, and adaptive to platform culture without losing the depth of teaching. Academically, these findings affirm the importance of reading digital religious authority as a relational, performative, and participatory process, while opening up further research space on cross-platform comparisons, audience differentiation, and the transformation of religious literacy of the younger generation in

Indonesia in the context of da'wah, Islamic education, and the formation of contemporary religious authorities in the social media ecosystem.

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