



DIGITAL DA'WAH AND ITS SOCIAL IMPACT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MUSLIM CONTENT CREATORS

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history:</p> <p>Received: 7 Aug 2025 Revised: 18 Sept 2025 Accepted: 25 Oct 2025 Published: 1 Nov 2025</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <p>Digital da'wah, Muslim content creators, Islamic social media, religious identity, online communities, religious authority, digital religion, social impact</p> <p>OPEN ACCESS</p>	<p>This qualitative study examines the phenomenon of digital da'wah (Islamic proselytization) through the lens of Muslim content creators and their social impact on contemporary Muslim communities. Through in-depth interviews with 25 Muslim content creators across various digital platforms and thematic analysis of their content, this research explores how digital technologies have transformed traditional Islamic outreach methods and their implications for religious identity, community building, and social change. The findings reveal that digital da'wah operates through three primary mechanisms: accessibility enhancement, community formation, and cultural adaptation. Content creators navigate complex tensions between religious authenticity and digital engagement, while simultaneously addressing diverse audiences across generational, geographical, and sectarian boundaries. The study identifies significant social impacts including increased religious literacy among youth, democratization of Islamic knowledge, and the emergence of new forms of religious authority. However, challenges persist regarding content quality control, theological accuracy, and the commercialization of religious messaging. This research contributes to understanding the intersection of religion, media, and social transformation in the digital age, providing insights for religious leaders, policymakers, and digital platforms seeking to foster constructive online religious discourse.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed how religious communities communicate, organize, and practice their faith, with Islam experiencing particularly significant changes in its modes of outreach and education (Campbell, 2017; Evolvi, 2019). Digital da'wah, defined as the propagation of Islamic teachings through digital platforms including social media, YouTube, podcasts, and mobile applications, represents a contemporary evolution of the centuries-old Islamic tradition of inviting others to understand and embrace Islamic principles (Bunt, 2018). Muslim content creators have emerged as influential figures in this digital landscape, producing diverse content ranging from Quranic recitations and Islamic lectures to lifestyle vlogs and social commentary, reaching millions of followers globally (Piela, 2021). This phenomenon reflects broader trends in the mediatization of religion, where religious practices and expressions are increasingly shaped by the logic and affordances of digital media platforms (Hjarvard, 2013).

The proliferation of Muslim content creators represents a significant departure from traditional Islamic educational hierarchies, where religious knowledge was primarily transmitted through formal institutions such as mosques, madrasas, and established scholarly networks (Mandaville, 2007). Digital platforms have democratized access to Islamic discourse, enabling individuals without traditional religious credentials to reach vast audiences and influence religious understanding and practice (Bunt, 2018; Sisler, 2011). This transformation has been particularly pronounced among younger generations of Muslims who increasingly turn to social media personalities, YouTube scholars, and Instagram influencers for religious guidance rather than exclusively relying on traditional religious authorities (Evolvi, 2019; Nisa, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, as physical religious gatherings were restricted and Muslim communities worldwide turned to digital platforms for spiritual sustenance, religious education, and community connection (Pennington, 2021).

Problem Statement

Despite the widespread adoption of digital da'wah and the significant influence wielded by Muslim content creators, substantial concerns have emerged regarding the quality, authenticity, and impact of religious content disseminated through digital platforms (Bunt, 2018; Cheong, 2021). The democratization of Islamic discourse has led to the proliferation of religious content created by individuals with varying levels of Islamic scholarship, raising questions about theological accuracy, sectarian bias, and the potential for misinformation (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). Furthermore, the algorithmic logic of social media platforms prioritizes engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which may incentivize sensationalism, controversy, or oversimplification of complex religious concepts (Evolvi, 2019). This tension between religious authenticity and digital engagement creates unique challenges for Muslim content creators who must navigate between maintaining theological integrity and producing content that resonates with algorithmically-driven platforms (Nisa, 2018).

Additionally, the social impact of digital da'wah remains inadequately understood, with limited empirical research examining how Muslim content creators influence religious identity formation, community cohesion, and social attitudes among their audiences (Evolvi, 2019; Piela, 2021). While anecdotal evidence suggests that digital da'wah has increased accessibility to Islamic knowledge and fostered transnational Muslim communities, critical questions persist about potential negative consequences including the reinforcement of sectarian divisions, the spread of extremist ideologies,

and the commercialization of religious messaging (Awan, 2017; Conway, 2017). The lack of comprehensive qualitative research examining content creators' motivations, strategies, challenges, and perceived impacts represents a significant gap in understanding this transformative phenomenon (Peterson, 2020).

To address these concerns, comprehensive research is needed that examines digital da'wah from multiple perspectives, including the experiences and perspectives of Muslim content creators themselves, the strategies they employ to balance religious authenticity with digital engagement, and the measurable social impacts of their work on Muslim communities. Such research should employ rigorous qualitative methodologies that capture the complexity and nuance of digital religious practice while providing actionable insights for religious leaders, policymakers, educators, and platform designers seeking to foster constructive online religious discourse (Campbell, 2017; Cheong, 2021).

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the motivations, strategies, and experiences of Muslim content creators engaged in digital da'wah across various platforms
2. To examine how Muslim content creators navigate tensions between religious authenticity and digital platform affordances
3. To identify the perceived social impacts of digital da'wah on Muslim communities, including effects on religious identity, knowledge acquisition, and community formation
4. To analyze the challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by Muslim content creators in producing and disseminating religious content

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Religion and the Mediatization of Islamic Practice

The scholarly discourse on digital religion has established that religious practices are increasingly shaped by digital media technologies, leading to transformations in how religious communities communicate, organize, and express their faith (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013). Heidi Campbell's (2013) seminal work on digital religion argues that online religious practices should not be viewed as separate from offline religiosity but rather as integrated expressions of faith that mutually influence one another. In the Islamic context, researchers have documented how digital platforms have facilitated new forms of religious learning, community building, and identity expression among Muslims worldwide (Bunt, 2018; Sisler, 2011). Gary Bunt's (2018) comprehensive analysis of "Hashtag Islam" demonstrates how social media has become integral to contemporary Muslim identity formation and religious discourse, enabling transnational conversations that transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries. However, critics argue that the mediatization framework may overemphasize technology's deterministic role while underestimating human agency and the continuity of traditional religious practices in digital spaces (Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler, 2019).

Research specifically examining digital da'wah has revealed how Muslim content creators employ various rhetorical strategies and aesthetic choices to make Islamic teachings accessible and engaging for digital audiences (Evolvi, 2019; Nisa, 2018). Eva Nisa's (2018) ethnographic study of Indonesian Muslim women using social media for da'wah found that these content creators strategically blend

religious messaging with lifestyle content, fashion, and personal narratives to attract broader audiences. Similarly, Giulia Evolvi's (2019) analysis of Muslim YouTube creators in Europe demonstrated how these content creators navigate between presenting "authentic" Islamic teachings and producing entertaining content that conforms to platform algorithms. These studies highlight the creative agency of Muslim content creators in adapting traditional Islamic pedagogy to digital affordances. However, a significant gap exists in understanding how these adaptation strategies vary across different cultural contexts, platforms, and audience demographics, as most existing research focuses on Western or Southeast Asian contexts with limited attention to Middle Eastern, African, or Central Asian digital da'wah practices (Peterson, 2020).

Religious Authority and Democratization in Digital Islam

The transformation of religious authority constitutes a central theme in scholarship on digital Islam, with researchers debating whether digital platforms democratize or fragment Islamic religious authority (Mandaville, 2007; Bunt, 2018). Peter Mandaville's (2007) influential work argues that digital technologies have enabled a "fragmentation and democratization" of Islamic authority, allowing individuals without traditional credentials to participate in religious discourse and claim authority based on charisma, communication skills, or large followings rather than formal scholarly training. Supporting this view, Bunt (2018) documents numerous examples of self-taught Muslim influencers who have gained massive audiences despite lacking traditional Islamic educational credentials, suggesting a fundamental shift in how religious authority is constructed and legitimized in digital spaces.

However, other scholars challenge overly optimistic narratives of democratization, arguing that digital da'wah may reproduce or even amplify existing power hierarchies within Muslim communities (Piela, 2021; Sisler, 2011). Monika Kalra Piela's (2021) research on Muslim women's online religious participation reveals that female content creators often face heightened scrutiny regarding their religious credentials and are subject to gendered expectations about appropriate religious speech, suggesting that digital spaces may not be equally accessible to all voices. Furthermore, Vit Sisler's (2011) analysis of Islamic websites demonstrates how established religious institutions and state actors have strategically used digital platforms to maintain their authority and compete with grassroots voices, indicating that democratization is contested rather than inevitable. This debate reveals a critical gap in understanding the complex power dynamics that shape who can speak authoritatively about Islam in digital spaces and how different forms of authority (traditional scholarly, charismatic, institutional) interact and compete in the digital ecosystem (Cheong, 2021).

Content, Engagement, and Platform Affordances

The relationship between Islamic content characteristics, audience engagement patterns, and platform affordances represents another crucial area of scholarly inquiry. Research has examined how Muslim content creators adapt their messaging and presentation styles to align with the technical features and cultural norms of specific platforms (Evolvi, 2019; Nisa, 2018). Pauline Hope Cheong's (2021) study of Muslim Instagram influencers reveals how visual aesthetics, particularly carefully curated images combining Islamic symbols with modern lifestyle elements, drive engagement and shape perceptions of contemporary Muslim identity. Similarly, research on YouTube Islamic lectures demonstrates how successful content creators employ cinematic production techniques, emotional storytelling, and interactive elements to maintain viewer attention in an attention economy characterized by infinite content choices (Bunt, 2018).

However, critical scholars raise concerns about how platform affordances and algorithmic systems may incentivize particular types of religious content while marginalizing others (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016; Conway, 2017). Maura Conway's (2017) research on extremist content online suggests that algorithmic recommendation systems may inadvertently amplify controversial or extreme religious interpretations because they generate higher engagement metrics, creating echo chambers that reinforce narrow worldviews. Campbell and Vitullo's (2016) analysis of religious authority online argues that the "attention economy" of social media may pressure religious content creators to prioritize virality over theological depth, potentially leading to oversimplification of complex religious concepts. These concerns highlight the need for empirical research examining how Muslim content creators navigate these tensions in practice and what strategies they employ to maintain religious integrity while achieving digital visibility (Peterson, 2020). Notably absent from existing literature are systematic analyses of content creators' own perspectives on these ethical dilemmas and how they conceptualize their responsibilities to both their religious tradition and their digital audiences.

Social Impact and Community Formation

Scholarship examining the social impact of digital da'wah has produced mixed findings regarding its effects on Muslim communities. Positive impacts identified in the literature include increased accessibility to Islamic knowledge, particularly for Muslims in minority contexts or remote locations with limited access to physical Islamic institutions (Anderson, 2015; Evolvi, 2019). Research documents how digital da'wah has enabled the formation of transnational Muslim communities that transcend national boundaries, facilitating solidarity and mutual support among geographically dispersed Muslims (Bunt, 2018). Studies also highlight how digital platforms have created opportunities for marginalized voices within Muslim communities, including women, converts, and progressive Muslims, to articulate alternative Islamic visions and challenge dominant interpretations (Piela, 2021; Nisa, 2018).

Conversely, researchers have identified potential negative social impacts including the reinforcement of sectarian divisions, the spread of misinformation about Islamic teachings, and the risk of radicalization through exposure to extremist content (Awan, 2017; Conway, 2017). Imran Awan's (2017) research on online Islamophobia and extremism demonstrates how digital platforms can become sites of both anti-Muslim hatred and extremist recruitment, with complex feedback loops between these phenomena. Additionally, scholars express concern about the commercialization of Islamic messaging, as content creators increasingly rely on sponsorships, advertisements, and merchandise sales to sustain their work, potentially compromising religious authenticity for financial gain (Cheong, 2021). Despite these important contributions, existing research predominantly relies on content analysis or surveys of content consumers, with limited qualitative research directly examining content creators' perspectives on their social impact or employing longitudinal methods to track actual behavioral and attitudinal changes among audiences (Peterson, 2020). This methodological limitation represents a significant gap that the current study addresses through in-depth interviews with content creators themselves.

Critical Gaps and Research Contribution

This literature review reveals several critical gaps in existing scholarship on digital da'wah and Muslim content creators. First, most research employs content analysis or audience reception studies, with limited qualitative investigation of content creators' own experiences, motivations, and ethical frameworks (Peterson, 2020; Evolvi, 2019). Second, existing studies predominantly focus on Western or Southeast Asian contexts, leaving significant geographical gaps in understanding how

digital da'wah operates in different cultural and political environments (Bunt, 2018). Third, while scholars identify tensions between religious authenticity and digital engagement, empirical research examining how content creators navigate these tensions in practice remains limited (Cheong, 2021). Fourth, most studies focus on single platforms, missing the cross-platform strategies that content creators increasingly employ (Nisa, 2018). Finally, research on social impact remains largely speculative or based on short-term measures, lacking comprehensive frameworks for assessing the multidimensional impacts of digital da'wah on Muslim communities (Campbell, 2017).

This study addresses these gaps by conducting in-depth qualitative research with Muslim content creators across multiple platforms and geographical contexts, examining their perspectives on authenticity, impact, and ethical challenges. By centering content creators' voices and experiences, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital da'wah as a complex social practice shaped by individual agency, platform affordances, religious traditions, and social contexts. Furthermore, by developing a comprehensive framework for analyzing the social impact of digital da'wah, this study provides theoretical and practical insights for understanding contemporary transformations in Islamic practice and religious communication more broadly.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making processes of Muslim content creators engaged in digital da'wah (Smith et al., 2009). The qualitative approach was selected because it enables in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, captures the subjective meanings participants attribute to their experiences, and allows for theoretical development grounded in empirical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). IPA specifically was chosen because it focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of significant experiences in their lives, which aligns with this study's objective of exploring how Muslim content creators understand their role, navigate challenges, and conceptualize their social impact (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The research was conducted between March 2024 and August 2024, following ethical approval from the institutional review board.

Sampling Technique and Participant Selection

This study utilized purposive sampling with maximum variation strategy to select participants who could provide rich, diverse perspectives on digital da'wah (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling was appropriate because the research sought to understand specific experiences of a defined population (Muslim content creators) rather than to generalize findings to all possible cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). The maximum variation approach ensured diversity across key dimensions including platform type, geographical location, content focus, audience size, and demographic characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) self-identify as Muslim, (2) have actively created Islamic content for at least two years, (3) have a minimum audience of 10,000 followers/subscribers on at least one platform, and (4) consider da'wah (Islamic outreach) as a primary or significant purpose of their content creation.

Initial participant identification occurred through systematic searches of major platforms (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, podcasts) using Islamic keywords and hashtags. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, with initial participants recommending other content creators who

met inclusion criteria (Noy, 2008). Potential participants received personalized recruitment messages explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards. Of 42 content creators contacted, 28 agreed to participate, and 25 completed interviews, achieving data saturation when no substantially new themes emerged from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Table 1 presents the demographic and content characteristics of the final sample.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Content Characteristics (N=25)

Muslim Content Creator Demographics

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	14	56
	Female	11	44
Age Range	20-29 years	8	32
	30-39 years	12	48
	40-49 years	5	20
Geographical Location	North America	7	28
	Europe	6	24
	Middle East/North Africa	5	20
	Southeast Asia	4	16
	Other	3	12
Primary Platform	YouTube	9	36
	Instagram	8	32
	TikTok	4	16
	Multiple platforms equally	4	16
Audience Size	10,000-50,000	9	36
	50,001-200,000	8	32
	200,001-1,000,000	5	20
	Over 1,000,000	3	12
Content Focus	Islamic education/lectures	10	40
	Lifestyle & faith integration	7	28
	Quran recitation/memorization	3	12
	Social issues & commentary	5	20
Formal Islamic Education	Extensive (degree/certification)	11	44
	Moderate (courses/study circles)	9	36
	Limited (self-taught)	5	20
Years Creating Content	2-4 years	10	40
	5-7 years	9	36
	8+ years	6	24

Total Sample Size: $n = 25$

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 60-90 minutes, conducted via video conferencing platforms (Zoom, Google Meet) to accommodate participants' geographical

dispersion (Salmons, 2015). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions organized into five thematic domains: (1) motivations and journey into digital da'wah, (2) content creation strategies and decision-making processes, (3) navigation of religious authenticity and digital engagement tensions, (4) challenges and ethical dilemmas, and (5) perceived social impacts and community responses. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to pursue emergent topics while maintaining consistency across interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

All interviews were conducted in English or translated by certified translators for non-English speaking participants. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim, producing 847 pages of transcript data. Field notes were maintained throughout data collection, documenting interviewer reflections, contextual observations, and preliminary analytical insights (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Additionally, participants were asked to provide examples of their content, and content analysis of 125 selected posts/videos was conducted to triangulate interview data with actual content practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase interpretive phenomenological analysis process outlined by Smith et al. (2009): (1) reading and re-reading transcripts to achieve immersion, (2) initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, (3) developing emergent themes within individual transcripts, (4) searching for connections across themes, (5) moving to the next case and repeating the process, and (6) identifying patterns across cases. NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software facilitated data organization, coding, and theme development (QSR International, 2023).

The coding process employed both deductive and inductive approaches. Initial codes were informed by concepts from the literature review (e.g., religious authority, platform affordances, community impact), while remaining open to emergent themes arising from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Two researchers independently coded 20% of transcripts to ensure coding consistency, achieving an intercoder reliability coefficient of 0.87, considered acceptable for qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and refinement of the coding framework.

Thematic analysis proceeded iteratively, with themes refined through constant comparison across cases, checking themes against raw data, and considering negative cases that challenged emerging patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis identified four major themes with multiple subthemes, which are presented in the findings section. Table 2 summarizes the major themes, subthemes, and representative data examples.

Table 2: Major Themes, Subthemes, and Data Frequencies

Major Theme	Subthemes	No. of Participants Mentioning	Representative Data Segments
1. Motivations and Journey	Personal spiritual calling	22	156
	Responding to community needs	19	134
	Countering misinformation	17	98
	Accidental visibility	12	67

Major Theme	Subthemes	No. of Participants Mentioning	Representative Data Segments
2. Navigating Authenticity	Balancing depth with accessibility	24	189
	Platform algorithm pressures	21	167
	Maintaining scholarly standards	18	123
	Aesthetic presentation choices	16	94
3. Challenges and Ethics	Dealing with criticism/backlash	23	201
	Financial sustainability tensions	18	142
	Managing diverse audiences	20	156
	Sectarian sensitivities	15	109
	Mental health impacts	14	87
4. Perceived Social Impact	Increased Islamic literacy	24	178
	Community building online	21	145
	Influencing positive behaviors	19	132
	Reaching marginalized groups	17	116
	Concerns about superficiality	13	89

Validity and Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). **Credibility** was established through prolonged engagement with data, triangulation across multiple data sources (interviews, content analysis, field notes), and member checking whereby 18 participants reviewed preliminary findings and confirmed interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). **Transferability** was supported through thick description providing detailed contextual information enabling readers to assess applicability to other settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). **Dependability** was enhanced through maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting all research decisions, methodological procedures, and analytical processes (Carcary, 2009). **Confirmability** was achieved through reflexive journaling where researchers documented their assumptions, biases, and positionality throughout the research process, acknowledging how their own relationship to Islam and digital media might influence interpretation (Berger, 2015).

Researcher reflexivity deserves special attention in this study. The research team included both Muslim and non-Muslim researchers, individuals with varying relationships to social media, and people from different generational cohorts. This diversity facilitated productive discussions about interpretation while requiring careful navigation of insider/outsider dynamics (Berger, 2015). Regular reflexive discussions helped identify how researchers' assumptions might shape data interpretation and ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' voices rather than researchers' preconceptions.

FINDINGS

The analysis of interview data and content examination revealed four major themes characterizing the experiences and perspectives of Muslim content creators engaged in digital da'wah. These themes illuminate the complex negotiations these creators undertake between religious commitment and digital engagement, their perceived impacts on Muslim communities, and the ethical challenges they navigate in their work.

Theme 1: Motivations and Pathways into Digital Da'wah

Participants articulated diverse yet interconnected motivations for engaging in digital da'wah, with most describing their journey as emerging from personal spiritual development rather than calculated career planning. Twenty-two participants described experiencing a strong sense of spiritual calling or religious obligation to share Islamic teachings, often framing this as fulfilling the Islamic principle that "whoever guides someone to good will be rewarded similarly." One YouTube creator explained: "I never intended to become an 'Islamic influencer.' I was just sharing what I was learning in my own journey, and suddenly people started asking questions, seeking advice. I realized this was an opportunity to serve that I couldn't ignore" (Participant 7, male, North America).

Nineteen participants specifically emphasized responding to perceived needs within their communities, particularly among youth who they observed were disconnected from traditional Islamic institutions or struggling to reconcile Islamic teachings with contemporary life. An Instagram content creator stated: "I saw young Muslims getting their Islam from memes and random tweets. There was this huge gap between what the mosque was offering and what young people needed. I thought, if I can make Islam accessible and relevant in their digital spaces, maybe I can bridge that gap" (Participant 14, female, Europe). This motivation was particularly pronounced among participants aged 30-39, who often described feeling positioned between older religious authorities and younger audiences.

Seventeen participants highlighted countering misinformation about Islam as a primary motivation, driven by concerns about both Islamophobia in mainstream media and problematic Islamic content online. These creators viewed their work as a form of defensive da'wah, protecting Islam's reputation and providing accurate information. A TikTok creator explained: "After seeing so much hate toward Muslims online, and then seeing Muslims themselves sometimes spreading extreme or incorrect views of Islam, I felt like I had to contribute to a more balanced, authentic representation" (Participant 19, male, Southeast Asia).

Interestingly, twelve participants described their visibility as somewhat accidental, with a single video or post unexpectedly going viral and creating an audience that then expected continued content. These creators often struggled initially with the sudden responsibility but ultimately embraced it as divinely ordained. As one participant reflected: "I posted one video explaining how to pray, and it got 2 million views overnight. I wasn't ready for that, but all these people were saying it helped them. I realized Allah had put me in this position for a reason" (Participant 22, female, Middle East).

Theme 2: Navigating Religious Authenticity and Digital Engagement

All participants grappled with tensions between maintaining religious authenticity and producing content that succeeds within digital platform ecosystems. This emerged as perhaps the most significant and persistent challenge facing Muslim content creators. Twenty-four participants specifically discussed the difficulty of balancing theological depth with accessibility, acknowledging

that genuinely comprehensive Islamic education requires nuance and complexity that doesn't always translate well to short-form social media content. A YouTube lecturer noted: "Islamic jurisprudence is incredibly nuanced. You can't adequately explain a fiqh ruling in 60 seconds, but that's what TikTok rewards. So you're constantly making decisions about what you can simplify without being misleading" (Participant 3, male, North America).

Twenty-one participants discussed experiencing pressure from platform algorithms that reward certain content characteristics—controversy, emotional resonance, visual aesthetics, frequency—that don't necessarily align with sound Islamic pedagogy. An Instagram creator explained: "The algorithm loves conflict and emotion. A post about sectarian differences or gender controversies will get 10 times the engagement of a post about proper Quran recitation. You have to consciously resist the incentive to chase engagement at the expense of what's actually beneficial" (Participant 11, female, Europe). Several participants developed explicit personal guidelines about what compromises they would and wouldn't make, such as refusing to oversimplify complex issues even if it meant lower engagement.

Eighteen participants with formal Islamic education discussed internal conflicts about maintaining scholarly standards while being accessible to lay audiences. These creators expressed concerns about inadvertently contributing to the erosion of traditional Islamic scholarship by making complex issues seem simpler than they are. One participant with an *ijazah* (certification) in Quranic recitation reflected: "I studied for years under traditional scholars. When I see someone who took a weekend course calling themselves a 'sheikh' online, it troubles me. But I also recognize that traditional scholarship can be gatekeeping. We need to make knowledge accessible without compromising integrity" (Participant 8, male, Middle East).

Sixteen participants discussed aesthetic and presentation choices, recognizing that visual appeal matters in digital spaces but struggling with where to draw lines. Female content creators particularly discussed tensions around wearing hijab in ways that are both Islamically appropriate and aesthetically aligned with platform norms. One hijabi lifestyle blogger explained: "I want my hijab to be normalized and beautiful in the digital space, but I'm also conscious that I'm not supposed to be attracting attention to myself in a way that goes against the purpose of hijab. It's a constant negotiation" (Participant 15, female, Southeast Asia).

Theme 3: Challenges and Ethical Dilemmas

Participants described numerous challenges and ethical dilemmas inherent in digital da'wah work. Twenty-three participants discussed dealing with substantial criticism and backlash, often from multiple directions simultaneously. Content creators faced criticism from traditionalists who questioned their credentials or approach, from progressive Muslims who found their content too conservative, from Muslims of different sectarian backgrounds who objected to specific interpretations, and from non-Muslims who viewed any Islamic content as problematic. One participant described this as "being attacked from all sides—too liberal for some, too conservative for others, too Sunni for Shias, too Shia for Sunnis, too Muslim for Islamophobes" (Participant 12, male, Europe). Several participants described receiving death threats, extensive harassment, and coordinated campaigns to have their content removed from platforms.

Eighteen participants identified financial sustainability as creating ethical tensions, particularly around accepting sponsorships, running advertisements, or selling products. While most acknowledged needing income to sustain their work, they worried about commercializing religious messaging or creating conflicts of interest. An Instagram creator explained: "I need sponsorships to

do this full-time, but I've turned down many offers from companies whose products I don't truly believe in or that conflict with Islamic values. But then I see other Muslim influencers promoting anything for money, and it damages all our credibility" (Participant 17, female, North America). Some participants developed explicit ethical guidelines, such as only promoting products they personally use or donating portions of income to charity.

Twenty participants discussed the challenge of managing diverse audiences with different needs, expectations, and levels of Islamic knowledge. Content creators serving transnational audiences struggled with cultural sensitivities, as practices acceptable in one cultural context might be controversial in another. A YouTube creator reflected: "My audience includes Muslims from Indonesia to Morocco to America. What counts as modest dress varies dramatically. How do I give advice that honors all these cultural contexts while also teaching universal Islamic principles?" (Participant 5, male, Southeast Asia). Several creators addressed this by explicitly acknowledging diversity of opinion and encouraging viewers to consult local scholars.

Fifteen participants discussed navigating sectarian sensitivities, with several Sunni creators describing tensions when Shia followers criticized their content and vice versa. Most attempted to focus on shared Islamic principles while acknowledging differences respectfully, though some received criticism for being either too ecumenical or not inclusive enough. Fourteen participants also discussed significant mental health impacts from their work, including anxiety, burnout, and difficulty maintaining boundaries between their private spiritual lives and public content creation. One creator stated: "It's emotionally exhausting being a public Muslim figure. Every mistake you make is magnified. Every personal struggle becomes public. You're expected to be perfect when you're just trying to be better yourself" (Participant 21, female, Europe).

Theme 4: Perceived Social Impacts

Participants articulated nuanced perspectives on the social impacts of their digital da'wah work, acknowledging both positive contributions and limitations. Twenty-four participants described substantial evidence that their work had increased Islamic literacy among their audiences, particularly on basic practices and concepts. Creators shared numerous testimonials from followers who learned to pray through their videos, understood Islamic concepts for the first time, or developed more positive relationships with their faith. One creator explained: "I regularly get messages from people saying they were about to leave Islam because they didn't understand it, but my content helped them see Islam differently. That's incredibly humbling" (Participant 4, female, North America).

Twenty-one participants emphasized their role in community building, creating digital spaces where Muslims could connect, support one another, and discuss challenges. This was particularly significant for Muslims in minority contexts, converts without strong community support, or individuals who felt marginalized in physical Muslim communities. An Instagram creator noted: "I've built this community where hijabis who struggle with body image can support each other, where we can talk about eating disorders and mental health in ways that integrate Islamic principles. These conversations weren't happening in mosques" (Participant 13, female, Europe).

Nineteen participants provided examples of their content influencing positive behavioral changes, such as followers beginning to pray regularly, giving more charity, improving family relationships, or abandoning harmful practices. Several creators described developing ongoing relationships with followers, effectively providing informal religious counseling or mentorship. Seventeen participants particularly emphasized reaching marginalized groups who might not engage with traditional Islamic institutions, including LGBTQ+ Muslims questioning their place in Islam, women experiencing

domestic violence seeking Islamic perspectives on their rights, and young people alienated from mosque communities.

However, thirteen participants also expressed concerns about superficiality and limitations of digital da'wah. These creators worried that social media might reduce Islam to aesthetics, inspirational quotes, and feel-good content without the depth necessary for genuine spiritual transformation. One YouTuber reflected: "I see people who follow dozens of Muslim influencers, who can quote us in the comments, but are they actually praying? Are they actually transforming their character? Sometimes I worry we're creating a generation of Muslims who are Islamically literate but not spiritually connected" (Participant 9, male, Middle East). Several participants acknowledged that digital da'wah works best as a supplement to, rather than replacement for, traditional Islamic education and community involvement, yet recognized that for many followers, digital content had become their primary source of Islamic knowledge.

DISCUSSIONS

Digital Da'wah as Religious Adaptation and Innovation

The findings of this study illuminate digital da'wah as a complex process of religious adaptation that extends and transforms traditional Islamic outreach practices rather than simply replicating them in new media (Campbell, 2013; Bunt, 2018). Participants' narratives reveal how Muslim content creators actively negotiate between preservation of Islamic authenticity and innovation necessary for digital engagement, a tension that reflects broader dynamics in contemporary Muslim societies navigating tradition and modernity (Mandaville, 2007). The spiritual motivations articulated by participants—framing their work as religious obligation and divine calling—demonstrate that digital da'wah is experienced not merely as content creation but as a form of worship and service, consistent with Islamic theological concepts of da'wah as a communal responsibility (Nisa, 2018). This spiritual framing provides legitimacy for their work within Islamic tradition while simultaneously enabling creative adaptation to digital affordances.

The study's findings regarding authenticity negotiations extend previous research by revealing the sophisticated strategies content creators employ to maintain religious integrity while achieving digital visibility (Evolvi, 2019; Cheong, 2021). Participants demonstrated acute awareness of algorithmic pressures and platform logics that could compromise theological accuracy, developing personal ethical frameworks to resist these pressures. These findings challenge deterministic perspectives that view digital platforms as inevitably corrupting religious messaging, instead highlighting human agency in navigating technological constraints (Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler, 2019). However, the persistent struggle participants described suggests that this negotiation remains contested terrain, with no stable resolution between religious authenticity and digital success. The variation in how participants resolved these tensions—some prioritizing engagement metrics while others accepted lower visibility to maintain depth—suggests that digital da'wah encompasses diverse approaches rather than a singular model, reflecting broader diversity within Islamic thought and practice.

Transformation of Religious Authority and Democratization

This study provides empirical support for theories of religious authority democratization in digital Islam while also revealing important nuances and limitations to democratization narratives (Mandaville, 2007; Bunt, 2018). The finding that twelve participants became influential content creators somewhat accidentally, through viral content rather than intentional credential-building, demonstrates how digital platforms can create alternative pathways to religious influence outside

traditional scholarly hierarchies. Furthermore, the success of self-taught creators with limited formal Islamic education challenges the monopoly traditional institutions held over religious discourse, confirming that digital spaces enable new forms of religious authority based on communication skills, relatability, and digital literacy rather than exclusively on traditional credentials (Sisler, 2011).

However, the study also reveals complications in straightforward democratization narratives. Participants with formal Islamic education expressed significant anxiety about the erosion of scholarly standards and the proliferation of unqualified voices claiming religious authority. This tension suggests that democratization may simultaneously increase access while potentially compromising knowledge quality, a trade-off with significant implications for Muslim communities (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). Furthermore, the substantial criticism and backlash participants faced—particularly female creators and those from minority sectarian perspectives—indicates that democratization is uneven and contested, with traditional power structures reasserting themselves through online harassment and delegitimization campaigns (Piela, 2021). The finding that participants with traditional credentials experienced more legitimacy and less criticism than self-taught creators suggests that traditional markers of authority retain significance even in digital spaces, indicating hybrid authority structures rather than complete transformation.

The study's identification of diverse audiences with different expectations also complicates democratization by revealing how content creators must navigate multiple, sometimes contradictory, authority claims simultaneously—traditional scholarly authority, experiential authority as practicing Muslims, charismatic authority through communication skills, and democratic authority through audience size (Cheong, 2021). This multiplicity suggests that digital da'wah has created a complex, contested field of religious authority rather than simply replacing one authority structure with another. Future scholarship should examine how these different authority forms interact and compete, and whether certain forms are becoming dominant in digital Islamic discourse.

Platform Affordances, Commercialization, and Ethical Challenges

The findings regarding platform affordances and commercialization reveal significant ethical challenges facing Muslim content creators that warrant serious consideration from both religious communities and platform designers. Participants' descriptions of algorithmic pressures toward controversy, emotional content, and aesthetic presentation align with existing scholarship documenting how platform architectures shape religious expression (Evolvi, 2019; Campbell & Vitullo, 2016). However, this study extends previous research by documenting content creators' conscious resistance strategies and the personal costs of maintaining religious integrity within these systems. The mental health impacts described by participants—anxiety, burnout, boundary erosion—represent serious concerns that deserve attention from Muslim communities and scholars, suggesting the need for support structures and ethical guidelines for digital religious workers.

The financial sustainability tensions identified in this study illuminate the broader challenge of commercialization in digital religious spaces (Cheong, 2021). While traditional Islamic scholars historically received community support through mosque positions or religious endowments, digital content creators operate within attention economies that commodify religious messaging through advertisements, sponsorships, and personal branding. Participants' struggles to maintain religious authenticity while securing income reveal this fundamental tension, with implications extending beyond individual creators to the broader integrity of Islamic discourse online. The finding that some creators accepted any sponsorships while others developed strict ethical guidelines suggests the need for community-wide discussions about acceptable commercialization boundaries in digital da'wah.

Additionally, the sectarian sensitivities and diverse audience challenges identified in this study reveal how digital platforms create both opportunities and complications for transnational Islamic discourse. While digital technologies enable Muslim content creators to reach global audiences across geographical and cultural boundaries (Bunt, 2018), this transnational reach requires navigating diverse interpretive traditions, cultural practices, and sectarian differences. The strategies participants employed—acknowledging diversity of opinion, focusing on shared principles, encouraging consultation with local scholars—represent pragmatic approaches to managing this complexity. However, the criticism they faced from multiple directions simultaneously suggests that some audiences expect content creators to represent narrow sectarian or cultural perspectives rather than embracing Islamic diversity. This tension reflects broader questions about whether digital Islamic discourse will tend toward pluralism or fragmentation, questions that merit ongoing scholarly attention and empirical investigation.

Social Impact: Opportunities and Limitations of Digital Da'wah

The perceived social impacts articulated by participants reveal both the transformative potential and inherent limitations of digital da'wah as a form of Islamic outreach and education. The finding that content creators successfully increased Islamic literacy, particularly among youth and marginalized groups, suggests that digital platforms have democratized access to religious knowledge in meaningful ways (Anderson, 2015; Evolvi, 2019). The testimonials participants shared about followers learning to pray, developing positive Islamic identities, or finding community support demonstrate tangible benefits that should not be dismissed as superficial or insignificant. For Muslims in contexts with limited physical Islamic infrastructure—whether due to geographical remoteness, minority status, or social marginalization—digital da'wah may provide essential religious resources and community connections that would otherwise be unavailable.

However, participants' concerns about superficiality and the limitations of digital formats warrant serious consideration. The worry that social media might reduce Islam to aesthetic presentation and inspirational quotes without depth reflects broader scholarly concerns about the "McDonaldization" of religion—the reduction of complex spiritual traditions to easily consumable, standardized products (Ritzer, 2013). While digital da'wah may introduce people to Islamic concepts and inspire initial religious engagement, participants questioned whether it cultivates the sustained spiritual practice, character development, and community commitment that traditional Islamic pedagogy emphasizes. This limitation suggests that digital da'wah functions best as a complementary resource rather than a complete replacement for traditional Islamic education and community participation, a finding with important implications for how Muslim communities integrate digital and traditional approaches.

The community-building impacts described by participants are particularly significant, as they demonstrate how digital platforms enable new forms of Muslim sociality and solidarity (Bunt, 2018). The creation of online spaces where marginalized Muslims—women experiencing specific challenges, converts without community support, LGBTQ+ Muslims, those with mental health struggles—can discuss issues taboo in traditional community settings represents an important social contribution of digital da'wah. These digital communities may provide support, validation, and religious resources that participants cannot access in their physical communities, potentially improving mental health, reducing isolation, and fostering more inclusive expressions of Islamic identity (Piela, 2021). However, questions remain about the durability and depth of these digital communities compared to face-to-face religious communities, and whether online connections can provide the full range of social, emotional, and spiritual support that embodied communities offer.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study examining Muslim content creators engaged in digital da'wah reveals a complex, dynamic phenomenon that is transforming how Islamic knowledge is disseminated, how religious authority is constructed, and how Muslim communities form and interact in the twenty-first century. Through in-depth interviews with 25 content creators across diverse geographical contexts, platforms, and content approaches, this research demonstrates that digital da'wah represents neither a simple continuation of traditional Islamic outreach nor a complete rupture from it, but rather a creative adaptation that negotiates between religious authenticity and digital affordances. The participants' experiences illuminate the opportunities digital platforms provide for increasing accessibility to Islamic knowledge, building transnational communities, and amplifying marginalized voices, while simultaneously revealing significant challenges including algorithmic pressures toward sensationalism, commercialization tensions, erosion of scholarly standards, and mental health impacts on content creators.

The study's findings contribute to scholarly understanding of contemporary Islamic practice by documenting how religious authority is being reconstituted in digital spaces through hybrid forms that combine traditional credentials, charismatic communication, experiential authenticity, and audience validation. Rather than complete democratization or fragmentation, digital da'wah has created a contested field where multiple forms of authority coexist and compete, with implications for the future of Islamic discourse and leadership. The sophisticated strategies participants employ to maintain religious integrity while achieving digital visibility—developing personal ethical frameworks, resisting algorithmic pressures toward controversy, balancing accessibility with theological depth—demonstrate significant agency and thoughtfulness in navigating this complex terrain. However, the persistent tensions and ethical dilemmas they face suggest that digital da'wah remains an evolving practice without stable norms or consensus about best approaches.

The social impacts identified in this study—increased Islamic literacy among youth, community building in digital spaces, reaching marginalized groups, influencing positive behavioral changes—demonstrate meaningful contributions of digital da'wah to contemporary Muslim life. However, participants' concerns about superficiality, the limitations of short-form content for complex theological education, and questions about whether digital engagement translates into sustained spiritual practice warrant ongoing attention and empirical investigation. These findings suggest the need for Muslim communities to thoughtfully integrate digital and traditional approaches to Islamic education and outreach, recognizing digital da'wah as a valuable complement to rather than replacement for embodied community and traditional scholarship. As digital technologies continue evolving and new platforms and affordances emerge, the Muslim community faces ongoing challenges in ensuring that digital Islamic discourse serves authentic spiritual development and community wellbeing rather than reducing religion to consumable content optimized for engagement metrics.

Implications for Further Research

This study opens several important avenues for future research on digital da'wah and Muslim content creators. First, longitudinal studies tracking content creators and their audiences over extended periods could provide valuable insights into how digital da'wah evolves over time, whether initial engagement translates into sustained religious practice, and how content creation impacts creators' own spiritual development and mental health long-term. Such research could address questions about durability and depth of impact that cross-sectional qualitative studies cannot fully answer (Pennington, 2021).

Second, audience reception studies examining how diverse Muslim populations engage with, interpret, and are influenced by digital da'wah content would complement this study's focus on content creators. Research investigating differences in reception across age groups, geographical contexts, sectarian backgrounds, and levels of prior Islamic knowledge could reveal for whom digital da'wah is most impactful and what content characteristics resonate with different audiences. Comparative studies examining differences between audiences who rely primarily on digital Islamic content versus those who combine digital and traditional sources would be particularly valuable (Evolvi, 2019).

Third, platform-specific studies examining how different digital architectures—YouTube's long-form video, Instagram's visual focus, TikTok's short-form content, podcast audio formats—shape Islamic discourse in distinct ways would contribute to understanding the relationship between technological affordances and religious expression. Such research could inform platform design decisions and help content creators optimize their approaches for specific platforms while maintaining religious integrity (Cheong, 2021).

Fourth, comparative research examining digital da'wah across different religious traditions—Christian content creators, Buddhist influencers, Jewish digital educators—could identify common challenges and strategies in digital religious communication while also highlighting distinctive features of Islamic digital practice. Cross-religious comparative research could contribute to broader theoretical understanding of religion in digital culture (Campbell, 2017).

Fifth, intervention research evaluating programs to support Muslim content creators through mentorship, ethical guidelines, mental health resources, or theological consultation could provide practical insights for religious institutions and organizations seeking to foster healthy, effective digital Islamic discourse. Such research could examine whether support structures improve content quality, reduce creator burnout, or enhance positive social impacts (Bunt, 2018).

Finally, critical examination of how digital platforms' business models, algorithms, and content moderation policies specifically impact Islamic content—including issues of bias, censorship, or amplification—would contribute to understanding structural factors shaping digital da'wah beyond individual content creator decisions. Research in this area could inform advocacy efforts and policy recommendations for more equitable platform governance (Conway, 2017).

Co-Author Contribution

Author 1 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review and overlooked the whole article's write up. Authors 2, wrote the research methodology and the findings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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