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The Construction of Digital Piety and the Phenomenon of Da'wah Micro-Influencers in the Formation of Religious Authority among Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to analyze the construction of digital piety through the activities of religious micro-influencers, as well as the interrelationship between engagement, popularity, and social media algorithms in the formation of religious authority among Generation Z.

Method – This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using library research. Data were collected through documentation from books, scientific journal articles, and relevant prior research, then analyzed descriptively and analytically using thematic analysis and linked to Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority

Findings – The results indicate that digital piety is constructed through religious visual symbols, narratives of personal experiences, the integration of Islamic values with modern lifestyles, and collective worship practices based on interactive features. A relatable style of da'wah fosters emotional closeness, while engagement and algorithms expand the visibility of da'wah figures. This study concludes that digital religious authority is formed through a combination of visibility, emotional closeness, and audience recognition; however, popularity does not necessarily reflect credibility or scholarly religious legitimacy, making it important for Generation Z to adopt a critical stance.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of da'wah micro-influencers has increasingly attracted attention because of their influence on the dissemination of religious messages on social media, particularly among Generation Z (Saepul Anwar et al., 2025). Da'wah micro-influencers can be understood as preachers or religious content creators with a relatively small to medium number of followers who build personal closeness with their audiences. In influencer marketing studies, an influencer's influence cannot be reduced to audience size, since an influencer's value is shaped by the relationship among three functional components: the target audience, the credibility of the message sender, and the management of the relevant social media (C. Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The human brand concept helps explain how audiences interpret such figures through the personas they present on social media and is not used to determine follower counts (Ki et al., 2020). In the context of da'wah, these characteristics are noteworthy because figures with relatively limited numbers of followers still have opportunities to attract attention and build relationships with audiences through the religious content they deliver.

The range of 10,000 to 100,000 followers commonly associated with the micro-influencer category is one convention in the literature and practice of digital marketing, rather than a universally agreed category. Recent literature reviews indicate varying thresholds across studies, ranging from defining micro-influencers as those with fewer than 100,000 followers to limiting the category to 10,000–50,000 followers, while some other studies place micro-influencers within the range of 1,000–100,000 followers (Kuzoren et al., 2025). This threshold is treated as an operational guideline for identifying cases, while the characteristics of the research object are determined through these relational features. The presence of da'wah micro-influencers indicates that the dissemination of religious messages involves not only religious figures with formal institutional authority, but also individuals with limited followings who build personal closeness through informal communication styles suited to young people's digital culture (Rizkiyah Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). The number of followers reflects the audience scale of a micro-influencer, whereas comments, questions, and audience responses indicate forms of engagement occurring through social media interactions. Thus, audience size and engagement level are two distinct aspects in understanding the influence of da'wah micro-influencers in digital spaces.

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram do not merely function as spaces for entertainment and communication; they have also developed into spaces for da'wah dissemination, identity formation, and the expression of religiosity (Nisa, 2018). Changes in patterns of access to religious knowledge within cyber-Islamic environments is a concept formulated by Bunt to explain that religious knowledge and authority do not depend entirely on face-to-face interactions with religious figures, since digital platforms provide other channels for producing, disseminating, and accessing religious knowledge (Mcclure, 2019). This reference is used as a conceptual source, namely, a framework for naming the environment in which religious practices take place digitally, and not as empirical data about Indonesian audiences; therefore, the claims it supports are limited to shifts in access channels, rather than the magnitude of changes in religious behavior. In this context, social media has become an important space for Generation Z to acquire religious knowledge, develop religious identities, and interact with figures who convey religious messages (Zaid et al., 2022).

The development of TikTok and Instagram provides platform characteristics that enable da'wah content to be produced, distributed, and consumed more widely. Within the framework of

this study, Generation Z is understood as a group that incorporates both platforms into its daily routines, so that religious content appears in the same stream as entertainment content and competes for audience attention within a short period (Institute, 2024). In terms of production, short-form vertical video formats allow creators to deliver da'wah messages without requiring production capacity on the scale of broadcasting institutions (Schellewald, 2023). In terms of distribution, TikTok's algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, as well as Instagram's Explore and Reels features, allow content to reach audiences beyond the creator account's circle of followers (Reinis, 2025). In terms of consumption, meanwhile, comments, replies, duets or stitches, live broadcasts, and direct messages enable audiences to respond to, question, and request explanations about the messages delivered (Entrena-Serrano, 2025). These three characteristics create opportunities for da'wah micro-influencers to gain visibility beyond their follower counts while maintaining close interactions with audiences (Chen et al., 2024). Therefore, the characteristics of digital platforms provide conditions that enable figures with relatively limited followings to become known and attract audience attention, once again making the formation and recognition of religious authority in digital spaces a relevant issue to examine.

The shift of religious interaction spaces to digital media has ultimately also changed how religious authority is formed and recognized. This change does not take place as the replacement of one form of authority by another, but rather as a process of negotiation between existing sources of legitimacy and opportunities to build influence through digital spaces. Heidi Campbell explains that digital media opens up spaces for negotiating religious authority, which was previously largely determined by hierarchy, organizational structures, ideology, and texts (H. Campbell, 2007). Within these spaces, new religious actors can gain influence through direct interaction with audiences, while figures who already possess scholarly depth, a chain of scholarly transmission (sanad), and institutional positions continue to maintain their legitimacy (Hidayatullah, 2024). Therefore, the development of digital media does not necessarily eliminate traditional authority, but expands the space for the emergence of new religious actors and changes the mechanisms through which figures considered worthy of serving as references are recognized (Chair et al., 2024).

Digital popularity does not necessarily eliminate religious legitimacy derived from scholarly competence, sanad, or institutional standing. Popularity is more closely related to a figure's recognition and visibility on social media, whereas recognition concerns audience acceptance of that figure's religious capacity (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). From Max Weber's perspective, traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority have different foundations of legitimacy, but may coexist in a single figure (Weber, 2017). Personal closeness and an appealing delivery style may be associated with characteristics of charismatic authority; sanad pathways and the transmission of knowledge are associated with traditional authority; while institutional positions and certification may be associated with rational-legal authority. In this study, this typology is used as a conceptual framework for understanding the diversity of sources of religious legitimacy, with primary attention to audience recognition as an important element in the formation of charismatic authority (Weber, 2017).

Research on young Muslims in Indonesia indicates a fragmentation of religious authority through the use of social media, as reflected in the emergence of religious figures who are close to young people's popular culture (E. Saputra, 2021). This tendency does not mean that institutional legitimacy has lost its place; rather, it indicates an increase in the pathways through which authority is formed, because religious influence can grow not only through formal structures but also through a figure's ability to become known and build closeness with their audience. However, recognition alone does not explain anything about audience acceptance (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Wahid and Gunarto explain that audience engagement on social media can expand the reach of religious

messages. Nevertheless, this expansion of reach must be distinguished from recognition of a figure's religious capacity (Wahid & Gunarto, 2022). Therefore, likes and comments should be read as indicators of visibility that create opportunities for recognition, not as evidence that recognition has already occurred. At this stage, what is formed is popularity, namely digital recognition measured by reach and interaction volume; popularity creates opportunities to become known, but does not guarantee recognition, because popularity may result from curiosity, entertainment, or controversy, without audiences being willing to regard the figure as a source of explanation (Korzynski et al., 2025). Therefore, what needs to be traced is not a direct path from popularity to authority, but the sequence of processes between them; this sequence is discussed in the discussion section.

Social media algorithmic mechanisms also shape the space in which digital piety develops, namely, a form of religious expression reflected not only through religious practices in everyday life, but also through the ways individuals present themselves, interact, and express religiosity in digital spaces. In the context of Generation Z, engagement with religious content can become a form of religious expression as well as a space for interaction between audiences and da'wah figures (Rizkiyah Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). However, high levels of engagement do not necessarily indicate acceptance of or trust in the figure concerned. Recognition is more closely related to how audiences accept the figure as a reference for obtaining explanations and understanding religious issues.

Several previous studies have discussed the relationship between social media, da'wah, and changes in religious authority among young people. Chair, Wawaysadhya, and Oktafiani found that social media is one source of religious knowledge for young people who attend online religious study sessions, while also indicating changes in patterns of religious authority (Chair et al., 2024). Hasanah and Baharun subsequently highlighted the faithfluencer phenomenon as a new figure serving as a social and spiritual mediator (Rizkiyah Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). These studies provide an overview of changes in access to religious knowledge and the emergence of new religious figures in digital spaces. However, the relationship between a figure's popularity, audience engagement, and recognition of religious competence still needs to be examined further through a synthesis of these research findings.

Studies on algorithms also demonstrate the influence of platform technology on the dissemination of religious messages. Malik, Ulum, and Wahud examined Islamic da'wah within the TikTok algorithm and showed that artificial intelligence-based algorithms can facilitate the dissemination of religious messages, but may also create filter bubbles that limit the diversity of religious information (Malik et al., 2025). Meanwhile, through a netnographic study of hadith content on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, Istifarin and Syamsudin found that religious authority is negotiated through communicative closeness and audience engagement metrics, which under certain conditions may come into conflict with religious legitimacy based on sanad (Nur Annisa Istifarin & Syamsudin, 2026). These studies provide an understanding of the role of algorithms and audience interaction in the dissemination of religious messages and the negotiation of authority in digital spaces.

Unlike previous studies, this research focuses on da'wah micro-influencers as religious figures who gain visibility through social media algorithmic mechanisms and have the potential to build recognition of their religious capacity among audiences. Chair et al. indicate a shift in patterns of religious authority on social media, particularly in relation to changes in how younger generations acquire religious knowledge (Chair et al., 2024). Hasanah and Baharun identify faithfluencers as figures who serve as social and spiritual mediators in shaping Generation Z's digital piety (Rizkiyah

Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). Meanwhile, Zaman et al. explain the use of TikTok algorithms in disseminating da'wah content and the challenges that arise, including the formation of filter bubbles (Malik et al., 2025). These three studies provide a foundation for understanding changes in authority and the dissemination of da'wah in digital spaces. However, the relationship between digital popularity, audience engagement, and the process of recognizing da'wah micro-influencers as religious references still needs to be examined in a more focused manner. Therefore, this study focuses on how popularity and audience engagement contribute to the process of forming recognition of da'wah micro-influencers and how this process relates to the negotiation of religious authority among Generation Z.

To clarify the analytical focus, this study distinguishes four interrelated concepts that nevertheless have different meanings. Recognition refers to the condition in which a figure is known by an audience, while popularity indicates the level of recognition reflected through reach and interaction volume (De Veirman et al., 2017). Engagement refers to audience actions toward content, such as liking, commenting, sharing, and following an account. Recognition of religious capacity, meanwhile, refers to audience acceptance of a figure's religious competence, reflected in the tendency to regard the figure as a reference for obtaining explanations, discussing religious issues, and understanding and practicing religious teachings (Hidayatullah, 2024). Therefore, popularity and engagement do not automatically indicate recognition of a person's religious capacity. On this basis, the novelty of this study lies in its effort to explain how the relationship between popularity and audience engagement contributes to the process of forming recognition of da'wah micro-influencers, and to understand how this process relates to the negotiation of religious authority among Generation Z. This study does not assume that digital popularity automatically replaces scholarly legitimacy, sanad, or religious institutions. Instead, it seeks to understand how recognition formed through social media interactions relates to existing sources of religious legitimacy.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design using the library research method to examine the construction of digital piety and the formation of religious authority through the phenomenon of da'wah micro-influencers on social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram. The library research method was selected because this study focuses on examining and analyzing various written sources related to digital da'wah, changes in religious authority, and the development of social media use in the religious lives of Generation Z. Library research is a research method conducted by collecting and analyzing various written sources relevant to the research problem (Danandjaja, 2014). Therefore, this study does not directly observe TikTok and Instagram accounts or content, but examines the phenomenon based on concepts, theories, and empirical findings published in various scholarly works.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and supporting literature sources. The primary literature sources comprise scholarly journal articles and previous research findings discussing digital piety, da'wah micro-influencers, changes in religious authority, audience engagement, and the role of social media algorithms. Meanwhile, supporting literature sources include books and academic references used to strengthen the conceptual and theoretical foundations, particularly regarding Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority and the development of religious authority in digital spaces. Literature was selected based on its relevance to the research focus, the alignment of its discussion with the research questions, the clarity of author and publisher identities, and publication credibility (Zed, 2014). Priority was given to

literature from peer-reviewed scientific journals, academic books, and previous research findings that can be scientifically accounted for.

Data were collected through documentation, namely by searching for, gathering, reading, and recording information from various literature sources relevant to the research topic (Danandjaja, 2014). The search used keywords related to digital piety, da'wah micro-influencers, religious authority, Generation Z, engagement, and social media algorithms (MacDonald et al., 2024). The literature identified was then selected based on the relevance of its content to the research focus and the credibility of its sources. Subsequently, each source was read and examined to obtain information about concepts, arguments, and research findings related to the research problem. The information obtained was recorded and grouped according to the focus of the study, including the construction of digital piety, da'wah styles of micro-influencers, popularity and audience engagement, the process of recognizing religious figures, and the role of social media algorithms in the formation of religious authority (Bowen, 2009).

Comparisons across sources were conducted by examining similarities and differences in arguments, concepts, and research findings addressing similar phenomena. Findings on popularity and audience engagement were compared with studies on recognition and changes in religious authority to understand how audience interactions can create opportunities for da'wah figures to emerge as religious references. In addition, discussions of algorithms were analyzed by connecting findings on content visibility and the recognition of da'wah micro-influencers. These comparisons also considered differences in the contexts and research approaches of each source to avoid conclusions that disregard the characteristics of the original findings. The comparisons were then synthesized into the main research themes: the construction of digital piety, the characteristics of micro-influencer da'wah, the relationship between popularity and audience engagement, recognition of figures as religious references, and the role of algorithms in the negotiation of religious authority (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This synthesis was conducted so that the research findings would not merely summarize the opinions of various authors, but would generate an understanding that connects the findings in the literature to address the research problem.

The results of the analysis were interpreted using Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority to understand the formation of religious authority through the phenomenon of da'wah micro-influencers in digital spaces. This theory positions charisma as an extraordinary quality attributed by followers to a figure, while followers' recognition of that quality is an important element in the formation of charismatic legitimacy (Weber, 2017). In this study, the theory is applied by considering three analytical aspects: audience perceptions of the qualities attributed to da'wah figures, audience recognition of figures as religious references, and audience trust in the figures and the messages they deliver, as reflected in previous research findings. These three aspects are used to examine how interaction and closeness with audiences may relate to the process of forming recognition of da'wah micro-influencers (H. A. Campbell, 2022). Popularity, as indicated by follower counts, likes, and comments, is not directly regarded as evidence of charismatic authority, but is distinguished from audience recognition of and trust in the figure concerned. Meanwhile, social media algorithms are understood as factors that influence content visibility and dissemination, rather than as the basis of charisma itself (Cotter, 2019). Literature on digital religious authority is used as a supporting concept to explain how platform mechanisms and audience interactions relate to the negotiation of sources of religious legitimacy (H. Campbell, 2007). Through this framework, Max Weber's theory is used to interpret the relationship between popularity, audience engagement, recognition, and the formation of religious authority among Generation Z.

The validity of the data in this study was established through triangulation of literature sources. The conclusions drawn were not based on a single source of literature, but were cross-checked against several sources discussing similar phenomena, so that the interpretation did not depend on a single research perspective. Differences that emerged were not flattened out, but recorded as limitations of interpretation and considerations in formulating the conclusions. The researcher also examined the consistency among the literature findings, the codes generated, the themes resulting from the analysis, and the theoretical framework used. Through these steps, the credibility of the research findings was maintained so that the interpretations and conclusions could be academically justified.

DISCUSSION

A. Forms of Digital Piety Construction

The construction of digital piety is understood as a process through which piety, originally associated with faith and worship practices, is shaped, displayed, and circulated as a communicative practice in digital spaces (Rofhani, 2026). In this process, piety is expressed not only through explicit religious messages, but also through clothing, visuals, self-narratives, hashtags, and a consistent image managed on social media (Rofhani, 2026). Thus, forms of digital piety construction refer to recurring patterns of representation in this process, through which piety can be seen, interpreted, and recognized by audiences.

The development of religious discourse in the new media era has changed the landscape of Muslim religious expression, particularly among Generation Z. Piety is no longer defined exclusively through physical presence in conventional ritual spaces such as mosques or religious study assemblies, but is produced and mediated through digital technology (Rizkiyah Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). This tendency is consistent with the idea of the mediatization of religion, namely, the process through which the forms and practices of religion are influenced by media logic. In this context, da'wah micro-influencers, namely religious content creators with relatively limited numbers of followers but intensive levels of engagement, play a central role in constructing "digital piety" (Hjarvard, 2012).

This construction has implications for da'wah micro-influencers. A study of hijab-wearing influencers on Instagram shows that consistently displayed piety functions as self-branding, making them easy for audiences to recognize, follow, and trust (Khamis et al., 2017). This self-image must be continually maintained through visibility labour, namely, adapting content to platform logic so that it continues to appear and attract attention; consequently, the reach of da'wah is also determined by platform mechanisms (Abidin, 2016). Such visibility is ambivalent: it expands the reach of messages, but publicly displayed piety may generate anxiety about riya (ostentation) and intersect with aesthetics, branding, and commercial interests. At the same time, micro-influencers are expected to appear authentic—that is, approachable, trustworthy, and genuine—because this impression supports audience trust (Marei, 2024). This construction of piety takes shape through several forms of representation and symbolic articulation on social media.

First, visual symbols and religious aesthetics (visual piety). Da'wah micro-influencers build an image of piety by combining sharia values with popular digital aesthetics. Physical appearance, the choice of fashionable Muslim clothing that still covers the aurat, and the use of lighting, filters, and visually curated feeds become part of religious expression (Rizkiyah Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). Spiritual values are presented in appealing audiovisual formats, such as cinematic transitions and soothing background music in the form of nasyid or instrumental music, designed to align with the platform algorithmic logic of Instagram Reels and TikTok (Aida et al.,

2024).

Second, personalization and narratives of individual experience (personalized piety). Unlike traditional preachers, who often deliver doctrine formally, da'wah micro-influencers construct piety through self-disclosure (Aida et al., 2024). Religious teachings are communicated through everyday narratives, such as the search for identity, struggles against reluctance to worship, relationship challenges, and the process of hijrah (Aida et al., 2024). This approach creates the impression that piety is not a rigid spiritual achievement, but rather a dynamic, empathetic, and accessible daily learning process for anyone.

Third, the integration of piety with modern lifestyles (Islamic lifestyle). The construction of digital piety by micro-influencers also gives rise to the commodification of religion, combining Islamic values with popular consumption trends. Piety is articulated through recommendations for halal lifestyles, sharia-compliant skincare choices, sharia-based financial literacy, and even a culture of gathering in Muslim-friendly cafés. Within this framework, micro-influencers operate simultaneously as agents of da'wah and drivers of a creative economy based on religious identity, making symbols of piety part of Generation Z's social identity (Rizkiyah Hasanah & Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, 2025). However, this process is ambivalent: on the one hand, it expands the reach of da'wah; on the other, it may shift the orientation from spiritual values toward market logic.

Fourth, collective worship practices based on interactive features. This form of piety is manifested in concrete religious actions through the use of interactive social media platform features (Aida et al., 2024). Features such as polls, Q&A boxes, story countdowns, and live streaming are used to organize daily collective worship movements, such as shared reminders for Dhuha prayer, the One Day One Juz challenge, and regular dawn charity campaigns (Qonitah, 2019). Through this interactivity, digital piety transforms from merely passive content consumption into a commitment to worship practices connected communally in the virtual world.

B. Relatable Da'wah Style

A relatable da'wah style can be observed through the use of simple language, persuasive message delivery, and inspiring stories that are close to the audience's experiences. Fidaul Qonita et al.'s research on Ustaz Hanan Attaki's da'wah communication strategy on YouTube shows that a communication approach adapted to the characteristics of younger generations can help religious messages be more readily accepted (Qonita et al., 2025). This indicates that the success of da'wah is determined not only by the material delivered, but also by how preachers package messages to suit the experiences and needs of their audiences. Therefore, communication styles that are close to everyday life can build better relationships between preachers and younger generations.

In addition to Ustaz Hanan Attaki, a communication approach that is close to young people's lives can also be seen in Ustaz Handy Bonny's da'wah. Research by Miftachul Aula and Sutamaji explains that Ustaz Handy Bonny's da'wah communication style is characterized by the use of casual language, popular diction, systematic message organization, and an emotional approach to nurturing young people's enthusiasm for hijrah (Miftachul Aula & Sutamaji, 2025). This approach shows that da'wah can be delivered in a way that is more readily accepted without losing its religious substance. Issues such as the desire for self-improvement, dealing with failure, and developing better habits can serve as concrete examples for connecting Islamic values with the everyday experiences of young people.

The use of storytelling, or conveying messages through stories, is also part of a relatable

da'wah style. Through stories, preachers can connect religious teachings with experiences commonly encountered in audiences' lives. This approach makes religious messages more communicative because religious values are conveyed through situations close to everyday experiences (Mutia, 2022). Lala Nabilah Chandra et al.'s study of Ustaz Hanan Attaki's da'wah strategy on Instagram shows that storytelling and a relaxed communication style are among the ways of conveying religious messages that are close to teenagers' lives. The study also explains the use of comment features, live broadcasts, and question-and-answer sessions as means of interacting with followers (Chandra et al., 2025). Therefore, digital da'wah does not function only as a medium for conveying information, but also creates opportunities for audiences to respond and ask questions.

A relatable da'wah style is reflected not only in the use of easily understood language, but also in how preachers deliver messages to audiences. Nonverbal communication elements, such as facial expressions, hand gestures, eye contact, and body language, also support message delivery and reinforce the meaning conveyed verbally (Rifqi & Hasanah, 2025). In addition, research on Gus Iqdam's da'wah shows that the use of simple language and humor in sermons can create a more relaxed communication atmosphere and build emotional closeness with congregations (Nikmah, 2025). This indicates that closeness between preachers and audiences can be built through a combination of verbal and nonverbal communication. Thus, each preacher has their own characteristics in delivering messages and building closeness with audiences, meaning that relatable styles can be implemented through various approaches.

With the development of social media, relatable da'wah styles also need to be adapted to the characteristics of each platform. Differences in social media formats and features provide opportunities for preachers to deliver religious messages through various forms of content, ranging from longer religious study sessions to short videos focusing on particular issues (Saidah, 2024). Sri Diana Putri et al.'s study of Ustaz Hanan Attaki's da'wah shows that the use of language familiar to Generation Z and discussion of issues relevant to everyday life are part of a digital da'wah approach (Sri Diana Putri et al., 2025). This indicates that da'wah delivery needs to consider audiences' habits in accessing information on social media. Nevertheless, adjustments to content format and duration must still take substantive accuracy into account so that religious messages do not lose their context when delivered briefly.

A relatable da'wah style has the potential to help younger generations understand the relationship between Islamic teachings and the issues they face. When religious messages are delivered in easily understood language, audiences can more readily connect da'wah material with their personal experiences. This can be linked to the concept of self-efficacy in Bandura's social cognitive theory, namely, an individual's belief in their ability to perform certain actions to achieve expected outcomes (Bandura, 1978). Winda Agustina Saputri et al.'s study of the influence of Ustaz Hanan Attaki's da'wah content delivery style on TikTok on adolescents' self-motivation indicates a relationship between the delivery style examined and respondents' self-motivation. The study involved 25 respondents and reported a coefficient of determination of 0.856 (Saputri et al., 2025). Nevertheless, these results need to be understood in light of the study's scope and number of respondents, and therefore cannot be directly generalized to all adolescents.

Despite the various opportunities it offers, a relatable da'wah style also faces challenges, particularly concerning religious material. Competition for attention on social media may encourage preachers to use sensational titles, inappropriate humor, or sermon excerpts detached from their discussion context. This condition is related to changes in religious authority in digital spaces, where the ability to attract audience attention can increase a preacher's popularity but does not always

reflect the depth of their religious knowledge (Rachman et al., 2025). In addition, conveying Islamic teachings through short videos risks omitting important explanations needed to understand an issue comprehensively (Yasin, 2025). Therefore, preachers need to ensure that every message has a clear religious foundation, uses accountable sources, and is delivered with due consideration of its context. This is important so that efforts to make da'wah more engaging do not reduce the accuracy of the meaning of Islamic teachings or cause misunderstandings among audiences.

In addition to the accuracy of religious material, ethical aspects also need to be considered when using humor and popular language as da'wah strategies. Humor should serve as a means of creating a comfortable atmosphere, not of belittling or ridiculing other people or particular groups (Sukma, 2023). Similarly, the use of popular terms needs to be adjusted to the context so that the meaning of religious messages is not changed. In this regard, communication creativity needs to go hand in hand with scholarly responsibility and courtesy (Lakum et al., 2025). Preachers also need to encourage audiences to check information sources, understand the context of discussions, and not immediately accept every religious content item that goes viral.

Based on the foregoing discussion, relatable da'wah can be understood as an effort to adapt the delivery of Islamic messages to developments in communication and society's needs without changing the substance of the teachings (Taufikurrahman, 2024). The use of everyday language, storytelling, proportionate humor, emotional approaches, and interaction through social media can help bring religious messages closer to younger generations. Nevertheless, an appealing delivery needs to be balanced with material accuracy, communication ethics, and a deep understanding of Islamic teachings. This is important so that da'wah not only attracts audience attention, but also helps them understand and apply religious values in everyday life.

C. Popularity Level of Micro-Influencers

The development of social media has changed how people obtain information, build social relationships, and become acquainted with figures they regard as role models. A person's popularity is no longer determined solely by appearances on television or recognition from particular institutions, but also by their ability to communicate and attract the attention of social media users (Zahra & Yusanto, 2025). In this situation, micro-influencers are among the figures who play an important role in shaping audience opinions and behavior. Micro-influencers are content creators with relatively limited numbers of followers compared with major digital celebrities, but who are able to build close relationships with their followers (C. Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

In the context of digital da'wah, Muhammad Fadel Malik Sulaiman explains that hijrah micro-influencers generally have around 10,000–100,000 followers. A relatively small number of followers can actually be an advantage because it allows for more personal interactions and communication that feels close to audiences' lives (Fadel et al., 2026). The popularity level of micro-influencers cannot be assessed solely on the basis of follower counts. Popularity is also related to audience engagement, such as the number of likes, comments, content shares, and follower responses to the messages delivered.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok also create opportunities for micro-influencers to increase their popularity through short-video features, comment sections, live broadcasts, and content recommendations. These features allow creators to reach users beyond their follower circles. Engaging, easy-to-understand content that meets audience needs has the potential to receive greater responses and engagement (Taufikurrahman, 2024). In research on da'wah communication systems in the digital era, Taufikurrahman and Setyowati explain that social media

platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as channels for conveying religious messages as well as building communication between preachers and audiences (Taufikurrahman, 2024). This indicates that the popularity of micro-influencers is related not only to the content of the messages delivered, but is also influenced by how content is presented and the interactions built with followers.

In the religious field, the popularity of da'wah figures can be seen through the growing attention of younger generations to creators who convey Islamic messages using modern communication styles. In their study of Felix Siauw and Hanan Attaki, Sulistia Salsabiilaa et al. show that both are able to attract many followers through relevant content, engaging communication styles, and the use of technology (Sulistia Salsabiilaa et al., 2024). Felix Siauw frequently discusses social and political issues, whereas Hanan Attaki places greater emphasis on developing individual spirituality, particularly among younger generations. These differences show that content characteristics and message delivery styles can influence the relationship between religious figures and their audiences (Sulistia Salsabiilaa et al., 2024). This condition indicates that micro-influencers do not function merely as information providers, but also have the potential to influence how audiences understand and practice certain values in everyday life.

The popularity of micro-influencers is related to their ability to build a personal identity and image (personal branding). Creators who consistently present content with particular characteristics are more easily recognized by audiences. In the context of digital da'wah, the use of everyday language, appealing visuals, and discussion of issues close to young people's lives can make religious messages feel more readily accepted (Afidah et al., 2024). Adi Saputra et al. explain that the religious authority of digital preachers is built not only through scholarly backgrounds or institutional recognition, but also through public trust, follower counts, audience interactions, and emotional closeness developed on social media (M. A. Saputra et al., 2025). This indicates that micro-influencer popularity can develop when audiences feel connected to the creator's personality, experiences, and messages.

High popularity does not always reflect the quality and credibility of the information conveyed by a micro-influencer. Viral content sometimes prioritizes visual appeal, emotion, and trends over depth of information. In the context of digital da'wah, this condition needs attention because religious messages delivered through short videos risk losing their context if not accompanied by adequate explanations (C. Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Putri Zulaikha and Bashori explain that communicative religious content that touches emotional aspects can influence the religious lives of younger generations, making the ability to assess the credibility of digital religious figures important (Putri Zulaikha & Bashori, 2025). Therefore, micro-influencer popularity needs to be balanced with responsibility in delivering information, source transparency, and audiences' ability to assess content critically.

Based on the foregoing discussion, micro-influencer popularity is determined not only by follower counts, but is also related to audience engagement, communication quality, credibility, and content relevance. Follower counts can indicate the potential reach of a message, whereas comments, content sharing, and other interactions provide an overview of audience engagement. However, high reach and interaction do not always reflect a creator's credibility, because audience trust is also influenced by the quality of communication and the relationships built with followers (C. Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In the context of digital da'wah, popularity needs to be accompanied by responsibility in conveying religious messages so that audience attention does not stop at content consumption, but is also supported by trustworthy information (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Therefore,

micro-influencer popularity needs to be understood critically by considering reach, engagement, credibility, and the quality of the messages delivered.

D. *Micro-Influencers as Sources of Religious Guidance for Generation Z*

The preceding discussion of relatable da'wah styles shows that closeness to Generation Z's everyday experiences is one element that makes religious messages more likely to attract attention. However, such closeness is not limited to the use of simple language or topics that are currently widely discussed (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Emotional aspects also influence why a figure attracts sustained attention, is trusted, and is even regarded as a source of guidance. Generation Z lives in a media environment in which interactions with digital figures occur repeatedly.

Data on social media use indicate that 91% of Generation Z actively use Instagram and spend approximately 3–10 hours a day accessing the internet. This condition shows that social media is no longer merely a space for entertainment, but has also become one of the main sources of information in everyday life (Dewi & Budiwati, 2024). As a result, messages that appear repeatedly and are packaged in an emotionally relatable manner have a greater opportunity to sustain audience attention. In the context of da'wah micro-influencers, this condition is important because religious messages are received not only on the basis of their content, but also through audiences' experiences when interacting with digital figures (Vu et al., 2025). When creators are able to present experiences that feel close, use easily understood language, and respond to issues their followers are facing, the relationship formed is no longer limited to one between a message sender and a message recipient.

This relationship can gradually foster trust, which then influences how audiences assess subsequent messages. Research on micro-influencers shows that personalization, engagement, and authentic relationships with followers are elements that play a role in trust in the messages delivered (Girsang, 2020). Therefore, the emotional aspect is one of the initial factors that enables micro-influencers not only to attract attention, but also to occupy a position as figures considered relevant in Generation Z's digital lives.

This process becomes stronger when emotional closeness meets perceptions of authenticity. Generation Z not only faces an abundance of information, but must also choose which information deserves attention amid a constantly moving stream of content. Therefore, figures who appear too formal, distant, or who only deliver one-way messages may be less competitive than figures who are able to present themselves in a more human way (Fahrudin et al., 2025). In research on influencer marketing, trust and emotional closeness are important elements in the relationship between influencers and followers, while content authenticity is one reason why an influencer's impact can be stronger than that of ordinary promotional communication (Robetty, 2025). This pattern can be interpreted in the context of digital da'wah as a mechanism that allows religious messages to enter through emotional experiences first, before subsequently being considered cognitively.

When a micro-influencer discusses issues such as academic pressure, friendships, lack of self-confidence, failure, or everyday anxieties, audiences may find experiences that resemble their own lives. This feeling of being understood can strengthen emotional closeness between followers and the figures they follow. In addition, social media communication features, such as comment replies, follow-up posts, and live sessions, allow direct interactions between creators and their followers (Friscillia et al., 2023). Repeated interactions can build parasocial relationships, namely, emotional attachments that audiences feel toward figures. In such conditions, trust in the creator as a person may also carry over when they discuss religious issues. Relationships previously built through personal experiences can then become a basis for accepting more serious messages

(Girsang, 2020). This explains why follower counts are not the only measure of a micro-influencer's influence; closer relationships can in fact produce stronger engagement between creators and audiences.

This emotional strength can also be seen in how Generation Z responds to content that repeatedly attracts attention. Findings on Generation Z's digital behavior show that visually appealing content, supported by influencers and repeatedly appearing through various posts, can provide emotional stimuli while also generating curiosity (Manurung et al., 2025). The study also found that influencers and micro-influencers are among the reasons audiences become more interested, because figures considered authentic and "on the same level" as them feel closer than overly formal sources of communication (Manurung et al., 2025). When this mechanism is applied to the context of da'wah, it can be seen that attention to religious messages may also develop through the same process: messages presented in brief forms, close to life experiences, and delivered by familiar-seeming figures more easily enter the audience's field of attention.

The issue in digital da'wah lies not only in how many people view content, but also in how audiences' experiences after accessing content encourage them to seek out the same figure again when facing other issues. A micro-influencer initially known through entertaining or relatable content can gradually become a reference figure when audiences need advice, spiritual encouragement, or explanations of religious issues (Friscillia et al., 2023). This process is related to parasocial interaction, namely, a relationship audiences feel with a media figure even though the relationship is not entirely reciprocal; repeated exposure and social media interactions can strengthen familiarity and closeness with the figure being followed. This closeness may also be related to trust in the message source, which influences how audiences receive and assess information conveyed by influencers. In Generation Z's lives, digital content is not only a means of obtaining information, but also a space for comparing experiences, building identities, and seeking social recognition (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Therefore, the process through which micro-influencers become sources of religious guidance takes place gradually through content exposure, repeated interactions, emotional closeness, and the growth of trust, although audience trust still needs to be accompanied by critical assessment of the credibility of religious messages.

Research on fear of missing out (FoMO) among Instagram users shows that exposure to Stories, Reels, algorithmic recommendations, and influencer and micro-influencer content may be related to processes of social comparison and the need to keep up with ongoing developments (Zahra Qoniah et al., 2026). Indeed, influencers and micro-influencers in that study were positioned as sources of social identity because what digital figures display can become material for users to assess themselves and determine their social position (Zahra Qoniah et al., 2026). Although these findings are situated in the context of consumer behavior, the mechanism provides an important illustration for understanding Generation Z's emotional relationships with digital figures. When a da'wah micro-influencer consistently displays religious practices, ways of dealing with problems, lifestyle choices, or particular forms of piety, audiences do not merely receive information about religion, but also see examples of how religion is practiced in everyday life.

As micro-influencers become representations considered close to audiences' circumstances, Generation Z may then ask not only "what should I do?" but also "how does the figure I follow go about doing this?" (Afidah et al., 2024). This shift is important because it shows that religious references can be formed through a process of identification, not solely through mastery of religious material. Micro-influencers become increasingly influential when the lives they display seem imitable, understandable, and relatable to their followers' personal experiences (Afidah et al., 2024).

At this point, the construction of digital piety takes place not only through the acceptance of religious messages, but also through a process of observing, feeling close, identifying with a figure, and then making that digital figure one of the references for understanding and expressing religiosity.

Nevertheless, a strong emotional relationship cannot immediately be equated with strong religious authority. This is precisely where an important issue in the formation of digital authority emerges. When Generation Z feels close to a micro-influencer, trust in that figure as a person may influence acceptance of the messages delivered, including religious messages (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Research on micro-influencers shows that personalization, engagement, and authentic relationships can build trust in messages, while research on influencers among Generation Z also highlights the importance of trust and authenticity in influencing audience acceptance (Robetty, 2025). However, trust arising from emotional closeness does not automatically prove that all religious knowledge conveyed has a strong scholarly foundation. In other words, emotional connection can serve as an entry point for the formation of a source of guidance, but is not sufficient as a basis for assessing religious authority (Girsang, 2020). This is important because the characteristics of social media tend to give greater space to content that quickly attracts attention, is easy to understand, and can generate interaction.

Emotional content can spread more quickly than discussions that require lengthy and in-depth explanations. Therefore, the stronger the position of micro-influencers as reference figures for Generation Z, the more important it becomes to examine how these emotional relationships are balanced with credibility, information accuracy, and scholarly responsibility (Febrian, 2024). Generation Z's emotionality can be understood as one pathway that strengthens the formation of micro-influencer authority in digital spaces, but this authority remains dynamic because it is shaped through the intersection of personal closeness, interaction, authenticity, popularity, and the quality of the religious messages delivered (Afidah et al., 2024). Ultimately, this process shows that the construction of Generation Z's digital piety is determined not only by what micro-influencers say, but also by how audiences feel connected, trust, identify with them, and then make these figures one of the sources of guidance in their religious lives.

E. The Role of Social Media Algorithms in Shifting Religious Authority

To understand the process through which da'wah micro-influencer authority is formed in digital spaces, Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority can be used as an analytical lens (Weber, 2017). Authority does not arise solely from formal positions, but can grow from followers' recognition of a figure's personal appeal. This pattern becomes increasingly complex when the recognition process takes place through social media (Febrian, 2024). In this context, a figure's charisma is built not only through communication style, emotional closeness, consistency of presence, and the ability to attract public attention.

The transformation of religious authority in the digital era shows that Weber's theory is relevant for understanding the emergence of religious figures who gain trust not primarily through institutional legality, but through personal appeal, rhetorical ability, and followers' perceptions of the figure (Nurhamidin et al., 2025). In digital spaces, charisma does not stand alone, because it intersects with algorithmic mechanisms that determine how often a figure is seen and interacts with audiences (Nurhamidin et al., 2025). Therefore, in the phenomenon of da'wah micro-influencers, charismatic authority can be understood not merely as a relationship between a figure and followers, but also as a relationship mediated by technology. Algorithms help provide a space for this charisma

to remain visible, recognized, and repeatedly acknowledged.

The first role of algorithms can be seen in their ability to expand micro-influencers' visibility among audiences with particular interests in religious content. Recommendation systems operate based on users' behavioral traces, such as viewing history, viewing duration, comments, searches, likes, and content-sharing activities. When a user repeatedly interacts with particular da'wah themes, the system may display content with similar characteristics again (Fajriana et al., 2026). This mechanism allows micro-influencers previously known only to a small group to potentially appear repeatedly on other users' feeds. At this point, popularity no longer derives entirely from the number of followers already held from the outset, but can be built through algorithmic distribution processes.

Research on digital da'wah shows that algorithms can direct the distribution of religious messages while shaping users' preferences for particular themes through content personalization (Fajriana et al., 2026). This condition creates opportunities for micro-influencers to reach wider audiences despite having relatively limited numbers of followers. These opportunities are supported by content's ability to generate engagement and be recommended to other users. Therefore, algorithms can serve as a link between content produced by micro-influencers and potential followers who previously had no direct connection with those figures (Malik et al., 2025). In the context of Generation Z, this process is important because social media has become one of the spaces for acquiring religious knowledge. Figures who repeatedly appear on users' feeds have greater opportunities to become known, be considered relevant, and serve as one source of religious guidance.

The second role relates to strengthening authority through repetition and engagement. Algorithms not only make content discoverable, but also allow the same figure to appear repeatedly in users' digital experiences. Such repetition can create a sense of familiarity, while comments, likes, shares, and other forms of interaction provide social signals that the figure receives attention from many people (Febrian, 2024). In digital religious authority, followers, likes, and engagement rates are even regarded as forms of symbolic capital that can determine a figure's position in virtual religious spaces (Nurhamidin et al., 2025). In relation to Weber's theory, this condition indicates that a micro-influencer's charisma does not emerge only from the content of their messages or their personality, but is continually produced through socially visible digital recognition.

A micro-influencer who receives many positive responses may be perceived as increasingly credible because audiences see a community that recognizes their presence. This is where algorithms play an important role in turning small interactions into an accumulation of influence (Febrian, 2024). Content that receives high responses has the opportunity to be distributed more widely; wider distribution generates new audiences, and new audiences in turn generate engagement. This cycle can form a reinforcing loop of authority: visibility generates attention, attention generates interaction, interaction increases visibility, and repeated visibility strengthens recognition of the figure (Shaleh, 2026). This phenomenon shows that micro-influencer authority is not entirely granted from the outset, but is gradually built through the relationship among content performance, audience responses, and platform mechanisms.

The third role of algorithms is evident in their ability to prioritize certain forms of da'wah, particularly content that is brief, emotional, appealing, and easy to consume. Engagement logic gives content with emotional appeal or short formats a greater opportunity to attract attention than lengthy and complex discussions (Shaleh, 2026). In the context of da'wah micro-influencers, this situation can encourage changes in how religious messages are packaged. Quranic verses, hadith,

advice, and religious issues can be condensed into video clips that are easier to watch and share.

This strategy expands the reach of da'wah, but at the same time creates problems when the popularity of a message begins to be regarded as a measure of its truth. Studies on digital da'wah and Generation Z show that provocative, emotional, simplistic, or controversial content can gain greater visibility than more careful and nuanced religious explanations (Zaman, 2024). This indicates that algorithms indirectly help determine the characteristics of messages that have a greater chance of becoming popular.

Findings on the commodification of Islam also show that preacher popularity, visualization, and algorithms are factors influencing patterns of religious consumption, while the risks include fragmented understanding and the dissemination of content without a scholarly chain of transmission (sanad) (Hakim & Harapandi Dahri, 2025). Therefore, micro-influencers occupy a rather dilemmatic position: the more successfully they follow algorithmic logic, the greater their opportunity to attract attention, but the stronger the pressure to maintain fast and engaging formats. If this pressure becomes more dominant than the need to maintain the depth of the material, the authority formed may shift from knowledge-based authority to visibility-based authority.

Ultimately, the role of algorithms cannot be separated from the process of negotiating religious authority. Social media means that audiences no longer merely receive messages, but also participate in making assessments through comments, likes, shares, and decisions to follow or leave a figure. Digital authority is therefore fluid because it can be strengthened or weakened through public responses (Nurhamidin et al., 2025). This phenomenon shows that algorithms do not directly "create" religious authority, but provide conditions that allow certain forms of authority to receive greater attention and recognition than others.

Research on Islamic influencers also shows that the presence of digital figures can influence preferences in religious practices and even encourage a shift in sources of guidance from local figures to figures with wider reach (Febrian, 2024). In the context of da'wah micro-influencers, this mechanism explains why figures with relatively small numbers of followers can still exert strong influence over particular audience groups. However, the magnitude of influence cannot automatically be equated with the depth of religious competence.

The transformation of authority in digital spaces confirms that popularity and audience engagement can indeed expand the reach of messages, but do not in themselves prove the accuracy or depth of the religious knowledge conveyed. Therefore, algorithms need to be positioned as infrastructure that shapes visibility and recognition, not as determinants of religious truth (Hidayatullah, 2024). At this point, the construction of Generation Z's digital piety becomes increasingly complex: micro-influencers may gain a position as sources of guidance because they are close, relatable, frequently visible, and receive many responses, while their religious validity still requires verification beyond measures of digital popularity (Febrian, 2024). Thus, algorithms play a major role in strengthening micro-influencer authority, but the legitimacy of that authority continues to be negotiated through the relationship among charisma, popularity, emotional closeness, algorithmic visibility, and scholarly legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the formation of religious authority among Generation Z is changing as social media develops into a space for disseminating messages and expressing religiosity. Authority is no longer recognized solely through the institutional position or scholarly background of a religious figure, but also

through processes of interaction, emotional closeness, popularity, and audience recognition. Thus, digital religious authority is formed through the relationship among da'wah figures, audiences, and platform mechanisms that influence content dissemination. Digital piety in the phenomenon of da'wah micro-influencers is related not only to the delivery of religious material, but also to how religious values are represented through visual symbols, personal experiences, lifestyles, and collective worship practices based on interactive features. These representations become increasingly close to Generation Z's lives through relatable da'wah styles, such as the use of simple language, storytelling, humor, and discussion of everyday issues. Closeness formed through communication and repeated interactions can foster trust, giving micro-influencers the opportunity to become one of the sources of religious guidance for their audiences.

The main contribution of this study lies in the relationship among the construction of digital piety, micro-influencer popularity, emotional closeness, and algorithmic mechanisms in explaining the formation of religious authority. Popularity is determined not only by follower counts, but also by audience engagement and a figure's ability to build relationships with followers. Algorithms also expand content reach through recommendations and repeated exposure, so that figures with limited numbers of followers still have opportunities to attract attention and recognition. When linked to Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, this process shows that audience recognition is an important element in the formation of charisma, while social media provides a space for such recognition to develop. Nevertheless, algorithms are not the only factor shaping authority and cannot determine the truth of religious teachings. Popularity and high engagement also do not automatically indicate a preacher's credibility or scholarly religious legitimacy.

These findings emphasize that the use of social media as a source of religious knowledge needs to be accompanied by a critical attitude. Generation Z needs to pay attention to message content, reference sources, and the religious competence of the figures they follow, rather than considering only popularity or emotional closeness. Meanwhile, micro-influencers need to maintain the accuracy of their material and their responsibility in conveying religious messages. This study remains limited to library research and therefore does not directly describe Generation Z's experiences in selecting, trusting, and regarding micro-influencers as sources of religious guidance. Future research could use interviews, observation, or digital ethnography to understand audience experiences in greater depth, including by comparing user interaction patterns on TikTok and Instagram. Ultimately, social media can expand the reach of da'wah, but digital popularity still needs to be balanced with credibility and scholarly responsibility.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to improve the clarity and readability of the text. Output generated by the tool were carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article. All substantive intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, analysis, interpretation of data, and final decisions regarding content, arguments, and conclusions, were carried out solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and academic quality of this article.

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