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I am Spiritual but Not Religious: Reconstructing *Da'wah* Communication to Re-Engage Generation Z in the Contemporary Digital Era

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Abstract - In the contemporary digital era, many Generation Z Muslims identify as "spiritual but not religious," affirming faith while distancing themselves from rigid institutional authority. Meanwhile, Islamic da'wah communication often remains hierarchical and one-directional, creating a gap between institutional messaging and digitally embedded youth. This study reconstructs da'wah communication strategies to re-engage Generation Z by aligning communicative practices with their digitally shaped spirituality, authority evaluation, and participatory expectations. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from 27 Muslim university students in urban Indonesia through semi-structured interviews, digital observation, and documentation of online da'wah content over three months. The data were analyzed using thematic coding through iterative reduction, categorization, and verification. Findings show that participants maintained commitment to Islamic values but expressed spirituality in individualized, selective, and digitally mediated ways. Religious authority was evaluated primarily through authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness rather than institutional status. Dialogical, short-form, and visually engaging content was most effective in sustaining trust and attention. These results indicate that da'wah communication must shift toward participatory, authenticity-centered, and digitally adaptive models. This reconstruction offers a theoretical and practical framework for engaging Generation Z meaningfully in contemporary digital religious environments today.

Keywords: Generation Z; Spirituality; Da'wah; Communication; Religion; Authority; Authenticity; Participation; Digitalization

Introduction

Contemporary shifts in religious identity among Generation Z reveal a growing tension between institutional affiliation and personal spirituality, particularly within digitally mediated environments. Recent scholarship demonstrates that digitalization has fundamentally reshaped religious practices, transforming how communities gather, learn, and construct meaning, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the normalization of online worship and spiritual engagement (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025).

In parallel, research on digital religion argues that contemporary faith expression now exists in an "onlife" condition where online and offline religious experiences are deeply integrated, thereby altering authority structures and modes of belonging (Campbell, 2024). Empirical studies further indicate that young Muslims increasingly construct hybrid religious identities through social media, positioning themselves as active agents who negotiate values rather than passively receive institutional teachings (Ayunda & Harahap, 2025).

At the same time, alternative spiritual movements and individualized belief systems gain visibility on digital platforms, offering flexible forms of spiritual exploration outside traditional structures (Bahadur & Çapçıoğlu, 2024). Studies of digital *da'wah* confirm a rapid surge in online preaching through TikTok and Instagram, signaling a structural shift from mosque-centered communication toward algorithm-driven engagement (Wicaksono et al., 2025). These converging dynamics suggest that the phenomenon of "spiritual but not religious" among Generation Z is not merely theological, but communicative and technological, requiring a critical reconstruction of da'wah strategies in the contemporary digital era.

Despite the rapid expansion of digital religion and online *da'wah*, a critical gap remains in understanding how the "spiritual but not religious" orientation among Generation Z reshapes the effectiveness of Islamic communication strategies. Recent empirical findings show that different forms of internet activity influence religious commitment in varied ways, with some digital engagements reinforcing religiosity while others correlate with declining institutional affiliation (Laderi & Uecker, 2025), yet these studies stop short of examining how *da'wah* communication should adapt to such differentiated digital behaviors.

Research on implicit religion in social media activism further reveals that moral commitment and spiritual language increasingly operate outside formal religious institutions (Gürlesin, 2024), suggesting a shift toward individualized meaning-making that current *da'wah* models rarely address. Although strategic frameworks for religious moderation campaigns in digital spaces have been proposed (Arif et al., 2024), these approaches emphasize message dissemination rather than reconstructing communicative paradigms responsive to identity negotiation.

Studies examining TikTok as a medium for Islamic preaching confirm its effectiveness when content aligns with youth communication patterns (Alma et al., 2025), yet they do not theorize the deeper theological and communicative implications of fragmented belonging. Moreover, policy-level analyses highlight the institutional push for digital religious counseling without sufficiently addressing generational skepticism toward authority (Hidayati, 2025). Consequently, existing literature lacks an integrative framework that connects digital religiosity, identity fluidity, and reconstructed da'wah communication tailored specifically to Generation Z's post-institutional spiritual landscape.

This study is urgent because the transformation of religious life in digital culture is not merely a technological shift but a structural reconfiguration of authority, belonging, and spiritual meaning among younger generations. Recent scholarship emphasizes that digital religion has entered a phase where emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, immersive media, and networked platforms are reshaping how faith is interpreted, practiced, and negotiated in everyday life (Dupi & Prayogo, 2025). At the same time, systematic reviews highlight that digitalization has redefined religious community boundaries and intensified questions of authenticity, authority, and spiritual engagement in technology-driven societies (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025).

Although technological innovation also offers opportunities for preserving and disseminating Islamic traditions through AI, social media, and immersive tools, it simultaneously raises concerns about theological dilution and spiritual commodification if not critically guided (Rizkitama et al., 2025). From a practical standpoint, empirical evidence shows that Generation Z demonstrates a high reliance on digital platforms for information-seeking and identity formation, which significantly shapes how they respond to institutional messages (Ariani & Zulhawati, 2024).

Furthermore, studies on youth political and civic reorientation reveal a broader generational shift from inherited authority toward evaluative and autonomous reasoning facilitated by social media exposure (Faisal et al., 2025). Therefore, reconstructing *da'wah* communication is academically necessary to expand theoretical discussions on digital religiosity and practically crucial for religious institutions seeking meaningful engagement with Generation Z in an increasingly post-institutional spiritual landscape.

Recent scholarship has significantly expanded the study of digital religion and youth religiosity, yet it remains fragmented in addressing the communicative reconstruction of *da'wah* for Generation Z. A migrant archive study documenting spiritual experiences during the pandemic demonstrates how digital platforms enabled individuals to narrate personal faith journeys outside formal institutional structures, highlighting the growing personalization of religious expression (Gillespie, 2024). Complementing this, research on digital religious networking through smartphone applications reveals how online communities facilitate identity negotiation and boundary management within pious groups, suggesting that authority and belonging are increasingly mediated by peer interaction rather than centralized institutions (Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2022).

In the Indonesian context, bibliometric mapping of radio *da'wah* studies indicates a historical reliance on broadcast-based preaching models, with limited theoretical adaptation to interactive digital cultures (Ismandianto et al., 2024). Furthermore, analyses of youth engagement with religious content on Instagram show that digital environments foster both empowerment and contestation, as young users actively reinterpret teachings through aesthetic and narrative creativity (Ismandianto et al., 2024). While these studies collectively illuminate digital mediation, identity negotiation, and evolving religious participation, none systematically integrate these insights into a coherent framework for reconstructing *da'wah* communication that addresses the "spiritual but not religious" orientation of Generation Z, thereby underscoring the distinct contribution of the present study.

This study aims to systematically reconstruct *da'wah* communication in response to the growing "spiritual but not religious" orientation among Generation Z within digitally mediated environments. Specifically, the first objective is to analyze how digital culture reshapes patterns of religious authority, participation, and meaning-making among young users, building on findings that digital platforms increasingly function as primary arenas for religious interaction and reinterpretation (Wahid, 2024).

The second objective is to identify communicative characteristics that make digital religious content effective for younger audiences, particularly in interactive and visually driven platforms, as prior research indicates that multimodal digital content significantly shapes youth engagement and perception (Noor & Arshad, 2024). The third objective is to evaluate the ethical and theological implications of emerging technologies in Islamic communication, considering evidence that technological mediation both expands access and risks altering spiritual authenticity (Rizkitama et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this study addresses three guiding research questions: (1) How does Generation Z negotiate spirituality and institutional religion within digital spaces?; (2) What communicative elements are necessary to reconstruct *da'wah* in a way that resonates with post-institutional spiritual identities?; (3) How can Islamic communication integrate digital innovation without compromising theological integrity? By articulating these objectives and questions, the study seeks to generate a measurable and theoretically grounded framework for adaptive *da'wah* communication in the contemporary digital era.

This study offers a conceptual and strategic novelty by moving beyond descriptive accounts of digital religiosity toward a reconstructive model of *da'wah* communication tailored specifically to Generation Z's post-institutional spiritual orientation. While previous research has examined how digital environments reshape religious practice and community, much of it remains focused on mapping trends rather than proposing integrative communicative frameworks. For instance, a recent systematic review on digital transformation in the religious sphere highlights the acceleration of online worship and hybrid faith practices but stops at identifying implications rather than rethinking communication paradigms (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). Similarly, bibliometric studies on digital *da'wah* document the rapid growth of online preaching and thematic clusters in social media discourse without developing a normative or adaptive model that addresses shifting spiritual identities (Dupi & Prayogo, 2025).

The present study contributes a new perspective by integrating digital religion theory, youth identity negotiation, and communicative reconstruction into a coherent analytical framework that centers the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon as a communicative challenge rather than merely a sociological trend. It also introduces a generationally responsive model that emphasizes dialogical engagement, ethical technological integration, and narrative authenticity, thereby extending earlier calls for critical and interdisciplinary approaches in digital religion studies (Campbell, 2024). By shifting the focus from platform utilization to paradigm reconstruction, this research provides both theoretical advancement and actionable guidance for Islamic institutions navigating the evolving digital spiritual landscape.

This study offers a distinct empirical and theoretical contribution by proposing a reconstructed model of *da'wah* communication grounded in Generation Z's digitally shaped spiritual orientation. Unlike previous research that primarily describes digital *da'wah* trends or platform usage, this study systematically analyzes how Generation Z evaluates religious authority, engages with digital religious content, and negotiates spirituality within participatory media environments. By integrating empirical findings with digital religion theory and Islamic communication studies, this research introduces a communicative reconstruction framework that emphasizes authenticity, dialogical engagement, and digitally adaptive strategies. This contribution provides a new analytical lens for understanding contemporary Islamic communication and offers practical guidance for religious institutions seeking to engage younger generations effectively in digitally mediated contexts.

This study focuses specifically on reconstructing *da'wah* communication strategies aimed at Generation Z within the context of contemporary digital culture. The scope is limited to examining how digital environments influence patterns of spirituality, identity negotiation, and religious engagement among young users, particularly those who exhibit a "spiritual but not religious" orientation. The analysis concentrates on communicative models, narrative strategies, and ethical considerations in Islamic preaching across social media and networked platforms, rather than providing a theological re-interpretation of Islamic doctrine itself.

The study does not attempt to generalize findings to all generations or religious traditions, as generational characteristics and cultural contexts may vary significantly. It also does not evaluate specific digital platforms through quantitative performance metrics such as algorithmic reach or engagement statistics. Instead, the emphasis remains on conceptual reconstruction and theoretical integration, aiming to offer a framework that can guide future empirical studies and practical implementation. By clearly defining these boundaries, the research maintains analytical focus while ensuring that its contributions remain coherent and contextually grounded within the study of digital *da'wah* and Generation Z spirituality.

This article is structured to move systematically from conceptual framing to analytical reconstruction. Following this introduction, the Methods section explains the research design, including the qualitative and conceptual approach used to analyze recent scholarship on digital religion, youth spirituality, and Islamic communication. It clarifies the criteria for literature selection, analytical procedures, and the framework employed to synthesize insights into a coherent model of reconstructed *da'wah* communication.

The Results section then presents the core findings derived from the analysis, identifying key patterns in Generation Z's spiritual orientation, digital engagement behavior, and communicative preferences. This section outlines the emerging characteristics of post-institutional spirituality and maps how these characteristics challenge conventional *da'wah* paradigms.

Subsequently, the Discussion section interprets these findings in light of existing theoretical perspectives on digital religion, identity negotiation, and communication strategy. It proposes a reconstructed *da'wah* model that emphasizes dialogical engagement, narrative authenticity, ethical technological integration, and participatory communication suited to the contemporary digital era.

Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the main arguments, highlights the study's theoretical and practical contributions, and offers recommendations for future research and institutional implementation. Through this structured progression, the article seeks to provide a clear, coherent, and academically grounded contribution to the study of Islamic communication in the age of digital spirituality.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that brings into conversation digital religion theory, communication theory, Islamic principles of *da'wah,* and contemporary reflections on Generation Z spirituality. Rather than treating these perspectives as isolated analytical tools, the study approaches them as interrelated lenses that help explain how *da'wah* is being reconfigured within digitally mediated environments. This perspective is important because it avoids reducing transformation to technological expansion alone, and instead situates it within broader shifts in meaning-making and patterns of religious engagement (Campbell, 2024).

Within this framework, digital religion theory provides a critical starting point for understanding how online spaces actively reshape religious life. These environments do not simply extend existing

practices; they subtly reorganize how authority is recognized, how participation takes place, and how meaning is negotiated. In this setting, authority increasingly depends on visibility, interaction, and perceived authenticity, rather than resting solely on institutional endorsement. This shift raises important questions about the adequacy of traditional communication models, particularly those that rely on one-directional transmission, and highlights the relevance of more participatory and dialogical approaches (Jenkins, 2008).

At the same time, the *da'wah* paradigm articulated by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah offers a necessary normative grounding. His emphasis on understanding the audience's spiritual condition, intellectual capacity, and lived context reflects an approach that is inherently adaptive, yet firmly rooted in ethical considerations. When brought into conversation with contemporary dynamics, this perspective does more than provide historical insight; it suggests that flexibility has always been part of the *da'wah* tradition itself. This becomes particularly significant when engaging Generation Z, whose religious expressions often appear more individualized, selective, and shaped by digital mediation (Twenge, 2017).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that *da'wah* communication should not be understood as a fixed or purely institutional practice. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic process that must continuously negotiate between normative commitments and the shifting logic of digital interaction. In this sense, adaptation is not merely strategic, but a necessary condition for sustaining both the relevance and integrity of *da'wah* in contemporary contexts.

Material and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative empirical research design to examine Generation Z's spiritual orientation and reconstruct *da'wah* communication within digitally mediated environments. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to interpret patterns of meaning, identity negotiation, and communicative transformation rather than to measure variables statistically (Tsuria & Campbell, 2021).

The primary data of this study are derived from empirical fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with 27 participants, digital observation, and document analysis. These methods enable an in-depth understanding of how Generation Z negotiates spirituality, evaluates religious authority, and engages with digital *da'wah* content in everyday contexts.

In addition to empirical data, this study incorporates a systematic and selective review of recent scholarly literature on digital religion, youth spirituality, and Islamic communication. This literature review is not treated as a standalone Systematic Literature Review (SLR), but rather as a supporting analytical component that strengthens theoretical interpretation and contextualization of the empirical findings (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2022).

By integrating qualitative empirical data with a structured review of relevant literature, this research ensures both analytical depth and theoretical grounding. This combined approach allows the study to develop a coherent reconstruction model of *da'wah* communication that is empirically informed and conceptually robust within the contemporary digital religious landscape.

This research is situated within the contemporary Indonesian digital religious landscape, with a particular focus on Generation Z Muslims who actively engage with social media platforms as primary spaces for spiritual exploration and religious communication. Indonesia provides a relevant context because it represents one of the world's largest Muslim-majority societies while simultaneously experiencing rapid digital transformation that has reshaped patterns of religious expression and authority. Recent policy-oriented research indicates that religious counseling institutions in Indonesia are increasingly required to adapt their preaching strategies to social media environments due to the growing dominance of digital communication in everyday life (Hidayati, 2025).

The study focuses on digital spaces rather than a single physical location, as contemporary religiosity among youth is often constructed through networked interaction rather than mosque-centered gatherings. Empirical studies on Islamic preaching via TikTok in Indonesian higher education contexts demonstrate that younger audiences perceive digital *da'wah* as effective when it aligns with creative, concise, and visually engaging communication styles (Alma et al., 2025). This environment is therefore selected because it reflects a transitional religious setting in which institutional Islam, digital media culture, and youth identity negotiation intersect dynamically. By situating the research within Indonesia's digitally mediated Islamic context, the study captures both the structural pressures facing

religious institutions and the lived realities of Generation Z spirituality, making it an analytically appropriate and socially relevant setting for reconstructing *da'wah* communication.

The participants in this study consist of Generation Z Muslims in Indonesia, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 who actively engage with religious content on digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. This demographic is selected because recent research demonstrates that Indonesian Muslim youth increasingly construct and express religious identity through digital interaction, positioning themselves as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of institutional teachings (Ayunda & Harahap, 2025).

A purposive sampling technique is employed to ensure that participants meet specific criteria, namely active engagement with online religious discourse and self-identification with a spirituality-oriented perspective. Purposive sampling is appropriate because the study seeks depth of insight into identity negotiation and communicative preference rather than statistical generalization, consistent with qualitative investigations of digital religious communities (Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2022).

The sample includes approximately 20–30 participants drawn from urban university settings and online religious communities, ensuring variation in gender, educational background, and levels of institutional religious involvement. This range is considered sufficient for achieving thematic saturation in qualitative studies focused on digital identity and communicative behavior. By selecting digitally active Muslim youth who represent diverse yet contextually relevant backgrounds, the study captures the lived experiences and communicative expectations that inform the reconstruction of da'wah communication in the contemporary digital era.

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews, digital observation, and document analysis conducted over a three-month period. The primary method consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with selected Generation Z participants. An interview guide was developed to explore three central themes: (1) personal understanding of spirituality and institutional religion; (2) patterns of digital engagement with religious content, and (3) expectations toward contemporary *da'wah* communication. The guide included open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection while allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own language. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face in university settings or through encrypted video calls to accommodate participants' preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To complement interview data, digital observation was conducted by examining participants' public interactions with religious content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. This observation focused on content formats, comment engagement, and narrative styles that appeared to resonate with participants. Field notes were systematically documented to capture recurring communicative patterns and symbolic expressions. Additionally, relevant digital documents—including selected *da'wah* videos, captions, and user-generated responses—were collected as supplementary material to contextualize participants' statements. By triangulating interviews, digital observation, and document review, the study ensured a richer and more credible understanding of how Generation Z negotiates spirituality and responds to contemporary Islamic communication in digital spaces.

The data were analyzed using thematic coding combined with the interactive model of qualitative analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman (Miles et al., 2013), which emphasizes iterative movement between data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This approach is widely applied in qualitative communication and religious studies because it allows researchers to organize complex narrative data while maintaining contextual meaning (Ismandianto et al., 2024). The analysis began with verbatim transcription of interviews, followed by careful reading to gain an overall understanding of participants' experiences in digital religious spaces. During the first stage, open coding was conducted to identify recurring expressions related to spirituality, institutional trust, digital engagement, and communicative preference.

In the second stage, these initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through axial coding, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge across participants. Themes such as "individualized spirituality," "algorithm-driven exposure," and "dialogical expectation" were identified through constant comparison between interview data and digital observation notes. To strengthen analytical rigor, data displays in the form of thematic matrices were developed to visualize relationships between generational identity and communicative response patterns, a strategy recommended in qualitative synthesis studies (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2024).

Finally, conclusions were drawn through interpretive reflection, continuously verified by revisiting the raw data to ensure coherence and credibility. This systematic and iterative procedure ensured that the reconstructed *da'wah* communication model emerged inductively from participants' lived digital experiences rather than being imposed a priori.

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants, particularly in digitally mediated contexts. Prior to data collection, all participants received a clear explanation of the research objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Ethical scholarship in digital religion emphasizes that research involving online religious communities requires careful attention to participant autonomy and informed participation, especially when discussing personal spirituality and identity negotiation (Gillespie, 2024).

To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms. Digital data, including interview recordings and observation notes, were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. In studies of online religious interaction, scholars have stressed the importance of protecting digital traces and avoiding unintended exposure of participants' online identities, given the sensitive nature of belief expression in networked spaces (Novak et al., 2022).

Institutional approval was obtained from the affiliated university's ethics review board prior to fieldwork. The research adhered to principles of respect, beneficence, and justice throughout the study. By maintaining transparency, anonymity, and secure data management, the study ensured that participants' spiritual perspectives and digital practices were treated with dignity and academic responsibility.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied established qualitative validation strategies encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, combining in-depth interviews, digital observation, and document analysis to compare findings across multiple sources. Member checking was also conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with selected participants to verify that the analysis accurately reflected their perspectives. This process helped minimize misinterpretation and ensured that the reconstructed communicative patterns genuinely emerged from participants' lived experiences rather than researcher assumptions.

Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and digital environments in which interactions occurred. By clearly outlining the socio-cultural and technological setting of Indonesian Generation Z Muslims, the study enables readers to assess the applicability of findings to comparable contexts. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of each research stage, including interview protocols, coding procedures, and analytic decisions. An audit trail was preserved to allow external reviewers to trace how themes and conclusions were derived from raw data.

Confirmability was addressed by maintaining reflexive awareness throughout the research process. The researcher kept analytical memos to distinguish participants' statements from personal interpretation and regularly revisited the original transcripts to verify thematic consistency. Together, these strategies ensured that the findings are grounded in empirical data, transparently derived, and methodologically sound, thereby enhancing the overall rigor and credibility of the reconstructed da'wah communication model. To provide a clear overview of the research design and analytical procedure, the qualitative research process employed in this study is illustrated in Figure 1 (Miles et al., 2013).

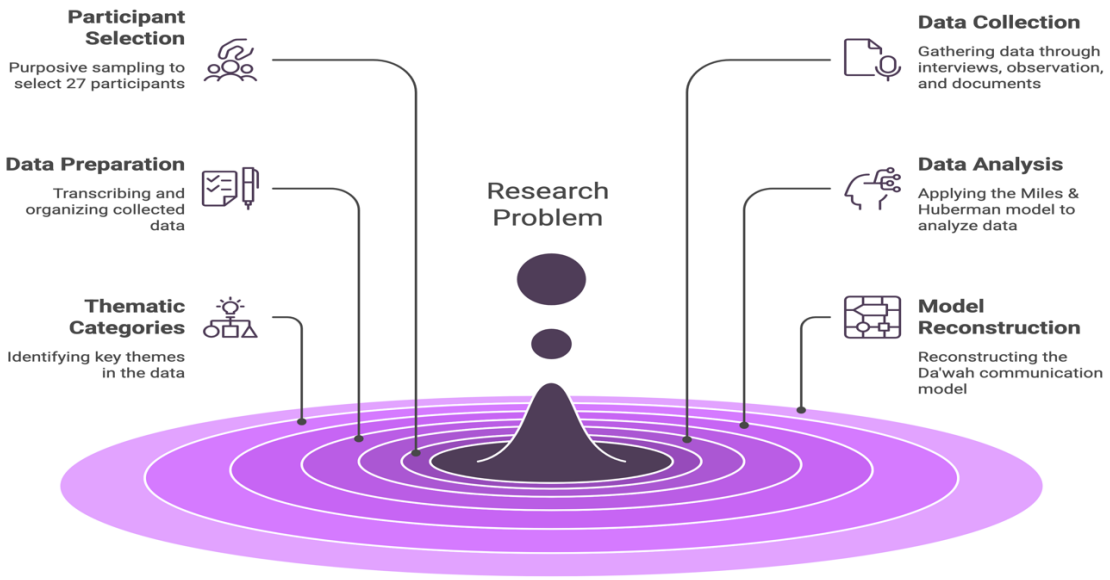


Figure 1. Qualitative Research Design and Analytical Procedure

Figure 1 illustrates the systematic research design used to reconstruct *da'wah* communication in digitally mediated environments. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (n=27), and data were collected through interviews, digital observation, and document analysis. The data were transcribed and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman framework and thematic coding. The identified themes informed the reconstruction of a contextually adaptive *da'wah* communication model grounded in empirical evidence and contemporary digital religious dynamics.

Result and Discussion

The findings of this study are derived from semi-structured interviews, digital observation records, and selected online religious content analyzed over a three-month period. The data consist of verbatim interview transcripts, field notes documenting participants' interactions with digital da'wah materials, and archived examples of short-form religious videos and accompanying comment threads. Across these data sources, several recurring patterns emerged concerning how Generation Z participants describe their spirituality, how they evaluate institutional religious messages, and how they engage with religious content on social media platforms.

The results reveal consistent references to individualized meaning-making, selective trust in religious authority, preference for dialogical communication, and sensitivity to narrative authenticity in digital preaching. These patterns align with broader observations that contemporary digital environments enable young users to negotiate belief and belonging through interactive and participatory media structures rather than through exclusively hierarchical communication models (Gürlesin, 2024).

Additionally, the collected data show that participants consistently referenced algorithm-driven exposure to religious content and peer-mediated validation as influential factors in shaping their spiritual engagement, reflecting documented patterns of digitally embedded religious interaction among youth communities (Bahadur & Çapçıoğlu, 2024). Overall, the results present a structured overview of communicative preferences, authority negotiation, and spiritual self-understanding among Generation Z within digitally mediated Islamic contexts, which are detailed in the following subsections.

The analysis produced four principal findings aligned with the study's research objectives. *First*, regarding spiritual self-identification, 23 out of 27 participants described themselves as "more spiritual than religious" or expressed discomfort with rigid institutional labeling. Interview transcripts frequently contained statements such as, "I believe in God and Islamic values, but I don't always feel represented by formal religious institutions." These narratives reflect a pattern of individualized spiritual articulation, consistent with documented trends of hybrid and negotiated religious identity among digitally engaged youth (Ayunda & Harahap, 2025).

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings on Generation Z's Spiritual Orientation and *Da'wah* Communication Preferences

Theme	Description	Number of Participants	Key Implication for *Da'wah*
Individualized spirituality	Participants expressed faith as personal and selective rather than institutionally defined	23 of 27	*Da'wah* should emphasize personal relevance and spiritual meaning
Algorithm-driven engagement	Religious content was primarily encountered through algorithmic recommendations	27 of 27	*Da'wah* must adapt to platform-based digital visibility
Authority based on authenticity	Credibility was evaluated based on transparency and relatability rather than institutional status	19 of 27	Authentic communication strengthens trust
Preference for dialogical communication	Participants preferred interactive, conversational religious communication	21 of 27	Participatory *da'wah* is more effective than one-way preaching

As summarized in Table 1, Generation Z demonstrates clear patterns of individualized spirituality, algorithm-driven engagement, authenticity-based authority evaluation, and preference for dialogical *da'wah* communication.

Second, in relation to digital engagement behavior, all participants reported daily exposure to religious content through algorithm-driven feeds, with 18 participants indicating that short-form video platforms were their primary source of religious learning. Observation notes show that participants interacted more frequently with content featuring storytelling, personal testimony, and visually concise explanations. This pattern aligns with findings that youth-oriented digital preaching tends to cluster around short-form and socially networked formats(Wicaksono et al., 2025).

Third, concerning authority perception, 19 participants expressed selective trust toward religious figures, often evaluating credibility based on transparency, relatability, and responsiveness in comment interactions. *Finally*, participants consistently emphasized preference for dialogical communication rather than one-directional preaching, frequently using phrases such as "I prefer content that feels like a conversation." These findings collectively demonstrate patterned responses in spirituality, digital practice, authority evaluation, and communicative expectation among Generation Z within digitally mediated Islamic spaces.

Theme 1: Individualized Spiritual Orientation

The first thematic category concerns how participants articulated their spiritual identity in relation to institutional religion. Most participants described spirituality as a personal, reflective, and experience-based dimension of faith rather than formal adherence to institutional structures. Statements such as "I focus on values and connection with God, not labels" appeared consistently across interviews. Participants emphasized internal sincerity, emotional resonance, and ethical conduct as primary markers of religiosity. This pattern corresponds with documented findings that digital platforms facilitate flexible spiritual exploration and exposure to diverse belief expressions beyond formal religious boundaries(Bahadur & Çapçıoğlu, 2024). The data show that spirituality was consistently framed as inwardly grounded and self-directed, while institutional religion was evaluated more critically.

Theme 2: Digital Engagement Patterns

The second theme relates to patterns of religious content consumption in digital spaces. All participants reported daily interaction with algorithm-curated feeds, and 18 of 27 identified short-form videos as their primary medium for accessing Islamic content. Observational data show higher engagement with content featuring storytelling, concise moral reflections, and visually dynamic presentation styles.

Participants frequently mentioned that they "discover religious content accidentally through the algorithm," indicating the central role of platform design in shaping exposure. This aligns with research documenting the dominance of TikTok and Instagram in digital *da'wah* dissemination among younger

audiences (Alma et al., 2025). The data therefore highlight the structural influence of digital architecture on religious engagement patterns.

Theme 3: Authority Evaluation and Credibility

The third theme concerns participants' evaluation of religious authority. Nineteen participants reported that credibility was determined less by formal titles and more by perceived authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness in online interactions. Participants frequently assessed preachers based on how they addressed comments, admitted limitations, or related personal experiences. Several noted that "if the preacher ignores questions, I scroll away." These patterns reflect an evaluative orientation toward authority, similar to broader generational tendencies to prioritize programmatic clarity and accountability over inherited affiliation(Faisal et al., 2025). The findings show that authority is negotiated interactively rather than assumed hierarchically.

Theme 4: Communicative Expectations toward Da'wah

The fourth theme focuses on communicative preference. Participants consistently expressed preference for dialogical, conversational, and empathetic communication styles over one-directional preaching. Twenty-one participants explicitly used terms such as "relatable," "interactive," or "open discussion" when describing ideal *da'wah* content. Observational notes confirm higher comment engagement on posts that invited questions or personal reflection.

These responses indicate a clear orientation toward participatory communication, consistent with broader patterns in digitally embedded religious interaction where users expect involvement rather than passive reception (Gürlesin, 2024). Collectively, these thematic findings provide a structured depiction of how spirituality, digital practice, authority perception, and communicative expectation intersect within Generation Z's religious experience.

The data reveal several dominant patterns that consistently appeared across interviews and digital observations. *First*, a strong pattern of selective religious engagement emerged, with 24 out of 27 participants indicating that they regularly consume religious content but only follow a limited number of specific preachers or accounts. Participants reported scrolling past content that appeared overly formal, confrontational, or rigid, while engaging more frequently with content perceived as concise and personally relatable. This selective exposure pattern reflects structured engagement behavior similar to documented patterns of differentiated internet use influencing religious commitment (Laderi & Uecker, 2025).

Second, a consistent trend of algorithm-mediated discovery was observed. Twenty participants reported that most religious content appears through platform recommendations rather than intentional search. Observation notes confirm that viral short-form videos with high engagement metrics were more likely to appear in participants' feeds. This trend aligns with recent analyses showing the structural role of algorithmic curation in shaping online belief exposure and digital participation patterns (Arif et al., 2024).

Third, the data indicate a dominant communicative preference for brief, visually engaging, and conversational formats. Participants repeatedly described ideal content as "short," "clear," and "interactive." Longer lecture-style videos were frequently described as less appealing unless segmented into shorter clips. Collectively, these patterns demonstrate a convergence toward individualized, algorithm-driven, and interaction-oriented modes of religious engagement within the digital environment.

The interview data provide direct evidence of selective religious engagement and individualized spirituality. One participant stated, "I still pray and believe in Islamic values, but I choose which ustadz to listen to based on how they explain things, not because of their title." Another noted, "If the message feels judgmental or too formal, I skip it immediately." Out of 27 participants, 24 explicitly described filtering religious content based on tone, relatability, and perceived sincerity. Field notes confirm that participants frequently paused, liked, or commented on short-form videos framed as personal reflections rather than doctrinal lectures. This selective engagement behavior corresponds with documented variations in how different types of internet activity shape patterns of religious commitment and affiliation (Laderi & Uecker, 2025).

Additional evidence from digital observation strengthens the pattern of algorithm-mediated exposure. Twenty participants reported that they "rarely search for religious content directly," instead

encountering it through recommended feeds. One participant explained, “TikTok shows me religious reminders between entertainment videos, so I watch if it catches my attention.” Observation logs indicate that videos under 90 seconds with conversational captions generated visibly higher engagement in comment sections.

These documented interaction patterns align with findings that online religious participation increasingly operates within socially networked and digitally embedded environments (Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2022). Collectively, these interview excerpts, frequency counts, and field documentation provide concrete empirical support for the dominant themes identified in the results section.

This section has presented the principal findings derived from interviews, digital observations, and documented online interactions involving Generation Z Muslim participants. The results show a consistent pattern of individualized spiritual identification, where participants emphasized personal faith expression while expressing selective attachment to formal religious institutions. The data also reveal dominant patterns of algorithm-driven exposure to religious content, with short-form and visually concise media emerging as the most frequently accessed formats. In addition, participants demonstrated evaluative approaches toward religious authority, prioritizing perceived authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness over formal credentials.

Furthermore, the findings indicate a strong preference for dialogical and conversational communication styles in digital *da’wah* content, as evidenced by recurring interview statements and observed engagement patterns in comment sections. Frequency counts and field documentation confirm that selective engagement, algorithm-mediated discovery, and interaction-oriented communication represent recurring tendencies across participants. Together, these empirically grounded observations provide a structured depiction of how spirituality, authority perception, and digital communication intersect in the lived experiences of Generation Z. These core findings form the foundation for the subsequent discussion, where their broader implications for reconstructing *da’wah* communication in the contemporary digital era will be examined.

The most significant finding of this study is that Generation Z Muslims demonstrate a consistently individualized and evaluative approach to spirituality, accompanied by a clear preference for dialogical and digitally embedded forms of *da’wah* communication. This core result directly addresses the study’s objective to reconstruct Islamic communication strategies in response to the “spiritual but not religious” orientation observed among digitally active youth. The data show that participants maintain commitment to Islamic values while simultaneously distancing themselves from rigid institutional authority, a pattern that reflects broader transformations in digital religiosity where belief expression becomes increasingly personalized and networked (Campbell, 2024). Moreover, recent research indicates that digital environments encourage hybrid forms of religious participation in which authority is negotiated through interaction rather than assumed through hierarchy (Wahid, 2024).

Within the field of Islamic communication studies, this finding is particularly important because it shifts attention from platform utilization to communicative paradigm transformation. Rather than merely adopting new media tools, religious institutions must recognize that Generation Z evaluates credibility, authenticity, and relational engagement as central components of meaningful religious discourse. By foregrounding this evaluative and dialogical orientation, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about digital religion and offers a foundation for rethinking *da’wah* as a participatory and relational process in the contemporary digital era.

The findings suggest that Generation Z’s individualized spirituality is closely linked to the structural characteristics of digital media environments that prioritize personalization, immediacy, and peer interaction. The consistent pattern of selective engagement indicates that exposure to religious content is no longer primarily institution-driven but algorithmically mediated, allowing users to curate belief-related information according to preference and emotional resonance. Research on digital religion demonstrates that algorithmic systems shape not only information visibility but also patterns of religious interpretation by reinforcing personalized pathways of exposure (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). This helps explain why participants reported stronger attachment to values and narratives that feel personally relevant rather than to formal institutional authority.

The evaluative orientation toward religious figures further indicates a shift from inherited legitimacy to performative credibility. Participants’ emphasis on transparency, responsiveness, and authenticity suggests that authority is constructed relationally within interactive digital settings. Studies on digital preaching have shown that engagement metrics, comment interaction, and narrative

storytelling significantly influence perceived credibility among younger audiences (Wicaksono et al., 2025). Consequently, the preference for dialogical communication may arise from habitual exposure to participatory digital cultures where users expect reciprocal interaction rather than unilateral instruction.

Taken together, these patterns suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between digitally structured interaction and the emergence of a spirituality that is reflective, selective, and conversational. The findings indicate that communicative transformation is not incidental but structurally embedded within the digital ecosystem that shapes Generation Z's religious experience.

The findings of this study largely support and extend prior research on digital religion and youth religiosity, while offering a more focused reconstruction-oriented perspective. Previous scholarship has consistently shown that digital environments reshape religious participation by blending online and offline expressions of faith and encouraging individualized forms of engagement (Tsuria & Campbell, 2021). The present findings align with this observation by demonstrating that Generation Z participants maintain religious commitment while selectively negotiating institutional affiliation within digitally mediated contexts. Similarly, studies on youth interaction with religious content on Instagram have reported that digital spaces enable reinterpretation and aesthetic reframing of religious messages, reinforcing the participatory nature of contemporary belief expression (Novak et al., 2022). The current study supports these findings by documenting similar patterns of conversational engagement and selective credibility assessment.

However, this research also extends prior literature by foregrounding the communicative implications of these patterns for *da'wah* reconstruction. While earlier analyses have described the growth of online preaching and its strategic dissemination across platforms (Arif et al., 2024), they have generally emphasized campaign effectiveness rather than paradigm transformation. The present study diverges by positioning individualized spirituality not simply as a sociological trend but as a communicative challenge requiring structural adaptation. In doing so, it bridges descriptive digital religion scholarship and normative Islamic communication studies, thereby occupying an integrative position within the contemporary research landscape.

The findings of this study contribute theoretically by extending digital religion theory beyond descriptive accounts of online religious adaptation toward a communicative reconstruction framework. Digital religion scholarship has emphasized the blending of online and offline religious spheres and the emergence of networked authority structures (Campbell, 2024). The present findings reinforce this theoretical claim by empirically demonstrating that authority among Generation Z is negotiated interactively through perceived authenticity, responsiveness, and relational transparency. However, the study moves further by showing that this negotiated authority is not merely a feature of digital mediation but a central driver requiring structural transformation in *da'wah* communication models.

In addition, the results contribute to theories of participatory communication by illustrating that dialogical expectation is not simply a preference but a generational norm shaped by interactive media environments. Recent interdisciplinary research highlights that emerging technologies reconfigure not only religious practice but also interpretive authority and communal boundaries (Rizkitama et al., 2025). The present study refines this argument by specifying how such technological mediation produces an evaluative spiritual orientation that prioritizes narrative relatability and reciprocal engagement.

Theoretically, these findings suggest a shift from hierarchical transmission models of *da'wah* toward a relational-constructive paradigm in which meaning is co-negotiated within digital ecosystems. By integrating digital religion theory with Islamic communication studies, this research offers a modified conceptual lens that situates *da'wah* as a participatory, credibility-driven, and digitally embedded communicative process rather than a one-directional act of doctrinal dissemination.

This principle reflects Ibn Qayyim's emphasis that guidance must correspond to the intellectual and spiritual readiness of the audience, as articulated in Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa'ādah, where he explains that effective religious guidance requires sensitivity to the condition of the human soul and its experiential reality (Al-Jawziyyah, 1998, pp. 60–70).

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for Islamic communicators, religious institutions, and policy stakeholders seeking to engage Generation Z effectively in digital environments. First, the demonstrated preference for dialogical and authenticity-driven communication suggests that *da'wah* practitioners should shift from lecture-centered delivery toward interactive and relational engagement strategies. Research on digital religious communication indicates that online audiences respond more positively to content that integrates storytelling, responsiveness, and personal

narrative elements rather than rigid doctrinal exposition (Noor & Arshad, 2024). Practically, this means preachers and institutions should incorporate structured Q&A sessions, comment engagement, and conversational tone in short-form video formats to align with prevailing user expectations.

Second, the prominence of algorithm-driven exposure highlights the need for strategic digital literacy among religious institutions. Studies on emerging technologies in religious preservation emphasize that technological tools must be intentionally integrated with ethical and communicative awareness to prevent superficial or fragmented religious messaging (Rizkitama et al., 2025). Institutions should therefore invest in digital content teams capable of understanding platform algorithms, optimizing concise formats, and maintaining theological consistency within fast-paced media cycles.

For policymakers and community leaders, these findings suggest that youth religious engagement programs should incorporate participatory media training and critical digital awareness. By acknowledging Generation Z's evaluative orientation toward authority and authenticity, stakeholders can design communication strategies that foster trust, transparency, and sustained engagement rather than relying solely on institutional legitimacy. Collectively, these practical steps translate the study's empirical insights into actionable strategies for reconstructing *da'wah* communication in the contemporary digital era.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged to maintain analytical transparency. *First*, the research is confined to a qualitative design with a relatively small number of participants drawn primarily from urban university contexts in Indonesia. While this approach allows for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, it limits statistical generalization to the broader population of Generation Z Muslims. Studies on youth digital religiosity have noted that regional, socio-economic, and educational differences significantly shape patterns of online religious engagement (Bahadur & Çapçıoğlu, 2024), suggesting that findings from urban settings may not fully capture rural or less digitally connected communities.

Second, the study relies heavily on self-reported data through interviews, which may be influenced by participants' reflective bias or social desirability. Although triangulation with digital observation was conducted to strengthen credibility, direct behavioral analytics such as platform metrics or algorithm data were not accessible. Research on digital media structures emphasizes that algorithmic systems operate in complex and often opaque ways, making it difficult to fully trace how content exposure shapes user perception (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025).

Finally, the focus on Islamic communication within the Indonesian context narrows the cultural scope of interpretation. While this specificity strengthens contextual depth, comparative cross-religious or cross-national perspectives were beyond the study's design. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but instead delineate the contextual boundaries within which the reconstructed *da'wah* model should be understood and applied.

Future research should expand the scope of inquiry by examining comparative contexts across regions, educational backgrounds, and levels of digital access to determine whether the individualized and dialogical patterns observed in this study are consistent beyond urban Indonesian settings. Comparative cross-cultural studies could explore how Generation Z Muslims in different national contexts negotiate spirituality within distinct socio-political and technological environments. Such research would help clarify whether the "spiritual but not religious" orientation identified here represents a localized communicative phenomenon or a broader global shift in youth religiosity.

Further investigation is also needed to incorporate quantitative and mixed-method approaches that measure the relationship between digital engagement patterns and religious identity formation more systematically. Experimental or survey-based designs could assess how variations in content format, narrative tone, or interactive features influence perceptions of credibility and engagement among youth audiences. In addition, future studies could integrate digital analytics, such as engagement metrics and algorithm tracking, to better understand how platform architecture shapes religious exposure and selection.

Another promising direction involves exploring the role of artificial intelligence, immersive media, and emerging digital tools in shaping future models of *da'wah* communication. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in tracking how Generation Z's spiritual orientation evolves over time as digital technologies continue to transform patterns of communication. By addressing these remaining gaps, future scholarship can deepen theoretical understanding and refine practical strategies for engaging younger generations within rapidly evolving digital religious ecosystems.

Conclusions

This study set out to reconstruct *da'wah* communication in response to the "spiritual but not religious" orientation among Generation Z in the contemporary digital era. The findings demonstrate that Generation Z Muslims maintain commitment to Islamic values while engaging religion through individualized, selective, and digitally mediated practices. Religious authority is not rejected, but it is evaluated based on authenticity, transparency, and relational engagement rather than formal institutional status. Digital platforms play a decisive role in shaping exposure, interaction, and credibility, with short-form, dialogical, and narrative-driven content emerging as the most effective modes of engagement.

These results indicate that reconstructing *da'wah* communication requires a shift from hierarchical, one-directional preaching toward participatory, credibility-centered, and digitally adaptive models. By aligning communicative strategies with the evaluative and conversational expectations of Generation Z, Islamic institutions can foster more meaningful engagement without compromising theological integrity. The study therefore provides a structured framework for understanding and responding to evolving patterns of youth spirituality in digitally embedded contexts.

This study contributes theoretically and practically by offering a reconstruction-oriented framework for *da'wah* communication in response to Generation Z's digitally shaped spirituality. Its novelty lies in shifting the focus from platform adoption to communicative paradigm transformation, demonstrating that credibility, authenticity, and dialogical engagement are central to contemporary religious communication. Scientifically, the research integrates digital religion theory with Islamic communication studies, providing a refined conceptual lens for understanding post-institutional spirituality. Practically, it offers actionable guidance for religious institutions to design participatory and digitally adaptive strategies that resonate with youth without compromising theological integrity.

Islamic institutions and *da'wah* practitioners should prioritize short-form, conversational, and visually engaging content tailored to Generation Z's digital habits. Preachers are encouraged to actively respond to comments, host live Q&A sessions, and integrate relatable storytelling to strengthen credibility and trust. Institutions should also invest in digital literacy training and dedicated media teams capable of understanding platform algorithms while maintaining theological consistency. Policymakers can support youth-centered religious programs that combine participatory media skills with critical digital awareness.

Future research should explore cross-cultural comparisons to examine whether similar communicative patterns emerge among Generation Z Muslims in different national contexts. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to track how digital spirituality evolves over time. Integrating quantitative methods and digital analytics could further clarify how algorithmic exposure influences religious identity formation and engagement patterns.

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