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From Pulpit to Platform: Digital Literacy and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority among State Counselors in West Sumatra

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of Islamic preaching from traditional spaces to digital platforms, focusing on the experiences of state religious counselors in West Sumatra. The unit of analysis is the group of *penyuluh agama* (religious counselors) under Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs who are adapting their da'wah practices to the algorithmic dynamics of social media. The study aims to explore their level of digital literacy, the challenges they encounter in online preaching, and how these affect their religious authority in a digitally mediated society. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving 19 counselors across several districts, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal that most counselors possess low digital literacy and rely on informal learning, resulting in limited online engagement and visibility. Challenges include a lack of technical training, inadequate institutional support, and fear of online misinterpretation. However, participants recognize the potential of digital media to expand da'wah outreach if supported by structured literacy programs and creative content strategies. This study contributes to understanding how state religious authority is being reconfigured in the digital age and provides policy insights for strengthening digital competence within Islamic counseling institutions.

Keywords: Digital Literacy; Religious Authority; Islamic Da'wah; Religious Counselors; Algorithmic Age

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become a defining characteristic of the contemporary world, reshaping how people communicate, access information, and interact on a daily basis. This technological shift has also entered the religious sphere, transforming the modes of Islamic preaching (*da'wah*) from traditional spaces—such as mosques, *madrasahs*, and *majelis taklim*—to online platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. This evolution, commonly referred to as *digital da'wah*, enables messages of Islam to reach wider audiences across geographical and temporal boundaries (Kango et al., 2024; Raya, 2025). Within this dynamic environment, state religious counselors (*penyuluh agama*)—who are mandated to provide moral and spiritual guidance—must adapt to maintain relevance. However, many still struggle with limited digital

competence, lacking the literacy and confidence needed to engage audiences through multimedia content. The phenomenon signifies not only a technological adjustment but also a profound cultural and institutional shift in how religious authority operates. As societies increasingly inhabit digital spaces, the question of who has the authority to speak on behalf of religion—and through which media—has become an essential concern for contemporary Islamic communication and governance.

A growing body of literature has examined how digital media reshape Islamic communication and authority structures in Indonesia and beyond. Alam et al. (2024) and Epafras et al. (n.d.) note that many counselors remain unfamiliar with algorithms and online engagement strategies, which limits their da'wah outreach. Meanwhile, Susanti, Syamsul, and Burhani (2024) found that 50% of Generation Z and millennial Muslims aged 15–25 gain their religious knowledge primarily from social media platforms, especially TikTok. This supports Piwko and Sawicka's (2025) finding that digital platforms serve as arenas where young Muslims negotiate identity and belonging while also encountering competing and sometimes radical interpretations. Scholars such as Andok (2024), Arifin et al. (2022), Dewi and Fata (2023), and Whyte (2022) highlight the emergence of online religious influencers who often lack formal education yet wield considerable influence. While this transformation democratizes access to religious discourse, it simultaneously blurs boundaries between sacred knowledge, entertainment, and digital commodification. These trends underscore that digital literacy is not merely a technical skill but a moral and critical competence necessary for navigating today's algorithmic religious landscape.

Despite the proliferation of studies on digital da'wah, most have focused on celebrity preachers and Islamic influencers in urban Java, leaving state religious counselors in peripheral regions underexplored. Few have examined how institutional religious actors, such as those employed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, experience and respond to digital transformation in their professional roles. This study addresses that gap by focusing on West Sumatra, a region deeply rooted in Islamic values and known for the Minangkabau philosophy *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* (custom rests on religion, and religion rests on the Qur'an) (Asrinaldi & Yoserizal, 2020; Rahim & Saput, 2024). Specifically, this research asks three main questions: (1) How do state religious counselors perceive and respond to the challenges of digital da'wah? (2) To what extent do they possess the skills and strategies needed to utilize digital media effectively? and (3) How is their religious authority negotiated and redefined within the fragmented digital sphere? By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how institutional religious authority adapts to the mediation of algorithms.

This article argues that the digital transformation of da'wah has led to a reconfiguration rather than a replacement of religious authority. Religious counselors, though constrained by low digital literacy and limited institutional support, are gradually negotiating their relevance within the new digital public sphere. Building upon theories of *Uses and Gratifications* and *Religious Authority in the Network Society*, this study hypothesizes that counselors' digital adaptation depends not only on individual literacy but also on institutional capacity and cultural legitimacy within local contexts. West Sumatra presents a compelling case due to its unique integration of Islamic and customary traditions, which shape how authority and authenticity are perceived online. By employing qualitative analysis of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 19 counselors, this study demonstrates that while digital media challenge traditional hierarchies, they also provide new opportunities for

state actors to promote moderate and contextualized Islamic messages. Ultimately, this research contributes theoretically to discussions on digital religion and practically to policy frameworks for strengthening digital literacy among Indonesia's religious counselors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Transformation and Religious Communication

The digital transformation has profoundly altered the ways in which religious communities interact, interpret texts, and disseminate their values. According to Campbell (2021), digital religion represents a hybrid domain where online and offline practices intertwine, forming new modes of spiritual engagement. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become prominent tools for *da'wah*, breaking traditional boundaries of time and geography (Kango et al., 2024). In Indonesia, internet penetration reached 77% in 2025, or around 215 million users (Datareportal, 2025), creating vast opportunities for religious communication. However, this transformation also exposes religious discourse to algorithmic mediation, where visibility depends on metrics such as likes, shares, and engagement (Whyte, 2022). As a result, the essence of *da'wah*—once centered on knowledge and piety—is increasingly shaped by media logic and audience preferences.

At the same time, the democratization of digital communication allows diverse actors, including lay preachers and influencers, to participate in religious interpretation (Dewi & Fata, 2023). This shift aligns with what Hjarvard (2016) refers to as the "mediatization of religion," where media become not just channels but agents of transformation. While this development promotes inclusivity and pluralism, it also leads to fragmented religious authority and potential misinformation (Risdiana et al., 2020). Studies in Muslim-majority societies indicate that audiences often prefer accessible and emotionally resonant content over formal religious instruction (Andok, 2024). Consequently, religious communication in the digital era must strike a balance between accessibility and theological depth. For state religious counselors in Indonesia, this digital shift represents both an opportunity to expand their *da'wah* reach and a challenge to maintain credibility amid the algorithmic competition for attention.

2.2 Digital Literacy and Religious Counselors

Digital literacy has emerged as a crucial skill set for modern religious practitioners. Gilster (1997) first defined it as the ability to understand and use digital information effectively, while Ng (2012) expanded it to include technical, cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies. In the Islamic context, digital literacy encompasses the ethical, spiritual, and communicative capacities required to engage with online publics (Epafras et al., n.d.). Research indicates that many Indonesian religious counselors possess basic operational skills, such as using WhatsApp or Facebook, but lack higher-order skills, including content curation, visual storytelling, and algorithmic awareness (Asegap et al., 2024). Alam et al. (2024) found that over 60% of the surveyed counselors had never received formal digital training, resulting in limited participation in online *da'wah* initiatives. This limitation restricts their ability to produce persuasive digital content and counter misinformation or radical narratives online.

Moreover, digital literacy among religious counselors is closely tied to institutional support and socio-cultural context. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) has initiated some training programs, but most remain sporadic and lack sustained implementation (Asep, 2023). Counselors often face infrastructural barriers, such as inadequate internet access or outdated equipment, particularly in rural areas (Kango et al., 2024). This gap reinforces a digital divide not only in technological skills but also in symbolic capital—those who can speak fluently in the language of algorithms gain greater influence. As Piwko and Sawicka (2025) emphasize, digital literacy should be viewed as both a form of empowerment and a moral responsibility in shaping online religious discourse. Enhancing counselors' literacy thus becomes essential to ensuring that digital *da'wah* aligns with the values of moderation (*wasathiyah*), inclusivity, and contextual understanding.

2.3 Reconfiguring Religious Authority in the Algorithmic Age

The digital age has redefined the foundations of religious authority, moving it from institutional hierarchies to networked forms of influence. Campbell (2021) and Whyte (2022) argue that online platforms redistribute authority through mechanisms of participation, visibility, and algorithmic recommendation. In Indonesia, figures such as popular *ustadz* and Islamic influencers—many of whom lack formal scholarly credentials—have amassed millions of followers and shape religious opinion across demographics (Arifin et al., 2022; Dewi & Fata, 2023). This shift reflects what Turner (2022) terms "post-institutional authority," where legitimacy is constructed through audience trust and emotional resonance rather than institutional sanction. However, this reconfiguration also raises concerns about theological depth, content authenticity, and the rise of populist religiosity that privileges style over substance.

For state religious counselors, the challenge lies in navigating the tension between traditional legitimacy rooted in sanad (scholarly lineage) and the performative demands of digital culture. Andok (2024) suggests that hybrid authority—combining traditional knowledge with media competence—may define the next phase of Islamic leadership. In West Sumatra, where adat basandi syarak and syarak basandi Kitabullah continue to shape moral life (Asrinaldi & Yoserizal, 2020), counselors must navigate how to project authenticity online without compromising their institutional identity. The algorithmic environment rewards engagement, not necessarily accuracy or depth, forcing counselors to balance popularity with ethical communication (Raya, 2025). Understanding how counselors perform and reinterpret authority in this context is crucial to grasping broader transformations in Indonesia's religious landscape, where the sacred increasingly coexists—and competes—with the logic of the digital marketplace.

3. Methods

3.1 Material Object

The material object of this research is the experience of *penyuluh agama Islam* (state religious counselors) in West Sumatra as they adapt to the digital transformation of *da'wah* practices. These counselors, appointed by Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), play a strategic role in promoting religious moderation (*wasathiyah Islam*). West Sumatra, renowned for its Minangkabau philosophy of adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah, presents a distinctive socio-religious context where Islamic values and local customs intersect (Asrinaldi & Yoserizal, 2020; Rahim &

Saput, 2024). The study examines how these counselors interpret, negotiate, and fulfill their roles within an increasingly algorithm-driven religious environment.

3.2 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore in-depth the meanings, perceptions, and practices of religious counselors. The approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes understanding human experiences in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative design is appropriate because the phenomenon of digital *da'wah* involves subjective interpretation, institutional norms, and cultural adaptation. The research does not aim for statistical generalization but seeks analytic depth, capturing counselors' lived experiences as they adapt to the rapid digitalization of Islamic preaching (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

3.3 Data Sources

Primary data were obtained through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with 19 religious counselors representing 12 districts in West Sumatra. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, experience, and digital engagement levels (Patton, 2015). Secondary data were drawn from policy documents of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, online training reports, and previous studies on digital *da'wah* (Asegap et al., 2024; Alam et al., 2024). This combination enables contextual triangulation between participants' perspectives and the institutional frameworks that govern their activities.

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection employed semi-structured FGDs supported by observation and document analysis. The FGDs were held in Padang from April 28 to 29, 2024, and were recorded with participants' consent. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and explored five thematic areas: digital literacy, institutional support, challenges in online *da'wah*, perceptions of authority, and future expectations. Field notes and transcripts were supplemented with relevant social media examples cited by participants. This multi-method strategy ensured both depth and reliability of qualitative evidence (Silverman, 2021).

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which encompasses three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding was performed manually to identify recurring themes related to literacy, authority negotiation, and institutional adaptation. Thematic matrices were developed to compare counselors' perspectives across districts. Data validation employed triangulation among sources and *member checking* with selected participants to ensure credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis ultimately aimed to interpret how counselors reconstruct their religious authority and professional identity amid algorithm-driven dynamics of digital *da'wah* in West Sumatra.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Digital Transformation and the Challenge of Contemporary Da'wah

Digital technology has become a primary catalyst for global social change in the contemporary era, providing access to interconnected information at any time, from anywhere, and by anyone (Alamsyah et al., 2024). As of February 2025, the global internet user base reached between 5.56 and 5.64 billion people, representing approximately 68% of the world's population (Kemp, 2025a). In Indonesia, internet penetration reached 74.6 percent, with 212 million users out of a total population of approximately 285 million. These figures indicate a steady upward trend from year to year (Kemp, 2025b).

Today, the world celebrates the ubiquity of smartphones, which offer immense convenience compared to what was available a quarter of a century ago. The expansion of internet networks and the open-source Android platform, which hosts thousands of applications, has transformed the world into a borderless territory—a global village (Mariko & Shigeru, 2024; Mattelart et al., 2024). However, this development has also revealed a significant gap between the ability to understand, use, and master digital intelligence and a way of life that may not be fully equipped to match it. Technological advancement has outpaced users' knowledge, highlighting the urgent need for digital literacy, alongside media and financial literacy.

Digital literacy refers to the ability to use digital technologies effectively and responsibly. It encompasses understanding hardware (computers, smartphones, and tablets), software (applications and programs), and the ability to navigate, assess, and produce content in digital environments. Effective use refers to meeting one's needs; responsible use involves avoiding harm to oneself or others (Limilia & Aristi, 2019; Rohman et al., 2024; Tanjung et al., 2024).

Today, anyone can access digital technology without formal training, unlike the early 1990s, when computer literacy required structured courses. Modern smartphones are intuitive and often self-explanatory. However, this ease has led to dependency. According to Dependency Theory by Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, the more people rely on a medium to meet their needs, the more important that medium becomes to them (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). This dependency is evident in the attachment to smartphones in daily life. Data from 2025 show that global users spend an average of three to four hours per day on digital devices, while Indonesians spend an average of 5.7 hours per day on smartphones (Kumar, 2025).

This reliance has altered modern lifestyles. Instant gratification has become a hallmark of digital society. People are increasingly impatient with slow, step-by-step religious learning processes typically found in pesantren, madrasahs, and religious study groups (Dewi & Fata, 2023; Kango et al., 2024). While this shift presents a challenge for religious figures (such as kiai, da'i, ustadz, and religious counselors), it also offers a significant opportunity to extend the reach of their preaching through digital means.

Yet, despite recognizing the potential of digital technology, many religious counselors remain hesitant to engage actively with it. As one counselor admitted, *"I know digital media is important for da'wah, but I'm not confident creating content because I don't understand the tools."*

This statement illustrates a common form of digital anxiety among counselors; awareness of digital importance does not automatically translate into capability or confidence. Their engagement

with online platforms is often cautious, limited to consuming or forwarding existing content rather than producing new materials.

Some respondents in this study view the digital realm as a "new field of spiritual endeavor" that enables wider outreach. However, they also recognize challenges such as misinformation and the proliferation of provocative content. Statements like "If we don't occupy that space, others will" and "Digital platforms are full of hoaxes and hate speech" reflect their awareness of the need for a constructive religious presence online.

At the same time, counselors also expressed anxiety about the moral and reputational risks of online preaching. One participant shared, *"I want to share short Qur'anic reflections, but I'm afraid people might misinterpret my words and it could go viral in the wrong way."* This concern demonstrates that the hesitation to engage digitally is not merely technical but also ethical. For many counselors, maintaining sincerity and religious integrity is more important than seeking popularity or visibility in algorithmic spaces.

The digital arena is multifunctional: it educates and shapes public opinion (Flew, 2008, pp. 10–12). In the context of da'wah, it has great potential to promote moderate and inclusive religious narratives. However, the algorithmic nature of social media tends to favor viral and emotionally charged content, potentially marginalizing more nuanced religious messages unless they are strategically presented.

The role of religious counselors as agents of change should be seen as an effort to establish ethical standards and digital credibility (Jamaludin et al., 2024). The concept of hybrid authority, a blend of traditional religious legitimacy and digital performativity, is essential for maintaining public trust. Several studies have noted that the success of digital da'wah depends on the counselor's consistency and ability to interact meaningfully with audiences, as illustrated by figures such as Abdul Somad, Adi Hidayat, and Yazid Jawas (Dewi et al., 2024; Dewi & Fata, 2023; Dhora et al., 2023; Verolyna & Syaputri, 2021). Therefore, digital transformation not only requires technological competence but also the construction of narratives that integrate Islamic values with the dynamics of digital culture, countering harmful content and promoting educational, reliable messages.

This opportunity should be embraced by religious counselors under the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. With more than 53,000 religious counselors across the country, both civil servants and non-civil servants, they represent a substantial force (Biro Hubungan Masyarakat Data Dan Informasi, 2022). If mobilized effectively, they could contribute to the national digital da'wah movement by creating and disseminating religious counseling content through various social media platforms.

Despite these challenges, several participants voiced optimism about the potential of collective efforts. As one counselor stated, *"If we receive proper training and work as a creative team, we can make da'wah more appealing to young people on social media."* Such optimism highlights the counselors' willingness to adapt, provided they receive institutional support and digital capacity-building. It also reflects a growing awareness that collaboration, rather than individual effort, is essential for sustaining an effective digital da'wah movement.

4.2 Digital Literacy among Religious Counselors in West Sumatra

Most respondents acknowledged that their level of digital literacy remains at a basic stage. Some admitted that their use of social media is mostly spontaneous, with little understanding of technical features, cybersecurity, or strategies for optimizing da'wah content. One respondent remarked, *"I know digital media is important, but I'm technologically illiterate,"* and noted that their knowledge was gained through self-learning, as no formal training had yet been provided. A religious counselor from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Padang admitted to using digital media only at a casual level, like most people, and had not yet engaged with it seriously in their work. However, there was a willingness to learn and grow, which may serve as a foundation for improving digital engagement in the future (Rapiun, *Interview,* 24 April 2024). This situation is concerning, as religious counselors are selected individuals with relatively high levels of education.

Table 1. Levels of Digital Literacy among Religious Counselors

Level of Digital Literacy	Description	Number of Participants	Percentage
Basic	Use social media passively (reading, liking, and forwarding religious content); have a limited ability to create or edit media.	17	55%
Intermediate	Actively use digital platforms for communication and sharing simple content (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, short posts).	9	29%
Advanced	Confidently produce, edit, and share original da'wah content on multiple platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok).	5	16%

The data indicate that more than half of the participants (55%) possess only basic digital literacy, engaging primarily in passive media consumption rather than content production. A smaller group (29%) shows intermediate competence, while only a few (16%) demonstrate advanced digital engagement. These findings confirm the counselors' uneven readiness to adapt to digital transformation and underscore the need for targeted training and institutional support.

Digital literacy involves more than just the technical ability to operate devices and applications. It also encompasses an understanding of cybersecurity, online privacy, information assessment, ethical digital behavior, and the ability to search, filter, and create content responsibly in digital spaces (Limilia & Aristi, 2019; Restianty, 2018). Cybersecurity, in particular, involves protecting personal data, digital systems, and information exchanged online. It includes various strategies designed to secure information from unauthorized access, hacking, theft, or damage. Key practices include exercising caution when working online, such as safeguarding sensitive data like ID cards, bank account numbers, and PINs, and avoiding posting such information in public digital spaces or on social media (Hardiman, 2010, p. 185; Rahmawati et al., 2023).

Cyber threats are becoming increasingly sophisticated and often target those who are unaware or indifferent to digital safety. Negligence frequently stems from a lack of awareness or apathy. Many cases of online fraud (phishing), for example, are due to a lack of awareness, as are ransomware attacks that result in extortion. Important individual measures include creating strong, unique passwords for each account, enabling two-factor authentication (2FA), and exercising caution with email attachments, WhatsApp messages, public Wi-Fi usage, and online shopping. Staying updated on current cybersecurity threats is also essential (Silalahi et al., 2022).

Protecting online privacy, critically evaluating incoming information, adopting a skeptical and vigilant stance, and upholding ethical conduct in digital interactions can help shield users from cyber threats. The ability to evaluate information is a key component of digital literacy, overlapping with media literacy. This includes recognizing clickbait headlines that prioritize emotional appeal over reason, verifying the credibility of media outlets, editorial addresses, and distinguishing between factual reports and subjective opinions. Users must also be aware of altered or misleading images and the frequent hacking of personal and official accounts that are then used to spread hoaxes and fake news (Zannettou et al., 2019).

Religious counselors, like all public figures, must be especially mindful of digital safety. As visible representatives of religious authority in their local areas, they must avoid negative publicity that may arise from carelessness or association with trivial or inappropriate content. A counselor carries the responsibility of maintaining a positive public image and setting a moral example. Digital literacy, therefore, becomes a crucial competency—not only for personal protection but also for safeguarding the wider community from misinformation and digital harm, particularly in the field of religious communication.

These findings align with contemporary literature that emphasizes the need for systematic digital literacy training among religious agents. Istianah, for instance, argues that digital literacy encompasses not only technical skills but also a critical understanding of online safety, privacy, and ethics. The recognition that digital literacy is integral to da'wah competence underscores the need for institutional intervention—particularly from the Ministry of Religious Affairs—to implement structured training programs (Istianah, 2025).

Moreover, optimizing the use of digital technology requires proficiency in design and editing applications, which remains a major challenge. This is supported by studies showing that limited technical knowledge constrains the use of platforms such as TikTok in religious education. Strengthening digital literacy capacity not only improves technical ability but also enhances the effectiveness of online religious messaging.

Table 2. Summary of FGD Results:
Digital Literacy Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations

Themes	Challenges Identified by Participants	Opportunities and Recommendations
Technical Skills and Digital Literacy	Limited ability to create and edit digital content; lack of familiarity with tools such as Canva, CapCut, or	Organize regular training sessions on basic content creation, video editing, and social media

	YouTube Studio.	management tailored to the needs of counselors.
Infrastructure and Access	Inadequate internet connection in rural areas; insufficient access to digital devices.	Strengthen digital infrastructure at local religious offices by providing shared facilities or devices for content production.
Institutional and Bureaucratic Constraints	Lack of institutional encouragement and absence of digital performance indicators in official evaluation systems.	Encourage the Ministry of Religious Affairs to integrate digital outreach as a measurable performance aspect for counselors.
Ethical and Moral Considerations	Fear of misinterpretation, viral backlash, and online hate speech.	Promote ethical guidelines and digital da'wah ethics training emphasizing sincerity (*ikhlas*), responsibility, and constructive engagement.
Youth Engagement and Content Relevance	Difficulty connecting with Gen Z and millennial audiences; outdated content style.	Develop creative teams to produce youth-friendly religious content and collaborate with younger digital volunteers.

The table above summarizes the key themes emerging from the FGD. Participants identified a range of challenges—from technical limitations and infrastructural barriers to institutional rigidity and ethical concerns—but they also proposed actionable recommendations. Notably, there was a shared awareness that digital engagement must be accompanied by moral integrity and creativity, underscoring the importance of capacity-building programs that combine both technical literacy and ethical sensitivity.

4.3 Religious Counseling through Social Media

While digital literacy among religious counselors under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in West Sumatra remains relatively low, this is not the case regarding their use of digital media for da'wah and community outreach. This finding emerged from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted by the researchers with local counselors.

Respondents stated that digital media has become one of the primary channels for delivering religious information, such as schedules for religious gatherings, announcements of community activities, and short sermons in video format. Approximately 19 respondents acknowledged using digital platforms to disseminate da'wah messages, although usage remains mostly personal and has not yet been integrated into a systematic da'wah strategy. Some participants commented, "We have to be more creative to make video content more engaging," and "Our da'wah content isn't optimized yet because we lack technical editing skills."

The use of digital media in da'wah reflects a paradigm shift from one-way communication (monologue) to interactive dialogue between counselors and their audiences. The Uses and

Gratifications Theory positions the audience as active media users who select content based on cognitive, affective, and social needs. Thus, counselors who optimize digital media not only educate but also foster two-way interaction, enabling da'wah messages to be better aligned with the diverse needs of their audiences.

Other findings indicate that the use of platforms like TikTok by da'wah figures—although it requires a creative approach—has had a positive impact in reaching younger generations (Allisa & Triyono, 2023; Putra et al., 2023). This reality should encourage religious counselors to be more active and creative in utilizing social media to fulfill their duties by producing content tailored to the unique characteristics of each platform. This opportunity can be leveraged to increase engagement by creating da'wah content that is both appealing and informative, as well as interactive. Therefore, the optimization of digital media must be supported through creative training, enhanced technical competencies, and institutional support for developing digitally based da'wah strategies.

4.4 Challenges of Religious Counseling through Digital Media

From the questions regarding the challenges of using digital media in da'wah, several recurring issues emerged. Respondents identified key obstacles, such as limited technological knowledge. Many still felt digitally illiterate and had not mastered content production applications. There were also concerns about negative virality and the risk of miscommunicating religious messages, which could spark controversy or expose them to cyberbullying. A lack of facilities and formal training was another issue, as there were no official modules or digital literacy programs specifically designed for religious outreach. Common remarks included "Many counselors still don't understand how to preach through social media" and "We lack facilities and technical support."

These challenges align with previous studies that emphasize low digital literacy as a major barrier to the transformation of da'wah in the digital age (Abdurrahman & Badruzaman, 2023; Ridwanulloh, 2023; Usman, 2019). Given the increasing dependence on digital technology, every communication agent—including religious counselors—must possess adequate technical skills to preserve the credibility of religious messages. Additionally, the concern over negative virality suggests that the perception of digital space as a potentially unsafe environment is a psychological factor that must be addressed through ethical digital training and crisis management strategies. This includes knowledge of normative behavior and support systems that enable users to respond effectively to cyberattacks and hate speech.

The lack of integrated training facilities from the Ministry of Religious Affairs also indicates a need for synergy between government institutions and higher education to develop comprehensive digital competence programs. Several studies, including those by Pratyaksa & Putri, suggest that collaboration between state institutions and academia must be enhanced to address the digital divide among da'wah agents (Pratyaksa & Putri, 2020).

Despite these barriers, some positive initiatives have emerged. In Payakumbuh and Bukittinggi, for example, small teams of counselors have collaborated to manage da'wah content on Instagram and YouTube. Initiatives such as the collective hashtag (#IslamSejukSumbar) and counselor collaborations indicate a growing motivation to harness collective power in addressing algorithmic challenges.

Some respondents noted that effective digital da'wah requires "IT training" and "digital media tools like smartphones and laptops," as well as collaborative strategies to ensure that da'wah messages are more structured and capable of penetrating algorithmic filters.

The adoption of digital innovation is a key adaptive strategy in modern da'wah. Data collected shows that counselor collaboration—although still local—has the potential to reshape the da'wah landscape if conducted systematically. Innovation in media usage should be encouraged through collaboration and the exchange of ideas among users. The concept of "collaborative da'wah" offers a strategic alternative to overcome individual limitations. By working together, counselor accounts spread across different regions can optimize visibility and engagement through coordinated campaigns that emphasize moderate Islamic values. This model also aligns with the principles of digital citizenship, which promote community-building within digital spaces.

In addition, enhancing creativity in producing da'wah content—beyond relying on static text to also utilize multimedia formats such as videos, graphics, and podcasts—represents an adaptive response to the rapidly changing needs of digital audiences. Research indicates that visually engaging approaches can improve the appeal and effectiveness of da'wah messages, particularly among millennials and Generation Z.

Respondents also called on the Ministry of Religious Affairs to provide stronger support for digital da'wah. Nineteen respondents consistently emphasized the need for intensive training, digital facilities (devices and internet access), and technical assistance. The most common comments included "provide digital training" and "help with acquiring digital tools."

These recommendations are highly relevant given the strategic role of religious counselors as front-line agents in spreading moral and religious values in society. As a regulatory institution, the Ministry of Religious Affairs should offer systemic support to address the barriers currently faced.

Structured digital training and technical mentoring are crucial steps in accelerating the digital transformation of da'wah. This approach would not only strengthen the counselors' technical capabilities but also help them understand digital ethics and strategic communication in online spaces.

In addition to training, institutional support should be integrated through the formation of digital da'wah creative teams at the district or municipal level. With such a system, local counselor groups could gain direct access to digital media experts, accelerating technological adaptation. Collaboration among government, academics, and field counselors in digital communication can produce more applicable innovations for the da'wah sector.

Overall, feedback from respondents confirms that the Ministry of Religious Affairs plays a strategic role in providing a foundation for religious counselors to undergo digital transformation. In this context, financial, technical, and institutional support must be combined to ensure that da'wah not only survives in the digital age but also thrives in terms of quality and impact.

4.5 Digital Space and the Urgency of Transforming the Role of Religious Counselors

Building on the series of findings presented above, it can be concluded that the digital transformation of religious counseling is a complex yet highly promising phenomenon. Theoretically, the Uses and Gratifications Theory provides a valuable framework to understand that

audiences (jama'ah) are active participants who demand quality, relevance, and diversity in da'wah content. As information intermediaries, religious counselors must possess the ability to filter, process, and deliver messages that respond to the psychosocial needs of digital audiences.

A deep understanding of digital literacy—which encompasses technical, ethical, and strategic dimensions—is essential for counselors to effectively utilize social media as a modern preaching platform and mitigate the negative impacts of disinformation. Institutionally, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) must provide adequate infrastructure, including intensive training, digital facilities, and creative da'wah teams. These efforts would help bridge the digital competence gap among counselors. Policy and regulatory frameworks should also evolve in parallel with technological advancements, ensuring religious outreach becomes more adaptive and responsive to contemporary demands.

Moreover, collaboration among counselors and between counselors and academics must be strengthened. A collaborative model of digital da'wah offers a sustainable paradigm in which preaching is no longer an individual effort but a collective movement for promoting moderate, contextual, and ethical Islamic narratives.

This study identifies the urgent need for a comprehensive digital literacy and da'wah training module. MoRA, in partnership with Islamic higher education institutions (UIN, IAIN, STAIN), should develop a training curriculum that encompasses technical skills (application use, editing techniques, social media management), media ethics, and content strategy, adapted to the nature of digital platforms.

MoRA should also consider establishing creative da'wah teams in every district/municipality, composed of counselors, digitally literate students, and media experts. These teams would manage da'wah accounts professionally, develop engaging content concepts, and periodically evaluate performance to ensure adaptability to social media algorithms. Strengthening counselor networks through discussions, workshops, or joint digital campaigns (e.g., collective hashtags) would enhance the effectiveness of da'wah and reinforce religious authority in digital spaces.

In addition to training, support for hardware provision and internet access is essential, especially in under-resourced areas. Continuous technical mentoring would enable counselors to consistently upgrade their digital skills. A regular monitoring and evaluation system for da'wah content is necessary to ensure message quality and prevent the spread of hoaxes or harmful content—this could be done jointly by MoRA and communication research institutions.

Digital transformation in da'wah presents both opportunities and challenges. Field data indicate that while religious counselors in West Sumatra are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of digital presence, the practical implementation of this awareness requires enhancement through digital literacy, content innovation, and institutional support. The Uses and Gratifications approach emphasizes that the success of digital religious communication depends heavily on counselors' ability to meet the cognitive and psychosocial needs of their audiences. Thus, both counselors and their supporting institutions must collaborate to develop a digital da'wah ecosystem that values not only visual appeal but also ethical, interactive, and substantive engagement.

MoRA and Islamic higher education institutions play a pivotal role in driving this transformation. Systemic support, sustained training, and cross-sector collaboration are critical to ensure that da'wah in the digital era is not merely a replication of conventional formats on social media, but a dynamic and competitive form of religious communication. Overall, the research findings reveal that digital da'wah transformation demands increased digital literacy, content creativity, and systemic support from the government. As the front-line agents of religious preaching, counselors must continually refine their digital strategies to stay relevant in an ever-evolving information society.

Collaboration among the government, academia, and da'wah practitioners is crucial for creating a digital da'wah ecosystem that is not only efficient and effective but also rooted in moderate and contextual Islamic values.

Therefore, the practical recommendations outlined in this study should serve as a foundation for improving training policies and programs within the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Awareness of digital media's potential is growing among counselors. However, full-scale optimization has yet to be realized. The recent Regional Work Meeting (Rakerwil) of the Indonesian Association of Religious Counselors (IPARI) in West Sumatra marked a serious step toward empowering counselors to engage more deeply with digital platforms. Participants acknowledged the need for space and time to fully understand the nature of digital media and its broad dissemination power.[1]

Digital information refers to all news and messages that have shifted from analog to digital formats. It is produced, stored, managed, and distributed through digital channels in various forms, including text, numbers, audio, and visuals. Topics include ideology, social life, health, business, religion, and culture—appearing daily on smartphone screens. Scholars refer to this as "new media"(See Flew, 2008), encompassing all online-based platforms. However, not all content available on these platforms qualifies as journalism or academic work. Therefore, careful verification is essential before using internet content as a basis for drawing conclusions, forming opinions, or taking actions. Caution and vigilance are necessary, and digital literacy should be viewed as a core competency for religious counselors, just as it is in other professions (Nandy, n.d.; Sari, 2017).

In West Sumatra alone, 1,657 out of Indonesia's 53,741 religious counselors could, if mobilized under a unified hashtag—such as #PeacefulIslam—on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, capture the attention of regional algorithms. Social media, then, is a powerful force that has not yet been fully realized as a collaborative vehicle for spreading goodness. The opportunity is present; what is needed now is the will, ability, and collective enthusiasm.

Even without major campaigns, counselors can still effectively use social media by focusing on their immediate working areas and monitoring local accounts. Tasks can be carried out through personal social media accounts, with influence growing organically within assigned areas.

The broad reach of digital audiences requires careful, consistent, and focused management. Large accounts, such as those of Atta Halilintar, Raffi Ahmad, or Deddy Corbuzier, are managed by professional media teams, driven by the logic of industry and reputation management. Their social

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[1] Syaiful Akhyar, *Interview*, Padang, 24 April 2024, time 14.00 Wib.

media accounts have become high-value digital assets. Today, audiences demand engaging content in various formats, including video, animation, graphics, and podcasts. While such efforts have begun, they often lack proximity to the target audience's culture. The creativity required goes beyond merely shifting conventional preaching activities into digital spaces—it requires practical knowledge and ideally, a team or staff with relevant digital skills.

Ultimately, if religious counselors gain a strong grasp of digital technology, collaborative efforts with low cost but high impact are entirely possible. The simplest key is creativity in using available tools. Once this baseline is met, a move toward more professional strategies can follow. Idea-sharing and content exchange among counselors can be valuable outcomes of meetings like this.

Like traditional mass media, social media is a battleground of discourse. If counselors are willing to co-create relevant and complementary content, the digital realm could be filled with inspiring and compelling da'wah narratives. Digital media urgently needs this shift—to counteract negative content with positive, educational messaging. For every harmful message, a thousand positive ones must be produced. And above all, religious counselors must remain alert and engaged in current public discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the digital transformation of *da'wah* in West Sumatra has significantly influenced how state religious counselors (*penyuluh agama*) perform and perceive their religious roles. The findings show that most counselors possess limited digital literacy, relying mainly on informal learning and spontaneous engagement through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Despite this, they demonstrate strong motivation to utilize digital media as an extension of their religious mission. The main challenges identified include low digital competence, inadequate institutional training, and a lack of systematic strategies from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Nonetheless, counselors recognize that the digital environment offers great potential for spreading inclusive and moderate Islamic messages. This indicates an ongoing reconfiguration of religious authority—one that blends traditional legitimacy with the performative demands of digital culture.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on *digital religion* by offering insights into how institutional religious authority is negotiated within algorithmic contexts. It expands the discussion beyond celebrity preachers to include state-appointed counselors who operate at the intersection of bureaucracy and digital publics. This research demonstrates that digital literacy is not merely a technical skill but also a form of ethical and communicative capital that shapes religious credibility. Practically, the study suggests that religious institutions, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs, should develop comprehensive digital training programs, integrate media ethics into counselor education, and promote collaborations with universities and the creative industries. Strengthening these capacities would ensure that digital *da'wah* aligns with the values of moderation (*wasathiyah*), authenticity, and contextual relevance.

Future studies should broaden the analytical scope by comparing digital da'wah practices across different provinces or between state and independent religious actors. Comparative research could explore how institutional structures, local cultures, and gender dynamics shape digital engagement among counselors. Additionally, quantitative approaches may complement

qualitative findings by measuring levels of digital literacy and their impact on audience interaction and trust. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how algorithmic changes influence religious communication over time. Further exploration into content creation strategies, audience analytics, and the ethics of online preaching would deepen understanding of da'wah in the algorithmic age. By pursuing these research directions, scholars can advance the field of Islamic communication and contribute to the development of policy for enhancing digital religious competence in Indonesia and beyond.

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