



Beyond Clickbait Islam: Sufistic Da'wah as a Counter-Model to Religious Commodification in the Digital Age

Khairul Hidayah^{1*}, Badrah Uyuni² , Zamakhsyari Abdul Majid² ,

Sarbini Anim², Mohammad Adnan³

¹ Shulhul Majami, Indonesia

² As-Syafiiyah Islamic University, Indonesia

³ Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University of Jakarta, Indonesia

Received : March 8, 2026

Revised : April 13 2026

Accepted : July 20, 2026

Online : July 31, 2026

Abstract

The expansion of digital media has profoundly transformed contemporary Islamic da'wah by reshaping religious authority, communication patterns, and audience engagement within algorithm-driven environments. While digital platforms have broadened access to Islamic knowledge, they have also intensified the commodification of religion through visibility-oriented communication characterized by virality, sensationalism, performative piety, and emotional polarization. This study examines Sufistic da'wah as a communicative counter-model to religious commodification through the case of Habib Umar bin Hafizh. Employing a qualitative case study combined with digital ethnography, the research analysed approximately 40 digital sermons and online religious materials, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with 15 Indonesian Muslim participants engaged in Sufistic da'wah communities. The findings suggest that Sufistic da'wah operates through a communicative framework centered on *mahabbah* (compassionate love), *rifq* (gentleness), *adab* (ethical conduct), and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (spiritual purification). Participants consistently associated this communication model with emotional calmness, ethical self-reflection, and spiritually meaningful engagement in digital environments. Unlike commodified forms of digital religiosity that prioritize algorithmic visibility and symbolic performance, this paradigm emphasizes spiritual presence, emotional resonance, contemplative engagement, and ethical transformation. The study introduces the concept of *spiritual presence* as an original analytical framework for understanding religious authority beyond platform visibility and media performance, thereby extending current scholarship on digital religion and Islamic communication. These findings suggest that Sufistic da'wah offers an ethically grounded model for navigating increasingly mediatized and commodified digital religious environments.

Keywords: *Sufistic Da'Wah, Digital Religion, Religious Commodification, Islamic Communication, Spiritual Presence, Mediatization, Habib Umar Bin Hafizh*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of contemporary Islamic da'wah. Religious authority, once predominantly mediated through traditional institutions such as pesantren, mosques, and scholarly networks, is now increasingly negotiated within algorithm-driven digital environments characterized by speed, virality, and visibility. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become central arenas for religious communication, enabling Islamic preachers to reach audiences on an unprecedented scale while simultaneously reshaping the structure, aesthetics, and authority of da'wah itself (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2010).

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Corresponding author's email: khairulhidayah@gmail.com

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This transformation has generated both opportunities and tensions. On one hand, digital media democratizes access to Islamic knowledge and expands the reach of religious discourse beyond geographical boundaries. On the other hand, the increasing dependence of religious communication on platform algorithms and attention economies has contributed to what several scholars describe as the commodification of religion, where visibility, emotional provocation, and audience engagement increasingly determine the circulation and legitimacy of religious content (Raya, 2025; Hoover, 2006). In many cases, religious messages are reformulated according to the logic of digital consumption, privileging sensationalism, polarization, brevity, and performative piety over contemplative depth and ethical transformation.

Within this environment, Islamic da'wah is frequently reduced to what may be described as "clickbait Islam," namely forms of religious communication structured around virality rather than spiritual substance. The growing prevalence of provocative sermon titles, fragmented religious quotations, emotionally charged polemics, and algorithm-oriented preaching reflects the broader mediatization of religion in the digital age (Hjarvard, 2011). While such forms of communication often succeed in attracting public attention, they may simultaneously contribute to fragmented spirituality, superficial religious engagement, and intensified ideological polarization among Muslim audiences.

The problem is not merely technological but also existential and spiritual. Contemporary Muslim societies increasingly experience a paradoxical condition in which the abundance of religious content does not necessarily correspond with deeper spiritual fulfillment or ethical transformation. The expansion of digital religiosity often coexists with anxiety, alienation, performative identity construction, and what several scholars describe as the crisis of meaning in late modernity (Bauman, 2000; Han, 2017; Rosa, 2019). Recent scholarship has further shown how digital Islamic authority increasingly intersects with commodified forms of religious visibility, branding practices, and platform-driven audience engagement within contemporary Indonesian Islam (Raya, 2025). In this context, religious communication risks becoming informational rather than transformational, emphasizing symbolic visibility instead of inner moral cultivation.

These conditions have stimulated renewed interest in forms of spirituality capable of responding to the emotional and existential needs of contemporary society. In many Muslim contexts, particularly among urban and digitally connected communities, there has been a visible resurgence of interest in Sufism, spiritual ethics, and affective religious experience as alternatives to excessively formalistic and polemical forms of religious discourse (Howell, 2010; Nasr, 2007). Rather than focusing primarily on doctrinal contestation or legal rigidity, Sufistic approaches emphasize compassion, ethical refinement, inner purification, and relational spirituality. Such approaches offer not only theological guidance but also forms of spiritual healing and emotional resonance within increasingly fragmented social environments.

Within the Indonesian context, one of the most influential contemporary figures associated with this spiritual orientation is Habib Umar bin Hafizh, a globally recognized Yemeni scholar whose da'wah has gained substantial influence among Indonesian Muslim communities both offline and online. His preaching model is particularly significant because it combines classical Islamic scholarship, spiritual ethics, and strategic engagement with digital media while largely avoiding the sensationalist tendencies that characterize much contemporary online religiosity. Rather than constructing authority through controversy or populist polarization, his da'wah emphasizes mahabbah (love), rifq (gentleness), adab (ethical comportment), and tazkiyat al-nafs (spiritual purification) as the core foundations of Islamic communication.

Importantly, the growing popularity of Habib Umar's da'wah in digital spaces suggests the existence of an alternative model of religious communication that operates outside the dominant logic of algorithmic sensationalism. His digital presence suggests that spiritual depth, ethical

consistency, and affective resonance can remain influential within highly mediatized religious environments. This phenomenon raises important theoretical questions regarding the relationship between spirituality, media, authority, and religious communication in the digital age.

Existing scholarship on digital Islam has extensively examined topics such as online religious authority, cyber-Islamic environments, Islamic influencers, and the mediatization of religion (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2010; Hoover, 2006). Meanwhile, studies on contemporary Sufism have explored the revival of spirituality and ethical Islam in modern Muslim societies (Howell, 2010; Sedgwick, 2017). However, relatively limited attention has been given to how Sufistic da'wah functions as a communicative counter-model to religious commodification in digital environments. Most existing studies examine digital religion either through technological frameworks or sociological analyses of online authority, while fewer studies investigate how spiritual ethics and affective religious communication may resist the commodifying tendencies of platform capitalism.

This article addresses that gap by examining the da'wah paradigm of Habib Umar bin Hafizh as a form of Sufistic communication that challenges the dominant logic of clickbait religiosity and algorithmic commodification. Rather than approaching Sufism merely as mystical doctrine or spiritual tradition, this study conceptualizes Sufistic da'wah as an ethical-communicative paradigm centered on spiritual presence, compassion, affective transformation, and embodied moral authority.

Drawing on qualitative analysis of digital sermons, public lectures, online religious dissemination, and the reception of Habib Umar's da'wah among Indonesian Muslim audiences, this article argues that Sufistic da'wah may represent a significant alternative model of Islamic communication in the digital age. Unlike forms of digital religiosity driven primarily by visibility and performative engagement, this paradigm prioritizes ethical embodiment, emotional resonance, and transformative spirituality as the central infrastructure of religious communication.

Theoretically, this article contributes to contemporary discussions on digital religion and Islamic communication by proposing the concept of "spiritual presence" as an alternative framework for understanding religious authority and da'wah beyond algorithmic visibility. It further argues that Sufistic da'wah offers an important critique of the commodification of religion by repositioning spiritual transformation, rather than digital virality, as the primary objective of contemporary Islamic communication.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how Sufistic da'wah functions as a communicative counter-model to religious commodification within contemporary digital environments through the case of Habib Umar bin Hafizh's da'wah paradigm. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on digital authority, online religiosity, or technological mediation, this article specifically investigates how spiritual ethics, affective communication, and ethical embodiment may resist the performative and commodifying tendencies of algorithm-driven religious culture. The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of Sufistic da'wah as a form of "spiritual presence" that reorients Islamic communication away from virality-centered engagement toward transformative spirituality, emotional resonance, and ethical relationality in the digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on digital religion has extensively examined how online media reshape religious authority, identity formation, and patterns of religious engagement in contemporary societies. Studies by Campbell (2010), Hoover (2006), and Bunt (2018) demonstrate that digital environments have fundamentally transformed the mediation of religious communication by expanding access to religious knowledge while simultaneously destabilizing traditional structures of authority. Within Islamic contexts, recent studies have further explored the emergence of digital da'wah, cyber-Islamic environments, religious influencers, and the growing role of social media in

shaping contemporary Muslim religiosity.

At the same time, scholars of mediatization have argued that religious communication increasingly adapts to the logic of digital media characterized by immediacy, visibility, emotionalization, and audience engagement (Hjarvard, 2011; Couldry, 2012). Such transformations contribute to what recent scholarship identifies as the commodification of religion, where religious discourse becomes increasingly shaped by platform capitalism and attention economies (Raya, 2025). Existing studies have shown how online religious content often privileges virality, symbolic performance, and emotional provocation over ethical depth and contemplative spirituality.

Meanwhile, studies on contemporary Sufism have highlighted the renewed relevance of spirituality, ethical refinement, and affective religious experience within modern Muslim societies (Howell, 2010; Sedgwick, 2017; Nasr, 2007). However, despite the growing literature on digital religion and contemporary spirituality, relatively limited attention has been given to how Sufistic da'wah may function as a communicative counter-model to the commodifying tendencies of algorithm-driven religious culture. Most previous studies examine digital Islam primarily through technological, sociological, or political frameworks, while fewer studies investigate the role of spiritual ethics, emotional resonance, and contemplative communication in resisting performative religiosity within digital environments. Taken together, these studies indicate that digital Islamic communication increasingly operates within market-oriented media environments where visibility and emotional engagement significantly shape the production and circulation of religious authority.

Digital Religion, Mediatization, and Religious Commodification

The emergence of digital media has significantly transformed the structure of contemporary religious communication. Rather than functioning merely as neutral channels of transmission, digital platforms increasingly shape the production, circulation, and reception of religious discourse itself. Campbell (2010) argues that digital religion should not be understood simply as religion "online," but as a hybrid social space where religious practices, identities, and authorities are continuously reconstructed through interaction with digital technologies. In this context, Islamic da'wah is no longer confined to traditional religious institutions but increasingly operates within platform-based media ecologies governed by algorithmic visibility and audience engagement.

Recent digital religion scholarship has increasingly examined how emerging technologies reshape religious authority, identity formation, and patterns of religious engagement, highlighting the growing influence of digital infrastructures in mediating contemporary religious experience (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that digital technologies not only mediate religious communication but also transform the ways religious experiences are produced, circulated, and perceived within contemporary societies (Meyer, 2011). Within the Indonesian context, digital platforms have increasingly become important sites for Islamic learning, religious authority formation, and the negotiation of religious identities (Solahudin & Fakhruji, 2019). More recent studies further indicate that social media ecosystems have intensified visibility-oriented religious engagement, contributing to the growing commercialization and commodification of religious discourse in contemporary Muslim societies (Sikumbang et al., 2024).

The mediatization of religion further explains how media logics gradually influence religious forms, practices, and authority structures (Hjarvard, 2011). Religious communication in digital environments tends to adapt itself to the characteristics of social media platforms, including brevity, emotional immediacy, visual attraction, and virality. Consequently, religious authority increasingly becomes tied not only to scholarly legitimacy but also to digital performance, visibility metrics, and audience reach. The authority of preachers is often negotiated through likes, shares,

subscribers, and algorithmic amplification rather than solely through traditional chains of knowledge transmission.

Within such environments, religion becomes vulnerable to commodification. Religious commodification refers to processes through which religious messages, symbols, and identities are transformed into consumable digital products shaped by market-oriented media logics (Raya, 2025). In many contemporary forms of online da'wah, religious communication is increasingly structured around attention economies that prioritize emotional provocation, controversy, and performative engagement. Religious content frequently competes for visibility within highly saturated digital spaces, encouraging the production of sensationalist narratives, fragmentary religious quotations, and simplified theological claims designed primarily to maximize engagement. Raya (2025) argues that contemporary digital Islam in Indonesia has increasingly transformed religious authority into forms of symbolic and economic capital mediated through digital platforms, contributing to new patterns of religious commodification and visibility-oriented da'wah.

This condition contributes to what may be described as algorithmic religiosity, namely forms of religious experience mediated through platform algorithms that reward emotional intensity, immediacy, and polarization. In such contexts, spiritual depth risks being replaced by symbolic visibility, while ethical transformation becomes secondary to performative religious identity. Religious communication becomes increasingly accelerated, fragmented, and consumption-oriented, reflecting broader characteristics of late modern digital culture described by Bauman (2000) as "liquid modernity" and by Han (2017) as a condition of psychological exhaustion produced by hyperconnectivity and continuous performance.

The critique of digital religious commodification is therefore not limited to questions of technology but extends to deeper concerns regarding spirituality, ethical formation, and the nature of religious authority itself. This study argues that understanding contemporary Islamic da'wah requires moving beyond technological determinism toward a broader analysis of how digital media reshape spiritual experience and moral communication in contemporary Muslim societies.

Sufism as Ethical-Spiritual Communication

In contrast to the performative tendencies of commodified digital religiosity, Sufism offers an alternative paradigm centered on ethical embodiment, spiritual refinement, and affective transformation. Historically, Sufism has functioned not merely as mystical speculation but as a comprehensive ethical-spiritual discipline concerned with the purification of the self (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), cultivation of moral character, and deepening of human relationality with both God and society (Al-Ghazali, 2010; Al-Qushayri, 2007; Nasr, 2007).

Within classical Islamic thought, spirituality is inseparable from ethics. The Sufistic tradition emphasizes that religious knowledge without inner transformation risks becoming formalistic and spiritually empty. Al-Ghazali, for example, critiques purely external religiosity detached from sincerity, humility, and inner awareness, arguing that true religious practice must integrate outward action with inward purification. Such perspectives remain highly relevant within contemporary contexts where religious expression is increasingly mediated through performative digital cultures.

Previous studies on Habib Umar bin Hafizh have similarly highlighted the centrality of prophetic ethics, compassion, and spiritual purification within his da'wah methodology (Wan Abdul Jalil & Mohamad, 2019). Their analysis demonstrates that Habib Umar's approach is deeply rooted in the Prophetic model of communication, emphasizing mercy, humility, moral refinement, and character formation as the foundations of religious guidance. Rather than constructing authority through confrontation or ideological contestation, his da'wah seeks to cultivate spiritual awareness, ethical responsibility, and emotional attachment to Prophetic values.

Importantly, Sufistic communication differs fundamentally from persuasion-oriented communication models dominant within many contemporary da'wah practices. Rather than prioritizing argumentative victory, ideological confrontation, or emotional mobilization, Sufistic communication emphasizes presence, compassion, gentleness, and ethical resonance. Communication is understood not merely as the transmission of information but as the transformation of the self and the cultivation of spiritual consciousness.

Several concepts are particularly central within this ethical-spiritual framework. The concept of *mahabbah* (divine love) positions love and compassion as the emotional foundation of religious engagement. *Rifq* (gentleness) emphasizes non-hostile communication and ethical sensitivity toward others, while *adab* refers to the cultivation of moral comportment, humility, and relational ethics. *Tazkiyat al-nafs*, meanwhile, functions as a continuous process of inner purification directed toward overcoming arrogance, hostility, and egocentrism.

These principles collectively construct what this article conceptualizes as Sufistic da'wah, namely a communicative paradigm in which spiritual transformation and ethical embodiment become the primary objectives of religious communication. Unlike commodified forms of digital religiosity that often prioritize visibility and emotional provocation, Sufistic da'wah seeks to cultivate emotional resonance, contemplative awareness, and moral refinement.

While previous scholarship has successfully examined the theological, spiritual, and ethical foundations of Habib Umar bin Hafizh's da'wah (Wan Abdul Jalil & Mohamad, 2019), relatively limited attention has been given to how these Sufistic communicative principles operate within contemporary digital environments shaped by algorithmic visibility, platform capitalism, and religious commodification. This gap is particularly important because contemporary digital religious communication increasingly operates according to media logics that privilege visibility, engagement, and virality over contemplative spirituality and ethical transformation. Consequently, examining Sufistic da'wah as a communicative response to religious commodification provides an important contribution to contemporary discussions on digital religion, Islamic communication, and mediated spirituality.

Spiritual Presence and Experiential Da'wah

This study further proposes the concept of spiritual presence as a theoretical framework for understanding the distinctive communicative structure of Sufistic da'wah. Spiritual presence refers to forms of religious authority and communication grounded not primarily in digital visibility or rhetorical dominance, but in perceived ethical authenticity, emotional resonance, and embodied spirituality.

The concept draws partly from Rosa's (2019) theory of resonance, which argues that contemporary societies increasingly suffer from alienated forms of social acceleration that weaken meaningful human connection. In this context, resonance emerges through relational experiences characterized by emotional depth, mutual responsiveness, and existential transformation. Applied to Islamic communication, Sufistic da'wah may be understood as producing forms of spiritual resonance that reconnect religious communication with emotional depth and ethical intimacy.

This perspective also relates to what may be termed experiential da'wah, namely forms of religious communication centered on affective and transformative experience rather than merely cognitive instruction. In experiential da'wah, audiences do not simply consume religious information but encounter emotionally meaningful experiences capable of shaping ethical orientation and spiritual self-understanding. Emotional calmness, compassion, humility, and spiritual intimacy become integral components of religious communication itself.

The emphasis on experiential spirituality is particularly significant within digital environments characterized by distraction, fragmentation, and emotional overstimulation. While

algorithmic cultures often reward immediacy and outrage, Sufistic communication introduces slower, contemplative, and ethically grounded forms of engagement. Such communication does not reject digital media entirely but attempts to reconfigure its use toward spiritual rather than purely performative objectives.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes Sufistic da'wah as a counter-model to religious commodification in the digital age. Rather than operating according to the dominant logic of virality, sensationalism, and symbolic consumption, this paradigm reorients Islamic communication toward ethical embodiment, relational compassion, and transformative spirituality. Through this framework, the article seeks to contribute to broader discussions on digital religion by demonstrating that religious communication in contemporary media environments may still sustain spiritual depth without fully surrendering to the commodifying pressures of platform capitalism. This conceptual positioning is particularly important in understanding how contemporary Islamic communication may preserve spiritual depth and ethical authenticity amid increasingly commercialized and algorithm-driven digital cultures.

Based on the preceding theoretical discussion, this study proposes a conceptual framework positioning Sufistic da'wah as a communicative counter-model to the commodification of religion in digital environments. The framework illustrates the tension between algorithm-driven religious communication and spiritually grounded forms of Islamic da'wah centered on ethical embodiment, compassion, and transformative spirituality. Rather than operating according to the dominant logic of virality and performative religiosity, Sufistic da'wah reorients religious communication toward spiritual presence and ethical transformation.

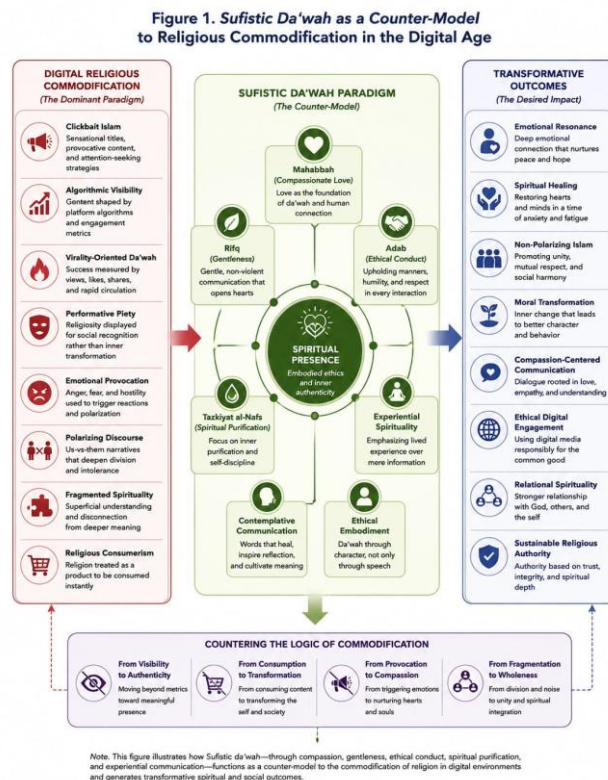


Figure 1. Sufistic Da'wah as a Counter-Model to Religious Commodification in the Digital Age

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework developed in this study demonstrates how Sufistic da'wah functions as an alternative communicative paradigm within highly mediated religious environments. The model highlights the transition from commodified forms of digital

religiosity characterized by polarization, symbolic consumption, and algorithmic visibility toward spiritually grounded communication based on compassion, contemplative engagement, and moral refinement. The framework further emphasizes that the transformative potential of Sufistic da'wah lies not merely in doctrinal transmission but in its capacity to cultivate emotional resonance, ethical presence, and sustainable forms of religious authority in the digital age.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the communicative paradigm of Sufistic da'wah represented by Habib Umar bin Hafizh within contemporary digital religious environments. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to explore meanings, ethical orientations, communicative patterns, and processes of spiritual internalization that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the research focused on developing an in-depth understanding of how Sufistic values are articulated, mediated, and experienced in contemporary Islamic communication.

The case study served as the overarching research design because Habib Umar bin Hafizh represents a significant example of spiritually oriented Islamic da'wah with substantial influence across digital and transnational Muslim networks, particularly in Indonesia (Yin, 2018). Within this design, digital ethnography provided the primary perspective for observing religious communication across hybrid online–offline environments, while thematic analysis constituted the principal analytical strategy for interpreting the collected data. This methodological combination enabled a comprehensive examination of how spiritual ethics, affective communication, and digital mediation interact within contemporary Islamic discourse.

Data were collected through three complementary sources to ensure methodological triangulation. First, the study analysed approximately 40 publicly accessible sermons, lectures, short-form videos, and online religious discussions disseminated between 2021 and 2025 through official YouTube channels, Instagram accounts, websites, and affiliated digital platforms associated with Habib Umar bin Hafizh and Indonesian Sufistic communities. These materials were purposively selected according to thematic relevance, audience engagement, and consistency with the study's focus on spirituality, ethical communication, and digital religious interaction.

Second, participant observation was conducted during both online and offline religious gatherings, including majelis, spiritual lectures, and digital interactions involving followers of Habib Umar's da'wah. The observations focused on communicative atmosphere, emotional engagement, symbolic interaction, and audience reception within physical and mediated religious spaces.

Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants who regularly engaged with Habib Umar's da'wah. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) regular engagement with Habib Umar's digital sermons, (2) participation in online or offline majelis activities, and (3) sustained involvement in Sufistic da'wah communities for at least one year. Interviews lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and explored participants' experiences of spiritual transformation, ethical communication, emotional resonance, digital religious engagement, and their perceptions of dominant forms of online religiosity.

Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Participants

Characteristic	Description
Number of participants	15
Gender	Male and female participants
Occupational	Religious teachers, lecturers, university students, entrepreneurs, and active

Characteristic	Description
background	members of Islamic study circles (majelis)
Religious engagement	Active engagement with Habib Umar's digital and offline da'wah for at least one year

The interview transcripts, observational field notes, and digital materials were subsequently analysed using [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase thematic analysis. Open coding was initially undertaken to identify recurring concepts related to spirituality, ethical communication, emotional resonance, religious authority, and resistance to commodified religiosity. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories, from which the principal themes and conceptual interpretations were developed. Coding was conducted by the first author and independently reviewed by the second author to enhance analytical consistency. Any differences in coding were discussed until consensus was reached.

Elements of digital ethnography ([Kozinets, 2020](#)) complemented the thematic analysis by examining communicative interactions, symbolic circulation, audience engagement, and the negotiation of religious authority across digital platforms. This approach enabled the study to interpret not only textual content but also the social dynamics surrounding contemporary digital religious communication.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation across digital materials, participant observation, interviews, and relevant scholarly literature. Credibility was further strengthened through iterative comparison between data sources, collaborative interpretation among the researchers, and reflexive memo writing throughout the analytical process. As several members of the research team were familiar with Sufistic traditions, reflexive memo writing and collaborative interpretation were employed to minimise potential interpretive bias.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research. Participation in interviews was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, participant identities were anonymised, and the spiritual sensitivities of the religious communities involved were respected.

Overall, integrating qualitative case study, digital ethnography, and thematic analysis enabled a comprehensive examination of Sufistic da'wah as a communicative counter-model to religious commodification. The findings should therefore be interpreted as context-specific analytical insights rather than statistically generalisable conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that Sufistic da'wah represented by Habib Umar bin Hafizh operates through a communicative paradigm fundamentally distinct from dominant forms of commodified digital religiosity. While contemporary online religious communication is frequently shaped by algorithmic visibility, emotional provocation, and performative engagement, Sufistic da'wah emphasizes ethical embodiment, contemplative spirituality, emotional resonance, and transformative communication. Table 1 summarizes the principal analytical distinctions identified throughout this study.

Table 2. Comparative Characteristics of Commodified Digital Da'wah and Sufistic Da'wah

Analytical Dimensions	Commodified Digital Religiosity	Sufistic Da'wah
Primary Orientation	Virality and audience engagement	Spiritual and ethical transformation

Analytical Dimensions	Commodified Digital Religiosity	Sufistic Da'wah
Communicative Logic	Algorithm-driven visibility	Compassion-centered communication
Religious Authority	Popularity and digital influence	Ethical embodiment and spiritual authenticity
Communication Style	Sensationalist and provocative	Gentle and contemplative
Emotional Strategy	Fear and polarization	Emotional resonance and spiritual calmness
Representation of Religiosity	Performative piety	Inner purification and moral refinement
Orientation toward Media	Visibility maximization	Meaningful spiritual dissemination
Religious Experience	Consumptive religiosity	Transformative spiritual experience

Source: Developed by the author.

The six themes presented below emerged inductively through iterative thematic coding of interview transcripts, observational field notes, and digital materials. Collectively, these themes explain how Sufistic da'wah operates as a communicative counter-model to religious commodification within the present case study.

Beyond Virality: Critiquing Performative Religiosity in Digital Da'wah

The findings suggest that Habib Umar's da'wah consistently avoids sensationalist rhetoric, ideological confrontation, and emotionally provocative communication strategies commonly associated with contemporary digital religious culture. Across digital platforms, his sermons emphasize humility, compassion, ethical reflection, and spiritual calmness rather than controversy or symbolic hostility. As Participant 7 explained, *"His sermons make people feel spiritually calm rather than emotionally angry. That is why many young audiences continue to follow his lectures online."* This response suggests that participants perceived Sufistic da'wah as emotionally restorative amid increasingly polarized digital environments.

These findings differ from studies that explain online Islamic communication primarily through algorithmic visibility, audience engagement, and digital performance (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Within the present case study, spiritual authenticity and ethical consistency emerged as important sources of religious authority alongside digital dissemination. The findings also qualify Raya's (2025) analysis of religious commodification by suggesting that spiritually grounded forms of communication may partially resist platform-driven visibility culture. Accordingly, Sufistic da'wah can be understood as a critique of performative religiosity that reorients Islamic communication toward spiritual transformation rather than digital popularity.

Mahabbah as Communicative Infrastructure

Another major finding concerns the role of *mahabbah* (compassionate love) as the ethical foundation of Sufistic communication. The analysed sermons consistently frame religious engagement through compassion, mercy, humility, and emotional intimacy rather than fear-based or hostility-driven narratives. As Participant 4 explained, *"Habib Umar teaches us to respond with compassion rather than anger, even in online debates."* Similarly, Participant 10 stated that *"his sermons encouraged me to control my emotions before judging others."* These responses suggest that

participants associated Sufistic da'wah with ethical self-restraint, affective trust, and compassionate communication.

These findings support previous studies highlighting compassion and moral refinement as central dimensions of contemporary Sufism (Howell, 2010; Nasr, 2007; Sedgwick, 2017; Wan Abdul Jalil & Mohamad, 2019). However, within the present case study, *mahabbah* extends beyond devotional spirituality to function as a communicative infrastructure shaping ethical interaction in digital religious environments. Accordingly, compassion-centered communication may offer an alternative model of Islamic engagement capable of reducing symbolic hostility and emotional fragmentation in contemporary digital culture (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hjarvard, 2011).

Rifq and the Ethics of Non-Polarizing Da'wah

The findings suggest that *rifq* (gentleness) functions as a central ethical principle of Sufistic da'wah. Unlike antagonistic forms of online preaching often amplified by algorithmic media systems, Habib Umar's sermons consistently employ gentle advice, indirect moral guidance, and non-confrontational communication. As Participant 2 explained, *"His lectures teach us to advise with kindness rather than anger."* Similarly, Participant 13 noted, *"Listening to Habib Umar makes me less reactive when encountering religious differences online."* These responses indicate that participants perceived *rifq* as fostering emotional restraint, humility, and constructive engagement in digital religious spaces.

These findings differ from studies of digital Islamic activism that emphasize ideological mobilization, identity contestation, and online polarization (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2010; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Instead, within the present case study, *rifq* functions as a communicative ethic that prioritizes inward moral refinement and relational sensitivity over symbolic confrontation. This interpretation is consistent with studies highlighting gentleness and Prophetic ethics as central to Sufistic communication (Nasr, 2007; Wan Abdul Jalil & Mohamad, 2019), while suggesting that *rifq* may contribute to moderating polarization in contemporary digital religious discourse.

Tazkiyat al-Nafs as Resistance to Algorithmic Culture

The findings suggest that *tazkiyat al-nafs* (spiritual purification) functions as a form of resistance to performative digital religiosity. Contemporary social media environments encourage visibility, symbolic self-presentation, and the public performance of religious identity. In contrast, Sufistic da'wah consistently redirects attention toward sincerity, humility, self-discipline, and ethical self-accountability. Several sermons explicitly criticize arrogance, *riyā'* (spiritual exhibitionism), and excessive attachment to social recognition.

As Participant 6 explained, *"Habib Umar reminds us to improve ourselves before correcting others."* Similarly, Participant 14 noted, *"His lectures encourage self-reflection rather than seeking recognition from people."* These responses indicate that participants perceived Sufistic communication as fostering moral introspection rather than public moral policing or ideological confrontation.

These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing the continuing relevance of *tazkiyat al-nafs* in addressing the ethical challenges of digital culture and symbolic religiosity (Nasr, 2007; Al-Ghazali, 2010; Uyuni & Adnan, 2026). Within the present case study, *tazkiyat al-nafs* emerges not only as an individual spiritual discipline but also as a communicative ethic that moderates the pressures of visibility-driven religious engagement.

Experiential Spirituality and Emotional Resonance

A further important finding concerns the experiential dimension of Sufistic da'wah.

Participants described Habib Umar's sermons not merely as intellectual learning but as emotionally transformative experiences. As Participant 5 explained, *"After listening to his lectures, I feel calmer and more willing to reflect on myself rather than judge others."* Similarly, Participant 12 stated, *"His sermons give me peace of mind; they feel more like spiritual guidance than ordinary lectures."* These responses suggest that Sufistic da'wah cultivates emotional calmness, spiritual intimacy, and ethical self-reflection.

The findings further indicate that emotional resonance is fostered through contemplative speech, prayer recitations, spiritual storytelling, poetic language, and collective devotional practices such as *ṣalawāt* and *dhikr*. These findings support Rosa's (2019) theory of resonance while extending it into Islamic communication. Consistent with previous studies on contemporary Sufism (Howell, 2010; Nasr, 2007; Sedgwick, 2017), the present case study suggests that experiential spirituality remains a distinctive dimension of digital Islamic communication that has received limited attention in digital religion scholarship (Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hoover, 2006).

Digital Media Without Commodifying Spirituality

The findings suggest that Sufistic da'wah does not reject digital technology but reconfigures its communicative use according to ethical and spiritual objectives. Habib Umar's digital presence actively employs videos, livestreams, social media, and transnational religious networks while consistently avoiding celebrity-centered branding and excessive self-promotion. As Participant 3 explained, *"The online lectures never feel like self-promotion; they always direct us back to Allah rather than to the preacher."* Similarly, Participant 11 noted that *"Digital media are used only as a means to spread beneficial knowledge, not to seek popularity."* These responses indicate that participants perceived digital communication as a medium for spiritual guidance rather than personal visibility.

These findings support scholarship on digital religion and mediatization (Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hjarvard, 2011) while qualifying studies that associate digital religious authority with branding, visibility, and commodification (Couldry, 2012; Raya, 2025; Sikumbang et al., 2024). Within the present case study, digital media function primarily as instruments of spiritual dissemination rather than symbolic consumption. Consistent with Sufistic ethics (Nasr, 2007; Wan Abdul Jalil & Mohamad, 2019) and Rosa's (2019) theory of resonance, the concept of spiritual presence proposed in this study suggests that religious authority may be grounded in ethical authenticity, compassionate communication, and embodied spirituality rather than algorithmic visibility. Accordingly, Sufistic da'wah can be understood as a post-algorithmic model of Islamic communication that appropriates digital media for spiritual transformation rather than performative religiosity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how Sufistic da'wah functions as a communicative counter-model to religious commodification within contemporary digital environments through the case of Habib Umar bin Hafizh's da'wah paradigm. Within the present case study, the findings suggest that, despite the increasing dominance of algorithm-driven religious communication characterized by virality, performative religiosity, and symbolic consumption, alternative forms of Islamic communication grounded in spirituality and ethical embodiment continue to flourish within digital spaces.

The findings indicate that Sufistic da'wah operates through a distinctive communicative framework centered on *mahabbah* (compassionate love), *rifq* (gentleness), *adab* (ethical conduct), and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (spiritual purification). Together, these principles shape a model of religious

communication that prioritizes spiritual transformation, emotional resonance, and moral refinement over visibility, popularity, and algorithmic performance. Unlike commodified forms of digital religiosity that often encourage polarization and performative engagement, Sufistic da'wah cultivates contemplative spirituality, relational compassion, and ethical self-transformation.

The findings further suggest that, within the context examined, digital media do not inevitably lead to the commodification of religion. Instead, digital platforms may function as channels for meaningful spiritual dissemination when guided by ethical and spiritually grounded communicative principles. Through the case of Habib Umar bin Hafizh, this study demonstrates that religious authority in contemporary digital environments may be shaped not only by technological visibility but also by perceived authenticity, emotional trust, and embodied spirituality.

Theoretically, this article advances the fields of digital religion and Islamic communication by proposing spiritual presence as an original analytical construct for understanding religious authority beyond algorithmic visibility and media performance. Developed through the synthesis of Sufistic ethical communication and contemporary theories of digital religion, the concept highlights how ethical authenticity, emotional resonance, and contemplative engagement may continue to shape religious communication within highly mediatized societies. By introducing this conceptual framework, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on digital religion, mediatization, spirituality, and contemporary Islamic communication, while suggesting that Sufistic ethical principles offer a meaningful perspective for interpreting religious communication in the context of digital modernity. Although these conclusions are grounded in a single case study, the proposed framework provides a conceptual foundation for future comparative research across diverse Islamic, cultural, and digital religious contexts.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on Indonesian Muslim audiences and selected digital religious materials associated with Habib Umar bin Hafizh's da'wah networks. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the specific socio-cultural and religious context examined. Moreover, because the research centers on a single prominent Sufi scholar, the findings do not necessarily represent the communicative characteristics of other Sufi traditions, religious leaders, or contemporary Islamic movements, which may adopt different theological orientations, communicative strategies, and patterns of digital engagement.

Second, as a qualitative case study, this research prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical generalization. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as context-specific insights into the communicative dynamics of Habib Umar bin Hafizh's Sufistic da'wah rather than as representative of all forms of contemporary Islamic communication.

Future research could expand this line of inquiry through comparative studies involving different Sufi scholars, *ṭarīqah* traditions, digital religious movements, or transnational Muslim communities across diverse socio-cultural settings. Such studies would provide a deeper understanding of how spirituality, religious authority, and ethical communication are negotiated in different digital environments. Further research may also examine the interaction between Sufistic communication and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, virtual religious communities, and immersive digital platforms. These investigations would enrich scholarly understanding of the evolving relationship between spirituality, technology, and Islamic communication in the digital age.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Doctoral Program in Islamic Da'wah Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam As-Syafi'iyah Jakarta, the participating religious communities,

interview participants, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable support and constructive feedback throughout this research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Khairul Hidayah, Badrah Uyuni, Zamakhsyari Abdul Majid, Sarbini Anim, and Mohammad Adnan contributed to the development and completion of this manuscript. Conceptualization and theoretical framework development were carried out by Badrah Uyuni and Khairul Hidayah. Data collection, digital content analysis, and field observations were conducted by Khairul Hidayah. Methodological supervision and analytical validation were provided by Zamakhsyari Abdul Majid and Sarbini Anim. The discussion on digital religion, Islamic communication, and Sufistic paradigms was further strengthened through academic contributions from Mohammad Adnan. Draft preparation and manuscript writing were primarily completed by Khairul Hidayah and Badrah Uyuni. All authors critically reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no competing interests to declare relevant to this article's content.

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