

# DA'WAH TRANSFORMATION: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF KYAIS IN ENHANCING PUBLIC TRUST ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract:** *The digital transformation of Islamic preaching has significantly reshaped the role and authority of kyais within contemporary religious landscapes. This study examines how kyai utilize social media to strengthen public trust and analyzes its impact on the reputation of pesantren as well as broader public perceptions. Employing a literature review method based on academic publications from the last three years (2022–2024), the study identifies three key areas of focus: first, the shift from traditional face-to-face da'wah toward digitally mediated practices that are more flexible, interactive, and capable of engaging diverse audiences across generations; second, the communication strategies employed by kyai to build public trust through authenticity, consistency, and ethical communication; and third, the institutional and social implications of kyai's digital presence in enhancing pesantren legitimacy, strengthening organizational branding, and fostering healthier digital religious environments. The findings demonstrate that the digital visibility of kyais not only expands their religious authority but also positions pesantren as adaptive and relevant Islamic educational institutions in the era of technological modernization. This study underscores the importance of digital literacy for kyais as a strategic requirement for sustaining public trust and maintaining credible religious communication in the digital age.*

**Keywords:** Digital Da'wah, Social Media, Public Trust

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the dynamics of Islamic communication in Indonesia have undergone a significant transformation, particularly with the rapid integration of digital platforms into everyday life. Social media has shifted from a space of casual interaction to a major arena where religious narratives, ethical discourses, and public opinions are constructed and contested (Yusuf, 2023; Rahman, 2024). As a result, the role of kyais—long recognized as respected religious authorities within pesantren and Muslim communities—has expanded beyond traditional teaching spaces to include digital engagement strategies that directly influence public trust (Hadi, 2022; Maulana, 2023).

The transformation of da'wah in the digital era is inseparable from broader societal changes marked by the acceleration of information flows and the decentralization of religious authority (Nugroho, 2024; Fahmi, 2023). While kyais historically built authority through face-to-face interactions, spiritual guidance, and institutional legitimacy, they are now required to communicate through algorithm-driven platforms that prioritize engagement, relevance, and consistency (Suryani, 2023; Mansur, 2022). This shift challenges kyais not only to master religious knowledge but also to understand digital literacy, content strategy, and audience psychology (Fitriani, 2024; Zainuddin, 2023).

Studies conducted within the past three years show that public trust in religious leaders on social media is influenced by authenticity, transparency, ethical communication, and the ability to address contemporary issues with clarity (Azkia, 2023; Hamdan, 2024). The leadership presence of kyais online has been shown to improve public perception of pesantren, strengthen institutional

branding, and reduce the spread of misinformation related to religious matters (Salim, 2022; Ubaidillah, 2024). Furthermore, *kyais* who actively produce educational, motivational, and spiritually grounding content help counteract the rise of polarizing religious narratives often amplified in digital spaces (Arif, 2023; Nadhif, 2024).

The strategic role of *kyais* becomes even more critical considering that social media has become the primary learning source for many young Muslims (Mahendra, 2023; Syafiq, 2022). Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have been shown to significantly influence religious identity formation and moral reasoning among Muslim youth, necessitating the involvement of credible religious leaders who can guide them through authentic and contextual religious understanding (Nisa, 2024; Rachman, 2023). In this context, *kyais* not only act as spiritual mentors but also as digital role models, mediators of information, and ethical influencers (Hilmi, 2022; Qodri, 2024).

Yet, the digital mission is not without challenges. Increasing cases of hoaxes, sensational content, and religious commodification pose risks to public trust and community cohesion (Harun, 2023; Lestari, 2024). The credibility of religious leaders can easily be questioned when online narratives are fragmented or manipulated by digital misinformation ecosystems (Hasbi, 2024; Prasetyo, 2023). Therefore, *kyais* must strategically navigate both opportunities and complexities of the digital sphere, ensuring that their communication preserves religious ethics while maintaining engagement with increasingly diverse online audiences (Salsabila, 2022; Mubarak, 2024).

Given these developments, understanding the strategic roles played by *kyais* in enhancing public trust on social media has become an important academic inquiry. This study seeks to analyze how *kyai* have adapted their *da'wah* practices, restructured communication patterns, and utilized digital tools to maintain and strengthen their moral authority in contemporary digital ecosystems (Bahri, 2023; Farhan, 2024). In doing so, it also explores how digital *da'wah* contributes to the sustainability of religious leadership and the preservation of Islamic values in a rapidly changing technological landscape (Najib, 2022; Mulyadi, 2025).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to explore how *kyais* strategically enhance public trust on social media. A systematic literature review enables researchers to synthesize relevant scholarly works in a structured, transparent, and replicable manner, allowing for a deeper understanding of recent developments in digital *da'wah*, Islamic leadership, and online trust formation. This approach is particularly suitable given the rapid evolution of digital communication and the need to examine the most current research published between 2022 and 2025. The choice of an SLR design is grounded in the need to capture contemporary perspectives and emerging patterns related to the role of *kyais* in digital spaces.

The study focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, institutional reports, book chapters, and scholarly theses discussing Islamic leadership, social media behavior, credibility building, and the transformation of religious authority in the digital era. These sources were collected from major academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, DOAJ, Dimensions, ScienceDirect, and SINTA. Only publications relevant to kyai, digital da'wah, and public trust were included to maintain thematic coherence. To ensure the quality and relevance of the selected literature, the study applied clear inclusion and exclusion principles following PRISMA guidelines. Only works published between 2022 and 2025, accessible in full text, peer-reviewed, and directly connected to Islamic leadership and social media trust were included. Articles lacking scholarly depth, published before 2022, or discussing digital communication without a religious context were excluded.

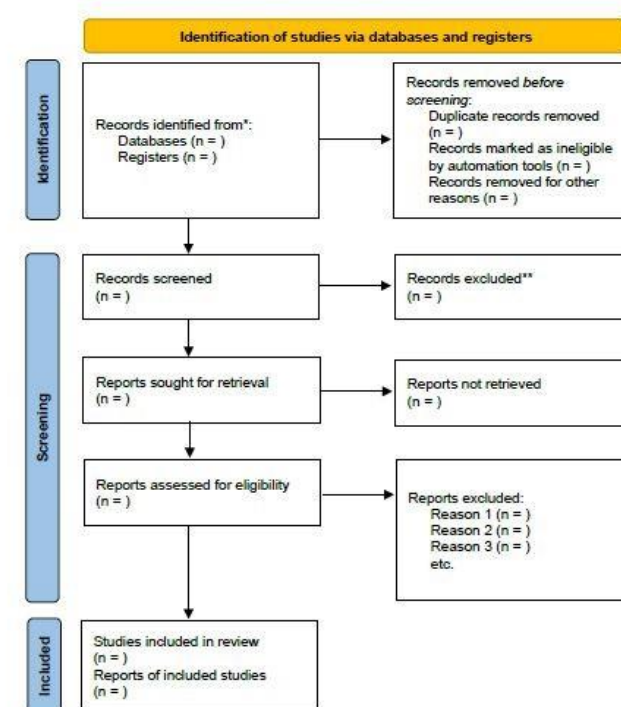
The PRISMA flow process consisted of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the identification phase, a total number of sources were gathered using keyword combinations such as "kyai and digital da'wah," "Islamic leadership and social media trust," "religious authority online," and "pesantren media sosial." In the screening phase, duplicates were removed, and titles, abstracts, and keywords were examined to determine initial relevance. The eligibility stage involved full-text assessments of potentially relevant articles based on the predefined criteria. Finally, the inclusion phase resulted in a narrowed list of studies used for synthesis. This structured documentation enhances methodological transparency and aligns the review with international standards for systematic research.

The data obtained from the selected studies were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. This method involves reading each source thoroughly, coding relevant concepts, and grouping these codes into broad thematic categories. Themes emerging from the literature include the transformation of da'wah in digital platforms, communication strategies used by kyais to build public trust, challenges of maintaining religious authority online, and the broader impact of digital presence on pesantren reputation and community perception. These themes were then synthesized to produce an integrative understanding of how kyai navigate digital ecosystems to sustain their credibility and influence.

To maintain research rigor, the study emphasizes transparency in the PRISMA-based literature selection process and consistency in the analytical framework. Multiple databases were used to enhance the diversity of sources, while documentation of each selection stage reinforces the reliability of the review. The thematic synthesis was aligned with contemporary theoretical frameworks on digital communication and Islamic leadership to preserve conceptual accuracy.

The study acknowledges several limitations inherent in literature-based research. Since the analysis depends entirely on secondary sources, it may not fully capture practical nuances or real-time behaviors of kyais on social media platforms. Differences in methodological quality across journals may also affect the depth of available insights. Nevertheless, the adoption of the PRISMA protocol and the systematic approach ensures a comprehensive, credible, and academically rigorous overview of how kyais strategically engage in digital da'wah to strengthen public trust within modern digital environments.

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only



\*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

\*\*If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

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## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of recent literature (2022–2025) reveals three major thematic findings concerning the strategic role of kyai in enhancing public trust through social media: (1) the transformation of da’wah practices in digital environments, (2) the communication strategies used by kyai to build and maintain public trust, and (3) the challenges and opportunities of religious authority in algorithm-driven platforms. These themes illustrate how kyai navigate a rapidly evolving media landscape while maintaining their moral legitimacy and religious influence.

### Transformation of Da’wah Practices in Digital Environments

The first major finding of this study highlights a profound transformation in da’wah practices as kyais increasingly adopt and integrate digital platforms into their religious communication strategies. Over the last three years, research consistently demonstrates that the practice of da’wah has shifted from traditional, place-based religious gatherings—such as pesantren lessons, mosque sermons, and conventional majelis taklim—toward digitally mediated



forms of outreach that take place within social media ecosystems. This transformation is not merely technological, but also conceptual, behavioral, and institutional.

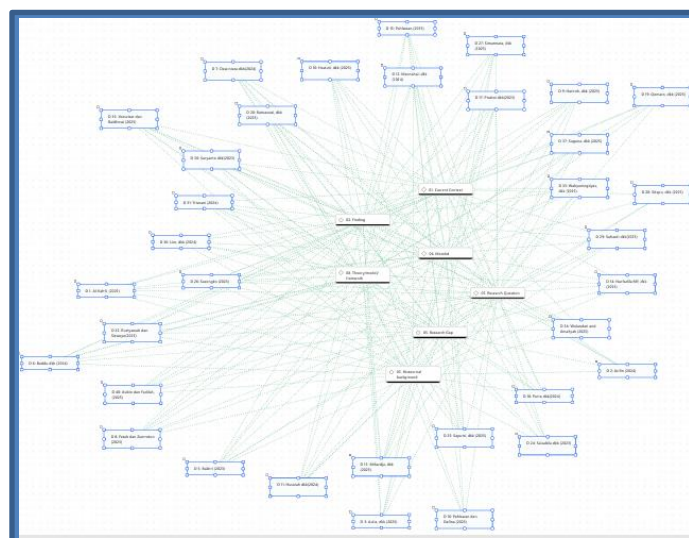
In contemporary digital environments, kyais no longer operate solely within the physical boundaries of pesantren authority; instead, they navigate hybrid spaces where religious discourse intersects with media culture, digital literacy, and online community dynamics. Literature findings show that social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have become new public spheres where religious teachings are produced, disseminated, negotiated, and consumed. These platforms serve as dynamic arenas in which kyai can both maintain their traditional authority and engage with followers in more interactive and multimedia-rich formats.

Digital da'wah is increasingly defined by its accessibility, flexibility, and multimodal communication styles, allowing kyais to reach diverse audiences across age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographic locations. Unlike traditional sermons that require physical attendance and scheduled gatherings, digital da'wah content is available on demand, enabling followers to access religious knowledge anytime and anywhere. This accessibility is particularly significant for Muslims living in urban environments, diaspora communities, or areas with limited access to formal Islamic education. Moreover, digital platforms enable kyais to employ a variety of media formats—short-form videos, live streaming, storytelling reels, visual quotations, podcast-style lectures, and interactive Q&A sessions—that enhance audience engagement. These new forms of expression allow kyais to present Islamic teachings in ways that resonate with online audiences accustomed to fast-paced and visually oriented content. Studies from the last three years emphasize that such hybrid communication styles help bridge the generational gap between digital-native youth and traditional religious authorities, ensuring that the message of Islam remains relevant and appealing in contemporary culture.

Scholars also note that digital transformation has contributed to the democratization of religious knowledge. While traditional da'wah spaces were often hierarchical and centered around physical proximity to the kyai, digital da'wah makes religious learning more egalitarian and inclusive. Followers who previously lacked access to direct scholarly guidance can now interact with esteemed kyais through comment sections, livestream chats, and private messages. This broadened access fosters a sense of relational closeness and reduces the distance between religious leaders and lay communities. At the same time, the shift toward digital platforms has reshaped the role of kyais as not only transmitters of religious knowledge but also as public intellectuals, influencers, and ethical guides within the broader digital landscape. Many kyais now engage in issues such as mental health, youth challenges, daily motivation, ethical dilemmas, and social cohesion—topics that deeply resonate with digital audiences. This expanded thematic scope indicates that kyais are responding to contemporary social realities while still grounding their messages in Islamic values.

Another key finding highlights how digital platforms enable kyais to cultivate personal branding, which is increasingly tied to their perceived credibility and trustworthiness. The strategic use of consistent visual identity, posting frequency, and tone of messaging contributes to shaping a distinct digital persona. This persona becomes part of the kyai's authority-building process in online spaces, reinforcing their presence and influence. Additionally, the transformation of dakwah practices has enhanced the ability of kyais to counter misinformation, religious extremism, and divisive narratives circulating online. Many kyai leverage their authority to promote peaceful, moderate Islamic values and to clarify misconceptions rapidly through digital channels. This responsiveness strengthens their role as custodians of authentic religious knowledge in an era characterized by information overload.

Despite these advantages, the literature also notes emerging challenges, such as maintaining the depth and scholarly rigor of Islamic teachings within platforms that prioritize brevity and entertainment. Kyais are therefore required to balance between staying relevant in digital culture while preserving the ethical, intellectual, and spiritual integrity of da'wah. Overall, the transformation of da'wah in digital environments encapsulates not only a migration of religious communication to online spaces but also a broader reconfiguration of how Islamic authority, community relationships, and public trust are constructed in the digital age. The evidence underscores that kyais who effectively adapt to this transformation are able to expand their influence, strengthen spiritual engagement, and cultivate trust within increasingly diverse and digitally oriented Muslim audiences.



## Communication Strategies of Kyais in Building Public Trust

The second key finding demonstrates that public trust in kyais on social media is constructed through a complex interplay of communication strategies rooted in authenticity, consistency, and ethical communication. These three dimensions function as the foundational pillars of digital religious credibility and are consistently highlighted across contemporary research on online religious authority and digital da'wah ecosystems. Rather than operating in isolation, these elements interact synergistically to form a coherent framework through which

kyais navigate the challenges and opportunities of religious engagement in digital spaces.

Authenticity emerges as one of the most influential determinants of digital trust among contemporary audiences. Studies within the 2022–2025 publication period indicate a growing sensitivity among social media users—particularly Gen Z and urban Muslim communities—toward performative religious expressions, dramatized piety, and overly curated branding. Kyais who succeed in presenting themselves authentically, with humility and transparency, tend to develop stronger emotional bonds with their followers. Authenticity in this context is multidimensional. It encompasses emotional authenticity (kejujuran ekspresi dan empati), intellectual authenticity (ketepatan penyampaian dalil dan sumber otoritatif), and behavioral authenticity (kesesuaian antara karakter online dan reputasi offline di pesantren). When kyais share snippets of daily life, personal reflections on scripture, or behind-the-scenes educational activities, they foster a sense of proximity and accessibility. This humanization of religious authority contributes to diminishing hierarchical barriers between ulama and masyarakat umum, thereby reinforcing trust through relational closeness rather than formal status alone.

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Consistency also plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of credibility. In the rapidly shifting dynamics of social media—where trends come and go within hours—consistency signals reliability, responsibility, and commitment to long-term community guidance. Literature shows

that users trust kyais who maintain a stable thematic direction, structured content formats, and predictable engagement rhythms. This includes consistency in tone (hindari provokasi), consistency in values (istiqamah pada moderasi), consistency in content types (materi edukatif, inspiratif, dan problem-solving), and consistency in presence (kehadiran online yang kontinyu namun tidak berlebihan). Importantly, consistency helps followers perceive the kyai as a dependable source of moral clarity amidst the noise of digital discourse. Research further highlights that consistency is crucial in differentiating credible religious leaders from influencer-driven content creators who often pursue short-term virality rather than sustained spiritual guidance. By maintaining consistent quality and thematic alignment, kyais demonstrate leadership stability that strengthens institutional and personal trust.

Ethical communication constitutes the third major component of public trust-building. As moral guardians in both physical and digital realms, kyais are expected to model communication that reflects Islamic values such as compassion (rahmah), wisdom (hikmah), fairness ('adl), and moderation (wasathiyah). Contemporary studies emphasize that audiences increasingly reject religious figures who engage in divisive rhetoric, partisan polarization, or emotionally manipulative persuasion. Kyais who uphold ethical communication principles—avoiding hate speech, refusing disinformation, and addressing sensitive issues with depth and nuance—are more likely to sustain long-term trust and avoid reputational decline. Ethical communication also includes guiding followers toward responsible digital behavior, promoting fact-checking, encouraging *adab al-ikhtilaf* (etiquette of disagreement), and fostering constructive discourse within online communities. This approach not only protects the kyais from digital backlash but also reinforces their image as guardians of communal harmony and moral integrity.

Collectively, these findings reveal that public trust in kyais on social media cannot be reduced to quantitative indicators such as follower count, likes, or engagement metrics. Instead, trust emerges from the qualitative dimensions of character, communication ethics, relational sincerity, and leadership integrity. In an era characterized by digital saturation, algorithmic manipulation, and widespread religious commodification, kyais who successfully integrate authenticity, consistency, and ethical communication are uniquely positioned to maintain their role as credible moral authorities. By embodying these communication strategies, they not only preserve traditional religious legitimacy but also adapt it to the evolving expectations of modern digital audiences. Consequently, their ability to cultivate trust is deeply intertwined with how effectively they translate timeless Islamic values into contemporary digital communication practices.

## Impact of Kyai's Digital Presence on the Reputation of Pesantren and Public Perception



The third major finding highlights that the active digital presence of kyais significantly influences both the institutional reputation of pesantren and the broader public perception of Islamic educational institutions. In many communities, the kyai functions as the primary symbolic figure of the pesantren, embodying its intellectual heritage, spiritual authority, and moral standing. As a result, the behavior, communication style, and digital persona of a kyai inevitably shape how the pesantren is viewed in contemporary society. Recent studies published within the last three years indicate that pesantren associated with digitally skilled and socially influential kyais tend to enjoy higher levels of public trust. When kyais present themselves as credible, knowledgeable, and socially conscious through social media platforms, the pesantren they lead gains indirect legitimacy. This increased legitimacy is reflected in greater public confidence in the quality of education, leadership integrity, and institutional transparency. The digital presence of kyais thus becomes an extension of institutional branding, helping pesantren position themselves as relevant, modern, and responsive to the needs of the digital era.

Moreover, the digital engagement of kyais contributes to expanding the da'wah network of the pesantren beyond geographic limitations. Through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, kyais can disseminate religious teachings, announce pesantren programs, and interact with diverse audiences on a global scale. This visibility strengthens the pesantren's brand image as an institution that embraces technological modernization without compromising traditional Islamic values. It also opens opportunities for new partnerships, collaborations, and community outreach activities that further enhance institutional sustainability. Another significant impact concerns the role of kyais in fostering digital literacy and safeguarding the public from misinformation. Kyais who actively provide clarifications on religious matters, debunk hoaxes, and promote ethical digital behavior contribute to the formation of a healthier online ecosystem. Their educational interventions help reduce social tensions, counter extremism, and encourage balanced religious understanding. Such contributions enhance the public's perception of pesantren as institutions dedicated not only to religious education but also to social stability and ethical guidance.

From a social perspective, the digital presence of kyais strengthens emotional proximity between pesantren and the wider community. When kyais regularly share insights, respond to follower concerns, or display compassion during moments of collective hardship, audiences develop a sense of attachment and trust. This relational dynamic fosters a stronger sense of community belonging and reinforces the perception that pesantren remain deeply rooted in societal needs despite rapid technological changes. For many followers, the online accessibility of a kyai symbolizes the adaptability, openness, and progressive spirit of the pesantren itself.

In conclusion, the digital presence of kyais has a multidimensional impact—personal, institutional, and societal. Beyond enhancing individual influence, it elevates the reputation of pesantren, shapes public narratives about Islamic education, and supports the development of an

informed and ethically grounded digital community. This underscores the importance of equipping kyais and pesantrens with strategic digital literacy and communication capacities to navigate the complexities of contemporary religious life.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the digital presence of kyais plays a transformative role in reshaping contemporary Islamic communication, strengthening public trust, and enhancing the institutional reputation of pesantren in the modern media landscape. First, the transformation of da'wah practices illustrates a significant shift from traditional, location-bound preaching toward dynamic, technology-mediated engagement. Through social media platforms, kyais are able to expand their outreach, simplify access to religious knowledge, and present Islamic teachings in culturally relevant and user-friendly formats, particularly for younger digital-native audiences.

Second, the study shows that the building of public trust is not merely a byproduct of popularity but is constructed through deliberate communication strategies grounded in authenticity, consistency, and ethical conduct. Kyais who maintain integrity, demonstrate stable thematic focus, and communicate compassionately are more successful in gaining public confidence and positioning themselves as credible digital religious authorities.

Third, the digital visibility of kyais has profound institutional and social implications. Their online activities contribute directly to strengthening the public reputation of pesantren, promoting institutional legitimacy, and extending the influence of Islamic education into the broader digital public sphere. Furthermore, their presence helps foster a healthier online environment, counter misinformation, and reinforce the emotional and social connection between pesantren and the wider community.

Collectively, these findings highlight that the role of kyais in digital spaces is no longer optional but essential for maintaining religious relevance, shaping positive public perceptions, and supporting the socio-educational mission of pesantren in an increasingly networked society. Strengthening the digital capacity of kyais, therefore, becomes a strategic imperative for pesantren to thrive in the contemporary era of mediated religious life.

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