

From the Pulpit to the Feed: The Transformation of Da'wah Rhetoric and Its Relevance to the Formation of Millennial Islamic Identity

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has fundamentally altered the way Islamic preaching (da'wah) is composed, delivered, and consumed in Indonesia. What was once bound to the linear, face-to-face structure of the khutbah (sermon) delivered from the pulpit has been reconfigured into short, algorithmically circulated, and highly visual "content." This article examines how this shift in rhetorical form relates to the construction of Islamic identity among the millennial generation. Using a qualitative library research design combined with critical discourse analysis of existing scholarship, the study traces the transformation of da'wah rhetoric across three dimensions: structural (from the five classical canons of rhetoric to the algorithmic logic of platforms), authoritative (from scholarly lineage to affective visibility), and communal (from congregational presence to networked, parasocial belonging). The findings indicate that classical rhetorical appeals identified by Aristotle—ethos, pathos, and logos—remain conceptually relevant but are reconfigured by the affordances of digital media: ethos is now built through visual branding and follower metrics rather than institutional pedigree; pathos is intensified through short-form emotional storytelling; and logos is compressed into quotable, meme-able fragments of religious argument. This transformation contributes to a hybrid millennial Islamic identity that is simultaneously pious and performative, communal and individualized, orthodox in content yet informal in style. The article concludes that the transformation from khutbah to content does not eliminate rhetorical persuasion in da'wah but repackages it, with significant implications for religious authority, media literacy, and the pedagogy of contemporary Islamic communication.

Keywords

da'wah rhetoric; digital da'wah; khutbah; millennial Muslim identity; religious authority; social media

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic preaching, or da'wah, has historically depended on rhetorical mastery. The khutbah delivered from the mosque pulpit, the majelis taklim conducted in community halls, and the tabligh akbar staged in open fields all rely on a preacher's command of language, voice, gesture, and argument to move an audience toward greater piety. Classical scholarship on Islamic rhetoric has long drawn a



conceptual bridge between the rhetorical tradition inherited from Greek philosophy—particularly Aristotle's triad of ethos, pathos, and logos—and the persuasive techniques employed by *du'at* (preachers), arguing that although *da'wah* is rooted in revelation, its delivery nonetheless follows recognizable patterns of credibility, emotional appeal, and logical argumentation (Hasanah, 2020). This classical framework continues to be invoked in recent Indonesian scholarship, which shows that Aristotelian rhetoric remains a durable analytical lens even when applied to contemporary, digitally mediated preaching aimed at critical millennial audiences.

What has changed is not the underlying logic of persuasion but its medium and packaging. Indonesia's *da'wah* landscape has been reshaped by an accelerating shift toward digital platforms, in which preachers increasingly manage Instagram accounts, YouTube channels, and TikTok profiles as extensions—or in some cases replacements—of the physical pulpit. Empirical accounts of this shift describe how celebrity preachers now curate dedicated applications and social media ecosystems to construct broader, more commercially oriented forms of religious authority (Raya, 2024). Scholars analyzing this phenomenon at a more structural level argue that Islamic preaching in Indonesia has entered a phase of "digital Islamisation," in which the visual packaging of sermons on digital platforms functions less as a straightforward extension of traditional *pesantren*-based transmission and more as a new commodified space where religious and business logics intertwine (Raya, 2025).

This transformation is inseparable from the demographic and behavioral characteristics of the millennial generation, who constitute the primary audience—and often the primary producers—of digital *da'wah* content. Research on how this generation consumes religious material consistently reports a strong preference for visual, interactive, and easily shareable formats over long-form oral exposition, with credible digital preachers and influencers playing a major role in attracting audience interest. This preference has, in turn, incentivized preachers and *da'wah* content creators to restructure their message: sermons once delivered in full during Friday prayers or evening study circles are now cut into short highlights, captioned with attention-grabbing text, and optimized for algorithmic recommendation systems. Analyses of specific TikTok-based *da'wah* accounts note that this restructuring requires a distinct literacy—not only religious literacy but algorithmic and narrative literacy—if digital preaching is to be effective (Ibad, 2025).

At the same time, this shift raises questions about religious authority and epistemic trust. Traditional Islamic authority in Indonesia has historically been anchored in scholarly lineage, *pesantren* affiliation, and institutional endorsement from organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah. Digital platforms disrupt this arrangement by rewarding visibility, charisma, and algorithmic circulation rather than credentialed scholarship. Recent studies of religious authority contestation in Indonesia's digital sphere describe this as a fragmentation process in which legitimacy

shifts from institutional affiliation toward affective communication and popularity metrics. Broader comparative literature on Muslim social media use corroborates this trend, noting that religious authority online is increasingly distributed rather than centralized (Larsson & Willander, 2025).

This transformation intersects directly with identity formation among young Indonesian Muslims. The widely documented hijrah phenomenon—a millennial-driven turn toward more visible, personally curated forms of piety—has been substantially shaped by, and expressed through, social media. Ethnographic and discourse-based studies of the hijrah trend show that Instagram in particular has become a stage on which millennial Muslims articulate a hybrid religious identity built from both textual religious understanding and personal aesthetic choices. Complementary research on urban millennial religiosity finds that virtual space functions as a primary arena in which new religious patterns are formed, blurring the line between public devotional practice and personal self-presentation (Hartono et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of scholarship addressing digital da'wah, religious authority, and hijrah culture as separate strands, comparatively few studies explicitly connect the rhetorical transformation of da'wah—from the structured khutbah to fragmented digital content—with the specific mechanisms through which this transformation shapes millennial Islamic identity. This article addresses that gap by asking two interrelated questions: first, how has the rhetorical structure of Indonesian da'wah changed as it has moved from the pulpit to social media platforms; and second, how does this rhetorical transformation relate to, and help explain, the formation of a distinctly millennial style of Islamic identity. In pursuing these questions, the article contributes a synthesis that bridges classical rhetorical theory, digital religion scholarship, and Indonesian Islamic studies.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research (*kajian pustaka*) design combined with critical discourse analysis, an approach commonly used in Indonesian communication and da'wah studies to trace conceptual and rhetorical transformation across a body of literature rather than through direct fieldwork. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed articles published in national (Sinta-indexed) and international (Scopus- and DOAJ-indexed) journals between 2018 and 2026, selected through targeted searches using keyword combinations such as "digital da'wah," "khutbah," "religious authority social media," "retorika dakwah," and "hijrah millennial Indonesia." Sources were screened for relevance to three analytical dimensions: the rhetorical structure of da'wah messages, the mechanisms of religious authority in digital spaces, and the articulation of Islamic identity among Indonesian millennials.

The analytical framework combines Aristotle's classical model of rhetorical appeals (*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*), which continues to be applied productively to both offline and online Islamic preaching in

Indonesian communication scholarship, with Heidi Campbell's concept of networked religion, which frames digital religious practice as shaped by the affordances, norms, and communal structures of the platforms through which it circulates (Campbell, 2010). Data analysis followed three stages: open coding of thematic patterns across the selected literature (rhetorical structure, authority claims, and identity markers), axial coding to identify relationships between digital platform affordances and rhetorical adaptation, and interpretive synthesis to connect these patterns to the broader question of millennial Islamic identity formation. Because this is a literature-based qualitative study, findings are presented as an interpretive synthesis rather than as statistically generalizable results, and are intended to generate a conceptual account that can subsequently be tested through empirical fieldwork.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *From the Five Canons to the Algorithmic Feed: The Restructuring of Da'wah Rhetoric*

Classical rhetoric, as codified by Aristotle and later applied to Islamic preaching, organizes persuasive speech around five canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Recent Indonesian communication scholarship applying this framework to digital preachers finds that these canons persist even in short-form video content, though their internal logic has been compressed and rearranged to fit platform constraints. Where a Friday khutbah is structurally obligated to move through a fixed sequence of praise, exhortation, and supplication over roughly twenty minutes, a TikTok da'wah clip must accomplish a comparable persuasive arc within thirty to ninety seconds, requiring da'i to front-load their most striking argument or emotional hook rather than build toward it gradually.

This compression is not incidental; it is a direct response to platform incentive structures. Studies of Indonesian da'wah accounts on TikTok emphasize that success depends on a preacher's or content creator's ability to master the platform's algorithmic logic in addition to their command of religious material (Ibad, 2025). Similarly, analyses of da'wah messaging on Instagram highlight that visually packaged religious content—infographics, short reels, and captioned quote cards—now performs much of the persuasive work once carried by extended oral argumentation, reflecting a broader move toward what might be called "visual logos," in which religious argument is condensed into an easily screenshottable, shareable unit of meaning (Wahid et al., 2021).

The Aristotelian ethos-pathos-logos triad remains a useful diagnostic lens for this compressed content, but each appeal is reconstituted by digital affordances. Ethos, traditionally rooted in a speaker's demonstrated knowledge, moral standing, and institutional lineage, is increasingly established online through visual branding, production quality, and quantifiable markers of popularity such as follower counts and view totals. Empirical work on celebrity preachers illustrates this recalibration directly, showing that credibility is now performed as much through polished visual presentation and cultivated

persona as through demonstrated scholarly credentials (Raya, 2024). Pathos, meanwhile, is intensified through the confessional, first-person storytelling style common to short-form video, in which preachers recount personal struggles with sin, doubt, or family conflict to generate emotional resonance with viewers navigating similar experiences—a pattern documented extensively in analyses of religious rhetoric on YouTube and TikTok that emphasize emotional touch and colloquial language as key persuasive devices (Haryadie, 2025). Logos, finally, survives in compressed form as citation-dense but brief scriptural argument, often reduced to a single verse or hadith presented as decisive proof within a short clip rather than unpacked through extended exegesis.

3.2. Fragmentation of Religious Authority: From Scholarly Lineage to Algorithmic Visibility

The restructuring of rhetorical form is closely tied to a broader redistribution of religious authority. In the pre-digital era, the legitimacy of a khatib or da'i was substantially derived from institutional markers: pesantren education, ijazah (certification) from recognized scholars, and formal affiliation with established Islamic organizations. Contemporary research on Indonesia's digital religious landscape describes a marked shift away from this model. Studies of religious authority contestation between traditional ulama and digital-native "influencers" find that legitimacy is increasingly earned through algorithmic visibility and affective connection with audiences rather than through scholarly genealogy. This dynamic is echoed in analyses that describe contemporary Indonesian Islam as undergoing a hybridization process in which older networked religion and mediatization theories help explain how new figures—so-called "ustadz selebgram" or celebrity preachers—emerge alongside, and sometimes in tension with, traditional authorities (Campbell, 2010; Raya, 2025).

This fragmentation is not without ethical and epistemic risk. Scholarship examining the reconfiguration of religious authority in digital media notes that the same platform features that democratize access to Islamic teaching also make it more difficult for audiences to distinguish credible scholarly interpretation from popular but under-qualified commentary (Malik & Masrur, 2025). Broader international literature on digital Islamic authority likewise cautions that anonymity, algorithmic amplification, and platform-driven virality can privilege charismatic delivery over doctrinal accuracy, a concern that parallels findings in the Indonesian context regarding TikTok- and Instagram-based da'wah accounts whose reach often outpaces institutional oversight (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). This tension between accessibility and accountability constitutes one of the central paradoxes of the shift from khutbah to content: the same transformation that makes da'wah more reachable to millennial audiences also loosens the traditional safeguards that once regulated who could speak with religious authority.

3.3. Content as Identity Practice: Hijrah, Hybridity, and Performative Piety

The rhetorical and authority shifts examined above converge most visibly in the phenomenon of hijrah among Indonesian millennials, which functions simultaneously as a religious commitment and as a social-media-mediated identity performance. Hijrah, historically referring to the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina, has been reinterpreted by young Indonesian Muslims as a personal turn toward greater religious observance, frequently narrated and displayed through Instagram posts, hashtags, and curated aesthetic choices in dress and lifestyle. Research tracing this movement's urban expansion notes that it has been substantially catalyzed by preachers who built large followings through social media, most notably the #pemudahijrah movement associated with a prominent Bandung-based preacher.

What distinguishes this millennial hijrah from earlier expressions of Islamic revivalism in Indonesia is precisely its content-driven, performative character. Discourse analyses of hijrah-related Instagram activity find that millennial Muslims articulate their religious identity less through formal doctrinal instruction and more through an ongoing, visually documented narrative of self-transformation. This aligns with sociological accounts describing contemporary Indonesian Muslim piety as having become a form of popular culture, expressed through majelis taklim that function partly as social gathering points and partly as devotional spaces.

This hybridity produces an Islamic identity that is at once more individualized and more communal than earlier models of religious belonging. It is individualized in that identity markers—modest fashion choices, personal testimony videos, curated reading lists—are selected and displayed by the individual believer rather than assigned by institutional religious authority. It is communal in a new, networked sense: audiences form parasocial and algorithmically clustered communities around specific preachers or hashtags, generating a sense of belonging that does not require physical co-presence in a mosque or majelis. Studies of religious maturity among the hijrah generation caution, however, that this content-driven identity construction does not automatically correspond to deeper spiritual maturity, and that the visibility of religious performance on social media can outpace substantive religious understanding (Hikmayanti, 2023). This concern is reinforced by comparative research showing that millennial religiosity mediated by social media is shaped by dual motivations—reflecting on past experience and projecting a desired self toward an audience—suggesting that digital da'wah content simultaneously serves genuine devotional purposes and self-presentational ones (Hartono et al., 2024).

3.4. Ethical and Pedagogical Implications of the Khutbah-to-Content Shift

The transformation traced above carries practical implications for both da'wah practitioners and religious education. First, because digital da'wah content competes directly with entertainment media for audience attention, preachers and da'wah organizations face growing pressure to master content production skills—videography, copywriting, platform analytics—that were largely irrelevant to classical preaching training. Indonesian scholarship on da'wah ethics warns that this pressure can create tension between the imperative to be persuasive and engaging and the obligation to remain doctrinally and ethically accurate, calling for a stronger integration of maqashid shariah considerations into digital da'wah practice.

Second, the fragmentation of religious authority documented throughout this review suggests that religious literacy education for millennial and younger audiences should place greater emphasis on evaluating the credibility of digital preachers, rather than assuming that popularity or production quality is equivalent to sound scholarship. Finally, because millennial Islamic identity is now substantially constructed through digital content consumption and production, da'wah institutions—including majelis taklim, campus da'wah organizations, and Islamic educational institutions such as the author's own Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Dakwah—have an opportunity to reposition themselves not merely as producers of digital content but as spaces that cultivate critical, reflective engagement with that content, helping millennial audiences distinguish performative piety from substantive religious growth.

4. CONCLUSION

The shift from khutbah to content represents more than a change in medium; it constitutes a genuine transformation of da'wah rhetoric, reorganizing how religious credibility, emotional appeal, and doctrinal argument are constructed and received. Classical rhetorical concepts—ethos, pathos, and logos—remain analytically useful, but their operationalization has changed substantially: credibility is now partly a function of visual branding and algorithmic visibility, emotional appeal is intensified through confessional short-form storytelling, and doctrinal argument is compressed into shareable fragments optimized for circulation rather than sustained exposition.

This rhetorical transformation is deeply entangled with the formation of millennial Islamic identity, most visibly expressed through the hijrah phenomenon, in which religious commitment is articulated through an ongoing, visually documented, and socially networked process of self-presentation. The resulting identity is hybrid: simultaneously individualized and communal, informal in style yet oriented toward orthodox content, performative yet often sincerely devotional. These findings suggest that Islamic educational and da'wah institutions should neither dismiss digital content as inherently superficial nor adopt it uncritically, but should instead develop pedagogical approaches

that help millennial audiences engage digital da'wah with both spiritual openness and critical media literacy. Future research would benefit from empirical fieldwork—including audience reception studies and platform-level content analysis—to test and extend the conceptual synthesis offered here.

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