

**INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS' CREDIBILITY ON FOLLOWERS' RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN MALAYSIA: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL THE USE OF *DA'WAH* STRATEGIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKING**

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***Abstract***

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*The growing trend of social media influencers (SMI) inspires their followers in almost every aspect of life. The new da'wah strategies through digital platforms proved massive dissemination of religious teachings to the ummah population compared to the conventional method of da'wah. The emergence of religious social media influencers in social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok undeniably attracted huge followers' social engagement that resulted in a behavioral change leading to a positive outcome, particularly in religiosity and spirituality, subjective well-being, and self-regulation toward the Islamic lifestyle. The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of religious social media influencers' credibility on followers' religiosity and spirituality in Malaysia. The researcher constructed new conceptual da'wah strategies based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Source Credibility Theory (SCT) for the effectiveness of persuasive religious content of the preachers. This study uses qualitative research methods through library research and intensive literature. Results showed that the credibility of the source (Social Media Influencer) affected the acceptance and reliability of the followers to practice Islamic Lifestyle that strengthen followers' level of religiosity and spirituality towards Islam.*

**Keywords:** *Social Media Influencers, Religiosity, Spirituality, Credibility, Da'wah Strategies, Islamic Lifestyle*

## INTRODUCTION

The new *da'wah* strategies through digital platforms escalated after the restrictions by the government due to the pandemic Covid-19. *Da'wah* is known for the dissemination of religious teachings to the followers on the right path. Allah says in Surah Yunus, verse 25:

*“And Allah invites to the Home of Peace and guides whom He wills to a straight path”.*

Allah says in Surah Al-Imran, verse 104, which means:

*“And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful”*

According to this verse, there must be individuals in Muslim society who act as *da'ei* or preachers to encourage virtue and forbid wrong-doings.

According to Mustafa Hilmi (2021), *da'wah* activities need to be transformed by the development of technology in new media. It is time to reformulate the contemporary digital approach in delivering religious content such as religious sermons in the mosques, *ta'alim* activities in *musholla*. The traditional *da'wah* method between the preacher (*da'ei*) and the audience tends to be monological since the congregation can only listen. This application was regarded as an uninteresting and ineffective *da'wah* strategy, especially among millennials. Preachers and congregations rarely engage in an interactive conversation. The younger generation is more interested in social media because of its features.

Preachers today are more effective when they use contemporary social media to spread their messages. Without a doubt, communication-based on religious material tries to change the way communicants behave inside the congregation. In the new digital platform of *da'wah*, the phrase *da'wahtainment* emerged in relation to *da'wah* strategies (Mutia, 2022). The words *da'wah* and *tainment* are combined, which refers to the idea of amusement as well as entertainment and attractiveness. In the current digital realm, entertainment is provided through new media on the internet, such as social media, in addition to traditional media like television. As a consequence, *da'wahtainment* provides an attractive and interactive medium related to religious content.

Social media is viewed as a form of online conversation in which users create, share, and save content. The features of social media, such as collectivity, connectivity, completeness, and clarity enhance *da'wah* strategies by the religious leaders (*da'ei*) to the audience. The new formation of online communities across geographic boundaries and time zone boost user engagement through the sharing of digital platform. The spread of religious content in social media is highly visible, interactive, and more appealing for the goal of *Amal-Makruf Nahi-Munkar* in relation to modern *da'wah islamiyyah*. The preachers' approach through interactive content to disseminate religious information related to problem-solving and decision-making helps the users to adopt Islamic

teachings in an easier and more appropriate manner. Due to their excitement, speed, and level of interaction, social media like Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and Instagram have given *da'ei* a new opportunity. With these capabilities, social media can have a bigger impact on *da'wah* activity, which can then influence the community's interest in Islamic teachings (Wahab et al., 2019)

Social media has been linked to the rise of new types of celebrities known as influencers. They are known as important figures in social media networks. These important figures include popular celebrities such as in entertainment, sports, health, religion, education, motivation, fashion, and many other domains in the public interest. The growth of social media influencers has a beneficial effect on online communities. The users of social networking sites can connect with one another, which may help the existence of online communities effectively to gain inspiration in order to improve their quality of life by observing the behaviors of their favorite influencers.

Influencers' popularity among digital natives has been increasing in the past few years. According to global social media statistics in October 2022, there are 4.74 billion social media users, equivalent to 59.3 percent of the total global population. The average daily usage is 2 hours and 30 minutes. As social media users spend more time on social networking, they are susceptible to the raising of social media influencers in many dimensions of life. These figures are known as opinion leaders, celebrities, and microcelebrities with a sizable following on social networking sites (Yee & Surat, 2021). There are four main levels of social media influencers that are currently recognized in the literature. Mega-influencers are social media influencers with more than a million subscribers. They include actors, artists, celebrities, and athletes due to their prior experiences in the "real world," they are frequently well-known. Their reach is utilized to raise brand recognition (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Vidani & Das, 2021). Another type of influencer is called macro-influencers. They are the influencers with a following of between 100,000k and 1 million.

In the modern digital communication millennium, social influence in societies has been transformed from conventional opinion leaders into new social media influencers (SMI). People spread information through word of mouth (WOM) as additional resources in decision-making, particularly in relation to behavior change. Numerous studies have revealed that traditional advertising is less likely to be believed by consumers than information coming from a source they know or trust (Taillon et al., 2020). The use of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) nowadays more is effective in many research disciplines such as marketing, education, and health.

Chung-Wha Ki (2018) in his research highlighted several terminologies related to social media influencers such as 'influencers, Instagram influencers (instafamous), citizen influencers, micro-celebrities, and non-traditional celebrities. Religious influencers also play an important role in imparting religious values and advice to believers. Islamic preachers are becoming more proactive in making updates and adjustments because of the modernization of *da'wah* on social media networking such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and the currently popular platform Tik Tok account. One

of the keys deciding elements in the digitization of *da'wah* is the preachers' competence in new media spheres.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is the effectiveness of *da'wah* strategies by religious social media influencers in social media network
2. How influencers' credibility able to influence followers' religiosity and spirituality

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. to examine the effectiveness of *da'wah* strategies by religious social media influencers in the social media network
2. to examine the influencers' credibility on followers' religiosity and spirituality

### **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

In the contemporary era of open access, an increasing number of websites and social media pages published Islamic contents in conformity with the fundamental teachings of Islam. Numerous Islamic scholars from outside and within the nation are actively using social media to distribute Islamic information and promote Islam as a way of life after harnessing the potential of social media as a tool for *da'wah* (Ab Kadir et al., 2018). Today, the influx of information is unavoidable. This results from the rapid development of communication technology. Social media users' level of religious literacy had an impact on whether or not misleading or inaccurate religious information was seen to be trustworthy. In other words, if social media users lack a firm foundation of knowledge of Islam's teachings, they may be prone to believing and accepting the material they are presented with.

Modern digital preachers or *da'ei* use modern media to promote their sermons, which encourage people to do good deeds and refrain from committing evil. This is due to the fact that more people nowadays are searching for Islamic literacy as a result of their usage of new media to get Islamic information. Islam actually enables people to advance in step with the advancement of modern technology (Wahab et al., 2019; Zakariya & Mohamad, 2018). In essence, the Quran and Hadiths are the primary sources of guidance and teachings in Islam. For instance, people can discover the facts and solutions about treatments and medications, choose the right courses, get advice, and make progress.

Today's youth are intrinsically tied to online social media platforms and online communities like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and many more. Modern society is greatly influenced by social media. Regardless of whether the information is real or misleading, social media is one of the most crucial instruments for spreading information. Users should exercise caution and conduct preliminary research on any information they find when looking for Islamic content. The distribution of false information encourages slander and causes harm to society. Therefore, before

sharing knowledge with others, Muslims must verify whether it is accurate or false (Pitchan et al., 2018).

Social media undeniably effective platform for *da'ei* and *ulama'* to reach a larger, global audience and promote the principles of Islam. Religious leaders see social media as a very valuable instrument for preaching Islam and for teaching in greater depth and detail (Ishak & Solihin, 2012). Virtual citizens should be aware that any valuable content found in new media derives from a variety of literary traditions. Some authors merely want to publish knowledge with a weak religious foundation and replicate the content to spread it to others. The violation of religious teaching may affect Muslims' faith due to lack of religious literacy that lead to destruction image of Islam with terrorism, violence and extremism.

The study on influencers' credibility on religious behavior are limited in the literature. The majority of earlier studies on the trustworthiness of influencers concerned on consumer behaviour (Joanly et al., 2022). There is a need for more research on how religious leaders might use social media to influence consumer behaviour and adopt Islamic values. The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of religious social media influencers' credibility on followers' religiosity and spirituality in Malaysia. The researcher constructed new conceptual *da'wah* strategies based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Source Credibility Theory (SCT) for the effectiveness of persuasive religious content of Islamic scholars.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The use of social media as a *da'wah* missionary**

Based on research findings by Shuhaimi & Sohirin (2012), in relation to the use of social media for *da'wah* activities, social media can be used more effectively to reach all tiers of society with a range of content in the form of documentation, news, commentary, and portrayals of Islam. The benefits of using social media to disseminate *da'wah* including:

- 1) It has more advantages for society, religion, nation, and country in addition to the individual.
- 2) It can reach more people, allowing for the promotion of morality and the avoidance of immoral behaviour (*Amar Ma'aruf Nahi Munkar*).
- 3) Able to penetrate the target population of young people who primarily view technology and gadgets as a supplement to their regular social connection.
- 4) The use of social media is not just a method to kill time or browse the internet; these platforms can also be excellent instruments for modern preaching. Muslims can use this social media as a platform to educate both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities.
- 5) In essence, social media platforms of today have developed into communication networks that include members of all societal strata, including teenagers and adults. It is a powerful tool that has an impact on all communication activities since it serves as a channel for engagement and communication to promptly, accurately, and reliably gather information (Ishak & Solihin, 2012).

Mohd. Shuhaimi Bin Haji Ishak & Sohirin Mohammad Solihin elaborated further the following components should be included in the usage of social media in modern *da'wah* strategies:

- (1) Preaching subject (*Maudu*).
- (2) A preacher (*Da'ie*).
- (3) People gave sermons (*Mad'u*).
- (4) Preaching approach (*Uslub*).

According to Hakim et.al (2021) the use of social media network in *da'wah* approach encourage the culture of Qur'anic generation. The concept of "living the Quran" in digital networks refers to a media campaign to integrate the Quran into daily life. This strategy is aimed at the younger generation to apply Islamic teachings in their life including memorization, recitation, learning, and comprehension of the Quran on a variety of digital platforms. On the other hand, according to Sam Rosen, a co-founder of ThoughtLead, he explained the connection between digital influence and the future of Islam in the social media era. He affirmed that people needed to grasp how digital influence operates on two levels. The first is the level of actions. It spreads when individual read an article, click on a link, then share it with other friends. The second level deals with worldviews, ideas, and beliefs. It is on a deeper, more contextual surface. He recommended that Islamic leaders who seek to advance Islam in new media, they must be able to accomplish both. Thus, they must be quickly adopt the internet use and new technologies (Faradillah Iqmar Omar, et.al,2014).

The effectiveness of social media networks in Islamic *da'wah* explored by Mustofa Hilmi (2021) in his study related to the use of YouTube. For example, *da'ie* can make educational movies by incorporating engaging elements on YouTube like animated imagery, original descriptions for interesting educational themes, and musical soundtracks with religious themes. In fact, YouTube is a new form of media that allows for the presentation of audio and visual information and offers a free service that allows users to interact with the content by browsing, uploading, downloading, and commenting. The audience has a wide range of access (Hilmi, 2021). Prominent *da'ei* such as Nouman Ali Khan, Dr. Zakir Naik, Suhaib Webb, Sheikh Tawfique Chodhury, Mufti Menk, and, not to list out from Malaysia itself, Ustaz Kazim Elias, Ustaz Zahazan Mohamed, and Ustaz Dr. Zaharuddin Abd Rahman use YouTube to teach and share their knowledge about Islam via digital platforms (Hakim et al., 2021; Hilmi, 2021; Wahab et al., 2019). Table 1 shows religious influencers in Malaysia and Indonesia and the number of followers on Facebook.

**Table 1: Religious influencers and number of followers on Facebook**

Religious Influencers in Social Media	Number of followers (Facebook)
Dr. Zakir Naik	23 million
Mufti Menk	4.8 million
Ebit Lew	6.7 million
Oki Setiana Dewi	3.4 million
Azhar Idrus	1.3 million
Prof. Muhaya	1.9 million
Asma' Harun	1.2 million
Dato'Ustaz Mohd Kazim Elias	1.9 million
Ahmad Dusuki Abd Rani	1.7 million

Source: <https://www.facebook.com>

The credibility of the *da'ei* who provides Islamic content is a key element in determining the accuracy of the information source. Credibility is defined by Nursyamimi Harun et al. (2021) as the trustworthiness and subject-matter expertise of an authorized reference. High credibility will increase the communication's effectiveness for persuasion and impact when it is given to a user, especially via social media platforms. It is critical to take the sender's or source's credibility into account in order to ensure that the information provided is accurate based on *Shariah Islamiyyah*.

The existence of social media gives space for *da'ei* and *ulama'* to spread the teachings of Islam to a wider and global audience. Islam allows for any innovation and change in the society. Undeniably, social media is very useful tool to introduce Islam and preach in more depth and detail (Ishak & Solihin, 2012). However, in reality, virtual citizens need to understand that any form of information value in new media comes from various writing backgrounds. There are writers who only intend to publish information without a strong religious basis and copy the information to disperse information to others. Based on this situation, religious influencers in Malaysia can be divided into three categories. The first category is genuine preachers who have authority in the field of religion. They are well-known in the community such as Dr. Zaharudin Abdul Rahman, Dato' Dr. Muhammad Izhar Ariff, Ustaz Azhar Idrus, Ustaz Don Daniyal, Ustaz Zakir Naik, Ustaz Kazim Elias, Ustaz Samsul and others. The second category is the authentic preachers who can only be detected through the height of their knowledge in covering Islamic issues. For example, the young *da'ei* produced by reality tv show like Imam Muda Ashraf. The third category is those who are not religious but are interested in preaching and are spreading religious information through websites (Ashaari et al., 2020) or on their personal social media accounts.

The outstanding genuine religious celebrity in Malaysia during the enforcement of Movement Restriction Order due to pandemic Covid-19, that inspire and motivate virtual citizens to foster philanthropy activities known as Ustaz Ebit Lew. Ebit Lew's approach to encourage *da'wah* activities is not limited to *da'wah bil lisan* (sermons), he also renowned with *da'wah bil-hal*. In reality, *da'wah bil-hal* is the implementation of

*da'wah bil-qudwah* (example) and *da'wah bil-amal* (deed). In other words, *da'wah bil-hal* is *da'wah* that is done through displaying personal qualities and activities that directly touch the needs of the community. The portrayals of Islamic values and teaching in social media encouraged more Muslims to practice Islamic as a way of life. In the meantime, Prof. Dr Muhaya is a well-known Islamic motivator that frequently posts religious contents about medical topic and informative messages relevant to daily living. The ultimate goal of religious social influencers is to promote Islam as a way of life for all the believers.

Influencers could be seen as role models for observational learning, similar to traditional media personalities. They could therefore influence or affect the audience's perceptions and behaviors (McCoy, 2022). Studies done in the past on source credibility have emphasized the value of the communicator's reputation, attractiveness, and subject matter expertise, particularly in the context of celebrity endorsement advertisement (Balaban, D., & Mustătea, 2019). Reliability, competence, and attractiveness are the three pillars of the Source Credibility Theory. The fourth element, similarity, was exclusively employed in relation to social media influencers, according to Munnukka et al. (2016). It refers to the resemblance between influencers and their followers, concerning demographic or ideological factors.

### **The impact of religious influencers' credibility to promote Islamic lifestyle**

Islamic lifestyle in Muslim communities indicated the effectiveness of *da'wah* approach by the religious leaders. In reality, religious beliefs are displayed in many social situations. For example, it can be seen through the physical appearance of wearing cloth, a celebration of rituals like birth, marriage, and death, and the roles that men and women are supposed to perform in various spheres of life, from the home to the workplace and from economics to politics, are all examples of how religion is represented in daily life (Hew, 2018).

Additionally, the exhibition of Islamic religiosity in women believers through the modest appearance of covering *aurah*. Hijab culture may be practised and accepted for a variety of reasons, including as to fulfil religious obligations, preserve one's identity as a Muslim, and also because it has become fashionable. Individuals who dress to cover their *aurah* have met the requirements of *Sharia* compliance in terms of clothing. In Malaysia, since Islam is the most widely practiced religion and accounts for 63.5% of the country's population, the culture of wearing hijabs are frequently worn by Muslim women (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/594657/religious-affiliation-in-malaysia/>). The majority of Malaysians are aware of the custom of Muslim women donning the headscarf, and many may have begun doing so at an early age.

According to previous research by Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen and Aini Maznina A. Manaf (2019) the behavior of shariah compliance among women believers affected by following the trend of Islamic celebrities in the social media. The findings denoted that those who follow celebrities on Instagram have the opportunity to connect and develop virtual relationship with them by viewing their videos, leaving comments on their posts, and appreciating their images. Therefore, well-



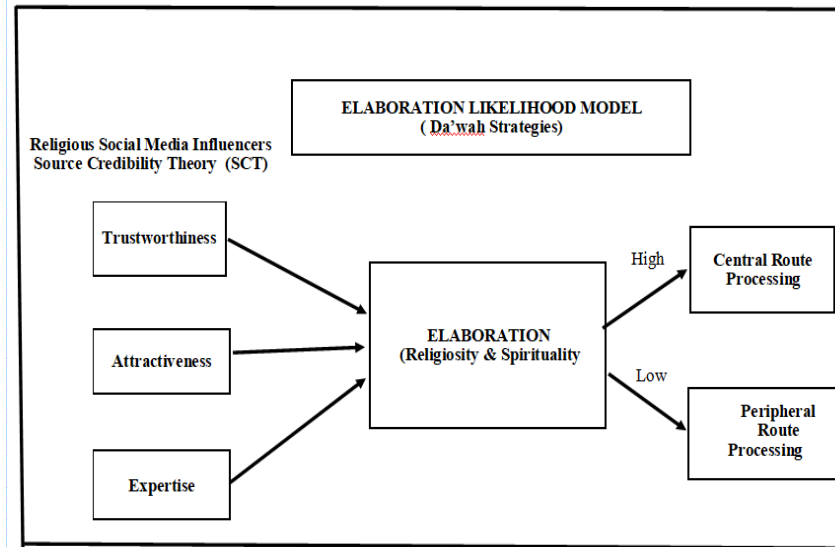
known media celebrities can therefore have a big impact on and influence their followers by sharing their lifestyle. The relationship with their fans through celebrity-fan connection and engagement on social media motivate the followers to change behavior and attitude to practice Islamic culture. The researchers stated that famous celebrities in Malaysia, such as Siti Nurhaliza, Noor Neelofa, well-known entrepreneur Vivy Yusof, and well-known social media personality Hanis Zalikha, have a significant influence on shaping current fashion trends. Overall, these significant media personalities and celebrities have developed a huge social media follower in the social media networks (Ithnin et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of persuasive religious contents demonstrated in volunteer actions such as giving donation for charity and needy also indication of Islamic practices. The influencers' credibility will encourage someone or followers to spend time and donate money for fund raising or *infaq* and *sadaqah*. The more the religious influencer is considered credible by followers, the higher the followers' religiosity values are (Joanly et al.2022). This shows that followers of religious content perceived religious influencers as trustworthy and credible. The persuasive contents motivate the followers to make donations to organizations or social foundations owned by the influencers. These results supported the research findings that trustworthiness is the key to changing consumer attitudes and behavior.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In the era of digital platforms, the religious leaders can now share their *da'wah* and thoughts with anyone, anytime, anywhere in the region. This can be considered as a tremendous opportunity for Muslims to participate in online discussions focused around contemporary interpretations of Islam via Islamic websites or personal influencers social media accounts. The qualities of trustworthiness, credibility, experts of the influencers determine the effectiveness of religious contents to the users. The researcher proposed religious social media influencers from Source Credibility Theory and Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain the user's acceptance level of religious contents in social media networks.

Figure 1: Influence of religious social media influencers' credibility on followers' religiosity and spirituality in Malaysia: a conceptual model the use of *da'wah* strategies in social media networking



The conceptual framework suggests the three pillars of the Source Credibility Theory known as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise. A source's reliability and the communicator's skill in conveying the information are both factors that contribute to their credibility. When a message is delivered via trustworthy sources, it is considered to be more convincing. The audience's opinions and behaviour can be influenced by these resources (Serban, 2010).

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a broad theory of behaviour change created in 1980, by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo. This model is one of the most popular psychological models, that explains how people digest information from social media content. The centre route and the peripheral route are the two main paths for persuasion that the ELM suggests. The probability of elaboration will depend on a person's drive and capability to assess the argument being presented. In other words, people can process different types of communication with diverse degrees of thought (elaboration), ranging from a low degree of mind (low elaboration) to a high degree of thought (high elaboration) (Ab Kadir et al., 2018).

In relation to this study, it will explain how religious social media content information is processed that affect users' religiosity and spirituality. Elaboration is influenced by a variety of motivations, skills and abilities, chances, etc. The peripheral route is employed when the message recipient has a low level of interest in the topic at hand and/or a limited capacity for message processing. Thus, the deep elaboration of messages has significant impact on user's religiosity. The cognitive elaborations that result from people processing information centrally will be considerably more relevant to the knowledge itself. The credibility source of messages undoubtedly determines type of message elaboration.

However, the amount of material that is unreliable and inaccurate contributes to confusion in religious practices. Users of social media with a limited understanding of Islam, such as Muslim youngsters, may have difficulty evaluating the reliability of information sources (Khairunnissa et al., 2021). Hence, the peripheral route of elaboration will be executed.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to review the role of religious leaders in terms of *da'wah* dissemination in social media networks. The study is using a secondary data approach, which is in the form of library research. Data analysis is based on journals and reference materials on the theme of the role of religious social media influencers to promote Islamic lifestyle to the Muslim users. The information obtained is from various sources such as books, journals and online newspaper reports. The secondary information is collected and the highlights of the study are done to complete the research objective. The researcher gathered information related to the influence of religious social media influencers' credibility to the followers' religiosity and spirituality. In addition, research findings related to the effectiveness of social media in spreading the Islamic *da'wah* in the new millennium documented in the literature and discussion.

## DISCUSSION

*Da'wah* today includes not just verbally disseminating Islamic information and teachings but also using creative methods to engage audiences. Younger generations consider social media more appealing because of its many functions (Hakim et al., 2021). Religious leaders need to be creative in their *da'wah* delivery in order to keep up with societal changes and requirements without sacrificing the integrity of the *da'wah's* core message. *Da'wah* in the digital era offers a different way to spread religious messages and advance intellectual efforts. *Da'wah* online has significantly increased because it is not constrained by time or geography. Many people choose to learn about religion through virtual encounters, both as preachers and as listeners. Nowadays, a lot of preachers provide online courses on Islam and the Quran.

The Covid-19 outbreak has even prompted widespread usage of social media. Many religious leaders or *ulama'* use social media to communicate and instruct their followers, especially the millennial generation, in addition to the government's strategy to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus by restricting religious activities in places of worship. The top three social media sites for creating content by religious influencers are YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Both written and visual content can be produced. It features motivational sayings, brief lectures, meditations, songs, and dance. By liking, sharing, commenting on, or promoting the information they view, followers can participate actively. It's interesting to note that the followers may belong to multiple religions in addition to just one. It would be fascinating to investigate this phenomenon further in order to determine whether the social media reaction is a result of the influence of the influencers' credibility or of other aspects. On social media, religious influencers can have a favourable impact on their followers' religiosity, especially if they have a large

following. Religious influencers use social media to promote non-profits or foundations and urge their followers to give donation for fund-raising helping the poor and needy people (Joanly et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

It is necessary to build *da'wah* that is focused on elevating the level of spirituality, intelligence, and *mad'u*. In the era of influx information in the internet, Islamic contents need to deliver effectively. Thus, the *da'ie* must have the latest skills and knowledge to maximize the effectiveness of the *da'wah* mission (Mustofa Hilmi, 2021). The *da'ie* today needs to be more creative and flexible in dealing with the community in order for the message to be accepted by them easily and openly in the social media networks. Social media also offers a variety of functions, from posting films and images. The creation of ICT innovations that are integrated with *da'wah* is the key to Islamic preachers succeeding in the industrial era 4.0. This step can enable users or followers to efficiently receive messages from *da'wah* without being dependent on a specific location or time. *Da'wah* communications can be accessed by the audience from any location. Additionally, by selecting materials, people can determine the *da'wah* form that perfectly suits them. They can pick from a variety of appealing and readily available media materials. Islamic preaching must adapt to the times as they change. By making the best use of the media, *da'wah* can be successful. The *da'wah* process can only become stagnate by insisting on the outdated practises.

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