



Meaning-Making of Paid Da'wah Among Indonesian Social Media Netizens

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ABSTRACT

Paid dawah held in luxury hotel ballrooms have become a visible digital phenomenon in Indonesia, generating debate regarding representation, accessibility, and spiritual experience. While previous studies have largely focused on religious institutions, preachers, or commodification, there remains limited research examining how digital audiences interpret and negotiate meaning within this emerging da'wah format. This study fills that gap by analyzing how netizens respond to, frame, and reconstruct the image of hotel-based da'wah circulating through TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. This research employs a qualitative design using a cyberphenomenology approach grounded in representation theory. The dataset consists of social media comments, which were inductively coded using NVivo 12 to trace patterns of perception, symbolic tension, and meaning-making within digital discourse. Findings reveal a shifting landscape of religious meaning. Discussions indicate a reconfiguration of da'wah authority, where legitimacy is shaped not only through knowledge, but also through digital visibility and performative aesthetics. Public responses further show that hotel da'wah is perceived through the logic of event-like experience, marked by ticketing systems, seat tiers, and staged visual atmospheres resembling concerts or motivational seminars. Meaning therefore does not reside solely in the lecture, but emerges through packaging, reception, and comparison with other social experiences. This study contributes to digital da'wah scholarship by demonstrating how meaning is negotiated through representation and public interaction. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of inclusive access and participation in visually mediated da'wah spaces.

Keywords: *Digital da'wah, social media, cyberphenomenology, paid dawah, netizen representation*

INTRODUCTION

The rise of paid dawah held in luxury hotel ballrooms and widely promoted through social media has become a subject of intense public debate in Indonesia. These events present a modernized form of da'wah that appeals to urban audiences, supported by professional audiovisual design, curated aesthetics, and digital marketing strategies. Supriansyah (2023)) associates this trend with the emergence of "populist preachers" and hijrah-oriented celebrity figures whose preaching formats no longer resemble traditional mosque-based study circles. At the same time, growing criticism highlights concerns surrounding exclusivity, the commercialization of religious symbols, and the blurring of boundaries between spiritual practice and lifestyle consumption. These debates place paid dawah at the intersection of religion, media, digital culture, and social class—illustrating how da'wah practices adapt to and are contested within contemporary Indonesian society.

Over the past decade, da'wah has undergone significant transformation as preachers migrate from physical venues to digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and X. In this environment, religious communication is increasingly shaped by the logic of digital culture, where visibility, engagement, and aesthetics influence how Islamic messages are received. Whyte (2021) similarly shows that digital technologies reshape how religious authority is constructed and perceived; audiences play an active role in assessing credibility and renegotiating authority online.

Indonesia's demographic landscape amplifies these dynamics. As the world's largest Muslim-majority nation with an active digital ecosystem, Indonesia provides fertile ground for the emergence of new forms of technologically mediated religiosity. Paid dawah exemplify this shift, merging spiritual messages with digital spectacle and aesthetic appeal aimed at young, urban Muslim communities. Gary R Bunt (2018) describes such environments as part of "cyber-Islamic environments," where Islamic symbols are produced, circulated and contested within platform-driven cultures.

Previous studies have explored religious commodification, lifestyle-oriented religiosity, and the growth of urban Muslim consumer culture ((Wibawa et al., 2025); (Yuningsih, 2024). Other research has examined digital da'wah strategies, platform disruptions, and the symbolic construction of online Islamic identities (Verolyna & Syaputri, 2021); (Hidayat & Nuri, 2024)). The commercialization of da'wah risks blurring the line between worship and the entertainment industry (Risadiana et al., 2020). Other issues include the spread of misinformation, the reduction of Islamic teachings to slogans, and the tailoring of religious content to market tastes (Ali & Maksum, 2024). However, much of this scholarship primarily focuses on preachers, institutions, or media systems. While the meaning-making processes of digital audiences remain understudied. In particular, little is known about how netizens interpret, reframe, or contest the visual and symbolic representations of paid dawah that circulate on social media.

This is crucial because digital publics are not passive recipients. They actively reconstruct religious meaning through comments, memes, emotional reactions, and symbolic negotiations. As (Sabri, 2021) notes, media content is never neutral but is shaped by ideological, technological and audience-driven forces. Understanding netizen interpretations is therefore essential for examining how da'wah meaning evolves within the digital attention economy. To address this gap, this study explores how netizens experience, interpret and respond to paid dawah in online environments. This approach enables deeper insights into lived digital experiences, capturing symbolic cues, emotional tensions, and cultural negotiations embedded in social media interactions.

The aim of this study is to analyze how paid dawah are represented on social media and how netizens symbolically respond to them. In addition, the study seeks to uncover the dynamics of da'wah meaning construction amid the digital culture and phenomena that continue to evolve in the era of Society 5.0. This research contributes methodologically by advancing cyberphenomenology as an approach to studying digital religious experiences; empirically by examining an emerging form of visually curated, platform-mediated da'wah; and theoretically by enriching representation studies through an analysis of how digital publics negotiate and reconfigure Islamic symbols in contemporary digital environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation of Religion and Mediatization in Digital Spaces

Religious representation in digital environments is not a neutral reflection of reality but a dynamic cultural construction shaped by visual aesthetics, media logics, and audience interaction. Drawing on Stuart Hall's concept of representation, meaning is produced through systems of signs and discursive practices rather than inherently embedded in the object itself. In digital spaces, meaning is further shaped by the affordances of platforms, algorithmic structures, and participatory cultures, making representation a negotiated and relational process.

Representation can be understood as the act of re-presenting, standing in for something, creating an image, or a way of attributing meaning to objects or texts that are depicted. Texts here can take various forms, such as written words, images, real-life events, or audiovisual materials (Alamsyah, 2020)

A number of studies emphasize that the representation of religion in digital media unfolds through processes of mediation and mediatization, wherein media act not merely as channels but as agents shaping religious experience. Túlio de Sousa et al. (2021) highlight that contemporary religious expression increasingly takes visual,

emotionally resonant, and platform-oriented forms that reconstruct how audiences perceive and engage with religious symbols.

This is consistent with findings by Anshar et al. (2024), who show that visual choices, narrative structures, and rhetorical styles in online da'wah content strongly influence how religious meaning is interpreted within social media environments.

In the context of paid dawah, elements such as stage lighting, ballroom décor, promotional posters, and curated event formats form integral components of representation that invite reinterpretation and contestation by online audiences.

Understanding these representations requires examining how digital platforms reshape religious communication, turning aesthetic and performative elements into central components of meaning-making.

Religious Authority in the Social Media Ecosystem

Digital technology has reconfigured religious authority by shifting legitimacy from traditional institutions to networked publics. Whyte (2021) argues that Islamic authority in cyberspace is produced through a negotiation between preachers and audiences, where credibility depends on visibility, interaction, and community perception.

In Indonesia, this transformation is evident in the rise of social media preachers who gain legitimacy through emotional resonance, accessibility, and stylistic appeal rather than solely through formal religious credentials. Ulyan (2023) further explains that digital da'wah democratizes authority by enabling new actors—often outside traditional institutions—to gain influence based on digital popularity and audience engagement.

This renegotiation of authority becomes particularly visible in the debate surrounding paid dawah. Netizen reactions—ranging from praise to skepticism—illustrate how digital communities collectively validate or challenge the legitimacy of religious performances.

Cyber-Islamic Environments and the Culture of Digital Da'wah

Bunt's (2018) conceptualization of *cyber-Islamic environments* offers a valuable framework for understanding how Islamic practices adapt to digital spaces. In these environments, religious identity, symbolism, and narratives are shaped through algorithm-driven interactions, platform aesthetics, and participatory engagement.

Paid dawah, promoted through visually polished posters, highlight reels and cinematic promotional videos, reflect digital da'wah practices embedded within platform cultures

such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Túlio de Sousa et al. (2021) note that religious expression in online environments increasingly relies on performance, visuality, and emotional appeal, reshaping how audiences interpret religious authenticity and authority.

The use of hotel ballrooms, stage designs, and professional audiovisual production aligns with these emerging aesthetics, positioning religious events within the broader dynamics of digital spectacle and mediated authenticity.

Lifestyle Religiosity

A shift in religious expression linked to middle-class consumption and lifestyle practices. Wibawa et al. (2025) and Yuningsih (2024) highlight how religious events increasingly intersect with market logics, aesthetic preferences, and aspirational identities. These dynamics are reflected in the use of premium venues, VIP seating, tiered ticketing, and curated experiences in some paid religious events.

However, while commodification provides an important sociocultural backdrop, it is not the central focus of this study. Rather, commodification is treated as a contextual factor that shapes how online audiences interpret the symbolic features of paid dawah. The study focuses primarily on how representation is produced and how meaning is negotiated by netizens, rather than on the economic aspects themselves.

Digital Da'wah, Audience Participation and Meaning-Making

Research on digital da'wah highlights the increasingly participatory nature of online religious engagement. Ulyan (2023) emphasizes that digital audiences are not passive recipients but active contributors who reshape and redistribute meaning through comments, reactions, and discursive engagement.

Anshar et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that audience responses form an essential part of the discourse surrounding online da'wah, serving as a mechanism that can reinforce, reinterpret, or challenge the intended meanings of religious content.

the case of paid dawah, online audiences actively reinterpret visual symbols such as luxury settings, ticket prices and event branding and negotiate their meanings through humor, critique, moral reflection, and social commentary. This underscores the importance of examining representation not only as a production of symbols but as an interactive process shaped by diverse audience perspectives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design using a cyberphenomenology approach, which integrates phenomenological inquiry with digital observation adapted from netnography (Bungin, 2023a). Cyberphenomenology, however, extends beyond these foundations of phenomenological awareness. It emphasizes that consciousness can also be constructed in worlds that are not only interpreted but also lived as realities within hyperreality, emerging from the intersubjectivities of individuals engaging through communication technologies.(Bungin, 2023b). This approach enables the researcher to trace how meaning is experienced, contested and interpreted within online interactions, making it suitable for examining how digital audiences negotiate the representation of paid dawah held in hotel ballrooms. Cyberphenomenology views digital discourse as lived experience, therefore, meaning is approached not only through the content of da'wah itself but also through emotional reactions, symbolic resistance, irony, and moral commentary emerging from user engagement on social media.

Data collection was conducted between June and August 2025, focusing on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube posts containing discussions and user responses to paid dawah. Data was gathered through purposive sampling, selecting online material that explicitly referenced hotel-based religious events, ticket pricing and audience reception. A total of 15 primary content posts and 700 public comments were analyzed. The sample size in this research is intentional and methodologically grounded. This study prioritizes depth rather than numerical breadth, emphasizing interpretive immersion over statistical generalization. Larger scraping often reveals frequency patterns, whereas this research seeks to uncover *how meaning is constructed*, not *merely how often it appears*. Thus, a curated data set allows for closer reading, thick interpretation and a phenomenological mapping of symbolic negotiation among netizens. Big data remains valuable for future extension, yet the present study adopts an immersive-small corpus model to privilege meaning, nuance, and experiential detail.

Data were gathered through passive-participatory observation, allowing the researcher to observe discourse without intervening in comment threads. Posts were archived manually using screenshots, URL logging and content capturing for traceable retrieval. Comments were scraped through keyword-based filtering (e.g., *kajian berbayar*, *tiket kajian*, *ballroom dakwah*, *ustadz bayar*, *kajian hotel*) and cleaned to remove duplicates, bots, and irrelevant entries. All material was then processed using NVivo 12 Pro for inductive thematic analysis. Coding followed three interpretive stages, they are open coding to identify recurring expressions and symbolic tensions, axial coding to cluster similar patterns across platforms and selective coding to synthesize higher-order meanings related to representation, religious authority, and spiritual identity negotiation.

All quotations are labeled using the format N(number/platform), where N refers to Netizen, the number indicates the comment's sequential order in the dataset, and the platform (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) identifies the source. For example, N219/TikTok refers to the 219th captured comment on TikTok. This coding system is used to maintain traceability while preserving anonymity and research ethics.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. All data were sourced from publicly accessible environments that do not require login-based consent, and user identities were anonymized to ensure privacy. The researcher remained a non-interfering digital observer, reflecting the phenomenological commitment to presence-without-alteration. The research design and analytical flow are visualized in Figure 1, illustrating the transition from digital immersion to meaning interpretation.



Figure 1 Cyberphenomenology Research Design on Paid dawah in Hotel Ballrooms

Source: Researcher's compilation

Through this methodological framework, the study does not merely document da'wah content, but interrogates how audiences, through humor, critique, endorsement and resistance, reconstruct the religious meaning of paid lectures in the era of Society 5.0.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study identifies three major groups of findings that represent how Islamic lectures in hotels are represented, received and interpreted by the digital public. All data were analyzed using a cyberphenomenology approach, focusing on users' lived experiences in online communities, and interpreted through the lens of representation theory to understand how the meaning of *da'wah* is constructed within the context of social media.

1. REPRESENTATION OF DA'WAH HOTEL-BASED ISLAMIC LECTURES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The phenomenon of Islamic lectures held in luxury hotels and massively promoted on social media illustrates a new form of Islamic da'wah representation that adapts to the aesthetics of the digital era. Based on data collected through observations on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, it is evident that organizers and preachers utilize social media platforms not merely as channels of information, but also as performative spaces to construct da'wah imagery that is visual, exclusive, and attractive.

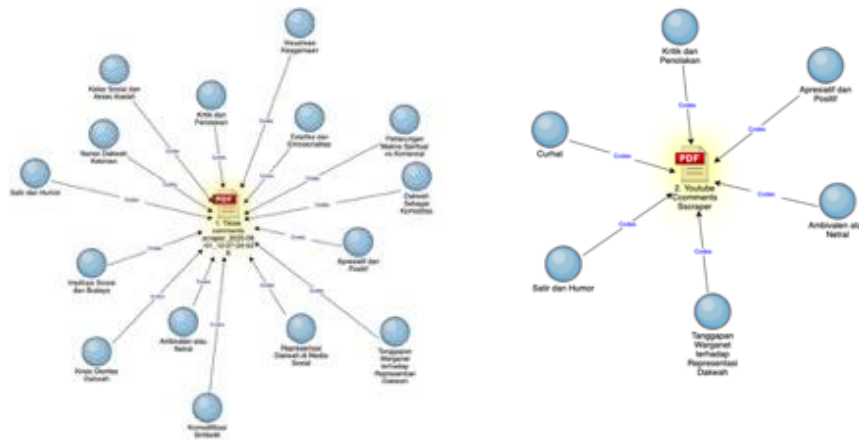


Figure 2 Mapping of Da'wah Representation Comments in NVivo 12
 Source: Researcher's compilation

Below illustrates node clustering for this theme, mapping how netizen comments were categorized under *representation framing*, *aesthetic performance*, and *platform-mediated perception*. Larger nodes show dominant meaning production, confirming that representation — not the event itself — constitutes the interpretive core of digital da'wah.

On TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, netizens respond not only to the religious content itself but also to how *da'wah* is represented visually, symbolically, and emotionally. This is evident in the emergence of nodes such as *Religious Visualization*, *Aesthetics and Emotionality*, *Symbolic Commodification*, and *Contemporary Da'wah Narratives*. The platform highlights the dominance of visual and performative experiences of *da'wah*, consistent with TikTok's character as a short-video medium shaped by the logic of the attention economy.



Figure 3 Example of TikTok Content on an Islamic Lecture Event in a Hotel Ballroom
 Source: TikTok

In religious visualization, content is no longer presented solely as religious material but is packaged with strong visual properties such as dramatic lighting,

modern sound systems, stage decorations resembling concerts, and dress codes that reinforce the exclusivity of the event. Netizen commented:

"kaya pesan tiket konser"
"it feels like buying a concert ticket"
 (N487/TikTok)

Suggesting that the structure of *da'wah* events has begun to resemble entertainment shows, both in terms of packaging and audience expectations. Other comments such as:

"berapa tiketnya?"
"how much is the ticket?"
 (N113/TikTok)

Or, *"pengajiannya bayar, hiks hiks"*
"the lecture requires payment, hiks hiks"
 (N23/TikTok)

Reveal both surprise and criticism regarding the loss of simplicity and openness traditionally associated with Islamic study gatherings. One of the most striking aspects is the contemporary *da'wah* narratives developed through content.

Themes such as hijrah, self-healing, relationship goals and *jodoh syar'i* (Islamic soulmate) dominate the discourse. These themes correspond to the spiritual needs and preferences of urban youth while also reflecting the adaptation of *da'wah* messages to digital market mechanisms. Some netizens voiced critical remarks toward this narrowing of focus, for example:

"Kajianya sering banget soal percintaan"
"The lectures are too often about romantic relationships".
 (N100/YouTube)

Other comments such as:

"Semoga mengkaji Islam bukan hanya masalah asmara dan jodoh"
"Hopefully Islam is studied beyond just romance and marriage",
 (N397/TikTok)

Both indicating resistance against reducing *da'wah* issues to merely personal and emotional concerns. Furthermore, the dimension of aesthetics and emotionality is evident in the organization and dissemination of this *da'wah* content. Many attendees participate primarily to document their presence on social media. Comments such as:

"story story story... konten konten konten..."
"stories stories stories... content content content..."
 (N452/TikTok)

"Itu emang buat kepentingan story aja ga sih?"
"Isn't that really just for the sake of Instagram stories?"
 (N383/TikTok)

Comments indicate a shift in orientation from internalizing values to seeking social validation through likes and views. In this sense, *da'wah* is no longer only a space for contemplation but also a performative arena for digital identity.

This phenomenon points to the new symbolic religious symbols. The *ustadz* is no longer merely a preacher but also a spiritual brand ambassador. The hotel ballroom is not just a gathering place but a stage for image-making. *Da'wah* material itself becomes "content" that can be clipped, quoted, given motivational captions and circulated in snackable formats. This shows that religion is undergoing a transformation not only in terms of delivery techniques but also in the meaning and forms of its reception. Comments reflect the visual culture dominating digital spaces today. It is not merely about religious participation but also about how such activities appear in the virtual public sphere. In this context, *da'wah* takes on a dual function: conveying Islamic messages while shaping an aesthetic impression that is worthy of going viral.

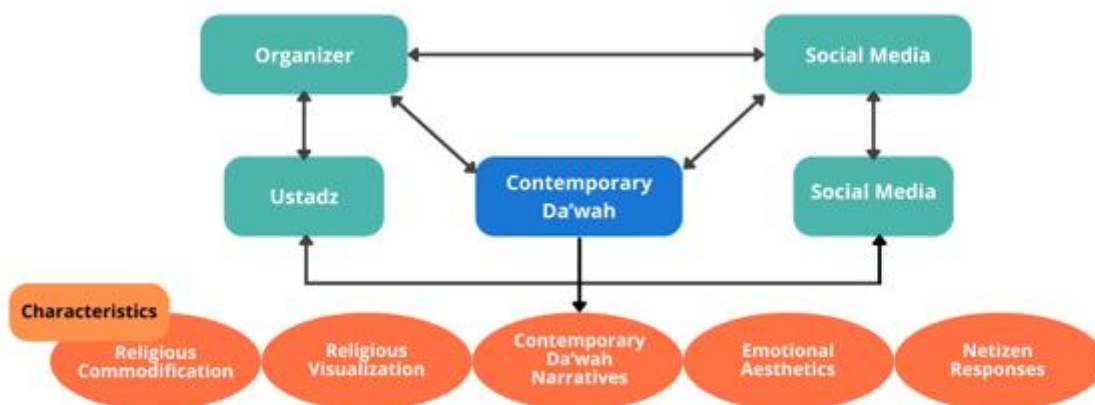


Figure 4 Research Finding Framework
 Source: Researcher's compilation

This type of *da'wah* content illustrates that the meaning of *da'wah* is not stable but is constructed through symbolic practices and audience interpretations. The representation of *da'wah* on social media is not a direct reflection of "Islam" but the outcome of negotiated meanings among organizers, preachers, social media platforms

and netizens as the audience. Islamic symbols such as *pakaian syar'i* (Islamic dress), *zikir* chants or greetings like *akhwat-ikhwan* (sisters-brothers) do not stand alone but appear within a new network of meanings shaped by visual aesthetics, technology and the attention economy.

2. NETIZENS' RESPONSES TO THE REPRESENTATION OF DA'WAH AND HOTEL-BASED ISLAMIC LECTURES

Netizens' responses to the phenomenon of hotel-based *da'wah* disseminated through social media reveal a complex landscape of meaning-making, full of interpretations that reflect the diverse social and spiritual positions of digital communities. Through comments scattered across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, we can observe a spectrum of responses that represent how religious experiences are processed emotionally, ideologically, and aesthetically within digital spaces.

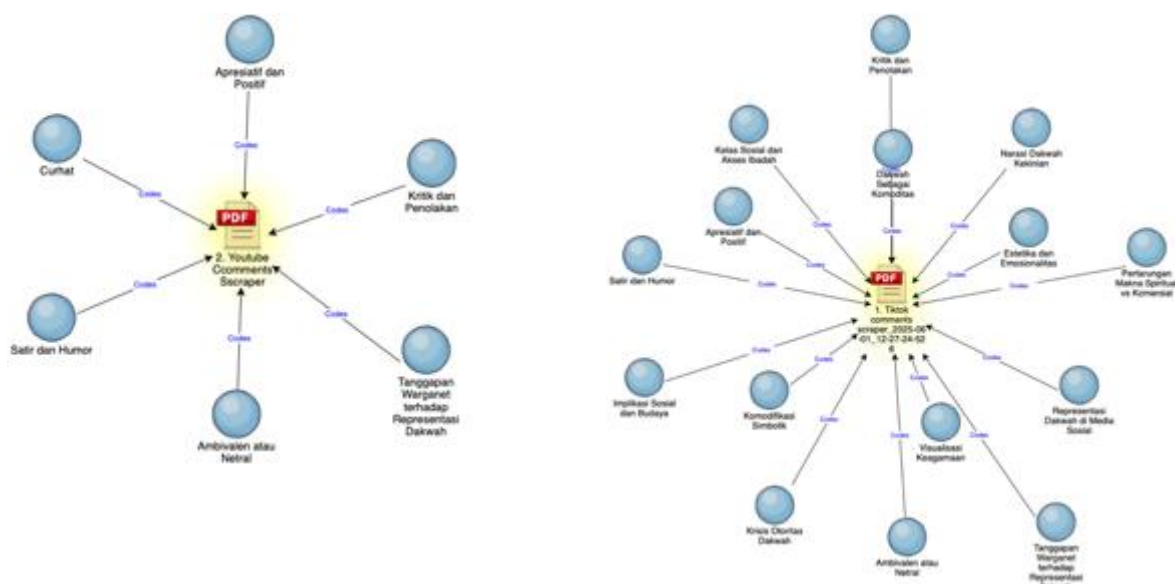


Figure 5 Node structure of netizen responses to the representation of *da'wah* based on comments from two main platforms on digital Islamic lecture content in NVivo 12

The visualization of these categories was produced through the coding of netizen comments on two main platforms—TikTok and YouTube—specifically related to audience responses to the representation of digital *da'wah*. This visualization underscores that aesthetically packaged and ticketed *da'wah* generates broad emotional and discursive resonance within digital spaces.

Netizen responses can be classified into several patterns they are positive appreciation, ambivalence, criticism and rejection, satire and humor, as well as personal confessions, which appeared frequently in YouTube comment sections. Each response pattern reflects not only personal reactions but also markers of social and cultural positions regarding how *da'wah* is represented.

Positive Appreciation and Admiration

Positive appreciation and admiration were expressed by some netizens who conveyed high regard for *da'wah* events considered attractive, touching, and inspiring. Comments such as:

"Masyaallah berlari kencang menuju kebaikan"
"Glory be to Allah, running fast toward goodness"
 (N31/TikTok)

"Semoga diberikan perlindungan Alloh SWT"
"May Allah protect them and grant them safety."
 (N77/YouTube)

Comments illustrate that strong visual representations of *da'wah* on social media can foster a positive religious imagination. Social media thus functions as a medium for spiritual motivation, evoking longing for closeness with religious figures and collective spiritual atmospheres. These comments also indicate that some netizens perceive hotel-based lectures not as deviations but as innovations in *da'wah* relevant to contemporary times. Social media, in this sense, acts as a "window of *da'wah*" that brings together emotional needs, spiritual quests, and aspirations for a more modern Islamic identity.

Ambivalence and Doubt

Beyond such comments, many also reflect ambivalence—expressing interest on the one hand, while questioning the motivation and substance of the events on the other. For example:

"Mereka ini ikut kajian karena benar-benar ingin ngaji atau kebutuhan IG Story aja?"
"Are they attending the lecture to truly study or just to fulfill an Instagram Story need?"
 (N382/TikTok)

These statements reveal confusion between *da'wah* as an act of worship and *da'wah* as a form of digital lifestyle. From a cyberphenomenology perspective, this ambivalence is part of an incomplete digital spiritual experience, as it is always intertwined with performative expectations and online presence. Here, netizens

experience an ambiguity of meaning, wanting to draw closer to *da'wah* while also recognizing the packaging and imagery that blur devotional intentions.

Criticism and Rejection

More explicit criticism appeared in the form of comparisons, reproaches or sarcastic analogies. For example:

"Seandainya jamaah sholat subuh begitu juga berebut barisan depan"
"If only people competed for the front rows at dawn prayer in the same way",
 (N4/TikTok)

or *"panitia pengajian udah kayak panitia konser"*
("the organizers of the lecture are like concert committees").
 (N487/TikTok)

Such comments direct criticism at symbols and mechanisms deemed excessive in representing religious values. They express a desire for *da'wah* to remain solemn, modest, and open—without the need for exclusivity or elite-style packaging.

The use of terms such as *konser* (concert), *war tiket* (ticket war), or *pencahayaan mewah* (luxurious lighting) in critical contexts is a way for netizens to articulate unease with the shifting meaning of *da'wah*. This reflects an oppositional reading, in which audiences reject the intended message delivery and create new meanings contrary to those of the organizers. In this case, the representation of *da'wah* on social media becomes counterproductive when read as an expression of spiritual narcissism or symbolic capitalization.

Satire, Humor and Symbolic Resistance

Amid the flood of comments, satire and humor emerged as distinctive forms of critique in digital spaces. Comments such as:

"war tiket kajian!"
"ticket war for a lecture!"
 (N147/TikTok)

Or;
"jangan lupa lari sambil bikin story"
"don't forget to run while making a story",
 (N431/TikTok)

And *"kajian jadi kebutuhan insta story"*
"lectures have become an Instagram Story necessity"
 (N5/TikTok)

They are subtle forms of resistance against *da'wah* aesthetics perceived as overly performative. Humor becomes a tool for reducing the dominance of symbolic displays presented in lecture videos.

From a cyberphenomenology perspective, this humorous experience is part of a survival strategy of digital communities facing the flood of symbols. By creating humor, netizens distance themselves from dominant representations and open up a space for critique without direct confrontation. This aligns with Stuart Hall's concept of negotiated meaning, where audiences neither fully accept nor fully reject but instead adapt the message to their social experience.

Confessional and Affective Comments

Interestingly, many comments included personal confessions, sadness, or reflections on life experiences related to desires to attend lectures but being hindered by social or economic conditions. For example:

"Pengen banget ikut tapi belum mampu"
"I really want to attend but can't afford it",
 (N6/TikTok)

"Doakan aku bisa hijrah juga ya teman-teman"
"Please pray for me to repent as well, friends",
 (N499/TikTok)

Or;

"Banyak yg komen bayar. Serius emang sekarang kajian bayar?? Setahu saya dari dulu masalah biaya ditanggung panitia yah. Ko sekarang malah kayak nonton konser.."
"Many people are saying it's paid. Seriously, are lectures now ticketed? As far as I know, the cost used to be covered by organizers. Why does it now feel like watching a concert?"
 (N113/YouTube)

These demonstrate how social media also becomes a space for sharing existential experiences. These confessional comments cannot be dismissed as mere noise but must be recognized as authentic expressions of meaning-making based on *da'wah* representations. They prove that social media is not only an observational arena but also an **emotional space**, where social realities are confronted with the symbolic realities offered by viral religious content.

3. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS: NEGOTIATING SPIRITUALITY THROUGH DIGITAL REPRESENTATION.

The phenomenon of paid dawah in hotel venues, which widely circulates on social media, not only stimulates debate at the level of religious discourse but also indicates broader cultural shifts in how da'wah is perceived and represented. What was once grounded in simplicity, communal participation, and spiritual collectivity now appears in a digitally mediated form shaped by visual aesthetics, platform culture, and symbolic markers associated with exclusivity.

Three key interpretive patterns emerge from netizen response: (1) the shifting perception of da'wah authority, (2) the symbolic framing of da'wah as a commodity, and (3) the awareness of class-based differentiation in religious access.

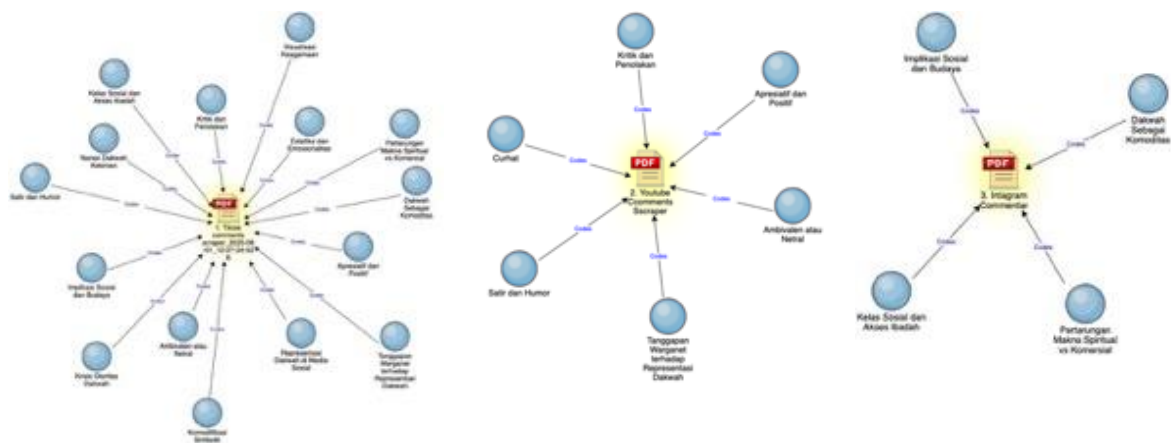


Figure 6. Nodes in netizen's response social and cultural implications: negotiating spirituality through digital representation based on NVivo 12

The Shifting Perception of Da'wah Authority

In traditional settings, da'wah authority was established through religious knowledge, moral character and recognition within pesantren and mosque communities. However, in the digital ecosystem, authority can also be constructed through algorithms, visibility and branding. The rise of popular preachers on social media reflects a transition where credibility is negotiated not only through scholarly depth, but also through follower count, delivery style and virality. Netizen responses illustrate this shift. Comments such as:

"Ini ustaz apa selebgram?"

"Is this ustaz or a social media influencer?"

(N100/Instagram)

Or comments "Kajiannya bagus, tapi vibes-nya kaya seminar motivasi"
"The lecture is good, but it feels like a motivational seminar."
 (N501/TikTok)

show ambiguity in how audiences categorize contemporary da'i. These figures increasingly occupy a liminal space — simultaneously preacher, performer, educator, and celebrity. The dual identity is not merely descriptive, but representational.

This reflects a reorganization of representational codes, where authority is no longer inherited through tradition alone, but contested and reconstructed symbolically in digital spaces. The strength of religious authority is no longer anchored solely in textual mastery, but often in audiovisual impact — performance quality, emotional resonance, and platform visibility.

Rather than indicating a decline in spiritual credibility, this shift signals a transformation in how religious legitimacy is produced. What appears convincing through visual presence and platform circulation is increasingly perceived as spiritually valid by segments of society. In other words, authority is not lost — it is **re-coded**, negotiated through symbols that are shaped, consumed, and interpreted online.

Netizen's Symbolic Framing of Da'wah as a Commodity

The phenomenon of paid dawah in hotel ballrooms does not necessarily indicate that religion has become an economic commodity in practice; however, many netizens interpret it through the language of commodification. Within digital representation, tickets, seat categories, VIP access, goodie bags and merchandise are not merely financial instruments but symbolic markers that influence how religious experience is perceived. In this sense, commodification operates as an audience-generated meaning rather than a structural economic reality. Several social media comments illustrate this pattern of symbolic reading, for example:

"Berapa tiketnya?"
"How much is the ticket?"
 (N113/TikTok)

These comments suggest that da'wah is no longer perceived solely as a space of worship but also as a curated social event, with qualities resembling packaged experiences. Ticket price, seating hierarchy, venue architecture, and branding do not only regulate entry; they function semiotically. The audience interprets religious participation through metaphors associated with concerts, seminars, and lifestyle gatherings. Thus, commodification here is best understood not as a material economic shift, but as a representational framework constructed by digital spectators.

In constructionist view, meaning does not reside inherently within religious practice. Instead, meaning emerges through representational codes that circulate in media. When da'wah is visually framed with stage lighting, LED screens, hotel ambience, ticketing systems, and promotional merchandise, these elements act as *signifiers* through which spirituality is reframed as prestige, exclusivity, and experience-based consumption. Netizens are not necessarily criticizing the economics of Islam — they are decoding the aesthetic grammar of da'wah as mediated content.

Under this perspective, commodification is not the core transformation of da'wah itself; rather, it is a perceptual outcome shaped by digital representation. Da'wah becomes thinkable in commodity terms because it is presented through the same symbolic structure used for entertainment and lifestyle events — stage, branding, lighting, ticket tiers and experience packages. What changes is not religion, but how religion is mediated, packaged and imagined online.

The Awareness of Class-Based Differentiation in Religious Access

Another significant pattern that emerges from the data is the awareness of inequality in access to religious experiences. While da'wah ideally remains open and spiritually inclusive, the format of hotel-based, ticketed lectures introduces a perception of hierarchy — where participation is shaped by one's financial ability, proximity to the venue, and social positioning. This does not confirm that religion is inherently exclusive; rather, it reveals how audiences **interpret access through class-related metaphors** in digital conversation. Netizen comments illustrate these sentiments:

"sayang banget gak dapat kuota. padahal mau ikut yang tanggal 25 bulan Desember *besok."*

"Too bad I didn't get a seat quota. I actually wanted to attend the one on December 25"

(N219/TikTok)

Or,

"saya ikutan yg ust. Hanan Attaki HTM Rp100 ribu mau duduk di depan atau belakang harga sama siapa yg datang duluan bisa duduk di depan, kalau Ustadz yang ini HTMnya beda-beda buat yg duduk di depan Rp300-an, duduk di belakang Rp100-an"

"I joined Ust. Hanan Attaki's event, the ticket price was the same for all seats — you could sit in front or back depending on who came early. But for this preacher, the ticket varies: around IDR300 for front seating and IDR100 for the back".

(N19/Instagram)

These expressions do not merely complain about price; they reveal how participation is being mentally mapped through class-boundary language. The idea of being able or unable to attend reflects symbolic stratification, where some audiences participate directly in the religious event, while others experience it only through short clips circulating on TikTok or YouTube. Digital platforms, instead of eliminating barriers, can also amplify them through visual contrasts — ballroom staging versus comment-section spectatorship.

This theme reflects how meaning is produced in relation to social positioning. A five-star venue, VIP seating, and reserved ticket categories do not only structure the event physically — they operate as **semiotic cues** that shape how religion is imagined, who it is “for,” and who remains at the margins. Thus, the issue is not economic determinism, but interpretive differentiation based on social symbols of access.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined how paid dawah held in hotel ballrooms are represented on social media and how netizens negotiate their meanings within digital culture. Using a cyberphenomenological approach and representation theory, the findings show that da’wah today is not only conveyed by preachers, but is co-constructed through audience interpretation, platform aesthetics, and symbolic association.

The results reveal an evolving landscape of religious meaning-making. Da’wah authority is increasingly shaped by digital visibility, performance style, and algorithmic presence rather than traditional scholarly recognition alone. Netizens also interpret paid da’wah using the language of commodification — not as an economic fact, but as a symbolic reading informed by ticketing, tiered seating, venue prestige, and event formatting. At the same time, discourses of accessibility and class awareness surface when participation is imagined through metaphors of exclusivity and layered belonging. These dynamics reflect that meaning is not fixed within religious events, but emerges through representation and public negotiation in online spaces.

This study carries certain limitations. The dataset represents a defined slice of social conversation and may not reflect the full spectrum of public engagement across wider platforms. Future research may broaden comparative cases, explore offline–online integration, or employ large-scale data scraping to deepen thematic variation and longitudinal understanding.

Practically, this study offers insight for da’wah organizers, digital religious institutions, and communication strategists. As da’wah becomes visually mediated, considerations of inclusivity and accessibility remain essential in maintaining meaningful spiritual

participation across diverse communities. Rather than signaling a decline, the ongoing transformation suggests new ways in which faith is experienced, represented, and negotiated in the attention economy — where authority, symbolism, and engagement continuously adapt to contemporary Muslim life.

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