AI Ustazah on Social Media: Digital Da'wah Opportunities and Challenges to Religious Authority
(A Case Study of the TikTok Account @nia.hajar_s)

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Abstract

The TikTok account @nia.hajar_s, featuring a figure called "Ustazah Hajar", went viral in late June 2026 and was later revealed to be entirely generated by artificial intelligence (AI). Within roughly two weeks, the account reportedly exceeded 1.2 million followers before being set to private. This study aims to describe the development of the phenomenon, identify the digital da'wah opportunities it offers, and analyse the challenges it poses to Islamic religious authority. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical method with a case study design, data were collected through documentation of 16 news articles from 12 online media outlets published between 25 June and 31 July 2026, supplemented by a literature review, and analysed through content analysis using Heidi A. Campbell's layers of religious authority and the concept of sanad in the Islamic scholarly tradition. The findings show that the AI persona gained public trust through convincing visuals and algorithmic distribution rather than through scholarly hierarchy, community, or verifiable textual references. The phenomenon expands the reach of da'wah but raises accountability problems, as there is no clearly identifiable party who can be held responsible for errors in the content. The study recommends five principles for managing AI-based da'wah: positioning AI as a tool, identity transparency, verification by scholars, operator accountability, and the strengthening of digital religious literacy.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, digital da'wah, religious authority, sanad, TikTok

Introduction

The development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has entered the religious sphere, a domain that has long depended on the personal relationship between teacher and student. One of the cases that has most captured public attention in Indonesia is the TikTok account @nia.hajar_s, which features a veiled woman called "Ustazah Hajar". In her videos, the figure delivers sermons in front of a microphone in a style that closely resembles that of a real preacher. As of 25 June 2026, the account reportedly had more than 920,000 followers and 10.4 million likes, and clips of its videos were widely reposted, even being shared as WhatsApp statuses (Redaksi Gebrak.id, 2026). Later, the digital culture and communication observer

Firman Kurniawan confirmed that the figure was an AI-generated fabrication ("Heboh, Ustazah Viral TikTok," 2026).

The disclosure of this identity prompted responses from various parties. Badrah Uyuni, a member of the Fatwa Commission of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of DKI Jakarta, warned of the risk of a crisis of religious authority, since an AI persona possesses neither a scholarly sanad nor accountability ("Fenomena 'Ustazah AI' Nia Hajar: MUI DKI," 2026). The Deputy Chairman of MUI, KH M. Cholil Nafis, emphasised that the Muslim community cannot take AI as a teacher (Hawari, 2026). The Ministry of Religious Affairs, through Thobib Al-Asyhar, Head of the Bureau of Public Relations, Data, and Information, stated that AI should be positioned as a supporting tool rather than as a substitute for teachers or preachers (*mubaligh*) ("Ustazah Hajar Viral di TikTok Ternyata AI," 2026).

This phenomenon is not merely a matter of visual hoaxes; it touches the core of the Islamic scholarly tradition, namely the question of from whom religious knowledge is taken. Muhammad ibn Sirin, as narrated in the *Muqaddimah* of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, stated:

إِنَّ هَذَا الْعِلْمَ دِينٌ، فَانْظُرُوا عَمَّنْ تَأْخُذُونَ دِينَكُمْ

Translation: "Indeed, this knowledge is religion, so consider carefully from whom you take your religion" (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, n.d., Muqaddimah, 1:14). When a persona can imitate the face, voice, and gestures of a preacher without any human being appearing and taking responsibility behind it, the principle of "from whom" loses its footing.

Studies on religious authority in the digital sphere are fairly abundant. Turner (2007) argues that the internet fragments religious authority because anyone can produce interpretations without passing through traditional channels. Eickelman and Anderson (2003) show the emergence of "new interpreters" in the Muslim world alongside the development of new media. In the Indonesian context, Slama (2018) demonstrates that social media has become an important space for everyday Islamic practice, while Nisa (2018) shows how the visual culture of Instagram shapes da'wah among young Muslim women. Student research has also shown that alternative religious authority can be formed through participatory interaction on Instagram (Firdausy, 2026) and through the relational basis of popular preachers across various platforms (Maulana, 2025).

Studies that specifically address AI are still relatively new. Reformis et al. (2026) examine the mechanisation of fatwas through jurisprudential (*fiqh*) chatbots and their disruption of the epistemology of isnad, while Lestari et al. (2026) investigate the patterns of fiqh epistemological negotiation among Islamic Religious Education students in relation to generative AI. However, these studies generally discuss human preachers who use digital media, or AI as a question-and-answer tool. Studies of AI personas that *appear as* preachers, complete with a face, a name, and a preaching style, and that initially do not disclose their artificial identity, remain scarce. This is the gap that the present study seeks to fill.

Based on this background, this study addresses three questions: (1) how did the @nia.hajar_s phenomenon develop, and how did the public respond to it; (2) what digital da'wah opportunities does the phenomenon offer; and (3) how does the phenomenon challenge Islamic religious authority, and what management measures can be taken? Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of digital religious authority by adding the dimension of subject accountability. Practically, it is expected to inform religious institutions, the government, and educators in responding to AI-based da'wah.

Religious Authority in the Digital Sphere

Heidi A. Campbell is one of the leading scholars in the study of digital religion. Campbell (2007) distinguishes four layers of religious authority on the internet: *hierarchy* (the roles and positions of religious leaders), *structure* (religious communities and institutions), *ideology* (belief systems and shared identity), and *text* (scriptures and official references). In subsequent work, Campbell (2012) formulated the concept of *networked religion*, which views digital religion as a hybrid space connected to offline religious practice rather than a space separate from real life. Campbell (2020) also shows that digital creatives can build authority through media skills and relationships with their audiences, not solely through formal positions.

In addition to Campbell, the theory of the mediatisation of religion developed by Hjarvard (2008) explains that media logic gradually reshapes the content and form of religious messages. It should be noted that the theory of mediatisation originates from Hjarvard, not from Campbell. In the social media ecosystem, this logic is embodied in algorithms that prioritise visually and emotionally engaging content.

Simulation and Illusory Intimacy

To understand the AI persona, Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum is helpful. According to Baudrillard (1994), a simulacrum is a sign that no longer refers to an original reality yet is still regarded as real by those who consume it. The persona of "Ustazah Hajar" can be read as such a simulacrum, as it displays the signs of an *ustazah* without there being any actual *ustazah* whom it imitates. The audience's trust in the figure can be explained through the concept of parasocial interaction, namely a one-sided sense of intimacy that audiences develop towards a media figure as though that figure were personally present (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Sanad and the Authority of the Ulama

In the Islamic tradition, the sanad functions not only as a chain of transmission but also as a guarantee of scholarly responsibility. Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak stated:

الإِسْنَادُ مِنَ الدِّينِ، وَلَوْلَا الإِسْنَادُ لَقَالَ مَنْ شَاءَ مَا شَاءَ

Translation: "The isnad is part of religion. Were it not for the isnad, anyone could say whatever they wished" (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, n.d., Muqaddimah, 1:15). Zaman (2002) shows that the authority of the ulama in contemporary Muslim societies continues to rest on their mastery of a scholarly tradition that is inherited and recognised by the community. Religious authority in Islam therefore presupposes a human subject whose teachers can be traced, whose integrity can be assessed, and who can be held accountable. All three frameworks above are employed in this study: Campbell's layers of authority to map the sources of the AI persona's authority, the concepts of the simulacrum and parasocial interaction to explain audience trust, and the concept of sanad as a normative benchmark.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach (Moleong, 2017) with a descriptive-analytical method and a case study design. The TikTok account @nia.hajar_s was selected because of the scale of its virality and because it prompted official responses from religious institutions. Direct observation of the account could not be carried out in full because the account was set to private in early July 2026 ("Ustazah Nia Hajar Ternyata Sosok AI," 2026). This study therefore relies on documentary data.

Data Sources and Collection Techniques

The primary data consist of 16 news articles from 12 online media outlets published between 25 June and 31 July 2026, namely CNN Indonesia, Gebrak.id, detikHikmah, AFU.id, Rublik Depok–Pikiran Rakyat, Hajiumrahnews.com, Harian Bengkulu Ekspres, Mozaik Inilah.com, SERU.co.id, Arrahmah.id, KosongSatu.id, and the opinion page of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The articles were selected purposively, using the criterion that they contained data on the @nia.hajar_s account, statements by experts, or statements by religious institutions. The secondary data consist of books, journal articles, undergraduate and master's theses, and relevant regulatory and fatwa documents.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analysed using *content analysis* (Krippendorff, 2019) in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). At the reduction stage, the data were grouped into three categories: (1) data on the development of the account; (2) responses from experts and institutions; and (3) the issues raised, such as accountability, sanad, and errors in the citation of religious proofs (*dalil*). The data were then presented in tables and narrative form and analysed using the theoretical framework outlined above. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, that is, by comparing the same information across several different media outlets.

Results

The Development of the @nia.hajar_s Account and the Characteristics of Its Content

Based on a review of news coverage, the @nia.hajar_s account grew extremely rapidly in less than three weeks. Table 1 summarises the development in the number of followers and likes as reported by the media.

Table 1 Development of the @nia.hajar_s Account Based on Media Reports

Date of observation	Number of followers	Number of likes	Source and notes
25 June 2026	> 920,000	10.4 million	Gebrak.id; CNN Indonesia
27 June 2026	± 1 million	12.1 million	detikHikmah
28 June 2026	864,000	10 million	AFU.id; possibly based on earlier observation data
9 July 2026	> 1.2 million	14.2 million	SERU.co.id; the account was subsequently set to private

Source: compiled from online news reports, June–July 2026.

Table 1 reveals two things. First, the number of followers rose from approximately 920,000 to more than 1.2 million within about two weeks. Second, there are discrepancies between media outlets; for example, on 28 June AFU.id reported a lower figure than detikHikmah had reported the previous day ("Fenomena 'Ustazah AI' Nia Hajar: MUI DKI," 2026; "Heboh, Ustazah Viral TikTok," 2026). These discrepancies are likely due to differences in the time of observation. The figures should therefore be read as indicating a trend rather than as precise data. Several outlets also described the account as having "millions of followers" ("Punya Jutaan Follower TikTok," 2026); this claim only matches the data from late June to early July.

In terms of content, the account shared short sermon videos, Islamic motivational messages, and invitations to recite more *ṣalawāt* ("Viral 'Ustazah AI' @nia.hajar_s," 2026). Visually, the persona was presented as a veiled woman speaking in front of a microphone, with

an attractive appearance and distinctive dimples (Redaksi Gebrak.id, 2026; "Viral 'Ustazah AI' @nia.hajar_s," 2026). Her lip movements, facial expressions, and manner of speaking appeared so natural that many users assumed the figure was human ("Ustazah Viral TikTok dengan 1 Juta Followers," 2026). According to Firman Kurniawan, the easiest way to recognise an AI voice is an intonation that is overly neat and consistent, without the pauses for thought typical of human speech. He also identified three factors driving the proliferation of such content: easy access to AI tools, the ability to create it simply by learning from online tutorials, and output that is already difficult to distinguish from authentic content ("Viral 'Ustadzah Hajar' di TikTok," 2026).

These findings indicate that audience trust was built not through scholarly argumentation but through a convincing display of piety. The choice to present a *female* persona with a particular aesthetic also deserves attention. Nisa (2018) shows that da'wah by young women on Indonesian social media is closely linked to visual culture and aesthetic appeal. This AI persona borrows that visual repertoire without any real woman behind it. In Baudrillard's terms, it is a simulacrum of an *ustazah*: a sign that appears real but refers to no one at all.

Responses from Experts, Religious Institutions, and Netizens

The disclosure of the AI identity elicited responses from various circles. Table 2 summarises the main views of the figures quoted in the media.

Table 2 Responses of Public Figures to the "Ustazah Hajar" Phenomenon

Figure and position	Main views	Source
Firman Kurniawan, digital culture and communication observer	Confirmed that the figure was AI-generated; explained the characteristics of AI content and urged the public to verify the sources of religious content	detikHikmah (27/6); Arrahmah.id (29/6)
Alfons Tanujaya, cybersecurity practitioner	The impact of content depends on the intention and the message, but the greatest risk arises when the identity of the operator is unknown	CNN Indonesia (25/6)
Dr. Badrah Uyuni, member of the Fatwa Commission of MUI DKI Jakarta	Technology is neutral; AI has neither sanad nor accountability; proposed four principles for AI-based da'wah	AFU.id (28/6); Rublik Depok (29/6)
KH M. Cholil Nafis, Deputy Chairman of MUI	The community cannot take AI as a teacher; found recitations of religious proofs that were incorrect or not fluent; AI may be consulted only if its references and the party responsible are clear	detikHikmah (1/7); Harian Bengkulu Ekspres (29/6)
Thobib Al-Asyhar, Head of the Bureau of Public Relations, Data, and Information, Ministry of Religious Affairs	AI is only a supporting tool, not a substitute for preachers; information from AI must be verified (*tabayyun*) with experts	detikHikmah (1/7); Mozaik Inilah.com (2/7)

Source: compiled from online news reports, June–July 2026.

Table 2 shows that these figures agree on two points: AI cannot replace the ulama, and the core problem lies in the absence of a responsible party. Alfons Tanujaya, for instance, considers that the greatest risk arises when the identity of the account operator is not clearly known ("'Ustazah AI' Viral di Media Sosial," 2026). Cholil Nafis adds a more concrete finding: in his view, some Arabic recitations of religious proofs were incorrect and at times unrelated to the issue being discussed ("Ustazah AI Nia Hajar Viral, MUI Ingatkan Publik," 2026). He stressed that AI cannot serve as a link in the chain of scholarly transmission because no one is personally responsible for its content, unless its references are clear and the person behind it is identifiable (Hawari, 2026).

Cholil Nafis's view on the background of the account's popularity is also significant. He argues that the high level of public interest stems from a need for religious motivation combined with inadequate public literacy, so that content that feels "relatable" is easily followed by many people (Hawari, 2026). On the netizens' side, news reports noted concerns about accountability: if there is an error in interpretation, there is no real person who can be held responsible ("Heboh, Ustazah Viral TikTok," 2026; Redaksi Gebrak.id, 2026). The sense of closeness that developed before the AI identity was revealed, to the point that the content was shared as WhatsApp statuses, indicates the formation of a parasocial relationship between the audience and the persona. It was this relationship that fractured once the public learned that there was no human being behind the screen.

Opportunities for Digital Da'wah

Despite the criticism, the phenomenon reveals several opportunities for digital da'wah. *First*, it offers an exceptionally wide reach. Within a short time, religious content can reach more than one million followers, a figure that most conventional study circles (*majelis taklim*) would struggle to achieve. Badrah Uyuni herself acknowledged that AI has great potential to make da'wah more engaging, faster, and more accessible, especially to the younger generation ("Ustazah Nia Hajar Ternyata Sosok AI," 2026).

Second, AI can support da'wah work. Badrah Uyuni mentioned several benefits of AI, including assisting in the preparation of da'wah materials, translating content into various languages, and broadening the dissemination of religious information ("Fenomena Ustazah AI Nia Hajar Viral," 2026). *Third*, the phenomenon offers material for reflection on conventional da'wah. The high level of interest in short religious motivational content that is relevant to everyday life ("Ustazah AI Viral, Kemenag dan MUI," 2026) should encourage preachers and religious institutions to renew their modes of delivery without sacrificing depth of knowledge.

Nevertheless, these opportunities must be approached critically. Wide reach is not the same as correct understanding; numbers of followers and likes measure attention, not learning. Moreover, the second benefit in fact confirms that the most appropriate role for AI is as a *tool* for preachers, not as the *figure* of the preacher itself.

Discussion

Challenges to Religious Authority

To identify where the challenge to authority lies, Table 3 compares human preachers in digital media with the AI persona on the basis of Campbell's (2007) four layers of authority, together with an additional dimension proposed by the author, namely subject accountability.

Table 3 Comparison of the Layers of Authority of Human Preachers and the AI Persona

Layer of authority	Human preachers in digital media	AI persona "Ustazah Hajar"
Hierarchy	Have teachers, an educational background, and degrees that can be traced	None; merely imitates the appearance of an *ustazah*
Structure	Connected to *pesantren*, religious organisations, or real congregations	Connected only to followers on the platform
Ideology	Methodology (*manhaj*) or school of thought (*madhhab*) is identifiable	Unclear; the operator and the sources of the material are unknown
Text	Refers to religious proofs that can be checked	Incorrect and irrelevant recitations of religious proofs were found
Subject accountability (proposed by the author)	Can be reprimanded, issue corrections, and be held accountable	No clearly identifiable subject; the account was eventually set to private without any clarification from its operator

Source: author's analysis based on Campbell's (2007) framework and news data.

Table 3 shows that the AI persona has no grounding in any of Campbell's layers of authority. Public trust in it was built on two factors outside this framework, namely visual appearance and algorithmic distribution. The author terms this condition *pseudo-authority*: authority that functions socially because its appearance is convincing, yet is not rooted in a scholarly hierarchy, a community, a clear ideology, or verifiable texts.

The dimension of subject accountability is the key distinguishing factor. Human preachers who are popular on social media are also subject to algorithmic logic. Maulana (2025), for example, shows that the authority of Habib Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar is built on a relational basis mediated by digital technology. Nevertheless, a human preacher remains a subject who can be corrected. In the case of @nia.hajar_s, the account operator never came forward to offer clarification; instead, the account was set to private ("Ustazah Nia Hajar Ternyata Sosok AI," 2026). This is precisely what Badrah Uyuni feared: if errors occur in quoting Qur'anic verses or hadiths, or in interpretation, AI cannot be held accountable, so responsibility should rest with the humans who design and operate it ("Viral 'Ustazah AI' @nia.hajar_s," 2026). This finding is consistent with the study by Reformis et al. (2026), which regards the production of fictitious AI-based da'wah content as a threat to the epistemology of isnad.

A comparison with a case abroad clarifies this problem. In 2019, Kōdai-ji Temple in Kyoto, Japan, introduced Mindar, an android robot that delivers Buddhist sermons on the Heart Sutra ("Could an Android Priest," 2019). Unlike "Ustazah Hajar", Mindar was openly introduced as a robot from the outset, with its mechanical parts deliberately left visible. The content of its sermons was composed by the temple, while Osaka University, as the development partner, was not involved in determining the content (Kodaiji Zen Temple & Android Kannon Production Committee, 2019). This comparison shows that the main problem is not non-human nature as such, but the combination of a *concealed identity* and the *absence of an accountable institution*.

Measures for Managing AI-Based Da'wah

In terms of regulation, Indonesia already has the Circular Letter of the Minister of Communication and Informatics Number 9 of 2023 on Artificial Intelligence Ethics (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika Republik Indonesia, 2023). However, this circular is an ethical guideline and does not specifically regulate religious content. The Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law regulates the dissemination of electronic information in general (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 1 Tahun 2024), while MUI Fatwa Number 24 of 2017 emphasises the obligation of *tabayyun* (verification) and the prohibition against spreading false information on social media (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2017). The fatwa is relevant, but it was issued before the rapid development of generative AI. Consequently, there is as yet no provision that explicitly determines who is responsible for erroneous religious content generated by AI.

Based on the above analysis, the author formulates five principles for managing AI-based da'wah. The first four principles are developed from the proposal of Badrah Uyuni ("Fenomena 'Ustazah AI' Nia Hajar: MUI DKI," 2026), while the fifth is added by the author. *First*, positioning: AI should be positioned only as a tool for delivery and for preliminary information searches, not as an issuer of fatwas or a primary reference. *Second*, transparency: all AI-based religious content must carry a label stating that the figure appearing in it is AI-generated. *Third*,

verification: the material must be reviewed by competent ulama or experts, and the reviewer's name must be stated along with the sources of the religious proofs. This principle is in line with the exception given by Cholil Nafis, namely that AI may be consulted if its references and the person behind it are clear (Hawari, 2026). *Fourth*, accountability: the individual or institution operating the content must be identifiable and willing to bear legal and moral responsibility. *Fifth*, literacy: the public, especially the younger generation, needs to be equipped with the habit of always asking from whom a piece of religious content originates.

The third and fourth principles can be understood as an effort to revive the logic of sanad in a new form. The demand is not that AI should possess a sanad, which is impossible, but that every piece of AI-generated content should be traceable to the human beings or institutions that reviewed it and are responsible for it. The fifth principle has particular implications for Islamic religious education. Lestari et al. (2026) found that some Islamic Religious Education students accept AI recommendations for the sake of efficiency, while others treat them as preliminary assumptions that must be tested against the literature. This finding underlines the importance of educators fostering the latter attitude. In the same vein, Thobib Al-Asyhar (2026) reminds us that da'wah is not merely the transmission of information but also the embodiment of wisdom, moral character, and spiritual responsibility, which AI cannot undertake.

Conclusion

The TikTok account @nia.hajar_s grew extremely rapidly, from approximately 920,000 followers on 25 June 2026 to more than 1.2 million followers on 9 July 2026, before being set to private. The persona of "Ustazah Hajar" gained public trust through convincing visuals, parasocial intimacy, and algorithmic distribution, rather than through scholarly hierarchy, community, a clear ideology, or verifiable textual references. The author refers to this condition as pseudo-authority.

The phenomenon opens up digital da'wah opportunities in the form of wide reach, technical support in preparing and translating materials, and material for reflection on conventional da'wah. Its greatest challenge, however, lies in the loss of a subject who can be held accountable, aggravated by the errors found in the recitation of religious proofs and the absence of any clarification from the account operator. The comparison with the Mindar robot in Japan shows that the core problem is the concealed identity and the absence of an accountable institution, not the technology itself. Accordingly, this study recommends five principles for managing AI-based da'wah: positioning, transparency, verification, accountability, and literacy.

Future research is recommended to analyse netizens' comments netnographically, to survey the level of public trust in AI-based religious content, or to interview ulama and content creators in order to test the feasibility of the principles proposed here.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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