VIRTUAL UMMAH ON WHATSAPP CHANNELS: REARTICULATING MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how WhatsApp Channels function as a new space for the formation of a Virtual Ummah and how this space is rearticulated within Muslim communities in the digital era. The increasing use of WhatsApp as one of the most popular social media platforms in Indonesia makes it a potential medium for ustadz and da'wah communities to build spiritual connections and religious solidarity. This digital space offers communication patterns that are more personal, faster, and more participatory compared to religious interactions in physical spaces. The study employs a qualitative method with a virtual ethnography approach. Data were collected through observations of several religious WhatsApp Channels and then analyzed thematically to identify communication patterns, forms of da'wah, and the values being constructed. The findings indicate that WhatsApp Channels function not only as media for disseminating religious messages but also as spaces for the formation of identity and spiritual solidarity. Values such as ukhuwah Islamiyah and ta'awun emerge through simple symbolic communication, including short messages, religious emojis, and user interactions. This demonstrates that Muslims in digital spaces are not merely passive audiences, but active participants in building a Virtual Ummah that is adaptive to modern communication culture.

Keywords: *Virtual Ummah, WhatsApp Channels, Digital Da'wah, and Muslim Community.*

INTRODUCTION

Entering the digital era means that all forms of access can be easily and rapidly reached anytime and anywhere through the internet. This factor has encouraged preachers across the country to utilize various media platforms in delivering their da'wah, as they are considered more effective and efficient in reaching the wider public (Toni et al., 2021).

Da'wah activities that previously took place only in physical spaces such as mosques, majelis taklim, or religious study gatherings have now expanded into digital

spaces that are more personal and instantaneous (Khoiruzzaman, 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that cyberspace has become increasingly crowded and saturated with religious activity (Helland, 2007). Dawson and Cowan argue that the emergence of the internet has transformed the face of religion in the world. This is certainly not a reckless claim, because although the statement may appear overly simple, it is highly significant given what the internet has done in reshaping various aspects of human life, including religion.

This statement is supported by Salman's earlier research on the internet and religion, which demonstrates how the presence of the internet has significantly influenced human engagement in da'wah activities, where cyberspace can function as a medium for the dissemination of Islamic religious teachings (Salman, 2015). This situation, in turn, presents a more democratic form of religion, in which religious interpretations become diverse and no longer singular (Rumadi, 2012). Everyone can easily access knowledge according to their own preferences and needs. Today, individuals are able to find answers and make decisions based on the information available through media platforms.

The various media platforms available provide multiple options for engaging in spiritual activities, including virtual da'wah. Da'wah conducted through intermediaries commonly referred to as channels or platforms therefore requires active contributions to the formation of virtual communities.

One prominent phenomenon in this context is the emergence of WhatsApp Channels as a new space for Islamic da'wah in Indonesia. According to the Digital 2025 report by We Are Social, WhatsApp is the most widely used social media platform in Indonesia, with 91.7% of respondents reporting its use (We Are Social, 2025). The top social media platforms in Indonesia as of February 2025 include WhatsApp (91.7%), followed by Instagram (84.6%), Facebook (83%), TikTok (77.4%), Telegram (61.6%), Messenger (50.5%), and Twitter/X (50.3%).
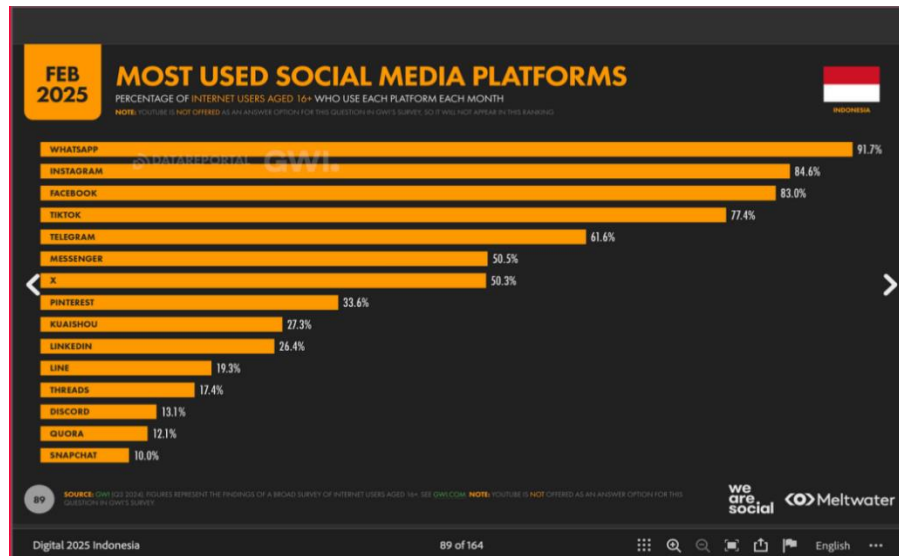
Figure 1: The Most Popular Social Media Platforms in Indonesia in 2025
(Digital Report 2025, We Are Social)

Referring to the figure above, it can be understood that WhatsApp continues to dominate as the most popular and highly favored media platform. Therefore, the emergence of WhatsApp Channels serves as an alternative for producing digital da'wah content. Da'wah activities carried out through this medium naturally involve extensive virtual interaction and communication between ustadz and the wider community as their partners. Such communication becomes the initial foundation for building virtual communities in the digital era, as reflected in the growing popularity of WhatsApp Channels on social media.

The popularity of WhatsApp is supported by its function as an indispensable instant communication tool for both personal and business interactions, including text messaging, voice calls, and video calls. WhatsApp enables its users to share a wide variety of content in accordance with the features it provides. It also offers numerous features that facilitate communication through internet-based services (Rahartri, 2019; Trisnani, 2017). As one of the platforms with the largest number of users in Indonesia, WhatsApp has transformed from merely a personal messaging application into a medium for the dissemination of public information, including religious messages.

The Channel feature, released globally in 2023, provides an opportunity for ustadz (Islamic preachers), dakwah institutions, and Muslim communities to convey religious messages to a broader audience without requiring two-way interaction. Through this feature, they can distribute Qur'anic verse quotations, hadiths, short videos, and spiritual reflections that can be accessed simultaneously by thousands of followers.
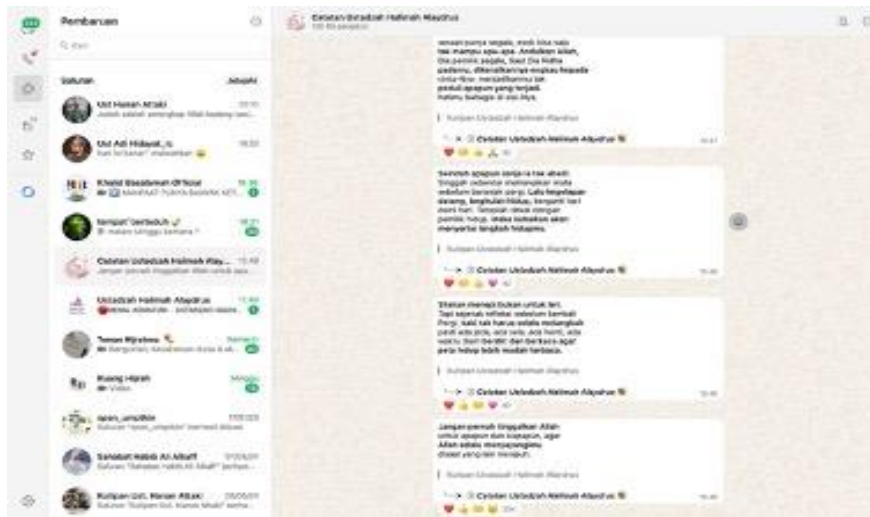
Figure 2: WhatsApp Channels — Religious practices within a more
personal and instant digital space.

This phenomenon marks the emergence of a new form of religious community
that exists within digital spaces, which scholars have referred to as the Virtual Ummah
(Delanty, 2018; Farchan, 2020; Rumadi, 2012; Wafda, 2020). The ummah, which was
previously bound by physical and social proximity, is now being rearticulated into a
virtual community formed through digital networks. Within this Virtual Ummah, a sense
of togetherness and Islamic identity is no longer constructed through face-to-face
encounters, but rather through the consumption of and participation in digital dakwah
messages.

This transformation also indicates a shift in religious authority and patterns of
religious communication (Sugiono, 2017). Whereas dakwah previously relied heavily on
the singular authority of an ustadz or formal religious institutions, today dakwah
messages can be widely disseminated by various figures and communities through
digital media, one of which is the WhatsApp Channel. WhatsApp Channels enable
dakwah messages to be delivered quickly, in a concise and accessible manner, and on a
consistent basis, thereby presenting a form of religious communication that aligns with
the practical and efficiency-oriented lifestyle of digital society.

However, behind this convenience, critical questions emerge as to whether digital
spaces such as WhatsApp Channels are capable of fostering spiritual depth and solidarity
in the same way as religious interactions in physical spaces. Furthermore, how can the
patterns of communication formed within these platforms sustain the values of ukhuwah
Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood) and ta'awun (mutual assistance) amid the inherently
individualistic nature of digital media?

In this context, this study becomes important for understanding how ustadz,
Muslim communities, and dakwah accounts in Indonesia utilize WhatsApp Channels as

a medium for dakwah and as a means of forming a Virtual Ummah. Through this research, it is expected to illustrate how the process of rearticulation takes place—ranging from the ways dakwah messages are packaged, the patterns of interaction that emerge, to the values of togetherness that are cultivated within Muslim communities in digital spaces.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to describe an event or phenomenon as deeply as possible through detailed and comprehensive data collection. The type of research used is descriptive qualitative research (Sugiono, 2017). A virtual ethnography method is applied to understand digital dakwah practices and the formation of a Virtual Ummah within WhatsApp Channels. This study utilizes virtual ethnography to examine communities and cultures that exist in cyberspace. Rather than conducting face-to-face observations, the researcher observes, collects, and analyzes data derived from social interactions that take place on digital platforms such as social media, forums, or online games (Nasrullah, 2013, 2016). This method is essential for understanding contemporary social and cultural phenomena that are formed within the digital realm.

The data were obtained through observations of several religious channels and groups, including the channels of Ustadz Hanan Attaki, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, Khalid Bassalamah Official, and Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus, as well as Muslim/ngaji communities such as Ruang Hijrah, Tempat Berteduh, Catatan Halimah Alaydrus, Teman Hijrahmu, and Kutipan Ustadz Hanan Attaki. The observations focused on communication patterns, types of messages, and audience participation in responding to the content. Data analysis was conducted thematically in order to identify patterns of meaning and representations of religiosity that emerge within these digital spaces.

In accordance with the thematic analysis procedure used to analyze the research data, the steps are as follows:

Figure 3: Thematic Analysis Procedure

Among the various popular data analysis methods, thematic analysis serves as a process through which researchers identify, analyze, and report data in the form of themes or patterns that lead to conclusions and interpretations. Thematic analysis is regarded as a foundational approach in qualitative research analysis and is included among analyses that employ grounded methods. The core procedures in thematic analysis consist of coding, data sorting, and data categorization, which enable the production of detailed and in-depth findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Balitbangkes, 2018; Rozali, 2022).

Based on the above explanation, it can be understood that thematic analysis is capable of revealing cultural patterns within virtual communities, which are often conceptualized as the Virtual Ummah.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

WhatsApp Channels as a New Space for Dakwah within the Digital Ecosystem

The results of observations of several religious WhatsApp Channels indicate that this medium has begun to be used strategically by ustadz and dakwah communities to build a broader reach for dakwah. This platform offers a form of communication that is fast, lightweight, and personal in nature, with characteristics that align well with the habits and preferences of today's digital media users.

As observed within this virtual community, various forms of information and dakwah messages are conveyed. One example can be found in the WhatsApp Channel of Ustadz Hanan Attaki, as follows:
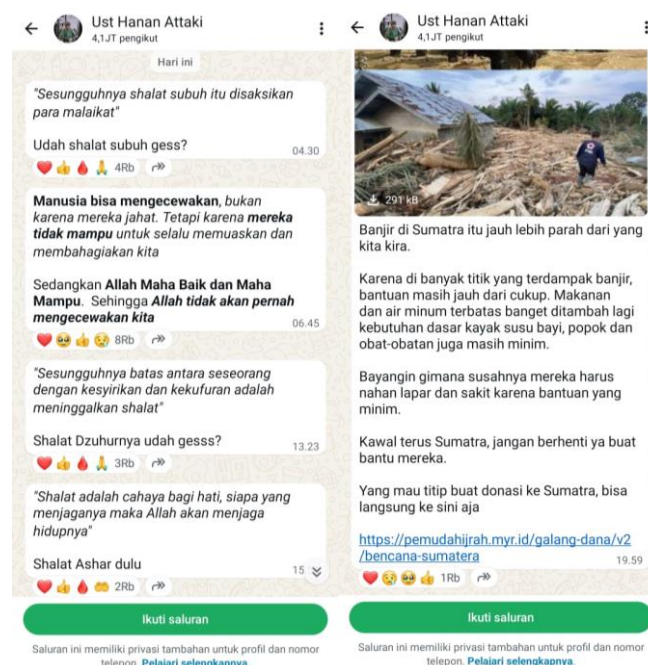
The dakwah messages delivered continuously and with relatively frequent intensity provide opportunities for the virtual community to receive Islamic teachings in a sustained manner. Furthermore, reactions on the social media platform indicate

positive responses, with users expressing appreciation for and support of the content being shared. Responses from this virtual community reached approximately 4,000 positive engagements, and notably, there were no negative responses to the messages conveyed. This condition indicates that access to information has become increasingly easy, which in turn contributes to the growing interest in using WhatsApp Channels as a preferred social media platform.

According to a report by We Are Social (We Are Social, 2025), WhatsApp is the instant messaging application with the largest number of users in Indonesia, exceeding 120 million active users. This condition positions WhatsApp Channels as a highly potential space for strengthening the digital dissemination of Islamic values. Dakwah is no longer confined to pulpits or majelis taklim (religious study gatherings), but is now also present on smartphone screens through short messages, brief videos, and motivational quotations.

In line with the theory of the Mediatization of Religion (Campbell, 2020), media functions not merely as an intermediary for conveying religious teachings, but increasingly as a space that shapes new ways of practicing religion. Ustadz figures such as Ustadz Hanan Attaki, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, Khalid Bassalamah Official, and Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus—as well as Muslim communities such as Ruang Hijrah, Tempat Berteduh, Catatan Halimah Alaydrus, Teman Hijrahmu, Kutipan Ustadz Hanan Attaki, and others—demonstrate this transformation. Many contemporary ustadz and young dakwah communities utilize WhatsApp Channels as a non-hierarchical dakwah space, where messages are delivered in light, contextual language and are easily reshared through message forwarding.
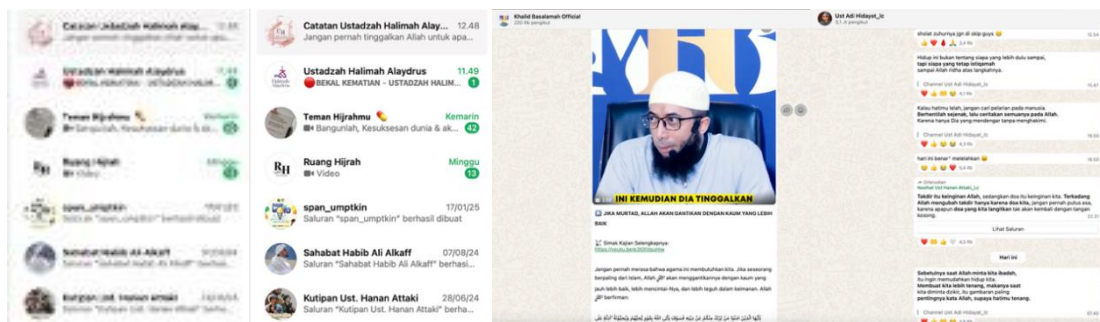

Figure 4: Virtual Ummah on WhatsApp Channels.

This indicates a shift from authority-based religious communication or practice toward participatory, network-based communication (Jinan, 2013). Users who join WhatsApp Channels do not function merely as passive audiences, but become part of the dissemination of dakwah messages by resharing content, quotations, motivational messages, or videos to family groups or other community networks. This pattern clearly reflects the characteristics of the Virtual Ummah as proposed by Campbell (2012, 2020),

namely a religious community formed through spiritual interconnectedness within the digital world.

Communication Patterns and the Dynamics of Religiosity within the Virtual Ummah

Communication that develops within WhatsApp Channels is characterized as semi–one-way yet emotionally interactive. Although users are unable to reply to messages directly, they express participation through emoji reactions, sharing, or forwarding content. This form of symbolic participation reflects the presence of digital solidarity, which replaces physical forms of interaction commonly found in traditional dakwah spaces.

As explained by Howard Rheingold (1993) in the concept of Virtual Community, interactions in digital spaces are capable of fostering an authentic sense of togetherness even without face-to-face encounters. This phenomenon is also evident in digital dakwah, where congregants experience spiritual connectedness through simple activities such as reading daily messages, collectively saying amen to prayers, or anticipating the delivery of morning tausiyah from their favorite ustadz.

Within the context of dakwah, digital dakwah on WhatsApp Channels functions as a form of virtual communication (Carey, 1989; Delanty, 2018; Farchan, 2020), namely a symbolic process that sustains a sense of community and faith through repeated communicative activities. Practices such as collectively reading prayers or sharing religious messages on a daily basis help cultivate a sense of belonging to the virtual community.

Furthermore, communication patterns in digital spaces also reveal a democratization of religious authority. Authority is no longer located solely in religious figures but is instead co-constructed through the participation of community members who actively disseminate, interpret, and contextualize dakwah messages. In line with the views of Eickelman and Anderson (as cited in Fakhruroji, 2017), this phenomenon gives rise to a new Muslim public sphere—a newly formed Islamic public space that is more open, participatory, and decentralized.

The Rearticulation of Muslim Communities: From the Pulpit to WhatsApp Channels

Digital spaces such as WhatsApp Channels do not cause Muslim communities to lose the essence of their religiosity; rather, this essence is rearticulated in forms that align with digital culture. Dakwah in the digital era no longer always takes the form of lengthy sermons as found on YouTube or Islamic podcasts, but instead appears as short tausiyah, reflective quotations, and spiritually motivating content.

This practice of digital dakwah demonstrates a rearticulation of religiosity, namely a process of adapting religious practices to technological contexts and modern lifestyles without abandoning the substance of Islamic teachings. According to Campbell (2020),

this new form of digital religiosity marks the phase of networked religion, in which believers interact, worship, and affirm their faith within the space of social networks.

The phenomenon of the Virtual Ummah on WhatsApp Channels also reveals a shift in religious rituals from physical collectivity to digital symbolism. Some forms of this re-articulation include:

a) Informational Rituals, namely reading daily verses or short tausiyah (religious reflections) messages in the morning.

b) Emotional Rituals, expressed through the use of emoji reactions as a form of empathy or gratitude.

c) Distributive Rituals, carried out by sharing da'wah messages with others as a form of digital charity (digital ṣadaqah).

Based on the above discussion, the digital space does not merely function as a medium for information dissemination, but also as an arena for the formation of a new form of spirituality that is participatory and inclusive.

Ethical and Solidarity Dimensions in WhatsApp Channel Da'wah

Beyond the communicative aspect, the findings also indicate that da'wah conducted through WhatsApp Channels strengthens the values of ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood), ta'āwun (mutual assistance), and the social ethics of the Muslim community. Many da'wah channels emphasize moral messages, such as the importance of helping others, guarding one's speech, and spreading goodness on social media.

Messages such as "Charity does not reduce one's wealth" or "Do not grow weary of doing good even when the world does not see it" constitute simple forms of digital moral communication—messages that are not only informative, but also transformative. This is in line with the function of da'wah as an effort to cultivate social and spiritual awareness within modern society (R. Setiawati, 2022). Thus, da'wah practices conducted through WhatsApp Channels demonstrate that digital spaces can function as media for the formation of new forms of social and spiritual solidarity. The Virtual Ummah that emerges is not merely symbolic, but also functional in strengthening Islamic identity within an increasingly individualistic digital world.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that WhatsApp Channels have become a new space for religious practice and digital da'wah among Muslims in Indonesia. Through this platform, ustadz, da'wah communities, and Muslim congregants participate in shaping what is known as the Virtual Ummah—a spiritual community that exists in digital space, interacting through messages, quotations, prayers, and short content that reflects Islamic values.

First, the use of WhatsApp Channels demonstrates the process of the mediatization of religion, in which da'wah is no longer confined to physical spaces such

as mosques or majelis taklim, but is instead adapted into digital formats that are fast, lightweight, and easily accessible. Da'wah becomes more participatory, as congregants can actively disseminate religious messages, thereby forming expansive networks of Islamic solidarity in the virtual world.

Second, the patterns of communication that emerge in this digital space indicate a rearticulation of the values of ukhuwah and ta'āwun. Although non-physical and individual in nature, symbolic participation—such as emoji reactions, forwarding messages, and involvement in collective prayers—affirms the emergence of new forms of spiritual togetherness. Thus, digital spaces do not erase Islamic social values, but instead adapt them to the new communication culture of the digital generation.

Third, the phenomenon of the Virtual Ummah on WhatsApp Channels marks a significant shift in religious life. Da'wah activities that once took place solely in physical spaces such as mosques, majelis taklim, or pengajian have now expanded into more personal and instantaneous digital spaces. As a result, da'wah has become more dialogical, critical, inclusive, and relevant to the fast-paced rhythms of modern society.

Overall, this study affirms that WhatsApp Channels are capable of serving as spaces for the rearticulation of Islamic spirituality and communal solidarity, where Islamic values can continue to grow and transform within a digital culture that tends toward individualism. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain a balance between digital religiosity and direct social interaction, so that the meaning of ukhuwah does not remain merely symbolic, but also materializes in concrete actions in the physical world.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

BA, as the primary author, contributed to determining the research object, conducting the analysis, and drafting the manuscript. DM, as the second author, contributed to data collection and to revising sections that required improvement as well as addressing gaps in the research data.

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