



WHEN FAITH MEETS THE FEED: HOW RELIGIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS SHAPE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND IDENTITY AMONG MUSLIM YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

Muslim young adults can now easily acquire religious knowledge from social media influencers, but little is known about how they affect Islamic practices. The role and impact of social media influencers on Muslim young adults in Islamic private higher education institution are investigated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out using an interpretivist methodology and Source Credibility Theory as a guide. Four topics emerged from the thematic analysis: Relatable Religious Practice, Credibility as a Gatekeeper, Selective and Bounded Religious Practice Change, and Accessible Religious Learning and Guidance. According to research, influencers help people learn and practise religion by providing relatable and easily accessible content. However, their effect is filtered by factors such as perceived legitimacy, preexisting religious knowledge, family, and conventional religious authorities. The study highlights the selective, conditional, and context-dependent nature of influencer-mediated religious influence by introducing Bounded Religious Transformation and proposing the Credibility-Gated Religious Influence Framework.

Keywords: social media influencer, religious influencer, religious practice, Muslim young adults, source credibility

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INTRODUCTION

According to Simon (2026), the average social media user actively uses or visits 6.5 different social platforms each month and spends an average of 18 hours and 36 minutes per week on social media, including browsing social networks and watching online videos on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. Young adults use social media extensively in their daily lives, relying on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to connect with peers, share updates, and explore their identities (Joseph, 2021). These platforms serve as spaces for self-expression, belonging, and social validation, which often shape their lifestyles and self-esteem.

Additionally, social media has also become a key platform for sharing, practicing, and

modifying religious views, and the digital age has completely changed religious communication (Zhang, 2025). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter enable religious leaders and regular believers to share personal experiences, spread teachings, and create worldwide communities (Jima'ain, 2023). This democratisation of religious discourse enables diverse interpretations and individualised expressions of faith, shifting some authority away from established institutions. TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have significantly boosted the availability of religious information for Muslims (Zaid et al., 2022).

The rise of religious social media influencers in Southeast Asia illustrates a broader transformation in Islamic authority, as legitimacy shifts from institutionally trained clerics to digital figures who rely on charisma, relatability, and visually engaging formats (Febrian, 2024; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). While these influencers make religious knowledge more accessible and appealing to younger audiences by integrating da'wah with lifestyle practices and motivational discourse (Henry, 2021; Latif & Kuntoro, 2025; Ramlan et al., 2024), their informal communication styles risk fragmenting doctrine, fostering misunderstandings, and generating tensions with traditional scholars (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Harry, 2024; Seitakhmetova & Zhandossova, 2025). Consequently, Muslim young adults must navigate competing sources of guidance and balance online influencer messages against institutional scholarship, family traditions, and prior religious training. Furthermore, most current studies on digital da'wah focus on the production side, specifically influencers' personal branding, algorithmic visibility, and communication techniques (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). As a result, there is a significant lack of empirical research on viewer interactions, audience perceptions, and reception according to Ali and Burhan (2025).

It is difficult to assess the genuine impact of digital da'wah on religious identity and practice without first investigating how audience members perceive, analyse, and react to online religious content. These findings highlight the need to critically assess the scope and boundaries of influencers' impact on lived religiosity (Malhotra & Shin, 2025; Missier, 2025; Serman & Sims, 2023). Social media influencers can also have a substantial impact on young people's beliefs, habits, attitudes, aspirations, and purchasing decisions. According to Al-Rashoud (2025), exposure to influencers can inspire imitation, affect lifestyle and purchasing patterns, and shape perceptions of education and future opportunities, while also providing inspiration and guidance.

Hence, this study focuses on students aged 18 to 30 who attend Islamic Private Higher Education Institution (IPHEIs) in Pahang, aligning with national youth policy standards for digital natives who actively engage with social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Using an interpretivist qualitative case study design, the focus on IPHEIs provides a well-defined scope for recording real lived experiences, audience response, and digital verification practices rather than pursuing statistical generalisation.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine how religious social media influencers facilitate accessible religious education and model practices for Muslim young adults at Islamic private higher education institutions.
2. To investigate the credibility criteria and contextual boundaries that shape the adoption of influencer-mediated religious content among Muslim young adults at Islamic private higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is presented as a powerful communication tool that connects people instantly across distances, enabling real-time sharing of information, multimedia, and interaction (Gazi et al., 2024). These digital platforms enable influencers to deliver religious content in an engaging, amusing, and approachable manner, combining narrative with Islamic ideals (Henry, 2021). Anggreani and Rafi'i (2025) further highlighted that social media provide diverse content such as lectures, sermons, and discussions, enabling learning, reflection, and self-expression. As a result, young Muslims increasingly receive religious instruction not only in mosques or formal settings, but also via short videos, posts, and interactive information on the internet, making religious knowledge more accessible, personalised, and incorporated into daily digital culture. As highlighted in Kerim et al. (2025), this generation can listen to sermons on their smartphones from anywhere, including while driving, without needing to attend at a specific place or time. Digitally stored sermons can be viewed, copied, shared, and distributed repeatedly for a long time.

Furthermore, according to Minarti et al. (2023), social media is becoming increasingly important in Islamic religious education because it connects students with academics and communities and makes lectures, articles, and discussions widely accessible. These platforms help students integrate religious principles into their everyday lives and promote flexible, interactive learning. However, there are risks associated with it, including exposure to views that can be at odds with Islamic principles, untrustworthy content, and distractions. This is consistent with Hajdini and Iaia (2024) and Romadlany and Effendi (2025), who noted that social media facilitates the creation of conspiratorial echo chambers and the rapid and widespread dissemination of false information. In the social media era, information is disseminated through a disintermediated process without editors or gatekeepers.

Religious influencers are people who utilise social media to spread religious content, develop sizable fan bases, and gain recognition outside of established organisations (Febrian, 2024). They frequently acquire authority through charisma, relatability, and internet presence, in contrast to clerics connected to formal education or organisations (Solahudin & Fakhrurroji, 2019). In order to engage audiences, they employ interactive information, personal narratives, and visually appealing presentations. Religious influencers are becoming more prevalent, which has advantages and disadvantages. Positively, they promote online religious groups and make religious teachings more interesting and approachable, particularly for younger generations (Latif & Kuntoro, 2025). On the down side, their casual approach may result in misunderstandings, conflict with conventional scholars, and disjointed religious knowledge (Harry, 2024). Overall, they signify a change in religious authority, where credibility is increasingly determined by audience trust and social media presence rather than institutional relationships.

Several studies have examined religious social media influencers. Solahudin and Fakhrurroji (2019) studied religious influencers in Indonesia, including Felix Siauw, Hanan Attaki, and Oki Setiana Dewi, who employ various approaches on social media, particularly Instagram. They combine digital branding and da'wah, making Instagram a platform for authority and accessibility. In another study, Ramlan et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between followers' religiosity and spirituality in Malaysia and the perceived credibility of religious social media influencers. The study demonstrates how Islamic teachings can be made more engaging, participatory, and comprehensive through the use

of digital da'wah tactics on websites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The study argues that credible influencers encourage modesty, generosity, and Islamic lifestyle practices, drawing on Source Credibility Theory (trustworthiness, knowledge, and attractiveness) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Influencer credibility has also been explored by Joanly et al. (2022), who found religious influencers' credibility directly improves followers' willingness to donate. Credibility fosters trust and engagement with material, which encourages followers to donate to charity causes supported by influencers, even if religion by itself does not significantly predict donation behaviour. Another study by Ariffin et al. (2025) examines the impact of social media influencers on the desire of International Islamic University Malaysia students to perform sadaqah (voluntary charity). Students are heavily exposed to influencer-led campaigns on Instagram and TikTok, with positive views and strong peer norms driving donations, according to research using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). According to the study's findings, students' intention and actual participation in digital sadaqah can be greatly increased when transparent platforms are combined with reputable, value-congruent influencers.

However, although a number of studies have been conducted related to religious social media influencers, Ali and Burhan (2025) point out that there is still a lack of research on viewer interactions and audience opinions. This indicates that little is known about how adherents see, interact with, and react to digital religious information as supported by Santoso et al. (2026), highlighted that there is a knowledge gap about how viewers interact with and react to religious messages online because the majority of studies on digital da'wah concentrates on content producers. Santoso et al. (2026) further highlighted that it is challenging to evaluate the true effects of digital da'wah on religious identity, practice, and community development without comprehending the reception side. Therefore, audience views should be examined in future research as suggested by Rachmah (2026) including how various demographics interact with religious information online, how algorithms affect their exposure, and how these interactions affect their attitudes and actions. This audience-centred approach provides a more complete picture of digital Islamic communication by considering not only production but also reception and impact.

Thus, this study aims to explore the role of social media influencers in shaping religious beliefs and practices among Muslim young adults at Islamic private higher education institutions. These research objectives focus on the impact of social media influencers on Muslim young people at Islamic private higher education institutions, demonstrating how digital personalities can influence beliefs, behaviours, and religious identity. By providing localised insights into how online engagement and credibility affect behaviour, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on digital religion and helps communities, educators, and legislators promote responsible and genuine religious communication in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to examine Muslim young adults studying at Islamic private higher education institutions and their interactions with religious influencers on social media. Case study research is widely recognised as useful for thoroughly examining intricate, context-dependent phenomena (Annamalah et al., 2026). This design, informed by an interpretivist perspective,

places a strong emphasis on lived experiences and meaning-making, consistent with the view that reality is multifaceted and socially produced (Pretorius, 2024).

Semi-structured interviews were used to document participants' individual accounts. These techniques are consistent with interpretivist epistemology, which emphasises the co-construction of knowledge by participants and researchers (Yin, 2017). Thematic analysis is a popular qualitative method that has been used to identify recurrent themes and patterns in religious practice and identity formation (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The design incorporated ethical awareness, recognising the positionality of the researcher and the influence of values on interpretation (Demirhan, 2025). Studies considering religious identity must take ethical factors including informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and secrecy into account (Hosseini & Haukås, 2025). Overall, this design places greater emphasis on rich, contextual understanding than on generalisation, consistent with the study's goal of determining how identity development and socialisation are impacted by religious social media influencers.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Purposive sampling is a technique used by researchers to select participants based on their potential usefulness in supplying the required data (Rawat, 2025). This is frequently used in research that requires particular people with particular characteristics or expertise. The rationale for using purposive sampling is that certain groups may hold distinctive and valuable perspectives on the concepts and issues under investigation and should therefore be included in the sample. (Campbell et al., 2020).

In this study, respondents were based on several criteria. First, participants had to be between 18 and 30 years old to represent young adults in Malaysia (Awang, 2023; Syazwan, 2023). Respondents were also required to have an account on at least one social media platform, such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. They also needed to actively follow Islamic content.

Seven interviewees were selected for this study in order to provide a variety of viewpoints pertinent to the study's goals. According to Braun & Clarke (2021), qualitative rigour is attained through data adequacy rather than fixed numerical thresholds, despite the small sample size. Adequacy is dependent on the data's richness, saliency, and analytical completeness, as stated by Mikhaeil and Robey (2024). The seven in-depth interviews generated verbatim transcripts containing rich, nuanced accounts across all four identified themes. The authors considered these data adequate for reflexive thematic analysis as suggested by Bouncken et al. (2026).

Interview Protocol

In this study, interviews were directed by a carefully planned interview protocol to ensure consistency in data collection, depth, and ethical rigour (Coker & Akande, 2025).

The interview process followed the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework developed by Castillo-Montoya (2016), which provides a systematic four-phase method for improving the reliability and quality of qualitative interviews. In order to make sure that every prompt directly related to the goals of the study, interview questions were first matched with research questions (Xu et al., 2025). Second, the protocol was designed to facilitate an inquiry-based debate by striking a balance between natural dialogue in understandable language and structured inquiry. Third, to improve clarity

and identify any gaps, input on the draft protocol was solicited from domain experts who could provide both methodological and content-specific insights. Lastly, before all the data were collected, the protocol was piloted with volunteers to assess its efficacy and flow. This procedure ensured that the interviews were thorough, sensitive to context, and able to produce rich, insightful data.

The protocol began with an explanation of the study's goal, a description of confidentiality precautions, and a request for participants' informed consent. After that, it went through a sequence of open-ended questions intended to elicit rich narratives, beginning with broad background prompts and moving on to more focused enquiries in line with the study's objectives (Parker et al., 2023). In order to promote elaboration, probes and follow-up questions were included, but participants were still free to describe their experiences in their own words. In order to ensure that the interview process honoured participants' values and circumstances while producing significant qualitative data, the protocol also placed a strong emphasis on cultural sensitivity and reflexivity.

Data Analysis

In this study, data were analysed using systematic thematic analysis guided by Naeem et al.'s framework (2025). The procedure included familiarisation with the data, quotation selection, keyword identification, coding, theme development, conceptualisation, and the creation of a conceptual model. The analysis was also informed by Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-step approach. The interview transcripts were coded and synthesised through seven sequential stages, guided by Naeem et al.'s "6Rs" criteria for keyword selection and code generation: realness, richness, repetition, reasoning, repartee, and regal for keyword selection and code generation to improve rigour and transparency. This systematic method made sure that themes were consistent with the study's research goals and were drawn from recurrent patterns. The analysis promoted accountability, helped reduce researcher bias, and offered a clear, repeatable process by referencing Naeem et al.'s methodology.

Stage 1: Familiarization with the data

To gain a thorough understanding of the raw qualitative data, the analysis began with reading and re-reading the full verbatim transcripts from all seven participants (R1–R7). Participants' descriptions of using digital da'wah, assessing influencers, and changing their Islamic practices were documented in preliminary observational notes and reflexive impressions.

Stage 2: Quotation selection

Relevant participant quotes and captivating stories were methodically taken out of the transcripts. Participants' descriptions of social media as a "trigger for young people" (R7), their use of social media while "alone" and in need of quick information (R4), and their descriptions of consulting a traditional muallim when online content deviated from previous lessons (R5) were highlighted as key statements.

Stage 3: Keyword identification

To identify relevant analytical terms, extracted quotations were filtered and assessed using Naeem et al. (2025) 6Rs criteria:

- i. **Realness:** Putting terms like "triggering interest," "verified accounts," and "asking my muallim" firmly rooted in genuine participant expressions.

- ii. Richness: Choosing terms that capture descriptive detail such as seeking for tauliah or verifying kitab narrations like Muslim or Bukhari.
- iii. Repetition: Finding recurrent themes in several accounts like citing verified badges or lectures on Facebook or TikTok.
- iv. Reasoning: Making logical connections between actual findings and theoretical ideas, such as the elements of Source Credibility Theory that consists of expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness.
- v. Repartee: Maintaining genuine participant voice and lively debate.
- vi. Regal: Making sure keywords had enough conceptual depth to support higher-order themes.

Stage 4: Initial Coding

Keywords that were conceptually similar and identical were combined to create distinct starting codes that represented particular patterns. Examples consist of:

- i. Initial Exposure / Spark: Content acting as a starter, motivation, or entry point to learning.
- ii. Lifestyle modelling: mimicking speech, public interactions, lengthy hijabs, and physical appearance.
- iii. Verifying credentials (tauliah), examining verified account badges, and consulting fundamental literature (kitab) are examples of credibility gatekeeping.
- iv. Bounded Adaptation: weighing traditional scholars, past religious education, and family upbringing against influencer material.

Stage 5: Theme development and objectives alignment

The codes were arranged into broader potential themes and directly linked into the two main goals of the study:

- i. Research Objective 1 (Facilitative Role): Themes 1 (Encouraging Accessible Religious Education and Inspiration) and 2 (Modelling Religious Practices Using Relatable Communication) were created from codes pertaining to initial entry points, motivation, relatable delivery, and visual dress/behavioral modelling.
- ii. Research Objective 2 (Conditions and Boundaries): Themes 3 (Credibility as a Gatekeeper of Religious Influence) and 4 (Selective and Bounded Religious Practice Change) comprised codes pertaining to confirming credentials, evaluating authority, and consulting traditional academics.

Stage 6: Conceptualization

The candidate themes were refined and cross-examined against the raw data to define their exact scope, boundaries, and theoretical implications. Through this conceptualization, the study defined the phenomenon of Bounded Religious Transformation that explaining why influencer-mediated influence leads to selective, conditional practice changes rather than sweeping identity shifts.

Stage 7: Creation of the Conceptual Model

Finally, the four themes were integrated into an overarching conceptual model: the Credibility-Gated Religious Influence Framework (refer Figure 1). The framework illustrates how accessible education (Theme 1) and relatable modelling (Theme 2) create potential for persuasion, which must then pass

through a credibility gate (Theme 3) and navigate contextual boundaries (Theme 4) to yield bounded practice change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified four themes corresponding to the two research objectives. Themes 1 and 2 address the first research objective and examine how religious social media influencers shape the religious practices and views of Muslim young adults at Islamic private higher education institutions. The second research objective is addressed in Themes 3 and 4, which look at the circumstances and limits that dictate how much influencer-mediated religious content influences shifts in religious belief and practice.

The findings distinguish between the roles of influencers and the extent of their influence. Influencers were seen as easily accessible resources for inspiration, religious knowledge, and behavioural modelling. However, participants did not always embrace influencer content uncritically. Instead, perceived credibility, religious authority, content verification, and participants' prior religious socialisation all influenced whether influencer messages were integrated into religious practice.

RO1: The role of religious social media influencers in shaping the religious practices and views of Muslim young adults in Islamic private higher institution

First, social media influencers make religious information, reminders, and helpful advice more accessible. This knowledge becomes relevant and useful in Muslims' daily lives through relatable communication and behavioural modelling. In some instances, this process influences religious practices as well as knowledge acquisition.

Theme 1: Encouraging Accessible Religious Education and Inspiration

The first theme suggests that religious social media influencers serve as accessible facilitators of religious education and motivation. Participants viewed social media as a simple way to access religious lectures, reminders, tips, and uplifting messages. In addition, social media was widely seen by participants as an easily accessible additional source of religious knowledge. However, influencers also offered relatable examples of how Islamic ideas could be comprehended and applied in daily life, so its function went beyond information access. The role of influencers thus goes beyond information dissemination to engaging participants' interest in learning about Islam.

For example, R7 described the motivational messages shared by a religious influencer as potentially stimulating young people's interest in Islam:

“Motivational words that, for me, could serve as a trigger for young people, or even the general public, to develop an interest in Islam itself.”

The expression “*triggering interest*” illustrates the role of influencer content as a stimulus for religious learning. Rather than replacing formal religious education, such content can spark curiosity and encourage young Muslims to further engage with religious knowledge. This finding was also reflected in participants' descriptions of social media as a source of useful religious knowledge. R1 stated that religious lectures and advice offered on Facebook provided him with both guidance and information.

“It impacts me because it provides advice, and at the same time, I gain knowledge from the lectures given on Facebook.”

Similarly, R2 explained that short-form social media information might provide an introductory grasp of religious practice while also encouraging additional inquiry. R2 mentioned that people may get an initial "input" and then look into the matter further. This suggests that influencers serve as gateways to religious learning, particularly by making religious content accessible throughout everyday social media use. The learning process is thus not necessarily completed by the influencer's message; rather, the content can spark additional research, questioning, and learning.

R4 also recognised social media as a useful source when he needs religious information:

"If you want to find information that you don't know, you can look for it there. But when it comes to religious behaviour, many things are just the same as what we learned in the past."

Nevertheless, for R4, social media can be a convenient substitute when immediate traditional sources are unavailable, but it is not always chosen religious authority. He explained:

"Honestly, as for me, I prefer asking, err, people. Asking just about anyone rather than asking social media. Like the example I gave earlier about the funeral prayer (solat jenazah), right? But, when I am alone, I don't know who to ask, so I ask social media."

The findings also show that the accessibility of religious content is especially important when participants want practical understanding about religious practices. R3, for example, mentioned TikTok religious lectures on prayer, women's fiqh, and methods to promote worship:

"There is a lecture teaching on TikTok... they always teach about things like prayer, women's fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and various practices for us to improve our worship."

These findings contrast with a study by Hannan and Mursyidi (2023) who highlighted how social media influencers have led to the destabilisation and fragmentation of traditional authority. Instead of relying entirely on religious figures, elders, or institutions, audiences are increasingly turning to influencers whose credibility stems from visibility, relatability, and engagement. This undermines traditional authority by moving trust to digital figures, but simultaneously fragmenting it as various influencers compete with differing interpretations and approaches. This is supported by Seitakhmetova and Zhandossova (2025), who stressed that the influencer who serves as the new, albeit popularity-based, religious authority, rather than as a gateway to traditional learning.

However, the Islamic private higher education institutions participants' accounts indicate that influencers serve largely as facilitators of religious learning rather than as replacements for institutional authority. These findings were supported by Latif and Kuntoro (2025) who claim religious influencers encourage followers by making teachings accessible and relevant. Instead of passively accepting information, users actively connect with social media to obtain fundamental knowledge and ask questions before deciding whether further inquiry is required. Eventually, influencers provide early learning opportunities rather than outright mandating religious ideas.

Theme 2: Modelling Religious Practices Using Relatable Communication

The second theme highlights how influencers impact religious participation thru relatable communication and behavioural modelling, as well as formal religious instruction. Participants discussed how influencers and public people might convey Islamic principles thru their appearance, language, and daily interactions.

"The presenters, their delivery style in terms of their attire, speech, and interaction with the public that serves as a good reflection and an example for the community to emulate." – R7

This demonstrates how the influencer becomes a public model of religious behaviour. Religious influence is not limited to formal preaching. Young Muslims may view the influencer's lifestyle, looks, and interpersonal interaction as models of acceptable religious behaviour. R5 gave a specific example of modest clothes that could serve as an example for young Muslim women:

"Wearing long hijabs, dressing modestly and respectably, can serve as an example for women and the young adults."

The findings imply that behavioural religious modelling supplements religious information. Influencers can make religious beliefs more tangible by illustrating how they might be used in everyday life. The effect may even extend to specific religious rituals. R7 highlighted how specific topics could influence his approach of prayer:

"Before this, I just prayed normally. But that improved my prayers, making me want to follow the Prophet's way more closely."

R3 also explained that the knowledge he gained from an ustazah on social media enabled him to help correct his friend's prayer.

"I noticed that whenever a friend of mine performs the takbir, she elongates the beginning of the word 'Allah'... The ustazah (female religious teacher) mentioned that if we elongate the 'alif' at the front, it turns into a question. For example, 'Allahu Akbar' means 'Allah is the Greatest'. But when the 'a' in 'Allah' is elongated, it becomes 'Is Allah the Greatest?'... after I shared this with her and gently corrected her, Alhamdulillah, she is now changing for the better."

This finding is essentially consistent with Aida et al. (2024) description of religious influencers as behavioural exemplars, emphasising the necessity of relatable communication in making religious teachings relevant to contemporary audiences. Similarly, their study found that influencer material can encourage followers to engage in religious activities such as prayer and other forms of religious involvement. The current study broadens this observation by distinguishing between communication-based and modelling-based influence. Participants respond not simply to what influencers teach, but also to how they live religious principles.

This finding can be understood using the Source Credibility Theory that is widely used in influencer studies (Reijmersdal et al., 2024; Wellman, 2024). Source credibility traditionally concerns communicative attributes that influence the receiver's acceptance of a message, with expertise and trustworthiness being major elements, as well as attractiveness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In the current religious context, however, participants' accounts indicate that relatability and observable behaviour contribute to how the influencer is perceived as a significant source, whereas religious expertise remains important when the content contains particular religious assertions.

RO2: The Nature, Extent And Boundaries of Religious Social Media Influencers Influence Religious Identity and Behaviour

The results show that religious social media influencers have a selective, conditional, rather than absolute impact on the religious identity and behaviour of Muslim young adults in Islamic private higher institution. First, participants assessed religious influencers' authority, knowledge, and credibility as well as their substance. Participants could integrate information into their religious beliefs or practices when it was deemed reliable and pertinent. However, this influence was limited by family socialisation, established religious authorities, and preexisting religious knowledge, leading to partial

rather than complete changes in religious practice.

Theme 3: Credibility as a Gatekeeper of Religious Influence

Participants did not automatically accept religious information encountered through social media. Instead, they assessed whether the influencer possessed sufficient religious expertise, authority and qualification and whether the information itself was trustworthy. Religious influence is made possible by influencers' relatability and accessibility, but whether or not that influence is accepted depends on their perceived legitimacy.

R7 explicitly distinguished between influencers with known religious backgrounds and those whose religious qualifications were uncertain. He explained:

"Not everything conveyed by influencer ustazs and ustazahs [can be accepted], because we don't know whether they have the proper religious credentials (tauliah) on these media platforms."

R2 also explains that social-media users should not automatically trust content because they do not necessarily know whether the information is supported by authoritative sources.

"Because on social media, we don't know if it is true or not... we need to have a little bit of doubt in order to carefully examine it."

R2 then makes an important distinction between recognised experts and less-established content creators:

"For the ustazs (religious teachers), most of them are experts, right, like Ustaz Wadi Annuar and Ustaz Azhar Idrus. They are indeed experts. So, there is no need to doubt them too much. As for... other ustazs or other content creators, to me, it is compulsory or we need to have some doubt. What is all of that? Is it true or not?"

More significantly, participants described actual verification methods. R3 provides perhaps the strongest evidence of credibility-gated influence. He stated about following verified social media account. However, verification alone is not sufficient. He also checks the source of religious information.

"Alhamdulillah, as for me, usually for these influencers, I will follow those who are verified. So, I feel that I will check first whether the source is correct or not. For hadith, usually, we have to check the books (kitab). Look at its narration, whether it's Tirmidhi, Muslim, or Bukhari."

In addition, he explicitly connects *tauliah* (credentials) and confidence in the information with willingness to follow an influencer:

"When we are confident that the knowledge conveyed is indeed correct... Then it becomes very easy to convince ourselves to follow that influencer."

This is similar to R1 that highlight on verified account as ways to assess whether the influencer can be followed or not.

"I follow people who are already known, like those with Verified accounts."

One of the participants (R5) also demonstrate a process of critical religious evaluation.

R5 provided another particularly clear example. She explained that she preferred asking her muallim when social-media information conflicted with information she had previously received:

"Because I saw on social media that the answer was different. But when I asked my muallim (religious teacher), his answer was different."

She then explained her rationale:

"Not everything on social media can be trusted. It is better for us to ask someone who is more of an expert on the matter to get confirmation."

Although individuals were exposed to religious content via social media influencers, exposure did not imply acceptance. Instead, participants actively assessed the source's trustworthiness and authority before determining whether to trust or use the information (Malhotra & Shin, 2025). Perceived faith knowledge was especially essential. Participants used religious background, qualification, and tauliah to determine whether an influencer was reputable enough to provide religious instruction (Missier, 2025). This is similar to findings by Serman and Sims (2023) on social media influencer. The researchers emphasise that when people come across material on digital platforms or blogs, they do not just accept it. Persuasion, on the other hand, comes only once the receiver deliberately judges the information provider as an expert (with authority) and trustworthy.

Theme 4: Selective and Bounded Religious Practice Change

The fourth focus investigates how social media influencers impact Muslim young adultss' religious understanding and behaviour in Islamic private higher institution. The results show a selective and limited influence, with participants incorporating religious content based on its applicability, reliability, and coherence with preexisting religious knowledge and reliable sources. Participants negotiated, vetted, and selectively incorporated influencer messages within their preexisting religious frameworks rather than accepting them without question.

According to the results, participants choose which religious content to include depending on how applicable and helpful it was to their religious life. R5 clarified that she uses social media to review previously taught Islamic customs:

"Sometimes, when we haven't done something for a long time, we tend to forget it. So, I use social media to remind myself of the proper way to set the intention (niat), and all the things that need to be recited."

This implies that rather than requiring introducing new religious activities, influencer content can serve to enhance preexisting religious understanding.

R6 also said that religious advice posted on Instagram and TikTok by influencers had an impact on her understanding of religion. She noted that such content had an impact on adab and daily behaviour. As a result, influencer influence seems to be selective, affecting specific facets of religious conduct and knowledge without always leading to all-encompassing changes in religious practice.

Although the studies indicate indications of behavioural change, this influence appears to be conditional rather than automatic. Without influences becoming the primary source of their overall religious orientation, participants may see changes in particular habits. Influencer content may therefore result in little or practice-specific changes, but it may not always have an impact on participants' broader religious identity, worldview, or customs. This contrast emphasises the distinction between specific practice influence and larger religious transformation, hence supporting the concept of bounded religious transformation.

The results also show that social media influencers function within a multiple religious authority framework, where their recommendations are taken into account in addition to religious instructors, muallim, ustaz/ustazah, scholars, parents, and preexisting religious knowledge. For instance, R5 favoured speaking with her muallim because of their long-standing relationship.

In addition, influencer authority works alongside established sources of religious advice rather than replacing them. According to R6:

"As for me, I prefer... asking an ustaz or ustazah [Islamic religious teachers] because sometimes they will ask us questions back, and we can think about whether it makes logical sense or not."

In a similar vein, R4 said he would contact his father when he was available and that he would rather ask others than rely on social media. Influencer influence is negotiated within an established network of conventional and family-based religious authority. The results in Theme 4 offer a different paradigm of "Bounded Religious Transformation," in contrast to the literature on digital religion, which frequently suggests that social media influencers are dismantling and displacing conventional religious authority (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023). The Islamic private higher institution participants showed that traditional hierarchies are not replaced by influencer authority, which is consistent with Missier (2025). Rather, digital impact is carefully handled and thoroughly examined in comparison to the long-standing authority of parents and traditional religious instructors (*muallim*).

In conclusion, the four themes lead to Bounded Religious Transformation through a credibility-gated process. While Theme 2 describes how relatable communication and behavioural modelling transform this knowledge into viable practice, Theme 1 demonstrates how influencers offer easily accessible religious instruction and advice. Theme 3 serves as a credibility gate, assessing the acceptability and trustworthiness of influencer content. Because religious conversion is influenced by competing religious authorities, family influence, and current information, Theme 4 explains why accepted influence is still conditional and selective. As a result, alteration takes place, but it is limited rather than all-encompassing in terms of depth, scope, and direction. Figure 1 shows the Credibility-Gated Religious Influence Framework by relating the role of religious social media influencers and conditions and boundaries of influence that produces bounded religious transformation as the outcomes.

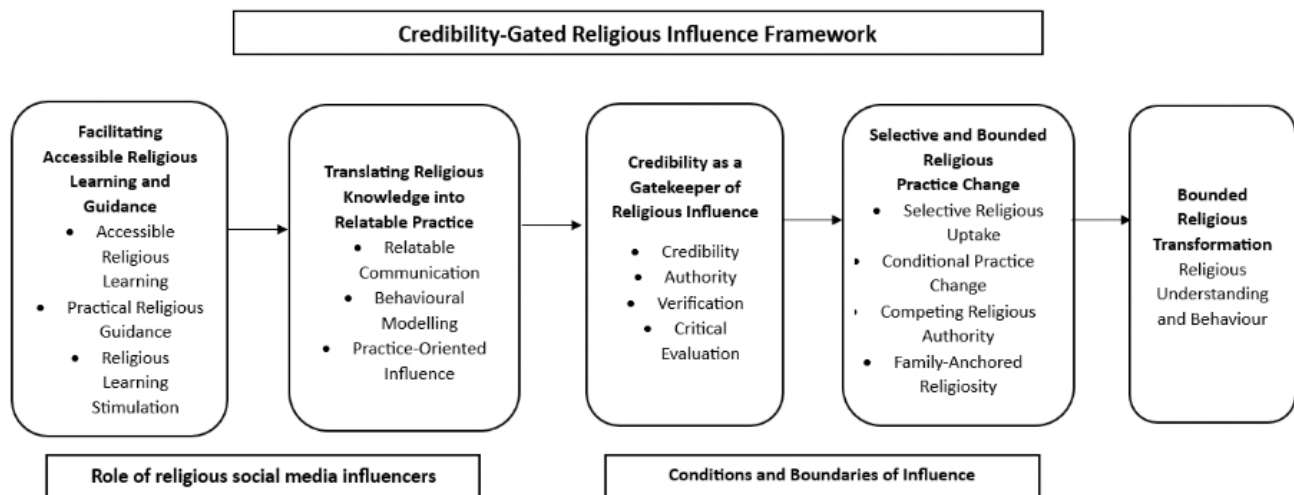


Figure 1 Credibility-Gated Religious Influence Framework among Muslim young adults in Islamic private higher institution

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of social media influencers on religious practices among Muslim young adults at Islamic private higher education institutions with particular attention to how these

influencers shape religious ideas and practices and the extent to which they influence religious understanding and behaviour. The results show that social media influencers are an accessible supplementary source of religious education, including religious information, helpful advice, inspiration, and reminders. Influencers can make Islamic teachings more approachable and relevant to the daily lives of young Muslims by using relatable communication and behavioural modelling.

The results, however, also show that influencers' influence is not universal nor automatic. Before adopting religious content, participants assessed its perceived authority, authenticity, relevance, and reliability. Religious guidance continued to come from established religious leaders, intellectuals, family members, and pre-existing religious knowledge. Therefore, rather than complete shifts in religious identity or activity, influencer-mediated religious influence was marked by selective reception and conditional practice change.

This study proposes the Credibility-Gated Religious Influence Framework, which demonstrates that perceived credibility dictates reception of religious content, accessible and relatable content generates potential for persuasion. However, this effect is limited by current religious knowledge, familial socialisation, and competing religious authorities, resulting in Bounded Religious Transformation, which refers to selected and context-dependent changes in religious understanding and practice. By showing that credibility promotes acceptance but does not ensure behavioural change, the study expands on Source Credibility Theory. Rather, religious influence is negotiated within preexisting social and religious settings, emphasising a process of religious influence that is contextually constrained and credibility-gated.

Practically, the findings stress the importance of influencers communicating responsibly and accurately about religion, as well as Muslim young adults critically evaluating and verifying religious content. Therefore, rather than replacing family or conventional religious authorities, social media influencers serve as an additional avenue for religious education. Their influence is still contextually limited, credibility-gated, and selectively adopted, offering a more complex picture of the impact of digital religion.

This study is limited by its small sample of Muslim young adults from Islamic private higher education institutions and reliance on self-reported interview data, which may limit transferability. Additionally, rather than offering broadly applicable proof of the degree of influencers' influence, the qualitative design offers contextual insights. Therefore, future research should use larger and more diverse samples and settings to further investigate the suggested Credibility-Gated Religious Influence Framework.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

All authors contributed substantially to this research. N.A.F Misaridin led the conceptualization and design of the study. F.S Roslan was responsible for data collection and transcription. N. Nordin conducted the primary analysis and interpretation of findings. A.Kamaruddin managed the literature review and drafting of the manuscript. All authors participated in revising the paper critically for intellectual content and approved the final version for submission.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study adhered to appropriate ethical principles for qualitative research, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Generative AI tools were used solely to support language refinement and writing clarity. The researchers retained full responsibility for the research design, data analysis, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

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