



Grand Imam, Digital Leadership, and Twitter

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Abstract

The Internet plays a vital role in shaping social dialogue, replicating and reinforcing established communication models. In both physical and virtual realms, public discussions and ideological debates necessitate influential leaders who can serve as reference points, either promoting or challenging prevalent values. The concept of leadership has garnered considerable attention in communication management studies, highlighting the distinctiveness of leaders and their chosen methods of influence. This article delves into the concept of digital leadership as a guiding force in online conversations, with a specific focus on microblogs like Twitter and their potential to facilitate this role. Our study centers on analyzing the Twitter account @alimamaltayeb, providing valuable insights into the type of leadership exhibited by the Grand Imam and the impact of his teachings. Through our analysis, we demonstrate that @alimamaltayeb predominantly employs Twitter to address various misunderstandings about Islam. Furthermore, this research unveils that certain messages elicit a greater interest among his audience compared to others

Keywords: grand imam; digital leadership; twitter

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Introduction

The development of communication and information technology in the 21st century has had an impact on various aspects of life, including the field of religion. In recent decades, the internet and social media have become new means that play a significant role in the spread of Islamic preaching. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have successfully overcome barriers in traditional communication. The internet provides convenience and speed in disseminating information. Furthermore, social media allows easy access to information and preaching messages for a wider audience in a short period. This opens up new avenues for preachers and Muslims to share knowledge, foster brotherhood, and provide motivation and education in practicing Islamic teachings (Hureri et al., 2019).

Numerous studies have explored both the positive and negative impacts of internet and social media usage as social platforms and tools for preaching. Some positive impacts can be seen in the emergence of various conveniences and flexibilities for Muslims in their religious lives. Examples include online study circles of Islamic texts. Traditional study circles that were limited to face-to-face interactions between students and teachers have now become limitless and accessible to anyone, anywhere. Additionally, the internet facilitates the search for Islamic references and knowledge sources, such as online forums for religious discussions, on-demand video lectures, podcasts, online Islamic articles, and digital

Islamic libraries (Rahman et al., 2015). Virtual religious communities have also flourished. With the aid of social media, groups of people can engage in online Quran recitation sessions, joint prayers, and provide mutual support to strengthen their faith, especially during social restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Purwanto, 2020; V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University & Muratova, 2021).

The use of social media and the internet, while contributing to the growth of Islamic preaching, has also become a challenge within this movement. Some studies have identified certain impacts, such as the internet and social media being used as platforms for the spread of hoaxes, fake news, and disinformation (Rijal et al., 2021), recruitment and coordination of terrorist activities by Islamist terrorist movements (Bloom et al., 2019), the emergence of instant preachers, explicit content, and the dissemination of non-mainstream religious ideologies ranging from liberal to fundamentalist and conservative perspectives (Muttaqin, 2020; Nasih et al., 2020), the rise of conservative Islam (Misbah & Setyaningrum, 2022), the growth of collective religious narcissism (Waliyuddin, 2022), a shift in traditional religious authority from scholars and religious organizations to non-scholar authorities, and a shift in the sources of religious knowledge from personal to impersonal, leading to chaos in fatwas (Jinan, 2012).

The increasing use of social media as a means of communication, along with its positive and negative impacts, has also influenced scholars and religious

organizations to utilize social media in supporting their preaching activities and the dissemination of religious messages. Several studies on the activism of scholars on social media have shown an increase in their participation as a means of preaching (Yanti & Yusnaini, 2021). On the other hand, social media has also become a platform for ongoing contests among scholars, transitioning from physical spaces such as mosques and study circles to the online world. Jahroni concludes that the free and open online space does not necessarily foster inclusive religious consciousness; instead, social media tends to create echo chambers or isolated bubbles, where messages are only heard by followers. Jahroni categorizes the contestation of scholars' voices on social media into four categories: conservative, moderate, secular, and traditionalist. So far, the conservative faction has emerged as the winner in the online contest (Jahroni & Bakti, 2022).

This article aims to explore the concept of "digital leadership" and its manifestation on Twitter within the domain of ecclesial communication. Specifically, we will investigate how the Grand Imam, who holds a leadership position in Al-Azhar, a renowned Islamic Sunni institution known for its authoritative role in Islamic jurisprudence and providing religious guidance to Muslims worldwide, exercises his leadership through Twitter and the consequential impact of his tweets. The research methodology employed involves a qualitative analysis of 546 tweets posted on the Grand Imam's Twitter account, @alimamaltayeb. These tweets will be classified based on the author's objective, the

intended audience, and the main topic of each message. Additionally, we will assess the level of impact achieved by each tweet by measuring the number of retweets.

Method

The study focuses on analyzing the leadership of Grand Imam through his Twitter messages, examining their impact across different cultural and linguistic groups. A qualitative approach was employed, analyzing 546 tweets from the @alimamaltayeb account over the course of four years, from April 6, 2020, to June 6, 2023. Rather than conducting a quantitative analysis using big data, a smaller dataset was used to facilitate a qualitative study.

The tweets were categorized based on their content. All the tweets were categorized into 12 specific topics. The study also examined the number of retweets for two categories: first, retweets for each topic; second, retweets based on different languages of tweets, aiming to understand whether topical differences and also linguistic and cultural differences influence the audience's response to the tweets.

The study further explored the type of leadership exhibited by the Grand Imam through his tweets, based on the framework proposed by Bass and Avolio (Bass & Avolio, 1994) and Juan Narbona (Narbona, 2016). The tweets from the @alimamaltayeb account were classified into five leadership areas: Vision, Emulation, Purpose, Action, and Education. In cases where a tweet could fit into multiple categories, it was assigned to the most prevalent one.

Additionally, the study also will also explore the writing style of the Grand Imam's tweets and diverse audience of the Grand Imam's Twitter account. The audience will be Identified as Sunni, Muslim, Believers (those open to God but not adhering to Catholic doctrine), and the general public. This analysis aims to understand how the expression style changes when the Grand Imam wants to address a specific issue related to the message recipient.

In the following sections, this paper will discuss the concept of leadership and digital

leadership, specifically looking at how leaders and followers interact in the age of social media. This exploration aims to uncover how leadership has changed over time and how social media platforms have affected the relationship between leaders and their followers. By studying how leadership and digital platforms intersect, we can gain a better understanding of the challenges and possibilities that arise in today's communication landscape.

Preliminary Findings

Table 1. The growth of Grand Imam' Twitter followers

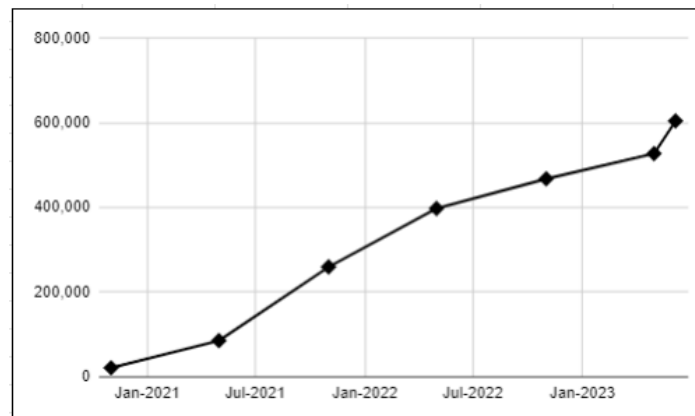


Table 2. The number of tweets and retweets based on the purpose of the messages.

	Tweets	%	Retweets	%
Action	9	3.9	8640	4.3
Education	7	3.1	6122	3.0
Emulation	32	14.0	9442	4.7
Purpose	92	40.2	116996	58.1
Vision	89	38.9	60283	29.9

Table 3. The number of tweets and retweets based on the intended language of the message.

	Tweets	%	Retweets	%
Arabic	327	59.9	167159	83.2
Chinese	1	0.2	546	0.3
English	162	29.7	17698	8.8
French	18	3.3	3967	2.0
German	4	0.7	854	0.4
Greek	2	0.4	700	0.3
Hebrew	2	0.4	2307	1.1
Hindi	2	0.4	81	0.0
Indonesian	2	0.4	1019	0.5
Italian	4	0.7	1734	0.9
Pashto	3	0.5	1594	0.8
Persian	2	0.4	674	0.3
Spanish	3	0.5	61	0.0
Swahili	2	0.4	666	0.3
Turkish	6	1.1	801	0.4
Ukrainian	2	0.4	194	0.1
Urdu	4	0.7	793	0.4

Table 4. Classification of the tweets and retweets by the subject

Subject	Tweets	%	Retweets	%
Family and Social Order	122	21.9	14810	7.3
Humanity	35	6.3	5644	2.8
Moral Values and Virtues	50	9.0	10985	5.4
Education and Science	18	3.2	3468	1.7
Intolerance	17	3.0	6823	3.4
Islamic belief & Practices	105	18.8	38933	19.2
Justice and fairness	9	1.6	1102	0.5
Nature and climate change	10	1.8	2489	1.2
Occasions and Celebrations	28	5.0	16626	8.2
Palestinian Support	18	3.2	63601	31.3
Unity and solidarity	101	18.1	23637	11.6
Violence	45	8.1	14826	7.3

Conclusion

The tweets were categorized based on their content. All the tweets were categorized into 12 specific topics. The study also examined the number of retweets for two categories: first, retweets for each topic; second, retweets based on different languages of tweets, aiming to understand whether topical differences and also linguistic and cultural differences influence the audience's response to the tweets.

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