

Digital Religious Identity and Personal Branding Among Wahdah Islamiyah Cadres

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ABSTRACT. The rapid expansion of digital media has transformed social media from a platform for personal interaction into a strategic space for identity construction and religious communication. While personal branding has been extensively examined in business, politics, and influencer culture, its application within Islamic da'wah organizations remains underexplored, particularly among young preachers operating in local organizational contexts. This study investigates how Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo, Indonesia, use social media to construct personal branding that strengthens both their individual credibility and their organizational da'wah mission. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving active Wahdah Islamiyah cadres engaged in digital da'wah. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Peter Montoya's Personal Branding framework, which emphasizes authenticity, specialization, consistency, visibility, and distinctiveness as the core dimensions of effective personal branding. The findings reveal that cadres strategically position themselves as credible Islamic communicators by consistently disseminating religious content aligned with Qur'anic values, maintaining ethical online behavior, and presenting a coherent digital identity that reflects Wahdah Islamiyah's vision. Their branding practices extend beyond content production to include sustained audience engagement, collaboration with fellow preachers and Islamic organizations, and the integration of offline and online da'wah activities. Rather than pursuing popularity or personal recognition, the cadres prioritize trustworthiness, religious authority, and community empowerment as the foundation of their digital presence. These practices demonstrate that personal branding in the context of Islamic da'wah functions as a value-oriented communication strategy rather than a self-promotional exercise. This study contributes to the literature by extending personal branding theory into the domain of digital religious communication and demonstrating how Islamic values shape branding practices in organizational settings. The findings provide practical insights for Islamic organizations and young preachers seeking to develop effective, ethical, and sustainable digital da'wah strategies in an increasingly networked society.

Keywords: Personal branding, digital da'wah, social media, Wahdah Islamiyah, Peter Montoya, religious communication.

INTRODUCTION

Content in the introduction, must contain: *first*, presentation of the main research or study topics; *second*, contains the latest literature related to citing the latest research literature (the last ten years) which has relevance to the article being studied; *third*, it can show gaps that have not been filled by previous studies, inconsistencies or controversies that arise between the existing literature; *fourth*, contain the problem, the purpose of the research or study, the context of the research or study, and the unit of analysis used in the study; and *fifth*, displaying what is discussed in the structure of the article.

Social media is a digital communication platform. The presence of social media allows for interaction without having to do so face-to-face; social interaction occurs online (Adisaputro & Sutamaji, 2021). In general, social media use varies depending on users' interests. According to Zúñiga, social media users can communicate through various features that allow interaction between users, such as conversations through instant messaging services (Chat), sending private messages, and commenting in the available fields (Anzani et al., 2024). In addition, users can also share content in the form of photos and videos. According to Miller et al., the information circulating on social media is not only limited to general information, such as news and entertainment, but also includes personal information, such as photos, videos, and individuals' identities (Puspita, 2024). In this context, social media has the potential to make the personal information shared accessible to the public, thus allowing other parties to obtain and utilize it (Laksono, n.d.). Impact of Media Use. Amid modernization and the development of digital technology, social media has become a new space that not only facilitates communication and social interaction, but also opens up great opportunities to shape personal image and identity. For cadres of Islamic organizations such as Wahdah Islamiyah, especially in Palopo City, social media can no longer be seen as a tool for disseminating information, but as a strategic medium to strengthen their position as da'i as well as a representative of the da'wah institution they represent (Hidayatullah, 2024).

Personal branding in the context of da'wah cadres is very important because the success of conveying da'wah messages is greatly influenced by the credibility and public perception of the da'i (I. Safi'i, 2019). A da'i who can build a positive, consistent, and in accordance with Islamic values will be more easily accepted by his mad'u, especially in the digital era that is very visual and fast-changing. This is in line with Wahid's statement in Nurjuman that the perception of *mad'u* against *Düsseldorf* has a great influence on the decision to accept or reject the message conveyed, whether in the form of information, advice, or advice. (Al-Barra et al., 2024) It can be said that the higher the trust *mad'u* has in credibility *Düsseldorf*, the stronger the influence of the information he receives will be. Similarly, vice versa, there will be fewer and weaker influences of the information received by *mad'u* if trust in credibility *Düsseldorf* is low. (Imam Safi'i I. Safi'i, 2024) If this happens, then the da'wah mission *cannot be achieved optimally and can be categorized as a failure* (Aini et al., 2022). Therefore, the need to manage self-image consciously and in a directed manner through social media cannot be ignored. Palopo City, as one of the areas that is active in the da'wah of Wahdah Islamiyah, holds great potential for further study (Norjana et al., 2022). Because amid the rise of conventional da'wah, which has been the main strength of the organization, there is a need to respond to the development of the times with a more contextual and adaptive approach (Adisaputro & Sutamaji, 2021). The use of social media by Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo is an interesting phenomenon that is worth exploring, especially in terms of how they use this media to form *Personal Branding* that supports the effectiveness of da'wah (Sya'diyah, 2024).

The research focuses not only on seeing social media as a means of da'wah communication, but also on tracing how Wahdah Islamiyah cadres build and manage Personal Branding strategically in the digital space. This research highlights the dynamics and communication strategies of cadres in presenting themselves as credible and relevant da'i, as well as how they maintain a balance between personal identity, organizational values, and the demands of digital public spaces. Unlike

previous studies that generally examined the effectiveness of da'wah on social media or audience perception of religious content, this study places Personal Branding at the core of the discussion. This focus makes a new contribution in the realm of da'wah communication, especially in the context of how a da'i shapes public perception through consciously designed digital constructions (Aminaturrofiqoh & Marzuki, 2024)

METHODS

The method section describes the steps taken to execute the research or study. Therefore, it is necessary to show the reader in detail why the method used is reliable and valid in presenting research findings. The research methods section should be able to explain the research methods used, including how the procedures are implemented, an explanation of the tools, materials, media, or instruments used, an explanation of the research design, population and sample (research targets), data collection techniques, instrument development, and the technique of data analysis. Subtitles in the method section should be included in the paragraph instead of bullets or numbering.

This research is a descriptive qualitative research that aims to provide an in-depth overview of the use of social media by Wahdah Islamiyah cadres as a means of *Personal Branding*. The case study approach is used to enable focused, thorough analysis and provide a rich understanding of the phenomenon under study. To support this research, 5 primary Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo cadres were selected as the main informants and focus of the study. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from various relevant literature, documents, and articles and supported the analysis in this study (Bungin, 2007).

The instruments used include observation sheets to record data that appears during the observation process, a list of questions as an in-depth interview guide, and a documentation tool in the form of a mobile phone camera to record relevant activities. Data collection techniques are carried out through three methods, namely observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were made on social media activities, especially the Facebook page of Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo City. Interviews were conducted in depth with selected cadres based on certain criteria that have been set beforehand. Documentation is used to complete field data through the collection of documents related to social media activities and articles relevant to the research topic (Kriyantono & Sos, 2014).

The data collected is then analyzed through three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification. Data reduction is carried out by selecting relevant data and discarding inappropriate data, then summarizing and organizing data from various informants. After the data is summarized, the next stage is presenting the data in the form of a systematic narrative to facilitate understanding. The last stage is drawing conclusions and verification, which is carried out through observation of patterns, explanations, and cause-and-effect relationships that arise from the compiled data. Through this method, research is expected to make a real contribution to the development of da'wah communication strategies, especially in building the personal branding of Islamic organization cadres in the digital era.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Personal Branding Opportunities Through Social Media

Personal branding is a very important step for pednakwah who has the task of conveying the teachings of Islam to the people. The goal is clear: to invite to goodness and avoid evil. With a noble purpose, the preacher must have a good image so that *the personal branding done will create a positive fire*. Thus, the *madh'u* will be more confident and believe in the advice conveyed. As cadres

of an Islamic religious institution, wahdah Islamiyah cadres also have the duty and responsibility to continue to preach and broadcast the teachings of Islam. In carrying out these duties, cadres need to have a good image so that their da'wah runs better and more effectively. Trusting madh'u in cadres facilitates the delivery of the content of da'wah conveyed. Based on the results of interviews with several cadres of Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo City, *Personal Branding* Through social media is an excellent and beneficial opportunity for their institution.

The Importance of Social Media

The existence of social media is very important so that more audiences can recognize it. In general, Wahdah cadres view social media in the current era as very important. Apart from the fact that this is the era of communication and information technology, they also think that if they can use this technological advancement well, many good things can be done and can easily reach a wider audience. Through an interview, Wahdah Islamiyah cadres revealed.

"Yes, social media is actually a means: Whether he becomes good depends on us, so whether he becomes good to us or bad depends on the user. Well, but specifically to introduce myself through social media, I think the easiest and cheapest way for now is to preach the easiest and cheapest way is also through social media. So why did we choose websites and Facebook? Because those are the ones most in demand by the public today. Even though there are other social media platforms, these two are the ones in the current condition. That was the advantage: it was cheap, so we were never afraid of spending less and so on. Second, it is easily accessible to everyone, so it is cheap and easy. Still high, it is indeed a feeling of being close to the goods as a person and his gadget, so when we brand the person, it can be invited by others or other social media users." (Hajar Aswad, Head of Information and Communication Media of Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo)

Other cadres also expressed the importance of using social media,

"Social media is important, facilitating communication and friendship. It is very important, in my opinion. Especially yesterday, I joined the driving teacher, so we use social media to do our assignments; we use YouTube. So all of those tasks are shared on Youtube" (Riska Basir, Coordinator of Muslimah Regeneration of the Palopo Region).

Furthermore, social media in the perception of wahdah Islamiyah cadres is very important to support self-development and da'wah. The importance of social media among da'wah cadres is evidenced by the use of social media by cadres who can use not only one but two to four social media. The social media in question are Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. The use of Facebook is among the longest; some have even used it for 20 years. WhatsApp is the most frequently used social media because it has become a daily necessity for connecting with others. Meanwhile, Instagram for cadres is still relatively new and is increasingly used more than Facebook. YouTube is only used to upload assignments and inspiration for teaching methods, but some posts contain Islamic da'wah. The use of social media as a da'wah medium carried out by Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo city is in line with the findings of Nurjuman's research. The results of the research conducted show that the quality of competence and science of the *da'i* of Muhammadiyah is supported by the style, method, and media of da'wah they use. According to the study, no matter how large the level of knowledge you have, the effectiveness of da'wah still depends on the accuracy in choosing the style, method, and media of da'wah. However, Muhammadiyah da'is can adapt these three aspects to the characteristics of mad'u and the dynamics of the development of the times, so that the da'wah delivered can be more optimal.

Meanwhile, Palopo city Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in their personal social media accounts, have not specifically done the same. They focus more on consistency in sharing da'wah content or information that is considered useful for a wide audience. However, organizationally, Wahdah Islamiyah in Palopo city has implemented special methods for preaching on social media. To

achieve the goals of da'wah, including through social media, they formed a special division to manage the organization's social media.

Social Media as a *Personal Branding Media*

As a medium that anyone and anywhere can access, social media is used by many influencers to find more followers, establish their names in the minds of followers, and reach behavioral followers who are influenced by the influencer in a certain way. This opportunity was also used by water preachers such as Ustad Jafar Husein, who used the YouTube channel as da'wah media to be closer to their *followers*. For Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo city, the existence of social media such as Facebook and Instagram opens opportunities for them to introduce the Wahdah Islamiyah Institution and also their religious understanding.

"Social media is a good medium to introduce yourself. Yes, social media is actually a tool. Whether it becomes good is up to us, so whether it becomes good to us or bad depends on the user. Well, especially to introduce myself through social media, I think the easiest and cheapest way for now, so that the easiest and cheapest way to preach is also through social media" (Hajar Aswad, Head of Information and Communication Media of Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo)

Posts on social media for cadres are considered an illustration that their lives are not always about formal da'wah activities, but like humans in general who also have daily activities,

"Sometimes work at school, sometimes trips to the village, sometimes selfies and activities and meals with friends. The goal is to divide the atmosphere more and provide an understanding that the preacher is also an ordinary human being who has other activities." (Muhammad Rifai, Member of Information and Communication Media Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo)

However, this is somewhat different from what some preachers in the country do, who are personally active in using social media to preach. Especially for Wahdah Muslim women in the Palopo Region, they tend to limit themselves to being active on social media if it is related to their personal lives or other things that highlight them personally. Not only in physical appearance but also in sound, these two things are very well maintained so that they are not brought up as much as possible, let alone highlighted on social media. If anything, the condition is considered very urgent and "necessary" to display their physique. However, of course, by still using *the niqab*, or better known as the veil.

"Social media is very good for doing personal branding; I agree with that, but if you go back to me personally, do not use it to form an image of myself. However, more importantly, just go for it, post a good one. Later, the person who sees it will judge" (Riska Basir, Coordinator of Wahdah Muslim Wahdah Cadre in Palopo Region)

In addition to obeying the sharia that regulates the Islamic religious view of images, this is also done to protect the cadres of Wahdah Muslims from slander.

"What about us, who are very limited from uploading their physical preaching, the way of preaching is different if the usual opinions of women who are usually free to display are so restrictive, we deliberate on Muslim women, a new forum is packaged, how to make the da'wah more attractive even without presenting the physical and also with the voice because indeed we are very limited, but we do not consider it as a limitation or The shortcomings are not because we believe that it is not allowed and we have also agreed that even if there are flyers that appear, they are flyers that are only advice in the form of captions." (Elis Kusmiaty, Head of Muslimah Wahdah Islamiyah District)

Slightly different from Muslim cadres, Muslim Wahdah cadres are more open in terms of posts through social media. Some informants said that at certain times, they would upload photos of themselves, their families, travel, their profession, and daily activities.

"Sometimes work at school, sometimes trips to the village, sometimes selfies and activities and meals with friends. The goal is to divide the atmosphere more and provide an understanding that the preacher is also an ordinary human being who has other activities." (Hendra Tarindje, Chairman of the Palopo District Management Board)

Despite having uploaded personal photos on social media, Wahdah Muslim cadres have minimized the appearance of their faces as clearly as possible. This is done by uploading photos of themselves as silhouettes and poses with their backs to the camera.

Building a Positive Image Through Social Media

Most people's social media uploads will be used as a benchmark to judge and label them with a certain image. Similarly, this applies to the cadres of Wahdah Islamiyah in Palopo City. If what is uploaded contains messages of kindness, then the impact on oneself will certainly be good. Similarly, if what is uploaded is a bad message, a negative self-image will be formed. Consistently, Wahdah cadres strive to filter information that will be shared through social media. Be so careful; uploads on social media such as FB and IG tend to be very rare. The process of sorting out the messages to be shared involves considering their truthfulness. In addition, to avoid misunderstandings, the message to be shared also considers the audience's understanding of its meaning. By understanding who the audience is, it makes it easier for them to compose a message.

"No, I never said I wanted to be known on social media like that. What it was, so we just try not to share things on social media negative things, for example. I like to share articles that discuss religion. So we do not design what it is; it is something that can then be considered to form a brand. The point is that we just focus on preaching; as for how the image is formed, it goes back to each individual who assesses." (St. Hasnah, Coordinator of Marriage and Family Development, Sakinah MWD Palopo)

*"If you want to brand yourself, it is not through social media. I am afraid that it will fall into *riya'*. If I am personal, I always go back to myself, that only do positive things, after all, later people themselves will judge. So *ndada* is like a strategy or special ways. Because that is not where the focus is, right?"* (Riska Basir, Coordinator of Wahdah Muslim Wahdah Cadre in Palopo Region)

"Posting useful things. Surely people will think, Oh yes, this is the image of our account; it will lead to that. If we post well, we know that we plant good that comes a lot. What we plant is good; what we harvest is so good" (Muhammad Rifai, Member of Information and Communication Media Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo)

Like other posts uploaded through social media, the cadres' messages did not escape negative comments from netizens. For cadres, avoiding long debates is one solution.

"No one has made a bad comment at all; most jokes contain allusions. Seeing who the person who comments is, if I am not known, I will give an argument; if I am invited to argue, I do not bother anymore" (Fadil Akib, Chairman of the Da'wah and Human Resources Development Department of Wahdah Islamiyah Palopo)

"Fatal negative comments have never happened; if you make negative comments about Wahdah, Alhamdulillah, it is solved by presenting facts from Wahdah Islamiyah" (Hendra Tarindje, Chairman of the Palopo District Management Board). If clarification has been made but is still being commented on, they choose to stop commenting; this is done so that there is no long debate that can cause disputes.

Discussion

Based on the results of interviews with Palopo City Wahdah Islamiyah cadres, it can be concluded that social media has a very large role in da'wah activities. Advances in communication technology have opened up great opportunities for the dai to expand their reach to more *mad'u* (da'wah objects) without being limited by space and time. (Satyadharma et al., 2026) With various interactive features such as live broadcasts, video uploads, and writings that anyone can access, social media is an effective means of spreading Islamic teachings widely. Wahdah Islamiyah cadres see that this digital platform allows the spread of Islamic values that can reach various levels of society, including the younger generation who are more familiar with digital technology. Furthermore, the use of social media in da'wah can also be a strategy to face the challenges of the times, especially in countering misinformation about Islam. Palopo City Wahdah Islamiyah cadres realize that in the midst of such a rapid flow of information, there is a lot of misinformation and inappropriate narratives about Islamic teachings. Therefore, da'wah through social media not only aims to spread goodness, but also to straighten out inappropriate understandings in society. With interesting, educational, and evidence-based content, social media can be a fortress in maintaining the purity of Islamic teachings and strengthening Islamic ukhuwah amid an increasingly complex digital life.

Palopo City Wahdah Islamiyah cadres, as part of the Islamic da'wah movement, realize that every upload on social media has a big impact on how their *mad'u* or audience perceives them. Every word, image, and video shared is not just ordinary content, but also reflects the Islamic values they carry. Therefore, a *dai* must be careful in using social media so that his image is maintained as a person with noble character and knowledge, and can be an example for the people. The influence of posts on social media on a *dai's* self-image is not only limited to the personal aspect, but also has an impact on the credibility of the da'wah he does. If a *dai* consistently shares content that contains Islamic knowledge, motivation for goodness, and useful advice, then people's trust in him will increase. However, if a *dai* is not wise in managing his posts, such as engaging in unproductive debates or sharing unverified information, then this can damage his image as a spiritual guide. The existence of social media does provide a great opportunity to spread da'wah, but it also carries risks if not used wisely. (Talukdar et al., 2026)

In addition, a dai's interaction on social media also greatly affects how his followers perceive him. A dai who actively responds to questions politely and provides solutions based on Islamic teachings will be more respected and appreciated. On the other hand, if a dai seems impatient in responding to criticism or displays a less wise attitude in discussing, then his image as a messenger of kindness can be tarnished. Therefore, ethics in communicating on social media is very important for a *dai* so that he remains respected and trusted by the wider community. (Jailani & Fatikh, 2026) Furthermore, the image of a *dai* on social media also has an impact on the development of da'wah more broadly. If a *dai* has a good image, then the message he conveys will be easier for the community to accept and follow. This is not only beneficial for him personally, but also for the da'wah organizations he represents, such as Wahdah Islamiyah. Therefore, every *dai* must be aware that social media is a very influential tool in shaping public perception. By maintaining the quality of content, interacting well, and upholding Islamic values in every upload, a *dai* can build a positive image so that his da'wah is more effective and provides wide benefits for the ummah.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research conducted, the author concludes that the presence of social media is seen as a great opportunity to expand the reach of da'wah. Through various social media, Wahdah Islamiyah cadres can carry out da'wah that can be seen by anyone who can access the social media. In addition, another advantage of social media is flexibility. This makes it possible to preach without being bound by time, meaning that if it has been uploaded to social media, then *mad'u* can access it anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, social media is also a forum to form a person's self-image, including Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo city as *dai*. *Mad'u* or the wider audience will judge and label them according to their uploads on social media. It can be said that, both positively and negatively, *dai*'s self-image is influenced by their uploads on social media. Personally, Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo city have strategically not made personal branding efforts. However, it can be ensured that through their uploads, they will still be judged and viewed with a certain image by the audience. So that in the future, it is hoped that Wahdah Islamiyah cadres in Palopo City will make efforts to determine strategies to carry out personal branding on social media. The goal is not to show off or *riya'* but as a form of effort to build a positive personal brand that will benefit oneself and the organization.

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