

Celebrity Ustad Preaching on YouTube: Students' Reception of Moderate Islamic Education and Interreligious Tolerance

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Abstract

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This study examines students' reception of celebrity ustad preaching on YouTube in relation to moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance. The study focuses on how Ustad Abdul Somad, Ustad Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar construct messages of moderation and tolerance, as well as how UINSU students interpret these messages as active digital audiences. This research employed a qualitative approach with a netnographic method. Data were collected through observation of selected YouTube preaching content, semi-structured interviews with eight students from Islamic-based faculties at UINSU, and documentation of relevant digital materials. Data were analyzed through coding, thematic categorization, and netnographic interpretation by connecting digital content with students' offline religious experiences. The findings show that the three celebrity ustad construct moderate Islamic education and tolerance messages through normative-ethical, educational-argumentative, and dialogical-inclusive communication patterns. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of digital da'wah content analysis and students' audience reception, showing that YouTube functions not only as a preaching medium but also as a space for shaping students' religious understanding, digital religious literacy, and interreligious tolerance.

Keywords: Celebrity Ustad, Digital Da'wah, Netnography, Audience Reception; Interreligious Tolerance

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji resepsi mahasiswa terhadap dakwah ustad selebriti di YouTube dalam kaitannya dengan Pendidikan Islam moderat dan toleransi antarumat beragama. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada cara Ustad Abdul Somad, Ustad Adi Hidayat, dan Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar mengonstruksi pesan moderasi dan toleransi, serta bagaimana mahasiswa UINSU memaknai pesan tersebut sebagai audiens digital aktif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode netnografi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi konten dakwah terpilih di YouTube, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan delapan mahasiswa dari fakultas berbasis studi keislaman di UINSU, dan dokumentasi bahan digital yang relevan. Data dianalisis melalui proses pengodean, kategorisasi tema, dan interpretasi netnografis dengan menghubungkan konten digital dan pengalaman keberagamaan mahasiswa di ruang luring. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketiga ustad selebriti membangun pesan Pendidikan Islam moderat dan toleransi melalui corak komunikasi normatif-akhlaki, edukatif-argumentatif, dan dialogis-inklusif. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada integrasi analisis konten dakwah digital dan resepsi mahasiswa, sehingga menunjukkan bahwa YouTube tidak hanya menjadi media dakwah, tetapi juga ruang pembentukan pemahaman keagamaan, literasi digital keagamaan, dan toleransi

antarumat beragama mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: Ustadz Selebriti, Dakwah Digital, Netnografi, Resepsi Audiens, Toleransi Antarumat Beragama

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has transformed patterns of religious communication in society, particularly in the way young people access, select, and interpret sources of religious knowledge. Social media, which was initially used mainly as a means of entertainment and social interaction, has now developed into a space for the production, distribution, and exchange of religious discourse on a broad scale. Digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram no longer function merely as communication media but have also become spaces for the formation of identity, religious orientation, and new religious references. In this context, religious education no longer takes place only in formal settings such as schools, universities, pesantren, or Islamic study assemblies, but also through religious content circulating in digital spaces.

Among the various digital platforms currently developing, YouTube holds an important position in Indonesian society. Based on the *Digital 2025 Global Overview Report* published by We Are Social and Meltwater, the number of YouTube users in Indonesia reached approximately 143 million users, equivalent to 50.2% of the total population at the beginning of 2025. The largest user age group was young people, particularly those aged 18–34 years (Kemp, 2025). This data indicates that YouTube has become one of the most widely consumed digital media platforms among young people, including for accessing religious information and knowledge. This condition shows that religious learning in the digital era takes place within an ecosystem that is more open, rapid, visual, and easily accessible.

The dominance of YouTube in the lives of young people has also influenced the pattern of Islamic da'wah dissemination. While da'wah was previously conducted mostly through face-to-face forums such as mosque sermons, Islamic study gatherings, and Islamic educational institutions, it now also takes place actively through digital media. This shift has given rise to the phenomenon of celebrity ustadz, namely religious preachers who gain popularity, audience reach, and religious authority through digital media. In this study, the term celebrity ustadz is not understood merely as a popular preacher, but as a religious figure who combines da'wah capacity, media communication strategies, public image, and connectedness with digital audiences. Thus, celebrity ustadz can be understood as part of the phenomenon of religious influencers in the digital da'wah space, because their religious influence is shaped not only by scholarly authority but also by their ability to build communication, emotional closeness, and audience engagement through social media (Pranoto, 2023).

The phenomenon of celebrity ustadz also indicates a shift in religious references. Religious references that previously came mostly from formal and non-formal educational institutions have now expanded into more flexible digital spaces. The

popularity of an ustaz is no longer determined solely by formal religious educational background, but also by the ability to deliver messages communicatively, manage self-image, adjust da'wah language to audience characteristics, and utilize social media algorithms. In this context, YouTube is not only a medium for delivering da'wah but also a space for forming religious influence, legitimacy, and authority within digital society (Muzayanah & Lubis, 2023).

Young people, particularly university students, are among the groups that intensively access digital da'wah content. They grow up in a digital environment where social media is not merely a source of entertainment but also a source of information, identity formation, and moral-religious reference. A KOL.ID report shows that around 90% of Indonesian Generation Z use YouTube, with an average daily usage duration of 2–3 hours (KOL.ID, 2025). The high intensity of YouTube use indicates that the process of religious learning and understanding among young people is no longer fully dependent on formal institutions such as schools, families, pesantren, or universities, but is also influenced by digital content consumption. The increasing trend of hijrah among adolescents and young people also strengthens the position of popular ustaz as religious references, especially when da'wah content is packaged emotionally, contextually, communicatively, and relevant to everyday life problems (Triana et al., 2021).

In the context of Islamic Religious Education, the development of digital da'wah presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, YouTube can serve as an alternative medium for disseminating the values of moderate Islam and interreligious tolerance to young people more broadly and flexibly (Sudirman, 2025). On the other hand, digital spaces also allow the emergence of various forms of da'wah, not all of which align with the principles of religious moderation. This issue is important because Indonesia is a multicultural country with religious, cultural, and social diversity. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia positions religious moderation as an important strategy for maintaining harmonious social life through indicators such as national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and acceptance of local traditions (Kementerian Agama RI, 2023). Therefore, moderate Islamic education needs to be understood not only as learning material in the classroom but also as a value that must be present in digital da'wah spaces widely consumed by students.

The relationship among digital da'wah, religious moderation, tolerance, and students needs to be understood within an interconnected conceptual framework. YouTube becomes a digital da'wah space that provides religious content; celebrity ustaz function as figures who construct Islamic messages through particular communication styles; students act as active audiences who select, interpret, and negotiate messages; while moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance become values that may be formed through this reception process. However, high consumption of da'wah content does not automatically produce moderate and tolerant religious understanding. Some users access YouTube as entertainment or casual media consumption, so da'wah messages are not necessarily understood critically and reflectively (Gao & Liu, 2023). In addition, social media algorithms can strengthen repeated exposure to certain types of

content, thereby influencing patterns of thought, religious references, and the ways students understand issues of moderation and tolerance.

From the perspective of media communication theory, audiences cannot be understood as passive message recipients. *Uses and Gratifications Theory* explains that individuals actively select media according to the needs, interests, and value orientations they seek to fulfill (Katz et al., 1973). This theory is relevant for understanding why students choose certain da'wah content on YouTube as a source of religious information. Meanwhile, *Social Learning Theory* explains that individuals may form behavior through observation and imitation of figures considered influential (Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022). In the context of digital da'wah, celebrity ustaz do not only function as transmitters of religious messages but also as public figures who are observed, assessed, and used as references by young audiences. In addition, *Cultivation Theory* emphasizes that continuous media exposure has the potential to shape a person's social perspective on the surrounding reality (Arnett, 2007). Thus, students' reception of celebrity ustaz da'wah on YouTube needs to be analyzed as an active process involving media choice, consumption intensity, religious learning experiences, social interaction, and digital religious literacy.

Several previous studies have discussed digital da'wah, celebrity ustaz, and religious expression on social media. However, most studies still focus on aspects of da'wah communication, media strategy, preacher popularity, or the representation of religious messages in digital content (Effendi et al., 2022). Studies on religiosity in digital spaces have also shown the configuration of ideology and religious expression in virtual society, but they have not specifically explained how students interpret messages of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance from celebrity ustaz content on YouTube (Zuhri, 2021). In addition, studies on Islam in the digital era generally place greater emphasis on content analysis and the diversity of religious expression on social media, while the dimension of audience reception, especially students as active consumers of digital da'wah, has received less attention (Khodafi et al., 2024).

This research gap indicates that studies of digital da'wah need to move from merely analyzing content toward analyzing audience reception. Previous studies have indeed made important contributions to understanding digital da'wah strategies and the popularity of preachers, but they remain limited in explaining how students interpret, accept, select, or even reject the da'wah messages they consume. Meanwhile, issues of tolerance and religious moderation among young people remain important in the social life of Indonesia's multicultural society. Various reports show that challenges related to intolerance, exclusivism, and religious polarization in digital spaces continue to develop, making it necessary to strengthen the values of moderation and tolerance more systematically through digital media (Wahid Foundation, 2022). Therefore, studies on celebrity ustaz da'wah on YouTube need to be directed not only at the content of da'wah messages but also at how these messages are received, interpreted, and reflected upon by students as active audiences.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of digital da'wah message construction analysis and students' reception analysis of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance. This study does not only examine the da'wah content of celebrity ustaz on YouTube but also investigates how UINSU students from Islamic studies-based faculties interpret these messages within their religious experiences. The three figures examined, namely Ustaz Abdul Somad, Ustaz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, were selected because they have different da'wah communication characteristics, namely normative-ethical, educational-argumentative, and dialogical-inclusive. Thus, this study contributes to the development of digital da'wah studies, audience reception studies, and moderate Islamic education in social media spaces.

Based on the above explanation, this study aims to analyze the construction of messages of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance in celebrity ustaz da'wah on YouTube, particularly in the da'wah of Ustaz Abdul Somad, Ustaz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar. In addition, this study aims to analyze UINSU students' reception of messages of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance in celebrity ustaz da'wah content on YouTube. This article is expected to provide an academic contribution to understanding the transformation of digital da'wah, strengthening the development of moderate Islamic education, and encouraging students' digital religious literacy so that they are able to be critical, reflective, and tolerant in facing diverse religious discourses on social media.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative approach using the netnographic method or Sade-Beck's internet ethnography model. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study seeks to understand the construction of digital da'wah messages and students' reception of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance in celebrity ustaz content on YouTube. Qualitative research is relevant for examining dynamic, contextual, and meaning-laden social phenomena because it is not oriented toward numerical measurement but toward an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations (Creswell, 2022). In this context, YouTube is positioned not only as a medium for disseminating religious information but also as a digital cultural space where interaction, the formation of religious authority, and the production of students' religious meaning take place.

Sade-Beck's netnographic method was used because this study integrates the observation of online activities with the exploration of participants' social experiences in offline spaces. Sade-Beck explains that netnography does not only focus on observing online activities but also connects digital data with participants' social experiences in the real world (Sade-Beck, 2004). The characteristics of netnography, which emphasize the observation of digital interaction, interpretation of meaning in

online communities, and the use of data such as YouTube videos, audience comments, digital documentation, and in-depth interviews, make this method relevant for digital da'wah research (Eriyanto, 2021). The research setting included the online space of da'wah content by Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar on YouTube, as well as the offline space through interviews with students of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara.

The participants consisted of eight undergraduate students of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Faculty of Sharia and Law, and Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Studies. Informants were selected purposively based on several criteria: being active students, coming from Islamic studies-based faculties, having accessed or actively accessing celebrity ustadz da'wah content on YouTube, knowing or following the da'wah content of Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, or Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, and being willing to provide information through semi-structured interviews. The number of eight informants was considered sufficient because the interview data showed recurring themes, particularly regarding students' interpretation of religious moderation, interreligious tolerance, ustadz communication styles, and the selection of digital da'wah content. Thus, data collection was stopped when the information obtained had reached saturation, meaning that no significant new themes emerged from the informants' responses. This study was conducted over three months, from February to April 2026.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observation of da'wah content on the YouTube channels of Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, as well as semi-structured interviews with students. Content observation was used to analyze the construction of da'wah messages, delivery patterns, communication styles, and the representation of religious moderation and interreligious tolerance values in digital spaces. Interviews were used to explore students' experiences, understanding, assessments, and reflections on messages of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance that they consumed through YouTube. Secondary data included video descriptions, audience comment sections, number of views, number of subscribers, audience responses, scientific literature, journal articles, books, official documents, and supporting reports relevant to digital da'wah, celebrity ustadz, moderate Islamic education, interreligious tolerance, digital media communication, and netnographic theory.

Data were collected through four main techniques: social media mapping, observation of da'wah content, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Social media mapping was conducted to map the characteristics of the three ustadz's YouTube channels, including dominant da'wah themes, upload activities, number of subscribers, number of views, content formats, and forms of audience interaction. Content

observation was carried out on videos relevant to moderate Islamic education, interreligious tolerance, diversity, social relations, and religious issues close to young people. In this observation, the researcher paid attention to themes, message substance, communication styles, language use, symbols, humor, forms of persuasion, and audience responses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara to obtain audience reception data on digital da'wah messages. Documentation was carried out by collecting YouTube video links, excerpts from da'wah content, screenshots of comments, observation notes, interview transcripts, and other relevant supporting documents. The use of several data collection techniques is in line with the character of qualitative research, which emphasizes data depth and the understanding of meaning within a particular social context (Sugiyono, 2021).

Data Analysis Techniques and Ethical Considerations

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using an interpretive-netnographic approach from the data collection stage to the drawing of conclusions. The analysis process was carried out in several stages. First, the researcher transcribed interview data and compiled observation notes on YouTube da'wah content. Second, the researcher conducted open coding by marking units of meaning that emerged from da'wah videos, audience comments, channel documentation, and student interview results. The initial codes that emerged were related to religious moderation, interreligious tolerance, boundaries of faith, da'wah communication styles, scholarly authority, cultural closeness, interfaith dialogue, content selection, and students' critical attitudes toward digital da'wah content.

Third, these codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, such as the construction of digital da'wah messages, the communication patterns of celebrity ustaz, students' reception of moderate Islamic education, the interpretation of interreligious tolerance, and digital religious literacy. Fourth, the researcher conducted netnographic interpretation by connecting digital data from YouTube with students' offline religious experiences. At this stage, da'wah content, ustaz communication patterns, audience comments or responses, and student interview results were analyzed integratively to understand how digital da'wah messages were received, selected, negotiated, and interpreted by students as active audiences. Fifth, the researcher drew conclusions by comparing findings from content observation, digital documentation, and student interviews, so as to obtain a comprehensive understanding of message construction and audience reception in celebrity ustaz da'wah on YouTube.

Data validity was maintained through the criteria of trustworthiness, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through source and technique triangulation by comparing data from YouTube videos, audience comments, channel documentation, interviews, and supporting literature. In addition, member checking was conducted to

ensure the conformity of the researcher's interpretation with the informants' experiences. Transferability was maintained by presenting detailed descriptions of the research context, the characteristics of celebrity ustaz, the digital da'wah space, informant criteria, and the data collection process. Dependability was ensured by systematically documenting the stages of the research, from content selection, informant selection, interview processes, data coding, thematic categorization, to conclusion drawing. Confirmability was maintained by ensuring that the research findings were derived from empirical data rather than the researcher's subjective assumptions.

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informants' consent before interviews, explaining the purpose of the research, giving informants the freedom to answer or refuse certain questions, and protecting their identities through the use of codes. Interview data were used only for academic purposes and did not include personal information that could reveal informants' identities. Digital data from YouTube were used proportionally as academic material by maintaining context, avoiding manipulation of quotations, and not displaying irrelevant personal information about audiences. Through these steps, this study seeks to maintain methodological integrity, analytical transparency, and research ethics in netnography-based digital da'wah research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The research findings obtained through YouTube content observation, channel mapping, digital documentation, and student interviews show that the da'wah of Ustaz Abdul Somad, Ustaz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar equally contains messages of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance, although these messages are constructed through different communication characteristics. The three figures use YouTube as a digital da'wah space that enables religious messages to be disseminated widely and rapidly and to reach audiences from various backgrounds. Ustaz Abdul Somad tends to develop da'wah through public lectures and popular Islamic studies that emphasize social ethics and religious boundaries; Ustaz Adi Hidayat highlights an academic, systematic, and argumentative approach based on religious evidence; while Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar develops more dialogical da'wah that is close to young people through podcasts, interfaith discussions, and contextual socio-religious conversations. These different da'wah characteristics provide an initial basis for understanding how messages of moderation and tolerance are constructed and received by students as active audiences in the digital da'wah space (YouTube content observation, 2026).

The content analyzed in this study was selected based on its relevance to moderate Islamic education, interreligious tolerance, diversity, social life, and religious issues close to young people. The six videos analyzed consisted of two videos by Ustaz Abdul Somad, two videos by Ustaz Adi Hidayat, and two videos by Habib Husein

Ja'far Al Hadar. The videos by Ustaz Abdul Somad covered the themes of internal tolerance among Muslims and tolerance toward adherents of other religions, as well as the implementation of tolerance in social and national life. The videos by Ustaz Adi Hidayat discussed interreligious tolerance and the practice of tolerance in national and state life. Meanwhile, the videos by Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar presented interfaith dialogue, respect for differences in belief, interreligious harmony, national spirit, and social harmony in Indonesia (YouTube content observation, 2026).

Table 1. Da'wah Content Analyzed

No	Name of Ustaz	Video Title	Main Theme	Duration
1	Abdul Somad	External Tolerance and Internal Tolerance	The concept of internal tolerance among Muslims and tolerance toward adherents of other religions	1 hour 19 minutes 26 seconds
2	Abdul Somad	Live: Tolerance in Islam "Hijrah with UAS"	The implementation of tolerance in social and national life	59 minutes 41 seconds
3	Adi Hidayat	Interreligious Tolerance	Islamic perspectives on interreligious tolerance	14 minutes 29 seconds
4	Adi Hidayat	Practices of Tolerance in National and State Life	Religious moderation in national and state life	11 minutes 34 seconds
5	Husein Ja'far Al Hadar	Greetings of Tolerance from Six Religions – Happy Eid!	Interfaith dialogue, respect for differences in belief, interreligious harmony, and national spirit	1 hour 08 minutes 43 seconds
6	Husein Ja'far Al Hadar	Look at This, Login!! This Is Indonesia, Folks!! Six Religious Leaders Together on Eid!!	Interfaith dialogue, interreligious harmony, religious moderation, respect for religious diversity, and social harmony in Indonesia	1 hour 41 minutes 05 seconds

Social media mapping of the three ustaz's YouTube channels shows that each has a broad digital da'wah reach. The Ustaz Abdul Somad Official channel has 5.07 million subscribers, 3,692 videos, and 556,411,589 views. The Adi Hidayat Official channel has 6.10 million subscribers, 2,714 videos, and 622,800,000 views. Meanwhile, the Jeda Nulis channel, which represents the da'wah of Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, has 1.71 million subscribers, 484 videos, and 195,880,000 views. In terms of average views per video, the Jeda Nulis channel obtained an average of 404,711 views per video, higher than the Adi Hidayat Official channel with 229,477 views per video and the Ustaz Abdul Somad Official channel with 150,707 views per video. This data shows that the number of subscribers and the number of videos do not always correspond directly to the average reach of each piece of content. Although Habib Husein Ja'far has fewer videos, his content has strong reach among digital audiences, particularly young people (YouTube channel documentation, 2026).

Based on audience characteristics and content forms, Ustaz Abdul Somad reaches more general congregations, urban and rural Muslim communities, Islamic

study assemblies, and adult to elderly audiences. His content is predominantly in the form of conventional lectures, studies on Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, Islamic question-and-answer sessions, and socio-religious issues. Ustaz Adi Hidayat reaches more students, university students, academics, teachers, young professionals, and people who prefer evidence-based Islamic studies. His content is predominantly in the form of Qur'an and hadith studies, Islamic education, scholarly-argumentative discussions, and national issues. Meanwhile, Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar reaches more young people, university students, Generation Z, digital communities, interfaith audiences, and active social media users through da'wah podcasts, interfaith dialogue, religious moderation, tolerance, social issues, and an inclusive Islamic approach (YouTube content observation, 2026).

The observation results show that the values of religious moderation and interreligious tolerance are present in the three channels, but they appear through different patterns of delivery. In Ustaz Abdul Somad's content, the value of moderation appears more often through religious explanations that emphasize balance in religious life, the importance of maintaining proper conduct, and positioning Islamic teachings proportionally in social life. Tolerance in his da'wah is evident when he discusses social relations in a plural society, the importance of maintaining good character, and ways of responding to differences in belief without mixing the boundaries of faith. In Ustaz Adi Hidayat's content, moderation and tolerance are more often explained through measured, systematic language based on scholarly references, especially the Qur'an and hadith. Meanwhile, in Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar's content, moderation and tolerance appear through dialogical and inclusive narratives that are close to the lives of young people and emphasize the importance of respect for diversity in a plural society (YouTube content observation, 2026).

The pattern of da'wah message construction among the three ustaz shows that moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance are not only formed through the content of lectures, but also through communication strategies, media formats, and the characteristics of the intended audience. Ustaz Abdul Somad constructs messages through a normative-ethical approach, emphasizing social balance while maintaining the boundaries of faith. Ustaz Adi Hidayat constructs messages through an educational-argumentative approach, emphasizing the balance between worship, social responsibility, and national life. Meanwhile, Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar constructs messages through a dialogical-inclusive approach, emphasizing a middle path through dialogue, respect for diversity, and active recognition of differences. A summary of these message construction patterns is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Da'wah Message Construction among Celebrity Ustaz on YouTube

Aspect	Ustaz Abdul Somad	Ustaz Adi Hidayat	Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar
Focus of moderation	Maintaining social balance while preserving the boundaries of faith	Balance between worship and social responsibility	A middle path through dialogue and respect for diversity

Focus of tolerance	Good social relations without mixing beliefs	Respect for religious rights based on Islamic teachings	Active recognition and respect for diversity
Dominant themes	External and internal tolerance among Muslims, ukhuwah, social ethics	National life, social justice, religious freedom, social ethics	Interfaith dialogue, nationalism, human brotherhood, plurality
Basis of argumentation	The Qur'an, hadith, stories of the Companions, Islamic history	The Qur'an, hadith, scholarly educational explanations	Social dialogue, experience, stories of the Companions, and universal religious values
Communication style	Normative, persuasive, communicative	Systematic, argumentative, educational	Dialogical, relaxed, inclusive
Dominant da'wah format	Lectures and religious sermons	Thematic studies and explanations	Podcasts, dialogues, and cross-community collaboration
Character of message construction	Normative-ethical	Educational-argumentative	Dialogical-inclusive

The table shows that the three ustaz have a relatively similar da'wah orientation, namely encouraging audiences to adopt a religious attitude that respects differences, rejects conflict in the name of religion, and maintains harmonious social relations. However, the coding results on da'wah themes, argumentative foundations, communication styles, media formats, and audience responses show that these messages are constructed through different patterns. Ustaz Abdul Somad emphasizes a normative-ethical approach by relying on religious evidence, stories of the Companions, social ethics, and explanations of the boundaries of tolerance in Islam. Ustaz Adi Hidayat presents an educational-argumentative approach through systematic scholarly explanations, inviting audiences to understand the religious foundations underlying moderate and tolerant attitudes. Meanwhile, Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar develops a dialogical-inclusive approach through interfaith conversations, contemporary social issues, and experiences of life in a plural society. Thus, moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance in digital da'wah are shaped not only by the substance of the message, but also by communication strategies, forms of media presentation, and the characteristics of the intended audience (YouTube content observation, 2026).

The results of interviews with eight students of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara show that students' reception of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance is not singular, but reflects relatively similar interpretive tendencies. Students interpret moderate Islamic education as a religious attitude positioned in the middle way, non-extreme, open to differences, and still grounded in religious principles. Meanwhile, interreligious tolerance is understood as an attitude of mutual respect, appreciation for others' beliefs, and the maintenance of harmonious relations in a plural society. One informant stated, "Tolerance is very important because we must respect and appreciate one another so that we can live together peacefully" (I-01, personal communication, 2026). A similar view was expressed by another informant: "Tolerance is very important so that society can live peacefully even though

people have different beliefs” (I-02, personal communication, 2026). Another informant mentioned, “Tolerance is an attitude of mutual respect and appreciation for other people’s beliefs” (I-03, personal communication, 2026), while another informant emphasized, “Tolerance is an attitude of respecting other religions” (I-04, personal communication, 2026). These informants’ statements show that students do not merely receive tolerance as a normative concept, but also interpret it as a social attitude needed to maintain peace, provide space for others to practice their beliefs, and build harmonious relations in a multicultural society.

Students’ interpretations also show that moderation and tolerance are not understood as two separate concepts. Moderation is understood as the basis of a balanced perspective, while tolerance is understood as the concrete manifestation of that attitude in social life. One informant stated, “I came to understand that a person can remain firm in his religion without having to hate other religions” (I-01, personal communication, 2026). Another informant said, “I became more open and understood that differences are natural, so I do not easily judge others” (I-02, personal communication, 2026). Another informant expressed, “I became more able to respect non-Muslims as fellow human beings who should not be treated as enemies, but should be treated well” (I-03, personal communication, 2026). These quotations show that students interpret tolerance not as a weakening of religious identity, but as the ability to maintain personal belief while building peaceful social relations with adherents of other religions.

Students’ responses to the three ustaz are influenced by communication style, da’wah characteristics, and the compatibility of messages with their needs. Ustaz Abdul Somad is appreciated for his firm, communicative, humorous, and culturally close style of delivery. One informant stated, “Because when delivering sermons, he presents the material firmly but also inserts humor, so listeners do not get bored” (I-01, personal communication, 2026). Another informant said, “Ustaz Abdul Somad has a distinctive Sumatran accent that feels close to the community, especially when he uses the Medan accent, making him more interesting to listen to” (I-07, personal communication, 2026). These two quotations show that cultural closeness, humor, and straightforward communication are important factors in students’ reception of Ustaz Abdul Somad’s da’wah messages.

In contrast, Ustaz Adi Hidayat is more appreciated for his scholarly authority, systematic delivery, and strength of argumentation. One informant stated, “Because his sermons are full of intellectuality and scholarship” (I-04, personal communication, 2026). Another informant said, “Because the material presented is very substantial, calming, and easy to understand” (I-05, personal communication, 2026). Another informant stated, “Ustaz Adi Hidayat’s way of delivering messages is very touching, making it easy for listeners to accept” (I-08, personal communication, 2026). These findings show that students view Ustaz Adi Hidayat as a figure with strong scholarly capacity, able to explain religious issues systematically and provide certainty of understanding to audiences.

Meanwhile, Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar is appreciated for his dialogical, inclusive, relaxed, and youth-oriented da'wah style. One informant stated, "He often engages in dialogue with figures from other religions, so his da'wah feels more open and moderate" (I-03, personal communication, 2026). Another informant said, "Because Habib Ja'far delivers his sermons gently but still firmly, making them easier to understand and making listeners interested in following his messages" (I-06, personal communication, 2026). This response shows that a dialogical and inclusive approach has a strong influence on students' openness in understanding religious differences and social diversity.

The findings also show that students do not receive digital da'wah content passively. As active audiences, they have the ability to select, avoid, verify, and negotiate da'wah messages that are considered inconsistent with the values of moderation and tolerance. Students tend to reject content that discredits other groups, triggers emotions, leads to division, or displays overly radical forms of da'wah. One informant stated, "Yes. If I find such content, I usually skip it immediately because it is not useful and only triggers emotions" (I-01, personal communication, 2026). Another informant said, "Yes. Usually, if there is content that excessively discredits other groups, I choose not to follow it or skip it immediately" (I-02, personal communication, 2026). Another informant mentioned, "Yes, especially content that leads to division" (I-03, personal communication, 2026), while another informant emphasized, "Yes, especially sermons that are too radical" (I-04, personal communication, 2026). Several other informants also stated that they had encountered da'wah content that lacked tolerance, although they did not explain the specific form of the content in detail. These informants' statements show that students have sensitivity toward content that may damage social harmony and prefer da'wah that builds understanding, peace, and respect for differences.

Overall, the findings show that students' reception of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include personal ways of thinking, religious learning experiences, reflective ability, intellectual tendencies, and students' background of religious understanding. One informant stated, "I accept the content of the sermon because it is in accordance with my logic" (I-07, personal communication, 2026). This statement shows that students' acceptance of da'wah messages is not solely determined by the popularity of the ustaz figure, but also by the compatibility of the message with their framework of thinking, learning experiences, and religious needs. External factors include the character of the ustaz, da'wah communication style, intensity of YouTube access, academic environment, faculty background, organizational experience, and habits of selecting and verifying religious information. Thus, students cannot be positioned as passive consumers of digital da'wah, but rather as active audiences who receive, select, verify, negotiate, and internalize religious messages according to their socio-religious experiences.

The final finding shows that YouTube is perceived by students as one of the important spaces in shaping religious understanding. Digital da'wah does not only function as a medium for disseminating sermons, but also becomes a space for meaning production that contributes to students' tendencies of understanding, patterns of thought, social attitudes, and religious reflection. The da'wah of Ustadz Abdul Somad is perceived as stronger in moral and social-ethical development; the da'wah of Ustadz Adi Hidayat is understood as strengthening religious understanding based on textual evidence; while the da'wah of Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar is perceived as helping broaden students' openness toward difference and diversity. Thus, celebrity ustaz da'wah content on YouTube cannot be concluded as a single factor that directly shapes moderate and tolerant attitudes, but it contributes as one important reference in students' interpretive process regarding moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance through different da'wah patterns that share the same orientation, namely building peaceful, inclusive, and difference-respecting religiosity.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the construction of messages of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance in the da'wah of celebrity ustaz on YouTube cannot be understood merely as the delivery of religious sermons, but rather as a process of constructing religious meaning within a digital media ecosystem. In this context, YouTube is not merely a channel for da'wah distribution, but a space that brings together preachers, religious messages, platform technology, and audiences in a mutually influential communication process. The audio-visual, interactive, flexible, easily accessible, and replayable characteristics of YouTube make religious messages easier for students as a digital generation to consume, select, compare, and interpret (Bari et al., 2025; Maesura' & Khumaedi, 2024). Thus, digital da'wah does not simply transfer sermons from physical spaces to virtual spaces, but also transforms patterns of religious authority, message delivery strategies, and the ways audiences construct their understanding of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance.

In this context, the different da'wah characteristics of Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar indicate that moderate Islamic education is not always constructed through a uniform pattern of communication. These three ustaz present the values of moderation and tolerance through communication strategies that correspond to audience characteristics and the media formats used. The normative-ethical approach displayed by Ustadz Abdul Somad shows that moderation can be constructed through an emphasis on social ethics, boundaries of faith, ukhuwah, and good relations among fellow human beings. The educational-argumentative approach of Ustadz Adi Hidayat shows that moderation can be strengthened through systematic explanations based on the Qur'an, hadith, and scholarly argumentation. Meanwhile, the dialogical-inclusive approach of Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar shows that tolerance can be communicated through interfaith conversations, humor, popular language, and closeness to the experiences of young people. These differences affirm

that digital da'wah operates not only through the substance of its messages, but also through communication style, media format, and the preacher's ability to build emotional closeness and audience engagement (Nona, 2022; Risdiana et al., 2020).

The da'wah construction of the three ustaz also shows that messages of moderation and tolerance do not have to appear in a uniform form. In Ustaz Abdul Somad's da'wah, tolerance is understood as the ability to maintain social relations without mixing beliefs. In Ustaz Adi Hidayat's da'wah, tolerance is positioned as part of Islamic ethics in national life, social justice, and respect for religious rights. In Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar's da'wah, tolerance is presented as a dialogical space that allows various religious identities to coexist without negating one another. Thus, moderation in digital da'wah functions not only as a normative concept, but also as a way of being religious that connects personal piety with social responsibility in a plural society (Hanum & Baidawi, 2024; Haq, 2024). This is in line with the framework of religious moderation, which places national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and acceptance of local traditions as important indicators in the religious life of a plural society (Kementerian Agama RI, 2023).

The findings on students' interpretations show that digital da'wah audiences are not passive. UINSU students do not simply receive da'wah messages as delivered by ustaz, but also select, compare, verify, negotiate, and internalize messages according to their learning experiences, ways of thinking, and religious needs. This active attitude is reflected in students' ability to choose content they consider credible, assess the preacher's communication style, compare da'wah messages with their existing religious knowledge, understand the context of sermon delivery, and avoid content considered provocative or discriminatory toward certain groups. This strengthens the view that digital media audiences play an active role in selecting media and religious figures that correspond to their informational needs, identity, and value orientations. From the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory, students choose certain da'wah content because they consider it capable of fulfilling their needs for religious knowledge, psychological calm, reinforcement of religious identity, or guidance in responding to differences (Katz et al., 1973). Therefore, students' interpretation of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance is not formed instantly, but through an interaction between da'wah messages, social experiences, personal needs, and the audience's digital religious literacy.

In addition, these findings can also be read through Social Learning Theory. Celebrity ustaz are not only understood as transmitters of religious material, but also as behavioral models observed by students. Students learn from the way ustaz speak, respond to issues, address differences, construct arguments, and position themselves in public. Ustaz Abdul Somad is perceived as strong because of his firmness, humor, and cultural closeness; Ustaz Adi Hidayat is perceived as strong because of his systematic explanations and scholarly authority; while Habib Husein Ja'far is perceived as strong because of his dialogical, relaxed, and inclusive attitude. Within the framework of social learning, the character of a figure observed repeatedly can influence the way audiences

shape their religious attitudes and orientations (Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022). Thus, the influence of celebrity ustaz does not only come from the content of their sermons, but also from the communicative example displayed in digital spaces.

Meanwhile, Cultivation Theory helps explain how repeated exposure to da'wah content can shape students' perceptions and value orientations. Students who consistently access da'wah content with moderate, communicative, and tolerant narratives tend to have more open religious references toward differences. Conversely, exposure to content that discredits other groups, is provocative, or contains radical nuances can narrow one's religious perspective. Therefore, the intensity of digital da'wah content consumption becomes an important factor in shaping students' understanding of moderation and tolerance. This is in line with the view that the higher a person's media consumption intensity, the greater the possibility that the media will influence their way of thinking, attitudes, and understanding of a socio-religious reality (Sianipar, 2025). Thus, YouTube can become a productive space for religious learning when the content consumed contains moderate, educational, and reflective values.

Students' interpretation of interreligious tolerance also shows a close relationship between religious understanding and social experience. Students do not interpret tolerance as the relativization of faith or the blurring of religious identity, but as the ability to maintain peaceful social relations without losing the principles of faith. This view is important because, in the context of a multicultural society, tolerance is not sufficient if understood merely as a passive attitude of allowing differences. It needs to be realized through an active attitude of respecting the rights of others, maintaining social communication, and rejecting hostility on the basis of religion. Thus, moderate Islamic education in this study appears as value education that not only shapes normative understanding, but also shapes students' social attitudes in facing diversity.

These findings also indicate a shift in students' sources of religious reference in the digital era. Whereas religious knowledge was previously obtained more often through family, teachers, pesantren, Islamic study assemblies, or religious figures who were physically present, YouTube has now emerged as one of the important sources of religious learning consciously chosen by students. This platform is no longer understood merely as an entertainment space, but as a new authoritative space where students seek religious knowledge, compare perspectives, and construct their own moral-religious references (Budiantoro, 2017). This shift confirms that digital media does not only function as a channel for message distribution, but also as a space for the formation of religious authority and legitimacy in the digital era (Dania, 2024; Rizqana et al., 2024).

The emergence of celebrity ustaz as religious figures on YouTube reinforces this transformation. Ustaz Abdul Somad, Ustaz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar are not only present as transmitters of religious material, but also as reference figures chosen by students because they are considered relevant, close, and trustworthy. This phenomenon is in line with studies on celebrity ustaz, which emphasize that religious popularity in the digital era is no longer determined solely by institutional

authority, but also by the ability to build image, digital communication, emotional closeness, and engagement with audiences (Kiptiyah, 2017; Muzayanah & Lubis, 2023; Roziqin et al., 2025). In this context, celebrity ustaz appear as religious influencers, not merely as formal religious teachers (Daulay & Khatibah, 2025). Religious authority no longer rests only on institutional position, but also on digital resonance, message reach, and the ability of religious figures to build personal relationships with audiences.

However, the shift of religious references into digital spaces also presents challenges that must be critically addressed. The logic of digital media allows content with high engagement to spread more easily, including content that is sensational, emotional, provocative, or presents religious information in an incomplete manner. In the context of YouTube, recommendation algorithms can strengthen students' repeated exposure to similar content, potentially forming filter bubbles or echo chambers that limit the diversity of religious perspectives. This condition can make audiences more likely to accept certain narratives without comparing them with other sources, especially when the content is packaged attractively, emotionally, and close to students' current problems. Therefore, students need adequate digital religious literacy, such as the ability to select content, examine the credibility of preachers, understand the context of sermons, compare religious references, and avoid content that discredits certain groups or normalizes intolerant attitudes. Algorithms, virality, attractive visuals, and the closeness of themes to current problems can influence students' viewing choices, so religious authority in digital spaces is not always formed solely by scholarly quality, but also by how content operates within the platform ecosystem (Rahmah et al., 2025). Therefore, digital da'wah needs to be managed ethically so that it does not merely pursue reach, but also maintains message depth, social responsibility, the accuracy of religious information, and the values of moderation.

Compared with previous studies, the findings of this study show a more specific contribution to the aspect of audience reception in digital da'wah. YouTube has previously been understood as a medium for disseminating religious moderation, but the focus of such studies has mostly been directed toward the representation of messages from religious institutions (Ridesta et al., 2022). Other studies have also shown the role of Habib Husein Ja'far in spreading moderate narratives, but they have not deeply discussed how audiences interpret, negotiate, and internalize these messages in their religious experiences (Azisi & Syam, 2023). In addition, studies on celebrity ustaz have highlighted the commodification of religion and the construction of the public image of digital preachers, while studies on global trends in digital da'wah have focused more on mapping the thematic development of digital da'wah in general and have not centered on students' interpretations as active audiences (Choirin et al., 2025; Dahlan et al., 2025). Thus, this study enriches digital da'wah studies by connecting three aspects at once: da'wah message construction, the logic of YouTube media, and students' reception. This contribution shows that students' understanding of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance is shaped not only by the content of da'wah

messages, but also by how these messages are packaged, selected, received, and interpreted within the digital media ecosystem (Lintang & Pahrudin, 2023).

The implications of these findings for Islamic education are significant. Islamic education can no longer be limited to classrooms, textbooks, and formal learning relations, because university students live in a digital ecosystem where YouTube, social media, and popular da'wah figures have become part of their everyday religious learning sources. Therefore, Islamic education needs to be present in digital spaces through approaches that are more contextual, communicative, and close to students' experiences. Materials on moderation and tolerance need to be framed not only as normative concepts, but also as the ability to read social realities, respond to differences, and build peaceful relations in a plural society. In addition, Islamic Religious Education learning needs to strengthen students' digital religious literacy through several main abilities: selecting religious content, checking the credibility of preachers, comparing scholarly references, understanding the context of sermons, avoiding provocative content, and rejecting narratives that discredit certain religious groups. At this point, Islamic Religious Education learning needs to move from material transfer toward the formation of critical reasoning, selective attitudes, and reflective abilities in interpreting digital da'wah moderately and tolerantly.

Thus, this discussion affirms that the da'wah of celebrity ustaz on YouTube plays an important role as one of the references in shaping students' understanding of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance. This role is not singular and cannot be understood as a direct influence that stands alone, but is formed through the interaction between da'wah messages, ustaz characteristics, the logic of digital media, and students' active reception. YouTube can become a productive space for religious learning when da'wah content is able to combine the strength of religious evidence, communication ethics, social closeness, and respect for diversity. Conversely, digital spaces can also become a challenge if students do not have adequate literacy in assessing religious content. This study has limitations because it focuses only on YouTube, three celebrity ustaz figures, eight student informants, and one higher education context. Therefore, future studies may expand the analysis by comparing other platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or religious podcasts, and by involving informants from more diverse university backgrounds and digital communities so that the dynamics of digital da'wah reception can be understood more comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the da'wah of Ustaz Abdul Somad, Ustaz Adi Hidayat, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar on YouTube shows that moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance can be constructed through different communication patterns. Ustaz Abdul Somad presents a normative-ethical approach that emphasizes social ethics, balance in religious life, and the boundaries of faith. Ustaz Adi Hidayat develops an educational-argumentative approach through systematic explanations based on religious evidence and scholarly reasoning. Meanwhile, Habib

Husein Ja'far Al Hadar presents a dialogical-inclusive approach that emphasizes respect for diversity, interfaith dialogue, and closeness to the digital culture of young people. These different patterns show that YouTube functions not only as a medium for da'wah dissemination, but also as a space for constructing religious meaning through the interaction between da'wah messages, preacher characteristics, digital media logic, and students' reception as active audiences.

Students' reception of moderate Islamic education and interreligious tolerance shows that they are not passive recipients in consuming digital da'wah. Students understand moderate Islamic education as a religious attitude that follows the middle path, is non-extreme, respects differences, and remains grounded in religious principles. Interreligious tolerance is understood as the ability to live peacefully side by side without eliminating religious identity. These findings indicate that celebrity ustadz da'wah on YouTube contributes as one important reference in students' process of interpreting the values of moderation and tolerance, although it cannot be understood as the only factor shaping their religious attitudes.

The practical implication of this study is the importance of strengthening digital religious literacy in Islamic Religious Education learning and religious moderation programs in higher education. Students need to be equipped with the ability to select da'wah content, examine the credibility of preachers, compare religious references, understand the context of sermons, and avoid content that is provocative or discredits certain groups. Therefore, Islamic education in the digital era needs to move beyond merely delivering materials toward the formation of critical reasoning, reflective attitudes, and the ability to interpret religious messages moderately and tolerantly. Future research may expand the study to other digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or religious podcasts by involving informants from more diverse higher education backgrounds and digital communities.

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