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Research Article

Detoxing from the Digital Crowd: How Muslim Gen Z Use Self-Directed Islamic Communication to Navigate Identity Crises

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Abstract

Social media comparison can unsettle young Muslims' sense of identity, yet research on digital da'wah has focused primarily on outward preaching rather than inward religious communication. This study explores how Muslim Generation Z students experience identity crises in social media environments and how self-directed Islamic communication contributes to their recovery of an authentic sense of self. Grounded in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, the study employed in-depth interviews with four Muslim undergraduate students, comprising three core cases and one negative case. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis generated twenty-two personal experiential themes, which were integrated into four group experiential themes. The findings trace an existential movement through identity disruption, absorption in the digital crowd, anxiety and withdrawal, and inward communication associated with self-recovery. In the three core cases, prayer, dzikir, personal engagement with the Qur'an, and remembered religious counsel supported a renewed sense of self grounded in *tawakkul*. The negative case described recovery through writing, music, and self-belief, indicating that religious communication was not the only pathway to recovery. Interpreted through Heidegger's concepts, the findings frame the digital crowd as das Man and self-directed da'wah as an inward call of conscience. The study's novelty lies in conceptualising da'wah fardiyah as an inward communicative practice of identity reconstruction, extending scholarship on Islamic communication and communicative resilience while informing Islamic counselling.

Keywords: Generation Z; Heideggerian phenomenology; identity crisis; Islamic Communication; social media detox.

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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z now forms a sense of self largely online, as this cohort is the first to mature entirely in networked, smartphone-mediated environments. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok do not merely entertain; they also provide a continuous stream of peer comparisons, benchmarks, and curated achievements against which young people assess who they are and who they should become. This ongoing comparative exposure carries psychological and social costs. Among Indonesian university students, intensive social media use and cyberbullying have been linked to psychological distress and weaker academic performance (Pujianti & Mardiansyah, 2025). Adolescents also face online risks that highlight the importance of cultivating digital awareness as a protective competence (Ramadhanti & Mardiansyah, 2025). The fear of missing out can further intensify these pressures by encouraging impulsive, status-oriented behaviour. However, Islamic religiosity has been found to moderate such tendencies among Indonesian Generation Z, suggesting a potential protective role for religion in their responses to digital pressures (Chairiyati et al., 2026). The digital environment that promises connection thus also confronts young people with an anonymous public standard against which they assess their worth, direction, and sense of self.

For young Indonesian Muslims, this identity work is inseparable from religion. Religious commitment constitutes a central axis around which Muslim youth organise meaning, belonging, and moral self-understanding, and the migration of religious life onto social media has reshaped how that commitment is formed and expressed. Social media has become a primary source of religious knowledge and a central arena of religious experience and identity formation for Muslim youth (Shabdan, 2026), and it generates new patterns of religiosity among urban Indonesian Muslims (Hartono et al., 2024). Digital practices actively recontextualise what it means to be a pious self-online, ranging from the everyday use of Arabic devotional expressions (Supriyadi et al., 2025) to participation in the urban hijrah movement (Ulama'i et al., 2026). Within this landscape, da'wah, understood as Islamic invitation and preaching, has been thoroughly digitised and has expanded from mosques and television into Instagram feeds, podcasts, and short-video platforms.

Four strands of literature provide the context for this study. The first concerns digital identity pressures and young Muslims' negotiation of religious selfhood. Research on American Muslim college students examines how TikTok becomes a resource for religious self-improvement (Inanoglu, 2025). Related work explores how Muslim adolescents negotiate belonging across contexts in which religious and national identities are presented as oppositional (Elassi, 2026). These studies highlight how Muslim identity is negotiated across digital and social environments. This literature is less explicit about how young Muslims use inward communication to make sense of identity disruption and reconstruct their sense of self.

The second strand examines digital da'wah, particularly its production, circulation, and reception. A systematic review addresses the relationship between social-media preaching and religious attitudes (Hurnawijaya et al., 2026). Other studies investigate Instagram-based da'wah and worship engagement (Makhrian et al., 2025), podcasts as alternative preaching media (Hidayah, 2021), and celebrity preachers' roles in millennial religious life (Rustan et al., 2020). Together, these studies foreground communication directed towards audiences through digital platforms.

This audience-oriented perspective also extends to religious communities and authority. Research examines the formation of a virtual ummah through contemporary da'wah communities (Yusri, 2021) and the renegotiation of Islamic authority through WhatsApp and youth leadership (Abdurrahman et al., 2026). These contributions explain how religious messages, relationships, and

authority circulate among participants. They give less attention to how individuals address religious messages to themselves during private experiences of identity crisis.

The third strand connects communication, meaning-making, and resilience. Communication scholarship provides a basis for understanding how people interpret experience and construct meaning (Febryanti et al., 2025; Sarwoprasodjo et al., 2025). Within the communicative-resilience literature, communication is presented as a resource for individual and community resilience (Mardiansyah, 2025) and for adaptive transformation following personal disruption (Mardiansyah, 2026; Mardiansyah et al., 2025). These perspectives invite closer examination of the intrapersonal dimension of religious communication. This study asks how prayer, dzikir, supplication, and the inward recollection of scriptural or parental counsel participate in the reconstruction of identity.

The fourth strand provides an existential framework for interpreting these inward practices. Heideggerian phenomenology directs attention to das Man, the anonymous public whose expectations shape everyday self-understanding, and to Angst as an anxiety through which questions of existence become apparent (Lyonhart, 2020; Suárez, 2018). Related scholarship explores religious consciousness and experience through Heideggerian perspectives (Gomes, 2022; Medova, 2025), alongside existential-phenomenological inquiry into religious experience in a digitally transformed world (Klun, 2024). Phenomenological research also contributes to Indonesian da'wah studies (Nasriah et al., 2026). Building on these discussions, the present study uses Heideggerian concepts to interpret the relationship between digital identity pressures, inward religious communication, and the recovery of an authentic sense of self.

Taken together, these four strands reveal three interconnected gaps in the literature reviewed here. Empirically, limited attention has been given to how Muslim Generation Z students experience and practise inward, self-directed da'wah when navigating identity crises. Theoretically, the relationship between religious intrapersonal communication and the reconstruction of an authentic sense of self remains insufficiently articulated. The audience-oriented perspective of digital da'wah and the communicative-resilience perspective provide relevant starting points, but their connection requires further development to explain this inward religious process. Methodologically, the reviewed literature leaves room for a Heideggerian hermeneutic inquiry into how students interpret identity disruption, withdrawal from social media, and religiously grounded self-recovery as interconnected dimensions of lived experience.

The relevance of this inquiry was reinforced by preliminary observations involving purposively selected Muslim undergraduate informants. Their accounts described private religious practices during identity crises, including prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and the recollection of parental advice. Some also described withdrawing from digital engagement. These observations prompted closer examination of how inward religious communication and digital withdrawal feature in students' efforts to make sense of themselves. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How do Muslim Generation Z students experience identity crises within the social media environment? (2) How does self-directed Islamic communication (da'wah fardiyah) function to recover an authentic sense of self?

The study's main contribution is to conceptualise self-directed da'wah as an inward communicative practice of identity reconstruction through a Heideggerian interpretation of Muslim Generation Z students lived experiences. Thematically, it brings private religious meaning-making during identity crises into discussions of digital da'wah that primarily foreground communication directed towards audiences. Methodologically, it combines a Heideggerian hermeneutic orientation

with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and a negative case to examine both the contribution and the limits of religiously grounded self-recovery. Empirically, it offers an idiographic account of Indonesian Muslim undergraduates, situating their experiences within the digital pressures and religious practices of their everyday lives. Theoretically, it develops the connection between Islamic intrapersonal communication and communicative resilience by interpreting self-directed da'wah as an inward call through which participants reorient their sense of self. Together, these distinctions provide an experiential basis for the study's proposed understanding of da'wah fardiyah as communication directed towards the self.

This study matters for Islamic counselling, communication scholarship, and the interpretation of lived religious experience. Practically, understanding how participants draw on private religious practices when navigating digital identity pressures may inform da'wah practitioners and university counsellors seeking approaches responsive to students' experiences. These insights can support attention to inward meaning-making while recognising that students may follow different pathways towards self-recovery. Theoretically, the study clarifies how religious intrapersonal communication can be understood as a resource for communicative resilience and identity reconstruction. Methodologically, its existential-phenomenological perspective offers an interpretive account of what digital withdrawal and self-directed religious communication mean to participants within their everyday lives.

Guided by these questions, this study aims to understand Muslim Generation Z Students lived experiences of identity crises in social media environments and to interpret the role of self-directed Islamic communication in their efforts to recover an authentic sense of self through a Heideggerian phenomenological lens.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological design grounded in Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology. It explored how Muslim Generation Z students experience identity crises in social media environments and how they make sense of self-directed Islamic communication in their efforts towards self-recovery. The design was selected to understand and interpret these lived experiences within participants' everyday contexts.

Type of Research

Heideggerian phenomenology was chosen because it situates lived experience within the relationships, practices, and circumstances that shape a person's being-in-the-world. This orientation supports interpreting identity crises in relation to participants' everyday digital and religious lives. It also acknowledges the researchers' fore-understanding and involves movement between individual passages and the account as a whole within the hermeneutic circle (Gomes, 2022; Medova, 2025).

Within this interpretive orientation, hermeneutic phenomenology informed the engagement with lived experience (van-Manen, 2023), while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided the analytical procedures. IPA supported detailed examination of each participant's account before comparison across cases. Its idiographic emphasis suited the study's small, purposively selected sample and enabled attention to both shared experiences and differences among participants(Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

Research Focus

As an interpretive design, this study did not operationalise independent and dependent variables. Instead, it specified a central phenomenon, namely the lived experience of identity crisis and self-directed Islamic communication, together with two sensitising lenses that focused the analysis without predetermining it. The first lens was the Heideggerian existential structure comprising thrownness, fallenness into das Man (the anonymous public "they"), Angst as a disclosive mood, the call of conscience, and authenticity; the second was the Islamic concept of da'wah fardiyah, understood as da'wah directed at the self through prayer, dzikir, supplication, Qur'anic self-interpretation, and the internal rehearsal of religious counsel.

Data Sources

The data for this study were primary, generated directly from the participants through in-depth interviews. Documentary material comprised verbatim transcripts and participants' interview-elicited descriptions of their own social-media practices. No participant observation was undertaken, and no secondary dataset was used.

Data Collection

Data were generated through one in-depth, semi-structured interview per participant, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes and conducted in Bahasa Indonesia by a trained interviewer. Each interview began with rapport-building and an explanation of the purpose, confidentiality, the absence of right or wrong answers, and a request for permission to audio-record; recording proceeded only after the participant consented. The interview covered everyday social-media use and its meaning; experiences of identity crisis and social comparison; communication and coping strategies (including disclosure versus self-communication); religious practice in moments of difficulty; family and social context; and reflective self-evaluation of change over time.

Informant Selection

The participants were Muslim Generation Z undergraduate students enrolled at Universitas Pamulang, Tangerang Selatan, Indonesia, recruited through purposive, criterion-based sampling of information-rich cases. To be included, a student had to (a) self-identify as Muslim, (b) belong to Generation Z (approximately 17–24 years at interview), (c) be an active undergraduate, (d) use social media actively, and (e) report having experienced a period of identity crisis or identity confusion; non-affiliation with Islam was an exclusion criterion, on the basis of which one initially interviewed student was set aside, since the phenomenon under study is specifically Islamic self-directed communication. Four participants met the criteria. Three were treated as core cases in which self-directed Islamic communication was salient, and one was retained through negative-case sampling as a contrasting account in which identity crisis was present but managed through largely secular intrapersonal means, thereby testing and sharpening the interpretation. Consistent with IPA's idiographic logic, the sample was deliberately small to permit detailed case-by-case analysis; statistical representativeness and survey-style saturation were not sought (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). We disguised identifying details and assigned participants codes P1–P4 to preserve confidentiality. Table 1 summarises their profiles and roles in the analysis.

Table 1Participant Profile (Pseudonymized)

Participants Code	Sex	Study Stage	Salient Context	Role in Analysis
P1	Male	Undergraduate, Communication Science	Freelance illustrator/designer; lives with family; crisis after repeated university-entrance failures	Core case
P2	Female	First-year undergraduate, Communication Science (≈20 yrs)	Religiously observant family; crises triggered by social-media comparison	Core case
P3	Male	Fourth-semester undergraduate, Communication Science	Young entrepreneur; both parents absent/deceased; eldest-son responsibilities	Core case
P4	Female	Undergraduate, Communication Science	Family rupture and relocation; copes through writing and music	Negative case

Research Instruments

The researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by a semi-structured interview guide and an audio recorder. No standardised psychological scales or tests were administered; therefore, psychometric validity and reliability coefficients were not applicable. The interview guide drew on Heideggerian existential phenomenology and the study's conceptualisation of self-directed Islamic communication. We refined its questions to encourage open accounts of participants' experiences without directing them toward predetermined theoretical categories. The guide covered social media use, identity crises, communication and coping practices, religious experiences, and participants' reflections on changes in their sense of self.

Validity of Findings

We addressed the trustworthiness of the interpretations through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin et al., 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria guided the documentation and scrutiny of the interpretive process.

Credibility was supported through in-depth engagement with participants' accounts during the interviews and investigator triangulation. The authors coded independently and discussed their interpretations to address differences in understanding. The authors also returned provisional interpretations to participants for comment through member checking. Analysis of the negative case provided an additional opportunity to examine divergent experiences and refine the boundaries of the findings. Detailed descriptions of the participants and the study context supported transferability. These descriptions provide contextual information that readers can use to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail documenting analytical decisions, from initial exploratory notes to the development of final themes. This record made the analysis progression traceable.

Confirmability was supported by grounding themes in verbatim extracts and maintaining a reflexive journal. The journal documented the researchers' fore-understanding, including their familiarity with Islamic practices and communication studies, and how they reconsidered these understandings during interpretation. These practices made the relationship between participants' accounts, researchers' perspectives, and the resulting interpretations more transparent.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an interpretive sequence informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). First, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were checked against the audio recordings. Second, I read each transcript repeatedly to become familiar with the participant's account. This reading involved movement between individual passages and the account as a whole, consistent with the hermeneutic circle. Third, I developed line-by-line exploratory notes to examine descriptive content, language use, and possible conceptual and existential meanings.

Fourth, we developed the exploratory notes into experiential statements that expressed the meanings identified in each participant's account. Fifth, related statements were clustered into personal experiential themes (PETs). This analysis was conducted separately for each case to preserve its particular context and meanings. Sixth, the personal experiential themes were examined across cases and integrated into group experiential themes (GETs), with attention to both shared experiences and differences among participants.

Seventh, the consolidated themes were interpreted abductively in dialogue with Heideggerian existential concepts and the study's conceptualisation of da'wah fardiyah. This stage connected the meanings developed from participants' accounts with the theoretical framework. Consistent with the double hermeneutic, the researchers interpreted how participants themselves made sense of their experiences. Finally, the negative case (P4) was examined to identify where its account converged with or diverged from the emerging interpretation and to clarify the boundaries of claims concerning religiously grounded self-recovery.

We coded and developed themes manually. We documented an audit trail of analytical decisions throughout the process. We translated selected extracts from Bahasa Indonesia into English for reporting and checked the translations against the original wording to preserve meaning.

Research Ethics

The study observed recognised ethical principles for research with human participants. Before each interview, participants received an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, provided informed consent, and gave explicit permission before any audio recording. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline any question or withdraw at any time without consequence; their data were used solely for research. We protected confidentiality and anonymity by disguising identifying details and reporting under codes, and we stored recordings and transcripts securely, with access restricted to the research team.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of the four participants' accounts generated twenty-two personal experiential themes (PETs), which were integrated into four group experiential themes (GETs). These themes concerned identity disruption, engagement with the digital crowd, anxiety and withdrawal, and inward communication associated with self-recovery. Their expression varied across participants. Self-directed Islamic communication was prominent in the three core cases (P1–P3), whereas P4 described a contrasting pathway centred on writing, music, and self-reliance. Table 2 illustrates the analytical progression through selected examples, showing how verbatim extracts informed

exploratory notes, experiential statements, personal experiential themes, and group experiential themes.

Table 2 Examples of the Analytical Progression

Verbatim extract	Exploratory note	Experiential statement	Personal experiential theme (PET)	Group experiential theme (GET)
"I often experience an identity crisis when I'm on social media—seeing people my age who have already achieved so much, while I feel I've gained nothing. I even wonder what I've been living for." (P2)	The crisis is triggered in the feed itself: "people my age" = an anonymous cohort, not named others; comparison escalates from achievement to the worth of living at all.	Feeling one's life measured, and found empty, against an anonymous online standard of peers.	Measured by a standard that is not her own (P2)	The digital crowd: social comparison as the anonymous "they"
"When I'm in an identity crisis, I usually detox from social media and WhatsApp—I just disappear. I close Instagram and go back to my freelance drawing." (P1)	"Detox" (a purification metaphor—the feed as toxin); withdrawal is deliberate and total ("just disappear"); exit is paired with a return to his own activity.	Withdrawing completely from the online crowd as a deliberate act of self-protection and self-recovery.	Exiting the crowd to return to what is his own (P1)	Anxiety and withdrawal: the crisis as disclosure and the detox
"Whenever I am at my lowest or confused, I run to worship, to God; I calm myself through worship. In fact, in moments like that, I feel closer to God." (P3)	"Run to" (movement toward refuge, not escape); worship is the mechanism of calming, addressed by the self to itself before God; the lowest point becomes the point of greatest closeness.	Turning worship into self-addressed communication that steadies the self and re-anchors it in God.	Worship as refuge and self-steadying speech (P3)	The inward call: self-directed da'wah and the recovery of an authentic self

Table 3 presents the twenty-two personal experiential themes by participant, alongside illustrative extracts or contextual summaries. This presentation preserves the distinct meanings within each account before considering the findings across cases.

Table

Table 3 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) by Case (Idiographic Level)

Case	Personal experiential themes (PETs)	Illustrative anchors (abridged)
P1	1.1 A self that fell apart after repeated failure	"My sense of identity fell apart"
	1.2 The feed as amplifier of inferiority	"Seeing other people's success… can make someone… feel even more inferior"
	1.3 Panic felt in the body	"Panic attacks; my chest feels tight"
	1.4 Exiting the crowd to return to what is his own ("detox")	"I close Instagram… go back to my freelance drawing"
	1.5 Talking to himself rather than to others	"I talk to myself more than to anyone else"
	1.6 Ritual as ground: prayer and Qur'anic recitation restoring steadiness	"Five daily prayers at the mosque… Qur'an after maghrib… kept me more grounded"
	1.7 An identity quietly rebuilt and owned	"My identity was rebuilt almost on its own"
P2	2.1 A horizon narrowed by family circumstance and economy	(family circumstances set "the horizon of what she could become")
	2.2 Measured by a standard that is not her own (peer achievement; TikTok templates)	"Which identity I'm supposed to follow: the standard, that account, or just myself"
	2.3 Keeping the struggle private for fear of being burdened further	"I'd rather keep it to myself"
	2.4 Rehearsing her mother's advice as inner counsel	"I often hear my mother's advice and her religious talks"
	2.5 Resting in "it is enough that Allah knows"	"It is enough that Allah knows"
P3	3.1 Emptiness after the loss of both parents	"I wondered what I was even chasing the world for"
	3.2 Registering the crowd's pull while resisting it on principle	"Principles to hold onto firmly"
		"I need solutions, and people usually have none"

	3.3 Needing solutions, not listeners: refusal to confide 3.4 Running to worship as refuge and self-steadying speech 3.5 A personal hermeneutic of the Qur'an ("verses that relate to my life") 3.6 From resentment to tawakkul and syukur; an identity found	"I run to worship, to God… I feel closer to God" "I anchor myself in the verses of the Qur'an" "I feel I have found my true identity"
P4 (negative case)	4.1 Unsettled belonging from family rupture and mixed heritage 4.2 Private anguish behind public composure 4.3 Writing and music as intrapersonal outlets 4.4 Recovery anchored in self-belief rather than the transcendent	"I kept asking, who am I really?" "At home I would cry, 'O Allah, where is this heading?'… go to campus and just carry on" "I pour everything into my writing while listening to music" "if you believe in yourself, you are capable"

Thrown into Crisis: Identity Disruption as A Given Condition

For each participant, the identity crisis did not begin as a free choice, but as a rupture in circumstances they were simply handed. P1 located the onset in repeated academic failure: After failing the national university entrance test for the second time, I was truly at my lowest point; I was just confused about what to do, and my sense of identity fell apart (P1). For P3, the rupture was bereavement and premature responsibility: My father left when I was two months in the womb, and my mother passed away recently. After losing my parents, I felt empty—I wondered what I was even chasing the world for (P3). P2 traced hers to the constraints of family circumstances and economy, which set the horizon of what she could become, while P4 described a confusion of belonging rooted in family rupture and mixed heritage: I kept asking, who am I really? I'm Javanese and Sundanese—so I just carry both (P4).

These are not problems that the students engineered; they are conditions into which they were thrown and from which the question of identity first arose. In other words, the crisis surfaced from facticity—the unchosen situation of failure, loss, hardship, and belonging, rather than from idle self-doubt, and it set the stage for everything that followed.

The Digital Crowd: Social Comparison as The Anonymous They

On this already unsettled ground, social media projected a relentless standard against which students measured themselves. P2 articulated this most directly as follows:

I often experience an identity crisis when I'm on social media, seeing people my age who have already achieved so much, while I feel I've gained nothing. I even wonder what I've been living for. (P2)

The standard was not only an achievement but a prescribed way of being a self: There are so many TikTok standards, how a daughter should be, how an ideal wife should be—and they make me feel pressured, until I'm confused about which identity I'm supposed to follow: the standard, that account, or just myself (P2). P1 named the mechanism by which this comparison feeds the crisis: Seeing other people's success on social media can make someone in an identity crisis feel even more inferior (P1). P3, although he resisted it, registered the same pull as a pressure acting on his generation, observing that he had never been swayed by TikTok standards precisely because he held to principles to hold onto firmly (P3), a resistance that presupposes the force being resisted.

Across the accounts, the social-media feed functions as an anonymous public they: a faceless collective whose curated successes and lifestyle templates dictate what one ought to have become. Measured against it, the self is leveled down and dispersed—P2's question, which identity am I

supposed to follow? is the voice of a self that has, for a time, surrendered its own measure to the crowd.

Anxiety and Withdrawal: The Crisis as Disclosure and The Detox

The pressure of the crowd did not remain diffuse; it intensified into an anxiety that the participants felt bodily and existentially, prompting withdrawal. P1 described the somatic edge of this anxiety: I often get panic attacks; my chest feels tight, and everything feels off (P1), and his response was to remove himself from the crowd entirely.

When I'm in an identity crisis, I usually detox from social media and WhatsApp; I just disappear. I close Instagram and go back to my freelance drawing. (P1)

This withdrawal was paired with a striking refusal to disclose information across core cases. Rather than seeking comfort from others, the students turned to themselves. P3 was emphatic: I never confide in anyone close to me, because I do not need to be heard or advised—I need solutions, and people usually have none, so I find my own (P3); I trust myself more when I calm myself; that way I find solutions faster (P3). P1 framed the same orientation as a settled stance: I talk to myself more than to anyone else; in the end, only we truly know who we are (P1). P2 likewise kept her struggles private: I do not really want to tell anyone, because I am afraid it will only burden me more; sometimes the response I get is not what I hoped for, so I'd rather keep it to myself (P2).

Far from being mere avoidance, this anxious withdrawal was disclosive: cutting off the noise of the crowd was the precondition for the students to confront, alone, the question of who they were. Thus, detox is not an end but a threshold, a turning away from the anonymous public toward the self that must answer for itself.

The Inward Call: Self-Directed Da'wah and the Recovery of An Authentic Self

What the students reached for in that solitude was not, for the three core cases, a secular self-help repertoire but a religious one—da'wah turned inward. P1 recovered his footing through ritual practice: During the crisis, I prayed the five daily prayers at the mosque and recited the Qur'an after maghrib; for me, religion mattered a great deal. According to P1, worship gave him a steadier, more settled sense of self. P3 made worship the very mechanism of recovery:

Whenever I am at my lowest or confused, I run to worship, to God; I calm myself through worship. In fact, in moments like that, I feel closer to God. (P3)

For P3, this self-directed da'wah extended into a personal hermeneutic of scripture—I anchor myself in the verses of the Qur'an; I look for the verses that relate to my life (P3) and even surfaced publicly in a quiet, self-addressed form, as he reported posting snippets of Qur'anic verses" as his status. P2's call took the form of internalized counsel: I come from a fairly religious family. I often hear my mother's advice and her religious talks, and from there I came to think: it is enough that Allah knows (P2). Here, a remembered sermon and parental nasihat are not received as an external message but rehearsed inwardly as a settling conviction.

This inward call is issued in a recovered, owned selfhood marked by acceptance and gratitude rather than comparison. P3 described the shift as a move from resentment to tawakkul and syukur: I acknowledge and accept it; more often I am grateful, because there are still many trials I am given (P3)—and reported its outcome plainly: I feel I have found my true identity; now I am more consistent and level-headed (P3). P1 experienced the recovery as a self that had been quietly rebuilt and that he would not trade away: Looking back, my identity was rebuilt almost on its own,

and I wouldn't want to return to that time (P1). In each core case, self-directed Islamic communication operates as a call that returns the student from the crowd's anonymous standard to a self-answerable before God.

The Negative Case: Identity Recovery Without the Call

P4 confirmed the pattern by departing from it. She traverses the same opening movements; thrownness, anxiety, and inward withdrawal but resolves the crisis through secular intrapersonal means rather than religious communication. Her anxiety even took an explicitly religious cry: At home I would cry, 'O Allah, where is this heading?' However, I would go to campus and just carry on as if nothing happened (P4). However, this cry did not develop into a sustained practice of worship or scriptural self-address. Instead, she steadied herself through writing, music, and self-reliance: I like writing novels, so I pour everything into my writing while listening to music; it all comes from talking to myself (P4). I do not share anything truly private with anyone; at most, I write it on my phone (P4).

Her recovery, like the core cases, was real, but its anchor was the self rather than the transcendent: From that crisis, I became more sure of myself; I have found my true self. Do not make family or friends your anchor—if you believe in yourself, you are capable (P4). P4 thus shows that withdrawal and intrapersonal communication alone can carry a young Muslim toward a recovered identity, as follows: What distinguishes the three core cases is not that they turned inward, but that the inward turn became a religious call, self-directed da'wah, that grounded the recovered self beyond the self. The contrast sharpens, rather than weakens, the study's central finding. Table 4 maps the four group experiential themes to their constituent personal experiential themes across participants. It shows patterns of convergence and variation, including P3's resistance to the digital crowd and P4's contrasting account of self-recovery.

Table 4 Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Their Constituent PETs Across Cases

Group experiential theme (GET)	Constituent PETs	P1	P2	P3	P4
GET 1. Thrown into crisis: identity disruption as a given condition	1.1 self-fallen apart after failure; 2.1 horizon narrowed by circumstance; 3.1 emptiness after loss; 4.1 unsettled belonging	✓ (1.1)	✓ (2.1)	✓ (3.1)	✓ (4.1)
GET 2. The digital crowd: social comparison as the anonymous "they"	1.2 the feed as amplifier of inferiority; 2.2 measured by a standard not her own; 3.2 registering the pull while resisting it	✓ (1.2)	✓ (2.2)	(✓) resists (3.2)	-
GET 3. Anxiety and withdrawal: the crisis as disclosure and the detox	1.3 panic felt in the body; 1.4 detox; 1.5 self-talk; 2.3 keeping the struggle private; 3.3 needing solutions, not listeners; 4.2 private anguish, public composure; 4.3 writing and music	✓ (1.3–1.5)	✓ (2.3)	✓ (3.3)	✓ (4.2–4.3)
GET 4. The inward call: self-directed da'wah and the recovery of an authentic self	1.6 ritual as ground; 1.7 identity rebuilt and owned; 2.4 mother's nasihat as inner counsel; 2.5 "enough that Allah knows"; 3.4 worship as refuge; 3.5 personal hermeneutic of the Qur'an; 3.6 tawakkul and syukur	✓ (1.6–1.7)	✓ (2.4–2.5)	✓ (3.4–3.6)	✗ divergent (4.4)

Discussion

This study asked how Muslim Generation Z students experience identity crisis within the environment of social media and how self-directed Islamic communication recovers an authentic sense of self. The findings answer both through a single existential movement from a thrown condition, through fallenness into the crowd of social media and a disclosive anxiety, to a recovery accomplished by da'wah turned inward. Read through the Heideggerian framework of the study, this movement yields several insights that depart from the existing literature.

The first insight concerns the ontological status of social media for the self in crisis. Recent scholarship, relying largely on measured variables or content analysis, has established that social comparison and FoMO exert pressure on young Muslims (Chairiyati et al., 2026), that digital platforms have become arenas in which Muslim youth construct and negotiate religious identity (Elassi, 2026; Inanoglu, 2025; Shabdan, 2026), and that intensive use among students coincides with psychological strain (Pujianti & Mardiansyah, 2025). These studies demonstrate that the feed destabilises identity, yet they treat it primarily as a measurable stressor or as a stage upon which identity work is performed. The participants' accounts invite a deeper reading in which the feed operates as what Heidegger terms das Man, an anonymous public whose curated achievements supply the standard by which individuals judge whom they ought to become. The question posed by P2 concerning which identity she was supposed to follow is not merely an expression of diminished confidence; it is the voice of a self that has been levelled down and absorbed into a public it never chose, so that identity crisis constitutes Verfallenheit, a mode of inauthentic existence rather than a deficit requiring correction. The departure from the literature on comparison and FoMO therefore lies not in observing the phenomenon but in explaining why the feed destabilises identity: it dictates the possibilities of the self anonymously, through the collective crowd rather than through any single message or influencer.

The second insight revises the understanding of the crisis and of the initial response of the students. The available evidence frames social media's effect on students as harm and distress to be mitigated (Pujianti & Mardiansyah, 2025), while both coping theory and the communal Indonesian norm of curhat predict that individuals in distress turn outward in search of support. The participants did the opposite: they withdrew and refused to disclose, as P1 closed his accounts entirely, P3 declared that he needed solutions rather than an audience, and P2 kept her struggles private. Interpreted through the framework, the crisis surfaces as Angst, an anxiety that differs from fear because it concerns existence itself and is therefore disclosive rather than merely painful (Lyonhart, 2020). The withdrawal is accordingly not avoidance but an authentic reticence, a deliberate choice of silence over the idle talk of the feed that clears the space in which the self can be confronted alone. This behaviour also challenges the dominant narrative of digital da'wah scholarship, which has assumed that religiously engaged youth respond to need by intensifying digital religious engagement through more content, a virtual ummah, or digital preachers (Makhrian et al., 2026; Rustan et al., 2020; Yusri, 2021). At the decisive moment, the participants exited the digital religious sphere and turned to offline and private practice, which suggests that strategic disconnection, and not only improved connection, can be religiously generative for da'wah and Islamic counselling.

The third and central insight answers the second research question. What filled the cleared space in the core cases was not a secular repertoire of coping but da'wah directed at the self, expressed in prayer and dzikir (P1, P3), a personal hermeneutic of the Qur'an (P3), and the inward

rehearsal of a mother's advice (P2). Within the framework, such self-directed da'wah functions as the call of conscience (Ruf des Gewissens), the summons that recalls the self from its dispersion in das Man and returns it to its ownmost possibility, issuing in an authenticity marked by tawakkul and syukur rather than by competitive achievement. This reconceptualisation departs from prior scholarship in direction and in function. In direction, the literature has overwhelmingly examined da'wah as outward communication toward audiences, including Instagram preaching and its effects on worship (Makhrian et al., 2026), celebrity preachers and renegotiated authority (Abdurrahman et al., 2026; Rustan et al., 2020), and the shaping of audiences by preaching on social media (Hurnawijaya et al., 2026), whereas the present study foregrounds da'wah that is addressed to the self and constitutive of identity, giving empirical substance to the largely normative notion of da'wah fardiyah. Functionally, whereas Chairiyati et al. (2026) show Islamic religiosity statistically moderating FoMO impulses, the present findings show religion operating as the active mechanism through which an unsettled self is reconstituted (Suárez, 2018). The findings likewise extend the perspective of communicative resilience, which holds that communication catalyses resilience and adaptive transformation after rupture (Mardiansyah, 2025, 2026; Mardiansyah et al., 2025), into a religious and intrapersonal register, and they differ methodologically from the descriptive Schutzian tradition of Indonesian scholarship (Hartono et al., 2025; Hidayah, 2021; Nasriah et al., 2026) by interpreting the structure through which the self is lost and recovered.

Finally, the negative case confirms and delimits these claims. P4 traversed the same movements of thrownness, anxiety, and inward turning, yet recovered through writing, music, and reliance on herself, showing that the existential structure is not specific to religious students and guarding the study against the excessive claim that only da'wah resolves identity crisis. What the case isolates is the distinctive contribution of da'wah fardiyah: the recovered self of P4 is anchored in the self, whereas the recovered selves of the core cases are anchored beyond the self, in a relationship with God. Taken together, these insights recast the crowd of social media as das Man, reinterpret detox as authentic withdrawal, and reframe da'wah fardiyah as an inward existential call, thereby relocating da'wah scholarship to the believer's interior communicative life.

Limitations of The Study

Several limitations bound these contributions. The design was idiographic and interpretive, with four participants (three core cases and one negative case) drawn from a single program at one university; consistent with phenomenology and IPA, the aim is depth and transferability through thick description rather than statistical generalisation, and the findings should be read accordingly. The data derive from a single, cross-sectional interview per participant, so the recovery is reconstructed retrospectively and is subject to memory and self-presentation effects; it was not tracked longitudinally, and students who did not recover were not sampled, which may bias the account toward successful trajectories. Because the analysis is interpretive, the researchers' fore-understanding inevitably shaped it; this was made explicit and managed reflexively, but not eliminated. Finally, the extracts were translated from Bahasa Indonesia into English, which risks subtle loss of meaning, and variation by gender, regional culture, and Islamic orientation was not systematically examined. Future research could examine and refine the proposed framework through studies involving larger samples and longitudinal designs. Comparative research could explore self-directed religious communication across faith traditions and investigate the conditions under which digital disconnection or continued engagement supports religious well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study pursued two objectives: to describe how Muslim Generation Z students experience identity crisis within the environment of social media and to analyse how self-directed Islamic communication functions to recover an authentic sense of self; it answers both through a single existential movement. With respect to the first objective, the students experience an identity crisis not merely as diminished self-worth or distress but as fallenness into the crowd of social media, which operates as what Heidegger terms das Man, an anonymous public whose curated successes and lifestyle standards dispossess the self of its own measure. This condition intensifies into an anxiety (Angst) that is not only painful but disclosive, revealing the self to itself and prompting a deliberate withdrawal, or detox, from the crowd. With respect to the second objective, the three core participants directed da'wah upon themselves within the space that this withdrawal had cleared, through prayer and dzikir, a personal reading of the Qur'an, and the inward rehearsal of remembered religious counsel. Such self-directed da'wah served as a call of conscience, returning them from the anonymous standard of the crowd to an authentic selfhood grounded not in competitive achievement but in *tawakkul* and *syukur*. The negative case, who recovered through secular reliance on herself, made visible the distinctive contribution of da'wah fardiyah, which is to anchor the recovered self beyond itself in a relationship with God. The study's contribution is therefore threefold. For da'wah scholarship, it reframes da'wah fardiyah as an inward existential call that constitutes identity and shifts the field from its default orientation toward audiences to the believer's interior communicative life. For communication scholarship, it extends the theory of communicative resilience into a religious and intrapersonal register and recasts strategic disconnection and reticence as constructive practices rather than forms of disengagement. For psychology and counselling, it reframes identity crisis as a disclosive existential anxiety rather than a deficit requiring correction, thereby offering Islamic counselling an empirically grounded and authentically youthful resource for guiding young Muslims through the pressures of digital life.

Several suggestions follow from these conclusions. For the research participants and for Muslim Generation Z students more broadly, the findings suggest that recognizing the feed of social media as an anonymous standard that one has not chosen, and pairing deliberate and temporally bounded disconnection with intentional self-directed da'wah in the form of prayer, dzikir, reflective reading of the Qur'an, and the recollection of trusted counsel, can serve as a healthy means of steadying identity, provided that inward coping is balanced with supportive relationships rather than wholly substituted for them when distress becomes severe. For future researchers, and in view of the limitations of this study, subsequent work should test the proposed framework with larger and longitudinal samples that also include individuals who did not recover, examine variation by gender, regional culture, and Islamic orientation, compare self-directed religious communication across faith traditions, and clarify the conditions under which digital disconnection rather than engagement is more conducive to religious wellbeing. For institutions connected to this theme, including campus da'wah units, Islamic student organisations, university counselling services, and da'wah practitioners together with their institutions, the findings recommend integrating literacy in digital wellbeing and the cultivation of interior self-directed da'wah into youth guidance and Islamic counselling, designing programs that respect the inward and reserved coping styles of young Muslims while keeping safe avenues of support open, and equipping da'i with approaches that are sensitive to counselling and that address the interior life of the believer rather than public preaching alone.

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