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Digital Da'wah as Soft Power: A Conceptual Review of Islamic Communication in Contemporary Global Politics

Nanda Khairiyah¹, Badrah Uyuni², Yanuardi Syukur³

^{1,2} Islamic University of As Syafi'iyah, Indonesia.

³ Khairun University, Indonesia.

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Corresponding Author:

Nanda Khairiyah, Islamic University

of As Syafi'iyah, Email:

nanda.rifani.nr@gmail.com

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Abstract

Digital technologies have transformed Islamic communication by expanding da'wah beyond localised religious preaching into transnational digital spaces where religious narratives intersect with global cultural and political perceptions. While existing studies have examined digital da'wah primarily as a pedagogical, sociological, or media phenomenon, its potential role as a source of attraction-based influence remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by conceptualising digital da'wah as a form of Islamic soft power operating within contemporary digital environments. Using a qualitative literature review and conceptual synthesis, the article integrates soft power theory with scholarship on digital Islamic communication, religious moderation, and platform governance. The analysis develops a conceptual model that illustrates how platform dynamics mediate digital da'wah narratives, as interpreted through audience reception and translated into soft power outcomes such as cultural attractiveness, moral legitimacy, and narrative influence. The findings demonstrate that moderation-oriented digital da'wah, when supported by ethical credibility and algorithmic visibility, contributes to shaping global perceptions of Islam through non-coercive means. This study advances theoretical discussions by positioning digital religious communication as a legitimate domain of soft power analysis and offers a framework for examining religion's role in global symbolic politics.

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Introduction

Digital communication has emerged as a pivotal force in shaping contemporary religious life. It has revolutionised the dissemination of Islamic messages and altered the perception of Islam within increasingly interconnected global publics. The proliferation of social media, video-sharing platforms, and mobile-based applications has facilitated the circulation of religious discourse beyond local communities and national borders. This expansion has given rise to novel forms of visibility, authority, and engagement. (Ulyan, 2023; Setia, 2022). In this context, da'wah has evolved

from a primarily localised religious practice into a transnational communicative process that intersects with cultural identity, ethical persuasion, and global perception.

A growing body of scholarship has examined digital da'wah from the perspectives of communication strategy, religious authority, and youth religiosity. Studies highlight how digital platforms facilitate the emergence of new religious actors, reshape patterns of legitimacy, and alter the modes through which Islamic knowledge is produced and consumed (Zaid et al., 2022; Hidayatul Ummah, 2024). Other research emphasises the role of Islamic educational institutions in integrating digital literacy and religious moderation into online preaching practices, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts (Machendrawaty et al., 2022; Baen et al., 2024). While these studies provide important insights into the social and pedagogical dimensions of digital Islamic communication, they largely approach digital da'wah as a media or educational phenomenon rather than a source of political influence.

This limitation becomes evident in the analytical detachment of digital da'wah from broader discussions of power and global politics. Despite its expanding transnational reach and symbolic resonance, digital Islamic discourse is rarely examined through the lens of attraction-based influence. Soft power theory, which conceptualises power as the ability to shape preferences through cultural appeal, moral legitimacy, and value resonance, offers a valuable yet underutilised framework for addressing this gap (Nye, 2004). Although soft power has been widely applied to culture, public diplomacy, and media narratives, religion—particularly in its digital and non-state forms—remains marginal within this analytical tradition (Banchoff, 2008).

In Southeast Asia, and especially in Indonesia, digital Islamic discourse has become closely associated with narratives of moderation, pluralism, and cultural adaptability. Research on Islam Nusantara and religious moderation demonstrates how local Islamic traditions emphasise inclusivity, dialogue, and ethical coexistence, values that are increasingly projected through digital media (Khairiyah & Abdillah, 2023; Handayani & Alfida, 2024). These narratives circulate not only within domestic publics but also across transnational digital spaces, implicitly shaping how Islam is imagined beyond national borders. However, existing studies tend to describe these developments normatively or descriptively, without theorising their broader implications for cultural diplomacy or global symbolic influence.

Similarly, scholarship on digital platforms and algorithmic mediation has focused primarily on issues of visibility, engagement, and content circulation. Studies show that algorithms play a crucial role in amplifying certain religious narratives while marginalising others, thereby shaping public religious discourse in significant ways (Nuriana & Salwa, 2024). However, the political significance of these dynamics—particularly their role in determining which Islamic values gain global legitimacy—has not been systematically explored. As a result, the interaction between digital da'wah, platform dynamics, and global perception remains analytically fragmented.

Against this backdrop, this study addresses a critical gap by conceptualising digital da'wah as a form of Islamic soft power operating within contemporary digital environments. Rather than treating digital da'wah solely as a communicative or pedagogical practice, this article positions it as an attraction-based mode of influence that shapes global perceptions of Islam through mediated narratives, audience reception, and symbolic legitimacy. By integrating scholarship on digital Islamic communication with soft power theory, the study develops a conceptual model that explains how digital da'wah narratives are mediated by platform dynamics, interpreted by audiences, and translated into soft power outcomes. In doing so, this article contributes to ongoing debates at the intersection of Islamic studies, communication studies, and global political analysis.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative literature review design to develop a conceptual synthesis linking digital da'wah, Islamic communication, and soft power within contemporary global politics. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the objective of this research is not to measure causal relationships or test hypotheses, but to integrate theoretical perspectives and interpret patterns across existing scholarship. As a conceptual study, the method is designed to generate analytical insights and theoretical linkages rather than empirical generalisations.

The data for this study consist of scholarly literature drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and authoritative conceptual works published within the last decade. Core sources include foundational texts on soft power theory, particularly Joseph Nye's formulation, as well as studies on digital da'wah, Islamic education, religious moderation, platform governance, and audience reception in digital religious communication. The literature corpus was intentionally interdisciplinary, incorporating perspectives from Islamic studies, communication studies, political science, and digital sociology in order to capture the multidimensional nature of digital religious influence.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic identification and selection of relevant literature. Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and institutional journal repositories were searched using targeted keywords including *digital da'wah*, *Islamic communication*, *soft power*, *religious moderation*, *digital platforms*, and *global politics*. Inclusion criteria were set to prioritise publications that demonstrated a conceptual or empirical connection to digital Islamic communication and attraction-based influence. Conversely, sources that exclusively focused on offline religious practices or lacked analytical significance were excluded. Notably, Southeast Asian contexts received special attention due to their growing influence on shaping global Islamic narratives.

The selected literature was analysed using thematic qualitative synthesis. This process involved iterative reading, coding, and categorisation to identify recurring concepts related to religious authority transformation, narrative framing, platform mediation, audience trust, and symbolic influence. Themes were generated inductively and subsequently organised into higher-level analytical categories aligned with the study's conceptual objectives. Rather than summarising individual studies, the analysis emphasised cross-cutting patterns and theoretical convergence across disciplines.

The final stage of analysis involved interpretive integration, in which insights from Islamic communication scholarship were systematically linked to soft power theory. This synthesis informed the development of the conceptual model presented in Figure 1, which illustrates how platform dynamics mediate digital da'wah narratives, as interpreted through audience reception and translated into soft power outcomes. Through this method, the study advances a coherent theoretical framework that explains digital da'wah as a form of non-coercive, attraction-based influence in contemporary digital environments.

Findings

The findings indicate that digital da'wah operates as an emergent form of Islamic soft power by mobilising credibility, cultural attraction, and value resonance through digitally mediated religious communication. Rather than functioning solely as a religious transmission mechanism, digital da'wah shapes symbolic influence by constructing narratives of moderation, ethical authority, and cultural legitimacy that circulate across national and cultural boundaries. Synthesising Southeast

Asian scholarship with Joseph Nye's soft power framework, this review identifies six interconnected mechanisms through which digital da'wah contributes to attraction-based influence in contemporary global politics.

1. Transformation of Religious Actors and Da'wah Practices in Digital Spaces

The findings demonstrate that digitalisation fundamentally transforms the agents and practices of Islamic communication. Traditional ulama and institutional preachers increasingly coexist with digital-native religious actors, including social media influencers, content creators, and platform-based preachers whose authority is shaped by narrative coherence, aesthetic appeal, and audience engagement rather than formal institutional credentials. This shift confirms that religious authority in digital spaces is no longer centralised but negotiated through affective resonance and platform visibility.

Digital da'wah practices have evolved from formal sermon-based delivery into highly mediated, interactive, and visually curated forms of communication. Empirical studies show that digital da'wah adopts platform-native formats that enhance perceived authenticity and audience intimacy, particularly among younger demographics. These transformations indicate that religious communication is increasingly embedded within everyday digital culture, blurring the boundaries between religious instruction, lifestyle content, and moral storytelling.

Beyond internal religious change, this transformation carries broader political implications. The findings suggest that relocating da'wah to digital platforms shifts from institution-based religious authority to platform-mediated symbolic authority. In this configuration, digital preachers function as non-state soft power actors whose communication practices shape global perceptions of Islam through attraction rather than coercion.

2. Digital Da'wah as Soft Power: Mechanisms and Political Direction of Influence

The findings show that digital da'wah operates through mechanisms that closely parallel the core dimensions of soft power. Cultural narratives emphasising moderation, tolerance, and ethical universality generate attraction by aligning Islamic values with globally resonant moral frameworks. Narrative framing, aesthetic presentation, and emotional engagement collectively enhance the persuasive capacity of digital Islamic discourse.

Moderation-oriented digital da'wah functions as a counter-narrative to exclusionary or radical representations of Islam, contributing to the construction of culturally attractive religious imaginaries. When Islamic messages are articulated through inclusive values and culturally embedded symbols, they foster trust and legitimacy among diverse audiences. These mechanisms correspond directly to Nye's dimensions of soft power—culture, values, and legitimacy—thereby extending soft power analysis into the domain of religious digital communication.

The findings further indicate that soft power generated through digital da'wah is symbolic rather than directive. Influence emerges not through doctrinal enforcement or political messaging but through voluntary audience alignment with ethical narratives. In this sense, digital da'wah contributes to global political meaning-making by reshaping how Islam is imagined, discussed, and emotionally perceived in transnational digital spaces.

3. Islamic Education and Moderation Values as Foundations of Digital Soft Power

The findings reveal that Islamic educational institutions play a foundational role in enabling digital da'wah to function as soft power. Moderation-based curricula and digital literacy training cultivate communicators who articulate Islam through dialogical, inclusive, and ethically grounded

narratives. These educational processes generate moral capital, enhancing credibility and trust in digital religious communication.

Higher education environments strengthen critical engagement with digital religious content, enabling students to evaluate, produce, and disseminate Islamic messages responsibly. The internalisation of moderation values through education ensures that digital da'wah narratives emphasise non-coercive influence, ethical consistency, and cultural adaptability. The findings indicate a clear transition from educational value formation to digital communication output, positioning Islamic education as a strategic source of soft power resources.

4. Platform Dynamics and Algorithmic Forces: Opportunities and Constraints for Soft Power Projection

The findings demonstrate that algorithmic systems play a decisive role in shaping the visibility and perceived legitimacy of digital da'wah. Recommendation engines, engagement metrics, and platform attention economies influence which Islamic narratives gain prominence and how global audiences interpret them. Content that aligns with emotional resonance, moderation values, and visual engagement is more likely to achieve algorithmic amplification.

While algorithmic dynamics offer opportunities to expand the reach of moderate Islamic narratives, they also introduce structural vulnerabilities. Polarising or sensationalist content may overshadow ethical and dialogical messages, potentially undermining credibility. The findings indicate that algorithms function not merely as technical infrastructures but as political mediators that shape which Islamic values acquire global symbolic legitimacy within digital public spheres.

5. Audience Reception and Measurable Indicators of Islamic Soft Power

The findings show that audience reception serves as a critical indicator of Islamic soft power formation. Trust emerges as the primary mechanism through which attraction-based influence is established, reflected in sustained engagement, positive sentiment, and narrative endorsement. Meaningful interaction—such as reflective commentary and dialogical exchange—signals internalisation of values rather than passive consumption.

Audience behaviour demonstrates that soft power manifests through voluntary alignment with moderation narratives and symbolic adoption of Islamic values. These patterns indicate that digital da'wah influence can be empirically observed through engagement quality, cross-border resonance, and narrative diffusion. Audience reception thus represents the empirical interface between digital religious communication and political soft power.

6. Risks That Undermine or Obstruct the Soft Power Potential of Digital Da'wah

The findings identify several risks that weaken the soft power capacity of digital da'wah. Political instrumentalisation of religious messaging diminishes credibility and erodes the moral appeal necessary for attraction-based influence. When digital da'wah is perceived as partisan or propagandistic, its legitimacy declines.

Disinformation and algorithmic bias further threaten the integrity of digital Islamic communication. The amplification of misleading or sensationalist content distorts audience perception and undermines trust. Additionally, the proliferation of unqualified religious actors and the commercialisation of religious content contribute to an authority crisis that weakens the moral foundations of soft power. These risks demonstrate that digital da'wah's influence is fragile and dependent on ethical consistency, credibility, and platform governance.

Table 1. Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators of Digital Da'wah as Islamic Soft Power

Soft Power Dimension	Quantitative Indicators	Qualitative Indicators	Literature Sources
Credibility	Stable number of followers, high retention rate	Consistent narratives, authority recognised by audiences	Ulyan (2023), Hidayatul Ummah (2024)
Cultural Attractiveness	Engagement rate > 5%	Content perceived as friendly, moderate, inclusive	Handayani & Alfida (2024), Baen et al. (2024)
Value Resonance	Number of shares across cross-national communities	Public references to moderation values in discussions	Machendrawaty et al. (2022), Yunus Daulay & Sazali (2024)
Cross-Border Reach	International audience > 20%	Da'wah messages accepted by global communities	Khairiyah & Abdillah (2023), Banchoff (2008)
Narrative Influence	Trending keyword analysis	Shifts in public perception of Islam	Nye (2004), Banchoff (2008)
Identity Adoption	Audience participation in digital campaigns	Adoption of symbols/values of moderate Islam	Khairiyah (2023), Baen et al. (2024)
Legitimacy & Trust	Percentage of positive comments > 80%	Stable reputation of preachers, non-controversial presence	Adnan & Uyuni (2021)
Algorithmic Visibility	Increased impression-to-reach ratio	Content perceived as socially relevant	Nuriana & Salwa (2024)

The metric table presented in this study constitutes a novel operational framework for assessing Islamic soft power in digital contexts, translating abstract theoretical concepts into observable indicators. By integrating quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative assessments of credibility, moderation, and narrative resonance, the table enables systematic evaluation of how digital da'wah shapes cultural attraction and symbolic influence across global audiences.

Moreover, the table bridges the gap between technological affordances and theological-ethical substance. Quantitative metrics—such as engagement rates, reach distribution and sentiment ratios—provide insight into the algorithmic and communicative effectiveness of digital da'wah. Qualitative indicators, on the other hand, capture intangible dimensions such as authenticity, moderation, intercultural dialogue and ethical coherence. Together, these metrics illuminate how digital da'wah becomes influential not merely through exposure but through value transmission, identity shaping and moral credibility. Therefore, the table functions as both an evaluative tool and a conceptual map that operationalises the theoretical claims of this study.

Discussion

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Digital Da'wah as Islamic Soft Power

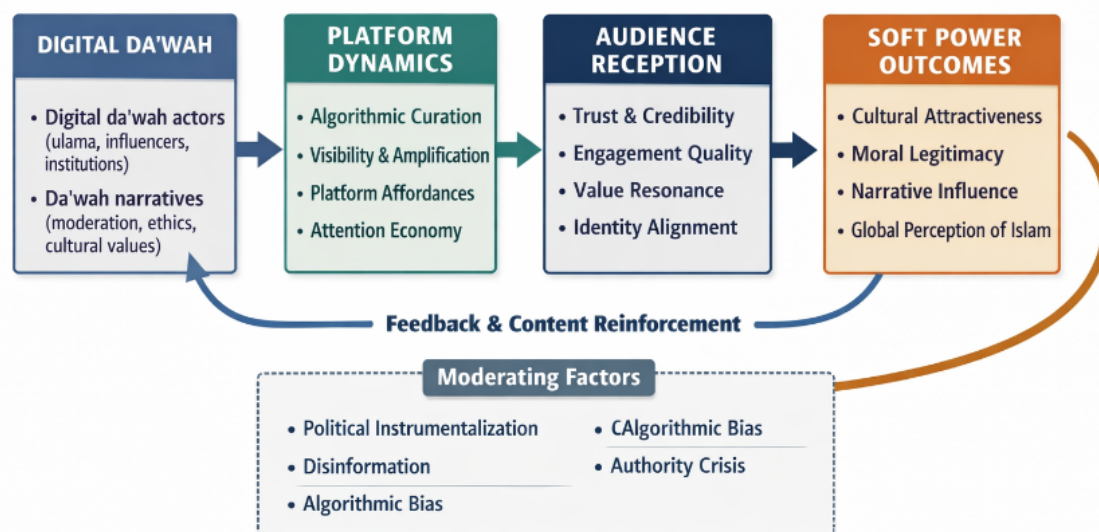


Figure 1 visualises the conceptual model developed in this study to explain how digital da'wah functions as Islamic soft power within contemporary digital environments. The model conceptualises digital da'wah as the initial source of symbolic narratives articulated by religious actors, which are subsequently mediated by platform dynamics such as algorithms, visibility regimes, and attention economies. These mediated messages are then interpreted at the level of audience reception, where trust, engagement, and value resonance determine whether Islamic narratives attract or elicit resistance. When reception is positive, digital da'wah produces soft power outcomes in the form of cultural attractiveness, moral legitimacy, and narrative influence, shaping global perceptions of Islam. The model also incorporates feedback loops, indicating that audience engagement reshapes future da'wah production and moderates risks—such as politicisation and disinformation—that may weaken attraction-based influence.

The findings of this study confirm that digital da'wah has evolved beyond its traditional pedagogical function to operate as a form of cultural and symbolic influence aligned with the logic of soft power. This supports Joseph Nye's (2004) argument that attraction, legitimacy, and value resonance constitute critical resources of power in contemporary global politics. By situating digital Islamic communication within this framework, the study demonstrates that religious discourse—when mediated through digital platforms—can serve as a non-coercive political force that shapes perceptions, identities, and moral alignment across borders. This insight extends soft power theory into the domain of religious communication, an area that has remained marginal in mainstream political communication literature.

The transformation of religious actors identified in the findings reinforces existing scholarship on the decentralisation of religious authority in digital environments. Studies on digital da'wah and online religiosity emphasise that authority is increasingly negotiated through affective engagement, narrative credibility, and platform visibility rather than institutional endorsement alone (Ulyan, 2023; Zaid et al., 2022). However, this study advances the literature by demonstrating that such transformations are not merely internal religious shifts but processes with geopolitical implications.

When digital preachers operate as cultural intermediaries whose narratives circulate globally, they effectively assume the role of non-state soft power actors. This perspective challenges earlier studies that treated digital religious influencers as isolated communicative phenomena without recognising their contribution to international symbolic politics (Banchoff, 2008).

The discussion further reveals that moderation-oriented digital da'wah constitutes a critical mechanism for generating Islamic soft power. Previous research has shown that narratives of moderation, tolerance, and local wisdom play an important role in countering religious extremism and fostering social cohesion in digital spaces (Handayani & Alfida, 2024; Machendrawaty et al., 2022). This study extends those findings by arguing that moderation is not only a counter-extremism strategy but also a core resource of attraction-based influence. When Islamic messages align with globally resonant ethical values, they enhance Islam's cultural attractiveness and moral legitimacy, thereby strengthening its soft power capacity. This confirms Nye's (2004) assertion that values perceived as legitimate and universal are central to sustainable influence.

The role of Islamic education emerges in this discussion as a structural foundation for the production of digital soft power. Existing studies emphasise that educational institutions play a crucial role in cultivating religious moderation and digital literacy (Baen et al., 2024; Yunus Daulay & Sazali, 2024). The present study reframes this insight by positioning Islamic education as a generator of moral capital that later manifests in digital communication practices. Through the internalisation of moderation values, educational processes enable the production of da'wah narratives that are dialogical, ethically coherent, and culturally adaptive. This theoretical linkage between education, value formation, and soft power output has not been systematically articulated in prior research and represents an important conceptual contribution of this study.

The discussion also highlights the political significance of platform dynamics in shaping digital Islamic influence. While previous literature has documented the role of algorithms in curating religious content online (Nuriana & Salwa, 2024; Wahid, 2024), this study demonstrates that algorithmic systems function as political mediators rather than neutral technical tools. By privileging certain forms of engagement, emotional tone, and narrative framing, algorithms influence which Islamic discourses gain global visibility and legitimacy. This finding aligns with broader political communication theories that emphasise the role of platform governance in shaping public meaning and power relations. Within this context, digital da'wah operates in a contested environment where moderation-oriented narratives must compete with sensationalist or polarising content for algorithmic attention.

Audience reception, as discussed in this study, provides an empirical lens through which soft power becomes observable. Prior studies in digital religious communication emphasise trust, authenticity, and engagement as key factors shaping audience interpretation (Hidayatul Ummah, 2024; Baen et al., 2024). This discussion extends those insights by framing audience reception as a political indicator of attraction-based influence. When audiences voluntarily align with moderation narratives, participate in dialogical exchanges, or adopt symbolic representations of Islam, they engage in processes that mirror the logic of soft power. These behaviours reflect not compliance but attraction, reinforcing Nye's (1990) argument that the most effective forms of power operate through consent and normative appeal rather than coercion.

At the same time, the discussion underscores the fragility of digital Islamic soft power. Existing research warns that political instrumentalisation of religious discourse undermines credibility and erodes trust (Banchoff, 2008; Handayani & Alfida, 2024). This study reinforces that concern by demonstrating that when digital da'wah is perceived as partisan or propagandistic, its attractiveness

declines, weakening its soft power potential. Disinformation, algorithmic bias, and the proliferation of unqualified religious voices further threaten the moral foundations upon which attraction-based influence depends (Nuriana & Salwa, 2024). These risks highlight that soft power is not an inherent attribute of digital da'wah but a contingent outcome shaped by ethical consistency, platform governance, and audience trust.

Taken together, this discussion demonstrates that digital da'wah occupies a critical intersection between religion, communication, and global politics. By integrating soft power theory with scholarship on digital Islamic communication, this study advances a more comprehensive understanding of how religious narratives function as political resources in contemporary media environments. The findings and interpretations presented here reposition digital da'wah as a legitimate subject of political communication analysis, offering new theoretical pathways for examining religion's role in shaping global imaginaries, cultural diplomacy, and attraction-based influence in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study concludes that digital da'wah has evolved into a significant form of Islamic soft power within contemporary digital environments. By integrating soft power theory with scholarship on digital Islamic communication, the article demonstrates that digital da'wah operates not merely as a religious or educational practice but as an attraction-based mode of influence that shapes global perceptions of Islam. Through mediated narratives of moderation, ethical credibility, and cultural resonance, digital da'wah contributes to symbolic influence without relying on coercive or state-driven mechanisms.

The conceptual model developed in this study clarifies the process through which digital da'wah functions as soft power. Digital religious narratives are first shaped by da'wah actors and values, then mediated by platform dynamics such as algorithms and visibility regimes, interpreted through audience reception, and ultimately translated into soft power outcomes, including cultural attractiveness, moral legitimacy, and narrative influence. This process-oriented perspective highlights the central roles of audience trust, value resonance, and platform mediation in determining whether digital Islamic discourse attracts or elicits resistance.

Theoretically, this study advances scholarship on soft power and political communication by repositioning digital religious communication as a legitimate analytical domain of global influence. It extends existing understandings of soft power beyond state-centric and secular frameworks, demonstrating how non-state religious actors and digital narratives contribute to contemporary symbolic politics. In the context of Islamic studies, the findings underscore the strategic importance of religious moderation and digital literacy as foundational resources for attraction-based influence.

Practically, the study suggests that strengthening ethical consistency, moderation-oriented education, and platform-sensitive communication strategies is essential for sustaining the soft power potential of digital da'wah. Future research may empirically test the proposed conceptual model across different national contexts and digital platforms, and examine how emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, further reshape religious authority, audience reception, and the dynamics of global Islamic communication.

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