



Hybrid Da'wah and Embodied Religious Authority: Kyai's Dialogical Responses to Extremist Narratives in Semi-Rural Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how kyai and Islamic preachers in two semi-rural districts of Lamongan, Indonesia, combine dialogical communication, moral exemplarity, and selective digital outreach when responding to religious narratives they regard as extremist. A qualitative descriptive design drew on observations of more than 15 religious gatherings, 14 semi-structured interviews with six kyai/preachers and eight congregation members, and documentation of offline and online da'wah practices. Data were organized using the interactive procedures of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña and interpreted thematically. Four themes emerged: (1) dialogical persuasion described as building relational trust; (2) visible moral conduct perceived as supporting religious credibility; (3) the use of WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube to extend existing relationships and circulate moderate messages; and (4) community-based responses constrained by limited digital literacy. The findings suggest that digital da'wah amplifies, rather than replaces, authority grounded in offline relationships and moral exemplarity. The study proposes that embodied religious authority and social embeddedness help explain the credibility of hybrid da'wah in semi-rural Muslim communities. As audience attitudes and radicalization outcomes were not measured, the findings indicate perceived communicative capacities rather than demonstrated preventive effects.

Keywords: hybrid da'wah, embodied religious authority, dialogical communication, religious moderation, extremist narratives

INTRODUCTION

The increasing integration of digital technologies into everyday social life has transformed the ways religious knowledge is produced, communicated, and interpreted within contemporary Muslim societies. Islamic da'wah, traditionally associated with face-to-face preaching, religious gatherings, and community-based religious education, now operates within increasingly interconnected offline and online communication environments. Digital platforms have expanded opportunities for religious actors to disseminate Islamic teachings, interact with diverse audiences, and participate in public religious discussions beyond conventional institutional boundaries. However, this transformation has also introduced new challenges concerning the credibility of religious information, the legitimacy of religious communicators, and the changing relationship between established religious authorities and digitally mediated religious influence.

Research on Indonesian religious influencers indicates that digital visibility and communicative presentation have become important elements in constructing religious authority, while more recent investigations demonstrate that digital da'wah increasingly involves negotiations between established religious traditions and platform-based communication practices (Effendi et al, 2026; Febrian 2024). These developments suggest that contemporary Islamic communication cannot be adequately understood through a simple distinction between conventional preaching and digital religious communication. Instead, attention must be directed toward how religious authority is constructed, maintained, and negotiated across interconnected communication environments.

The transformation of religious communication has become particularly significant amid the circulation of intolerant, divisive, and extremist religious narratives in digital spaces. Social media platforms enable religious information to reach audiences rapidly, but the same communicative conditions can facilitate the dissemination of messages promoting hostility, exclusionary interpretations, and ideological polarization. Research examining religious moderation campaigns in Indonesia indicates that certain ideological movements attempt to undermine moderation-oriented initiatives by questioning their religious legitimacy and weakening public confidence in the institutions and individuals associated with them (Alvian, 2023). Nevertheless, the relationship between exposure to extremist content and radicalization is more complex than a straightforward process of ideological influence. A systematic review of media-related radicalization research found that the available evidence does not support treating media exposure alone as a sufficient explanation for radicalization, particularly when differences between cognitive and behavioral outcomes are considered (Wolfowicz et al. 2022). Consequently, responses to extremist narratives require an understanding of the social relationships, communication practices, and credibility judgments through which religious messages are evaluated within particular communities.

Within the Indonesian context, religious moderation has become an important orientation for developing inclusive religious understanding and maintaining constructive relationships across differences in religious interpretation and social affiliation. Its implementation involves more than communicating normative messages about tolerance; it also requires educational and communicative processes through which individuals engage with religious diversity and develop the capacity to evaluate competing interpretations. Research on interreligious literacy in Indonesian Islamic higher education demonstrates the relevance of participatory learning and direct interaction in developing inclusive religious perspectives (Ali et al., 2021). Other studies emphasize the importance of established religious authorities in communicating moderation within communities where social relationships and cultural traditions remain influential (Faisal et al., 2022). At the same time, analyses of religious moderation communication in Indonesian digital environments highlight the challenges associated with competing narratives, institutional communication strategies, and the credibility of moderation-oriented messages (Zaimina, 2025). These findings suggest that promoting religious moderation should be examined not only as the dissemination of religious messages but also as a relational communication process shaped by local authority structures, audience characteristics, and the media through which religious interpretations circulate.

Kyai occupy an important position within these processes because their religious influence extends beyond the formal transmission of Islamic knowledge. In many Indonesian Muslim communities, kyai are recognized as religious educators, community advisers, moral figures, and participants in social activities that connect religious institutions with everyday

communal life. Contemporary research indicates that the authority of kyai is sustained through combinations of religious legitimacy, social relationships, institutional recognition, and participation in community affairs. A study of traditional religious leadership in Indonesia identified the continuing relevance of culturally grounded authority in promoting religious moderation, particularly in communities where religious leaders maintain close social relationships with their audiences (Faisal et al., 2022). More recent investigations into pesantren leadership similarly show that institutional trust and religious legitimacy are shaped by interconnected cultural, social, and symbolic resources rather than religious position alone (Nu'man, 2025). These findings indicate that the credibility of kyai should be understood as a socially situated phenomenon that develops through continuing interaction between religious leaders and community members.

The relational foundations of religious authority also highlight the importance of everyday conduct in establishing and maintaining religious legitimacy. Religious leadership is not expressed exclusively through sermons or formal religious instruction but may also be recognized through visible conduct, interpersonal engagement, and participation in communal practices. Recent ethnographic research in Indonesian pesantren demonstrates that religious authority is reproduced and negotiated through everyday educational interactions, embodied practices, and relationships between religious leaders and members of their institutions (Rofiqi et al., 2026). A systematic review of scholarship on kyai further indicates that their contemporary roles extend beyond conventional religious instruction to include social leadership, community development, and digital adaptation (Suresman & Faqihuddin, 2026). These studies provide a basis for understanding religious credibility as connected to the consistency between communicated religious values and observable social behavior. Such an understanding becomes particularly relevant when religious leaders extend their communication into digital spaces, where audiences may encounter religious messages without the immediate interpersonal context in which the communicator's legitimacy was originally established.

Previous studies have examined the transformation of Islamic da'wah and religious authority from several perspectives. Research on Indonesian religious influencers has explored how religious legitimacy is communicated through visual presentation and digitally mediated public engagement (Febrian, 2024). Studies of urban Muslim religious leaders have identified diverse digital preaching practices and demonstrated how conventional religious authority interacts with audience expectations, local religious cultures, and platform-specific communication opportunities. Other investigations have examined the relationship between digital media and religious authority in rural environments. Research involving Tuan Gurus in Lombok demonstrates that digital religious communication develops through processes of relational trust, communicative interaction, and continuing recognition within culturally embedded communities (Dharta et al., 2026). Meanwhile, studies of traditional religious authority and embodied practices demonstrate that credibility and legitimacy remain closely connected to the everyday relationships through which religious leadership is enacted and recognized (Rofiqi et al., 2026). Collectively, these studies establish that digital religious communication, interpersonal trust, and embodied authority are interconnected dimensions of contemporary Muslim religious life.

Despite these contributions, a more specific analytical problem remains concerning how locally established religious authority informs communicative responses to narratives perceived as extremist. Research on digital religious authority has demonstrated the importance of platform visibility, audience engagement, and social relationships, while studies of religious moderation have examined educational approaches and the role of

established religious leaders. However, these bodies of scholarship do not fully explain how dialogical communication, visible moral conduct, and digitally mediated religious messaging are brought together when kyai respond to contested religious narratives within semi-rural communities. Existing research on counter-messaging also emphasizes the need to distinguish the implementation of communication strategies from evidence of their effectiveness in changing attitudes or preventing violent extremism (Treacy et al., 2026). The central analytical issue is therefore not simply whether religious leaders employ both conventional and digital communication, but how interpersonal credibility and socially recognized religious legitimacy shape the practices through which moderate religious interpretations are communicated and defended. This problem warrants investigation because the capacity to distribute religious messages through digital platforms does not necessarily establish whether audiences consider those messages credible, meaningful, or worthy of further consideration.

To examine this relationship, the present study draws on contemporary scholarship concerning communicator credibility, dialogical communication, and religious authority. Recent communication research demonstrates that evaluations of persuasive messages are influenced by perceptions of the communicators who deliver them. A meta-analysis of social media influence research identifies perceived expertise and trustworthiness as important dimensions associated with audience evaluations and attitudinal responses (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Experimental research on information evaluation in social media contexts further indicates that assessments of source credibility interact with judgments concerning the plausibility of communicated information (Wertgen & Richter, 2023). Although these studies were conducted outside the specific context of Islamic preaching, they provide relevant analytical perspectives for examining how audiences evaluate religious communicators. In the context of kyai-led da'wah, credibility may be associated with perceived religious competence, consistency between religious teaching and everyday behavior, and the degree to which community members regard religious leaders as sincere and responsive to their concerns. These dimensions are treated in the present study as analytical considerations rather than independently measured determinants of audience persuasion.

Dialogical communication provides a complementary perspective for understanding how credibility may be sustained through interpersonal religious relationships. Contemporary communication scholarship distinguishes genuine dialogical engagement from communication that merely allows messages to move in two directions. Dialogue involves varying degrees of reciprocity, responsiveness, openness, and willingness to recognize the perspectives of others, rather than being reducible to the exchange of questions and answers (Lane, 2020). Research on digitally mediated communication also demonstrates that communication technologies can support dialogical relationships when their characteristics facilitate interaction and social presence (A. Zhou & Xu, 2022). These perspectives are relevant to Islamic da'wah because religious gatherings, community discussions, and interpersonal guidance provide opportunities for religious leaders to engage with questions, respond to concerns, and contextualize religious interpretations within participants' everyday experiences. In this study, dialogical communication is therefore approached through observable practices such as inviting audience participation, avoiding hostile labeling, responding to sensitive religious questions, and maintaining continuing relationships with congregants. Such practices provide a basis for examining how participants understand the relationship between dialogical engagement and religious credibility.

Contemporary persuasion research further suggests that the evaluation of mediated messages involves interactions between characteristics of the information presented and perceptions associated with its source. Research applying elaboration-based perspectives to social media communication indicates that message evaluation is shaped by factors such as issue involvement, perceived information quality, and contextual influences on credibility judgments (Miller et al., 2024). Related studies of online corrective communication likewise demonstrate the relevance of message-related and audience-perceived characteristics when examining responses to information circulated through social media (C. Zhou & Chang, 2024). These findings provide a supplementary analytical perspective on the relationship between religious messages and communicator credibility. However, the present research does not directly measure cognitive processing, persuasion routes, or changes in audience attitudes. Such perspectives are therefore used to contextualize the importance of credibility and message evaluation rather than to establish a causal account of religious persuasion. The primary analytical emphasis remains on the communication practices described by participants and observed within the research setting.

These theoretical considerations are brought together through the concepts of embodied religious authority and social embeddedness. Embodied religious authority refers in this study to religious legitimacy expressed and recognized through visible conduct, everyday interaction, and the perceived consistency between communicated religious values and social behavior. Social embeddedness, by contrast, refers to the interpersonal relationships and community networks within which religious legitimacy develops and acquires social significance. Recent research on Indonesian pesantren demonstrates how religious authority is enacted through embodied practices and everyday institutional relationships (Hasan, 2025), while studies of traditional religious leadership indicate that culturally recognized authority remains influential in communicating religious moderation (Tahir et al., 2025). Research on rural digital religious communication further suggests that the legitimacy of religious leaders in online environments can remain closely connected to trust and recognition established through offline social interaction (Andok, 2024). On this basis, the present study examines hybrid da'wah as a socially embedded communication practice in which digital platforms may extend established religious relationships without necessarily replacing their interpersonal foundations. The relationship between offline legitimacy and digital communication is treated as an interpretive proposition to be examined through the empirical material rather than as a predetermined causal mechanism.

The study also distinguishes between extremist narratives, religious intolerance, radicalization, and community resilience to maintain conceptual consistency between its research questions and empirical evidence. Extremist narratives are approached as messages interpreted as legitimizing hostility toward religious or ideological out-groups or justifying ideologically motivated violence. This definition requires distinguishing such narratives from religious disagreement, doctrinal exclusivism, and expressions of intolerance that do not necessarily indicate radicalization. Existing research demonstrates that ideological radicalization and involvement in extremist violence cannot be treated as equivalent outcomes, while media exposure alone provides an insufficient basis for identifying radicalized individuals (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). Moreover, research on community-based responses to violent extremism in Indonesia identifies ethical and institutional challenges associated with assigning monitoring responsibilities to local leaders, including the possibility of inappropriate suspicion and stigmatization (Jaffrey et al., 2026). Community resilience is therefore approached in this study as a conceptual orientation toward perceived capacities for recognizing, questioning, and responding to problematic narratives through

trusted relationships and communal communication practices. It is not treated as a measured outcome, and the study does not assume that observed communication activities demonstrate reductions in radicalization or extremist attitudes.

The empirical investigation was conducted in Maduran and Karanggeneng Districts, Lamongan Regency, East Java, Indonesia. These semi-rural Muslim communities provide a bounded context for examining how kyai and Islamic preachers combine interpersonal religious communication, community-based practices, and selective digital outreach. The study focuses on religious communication as experienced and described by religious leaders and congregation members, with particular attention to the ways dialogical engagement, moral exemplarity, and digital media use contribute to perceptions of religious credibility. Three research questions guide the investigation: (1) How do kyai employ persuasive-dialogical communication and moral exemplarity in their da'wah practices? (2) How are offline relational authority and digital da'wah connected in the communication practices and perceived credibility of kyai? (3) What limitations do participants identify in community-based responses to extremist narratives, particularly concerning digital literacy and the reach of established religious relationships?

This study aims to contribute to Islamic communication scholarship by developing an empirically informed interpretation of how dialogical communication and embodied religious authority are related to hybrid da'wah practices in semi-rural Muslim communities. Its principal contribution lies in examining the perceived relationship between interpersonal trust, visible moral exemplarity, and the credibility of religious messages communicated across offline and digital environments in response to extremist narratives. Rather than proposing hybrid communication as a newly emerging phenomenon, the study investigates the social conditions under which established religious authority may support the communication of moderate religious interpretations through digital platforms. The findings are intended to inform theoretical discussions of religious authority, relational credibility, and hybrid communication while identifying potential implications for religious communication and digital-literacy initiatives. Given the qualitative design and limited research setting, the resulting interpretation is presented as a context-dependent theoretical proposition that may be examined through future comparative and audience-centered research in other Muslim societies.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive thematic approach to examine how kyai and Islamic preachers communicate religious moderation and respond to extremist narratives in semi-rural Muslim communities. This design was selected to explore religious communication practices, interpersonal relationships, and participants' interpretations of religious authority within their natural social settings. Qualitative descriptive research allows researchers to document situated practices while maintaining close engagement with participants' experiences and contextual meanings (Bradshaw et al. 2017). Interpretive thematic analysis was incorporated to identify recurring patterns and examine how dialogical communication, moral exemplarity, and digital da'wah were understood in relation to religious credibility. The study did not seek to test causal relationships or measure the effectiveness of radicalism prevention. Instead, it aimed to develop an empirically informed interpretation of communication practices and their perceived contributions to community responses to extremist narratives. Fieldwork was conducted from February to May 2026 in Maduran and Karanggeneng Districts, Lamongan Regency, East Java, Indonesia. These locations were purposively selected because they

represent semi-rural Muslim communities where established religious authority, pesantren networks, mosque-based activities, and increasingly accessible digital communication coexist within everyday religious life (Aisyah, 2024).

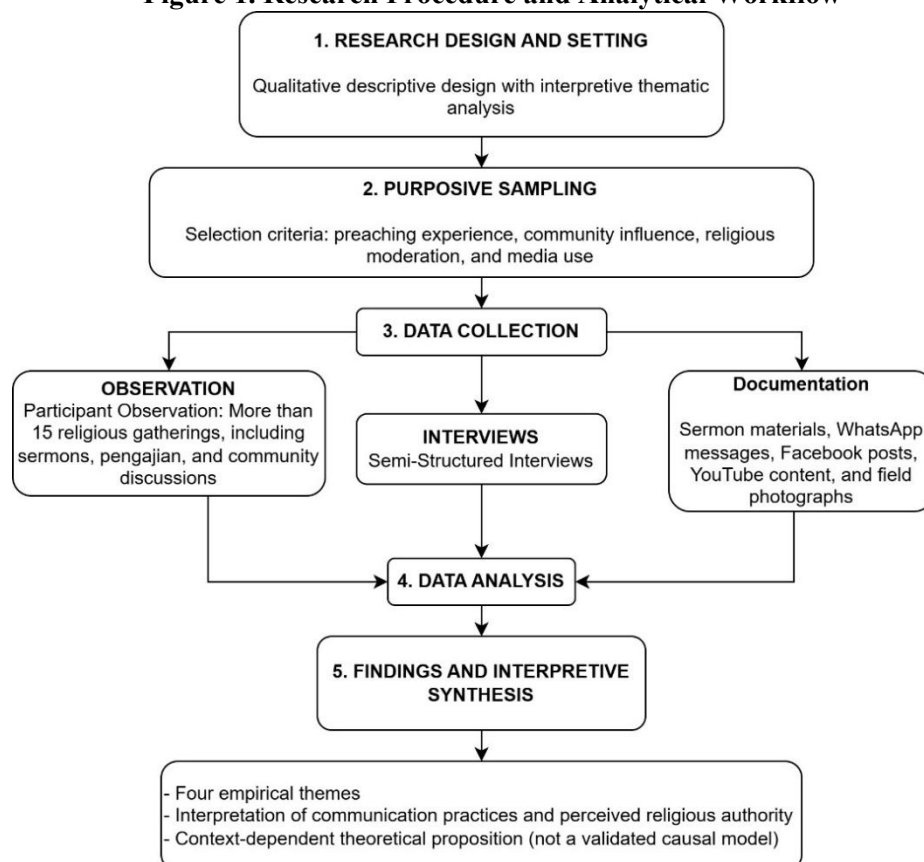
The researchers recruited participants through purposive sampling based on their involvement in local religious communication practices (Schmidt & Miles, 2017). The study involved fourteen informants, comprising six primary informants (kyai and Islamic preachers) and eight supporting informants drawn from congregation members (mad'u), mosque administrators, youth religious activists, and regular participants in Islamic study groups. Primary informants were selected based on four criteria: having at least five years of preaching experience, being recognized within local religious communities, participating in the promotion of moderate religious teachings, and employing conventional, digital, or hybrid communication approaches. Four primary informants were affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama-based pesantren networks, while two were independent community preachers. Their ages ranged from 38 to 67 years, with preaching experience ranging from 10 to 35 years. Three informants actively employed digital platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, whereas the others relied primarily on face-to-face religious forums. Supporting informants provided additional perspectives on how religious messages and communication practices were understood within the community. The adequacy of the sample was assessed through recurring patterns and thematic consistency across interviews and observations. Although substantially new categories became less frequent during data collection, no formal saturation threshold was applied; therefore, sample adequacy was treated as a context-dependent analytical judgment rather than proof of exhaustive thematic saturation (Temraz et al., 2026).

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis to enable comparison across different sources of evidence. Participant observation involved attendance at more than fifteen religious gatherings across both districts over approximately three months, including routine *pengajian*, Friday sermons, majelis taklim, pesantren discussions, and youth religious activities. Observations focused on message delivery, opportunities for audience participation, communicative responses to sensitive religious issues, expressions of moral exemplarity, and the integration of digital media into religious communication. Field notes were prepared following each observation to document communication patterns and relevant contextual conditions. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six primary and eight supporting informants, lasting approximately 45–90 minutes each. Interviews addressed religious moderation, dialogical preaching, moral conduct, responses to controversial religious content, digital media practices, and perceived communication constraints. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and, according to participant preference, partly in Javanese; they were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The research team subsequently translated selected excerpts into English, prioritizing equivalence of meaning while retaining culturally specific expressions where necessary. Documentary materials included sermon manuscripts, religious teaching materials, mosque bulletins, lecture recordings, WhatsApp messages, Facebook posts,

YouTube content, and photographs of religious activities. These materials were examined as contextual and supporting evidence rather than subjected to a separate systematic digital content analysis.

The analytical framework was informed by four interconnected sensitizing concepts: dialogical communication, moral exemplarity, embodied religious authority, and hybrid da'wah. Dialogical communication directed analytical attention toward reciprocity, openness, responsiveness, and respectful engagement between religious leaders and congregants. Moral exemplarity concerned the perceived consistency between religious messages and everyday social conduct. Embodied religious authority referred to legitimacy expressed through observable behavior and maintained within established interpersonal relationships and community networks. Hybrid da'wah concerned the selective integration of face-to-face communication and digital platforms in circulating moderate religious messages and responding to narratives perceived as extremist. These concepts provided analytical guidance without being treated as predefined measurable variables or assuming causal relationships among them. The analysis also considered contextual constraints, particularly digital literacy, selective exposure to online content, and the limited reach of local religious networks. Figure 1. illustrates the methodological sequence through which these analytical concerns were investigated, from participant selection and data collection to thematic interpretation.

Figure 1. Research Procedure and Analytical Workflow



Data analysis was conducted iteratively alongside data collection, drawing on the interactive procedures of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing described by Schmidt & Miles (2017), together with contemporary guidance on thematic interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Interview transcripts, observational field notes, and documentary materials were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the dataset and identify meaningful communication practices. Initial coding focused on participants' statements and observed interactions concerning interpersonal persuasion, dialogical engagement, exemplary conduct, religious credibility, digital communication, and community responses to extremist narratives. Related codes were progressively organized into analytical categories and compared across informants and data sources. Through this process, four overarching themes were developed: persuasive-dialogical communication as trust-building, social exemplarity as nonverbal religious communication, hybrid da'wah as an extension of existing relationships, and community-based responses constrained by digital literacy. The initial coding was conducted by the first author, while interpretations were discussed through peer debriefing and compared with observational and documentary evidence. The analysis also considered differences in participants' organizational affiliations and communication practices, although disconfirming cases were not systematically sought. The resulting themes were interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework to develop a context-dependent proposition concerning the relationship between offline religious legitimacy and digitally mediated da'wah. This proposition was not treated as an empirically validated causal model.

The trustworthiness of the findings was addressed through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity. Source triangulation involved comparing accounts from religious leaders and congregation members, while methodological triangulation examined convergence and differences among interviews, observations, and documentary materials. Summarized interpretations were returned to several key informants to assess whether the researchers had adequately represented their intended meanings. Peer discussions supported critical reflection on coding decisions and thematic interpretations, while reflexive field notes were maintained to examine how the researchers' academic interests in Islamic communication and religious moderation might influence data interpretation. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, explanation of the research purpose, oral informed consent before interviews and observations, and the anonymization of participants through identification codes (Hosseini & Haukås, 2025). Personal identifiers and potentially identifiable information from digital materials were removed, and messages from semi-private WhatsApp groups were not reproduced verbatim. Formal approval from an institutional research ethics committee was not obtained, and this limitation is acknowledged transparently. Furthermore, because the study did not directly measure audience attitude changes, digital message reception, or radicalization outcomes, its findings were interpreted as evidence of observed communication practices and participants' perceptions rather than demonstrated effectiveness in preventing radicalism (Widjanarko et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Analysis of fourteen interviews, observations from more than fifteen religious gatherings, and supporting documentary materials identified four interrelated themes in kyai-led religious communication in Maduran and Karanggeneng, Lamongan Regency. These themes encompass persuasive-dialogical communication, moral exemplarity, hybrid da'wah practices, and community-based responses constrained by digital literacy. Together, they illustrate how religious leaders and congregation members understand the relationship between interpersonal communication, religious credibility, and digitally mediated responses to contested religious narratives. The findings distinguish participants' perceptions from directly observed practices and documentary evidence. Participants' statements about the effectiveness of specific communication strategies are interpreted as assessments rather than as independently verified changes in religious attitudes or reductions in radicalization.

1. Persuasive-Dialogical Da'wah and the Construction of Relational Trust

The first theme concerns the use of persuasive and dialogical communication in conveying moderation-oriented religious messages. Participants described religious communication as a gradual interpersonal process that prioritized emotional closeness, respectful engagement, and opportunities for discussion over confrontational preaching. During observed *pengajian* and mosque-based discussions, kyai invited congregants to raise questions concerning religious differences, social tensions, and controversial religious content circulating through social media. Rather than immediately challenging opposing interpretations, several preachers began with familiar social experiences before relating them to Islamic values of tolerance, balance, and mutual respect. These practices were understood by participants as creating a more comfortable environment for discussing sensitive religious matters.

One senior kyai explained the reasoning underlying this approach:

"If we preach by blaming or attacking people, the congregation becomes defensive. I usually invite them to discuss everyday problems first, then slowly connect them with Islamic values of tolerance and balance." (Informant 2, senior kyai, interview, March 2026).

A similar perspective emerged from a younger preacher who emphasized the importance of recognizing congregants' expectations, particularly those of younger audiences:

"Young people today do not like being lectured harshly. They want dialogue. When they feel respected, they are more open to listening to moderate religious messages." (Informant 5, youth preacher and mosque educator, interview, April 2026)

These accounts reveal that participants associated persuasive communication with the quality of relationships between religious leaders and congregants. The communicative approach described by the informants involved acknowledging audience concerns, avoiding hostile language, and incorporating everyday experiences into religious explanation. Observational accounts were consistent with these descriptions, particularly in the use of

questions and interactive discussions during religious gatherings. The evidence therefore suggests that dialogical engagement was understood as a means of sustaining interpersonal confidence and perceived religious credibility. However, the study did not independently assess whether the practices increased trust or changed participants' religious attitudes. Relational trust is consequently interpreted as a meaning attributed to these communication practices rather than a directly measured outcome.

2. Moral Exemplarity and the Embodiment of Religious Authority

The second theme highlights the significance of kyai's everyday social conduct in the community's evaluation of religious legitimacy. Congregation members described religious leaders not only as transmitters of Islamic knowledge but also as figures whose behavior provided visible examples of religious values. Observations documented kyai's participation in neighborhood meetings, funeral assistance, inter-village cooperation, and youth mentoring activities. These engagements extended beyond formal religious instruction and provided opportunities for community members to observe how religious leaders interacted with individuals from different organizational and social backgrounds.

A congregation member described the importance of everyday conduct in evaluating religious leadership:

"People listen to the kyai because they see how he treats others in daily life. He never insults different groups and always reminds us to maintain harmony." (Supporting Informant 3, mosque congregation member, interview, March 2026)

A kyai similarly emphasized the relationship between religious teaching and personal conduct:

"Moderation is not only spoken from the pulpit. The community watches our behavior. If we preach tolerance but behave arrogantly, people will not believe us." (Informant 1, pesantren caregiver, interview, April 2026)

These accounts indicate that the community's recognition of religious authority was associated with the perceived consistency between communicated values and observable behavior. Participants treated humility, willingness to engage with others, and respectful treatment of differing affiliations as important characteristics of credible religious leadership. Such practices can be interpreted as forms of embodied communication because religious values were represented through social action rather than exclusively through verbal instruction. Importantly, participants also described religious credibility as conditional: perceived inconsistency between teaching and conduct could weaken confidence in a religious leader. The findings therefore suggest that religious legitimacy was understood as something continually maintained through everyday interactions, although the study did not measure the extent to which these practices influenced congregation members' behavior.

3. Hybrid Da'wah and the Digital Extension of Religious Communication

The third theme concerns the selective integration of conventional religious communication with digital media. Face-to-face preaching remained prominent in the

activities described by informants, particularly in religious gatherings involving older congregants. Nevertheless, three of the six primary informants actively managed WhatsApp groups to circulate religious advice, moderation-oriented messages, and clarifications concerning controversial religious issues. Two informants also uploaded short religious lectures through Facebook and YouTube, primarily to maintain communication with audiences who increasingly consumed religious information online.

One preacher explained why digital participation was considered necessary:

"Radical content spreads quickly on social media. If moderate scholars are absent from digital platforms, young people will only hear one side of religion." (Informant 4, digital da'wah activist, interview, March 2026)

Documentary materials showed that the digital communication practices included messages encouraging *tabayyun*, or verification of information, warnings against hate speech, and short videos emphasizing peaceful relationships among Muslims from different organizational backgrounds. These materials indicate that digital platforms were used not only to distribute religious lectures but also to contextualize religious information circulating within congregational networks. During a youth religious discussion, the researchers recorded the following observation:

"The preacher showed screenshots of provocative religious posts circulating online and explained why the information was misleading and potentially divisive." (Field observation, Karanggeneng, February 2026)

The observation illustrates how online religious content could become material for face-to-face discussion. Rather than treating digital and conventional communication as separate activities, the preacher introduced digitally circulated messages into a religious forum where they could be questioned and interpreted. The communication practices thus operated across interconnected settings: digital content informed interpersonal discussion, while existing religious relationships provided a social context for subsequent online communication.

The findings suggest that digital platforms functioned primarily as extensions of established religious communication rather than replacements for face-to-face religious authority. The practices described by informants were embedded in existing congregational relationships and local religious networks. The *kyai's* role also appeared to expand from delivering religious instruction toward selecting, contextualizing, and clarifying circulating information. Nevertheless, the available documentation did not include systematic measures of audience engagement, message diffusion, or changes in digital attitudes. Furthermore, although some documented messages were considered provocative or potentially extremist by informants, their classification was not established through a separate systematic content analysis. The findings therefore demonstrate the existence and forms of digitally mediated religious responses without establishing their effectiveness in countering violent extremism.

4. Community-Based Responses and the Constraints of Digital Literacy

The fourth theme concerns the role of community relationships in responding to religious narratives regarded as threatening to social harmony. Participants described responsibility for addressing such narratives as extending beyond individual religious leaders to families, mosque administrators, educational institutions, and youth communities. Routine religious gatherings, Qur'anic study circles, and mosque youth forums were understood as opportunities for religious discussion, interpersonal guidance, and continuing engagement with community concerns. Informants considered these activities important for recognizing changes in social relationships and addressing religious disagreements through direct communication.

One kyai described how he approached individuals whose behavior caused concern within the community:

"If someone suddenly becomes exclusive, easily blames others, and refuses community activities, we usually approach them personally first." (Informant 6, community preacher, interview, April 2026)

This account demonstrates a preference for interpersonal engagement rather than immediate public confrontation. However, the behaviors described represent the informant's own interpretations of possible concerns and cannot be considered reliable indicators of radicalization. Social withdrawal, religious exclusivism, and disagreements with community practices may arise from different personal or social circumstances. Accordingly, these accounts are interpreted as descriptions of local responses to perceived problems rather than evidence that particular individuals had adopted extremist beliefs.

Digital literacy emerged as a recurring limitation in participants' accounts. Several congregation members described difficulties evaluating the reliability of religious information encountered through social media. Younger community members were also described as frequently encountering short religious videos on TikTok and YouTube, including content produced outside their existing religious networks. Participants expressed concern that the rapid circulation of online material could encourage audiences to accept religious claims without examining the credibility of their sources.

One supporting informant explained:

"Sometimes people immediately believe religious content from social media without checking who created it or whether the explanation is correct." (Supporting Informant 6, youth mosque activist, interview, May 2026)

These findings indicate a perceived difference between the communication environments in which local kyai maintained established relationships and the broader digital environments through which religious messages circulated. Community-based religious forums provided opportunities for interpersonal clarification, but their influence was potentially limited among individuals who primarily encountered religious information from external online sources. Participants consequently identified digital literacy, critical evaluation of information, and continued religious dialogue as important conditions for responding to contested religious narratives. The study did not directly measure these

capacities or determine whether community-based practices reduced vulnerability to extremist messaging.

Variation Across Informants and Communication Contexts

Although four common themes were identified, the communication practices of the six primary informants were not uniform. Four were associated with Nahdlatul Ulama-based religious networks, whereas two were independent community preachers. Three informants incorporated digital platforms into their communication practices, while the others relied predominantly on conventional religious forums. Even among digitally active informants, media practices varied between managing congregational WhatsApp groups and publishing religious lectures on Facebook or YouTube. These differences indicate that hybrid da'wah did not represent a standardized communication strategy adopted equally by all religious leaders.

The study was not designed to conduct a systematic comparison between Maduran and Karanggeneng or to assess differences between organizational affiliations. Consequently, the available data do not establish whether particular communication practices were more influential in one location or among specific types of religious leaders. In addition, negative or disconfirming cases were not systematically examined. The identified themes should therefore be understood as recurring patterns within the available dataset rather than exhaustive descriptions of religious communication across the two districts.

Table 1. Synthesis of empirical themes, supporting evidence, and analytical implications

Empirical theme	Supporting evidence	Analytical implication	Boundary of evidence
Persuasive-dialogical communication	Interviews with Informants 2 and 5; observations of religious discussions	Dialogue is associated with perceived relational trust and respectful engagement	Changes in audience trust or attitudes were not measured
Moral exemplarity	Interviews with Informant 1 and Supporting Informant 3; observations of communal activities	Visible conduct contributes to participants' recognition of religious legitimacy	Effects on religious behavior were not established
Hybrid da'wah	WhatsApp practices, Facebook and YouTube lectures, and observations of digital-content clarification	Digital communication extends established relationships and supports the contextualization of religious messages	Message reach, reception, and counter-narrative effectiveness were not systematically evaluated
Community-based responses	Interviews with Informant 6 and Supporting Informant 6; community religious activities	Interpersonal guidance and digital literacy are perceived as relevant to community responses	Radicalization and community resilience were not measured as outcomes

Discussion

Dialogical Communication, Relational Credibility, and Embodied Religious Authority

The first research question examined how kyai enact persuasive-dialogical communication and moral exemplarity in their da'wah practices. The findings suggest that these practices are interconnected dimensions of religious credibility rather than independent communication techniques. Participants described dialogical engagement as a means of establishing respectful relationships, while their accounts of moral exemplarity indicated that religious messages were evaluated in relation to the communicator's everyday conduct. Together, these patterns support an interpretation of religious credibility as socially negotiated through continuing interpersonal engagement rather than derived exclusively from formal religious knowledge or institutional status.

This interpretation can be situated within contemporary research on dialogical communication and source credibility. Lane (2020) distinguishes simple two-way communication from more substantive forms of dialogue characterized by deeper relational engagement. The practices observed in Lamongan, particularly opportunities for questioning and the avoidance of confrontational labeling, are consistent with aspects of dialogical communication. However, the data do not establish whether these interactions achieved the more demanding conditions of mutual understanding associated with substantive dialogue. The findings therefore demonstrate observable and reported dialogical practices without assuming that every religious discussion constituted fully reciprocal dialogue.

Research on communicator credibility also provides a relevant analytical perspective. Han and Balabanis (2024) show that perceived credibility and trustworthiness are associated with audience evaluations in mediated communication, while Wertgen and Richter (2023) demonstrate the relevance of source credibility when people evaluate textual information in social media environments. Although these studies address communication contexts different from Islamic da'wah, they help explain why participants emphasized the perceived integrity of religious communicators alongside the content of religious messages. In the present study, credibility was linked to the social visibility of the kyai's behavior, his responsiveness to community concerns, and the perceived consistency between religious teaching and everyday conduct. The findings extend this discussion by suggesting that, within locally embedded religious relationships, communicator credibility may be reinforced through recurring encounters in which audiences observe how religious values are enacted (Aldhaeri et al., 2026).

The significance of everyday conduct is also consistent with contemporary research on religious leadership in Indonesia. Faisal et al. (2022) identify the importance of traditional religious authority in communicating religious moderation, while Nu'man (2025) highlights the relationship between kyai leadership, symbolic legitimacy, social networks, and institutional trust. More recent ethnographic research by Rofiqi et al. (2026) demonstrates how authority within pesantren environments is enacted and negotiated through embodied educational practices and everyday interactions. The present findings complement these studies by showing how participants associated the credibility of moderation-oriented

da'wah with the observable consistency between the kyai's religious messages and social behavior (Suharto et al., 2026).

The analytical contribution lies in recognizing moral exemplarity as part of the communicative process through which religious legitimacy is evaluated. Embodied religious authority, in this interpretation, does not simply refer to the kyai's charismatic presence or social position. It concerns the performance of religious values through conduct that can be observed, interpreted, and evaluated by community members. Participants' accounts additionally suggest that such legitimacy is conditional: behavior perceived as inconsistent with religious teaching may undermine the credibility of the communicator. This does not demonstrate that moral conduct directly causes message acceptance, but it suggests a relationship worthy of further empirical investigation between visible ethical consistency and the perceived credibility of religious communication (Alsaed, 2026).

Hybrid Da'wah as the Extension and Negotiation of Offline Religious Authority

The second research question concerned the relationship between offline relational authority and digital da'wah. The findings indicate that digital communication was selectively incorporated into existing religious relationships rather than uniformly replacing conventional preaching (Wahid & Abdulloh, 2026). WhatsApp groups supported the continued circulation of religious guidance within congregational networks, while Facebook and YouTube enabled some preachers to distribute lectures beyond scheduled religious gatherings. Digital content also became an object of discussion in face-to-face forums, particularly when kyai addressed provocative religious material encountered online.

These patterns suggest that hybrid da'wah should be understood as an interaction between communication environments rather than merely the simultaneous use of conventional and digital media. The significance of this distinction becomes clearer when the findings are compared with recent research on Islamic digital religious authority. Effendi et al. (2026), in their study of urban kyai, they identify diverse digitally mediated preaching modalities shaped by religious authority, audience expectations, and platform practices. The present study likewise identifies variation in platform use, but its evidence points more specifically to the extension of existing congregational relationships through relatively selective digital communication. Unlike analyses centered on multiple forms of professionally mediated urban preaching, the Lamongan data emphasize everyday interpersonal relationships and the use of digital platforms to maintain contact and clarify contested religious information.

A closer comparison can be made with Dharta et al. (2026), whose research on rural religious leaders in Lombok identifies relational trust, communicative interaction, and culturally embedded practices as important dimensions of digital religious authority. The Lamongan findings are consistent with the broader argument that religious legitimacy in digital environments may remain connected to established offline relationships. However, the present study examines a more specific communicative purpose: the use of locally recognized religious authority to contextualize and respond to religious messages perceived as divisive or extremist. Its contribution therefore concerns the relationship between moral

exemplarity, interpersonal religious credibility, and the circulation of moderation-oriented responses, rather than the broader proposition that rural religious authority is socially embedded.

The findings also suggest a partial transformation in the communicative role of kyai. Within conventional religious gatherings, kyai were primarily described as teachers and guides who explained religious values through sermons and discussion. In digitally connected settings, some also acted as interpreters and contextualizers of information circulating through social media. The observed discussion of provocative online posts illustrates this emerging role: the religious leader did not simply deliver a competing message but introduced existing media content into an interpersonal setting where its meaning and credibility could be questioned.

Research on digitally mediated dialogue indicates that communication platforms can provide opportunities for relational interaction, although these opportunities depend on their communicative characteristics and use (A. Zhou & Xu, 2022). The present findings suggest that such opportunities were incorporated into established religious networks, particularly through WhatsApp-based communication. Nevertheless, the research did not examine platform affordances systematically or assess how audiences interpreted individual digital messages. The extent to which digital communication independently strengthened religious credibility therefore remains uncertain.

Importantly, the findings identify limits to the extension of offline religious authority. The credibility associated with locally recognized kyai cannot automatically be assumed to extend to audiences beyond their established relationships. Participants described younger community members encountering religious content from unfamiliar online creators whose messages circulated independently of local religious institutions. This suggests that hybrid religious authority may depend not only on access to digital platforms but also on the social boundaries within which religious leaders are recognized as credible. The relationship between offline legitimacy and digital authority is therefore potentially uneven and context-dependent.

Community Responses, Digital Literacy, and the Limits of Counter-Narrative Communication

The third research question addressed the constraints participants identified in community responses to extremist narratives. The findings indicate that participants regarded religious communication as a collective responsibility involving kyai, families, mosque administrators, educational institutions, and youth communities. Such relationships provided settings in which religious concerns could be discussed and potentially misleading information could be questioned. However, participants also identified unequal digital literacy and exposure to religious content beyond established community networks as limitations.

These concerns are relevant to scholarship examining religious moderation and the circulation of competing ideological messages. Alvian (2023) demonstrates that efforts to promote religious moderation can themselves become targets of communication strategies

seeking to undermine the credibility of moderation campaigns and their supporters. This finding underscores the importance of considering not only the content of moderation-oriented messages but also the social legitimacy attributed to their communicators. In Lamongan, participants similarly emphasized that religious messages were likely to be considered within existing relationships of recognition and trust, although this study did not test whether such trust improved resistance to extremist messages.

The documented communication practices included encouraging *tabayyun*, explaining potentially misleading online content, and promoting respectful engagement across differing religious affiliations. These activities are relevant to counter-narrative communication because they involve attempts to question or contextualize messages considered harmful by participants. Nevertheless, contemporary research emphasizes the need to distinguish the implementation of counter-messaging from evidence of its effectiveness. Treacy et al. (2026), through a systematic review of counter-messaging campaigns targeting terrorism and violent extremism, identify important limitations in the available evaluations of such interventions. Their findings indicate that communication campaigns cannot be considered effective solely because messages are produced, distributed, or positively described by their implementers.

A similar distinction is necessary when interpreting the present study. The availability of moderation-oriented WhatsApp messages and videos demonstrates communication activity, but does not establish whether recipients examined the content critically, reconsidered existing beliefs, or rejected extremist interpretations. Moreover, the documented examples involved warnings against hate speech, information verification, and provocative religious posts, which do not necessarily meet a strict definition of extremist narratives. Without systematic classification of the original content, these examples should be interpreted as responses to religious information perceived as misleading, divisive, or potentially extremist rather than definitive evidence of communication against violent extremist propaganda.

This distinction is consistent with the findings of Wolfowicz et al. (2022), whose systematic review demonstrates the complexity of relationships between media exposure and radicalization outcomes. The present research did not assess either cognitive or behavioral radicalization and therefore cannot establish whether participants' communication practices prevented radicalization. Its empirical contribution is more appropriately located in describing how local religious actors interpret and respond to contested digital religious narratives within their social environments.

A further issue concerns the ethical implications of community-based monitoring. Informants described personal approaches toward individuals whose behavior they perceived as increasingly exclusive or socially withdrawn. Although such practices may reflect efforts to maintain interpersonal communication, their interpretation as indicators of extremist influence requires caution. Research by Jaffrey et al. (2026) demonstrates that community-based prevention initiatives in Indonesia can generate complex tensions involving trust, responsibility, and responses to suspected extremism. The present findings

similarly suggest that informal community monitoring should not be equated with reliable identification of radicalized individuals.

Consequently, the practical implications of the study are more appropriately directed toward respectful interpersonal engagement, careful verification of religious information, and opportunities for religious and digital literacy development. Such practices may support community discussions about contested religious narratives, but their preventive effectiveness remains an empirical question rather than an established finding.

Theoretical Contribution: Embodied and Socially Embedded Authority in Hybrid Da'wah

Taken together, the findings support a context-dependent interpretation of hybrid da'wah in which religious credibility is associated with both embodied moral conduct and established interpersonal relationships. The four themes suggest a possible explanatory relationship: dialogical engagement provides opportunities for reciprocal communication; moral exemplarity contributes to participants' perceptions of religious legitimacy; and digital platforms enable some kyai to extend their existing communication relationships while responding to contested religious narratives. These elements are not necessarily sequential or causally independent. Instead, they appear to interact within the social settings in which religious authority is recognized and maintained.

The distinction between embodied religious authority and social embeddedness is important for specifying this contribution. Embodied authority concerns the enactment of religious legitimacy through visible conduct, consistency, and interpersonal behavior, whereas social embeddedness concerns the relationships and community networks within which such conduct is observed and interpreted. The Lamongan findings suggest that these dimensions may operate together when religious communication moves across offline and digital environments. Rather than digital visibility independently producing legitimacy, digitally mediated religious communication may draw upon existing relationships of recognition, while also providing opportunities to maintain and renegotiate those relationships.

This interpretation should not be presented as an entirely new discovery that traditional religious authority persists in digital settings. Related contributions have already been established in research on Indonesian religious leadership, rural digital religious communication, and embodied pesantren practices (Dharta et al., 2026; Faisal et al., 2022; Rofiqi et al., 2026). The more specific contribution of the present study is to connect these dimensions with the communicative practices through which kyai respond to narratives perceived as extremist in semi-rural communities. It therefore advances an interpretive proposition concerning the relationship between moral credibility, dialogical engagement, and selective digital communication in moderation-oriented da'wah.

Three propositions may guide subsequent empirical investigation. First, audiences who perceive greater consistency between a religious leader's teaching and everyday conduct may assign greater credibility to that leader's digitally mediated messages. Second, the credibility attributed to digitally circulated religious messages may differ between audiences

with established interpersonal relationships with religious leaders and audiences outside those networks. Third, the perceived capacity to evaluate contested religious narratives may be associated with the interaction of interpersonal trust, religious literacy, and digital information-evaluation skills. These propositions are derived from the qualitative interpretation and relevant literature; they were not tested in the present study.

The contribution of this framework is therefore explanatory rather than predictive. It provides a way to examine how religious communication may draw upon locally recognized authority when operating across conventional and digital environments, while also identifying the social and communicative conditions under which this relationship may be limited. In particular, uneven digital participation, differing levels of media literacy, and exposure to religious information outside established congregational networks challenge any assumption that offline religious authority automatically translates into digital influence.

The findings also need to be interpreted within the methodological boundaries of the study. The sample comprised fourteen purposively selected participants from two semi-rural districts, and the analysis was primarily based on interviews, observations, and supporting documentation. Digital communication was not examined through systematic audience reception research or comprehensive content analysis, and disconfirming cases were not systematically sought. These limitations restrict claims regarding the broader distribution, effectiveness, or generalizability of the identified practices. Nevertheless, the study provides an empirically grounded starting point for investigating how dialogical religious communication, moral exemplarity, and digital media use are understood within socially embedded Muslim communities.

From an Islamic communication perspective, the findings suggest that contemporary da'wah involves more than the adoption of new communication technologies. It also requires attention to how religious legitimacy is recognized through everyday conduct, how dialogue is sustained within interpersonal relationships, and how digital media are incorporated into existing systems of religious communication. This interpretation contributes to ongoing discussions of religious authority and hybrid communication by identifying the conditions under which locally recognized religious leadership may remain communicatively relevant amid increasingly diverse sources of online religious information.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how kyai and Islamic preachers in semi-rural Muslim communities in Lamongan, Indonesia, integrate dialogical communication, moral exemplarity, and digital media into their da'wah practices when responding to religious narratives perceived as extremist. The findings identified four interconnected communication patterns: persuasive-dialogical engagement associated with relational trust, visible moral conduct perceived as supporting religious credibility, selective integration of conventional and digital da'wah, and community-based responses constrained by uneven digital literacy. These findings indicate that participants understand religious communication not merely as the transmission of doctrinal messages but as a socially embedded practice shaped by interpersonal relationships, ethical conduct, and community recognition.

The principal theoretical contribution is an empirically informed proposition that hybrid da'wah draws upon embodied religious authority established through everyday social interactions and moral exemplarity. Rather than replacing conventional religious authority, digital communication appears to extend existing relationships and provide additional opportunities for contextualizing contested religious narratives. This interpretation distinguishes embodied authority, expressed through observable conduct, from social embeddedness, reflected in the community relationships through which religious legitimacy is recognized. The study thus contributes to Islamic communication scholarship by conceptualizing hybrid da'wah as a relationally grounded communication practice rather than simply a combination of offline and online media.

Practically, the findings highlight the relevance of sustained interpersonal dialogue, ethical religious leadership, and critical digital literacy in supporting community engagement with potentially divisive religious information. Nevertheless, these implications should be interpreted cautiously because the study did not establish whether the observed communication practices changed audience attitudes or prevented radicalization.

The study is limited by its small purposive sample, geographically bounded setting, reliance on participants' accounts, and the absence of systematic audience reception and digital content analysis. Moreover, potentially extremist narratives were not independently classified through a comprehensive content assessment, and disconfirming cases were not systematically examined. Future research should investigate the proposed relationships across different Muslim communities through comparative qualitative studies, digital ethnography, and audience-centered or mixed-method approaches. Such investigations could examine whether and under what conditions embodied religious authority, relational trust, and digital literacy influence the credibility and reception of religious counter-narratives.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to assist with language refinement and organization of ideas. After using this AI-assisted tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed, revised, and edited all content as needed and take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the final version of this publication version.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Authorship contributions are reported following the CRedit (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) system. Each author's specific role in the research and writing process should be identified clearly.

- a. Syariffudin Zuhri: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing Original Draft, and Writing Review & Editing.
- b. Nilna Dzakiyyah: Supervision, Validation, Project Administration, and Writing Review & Editing.
- c. M. Sena Horison: Funding Acquisition, Software, Visualization, and Resources.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this research are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author. Data have not been placed in a public repository but may be shared for academic purposes upon request

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Ethical Approval Statement

The authors confirm that this study adheres to ethical research standards established by Universitas Sunan Drajat Lamongan. Ethical approval for conducting field observations and interviews was obtained through the relevant institutional procedures. No personal or sensitive identifying information was collected or disclosed in this study.

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