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Da'wah Communication Strategies of the Caregivers of Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School, Sepulu Bangkalan

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ABSTRACT :

This study aims to analyze the da'wah communication strategies implemented at Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School in Sepulu Bangkalan and to examine their effectiveness in the process of student character building. Using a qualitative approach with a field research design, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, literature review, and documentation. The analysis integrates Da'wah Communication Theory as the primary framework and Interpersonal Communication Theory as a supporting perspective to understand the relational patterns between the kiai and the students.

The findings reveal that the da'wah communication strategies employed at Al Kahfi are integrative and contextual. The kiai combine sermons, dialogic methods, classical Islamic text instruction, informal approaches, and personal example as effective media of da'wah. The interpersonal communication established between the kiai and the students strengthens the internalization of religious values, as warm, intensive, and open relationships encourage deeper acceptance of da'wah messages. These strategies are not merely informative but also transformative, influencing students' religious attitudes and daily behavior.

The study concludes that the success of da'wah at Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School is determined by the synergy between the da'wah messages, the methods of delivery, and the strength of interpersonal relationships. These findings contribute to the development of da'wah communication studies within pesantren contexts and offer implications for reinforcing relational-oriented da'wah models in traditional Islamic educational institutions.

Keywords: Da'wah communication, Da'wah strategies, Interpersonal Communication, Islamic Boarding School, Kiai-Student Relations.

Introduction

Da'wah in Indonesia represents a multidimensional socio-religious phenomenon, as it is not only related to the internalization of Islamic teachings but also connected to the social, cultural, political, and educational dynamics of Muslim society. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, da'wah activities hold strategic significance in strengthening religious identity, cultivating social ethics, and fostering a civilized society (Mardi et al., 2025). In this context, da'wah cannot be understood merely as the act of conveying religious messages; rather, it should be seen as a transformative communication process oriented toward behavioral change and the improvement of the community's quality of life.

Islam positions da'wah as an integral obligation for every Muslim, namely to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (Syafriani, 2017). This obligation implies a moral and social responsibility to present Islamic values constructively within society. Consequently, da'wah is understood as a praxis that must adapt to changing times and

societal needs. Contemporary da'wah approaches must therefore consider social contexts such as digitalization, media development, shifting social structures, and the challenges of religious moderation in Indonesia (Aziz et al., 2021).

In recent developments, da'wah also functions as an instrument of social empowerment (Muhsinah, 2024). Da'wah is not merely a religious communication activity but also forms of social intervention involving changes in habitus, the development of social capital, and the cultivation of a sustainable religious culture. Through such approaches, da'wah has the potential to become a driver of social transformation that positions Islamic values as ethical orientations in the life of Indonesian society (Muhtadi et al., 2025). Within the pesantren tradition in Indonesia, the kiai holds a central role as a da'wah communicator. A kiai is not only a religious instructor but also a moral exemplar, community leader, and agent of cultural transformation. According to Syukir, da'wah in all its forms is a mandate for every Muslim, with the Prophet Muhammad serving as the foremost model in fulfilling this mission (Munir, 2021). The kiai's scholarly authority and moral integrity give their communication strategies strong persuasive power, enabling them to shape students' behavior effectively.

Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School in Sepulu, Bangkalan, is one such educational institution that carries out da'wah functions comprehensively. Its existence is especially important amid social challenges in Madurese society, such as moral degradation among youth, promiscuity, illegal street racing, and violence-related social conflicts (Julijanti & Sos, 2025). In this context, the da'wah communication strategies of the kiai serve as essential instruments in fostering students' akhlaq al-karimah and developing strong religious character. The da'wah strategies employed by the kiai in the pesantren are not limited to sermons or formal teaching; they also include bil-hal approaches through exemplary behavior, direct supervision, guidance, reprimands, and educational sanctions (Mukzizatin, 2024). By combining verbal and nonverbal methods, the kiai facilitates deeper internalization of Islamic values so that da'wah is not only understood cognitively but also embraced affectively and manifested in students' daily behavior.

Current social realities show that many parents choose Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School for their children because they view pesantren as agents of moral transformation. The pesantren is perceived not only as a place for religious learning but also as a moral rehabilitation space for youth experiencing character decline. The kiai's efforts through advice, character building, and social guidance are understood as forms of transformative da'wah aimed at nurturing a disciplined, ethical, and religiously grounded young generation. Given the strategic role of the kiai as the main communicator in shaping students' character, this study is crucial to examine how da'wah communication strategies are implemented at Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School in Sepulu, Bangkalan. The findings are expected to enrich scholarly discourse on da'wah and Islamic communication, as well as offer practical contributions for Islamic educational institutions in developing more effective and socially responsive da'wah strategies.

Theoretical Review

1. Da'wah Communication Theory

Da'wah communication theory is grounded in the understanding that da'wah is a planned communication activity designed to deliver Islamic messages to the *mad'u* with the aim of producing changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behavior toward a better direction. Da'wah communication does not merely emphasize the transmission of religious materials but also involves persuasion, exemplary conduct, and social interaction that adapts to the cultural context of the community (Miftahuddin, 2025).

From a communication perspective, da'wah is understood as a process of conveying messages (*risalah*) through various media and methods so that the messages can be received, understood, and internalized by the audience. The elements of da'wah communication include the *da'i*, the da'wah message, media, methods, and the *mad'u* (Kasir & Awali, 2024). The effectiveness of da'wah depends on the ability of the *da'i* to strategically manage the message and adapt the approach to the audience's characteristics, social conditions, and local cultural context.

Kiai possess strong symbolic authority and charisma; therefore, their da'wah strategies are not limited to sermons but also encompass nonverbal communication, exemplary behavior, and everyday social interactions (Yanti, 2022). Thus, da'wah communication theory provides a foundational framework for analyzing how a kiai formulates da'wah strategies, builds closeness with students, and develops effective message-delivery patterns within the pesantren environment.

2. Interpersonal Communication Theory

Interpersonal communication theory is employed as a supporting framework to understand how the kiai's da'wah process occurs through direct interaction with students and the surrounding community (Azka, 2022). Interpersonal communication is defined as the process of exchanging messages between two or more individuals in face-to-face interactions that allow for immediate feedback (Harahap & Aini, 2025). In the context of da'wah within pesantren, interpersonal communication becomes an essential medium for strengthening influence, providing individual guidance, and building deep emotional connections with students.

Key concepts in interpersonal communication relevant to da'wah in pesantren include:

1. Openness, referring to the kiai's ability to create space for dialogue and receive students' responses.
2. Empathy, the ability to understand students' psychological conditions and needs, enabling more precise delivery of da'wah messages.
3. Supportiveness, meaning the kiai's communication provides moral and spiritual reinforcement to the students.
4. Intimacy, developed through intensive interaction, routine teaching, and personal guidance characteristic of the pesantren tradition.

This theory strengthens the analysis that the kiai's da'wah strategies are not limited to formal message delivery (sermons, study sessions) but also include interpersonal interactions that serve as a medium for deeper internalization of religious values.

3. Relevance of Both Theories to the Study

The use of both theories is complementary:

- Da'wah Communication Theory is applied to analyze the strategies, methods, and message management employed by the kiai within the institutional context of the pesantren.

- Interpersonal Communication Theory provides clarity on how the kiai–student relationship is built through direct interactions that enhance the effectiveness of da‘wah messages.

Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a strong conceptual foundation for comprehensively analyzing the da‘wah communication strategies of the Kiai at Al Kahfi Islamic Boarding School, Sepulu Bangkalan.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a field research approach conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi, Sepulu Bangkalan. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of communication patterns, da‘wah strategies, and moral development practices that occur within the daily context of the pesantren.

Selection of Informants

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who possess substantial knowledge and direct involvement in da‘wah activities within the pesantren. The informants consisted of:

1. The *kiai* as the key informant,
2. *Ustadz* as teachers and student mentors,
3. Senior students with more than two years of study, and
4. Pesantren administrators who understand the structure of da‘wah activities.

To enrich the diversity of perspectives, snowball sampling was also utilized by obtaining additional informants through recommendations from previous participants. Recruitment was conducted directly within the pesantren environment after institutional approval was granted. Participation was voluntary and aligned with research ethics principles.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through several techniques:

1. Observation, conducted during religious gatherings, mentoring interactions, and the daily activities of the *kiai* and students.
2. In-depth interviews, using semi-structured guidelines to explore informants’ understanding, experiences, and da‘wah strategies with flexibility.
3. Literature review, to strengthen theoretical analysis and contextual understanding.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through transcription, coding, categorization, and theme development. The analysis focused on communication patterns, da‘wah techniques, and contextual factors influencing their implementation.

Data Validity

Data validity was ensured through:

- Source triangulation (*kiai*, *ustadz*, students, administrators) and method triangulation (observation, interviews, documentation).
- Member checking, confirming findings with key informants to ensure accurate interpretation.

- Peer debriefing, discussing analytical results with colleagues or supervisors to enhance analytical rigor.

All research procedures followed ethical standards, including confidentiality of informants' identities and obtaining informed consent.

Result

The findings show that the da'wah communication strategies implemented by KH. Mudarris Syukur at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi Sepulu Bangkalan are systematic, continuous, and oriented toward shaping a distinctive religious culture within the pesantren. These strategies are reflected in various forms of communication conducted both directly and indirectly through formal activities, non-formal settings, and daily interactions.

1. Intensification of Routine Religious Lessons as the Primary Medium of Da'wah Communication

Religious lessons (*pengajian kitab*) serve as the central medium for conveying da'wah messages. Held six times a week, these sessions ensure that students receive consistent exposure to Islamic teachings. The lessons include:

- Reading and explaining classical Islamic texts (*kutub al-turāth*),
- Strengthening understanding of *fiqh*, *tawhīd*, and *akhlāq*,
- Delivering moral advice relevant to students' daily lives.

In these forums, the *kiai* employs direct, dialogic, and persuasive communication, enabling students to grasp religious messages more profoundly.

One frequently conveyed advice from the *kiai* states:

“Nak, while you are in the pesantren, spare some time to pray, so that I do not feel too pious here.”

This advice reflects a simple yet effective da'wah communication style that stimulates students' moral awareness through subtle and reflective messages.

2. Da'wah Communication Through Role Modeling (Modeling Communication)

The most dominant da'wah strategy at Al Kahfi is role-model-based communication, where the *kiai's* personal behavior becomes the primary reference for students. KH. Mudarris Syukur demonstrates a simple, modest, and humble lifestyle, serving as a strong form of non-verbal da'wah.

He often emphasizes the principle:

“A person must never feel superior to others.”

This statement is conveyed in various settings—during lessons and informal conversations. Such role modeling becomes an effective da'wah instrument as it is reflected through real actions rather than words alone.

3. Da'wah Through Interpersonal Communication and Daily Interaction

Daily interactions between the pesantren leader and students play a crucial role in the da'wah communication strategy. These interactions include:

- Light conversations after congregational prayers,
- Casual dialogues during the *kiai's* rounds in the dormitories,
- Informal meetings during cleaning activities,

- Spontaneous communication when students face personal issues.

These interpersonal encounters foster emotional closeness and trust, making da'wah messages more readily accepted. In this context, da'wah is presented not as mere instruction but as a humanistic and educational form of guidance.

4. Optimization of Senior Students as Secondary Da'wah Communicators

The study reveals that senior students hold a strategic role in expanding the effectiveness of da'wah in the pesantren. They serve as:

- Bridges between the *kiai* and new students,
- Reiterators of the *kiai's* advice,
- Enforcers of pesantren regulations.

When senior students embody the values taught by the *kiai*, the impact of da'wah becomes more widespread. Conversely, a lack of exemplary behavior among seniors hinders the dissemination of da'wah messages. Therefore, the *kiai* regularly provides special guidance to senior students to ensure they function as proper role models representing the pesantren's da'wah ideals.

5. Integration of Da'wah into the Pesantren's Collective Life

Da'wah communication strategies at Al Kahfi extend beyond religious lessons and interpersonal interactions. They are integrated into the entire structure of pesantren life. This is evident through:

- Daily schedules filled with religious activities,
- The use of polite and respectful language in social communication,
- Reinforcement of traditions such as prayer, *istighāthab*, and *dbiker*,
- Rules designed to support a religious atmosphere.

Here, da'wah is not viewed as a separate activity but as a collective environment embedded in the pesantren's daily system.

6. Outcomes and Effectiveness of Da'wah Communication

Based on an interview with KH. Mudarris Syukur (2023), the success of da'wah strategies is measured by:

- Students' positive responses to delivered messages,
- Increased student participation in religious activities,
- Stable social relations among students,
- High levels of trust from the community and students' parents toward the pesantren's developmental system.

The *kiai* emphasizes that the success of da'wah is not merely reflected in the number of students, but in the extent to which they internalize the values taught through continuous da'wah communication.

Article Content

A. Patterns of Da'wah Communication at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi

1. The Role of Communicators: Kiai, Administrators, and Senior Students

Kiai Mudarris Syukur, as the caretaker of Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi, occupies a central position in the da'wah communication process. His credibility, exemplary conduct, and rhetorical ability are primary factors contributing to the effectiveness of message delivery. This aligns with the

concept of *source credibility*, which posits that the expertise, character, and attractiveness of a communicator influence the audience's acceptance of the message (Hasan M., 2023).

In addition to the *kiai*, senior students and administrators play strong interpersonal communication roles by guiding, supervising, and modeling behavior for junior students. Educational sanctions—such as cleaning pesantren facilities—are used as persuasive strategies to instill discipline (Abdul A., 2023). Their influence emerges from closeness, shared experiences, and the intensity of interaction.

Situational factors such as respect, shared values, and perceived capability also shape interpersonal closeness among students. Individuals deemed to possess good character, skills, or certain attractive traits tend to become *significant others*, whose messages are more readily accepted.

2. The Rhetorical Strategies of Kiai Mudarris Syukur in Da'wah

Kiai Mudarris Syukur is known for using story-based da'wah strategies (*storytelling*) by presenting real-life stories relevant to students' experiences. Stories are chosen because they help build emotional closeness, evoke empathy, and increase cognitive engagement.

His use of improvisation, simple diction, and local cultural symbols makes the da'wah messages accessible. Metaphors such as “life must be like a spare tire” or “life is like a shock absorber” are intended to shape students' worldview that pressures and challenges serve as opportunities for growth. These messages are not only communicative but also carry persuasive power and educational value.

3. Audience Analysis as a Foundation for Message Development

Before delivering da'wah, the *kiai* conducts direct audience analysis through daily interactions with students. This includes:

1. Mapping students' perspectives on particular issues,
2. Understanding students' habits and cultural practices in the pesantren,
3. Identifying commonly used language and symbols,
4. Determining the most appropriate da'wah approach (Barus, 2025).

This analysis enables the development of messages that are relevant, contextual, and easily understood. As a result, the da'wah becomes more effective because it aligns with the characteristics of the audience.

4. Communication Barriers in the Da'wah Process

In practice, da'wah communication is not free from obstacles. These include:

- **Semantic barriers**, such as unclear or ambiguous language (Achfandhy, 2020).
- **Psychological barriers**, including prejudice, ego, or feelings of shyness among students.
- **Social barriers**, such as differences in economic background that may lead to divergent perceptions.

Interviews suggest that semantic barriers are the most dominant. Therefore, the *kiai* emphasizes careful word choice, intonation, and language style. Inaccurate delivery may lead to misunderstanding and reduce the effectiveness of da'wah (Maulidna et al., 2025).

B. Da'wah Communication Strategies Based on Values and Exemplary Conduct

1. Modeling-Based Communication

Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi emphasizes *leading by example*. The *kiai*, *ustaz*, and senior students model daily behaviors as forms of nonverbal da'wah:

- Discipline,
- Humility,
- Simplicity in appearance,
- Avoiding pride or social status display.

This nonverbal communication shapes students' perceptions and behaviors because it is consistent and repetitive. Role modeling becomes a powerful da'wah strategy as students learn through observation and imitation.

2. Persuasive Communication Based on the Value of Simplicity

The pesantren teaches values of simplicity, *qanā'ah* (contentment), and *zuhd* (detachment from worldly desires) as core messages of its da'wah. The *kiai* prohibits students from participating in competitions that may trigger arrogance. This serves as a form of *attitude control* to prevent students from developing spiritual diseases such as moral superiority.

3. Participatory Communication through Deliberation

When conflicts occur among students, administrators employ participatory communication through deliberative forums (*musyawarah*). In these spaces, students are encouraged to take part in finding solutions. This strategy is effective in reducing conflict, increasing ownership, and strengthening social cohesion among students.

4. External Communication with the Community

The pesantren also conducts da'wah communication with the broader community through:

- Educational programs,
- Scholarships for underprivileged families,
- Social-religious development,
- Routine religious activities.

These initiatives build a positive institutional image and foster public acceptance. External communication strengthens the pesantren's position as not only a center for student education but also a contributor to community empowerment.

C. Impact of Da'wah Communication Strategies

Field findings indicate several impacts:

1. The cultivation of a culture of simplicity and humility among students.
2. The development of harmonious communication between students, administrators, and the *kiai*.
3. Increased community trust in the pesantren.
4. The formation of an inclusive learning environment regardless of economic background.

The Al Kahfi educational system emphasizes equal rights to education and spiritual guidance for all students, fostering a supportive and egalitarian learning atmosphere.

Analysis of Findings Based on Theory

1. Analysis Using Da'wah Communication Theory

Da'wah Communication Theory states that the process of conveying religious messages must include elements such as *da'i*, *mad'u*, the message, media, methods, and effects (Um Mayah et al., 2025). The findings at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi demonstrate that the da'wah strategies used by the *kiai* embody all these elements comprehensively.

First, the *kiai* acts as the primary communicator with religious authority and charisma, resulting in high compliance among students. This aligns with the theory asserting that da'wah effectiveness is heavily influenced by the credibility of the *da'i*.

Second, the da'wah messages are thematic and contextual, focusing on discipline, manners, and spiritual responsibility. Their relevance to daily life reflects the theoretical principle that da'wah messages should be adaptive and problem-solving.

Third, the da'wah methods used are varied, including lectures, direct modeling (*uswab*), dialogue, and informal guidance in daily activities. This aligns with the theoretical recommendation to use diverse methods to reach heterogeneous audiences.

Fourth, the media used are mostly interpersonal and experience-based rather than digital. Interactions such as religious lessons, daily mentoring, and routine supervision reinforce value internalization. This is consistent with the idea that traditional da'wah media remain effective in controlled pesantren environments.

Overall, the da'wah communication strategy at Al Kahfi is integrative, situational, and rooted in the *kiai's* authority, resulting in effects such as increased compliance, improved discipline, and deeper religious understanding among students.

2. Analysis Using Interpersonal Communication Theory

Findings show that interpersonal communication forms the foundation of successful da'wah strategies at Al Kahfi. The *kiai* functions not only as a teacher but also as a spiritual guide (*murayid*) who is present in students' daily lives. This strengthens emotional closeness and trust two key elements of interpersonal communication (Hidayat, 2022).

Spontaneous dialogue, personal advice, persuasive correction, and nonverbal communication through exemplary behavior indicate that the *kiai* employs relationship-based interpersonal strategies. This aligns with theories stating that communication effectiveness is influenced by the closeness between communicator and audience.

Furthermore, consistent interpersonal communication across various pesantren activities fosters a supportive, empathetic, and humanistic environment. Positive interpersonal interactions enhance the acceptance of normative and corrective messages, including religious instruction.

According to interpersonal communication theory, the strength of da'wah at Al Kahfi lies in relational intimacy, the consistent presence of the communicator, and emotional engagement. As a result, da'wah messages are not only understood but internalized in students' attitudes and behaviors.

3. Synthesis of Theoretical Analysis

The integration of da'wah communication theory and interpersonal communication theory indicates that the success of da'wah strategies at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi is not solely influenced by message content and methods but also by strong interpersonal relationships between the *kiai* and students. Interpersonal communication strengthens da'wah effectiveness, while da'wah structures provide clear direction for interpersonal communication (Azmi & Jaya, 2025).

Da'wah communication at Al Kahfi can thus be categorized as relational da'wah, an approach that combines religious messaging with emotional bonding and practical role modeling.

Conclusion

The study on the da'wah communication strategies at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi Sepulu Bangkalan reveals that the success of the kiai's da'wah is not solely dependent on the religious content delivered, but also on the communication approaches employed throughout the process. The da'wah strategies implemented are integrative, combining sermons, dialogical methods, daily supervision, and direct role-modeling an approach that characterizes da'wah practices in traditional pesantren.

Based on the Da'wah Communication Theory, the kiai effectively manage the essential elements of da'wah (the preacher, audience, message, methods, and media) in both functional and contextual ways. This is evident from their ability to present messages that are relevant to the needs and challenges faced by the students (santri), their use of varied methods, and their reliance on interpersonal communication media suited to the pesantren's cultural environment. Such an approach results in positive da'wah outcomes, including enhanced religious understanding, improved discipline, and the development of religious behavior among the santri.

The findings also demonstrate that the effectiveness of da'wah strategies is significantly influenced by the interpersonal communication established between the kiai and the santri. Warm, communicative, and trust-based relationships strengthen the acceptance of da'wah messages. This emotional closeness makes the da'wah not merely informative but also transformative, as it enables deeper internalization of religious values.

This study concludes that the da'wah communication strategy at Pondok Pesantren Al Kahfi is relational, situational, and grounded in exemplary conduct, enabling it to effectively address the educational and spiritual needs of the santri. The integration of da'wah approaches with strong interpersonal communication becomes the key factor in the success of da'wah within the pesantren environment. Furthermore, this research opens opportunities for future studies to explore da'wah communication patterns in pesantren in response to evolving social and technological contexts.

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