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Therapeutic Da'wah in the Digital Era: Religious Communication as a Support for the Mental Health of Generation Z

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Abstract

Generation Z faces a paradox: unprecedented exposure to religious content online alongside rising rates of anxiety and depression. This study examines how digital religious communication can function therapeutically for this cohort. Using a systematic literature review of sources published between 2019 and 2026, this study screened academic databases for studies linking digital da'wah, religiosity, and adolescent mental health, then synthesized findings thematically. Results show three patterns: religiosity consistently correlates with psychological well-being, digital da'wah has expanded reach but remains strategy-oriented rather than therapeutically designed, and few studies integrate Islamic communication ethics with therapeutic communication principles. This gap signals an opportunity to design da'wah as a preventive, supportive communication practice within Islamic guidance and counseling. The study proposes a therapeutic da'wah framework combining hikmah, mau'idzah hasanah, and empathetic digital engagement.

Keywords: *therapeutic da'wah, religious communication, mental health, Generation Z, social media*

Abstrak

Generasi Z menghadapi paradoks: paparan konten keagamaan digital yang masif berbarengan dengan meningkatnya angka kecemasan dan depresi. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana komunikasi keagamaan digital dapat berfungsi secara terapeutik bagi generasi ini. Menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur sistematis atas sumber terbitan 2019-2026, penelitian ini menyaring basis data akademik untuk studi yang menghubungkan dakwah digital, religiusitas, dan kesehatan mental remaja, lalu mensintesiskannya secara tematik. Hasil menunjukkan tiga pola: religiusitas secara konsisten berkorelasi dengan kesejahteraan psikologis, dakwah digital telah memperluas jangkauan namun masih berorientasi strategi ketimbang dirancang secara terapeutik, dan sedikit studi yang memadukan etika komunikasi Islam dengan prinsip komunikasi terapeutik. Kesenjangan ini membuka peluang merancang dakwah sebagai praktik komunikasi preventif dan suportif dalam bimbingan konseling Islam. Penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka dakwah terapeutik yang memadukan hikmah, mau'idzah hasanah, dan keterlibatan digital yang empatik.

Kata kunci: *dakwah terapeutik, komunikasi keagamaan, kesehatan mental, Generasi Z, media sosial*

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z grows up amid two currents running side by side. On one hand, they are the generation that accesses religious content through screens most intensively. Short sermons, Quranic verses, and advice from ustaz now appear on the same timeline as entertainment content. On the other hand, this generation also records higher psychological distress than previous generations. Closeness to digital religious messages does not automatically translate into inner peace.

The 2023 Indonesian Health Survey (Survei Kesehatan Indonesia) recorded a national depression prevalence of 1.4 percent, but this figure rose to 2 percent among the 15–24 age group, a group dominated by Generation Z (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). More recent data from the Free Health Check program (Cek Kesehatan Gratis) run by the Ministry of Health during 2025–2026 reinforces this picture. Of roughly 7 million children and adolescents who have been screened, nearly 10 percent show indications of mental health problems, consisting of 4.8 percent with depressive symptoms and 4.4 percent with anxiety symptoms (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026). A school-based survey also recorded an upward trend in suicide attempts among children and adolescents, from 3.9 percent in 2015 to 10.7 percent in 2023 (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026). Of this vulnerable age group, only a small portion seek professional help.

At the same time, cross-national research shows a shift in how this generation practices religion. Liu, Ghouri, Wang, and Lin (2025) found that Generation Z in China integrates religious practices into their digital routines through platforms such as Weibo and TikTok. Wang, Balakrishnan, Wan, Yu, and Ye (2024) noted a similar pattern: young people seek spiritual meaning through social media interaction, even in societies with secular backgrounds. This phenomenon confirms that digital space has become a new arena of religiosity, not merely an additional channel.

Studies of digital da'wah in Indonesia have so far largely stopped at strategy and the effectiveness of message delivery. Faridah, Zulkarnain, Yusuf, and Asriadi (2022) measured the effectiveness of Instagram da'wah in terms of the religious understanding of millennial audiences. Supratman and Suhendi (2022) did the same for TikTok. Anas (2024) and Zulaecha, Hafidz, Pertiwi, and Nashihin (2023) mapped how preachers use Instagram and YouTube to expand their reach. Ridwan and Tasruddin (2024) discussed the challenges and strategies of optimizing social media for da'i. All of these studies stop at the question of how effectively a message is delivered, not at whether the message contributes to the mental health of its audience. Meanwhile, studies of religiosity and psychological well-being, such as those by Hidayati and Fadhilah (2021), Kosasih, Kosasih, and Zakariyya (2022), and Winman and Soetjiningsih (2022), consistently show a positive correlation between religiosity and psychological well-being. However, these studies stop at correlational measurement and rarely touch on the perspective of communication design.

The absence of a bridge between da'wah communication studies and mental health studies risks leaving digital da'wah without a clear direction regarding the psychological well-being of its audience. Da'i and administrators of da'wah accounts continue to produce content without guidance on how to convey messages that soothe rather than judge. Yet Generation Z actually seeks digital spaces that feel safe and non-punitive when they are feeling fragile (Elzamzamy, Naveed, & Dell, 2024). If this gap is left unaddressed, digital da'wah risks losing one of its classical functions as a source of inner tranquility, and instead adds to psychological burden through a judgmental tone.

This study proposes the concept of therapeutic da'wah, namely digital religious communication practices deliberately designed according to the principles of therapeutic communication, without abandoning the ethical principles of Islamic da'wah such as hikmah, mau'idzah hasanah, and mujadalah

billati hiya ahsan. This concept is proposed as a preventive and supportive approach that can be adopted within the framework of Islamic guidance and counseling, particularly for Generation Z living in digital spaces.

Based on the above, this study formulates two research questions. First, how the relationship between digital religious communication and the mental health of Generation Z is mapped in the literature of the last five years. Second, what principles can shape digital da'wah so that it functions therapeutically without losing its authenticity as da'wah. The aim of this study is to map these themes and, at the same time, formulate an initial framework of therapeutic da'wah that can serve as a practical reference for da'i, counselors, and managers of digital da'wah accounts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, referring to the PRISMA reporting framework (Page et al., 2021). Data sources were compiled from academic databases for publications between 2019 and 2026, including journals indexed in Sinta and international databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria covered articles discussing digital da'wah, religiosity, or religious communication in relation to mental health or psychological well-being. Articles that only discussed the effectiveness of da'wah without psychological variables were excluded from the main synthesis, although they were still used as comparative context.

The initial search across the three databases yielded 187 potentially relevant articles. After duplicates across databases were removed, 152 articles remained and were screened based on title and abstract. This process excluded 104 articles that clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria. The remaining 48 articles were then assessed for eligibility through full-text reading. At this stage, 34 articles were excluded for three main reasons: they only measured the effectiveness of da'wah

without psychological variables, they examined religiosity and well-being without a digital communication context, or they were conceptual or opinion pieces without empirical data. This screening process finally left 14 articles that met all inclusion criteria and became the main data sources for the thematic synthesis in this study.

The articles that passed screening were grouped thematically rather than reviewed one by one, to facilitate comparison of findings across sources. This thematic synthesis was directed at answering both research questions while identifying the gap that is the main contribution of this paper, namely the absence of a digital da'wah framework deliberately designed for therapeutic functions.

RESULTS

Religiosity Consistently Correlates with Psychological Well-Being

The reviewed literature shows a fairly stable pattern. The majority of the religiosity–well-being studies reviewed reported a positive correlation between the two, whether among university students, pesantren adolescents, or other religious communities. Kosasih et al. (2022) reported that religiosity explained 46 percent of the variance in psychological well-being in their student sample. Winman and Soetjiningsih (2022) found a similar positive correlation among church youth during the pandemic, suggesting that this pattern is not exclusive to a single religion. The consistency across contexts strengthens the argument that religiosity, if managed appropriately, is a tangible psychological resource for young people.

Digital Da'wah Is Growing Rapidly but Oriented Toward Reach

The second pattern is the dominance of an effectiveness paradigm in digital da'wah studies. Most of the studies reviewed measured the success of da'wah by indicators of reach, religious understanding, or changes in the religious attitudes of audiences (Faridah et al., 2022; Supratman & Suhendi, 2022; Anas, 2024). None

of these studies included psychological well-being as an indicator of da'wah success. In other words, digital da'wah is considered successful when its message arrives and is understood, not when it helps lighten its audience's inner burden.

An Absence of Integrative Frameworks Between Da'wah Ethics and Therapeutic Communication

The third pattern, and the most relevant to the purpose of this study, is the absence of studies that explicitly combine the principles of hikmah, mau'idzah hasanah, and mujadalah with the principles of therapeutic communication in a digital context. The concept of faithfluencer raised by Hasanah and Sain (2025) touches on the shift in religious authority within digital space, but has not addressed its implications for the mental health of audiences. Meanwhile, studies on religiosity and psychological well-being are generally quantitative and correlational, and do not start from a message-design perspective. It is this void that creates room for the concept of therapeutic da'wah proposed in this study.

DISCUSSION

The finding that religiosity consistently correlates with psychological well-being is in line with Balboni et al. (2022), who argue that spiritual needs, when addressed appropriately, contribute to reducing patients' anxiety. This study extends that argument to the realm of da'wah communication. If spirituality is clinically shown to be protective, digital religious messaging should be treated as part of preventive mental health efforts, not merely as a standalone propagation activity.

The dominance of the effectiveness paradigm in digital da'wah studies, as found in Faridah et al. (2022) and Supratman and Suhendi (2022), runs counter to the finding of Khotibul Umam et al. (2025) that the type of religious content determines whether its impact is soothing or triggers anxiety. This difference suggests that the commonly used measures of digital da'wah success, namely

reach and understanding, are insufficient to assess its actual impact on audiences. A da'wah content piece may reach millions of viewers and still leave a judgmental impression on some of them.

A similar pattern is also evident in cross-national contexts. Liu, Ghouri, Wang, and Lin (2025) note that Generation Z in China integrates religious practices into their digital routines, while Wang et al. (2024) found the pursuit of spiritual meaning through social media even in societies with secular backgrounds. This commonality across cultural and religious contexts strengthens the suspicion that the need for soothing digital religious spaces is not a phenomenon specific to Indonesian Islam, but rather a general response by young generations to contemporary life pressures. This similarity also raises an important question: do the principles of hikmah, mau'idzah hasanah, and mujadalah billati hiya ahsan offer something substantively different from generic spirituality, or do they merely relabel universal psychological needs with Islamic vocabulary? This study holds that the difference lies in the source of their normative authority. Hikmah and mau'idzah hasanah are not merely communication strategies that may be chosen at will, but ethical obligations inherent in the practice of da'wah itself, so their application does not depend on whether a given approach has been empirically proven to alleviate anxiety.

The concept of faithfluencer from Hasanah and Sain (2025) shows that digital religious authority is now shaped by algorithms rather than solely by scholarly chains of transmission (sanad keilmuan). This situation risks pushing da'i to choose viral delivery styles over soothing ones, because algorithms tend to reward content that provokes strong reactions, including negative ones such as guilt or fear. This is the opening where the principle of hikmah can play a role: hikmah demands adjusting the message to the readiness of the recipient, not adjusting the message to the preferences of the algorithm.

The tension between algorithmic logic and the principle of hikmah can be read further through the framework of maqashid sharia. Auda (2008) places the preservation of intellect and soul (hifz al-'aql wa al-nafs) among the principal objectives of sharia, on par with the preservation of religion itself. If the mental health of the audience is among the objectives that sharia seeks to protect, then da'wah that neglects its psychological impact, however high its reach, risks failing to fulfill the maqashid of da'wah itself, not merely being suboptimal in its communication. This perspective positions therapeutic da'wah not as an additional technique alone, but as a demand arising from the more fundamental objectives of sharia, so that its argument rests on the foundation of fiqh rather than on a mere preference for communication style.

Unlike previous studies that treat Islamic communication ethics and therapeutic communication as two separate fields, this study brings the two into direct dialogue. Mau'idzah hasanah, with its emphasis on gentleness and avoiding a judgmental impression, aligns with the principle of validating feelings in therapeutic communication. Mujadalah billati hiya ahsan, which rejects debate that defeats the interlocutor, aligns with the principles of active listening and unconditional acceptance. This meeting point shows that therapeutic da'wah is not a foreign concept imposed from outside the Islamic tradition, but a sharpening of principles that already exist yet have rarely been deliberately operationalized for the digital context.

This study proposes three operational principles for therapeutic da'wah. First, adjusting the tone of the message to the psychological vulnerability of the audience, so that content addressing anxiety is delivered with gentleness, not with a judgmental tone or demands for instant spiritual perfection. Second, selective algorithmic engagement, namely choosing formats and upload times based on the needs of vulnerable audiences rather than solely on reach metrics. Third, a clear referral pathway to Islamic guidance and counseling services for audiences who

show signs of serious psychological distress, so that digital da'wah serves as a safe entry point to such services rather than a replacement for the professional roles of mental health care.

Implementing these three principles requires institutional readiness that digital da'wah studies have so far rarely addressed. Mufarrihah (2023) showed that a tradition-based approach in pesantren, such as shalawat burdah therapy, can foster adolescent religiosity while also providing a structured space for emotional expression. This is a precedent indicating that pesantren possess the cultural capital to develop similar approaches in the digital realm. That capital, however, is not automatically available in the form of adequate competence. Al Musafiri, Hafifah, Intiha, and Fatmawati (2023) found that counseling teachers in pesantren environments, including those within the network of Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung, still require significant strengthening of competence to carry out counseling functions effectively. This finding implies that the referral pathway proposed in this study, from digital da'wah accounts to Islamic guidance and counseling services, will only function if the receiving institutions have been prepared institutionally, rather than merely being listed as a normative principle without adequate human resource support.

Several limitations of this study should also be openly acknowledged. The thematic synthesis used is narrative and has not applied a formal methodological quality assessment to each reviewed study, so the weight of findings across sources has not been fully measured. Most of the religiosity–well-being studies reviewed also come from student and organized religious community contexts, so their generalizability to Generation Z who are not affiliated with formal religious institutions still needs further testing. The proposed therapeutic da'wah framework also remains conceptual, formulated from a literature synthesis, and has not been directly tested on digital da'wah audiences. Its claims about

effectiveness in alleviating anxiety therefore remain hypotheses awaiting empirical proof.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religiosity consistently correlates with the psychological well-being of Generation Z, yet digital da'wah studies have so far not used these findings to design messages that are deliberately therapeutic. Digital da'wah is still measured by reach and religious understanding, rather than by its impact on the inner peace of its audience. This gap addresses the research problem and at the same time affirms the need for a new framework that unites Islamic communication ethics, particularly hikmah, mau'idzah hasanah, and mujadalah billati hiya ahsan, with the principles of therapeutic communication. The therapeutic da'wah framework proposed in this study offers three operational principles: adjusting the tone of messages to the vulnerability of the audience, selective algorithmic engagement, and a clear referral pathway to Islamic guidance and counseling services.

Further research is recommended to test this framework empirically, for example through field experiments on digital da'wah accounts or case studies of pesantren-based Islamic guidance and counseling programs. Da'wah practitioners and managers of religious accounts are advised to consider indicators of audience psychological well-being as part of content evaluation, alongside the reach indicators that have so far been more dominant.

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