

University Students' Engagement with *Ulamas'* Political Messages on Social Media

USMAN*

HAIDIR FITRA SIAGIAN

Alauddin State Islamic University, Indonesia

AMIRSYAH

Jakarta Muhammadiyah University, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Ulama involvement in educating the young generation about political issues is seen as crucial. However, their involvement's significance potentially diminishes with the increased accessibility of political information through digital media. This qualitative study utilises the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a valuable lens in exploring the engagement of university students in Sulawesi, Indonesia, with *ulamas'* political lectures on social media. Thematic analysis of 101 eligible participant's responses resulted in four key themes: *da'wah* preferences, content, styles, and impacts. Politics was not the primary or secondary topic preference for the young adults when engaging with Islamic lectures on social media. Instead, topics such as Islamic rituals and the life of the Prophet took precedence. Participants emphasised that *ulamas* maintained the balance between entertaining audiences and keeping online *da'wah* educating and relevant to the audience. *Ulamas'* arguments in *da'wah* should be grounded in Islamic texts and prevent divisiveness in society. Students confirmed that their knowledge and attitudes towards important national or local issues were improved due to *ulamas'* *da'wah*. Although students expressed a sense of powerlessness to address political issues highlighted in *da'wah*, some reported that *da'wah* motivated them to take action. This study underscores the importance of *ulamas* adjusting their *da'wah* approach to suit young audiences. Further research needs to explore strategies to enhance youth engagement with political content on social media.

Keywords: *Opinion leaders, ulama, political messages, da'wah, social media.*

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic context of democratic nations, community participation in political discussions is pivotal, reflecting a key aspect of civic engagement (Rossini, 2022). Such participation has been recognised as a form of genuine political engagement and it is crucial because it fosters an environment of honesty, trustworthiness, and responsibility within the society. It grants communities the right to partake in various political processes, from policy design to decision-making, implementation, and evaluation (Walgrave & Wouters, 2021). Effective political communication enables this active community participation by facilitating the dissemination of political knowledge, encouraging civic engagement, and developing a shared understanding of key issues in the society (Zebib, 2022).

Crucial to the broader spectrum of political communication are political messages. Political messages play a vital role in providing information about local, national, and global issues and how the issues may affect the community (Zebib, 2022). The exchange of political information and ideas among individuals within a community motivates community members

to participate in the political process (Yusri, 2021). Community discussions about politics often revolve around formulating and establishing policies for the benefit of society. In the discourse of political communication, the discussions involve political activists from diverse backgrounds seeking to influence societal perspectives through meaningful dialogue (Zebib, 2022). In a democratic country, broader participation is encouraged and everyone, including religious leaders, is entitled to discuss political issues as it is an inherent right of citizens (Rossini, 2023). In a muslim majority country such as Indonesia, *ulamas* (Islamic scholars and religious leaders) have historically played a crucial role in addressing multiple national problems (Randi et al., 2021). Their involvement in discussing state and political order, has an important place in political discourse (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). Although the interpretation of Islamic teachings may vary, and there may be diverse opinions among muslims, *ulamas* have been continuously involved to facilitate constructive dialogue in the community (Yani et al., 2022). They contribute positively to the political discourse, helping to align people's understanding and actions with the principles of justice, compassion, and social welfare as outlined in Islamic teachings (Hew, 2018).

Ulamas' contribution to raise the awareness of the young generation about political issues is particularly important (Komariah & Nihayah, 2023; Lailiyah et al., 2020; Mahmuda & Padagas, 2022). In a Muslim majority country, there is an expectation that *ulamas* increase their efforts to reach young people and to guide them about political issues (Mahmuda & Padagas, 2022; Rosidi, 2022). Young people are in a formative stage where their values, beliefs, and worldview are in a developing stage (Mahmuda & Padagas, 2022). Introducing them to Islamic perspectives on political issues helps them build a moral and ethical framework that aligns with Islamic teachings (Rosidi, 2022). By providing accurate guidance, *ulamas* can help counter extremist ideologies and promote a balanced understanding of Islam (Hew, 2018). *Ulamas* can assist young people in navigating the complexity of life by offering guidance that is rooted in Islamic principles. This helps them make informed and ethical decisions and encourages them to engage in constructive political activities, such as voting, advocacy, and community service, to contribute positively to society (Nor Hafizah Abdullah et al., 2021; Rehan et al., 2022). Most Indonesian voters are those in the young group, aged below 40, and their voice in political matters is considered significant (Djuyandi & Herdiansah, 2018). This young generation has been a focus of interest for many political parties, including those that tout Islam as a platform and basis for their movement (Fajar, 2020). Increasing their involvement in the policy-making process is critical for the country's development and, therefore, knowing how to effectively reach and engage with these young groups is important (Lailiyah et al., 2020).

In a contemporary context, digital media and social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for political communication and civic engagement (Hew, 2018). The ubiquity of digital and social media platforms offers a potent channel for an *ulama* to reach a broader audience, thereby facilitating democratic discourse, political involvement, and the exchange of information (Saputra et al., 2021). Young people use social media for a variety of purposes, and the specific activities can vary based on individual preferences, interests, and cultural factors (Mutia, 2022). They may use it for entertainment as well as socialising and connecting with others. They may also use it as a platform for self-expression, creativity, and educational resources.

Our study explores how university students, active participants of the digital age, engage with *ulamas'* political messages on social media. There has been an increasing trend of Islamic scholars using digital platforms to convey *da'wah*, including that which contains

political messages (Hew, 2018; Said, 2020). However, little is known about the dynamics within these initiatives and their impacts on people, particularly in locations that held historical significance for Islamic movement. Limited research was conducted on the engagement of university students with *ulamas'* political messages on social media in a location pivotal to Islamic activism in Indonesia. This study helps fill the gap by, first of all, examining whether politics is among the topics of interest when students access *ulamas' da'wah* through social media. Secondly, this study investigates the factors influencing students' *da'wah* topic preferences. Lastly, it explores how political messages in social media *da'wah* impact political awareness and civic engagement among university students. Through this inquiry, we aim to add valuable insights into the evolving discussion of religious leaders' political communication and how it can improve civic engagement particularly among the young generation.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

For many years, enhancing young citizen political engagement has been an important research focus (Galston, 2001; Lailiyah et al., 2020; Ndiaye, 2020). Youths' involvement in politics helps foster a more robust and representative political system. Investing in youth political engagement ensures the sustainability of democratic values in future generations (Galston, 2001). Youth political engagement is intrinsically linked to their political knowledge. Good political literacy for young citizens is characterised by a comprehensive understanding of political systems, institutions, and processes, as well as the ability to critically analyse information, discern biases, and make informed decisions (Ndiaye, 2020). A politically literate youth is better equipped to make informed decisions about their future and to further influence the trajectory of their country (Lailiyah et al., 2020; Ndiaye, 2020). It empowers young people to actively participate in the democratic process, including in making informed electoral decisions and in making choices related to education, employment, and social issues (Galston, 2001).

University students are future leaders and an important part of the society. Good understanding of politics enables them to influence policies that directly impact their lives and those of others (Ndiaye, 2020). In a democratic, non-industrialised nation, proactive engagement of the youth in politics plays a crucial role in fostering the overall development of the country (Rehan et al., 2022). Their energy, ideas, and perspectives are valuable assets in shaping a progressive and inclusive society (Ndiaye, 2020). It is crucial for the younger generation to receive accurate political guidance for their civic engagement to ensure informed and responsible participation in democratic processes. Islamic values can play a significant role in this as it provides a moral framework that guides young individuals towards responsible civic engagement which is aligned with ethical and community-oriented values (Lailiyah et al., 2020).

According to Islamic principles, leaders including *ulamas* are expected to uphold moral values and proactively serve the well-being of the community (Randi et al., 2021). Whether *ulamas* should involve themselves in politics remains highly debatable and people's views on this matter depend on factors such as individual beliefs, cultural contexts, and the specific known role of an *ulama* within a given community (Hew, 2018). The first perspective argues that *ulamas* should discuss politics in their *da'wah*, as it reflects the realisation of an Islamic principle that asserts Islam encompasses all aspects of life, including state and social affairs (Faisal et al., 2023). Islam does not compartmentalise worldly affairs from matters

concerning the afterlife; both are issues of concern for Islamic scholars (Baba & Mohammad, 2022). Politics is closely related to managing essential resources to improve peoples' lives. It aligns with Islamic teachings and is an important subject that *ulamas* should discuss (Hidayat & Suwanto, 2020). According to this first perspective, *ulamas*, being the most knowledgeable about Islamic teachings, are capable of enriching and enhancing political discussions and actions. (Said, 2020). The perspective believes that by imparting their profound understanding of moral and ethical principles to the audience, *ulamas* can inspire individuals and contribute to fostering justice, honesty, and integrity in political discourse, thereby promoting ethical governance (Randi et al., 2021).

The second perspective disagrees with the above view. This perspective believes that *ulamas* should maintain neutrality and avoid direct involvement in politics to preserve their spiritual authority (Faisal et al., 2023). *ulamas* are primarily viewed as educators and spiritual guides whose main role is to teach and provide guidance on religious matters, leaving out political aspects addressed by others such as elected officials and policymakers (Randi et al., 2021). Entering the political field, where dishonourable acts tend to occur, might compromise their effectiveness as religious leaders (Mráz, 2021). This perspective suggests that *ulamas* should focus solely on religious matters and spiritual guidance. Politics was said to be a divisive and sensitive topic. Some argue that if *ulamas* engage in political discussions, there is a risk of being misunderstood or perceived as biased, which could compromise their effectiveness as religious leaders (Randi et al., 2021).

For *ulamas* to involve themselves in political discussions through their *da'wah*, they need to be aware of several aspects. First of all, they need to balance between directly addressing societal issues and maintaining neutrality so that spiritual guidance in the *da'wah* remains easily acceptable for the audience (Randi et al., 2021). Their involvement in politics should be based on a commitment to ensuring ethical governance and societal welfare (Mahmuda & Padagas, 2022; Yani et al., 2022). They need to encourage Muslims to participate in politics and to do this with a high Islamic ethical standard (Mahmuda & Padagas, 2022). The use of social media as a *da'wah* tool to convey political messages may contribute to reshaping political ideas, uncover political attitudes, and influence certain political behaviours (Walgrave & Wouters, 2021). As compared to conventional, non-digital campaign activities, social media has been more extensively employed as a campaign tool for reaching the youth (Lailiyah et al., 2020; Petrova et al., 2021; Said, 2020). The social media campaign aims not only to gain political votes but also to increase user political literacy (Petrova et al., 2021).

Currently, social media is widely used by young audiences for communication and information-seeking (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021; Retpitasi & Oktavia, 2020). Indonesian adolescents engage in diverse activities on social media platforms, with preferred platforms being WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook (Retpitasi & Oktavia, 2020). Social media has redefined how people interact, enabling connections across geographic and demographic barriers. It is currently the most efficient and influential communication medium for social activities, commerce, business, and politics (Nor Hafizah et al., 2021). When seeking religious information, adolescents primarily turn to Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook as their preferred social media channels (Retpitasi & Oktavia, 2020). Given these patterns, it is crucial for *ulamas* to make sure they reach out to young people through social media that they mostly use and create visually engaging materials such as infographics, images, and videos, as good visual content is more likely to be shared (Hew, 2018), thus increasing the reach of political messages.

Studies confirmed that *ulamas* have started to leverage social media platforms to deliver political messages, acknowledging the platform's influence on contemporary communication and addressing the specific preferences and concerns of the youth (Hew, 2018; Said, 2020; Rehan et al., 2022). They use social media for live sessions and webinars to engage with the audience in real-time (Yusri, 2021). *Ulamas* also use social media to actively respond to comments and queries (Yusri, 2021). This interactive approach facilitates direct communication, Q&A sessions, and the addressing of immediate concerns, thereby fostering a more dynamic exchange of ideas. *Ulamas* employ language that resonates with the youth, adopting a conversational tone and incorporating expressions from contemporary culture to make their messages relatable and easily understandable (Hew, 2018; Saputra et al., 2021). In educational campaigns on social media, *ulamas* would break down complex political concepts into digestible information, fostering a better understanding of political issues among the young audience (Hidayat & Suwanto, 2020). By drawing connections between political events and religious principles, they provide guidance on how to navigate political issues while adhering to Islamic values (Hew, 2018).

A case study on an Indonesian *ulama* suggests that “intimacy and visibility” are significantly important both to offline and online preaching (Hew, 2018). *Ulamas* maintain a consistent presence on social media by regularly posting content, participating in discussions, and sharing updates (Hew, 2018; Nurjaman, 2022). These efforts help to build a dedicated online community around the *ulamas’* messages (Lailiyah et al., 2020; Nurjaman, 2022). Collaborating with social media influencers who already have a substantial following among the youth potentially expands the reach of their political messages (Nurjaman, 2022; Yusri, 2021). Influencers can help disseminate the content to a broader audience (Mutia, 2022). By staying attuned to current strategies, trends, and hashtags on social media, *ulamas* align their political messages with ongoing discussions, increase their visibility, and ensure the political messages relevant to issues that matter to the young audience (Hew, 2018).

Several studies have explored the significance of engagement between *ulamas* and the young generation to improve youth political awareness and participation, either through social media or other platforms (Djuyandi & Herdiansah, 2018; Hew, 2018; Lailiyah et al., 2020; Nurjaman, 2022; Rusli & Nurdin, 2022; Yusri, 2021). In an Indonesian setting, for instance, a 2018 study by Djuyandi and Herdiansah investigated the political participation of youth in a governor election in West Java. The study found that there was an increase in youth political participation through voting and it was partly due to the influence of *ulamas’* political messages and their strong charisma (Djuyandi & Herdiansah, 2018).

Efforts to advance Indonesian online *da’wah* were also examined in an Indonesian study (Yusri, 2021). The study showed that involving celebrities to increase attention to *da’wah* is important. It was suggested that Indonesian *ulamas* need to learn more on different strategies to improve the use of online *da’wah* for knowledge production and sharing (Rusli & Nurdin, 2022; Yusri, 2021). In Pakistan, a study implied that social media (especially Facebook) provided the Pakistani young generation with political space that was much bigger than the space created through using traditional platforms (Mohiuddin et al., 2018). The study also highlighted that although the use of social media seemed useful, the credibility of the online information shared in such media may be questionable (Mohiuddin et al., 2018). The quality and the credibility of online information was also a concern highlighted by Malaysian youth (Nor Hafizah et al., 2021). The credibility concern emphasised the critical need for the source of political information to be trustable and accountable, making the involvement of

ulamas in sharing knowledge through social media become much more crucial (Nurjaman, 2022; Rusli & Nurdin, 2022).

Although social media engagement with political content has been studied extensively, there remains a substantial gap in understanding how university students engage with the political messages of religious leaders, including *ulamas*, on these platforms. Previous research mainly focused on the general population or certain political figures (Petrova et al., 2021), overlooking the unique demographic of university students who are active users of social media and whose political participation is of high importance (Djuyandi & Herdiansah, 2018; Fajar, 2020). Furthermore, while the intersection of religion and politics is a crucial area of study, the role of *ulamas* as political influencers on social media has not been thoroughly explored (Hew, 2018). Addressing this gap is essential because understanding the nature and implications of this engagement can provide valuable insights into the political socialisation of young adults in predominantly Muslim societies. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the specific ways in which university students interact with and are influenced by *ulamas'* political messages on social media.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that explores participants' views through a qualitative survey design. It was conducted in both South and West Sulawesi. The location was chosen intentionally because Sulawesi is well known for their pivotal role in the Indonesian Islamic movement (Faisal et al., 2023). Notably, Makassar, South Sulawesi, hosted the first nation-wide declaration for the establishment of the Preparatory Committee for the Enforcement of Islamic Sharia in 2001, highlighting the region's historical significance in shaping Islamic discourse and activism.

To recruit participants, an invitation was sent through WhatsApp to undergraduate students in both South and West Sulawesi. The invitations included a link to Google Forms through which the survey was distributed. Potential participants were informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with the assurance that their details would be anonymised to protect their privacy. Furthermore, it was clarified that no incentives were offered for participation. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the survey at any point if they changed their minds about participating. By selecting the final submission button, participants confirmed their consent to participate. Our research team consisted of three senior Indonesian lecturers specialising in communication and *da'wah*. The three authors are familiar with the topics under research and the use of qualitative methods in research. They are frequently invited to engage in *da'wah* activities, such as delivering sermons during Jumah prayers, and actively use social media as a platform to access and spread *da'wah* messages.

The survey comprised 38 questions in the Indonesian language: 12 focusing on demographic backgrounds and 26 exploring students' opinions regarding various aspects related to their engagement with *ulamas'* political *da'wah* on social media. Demographic data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28, while qualitative responses were extracted and managed using Microsoft Excel. Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative responses. The survey responses were in Indonesian language and were not translated to English to preserve their original meaning. However, quotes used in this paper were translated into English, and to ensure accuracy, the English translation was back translated into Indonesian and compared to the original text for fidelity of meaning and sense.

This study utilises the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a valuable lens for understanding how and why individuals engage with specific media content (Habes, Salous, & Jwaniat, 2022). In 1970s, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch developed this theory highlighting that media users are active participants who purposefully choose media sources to satisfy particular needs and desires (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasises the active role of the audience in selecting and interacting with media to fulfill various needs, such as information, personal identity, social integration, and entertainment (Habes, Salous, & Jwaniat, 2022). Grounded in this theory, this study explores how university students utilise social media to access and engage with the political messages conveyed by ulamas. It examines the students' consumption of ulama's content and how it fulfills their informational and sociopolitical needs. Understanding the students' engagement with ulama's messages helps to further our understanding of the role of social media as a platform for political discourse and the influential position of ulamas in shaping political attitudes and behaviours among young adults. This theoretical perspective not only contextualises the students' engagement with ulama's messages but also highlights the dynamic interplay between media use and gratification in the digital age.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey was conducted in June 2023. We received responses from 109 students. Table 1 shows that participants were mostly females (60.6%), aged 20-25 years old (58.7%), and originated from South Sulawesi (82.6%). The percentage of those who graduated from non-religious based Islamic high school (51.4%) was quite similar to that of religious based high school (48.6%). Participants who reported that they watched *da'wah* content at least once a month (52.3%) was around twice as many as those who watched it almost every day (28.0%). TikTok (58.7%) was the platform mostly used to watch *da'wah* content. 8 of the 109 students responding to the survey reported that they never watched any *da'wah* content on social media and, therefore, their responses were excluded from the qualitative analysis. The eight university students whose responses were removed from the qualitative analysis, seven were female, half were aged <20 years, and only one graduated from an Islamic-based high school.

Table 1: Participant demographics

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	43	39.4
	Female	66	60.6
	Total	109	100.0
Age	<20 years	44	40.4
	20-25 years	64	58.7
	>26	1	.9
	Total	109	100.0
Province of Origin	South Sulawesi	90	82.6
	West Sulawesi	9	8.3
	Other	10	9.2
	Total	109	100.0
Completing study in an Islamic-based high school	No	56	51.4
	Yes	53	48.6
	Total	109	100.0
Watching <i>da'wah</i> on social media	No	15	13.8
	Yes	94	86.2
	Total	109	100.0

How often do you watch <i>da'wah</i> on social media?	Never	8	7.3
	Once a month	57	52.3
	Once a week to once a month	16	14.7
	More than once a week	28	25.7
	Total	109	100.0

Most participants answered all the 26 open questions and only several responses were missing. The following four main themes emerged namely: *da'wah* preferences, *da'wah* content, *da'wah* style, and *da'wah* impacts.

Da'wah Preference

This theme contains an exploration of the students' preferred topics of *da'wah* on social media and the underlying reasons for their choices. None of the student participants ranked politics as their first preference topic when watching *da'wah* content. *Da'wah* topics which they chose as the first preferences were how to perform *ibadah* (Islamic rituals) based on the Qur'an and the Hadith, how to best socialise with fellow human beings, how to be a good Muslim in general, and the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him (PBUH).

Despite politics not being the first choice, 21 out of the 101 participants (20.79 %) did select it as their second preference. The majority of students favoured non-political topics as their second preference. Topics such as *ibadah* (praying rituals) and *akhlak* (good deeds) were more preferable than politics as students felt these were more actionable and were directly related to their own personal development. This finding aligns with Komaria and Nihayah's study (2023) where students emphasised that the primary objective of Islamic religious lectures was to encourage individuals to enhance the quality of their faith and devotion to Allah. Participant emphasised why learning about *ibadah* and *akhlak* was more important than learning about politics:

[learning about ibadah in social media] can increase my motivation for worship, especially in matters related to sunnah [non-compulsory rituals]. Learning *akhlak* [Islamic morality] can help improve my behaviour in everyday life (P6, female, aged 23).

Well, digital *da'wah* needs to touch on political matters so that people can know what politics is like from a religious perspective... But topics about ibadah are my top choice because it is close to everyday life, and often serves as a reminder to always carry out worship (P76, male, aged 21).

Some participants viewed politics as an unsuitable topic for *da'wah* because it was sensitive and potentially led to misunderstandings. The suggestion was for *ulamas* to avoid discussing politics or, if they had to, they needed to exercise extreme caution. Participants argued that because Indonesia is a secular state, *ulamas* should not try to mix between state issues and religion. However, there were diverse opinions, with some suggesting that when *ulamas* discussed politics in *da'wah*, this could serve as a means for the public to obtain information from an accountable source which potentially reduced the risk of misinformed actions. *ulamas* interviewed in a study involving leaders of some *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Central Java agreed that politics should be part of Islamic *da'wah* because it helped people to understand the realisation of Islamic teaching in addressing political issues (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). Discussing national-level politics in *da'wah* enables the public to quickly

access information related to political issues. It was believed that having such information from an *ulama* would minimise potential negative impacts which may occur had the information came from sources other than an *ulama*:

It is good [to hear national-level politics discussed in *da'wah*]. Because I think that way, the public can get information very quickly related to political issues... The impact [of receiving the information from *ulama*] will depend on each audience... most likely, they will respond to the information wisely. So, there is little or no potential for a bad impact (P106, female, aged 18).

Contrary to those who viewed politics as a sensitive subject, some students strongly advocated for its inclusion in *da'wah* content. This finding is similar to that in Anwar et al.'s (2021) where some students strongly recommended politics to be discussed. They highlighted the necessity of discussing politics, as it provided a platform to shed light on the corrupt practices of leaders and the negative impact on society:

...*da'wah* could expose leaders to the public...many leaders are greedy, corrupt, and have a bad impact on society. Irresponsible leaders take away people's rights, they corrupt, [they even steal] people's donations (P68, female, aged 23).

It is necessary for *ulamas* to discuss politics on social media. It is to act as a balance for politicians who do not work well but keep speaking without thinking. The politicians can cause chaos [if *ulamas* do not intervene to calm people] (P96, male, aged 21).

Moreover, some participants emphasised the crucial role of *ulamas* in directly engaging in politics or guiding those who wished to enter the political arena. They argued that influential religious leaders could have a significant impact on the political landscape. In their *da'wah*, *ulamas* could help by stressing out the importance of individuals involved in politics to comply with Islamic values for just, honest, and responsible governance:

A very well-known religious leader can have a big impact on the course of politics. In a Muslim-majority country, a famous *ulama* has many followers and their opinion is very influential. Therefore, they can assist a person who is involved in the world of politics to learn about having high Islamic values and faith, in order to build a just, honest and responsible government (P6, female, aged 20).

Da'wah Content

This theme delves into the diverse perspectives of students concerning the content that is recommended or advised against in preaching about politics on social media. One participant highlighted the need for *ulamas* to instill political literacy among young audiences by emphasising the prevalence of misinformation and deceit in political spheres. Young audiences should be aware that there was potentially massive lip service in politics. Given the

naivety of the youth who may easily fall for politicians' sweet promises, there was a need to cultivate a discerning filter and enhance their ability to spot deceit:

For example, [we saw] a political figure who called themselves a Muslim. They made sweet promises during press conferences and socialisation to the community but when they rose to the top, they forgot about their promise, this had a very bad impact on us who had been waiting for [the realisation of] their sweet promise but it never happened (P108, female, aged 19).

While some expressed reservations to include political topics in *da'wah* due to their sensitive nature, others emphasised the importance of *ulamas* to shed light on societal issues and to advocate for ethical and accountable governance. A recurring suggestion in participants' comments was for *ulamas* to discuss examples of how the Prophet PBUH and the Companions were involved in politics in the past. This aligned with findings from an Indonesian study (Saputra et al., 2021). The study indicated that scholars believed it was crucial to encourage youth civic activism by drawing inspiration from the Prophet PBUH's life:

It is necessary to talk about the way of the Messenger of Allah PBUH [took in politics]. [*Ulamas* need to talk about] how the Prophet PBUH did politics when he fought for people's [better understanding] of the religion of God and which way he chose to preach Islam. A good example [of topics] is the history of the Charter of Medina, this Charter was made by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH (P33, male, 19).

For contemporary issues, a topic frequently mentioned by participants was leadership. Students hoped that *ulamas* could explain what Islam said about the characteristics of good leaders and why it was crucial to consider these qualities when voting for a leader:

...invite people to choose leaders who are trustworthy, honest, clean, etc. Look at Indonesia now, from the village to the central level, there is a shortage of trustworthy leaders (P64, female, aged 22).

Participants also discussed which topics to avoid when delivering political *da'wah* on social media. It is essential for those engaging in *da'wah* to verify the correctness of their understanding before delivering it. A study in Bandung, Indonesia, found that the younger generation tended to be more open-minded, accepting differences in society as a path to growth and wisdom (Rosidi, 2022). This study stressed out the same thing that Islamic scholars needed to avoid topics that may trigger divisiveness or unintended repercussions in the society.

Social media is potentially used as a place to spread incorrect religious understanding, some people may also misunderstand sensitive [political] matters which may lead to radicalism and terrorism (P53, male, aged 23).

Regardless of the scope of [audiences intended in] *da'wah*, whether it is only for Muslims or open to the general public, there is no excuse for saying things that offend the feelings of people of other religions (P54, female, aged 18).

Da'wah Styles

This theme encapsulates participants' reflections on their own experiences regarding how political topics in *da'wah* delivered on social media can captivate a young audience. Participants emphasised the importance of making *da'wah* engaging, irrespective of the topic under discussion. Students suggested that even weighty subjects like politics should be presented in a light and accessible manner. This aligned with findings from another Indonesian study that highlighted the effectiveness of incorporating humor into *da'wah* messages, particularly for a youthful audience (Mutia, 2022). Creating a relaxed atmosphere in the delivery of messages was seen as crucial because it enhanced students' comprehension and connection with the *da'wah* content:

The way they preach should be good so that we are not bored and [it should be] entertaining (P107, female, aged 20).

Ustadz Maulana's eccentric, slangy and funny way of preaching became a special attraction for him. In each lecture, he tries to present themes that are close to people's lives. Not only that, but he also conveys them in light and humorous language without losing the meaning of the *da'wah* message itself (P30, male, aged 21).

While participants acknowledged the entertainment value of occasional jokes in *da'wah* about politics, they also emphasised the importance of *ulamas* choosing relevant, educative, and appropriate humour. Some participants expressed discomfort with speakers use excessive or inappropriate jokes, highlighting the subjective nature of humour in *da'wah*:

Sometimes there are attitudes that I don't like from some [Islamic] speakers, such as making excessive jokes, or using bad terms [to explain things]. Maybe for some people it's funny but for some other people it is not. They don't like it [P72, female, aged 20].

Ulamas also need to pay attention that young audiences may not only be disturbed by obvious and excessive jokes but were also sensitive to innuendos that were seen as hurting people's feelings:

There was one [Islamic] preacher who conveyed his messages in an indirect way. He inserted sarcasm into a joke. Some people thought it was 'just' a joke, but if you pay close attention, it is definitely not. This is not good etiquette for a preacher [P99, female, 17].

When discussing politics in *da'wah*, participants felt that *ulamas* should prioritise enriching knowledge and encouraging actions rather than solely entertaining audiences. Participants admired several prominent scholars whom they used to watch on social media. These *ulamas* were praised for their depth of knowledge and convincing arguments rooted in the Qur'an and the Hadith. Furthermore, they looked at the *ulamas* as role models:

Their lecture is clear and firm, emphasising important matters...[their] knowledge is thorough, so, God willing, they won't mislead [us] (P30, male, aged 21).

What made me interested in the lectures of these three *ulamas*...they are very smart, incredibly smart, and a role model for many people. Their life stories are very motivating. Especially when they preach. [One of them even] knows where exactly in the Qur'an the verses that he quotes, on what pages, they know how to link them with our current situation. That is what makes me admire him (P98, female, aged 20).

Despite the generally positive perception of *ulamas* as knowledgeable and trustworthy, some participants urged caution when consuming *da'wah* content on social media. This is similar to a study conducted in the Netherlands where participants shared concerns about the quality and trustworthiness of political information shared via social media (Swart & Broersma, 2022). Students pointed out potential issues such as incomplete information, lack of context, or concerns about the credibility of certain scholars:

Many preachers are sometimes forceful, meaning that what they say must be accepted, even though sometimes what they say is not in accordance with the Sharia and there is even heresy, my advice is not to immediately believe in the lecture, try to look at other references (P17, female, aged 19).

Another crucial aspect highlighted by students was the language used in *da'wah*. There was a divergence of opinions regarding the use of local language. Some participants argued that using local language limited the scope of the audience, particularly if the language was not familiar beyond a specific region. They suggested that providing subtitles could be a solution, but others argued that using a national language was more efficient. This could foster better understanding about the content in *da'wah* and a deeper connection between the preacher and the audience:

If it is [using] local [language], in my opinion, the scope of the lecture would only be in the region, not beyond.... This means it can't reach wider population (P46, female, aged 20).

[It is] more efficient [to watch] preachers speaking our language. They are as educated as other preachers. They speak based on the knowledge that they have gained from a higher education. They are accountable for what they convey, [their *da'wah* is] more efficient because we have the same language, the same culture. We can understand more easily what is conveyed and the preachers can also understand our character (P56, female, aged 18).

While participants in this study seemed less supportive of local language use, a study in Lombok, Indonesia, demonstrated that *da'wah* messages in the local language were well-received by the youth, especially when presented in a movie format (Mutia, 2022). This suggests that both the format used and the context where *da'wah* is undertaken play a crucial role in the acceptance of local languages in *da'wah* (Mutia, 2022).

Da'wah Impacts

This theme explores participants' perspectives on the impact of political messages in *ulamas' da'wah* through social media. There were improved knowledge and attitudes reported by some students after watching *da'wah* on politics. This was similar to findings in Salahuddin's (2021) where participants viewed political messages in *ulamas' da'wah* on social media enhanced their understanding on what happened in the country and made them confident to act because they understand how Islam would address the issues.

Yes, I have become more confident and often implement what I learn from digital *da'wah* (P62, male, aged 20).

Many students acknowledged that after engaging with *da'wah* on social media, they saw noticeable changes in their political literacy and skills. However, the transformative content that they perceived as linked to the changes was not necessary only about politics. Instead, they also attributed positive changes such as improved decision-making abilities in political matters to contents including those other than politics. For example, after frequently watching online *da'wah* about improving *ibadah* and being a good Muslim, a participant felt enlightened in different aspects of her life:

It helps me to know more about the truth as a basis for me to make a decision about politics as a Muslim (P18, female, aged 19).

I think *da'wah* about politics is as necessary as the non-political one. Take *aqidah* (the beliefs in the oneness of God (Allah) and the prophethood of Muhammad PBUH), for example. When I do an activity in this world, even when choosing a leader in an election, if it is not based on our faith and devotion to Allah, it will definitely deviate from what Allah calls to us (P100, female, aged 22).

Furthermore, some participants indicated that these messages inspired them to take action, whether through further research on the issues or by disseminating the messages to others.

Yes, I conveyed what I learned to my friends (P16, female, aged 20 years).

However, the acquisition of political knowledge through digital *da'wah* did not always yield positive outcomes. Some participants confessed that being more informed about the country's issues made them feel disheartened, as they perceived limited avenues to address these challenges. Additionally, the ease of accessing political information through digital *da'wah* was noted as a potential detriment to literacy.

People's reading culture is weakening. The rise of social media has caused people to become lazy to read books. They play more on social media... the quality of Islamic literacy is deteriorating. People easily believe the information spread on social media... [and] unfortunately, they immediately spread the information without double-checking the truth (P43, male, aged 21 years).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that politics is not the primary or secondary topic of preference among young adults when engaging with Islamic lectures on social media. Nonetheless, it was generally agreed that *ulamas* should include politics as a topic to discuss in their *da'wah* on social media as it served as a valid source of information and encouraged people to respond to political situations in a way that comply with al-Qur'an and al-Hadits. This underscores the need for *ulamas* to refine their approach when delivering political messages to young audiences. Addressing issues such as maintaining the right amount of humour in *da'wah*, relevance of *da'wah* to the audience, the materials chosen, and language used are among critical aspects to improve the attractiveness and the impacts of the *da'wah*. Further research is warranted to explore effective strategies for enhancing engagement with political content among young adults.

IMPLICATIONS

This research holds significant implications for various stakeholders, providing valuable insights into the political messages conveyed by *ulamas* through religious lectures on social media. It underscores the importance for *ulamas* to recognise their influential role in national development through the effective communication of political messages on social media. It suggests that *ulamas* should adapt to the evolving dynamics of communication, utilising visually engaging content and aligning with current trends to connect with the younger generation. Additionally, maintaining a consistent and visible presence on social media, coupled with real-time engagement, can foster a dynamic exchange of ideas and enhance the impact of their political messages.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the Uses and Gratifications Theory by providing an example of how individuals use social media to fulfill their needs for political information and engagement. Specifically, the study suggested that university students actively seek out ulama's political messages on social media to satisfy their informational needs, socio political engagement, and personal identity reinforcement. These findings align with the core premise of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that media consumers are active participants who use media to meet specific needs. Moreover, this study extends the Uses and Gratifications Theory by highlighting the unique role of religious leaders in political communication on digital platforms. It demonstrates that ulama's political messages are not only consumed for traditional religious guidance but also for contemporary political engagement. This dual role emphasises the versatility of social media as a medium for multifaceted gratifications, including the blending of spiritual and political needs.

For Muslims and the wider public, the findings offer guidance in understanding and implementing the nuanced political messages, fostering active engagement with the principles advocated by religious leaders. Moreover, the research highlights the importance for the Indonesian government to appreciate the multifaceted role of *ulamas* in providing guidance, advice, and constructive criticism in the realm of national development. Understanding the context in which *ulamas* contribute to political discourse is crucial for fostering collaboration between religious leaders and the government, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and holistic approach to national development. In essence, the implications of this research extend beyond academia, offering practical guidance for navigating and leveraging the contributions of *ulamas* in shaping Indonesia's political landscape.

LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations in this study. While participants generally expressed positive views on *ulama* involvement in political communication, there may be underexplored obstacles and challenges in the actual engagement between students and *ulamas'* political messages which were not extensively discussed by participants in their survey responses. Future researchers are encouraged to allocate additional time to comprehensively investigate potential impediments to provide a more nuanced understanding. Despite the diverse characteristics of informants in age, gender, education level, regional origin, social media usage, and ethnicity, the findings may not be universally applicable to all of Indonesia. This limitation arises from the small sample size although we have tried to include university students from both South and West Sulawesi Provinces. Addressing these limitations necessitates future research on this study topic to be conducted on a broader scale and in more diverse settings.

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BIODATA

Dr. Usman is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar. He obtained a doctorate in Da'wah and Communication from the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta. His areas of interest are Islamic communication, sociology of communication, and digital communication. Email: usman.jasad@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Haidir Fitra Siagian, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar. He obtained a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Communication from the National University of Malaysia. His areas of interest are political communication, journalism and Islamic communication. Email: hfitra.siagian@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Dr. Amirsyah is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Islamic Religion, Muhammadiyah University, Jakarta. He obtained a doctoral certificate in the field of Islamic Education at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta. His areas of interest are Islamic Education, Communication and Globalization, Interfaith and Cultural Communication. Email: amirsyah@umj.ic.id

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