

## Preaching in the Digital Age: Exploring Digital Literacy Among Virtual Da'i in Ponorogo

Rila Setyaningsih, Rihan Dwidarmawati

Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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**Abstract** The increasing transition of Islamic preaching (da'wah) to digital platforms has generated new requirements for digital literacy among community-level preachers (da'i). Although current research frequently emphasises content strategies and audience reactions, little attention has been directed towards the actual experiences of grassroots da'i in managing this shift. This study examines the development and use of digital literacy among virtual da'i in Ponorogo within their preaching practices. Employing a phenomenological methodology that included three participants, data were gathered via in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis, and thereafter analysed using the European Commission's digital literacy competence framework. The findings indicate that da'i often exhibit basic to intermediate levels of digital literacy, characterised by constrained technical abilities, instinctive rather than methodical material selection, and a reluctance to participate in interactive online communication. This study adds to the body of knowledge by providing an experienced viewpoint on community-based digital da'wah. It offers practical guidance for developing participatory training models incorporating technical, ethical, and communication skills.

**Keywords** Digital literacy; Virtual dakwah; Phenomenology; Community; Da'wah transformatio

### Corresponding Author

Rila Setyaningsih

Univeritas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta, Indonesia, rila.s@mercubuana-yogya.ac.id

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has profoundly reshaped multiple sectors, including da'wah practices, now increasingly mediated through online platforms. The proliferation of social media and video-sharing channels such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok has enabled the rapid and borderless dissemination of religious messages, a trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Singh & Singh, 2025; Tang, 2024). In this new landscape, digital media is no longer a mere complement but a constructive and transformative space for religious engagement. However, this transformation brings **multi-dimensional** challenges that require systematic categorization: technical barriers such as limited platform operation skills and basic content production capabilities; ethical concerns including misinformation risks and the preservation of message authenticity; and socio-cultural issues such as audience fragmentation, generational gaps, and evolving expectations for interactive communication



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(Nainggolan & Pabisa, 2024; Ridwan, 2023).

In this environment, digital literacy becomes essential for da'i to create and convey practical, necessary, and morally sound religious teachings. This literacy encompasses technical competency, cognitive abilities for information assessment, and ethical awareness in engaging with sensitive religious discussions (Usman & Siagian, 2024). Without enough proficiency, digital da'wah may forfeit its substantive significance or even facilitate the dissemination of disinformation (Hasanah, 2024). While numerous initiatives—such as training programs, mentoring, and partnerships with digital content creators have been established (Burhan et al., 2024), most research has focused on prominent preachers and digital influencers, resulting in a lack of exploration of community-level preachers. This divide is significant since grassroots da'i encounter problems that differ significantly from those with institutional or organisational assistance.

This research gap is particularly significant at the community level, where da'i often encounter overlapping challenges: limited technical skills, low confidence in facilitating interactive communication, and difficulty balancing popular appeal with theological integrity (Aini, 2023; Hartono et al., 2020; Indriyani, 2023). Acknowledging these concerns has led to a scarcity of works systematically investigating them within a recognised conceptual framework. The European Commission's digital literacy competence model has hardly been utilised in religious communication studies, presenting a chance to enhance both fields of literature (Ferrari, 2012; Spante et al., 2018). This structured framework offers a more nuanced understanding of da'i adaptation, illuminating observable practices and the personal reflections and contextual factors shaping their engagement in digital preaching (Al Giffari & Dermawan, 2025).

Positioned within this framework, the present study seeks to: (1) explore the lived experiences of virtual da'i in Ponorogo in building, developing, and reflecting on their digital literacy; (2) categorize their competencies according to a structured model; and (3) identify practical implications for designing inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive digital da'wah training. By integrating theoretical rigor with grounded experiential narratives, this research contributes to the scholarly discourse on digital Islamic communication while offering actionable insights for grassroots religious training initiatives.

## 2. METHODS

This research utilised a qualitative phenomenological methodology to elucidate and analyse the lived experiences of virtual da'i in their adaptation to digital preaching in the post-pandemic era. Phenomenology was selected for its concentration on investigating subjective meaning and lived experiences, rendering it more appropriate than other qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography

or case study, which concentrate on cultural patterns or defined systems. In this setting, phenomenology enables the researcher to elucidate not only the actions of the da'i in digital environments but also their personal and spiritual experiences and interpretations of such activities (Aspers, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This alignment emphasises the study's methodological rigor, guaranteeing that the conclusions are grounded in participants' reflections rather than the researcher's assumptions.

This research was performed in Jintap Village, Ponorogo Regency, East Java, and included three da'i chosen by purposive selection. Even though the sample size is modest, this is compatible with phenomenological research methods, which value depth over breadth. Three individuals were adequate to attain data saturation, since persistent patterns surfaced and no significantly novel insights were produced in the concluding interviews. In phenomenological inquiry, the depth of story detail and the degree of engagement with each participant are paramount compared to numerical representation (Etikan et al., 2016). Thus, the limited sample is warranted to facilitate a comprehensive description, sustained involvement, and nuanced interpretation of da'i experiences.

Fieldwork was conducted over three months (January–March 2024), encompassing exploration, data collection, and preliminary analysis. Data collection methods included: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 60–90 minutes to elicit rich, reflective narratives; (2) non-participant observation of da'i-produced digital content to contextualize verbal accounts; and (3) document analysis of related social media materials to support triangulation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-validated with participants for accuracy.

The research integrated Asper's (2009) phenomenological phases with Miles et al. (1994) interactive model to ensure clear philosophical and procedural parts. Aspers' framework established the methodological basis for identifying and interpreting the core of participants' lived experiences, whilst the interactive model facilitated systematic data management, coding, and visualisation. This integration was not conflicting but complementary, as both methodologies underscore inductive and iterative investigation.

In practice, the phenomenological perspective directed the researcher to set aside assumptions, emphasise important assertions, and derive thematic interpretations from the tales. On the other hand, the interactive approach ensured the process was straightforward and strict by breaking it up into open coding, theme categorisation, and pattern mapping. This dual application allowed the study to balance interpretative depth and methodological consistency. For instance, the first open coding recorded participants' comments about their digital habits. These remarks were then sorted into media awareness, adapting to new technology, interacting with an audience, and thinking about religion. These categories were then further developed into higher-order themes that use skills, critical

understanding, and communication abilities that fit with the European Commission's (2009) digital literacy framework.

The analysis ensured the results were descriptive and analytically strong by combining phenomenological depth with procedural clarity. This method made interpretations more trustworthy and showed how the digital literacy of grassroots da'i's could be comprehended through real-life stories and organised theoretical models. Credibility was strengthened through member checking and peer debriefing to test the consistency of interpretations. Thick descriptions of the research setting and participant backgrounds supported Transferability. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through an audit trail documenting

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Findings

This study explored the digital literacy competencies of virtual da'i in Ponorogo using the European Commission's (2009) competency framework, categorizing findings into three dimensions—use skills, critical understanding, and communicative abilities while interpreting them through a phenomenological lens. The results, while structured, reveal layered meanings about how community-level da'i navigate digital preaching in a rapidly evolving socio-technical environment.

Table 1. The Dimension of Digital Literacy Da'i

Digital Literacy Dimension	Indicator	Field Findings	Competency Level
Use Skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability to operate the device</li> <li>Access digital platforms</li> <li>Basic content production</li> </ul>	Da'i could only open YouTube Studio with the help of a child; not being able to edit videos; Digital da'wah activities did not continue after the pandemic.	Basis
Critical Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information selection-Source verification</li> <li>Understanding the function of the media</li> </ul>	Da'wah content is taken from the internet based on intuition; no verification process or deep reading; Knowledge of regulations is minimal.	Intermediate
Communicative Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of interactive features</li> <li>Response to the audience</li> <li>Ability to build online dialogue</li> </ul>	Comment fields are disabled due to discomfort; there is no two-way interaction; The process of digital communication is one-way and not sustainable	Basis

Source: Researcher, 2025

The level of competence is based on the level of digital literacy competence issued by the European Commission Directorate-General for Information Society and Media (2009).

### 3.1.1 Use Skills

Most of the da'i at the research location only have minimal digital media capabilities. Most people who participated in the study started using digital tools after the COVID-19 outbreak forced them to move online. One informant said, "I first opened YouTube Studio with my son's help" (Informant 1). This dependency suggests that digital adoption was facilitated by social and intergenerational support, a phenomenon previously noted by Aini (2023). Field investigations indicated that da'i could record and upload lectures but seldom performed more complex tasks, such as video editing, scheduling, or channel administration, which were frequently assigned to mosque managers or family members. Instead of permanent deficiencies, these limits signify transitory phases within a comprehensive learning trajectory.

From a phenomenological standpoint, our findings underscore the interplay between technical constraints and pre-digital preaching practices, alongside prudent adaptation strategies. Theoretically, this dependence on external assistance exemplifies socio-technical adaptation, wherein technology utilisation is integrated within pre-existing trust-based networks. In practical terms, research indicates that focused, context-sensitive training, particularly methodologies that integrate religious principles with digital skills, may facilitate the advancement of community da'i from fundamental to sophisticated digital competencies (Aziz et al., 2025).

### 3.1.2. Critical Understanding of Media

The da'ida'i in this research showed an intermediate level of critical comprehension. They usually saw the promise of digital media as a way to preach, but they didn't have much experience judging the quality and trustworthiness of the information. One participant succinctly stated, "If there is material from the internet that looks good, I just use it" (Informant 2). This dependence on intuition illustrates that doctrinal confidence frequently supersedes methodical proof, a fact previously emphasised by (Ng, 2012; Sumiati & Nawawi, 2024).

The da'ida'i knew that digital media may be helpful, but they didn't know much about rules like copyright and ethical requirements for sharing religious information. This shows a widespread disparity in how well people understand digital literacy in religious settings, where following the rules is often less significant than following the rules of theology. From a phenomenological standpoint, their selected practices indicate technological constraints and an intention to maintain conventional preaching tactics in algorithm-driven contexts.

### 3.1.3. Communicative Abilities through Digital Media (Communicative Abilities)

The da'i's ability to communicate in this investigation stayed rudimentary. Most people who

took part utilised digital media primarily for one-way communication and were not interested in using interactive elements. One informant said, "I turned off comments because I wasn't ready" (Informant 3). This avoidance shows the person is not ready to talk to audiences through dialogical engagement. Observations indicated that da'i seldom replied to viewers and that their social media profiles didn't have regular schedules, clear descriptions, or places for people to leave comments. Consequently, their digital preaching mirrored traditional offline lectures, characterised by little audience engagement. Theoretically, this hesitance may be elucidated through media perception and the digital disinhibition effect. People afraid of unpleasant comments or challenges to religious authority tend to prefer restricted, one-way communication. This shows that conventional preaching authority and the participatory culture of internet platforms are still working things out.

#### **3.1.4. Obstacles to the Implementation of Digital Da'wah**

The adoption of digital da'wah met three recurring challenges. First, the da'i didn't comprehend the idea of e-da'wah very well. They often saw digital media as a short-term solution. One informant said, "I like live lectures better because talking through video feels like talking to a wall" (Informant 1). This shows that people still depend on traditional preaching styles and are hesitant to accept digital channels as valid places for religious interaction. Second, the participants showed they didn't manage digital content well. They didn't plan, stick to a schedule, or prepare messages for each channel. Because of this, their digital activities were not regular and often relied on help from mosque officials or family members. This made it much harder for them to remain independent and keep their da'wah channels consistent.

Finally, psychological obstacles became a big problem. Several da'i said they didn't like or were scared of talking to others online because they were worried about nasty remarks, misunderstandings, or cyberattacks. From an analytical standpoint, these impediments illustrate that the difficulties of digital da'wah are not just technological but also managerial and psychological, necessitating da'i to navigate cultural norms, emotional preparedness, and authority within a participatory digital context.

#### **3.1.5. Implications**

These findings contribute to digital da'wah scholarship by illustrating how personal meaning-making processes and community norms mediate technological adaptation. They suggest that capacity-building programs should address technical gaps and engage with digital literacy's emotional, ethical, and theological dimensions. In doing so, da'i may progress from basic to advanced competencies in ways that honor both the epistemological integrity of religious teaching and the participatory potential of digital platforms.

### **3.2. Discussion**

The results of this study corroborate previous studies indicating that digital literacy among grassroots religious leaders is still inadequate. Aini (2023) underscored the difficulty of adjusting to social media algorithms, whilst Antonio (2022) stressed the necessity for cultural adaptation in digital da'wah mentorship. This study builds on previous discoveries by concentrating on the subjective experiences of da'i, including a phenomenological viewpoint that underscores the influence of human meaning-making and contextual reality on digital behaviours (Al Giffari & Dermawan, 2025).

Da'i had only rudimentary media utilisation abilities, sometimes depending on family members or mosque administration to navigate sites. The European Commission's rating from 2009 says that this puts them at a basic literacy level. These results align with Gilster & Glister, (1997) fundamental definition of digital literacy: effectively accessing and utilizing digital technologies. Younger preachers adjust more quickly, but the generational divide is still problematic for long-term channel management (Hasim, 2023; Usman & Siagian, 2024). So, digital literacy at the community level means using technology and turning communications into the proper digital forms and languages (Baihaqi, 2023; Saleh et al., 2022).

A critical comprehension of media also demonstrated limitations. The selection of content was driven mainly by intuition and doctrinal trust rather than a methodical assessment, reflecting Ng's (2012) notion of evaluative literacy. This gap embodies what Hobbs, (2010) delineates as the core of media literacy: the capacity for critical analysis and ethical judgment in navigating digital information. Sumiati & Nawawi, (2024) contend that training programs frequently presume the existence of crucial competencies. Still, this study demonstrates that these competencies represent the most deficient aspect of da'i literacy, rendering preachers susceptible to disinformation.

The least developed part was the ability to communicate. Many da'i did not allow comments or interactive elements because they feared getting bad feedback or damaging their reputation. This hesitation may be elucidated by notions such as media apprehension and the digital disinhibition effect, wherein fear of losing authority inhibits open involvement. McLuhan, (1994) media ecology viewpoint emphasises that the medium alters communication patterns; in digital preaching, the avoidance of interactivity diminishes the medium's transformational capacity. Muliawan, (2023) and Rachmawati, Pradita, Ulyan, & Sotlikova, (2024) assert that the efficacy of digital da'wah is rooted in dialogical communication; yet, this study shows a tendency towards traditional monologues.

These results show that grassroots da'i must deal with many problems, including technical issues, a lack of evaluative literacy, and psychological hurdles. Theoretically, these findings correspond with media literacy theory, socio-technical systems views, and religious communication models, illustrating how cultural norms, authority negotiation, and emotional preparedness influence

digital adaptation (Xue, 2025). Castells, (2011) underscores in his notion of the network society that power and influence are progressively mediated through digital networks rather than conventional hierarchies. By setting the experiences of Ponorogo da'i within both local realities and global theoretical views, this research adds a more nuanced understanding of how religious leaders adapt to the digital revolution while retaining theological authenticity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research indicates that the digital literacy of community-level da'i in Ponorogo is at a fundamental to intermediate level, facing obstacles that encompass technical deficiencies, evaluative shortcomings, and psychological impediments. The primary understanding is that digital da'wah necessitates more than just operational proficiency; it also involves critical awareness, emotional preparedness, and the capacity to navigate conventional authority within participatory digital contexts.

This study enhances academic comprehension of religious digital communication by focusing on lived experiences and recognising its limits. The tiny and localised sample hinders greater generalisation, and the sole reliance on qualitative methodologies constrains the capacity to assess wider patterns. These limitations, however, create opportunities for further research to utilise comparative, multi-site, or mixed-method techniques to delineate the variation of digital abilities among preachers more effectively.

The findings indicate the necessity for training strategies that extend beyond technical workshops. Programs should include mentorship between tech-savvy young preachers and older da'i, encourage thoughtful and participatory practices, and discuss digital involvement's moral and communicative aspects. These projects would help ensure digital da'wah grows in reaction to new technology and as a long-lasting, conversational, and socially integrated practice.

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