



Gamified Da'wah Communication among Muslim Gamers in Palopo: A Digital Ethnography Study

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ABSTRACT

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Purpose: This study examines gamified dakwah communication among Muslim gamers in Palopo, Indonesia, by investigating how religious messages are constructed, negotiated, and internalized within gaming communities. The topic is relevant because digital gaming has become a significant cultural space where young Muslims interact, build social identities, and negotiate religious values beyond conventional dakwah settings. The study aims to identify forms of dakwah communication in gamer communities, explain the gamification mechanisms that shape message acceptance, and develop a conceptual model of digital dakwah grounded in local Muslim gaming culture.

Methodology: This research employed an integrative qualitative design combining ethnographic research and grounded theory. Data were collected through two months of field immersion, participant observation, in-depth interviews with gamers and ulama/dakwah practitioners, field documentation, and constant comparative inquiry. Purposive sampling was used for ethnographic exploration, while theoretical sampling was applied during grounded theory development. Data were analyzed through open coding, axial coding, selective coding, iterative data analysis, and thematic categorization with the support of qualitative data analysis software.

Findings/Results: The findings reveal five major themes: informal religious communication, Islamic gaming ethics, community-based religious authority, gamification of dakwah messages, and negotiation and resistance. Dakwah in gamer communities operates not as a linear transmission of religious instruction, but as a culturally negotiated process shaped by social relations, gaming language, timing, humor, symbolic rewards, and peer-based legitimacy.

Originality: This study contributes to digital religion, Islamic communication, and game culture studies by proposing the concept of gamified dakwah communication as a grounded theoretical model. It demonstrates that gaming communities are not merely entertainment spaces, but dynamic cultural arenas where Islamic values are socially constructed, adapted, and negotiated through digital social practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of contemporary religious communication cannot be understood through conventional media categories, face-to-face sermons, or mainstream social media platforms. In the global digital landscape, religion is increasingly negotiated through interactive, participatory, and community-based spaces, including digital gaming spaces. This shows that not only is *dawah* experiencing digitalisation, but also platformisation, gamification, and a shift towards more horizontal communication patterns. At a global level, digital religion is growing alongside the increasing interconnectedness of the world's population: the April 2025 Digital Global Statshot report recorded 5.81 billion unique mobile users, accounting for 70.7% of the world's population, while smartphones accounted for around 87% of the global mobile device market. At the same time, the gaming industry has become one of the largest arenas of digital culture; Newzoo estimates that gaming will reach around 3.4 billion players by 2024, with a global market value of around USD 187.7 billion. These figures demonstrate that gaming is no longer just entertainment, but a significant social, economic, identity, and communication space.

In the Indonesian context, the urgency of this research is further emphasised by the fact that digitalisation is closely linked to Indonesia's status as a large, active Muslim-majority country. According to DataReportal, as of January 2025, Indonesia had 212 million internet users, 356 million active mobile connections, and 143 million social media accounts. Meanwhile, APJII's 2024 data shows that internet penetration in Indonesia reached 79.5%, with around 221.56 million people connected based on a national survey. Demographically, Indonesia remains a predominantly Muslim country. Data from the Ministry of Home Affairs, reported in the first half of 2024, show that 87.08% of the population is Muslim. Moreover, Kota Palopo, the local context of the study, has a relevant social base: The Palopo City Statistics Office recorded a population of 182,898 in 2024, with around 32,253 people in the 15–24 age group. The combination of a Muslim population, internet penetration, mobile culture and a young demographic makes Palopo an important context for understanding how *dawah* adapts within the local gaming community.

However, the development of digital evangelism in Indonesia is still more often understood through social media such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok or Facebook, while the gaming community is rarely studied as an arena for evangelistic communication. This is despite the fact that the gaming community has a different communication style: interaction takes place through voice chat, guilds, tournaments, Discord, WhatsApp groups, streaming, memes, in-game terms, competitions, reward systems, and team-based solidarity. The research problem in this study lies in the lack of clarity regarding how religious messages are negotiated, mediated, and gamified within the Muslim gamer community in Palopo. The issue is not merely whether gamers receive religious messages, but how Islamic values are constructed in gaming practices, community language, relationships with other players, digital humour, competitive ethics, and participatory mechanisms that resemble game logic.

Previous studies have provided important foundations for this study. Al-Zaman (2022) demonstrated that Islamic videos on YouTube had increased significantly, showing the strong social mediatisation of religion through indicators such as comments, likes, and user engagement. Hasan (2022), through a digital ethnographic study of Muslim Instagram, showed that young Muslims were creating trans-local visual spaces to negotiate *deen*, identity, morality, and lifestyle. Wahid (2024), through bibliometric analysis of 1,060 Scopus documents, showed that research on Islam and digital technology has increased since the early 2000s, with a strong focus on social media and mobile applications. In the Indonesian context, Choirin et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of digital communication strategies for conveying moderate Islamic values to Generation Z.

Meanwhile, research on gaming and gaming communities also shows that gaming is a complex social space. Meriläinen (2022) argues against reducing gaming to merely a risk or a form of entertainment, as the gaming

experience is influenced by social relations, motivation, identity, and cultural context. Saldanha et al. (2023) explain that video game communities foster a sense of ownership, access, structure and participation, thereby reconstituting the meaning of community in digital society. Gandolfi et al. (2023) demonstrate that acceptance within gaming communities can positively impact players' vitality and well-being. Furthermore, Papakostas (2024) asserts that digital, game-based learning in religious education can create a learning environment that is more interactive, immersive and culturally sensitive, while maintaining the accuracy of religious traditions.

Nevertheless, a research gap remains evident. Firstly, studies on digital da'wah tend to focus on social media content and preachers, rather than on the gaming community as a participatory space for religious communication. Secondly, studies on games generally address well-being, identity, toxicity, learning, or community, but have not specifically examined how da'wah is communicated through gamification among Muslim gamers. Thirdly, studies of game-based religious learning are more often situated within formal education, rather than within informal and organic da'wah in digital communities. Fourthly, there is a locality gap because non-metropolitan cities such as Palopo are rarely the focus of digital religion studies, even though such cities can demonstrate a hybrid form of local religiosity, youth culture, and the mobile gaming ecosystem.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to develop a conceptual understanding of gamified da'wah communication through a combination of Grounded Theory and Digital Ethnography. Using this approach, the study not only describes da'wah content but also constructs a theoretical model based on empirical evidence regarding how Islamic messages emerge, are negotiated, accepted, rejected, or modified within the communication practices of gamers. Digital ethnography is relevant because, as Forberg and Schilt (2023) emphasise, digital ethnography requires relational engagement, co-presence, and an understanding of the norms of self-presentation within digital communities, rather than merely passive observation of content. Thus, this study positions the Muslim gamer community in Palopo as a living, dynamic space for da'wah, bound by digital-offline social relations.

This study aims to develop a grounded theoretical explanation of gamified da'wah communication among Muslim gamers in Palopo by examining how Islamic messages are embedded, negotiated and circulated through gaming practices, digital interaction and community norms. More specifically, this study aims to identify forms of da'wah communication within the gaming community, explain the gamification mechanisms that influence message reception, and formulate a conceptual model of digital da'wah relevant to the culture of local Muslim gamers.

The significance of this research is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this study expands the fields of digital religion, Islamic communication and game studies by offering the concept of gamified dakwah communication as a new analytical lens. Methodologically, this research demonstrates how Grounded Theory and Digital Ethnography can be combined to capture the processes of religious communication that emerge organically within digital communities. In practical terms, the research findings have the potential to provide a basis for preachers, Islamic organisations, educators, and digital community managers to design da'wah strategies that are more participatory, ethical, relevant, and aligned with gamer communication culture, without reducing da'wah to mere entertainment content.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUA FRAMEWORK

Research on gamified da'wah communication must be situated at the intersection of digital religion, da'wah communication, studies of gaming communities, and gamification theory. In contemporary literature, digital religion is no longer understood as the transfer of religious activities from physical spaces to online spaces, but rather as a hybrid configuration in which religious practices, authority, identity, and affiliation are negotiated through digital infrastructure. Evolvi (2021) argues that religion on the internet must be analysed through the

concept of hypermediated religious spaces—that is, religious spaces shaped by the material, symbolic, and spatial relationships between online and offline realms. This perspective is important because the gaming community does not exist entirely within a virtual space; their interactions move between online games, voice chat conversations, WhatsApp or Discord groups, local tournaments, and social relationships in the city of Palopo. Consequently, da’wah within the gaming community cannot be understood as a one-way message from the preacher to the audience, but rather as a practice of religious communication that emerges within a digital-hybrid, fluid, and participatory space.

In this study, the concept of da’wah is understood as a process of Islamic communication aimed at conveying, negotiating, and internalising religious values within social life. However, in the digital context, da’wah has shifted from an instructional model towards an interactive one. Previous studies have shown that social media has transformed religious authority, spiritual practices, and the communication styles of young Muslims. Zaid et al. (2022), for example, demonstrate that Muslim social media influencers not only convey religious messages but also reconstruct Islamic authority through visual styles, personal narratives, and media production capabilities. Hasan (2022) shows that Muslim Instagram serves as a space for the formation of deen, identity, morality, and religious aesthetics among young people. Al-Zaman (2022) also demonstrates that Islamic videos on YouTube illustrate the process of the social mediatisation of religion, as religion becomes increasingly reliant on the logic of digital engagement—such as comments, likes, and content reach. These three studies confirm that digital da’wah is increasingly mediated by platform aesthetics, affect, visibility, and user participation, rather than solely by formal religious authority.

However, upon critical examination, research into digital da’wah still tends to focus on mainstream social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. Larsson and Willander (2024), in a scoping review of 359 articles on Muslims and social media, demonstrate that research on digital Muslims remains dominated by studies of digital documents, social media platforms, identity representations and content production. Wahid (2024) also demonstrated, through a bibliometric analysis of 1,060 Scopus documents, that research on Islam and digital technology is growing rapidly, but the primary focus remains on social media, mobile applications, religious education, and expressions of Islamic identity. This state of the art reveals significant developments, but also highlights theoretical limitations: the gaming community as a space for da’wah has not yet become a primary focus within the mainstream of digital Islamic studies. This research gap is significant because the gaming community operates on a different communicative logic from upload-based social media; it is more real-time, collaborative, competitive, role-based, and influenced by game mechanics.

Within a theoretical framework, this study employs digital religion theory as a grand theory to understand how religion exists within a digital ecology that is unstable, pluralistic, and not entirely controlled by religious institutions. Digital religion theory helps explain that religion in the digital space is not merely content, but rather a social practice shaped through technology, communities, symbols, platform affordances, and distributed authority. Campbell and Tsuria (2022) position digital religion as a field that examines how religious beliefs and practices are carried out through digital media, ranging from social media, apps, video games, to virtual reality. In the context of this research, this theory allows da’wah to be understood as a practice embedded within gamer culture, rather than as an external message inserted into the game. Thus, gamified da’wah communication can be interpreted as a form of da’wah emerging from the intersection of Islamic values, community interaction, and the logic of the game.

The first relevant supporting theory is gamification theory. Conceptually, gamification refers to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts to enhance motivation, engagement, learning, or behavioural change. Krath et al. (2021), through a systematic review, demonstrated that gamification theory is largely underpinned by self-determination theory, flow theory, experiential learning theory, and constructivist learning theory. They emphasise that gamification operates through goal-setting, immediate feedback, progression paths, challenges, performance reinforcement, user choice, and social elements such as comparison and collaboration. Khaldi et al. (2023) also indicate that the most frequently used elements in gamification systems are points, badges, leaderboards, levels, feedback, challenges, and storytelling. However, they also caution that the effectiveness of gamification is not universal; it is highly dependent on context, design, user motivation, and the nature of social interaction. In this study, gamification is not understood narrowly as the use of formal points or badges, but

rather as a communicative logic emerging from gaming culture: symbolic rewards, player reputation, team solidarity, competition, humour, challenges, and narratives of victory and defeat.

The second supporting theory is social identity theory and the concept of digital communities. In the context of religious communication, social identity helps explain why religious messages are accepted when they align with group identity. Myers et al. (2023), through a cross-platform analysis of more than 58,000 posts by Christian influencers, found that religious cues can increase engagement, whilst promotional cues tend to decrease engagement. This finding is significant as it demonstrates that religious messages are not only evaluated based on their normative content, but also on their alignment with the community's identity, symbols, and expectations. Within Muslim gaming communities, da'wah messages are likely to be more readily accepted when they do not appear as intrusive external sermons disrupting gameplay, but rather as identity cues that blend with the community's language, humour, gaming ethics, and solidarity. Thus, the success of da'wah within gaming communities depends not only on the truth of the message, but also on symbolic performativity and social acceptance amongst players.

The literature on game studies reinforces the argument that gaming communities constitute a social space worthy of study as an arena for communication and the formation of values. Saldanha et al. (2023) demonstrate that video game communities construct a sense of community through a sense of belonging, access, structure, organisation, and the context of participation. They also demonstrate that gaming communities are not merely a collection of players, but spaces for cultural production, learning, networking, and collective experience. Meriläinen (2022) emphasises that young people's relationship with gaming needs to be understood through social and cultural contexts, not merely through the risk or addiction paradigm. Gandolfi et al. (2023) even suggest that a gaming community's receptiveness is linked to players' vitality and well-being. These empirical findings indicate that gaming communities are affective and social spaces capable of influencing behaviour, morality, identity, and a sense of connectedness. Consequently, research into da'wah within gaming communities possesses a strong academic foundation, as these communities are not neutral spaces but rather spaces for the formation of social norms.

A critical comparison of previous studies reveals two trends that have not yet been fully connected. On the one hand, studies of digital Islam emphasise the transformation of authority, identity and religious expression on social media. On the other hand, studies of games emphasise community, affordances, well-being, learning and participatory culture. However, the two rarely converge within a single analytical framework that explicitly examines da'wah as a gamified communication practice. Papakostas (2024) does demonstrate that digital game-based learning in religious education can create immersive, interactive, and culturally sensitive learning experiences. Nevertheless, the focus remains on formal religious education, rather than the informal da'wah that emerges organically within gaming communities. Inconsistent findings are also evident in the gamification literature: some studies emphasise increased motivation and engagement, whilst others suggest that gamification elements may fail if they do not align with the context, user needs, and community values. Consequently, research on Muslim gamers in Palopo must avoid the assumption that gamification automatically renders da'wah effective; what requires investigation is how community members interpret, accept, reject, or modify da'wah messages within their gaming practices.

Digital ethnography serves as an important methodological foundation for analysing such practices. Forberg and Schilt (2023) emphasise that digital ethnography differs from mere content analysis in that it requires co-presence, a relationship with participants, engagement within the community space, and an understanding of self-presentation in digital spaces. In other words, research into gaming communities cannot be conducted solely through the observation of posts or chat transcripts; researchers need to understand the rhythm of the game, communication ethics, forms of presence, internal humour, informal hierarchies, and how community members distinguish between religious advice, jokes, moral admonitions, and preaching. Digital ethnography also enables research to capture the interconnectedness between online and offline spaces, particularly in the context of Palopo as a non-metropolitan city with closer local social ties than those found in anonymous, global-scale gaming communities.

Grounded Theory is positioned as an analytical approach that allows theory to emerge from field data, rather than being imposed by pre-existing concepts. In this study, Grounded Theory is relevant because the concept

of gamified da'wah communication is not yet well-established in the literature. Rather than testing existing models, this study aims to construct a conceptual explanation of the processes, patterns, categories and mechanisms of da'wah communication within Muslim gaming communities. The combination of Grounded Theory and Digital Ethnography enables the research to link digital interaction data with the formation of theoretical categories, such as forms of da'wah messages, communicative actors, game affordances, community norms, gamer responses, and mechanisms of acceptance or resistance. Thus, the theory is not constructed speculatively, but built through empirical evidence from conversations, gaming practices, community symbols, digital observations, and participant reflections.

Based on this synthesis, the research gaps in this study can be formulated in three layers. Firstly, there is a platform gap, as studies of digital da'wah remain predominantly focused on content-based social media, whilst the gaming space—which is more synchronous, performative and interactive—has not yet been extensively analysed as a space for da'wah. Secondly, there is a theoretical gap, as theories of digital religion, gamification and game community studies have not yet been widely integrated to explain Islamic communication within gaming communities. Thirdly, there is a locality gap because research on digital Islam often centres on global contexts, major countries, or transnational platforms, whilst cities such as Palopo are rarely used as a locus for examining local forms of digital religiosity. These research gaps indicate that da'wah within gaming communities cannot be explained solely through conventional da'wah theory or social media theory; it requires a framework that is sensitive to gaming culture, digital affordances, Muslim identity, and local social contexts.

This study proposes that gamified dakwah communication can be understood as a process of Islamic communication that takes place through the integration of dakwah values with the mechanisms, language, symbols and social relations of the gaming community. The conceptual framework of this study identifies three main components as the basis for analysis. The first component is digital-religious orientation, namely the way Muslim gamers understand, display, and negotiate Islamic values in the digital space. The second component is gaming affordances, namely game features and culture such as teamwork, competition, role assignment, rewards, rankings, chat, voice communication, and tournaments. The third component is community negotiation, which is the social process whereby community members interpret, accept, reject, or adapt da'wah messages based on group norms. The interaction of these three components produces a form of gamified da'wah communication that can manifest through brief advice whilst playing, ethical reprimands regarding toxic behaviour, reminders of worship, the use of religious humour, solidarity based on ukhuwah, or the framing of Islamic values within gaming strategies and ethics.

This study differs from previous studies in three respects. Firstly, it does not focus on digital preachers as influencers, but rather on the gaming community as a collective actor that produces and negotiates the meaning of da'wah. Secondly, it does not view games merely as a medium for religious education, but as a cultural ecosystem with its own communicative logic. Thirdly, this study does not merely describe the practice of digital da'wah, but seeks to construct a Grounded Theory-based conceptual model of how da'wah is gamified through the affordances of games and the norms of local Muslim communities. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in the development of an interdisciplinary perspective spanning digital religion, Islamic communication, gamification theory, and game community studies.

As this study employs a qualitative approach utilising Grounded Theory and Digital Ethnography, hypotheses are not formulated in the same way as in quantitative designs. Instead, the study is guided by the conceptual proposition that da'wah within the Muslim gaming community does not proceed in a linear fashion from communicator to recipient, but rather through a process involving symbolic negotiation, community participation, the affordances of the game, and religious identities that mutually influence one another. This proposition forms the basis for empirical exploration to identify core categories, inter-category relationships, and a theoretical model of gamified da'wah communication among Muslim gamers in Palopo.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrative qualitative design that combines ethnographic research and grounded theory within an interpretive-constructivist paradigm. This paradigm views social reality as the result of a construction of meaning formed through experience, interaction, language, symbols, and social negotiation between actors. The integration of ethnography and grounded theory is employed because the research focus is not only to

understand the culture, social behaviour, community practices, and patterns of social interaction within the Muslim gamer community in Palopo City, but also to construct a new theory based on empirical data. In this design, ethnographic inquiry serves to interpret community culture through cultural interpretation, whilst grounded theory is used to develop theory generation through the processes of coding, continuous comparison, and the formation of conceptual categories. Consequently, this research does not begin its analysis from pre-established hypotheses, but rather from field data that is collected, compared, interpreted, and developed inductively.

The research location is the city of Palopo, South Sulawesi, which is positioned not merely as a geographical space, but as a cultural context where youth culture, Muslim religiosity, digital practices, and gaming communities interact. Palopo was chosen because it represents a non-metropolitan urban context with distinctive religious, social, and digital dynamics, including the emergence of active gaming communities in both online and offline spaces. The research participants consisted of Muslim gamers active in gaming communities and religious scholars or preachers with experience in preaching to the younger generation, both in person and via digital media. Participant selection was conducted through purposive sampling during the ethnographic phase to identify informants with a deep understanding of community practices, followed by theoretical sampling within a grounded theory framework to select additional participants based on the need to develop emerging categories. Through this strategy, participants were selected not only for their social relevance but also for their contribution to conceptual refinement, data comparison, and the strengthening of the theoretical model.

Data collection was carried out through participant observation, field immersion, in-depth interviews and field notes over a two-month period. The field immersion process involved gradually entering the social space of the gaming community, whether through gaming activities, group communication, informal gatherings or the digital interactions used by the community. The observation was aimed at understanding how community members communicate, build solidarity, negotiate norms, respond to toxic behaviour, use humour, convey religious advice, and distinguish between jokes, moral admonitions, and da'wah messages. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with gamers and religious scholars or preachers to explore their experiences, perceptions, communication strategies, and the meaning of da'wah within gaming culture. The entire observation process was recorded in field notes comprising descriptive, reflective, and preliminary analytical notes, ensuring that the field data serves not only as empirical documentation but also as a foundation for iterative data analysis.

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously from the outset of data collection using inductive, iterative and comparative principles. Within the framework of grounded theory, the data were analysed through open coding, axial coding and selective coding. During the open coding stage, data from observations, interviews and field notes were broken down into units of meaning to identify relevant actions, symbols, experiences and patterns of communication. In the axial coding stage, the initial codes were linked into more conceptual categories, such as forms of da'wah in gaming conversations, communicator legitimacy, community responses, negotiation of norms, and mechanisms of message reception. In the selective coding stage, core categories are constructed to explain the primary processes by which da'wah communication is constructed and gamified within the Muslim gaming community. This process is reinforced through the constant comparative method, which involves comparing data with data, codes with codes, categories with categories, and categories with new cases until stable emergent categories are formed. Ethnographic analysis and grounded theory were conducted in an integrated manner: ethnography provided depth of cultural interpretation, whilst grounded theory provided a conceptual framework for generating substantive theory. Data management was supported by NVivo to organise transcripts, observation notes, codes, categories, and analytical memos without replacing the researcher's critical interpretation.

The validity of the research was ensured through data triangulation, credibility, transferability, reliability and ethical considerations. Triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of observations, interviews with gamers, interviews with religious scholars or preachers, and field notes taken during the immersion process. Credibility is strengthened through two months of field engagement, repeated observations, limited member checking, and clarification of meaning with participants. Generalisability is ensured through the provision of detailed descriptions of the Palopo context, the characteristics of the gamer community, patterns of interaction,

and the observed preaching practices, so that readers can assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts. Dependability is maintained through an audit trail comprising documentation of methodological decisions, the coding process, analytical memos, and category changes during the research. Ethically, each participant received an explanation of the research objectives, the nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw, and data protection. Participants’ identities, community names, digital accounts, and sensitive information were anonymised using pseudonyms. In the observation of digital spaces, the researcher distinguished between public, semi-public, and private spaces, and only utilised private data after obtaining consent. Consequently, this methodology enables the research to generate empirical, contextual, and theoretical insights into the process of gamified da’wah communication within the Muslim gaming community in the city of Palopo.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

This study was conducted amongst the Muslim gaming community in Palopo City using an integrative qualitative approach combining ethnographic research and grounded theory. Data were collected through field immersion, participant observation, in-depth interviews, field documentation, and constant comparative analysis. The research informants comprised active gamers involved in both online and offline gaming communities, as well as religious scholars or preachers with experience interacting with the younger generation in the context of digital da’wah. The gamer informants were coded G1–G12, whilst the cleric or preacher informants were coded U1–U4. The gamers involved in the study were generally active in team-based games, using digital communication spaces such as voice chat, WhatsApp groups, Discord, and informal community forums, as well as interacting in offline activities such as community meetings, strategy discussions, or local tournaments.

Picture 1 : Relationship Model



From an ethnographic perspective, the gaming community in Palopo does not present itself as a neutral space for entertainment, but rather as a social arena where members build solidarity, status, humour, norms, conflicts, and negotiate religious values. The results of participant observation indicate that social interaction within the community unfolds in a distinctive rhythm: rapid conversation, spontaneous responses, in-group humour, technical gaming terminology, competition, teamwork, and forms of social reprimand that are not always formal. It is within this space that messages of da’wah emerge situationally, for example through reminders to pray when a game has been going on for a long time, calls to watch one’s language when players become emotional, or religious jokes that use gaming terminology. Thus, da’wah does not appear as instructional

communication from outside the community, but as a social practice negotiated through the culture of the gaming community.

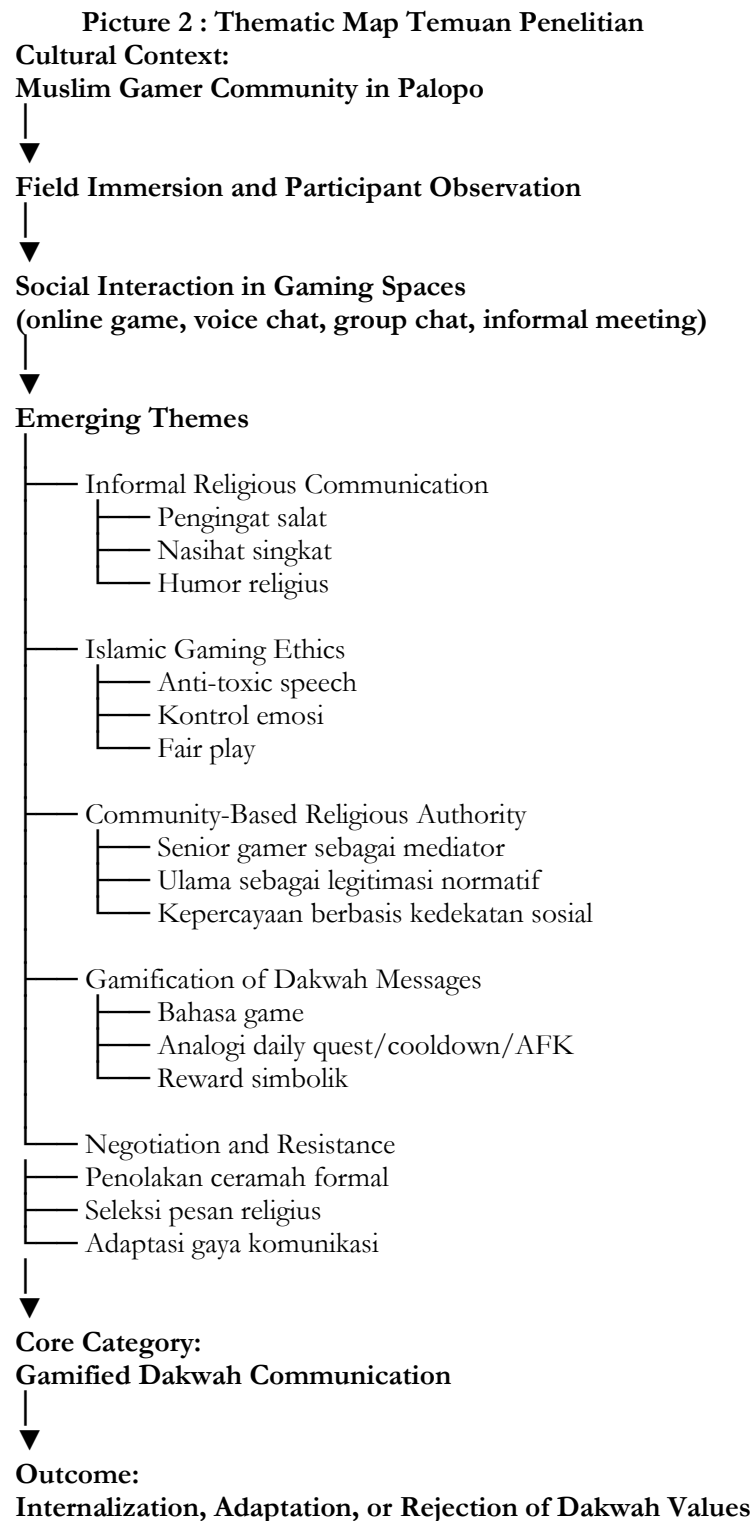
The findings of a two-month field immersion study reveal that community members have their own ways of distinguishing between advice they receive, jokes they consider acceptable, and religious messages they perceive as patronising. Da'wah messages are more readily accepted when delivered by members who have close social ties, a positive reputation, or respected gaming experience. Conversely, religious messages delivered in a tone that blames or stigmatises gaming as a negative activity tend to provoke resistance. This pattern suggests that the meaning of religious outreach within the gaming community is determined not only by the content of the message, but also by relationships, the timing of delivery, linguistic style, and the communicator's position within the community's social structure.

Grounded theory analysis was conducted through open coding, axial coding and selective coding, utilising NVivo to manage transcripts, observation notes, analytical memos and inter-category relationships. The coding process did not take place after all the data had been collected, but ran concurrently with data collection through iterative data analysis. Each observational finding was compared with the interviews, each quotation was compared with the provisional categories, and each category was re-examined through theoretical sampling. Using the constant comparative method, this study produced five main thematic categories and one core category.

Table 1. Results of Data Coding and Categorisation

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding	Emergent Categories	Thematic Categories
Pengingat salat saat bermain, ajakan <i>break</i> , nasihat singkat, candaan religius	Dakwah sebagai komunikasi informal dalam ritme permainan	Dakwah dikonstruksi sebagai praktik sosial yang menyatu dengan interaksi komunitas	Pesan religius informal	Informal religious communication
Menahan emosi, menghindari kata kasar, tidak menyalahkan tim, bermain jujur, menjaga solidaritas	Etika bermain sebagai ekspresi nilai Islam	Akhlah dipraktikkan melalui perilaku bermain, bukan hanya melalui pesan verbal	Etika bermain Islami	Islamic gaming ethics
Senior gamer memberi nasihat, pendakwah memahami bahasa gamer, kepercayaan terhadap anggota komunitas	Otoritas dakwah dimediasi oleh kedekatan sosial dan literasi budaya game	Legitimasi pesan ditentukan oleh relasi komunitas dan relevansi komunikator	Otoritas religius berbasis komunitas	Community-based religious authority
Istilah <i>daily quest</i> , <i>cooldown</i> , <i>AFK salat</i> , <i>push rank</i> , humor game, reward simbolik	Pesan dakwah diadaptasi ke dalam logika dan simbol game	Dakwah menjadi komunikatif melalui mekanisme gamifikasi sosial	Gamifikasi pesan dakwah	Gamification of dakwah messages
Penolakan terhadap ceramah formal, stigma terhadap gamer, pesan dianggap mengganggu permainan	Seleksi dan resistensi terhadap pesan religius	Penerimaan dakwah bergantung pada waktu, bahasa, relasi, dan konteks interaksi	Negosiasi dan resistensi	Negotiation and resistance
Percakapan spontan, momen setelah kalah, teguran saat toxic, diskusi setelah bermain	Dakwah berlangsung melalui momen sosial yang tidak direncanakan	Makna dakwah muncul dari proses interaksi, bukan skenario formal	Dakwah berbasis momen	Contextual dakwah interaction
Klarifikasi ulama, dialog tentang hukum game, diskusi etika digital	Ulama berperan sebagai sumber legitimasi normatif, tetapi harus berdialog dengan budaya gamer	Relasi gamer-ulama bersifat negosiatif, bukan satu arah	Dialog religius digital	Dialogic religious mediation

Based on the results of this coding, the core category that emerged is 'gamified dakwah communication as a culturally negotiated process of Islamic meaning-making within gaming communities'. This core category explains that dakwah communication within the Muslim gaming community in Palopo does not take the form of a linear transmission of normative messages, but rather a process of meaning-making shaped by social interaction, gaming culture, community ethics, relational authority, and game symbols.



The research findings indicate that da'wah within the Muslim gaming community in Palopo is communicated through five main patterns: informal religious communication, Islamic gaming ethics, community-based religious authority, the gamification of da'wah messages, and negotiation and resistance to religious messages. The first theme that emerged was informal religious communication. Qualitative findings indicate that da'wah messages are more frequently conveyed through casual conversation than through formal sermons. Reminders to pray, calls to take a break, or advice to watch one's language arise spontaneously during gaming conversations. One informant stated, "When maghrib comes around, someone usually says, 'Take a break, pray first, then carry on pushing rank.' It's not a sermon, but we get the point" (G3). This quote demonstrates that

religious messages are accepted because they are conveyed in the language of the community and do not sever the gamer's identity as part of the group.

The second theme is Islamic gaming ethics. Participants' perspectives indicate that religious values are not merely understood as ritual worship, but also as a code of conduct for gaming. Gamers recognise that avoiding toxic speech, controlling one's emotions, refraining from insulting opponents, and maintaining team solidarity are all part of good character. Informant G7 stated, "If you can control your emotions and not swear at your friends, that is also part of good conduct." This statement serves as empirical evidence that da'wah within the gaming community has seen an expansion of meaning from verbal messages to behavioural practices. In observations, admonitions such as "don't be toxic, or you'll lose your blessings" or "it's fine to get heated in the game, but keep your mouth in check" demonstrate that Islamic values are translated into the social language of the community.

The third theme is community-based religious authority. The research findings indicate that the authority of religious preaching does not depend entirely on formal religious status. Clerics or preachers are still regarded as important sources of normative legitimacy, but their messages are better received when delivered with an understanding of gamer culture. One gamer stated, "If a cleric simply says that gaming is a waste of time, kids usually refuse to listen straight away. But if the ustaz knows about games and understands the terminology, we respect them more" (G5). Meanwhile, preacher U1 stated, "We must first understand their world. If we don't understand it yet, we shouldn't be quick to judge. Da'wah must enter through a door that is familiar to them." This data indicates that da'wah authority within the gamer community is dialogical and relational.

The fourth theme is the gamification of da'wah messages. In this study, gamification does not refer to formal apps or points systems, but rather to the translation of da'wah messages into gaming logic, such as daily quests, cooldowns, AFK, ranks, teamwork and symbolic rewards. Informant G9 stated, "If someone says that prayer is like a daily quest that mustn't be missed, we laugh, but the message gets through." This quote demonstrates that humour and gaming analogies make religious messages easier to accept. Interpretative analysis shows that gamification functions as a symbolic bridge between Islamic values and the gaming experience.

The fifth theme is negotiation and resistance. Not all da'wah messages are accepted outright. Some gamers reject messages perceived as judgemental or generalising gamers as a religiously negligent group. Informant G2 stated, "We don't mind being reminded, but don't act as if gamers are necessarily bad. Sometimes outsiders don't realise that within our community we look out for one another." This statement highlights a cultural negotiation between gamer identity and Muslim identity. Resistance does not always signify a rejection of religion, but is often a rejection of forms of da'wah communication that fail to understand the community's context.

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that gamified da'wah communication within the Muslim gaming community in Palopo cannot be understood as a mere transfer of conventional da'wah to the digital sphere, but rather as a social process arising from interaction, community cohesion, gaming symbols, and the negotiation of Islamic values within gaming practices. These findings indicate that da'wah in the gaming space operates through communication mechanisms distinct from formal sermons or da'wah content on social media; it manifests as reminders of worship, religious humour, ethical admonitions, and the use of gaming terminology to bridge religious meanings. The author's analysis confirms that da'wah within this community is not merely a religious message conveyed to gamers, but a cultural practice co-produced by gamers and da'wah practitioners through situational social interaction. This position aligns with the digital religion approach, which views religion as a living practice within a digital ecology, rather than merely as technology-mediated content (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Evolvi, 2022).

Findings regarding informal da'wah communication reveal that religious messages are more effective when they do not interrupt the rhythm of the game and do not undermine the social identity of gamers as community members. In this context, reminders to pray, calls to watch one's speech, or brief advice are accepted because they are presented as part of a friendship dynamic, rather than as external moral instructions. The author's interpretative analysis suggests that the acceptance of da'wah is determined not only by the normative truth of

the message, but by the message's alignment with the community's language, timing, and emotional atmosphere. This expands upon Al-Zaman's (2022) study on the social mediatisation of religion on YouTube, as da'wah within gaming communities follows not only the logic of content-based platforms but also the logic of direct interaction, rapid response, and team solidarity (Al-Zaman, 2022).

The findings of this study also reveal that gaming communities form moral spaces that are not always apparent from the outside. Gamers do not merely play; they establish norms regarding how to speak, manage emotions, respect teammates, and maintain a positive gaming atmosphere. When informants interpret emotional control and anti-toxic speech as part of moral conduct, empirical evidence suggests that Islamic values are expanding from the realm of ritual towards ethical practices within digital culture. The author's analysis situates these findings within a symbolic interactionist framework: religious meaning is not automatically inherent in the act of playing, but is constructed through shared interpretation. Thus, "gaming ethics" becomes a form of social meaning negotiated within community practice, rather than merely a theological concept imposed from the outside (Saldanha et al., 2023; Meriläinen, 2022).

This ethical dimension of play is significant because the game studies literature often highlights that gaming communities can have a dual impact: they can serve as spaces of solidarity, but may also give rise to conflict, emotional strain, or toxic behaviour. Research by Gandolfi et al. (2024) indicates that acceptance within the gaming community is linked to players' vitality and well-being, whilst the findings of this study suggest that such acceptance can also serve as a channel for the internalisation of religious values. The authors' analysis confirms that da'wah does not function by rejecting gaming culture, but by directing the community's internal norms towards more ethical gaming practices. In other words, the gaming community has the potential to become a space for character formation if religious values are not conveyed in a confrontational manner, but rather through group norms that have been recognised by community members (Gandolfi et al., 2024; Saldanha et al., 2023)

Findings regarding the authority of da'wah indicate that religious scholars or preachers retain normative legitimacy, but this legitimacy is not automatically accepted within the gaming community. These findings suggest that religious authority in the digital space is undergoing reconstruction: preachers need to understand the community's language, humour, rhythm, and social issues so that their messages are not perceived as detached moral judgements. The authors' analysis shows that the authority of religious preaching within the gaming community is shifting from a vertical model towards a dialogical one. The messages of religious scholars become effective not only because of their scholarly status, but because of their ability to build symbolic bridges with gaming culture. These findings expand upon the study by Zaid et al. (2022), which asserts that Islamic authority in the digital space is reimagined through communicators who possess media literacy and a closeness to young audiences (Zaid et al., 2022).

Unlike studies on Muslim influencers that position digital public figures as the centre of authority, this research finds that da'wah authority can also emerge from internal community actors such as senior gamers, peers, or members with a social reputation. Contrary to prior research that largely interprets digital authority through public visibility and media performance, these findings confirm that authority within the gaming community is relational, situational, and trust-based. The authors' analysis indicates that senior gamers can function as mediators of da'wah because they possess two forms of capital simultaneously: gaming cultural capital and community social capital. Thus, da'wah within the gaming community is not determined solely by who is the most pious, but by who is the most trusted, best understands the community's dynamics, and is capable of conveying messages without undermining group solidarity.

Findings on the gamification of da'wah messages reveal that terms such as 'daily quest', 'cooldown', 'AFK salat' and 'push rank' are not merely slang, but symbolic tools that enable Islamic messages to be integrated into the gamer's experience. Krath et al. (2021) demonstrate that gamification relates to motivation, affect, behaviour, and learning, whilst this study finds that the gamification of da'wah does not always take the form of formal points systems or religious applications. The authors' analysis indicates that gamification within the Palopo gaming community operates culturally: religious messages are translated into familiar symbols, so they do not feel like an external moral burden. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in interpreting gamification as a bottom-up social communication practice, rather than a top-down, externally imposed persuasive design.

This analysis also expands the study of digital game-based learning in religious education. Papakostas (2024) emphasises that game-based religious learning can be more personalised, interactive, and culturally sensitive if its design aligns with pedagogical objectives. However, the findings of this study reveal a different phenomenon: the process of religious learning is not always present in formal instructional design, but emerges organically from community conversations. This result supports previous studies on the potential of games to enhance engagement, but adds a new dimension that religious outreach can be gamified through informal social practices. The authors' analysis confirms that Islamic values become more communicative when translated into actual gaming experiences, rather than merely packaged within institutionally designed religious learning media (Papakostas, 2024; Khaldi et al., 2023).

Findings regarding gamers' resistance to judgemental da'wah suggest that rejection of religious messages does not necessarily equate to rejection of religion. Rather, resistance is more likely to arise when gamers feel their identity is stigmatised as negligent, unproductive, or distant from Islamic values. The authors' analysis confirms that deficit-oriented da'wah communication risks widening the gap between preachers and the young digital community. Empirical evidence suggests that gamers are more receptive to da'wah that acknowledges their experiences, understands the logic of gaming, and positions them as subjects capable of producing religious meaning. These findings align with the study by Douglass et al. (2022), which demonstrates that digital spaces for young Muslims can serve as spaces for connection, identity, and social ambivalence (Douglass et al., 2022).

Within the context of the development of digital Islamic studies, this research fills an important gap. Larsson and Willander (2025) note that studies on Muslims and social media are growing rapidly, yet remain largely dominated by corpus analysis, data scraping, and descriptive platform studies. Wahid (2024) also highlights that research on Islam and digital technology is increasing, but the primary focus remains on social media, mobile applications, and digital identity expression. The authors' analysis suggests that the gaming community offers a distinct empirical space because interactions occur synchronously, competitively, affectively, and are based on team solidarity. Consequently, this study expands the state of the art in digital Islamic studies by shifting the focus from da'wah content towards community practices and the construction of meaning within gaming culture (Larsson & Willander, 2025; Wahid, 2024).

The relationship between gaming culture, religiosity, and social interaction in this study demonstrates that gamer identity and Muslim identity are not always in an antagonistic relationship. On the contrary, both can be negotiated through everyday practices such as managing prayer times, controlling emotions, avoiding toxic speech, and maintaining team solidarity. The author's analysis suggests that gaming communities need not be understood as secular spaces separate from religion, but rather as hybrid spaces where religiosity is practised flexibly. From the perspective of hypermediated religious spaces, the boundaries between online and offline, the sacred and the profane, and entertainment and morality become fluid because religious experiences are mediated by digital spaces, materiality, devices, and social relations (Evolvi, 2022; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022).

The dynamics of communication between gamers and religious scholars highlight the need to shift da'wah strategies from a corrective approach to a participatory one. Preachers who enter gaming communities with a judgemental approach tend to provoke resistance, whereas those who adopt a dialogical approach can strengthen the legitimacy of their message. The author's analysis indicates that digital da'wah among gamers requires cultural literacy, not merely a mastery of religious texts. Da'wah practitioners need to understand the terminology, emotional moments, internal conflicts, and communication norms of the community. These findings relate to the study by Choirin et al. (2024) on the importance of digital da'wah strategies for Generation Z, but this research adds that such strategies must be more micro-level, community-based, and sensitive to gaming culture (Choirin et al., 2024; Zaid et al., 2022).

From a grounded theory perspective, the core category generated by this study is that gamified da'wah communication constitutes a process of negotiating the meaning of Islam through gaming culture, community relations, and digital symbols. This process is formed through open coding, axial coding, selective coding, analytical memos, and the constant comparative method. The authors' analysis confirms that the substantive theory that emerges is not the result of the deductive application of concepts, but rather the result of a systematic reading of recurring empirical patterns. This aligns with Charmaz and Thornberg (2021), who

emphasise the qualities of grounded theory—coherence, credibility, originality, and theoretical utility—as well as Stough and Lee (2021), who highlight the importance of methodologically explaining grounded theory so that it does not remain merely a descriptive coding technique (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Stough & Lee, 2021).

The integration of ethnography and grounded theory in this study also yields methodological contributions. Forberg and Schilt (2023) assert that digital ethnography must involve co-presence, the management of the researcher's self-presentation, and relations with the community, rather than merely the passive collection of digital data. The findings of this study support this view because the meaning of 'dakwah' can only be understood through engagement with the rhythm of play, informal conversations, internal humour, and moments of community conflict. The author's analysis suggests that without field immersion, researchers risk interpreting the gamer community superficially as merely a space for entertainment. Consequently, ethnographic inquiry provides cultural depth, whilst grounded theory offers an analytical framework for developing substantive theory (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

A unique phenomenon emerging from this research is the role of religious humour as a bridge between the seriousness of Islamic values and the relaxed culture of the gaming community. Humour such as "prayer is a daily quest" or "don't AFK from your duties" demonstrates that da'wah messages can be light-hearted without losing their normative meaning. The author's analysis interprets humour not as a diminishment of the sacredness of the message, but as a cultural strategy to reduce the psychological distance between da'wah and the young digital audience. This finding expands upon Hasan's (2022) study of the visuality of young Muslims on Instagram, as within the gaming community religious expression is constructed not only through visual imagery, but through wordplay, spontaneity, and internal community symbols (Hasan, 2022; Meriläinen, 2022).

Another unexpected finding is that some gamers actually view the gaming community as a space where members look out for one another, rather than a space that completely distances them from religion. Participants' perspectives indicate that community members remind one another of prayer times, reprimand rude behaviour, and build solidarity following in-game conflicts. The authors' analysis suggests that stereotypes of gamers as a passive, addictive, or anti-social group need to be reconsidered. The study by Gandolfi et al. (2024) has demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between gaming communities and player well-being, whilst this research adds that such social well-being may possess a religious dimension if community norms are directed towards ethics, emotional control, and collective care (Gandolfi et al., 2024; Douglass et al., 2022).

Thus, this discussion affirms that gamified da'wah communication constitutes a scientific contribution that explains how Islamic values are negotiated through gaming culture, social interaction, community authority, humour, game symbols, and everyday digital practices. This research demonstrates that contemporary da'wah cannot be adequately understood merely as the dissemination of religious messages via digital media, but rather as a process of socially constructed meaning occurring within digital communities. The novelty of this research lies in the explanation that games are not merely a medium or object of da'wah, but a cultural space where religious values are produced, selected, adapted, and negotiated. Thus, this research broadens the scope of digital da'wah studies from a platform-centric approach towards a community-centred and culturally grounded approach (Larsson & Willander, 2025; Wahid, 2024; Krath et al., 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that gamified dakwah communication within the Muslim gaming community in Palopo is a process of religious communication shaped by social interaction, gaming culture, and the negotiation of meaning in both digital and offline spaces. Based on the results of ethnographic inquiry and iterative grounded theory data analysis, this study found that dakwah does not manifest as a linear transmission of normative messages, but rather as a social practice that is integrated into the rhythm of the gaming community. Emerging themes identified include informal religious communication, Islamic gaming ethics, community-based religious authority, the gamification of dakwah messages, and negotiation and resistance. These findings suggest that dakwah within the gamer community operates through reminders of worship, religious humour, gaming ethics, reprimands for toxic behaviour, the use of gaming terminology, and social legitimacy based on community closeness.

This study directly addresses the research objectives, namely to identify forms of da'wah communication within the gaming community, to explain the gamification mechanisms influencing message reception, and to formulate a conceptual model of digital da'wah relevant to the local Muslim gaming culture. Empirical evidence suggests that the reception of da'wah messages is determined not only by the religious content of the message, but also by social relationships, the legitimacy of the communicator, linguistic appropriateness, the timing of delivery, and the emotional atmosphere of the game. Thus, effective da'wah within the gamer community is not da'wah that judges or rejects gaming culture, but rather da'wah that is able to engage with the community's language, respect the identity of gamers, and negotiate Islamic values through the digital experiences they undergo.

The interpretative findings of this study confirm that the gaming community is not merely a space for entertainment, but a cultural space where religious values are produced, selected, adapted, and negotiated. The social interaction patterns emerging within the community demonstrate that Islamic values can be constructed through everyday practices such as minding one's speech, controlling emotions, respecting the team, reminding others of prayer times, and building solidarity. Cultural interpretation suggests that terms such as 'daily quest', 'cooldown', and 'AFK salat' serve not only as internal humour but also as symbols bridging religious meaning with the gaming experience. Thus, digital social practices within the Palopo gamer community form an informal religious space that is participatory, dialogical, and based on social trust.

The study reveals that the theory generated through grounded theory can be formulated into a core concept: gamified dakwah communication as a culturally negotiated process of Islamic meaning-making within gaming communities. This concept explains that digital dakwah within gaming communities does not operate through a top-down model, but through a relational process involving gaming culture, community authority, digital symbols, humour, social ethics, and the negotiation of Muslim identity. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the expansion of digital dakwah studies from a platform-based approach towards a community- and culture-based approach. Thus, this research enriches the literature on Islamic communication, digital culture, digital ethnography, and grounded theory by positioning gamers as active cultural actors in shaping religious meaning.

The empirical contribution of this research lies in revealing that local gaming communities in non-metropolitan cities such as Palopo possess complex religious dynamics that cannot be reduced to the stereotype that gaming always distances young people from religion. The novelty of this research lies in explaining that games are not merely a medium for da'wah or a moral object in need of correction, but rather a social space where da'wah can be creatively and contextually negotiated. Within the context of contemporary society and culture, this study emphasises that digital da'wah must move beyond the logic of content dissemination towards a deeper understanding of communities, interactions, language, and digital cultural practices. Thus, this study provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for the development of da'wah strategies that are more participatory, inclusive, and relevant to the digital lives of the younger generation of Muslims.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Based on the empirical findings that gamified da'wah communication within the Muslim gaming community in Palopo takes place through informal religious communication, Islamic gaming ethics, community-based authority, the gamification of da'wah messages, as well as negotiation and resistance to religious messages, the main practical recommendation of this study is the need to develop community-based digital da'wah strategies, rather than those based solely on content. Da'wah organisations and socio-religious institutions need to design stakeholder engagement programmes involving senior gamers, community moderators, young scholars, educators, and digital literacy activists as communication mediators. Such programmes could take the form of digital da'wah literacy classes for preachers, training in communication ethics within gaming communities, dialogue forums between gamers and scholars, and anti-toxic communication campaigns that utilise internal gamer terminology such as fair play, teamwork, cooldown, or daily quest. These evidence-based recommendations are crucial because the research findings indicate that religious messages are better received when conveyed through the community's own language, at the right time, within close social relationships, and using a non-judgmental communication style. Consequently, da'wah organisations must not merely produce

religious content on digital platforms, but must also understand the digital cultural practices prevalent within the gaming community, including humour, the rhythm of gameplay, team solidarity, and mechanisms of social reputation.

The policy implications of this research suggest that governments, educational institutions, gaming communities, and socio-religious institutions need to view gaming culture as a productive space for social intervention, rather than merely as a moral issue or passive entertainment. Local governments can use these findings to formulate community-based digital literacy policies, for example through programmes to foster digital creative communities, ethical gaming tournaments, and campaigns for a healthy digital space that integrate values such as anti-verbal violence, time management, and social solidarity. Educational institutions can develop digital-religious literacy modules that do not stigmatise gamers, but teach emotional control, communication ethics, time management, and social responsibility in the digital space. Gamer communities can establish internal codes of conduct based on socio-religious values, whilst clerics and preachers need to be trained to develop dialogical da'wah strategies that are sensitive to gaming culture. Such social intervention strategies have the potential to strengthen positive interactions between gaming culture and social-religious values, as research findings indicate that gaming communities possess the capacity to serve as spaces for meaning-making, solidarity, and the internalisation of values, provided that policy and da'wah approaches are developed in a participatory, contextual, and empirically grounded manner.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In terms of research quality, the use of field immersion, triangulation, analytical memos, and the constant comparative method strengthens the credibility of the findings. Nassaji (2020) emphasizes that good qualitative research must demonstrate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, while Ahmed (2024) emphasizes the importance of adequate engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, thick description, audit trails, and reflexivity. The author's analysis confirms that the validity of this study is not determined by statistical generalizations, but by the depth of interpretation and transparency of the analysis process. Therefore, the findings on gamified da'wah communication are contextual but can serve as a conceptual model for understanding similar phenomena in other Muslim gaming communities.

The limitations of this study lie in the scope of the location, the duration of immersion, and the diversity of participants. The focus on Palopo City makes the findings contextually rich, but they are not intended for universal generalization. The two-month observation period allows for in-depth initial understanding but does not fully capture long-term changes in gamer communication patterns. Furthermore, variations across gender, game types, and social classes still need to be explored. Future research should compare gaming communities across multiple cities, analyze the differences between competitive and casual gaming, and examine how gender influences the acceptance of Islamic preaching within gaming communities. These limitations are not substantive weaknesses, but rather contextual limitations that open up space for further theoretical development.

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