



A Cross-Generational Da'wah Strategy for Fostering an Understanding of Islam Among Generation Y and Generation Z in Aceh

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A B S T R A C T

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The transformation of da'wah media has become a central issue in the dynamics of religious life across generations in Aceh, especially between Generation Y (millennials) and Generation Z, which has not been seen in da'wah. The striking differences in the patterns of understanding and practising Islam between the two generations indicate communication challenges and the need for da'wah strategies to bridge these differences effectively. Generation Y tends to access Islamic teachings through traditional channels such as dayah and study religion, and adheres to the authority of local ulama. Meanwhile, Generation Z forms an understanding of Islam through social media, digital da'wah, and "relatable" religious figures, with a more contextual and personal approach. In Aceh, the shift in Gen Z's religious orientation is active in digital da'wah content and online Islamic discussions, while Gen Y is more dominant in conventional religious forums. However, this gap can cause polarization, even tension, if not facilitated by an inclusive and adaptive da'wah approach to the character of each generation. Using descriptive qualitative methods and a field study approach in urban and semi-urban areas in Aceh, this study focuses

on analyzing the effectiveness of da'wah media in uniting religious visions across generations. The study results found that the da'wah press, which combines traditional values with interactive digital formats, has greater reach and acceptance across generations. This study's novelty lies in submitting a collaborative da'wah model across generations that does not position generations as competitors but as partners in the ongoing process of interpreting Islam. This study is critical-constructive, emphasizing the importance of da'wah as a space for dialogue, not domination, to maintain socio-religious harmony amidst changing times.

Introduction

Aceh is known as the only province in Indonesia that formally applies Islamic Sharia law within its legal and governmental systems. This distinctive feature is not only enshrined in regulations but is also reflected in the culture, education and social life of the community, which is deeply rooted in Islamic values. The implementation of Sharia in Aceh serves as a symbol of collective identity and a moral foundation that shapes the character of the community, including in the practice of da'wah (proselytising), which takes place across various aspects of life, from mosques and Islamic boarding schools to local media.

However, amidst the tide of globalisation and the development of digital technology, the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh faces new challenges. Younger generations, particularly Generations Y and Z, exhibit patterns of religious practice that are more dynamic, individualistic, and connected to the digital world. In this context, da'wah in Aceh is required not only to preserve the authenticity of Sharia values but also to adapt to new patterns of communication in order to remain relevant and effective in guiding the faithful across generations.

Amidst the religious landscape, media for transforming da'wah has not yet been fully prioritized, particularly in addressing the differences in communication patterns and understanding between Generation Y and Generation Z in Aceh. These two generations live in different social ecosystems: Generation Y grew up alongside the early development of digital technology, while Generation Z has been immersed in the world of social media and algorithms from the start. Both have differing ways of receiving, processing, and responding to religious messages. The mismatch in the characteristics of da'wah approaches to each generation

has the potential to create a gap in understanding, even distorting Islamic values themselves.

The transformation of intergenerational religious outreach has become essential because changes in communication technology have altered the way believers—particularly the younger generations—access and understand religious teachings. Generations Y and Z no longer rely entirely on face-to-face sermons, but are more familiar with religious messages disseminated via social media, short videos, and interactive digital platforms. If da'wah does not adapt to this trend, Islamic messages risk losing their reach and influence amidst the fast-paced and pervasive digital landscape.

As a region known for its strong Islamic identity, Aceh faces a major challenge in ensuring the continuity of religious values across generations. Da'wah, which remains dominated by conventional methods such as live lectures, sermons, and religious study sessions in mosques, is often unable to reach or engage the younger generation, who are accustomed to short, visual, and interactive content. On the other hand, a few da'wah institutions have strategically re-examined da'wah media as a transformative tool across generations. Yet, the need for a new approach that is communicative, participatory, and relevant to the digital landscape has become an absolute necessity.

This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: to what extent have Islamic outreach media in Aceh transformed to address intergenerational challenges, and how effective are they in bridging the differences in Islamic understanding between Generation Y and Generation Z? This study stems from concerns regarding the lack of alignment between outreach strategies and the mindset and media preferences of these two generations. Using a qualitative approach and field data, this paper aims to unpack the dynamics of digital da'wah in Aceh, whilst offering a new perspective on the importance of reconstructing da'wah media that can serve as a space for dialogue and spiritual connectivity across generations.

This study aims to analyse how the transformation of Islamic outreach media in Aceh can bridge the differences in understanding of Islam between Generation Y and Generation Z, by exploring their respective communication patterns, media preferences and religious characteristics. Furthermore, this study seeks to formulate a contextual and adaptive model of digital da'wah, in order to strengthen intergenerational connectivity without neglecting the values of Sharia

and Acehnese local wisdom.

Various studies highlight the importance of transforming da'wah media in response to changing communication patterns among the Muslim community, particularly the younger generation. Fikriansyah emphasises that social media can broaden the reach of da'wah, but still faces challenges in maintaining the depth of the message (Fikriansyah et al., 2022). Hasan found that the younger generation is more interested in religious content that is visual, contextual and grounded in real life, although he has not specifically addressed the differences between Generation Y and Generation Z in the context of da'wah (Hasan, 2019).

Rahmat's research in Aceh highlights that Generation Z tends to access religious preaching via platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, whilst Generation Y prefers YouTube and online religious study forums (Rahmat, 2022). These differences in preference reflect the challenges of intergenerational da'wah, which have not yet been studied in depth, particularly in the context of Aceh as a region that implements Islamic Sharia law. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing how the transformation of da'wah media can serve as a bridge of understanding between two different generations, in the spirit of a moderate and adaptive Islam.

This research highlights the need to recognise that the role of the media is not merely to act as a channel for conveying messages, but also to shape the way people think, feel and respond to religious information (Levine & McLuhan, 1964). In the context of da'wah, media transformation refers to a shift from one-way communication towards interactive dialogue that is adapted to the digital culture (Prensky, 2001a). Generations Y and Z have different communication styles, so the approach to da'wah must be adapted to the way they interact with technology and information.

Using a sociological and da'wah communication approach, this study examines da'wah media as a space for the mediation of culture and spirituality across generations. Digital media is not merely a tool, but an ecosystem that reshapes religious authority, symbolic preferences and religious participation (Campbell, 2010). Therefore, an effective da'wah strategy depends not only on the content of the message, but also on the appropriateness of the medium and a communication style that is contextual to the realities of the current generation.

Literature Review

In the field of Islamic communication studies, da'wah is understood as a dynamic and adaptive process of communication that responds to changing times, including the shift from conventional methods such as lectures to interactive digital formats such as social media and podcasts (Munir, 2020). In line with McLuhan's (1964) notion that "the medium is the message", the media used for da'wah also determines the effectiveness of the message conveyed. The success of da'wah in the digital age is largely determined by the da'i's ability to understand the nature of the audience and select the appropriate media; consequently, an understanding of changes in the media landscape is key to designing a da'wah strategy that spans generations (Mutmainah, 2023).

Generation Y (millennials) and Generation Z have different characteristics when it comes to receiving information, communicating and practising their faith; Gen Y, born between 1981 and 1996, are 'digital immigrants' who have experienced the transition from the analogue to the digital era and tend to be adaptable (Brownstein, 2000), Meanwhile, as 'digital natives', Gen Z have lived within the ecosystem of the internet and social media from the very start; they access information more quickly but tend to be selective and individualistic in their understanding of religious issues (Prensky, 2001b).

Generation Z, born after 1997, are known as digital natives because they have been accustomed to digital technology and global connectivity from the very start of their lives (Prensky, 2001b), with a tendency towards multitasking, a visual focus, and a desire for quick and interactive information (Grace-Bridges, 2019); When it comes to religion, they tend to opt for a personal and practical approach via social media (Kring, 2018), unlike Generation Y, who experienced digitalisation gradually, this difference influences their preferences regarding religious outreach: Generation Z prefers short visual content such as videos and infographics, whilst Generation Y is more interested in online lectures and community study groups (Rahmat, 2022).

Understanding these two generations from a conceptual perspective is crucial when formulating a cross-generational da'wah strategy. Da'wah that fails to adapt to their cognitive characteristics and digital preferences risks becoming less effective. Therefore, the approach to da'wah in Aceh—as a region governed by Islamic Sharia law—must take the psychosocial and digital cultural aspects of these

two generations seriously, so that Islamic values remain relevant and accessible.

In the context of religious identity, Gen Z tends to express their Islamic identity through digital platforms using visual symbols and short narratives (Hasan, 2019). Meanwhile, Generation Y prefers institutional formats such as community study groups and online lectures; these differences call for a cross-generational da'wah strategy that takes into account intergenerational communication, the selection of appropriate media, and flexible, context-sensitive messaging, as digital media has now become a new space for interaction that shapes patterns of personal and collective religiosity (Campbell, 2010).

Rahmat's research shows that Generation Z in Aceh responds better to light-hearted, inspirational and visual forms of da'wah, whereas Generation Y tends to require an argumentative and dialogical approach (Rahmat, 2022). Consequently, da'wah strategies need to be adapted to prevent a gap in understanding of Islam; in the context of Aceh as a Sharia-governed region, the challenge for da'wah is to present a message that is globally relevant yet remains rooted in cultural values and Islamic principles, with Zulfikar emphasising the importance of the role of da'is and religious institutions in bridging Sharia norms with the dynamics of the media and the lifestyle of the digital generation (Zulfikar, 2023).

Generational Communication Theory explains that differences in birth years and historical experiences shape the communication styles of each generation, with Gen Y and Gen Z exhibiting distinct communication patterns due to the influence of digital media (Mannheim, 1952); Meanwhile, Rogers' Theory of Innovation Diffusion emphasises that the adoption of digital da'wah depends on the factors of superiority, compatibility and observability, whereby Gen Z, as early adopters, are quicker to embrace instant visual content, whilst Gen Y prefer da'wah that is substantive and structured; thus, these two theories form an important foundation for designing effective cross-generational da'wah strategies (Rogers, 2003).

In the sociology of da'wah, Mead and Blumer's theory of symbolic interaction emphasises that the meaning of religious communication is shaped through social interaction and symbols, making da'wah a process of negotiating meaning between the da'i and the congregation (Dr. H. Ahmad Sarbini, 2020); Together with generational communication theory and the theory of innovation diffusion, this framework helps to understand the differences in communication patterns, technology adoption and the construction of the meaning of da'wah by Gen Y

and Gen Z in the digital space, positioning da'wah as an adaptive, dynamic and contextual communication process.

In analysing intergenerational da'wah strategies, research findings indicating that Gen Z prefers visual and concise da'wah content, whilst Gen Y favours more argumentative and dialogical approaches, align with Generational Communication Theory, which emphasises that differences in historical experience and birth cohort shape distinct communication patterns across generations. Furthermore, the Theory of Innovation Diffusion is also relevant, whereby Gen Z, as early adopters, are quicker to embrace social media and digital content, whilst Gen Y require a more measured and substantial approach.

From the perspective of the sociology of da'wah, Symbolic Interactionism highlights the process of negotiating meaning in religious communication, a view reinforced by findings that Gen Z and Gen Y interpret religious symbols and the authority of religious scholars differently, particularly in the digital context. These three theories form a crucial foundation for understanding that effective da'wah must be adaptive to generational characteristics, adopt appropriate technologies, and be sensitive to the construction of religious meaning within constantly evolving social and digital contexts.

The implications of this research underscore the importance of cross-generational da'wah strategies that are adaptive and responsive to the differing communication characteristics of Generation Y and Generation Z. Digital media, as a space for both personal and collective religious interaction, requires da'is and da'wah institutions to adapt swiftly in selecting appropriate formats and media, so that da'wah messages can be effectively received by the younger generation. Furthermore, the Theory of Innovation Diffusion emphasises the need to tailor da'wah methods to each generation's stage of technology adoption, whereby Gen Z, as early adopters, are more open to digital media innovations, whilst Gen Y require a more mature and substantive approach.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach (Nassaji, 2015) to understand intergenerational da'wah strategies in fostering an understanding of Islam among Generations Y and Z in Aceh. The research will be conducted in areas where da'wah activities are prevalent, such as Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar,

over a three-month period (March–May 2025). The sample will be selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods, involving da'is, community leaders, and members of both generations who actively participate in da'wah activities both offline and online.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 15–20 informants, participatory observation of da'wah activities on social media and community studies, as well as documentation in the form of video recordings and digital da'wah content. Data analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) was carried out using thematic techniques, including transcription, coding and thematic grouping, accompanied by source triangulation and member checking to ensure the validity and accuracy of the data interpretation.

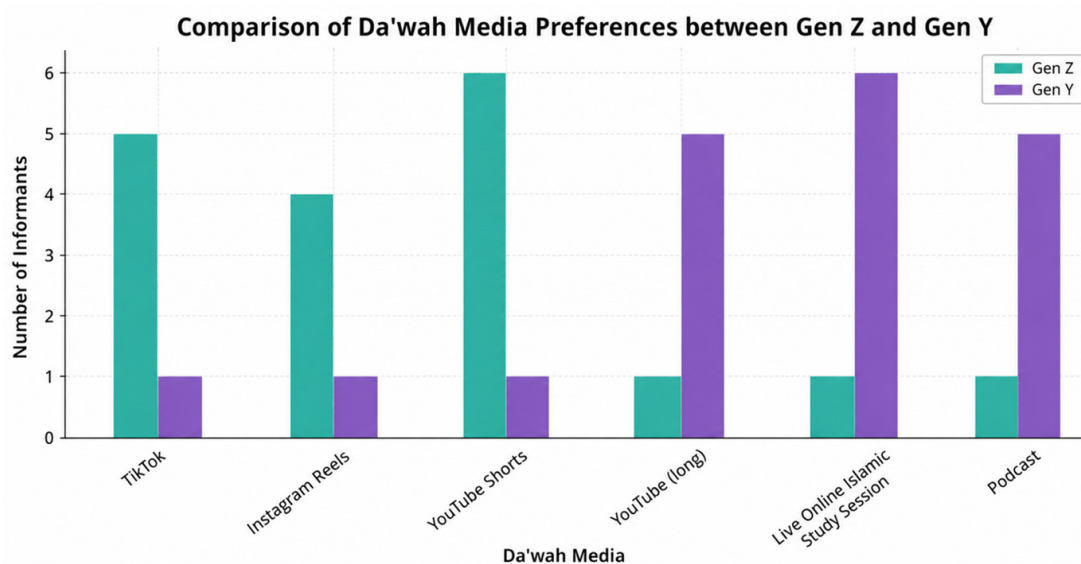
Results and Discussion

The results of in-depth interviews reveal striking differences in preferences for religious outreach media between Generation Z and Generation Y. Gen Z, comprising individuals aged 18–24, tends to favour fast-paced, visual and easily accessible platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. They prefer religious content that is concise, emotional and relatable to everyday life. Aisyah (20) said, “If it’s a one-hour sermon, I’ll skip it. But with a 1–3-minute video, the message goes straight to the heart.” (Jasafat, 2025b). This reflects Gen Z’s content consumption patterns, as they prefer religious messages that get straight to the point and do not require prolonged attention. This reinforces their position as digital natives who are accustomed to instant and visual information.

Conversely, Generation Y (aged 25–39) tends to access religious outreach through more in-depth media such as long-form YouTube videos, religious study podcasts, and offline community discussions. They tend to prefer an approach to religious outreach that is argumentative, structured, and open to dialogue. One informant, Muhammad (29), stated that two-way discussions or question-and-answer sessions during religious study sessions are crucial so that religious messages do not merely become a monologue, but can be critically examined (Jasafat, 2025b). This preference suggests that Generation Y seeks a logical and rational understanding of religious teachings, rather than merely an emotional presentation of moral values.

These differences can be analysed through the framework of Generational Communication Theory, which posits that an individual's historical experiences and the dominant media during their formative years significantly influence their communication patterns and how they receive messages. Gen Z has been shaped by an era of fast-paced, visually-driven social media, whilst Gen Y grew up during the transition from analogue to digital media, making them more adaptable to long-form content and text-based discussions. These findings suggest that da'wah strategies cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, but must be tailored to the media characteristics and needs of each generation.

Furthermore, observations of local religious content on TikTok and Instagram indicate that Gen Z tends to respond to religious symbols that are presented in a creative way and appeal to their emotions, such as 'one-minute sermons', animated depictions of the prophets' stories, and quotations from the Quran set to moving background music (Jasafat, 2025b). This approach provides evidence that Generation Z does not reject religious outreach, but rather seeks formats and symbols that are more communicative and participatory. This is consistent with Symbolic Interactionism, which holds that religious meaning is shaped through symbols and social interactions that are appropriate to the context of the message's recipients.



It is therefore clear that the differences in media preferences between Gen Z and Gen Y are not merely a matter of technology, but also reflect the way in which

each generation constructs meaning from religious messages. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of an adaptive approach to da'wah, namely combining visual elements for Gen Z with a discursive approach for Gen Y, whilst strategically utilising cross-platform media. For da'is and da'wah institutions in Aceh, it is important to design multi-format da'wah narratives so that Islamic values can be widely accepted across generations in a way that remains relevant, meaningful and contextual.

The graph above illustrates the differences in preferences for da'wah media between Gen Z and Gen Y, based on interview data from 18 informants. Gen Z tends to prefer fast-paced, visual and emotional media such as TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Conversely, Gen Y prefers longer and more in-depth content such as full-length YouTube videos, live online lectures and podcasts. These findings reinforce the results of previous interviews, which indicated that Gen Z prefers short, to-the-point content, whilst Gen Y appreciates da'wah content that is argumentative and reflective. This data serves as a crucial foundation for developing contextual and cross-generational da'wah strategies.

Based on observations and interviews, the meaning of da'wah for Gen Z does not always refer to formal sermons or the authority of traditional religious scholars. Instead, they more often interpret da'wah as a moral message, inspiration, or spiritual call conveyed through digital symbols such as short quotes, illustrations, or even Islamic-themed memes. One Gen Z informant, Raka (21), stated: "I feel more moved when I see da'wah content from ordinary people I can relate to, rather than necessarily from a religious scholar." (Jasafat, 2025b). This suggests that religious symbols are no longer confined to institutional representations, but can also emerge from social interactions and personal digital experiences.

Field research has also revealed that Generation Y still values conventional religious authority structures. They tend to follow the teachings of widely recognised religious scholars or figures, and judge the validity of a message based on the credibility of the speaker. Siti (34), a Gen Y informant, said: "I trust the teachings of Ustadz Abdul Somad or Ustadz Adi Hidayat more, because their knowledge has been proven." Conversely, Gen Z are more flexible and not overly bound by formal authority (Jasafat, 2025b). They are receptive to messages promoting Islam from influencers or peers, provided that these messages are moving and easy to understand, reflecting the fluid nature of symbolic processes in the digital space.

Visual media such as short videos, animations or attractively designed quotes hold great symbolic power for Gen Z. In some cases, they even quote or share religious content not because of its theological content, but because of its emotionally resonant aesthetics. In an observation of the da'wah account @hijrahvisual on Instagram, for example, content with light-hearted narratives and colourful graphics receives more engagement than content that is too long or has a dogmatic tone (Jasafat, 2025a). This reinforces the argument that meaning is formed through interaction, and that symbols (including visual symbols) play a key role in that process.

An interview with Ust. Hilmi (29), a young preacher active on social media, revealed that interactions via comments, private messages and live sessions are key tools in fostering a shared understanding of Islamic values. He said: "When I'm live, Gen Z often ask about small things, like how to form the intention for wudu or why we have to fast (Jasafat, 2025b). "From that, I realised they needed a safe and non-judgemental space for interaction." This demonstrates that da'wah is not merely a one-way communication, but a symbolic negotiation that takes place continuously in the digital space.

These findings suggest that the meaning of da'wah for the younger generation is shaped dynamically through symbols, interactions and personal digital experiences. Da'wah that relies solely on a normative approach without opening up space for dialogue will be difficult to accept, particularly by Gen Z. Therefore, da'wah strategies must take into account the construction of meaning built through digital symbols, emotional narratives, and participatory relationships between the da'i and the audience. The success of da'wah depends not only on the content of the message, but on the ability to understand the symbolic and social context in which the message is produced and received.

The following is a comparative table of Gen Z and Gen Y preferences regarding symbolic interaction and the meaning of da'wah, based on field data:

Aspect	Gen Z	Gen Y
The Meaning of Da'wah	Relatable visual and moral inspiration	Theological and argumentative message
Dawah Authority	Flexible; open to influencers who are not religious scholars	Institutional; respecting the authority of religious scholars
Favourite Content Formats	Short videos (1–3 minutes), memes, quotes	Online study sessions, structured lectures
Symbolic Media	Visuals, animation, digital aesthetics	Conventional religious symbols
Response to Visuals	Very positive; the visuals are emotionally moving	Positive if the visuals support the content
Response to the Long Narrative	Less responsive; tends to skip	Responsive; enjoys in-depth explanations
Social Interaction in Da'wah	Requires interactive features, such as comments and live chat	More comfortable with live Q&A sessions

The intergenerational approach to da'wah in Aceh is based on differentiating the communication styles and media used. For Generation Y (born 1981–1996), the most effective approach to da'wah is through live lectures, group study sessions, and in-depth narrative text content such as articles, da'wah books, or Friday sermons. Conversely, Gen Z (born 1997–2012) are more responsive to da'wah based on interactive digital media such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, da'wah podcasts, and short, communicative visual content. Ahmad Saidi, a Gen Z from Banda Aceh, stated: “I prefer short videos that get the message across straight away; long lectures can sometimes be boring.” (Jasafat, 2025b). This highlights the importance of using different media to convey the message of da'wah across generations.

An effective strategy for reaching both generations is the use of an emotional approach and humanistic language. Gen Y tends to appreciate philosophical da'wah narratives that touch upon the values of family life, work and social life. Meanwhile, Gen Z is more moved by da'wah that uses a light, empathetic and relatable style of language, as well as touching on personal experiences and existential anxieties. Tgk. Furqan, a young da'i from Aceh Besar, revealed that: “With Gen Z, I use a storytelling and humour-based approach. But with Gen Y, I focus on life's wisdom and responsibility.” (Jasafat, 2025b). This indicates that a successful da'wah strategy must be adaptable to the linguistic sensitivities and prevailing emotional values of each generation.

The success of cross-generational da'wah strategies is also largely determined by collaboration between platforms and communities. For example, a campus da'wah community at UIN Ar-Raniry has adopted a hybrid model: in-person religious study sessions followed by online educational content targeting Gen Z via Instagram Reels and TikTok. This approach facilitates the transfer of values from Gen Y, as the primary da'wah practitioners, to Gen Z, as the primary consumers of da'wah content. One of the organisers remarked: "We use offline da'wah as the 'foundation', but we break the content down for online use so it can be shared with Gen Z." This strategy enhances the effectiveness of message delivery whilst maintaining the continuity and context of the da'wah.

In intergenerational da'wah, the use of local symbols and Acehnese cultural identity serves as a key strategy for bridging understanding and strengthening shared values. Generation Y, who are more attached to narratives of history, local customs and Islam, appreciate da'wah that references classical Acehnese ulama, folk tales and local wisdom. Meanwhile, Generation Z are more interested in local cultural symbols that are packaged in modern visual forms, such as animations, Islamic memes, or da'wah vlogs themed 'Nanggroe Style'. One da'wah activist remarked: "Gen Z needs relatable icons, but if you slip in advice from Tgk Chik or quotes from Acehnese ulama, they'll still think it's cool as long as it's creatively packaged." This highlights the potential for harmonising tradition and creativity in intergenerational da'wah.

Although the above strategies have proven successful, challenges remain in the form of the digital divide, differences in mindset, and resistance to changes in da'wah methods amongst some Gen Y da'is. Several sources have highlighted the lack of technological training for senior preachers and the limited religious literacy of a more fragmented Gen Z. However, adaptive solutions are beginning to be implemented, such as digitalisation training for preachers at Islamic boarding schools and the mentoring of young preachers from the Gen Z cohort.

Conclusion

Intergenerational da'wah strategies have not yet adapted to the media characteristics and communication patterns of each generation, with Generation Y preferring a conventional and reflective approach, whilst Generation Z is more responsive to digital da'wah that is fast-paced, visual and personalised. These

differences necessitate strategic segmentation and the use of contextual and emotional da'wah language tailored to each group's experiences. The integration of conventional and digital methods through intergenerational collaboration is key to success, with hybrid da'wah models proven effective in bridging the differing learning and interaction styles across age groups.

An approach to da'wah that highlights the symbols and cultural identity of Aceh remains relevant across generations if it is presented creatively and adapted to the characteristics of the digital age, where Generation Y responds to historical values and local figures, whilst Generation Z is more receptive to similar messages through modern formats such as Islamic memes or vlogs in the local language. This demonstrates that the substance of da'wah need not be sacrificed for the sake of trends, but can instead be harmonised through adaptive symbolic innovation.

Intergenerational da'wah strategies in Aceh must prioritise flexibility, technological literacy, and sensitivity to local social and cultural conditions, as their success depends heavily on the da'is ability to craft messages that are communicative, relevant, and capable of reaching people of all ages. In this context, da'wah is not merely a medium for conveying teachings, but also functions as a cultural and spiritual agenda to ensure the continuity of Islamic values amidst rapid changes of the times, with an approach that takes into account media segmentation, communication styles, and the value preferences of each generation. This research has enriched the discourse on modern da'wah with a contextual and practical local-cultural perspective, whilst introducing a new approach that integrates traditional values with digital innovation.

The recommendation arising from this study is that it is important to provide training for da'is so that they become more proficient in using technology and social media to create da'wah content that appeals to the younger generation, particularly Gen Z. Furthermore, it is necessary to implement a da'wah model that combines traditional and digital methods so that the da'wah message can reach a wider audience whilst remaining meaningful. Dawah strategies must also be tailored to the characteristics and preferences of each generation, whilst reinforcing Acehnese cultural values in creative and modern ways. Finally, it is recommended that regular evaluations and further research be conducted to ensure that da'wah remains relevant and appropriate.

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