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***Dakwah* on Instagram and the Potential Application of ELM and Relevance Theory**

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ABSTRACT

*Instagram is popular in Indonesia, with 109.03 million users in a country with a population of 277,534,122 in 2023. It is the third most popular social media platform after Facebook and YouTube. The phenomenon of using *dakwah* on Instagram has gained significant attention in recent years, but it has yet to be studied using the fusion of Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Relevance Theory in Indonesia, which creates a research gap. Amongst the rise of social media platforms in Indonesia, according to previous studies, Instagram has become a popular platform for Muslims to engage in *dakwah*, which refers to the act of spreading Islamic teachings and inviting others to embrace Islam. The most attractive feature of Instagram is its great visual appeal and potential for engagement, which is attractive to young Muslims. This conceptual paper explores the possibility of using ELM and Relevance Theory as part of a conceptual framework for analysing *dakwah* content on Instagram from the perspective of young Indonesian users. ELM is a persuasive communication theory that seeks to understand how individuals process and respond to persuasive messages. Relevance Theory, on the other hand, focuses on the cognitive processes involved in communication and how the relevance of messages to users is determined. By applying both of these frameworks to the context of *dakwah* on Instagram, we can understand how persuasive messages are received and processed by Instagram users and how relevance is established in relation to Islamic messages.*

Keywords: *Dakwah, Instagram, social media, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Relevance Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Dakwah (religious propagation) denotes to invite or call to something that underscores the propagation of Islam (Meuleman, 2011). It is “*an activity that encourages others to follow Allah's commands and avoid His prohibitions*” (Hadi and Suharyat, 2022, p. 55). Shukri (2021) describes *dakwah* as a general term that signifies the propagation of the Islamic religion. It can be inferred that religious propagation generally refers to inviting, disseminating, and teaching religious knowledge, information, and good deeds to other people. In the case of *dakwah*, it is related to Islam. Traditionally, *dakwah* has been conducted through various means such as sermons, lectures, books, or personal interactions with individuals seeking knowledge about Islam. However, with the rapid development of the internet and various forms of new technology such as social media, religious propagation is provided with a new means to reach and disseminate religious messages. In this case, preachers from different religious communities who would like to disseminate religious messages are provided with a medium that is adjusted to the development and requirements of the people in this technological era.

Instagram is one such social media platform that is used for *dakwah* purposes. Since its launch on 6 October 2010, Instagram has rapidly gained popularity as a social media platform (Douglas et al.,

2019), attracting millions of users worldwide, including those in Indonesia. Its unique approach of sharing photos and short videos (Rejeb et al., 2022) has made it a preferred platform for various individuals and communities, including *dakwah* practitioners. In recent years, the use of Instagram for *dakwah* purposes has become increasingly prevalent, with practitioners utilising the platform to share Islamic content and engage with the wider audience, especially during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instagram accounts have been inspirational in spreading *dakwah* such that owned by a famous Indonesian female preacher, Oki Setiana Dewi (@okisetianadewi), who has 21.2 million followers on Instagram, in 2023 and @shaabb_muslim616, the preacher manages Ustaz Muntaga Hasyir (Febrina et al., 2021) who has 54.4 thousand followers in 2023. Instagram has also become the platform for Indonesian female Muslim youth to train each other in transforming themselves into virtuous Muslims, thus underscoring the use of the social media platform for *dawah* purposes (Nisa, 2018).

Instagram offers unique features that make it an ideal tool for *dakwah* purposes. Its visual nature allows for creative content creation through images and videos that can capture attention quickly (Casalo et al., 2021). Instagram's broad reach also enables practitioners to connect with diverse audiences globally. Instagram is popular in Indonesia, as in 2023, 109.03 million users are found in a country with a population of 277,534,122.

To effectively utilise Instagram as a platform for *dakwah*, it is crucial to understand the principles of persuasion and communication. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Relevance Theory are two theories that can be applied to the study of *dakwah* on Instagram by fusing them. Applying ELM and Relevance Theory to the study of *dakwah* on Instagram can provide valuable insights into creating persuasive and relevant content that effectively engages and influences the target audience.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The theoretical framework for a study could be mainly based on ELM developed by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo in 1981, with Relevance Theory playing an extended role. ELM explains different routes undertaken in processing stimuli, why they are used, and their outcomes on attitude change. ELM is one of the most commonly used theories in the studies of persuasive communication as it posits how and why message recipients elaborate on the persuasive messages they encounter (Polacek, 2012).

This model proposes two major persuasion routes: the central and the peripheral. Central route processing occurs when individuals are motivated and can engage in deep, thoughtful message processing. This type of processing is more likely to occur when individuals have a high level of involvement or personal relevance and the ability to process the message being conveyed. On the other hand, peripheral route processing occurs when individuals rely on heuristic cues, such as the attractiveness or credibility of the source, to make judgments about the message (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Elaboration is defined as the extent to which people consider a message's arguments as being relevant (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). It refers to how much effort people have to make to process and evaluate a message, remember it, and then accept or reject it (Geddes, 2016). Elaboration is the initial and often the most critical step in determining whether attitude change occurs via the central or peripheral route (Petty and Wegener, 1999). People in a state of high elaboration tend to engage in thoughtful processing of an informational message, i.e. they are more persuaded by argument quality

than by peripheral cues. On the other hand, people who are in a state of low elaboration (lacking the ability or motivation to engage in thoughtful processing) tend to be persuaded by peripheral cues such as visual appeals (Taylor et al., 2020).

When people use the central route, they are more influenced by the rationality of the message (if the argument of the message is well-reasoned, well-supported, etc.). Therefore, people use more thought to critically elaborate the quality of the arguments in the message and relate these arguments to relevant information stored in their memory. When people use the central route, they will elaborate on new information using their prior knowledge and experience and then decide whether to change their attitude (Petty et al., 2002). If people are not motivated or able to engage in message elaboration through the central route, they will use the peripheral route. When messages are elaborated through the peripheral route, people are more influenced by emotional appeals such as the attractiveness or credibility of its source, accompanying music or images. Elaboration through the peripheral route requires less cognitive effort, but elaboration through the central route results in longer-lasting persuasive influence (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

The level of people's motivation and/or ability helps determine the pathway to elaboration of a message. If people are motivated and pay attention to the message, then the central route of persuasion is applied. Several factors influence people's motivation and ability to think about the message, such as time constraints, knowledge of the issue, mood, and repetition (Petty and Wegener, 1999). To apply the central route, people must also be able to think and not be distracted. The peripheral route is applied if there are too many distractions when encountering the message. As mentioned, the central route depends on motivation and the strength or quality of arguments presented in a message. Meanwhile, the peripheral route depends on peripheral cues such as the attractiveness or credibility of the message source.

To illustrate, concerning advertising which is similar to the orientation of *dakwah* messages, a person who is about to purchase a new fridge (is highly involved) would closely examine the advertising messages on the fridge if this information were 'cogent and persuasive' favourable attitudes will be the outcome, but if the information were weak, then unfavourable attitudes will result on the central route however, a person who is not considering purchasing a new fridge (has low involvement) would not pay attention to the information in the ad but focus on the "attractiveness, credibility or prestige of the products' endorser" which are peripheral cues that could also shape attitudes nevertheless (Cacioppo and Petty, 1983).

It is also necessary for the message to have good-quality arguments if the central route is to be applied. Message recipients can be more persuaded when arguments are strong and of good quality (Petty et al., 1983). Conversely, weak arguments can still be helpful if message recipients are already familiar with the topic and the arguments match an existing attitude. This is because weak arguments can still help message recipients retrieve their own stored information about the topic and think about it, which can lead to increased persuasion (El Hedli and Zourrig, 2023).

The study of peripheral cues about the elaboration of a message is essential because peripheral cues can also affect attitude (Petty et al., 1983). When message recipients do not have the motivation or ability to engage in a message, they will use the peripheral route. Peripheral cues can also affect attitude due to their ability to prompt other associations in the minds of the message recipients (Wu and Shaffer, 1987). Attitudes of the message recipients can be formed or changed by using specific persuasive peripheral cues such as attractive images. Peripheral cues could affect attitudes if message

recipients cannot elaborate using the central route due to a lack of motivation or ability (i.e. due to distractions) or a lack of personal relevance (Shahi et al., 2021).

Previous Studies on Dakwah and ELM

Dakwah on Instagram can take various forms, such as posts in Islamic visuals. Incorporating messages from the Qur'an and Hadith with visuals that are emotionally appealing can be seen as a way to grab the attention of users when scrolling through Instagram posts because it is the perfect motivating force to encourage them to explore the religious propagation in greater detail and be persuaded by the messages shared.

There have been several studies on using visuals or symbols within a religious context. However, the studies that used ELM as a theoretical framework were mostly found in advertising.

A few studies regarded Islamic or Christian symbols as peripheral cues (Azhari and Oktavia, 2019; Dotson and Hyatt, 2000). A study by Nuzulfah et al. (2019) regarded *halal* logos as peripheral cues and appeared to have regarded the argument quality of halal products as a central cue. Hasan et al. (2016) labelled the hijab symbol as a central cue because of the high involvement of respondents with the Islamic symbol in the ads.

The degree of religiosity of the sample was taken into consideration when examining responses to advertisements with religious cues by Dotson and Hyatt (2000) as they used a sample of highly dogmatic respondents, but it appears that the degree of product involvement affected consumers' attitude to the brand more than the religious symbol of the cross even for highly dogmatic consumers that marginally affected their attitude to the ad for high involvement product consumers. Hasan et al. (2016) indicated that their sample was Muslim women without mentioning their religiosity. Azhari and Oktavia (2019) used *hijabers* (women who wore hijab) and *non-hijabers* (women who did not wear hijab) in their study to measure their perception of ads with Islamic symbols. Nuzulfah et al. (2019) also used Indonesian Muslim consumers as their sample without mentioning their religiosity.

When it came to the findings, most of the studies examined found that the sample positively perceived the brands and advertisements with religious symbols or cues.

Dotson and Hyatt (2000) performed a study using ELM on consumers' responses to advertisements with the Christian cross. It was found that respondents who were lowly involved in the product and who were highly dogmatic had a negative attitude toward the brand that used ads with a Christian cross symbol, whereas those who were more highly involved in the product had their interest in the ad containing the cross increased albeit in a marginal way.

Hasan et al. (2016) conducted a study using ELM to examine the role of Islamic symbols in television advertisements regarding consumer involvement, attitude and purchase intent. The study revealed that consumers were highly involved in advertisements that displayed Islamic symbols such as the '*hijab*', regarded as a central cue that generated a positive attitude towards the advertisements. The results also indicated that Islamic symbols positively influenced consumers' purchase intent. They mentioned, "Although ELM explains that peripheral cues work better in low involvement situations, yet central cues play a significant role in information processing regardless of the level of involvement", as found by the study (Hasan et al., 2016).

A study by Azhari and Oktavia (2019) examined the use of Islamic symbols in an advertisement, i.e., a halal logo and a model wearing the *hijab*. Using an ELM framework, the researchers found a fundamental difference between women who wore the *hijab* and those who did not regard how they perceived advertisements that used Islamic symbols. Women who wore the *hijab* were more likely to try new products compared to those who did not wear the *hijab*. The two Islamic symbols, *hijabers* talent and the *halal* logo, related well with *hijabs* but were regarded as peripheral cues by the researchers.

Nuzulfah et al. (2019) conducted a study using ELM to examine the role of Islamic symbols, i.e., the halal logo, on food products and how consumers responded to the religious symbol displayed. As shown by the study, the sample of Indonesian Muslim consumers had a positive attitude toward halal food products when producers used religious symbols in their product descriptions compared to when no such symbols were included. Regarding argument quality, the analysis depicts that “strong argument quality does not make consumer attitudes toward halal food products significantly different from the quality of weak argument” (Nuzulfah et al., 2019).

Overall, sacred symbols like religious symbols must be used sensitively to associate religious symbols with pet food or products that may not be appropriately associated with sacred symbols, which can lead to adverse effects (Dotson and Hyatt, 2000). Apart from ELM, another theory that could be useful in analysing the topic of *dakwah* on Instagram is Relevance Theory. The following section elaborates further on this.

Relevance Theory

In addition to ELM, ideas from Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986), the founders of Relevance Theory, are included in this paper. Relevance Theory is a pragmatic approach to communication that focuses on the cognitive processes involved in understanding and interpreting information (Wilson and Sperber, 2004). Relevance Theory is a psychological model for understanding the cognitive interpretation of language (Al-Hindawi and Abdulmajeed, 2016).

The basic idea of Relevance Theory is that all human communication is driven by relevance (Blakemore, 1992; Huang, 2012; Wilson and Sperber, 2004). People prefer to focus on the most important phenomena in their lives and process them according to their relevance. Human cognition depends on relevance, and relevance should be maximised (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). From the audience's perspective, paying attention to a type of communication is not worthwhile unless there is information worth processing or, to put it another way, it is relevant (Rezk, 2021). Relevance Theory suggests that communication is successful when the communicated information is deemed relevant to the recipient's cognitive context (Perry, 2015).

The definition of relevance considers both the ‘contextual effect’ and the ‘processing effort’ of information (Wilson and Sperber, 2004). Contextual effects are how new information can interact with the audience’s existing contextual assumptions, resulting in a more accurate understanding of the world. These are not limited to new assumptions created from combining new information with contextual assumptions; they can also involve additional evidence for current assumptions or even the deletion of existing assumptions. The processing effort required is the audience’s effort when accessing and utilising contextual assumptions throughout deriving contextual effects (Blakemore, 1992; Sperber and Wilson, 1995).

Accordingly, the degree to which something is relevant is up for debate. The degree to which

an individual is influenced by information is a delicate balancing act between the cognitive effects produced by the information and the mental effort required to process it. The greater the cognitive effects produced, the more relevant the information becomes; conversely, the greater the mental effort required to process it, the less relevant the information becomes (Allott, 2013).

The concept of relevance has been used by scholars in different literature, such as in marketing literature. In marketing literature, there is a term called Subjective Relevance. Research into relevance in the subjective context considers how meaningful an individual finds the details of an advertisement (Lastovicka, 1983). Subjective relevance is determined by the degree to which a given person finds the content of an advertisement to be of interest to them (Petty et al., 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). Relevance influences a person's motivation levels because if a person is interested in a topic, he or she will be more willing to elaborate on it. If the topic is relevant to the audience, he or she will usually spend more time elaborating. The more time spent elaborating on a topic, the more relevant it becomes.

Previous Studies on *Dakwah* and Relevance Theory

There have been few studies on *dakwah* that have used Relevance Theory as a theoretical framework. One study by Awad and Qasim (2019) analysed the use of the Relevance Theory on Friday Khutba, a form of Islamic preaching that takes place during Friday prayers in mosques. The researchers examined how *khatibs* (preachers) on Friday *Khutba* maximised the relevance of their topics to the audience while minimising cognitive processing efforts, making it easier for them to process the information. Findings from the study suggest that Relevance Theory can be a useful framework for analysing communication effectiveness in religious contexts, specifically on Friday *Khutba* messages.

The researchers argue that preachers must carefully choose relevant and exciting topics for their audience while also minimising the cognitive effort required to process the information, as this would make people listen better. They provide examples of effective *Khutbas* and analyse the rhetorical strategies used by preachers. The study also highlighted the importance of the cultural context and the role of the media in shaping audience expectations. Overall, the researchers suggested that effective communication in religious contexts requires a deep understanding of the audience's needs and interests, and careful attention should be given when choosing rhetorical strategies and including the cultural context.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Application of ELM to Religious Contexts

ELM is a theoretical framework that explains how individuals process persuasive messages and make decisions based on the central or peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979, 1986). When applied to *dakwah* on Instagram, ELM offers valuable insights into how individuals engage with and respond to religious messages disseminated through Instagram. When individuals are exposed to *dakwah* messages on Instagram, ELM suggests that they will process these messages through either the central or peripheral routes. This is dependent on their motivation (personal relevance and need for cognition) and ability to process the messages (argument quality and initial attitude) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) in the case of messages with Islamic symbols. The central route refers to deep and careful message processing, where individuals critically evaluate the content and arguments presented. In contrast, the peripheral route involves a more superficial message processing, where individuals rely on heuristics or mental shortcuts to form their attitudes and make decisions using peripheral cues

such as source credibility.

Using ELM in the context of *dakwah* on Instagram can provide insights into effectively communicating religious messages to increase the likelihood of individuals engaging with and internalising these messages. By understanding which route individuals are likely to take when processing *dakwah* messages on Instagram, religious leaders and organisations can tailor their content and strategies to maximise their impact and effectiveness. Individuals highly involved and motivated to pay attention to the messages due to their religious beliefs are more likely to process *dakwah* messages through the central route. They are more willing to carefully evaluate the arguments and evidence presented, resulting in a stronger impact on attitude change and behaviour. There could be positive or negative shifts in attitude.

On the other hand, less involved or motivated individuals may rely more on peripheral cues, such as the popularity of a post or the source's reputation, to form their attitudes and make decisions. Therefore, religious leaders and organisations should consider utilising peripheral cues strategically to enhance the persuasiveness of their *dakwah* messages for this type of audience. The use of peripheral cues, such as influential endorsers or appealing visuals, can capture the attention and interest of individuals who may have yet to be motivated to engage with the *dakwah* message. Utilising the ELM on Instagram can help religious leaders and organisations identify the factors that influence individuals' motivation to engage with *dakwah* messages and understand how individuals process *dakwah* messages through either the central or peripheral route.

Application of Relevance Theory

Another theory that could be useful in analysing the *dakwah* on Instagram is the Relevance Theory. This theory could be applied to *dakwah* on Instagram to explore how users perceive and interpret the content shared by *dakwah* practitioners and how they engage with it. By analysing the factors that contribute to the relevance of *dakwah* content on Instagram, Relevance Theory can provide insights into the effectiveness of this platform as a medium for spreading Islamic messages and engaging with an audience. These factors include the alignment between the content of the *dakwah* message and the interests and needs of the target audience.

One aspect of Relevance Theory that can be applied to *dakwah* on Instagram is the concept of cognitive context. Cognitive context refers to recipients' background knowledge, beliefs, and expectations that influence their understanding and interpretation of communication (Wilson and Sperber, 2004). The scholars also claim from the relevance-theoretic perspective that “an input is relevant to a person when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect” (p. 608). Relevance Theory helps to explore the factors that affect users' judgments of relevance in *dakwah* content shared on Instagram. This includes examining how users' cognitive context, such as their beliefs and expectations, influence their interpretation of *dakwah* messages.

Relevance Theory can help in understanding how *dakwah* messages on Instagram are perceived and evaluated by users. By analysing the cognitive effort required to process the content and its cognitive effect on the audience, we can determine whether the *dakwah* messages are perceived as relevant and meaningful.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this conceptual paper can be used by fusing ELM and Relevance Theory

in a way where personal relevance, which is part of the motivation in ELM (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) is detailed further by Relevance Theory that encompasses the influence of the cognitive context on people's interpretations of messages in the form of users' beliefs and expectations, which explains how these influence their interpretation of *dakwah* messages thus making the input relevant to them (Wilson and Sperber, 2004).

When individuals are exposed to *dakwah* messages on Instagram, ELM suggests that they will process these messages through either the central or peripheral routes. This is dependent on their motivation (personal relevance and need for cognition) amounting to high involvement and the ability to process the messages (in terms of whether they are distracted) with positive answers to these aspects leading to the adoption of the central processing route that is affected by argument quality and initial attitude. Yet, audiences that have low personal relevance of the *dakwah* posts leading to the peripheral route should also be considered by preachers by using cues (heuristics and source credibility) that would affect their attitudes to the post and Islam positively.

Recommendations for Practitioners Employing Relevance Theory and ELM in Instagram-based *Dakwah*

1. Optimise the learning experience, employ the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and strategically use the central processing (e.g., persuasive language in captions) and peripheral processing (aesthetically pleasing images) in *dakwah* messages. This dual-process strategy accommodates the varied preferences of the audience and amplifies the overall influence of *dakwah* content on Instagram.
2. Adapt Content to the Needs and Interests of the Audience. Implement Relevance Theory by comprehensively understanding target audiences' interests and requirements. Adapt *dakwah* material to correspond with these inclinations, guaranteeing its continued pertinence to their everyday existence. Personalised approaches have been found to increase engagement and resonance among followers.
3. Leverage Storytelling Techniques. Effectively communicate *dakwah* messages through the implementation of narrative strategies in content creation. By increasing the content's relatability and facilitating both central and peripheral processing, storytelling amplifies the memorability and impact of the messages.
4. Employ Audience Surveys and Feedback Sessions: Constantly mass audience insights via Instagram surveys and feedback sessions. By utilising this approach, professionals can refine their content strategies to the ever-changing preferences and expectations of the target audience by utilising insightful data.
5. Engage in Collaborations with Community Leaders and Influencers: Foster partnerships with prominent individuals within the Islamic community or Instagram influencers who espouse comparable principles. These collaborations could expand the dissemination of *dakwah* messages and bolster their credibility. Ensure that collaborations adhere to Relevance Theory and ELM principles.
6. Assess Engagement Metrics: Observe and evaluate Instagram metrics of user interactions, likes, remarks, and shares. Evaluate the efficacy of content in stimulating central and peripheral processing by employing analytics tools. Considering insights derived from data analysis, adapt

strategies to maximise their impact.

7. Foster Interactivity and User Engagement. Incorporate interactive components, such as polls, quizzes, or open-ended inquiries, into posts to encourage user engagement. By doing so, adherents are encouraged to participate, their central processing is stimulated, and they develop a sense of community.
8. Uphold consistency in messaging and visual identity throughout all *dakwah* content. Consistency contributes to the overall communication strategy's coherence and cohesion by fostering a recognisable brand identity.
9. Maintain Knowledge of Platform Trends and Updates. Maintain awareness of Instagram developments and emerging trends. Adjust *dakwah* strategies in a corresponding manner to take advantage of emerging user behaviours and new functionalities. Adopting this proactive approach follows the principles of relevance and serves to augment the efficacy of the platform for *dakwah*'s objectives.
10. Encourage Academic Researchers to Collaborate. Cultivate partnerships with scholars conducting research in Islamic communication and social media. Interacting with scholars can grant practitioners access to state-of-the-art research, enhanced understanding, and prospects to make scholarly contributions concerning efficacious *dakwah* strategies on Instagram.

CONCLUSION

Dakwah, or the act of spreading Islamic teachings, has evolved with the advancement of technology. One platform that has gained immense popularity for *dakwah* is Instagram. With its wide reach and user-friendly interface, Instagram provides a unique opportunity to engage with a diverse audience and promote Islamic values. However, the effectiveness of *dakwah* on Instagram can be enhanced by applying theories such as ELM and Relevance Theory.

ELM suggests that individuals process information through two routes: central and peripheral. By incorporating this model into *dakwah* on Instagram, content creators can strategically design posts that appeal to both routes. For instance, using persuasive language in captions can stimulate central processing, while visually appealing images attract peripheral processing.

Additionally, Relevance Theory emphasises the importance of relevance in communication. When applied to *dakwah* on Instagram, it implies that content should be tailored to the interests and needs of the target audience. By understanding their preferences and concerns, *dakwah* accounts can deliver messages more likely to resonate with the audience.

By utilising ELM and Relevance Theory in *dakwah* on Instagram, we can maximise their potential impact. This approach ensures that content is not only visually appealing but also intellectually stimulating for users who are actively seeking knowledge about Islam. Moreover, by making content relevant to their daily lives and addressing their concerns directly, we increase the chances of users engaging with the material and implementing Islamic teachings in their lives.

Dakwah on Instagram has immense potential for spreading Islamic teachings effectively. By applying theories like ELM and Relevance Theory in designing content for this platform, we can further enhance its impact. This will enable us to engage a wider audience with varying interest levels

in Islam while ensuring that our message remains relevant and meaningful to them.

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