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Embodied Presence and Hybrid Strategies: Kiai Kampung's Political Communication in Rural Madurese Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of embodied presence and hybrid strategies in Kiai Kampung's political communication within the context of rural Madurese village democracy. Focusing on the village head election (pilkades) in Kerta Barat Village, Sumenep, Madura, the research explores how these informal religious leaders combine physical presence with selective digital tools to construct persuasive messages, build social-religious networks, and mobilize community support.

Employing a qualitative descriptive approach through prolonged observation and in-depth interviews with three influential Kiai Kampung, the candidates, and villagers, this study reveals that embodied presence remains the dominant and most effective instrument of political influence. The findings show that Kiai Kampung skillfully transform routine religious activities such as pengajian, tahlilan, and silaturahmi into primary mobilization platforms. While Kiai Matbaki relied heavily on intensive face-to-face "gerilya" communication, Kiai Abdul Gani demonstrated a hybrid approach by integrating traditional methods with limited digital engagement, and Kiai Ramidi emphasized ethical-consultative communication.

Moral legitimacy and the strong rejection of money politics emerged as decisive factors that outweighed formal education and incumbent advantages. This research highlights the enduring superiority of embodied presence while illustrating how hybrid strategies are being selectively adopted to engage different segments of the community, particularly the youth. Even in the post-2024 democratic landscape, traditional relational authenticity continues to anchor political communication in Madura, with digital tools serving only as supplementary channels.

Theoretically, the study contributes to understanding the hybrid nature of political communication where embodied presence and charismatic authority maintain dominance in rural settings. Practically, it offers insights for stakeholders on engaging kiai kampung constructively to strengthen ethical and participatory village democracy in Indonesia.

Keywords: Embodied Presence, Hybrid Communication Strategy, Kiai Kampung, Political Communication, Village Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The involvement of religious leaders, particularly kiai, in practical politics is a persistent feature of Indonesia's democratic landscape. From the national level to the most localized village settings, kiai have continuously demonstrated their capacity to influence political processes through moral authority, extensive social networks, and deeply rooted religious legitimacy. In many rural communities, this influence becomes especially visible during electoral contests, where traditional religious figures often serve as key mobilizers of public support, opinion shapers, and mediators between formal political actors and ordinary citizens. Such dynamics reflect the deep intertwining of religious authority with everyday political life in Muslim-majority societies characterized by strong patron-client relationships, communal solidarity, and culturally embedded forms of leadership.

In the Indonesian context, a clear distinction exists between Kiai Sepuh, who typically led large Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and exert influence at broader regional or national scales, and The Kiai Kampung, who manage smaller prayer houses such as langgar or musholla at the village level. While Kiai Sepuh often engages in macro-level political discourse and organizational leadership within

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Kiai Kampung plays an indispensable role at the grassroots level. They function not only as spiritual guides and educators but also as social mediators who listen to villagers' aspirations, resolve local disputes, transmit religious knowledge, and provide moral guidance in daily life. Their leadership is deeply embedded in the socio-religious fabric of rural society, particularly in regions like Madura, where Islamic traditions have historically blended with local cultural values to produce a distinctive form of charismatic authority (Suryanto et al., 2023). This charismatic authority stems from a combination of religious expertise, personal moral reputation, and close everyday interactions with the community, making The Kiai Kampung highly effective in shaping both religious practices and secular decisions, including political preferences.

Madura offers a particularly rich and unique setting for examining these phenomena. The island's social structure is strongly shaped by genealogical lineage, moral reputation, adherence to Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah ideology, and strong organizational ties to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Historical processes of cultural acculturation between Madurese and Javanese traditions have reinforced a leadership pattern that combines elements of traditional respect with robust communal bonds rooted in pesantren culture. In this environment, the Kiai Kampung are not merely religious instructors; they function as central figures in social mobilization, community decision-making, conflict resolution, and the reproduction of local values. Their opinions frequently carry significant weight in both religious and secular matters because they are perceived as guardians of moral order and representatives of divine guidance in everyday life. This positions them as strategic actors capable of influencing public attitudes and behaviors, including electoral choices, especially in rural areas where formal political institutions may be perceived as distant or less trustworthy than local religious figures.

The concrete manifestation of this influential role became particularly evident in the village head election (pilkades) held in Kerta Barat Village, Dasuk Subdistrict, Sumenep Regency. The contest featured two strong candidates from respected families with kiai lineage: Muhlis and Fauzan. Muhlis, widely known for his closeness to the community and effective grassroots engagement, ultimately secured victory by skillfully utilizing the communication networks of several influential Kiai Kampung. In contrast, Fauzan experienced defeat despite his superior formal education and incumbent backing. Preliminary data suggest that Muhlis's victory was not merely a matter of popular appeal but was driven by a strategic alliance, facilitated through the communication networks of influential Kiai Kampung, which proved more effective than formal political machinery.

These local figures played a pivotal role in delivering persuasive messages, building social-religious alliances, and conducting face-to-face mobilization through routine religious gatherings such as pengajian, tahlilan, and silaturahmi, and consistently emphasizing moral values such as integrity, the rejection of money politics, and the promotion of harmonious politics (politik sejuk) to maintain communal stability. These findings illustrate how political communication at the village level in Madura remains heavily contingent on traditional relational and symbolic channels rooted in personal trust, moral legitimacy, and repeated face-to-face interactions, rather than relying solely on modern campaign methods or digital platforms.

Although existing scholarship has addressed the political roles of kiai in Indonesia, significant gaps persist that underscore the urgency of further empirical investigation. Several studies have examined the authority of The Kiai Kampung in constructing local Islamic practices and shaping community norms and behavior (Setiyani, 2020). Others have explored the broader social functions of village kiai as significant others who influence social relations and cultural values in rural Madurese society (Suryanto et al., 2023). Additional works have analyzed kiai involvement in regional elections or as direct political actors, including the transformation of kiai leadership from primarily religious educators toward more active political roles in Madura (Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024; Khoiri et al., 2024). Some research has also focused on expressions of moderation among the Kiai Kampung in responding to national political dynamics, particularly in the Pandalungan region of East Java (Husni, 2024).

Despite these contributions, there remains a paucity of qualitative research that scrutinizes the micro-dynamics of the Kiai Kampung acting specifically as primary political communicators for village head candidates. Limited attention has been given to the detailed strategies they employ, such as the clear dominance of face-to-face interactions, the sophisticated integration of moral and religious messaging

into everyday discourse, the careful management of social-religious networks, and the still-supplementary role of social media in the highly localized and culturally embedded context of pilgrimages.

Furthermore, how competing messages from multiple kiai within the same village may generate fragmentation of support or confusion among voters deserves deeper empirical scrutiny, especially in settings where voters often follow the guidance of their most trusted kiai without critical comparison. These gaps highlight the research urgency of the present study, particularly as Indonesia continues to strengthen village-level democracy through direct elections while traditional religious authorities dynamically interact with formal electoral mechanisms. In many rural Muslim communities, the persistence of charismatic religious leadership amid modernization raises important questions about the nature of grassroots democracy, the sources of political legitimacy, and the potential for both cohesion and division created by overlapping moral authorities. A deeper, context-rich understanding of these processes is therefore essential not only for academic scholarship but also for practical efforts to foster more inclusive, transparent, and participatory local democratic practices.

This study is also motivated by the need to transcend macro-level analyses of kiai politics toward more grounded, village-level investigations. Most previous research tends to focus on Kiai Sepuh or regency-level elections (pemilukada), leaving the everyday political communication practices of the Kiai Kampung in pilkades relatively underexplored. Consequently, the current research addresses this empirical gap by providing detailed evidence from direct observation and in-depth interviews conducted in a single village setting. Such a micro-level focus is crucial because village elections represent the most basic unit of Indonesian democracy, where traditional authority structures often exert stronger influence than formal party machinery or national campaign narratives (Topan & Pratiwi, 2024).

Accordingly, this research seeks to elucidate the intricate political communication practices of Kiai Kampung during the village head election in Kerta Barat Village. Specifically, it examines how these figures operationalize social-religious networks and craft persuasive messages through traditional face-to-face methods. By employing a qualitative descriptive approach supported by direct observation and in-depth interviews, the research provides a holistic and nuanced portrayal of this culturally and religiously rich phenomenon.

In the context of this study, 'kiai kampung' is operationally defined as informal religious leaders who oversee small-scale prayer facilities (langgar or musholla) and maintain intensive daily interactions with villagers through religious teaching, social mediation, and community presence. Meanwhile, "political communication" encompasses the processes of formulating, transmitting, negotiating, and reinforcing political messages through moral, symbolic, relational, and occasionally digital channels in order to influence voting behavior and political attitudes within the local community. The findings of this study are expected to offer fresh empirical contributions to the fields of political communication and the sociology of religion in Indonesia.

Practically, the results may assist policymakers, election organizers, village governments, and community leaders in better understanding the mechanisms of grassroots democracy in traditional Muslim societies and in designing interventions that promote more rational and participatory political engagement. Theoretically, the study enriches ongoing discussions on the persistence and adaptation of charismatic religious authority amid processes of modernization and democratization at the village level, contributing to broader debates about the role of informal leaders in contemporary democratic systems.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative descriptive research is highly appropriate when the aim is to provide a rich, straightforward, and context-specific account of participants' experiences and practices as they naturally occur in their real-life settings (Adlini et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2020). This approach enables the researcher to capture the complexity of political communication practices conducted by The Kiai Kampung without imposing rigid theoretical frameworks from the outset. It allows symbolic meanings, persuasive strategies, moral dimensions, relational dynamics, and culturally embedded practices to emerge organically from the data collected in

the field.

In the field of political communication, particularly studies involving traditional religious leaders in rural and culturally embedded communities, qualitative descriptive designs have proven effective in uncovering layered actor strategies, audience interpretations, power relations, and the interplay between moral authority and electoral behavior (Chalik et al., 2024). The design follows the interpretive paradigm, prioritizing thick description and holistic understanding of how the Kiai Kampung utilize face-to-face interactions, social-religious networks, moral messaging, and routine religious activities to influence voting behavior and community political attitudes during the village head election (pilkades).

This choice of design is also consistent with previous qualitative studies conducted by the authors, which emphasize the importance of descriptive depth in exploring communication phenomena within specific cultural contexts. For instance, Febrianita has applied qualitative descriptive approaches combined with in-depth interviews to examine identity construction and digital interactions (Adisty & Febrianita, 2025), while collaborative work with Achmad has utilized virtual ethnographic elements to understand cultural preservation through media adaptation (Achmad et al., 2025). These prior experiences strengthen the methodological foundation of the current study, which similarly seeks to portray the nuanced role of the Kiai Kampung as political communicators in a traditional Madurese village setting. The descriptive nature of the design further supports the presentation of findings in a holistic manner, integrating the social, cultural, and religious layers that characterize the political communication process in Kerta Barat Village.

Time and Place of Research

The fieldwork was conducted in Kerta Barat Village, Dasuk Subdistrict, Sumenep Regency, East Java Province, Indonesia. This village was purposefully selected because it exemplifies the strong influence of the Kiai Kampung networks in determining local political outcomes, particularly evident in the recent pilkades contest between candidates Muhlis and Fauzan. The selection of this site allows for an in-depth exploration of grassroots political communication in a region where religious authority, moral legitimacy, and community networks remain central to electoral dynamics.

Data collection took place from early 2023 to mid-2024, spanning the pre-campaign preparation phase, the active campaigning period, election day activities, and the post-election reflection stage. This extended timeframe was deliberately chosen to enable prolonged engagement in the field. Prolonged engagement is a key strategy in qualitative research to build trust with informants, reduce observer effects, and observe the evolving nature of political messaging across different stages of the electoral cycle (Adlini et al., 2022). By immersing in the natural setting over an extended period, the researcher could witness how the Kiai Kampung integrated communication practices into routine religious and social activities such as pengajian, tahlilan, and silaturahmi, rather than relying solely on formal campaign events. This temporal scope also allowed for the capture of both planned and spontaneous communication moments that shape community political behavior in a rural Madurese context.

Research Subjects

The subjects of this study were individuals directly involved in or significantly affected by the political communication practices during the pilkades. The primary informants consisted of three influential Kiai Kampung; Kiai Matbaki, Kiai Abdul Gani, and Kiai Ramidi, all of whom actively engaged in delivering political messages and mobilizing grassroot support. The two village head candidates (Muhlis and Fauzan) were also included as key informants due to their direct interactions with kiai networks and their roles as recipients and users of the communication strategies. Additionally, selected community members (villagers) from diverse demographic backgrounds (different age groups, gender, and social positions) served as supporting informants to provide perspectives on how messages from The Kiai Kampung were received, interpreted, and acted upon.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: direct involvement in the election process, depth of knowledge regarding local communication practices, length of residence in the village, and willingness to share detailed experiences openly (Sugiyono, 2023). The Kiai Kampung were positioned as the central unit of analysis because of their strategic role as moral and religious communicators who bridge formal political actors with grassroots society. This focus on

individual-level units of analysis aligns with qualitative traditions that view key informants as rich sources of insider knowledge, especially in studies exploring leadership, authority, and communication in traditional communities (Adisty & Febrianita, 2025). The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups (kiai, candidates, and villagers) ensured a multifaceted understanding of the communication process from both production and reception sides.

Research Procedure

The research proceeded through systematic yet flexible iterative stages to maintain methodological rigor while remaining responsive to the field context. The initial stage involved preliminary visits to the village to map the social-religious landscape, identify potential informants, and build initial rapport. Rapport-building was prioritized through active participation in non-political community and religious activities, which helped reduce power imbalances and fostered openness from the informants.

Following rapport establishment, the core phase involved intensive data collection through combined observation and in-depth interviews. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, following the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014), allowing emerging themes to inform subsequent inquiries. This iterative procedure is particularly valuable in qualitative research, as it enables the researcher to refine the focus and deepen understanding as the study progresses (Doyle et al., 2020; Achmad et al., 2025). The final stage involved rigorous data validation through source triangulation and member checking. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing information obtained from the Kiai Kampung, village head candidates, and local villagers to ensure an objective and multifaceted portrayal of the communication process. Furthermore, member checking was conducted with selected informants to verify the accuracy of the transcribed data and preliminary interpretations, while the researcher maintained a reflexive stance to ensure that the findings remained grounded in the observed reality rather than merely informant self-presentation.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

Data in this study consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered directly through two main techniques: observation and in-depth interviews. Observation was conducted using both participant and non-participant approaches in natural settings, ranging from routine religious activities like pengajian and tahlilan to informal silaturahmi and campaign-related interactions. This technique allowed the researcher to capture non-verbal cues and the integration of political messaging into everyday socio-religious life (Karim, 2023). Such immersive observation is essential for understanding the contextual and symbolic layers of communication that are difficult to access through interviews alone.

In-depth interviews followed a semi-structured format to encourage informants to speak in their own terms. While interviews with the Kiai Kampung explored intentional strategies and moral framing, those with candidates and villagers focused on reliance on Kiai networks and message reception, respectively. To mitigate potential bias, the researcher, acting as the primary research instrument, maintained a reflexive journal to document personal interpretations and ensure that the findings remained grounded in the informants' perspectives. This was supported by field notes, audio recordings (with explicit consent), and reflective memos.

Secondary data, including official village records, voter lists from the General Elections Commission (KPU), and pilkades-related archives, served as supporting material. This multi-method approach mirrors qualitative traditions that prioritize contextual observation alongside deep interviewing (Adisty & Febrianita, 2025; Achmad et al., 2025). By integrating these techniques, the study achieved a comprehensive view of both the production and reception of political communication strategies in the village setting.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020). This model follows a cyclical process involving three interconnected activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved selecting and simplifying raw observational notes into thematic categories, such as the moral framing of messages, network management, and the interplay between face-to-face and digital channels. This process ensured that the vast volume of field data remained focused on the research objectives. These

categories centered on key aspects such as communication strategies employed by The Kiai Kampung, the role of moral and religious legitimacy, preferences for face-to-face versus supplementary channels, network management, and community responses or fragmentation of support.

Data display involved organizing the reduced information into narrative summaries, thematic matrices, chronological charts, and comparative tables to facilitate the identification of patterns, contradictions, and relationships across different informants and data sources. Conclusions were drawn progressively throughout the analysis and were constantly verified and refined against the raw dataset to ensure they remained grounded in empirical evidence. This interactive and iterative nature of the model is particularly suitable for qualitative descriptive studies that aim to construct holistic interpretations of complex social phenomena (Miles et al., 2020; Adisty & Febrianita, 2025). To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, rigorous triangulation techniques were applied. Source triangulation compared accounts from multiple informant groups (The Kiai Kampung, candidates, and villagers), while methodological triangulation cross-checked results obtained from observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Fusch et al., 2018). Member checking was conducted with selected informants to verify the accuracy of interpretations and representations. These strategies, combined with a reflexive stance, mitigated researcher bias and enhanced the confirmability and dependability of the results. The overall analytical process was further informed by the authors' prior qualitative research experiences in communication studies (Febrianita, 2024; Syarrafah, 2025; Achmad et al., 2025).

In summary, the combination of a qualitative descriptive design, prolonged fieldwork, purposive sampling, multi-technique data collection, and iterative interactive analysis with strong triangulation provides a rigorous methodological foundation for exploring the political communication practices of The Kiai Kampung in the localized context of village democracy in Madura. This approach not only addresses the research objectives but also contributes to the broader scholarship debates on traditional authority and grassroots political communication in Indonesia.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Kiai Kampung in Kerta Barat Village serves as pivotal political communicator. Their influence stems from deep-rooted moral legitimacy and charismatic authority, assets that proved more decisive than the formal institutional power or digital resources typically associated with modern campaigns. Through prolonged observation of daily religious and social activities and in-depth interviews with three key kiai, who are Matbaki, Abdul Gani, and Ramidi, the two candidates, who are Muhlis and Fauzan, and diverse villagers, the research reveals that political communication at the village level operates as a culturally specific process that integrates religious authority with everyday relational practices. These practices directly address the research objective to examine how the Kiai Kampung construct persuasive messages, build networks, and mobilize support during the pilkades. The data show that Muhlis's victory was not accidental but the outcome of strategic moral framing, face-to-face mobilization, and ethical positioning by the kiai, while Fauzan's defeat highlighted the limits of relying on formal education and incumbent backing without strong grassroots religious endorsement. This pattern answers the central question of why traditional authority remains decisive in local elections: in Madura's socio-cultural context, voters prioritize moral guidance from trusted kiai over material incentives or digital campaigns, a dynamic that persists even after the 2024 national elections amid ongoing village-level democratization in Indonesia (Suryanto et al., 2023; Chalik et al., 2025; Ni'am, 2025).

Table 1. Comparative Political Communication Strategies of Kiai Kampung

Informant	Primary Strategy	Communication Channels	Key Moral Framing	Target Audience
Kiai Matbaki	Intensive "Gerilya" Person-to-Person	Tahlilan, silaturahmi, face-to- face visits	Religious responsibility & communal safety	Santri, neighbors, and undecided voters

Kiai Abdul Gani	Hybrid (Traditional-Digital)	Khataman, sholawatan, Facebook posts	Humor, relatable anecdotes, & youth engagement	Youth organizations and kinship ties
Kiai Ramidi	Ethical-Consultative	Wali murid networks, informal consultations	Anti-money politics & moral integrity	Parents (wali murid) and undecided moralist voters

The strategies of the three Kiai Kampung illustrate distinct yet complementary approaches that together produced effective mobilization. Kiai Matbaki employed the most intensive and multifaceted strategy, centering on sustained face-to-face engagement and moral education. Observations during tahlilan, silaturahmi, and informal gatherings revealed that he actively mapped social alliances, identified potential supporters and opponents, and conducted what informants described as "gerilya person-to-person" visits in the final weeks before voting. In one observed session, Matbaki addressed a group of santri and neighbors by saying, "Memilih pemimpin bukan sekadar politik duniawi, tetapi tanggung jawab agama untuk menjaga desa tetap aman, bermoral, dan terhindar dari fitnah serta politik uang." This message was repeated across multiple events, creating a consistent moral framework that framed voting as a religious duty. Interviews with villagers confirmed that this approach generated strong emotional loyalty; one resident explained, "Ketika Kiai Matbaki bicara, kami merasa itu suara agama yang tidak bisa dibantah." His ability to maintain harmonious relations with other kiai despite differing candidate preferences further reinforced a harmonious political atmosphere, reducing conflict and enhancing collective trust. This strategy's effectiveness stems from the cultural expectation in Madura that kiai guidance carries moral weight, allowing Matbaki to transform routine religious forums into powerful mobilization tools.

The depth of this face-to-face approach allowed him to address individual concerns, adjust messages based on real-time feedback, and build long-term relational capital that translated into votes. Such practices reflect a sophisticated understanding of local power dynamics, where personal trust and repeated interaction outweigh abstract campaign promises (Setiyani, 2020; Ni'am, 2025). Kiai Abdul Gani adopted a hybrid strategy that combined traditional networks with limited digital supplementation. He leveraged kinship ties, youth organizational links, and existing religious gatherings such as khataman and sholawatan to deliver messages. Observations showed him using humor and relatable anecdotes to make political points without appearing overtly partisan. He also posted subtle community reminders on Facebook, targeting younger villagers.

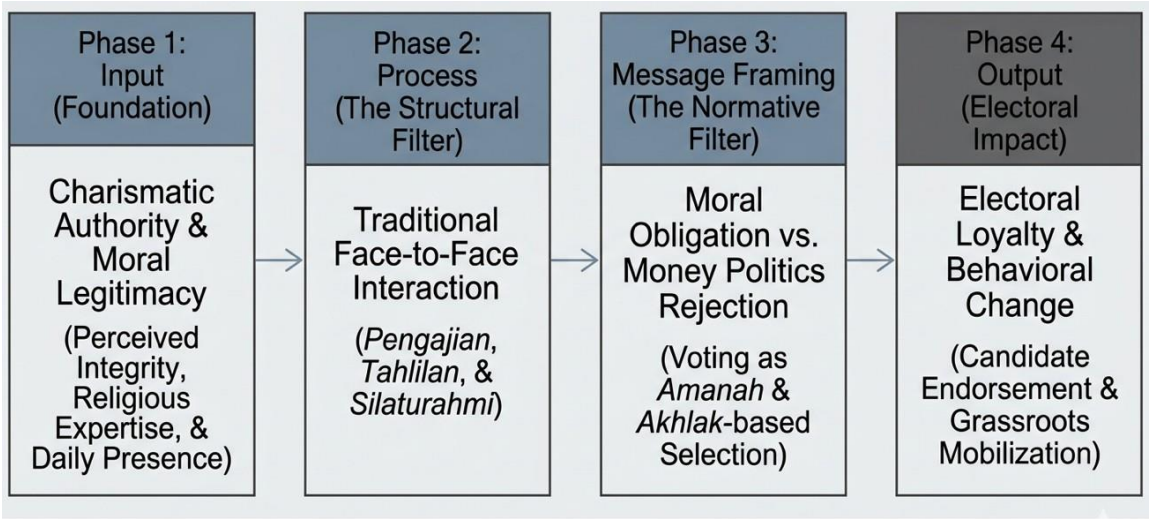
However, in-depth interviews revealed the limitations of this digital component. A young informant stated, "Saya lihat postingan Kiai Abdul Gani di Facebook, tapi yang benar-benar memengaruhi adalah ketika beliau datang ke rumah atau pengajian dan bicara langsung." This gap between digital reach and actual behavioral influence highlights that social media functions only as a complementary channel when anchored in strong offline credibility and personal relationships. Abdul Gani's approach succeeded in broadening reach among youth but relied ultimately on face-to-face reinforcement to convert awareness into votes. The hybrid nature of his strategy illustrates the transitional phase of political communication in rural Madura, where digital tools are increasingly present but still subordinate to traditional relational mechanisms.

This finding extends previous research on media adaptation in cultural preservation by showing that even when kiai incorporate new channels, their effectiveness depends on alignment with established social-religious capital (Achmad et al., 2025; Ladini et al., 2025). Kiai Ramidi followed a distinct ethical and consultative path. Initially maintaining neutrality, he declared support for Muhlis only one month before the election after careful observation of community dynamics. His communication relied heavily on informal religious forums and mulut-ke-mulut dissemination through wali murid networks. During interviews, he emphasized anti-money politics and integrity, telling researchers, "Politik uang merusak akhlak bangsa; kita harus memilih dengan hati yang bersih dan iman yang kuat." Villagers frequently described him as a trusted consultant, with one wali murid noting, "Banyak yang datang ke rumah Kiai Ramidi untuk bertanya tentang calon yang baik menurut agama." This late but principled endorsement

proved highly effective among segments of the community that valued moral consistency over early campaigning. Ramidi's strategy underscores how delayed, value-driven positioning can consolidate support more powerfully than aggressive early mobilization.

The consultative nature of his interactions created space for villagers to voice concerns, strengthening perceived legitimacy and reducing resistance. This approach highlights the importance of timing and perceived neutrality in building trust within fragmented communities (Fikri, 2024; Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024). These strategies are underpinned by four interlocking themes that explain the observed electoral outcomes and answer why traditional authority prevails in this setting. The first theme is charisma and moral legitimacy as the foundational driver of influence. Across all interviews and observations, the three kiai were consistently described as "dihormati, sabar, santun, and pembimbing agama." This personal charisma, rooted in perceived integrity and daily presence rather than formal titles, produced what villagers termed an almost unquestioned acceptance of their messages. One informant explained, "Pesan kiai itu seperti fatwa; kami ikuti karena itu datang dari orang yang kami percaya sepenuh hati." Such legitimacy functions as a powerful filter through which candidates are evaluated, explaining Muhlis's success and Fauzan's defeat despite the latter's educational advantage.

Figure 1. The Mechanism of Religious-Political Mobilization in Kerta Barat



This finding aligns with theoretical understandings of charismatic authority in rural Indonesia, where moral reputation derived from religious and social proximity outweighs institutional power. The "why" lies in Madura's cultural-historical context, where pesantren traditions have long positioned kiai as moral guardians whose guidance carries both religious and communal weight, especially in uncertain electoral environments. In the post-2024 Indonesian context, where village autonomy has increased under Law No. 6/2014 on Villages, this moral capital continues to fill governance gaps left by formal institutions, making The Kiai Kampung indispensable actors in local democracy (Setiyani, 2020; Suryanto et al., 2023; Chalik et al., 2025).

The second theme centers on communication channels, with face-to-face interaction emerging as overwhelmingly dominant. Observations across months of fieldwork confirmed that pengajian, tahlilan, silaturahmi, and informal gatherings served as the primary venues for message transmission. These settings allowed kiai to control tone, observe immediate reactions, and reinforce messages through repeated personal contact. In contrast, Kiai Abdul Gani's use of Facebook, while innovative, showed delayed and limited effects on voting behavior. Youth informants repeatedly emphasized that digital exposure alone did not translate into action without direct encounters. This pattern reveals that in traditional rural settings, relational authenticity remains the decisive factor, even as digital tools gain limited traction among younger generations.

The persistence of face-to-face dominance answers why Muhlis's campaign succeeded: it was built on the kiai's ability to embed political messages within trusted religious and social routines rather than relying on detached modern methods. In contemporary Indonesia, where rural digital infrastructure remains

uneven, and trust in online information is often low due to misinformation concerns, this reliance on personal interaction provides stability and credibility that digital platforms struggle to replicate (Ladini et al., 2025; Khoiri et al., 2024; Adisty & Febrianita, 2025).

The third theme concerns moral messaging and the rejection of money politics. Kiai Matbaki and Ramidi repeatedly framed voting as a moral and religious obligation, warning against politik uang, fitnah, and black campaigns. These messages resonated deeply because they aligned with villagers' religious values and everyday concerns about corruption. One villager recounted, "Kalau kiai bilang jangan ambil uang politik, kami patuh karena itu suara agama yang menjaga akhlak desa." Such framing not only legitimized support for Muhlis but also shaped the overall campaign climate, pressuring candidates to avoid overtly transactional tactics. This theme illustrates how moral authority functions as both a persuasive tool and a normative filter in local politics, consistent with findings that kiai charisma is sought precisely for its capacity to uphold ethical standards in electoral contests.

In the current Indonesian political landscape, where concerns about money politics and elite capture in village elections remain widespread, the moral stance taken by these Kiai Kampung serves as a counterbalance that reinforces public trust in the democratic process (Fikri, 2024; Ni'am, 2025; Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024).

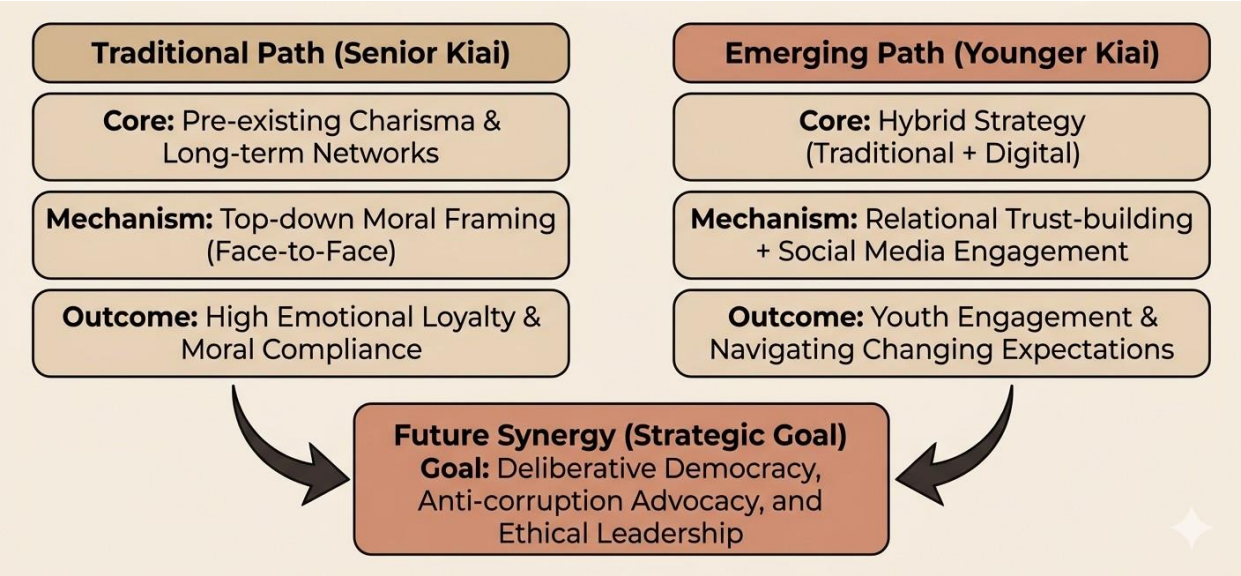
The fourth theme addresses message fragmentation and resulting voter confusion. Because the three kiai delivered partially differing messages or shifted positions at different times, some families experienced internal division.

Observations and interviews documented cases where siblings or parents voted differently based on their respective kiai's guidance. This fragmentation arose primarily from the one-way, hierarchical nature of communication: kiai delivered messages more often than they engaged in open dialogue. While Matbaki occasionally facilitated small group discussions, most interactions remained top-down. The resulting confusion highlights a tension within traditional authority systems, where respect for kiai can produce passive compliance rather than critical deliberation. This dynamic answers why electoral outcomes in such villages can appear both unified and fragmented simultaneously: moral authority creates strong blocs of support but can also generate localized divisions when multiple legitimate voices compete.

The findings reveal a dualistic electoral outcome: the Kiai Kampung generates strong blocs of support while simultaneously triggering localized fragmentation. This tension stems from the hierarchical, top-down nature of their communication, where obedience often supersedes critical deliberation. Consequently, when multiple legitimate voices compete, even close-knit family units may experience internal division.

Figure 2.

The Evolution of Kiai Kampung's Political Communication: From Traditional to Hybrid Authority



In the broader Indonesian context after the 2024 elections, this fragmentation points to the need for greater deliberative practices in village politics to prevent polarization while preserving the positive role of religious leaders (Husni, 2024; Chalik et al., 2025). Expanding on these themes, the data further reveal the adaptive nature of kiai strategies in response to local context. Kiai Matbaki's emphasis on moral education alongside political messaging created a dual function: he not only mobilized votes but also reinforced community norms of ethical conduct and social harmony. This dual role enhances the long-term legitimacy of The Kiai Kampung, as villagers perceive their political involvement as an extension of their religious duty rather than self-interest. In contrast, Kiai Abdul Gani's hybrid approach reflects generational adaptation, where younger or more tech-savvy Kiai attempt to bridge traditional authority with modern tools.

However, the limited success of digital efforts underscores a key insight: in rural Madura, credibility is built through embodied presence and repeated interaction, not virtual visibility alone. Kiai Ramidi's consultative style, meanwhile, highlights the importance of perceived neutrality and ethical consistency in gaining trust from segments of the community wary of overt political engagement. Together, these strategies demonstrate that effective political communication in this setting requires a sophisticated balance of moral authority, relational depth, and contextual awareness.

The "why" behind these findings can be traced to several interconnected factors. First, Madura's historical and cultural context has institutionalized The Kiai Kampung as a significant other in daily life, extending their influence from religious to political domains (Suryanto et al., 2023). Second, the relative weakness of formal political parties at the village level creates a vacuum that informal leaders naturally fill. Third, villagers' preference for moral guidance over material promises reflects deeper cultural values shaped by pesantren education and Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah traditions. Fourth, the one-way communication pattern is rooted in hierarchical respect structures that prioritize harmony and obedience to religious authority. These factors collectively explain why face-to-face moral messaging proved more decisive than other campaign elements.

The persistence of face-to-face moral messaging over material incentives can be attributed to four factors: (1) the institutionalization of the Kiai Kampung as 'significant others'; (2) the structural vacuum left by weak formal party machinery; (3) the cultural weight of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah traditions; and (4) the internalized respect for religious authority. The novelty of this study lies in its micro-level, observation-driven analysis of a single Madurese village pilkades conducted well after the 2024 national elections. Unlike earlier macro-level studies that examined kiai in regency or presidential contests, this research captures real-time, sustained fieldwork dynamics through direct observation and in-depth interviews, revealing how competing moral authorities create both cohesion and fragmentation within one community. It updates the literature by demonstrating that, in Indonesia's current post-2024 landscape of strengthened village autonomy and gradual digital transition in rural areas, the Kiai Kampung retain dominant influence while facing new pressures to adapt toward more inclusive styles of engagement. This micro-perspective fills a critical gap by showing the everyday mechanisms through which traditional authority operates in the most basic unit of Indonesian democracy.

Table 2. Research Novelty: Comparing Macro-level and Micro-level Perspectives

Aspect	Previous Macro-Studies (Regency/National)	Current Micro-Study (Village/Pilkades)
Primary Actor	Kiai Sepuh or political party elites.	Kiai Kampung (informal, grassroots leaders).
Communication Mode	Mass media, large-scale rallies, official endorsements.	Intensive face-to-face (tahlilan, silaturahmi), "gerilya" visits.
Political Dynamics	Focus on regional power-sharing & coalitions.	Focus on moral legitimacy, family fragmentation, & daily interactions.

Digital Integration	Heavy reliance on social media & digital branding.	Digital as supplementary; "embodied presence" remains superior.
Post-2024 Context	National polarization & party machinery.	Sustained traditional authority amidst village autonomy.

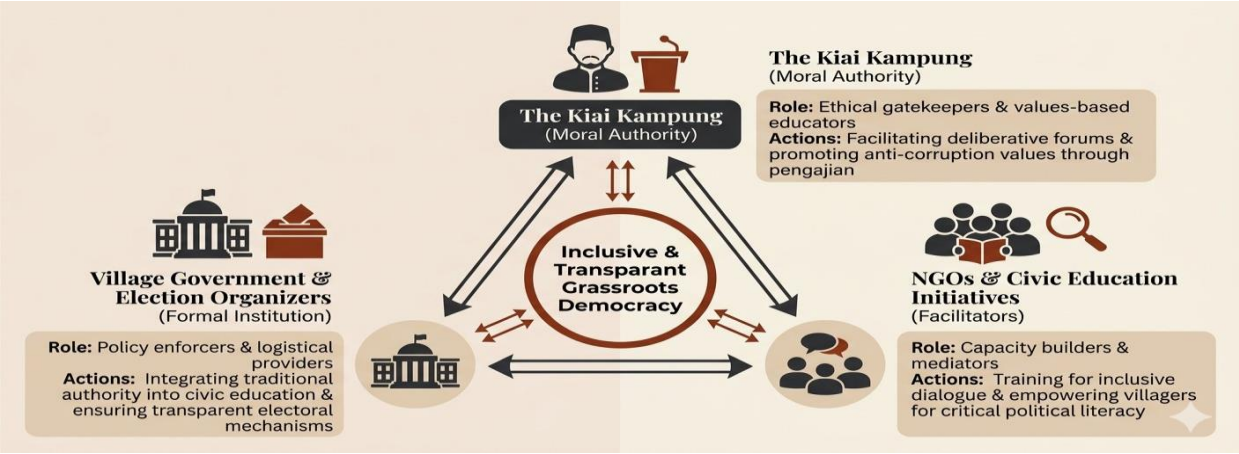
Furthermore, by integrating the authors' prior qualitative work on communication and identity construction, the study brings a fresh methodological lens that emphasizes prolonged immersion and multi-stakeholder perspectives (Adisty & Febrianita, 2025; Achmad et al., 2025; Syarrafah, 2025). The implications are both practical and theoretical. Practically, election organizers, village governments, and civic education initiatives should recognize that moral legitimacy from The Kiai Kampung remains a primary driver of voter turnout and choice. Programs aimed at improving political literacy must therefore engage these figures constructively rather than bypass them. NGOs and local authorities could encourage kiai to facilitate deliberative forums that transform one-way messaging into genuine dialogue, thereby reducing fragmentation and fostering more rational, participatory decision-making.

In the current Indonesian context, where village elections continue to shape local governance amid national democratic consolidation efforts and concerns over money politics, ignoring or underestimating kiai networks risks undermining the quality and inclusivity of grassroots democracy. Village development funds and community programs could also be designed to collaborate with The Kiai Kampung to promote ethical leadership and anti-corruption values, leveraging their moral authority for broader social good.

Theoretically, the study enriches debates on charismatic authority in modernizing societies by illustrating how traditional leaders adapt relational strategies to contemporary electoral demands while preserving cultural authenticity. It also contributes to broader discussions on the hybrid nature of political communication in rural Indonesia, where face-to-face relational capital continues to outweigh digital tools in determining outcomes. Future comparative research across other regions could test the generalizability of these patterns and explore how increasing digital literacy or changing generational attitudes might gradually shift the balance between traditional and modern channels.

Furthermore, long-term research might investigate whether the moral framing seen here improves governance results or just serves to maintain current power systems. Further investigation of the data reveals that communication efficiency varies by generation. Matbaki and Ramidi, two senior kiai, benefited from long-standing networks and charm developed during decades of community engagement. They did not need to actively cultivate their influence because it already existed. Kiai Abdul Gani, on the other hand, had to put in more work to establish trust, even though he used contemporary equipment since he was thought to be younger or more inventive. This generational dynamic reflects broader shifts in Indonesian rural society, where younger religious leaders navigate between preserving tradition and adapting to changing expectations from digitally exposed youth. The success of senior kiai in this case suggests that deep-rooted moral capital still holds greater sway, but the hybrid efforts of figures like Abdul Gani indicate potential pathways for evolution in future elections.

Figure 3. Stakeholder Collaborative Framework for Ethical Village Democracy



Another layer of complexity emerges in the gendered nature of message reception. While the public sphere is dominated by male kiai, interviews reveal that women act as 'domestic intermediaries', transmitting and deliberating political messages within the household. This suggests that the kiai's influence is not merely a direct command but a multi-layered process that involves private negotiation among female villagers.

In summary, the political communication practices of The Kiai Kampung in Kerta Barat Village illustrate that moral legitimacy, face-to-face relational networks, ethical messaging, and strategic moral framing continue to determine local electoral outcomes even in the post-2024 era. By seamlessly integrating these elements into routine religious and social life, the kiai not only secured victory for Muhlis but also reinforced the cultural foundations of village democracy. This research underscores the need for a balanced evolution: preserving the strengths of traditional authority while addressing its limitations through greater emphasis on dialogue and critical engagement. Such balance will be essential for strengthening inclusive, transparent, and participatory democracy in Indonesia's rural communities in the years ahead, contributing to more resilient local governance amid ongoing national democratic challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

This study establishes that the Kiai Kampung in Kerta Barat Village functions as pivotal and highly effective political communicator that seamlessly synthesizes moral legitimacy, charismatic authority, and deeply embedded socio-religious networks to navigate the complexities of village democracy. By systematically addressing the research problem of how these figures construct persuasive messages and mobilize support, the findings reveal that political communication in rural Madura transcends simple transactional or technology-driven models. The distinct yet converging strategies of Kiai Matbaki, Kiai Abdul Gani, and Kiai Ramidi demonstrate that, despite the increasing presence of digital tools, the "gold standard" of political influence remains rooted in embodied presence and relational authenticity. Whether through Matbaki's intensive face-to-face "gerilya" visits, Abdul Gani's experimental hybrid approach, or Ramidi's consultative ethical positioning, the decisive factor in electoral victory is the ability of religious leaders to frame political choices as sacred moral obligations.

The research further advances three critical generalizations that contribute to the broader literature on political sociology. First, the Kiai Kampung operate as the primary architects of grassroots political narratives, transforming routine religious activities, such as tahlilan, pengajian, and silaturahmi, into potent platforms for mobilization that bypass formal campaign machinery. Second, face-to-face interaction is not merely an alternative channel but the foundational infrastructure of trust; it allows for real-time emotional resonance and moral reinforcement that digital platforms struggle to replicate. Third, moral capital, specifically the vocal rejection of politik uang (money politics), fitnah, and black campaigns, serves as a vital normative filter. This framing not only persuades voters but also disciplines the behavior of candidates, forcing them to align with the community's perceived ethical standards to maintain legitimacy. However, the study uncovers a significant paradox: while these kiai act as stabilizing forces, their competing moral interpretations can trigger localized fragmentation. This suggests that traditional authority is a double-edged sword, capable of creating cohesive blocs of support while simultaneously inducing communal confusion when multiple legitimate voices diverge.

Theoretically, these findings offer a robust challenge to the linear assumptions of modernization and the "digital displacement" of traditional authority. In the post-2024 landscape of strengthened village autonomy under Law No. 6/2014, the Kiai Kampung have proven that traditional structures do not necessarily fade in the face of democratization; instead, they adapt and entrench themselves as indispensable intermediaries. This research enriches the sociology of religion by illustrating how charismatic authority maintains its cultural authenticity while operationalizing democratic processes for communal preservation. Practically, the implications are profound. Ignoring the influence of kiai networks risks alienating the very actors who hold the key to grassroots participation and ethical governance.

Moving forward, several strategic recommendations are proposed to evolve Indonesia's village democracy into a more deliberative system. For academic researchers, there is an urgent need for comparative longitudinal studies to determine if the moral framing observed here translates into long-

term governance accountability or merely reinforces existing power hierarchies. For election organizers and policymakers, the evidence suggests a shift toward constructive engagement is necessary. Rather than bypassing traditional leaders, civic education programs should collaborate with the Kiai Kampung to facilitate transparent, two-way deliberative forums. Such initiatives could transform one-way hierarchical messaging into participatory dialogue, empowering villagers to engage critically with political choices while maintaining cultural respect for religious guidance. Furthermore, local governments should leverage kiai authority to promote anti-corruption education, anchoring modern transparency standards in traditional moral language to ensure wider community acceptance. Ultimately, this research affirms that the Kiai Kampung remains the "moral pulse" of Indonesia's grassroots democracy. Their ability to blend religious sanctity with political pragmatism offers both a source of stability and a potential pathway for more ethical governance in rural Muslim societies. By recognizing and constructively integrating this reality, stakeholders can ensure that village elections are not just competitive contests, but culturally resonant and morally grounded reflections of Indonesia's unique socio-religious fabric. The persistence of kiai influence underscores the essential need to balance tradition with democratic maturation. ensuring that local democracy remains vibrant, inclusive, and resilient against the challenges of a rapidly changing political landscape.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

1. Mohammad Syarrafah: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation (Lead); Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing - original draft; Project administration.
2. Roziana Febrianita: Conceptualization; Resources; Visualization; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Supervision.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and the results are presented objectively, free from any personal or financial influences that could be perceived as biasing the interpretation of the data.

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