

Interpersonal Communication-Based Religious Services: Assisting Elderly Hajj Pilgrims in Medan

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 2026-02-05

Revised 2026-02-23

Accepted 2026-02-25

Keywords:

Communication Model

Elderly Hajj Pilgrims

Interpersonal Communication

Medan City

Religious Services

ABSTRACT

The increasing number of elderly Hajj pilgrims in Medan City presents specific challenges in religious services, particularly related to physical decline, communication barriers, and the need for emotional support. These conditions often affect the quality of worship experiences among elderly pilgrims. This study aims to analyze the role of interpersonal communication in religious services for elderly Hajj pilgrims and to formulate an effective communication model that ensures a safe, comfortable, and meaningful worship experience. This research employs a qualitative approach, with field research and descriptive analysis. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation involving companions, elderly members of the Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH), administrators, health workers, and pilgrims' families. Data validity was ensured through triangulation and member checking techniques. The results indicate that interpersonal communication plays a strategic role as a medium for empathy, adaptation, and problem-solving in assisting elderly pilgrims. An effective communication model is characterized by patience, empathy, simple, clear language, two-way communication, and active family involvement. Companions adapt their communication styles to the physical and psychological conditions of the elderly; health workers use visual and nonverbal communication to enhance understanding; and families support the communication process through regular meetings and digital platforms such as WhatsApp. This communication model significantly improves the quality of religious services and worship experiences for elderly Hajj pilgrims.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hajj services for the elderly have become an increasingly important issue, along with the rising number of elderly pilgrims and the complex physical, psychological, and social challenges they face in performing the Hajj as the culmination of a Muslim's spiritual

journey. Elderly pilgrims commonly experience declining physical strength, reduced sensory abilities, emotional vulnerability, and communication limitations, which can affect their independence and comfort during the pilgrimage. Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Medan City in 2025 shows that out of 2,635 prospective Hajj pilgrims, 115 are elderly, indicating a growing need for adaptive, friendly, and elderly-oriented religious services. However, in practice, these services are often not fully supported by effective interpersonal communication that accommodates the specific needs of elderly pilgrims.

In response to this condition, the Indonesian government has introduced various policies to promote the concept of an “Elderly-Friendly Hajj,” including health *istitā‘ah*, the provision of special officers, customized *manasik* guidance, priority services during rituals, and the development of elderly-friendly facilities both in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia [1]. Despite these policy initiatives, implementation at the grassroots level still faces challenges, particularly in terms of communication effectiveness. This situation places the Hajj Guidance Group (KBIH) in a central role, as it not only provides technical guidance but also serves as a companion, supporting elderly pilgrims cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually throughout the pilgrimage.

Several previous studies emphasize that the effectiveness of KBIH mentoring depends heavily on the quality of interpersonal communication between companions and elderly pilgrims. Effective interpersonal communication ensures that information is well understood, that emotional needs are addressed, and that a sense of safety and comfort is established throughout all stages of worship [2]. Elderly pilgrims themselves are heterogeneous, ranging from those who remain independent to those who require full assistance. This diversity demands communication that is open, empathetic, supportive, and based on equality in order to accommodate physical, psychological, and spiritual differences.

Empirical evidence from previous research supports this view. Study [3] highlights that effective interpersonal communication with elderly pilgrims requires several key aspects: openness that allows the elderly to express themselves freely, empathy that acknowledges emotional and behavioral changes, positive attitudes that create pleasant interactions, equality through mutual respect, and continuous support in the form of motivation and guidance.

Similarly, research by [4] shows that clear, patient, and empathetic communication is crucial in helping elderly pilgrims understand administrative procedures and religious guidance, thereby reducing anxiety and increasing satisfaction during their stay in Hajj dormitories. Furthermore, [5] emphasizes that Hajj officers and companions must understand the rights, needs, and service characteristics of elderly pilgrims, including appropriate mentoring and communication strategies tailored to individual conditions.

Despite these findings, several studies also reveal persistent obstacles in implementing effective interpersonal communication. These include limited knowledge among companions regarding elderly characteristics, physical limitations such as hearing loss and memory decline, language and cultural differences, and age gaps between companions and elderly pilgrims [3][6]. Additional research [6] points out problems in the socialization of Hajj health information, inadequate facilities, and limited access to comprehensible information for elderly pilgrims. Meanwhile, [7] notes that one-way digital

communication systems tend to be less responsive to the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including the elderly.

Based on this review, a clear research gap emerges. Previous studies have mainly focused on general communication principles or service quality for elderly pilgrims, but have not developed a structured, contextually and religiously grounded interpersonal communication model, particularly within the KBIH context in Medan City. Most existing research discusses communication aspects in a fragmented manner, failing to integrate psychosocial, cultural, and spiritual dimensions into a comprehensive model tailored to local conditions.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of interpersonal communication in religious services to assist elderly Hajj pilgrims in Medan City and to develop an effective interpersonal communication model that is adaptable to their psychosocial, cultural, and spiritual needs. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in interpersonal communication theory (openness, empathy, support, and equality), communication adaptation theory, theories of reduced communication capacity in the elderly, and Islamic communication ethics, particularly *Qaulan* principles.

It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research enriches communication and religious service studies by offering a contextual interpersonal communication model for elderly Hajj services. In practice, it is hoped that the results will serve as a reference for KBIH supervisors, Hajj officers, and policymakers to improve the quality of elderly-friendly Hajj services, bridge the gap between policy ideals and service practices, and ultimately ensure a safe, comfortable, and meaningful worship experience for elderly pilgrims.

2. METHOD

This study uses a type of qualitative research with the field research category (*Field Research*), which means that the data is collected directly at the location of the research object without statistical manipulation of variables. The approach used is a qualitative descriptive approach, which aims to describe social phenomena in depth and comprehensively using data in the form of words, deeds, and behaviors of the observed participants. This approach is based on the deductive method's mindset: first look at things in general and globally, then focus on more specific and local aspects, and finally return to the general view. This allows researchers to examine social phenomena in detail and systematically and then draw relevant conclusions [8].

The research was conducted in Medan, chosen because the researcher had easy access to KBIH, elderly pilgrims, and their companions, enabling effective data collection. The main informants in the study are key participants with experience and strong involvement in the assistance activities for elderly pilgrims, including companions, elderly pilgrims who are members of KBIH, KBIH administrators, health workers, and pilgrims' families [9]. The criteria for selecting informants take into account the duration of the engagement as well as their willingness and time to be interviewed. Data collection was carried out using a cross-sectional method, which involves data collection at a specific point in time using unstructured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and

documentation from various sources such as books, journals, and records related to interpersonal communication models.

Data analysis is qualitatively descriptive, using data reduction stages to simplify and summarize data, presenting systematic, detailed narratives, and drawing repeated conclusions/verifications to achieve valid, meaningful data. The analysis was carried out continuously before, during, and after field data collection [8]. The data validity test is carried out by triangulating sources, comparing data from various sources (interviews, observations, documentation), and conducting member checks, which involve rechecking the data with the data provider to ensure its validity and credibility. If significant differences in perception are found, the researcher will discuss and adjust the findings to align with the original data provided by the informant [8] and [10]. Thus, this study utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach in the field to deeply understand the phenomenon of interpersonal communication in assisting elderly pilgrims with a systematic process and strong data validity through triangulation and member check.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Application of Interpersonal Communication in Religious Services for Elderly Hajj Pilgrims in Medan

Interpersonal communication in religious services for elderly pilgrims in Medan plays a very important role, especially in bridging the gap between ideal policies and on-the-ground realities. Based on the results of interviews with various parties involved, such as companions, elderly pilgrims, KBIH administrators, health workers, and pilgrims' families, it can be described that interpersonal communication not only functions as a conveyor of information, but also as a medium of empathy, adjustment, and bridge solutions in the field. The companions emphasized that interpersonal communication with elderly pilgrims must be carried out patiently, using simple, easy-to-understand language, and must be sensitive to their physical, psychological, and emotional needs. The companion stated, "Our communication is not just talking, but listening and responding with empathy," and using direct face-to-face contact and pleasant body language to make the congregation feel comfortable. They acknowledge the gap between the ideal policy that requires complete facilities and the reality on the ground, where facilities such as wheelchairs or long queues are sometimes lacking.

However, through clear communication, the companion can explain the policy slowly, help calm the pilgrims, and voice their needs to management, so that "communication is the bridge" to overcome the problems that arise. Elderly pilgrims admitted that they enjoyed the communication between the companions and KBIH during the preparation and implementation of the Hajj. They receive fairly clear explanations and patient guidance, though some technical terms and certain rules remain difficult to understand. Open and responsive communication from the companions makes them feel safe and comfortable while performing the Hajj. One of the pilgrims said, "If we talk frankly with our companions, they immediately understand our condition and help us set schedules or help if there are health problems". The KBIH management reported efforts to implement

active, open communication using an easy-to-understand, patient-friendly approach so that elderly pilgrims are comfortable and not confused.

Even though they have internalized the government's policy on elderly-friendly Hajj, in the field, they face obstacles in facilities and Human Resources (HR). Therefore, KBIH utilizes two-way communication to adjust policies to real conditions, for example, by scheduling more flexible guidance and more intensive health communication. They emphasized the need for better communication training for companions to be sensitive to the needs of the elderly and suggested the use of diverse communication media (transcripts of KBIH administrators). Healthcare workers also recognize the importance of simple, patient, and attentive interpersonal communication when explaining health conditions or services. They coordinate closely with companions and KBIH to support elderly-friendly health services. Communication barriers arise if the pilgrim or family does not understand medical terms or is afraid of certain health conditions. Good communication helps bridge the gap between ideal health care policy and the reality on the ground and builds a sense of security and trust (health worker transcripts).

The families of the pilgrims admitted that they received smooth, informative communication from the companions and KBIH, either directly or via telephone or WhatsApp. They feel helped in understanding the needs and conditions of elderly pilgrims. However, information is sometimes delayed or unclear, which can cause temporary confusion. Two-way communication between families and officers is expected to continue so that the service policy for elderly pilgrims is more flexible and better aligned with the actual situation. Family suggestions include a special communication line that is responsive to the family, communication training for companions to be more patient, and regular face-to-face meetings to strengthen communication.

3.2. Interpersonal Communication Model to Build Elderly-Friendly Religious Services

An effective and appropriate interpersonal communication model for elderly-friendly religious services during the Hajj in Medan City must prioritize patience, empathy, and a personal approach tailored to each elderly pilgrim's characteristics. Companions and officers at KBIH should use simple, easy-to-understand, and relaxed language, and avoid technical or complicated terms that could confuse elderly pilgrims. Communication must take place in both directions, with the pilgrims feeling comfortable asking questions and submitting complaints, and the companion listening actively.

The companion pays special attention to the physical and psychological condition of each pilgrim, adjusting the communication style as needed, repeating explanations when necessary, and using examples close to daily life. An empathetic approach and a gentle tone are the key to making the elderly feel valued and not depressed. Effective communication also includes strategies to bridge the needs of pilgrims with rules or policies through clear explanations and involving families, so the message is conveyed well. Elderly pilgrims appreciate easy-to-understand, relaxed, and patient communication from companions. They feel more comfortable when communication is personal, uses friendly calls, and explanations are delivered slowly so that they are easy to digest. They also hope that communication will be open and responsive, so that their needs and obstacles are quickly resolved.

In practice, KBIH carries out the principles of polite, empathetic, and personal communication by adjusting message delivery to the needs of each elderly pilgrim. Training for companions is provided to instill patience and to understand the characteristics of the elderly, though its implementation still faces obstacles such as limited time and human resources. KBIH suggests developing interactive communication media and greater government support to maximize service delivery. Health workers also emphasized the importance of using simple language and visual aids so that elderly pilgrims can better understand medical recommendations. Interactive and empathetic communication helps build a sense of security and trust among pilgrims in health services.

Family involvement in communication is also an important factor in strengthening understanding and obedience among elderly pilgrims. From the family side of the pilgrims, effective communication is clear, direct, actively involves the family, and uses simple, empathetic language. They want dedicated communication channels, such as active WhatsApp groups and regular meetings, so that they feel engaged and can provide input. The main hope is for fast, open, friendly, and patient communication from officers and companions so that the elderly feel comfortable, safe, and appreciated during the Hajj. All of these findings are in line with the principles of interpersonal communication, which emphasize openness, empathy, patience, and two-way, personal, continuous communication to provide safe, comfortable, and meaningful elderly-friendly religious services in the city of Medan.

3.2.1 Implementation of Empathy-Based Interpersonal Communication and Adaptation in Religious Services for the Elderly

Interpersonal communication plays a strategic role in bridging the gap between ideal policies and on-the-ground realities. Findings from interviews with various parties, including companions, elderly pilgrims, KBIH administrators, health workers, and families, strengthen the view that communication is not just a conduit of information but a medium of empathy, adjustment, and practical solutions in the field. According to modern religious service theory, service is not only administrative but must be responsive to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of service recipients [11]. This is reflected in empathetic and supportive communication between companions and elderly pilgrims, so that they feel safe and comfortable. Companions adapt their communication to the elderly's physical and psychological condition, use simple, patient language, and foster a pleasant atmosphere through face-to-face contact and positive body language.

They acknowledged the limitations of field facilities, but with effective communication, the companions were able to ease the pilgrims' concerns and convey their needs to KBIH management. The accompanying statement that "communication is the bridge" affirms the theory of religious ministry that emphasizes the synergy between spiritual and social aspects in ministry [12] and [13]. In line with that, effective interpersonal communication models include openness, empathy, positive attitudes, equality, and support [14]. In practice, companions and officers adopt this model by conducting adaptive two-way communication tailored to each elderly pilgrim, ranging from active listening and motivation to guidance and emotional calming.

This is consistent with the interpersonal communication process, which requires companions to be able to adjust communication methods to foster trust and comfort for the elderly [15]. The impact of this interpersonal communication model is also felt directly by elderly pilgrims. They stated that the easy-to-understand, relaxed, and empathetic communication experience made them feel valued and supported during the Hajj. The success of this communication also helped bridge the mismatch between technical rules and the factual needs of elderly pilgrims in the field. However, communication barriers persist, including limited human resources and facilities at KBIH, as well as a decline in the elderly's physical and cognitive abilities to understand messages. In this context, the theory of interpersonal communication adaptation becomes highly relevant. This theory emphasizes the need for communication adjustments based on the characteristics and psychosocial conditions of elderly pilgrims, including the use of straightforward language, repetition of information, and an empathetic approach [16], [17], [18]. Companions who adopt communication adaptation can increase the satisfaction and smoothness of elderly worship, as well as help build effective two-way communication with families and health workers.

Empathy theory also complements the understanding of interpersonal communication in religious services for the elderly. Empathy enhances emotional bonds, strengthening a sense of security and psychological support for the congregation [19], [20], and [21]. Empathy-based communication helps avoid misunderstandings and fosters a climate that supports the personal growth and comfort of the elderly during the pilgrimage, an aspect indispensable in the context of the physically and mentally demanding Hajj. Understanding the biological and psychosocial barriers to communication among the elderly, the theory of declining communication skills among the elderly emphasizes the importance of an adaptive, supportive therapeutic communication approach [22]. The use of simple language, active listening, and family support in communication are the main factors that help overcome the lack of understanding and the psychological stress experienced by the elderly.

In addition to moral and ethical values, the concept of Qaulan Karima: Ethics to Parents emphasizes that communication with the elderly should be marked by good manners, tenderness, and respect that soothe the heart and strengthen relationships [23]. This principle strongly supports the creation of interpersonal communication that is not only technically effective but also ethically and humanly charged, which is particularly important in the religious care of the elderly. Overall, the implementation of empathetic, patient, adaptive, and language-based interpersonal communication, involving families, health workers, and KBIH administrators, is a key factor in building elderly-friendly religious services in Medan. The main obstacles in the form of limited facilities, human resources, and differences in the understanding ability of pilgrims can be overcome with inclusive communication and diverse communication media. This result is in line with the theory of modern religious services, which demands interpersonal communication as an adhesive and bridge between ideal policies and field realities to create a safe, comfortable, and meaningful Hajj for the elderly [24], [25], [26], and [27].

3.2.2 Empathetic and Adaptive Interpersonal Communication Strategies in Building Elderly-Friendly Religious Services for Hajj Pilgrims in Medan City

Based on the study's results, the importance of communication strategies centered on patience, empathy, and a personal approach tailored to the physical and psychological characteristics of elderly pilgrims in Medan City is evident. Communication by KBIH companions and officers must use simple, relaxed, and easy-to-understand language, avoiding technical terms that could confuse the elderly. The two-way communication model provides space for pilgrims to ask questions and submit complaints, and requires companions to actively listen and be responsive (research results). This personal and empathetic communication model aligns with the principles of the interpersonal communication model, which emphasize openness, empathy, support, positive attitudes, and equality as the main components for building a sense of trust and comfort among the elderly [6].

Companions who can adapt their communication styles to the individual needs of elderly pilgrims, through repetition and everyday examples, enhance communication effectiveness, ensuring that religious messages and guidance are conveyed optimally. In addition, family involvement in the communication process is an important factor supporting the ministry's success. Communication that actively engages families and uses easily accessible media (such as WhatsApp groups) helps bridge information gaps while also providing emotional and practical support for elderly pilgrims. This enriches the approach to interpersonal communication, making it more inclusive and holistic. Communication training for companions and service staff at KBIH still faces practical obstacles, such as limited time and human resources, but shows a serious commitment to improving empathetic, patient, and personal communication competencies. The development of interactive communication media is also expected to strengthen elderly-friendly religious services, complementing face-to-face communication as the main pillar.

Proponents of modern religious ministry theory assert that services must integrate the emotional and psychological aspects of service recipients, especially for vulnerable groups such as the elderly. Holistic, responsive services that address local socio-cultural needs can support the implementation of the Hajj in a safe, comfortable, and meaningful manner [28], [29]. The digitization of services, balanced with face-to-face interpersonal communication, is also an important part of this modern context [24]. The theory of interpersonal communication adaptation supports these findings by highlighting the need to adjust communication to the physical, cognitive, and psychological limitations of the elderly, ensuring messages are received and understood properly without causing stress or confusion [30]. A patient approach, simple language, structured repetition, and equality in interaction provide the foundation for effective and inclusive communication in Hajj services (Fahmin, 2023). Empathy, as an important foundation in interpersonal communication, is affirmed by modern empathy theory, which states that attention and deep understanding of individual feelings and perspectives improve the quality of relationships and services [17], [31], [32]. Empathetic communication also facilitates open dialogue, reducing anxiety and strengthening trust, particularly relevant for the ministry to the elderly, who need special attention.

Decreased communication ability in the elderly, due to physiological and cognitive

changes, requires an adaptive, supportive communication approach. Mentoring that provides verbal and nonverbal support grounded in empathy and family can overcome these barriers, thereby maintaining the quality of social interaction and the elderly's worship experience [33], [34]. The concept of *Qaulan Karima* is a noble and respectful speaking ethic that will strengthen ethical values in the communication of religious services for the elderly. Communicating with courtesy, gentleness, and respect, in accordance with Islamic guidance, not only smooths interactions but also strengthens emotional and spiritual relationships with the elderly, ultimately strengthening social harmony and service quality [35], [36]. Based on the results of the research and discussion above, the interpersonal communication model that can be applied in implementing elderly-friendly Hajj is.

Table 1. Elderly-Friendly Hajj Interpersonal Communication Model

Information:	Supporting Elements:
1. Understanding	a. Empathy & Patience
2. Active <i>Listening</i>	b. Simple & Adaptive Language
3. Adapting communication (<i>Adaptation</i>)	c. Two-Way Communication
4. Provide Motivation & <i>Support</i>	d. Principles of Qaulan Karima (Manners)
5. Soothing & Entertaining (<i>Emotional Comfort</i>)	f. Continuous Assistance
6. Giving direction and guiding (<i>Guidance</i>)	
7. Invite and strengthen the spirit (<i>Encouragement</i>)	
8. Involve families & health workers (<i>Collaborative Communication</i>)	

The cycle of elderly-friendly communication in religious services consists of several repeated stages. The companion first understands the physical, psychological, and social needs of elderly pilgrims, as well as their communication barriers. Furthermore, with patience and empathy, the companion listens to stories and complaints using simple language so that the elderly feel heard. In the next stage, the companion repeats the explanation in simple language and everyday examples and involves the family to reinforce the message. The companion also provides motivation and support, offering polite explanations in line with the principles of Qaulan Karima. The calming stage is carried out by creating a calm atmosphere through stories or humor. The companion guides the elderly in carrying out worship with clear directions, according to their ability.

Furthermore, they invited the elderly to remain enthusiastic with continuous moral support. Open communication between companions, families, and health workers is maintained through media such as WhatsApp. This cycle is supported by empathy, patience, simple language, two-way communication, and the Qaulan Karima principle, ensuring the service is friendly, meaningful, and consistent.

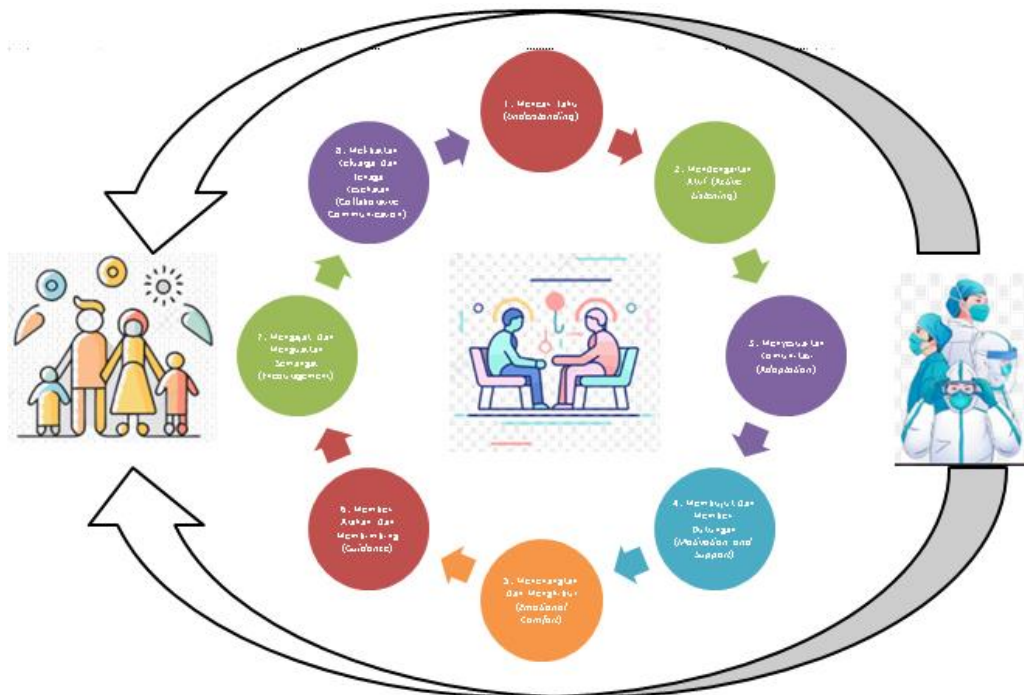


Figure 1. Elderly-Friendly Hajj Interpersonal Communication Model
Source: Author (2025)

4. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the central importance of interpersonal communication in shaping the quality of religious services for elderly Hajj pilgrims in Medan. Rather than functioning merely as a technical instrument, interpersonal communication emerges as a relational and ethical process that enables religious services to respond more effectively to the lived realities of elderly pilgrims. The study highlights that adaptive, empathetic, and dialogical communication is fundamental in fostering trust, emotional security, and a sense of dignity among elderly pilgrims throughout the pilgrimage process. From an applied perspective, the findings imply that religious service delivery for the elderly must prioritize human-centered communication competencies alongside procedural compliance. Strengthening empathy-based interpersonal communication, grounded in Islamic ethical principles such as *Qaulan*, can enhance the responsiveness of companions, health workers, and Hajj service providers. The study also suggests that communication should be understood as a collaborative process involving not only KBIH companions and health personnel, but also families as key actors in providing emotional and informational continuity.

This research is subject to certain limitations. First, it is confined to the context of Hajj Guidance Groups (KBIH) in Medan City, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different socio-cultural characteristics. Second, the qualitative approach employed emphasizes depth of understanding rather than impact measurement, so the effectiveness of the proposed communication model has not been statistically tested. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to expand the geographical scope to include multiple regions and diverse KBIH settings, and to adopt mixed-methods or quantitative

designs to assess the effectiveness of interpersonal communication models in improving service outcomes for elderly pilgrims. Further studies may also explore integrating digital communication technologies that remain accessible and inclusive for elderly users.

Overall, this research contributes to the broader discourse on religious service innovation by offering a contextual and ethical communication framework for elderly Hajj services. For the general public and policymakers, the study provides practical insights into how empathetic and adaptive communication can enhance the dignity, safety, and spiritual fulfillment of elderly pilgrims, supporting the realization of sustainable elderly-friendly Hajj services in Indonesia.

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