

DA'I FASHION AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: Public Perspectives in Southern Tapanuli

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Abstract: This study examines how religious values, social norms, and cultural expectations influence public perceptions of preacher attire in regions deeply rooted in local traditions. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews and participatory observation for data collection. The research sample consisted of purposefully selected local community members from diverse age groups and social backgrounds. The findings indicate that preacher fashion in South Tapanuli is perceived as a reflection of religious devotion and personal integrity. Traditional clothing styles, along with accessories such as the peci and sarong, symbolize commitment to Islamic principles and respect for local customs. However, some view certain aspects of preacher attire as a marker of exclusivity or social status. Overall, the community perceives preacher fashion as a bridge between religious identity and local culture, serving as both a medium for da'wah and a representation of social values

Keywords: Islamic propagation, Da'i, Perception, Fashion, Southern Tapanuli, Non-verbal Communication

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Introduction

Fashion is one of the elements of culture constantly evolving and serves as a powerful non-verbal communication tool,² expressing one's character, identity, and social status.³ In a broader context, fashion reflects a particular society's social, cultural, and economic conditions.⁴ In this era of globalization, fashion has become a part of daily life and an essential tool for individuals, including public figures, to shape their self-image.⁵ Public figures, especially in Islamic da'wah, often use fashion to communicate with their audience,⁶ reinforce the message of da'wah conveyed, and build an emotional connection with their worshippers.

In da'wah, Da'is or ustadz are often the main spotlight. The content of their lectures and physical appearance became the public's attention.⁷ The fashion worn by a Da'i is often the first judgment affecting how people receive the message.⁸ In regions such as South Tapanuli, where local customs and culture are still powerful, Da'i fashion has a deeper meaning. It is perceived as an indicator of piety and expertise in religious science.⁹ The people of South Tapanuli, known for their rich culture and local wisdom,¹⁰ have special expectations for the appearance of a Da'i. In this context, a Da'i who wears cocoa clothes, robes, sarongs, and turbans is more easily accepted as a pious figure worthy of delivering da'wah.

However, along with the times, there has been a change in people's perception of fashion, including the fashion worn by the Da'is. The rise of social media and popular culture influences has significantly influenced how people perceive fashion. Da'i-Da'i, who appear on television and in mainstream media, often wear more modern and casual clothing,¹¹ which is different from the traditional clothing worn by local Da'i in South Tapanuli. This raises questions about how the people of South Tapanuli view Da'i fashion and whether this fashion shift affects how they receive da'wah.

Non-verbal communication theory states that physical appearance, including clothing, is a form of non-verbal communication that can send a specific message to the audience.¹² In the context of da'wah, fashion can be seen as part of the ethos, namely credibility and character that a Da'i wants to highlight.¹³ The fashion worn by a Da'i not only reflects his personality and identity but also serves as a symbol of social status and religiosity that can influence the perception and response of the audience.¹⁴ This is in line with the symbolic theory of interactionism, which emphasizes that social interaction occurs through symbols, including clothing, used by individuals to communicate.

Previous research on fashion in the Islamic context has primarily focused on the analysis of Islamic fashion in general¹⁵ and how religious and cultural values influence Islamic fashion.¹⁶ Several studies have also highlighted the style of da'wah rhetoric and how Da'i fashion can affect the audience's acceptance of da'wah messages. However, research that explicitly examines Da'i fashion in a local context, such as in South Tapanuli, still needs to be completed. Most existing studies focus more on analyzing rhetoric¹⁷ or media influence on Islamic fashion¹⁸ without looking at how local communities interpret Da'i fashion in their cultural and social contexts.

This research gap provides an opportunity to conduct a more in-depth study of how the people of South Tapanuli perceive Da'i fashion and how religious values, social norms, and cultural expectations influence these perceptions. In this context, it can be understood that fashion is not only a matter of aesthetics but also a communication tool that can strengthen or weaken the message of da'wah conveyed by a Da'i. This research focuses on the study of the perception of the people of South Tapanuli towards the fashion used by a Da'i, including the style of dress and accessories. This research will delve deeper into how the

people of South Tapanuli interpret Da'i fashion and what they expect from the appearance of a Da'i. The purpose of this study is to answer questions related to people's perception of Da'i fashion, as well as to identify the factors that affect this perception. The research also seeks insight into how Da'i can use fashion as part of their da'wah strategy, especially in a rich and complex local culture like South Tapanuli. Thus, this research will not only make a theoretical contribution to understanding the relationship between fashion and da'wah but also provide practical implications for Da'is in conveying their religious messages effectively and following the local community's expectations.

Fashion in Religious and Cultural Debates

In fashion, the contestation between religion and culture often reflects the tension between principles considered sacred and social norms that develop in society.¹⁹ Religion and culture are two mutually influencing forces, but they often have different values and demands regarding individual appearance, which can lead to conflict or compromise.²⁰

Religions often set specific rules and guidelines for clothing that reflect purity, modesty, and spiritual identity.²¹ For example, in Islam, the principles of dressing are contained in the teachings of the hijab, which emphasizes modesty and covering the awrah. This rule aims to maintain morality and strengthen religious identity. Dress codes often emphasize simplicity and expressing piety. Therefore, religious guidelines on fashion have a dual function: moral and spiritual guidelines that shape how people dress and act as proof of loyalty and obedience to God.

On the other hand, local culture significantly influences how people dress, which may only sometimes be in harmony with religious guidelines.²² Culture often reflects aesthetic values, traditions, and social customs that may be more flexible or

contrary to religious teachings. For example, specific clothing may be considered a symbol of status or elegance in some cultures, even though the clothing may not fully comply with religious guidelines. Traditional clothing or the fashion that develops in society often reflects an adjustment to social change and globalization, which can create tensions with more conservative religious rules.²³

This contestation between religion and culture becomes more apparent when individuals or groups try reconciling the two aspects. These challenges can be very complex in countries with cultural and religious diversity, such as Indonesia.²⁴ In Southern Tapanuli, for example, there is a public expectation that Da'i clothing reflects a robust religious identity while maintaining modesty by local cultural norms.²⁵ When a Da'i wears clothing that is considered insufficiently formal or not in line with social expectations, even though it may follow religious guidelines, this can elicit criticism from people who prioritize harmony with the local culture.

In contrast, a more open or modern cultural approach may embrace innovation in dress, but this often faces resistance from more religiously conservative circles. This conflict reflects not only differences in dress norms but also in the values that underlie each approach. Culture is often more oriented toward social and aesthetic adaptation, while religion is more focused on adhering to principles that are considered sacred and non-negotiable.²⁶ Compromises or innovative solutions are often needed to bridge the gap between these two worlds. Some individuals may choose clothing that blends traditional and modern elements, seeking a middle ground between cultural expression and religious observance. For example, wearing the hijab combined with modern design or traditional clothing adapted to contemporary elements can exemplify how these two forces interact constructively.²⁷

However, this process is often fraught with challenges and conflicts. Religions with strict guidelines regarding clothing may feel threatened by cultural changes perceived as too liberal. At the same time, rapidly evolving cultures may see religious guidelines as an obstacle to social or aesthetic progress. This contestation requires an open dialogue and a deep understanding of how these two aspects can complement each other without ignoring each other. As such, the debate over fashion between religions and cultures reflects the deep tension between spiritual norms and evolving social values. ^{28An} approach that respects and understands these perspectives can help create Da'i solutions for individuals who want to express themselves authentically while respecting their religious guidelines and cultural norms.²⁹

Method

In this study, the approach used is qualitative, using a case study method³⁰ to understand the perception of the people of Southern Tapanuli towards Da'i clothing in various activity contexts. This case study method is believed to provide a deep and thorough understanding of how Da'i fashion is received and perceived in various social and cultural contexts in Southern Tapanuli. The object of the study includes three Da'i figures who played an essential role in the region, namely Ustadz H. Zulfan Efendi Hasibuan, Ustadz Amsir Shaleh Siregar, and Ustadz Gembira Siregar, as well as people from five regions, namely Padangsidempuan, South Tapanuli, Padang Lawas, North Padang Lawas, and ManDa'iling Natal. The data source consisted of primary data obtained through observation and in-depth interviews with eight purposively selected informants. Observations were made to identify the characteristics of Da'i dress in various situations, while interviews aimed to collect people's views on Da'i fashion in the context of lectures, khatib, traditional events

(makkobar), gardening, sports, and leisure activities in coffee shops. Data collection tools include semi-structured interview guides and field notes from observations.³¹ Data analysis was done using thematic analysis techniques, identifying patterns and themes from interviews and observation data to reveal public perceptions regarding Da'i clothing. The validity test of the data was carried out through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as validation with informants to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data obtained.³²

Results and Discussion

Public Perception of Da'i Clothing in Southern Tapanuli

This study shows that the expectation of consistency with religious identity and social norms dramatically influences the public's perception of Da'i clothing in Southern Tapanuli. The results revealed that more traditional Da'i clothing, such as those worn by Ustadz Amsir Shaleh Siregar and Ustadz Gembira Siregar, was considered more appropriate and accepted. They appeared in Muslim clothes, sarongs, and turbans, which reflected a strong religious identity.

Based on an interview with Zulkarnain³³ from Padangsidempuan argued, "Ustadz clothes during lectures and khatib as usual wear clothes like an ustadz. If *makkobar* is at a traditional event, it is also the same because it shows that he is an alim ulama." This shows that people expect Da'i clothing to reflect politeness and a clear religious identity. On the other hand, Ustadz H. Zulfan Efendi Hasibuan,³⁴ who chose batik clothes and loose pants in certain situations, received a more varied response. Despite the recognition of the comfort and practicality of the garment, some people consider it to be less in line with the formal image expected.³⁵

The public's perception of Da'i clothing in Southern Tapanuli shows a close relationship between Da'i's appearance and social expectations in the community. The community better accepts clothes considered by local religious and cultural norms. This reflects the importance of harmony between the Da'i's appearance and the public's expectations of religious symbols, ultimately shaping the Da'i's reputation and credibility.³⁶

The traditional clothing worn by Da'is, such as Ustadz Amsir Shaleh Siregar and Ustadz Gembira Siregar,³⁷ reflects the image of politeness and formality valued in a religious context. This can be understood as fulfilling the social expectations of the community, considering that formal and religious norms increase the credibility and belief in Da'i.

On the contrary, a more flexible approach, as shown by Ustadz H. Zulfan Efendi Hasibuan, can be considered an effort to adapt to daily practical needs without neglecting religious values. Although people's responses to this dress style have been mixed, it reflects a change in people's views of how Da'is' appearance can be adapted to different contexts.³⁸

This study found that people's perception of Da'i clothing is not only influenced by conformity with religious identity but also influenced by local social and cultural contexts. In a society steeped in traditional and cultural values such as Southern Tapanuli, Da'i clothing often symbolizes how they meet social expectations. This suggests that moderation in Da'i dress must consider balancing religious identity and adaptation to local social demands.

From interviews conducted with respondents Indra Tarigan, Zulkarnain, Doni Gunawan, Hasmar Hidayat Harahap, Naamuddin Nasution, Junaidi Harahap, Harisun Simbolon, Husein Simbolon, it appears that the community has clear expectations regarding

how Da'is should dress in a religious context. "Ustadz, during lectures and khatib, must wear Muslim clothes, sarongs, and peci. When *makkobar* is usually here, traditional clothes are used. If gardening, sports, and kelopo are adjusted but still polite, cover the aurat".³⁹ This expectation includes a formal appearance and conformity with religious norms, which is considered to improve the quality and confidence of the message conveyed by the Da'i. This shows that to be well accepted by the community, Da'i must consider both aspects: conformity with religious identity and adaptation to local social norms.

Factors Affecting Public Perception

Factors that affect people's perception of Da'i clothing include the influence of local culture, social expectations, and the context of Da'i activities. In the southern Tapanuli community, where traditional values are very dominant, Da'i clothing is often considered a representation of politeness and religious identity that must be considered. In the southern Tapanuli community, customary factors and social norms greatly influence the perception of da'i fashion. Da'i are expected to maintain *mur'ah* through clothing and speech by customs, as well as showing honesty and consistency between words and deeds.⁴⁰ Da'i clothing that reflects religious and traditional symbols is an essential marker of their status and dignity. The existence of da'i in various traditional events, both in happiness and sorrow, shows their unique position in society.

The results of interviews with various respondents revealed that the public is very concerned about how Da'i clothing reflects social and religious norms. For example, Doni Gunawan⁴¹ from South Tapanuli emphasized, "Ustadz clothes during lectures and khatib must wear polite, neat, and clean clothes because an

ustadz will be the speaker who is the main focus of the congregation.” This shows that local social and cultural expectations are essential in shaping people’s perception of Da’i clothing.

The people of Southern Tapanuli have strong cultural values that influence their view of how Da’i clothing should be. A local culture that prioritizes formality and modesty in dressing significantly shapes expectations for Da’i appearances. Traditional clothes such as Muslim clothes, sarongs, and turbans are considered more by existing cultural and religious values, so the community accepts them more. Social expectations also play a role in shaping public perceptions. Da’is are expected to wear clothing that reflects religious identity and modesty, especially in the context of lectures and sermons.⁴² This appearance, which is considered by social expectations, helps strengthen the trust and credibility of the Da’i in the eyes of the public. The context of Da’i activities also influences public perception. Clothing worn in formal situations such as lectures or sermons tends to be expected to be more in line with religious and cultural norms. In contrast, clothing in non-formal situations may be considered more flexible. This indicates that there is a difference in expectations depending on the context in which the Da’i is active.

Based on the explanation above, understanding people’s perception of Da’i clothing involves an in-depth analysis of local cultural influences, social expectations, and the context of activities. This is important to assist Da’is in adjusting their appearance to societal expectations while maintaining their religious identity.

Reconstruction of Public Perception of Da’i Fashion

The findings of this study show that strategies to improve people’s perception of Da’i clothing involve increasing Da’i’s understanding of local social and cultural expectations and adjusting

their appearance according to the context of the activity. Ustadz H. Zulfan Efendi Hasibuan, with a flexible approach to dressing, can be considered an example of a good strategy in this regard. From interviews with the public, there is an acknowledgment of the importance of adapting appearances to local expectations without neglecting religious values. The community accepts Da'i, which can balance formal appearances in religious situations with more relaxed appearances in everyday situations. This suggests that strategies that deeply understand societal expectations and social contexts are essential.

Practical strategies to improve people's perception of Da'i clothing require an approach that involves a deep understanding of social and cultural expectations and adjustments based on the context of the activity. Da'i needs to deeply understand the community's cultural values and social expectations. This can be done through training or consultation with community leaders and local religious leaders to ensure their performance aligns with community expectations. Another strategy involves tailoring Da'i clothing according to the context of their activities. Formal attire may be required for formal activities such as lectures and sermons. Meanwhile, for non-formal activities, flexibility in dressing is acceptable. This shows the importance of adapting the appearance to the situation and context in which the da'i is active. Finally, improve communication between da'is and the community about their preferences and expectations. This can help in forming a better understanding of what is considered appropriate. Da'i can engage in dialogue with the community to get feedback and adjust their appearance according to expectations.

In South Tapanuli, the mismatch between the da'i's appearance and the community's social expectations can significantly impact their reputation and presence in the community. The people in this area highly appreciate religious symbols such as turbans,

peci, and traditional clothes that reflect the glory and dignity of a da'i. If a da'i is seen not complying with these norms—for example, by wearing a T-shirt, not covering his head with a scarf, or not wearing a turban—the consequences can be very detrimental. The existence of da'i in religious events such as religious sermons and lectures can be threatened because people tend to feel uncomfortable and lack respect for da'i who do not commit to these religious symbols. This has the potential to deprive da'is of invitations to deliver lectures, which directly affects their opportunities to interact with the congregation and spread religious teachings.

Furthermore, consistency in appearance can also result in a loss of support from the masses or mad'u, which is the primary source of their da'wah success. If people feel that da'i is no longer in line with their expectations, trust in da'i's ability to guide and provide religious advice can decline drastically.⁴³ As a result, da'i may lose the audience that has been the base of its support and income. Thus, appearances outside the social expectations of the people of South Tapanuli impact not only the image and personal honor of the da'i but also the sustainability of their da'wah careers and the potential income generated from religious activities.

In analyzing the public's perception of Da'i clothing in southern Tapanuli, this study's results show a close relationship between social expectations, religious identity, and local cultural context. This study's findings reveal that the community's traditional clothes worn by Da'i, such as Muslim clothes, sarongs, and turbans, are more widely accepted by the community than clothes considered less formal, such as batik and loose pants. The respondents' opinions, as expressed by Zulkarnain and Doni Gunawan, emphasized that Da'i's appearance must reflect politeness and religious identity to increase the credibility and trust of the community. These

findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that Da'i appearances are often perceived as visual representations of religious and social values held by local communities.⁴⁴

Other research, such as those conducted by Syaepu, Sauki, Zamri, et al., found that people in various regions of Indonesia also tend to have similar expectations for Da'i clothing. They show that Da'i appearances following local cultural and religious norms are more acceptable. However, significant differences can arise based on specific cultural contexts. In areas with customary solid values, such as southern Tapanuli, expectations of Da'i appearance are stricter than in other areas that may be more tolerant of variations in dress.⁴⁵

The main difference in these findings lies in the adaptation between religious identity and local social norms. While Syamsudin and Darwis identify that Da'i appearances should be adapted to general religious norms, this study adds a new dimension by emphasizing the importance of adapting to the local culture that is so dominant in Southern Tapanuli. Clothing that is considered formal and by religious norms, such as those worn by Ustadz Amsir Shaleh Siregar and Ustadz Gembira Siregar, is a concrete example of how a more traditional appearance can meet the expectations of the people in the area. On the contrary, a more flexible approach, such as the one applied by Ustadz H. Zulfan Efendi Hasibuan, shows the need to adapt to practical needs without neglecting religious values. This shows a shift in public views that needs to be accommodated in Da'i's appearance.

The contribution of this research to the existing theory is very significant. While many previous studies have examined the relationship between Da'i clothing and religious identity, this study expands the understanding by highlighting how local cultural factors affect people's perceptions. This research provides deeper insights into how cultural factors and specific

social expectations in southern Tapanuli shape perceptions of Da'i clothing, offering a more detailed and contextual perspective. By highlighting the importance of reconciliation between religious identity and local cultural norms, this research helps fill in the gaps in the existing literature. It provides a more substantial basis for understanding how da'i clothing can affect their image and effectiveness in society.

This research encourages further studies on the interaction between religious identity, social expectations, and local culture in the context of Da'i clothing. This research opens up opportunities for further exploration of how these factors interact in different cultural contexts in Indonesia and how adaptation to local social norms can influence people's perceptions of Da'i. In addition, this study can provide practical guidance for Da'is in adjusting their appearance to be more effective in interacting with people with diverse social and cultural norms.⁴⁶

Overall, it is understandable that this study shows that the appearance of Da'i is influenced not only by religious identity but also by local social and cultural norms.⁴⁷ An approach that emphasizes the importance of a deep understanding of local social and cultural expectations and adjustments based on the context of activities makes an essential contribution to existing theories and the development of science in this field. This study offers a more holistic view of how these factors interact and provides a solid foundation for future studies that can deepen understanding of people's perceptions of Da'i clothing in various cultural contexts.⁴⁸

Conclusion

This study reveals that the interaction between religious norms and local culture influences the perception of the people

of South Tapanuli towards Da'i fashion. The community is more accepting of Da'is who wear traditional clothing, such as cocoa shirts, sarongs, and turbans, which are considered more by religious identity and prevailing norms of politeness. This traditional clothing not only reflects religion but also conforms to local customary values, increasing the credibility and trust of the community in the message of da'wah conveyed. In contrast, Da'is who opt for modern clothing, while practical, are often perceived as needing more by formal and religious expectations. The study also shows that religious factors and adaptation to the broader social and cultural context influence the perception of Da'i fashion. Thus, Da'is must balance religious identity and local social demands in their appearance to be well received.

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