

The Silent Struggle Behind the Sermon: Speaking Anxiety and Coping Mechanisms of Imams during the Friday Khutbah in Muslim Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the causes, manifestations, and coping mechanisms of speaking anxiety among Imams during the Friday Khutbah in Muslim communities of Zamboanga and Tawi-Tawi. While public-speaking anxiety has been widely examined in academic settings, little is known about its occurrence in religious communication. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study involved eight (8) purposively selected Imams who regularly deliver sermons. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that anxiety stemmed from fear of audience judgment, pressure to meet religious expectations, and concern over sermon accuracy. The anxiety manifested emotionally through self-doubt, mentally through distraction, and physically through tension and trembling. To manage these experiences, Imams employed spiritual and cognitive coping strategies, such as supplication (du'a), remembrance of Allah (dhikr), visualization, and positive self-talk. Behavioral approaches like content mastery and controlled pacing also helped sustain composure. Overall, the study concluded that Imams' speaking anxiety reflects a unique intersection of faith and psychology. It filled a research gap by documenting the emotional struggles and faith-based resilience of Imams in the Philippine Muslim context, offering insights for future training and support programs.

Keywords: *speaking anxiety, khutbah, coping mechanisms, Imams, Mindanao*

1. Introduction

Public speaking anxiety, also referred to as communication apprehension or performance anxiety, is a well-documented psychological and communicative phenomenon. Across decades of research, scholars have consistently demonstrated that real-world speaking tasks generate more intense physiological and subjective anxiety responses than many controlled laboratory simulations (Zuardi, de Souza Crippa, Cecilio Hallak & Gorayeb, 2013). These findings establish a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for understanding how individuals experience and manage anxiety in authentic speaking contexts, including highly unstructured and socially significant events such as the Friday khutbah.

Intervention studies in the performance-anxiety literature reveal that coping strategies can be intentionally developed and effectively taught. Techniques such as vocal and bodily training, breathwork, rehearsal, and embodied or gesture-based practices have been shown to reduce perceived anxiety and enhance delivery among public speakers and performers (Merritt, 2001; Garcia-Monge, 2023). These findings suggest that technical coping mechanisms may also benefit speakers in religious contexts, where oratory skill, ritual fidelity, and spiritual responsibility intersect.

The Friday khutbah, however, represents more than a typical public-speaking engagement. Research on sermons, khutbah discourse, and the communication practices of religious leaders identifies the khutbah as a distinct communicative genre characterized by specific rhetorical structures, directive speech acts, and community-oriented content (Wardoyo, 2016). These elements shape both the message and the manner of delivery, demanding not only clarity and eloquence but also theological precision and ethical responsibility. While previous discourse analyses have richly described the structure and function of khutbahs, they have largely overlooked the subjective experiences of imams, particularly their anxiety levels and coping strategies during sermon delivery.

In addition to their role as religious orators, imams frequently serve as pastoral figures and community counselors. Empirical research highlights that imams often act as first-line mental health gatekeepers, providing spiritual and psychosocial support despite limited formal training. For instance, Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk (2005) found that U.S. imams were frequently sought for counseling and guidance, while Ibrahim and Mojab (2022) documented Canadian imams' sense of responsibility for the

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psychosocial well-being of immigrant and refugee Muslims. These studies underscore the central role imams play in their communities, increasing the significance of their public communication. However, much of this literature concentrates on referral practices and pastoral attitudes rather than the emotional and psychological experiences of the imams themselves when delivering the khutbah.

Parallel research in psychology and religious studies has shown that faith-based practices—such as prayer, Qur'an recitation, and communal rituals can function as coping mechanisms that reduce anxiety and enhance emotional resilience (Bano, Akram, Umm E Habiba & Arshad, 2025). In the context of the khutbah, this suggests that imams may draw upon culturally and religiously grounded strategies such as Qur'anic preparation, ritual dhikr, or devotional rehearsal, to manage their anxiety. Yet, despite this plausible connection, there remains a scarcity of empirical research documenting which coping strategies imams actually employ immediately before and during khutbah delivery, or how these strategies relate to their anxiety levels, perceived sermon effectiveness, and overall well-being.

In light of these, three strands of literature converge on a clear research gap. First, public-speaking research establishes that real-world speaking contexts heighten anxiety responses. Second, studies of khutbah discourse reveal that sermon delivery is a specialized communicative act with unique rhetorical and ethical dimensions. Third, imam-focused community studies demonstrate the high pastoral and communicative expectations placed on imams. Despite this, little is known about imams' lived experiences of speaking anxiety during khutbah delivery and the specific coping mechanisms they use.

2. Literature

2.1. Public Speaking Anxiety in Global Contexts

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) has been extensively explored across various disciplines, including psychology, communication, and education. Zuardi, de Souza Crippa, Cecilio Hallak, and Gorayeb (2013) demonstrated that actual public-speaking situations trigger more intense physiological and subjective anxiety responses compared to simulated settings. McCroskey (1977) defined communication apprehension as the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with others, emphasizing that it affects individuals across professions and cultural contexts. Similarly, Dwyer and Davidson (2012) highlighted that public speaking remains one of the most common and intense forms of anxiety, often surpassing fears of death or physical harm. Their findings emphasized that anxiety experienced in authentic environments involves heightened emotional and bodily reactions, underscoring the need to study real-world contexts such as religious sermons. Similarly, Gallego and McHugh et al. (2021) examined self-reported, behavioral, and physiological measures of public-speaking anxiety, concluding that its assessment requires multimodal tools to capture its full complexity. These studies collectively show that anxiety is not merely cognitive but also deeply embodied, manifesting through physical and emotional symptoms during live performances.

Training and intervention studies have likewise addressed anxiety management in speaking contexts. Merritt (2001) found that vocal and physical training helped performing arts students reduce performance-related anxiety and enhance delivery confidence. Expanding on this, García-Monge (2023) implemented a body-oriented program that emphasized posture, breathing, and embodiment, resulting in significant reductions in public-speaking anxiety. These findings suggest that body-centered interventions could also be adapted to contexts where imams perform religious speech acts requiring composure, presence, and clarity.

2.2. Imams, Khutbah Delivery, and Religious Communication

Within Islamic contexts, the communicative responsibilities of imams extend beyond mere preaching. Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk (2005) conducted a national survey of U.S. mosques and found that imams often serve as community counselors, despite receiving limited formal training in mental health. Abu-Ras, Gheith, and Cournos (2008) further revealed that imams play active roles in promoting mental health, fostering psychological well-being and resilience among congregants. These findings demonstrate that khutbah delivery is not a purely theological act—it involves emotional, social, and pastoral demands that may heighten performance anxiety. Anxiety in speech situations is not limited to linguistic or cognitive performance; it also influences one's emotional and attentional control. Eysenck et al. (2007) proposed the Attentional Control Theory, which explains how anxiety disrupts an individual's ability to focus, process, and deliver coherent speech due to increased self-consciousness and worry. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) supported this notion in their study on language anxiety, revealing that anxiety can hinder fluency, spontaneous thought, and communicative confidence. In the context of the Khutbah, such effects may manifest in trembling, disorganized thoughts, or difficulty recalling verses, demonstrating how emotional pressure affects both the delivery and spiritual depth of sermons.

In addition to their emotional responsibilities, imams face linguistic and rhetorical challenges in delivering sermons. Wardoyo (2016) examined khutbah discourse and found that directive speech acts, such as commands and exhortations, were the most frequent, reflecting the instructional and persuasive nature of Islamic sermons. This linguistic expectation situates imams in a position that demands rhetorical precision and self-assured delivery, both of which may be affected by speaking anxiety. As such, studying imams' experiences of anxiety and their coping mechanisms provides insight into the intersection of communication, spirituality, and leadership.

2.3. Faith-Based Coping and Anxiety Reduction

Religious coping has been empirically shown to alleviate stress and anxiety in multiple settings. Moulaei et al. (2023) reported that Qur'anic recitation and listening significantly reduced physiological stress and self-reported anxiety levels, suggesting a measurable link between spiritual engagement and emotional regulation. Similarly, Salari et al. (2025) demonstrated that patients who recited or listened to the Qur'an before surgery exhibited lower anxiety levels, reinforcing the calming and therapeutic effects of faith-based practices. These findings align with Islamic perspectives on dhikr (remembrance of God) and tawakkul (trust in divine will), which are also common coping mechanisms among imams who prepare for the emotionally demanding task of delivering sermons.

Mörtberg et al. (2018) contributed to the methodological grounding of this field by validating the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA), confirming its reliability across diverse cultural contexts. While the present study uses a qualitative lens, such validated instruments enrich understanding of how anxiety can be measured and interpreted across communicative contexts. Together, these international studies provide conceptual and empirical foundations for exploring imams' speaking anxiety, bridging psychological, linguistic, and spiritual dimensions of the phenomenon.

Scholars have also examined strategies for reducing communication apprehension. Alkhaldi (2023) discussed classroom and clinical techniques that focus on systematic desensitization, cognitive restructuring, and skills training — methods proven effective in lowering speech-related anxiety. Aripin et al. (2025) further emphasized the role of adequate preparation in enhancing performance confidence and reducing speech anxiety, suggesting that mastery of content and rehearsal significantly influence calmness during public delivery. Complementing this, Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2011) found that visualization and self-talk serve as effective cognitive-behavioral strategies to enhance self-assurance and maintain focus under

pressure. These insights suggest that similar psychological techniques could be beneficial for Imams preparing for emotionally charged sermons.

Beyond psychological interventions, religious and spiritual perspectives provide another dimension of coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) introduced the stress and coping theory, explaining that individuals utilize both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to deal with stress. For Imams, these strategies might include prayer, meditation, or reliance on divine will as mechanisms for emotional regulation. Saleh, Ayman, and Basri (2021) echoed this perspective, demonstrating that faith-based resilience enables Muslim educators to maintain composure and confidence despite anxiety-inducing situations. Madale (2016) also illustrated how Muslim traditions in the Philippines shape behavioral and emotional responses to religious duties, underscoring the deep interconnection between faith and communication.

2.4. Public Speaking Anxiety in the Philippine Context

In the Philippines, several studies have explored communication apprehension and its underlying causes among students and professionals. Christy et al. (2021) identified high levels of speech anxiety among communication students, particularly during formal speaking engagements. Giray et al. (2022) similarly observed that English majors with lower language proficiency tended to experience greater anxiety, suggesting a strong correlation between linguistic confidence and performance. Ong (2021) addressed this issue through a structured training program that successfully decreased students' anxiety and improved their public-speaking competence. These studies collectively highlight the persistence of speech anxiety within Philippine educational contexts, establishing local relevance for research into performance-related stress.

2.5. Islamic Communication and Cultural Contexts in Mindanao

Although studies on imams' speaking anxiety are limited in the Philippines, cultural and religious literature provides valuable insights into their communicative roles. Madale (2016) emphasized that imams in Mindanao hold dual responsibilities as religious leaders and moral guides, with khutbah delivery serving as a central act of community instruction. The *Selected Khutba: A Guide to Social Development for Muslim Communities in the Philippines* (Local Governance Support Program in ARMM, n.d.) similarly documented sermon themes promoting social awareness and moral conduct, suggesting that khutbahs are both spiritual and civic in nature. These sources reveal that imams' ability to communicate effectively is essential to maintaining social cohesion and religious engagement, underscoring the significance of studying speaking anxiety in this context.

Faith-based coping among Filipino Muslims has also been explored in the context of mental well-being. Alonto (2024) found that Islamic religiousness and gratitude predicted higher levels of mental health and emotional resilience. Likewise, Abdulraof and Guro (2025) recommended integrating Islamic spirituality into counseling practices, highlighting how faith functions as both a therapeutic and motivational force. These findings support the assumption that imams, grounded in their religious practices, may employ spiritual coping strategies—such as prayer, recitation, and reflection—to manage the psychological demands of public preaching.

While international studies have examined public-speaking anxiety across various populations and religious communication settings, there remains a lack of qualitative inquiry focusing on imams in the Philippine context, particularly in Mindanao regions such as Zamboanga and Tawi-Tawi. The reviewed literature points to three converging domains public-speaking anxiety, faith-based coping, and religious

communication that have been examined separately but rarely together. Thus, this study sought to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences, manifestations, and coping mechanisms of imams dealing with speaking anxiety during the Friday khutbah. The study emphasized situating the investigation within the socio-religious context of Mindanao, which contributed to both local and global discussions on anxiety, faith, and communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the speaking anxiety and coping mechanisms of imams during the Friday khutbah. The descriptive approach was appropriate because it focused on presenting an accurate, detailed account of participants' experiences without deep interpretation. As Sandelowski (2000) noted, descriptive qualitative research aimed to provide a comprehensive summary of an event in everyday terms, allowing findings to remain close to the participants' own words. Through this approach, the study captured the natural expressions, thoughts, and emotions of imams as they described how they managed anxiety while fulfilling their religious duties.

The design also allowed flexibility in exploring multiple perspectives drawn from interviews and observations. According to Lambert and Lambert (2012), the descriptive qualitative method was ideal for studies seeking to understand real-world situations and to produce straightforward descriptions of phenomena. In this study, the researcher documented how imams recognized, experienced, and responded to speaking anxiety during sermons. The descriptive nature of the design ensured that the imams' voices and lived realities remained central to the presentation and interpretation of the data.

3.2. Population and sampling

The study population consisted of 10 imams from various Muslim communities who regularly delivered the Friday khutbah. The participants were selected for their active involvement in public religious speaking, which made them well-suited to exploring experiences of speaking anxiety. The study employed purposive sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess firsthand knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling allowed researchers to select information-rich cases that provided deep insight into the research topic. This sampling approach ensured that the participants could offer meaningful accounts of their challenges and coping mechanisms during the khutbah.

In this study, approximately 8 imams were included, and the number of participants was determined using data saturation, with no new information or themes emerging from additional interviews. Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) emphasized that saturation guided qualitative researchers in determining an adequate sample size to ensure the depth and completeness of the data. To ensure the credibility and relevance of the data, participants met the following criteria: (1) must be a male imam actively delivering the Friday khutbah in a mosque within the selected Muslim community; (2) must have at least two years of experience in leading Friday sermons; (3) must have experienced speaking anxiety before or during sermon delivery; (4) must be willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent; and (5) must be able to articulate experiences in either English or a local language understood by the researcher. Overall, the use of purposive sampling ensured that the selected participants were those best positioned to provide detailed and meaningful insights into imams' experiences of speaking anxiety. The study gathered authentic narratives that reflected both the challenges and the coping strategies involved in delivering the Friday khutbah.

3.3. Research Locale

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The study was conducted in selected Muslim communities in Zamboanga City and Tawi-Tawi, both in the Mindanao region of the Philippines. These locations were chosen for their strong Islamic presence and the active observance of the Friday khutbah in various mosques. Zamboanga City, known for its cultural and linguistic diversity, served as an urban research site where imams often addressed large, mixed congregations. In contrast, Tawi-Tawi, considered one of the centers of Islamic faith in the Philippines, offered a rural perspective, where khutbah delivery remained deeply intertwined with community life and local traditions. Conducting the study in both settings provided a more comprehensive understanding of how imams from different contexts experienced and managed speaking anxiety.

The selection of these areas was also justified by their religious and cultural significance in the development of Islamic education and leadership in the southern Philippines. According to Madale (2016), Mindanao's Muslim communities continue to uphold strong religious traditions where the imam plays a central role in shaping both faith and social cohesion. The study captured variations in preaching experiences influenced by factors such as audience size, cultural expectations, and access to religious training. These diverse contexts contributed to richer data that reflected the multifaceted nature of speaking anxiety among imams across different Muslim communities in Mindanao.

3.4. Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. This tool was designed to gather detailed narratives about the participants' experiences with speaking anxiety and their coping mechanisms during the delivery of the Friday khutbah. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors before, during, and after their sermons. As Kallio et al. (2016) explained, semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, allowing researchers to explore participants' perspectives while ensuring that key topics related to the research objectives were covered.

To ensure clarity and relevance, the interview guide was subjected to expert validation by professionals knowledgeable in qualitative research and Islamic studies. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback to refine the wording and sequence of questions. According to Turner (2010), well-prepared interview protocols helped establish consistency and reliability while maintaining the conversational tone essential in qualitative research. **Table 1** presents the instrument of the study:

Table 1. Instrument of the study.

Objectives	Interview questions	Participants
To explore the underlying causes and psychological manifestations of speaking anxiety among Imams during the Friday Khutbah.	1. What particular aspects of the Friday Khutbah to trigger your anxiety before or during the sermon? 2. Can you describe how this anxiety manifests — emotionally, mentally, or physically — when you are about to deliver or are already delivering the Khutbah?	Imams delivering Khutbahs in Muslim Communities
To examine the personal, spiritual, and behavioral coping mechanisms that Imams adopt to manage	1. What personal or spiritual practices do you engage in to calm yourself before giving the Khutbah?	

anxiety and sustain confidence during their sermon delivery.	2. How do you mentally prepare yourself to face the congregation despite feelings of anxiety or self-doubt?
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3.5. Data Gathering Procedure

The data for this study were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with selected imams who met the inclusion criteria. Prior to data collection, formal permission was secured from the concerned religious authorities and mosque administrators. Each participant was informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations, after which informed consent was obtained. The interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting to ensure privacy and encourage openness. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), creating a safe and trusting interview environment allowed participants to share their experiences more authentically.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in either English or a local language familiar to the participants. With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription. Field notes were also taken to document nonverbal expressions, tone, and contextual details that might provide deeper insight into the participants' experiences. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached—that is, when no new themes or information emerged from additional interviews (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). All collected data were securely stored in password-protected files and used solely for academic purposes.

3.6. Data analysis

The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which aimed to identify recurring patterns and themes that reflected the imams' experiences of speaking anxiety and their coping mechanisms. The process began with the transcription of all audio-recorded interviews, followed by several readings to gain familiarity with the data. Afterward, meaningful statements were coded and categorized into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' narratives. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that thematic analysis involved systematically organizing qualitative data to uncover common ideas and underlying meanings, allowing researchers to interpret experiences in a structured yet flexible manner.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher ensured accuracy and credibility by continually comparing data and closely adhering to participants' original expressions. Notes and reflective memos were written to document analytical decisions and interpretations. To further enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing and member checking were conducted, allowing selected participants to review and verify the accuracy of transcribed data and emerging themes. As Nowell et al. (2017) noted, maintaining transparency and reflexivity throughout the analytic process helped ensure that the findings were both credible and dependable.

3.7. Ethical considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research to ensure the protection of participants' dignity and rights. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct interviews was secured from mosque administrators and relevant religious authorities. Each participant received an informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any stage without penalty. According to Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001), informed consent ensured that participants were adequately informed and able to make a voluntary decision to participate.

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Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants' identities were replaced with codes or pseudonyms, and all collected data—including audio recordings, transcripts, and notes—were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. The researcher also ensured that participants were treated with respect and cultural sensitivity, particularly given the study's religious context. As Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized, ethical qualitative research required researchers to safeguard participants' welfare while maintaining transparency, trust, and integrity in data handling and reporting.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore the underlying causes and psychological manifestations of speaking anxiety among Imams during the Friday Khutbah.

Question No. 1. What particular aspects of the Friday Khutbah trigger your anxiety before or during the sermon?

Through careful analysis of interview transcripts, three major themes emerged from the responses of participating Imams. These themes revealed how their speaking anxiety was rooted in a combination of social expectations, spiritual accountability, and self-perceived linguistic inadequacy. Each of these themes captures the multifaceted nature of their emotional and psychological experiences before and during the Friday Khutbah.

Theme 1: The Demands of Congregational Expectation

One of the most prominent sources of anxiety among Imams was the overwhelming pressure to meet the expectations of the congregation. The *Khutbah* is regarded as a sacred act of guidance, and attendees closely observe the Imam's ability to deliver a coherent, inspiring, and doctrinally sound message. Participants shared that knowing they are being evaluated—consciously or subconsciously—creates tension, especially when addressing a diverse audience that includes scholars, elders, and youth.

As one Imam from Zamboanga expressed:

"When I stand before the congregation, I feel hundreds of eyes watching me, not just to listen but to judge. Some expect me to quote verses perfectly, others wait for practical lessons. I start thinking—what if I forget something important or mispronounce an Arabic term? The pressure builds even before I climb the pulpit."

This sense of audience scrutiny aligns with McCroskey's (1977) theory of communication apprehension, which emphasizes the role of perceived evaluation in triggering speech anxiety. In religious contexts, such scrutiny is intensified by the moral and spiritual weight of the message. Imams thus experience a blend of social and spiritual tension, where the need to "perform well" becomes synonymous with representing faith correctly.

Theme 2: The Burden of Spiritual Responsibility

Another recurring source of anxiety stemmed from the deep spiritual accountability associated with the *Khutbah*. The participants revealed that their nervousness was not simply about public speaking but about the fear of misguiding others through imprecise interpretations or inadequate explanations of

Qur'anic verses and Hadith. The *Khutbah* serves as a vehicle of moral instruction; hence, any error could carry not only social but also spiritual consequences.

One Imam from Tawi-Tawi reflected:

“Every time I deliver the Khutbah, I ask myself—am I worthy to speak on behalf of Islam today? What if I interpret something wrong? The fear of saying something that contradicts the teaching of our Prophet makes my heart beat faster. It’s not stage fright; it’s a fear of being accountable before Allah for my words.”

This statement illustrates that speaking anxiety among Imams is often existential rather than performative. The fear is not just about forgetting lines but about violating divine trust. Similar observations were made by Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk (2005), who emphasized that imams often carry emotional burdens tied to their pastoral and doctrinal responsibilities. The anxiety, therefore, becomes a reflection of reverence and conscientiousness—an emotional manifestation of their devotion and moral vigilance.

Theme 3: Linguistic and Rhetorical Insecurity

A third theme that surfaced was linguistic insecurity, particularly concerning the use of Arabic and classical Islamic expressions. Many Imams reported feeling anxious about their pronunciation, fluency, and rhetorical style, especially when addressing congregations that included individuals with formal Islamic education. This linguistic self-doubt intensified their pre-sermon anxiety, leading to mental blocks and physical symptoms such as trembling or dry mouth during delivery.

A participant from Zamboanga recounted:

“Sometimes I prepare my sermon days before, but when the time comes, my tongue stiffens. Arabic is not my first language, so when I recite verses, I fear mispronouncing them. Some members of the congregation are hafiz or scholars, and I imagine them silently correcting me. That thought alone makes me lose focus on my message.”

This anxiety mirrors findings by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who found that language-based apprehension often intertwines with performance anxiety, especially in multilingual contexts. For imams in Mindanao—where local languages like Tausug, Sama, and Chavacano coexist—the challenge of shifting between Arabic and vernacular speech adds another cognitive load. As a result, linguistic anxiety becomes both a linguistic and cultural performance stressor.

The findings revealed that speaking anxiety among Imams is a complex intersection of social, spiritual, and linguistic factors. Unlike conventional public-speaking contexts, the *Khutbah* amplifies pressure through religious accountability and the sacredness of the act. The Imams’ psychological manifestations—such as increased heart rate, self-doubt, and overthinking—reflect both their commitment to religious accuracy and their vulnerability as communicators. These insights affirmed that speaking anxiety in faith-based settings is not merely a communication barrier but a profound spiritual experience rooted in reverence, responsibility, and the pursuit of eloquence in serving God and community.

Question No. 2: To describe how anxiety manifests emotionally, mentally, and physically when Imams are about to deliver or are already delivering the Friday *Khutbah*.

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From the participants' narratives, three major themes emerged regarding the manifestations of anxiety: (1) Emotional Turbulence and Self-Doubt, (2) Cognitive Overload and Fear of Mistakes, and (3) Physiological Reactions as Visible Signs of Strain. These themes reflect the multidimensional nature of speaking anxiety, revealing how emotional unease, intrusive thoughts, and bodily reactions intertwine in the Imams' experience of delivering sermons.

Theme 1: Emotional Turbulence and Self-Doubt

Imams commonly described feelings of nervousness, insecurity, and intense self-consciousness before delivering the *Khutbah*. They reported that anxiety often begins hours before the sermon, gradually building as they anticipate the responsibility of addressing a large and expectant congregation. Many noted that even with preparation, emotional instability persisted, leading to moments of hesitation or inner conflict.

An Imam from Zamboanga shared:

"Before the Khutbah, my heart feels heavy, and I start questioning myself—'Will my message touch them? Am I worthy to speak on Allah's words today?' Sometimes I even feel guilt for not being as knowledgeable as others. It's not just nervousness; it's emotional exhaustion that starts even before I reach the mosque."

This aligns with the findings of Dwyer and Davidson (2012), who revealed that emotional components of public-speaking anxiety often precede the act itself, triggered by anticipation and perceived inadequacy. Similarly, the study by Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk (2005) noted that imams carry a unique form of emotional strain because their public role involves both spiritual representation and community expectation. These emotional burdens heighten self-doubt, making the anxiety deeply tied to moral and identity concerns rather than mere performance fear.

Theme 2: Cognitive Overload and Fear of Mistakes

Mentally, Imams reported experiencing racing thoughts, intrusive worries, and lapses in concentration while delivering sermons. Many confessed that anxiety causes them to lose track of their prepared message or forget specific Arabic terms and Qur'anic verses. The cognitive tension often stems from the fear of making theological or linguistic errors, which they perceive as a failure not only of memory but of faithfulness to their religious duty.

A participant from Tawi-Tawi expressed:

"Sometimes my mind goes blank while delivering the sermon. I have my notes in my head, but suddenly they vanish. I think of whether I'm using the right Arabic phrase or quoting the verse correctly. The more I think about avoiding mistakes, the more my mind gets clouded."

This manifestation corresponds with the cognitive dimension of anxiety described by Eysenck et al. (2007), who explained that anxiety impairs working memory and information processing, particularly under evaluative conditions. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) further asserted that speakers who fear negative evaluation often experience self-interruptions and mental overload. Among Imams, this cognitive

disarray reflects the mental strain of balancing accuracy, clarity, and composure while maintaining spiritual focus.

Theme 3: Physiological Reactions as Visible Signs of Strain

Physical manifestations were among the most reported indicators of speaking anxiety. Imams described trembling hands, dry throat, increased heart rate, and sweating, especially during the initial moments of the *Khutbah*. Some also noted trembling voices and shortness of breath, which made them aware of how their bodies betrayed their inner unease before the congregation.

One Imam from Zamboanga narrated:

“When I hold the microphone, my hands sometimes shake. My voice quivers in the first few minutes. I feel my heartbeat pounding, and I keep taking deep breaths to calm myself. Once I see that the congregation is listening silently, I start to regain control, but those first moments are always the hardest.”

Such physiological symptoms are well-documented in literature on public-speaking anxiety. Zuardi et al. (2013) found that actual public-speaking situations elicit stronger physiological responses—such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure than simulated settings. Similarly, Mörtberg et al. (2018) noted that physical reactions often occur in tandem with emotional and cognitive distress, forming a comprehensive pattern of performance anxiety. For Imams, these physiological reactions signify not only nervousness but also the body’s response to the sacred gravity of the *Khutbah* as both a communicative and spiritual act.

The findings indicated that the speaking anxiety of Imams manifests across emotional, cognitive, and physiological dimensions, forming an interrelated pattern that influences their confidence and delivery. Emotionally, they wrestle with self-doubt and spiritual unease; mentally, they endure cognitive interference and fear of error; and physically, their bodies express the strain of sacred responsibility. These manifestations demonstrate that anxiety in the context of the *Khutbah* transcends ordinary public-speaking fear—it becomes a deeply human response to the spiritual, linguistic, and moral demands of religious leadership.

Research Objectives 2. To examine the personal, spiritual, and behavioral coping mechanisms that Imams adopt to manage anxiety and sustain confidence during their sermon delivery.

Question No. 1. What personal or spiritual practices do you engage in to calm yourself before giving the *Khutbah*?

The Imams’ responses revealed that coping with speaking anxiety involves an intricate combination of faith-centered practices, self-regulation strategies, and behavioral preparation routines. These coping mechanisms are rooted in their religious devotion and personal discipline, helping them transform anxiety into spiritual motivation. Three themes emerged: (1) Spiritual Centering through Dhikr and Du’a, (2) Cognitive Reframing through Self-Preparation and Reflection, and (3) Behavioral Routines that Foster Composure and Readiness.

Theme 1: Spiritual Centering through Dhikr and Du’a

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Almost all participants reported that spiritual grounding through prayer (du'a) and remembrance of Allah (dhikr) was their primary means of calming anxiety before delivering the *Khutbah*. Engaging in quiet supplication or reciting short verses from the Qur'an helped them realign their focus away from fear and toward divine purpose. This practice not only reduced emotional tension but also reinforced their sense of humility and reliance on Allah's guidance.

An Imam from Tawi-Tawi shared:

"Before the Khutbah, I isolate myself for a few minutes. I recite dhikr, asking Allah for calmness and wisdom. When I say, 'Bismillah,' I feel the burden ease a little. I remind myself that I am only an instrument, and the message belongs to Allah, not me."

This spiritual centering echoes the findings of Moulaei et al. (2023), who demonstrated that Qur'an recitation and listening significantly lower anxiety and stress levels, functioning as a form of *faith-based regulation*. Similarly, Abu-Ras, Gheith, and Cournos (2008) noted that imams often use spiritual rituals as therapeutic coping mechanisms, reinforcing their inner peace before performing community roles. Thus, spirituality not only anchors the Imams' composure but also transforms their anxiety into reverent mindfulness—a recognition that speaking in God's name is an act of worship rather than performance.

Theme 2: Cognitive Reframing through Self-Preparation and Reflection

Many Imams reported using mental reframing and self-dialogue as cognitive strategies to manage anxiety. They viewed their nervousness as a reminder of the importance of their task rather than a sign of weakness. This self-reassurance process often included revisiting sermon outlines, reflecting on the message's moral intent, and focusing on sincerity rather than perfection. Such reflective thinking reduced cognitive tension and restored focus.

One Imam from Zamboanga explained:

"I used to feel nervous because I wanted to impress people with my words. But now, I tell myself that sincerity is more important than eloquence. I review my topic and pray that it will touch hearts. When I think that way, the anxiety becomes smaller—it turns into motivation."

This aligns with the findings of García-Monge (2023), who found that embodied and reflective practices improve confidence by linking self-awareness to calmness. Cognitive reappraisal, as explained by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), enables individuals to reinterpret stressors positively, transforming fear into purposeful energy. For Imams, this reframing connects emotional regulation with spiritual intent, thereby integrating cognition and faith in managing performance pressure.

Theme 3: Behavioral Routines that Foster Composure and Readiness

In addition to spiritual and mental strategies, Imams employed structured behavioral routines—such as arriving early at the mosque, quietly observing the congregation, practicing controlled breathing, and maintaining proper posture to physically prepare for delivering sermons. These actions helped them internalize calmness and signal psychological readiness. Many also mentioned that rehearsing aloud or reading verses slowly before the *Khutbah* reduced trembling and built rhythm in speech.

A participant narrated:

"I come early and sit inside the mosque to feel its atmosphere. I breathe slowly and review the flow of my message in my mind. When I finally climb the pulpit, I already feel that I belong to the moment. The nervousness is still there, but it no longer controls me."

These behavioral coping mechanisms align with Merritt's (2001) findings that structured preparation and physical grounding such as breath control and posture training reduce performance anxiety among speakers. Likewise, Dwyer and Davidson (2012) emphasized that behavioral rehearsal enhances perceived control, a key factor in anxiety reduction. For Imams, these small but deliberate routines bridge the gap between spirituality and communication performance, cultivating composure and authenticity in their delivery.

The findings revealed that coping mechanisms among Imams are inherently multidimensional, intertwining faith, cognition, and behavior. Through *dhikr* and *du'a*, they draw spiritual strength; through reflection, they regulate cognition; and through behavioral routines, they anchor calmness in physical form. This holistic approach shows that for Imams, coping with anxiety is not merely about reducing fear but about restoring alignment between body, mind, and faith. The *Khutbah* thus becomes not just a test of eloquence, but a lived act of devotion and self-mastery.

Question No. 2. How do you mentally prepare yourself to face the congregation despite feelings of anxiety or self-doubt?

Delivering the *Khutbah* each Friday demands not only spiritual depth but also strong mental composure. For many Imams, the moments before facing the congregation are filled with both anticipation and internal struggle, often marked by anxiety, self-doubt, and the weight of communal expectation. Mental preparation thus becomes a crucial element in transforming anxiety into confidence and ensuring that the sermon remains heartfelt and impactful. In this study, three central themes emerged from participants' narratives: Reaffirming Purpose and Divine Responsibility, Visualization and Positive Self-Talk, and Internalizing Knowledge and Familiarity with the Sermon. These themes reflect a balance between faith-based grounding and cognitive strategies that collectively strengthen the Imams' mental readiness.

Theme 1: Reaffirming Purpose and Divine Responsibility

The most dominant strategy among Imams for mental preparation was reaffirming their divine purpose in delivering the *Khutbah*. Instead of viewing the sermon as a personal performance, many emphasized reminding themselves that they were mere conduits of Allah's message, not performers seeking approval. This cognitive realignment helped them redirect attention from self-consciousness to spiritual accountability, thereby reducing anxiety and strengthening inner conviction.

A participant from Zamboanga articulated this clearly:

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“Before I face the congregation, I tell myself that this Khutbah is not about me—it is about Allah’s words. When I remember that I am only His servant delivering a message, the fear becomes lighter. I feel more at peace knowing that I am fulfilling a duty, not trying to impress people.”

This practice aligns with findings by Abu-Ras, Gheith, and Cournos (2008), who found that religious leaders often rely on their spiritual mission to manage stress associated with public roles. Similarly, Saleh et al. (2021) observed that purpose-driven mindset and faith-based motivation foster emotional regulation among Muslim educators and leaders. Thus, by situating their anxiety within a larger spiritual context, Imams transform nervousness into reverence—turning fear into fuel for devotion.

Theme 2: Visualization and Positive Self-Talk

A number of Imams described using visualization and affirmative self-dialogue to mentally rehearse the act of delivering the *Khutbah*. They imagined themselves speaking calmly and effectively, visualizing the congregation listening attentively. These mental exercises allowed them to “pre-live” the experience, reducing anticipatory anxiety and instilling a sense of control. Positive self-talk—such as telling oneself “I am prepared,” or “Allah will guide me”—served as an antidote to self-doubt.

As shared by an Imam from Tawi-Tawi:

“I picture the people listening quietly, nodding, learning. I say to myself, ‘You’ve studied, you’re ready, Allah is with you.’ I imagine the flow of my speech until it feels natural. When I finally stand before them, it’s like I’ve already done it before.”

This approach reflects the principles of cognitive-behavioral techniques used in anxiety management. Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2011) highlighted that visualization helps speakers reduce anticipatory fear by mentally conditioning confidence responses. Likewise, Alkhaldi et al. (2023) emphasized that positive self-talk shifts focus from threat to challenge, encouraging speakers to view the audience as allies rather than critics. For Imams, such strategies merge modern psychological approaches with spiritual conviction, creating a balanced mindset grounded in both faith and cognition.

Theme 3: Internalizing Knowledge and Familiarity with the Sermon

Many Imams emphasized that thorough preparation and internalization of the *Khutbah*’s content significantly boosted their confidence. They did not merely memorize the sermon but sought to deeply understand the Qur’anic verses, *hadiths*, and moral lessons they intended to deliver. This intellectual readiness translated into emotional security—reducing uncertainty and strengthening mental composure. Familiarity with the content allowed them to focus on the message rather than the mechanics of speaking.

An Imam from Zamboanga explained:

“When I truly understand what I am preaching, the fear lessens. I study the meaning of each verse, and I reflect on it until I feel it in my heart. That way, even if I forget a line, I can still speak from understanding. Knowledge gives me calmness.”

This finding resonates with Aripin et al. (2025), who reported that subject mastery is a key predictor of reduced communication apprehension. Similarly, Merritt (2001) argued that familiarity with the speech

material minimizes the “fear of blanking out,” a common anxiety trigger. Among Imams, intellectual mastery becomes intertwined with spiritual conviction—knowing the message deeply not only ensures clarity but reinforces authenticity and sincerity.

Imams’ mental preparation for the *Khutbah* reflects a convergence of faith-based conviction, cognitive reframing, and intellectual mastery. Reaffirming purpose grounds them spiritually, visualization empowers them cognitively, and internalization anchors them intellectually. These combined mechanisms exemplify a holistic model of preparation that transcends mere speech training—it is a process of aligning the mind, soul, and knowledge with divine service. Consequently, anxiety becomes not a hindrance but a humbling reminder of their sacred responsibility as conveyors of truth and guidance.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the emotional and psychological experiences of Imams in preparing for and delivering the Friday Khutbah through a descriptive qualitative approach. The findings revealed that speaking anxiety among Imams is influenced by the convergence of personal, spiritual, and communicative responsibilities inherent in their role as religious leaders. Three principal sources of anxiety were identified: the expectation to fulfill religious and congregational obligations, heightened self-consciousness during sermon delivery, and concerns regarding the accuracy and effectiveness of conveying Islamic teachings. These sources of anxiety manifested across emotional, cognitive, and physiological dimensions, including self-doubt, heightened mental preoccupation, diminished concentration, trembling, perspiration, and increased physiological arousal. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated adaptive coping responses grounded in spiritual devotion, deliberate preparation, and a strong sense of religious purpose, enabling them to maintain composure and fulfill their responsibilities during the Friday Khutbah.

The findings stressed the multi-layered coping mechanisms that Imams adopt to manage their anxiety. Personal and spiritual practices such as supplication (*du’a*), remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), and ritual ablution (*wudhu’*) served as vital anchors that restored calmness and centeredness. Mentally, the Imams engaged in visualization, positive self-talk, and reaffirmation of their divine duty—strategies that aligned both with Islamic mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral principles. Behaviorally, they relied on mastery of sermon content, familiarity with the audience, and controlled pacing and breathing to maintain composure during delivery. Collectively, these coping strategies highlight the Imams’ ability to harmonize psychological self-regulation with spiritual devotion, embodying a holistic form of resilience that blends faith and cognition.

Beyond its empirical insights, this study addressed an important gap in the existing literature. While public-speaking anxiety has been extensively studied in educational and corporate contexts, limited attention has been given to its occurrence in religious communication, particularly among Muslim Imams in the Philippine context. Focusing on the lived realities of Imams from Zamboanga and Tawi-Tawi, the research contributed a culturally and spiritually nuanced understanding of anxiety in religious discourse. It also demonstrated that Islamic practices function not merely as expressions of religious devotion but also as mechanisms of psychological coping and emotional regulation. Consequently, the study achieved its objective of highlighting the often-overlooked internal struggles of faith leaders while providing an empirical foundation for future support programs, leadership development initiatives, and faith-sensitive interventions that promote both spiritual confidence and psychological well-being among Imams.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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