

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMPLEMENTARY SOURCE FOR RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract. Religious content in various formats is served to users on social media and interpreted in many ways. Drawing on interviews with 24 daily social media users, this qualitative study discusses how the audience interprets and utilizes social media content with religious topics. How do users interpret and use social media as a source of religious learning? Especially with their experience of learning about religion before or without the internet. We also discuss their motive to follow religious influencers, accessing content, to the facts about the construction of piety on their digital presence. This study argues that social media has the potential as not only a place to enjoy religious content but also complementary for learning and moderating the conversation around it. This study also enriches the literature around the intersection of social media and religion

Keywords. Islam and Social Media; Social Media and Religion; Da’wa; Religious Content

A. INTRODUCTION

Da’wa as a form of an invitation to perform religious activities, developed along with the penetration of various information and communication media. The development of the media as a means of Da’wa began in the early 20th century. Magazines, newspapers and books introduced by the printing culture and imported printing technology of the Netherlands are one of the important vectors of the archipelago of Da’wa in Indonesia (Burhanudin, 2004). In addition, Da’wa messages using radio and cassette access were introduced in the early 1920s and late 1960s, respectively (Jurriëns, 2009). With the inclusion of Indonesian television channels which first aired in 1962, views of Indonesian Da’wa are changing (Rakhmani & Siregar, 2016). It is no longer restricted to traditional offline sites such as mosques, but is also a part of mass media and when the Internet was introduced in Indonesia in the 1990s, it has also become a part of new communication technologies, especially smartphones and various social media platforms (Hill & Sen, 2000).

In the age of social media platforms, the Da’wa is offered in various content formats not only by the daily ordinary user but also by high profile users or well known influencers. Social media influencers (SMI) are people who accumulate a following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday lives, upon which paid advertorials, advertisement written in the form of editorial opinions, for products and services are premised (Abidin, 2016). Social Media Influencer (SMI) is not only limited to branding or selling commercial services and products. They are also about being part of the daily life of followers, including religious conversation through their social media content (Beta, 2019). In the later work, Abidin (2018), proposed that influencers are not only represented by ‘people’ with high profile on social media or other platforms. It can be a cute cat official account, or regarding this study, a da’wa official account studied by Nisa (2018) showing less human figure and dominated cartoon or text based content.

Prior studies related to social media influencers and religion in Indonesia have been conducted by scholars like Annisa Beta and Eva F Nisa. Beta (2019) studies how religious social media influencers are situated within religious, socio-political and commercial elements in their online and

offline representations while motivating their followers to do self-transformation or hijra. Meanwhile, the study from Eva F Nisa (2018), is more related to the hijra and Da'wa movements conveyed by the Da'wa accounts. Da'wa is an invitation to carry out religious activities, in the hope that followers can be more obedient in practicing religion. Both studies show religious influencer producing Da'wa content with different agenda, from the religious knowledge sharing, tips, religion based daily quotes, religion movement to political movement. Beta (2019) and Nisa (2018) portrays the phenomenon from the religious influencer side to at best covering the motive behind all of their agenda. From that background this study tries to broaden the view by covering the audience side, specifically religious influencer's followers.

B. METHODS

For this study, we conducted interviews with followers of Ustadz Hanan Attaki and Pemuda Hijrah. The participants in this study were mainly from the 17-35 age group. In all, 24 Indonesian from rural and urban area were interviewed in online and offline mode. The national language Bahasa Indonesia and the local, Javanese Language used on the interview, which made it possible to comfort audience on the conversation. As we value the participants' privacy, we ask for information consent, and anonymize their name. To recruit participants, we used the snowball method. Snowball is a method that uses information from participants to get the next participant (Goodman, 1961). Data analysis is guided by the principle of constant comparative analysis [53] in the data collection process to generate conceptual themes which are discussed as findings in the next chapter. Formal analysis of the data began by transcribing the interview recordings and typing in the notes from the interview after ending the fieldwork. Interviews and field notes were read many times and then coded three times to identify broad themes. Content and comments which are posted and/or reposted in social media by religious influencers or participants are also collected and analyzed to add to the discussion.

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

Religious digital content published on platform, caught by the audience, consumed, and interpreted in various ways by participants. In this section, we will explain how these religious contents are used as learning materials or religious reminders, to the motive behind their decision to follow an influencer account, accessing religious content and to share (or not share) as a way to construct their self-presentation.

1. Religious Reminders

The emergence of social media has served as a natural forum for Indonesians interested in learning about Islam. For instance, research that conduct by Nisa (2018) found that social media is the ultimate platform for Indonesian Muslim especially young women to educate each other to become better Muslims. The values possessed by social media such as visual images are also able to make sure the position of SMI or youth social media is a means to achieve instant gratification through technology (IDN Media, 2020) and the participants in my study also revealed that they spent a lot of time on social media and thus also looked for religious content to follow on social media platforms (see the example in Figure 1).



Figure 1: The content with the title #oneminutebooster from Ustaz Hanan Attaki that translates to “God Likes to be Asked”

“This content (#oneminutebooster) Yes, it is a reminder for me... I actually know these principles, but when I see Hanan Ataki’s posts, it not only reminds me of them, but also motivates me to follow them in my life. By following Hana Ataki on Instagram, I get this as a reminder to apply this in my everyday life”

The example above show that respondents often mentioned the straightforward content of Ustaz Hanan Attaki that he posts with the hashtag #oneminutebooster on Instagram. The 60-seconds video with this hashtag reminds his followers to never lose hope in asking God for help. On the next section we explain that it is not only the message of the religious content that attract respondent, but also the form of it while presented to these audiences.

2. Presentation of Content

Another positive point conveyed by respondents is the presentation of content on social media that makes religion easy and attractive to understand. As we know Instagram and YouTube places more emphasis on image creation and visuals, where influencers compete to create content with colorful images and captions and support the content to get attraction from the followers.

“Yes, I think Instagram is a very visual platform, right and YouTube also does that. I don’t get this presentation of content in offline sources because there we just sit and listen...”

Participants added that religious content on social media is different from the offline Da’wa event (called *Kajian*, in Indonesian language). When attending the offline religious event, participants most probably get the religious knowledge by sitting around for hours and hearing what the preachers are saying. While, in social media, they attract different forms of religious content combined by multimedia effort. Above statement is also echoed by another respondent, who only uses Instagram for his social media and said,

“For me, Instagram is a more visual and exciting way to understand and interact with religious content. It is not like I am just listening to a long explanation from an Ustaz that can get very boring for me”

For young people, who are the most significant users of social media in Indonesia today, encountering religion on social media in the visual and editing language of one-minute videos, Instagram stories, and Instagram Live creates curiosity about what they learn about religion on a social media platform that they otherwise use for leisure and entertainment.

3. Youthful Trend

“For me social media is about being young and up to date and this is reflected in the way religion is also presented. So, I feel that when I see religious content on social media, it is relevant to being young and therefore I follow and learn about it”

Another reason that participants in this study provided about why they choose social media for their religious needs is because they found it trendy. From the interviews conducted, respondents

said that they use social media because of the trend in their own social circles. Whether it is playmates, work friends, or even family, respondents said that they knew other friends followed preachers on social media and thus they too do the same. They feel more up-to-date and modern when using social media as a source of learning religion.

4. Self-Presentation and Networking

Some respondents turned out to have a specific motivation in reposting content from influencers. Through social media, users can build good relationships with other fellow users and express *their* feelings again by posting, tagging, and commenting through the available features. In addition, social media is also used by its users to provide a motivating environment as a form of user identity (Piece, 2003). Social media facilitates users psychologically to master their digital environment (Karahanna, 2015). We found respondents mentioning all these factors when they explained why they posted and reposted about religion on social media.

"I collect religious content that I find and share it through my status/story in WhatsApp or Instagram. I think this can be a chance to tell my friends that the content is interesting. I immediately take a screenshot and then I post it on my status. and of course tell to them that I am quite religious"

Some respondents turned out to have a specific motivation in reposting content from influencers. Through social media, users can build good relationships with other fellow users and express their feelings again by posting, tagging, and commenting through the available features.

"I'm not one who expresses my religion through social media. I just take the content for myself. I don't want to give the image that I am a religious person. What is the reason for sharing? It's better to see and understand for yourself when it comes to religion rather than make a show of it?"

There are also participants who consumed the religious content for themselves. The reason is because they think that consuming such content is a personal matter. They do not want their network to see them in relation to religious matters. Here, we can see two sides of the user, with both maintaining their self-presentation and network. First is those who want to present themselves with religious relations, and eager to reach peers with the same interest. While the second one is those who had a strict self privacy setting. Also, those with religious self-presentation want to build relations with other fellow followers of religious influence, which differ with participants who keep their network from this religious image.

D. CONCLUSION

The presence of social media is a new way to enjoy religious content. If before social media, the da'wa method was only done through offline sources such as mosques and other community events, then social media is considered a new way to remind people of religious matters that also serves to form new religious habits. My findings show that social media is convenient to access, which is also the main reason for people to use it for their religious needs. The visual nature of platforms like Instagram imparts a sense of attractive ease to the religious messages and respondents said that it was something that cannot be obtained from offline sources. The attractive captions and pictures on religion as well as personal demonstrations by influencers like Hanan Attaki about how to implement religious values in everyday life, allow followers to enjoy and learn from the religious content on these platforms.

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