RELIGIOUS LITERACY: INFORMATION SEARCH REGARDING ISLAM AMONG VIRTUAL CITIZENS AND ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

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Abstract

The issue of religious literacy and information search regarding Islam has become a trending topic among virtual citizens, especially among the younger generation. The younger generation is synonymous to virtual citizen and social media platforms such as IG, Telegram, Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook and many more. This article aims to present (1) the role of preaching in terms of religious literacy and the search for information regarding Islam among virtual citizens, as well as (2) ways to approach contemporary preaching in social media platforms. This study uses qualitative research methods through library research. Results showed that the level of religious literacy among social media users affected the acceptance and reliability of false or inaccurate religious information. Consequently, social media users could easily be influenced in heretical teachings if they learn religion and get information about religion from sources which are unauthentic such as from random social media platforms. Social media users who lack Islamic knowledge, particularly Muslim youths may face problems to determine the validity of information resources. In fact, Islam prohibits the dissemination of untruthful information. Essentially, Muslims must practice Tabbayyun. Tabbayun directs the attitude of doing vigilant checking and researching of any information to keep away from information which could harm our believes and perspectives

INTRODUCTION

21st century preachers utilize the new media to spread their preaching missions of reminding the public to do good deeds and avoid evil doings. This is because people nowadays seek Islamic information via the new media, thus increasing the search towards Islamic literacy. In fact, Islam allows people to progress in line with the development of current technology (Wahab et al., 2019; Zakariya & Mohamad, 2018). Essentially, Islam provides guidance and teachings through the Quran and Hadiths. For example, people can find truths and answers on cure and medication, following the correct paths, finding guidance, and achieving progress. The evidences are as follows:

"O mankind, there has indeed come to you advice (religion) from your Lord as a cure for the disease that is in the (spiritual) chest, as guidance and mercy for those who believe" (Surah Yunus: 57).

"Whoever does good deeds, both men and women in a state of faith, We will surely give them a good life and we will reward them with a better reward than what they have done" (Surah An -Nahl :97).

Islam as a way of life should be a prioritized by all Muslims. To live well, human beings need to adhere to religious obligation in serving Allah. Muslims who appreciate life with religion are promised with the sense of security, tranquility and peace (Habibah & Wahyuni, 2020; Nurzakiyah, 2018). However, when people side line religion, especially among the younger generation, society would face many social issues such as crimes and social illnesses. Essentially, if the generation is not instilled with solid religious knowledge and positive moral values, there will be negative impacts on the development of the future generation and nation. Religious literacy is a bulwark that would eventually save the young generation from drowning with the influence of negative outside culture especially through the dissemination of information in social media (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020).

The flooding of information is undeniable today. This comes along with the rapid use of communication technology. Moreover, social media networks are increasingly dominating human life in this millennium. This situation invites concern from various parties such as researchers, parents, teachers or individuals who are concerned with addiction symptoms towards internet usage. Positively, with the accessibility of the internet, the search for Islamic information becomes easier. However, this does not mean that the Islamic information provided through the Internet is correct and authentic (Salleh et al., 2022). Moreover, some Muslims become confused when they access information which are skewed and distorted. This triggers the emergence of various religious beliefs which deviate from true Islamic teachings (Daud et al., 2018).

Similarly, there are also ongoing debates between religious groups which led to conflicts related to religious issues to become even more severe (Musa & Hendun, 2020). One example of confusion related to religion in a Facebook post is regarding the worship of

sacrifices during the celebration of Eidul Adha and the issue of apostasy as shown below. These posts are in the Malay language as the majority of Muslims in Malaysia are Malays and Malay is the official language used. Basically, the Facebook posts are telling readers that the act of sacrificing cows, goats are rituals only and that Muslims could use other items as sacrifices. Whereas, in the second posting the account owner talks about the rejection of non-Muslims to accept the learning instructions on writing Khat in Malaysian schools. The writer gave three conditions regarding omitting religion in MyKad, issue of Deviant and allowing missionaries to openly talk about Christianity in Islamic worshipping institutions. Therefore, these posts could create confusion and raise conflicts in Malaysian society.

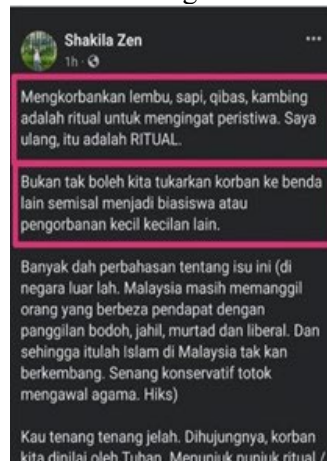Figure 1: Example of confusion related to religion

Figure 2: Example of confusion the issue of apostacy

Based on the post, it could be said that the level of religious literacy among social media users affected the acceptance and reliability of false or inaccurate religious information. This means that if social media users do not have solid basic knowledge about the teachings of Islam, then they could easily believe and accept the information received. In Malaysia, this could also mean that it is possible that the information contradicts the teachings that follow the beliefs of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah. Another bane of the

internet information is the emergence of religious extremists which spread through social media which is indirectly influenced by having low acquisition of religious literacy (Aksin, 2016; Imran et al., 2018; Musa & Hendun, 2020). For example, global terrorism movements such as Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyya, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), the Daesh group brought in extreme and radical elements into the religious life of the Muslim community in Malaysia (Nilapradnya, 2016). Apart from that, the threat of religious extremists in social media such as Shia teachings need to be monitored to protect the beliefs and thoughts of those who are less knowledgeable about Islamic teachings. According to the Mufti of Kedah, Datuk Syeikh Muhamad Baderudin Ahmad (2022) religious learning from non-authentic sources through social media is one of the causes which can cause social media users to easily get caught up in heresy. (https://www.mstar.com.my/lokal/semasa/2016/03/03/belajar-agama-media-sosial)

Hence, contemporary preachers in Malaysia have very important roles to deliver true Islamic preaching according to the Sunnah Wal Jamaah school of thoughts in the new media platforms. Ustaz or ustazah, Dai' and famous preacher celebrities should utilise various highly used social media platforms such as Facebook, Instragram, You Tube, Tik Tok to deliver da'wah. This is because these personas have many followers due to aspects such as credibility and dissemination of correct source of information about religion (Saidpudin et al., 2021).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Today's young generation is inseparable from the online social media networks and cyber communities such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp and many more. Social media has a significant influence in shaping society's life today. Social media is one of the most important tools to spread information, disregarding whether the information is false or true. In the context of searching for Islamic information, users need to be careful and make a research on the information they receive first. The spread of fake news invites slander and damage in society. Thus, Muslims are required to examine whether the information received is true or false before disseminating it to others (Pitchan et al., 2018).

In Islam, people who receive news without checking them are considered as wicked. According to Rosmawati & Mohamad Zulkifli (2021), ungodly people are more likely to get news which contains doubts and is mixed between truth and falsehood. This is because a wicked person has a lower level of religious belief and faith. This situation encourages them to do actions that are forbidden in Islam. They become pests. Eventually, these people bring slander to the community, even though their number is small (Rizal & Fuad, 2019; Wahab et al., 2019). Therefore, every social media user should have a responsible attitude. Muslims must have a self-assessment obligation to filter information received. Religious literacy is one of the most effective self-control aspects in dealing with the issue of misuse of information in social media. Therefore, religious beliefs have a very large role in human life. Islam teaches people to uphold the values of good life so that they can free themselves from the social, moral crisis and anxiety of the soul (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020).

The threat in faith which occurs in social media is because people ignore and side line religion (Abdul Aziz et al., 2020). Existing social symptoms such as the issue of apostasy, atheism, liberalism and various beliefs that are contrary to the true teachings of Islam have spread and undermined the belief and faith of Muslims (Musa & Hendun, 2020). Nowadays, the spread of religious threats, also known as *di'ayah*, takes place on social media openly. *Di'ayah* according to *Kamus Dewan* 4th Edition means the spread of an understanding, teaching and others to get support. It is also a propaganda or broadcasting of an ideology (doctrine, opinion, etc.) with the same purpose, which is to gain support (Kamus Dewan, 2007).

The spread of *di'ayah* in social media means broadcasting and spreading beliefs, ideologies, doctrines and propaganda through social media networks (Nilapradnya, 2016; Pitchan et al., 2018). The scenario of spreading di'ayah in the social media in Malaysia is seen to be getting worse day by day. Issues such as liberalism, Daesh, Indie and in the form of religious distortions such as Shia, Christianity and heretical teachings. This ideology creates confusion for the general public and becomes a slander in the Islamic religion, if a Muslim's religious beliefs are not strong enough to be a defence bulwark. The situation of confusion due to the spread of this understanding was presented by Siti Razmah (2017), as the Chief Assistant Director, Planning and Research Division, JAKIM who represented Malaysia in the presentation of the 42nd Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) for the Informal Annual Meeting of Ministers- The Minister of Religion of Brunei Darussalam, the Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Republic of Singapore (MABIMS) which was held on 25 to 28 October 2017 in Yogyakarta, Republic of Indonesia with the theme of Prevention of Extremism Through Information Technology. (https://www.islam.gov.my/ms/node/1185).

Thus, to seek answers on religious literacy and the information search of virtual citizens, this study aims to 1. identify the preacher's role in religious literacy and the information search of virtual citizen, and 2. review the contemporary da'wah approach in social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Spread of Heresy Via the Social Media Platform

The misuse of social media by virtual citizens, especially in spreading fake news is very worrying. In Islam, spreading fake news is a prohibited action because it can threaten the security and harmony of the country (Nor Azlina et al., 2020). The act of spreading fake news is the attitude of wicked people who like to commit major sins such as lying, spreading slander and doing damage in society. The word of God which means:

"O you who believe, if a wicked person comes to you with news, then investigate (to determine) its truth, so that you do not befall a people with unwanted things, because of your ignorance (about it) that causes you to regret what you did . (Surah al-Hujurat, verse 6)

According to Chalimatus Sa'diyah (2020), the spread of fake news is easy due to the low level of media literacy. For example, the attitude of a person who easily accepts news without taking the effort to check and screen the news. Consequently, the negative impact is that by spreading the news to other parties, it could create disharmonious situations in the community. Inadvertently, people who receive the news will feel confuse, suspicious, anxious, suspicious, cause slander and provocation.

In addition, confusion in religious practices is caused by the abundance of information which does not come from a correct and reliable source. Social media users who do not have sufficient knowledge of Islam such as the Muslim youths may face problems in determining the validity of information sources (Kairulanuar et.al, 2021). For example, according to the Mufti of Kedah, Datuk Syeikh Muhamad Baderudin Ahmad in 2016, among the things that every Muslim must know are things that are contradictory in Islamic teachings. These claims include claims that there is a messenger after the Prophet Muhammad SAW, accusing those who do not follow their teachings as people who is polytheistic, combining three religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism), understanding the Quran according to his own interpretation, claiming that the event of the Day of Judgment is false and abandoning the Friday prayer and the five-time prayers which are obligatory for all Muslims. In fact, the act of abandoning the teachings of Islam by believing in new beliefs or ideologies is a disease of faith which is dangerous in the Muslim society (Habibah & Wahyuni, 2020).

Next, in the digital era, the internet has been used by extremists for various misappropriate activities such as to recruit, educate, communicate and fundraise money to run their misguided activities (Imran et al., 2018). Researchers who study terrorism argue that the Daesh's influence is like a fire in a husk. Daesh is growing rapidly without being noticed, and it is gaining the support of young people in Malaysia. The main medium of spreading this understanding is through the internet which is done quite effectively. This is because these young people are more exposed to the use of the internet, which is more open, interactive and global in nature (Habibah & Wahyuni, 2020; Zakariya & Mohamad, 2018). According to Daud et al., (2018) the internet has become a kind of "new religion" for the 21st century and for the future century, which is taking over the same trust that was once given to television in the past. Therefore, the issue of the use of social media by extremists in recruiting members and spreading their propaganda, needs to be addressed by the authorities by using the same medium to curb the spread of the threat of religious extremism in the community (Imran et al., 2018; Pitchan et al., 2018). Among the active movements that bring liberalism in Malaysia is Sisters in Islam (SIS), a non-governmental organization that fights for the equality of Muslim women. This organization is very active in bringing liberalism and pluralism to Malaysia.

According to researchers who conducted studies on religious literacy such as Habibah & Wahyuni (2020); Nurzakiyah (2018) and Rizal & Fuad; (2019), Imran et al., (2018), there are several factors that make an individual to be easily influenced by false teachings through the social media platform:

i) Extremists are usually people with problems in terms of spiritual emptiness and religious beliefs.
ii) They thirst for spiritual touch.
iii) Trusting too much an extremist figure that is used as a reference.
iv) Committed to religion but very little religious knowledge. They will be exposed to the reality of Muslims being oppressed and oppressed by big powers.
v) Desperate financially (Imran et al., 2018).

Role of Contemporary Preachers in Religious Literacy and the Online Search for Islamic Information

In an atmosphere of open skies and information at your fingertips, there are various types of information which are spread online and are mainly false and vague information. The transmission of false and slanderous information is easily done with the help of information technology (Rizal & Fuad, 2019). In the context of news content in social media, Muslims are advised to be careful in choosing information and to conduct the act of *tabayyun*, or doing critical research (Muhammad Faisal Ashaari, 2021). *Tabbayyun* is a concept of information management in Islam which directs the attitude of checking and carefully researching the news received before believing or taking an action.

The existence of social media gives space to preachers to spread the teachings of Islam to a wider and global audience. According to the perspective of preachers, they consider social media as a very useful tool to introduce Islam and preach in more depth and detail (Ishak & Solihin, 2012). Nonetheless, there is a challenge to identify the authentic source of information obtained from social media if virtual citizens do not perform *tabayyun* in advance of the information or news received. In general, virtual citizens need to understand that any forms of information value in new media comes from various writing backgrounds. There are writers who only intend to publish information without a strong religious basis and copy the information to disperse information to others. This situation, of course, removes the basic meaning of *mutawatir* which is knowledge is legally transmitted (Zulkefli, 1993).

Based on this situation, preachers in cyberspace in Malaysia can be divided into three categories. The first category are genuine preachers who have authority in the field of religion. They are well-known in the community such as Dr. Zaharudin Abdul Rahman, Dato' Dr. Muhammad Izhar Ariff, Ustaz Azhar Idrus, Ustaz Don Daniyal, Ustaz Zakir Naik, Ustaz Kazim Elias, Ustaz Samsul and others. The second category are the authentic preachers who can only be detected through the height of their knowledge in covering Islamic issues. Nonetheless, their fame is not yet known among the community. The third category are those who are not religious but are interested in preaching and are spreading religious information through websites (Muhamad Faisal Ashaari et.al, 2020).

Contemporary Preaching and Social Media Platforms

There are several advantages created by social media in delivering *da'wah* more clearly and in detail. Social media has a variety of content in the form of documentation, news, analysis, issues and depictions of Islam at the fingertips more effectively to all levels of

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society by only using the internet (Mohd. Shuhaimi & Sohirin, 2012). Among the advantages of social media as a preaching medium are:

1) The use of social media in preaching is an effective initiative and gives positive implications not only to an individual, but also to society and even to religion, nation and country.
2) Social media is a priority because it is able to reach more targets for the purpose of calling for goodness and avoiding immoral things *(amar ma'aruf nahi munkar)*.
3) The role of preaching using social networking sites can break through the target fortress of youth who mainly prefer technology and gadgets as a complement to their daily social interaction.
4) The use of social media such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram is not just an empty chat room or just to spend free time but can become useful tools or the effective ways of contemporary preaching. This social media is also a platform for Muslims to disseminate knowledge to the Muslim and non-Muslim community.
5) Essentially, today's social media platforms have become communication networks that extend to all levels of society, be it teenagers or adults. It is an influential tool in all communication activities as a medium of interaction and communication to obtain information quickly, accurately and reliably.

In fact, social media as a means for preaching by preachers is proper and effective. The emergence of celebrity preachers who have many followers form a virtual community that can learn religious knowledge more easily and practically. The use of social media as a medium to obtain religious knowledge has opened up new dimensions for the community to use this medium for good purposes. For celebrity preachers, the influence and attraction they have are their ability to attract hundreds of thousands of social media users to follow their accounts. These followers have accepted and trusted the *da'wah* content messages that these preachers constantly uploaded. Therefore, celebrity preachers need to build credibility so that these transmissions of preaching contents which are uploaded through social media platforms do not have cause confusions in the religious information delivered, especially those contents involving religious law and shariah (Saidpudin et al., 2021).

According to Nordin et al. (2019) and Ghazali (2007), *da'wah* personas in social media should hold and correct their intention of preaching solely for the sake of Allah as their main intention. Celebrity preachers must have credibility, spread things that are comprehensive and permitted by *syariah*, do not leave out the basic things that are the core of a person's faith throughout the process of preparing content material (content) in any social media used, not focused on some opinions or party only, and present something which must be confirmed to be valid before disseminating their knowledge to their followers. Apart from that, contemporary preachers must have a sense of responsibility towards the content of the preaching that is sent, try to gather as much religious knowledge as possible and have good manners because these celebrity preachers are role models for their followers (Habibah & Wahyuni, 2020; Saidpudin et al., 2021).

The credibility of the preacher who provides Islamic content is the main thing that determines the validity of the source of information presented. According to Saidpudin et al., (2021) credibility refers to the reliability and expertise of an individual on a subject or field of science that is an expert reference. High credibility will increase the value of persuasion and influence a message delivered to the recipient, especially through social media platforms. In fact, the credibility of the sender or source of the message is very important to ensure that the information brought by the source is reliable.

The *da'wah* approach in social media is more easily accepted by virtual citizens because it can be found at any time in a more relaxed state. Wawarah et al. (2019) stated that 32% of teenagers, the majority of whom have a background in Islamic education, search for information related to motivation and religion on Instagram. This is because the achievement of information and learning religious knowledge is increasingly accessible and spread through new media such as through various online social networks. Moreover, the use of simple language also affects the acceptance of the preaching delivered. This is because the use of language when delivering a talk or giving advice symbolizes the credibility and authority of a preacher. Therefore, celebrity preachers should act strategically so that each of their talk is considered credible. Essentially, their communication style is able to attract the interest of various parties to listen to them. Inadvertently, the preaching that they delivered could therefore help their followers to have better moral values (Rizal & Fuad, 2019).

In a study of the use of social media as a means of preaching conducted by Saidpudin et al., (2021) indicated that there are several preaching guides to build the credibility of celebrity preachers on social media. Preachers have responsibilities before, during and after uploading preaching content on social media accounts.

1. The previous guide is a phase where celebrity preachers need to build credibility by trying to gather as much religious knowledge as possible, avoid sending da'wah content that is not in accordance to their field of expertise, get access to experts in the field for a religious issue and apply noble morals such as patience and correct preaching intentions. In addition, celebrity preachers also need to be aware of the current issues that occur in the community. Another bonus would be to be creative in their preaching approaches.
2. In terms of giving guidance, celebrity preachers could build credibility by intelligently managing their social media accounts, including how to handle questions and answers from followers.
3. As for the guidance after uploading the messages, the study found that celebrity preachers can practice the practices of previous scholars so that the preaching delivered is more effective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to review the role of preachers in terms of religious literacy and the search for Islamic information among virtual citizens using a secondary data approach, which is in the form of library research. Data analysis is based on journals and reference materials on the theme of the role of contemporary preachers. This study uses qualitative research methods through library research to find information related to the role of

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preachers in the level of literacy and information search among virtual citizens. The information obtained is from various sources such as books, journals and online newspaper reports. The secondary information is collected and the highlights of the study are done to complete the research objective. The researcher gathered information related to the role of preachers in spreading the mission of preaching in the new millennium. Contemporary *da'wah* approaches are also examined in terms of confusion regarding Islamic tracts and avoiding religious extremists**.**

DISCUSSION

Essentially, *da'wah* is an activity that calls people or invites them towards goodness and abandoning evil doings based on the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah. The mission of preaching is to change the lives of individuals and communities towards a better and perfect life. Effective dakwah delivery is easily understood by all groups of society. Thus, preachers as Islamic communicators need to make social media the best medium to bring in the message of goodness and aborting evil doings to the Muslim community around the world.

The emergence of social media applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have created new and refreshing opportunities for preachers to run their dakwah elements. This is because the new media has useful features. Basically, it is attractive, fast and highly interactive in nature. With these characteristics, social media is seen to be able to have a maximum impact on preaching activities. Furthermore, virtual preaching activities could influence and promote public interest to learn more about Islam. Pitchan et al., (2018) explained that Dato' Dr. Asyraf Wajdi bin Dato' Dusuki, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) suggested that religious agencies take advantage of all these applications. Preachers should not just use conventional forum platforms or discussion mediums to spread knowledge about Islam. Furthermore, religious institutions such as the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), the Malaysian Syariah Justice Department (JKSM) and the states' Islamic Religious Departments need to continue to monitor and act to prevent the spread of negative deviant and misleading beliefs such as liberalism, atheism, Agnosticism, and efforts to discredit and bring down the image of Islam. This is important so that the position of Islam as a religion of association will continue to be preserved (Imran et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The role of social media today is not only as a channel to disseminate current information on social issues and national development. Essentially, in Malaysia where Islam is the main religion, social media platforms play the fundamental role as tools for preaching, providing dakwah, and spreading information about Islam to all man kinds. The use of online social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp and many more needs to be utilized as best as possible, especially as tools for preaching. Therefore, people in this world, especially Muslims, need to return to the principles of the Quran and Sunnah when dealing with slander in cyberspace, which is known as slander in the digital world. Currently, this issue is becoming more prevalent in

the cyberspace. This is because today's society is faced with the challenges of the information age where information is obtained at the fingertips. Furthermore, resources available online are too many and might be true, fake or misleading. Accordingly, the Muslim community as social media users need to check and ensure the validity of any information they received before making conclusions and taking actions upon the conclusions they find. This is because, we ourselves know that today's world is called a contagious world. The occurrence of this viral infection is caused by a group consisting of irresponsible individuals spreading news disregarding the notion of false or truth through social media platforms be it openly or privately.

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