

Online Religious Practices in a Second Reality: Constructing Religious Identity in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

Advances in information technology have had a significant impact on society. The ease of access afforded blurs the boundaries of space and time, resulting in the formation of a one-dimensional world within cyberspace. The influence of cyberspace on social life is evident at at least three levels: individual, inter-individual, and group. The institutional systems mentioned above create new social relations and identities built within cyberspace. Interestingly, institutions that typically form within social life are now emerging and taking shape within cyberspace. This article examines how a religious study group constructs a “new world” in cyberspace and its identity. The article examines the social solidarity and social identity that form within the “Muslim Berhijrah” religious study group on the WhatsApp Group (WAG) application, and why the group needs a digital space to disseminate its ideological message. The method used is a descriptive qualitative one, incorporating the theory of simulacra proposed by Jean Baudrillard. The results show that social activities within the Muslimah Berhijrah WAG operate as a simulacra space, where religious information produced in cyberspace is interpreted as a tangible reality. These religious consumption patterns shape a communal identity characterized by attachment to traditional information and solidarity based on ideological similarities. In this process, symbolic power relations are exercised through the role of group administrators who control the flow of information and define the boundaries of what is considered legitimate Islam, thus fostering voluntary compliance among members. However, this study also found subject ambiguity, with some members attempting to verify information through other sources, despite remaining within the digital realm, which is also a simulacra.

Keywords: Online religious practices; Religious identity; Cyberspace; Simulacra; Solidarity

ABSTRAK

Kemajuan teknologi informasi memberikan dampak yang besar bagi masyarakat. Kemudahan akses yang diberikan seolah memudahkan batasan ruang dan waktu, sehingga yang terjadi adalah terbentuknya dunia satu dimensi dalam sebuah ruang yang disebut cyber space. Pengaruh cyber space terhadap kehidupan sosial setidaknya terlihat pada tiga tingkat, yaitu individu, antar individu, dan kelompok. Sistem kelembagaan diatas menciptakan relasi sosial dan identitas baru yang dibangun dalam cyber space. Hal yang menarik adalah ketika kelembagaan yang biasanya terbentuk dalam kehidupan bermasyarakat kini justru muncul dan terbentuk dalam ruang siber. Artikel ini mengulas bagaimana kelompok kajian keagamaan membangun ‘dunia baru’ dalam ruang siber, serta bagaimana kelompok tersebut membangun identitasnya. Fokus artikel ini adalah dengan melihat solidaritas sosial dan identitas sosial yang dibentuk dalam kelompok kajian keagamaan “Muslim Berhijrah” pada aplikasi Whatsapp Group (WAG), dan mengapa kelompok tersebut membutuhkan ruang digital untuk menyebarkan syiar idelogisnya. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan teori simulakra yang diusung oleh Jean Baudrillard. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aktivitas sosial dalam WAG Muslimah Berhijrah beroperasi sebagai ruang simulakra, di mana informasi keagamaan yang terjadi dalam ruang siber diproduksi dan dimaknai sebagai realitas yang riil. Pola konsumsi keagamaan tersebut membentuk identitas komunal yang ditandai oleh keterlekatan terhadap informasi salaf dan solidaritas berbasis kesamaan ideologis. Dalam proses ini, relasi kuasa simbolik dijalankan melalui peran admin grup yang mengontrol arus informasi dan mendefinisikan batas-batas keislaman yang dianggap sah, sehingga membentuk kepatuhan sukarela di antara anggota. Meskipun demikian, penelitian ini juga menemukan adanya ambiguitas subjek, di mana sebagian anggota melakukan upaya verifikasi informasi melalui sumber lain, meskipun tetap berada dalam ranah digital yang juga merupakan ruang simulakra.

Kata kunci: Praktik keagamaan daring; Identitas keagamaan; Ruang siber; Simulakra; Solidaritas

INTRODUCTION

The global expansion of the digital world, through internet networks, provides a new space for people to express and shape their identities (Castells, 2010; Turkle, 2011). The development of digital technology presents a new arena and space through the internet, and ultimately becomes a second reality for people in communicating their identities that they do not express in real space (Turkle, 2011; Poster, 1995). The interactions built in the digital world become a new space for interaction and a new world, and form new solidarity, until finally a new identity is created through the digital space (Wellman, 2001; Baym, 2015). Moreover, the rise of internet-based communication media such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook offers an alternative means to overcome the boundaries of space and time, which are the main constructions in social life in the real realm (Castells, 2010). Singhal, Rogers, and Brown (1993) stated that the rapid development of communication technology today has brought society to a point where distance and time are no longer communication barriers. The blurring of space and time boundaries accommodated by the development of internet networks and social media actually makes it easier for individuals to communicate, express their identities, and form communities (Baym, 2015; Hine, 2015).

The intersection of society and the internet has given rise to a new form of reality. According to Baudrillard (1981), current reality is a form of simulation of reality based on symbols and signs. This means that people's lives in cyberspace no longer seem to be a representation or reflection of society, but rather become reality itself (Baudrillard, 1981; Ritzer, 2010). Furthermore, society no longer has boundaries between real space and cyberspace, leading to the formation of pseudo-realities believed to be true (Baudrillard, 1981). Baudrillard ultimately considers these simulations not to be actual reality, but rather a reality shaped by human consciousness through media. Furthermore, cyberspace not only affects the social life of individuals and between individuals, but also the group or community level (Wellman, 2001). If in social life in "real space" territorial elements play a vital role in the formation of communities or social groups, this does not happen in cyberspace, which ultimately forms cyber culture (Bell, 2001; Rheingold, 2000).

Simply put, community groups or communities will undoubtedly depend on territorial elements, such as nature lovers groups, PKK mothers' groups, and other community-based groups. Although a common movement and goal unite them, the territorial element also plays an important role, leading them to form a meeting space, a community or group (Tönnies, 2001). In contrast to groups or communities in cyberspace, similarities are strong enough to form a community that does not care about territorial boundaries (Rheingold, 2000). The dimensions of space and time are no longer major problems as internet-based digital technology becomes increasingly widespread and serves various conveniences (Castells, 2010). In this case, communities formed in cyberspace seem to have greater freedom and reach in demonstrating their ideological existence and group identity in cybersociety without any concern for territorial boundaries (Bell, 2001).

Such is the case with the religious group "Muslimah Berhijrah." Initially, this group was a Facebook account with a large following. However, this account gradually expanded into an instant messaging network, namely a WhatsApp Group, to facilitate its followers in gaining more intensive religious knowledge (Campbell, 2013). Anyone can join this group, without any age or regional restrictions. Everyone in the group has a different background and does not know each other. Even group members do not know the educational background of the group admin, who, in fact, has significant power in conveying religious beliefs and knowledge. What is interesting is how each of these different individuals can trust each other, both the group admin and other members, and how they seem to share a standard view of Islamic guidance, thus forming a solidarity in cyberspace (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2016).

From this, we can see that religious devotion and modernity are not always in conflict (Heryanto, 2015). For them, religious observance and consumption of cyber culture are available as options rather than a choice between the two. Muslims seem unwilling to be left behind in the consumption of cyber culture and strive to participate fully in the modern (digital) world without sacrificing their faith (Heryanto, 2015). This makes it interesting to examine how issues related to the digital world and the need for religious information give rise to a new culture in cyberspace. The formation of identity, solidarity, and interaction patterns in the real world will differ from those

developed in cyberspace (Baym, 2015). Territorial issues are no longer the primary element in community formation; instead, they refer to shared ideologies and existence. Therefore, researchers are interested in seeing how these religious study groups shape a “new world” in cyberspace.

To answer the research questions above, the researcher uses Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra as an analytical tool. The theoretical approach in this study is not intended to view religion simply as a practice “mediated” through digital technology, as is commonly discussed in studies of the mediatization of religion or digital religion (Hjarvard, 2011; Campbell, 2013). Rather than positioning digital space as an intermediary, this study starts from the assumption that digital space has shifted into an arena for the production of reality itself. In this context, Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra is relevant because it helps us understand how religious practices in cyberspace no longer function as representations of practices in real space, but instead emerge as autonomous realities believed to be true by their subjects (Baudrillard, 1981). From a simulacra perspective, digital da’wah spaces such as WhatsApp Groups are not merely channels for the distribution of religious messages but social spaces that produce signs, meanings, and normative standards for what is considered valid, pure, and ideal Islam. In this situation, the distinction between online and offline spaces becomes increasingly blurred, as religious meanings constructed in digital spaces become the primary reference point in everyday religious practices. Therefore, a simulacra approach is used to examine how religious realities in cyberspace shape their own logic and rationality, binding the subjects within them.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand communication practices, identity formation, and social solidarity in digital spaces. Cresswell (1998) and Denzin & Lincoln (2011) define qualitative research as an approach that yields an in-depth understanding of meanings, processes, and social practices that cannot be explained through statistical procedures. This approach was chosen to capture the dynamics of interactions, symbolic meanings, and the construction of religious realities that occur naturally in cyberspace.

Data collection was conducted through participant observation in a WhatsApp group (WAG) called “Muslimah Berhijrah,” interviews, and documentation using a purposive sampling technique. The research was conducted over two months, with the researcher serving as a silent reader within the group and, at certain moments, participating in discussions on a limited basis, without explicitly revealing her identity. This position allowed the researcher to observe communication practices, interaction patterns, and the distribution of religious discourse as they occurred naturally, without direct intervention that could potentially alter group dynamics. Observations focused on communication patterns, the types of religious content shared, the mechanisms administrators used to regulate discourse, and members’ responses to information circulating within the group. Selective interviews were conducted to gain a reflective understanding of how members interpret religious information and their involvement in the group. Documentation in the form of conversation archives, study materials, and group rules served as supporting data to enrich the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted interpretively, using Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra theory framework to interpret field findings. The analysis phase included thematic data grouping, the exploration of patterns of repetition in religious signs and meanings, and the interpretation of the relationship between information consumption, identity formation, and symbolic power in the digital space. To maintain research ethics, the identities of all participants were disguised, conversation data were treated as sensitive, and all findings were presented anonymously to ensure confidentiality and protect participants’ privacy (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The “Muslimah Berhijrah” Study Group and the Production of Religious Authority in Cyberspace

The Muslimah Berhijrah group began as a Facebook fan page. The page served as a platform for preaching and disseminating information on religious subjects, such as aqidah (belief),

tauhid (monotheism), and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). As the group grew, it established a study forum within an instant messaging group, a WhatsApp Group (WAG). The WAG aimed to facilitate a more intensive sharing of Islamic knowledge. Through this forum, the Muslimah Berhijrah group strives to develop Muslim women with noble character, guided by an understanding of Islam based on the Quran and Sunnah. With the same admin, the group has 226 members. Within this forum, the group admin possesses greater resources than other members. These resources include religious knowledge, perceived as a better understanding and mastery of the study material, the authority to add and remove group members, and the ability to organize the flow of preaching and study activities, such as establishing rules, determining schedules, and managing communication dynamics within the group. The group admin sets a thematic schedule for the topics covered by the lectures presented to members. For example, on Sundays, lectures on etiquette and morals are presented; on Mondays, discussions on faith, monotheism, and manhaj are discussed; on Tuesdays, discussions on the Prophetic biography are discussed; and so on.

In addition to setting study schedules, the group admin also enforces several rules to maintain a conducive discussion atmosphere. These rules include allowing group members to post only religious studies or articles that align with their adopted method, namely the Salaf method; prohibiting buying and selling within the group; and imposing sanctions, including expulsion from the group, for members who do not comply with the established rules. Regarding interaction patterns, the group initially implemented a relatively open, two-way communication pattern between the admin and members. This meant that interactions primarily occurred between the admin and members, not between members. However, over time, the admin changed the communication rules to a one-way pattern, allowing only the admin to post messages. This change was made in response to situations deemed less conducive to discussion within the forum.

What is interesting in the context of this discussion is that group members tend to believe the religious information conveyed by the admin, even though they do not know him personally or are unaware of his religious educational background. Furthermore, some members not only passively accept this information but also practice the teachings and guidance conveyed by the admin in their daily lives. The trust placed by group members in the admin, even without a clear basis in formal religious authority, cannot be reduced solely to interpersonal trust or informal authority. This trust marks a fundamental shift in how religious truth and authority are produced in digital space. Within the framework of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, this phenomenon can no longer be understood as a representative relationship between an authoritative source and a recipient of teachings, but rather as a process of simulating truth. Religious authority in cyberspace is produced and repeated through religious signs that appear consistently and are organized in everyday communication practices. Through this repetition, religious signs not only represent truth but also become truth itself. In this situation, questions about the origin of authority or the validity of sources become irrelevant, because the religious reality experienced by group members has shifted to a simulated reality that is believed to be the most authentic.

Identity and Solidarity in the Second Reality: Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra

The emergence of religious study groups on virtual messaging platforms is nothing new. The proliferation of digital Islamic study groups is not actually driven by a lack of momentum for religious study or Islamic outreach in prayer rooms (surau), mosques, or even media content production. Instead, the emergence of these groups is driven by a growing need for religious information. This consumerist behavior also occurs within the Muslimah Berhijrah (migrant women's) religious study group, which is based on a WhatsApp group (WAG). Initially, this forum was formed on a Facebook page created by the group admin and accessible to anyone. However, a new communication network, the WhatsApp group, gradually emerged. There are different forms and patterns of interaction between WhatsApp and Facebook, particularly in building subjective attachment among the individuals involved. While on Facebook, members do not regularly interact or even check notifications when discussions take place, WAGs are more proactive in providing notifications when discussions related to Islamic studies tend to adhere to the traditional Islamic method.

The admin also regularly posts study materials on Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), aqidah (belief), and monotheism (tauhid). While generally speaking, this is almost identical to Facebook, where each post does not necessarily trigger active interaction, the fundamental difference lies in how each member within the WhatsApp Group receives notifications without having to open the platform. Based on this, we can see that a consumerist pattern is deliberately created by a larger interest, through the need for religious information. This need for religious knowledge seems to be continually repeated through media broadcasts and other social media, giving rise to the opinion that the ideal Muslim is one who actively consumes religious information. When linked to Muslimah Berhijrah (migrating Muslim women), the consumption pattern, continually repeated through virtual messaging within the WhatsApp Group, is the need for information on the Salafi method as an ideological propagation promoted by the group admin. Therefore, when group members do not understand the Salaf, it is considered that they are not ideal Muslims. For example, when a member posts something that differs from the Salaf method, the admin immediately reminds them to only post content that refers to the Salaf method. This is also followed by admin posts that refer to studies of the Salafist method. These practices of content regulation and discourse restrictions demonstrate that the role of admins in the Muslimah Berhijrah WhatsApp Group is not merely technical, but also contains a symbolic power dimension that determines the boundaries of religious truth in the digital space. In this context, admins function not only as conveyors of information but also as religious authorities who produce and affirm definitions of Islam deemed legitimate and ideal. This authority is not established through formal legitimacy, such as religious institutions or chains of knowledge, but rather through message repetition, consistency of signs, and control over the flow of information within the group. In the logic of simulacra, this kind of power does not appear as repressive domination. However, it is internalized as voluntary compliance, in which members interpret this control as an effort to maintain the purity of the teachings.

Based on these social facts, Baudrillard (1981) stated that the drive for a product is actually a desire to consume, and when an individual cannot keep pace with this need, they feel insecure. From this explanation, we can see that information on religious knowledge based on the Salaf method is advertised through WhatsApp Groups and consumed by the Muslimah Berhijrah study group. The virtual world, which provides various information on religious knowledge, is a system of sign manipulation that enables each individual in the group to practice and apply the information in their daily lives. In this way, they will continue to be invited to follow the rhythm of information needs, as per the Salaf method. If a member cannot keep up, then they are not part of the group. This can be seen when the group admin enforces a rule prohibiting the posting of articles that are not ideological and does not hesitate to expel members who do not comply with the group's rules. From this, it seems that the Muslimah Berhijrah group is exclusive in meeting the need for Salaf information. This seems to differentiate them from other groups or even members, considering that not all members of Muslimah Berhijrah adhere to the Salafist method. Indirectly, they demonstrate their identity and social status as a distinct group, a group "chosen" as ideal Muslims, embracing the Quran and Sunnah as their primary guidance, as did the Prophet Muhammad. This is what Baudrillard (1981) later called social differentiation. He argued that social differentiation arises from an individual's response to fulfilling a need for objects and, as it were, a form of social recognition. This social recognition, which ultimately creates differentiation, gives rise to false needs for a reality that is not actually real. This means, in this discussion, the virtual da'wah space (Muslimah Berhijrah) is merely a projection of reality, where this objective reality is the offline da'wah space. However, it seems that group members consider the online da'wah space to be reality until they truly interpret the information from the Salafists and practice it in the real world. They are trapped and unable to distinguish between what is truly real and what is imaginary. However, the findings of this study also indicate that being trapped in a simulacra space does not operate uniformly or continuously for every subject. Some group members do not passively accept the information conveyed by the admin; instead, they seek to verify it by consulting other sources outside the group. Interestingly, however, this verification process largely continues to take place in the digital realm, so that the search for truth does not remove the subject from the logic of the simulation, but instead prolongs the circulation of signs within the same representational system. In this context,

doubt and the search for meaning do not necessarily function as resistance, but rather become part of the dynamics of religious information consumption itself. The solidarity formed in this context does not arise from organic social relations or shared experiences in the real space, but rather from a collective attachment to the circulation of religious signs and meanings that are continually repeated in the simulative space.

Based on this, the apparent need for information on religious studies is ongoing and blurs the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. The cyberspace activities occurring within the Muslimah Berhijrah WhatsApp group certainly shape social phenomena that ultimately shape a collective identity and the group's solidarity. We can see how an identity is formed in a simulacra of the social activities that occur within it, both through interaction patterns, ongoing discussions, and even the level of activity of the WhatsApp group itself. Based on this, we can also see how these interaction patterns and levels of activity indirectly indicate forms of solidarity. It can be concluded that the social activities within the Muslimah Berhijrah WhatsApp group, as simulacra, give rise to an identity in which cyberspace is saturated with Islamic study information, making them seem addicted to it. Furthermore, the admin's one-way interaction pattern and several admin rules prohibiting posts of studies other than the Salafist method further reinforce social distinctions, so that each member interprets it as a form of their social status. The social distinctions that exist in the Muslimah Berhijrah WAG can ultimately also be said to be a form of control over all cyberspace activities that influence how their solidarity is formed.

Table 1. Online Religious Practices and the Production of Identity in Cyberspace

Analytical Aspect	Findings in the Muslimah Berhijrah WhatsApp Group	Analytical Meaning
Cyberspace	The WhatsApp Group functions as the primary space for religious study and reference	Digital space operates as a second reality in religious practice
Online Religious Practices	Repetitive circulation of religious materials on <i>aqidah</i> , <i>tauhid</i> , and Salafi <i>manhaj</i>	Repetition of information forms habitual consumption of religious knowledge
Religious Authority	The admin regulates schedules, content, rules, and sanctions without formal religious legitimacy	Authority is produced through information control and message consistency
Discursive Control	Restriction of non-Salafi content and removal of members who violate group rules	Normative boundaries of "legitimate" Islam are established
Information Consumption	Members actively read and apply religious content in daily life	Religious information functions as a symbolic commodity
Distinction	The image of the "ideal Muslim" is associated with adherence to Salafi <i>manhaj</i>	Social differentiation and collective identity are produced

Subject Ambiguity	Some members verify information through other online sources	Meaning-making remains within the circulation of digital representations
Solidarity	Ideological and emotional attachment among group members	Solidarity emerges through shared meanings and practices

CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of digital-based religious study groups such as Muslimah Berhijrah demonstrates that cyberspace can no longer be understood simply as a medium for preaching, but has transformed into a social arena that produces religious realities. In this context, virtual preaching spaces are not merely projections of offline religious practices, but emerge as autonomous realities that shape how subjects interpret truth, authority, and their Islamic identity. Through Jean Baudrillard's simulacra lens, social activity within the Muslimah Berhijrah WhatsApp Group can be read as a practice of consuming religious signs, repeated over and over again, creating a false need for Islamic information based on the Salafist method. This religious information serves not only as a source of knowledge but also as a symbolic commodity that marks who is considered an ideal Muslim. In this process, social distinctions emerge that function as mechanisms of differentiation and social recognition, both among group members and within other religious groups outside the community.

The communal identity formed within this simulacritic space cannot be separated from the symbolic power relations exercised by the group administrators. Religious authority is produced through control over the flow of information, restrictions on discourse, and the repetition of ideological messages that members accept and reproduce as natural. Power in this context is not repressive, but instead operates through voluntary compliance, intertwined with a desire to continue consuming religious information deemed legitimate and trustworthy. However, this study also shows that subjects are not entirely passive. The efforts of some members to verify information demonstrate a space of ambiguity in their relationship with simulacra. However, because the search process continues in the digital realm with a similar logic of representation, this ambiguity does not necessarily free subjects from the simulation system but instead prolongs the circulation of religious signs in cyberspace.

Thus, the communal solidarity formed in the Muslimah Berhijrah WhatsApp Group is a consequence of collective attachment to the consumption of religious information, symbolic power relations, and the logic of simulacra that blurs the boundaries between reality and virtuality. This study emphasizes that the study of digital da'wah and religious communication should be read critically as a process of producing social and religious realities with significant ideological, cultural, and political implications.

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