

POLARIZED MUSLIM AUDIENCES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

There have been a significant rise of local programs in TV stations in Malaysia. One form of the program that have been gaining interest is known as Islamic televangelism. Online focus groups discussion were conducted to understand audiences' perception on Islamic televangelism programs. The interaction among these television audiences-turned-online followers revealed aspects of audience taste, audience segmentation and the use of social media. Findings illustrate that Muslim audiences in Malaysia are rather diverged due to a large amount of religious television programs. The diversity of the programs shown in television allows for audience to receive a variety of Islamic knowledge and contemporary religious issues. Muslim audiences now have access to an assortment religious programs with different hosts explaining and simplifying religious principles and practices. Caution, however, must be exercised when audiences display a rather intense preferences when acquiring religious knowledge through television. Unjustified reasons and obsessed emotions can interrupt the unity of Muslim society as whole and some form of vigilance should be observed for Islamic televangelism programs.

Keywords: religious programs, Islam, television, Muslim audiences, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In the climate of the current television content in Malaysia, religious programs can be categorized as one of the genres that is well accepted by the audience. Almost every television network shows religious programs targeting Muslim audiences. Programs such as *Al Kuliyyah*, *Forum Perdana Hal Ehwal Islam*, *Halaqah*, *Imam Muda*, *Kalam Suci Reflections*, *Semanis Kurma*, *Seruan Haji*, *Tabayyun* and many more others have been shown in local television networks in Malaysia. Some of these television programs has been around for decades (Abd Ghani, 2010) signifying that Islamic televangelism has been part of the local television content for a substantial period of time.

The implementation of Islamisation policy was believed to be one of the reasons for local television networks to produce religious programs since the 1980s. Nain (1996) observes that the Malaysian broadcasting policies has significant change during this period. The inception of a new tv network known as TV9 and the establishment of Astro Oasis further provided a turning point for the local media industry (Sabran, 2010), whereby the production of religious programs has considerably increased.

Subsequently, with the establishment of *Islam Hadhari* a socio-religious policy under the 5th Prime Minister of Malaysia Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration, there have been significant rise on the production of religious programs (Wahab, 2011). Adding to this, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Zahid Hamidi has refreshed the call by urging local channels to produce a rather balance content in religious programs (DPM urges media, 2016).

It appears that the global environment and perception towards Islam has been constantly negative, after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, Bali disaster in 2002 (Kabir, 2006) and other subsequent religious based violence. The call for modern, fresh, authentic and balanced religious programs in the television by Malaysian political leaders suggests the need for such programming to highlight Islam on its true manner, moreover in multiracial Malaysia.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The studies on Islamic televangelism in the Malaysian media has been confirmed by several research studies (Salim, 2018; Wahab & Abdullah, 2017; Kanaker & Abd Ghani, 2016). Yet, most studies conducted so far emphasized on how religious programs serve as a medium to transfer Islamic knowledge to community (Rofil, Syed & Hamzah, 2016); as an avenue to learn and understand the insights of the religion broadcasting (Siagian, Mustari & Ahmad, 2016) and as a supplementary educational tool for everyday religious learning (Wasli & Husin, 2014). These are, however only fractions of the overall scenario. As such, there seems to be a shortage of studies on religious programs based on audience studies (Buyong & Ismail, 2010; Mustafa & Buyong, 2011).

There are numerous research that examine audience perceptions; however most of them are numerical and statistical which doesn't highlight deeper explanations of subject under study. This can be seen in the Wok, Ismail, Azman and Abdul Latif's (2012) study, whereby this research examines how Malay audiences are pleased with the featuring of Islamic televangelism in the local media. However, this study doesn't explain further on why the relationship among each of the variables are weak despite that they show a positive relationship.

Abdul Manaf, Wok, Ismail and Abdul Latif (2013) study is similar to Wok et al (2012) research findings where they studied the acceptance of Islamic reality program among Malay Muslim community in Malaysia. This study used survey questionnaire to understand the viewing habits of the community by examining the motivations and satisfaction of watching such programs. The study reveals that a positive relationship between reasons and satisfaction of watching Islamic televangelism overall. Nonetheless, it did not further discuss the insights of audiences' viewing habits. Adding to this, research by Mat Rahim, Nizah, Ahmad, and Karim (2012) investigated on the effect of how the messages are directed to the audiences. However, this study also did not elaborate the viewpoints of television audiences.

In contrast, Karim's (2016) research had examined the reception of Imam Muda among university students provided a notable point. She observed that her respondents had 'contradicted' views suggesting that audiences' perception are rather dynamic. Karim (2016), revealed that the contested audiences' views were subjected to audiences' notion of identity and how that influence their reception on Islamic televangelism. The findings of this study could be attributed to that reasonable approach that the researcher had taken instead of restricting audiences' views to statistical and numerical context.

The shortage of explaining the phenomena of audience reception of such programs indicates that the subject under study is worth of further exploration. Hall (1973) best epitomizes audience studies through his seminal work, *Encoding/Decoding*. But this idea was further enriched by Morley's (1980) Nationwide study. Nightingale (1996) later observed that the audience research begun to shift from media production to media consumption and have been observed in the works of Livingstone (2003) and Couldry, (2006). Subsequently there have been numerous audience reception studies which provided deeper and enriching accounts of audiences' perceptions and viewpoints (Papathanassopolous et al, 2013). This study, thus,

examines the perception of Muslim audiences in a bid to understand the insights of their ideas and thoughts on Islamic televangelism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Focus groups surfaced as a useful research technique for studying audience reception (Baran & Davis, 2015) because they stage a process of socially constructed meaning-making among participants. As such, focus groups permit the researcher to observe: (1) how audiences construct meaning through group conversations and social interaction; and (2) the role played by group dynamics in constructing and/or contesting meanings that members in the group pose (Hansen, Cottle, Newbold & Negrine, 1998). In other words, focus group discussions are an appropriate and suitable technique to study audiences because they imitate real-life conversation, interaction, and discussion of media content (Geiger, Bruning & Harwood, 2001). Traditionally, focus group is commonly conducted in a specific space, time and environment with the physical presence of participants for research discussion.

However, with the advent of technology, focus group discussion is increasingly taking place in online platforms (Collard & Van Teijlingen, 2016). The use of online focus groups in research is increasingly evident in medical literature (Townsend et al, 2015); psychological research (Jowett, Peel & Shaw, 2011) and social work field (Huis In Het Veld et al, 2018).

The use of online focus groups in a variety of field, as above, suggest that the topic of study isn't necessarily about the computer - mediated platform, interaction, space or the environment but are used to study any topics that are considered suitable to take place and interact online as an alternative medium to face to face discussion. The common trend of the use of online focus groups are usually in the form asynchronous, or non-real-time groups (Tuttas, 2015) using emails, online bulletin boards and forum discussion where conversation of subject under study can take place several days and answers are rather contemplative. But with more advanced and higher technology, virtual interactions can take place in present time and instantaneous (Bridges, 2016) using instant messenger and chat rooms (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2015). On this basis, this research employs online focus groups to gain an understanding of how Muslims perceive Islamic television programs in Malaysia.

Each focus group session in this study, begins with an explanation of the purpose of the research to participants. This was followed up with an ice-breaking session to establish familiarity between the participants and the researcher. Most participants spoke interchangeably in Malay and English and they were able to arrange their thoughts and convey their views discursively. All focus group sessions were documented using Facebook Messenger. Each session is labelled by alphabetical numbering. Participants were given a pseudonym so that their identities are not compromised. Short notes were also taken for validation purposes.

Twelve respondents participated in the study. The respondents are Facebook users who subscribe to pages that contain information relevant to Islamic televangelism programs. Group A comprises of four people, who are known by their respective pseudonyms as Nora, Haiqal, Siti and Seri. There are 3 females and 1 male in this group. All four in their 30s but only 3 are working adult while one female is a housewife with a tertiary education. The interaction with this group is rather interesting because the housewife is most vocal participant than the rest of the working adult in the group.

Group B consisted of 3 people . There are 3 females and only male in this group. Their pseudonyms are Adam, Hazreen and Zuleika. All three of them are in their 30s. The male

participant works as an executive in an international company while the females are graduate but chose to be housewives. The group session with them were rather lively and dynamic.

Group C of comprised 3 females and 2 males. For this research, they are known as Adeeb, Fatimah, Lina, Romzi and Zidah. All of them are working adult with age range between 30s and 50s. The respondents were able to provide insights based from different perspectives.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three focus groups were successfully organised for this study. Each focus group session was conducted between 90 to 120 minutes. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis whereby the themes, patterns and disparities were inductively generated to provide rich and interpretive outcomes.

The interactions with participants were open and flexible, allowing for a detailed account of how Malaysians view the Islamic televangelism. Most respondents communicated in both Malay and English. For the purpose of this study, all interactions in Malay have been translated into English. Respondents addressed their viewing on Islamic televangelism in the light of public discourses between religion and the general Malaysian Muslim. Thus, the findings are organised around these themes: audience taste, audience segmentation and the use of social media.

The first theme was observed through interactions with respondents who based their opinions on their preferred program and the justifications of why they favour such programs. Audience segmentation, on the other hand, was constructed based on the contested views pertaining to the style and delivery of Islamic programs. The theme on use of social media is extracted based on respondents account on engaging the Islamic televangelism programs between different media platforms i.e. television and computer-mediated medium.

Audience Taste

The interaction with reveals that the audience taste plays an influential part in understanding the reception of Islamic televangelism programs. However, this term seems to be a contested concept among the Muslim audience. Audiences seems to articulate their opinions differently. This research reveals that audience opines their accounts differently rather than homogenously as how it was discussed in previous studies.

This study also observes that the audience constructs diverse views when discussing about the topic featured in the Islamic programs. For some, the topics promoted in the Islamic televangelism are considered as important and relevant for the society while the rest believes that the content of such program are boring and dull that is shown repeatedly by over the years.

This focus group research highlighted a unique understanding of the reception of Islamic televangelism programs. For some participants, the Islamic televangelism programs is seen as favourable content, while for others the topic discussed in Islamic programs are clichés, worn out and trite matter that is shown repeatedly over the time.

i. Favourable content

For some participants, the Islamic program is seen as favourable initiative by local media. Islamic programs are seen in a positive light, which discusses on variety issues:

I usually watch RTM 1 that Forum Perdana Hal Ehwal Islam. I love it because

they have a variety of topics and panels. (Haiqal)

I like Al Kuliyyah. The topics presented are very interesting. The host is good too. And they are usually run on live. (Siti)

I diligently watch Semanis Kurma. Interesting topics. The hosts are real life couples.(Hazreen)

Reflections. My dad and I love this program.(Adam)

Echoing this view, other respondents such as Zidah and Seri believes such programs serve as an important tool of learning about Islam particularly about the Quran and its interpretation:

I usually watch Tanya Ustaz. I learn a lot of proper Quran recitations from it. (Zidah)

Ustaz Don explain about prayer comprehensively. I gained a lot of knowledge from it. (Seri)

Participants in this study asserted that the portrayal of Islamic programs serve them as a tool of reminder for Muslims about their role and obligations and not to be distracted with worldly pleasures:

It's important to have this type of programs so that it will be an awakening for Muslims so that they aren't focus on worldly matters. This type of programs enable us to get closer to Islam. (Lina)

ii. Clichés, Overused and Trite Topic

Although several respondents view the Islamic programs in a positive light, some participants were rather critical and thought that the topic were dreary, trite and repetitive. Nora, for example, claims that:

We are not going anywhere with these programs especially because of the quality of the program. They talk about the same thing again and again. Polygamy, jamak prayers, qasar prayers, the role of wife, Tahajjud and its importance - these kinds of things u can read too.

Nora further explains her frustration on watching repeated topics in Islamic program. She feels topic discussed on local religious programs are recycled and repetitive because it is created to reinforce ritual practice and thus leads to lesser thought provoking contents.

Why do u need so much program? We have bigger problem in the Muslim world. I'm also talking about its root cause; that Islam has been treated like a fashion or a trend. Thus, Muslims have stopped thinking. They love rituals and keep wanting to know more about nothing but rituals. These programs too have been patented to entertain Malaysian Muslims. because we don't like to think.

When probed further, Nora pointed out that instead of ritualist topics, she feels that current issues must be discussed in Islamic programs. Nora asserts that by illuminating current issues within the purview of Islam will project the religion rather dynamically in the current complex society:

Ask them to talk about something bigger and current issues like Tahfiz boy 'murdered', sexual harassment in Tahfiz school, the poverty in Malaysia despite having zakat, etc - something that both Muslims and non-Muslims would be interested. Something that attract non-Muslims as a tool to dakwah. These topics are the ones that we must discuss in religious programs.

The response from participant Nora indicates that the content of program is rather unexciting and doesn't explore other important issues apart from mundane religious rituals. This respondent believed such topic when repetitively shown demonstrates the religion skewedly as if it is exclusively focused on ritual practice and lack of raising or managing complex contemporary issues.

Corroborating the foregoing views on the clichés and trite topics in the Malaysia media, Adam believed that the Islamic programs must feature a rather balance content. Adam asserts that the media must provide a variety of topics without taking sides on extreme points views. He insists:

The topics shouldn't be all same. Always about women respecting their husband; children's filial responsibility towards their parents. Please change. Change to other topics such as interfaith dialogues; understanding other cultures. But not to the extent of accepting LGBT groups. Must have a middle ground and balance meeting point.

Analysis demonstrates that there are contested views from participants on the perception of Islamic programs in Malaysia. One faction who sees as an educating tool while the rest feels that the topics could be diverged and relate to contemporary issues. It is notable that there are conflicting views between the respondents, despite that they all share the same faith among themselves. This distinction is also reflected in the study by Karim (2016) who found that her student-audiences also interpreted a rather disputed impression when it comes to viewing Imam Muda, a popular reality tv religious program in Malaysia. Karim (2016) asserts that her participants are "forced to build their religious identity and seek their own spiritual path" (p.202). One reason for this is because the topic and the communication approach used in the religious program doesn't appeal to the younger generation (Karim, 2016) and appears to create a division among Muslims in this country.

Audience segmentation

Participants of this research, in contrast to Karim's (2016) respondents, indicated a rather diverse view which seems to suggest that each program are crafted with specific criteria of viewership. Several the respondents in this study highlights that the Islamic programs are crafted based on audience segmentation.

The producers of these programs must have carefully thought and planned on the how and ways of attracting audience. (Adam)

Some of these programs are crafted to appeal youngsters so that they will be attracted to follow religious programs. (Hazreen)

The accounts from Adam and Hazreen highlights that audience segmenting is essential in the production of Islamic televangelism. By segmenting, the concept of each programs can be crafted uniquely to reach its intended audience.

i. Delivery and Presentation Style

Some respondents in this study indicates that the presentation and the delivery are an important appeal factor to the program's segmented audiences. This will enable the audiences to select and choose the style and the delivery that matches with their preference:

The delivery style is important when discussing Islamic matters so that the audiences aren't bored. (Lina)

A simple and humorous delivery will influence audience to watch the respective religious program. (Zuleika)

Fatimah, points out examples of how host or television personality have their own way of presenting and appealing to audience:

For example, the Faraid system is best presented by Ustaz Kazim. Ustaz Syamsul Debat is better at discussing family issues and matters.

Despite of the positive accounts on Islamic programs, some respondents of this study provided interesting observations. Adeeb, for instance, criticise the use of young Muslims as religious personalities. He asserts that reality tv produced presenters are phoney and trained for television. Adeeb further exemplifies that these young presenters are immature, coached and their delivery is rather scripted.

In similar vein, Fatimah also feels some presenters don't appeal to audience with their delivery styles. Adding to this, Nora claims some of the religious preachers tends to exaggerate with their delivery styles so much so that their approaches tends to be overkill:

We like to be fed and our ustaz loves topic like this. Probably because it's easy, comedic, contain songs and at times use double meanings in their talks. (Nora)

Nora was referring to a popular preacher who seemed to engage in rather suggestive communicative approaches by which means insinuating sexual references in his preaching. Hazreen further elucidates, stating:

Some Muslims like to talk and post about of 'Friday Night' (Malam Jumaat) sheepishly. So much so that when non-Muslims hears or reads about it, they think it's about night of sexual activities.

Adam, in contrast, provide arguments to the Nora's and Hazreen's statements. He claims:

But at the same time, observe the response of Ustaz Azhar Idrus's audiences. Many were brave enough to ask important questions such as obligatory bath, ablutions without proper cloth, and other questions that it's not apt for me to tell here. Obviously, preacher must come up with creative ways of delivering messages. This is because the audiences too are of people with different taste and preference.

Adam's justification on the presenter highlights that some presenter had to employ strategic approach to appeal to the audience. He asserts that by employing strategic approach, Muslim audiences are able to exchange and interact not only on thought provoking matters but also on sensitive and taboo issues.

The exchange between these respondents illustrates that, while on the surface the proliferation of Islamic programs appears to be a positive and widely accepted, the informants of this study seems to uncover other layers of Islamic televangelism. The response by these participants provides an overview on how audiences account the aspects in the Islamic program that have not been explored previously. This study, thus, asserts that audiences articulate Islamic televangelism diversely, in contrast to the works of Wok's et al (2012) and as such influence the way they perceive the contemporary practice of local religious practices.

Islamic Televangelism and Social Media

Another notable theme that was derived through respondents of this study is that the use of social media implying that Muslim audience are actively participating online' observing, watching, commenting on religious television programs. This theme is considered noteworthy as it indicates how audiences mediate between television and online platform to satisfy their interest and inquisitiveness on religious knowledge and issues. One reason indicated for this is because most of the respondents of this study heed a busy lifestyle where the larger part of their daily routines are subjected to work commitments. For this reason, social media acts as a mediated medium for them to catch up on what they missed in television.

Adeeb, for instance that he uses the social media to catch up on religious programs as he doesn't have the time to watch television. His view were agreed by other respondents who also finds that the Internet is a tool on catching up issues that have been overlooked due to work commitment:

I am working so I watch reruns of Islamic programs instead. At times from the internet. If I got time, I watched it from YouTube. (Zaidah)

I don't have much time during the day, so I don't get to watch when the program on its original air time. But I watch it in the Internet, catching up what I have missed on television. (Zuleika)

Others feel that the online platform is an effective medium to disseminate information in faster and concise manner:

In my opinion, social media platform is an effective and influential medium to disseminate information about religion. You can use short quotes yet impactful.

*The task is done swiftly but the main point is deliverable in short span of time.
(Adam)*

*Social media is the current influential platform in present time. This medium
must be used sensibly for religious matters. (Siti)*

*Social media is important because many people spend time on it in comparison
to television. (Romzi)*

Despite of the benefits that social media provide for participants of study, some respondents are concern of the excessive use of this medium exclusively:

*Facebook maybe influential but one must be careful when giving commentaries
on this platform.(Zaidah)*

The concern, as expressed by participants of this study refers to the comments left by social media users. They feel that social media users are at times are very emotional and tend to be brash in their comments:

*That's the problem with social media. Its uncontrollable. These days people
leaves comments for the purpose of trolling. (Seri)*

*The Malaysian Muslims are one of a kind. Many are keyboard warriors It is
important to be cautious when leaving a comment in social media platform.
(Hazreen)*

*Most of the netizens are emotional when they give their opinion in social media.
The best form of giving opinion is to be cautious on sensitive matters. (Adeeb)*

The concern expressed by participants of this study does indicate that religious matters are sensitive issues in Malaysia. Informants of this study asserts that some form of vigilance must be observed in curbing delicate and complex issues from getting uncontrollable particularly when social media commentators leaves confusing and slanderous comments:

*There are issue on this, at times we are confused who is right and who is wrong.
I prefer the authority to evaluate the matter accordingly. (Romzi)*

*The authority must strategize the way of disseminating religious issues in social
media. I think a Social Media Commission must be formed to monitor and
supervise on this matter. Perhaps, the religious unit in the Prime Minister's
Department can also oversee this matter. (Seri)*

On that account, participants assert that although social media serve as an interactive platform, the genre of televangelism remains important. The dissemination of religious issues through television is imperative:

*Social media is imperative on religious matters that is exclusively related to
news posting. But I don't think so it's ideal for talks or seminars. (Nora)*

*Internet isn't accessible for everyone, so television is still import for them.
(Haiqal)*

The analysis reveals that for most participants, Islamic televangelism provides a combination of information on religious education, socio-religious interactions as well serve as spiritual Islamic awakening from time to time. As for participants who were critical of the advertisements, it is possible that they may be reacting to what they perceive as ritualistic topics which has been discussed repetitively. Their frustration at what they consider a trite and routine topics might turn them against this genre of television program. It appears that, for these participants, the need to address complex contemporary issues is significant and must be addressed intellectually to uphold the relevancy of religious practice in the contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

Detailed analysis demonstrates that the social media medium functions as a supplementary platform for Islamic televangelism. The response by these participants provides an overview on how audiences actively participate in media convergence when engaging with Islamic televangelism. Yet, the informants of this study asserts that television is an important medium television for religious programs. This imply that television remains as the dominant medium for Islamic televangelism (Wahab & Abdullah, 2017, p. 452).

It is evident that in Malaysia, Islamic televangelism will remain flourish. One reason for this is due to its wider policy and constant reminder from leaders of the country to project Islam in a more balance nature. The call from these leaders had witness an assortment religious programs with different hosts explaining and simplifying religious principles and practices. Audience reception to these programs, however, demonstrates lively and dynamic views. Caution, however, must be exercised as the increasing use of social media demonstrates audiences' involvement in providing feedbacks about these religious programs. This platform although allows for 'freedom of voice' (Salim, 2018), it must be monitored, and some form of vigilance should be observed as unjustified remarks and obsessed emotions can interrupt the unity of Malaysian Muslim society.

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