THE SUNNAH LAKE OF MUSLIMAH: SALAFI WOMEN, THE MANHAJ AND ONLINE MEDIA

[1*]Yuyun Sunesti, [2]Noorhaidi Hasan, [3]Muhammad Najib Azca
[1] Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Sebelas Maret University, Surakarta
and Inter-Religious Studies, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta
[2]School of Graduate Studies, State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta
[3]Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta
*yuyun_sunesti@staff.uns.ac.id, noorhaidi@hotmail.com, najibazca@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose of the study: This paper analyses the use of internet by salafi women especially in an online group named Telaga Sunnah Muslimah (The Sunnah Lake of Muslimah-TSM).

Methodology: Applying content analysis by analyzing the messages shared within TSM WhatsApp Groups discussion, this paper analyses the agency which salafi women play through their internet usage, especially in online media they use.

Main Findings: Viewed as passive, voiceless and subordinated group, they use internet as media for reproducing knowledge, expressing their voice and negotiating their identity. While salafi manhaj requires them to strictly limit their appearance in public space, the online space has facilitated them to have more spaces to exist beyond their offline world

Applications of this study: The study gives an understanding on how a closed women group plays their agency to negotiate their boundary within modern world.

Novelty/Originality of this study: While salafi women are commonly viewed as having no agency, this paper found their agency through their online media usage.

Keywords: Salafi women, manhaj, online media, agency, public sphere

INTRODUCTION

The advent of new technology has transformed the way people communicate and interact in modern world. Face-to-face interaction has no longer become a requirement in people's communication, yet the internet has facilitated it with borderless, timeless and spaceless contact. The emergence of websites, online chat rooms and social media has brought about a nature of people's daily life interface and has created a new virtual social network. This greater variety of digital contents has benefited people for various purposes, from politic and economic to daily life discussion. Anis (2018) stressed that people even spend more time in online communities than in offline daily interaction.

One of groups having used the internet for their various purposes is salafi women, a group of female Muslims well known for their strict obedience to *salafi manhaj* (rule). They are acquainted with loose *abaya* (Arab-style flowing robes) and some of them wear *niqab* (face covering) as well as limit their appearance in public spaces to avoid what they believe as *ikhtilat* (intermingling between men and women in one place). Hasan argues that they are "living in small, exclusive tight-knit communities and inclined to stand distinctly apart from the "anything goes" open society around them" (Hasan, 2007: 83-94).

Scholarly studies on this group have generally argued their inability to express their agency within their life. They generally view that the practice of niqab and the consequences afterward such as limiting their appearance in public spaces and preferring to stay in private space show their subordination and passivity within the power relation they face. In fact, post-colonialist scholars argue that the practice of veiling as a symbol of resistance against western hegemony and commodification of women's bodies implies their power to employ their agency (Bilge, 2010: 8).

This paper analyses the agency of salafi women as described in their internet usage, especially in the WhatsApp's chat forum named Telaga Sunnah Muslimah (TSM). While they are very closed in offline sphere, they do online interactions and expressions actively. In this chat room, they exercise their agency and participate in shaping and constructing a virtual Islamic discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly studies on Salafism have largely focused on this group as a global movement. Teitelbaum (2000), Fandi (2001), Roy (2002), Al-Rasheed (2002), Commins (2006) and Turner (2014) discussed the linkage of salafism with other Islamic movements in the Middle East, Europe and North America. Several other studies focusing on salafi as a global movement have also been undertaken by Sedgwick (2012), Lauzière (2016) and Byman & Gold (2012). However, most of these studies have looked at Salafism as a transnational Islamic movement in relation to terrorism and radicalism and used a security study approach (Ali, 2016; Armborst, 2009; Amghar 2007; Hegghammer 2006; and Lia 2007). An objectively comprehensive literature on the global salafi is a collection of studies conducted by Meijer (2009).

Furthermore, the discussion of Salafism in Indonesia has generally focused on its movement development, movement politics, criticism of their religious doctrine and challenge to democracy in Indonesia (Hasan 2007; Jahroni 2015; Hisyam 2010; Wahid, 2014; Bruinessen, 2017). As a religious movement beginning to globalize and attract many followers, Hasan (2011) saw a significant increase in the number of salafi schools in Indonesia after the New Order. In line with this, Iqbal (2017) also found young Indonesians' increased interest in following the path of salafism in the last five years. Unfortunately, despite the emergence of research on Salafi movement groups in Indonesia, the one focusing on salafi women is still very limited in number.

Inge's (2016) study described the life of salafi women living in secular Western world, especially England. Through ethnographic methods, Inge explored how salafi women in London adapt to British secular culture and maintain their beliefs and way of life according to their salaf manhaj. The studies on salafi women in Indonesia have dominated the view on the passivity and subordination of salafi women. Research conducted by Astuti (2010), Tarawiyah (2012), Merlin (2010), Hapsari (2011), Sabrina (2014), Mahanani (2016) and Nisa (2012; 2013), largely confirmed an argument about the salafi women's limited agency due to their way of life that is exclusive and closed from the outside world. A study conducted by Nisa (2012) focused on young salafi women in Yogyakarta and Makasar. She underlined that amid its limitations, salafi women also have a strategy to negotiate when living under a non-Islamic state.

In relation to Salafism and the internet, several studies revealed the online activities of salafis. Iqbal (2014) argued that the internet has benefited salafis in promoting their ideology and doctrine, an in challenging their enemies such as Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal) and Shiah. Besides, they use internet to respond to contemporary issues such as terrorism, earthquake and others. Responding to the appearance of Shia Media in the internet, Ida's (2016) study also found the salafi's activism in the online space to counter these Shiite online activities. Discussion on salafi women and the internet has been made by Piela (2017) and Nisa (2013). Concerning the self-representations in the form photographic self-portraits published in new media, Piela argued that salafi niqabi women exercise their agency by making visual references to their daily life and establish dialogue and intimacy with their audiences (Piela 2017). In different focus, Nisa (2013) found that the internet usage by these salafi niqabis is intended mainly to maintain their subculture.

METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative research with content analysis on the online media used by the niqabis. Content analysis is one of research methods to analyze data focusing on the content of communication taking place in document evidence. Holsti (1969: 25) defined it as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." Content analysis was chosen because the text in which messages in online discussion forums that will be analyzed is large enough and an excerpt in categories was needed to catch the meaning of messages.

The data of research was collected from the information posted by the members of TSM group from February 2018 to August 2019. As the members largely hid their real identity in the online forum, the identity used in this research was employed based on what they have provided in the chat rooms. The fact that Salafi women community is known as very tricky to approach because of their restrictions on social interaction in public spaces, their interaction and communication in online forums can be an alternative reason to look at and analyze how they interact and what issues they often share and discuss.

Additionally, this qualitative research employed simple random sampling producing a representative sample in which every unit of population has equal probability to be included into the sample. This is because in online forum, the identity of each member is very flow. All members do not know each other commonly and they have met in forum due to shared needs. Therefore, this research focused more on messages they share and discuss. Additionally, the random sampling was used since the descriptive data in online discussion forums was large, with various comments from their members and equal chance to be selected so that the representativeness would be chosen randomly.

DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

Marcotte (2009) recorded the rapid expansion of Islamic cyberspace ecology nowadays offering virtual muslim communities engagement and online Islamic environments. Beside Islamic websites, blogs and Facebook or Tweeter, the online forums are still attractive to be used by online users. One of the popular online forums used is WhatsApp group enabling many users to be connected in a chat room to share various concerns. Here, they can posts their opinions, links, pictures, and videos as well as discuss them directly just like they do in offline communication. This online chat room also facilitates people from different places to discuss in one similar online room for unlimited time and spaces. Out of many WhatsApp groups, Telaga Sunnah Muslimah Group is interesting to study as it reveals the interaction of female salafis who has been commonly seen as a closed group in offline sphere. Therefore, analyzing their interaction within online forums will reveal to what extent they exercise their agency and for what reasons this active communication is created.

Telaga Sunnah Muslimah is one of many Salafi Whatsapp Chat Forums beside Taman Syurga Akhwat, Mutiara Sunnah Muslimah, and Yook Ngaji#mbak. This wag has been created in September 5, 2017 by bismillah, an account name. Compared with other salafi whatapps groups (wag) which are stated as a *dakwah* group proposing *tarbiyah* (education) and *tashfiyah* (purification) to dig the legacy of the best muslim generation (*salafussalih*), this wag is slightly different as it literally says that all members have a posting right in the group—which is very strictly limited in other groups. In addition,

this wag also gives the members the opportunity of advertising the members' product that is allowed on only Saturday and Sunday. While the members of other groups have to gain permission to post an article, this wag allows the members to post articles in the group with special note saying that "it must fit the salafussalih understanding".

Furthermore, although this wag is salafi media meaning that all the materials shared should be taken from the salafi sources, the members are also opened to non salafis. Out of 216 wag participants, 18 are administrator (admin) who will regularly post the articles relating to salafi doctrines and warn the members when they break the TSM wag rules. While the members come from various backgrounds, the admin should be the salafi members. Additionally, to join this group, the muslimah only needs to click the invitation sent by the members who have been already in the group. So, although this wag is opened, the muslimah outside the group who want to join should have this invitation beforehand. As an active whatsapp group, this wag has offered various uses for the members, from learning salafi manhaj to selling and buying the members' products.

A. The Internet for TSM chat group members

a. Offering salafi teaching and information

As written in the wag rules, this wag aims to share salafi teaching and to be a media for salafi dakwah. Therefore, most of articles shared by admin are taken from various salafi sources such as www.salamdakwah.com, muslimafiyah.com, alwasathiyah.com, almanhaj.or.id, taawundakwah.com, sofyanruray.info, muslim.or.id, konsultasisyariah.com, forumsalafy.net, rumaysho.com, and telegram channels such as sahabat hijrah, KJMuslim, muliaDenganSunnah, as well as salafi ustadz's recorded preaching from salafi channels such as Yufid.TV, Acehtafaqquhfiddin and roja TV. The articles and summary of salafi books are also selected from only salafi ustadzs such as Muhammad abduh Tuasikal, Musyaffa AdDariny, Abu Fairuz Ahmad Ridwan, Johan saputra Halim, Yazid bin Abdul Qodir Jawas, Muhammad sulhan jauhari, sofyan chalid bin idham ruray, dr. raehanul bahraen. The admin also promote a Sunnah search engine (*Mesin Pencari Sunnah*—MPS) which can be downloaded through a playstore. The admin said that MPS can be a solution as it only accommodates Islamic websites based on the prophet Muhammad, His companions (*sahabat*) and *tabi'in* and *tabi'ut tabi'in* teachings. The themes often shared are, among others, Quran and hadits teachings, questions and answers of Islamic laws, as well as everyday salafi guidance.

b. Selling and buying *toyib & *non-*ghoror* products

In addition to being a media for sharing salafi teachings, TSM is also the only one salafi women wag allowing the members to promote the member's products to sell. The admin warns the members to sell *toyib* (good) and non-*ghoror* (scam). The admin only allows the members to advertise the sellers' products. Several products they sell are *abaya*, *hijab* (veil) and *niqab*, *sirwal* (trousers right to the ankles), cosmetics, shoes, foods, children clothes, strong health drugs for men, as well as *syar'i* cluster housing offering Islamic environment. However, the admin allows this selling and buying on only Saturday and Friday. The members interested in buying the products will usually send the private messages to the seller to avoid long chats in group. Although the days for promoting the seller stuff are only Saturday and Sunday, some members break this rule by selling in other days as well. For this rule, the admin has usually warned it and sometimes develops the sending messages setting by which only admin can send messages on workdays.

B. Opened yet limited

Although it has been written in the TSM rule that the TSM members have equal rights to post, the admin still dominates the posting. The admin regularly posts the salafi articles relating to salafi doctrines, Islamic laws, guidance for salafi women, advices and motivation of being salafis. Several members of group have also tried to post articles, yet some of them got warning from the admin as their articles do not mention the reliable sources from salafi teaching. Although giving the members the freedom to discuss and ask, in fact the questions unrelated to salafi teaching from the members would have not been answered by the admin, for example, the question from a member, Helni, asking about whether or not Syeikh Ali Jaber is also Sunnah ustadz. However, when a member asked about what is the true aqidah? The admin directly posts the articles on salafi manhaj. Furthermore, the admin's authority to set out who can send messages in particular times show the delimitation of interaction among the members.

C. TSM and Salafi's Women's Agency

Maslak (2018) defined agency as "the action propelling deliberate movement through a structure(s) by an individual(s) and/or collective(s), with the expressed purpose of achieving a goal or desired outcome". Burke (2012) highlighted agency in related to the significance of women as actors, rather than simply acted upon by male-dominated social institutions. While scholars found salafi women's inadequate agency in exercising choices in their life, participating in public activities and expressing their voices, the online sphere has facilitated them to have spaces to express their identity, voices and demonstrate their expressions. In online sphere, these salafi women can have alternative spaces to exercise their choices. TSM WhatsApp group can be an alternative way to be used in many activities, from producing and consuming salafi ideology, social interaction to economic empowerment for the members.

On the one hand, TSM wag aims to gather women who are interested in learning salafi doctrines as well as empowering their economy. Women have been allowed to promote whatever products they have as long as it toyib and non-ghoror. On

the other hand, the strict rule from the admin to share only salafi's teaching contents portrays the effort to maintain the true Islamic doctrines they believe. The lack of dialogue atmosphere built within the group—in which the admin dominated the information sharing of religious contents—confirms this well-maintained subculture.

The agency they show through TSM is the ability of salafi women to create a public sphere through online world. As Nisa (2013) argued that while scholars found the internet contributing to democratization and development of civil society in Indonesia, the usage of internet for niqabi has tended to maintain their subcultures. Hence, the relation between niqabis and internet is established by "creating their own secluded virtual public sphere" (Nisa, 2013: 3). In addition, to maintaining their subculture by consistently sharing salafi teaching contents, this TSM wag has also attempted to empower the members' economy through facilitating them to advertise and open chats to the sellers and the buyers.

CONCLUSION

Telaga Sunnah Muslimah is one of online media in the form of WhatsApp chat group used by salafi women for particular reasons. Unlike other wag used by salafi women, TSM is different as it allows the members to sell various products. In addition to producing and consuming salafi teaching contents, this online forum has empowered the members in their economic improvement. While scholars have described this group of women as passive and subordinated, in fact it exercises its agency in another way. They create a public sphere where they can generously express their interests and voices through online media, while they have limited space in offline space. Through online forum, they also try to empower the member's economy through their 'syar'i' trade.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study only look at one salafi online group in Indonesia, in fact there are many other salafi online groups. Therefore, it cannot be used to generalise the phenomenon of salafi women in other groups or other areas. Comparing many more salafi women online forums for further study will enrich the understanding of salafi women phenomenon in Indonesia as well as other countries.

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