# Exposure to Online *Da'wah* Messages among Young Social Media Users in Aceh: A Reflection of Habermas's Communicative Action

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**Abstract:** This study aims to reveal the transformative power of social media platforms as a new form of public sphere for religious discource amongst Acehnese Muslim students. Using a descriptive quantitative method through online survey with 129 of those students, this study shows that social media have contributed providing a new public sphere for young Muslim and have become an essential part of Islamic proselytising (da'wah). In this regard, most young social media users utilised social media to discuss Islamic da'wah as well as to express their thought concerning on shariah enforcement. Therefore, this study argues that social media use has a close relationship with the increase of religious thoughts and knowledge as the implementation of da'wah.

**Keywords:** Social media, public sphere, Muslim student, da'wah.

**Abstrak:** Studi ini membahas kekuatan transformatif *platform* media sosial sebagai bentuk alternatif ranah publik baru terkait wacana keagamaan bagi mahasiswa Muslim di Aceh. Dengan menggunakan metode kuantitatif deskriptif dan survei online dengan sampel 129 mahasiswa, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa media sosial terbukti bermanfaat sebagai ranah publik baru bagi masyarakat Muslim Aceh dan esensial bagi dakwah Islam. Dalam kaitan ini, sebagian besar pemuda Muslim, khususnya mahasiswa, memanfaatkan media sosial untuk berdiskusi tentang dakwah Islam, termasuk untuk mengekspresikan pemikiran mereka tentang penegakan syariah. Oleh karena itu studi ini berpendapat bahwa penggunaan media sosial memiliki hubungan yang erat dengan peningkatan pemikiran dan pengetahuan keagamaan ummat, dimana hal itu juga sebagai bentuk implementasi dakwah.

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# Introduction

The number of social media users worldwide increased in 2019 by 3.4 billion, with 9% penetration from the previous year. In Indonesia, social media users account reached 56% of the population (Global Social Media Research Summary, 2019). Thus, the presence of social media platform, it has been allegedly an alternative to the new public sphere in Indonesian society.

The public sphere concept continues to change according to the needs-based on normative values of rational and critical discussion and debate. This conception has historically been passed down to the next generation through different contexts, with the same goal: egalitarianism or equality, by applying norms such as social criticism and egalitarianism to several aspects to influence political, social, and cultural, economic, and morality (Habermas, 1995). The emergence of various social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, has revived the new public sphere. Like traditional public sphere, social media is also used to express thought, knowledge and discuss relevant Islam themes. Through social media, Muslim society in Aceh as users can present any information and arguments, sometimes ambiguities misunderstandings that lead to hatred, anger, and so on between social media users regarding Islamic perspectives.

Therefore, further study is needed considering that studies on social media and the public sphere do not represent Muslim society in Aceh, specifically as active users within *da'wah* and communication through a more contemporary Islamic landscape. Is it true that social media is a public sphere for Muslim society in Aceh? If yes, how it goes? Many assumptions argue that social media has also given unlimited access to space and time that has exceeded the technical says capabilities of a traditional public sphere such as television and radio. This research is expected to reveal social media's transformative power as an alternative to the public sphere among Muslim society in Aceh.

Many studies have shown that social media varies considerably based on the level of usage in Indonesia with various community demographics. Understanding these circumstances in the popularity of different social media is very important to target specific users.

Therefore, users of social media with high intensity are often directed at those who are highly educated. In other words, it can be said that the higher the level of one's education, the greater the need to access social media (Bhakti, 2020). From the statement above, the population that meets the criteria in this study is students from Muslim society in Aceh.

The theoretical framework aims to determine the extent of the public sphere and social media from communication. The public sphere through communicative action theory by Habermas (1979) believes that a particular society as part of the community is free to communicate with one another without manipulation and coercion. However, the idea of reaching this understanding has several meanings, as Habermas (1979) explained. In its most basic sense, intersubjective understanding means linguistic comprehensibility. In every communicative act, people must presuppose that we can use the same expressions in the same way. As Habermas (1995) asserts that if people do not presuppose that they can assign the same meaning to the same terms, they would not even start to speak.

Correspondingly, the communicative action theory seeks to link da'wah with religious responses, which attempts to investigate normative assumptions of Muslim social interaction regarding Islam's development by emphasizing the communicative dimension in rational and critical conversation. In this context, the theory of communicative action attempts an ethical discourse that is practical, not merely an ethical suggestion that is an imperative but rational discussion to reach consensus or agreement about Islam.

To avoid obstacles in communicative action, according to Habermas (2015), Muslim society as participants in the public sphere, are expected to develop ethical discourse, which is a normative justification for achieving interests between fellow individuals and groups. Habermas then formulates communicative conditions as summarized in the ideal speech situation, namely, first, all participants have the same opportunity to start a discussion and to express arguments and criticize the arguments of other participants; second, Among the participants, no difference in power can avoid that

arguments might be relevant; *third*, all participants express their thoughts sincerely, so it is not possible for one to manipulate the other without realizing it.

Habermas (1989) offered a conception using formal pragmatic relations that are objective reality, social reality, and the subjective reality that can produce three kinds of attitudes, including objectivism, normative conformity, or critical attitude and expressive attitude. In other words, rationality is understood as an argumentative discussion to obtain mutual agreement. The basic concept of the public sphere is revealed from the thought of Habermas (1989). Everyone has the same opportunity to participate and convey their ideas. Definitively, according to Habermas, the public sphere can be defined as a space that is located between the religious community and the state where the public conducts rational discussion, forms their opinions, and carries out supervision of the government (Habermas, 1989).

Toulouse (1998) in Salman (2017) suggested that there are three main principles in the public sphere: (1) Easy access to information. Technologies such as social media that enable community members to get access to information. (2) There is nothing special about the participants (equal); and (3) Participants can state rational reasons for discussing consensus. According to Habermas (1995), that communication activities in the public sphere must be oriented to valid claims that are real, but related and complementary to each other, namely: truth claims which concerning the objective natural world; claims of appropriateness (rightness) which concerning the implementation of social norms; claims of sincerity which concerning the suitability between mind and expression; and claims of comprehensibility which is agreement because the fulfillment of the three claims above is sufficient reason for consensus (Habermas, 1995).

In *da'wah*, there should be strength of communicative action in the public sphere. The communication process in the open forum is a process where Muslim society, as users of social media, try to convince other Muslims to accept the proposed sharia law, for instance, based on the use of reason in Aceh in the process of deliberative dialogue take

and give. Therefore, the public sphere's role in this process is crucial for Aceh's Muslim society.

Social media can help Muslim society create and maintain their social capital because social media's technical ability can cause addiction to increased social interaction so that Muslim society can build more significant social connections. This growing social network among Muslim society can holistically change the character of Muslim society's social and religious way of life at both the interpersonal and community levels. Therefore, social media allows Muslims to play an active role sociologically and politically in Aceh.

Regarding components related to social media, social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) states that media is divided into several levels, namely: acoustic, visual, and physical. Concerning the social media dimension, the concept of self-presentation states that people have a desire to control the impressions of others towards them (Goffman, 1959). Usually, such presentations are made through self-disclosure; that is, conscious or unconscious disclosure of personal (e.g., thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes) that is consistent with the image you want to give (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Some of the previous researchers have tended to focus more on Post-Islamism and the remaking of the Islamic public sphere in post-reform Indonesia, netizen journalism, and the challenge of *da'wah* in new media and Islamic communication action to defend Islam and Muslim public spaces. It must also be acknowledged that the classic era of the public sphere lacks significant benefits to Indonesia's democracy development (Anshor 2016; Pamungkas, 2017; Aziz, 2018). Therefore, this study sees some typology of social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook as an alternative to the new public sphere among Acehnese Muslim society. Additionally, the emergence of various social media platforms such as WhatsApp as a new public sphere can be seen from da'wah and Muslim society's communication.

# Social Media and Da'wah

Practically, *da'wah* means trying to convince Islam as a religious belief by talking, doing, inviting, persuading individuals or groups,

even societies, and making them think, learn, and do like the way of living to Islam. In other words, *da'wah* is an effort, which is compulsory for any Muslim to convey the message about Islam by their capacity and ability. The al-Quran mentions *da'wah* quite a lot in several verses, such as Al Imran 3: 104 and An-Nahl 16: 125.

Besides as the medium of *da'wah*, social media has become an essential source of information about religious issues. In the past, seeking knowledge about Islam was mainly restricted to the mosques, educational institutions, and learning from *Imams*. These traditional learning opportunities remain intact. Now, Muslim societies can also learn, question, teach, and network through social media. For instance, Muslims can listen to a lecture on YouTube in any language they want, whenever they want. Meanwhile, WhatsApp is a medium to discuss any relevant religious issues have on Muslim societies (Omar, Hassan, and Sallehuddin, 2015).

Social media contribute to spreading knowledge about Islam. No doubt, it also changes *da'wah* patterns and forms, especially when dealing with millennial Muslim society as the most users. Because social media has become an essential source of information on spiritual matters, therefore, social media can and should be used to communicate and disseminate the Islamic *da'wah*. Since social media has indeed become the primary reference for religious issues, therefore the *da'wah* developed by using social media must uphold the Islamic values derived from *al-Qur'an* and *Hadith*.

Research conducted by Zaini (2013) showed the importance of the media in spreading *da'wah* messages. In this modern era, *da'wah* must be disseminated through modern information technology. *Da'wah* through the internet is seen as an effective breakthrough because it can reach more comprehensive da'wah objects quickly and cheaply. Therefore, the use of the internet as a medium for da'wah will always be today's choice. It is marked by the emergence of many sites on the internet that contain da'wah content.

Subsequent research conducted by Omar and Sallehuddin (2015) showed the role of social media in disseminating *da'wah*. This research revealed social media's advantages have to be used effectively to convey

the message of da'wah. Indeed, da'wah is a thriving activity implemented through social media whenever the renowned da'i (preacher) also uses this method. Therefore, this paper reveals social media's role in disseminating the message of da'wah to the community. It focuses on the social media factors which affect publicizing Islamic information. This paper also discusses the need for social media to be used by the community to get more exposure to Islamic messages. All parties should know the importance of social media as a medium of communication for da'wah in this era of information.

Another research by Islam (2019) revealed the impact of social media on Muslim society: from Islamic Perspective. This research shows that social media is essential to establish new social communication by modern information technology between friends, family, and people. This study has the goal of promoting the role of social media in Muslim society. The paper concludes that the exquisite use of social media of Muslim Society in the world.

Following research conducted by Thaib (2019) reveals how da'wah's reality on social media in the people of Gorontalo City. This study states that Islamic da'wah always requires various things that support da'wah's implementation or send the da'wah messages to da'wah's object. Facilities that support the implementation of da'wah are called the media of da'wah (wasilah). The skill of the da'wah subject in choosing the right media is the initial success for the success of da'wah. Especially in the current climate of technological development, where science is proliferating without limits, it continues to develop to be taken advantage of in the development of da'wah media.

Research conducted by Kamaruddin et al. (2019) showed communication technology is proliferating. Social media is inseparable from internet users with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other new applications. Through social media, not only can share various information but also can exchange opinions and add knowledge. Social media is also of great benefit to preachers to spread Islamic *da'wah*. The purpose of preaching is to remind everyone that human life in this

world is only temporary and that the one who has power over everything is Allah SWT. Furthermore, this research revealed preaching is fundamental in spreading Islam's teachings to Muslims and those who are still looking for their way of life. In disseminating information, it is necessary to maintain good manners in conveying information, mainly to ensure that the information is true, accurate facts, maintain good morals in writing, advise prudently and protect the feelings of Muslims and non-Muslims.

The subsequent research conducted by Basit (2016) shows that Indonesian Muslim students' ideological fragmentation and da'wa movements in the post reformed era. This study explains that postreformation religious organizations have influenced students' ideology and movements and the processes of Muslim students' ideological fragmentation and its implications to students' post-reformation movements. This study was conducted through observations and interviews with extracurricular organizational activists in Purwokerto. The reflective analysis is then conducted using primary and secondary data. This research suggests that Islamic ideology has many essential roles, such as guidance, values, beliefs, and directions for da'wa activities. In its operation, Islamic ideology is fragmented into fundamental, modernist, liberal, and traditional ideology. The ideological processes are influenced by several factors, such as organization historical background, ideological relationship with social organizations, development of transnational Islamic organizations, students' increasing demands and needs in the modern era, and massive information media. The Implications of ideological fragmentation influence post-reformation activities performed by those Muslim students.

The following research conducted by Suherdiana et al. (2018) revealed the high number of social media users in Indonesia raises opportunities for various parties to use it. Not only for business, politics, and campaign but also Islamic purposes. This study concluded that the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah *da'wah* strategies on Facebook social media generally still use a normative pattern. *Da'wah* messages have not been creatively packaged and generally still

lack innovation. More and more people accessing online media, social media, and other Internet products are good chances to deliver da'wah for the da'wah country's da'wah community. The da'wah community involved in the Islamic mass organization had a *da'wah's* unique typology for social media users. Two of the most prominent Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia are Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah through their institutions that use social media, especially Facebook, as a place of da'wah.

Information and communication technology is increasingly developing for preaching. Today, media technology has changed the world as if it were without time and space boundaries. With the presence of information technology through several social media types, it is hoped that Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia can combine conventional preaching with information technology-based da'wah. Therefore, Islamic broadcasting (da'wah) based on technology will be more effective if this is done.

Many societies in Indonesia, including Aceh as the province of sharia law, widely use social media to deliver da'wah through some of the applications that are on the social media feature. Muslim societies must be able to involve and utilize social media development as a new public sphere because social media has a strength that can be used in an effective way to spread the values of Islamic and gathering *Ukhuwah Islamiyah* (brotherhood among Muslims).

Social media is one of the most crucial tools for *da'wah* between individuals or societies in Indonesia, including Aceh, as a channel of sharing, discussing, and disseminating religious issues. Social media's advantages, such as WhatsApp, have to be used wisely to convey the message of *da'wah* about Islam. If this runs smooth, social media as a new public sphere will be an effective medium for da'wah.

Under these circumstances, social media's emergence is an essential public sphere to practice and discuss religious issues and other relevant information about Islam among Muslim societies in Aceh. With the assumption, social media as a new public sphere should promote mutual understanding (consensus) about Islam perspective more beneficial for the Muslim societies in Aceh. Social media, in

many ways, can be seen as a public sphere to promote and develop better *Ummah* (societies) in the future.

# Methodology

This research used a descriptive quantitative method through online survey approach. The population is active social media users with a total sample of 129 Muslim students in Aceh. The online survey was conducted by using Google form to explore the students' usage of social media as a public sphere. Previously, pre-tests were carried out to assist this research in increasing survey validity. This survey is available for responses for two weeks using Google form.

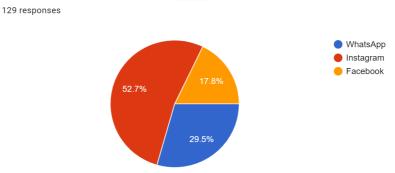
The scope of this research was only on WhatsApp. Previous research on social media has been investigated, but there have been still some gaps in understanding how Muslim society uses social media as a public sphere, especially in Aceh. Hence, this research is expected to continue several previous studies' pivotal results to explain how Acehnese Muslim society in bridging and bonding interaction through media social.

# Findings and Discussion

This study found that Acehnese Muslim students chose the most popular social media like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook to discuss and disseminate information such as religious and other relevant Islam issues. Here, social media from the perspective of communicative action theory (Habermas, 1989) can be concluded as one alternative communication and *da'wah* with much other potential such as social capital. Through inductive reasoning, this research has developed a theory that argues that individuals using social media can experience changes influenced by information and communication technology (ICT), namely changes that make things more open and fast for Muslim society, especially in Aceh.

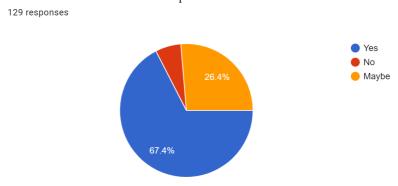
Figure 1 'Social media platforms used by Muslim students to look for Islamic

Da'wah'



Based on the 129 of surveyed Muslim students, social media were used to look for Islamic *da'wah*, namely 52.7% of Muslim society that often used "Instagram," 29.5% used "WhatsApp," and 17.8% were used "Facebook." With regard to WhatApp usage in particular, the surveyed Muslim society said that they have ever seen texts about Islam on WhatsApp (88.4%), and the rest said "No" (3.1%), and "Maybe" (8.5%). In this sense Acehnese Muslim society considers social media as effective media as a new public sphere that has influenced their religious life.

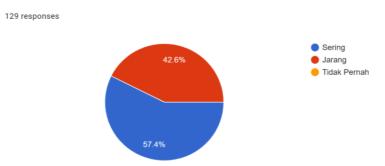
Figure 2 'Frequency of WhatsApp usage to discuss about Islamic propagation, in percent'



Regarding to the usage of WhatsApp to discuss Islamic *da'wah*, the survey result indicated that 67.4 % of respondents said "Yes", 26.4 % said "No," and others said "Maybe." It attempts at the ethical discourse that enables Muslim society as participants can express their thoughts sincerely. Hence, one cannot manipulate the other without realizing it is practical that is linked to a normative justification by Habermas (1989).

Additionally, based on the data obtained, the surveyed students admitted that they saw news about Islamic *Sharia* enforcement on social media. 57.4% of Muslim society through a survey stated that they "often" and as many as 42.6% of Muslim society "rarely" (see figure 3). In this regard, drawing on Habermas' perspective (1989), social media can be defined as a sphere that is located between the Muslim society and the state where the public conducts rational discussion, forms their opinions, and carries out supervision of the government in Aceh regarding the development of Islamic *sharia* law.

Figure 3 'Frequency of following news about *sharia* enforcement on social media'



Based on the data found, several Muslim societies are trying to garner Islamic charities and invite social activism through social media such as WhatsApp. As many as 46.5 % of Muslim society look at the social text and accept invitations to charity. Further, based on the data obtained, it can be seen that 77.5 % of Muslim society in Aceh stated social media as an effective medium to communicate before starting

da'wah in particular. It is relevant to Toulouse's assertion (1998, in Salman 2017) about the principles in the public sphere that ease access to information that technologies such as social media enable community members to access information especially about da'wah.

This research also concentrates on the quality or meaning of using social media as a new form of the public sphere, which shows that social media use has a close relationship with increasing religious thoughts and knowledge in realizing *da'wah*. It is a process where Muslim society as citizens try to convince other citizens to accept the proposed policy based on the use of reason in public in deliberative dialogue that takes and gives (Bohman, 1996).

Social media as a public sphere has also been proven to increase the level of Muslim interaction by establishing, fostering, and perpetuating social interaction among the Acehnese Muslim students. Using social media like WhatsApp, communication has practically succeeded in connecting information, communication, and technology (ICT) with the new public sphere's power. Social media has had many positive effects on Islamic communication and *da'wah* in Aceh because it can reduce the number of communication barriers in time and space. In turn, it can also increase Islamic *sharia's* thoughts and knowledge more rationally and critically. In other words, the results of the study provide evidence that the new social media has become a significant public sphere for Muslim society in Aceh.

#### Conclusion

The emergence of social media has created a new public sphere for Muslim society to discuss religious aspects. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp increasingly provide opportunities for participation and equality of Muslim society's understanding of Islamic values through practical discourse. So, Muslim society can play an essential role in the Islamic *sharia* process by forming a new universal public sphere, accessible to Muslim society in all regions in Aceh, without experiencing obstacles to voice their aspirations.

Nowadays, Muslim society in Aceh is not only an active user of social media, but they also can be digital journalists who are able to

build individual narratives chosen as a form of social struggle to win their discourse, ideas, and understanding of religion, society, culture, and other aspects. It is important because social media's influence on public opinion in Aceh will also influence government policies through law and regulations in the democratic system in Aceh.

However, this result is not a comprehensive and representative study of a detailed demographic. The results have presented that social media has become a new public sphere where Muslim society in Aceh can also build *da'wah*, communicate, and discuss strategic and relevant thoughts and knowledge about Islam. Besides, the public sphere and social media have changed the *da'wah* pattern that has tended to be more decentralized. With the hope that the more open public sphere for Muslim society through social media can increase rational and critical religious thoughts and knowledge of Muslim society in a dialogical *da'wah* and more contemporary communication framework.

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