BRUNEIAN YOUTHS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Key Trends and Challenges

Siti Mazidah Mohamad

TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The **ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organization established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Singapore APEC Study Centre and the Temasek History Research Centre (THRC).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

BRUNEIAN YOUTHS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Key Trends and Challenges

Siti Mazidah Mohamad

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The **Trends in Southeast Asia** series acts as a platform for serious analyses by selected authors who are experts in their fields. It is aimed at encouraging policymakers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.

THE EDITORS

Series Chairman:
    Choi Shing Kwok

Series Editor:
    Ooi Kee Beng

Editorial Committee:
    Daljit Singh
    Francis E. Hutchinson
    Norshahril Saat

Bruneian Youths on Social Media: Key Trends and Challenges

By Siti Mazidah Mohamad

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the past five years, Brunei Darussalam's socio-cultural landscape has witnessed a significant transformation, creating social and economic opportunities for Bruneians. Social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter and TikTok have become spaces and sites for racial, political and religious engagements in Bruneian society.
- Digitally connected young people and their engagements on various social media platforms are major catalysts in this transformation. They actively share their social and religious practices and, in the process, create new discourses that are effectively reshaping the nation's socio-cultural, religious and political landscape.
- This article examines three trends in Bruneian youths' social media engagements: digital civic engagement and social justice; self-expression and influencing culture; and new religious expressions and lived religiosities.
- Based on these trends, we can expect further evolution of youth culture carrying significance for the nation's development.
- The social consciousness and mobility of these young people are effectively measured through a study of the fluidity of their identity, ideas and practices.

Bruneian Youths on Social Media: Key Trends and Challenges

By Siti Mazidah Mohamad[1]

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, Brunei Darussalam has been experiencing a huge increase in Internet penetration and social media usage. As of January 2023, these stand at 98.1 per cent and 94.4 per cent, respectively. Instagram remains the platform with the potential to reach citizens by advertisements (60 per cent), followed by Facebook (57.6 per cent) and Twitter (21.9 per cent)[2] (Kemp 2023). While indicating society's high reliance on social media platforms for daily interactions and engagements, these statistics also point to these platforms being alternative sites for social engagements. With the proliferation of affordable mobile technology, mobile and fixed broadband availability, and high digital literacy,[3] social media such as Instagram, Twitter and TikTok have become sites where young people share their everyday life experiences and their socio-cultural and religious practices, and create new discourses that effectively shape the nation's socio-cultural, religious and political landscapes.

---

[1] Siti Mazidah Mohamad was formerly Visiting Fellow in the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. She is an Assistant Professor and Director for the Centre for Advanced Research (CARe) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, where she does research on Muslim youth culture and youth engagements with popular culture and new media in Southeast Asia.

[2] The statistics on penetration and the total potential number reached by ads for TikTok in Brunei are not available as yet.

[3] For instance, the knowledge on how to use smartphones and social media apps.

Certain digital trends can already be identified. In the past, Bruneian youths' digital social transactions were in the form of knowledge exchanges and social interactions that were enabled by social media platforms' key features and affordance,[4] by the rise of individualism and self-expression, and by the transnational flow of popular culture produced and consumed.[5] They included entertainment, daily life, satires and memes, to name a few.

Today, social media's user-generated functions allow users to co-create and share content. Users can become editors and producers, or what is commonly known as "produsers" or "produsage"[6] (Bruns 2008, 2009, 2011). These platforms encourage active engagement, and intensification of participatory culture[7] and further contribute to the profusion of digital content. As a result, we see social media users sharing content of different genres, be this on their everyday life at work/school/home, on lifestyle and fashion, religious knowledge and practices, including food and restaurant reviews, and humour and satire. They even allow them to act as amateur journalists reporting on local and global happenings.

Between 2017 and 2023, several key trends have been observed among Bruneian youths: these concern identity expression, civic engagement, and influencing culture, all attesting to young people's capability to initiate social processes and transform Bruneian society. Furthermore,

---

[4] "Affordances" refers to the functionality of social media in enabling users' interactions and engagements.

[5] Popular culture in this context refers to videos and photos originating from within and from outside social media users' cultures and contexts.

[6] Produser, and Produsage are a portmanteau of producers and users, and production and usage. Axel Bruns (2008, 2009, 2011), who coined the term Produser, in his later work developed the term "Produsage" (Production and Usage) to reflect how users are producing and using content in a collaborative and continuous manner.

[7] According to Henry Jenkins (2004), participatory culture is a culture where users collectively produce, share and respond to media. Participatory culture is observed on various social media platforms.

increased digital connectivity has expanded opportunities for Bruneian youth to mobilize themselves, which in turn further intensifies their reliance on digital technologies and social media. Their digital presence is giving rise to new practices and trends, and these are the focus of this article. Three emerging trends—social justice and digital civic engagement, self-expression and influencing culture, and new religious expressions and lived religiosities—are discussed. How these trends shift socio-cultural and religious realities in the country is also studied.

The data discussed in this article are drawn from the author's long-term research (2014–22) on Bruneian youths' digital practices. These projects were predominantly qualitative in nature, employing semi-structured interviews, Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) on social media platforms, and questionnaire surveys. They include Bruneian youths' use of social media (2014), Bruneian women's veiling practices (2014), youths' self-disclosure on social media (2016–17), the rise of social media influencers in Brunei (2017–18), creative community and their affective labour on social media (2019), Muslim youths' religiosity and social media (2021), digital civic engagement (2022–present), and Bruneian TikTokers' practices (2022–present).

The young people interviewed in these projects were mostly between the ages of 18 and 25 while the owners of the social media profiles observed were generally between the ages of 18 and 40.[8] Where necessary, to offer additional information and context, the discussion is supplemented with excerpts from the author's conversations with young people on: (1) social justice and digital civic engagements; (2) self-expression and influencing culture; and (3) new religious expressions and lived religiosities. The subsequent section offers an analysis of the three social media trends, and the penultimate section explicates broader emerging social processes in the country, which the author contends various stakeholders need to pay attention to since these hold wider socio-cultural configurations and are relevant to the future development of the country.

---

[8] In 2020, the youth age categories were 15 to 40 and 18 to 35 (National Youth Policy and Strategy 2020–2035).

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Young people's popular culture and new media engagement have expanded their social connectivity, circulated new ideas and shaped different forms of civic engagement. They are now venturing into different concerns such as societal development, well-being and health, and social injustices, topics that rarely feature in the past. Ongoing digital civic engagements in Brunei include issues relating to climate change and the environment and young people's mental health and well-being. In this article, I narrow the focus to the growing social awareness of social justice among young people. Critical events originating from outside of the country (mostly Western) in the past years have sparked their social consciousness and concerns about existing local issues, which have triggered both individual and collective actions to improve the social conditions in Brunei. Among Brunei's prominent social justice and civic engagement concerns and actions were the Black Lives Matter (BLM), the Palestine-Israeli conflict, and the MeToo (*#metoo*) movement. These issues gained traction among Bruneian netizens due to their close resonance with local concerns and their identity as Bruneian Muslims.[9]

The BLM movement began in 2013 in the United States and was a grounds-up mobilization against racism towards the black community. The hashtag *#BlackLivesMatter* was used effectively on social media to increase the reach of BLM content. It also helped to bring together content with a similar focus. The BLM movement was first tied to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. It became a global phenomenon after the subsequent death of more people from the black community. The impact of the BLM movement in its early days was not felt in Brunei,

---

[9] According to the Report of the Population and Housing Census 2021 – Demographic, Household and Housing Characteristics, Brunei was home to 362,035 Muslims (82.1 per cent of the total population) in 2021.

and it was the death of George Floyd in 2020 which acted as the turning point for online racial-related concerns in the country (Mohamad 2021). It is unclear why this case left a strong impression on Brunei society. Whatever the reason, the traction of this case saw a wide circulation of videos and photos on Instagram and Twitter. As its social reach expanded, it evoked deep reactions in the country. A possible reason could be the increasing size of the educated and the middle class in Brunei.

Social media users in Brunei applied the BLM movement's hashtag to highlight society's long-standing racial discrimination and prejudice towards blue-collar workers of South Asian descent. In Brunei, it is common to hear people (mostly of the older generation) calling this group "*Kaling*". They used this labelling derogatorily to denote any form of rude and reckless behaviour. Sometimes, it is used nonchalantly to address those originating from South Asia without any negative connotation attached to the label. Because of their exposure to the BLM movement, an increasing number of the younger generation have called out this behaviour for its derogatory, rude and improper nature. They also criticized others on social media for their ignorance, blaming their parents' generation and community for using and normalizing the term. Aside from the general youth population, key personalities also jumped on the bandwagon, calling for more attention to be paid to this issue. The latter helps explain how the BLM became a force in Brunei. Social media influencers such as Bash Harry[10] together with other social media users played a prominent role in raising awareness of BLM. This is also seen in the support for the MeToo movement in the country, which will be elaborated upon below.

Another global geopolitical issue Brunei society has responded to is the ongoing Palestine-Israeli conflict. The attention of the netizens is seemingly fleeting (on and off) due to the nature of the conflict having peak and quiet periods (when they are not reported by international and

---

[10] Twitter handle @heybash. Bash Harry is a law graduate and a local Social Media Influencer.

local media), while persisting for a long period. The tension in May 2021 when Israeli police stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the violence in April 2022 and recently, in April 2023 during the holy month of Ramadan are several recent events that saw them fiercely voicing their views. Bruneian Muslims actively share videos of the attacks on social media accompanied by captions to protest this violence. Previously, lobbying other Bruneians to boycott products made and sold by companies supporting Israel had been observed. Support by Bruneians also includes the use of the Palestine flag as a profile photo on Instagram and Facebook and as a design for accessories such as handbags, *hijabs* (headscarves), brooches and t-shirts.

This conflict resonates more with Bruneian Muslims as they imagine themselves to be part of the global Muslim community—the *ummah*—regardless of where they reside. An example of their identity as *ummah* can be seen in the caption "Never forget our identity as a Muslim and our role as part of the *ummah* across the globe" (Figure 1). In this case, their civic engagement to uphold justice for other Muslims, who are seen as victims, justifies their support for Palestine. The value they put on this digital civic engagement is apparent in their responses towards a local celebrity's music video that allegedly calls for everyone to understand the conflict from both sides and seemingly objects to hashtag activism (Figure 2). The netizens (on Instagram, Twitter and Reddit) responded to the celebrity's statement by stating the power of circulating videos of the attacks and using the appropriate hashtags to bring the plight of the Palestinians to the forefront. Such a response explains how they see the use of digital affordances in their civic engagements. Netizens also adopt the cancelling culture to pressure the celebrity and others to side with them. These individuals think that Muslims need to collectively support other Muslims in such a situation.

Unlike the BLM movement, this Palestine-Israeli conflict is not connected to any local issues. Yet the responses to the conflict among Bruneian youths demonstrate their interest in social justice. While the influence of the BLM and the Palestine-Israeli conflict was noticeable in the country, their actual impact on society has been minimal. There were no legal or policy-related actions that followed the BLM social media

Figure 1: A Reminder for Nakba Day and Their Identity as Part of the Ummah

Figure 2: One of the Reasons for Netizens' Discontent with a Local Celebrity's Video—"You Can #Hastag All You Want but That Ain't Changing SH*T" Statement

civic engagements; this could have been due to the absence of any strong non-governmental organization (NGO) seeing this civic engagement through.

The MeToo movement (*#metoo*) is a global one against sexual violence and harassment which has gained relatively strong responses from Bruneian women. It was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, an American activist and business executive. However, it only gained the world's attention in 2017 when Alyssa Milano, an American actress, made a Twitter post encouraging women to share their assault experiences on social media, which went viral (Khomami 2017). Notwithstanding the recent viral culture on *#metoo*, Brunei society's concerns about sexual harassment and violence existed before the MeToo movement gained global attention. But the circulation of popular culture, the rise of individualism, and the abundance of platforms to speak up expanded the social reach of Bruneian women's voices in this matter. The movement was adopted to actively voice their sexual harassment experiences, amplify the community's concerns, and break the taboo of speaking about sexual harassment. In recent years, Bruneian women and local non-profit organizations have used relevant hashtags such as *#metoo*, *#sexualharassment #stopsexualharassment*, and *#sexualviolence* on social media to raise awareness of this issue and to garner collective action online and offline. This has proven relatively successful in transcending from social media engagement to physical action in the Bruneian government and society. *#metoo* as a hashtag and a tool has invoked consciousness on these issues in the community.

Similar to the BLM movement that was supported by local Social Media Influencers (SMI) or Key Opinion Leaders (KOL), the MeToo movement agenda was pushed forward by Khairunnisa Ashari, a former Legislative Council (LegCo) member, and by other prominent individuals in the country. Both online and offline platforms were used to voice their opinions and call for the state and public to act collectively. Khairunnisa had time and again raised this issue on her Twitter and at several LegCo Meetings (Figures 3 and 4). She first raised the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace at the 2018 LegCo meeting. In March 2021, at the 17th LegCo meeting, she stated that despite the

Figure 3: Khairunnisa Ashari's Twitter Post on Addressing Sexual Harassment at the Legislative Council in 2018
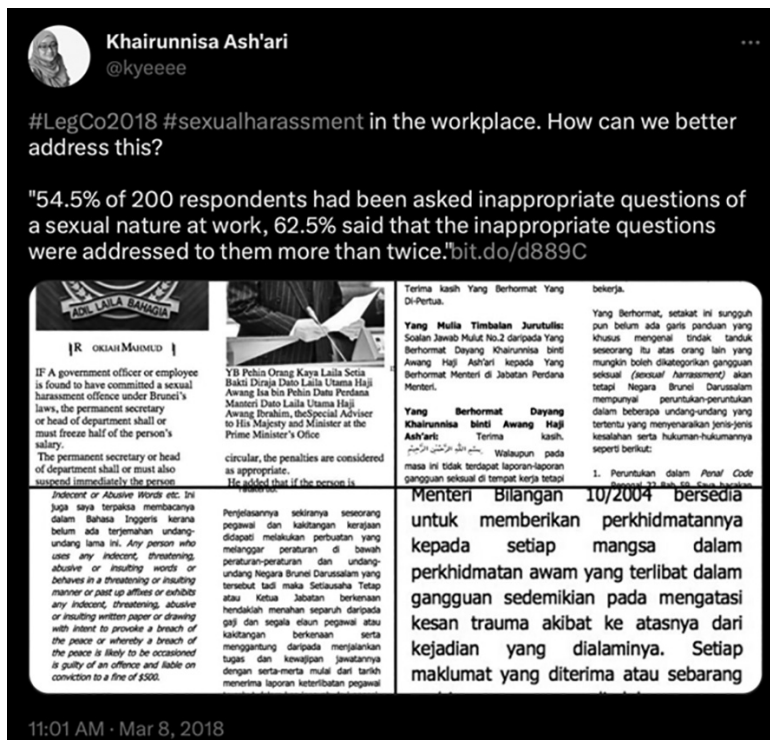
prevalence of sexual harassment in the country,[11] no concrete action had been taken; she thus called for a code of conduct at workplaces (Bandial 2021). Pg Hjh Zabaidah Pg Hj Kamaludin, the President of the Women Graduates Associations called for sexual harassment laws to be introduced and vigorously enforced (Bandial and Haris 2021). Actions

[11] In the 2016 study on sexual harassment conducted by the Women's Graduate Association in Brunei, 55 per cent of the respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. 75 per cent of these did not report their cases to the authorities. Since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of sexual assault cases outside of the workplace, as reported by *Borneo Bulletin*, a local newspaper agency.

**Figure 4: Khairunnisa Ashari Updating Her Progress in Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace**

by other Bruneian women such as Tiwin Aji's three-part essay on sexual harassment including her experiences in Brunei and abroad (Tiwin Aji 2017a, 2017b, and 2021) as well as Twitter user comments (Figure 5) on Brunei's own #*metoo* phenomenon are some examples of this wokeness and manifestation of the MeToo movement.

Since 2020, several forums and talks have been organized by different state and non-state organizations to increase society's awareness about sexual harassment; to highlight the loopholes in current policies and laws such as the absence of sexual harassment laws to protect women and persecuted perpetrators; and to seek solutions for sexual harassment. In 2020, Project Women Brunei,[12] a non-profit social enterprise committed

---

[12] Instagram handle @projectwomenBruneis.

Figure 5: A Twitter User Commenting on Brunei's #metoo Phenomenon
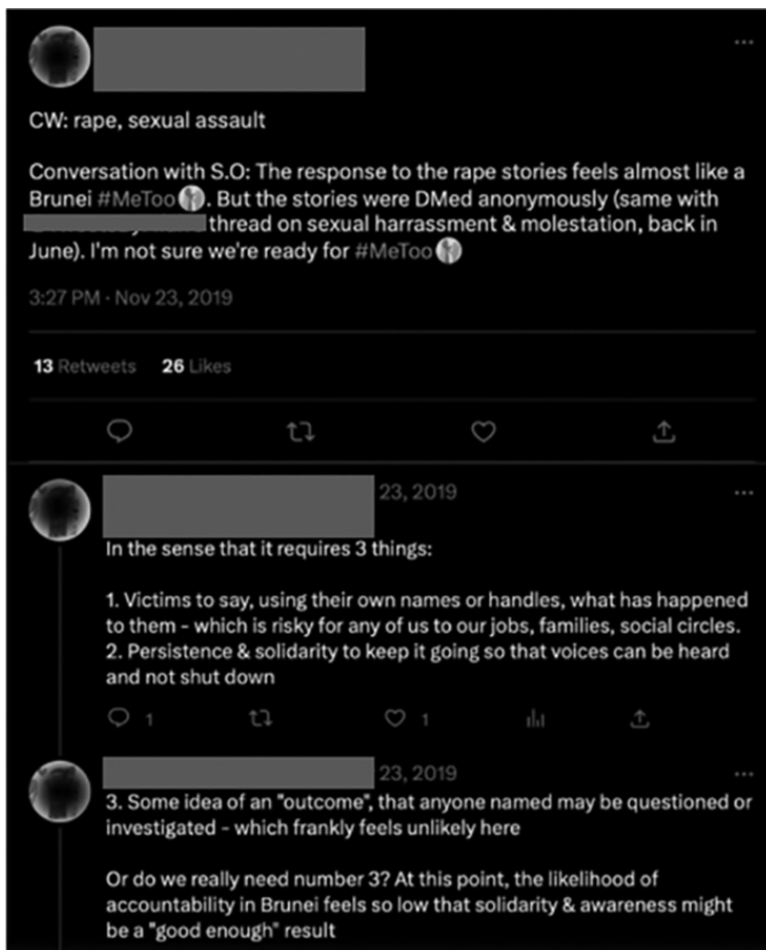
to educating, engaging, and empowering both women and girls in their development journey organized relevant talks such as Awareness Raising on Sexual Harassment among Girl-Children in Brunei Darussalam at one of the all-girls schools in the country. That same year, a Youth

Outreach Team comprised of university students organized a forum titled "No More Silence: Combatting Sexual Harassment in Private & Public Spaces" (Mohamad 2020).

What started as hashtag activism on social media manifested into action offline. To be sure, concerns for social justice and the youths' civic engagements are not new practices. What is significant and new is that social justice and civic engagement have taken different forms among the digitally connected young people, revealing new ways of dealing with long-existing issues in the country and materializing them on digital sites that have a distinct ontology and modus operandi, such as TikTok and Instagram.

SELF-EXPRESSION AND INFLUENCING CULTURE

The growth in the size of the digitally connected group who are both the consumers and producers of cultural creative materials is driving this recent interest in digital (creative) work and labour. The features and affordances of Web 2.0 have resulted in more rampant self-expression. Individual users continue to produce and curate their daily life, revealing it to audiences on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, and on blogging sites. Over a short period, we have witnessed distinct and innovative social practices such as the growth of the Bruneian contemporary fashion industry and creative talents, fed by these young people's compulsion to share everyday activities on social media.

By showcasing their life to the social media audience, they increase their public visibility online. Some social media users eventually create a brand for themselves, capitalizing on unique selling propositions. Self-branding refers to "a set of practices and a mindset, a way of thinking about the self as a salable commodity … (and to a) strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others'" (Marwick 2013, p. 166). It is now a way for attaining social and economic mobility (Gandini 2016). These individuals' successful self-branding has elevated their status from ordinary users to "Social Media Influencers (SMI)". Circa 2016–20, Brunei had an explosion of SMIs in different categories such as lifestyle, fashion, foodie and fitness. Based on the growth of

their influence (here, influence is taken as the number of followers they have), many Bruneian influencers are at the thinner end of the influencers category; they tend to be nano- and micro-influencers. These include Kurapak, Nabeela Fadzhil, Rano Adidas and Dj Nadzri. Followers of nano-influencers and micro-influencers range from 1,000–10,000 and 10,000–100,000 followers, respectively. Only a few local influencers are in the macro-influencers category with 100,000–1 million followers or are mega-influencers with over 1 million followers such as a royal family member, Prince Abdul Mateen.

As seen in this SMI practice, Bruneian youths today are taking advantage of mobile digital technologies to empower and mobilize themselves for self-development. For instance, there is an increasing number of collaborations between influencers and local companies.[13] What we have here is youth mobility (social and economic) done via social media disclosure and influencing. Although the influencer market in the country is relatively small compared to Brunei's neighbours,[14] the influencers' marketing could generate enough movement to encourage and aspire other young people to emulate their practices. In this context of youth mobility, social media play an invaluable role.

While self-branding is predominantly debated in the business and marketing literature as a strategy for profit generation (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2013; Brooks and Anumudu 2015), it is important to note that notwithstanding the economic opportunities branding offers, the practice is not only a strategy for gaining economic capital. Aside from the expanding community of local influencers, other ordinary social media users are similarly shaping the digital landscape through their identity expressions. For many users, this is intricately linked to the creation of an image of oneself or creating a narrative of one's identity, a new

---

[13] Volkswagen Brunei and GWM Brunei have used an influencer marketing approach by inviting several influencers to their opening ceremony events.

[14] According to the Report of the Population and Housing Census 2021 – Demographic, Household and Housing Characteristics, the total population of Brunei Darussalam was 440,715 persons in 2021.

or a reinvention of an old one for self-satisfaction and non-economic consumption by the audience. As such, this intense self-expression trend forces us to rethink our daily digital practices.

NEW RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS AND LIVED RELIGIOSITIES

The production and consumption of religious content on social media by young Muslims throw new light on contemporary youth religious culture and the broader socio-cultural and religious development facilitated by digital technology. In effect, young Muslims' everyday practices are shifting socio-religious realities within Brunei. This does not mean that previous practices are being wiped away entirely. Traditional modes for obtaining religious knowledge remain relevant, such as formal religious education, physical religious talk, and Al-Quran classes held at national mosques throughout the country.

New religious expressions on social media are manifested in several ways. First is the circulation and production of religious knowledge. When traditional mass media were at their peak, the power to disseminate information was in the hands of a few agencies.[15] With social media, the sharing of information has been democratized, all the way down to individual users. Gone are the days when Muslims relied solely on physical religious books and on attending religious talks in person. A combination of online and offline practices is now commonly observed.

Bruneians are creatively (re)producing religious knowledge in the format of short videos and cartoons and circulating them on social media. For instance, Matters of Choice (@matters.oc), a content creator agency, is producing entertaining religious content and uploading them on their Instagram profile. The approaches used include a cartoon on

---

[15] In Brunei, these agencies are state controlled, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and Radio Televisyen Brunei (RTB), the national broadcasting institution.

what to do during the month of Ramadan (Figure 6) and One Minute Reminder (1MR) short videos that remind Muslims about matters such as moderation in spending and developing empathy (Figure 7). Other users are using Islamic-related hashtags such as *#alhamdulilah, #insyaallah, #selfreminder*, and *#muslim* to give their social media content some context, and reposting Islamic quotes and videos from Islamic social media accounts such as Islamify[16] and Yasmin Mogahed.[17] A local singer, Fauzan Aziz, produced a music video "*Aku Redha*" which is rapminder, a portmanteau of rap and reminder (Figure 8), to prompt the audience to continue working hard and trust in God's timely plans in a "cool" and non-obtrusive way. These sharing practices are connected to self-disclosure, the rise of individualism and social media affordances as elucidated in the trend previously discussed (Self-expression and Influencing Culture).

Some content creators are actively sharing religious teaching and knowledge but do not consider themselves preachers. Interestingly, a Muslim-dominant country like Brunei has only a handful of digital preachers and religious social media influencers. This could be due to the certification required for aspiring preachers before they are allowed to preach (offline or online).[18] Moreover, religious preachers are still using in-person and mass-mediated means to communicate with their audience. Plus, there is concern among young people about presenting themselves as Muslims/pious Muslims. Their lack of knowledge about Islam is often used to justify their lack of interest in sharing religious information. Regardless of the absence of such labels, their actions in sharing religious knowledge can be considered a form of *dakwah 2.0*,

---

[16] Instagram handle @Islamify.

[17] Yasmin Mogahed is an American educator and motivational speaker who is well-received in Brunei. In 2019 and 2022, she delivered motivational lectures in Brunei based on her best-selling books, *Reclaim Your Heart: Personal Insights on Breaking Free from Life's Shackles* and *Healing the Emptiness: A Guide to Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being*. Instagram handle @yasminmogahed.

[18] Interested individuals are required to fill out a form to apply for a certification from Brunei's Islamic Religious Council/Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (MUIB) to teach Al-Quran and religion, and to proselytize.

Figure 6: A Few Instagram Screenshots from Local Account Matters of Choice (@matters.oc), with Reminders on Managing Anger in the Month of Ramadan (Fasting Month)

Figure 7: A Screenshot of One Minute Reminder Video (1MR)
Reminding Muslims of the Prophet's Sunnah

which hints at the shift in religious practices and socio-religious realities in the country. It is a common understanding that doing a small deed on social media is considered *dakwah*, as written on Matters of Choice's Instagram blog "*Sampaikanlh dariku, walau hanya satu ayat—PBUH*" [Convey it from me, even if only a verse—The Prophet].

Figure 8: A Screenshot of Rapminder by Local Singer, Fauzan Aziz

Second, their online presence is laden with self-identification, performance and reflexivity. The performance of one's religious identity in an online space where there are collapsed contexts[19] and

---

[19] Where users from different background and contexts are brought together in the online space as audience/followers.

different modes of engagement is more complex than an in-person self-presentation. This performance of religiosities refers to a Muslim showcasing their identity through sartorial presentations, Islamic quotes, and religious knowledge. Presenting themselves as pious Muslims put them under pressure from the expectations of other Muslims. In such a situation, some must tread carefully with their online-offline presence. There are young people who avoid showing their Muslim identity to their audience.[20] They feel that it is not necessary to excessively portray their religiosity as it is sufficient to present a neutral self on social media and not commit transgressions. The Muslim consciousness we often see in other countries, particularly in countries where Muslims are minorities is quite different in the Bruneian context.[21] As Islam is highly institutionalized in Brunei, some young Muslims do not see the need to express their Muslim identity. As shared by a respondent, "I never thought of this, to be honest. We live in a Muslim country and the majority of the people are Muslims, so I think it's not really necessary to 'show your Muslim identity online'." Furthermore, their lack of knowledge about Islam often justifies their lack of interest in sharing religious information and generates fear of *riak/riya* (arrogance) when performing their Muslim identity explicitly.

Third, as more Muslim users share about their everyday lives, online there are new horizons of piety for the contemporary Muslim youth and new expressions of Islamic piety observable on various social media platforms. For some Muslim women, their performance and expression

---

[20] This finding is based on my research on young people's religiosities and social media. An online discussion was conducted with over 40 young people on their performance of religious identity on social media. The excerpts provided in this subsection are from the online discussion.

[21] Anecdotally, this reminds me of my own identity expression depending on where I was located. In Brunei, a Malay Muslim majority nation, I do not question and think much about my Malay Muslim identity. When studying in the United Kingdom, with my identity as a minority, I was conscious of being a Muslim and how I portray this identity to British people and to others. The locality is an important aspect in the matter of religiosity and identity.

of identity are linked to everyday consumption and practices such as purchasing specific *hijab* brands and displaying *hijab* styles. *Hijab* consumption that merges fashion and piety is influenced by *hijabi* celebrities and social media influencers such as Vivy Yusof and Neelofa.[22] Consumption of certain *hijab* brands is tied to their individual taste, the middle-class image these brands exude due to their price range[23] and the identity of the founders and the attachment to the community of women wearing the same *hijab* brand (Mohamad and Hassim 2021). There is also a strong link between middle-class consumption and religious piety in this case. Practices that blend piety, fashion and fun are indicative of their performance of religious identity and their new expressions of Islamic piety (Amer 2020) and have gained the term Muslim "cool" (Nilan 2017; Abdul Khabeer 2016).

All three trends discussed in this section are a result of the interplay of different factors including rising individualism and affordability of digital technology which give rise to new digital practices. While we see social media as platforms for communicating with others, they are sites where everyday practices are refashioned by their shifting contexts. Young people's consumption and engagements with social media reveal the rise in social and class consciousness, and new expressions of piety facilitated by the circulation, exchanges and (re)production of popular culture content on social media. They act as a catalyst for social development and wider configurations in the country; this will be discussed in the next section.

---

[22] Vivy Yusof is the founder of the dUCk group that sells headscarves, handbags, prayer wear and other accessories. Neelofa, a celebrity and entrepreneur, is the owner of a *hijab* brand, Naelofar. dUCk and Naelofar are amongst the well-known and favourite *hijab* brands in Brunei.

[23] Prices for the dUCk headscarves range from S$45 to S$120 per piece depending on whether they are basic print or limited-edition print. Over time, this price range (and price hike) and the buyers being at least from the middle-class group elevate the status of this brand. This high price point was once claimed by Muslim women in Malaysia and Brunei as going being immodesty. Despite this, the dUCk consumer base remains strong.

SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS, "WOKENESS" AND YOUTH MOBILITY

Brunei's socio-cultural and religious landscapes have been transformed by two overlapping macro-scale social processes, namely, growing social consciousness and youth mobility. Social consciousness among digitally connected young people includes their growing awareness of other races and nationalities and detaches them from their privileged position as Malay/Muslim Bruneians. Social justice and civic engagement point to the rise of individual and communal awareness of self-identity and one's position in society in challenging hegemonic discourses and addressing injustices. Their responses to critical global events on social media and their actions offline are indicative of growing civic imagination and engagement. Despite the short and fleeting concerns of the netizens (in the case of BLM and the Palestine-Israeli conflict) raising questions on whether they genuinely care about these long-standing issues, I argue that their actions are not simply about wokeness or jumping on the trending bandwagon. To some extent, their actions function as a catalyst for more youth advocacy and youth mobilization in Brunei. For instance, the *#metoo* collective action reveals the progressiveness of the country's youth and how these young people may yet emerge to become a game-changer. It also indicates women's empowerment in addressing hidden and unspoken issues.

These practices and trends are not novel practices caused by digital practices. To be sure, the consciousness of civic duties is not new in the country. It is embedded in the education curriculum through extracurricular activities such as volunteerism and community service. However, these existing civic imaginations and practices are becoming visible at the communal and national levels due to the abundance of related content (video, images and captions) circulated on social media sites (especially in the past five years). To be sure, their online engagements have sparked this consciousness and led to actions based on one's interest and ad hoc responses to issues at hand or to critical events.

Most importantly, these social justice and civic engagements sparked by different global critical events demonstrate the country's intensifying

participatory culture. There have not been any prominent global critical events in recent times that have sparked social justice civic engagements in the country. Issues of racial discrimination, geopolitics and sexual harassment continue to receive Brunei society's attention and the young people have been quite consistent in their collective actions, albeit slow in making bigger transformations. These digital practices need to be observed to understand the catalyst and processes for wider social transformations.

For a generally non-contesting society like Brunei, a community that is careful with expressing discontent for fear of offending others, the individual and collective consciousness of racism and sexual harassment leading to communal actions signals important social changes to come. As I have written elsewhere, it was uncommon to see individuals speaking out on pressing matters on public platforms with the strong intensity we now see in neighbouring countries (Mohamad 2021). Perhaps, Brunei's collectivist community where self-censorship and cultural sensitivity are strong is contributing to this lack of contestation. As more and more young people become vocal and act their civic imagination, we observe a change from what used to be a top-down approach to development to growing grassroots involvement and intervention.

The youths' self-branding and influencer "practices" further reconfigure the social, cultural and economic aspects of everyday life concerning such matters as instantaneity, user-generated content, social reach, self-disclosure and self-branding practices. Most importantly, these practices point to the emergence of new ways of understanding and expressing self, and intriguingly, new ways of seeing, living and consuming everyday life. For instance, the new religious expressions allow us to rethink youth religiosity. What is of importance here is that these young Muslims are expressing piety in different ways suited to their generation's needs and the digital environment.

At the micro-scale level, Bruneian youths are creatively involved in cultural and creative digital work on social mediascape. Self-entrepreneurship is apparent in their affective self-branding practice and social value production on Instagram. At the macro-scale level, this specific youth-led self-disclosure and self-branding practice reveal

the active, mobile and empowered individual youth taking charge of their own lives and in effect reconfiguring youths' everyday lives in the nation.

Muslim youths' social consciousness and mobility may not exist so much in the physical sense but in the fluidity of identity, ideas and practices. I define youth mobility as reflexive mobility processes informed by an individual's aspirations and decision-making being fluid, weaving in and out of context and influenced by self-reflexivity, local and global contexts (via popular culture consumption and production), and everyday lived experiences. Based on these trends, we can expect further evolution in youth culture which will come to challenge existing norms.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted three key trends in digital social media practices among youths. From these trends, we already know of the existence of progressive Bruneian youths. Here, we have a growing civil society sparked and supported by new practices. I contend that these and other emerging trends should be studied by different stakeholders (academics and non-academics alike). Based on the current trends, practices and growing size of the educated middle class, I anticipate more young people's voices being heard calling for changes in different ways. To progress, the state needs to be cognizant of the concerns of the community. Yet, such actions could destabilize the existing status quo and disrupt harmony and peace. Stakeholders, policymakers and the population need to work together diligently to ensure minimal disruptions to the country's current state while pushing forward their development agenda.

Since youths are the main users of social media, stakeholders must continue to observe the development of youth culture online, as well as the ways new media and digital technologies alter traditional ways of socializing. Knowing their digital practices will help us to understand the inner workings of young lives and their implications for national strategy and policies. The potential implications of transcultural flows of content call for further consideration of the future of youth culture

and the potential changes it would bring, and it is clear that transcultural flows of popular culture can inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency (Jenkins 2004).

REFERENCES

Abdul Khabeer, S.A. 2016. *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.

Amer, S. 2020. "The New Horizons of Piety". In *Pathways to Contemporary Islam: New Trends in Critical Engagement*, edited by M.N. Mohamed Osman. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Bandial, A. 2021. "All Workplaces Need Zero Tolerance Policy Towards Sexual Harassment". *The Scoop*, 18 March 2021. https://thescoop.co/2021/03/18/all-workplaces-need-zero-tolerance-policy-towards-sexual-harassment/ (accessed 21 March 2023).

———, and N. Haris. 2021. "Gov't Says It Will Address Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, but Women's Groups Call for New Laws". *The Scoop*, 19 March 2021. https://thescoop.co/2021/03/19/govt-says-it-will-tackle-sexual-harassment-at-work-but-womens-groups-call-for-dedicated-laws/ (accessed 21 March 2023).

Brooks, A., and C. Anumudu. 2015. "Identity Development in Personal Branding Instruction: Social Narratives and Online Brand Management in a Global Economy". *Adult Learning* 27, no. 1: 23–29.

Bruns, A. 2008. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Peter Lang.

———. 2009. "From Prosumer to Produser: Understanding User-Led Content Creation". *Transforming Audiences 2009*.

———, and J.-H. Schmidt. 2011. "Produsage: A Closer Look at Continuing Developments". *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 17, no. 1: 3–7.

Department of Economic Planning and Statistics. 2022. "Report of the Population and Housing Census Report (BPP) 2021: Demographic, Household and Housing Characteristics". Ministry of Finance and Economy.

Gandini, A. 2016. "Digital Work: Self-Branding and Social Capital in the Freelance Knowledge Economy". *Marketing Theory* 16, no. 1: 123–41.

Hearn, A. 2008. "'Meat, Mask, Burden': Probing the Contours of the Branded 'Self'". *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2: 197–217.

Jenkins, H. 2004. "Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence". In *Globalization: Culture and education in the new millennium*, edited by M.M. Suarez-Orozco and D.B. Qin-Hilliard, pp. 114–40. Berkeley: University of California Press and Ross Institute.

Kemp, S. 2023. "Digital 2023: Brunei Darussalam". DataReportal, 14 February 2023. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-brunei-darussalam (accessed 18 March 2023).

Khomami, N. 2017. "#MeToo: How a Hashtag Became a Rallying Cry Against Sexual Harassment". *The Guardian*, 20 October 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment (accessed 16 December 2022).

Marwick, A. 2013. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity & Branding in the Social Media Age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mohamad, L. 2020. "Call for Framework to Address Sexual Harassment Issues". *Borneo Bulletin*, 17 November 2020. https://borneobulletin.com.bn/call-for-framework-to-address-sexual-harassment-issues/ (accessed 21 March 2023).

Mohamad, S.M. 2021. "Micro-Celebrity Practices in Muslim-Majority States in Southeast Asia". *Popular Communication*, pp. 1–15.

———. 2023. "Youth Religiosity and Social Media in Brunei". In *(Re)presenting Brunei Darussalam: A Sociology of the Everyday*, edited by Lian K.F., P. Carnagie, and N.H. Hassan. Springer.

———, and N. Hassim. 2021. "Hijabi Celebrification and Hijab Consumption in Brunei and Malaysia". *Celebrity Studies* 12, no. 3: 498–522.

Nilan, P. 2017. *Muslim Youth in the Diaspora: Challenging Extremism through Popular Culture*. Routledge.

Tiwin Aji. 2017a. "Think Sexual Harassment Doesn't Happen Here? Think Again". *The Scoop*, 25 October 2017. https://thescoop.

co/2017/10/25/think-sexual-harassment-doesnt-happen-think/ (accessed 21 March 2023).

———. 2017b. "What's Missing in Sexual Harassment Awareness Campaigns? Male Voices". *The Scoop*, 15 November 2017. https://thescoop.co/2017/11/15/whats-missing-sexual-harassment-awareness-campaigns-male-voices/ (accessed 21 March 2023).

———. 2021. "How Do We Break the Taboo Around Sexual Harassment?". *The Scoop*, 26 May 2021. https://thescoop.co/2021/05/26/how-do-we-break-the-taboo-around-sexual-harassment/ (accessed 21 March 2023).