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Expressions of Religiosity on Social Media among Muslim Youths in Brunei

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Muslim women listening to Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's speech during an event in Bandar Seri Begawan on 3 April 2019. AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Digital platforms, new media, and popular culture have diversified Muslims' production and consumption of religious content, their forms of religious expression, and even their religiosity.
- Tech-savvy and proactive young Muslims who seek and reproduce religious knowledge outside traditional and institutional structures are at the core of this socio-religious transformation.
- This article examines young Bruneian Muslims' production and consumption of religion-related content on social media sites. It elucidates how they, as new religious agents, are altering the lived socio-religious realities and landscapes in the country, which upholds the *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy or MIB) ideology.
- Although new religious practices have emerged, and the young have become agents of religious transformation, this article contends that the role and significance of traditional religious authorities in Brunei society remain strong.
- When portraying their religious identity, the youths continue to observe self-restraint and be guided by the dominant state narrative. In that way, they avoid undermining the MIB and also suffering any backlash from a community that continues to practise ground-up surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

The everyday digital practices of young Bruneian Muslims today are altering the country's socio-religious realities in ways that are different from those of previous generations. Previously, religious knowledge was disseminated solely through physical means, such as in-person talks and publications. Today, the production and consumption of religious content occur on social media sites in the form of comics, images and short videos, and these are mainly produced by young Muslims (aged 18-35). Such digital practices are valuable to academics and relevant state agencies keen for understanding how digital technology and Muslim youth culture have transformed socio-religious practices. Their digital practices create new horizons and generate new expressions of piety, shaping the cosmopolitan socio-religious landscape in Brunei.

Highlighting the everyday digital practices of young Muslims in Brunei, this article reveals how they have been using digital technology to produce and consume religious knowledge and express their religiosity on social media. In this context, they become new agents for religious dissemination capable of shifting everyday lived socio-religious practices and upending traditional religious practices. However, this article argues that even when they are seen as challenging conventional practices and expectations, they are not challenging existing religious structure and authority.

RELIGIOUS SELF-EXPRESSION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In this section, I demonstrate how religious knowledge was obtained in the past and how this process has evolved and been transformed with the arrival of social media as new engagement sites for young people. As with other aspects of life, social media were not originally meant for religious dissemination. However, the evolution of this daily means of communication has altered Bruneians' socio-religious realities.

In Brunei, religious education is conducted through informal and formal schools. Before 1956, informal religious education was conducted at home, in *balai* (halls), and in *masjid* (mosques). On the other hand, formal education was carried out in Malay or English schools. To ensure that all Bruneian Muslims are proficient in both secular and religious subjects, the state established religious primary schools separate from the Malay and English schools.¹ The introduction of the Laws of Brunei, Chapter 215, Compulsory Religious Education Act further legalised religious education in the country, making it compulsory for Muslim children between the ages of seven and fifteen.² While formal religious education and other informal means—such as mass sermons at Friday prayers, religious books, and in-person *ceramah* (religious talk) or mass preaching organised by different agencies—remain the main sources of religious knowledge, young Muslims have now taken the lead in expanding into new forms of religious learning methods.

Undoubtedly, the rapid development of digital technologies has transformed religious practices. At the core of this are Muslim youths who are tech-savvy and proactive in seeking and reproducing religious knowledge and expressing their religiosity outside the confines of traditional and institutional structures. Personal and communal religiosities are now expressed through their behaviour and practices in digital space. Thus, youth religiosity and culture need to be analysed through these everyday interactions and alternative communication sites.³

Unlike the production and consumption of religious content, religious self-expression is now more complex due to the country's existing sociocultural and religious norms. In Brunei, where Islam is institutionalised and practised in daily life, and where religious and ethnic identities are conflated, the state unequivocally sets the parameters for young Muslims' online presence in the form of the MIB. Also, while young people have the freedom to produce and circulate religious content and express their identities, they are subjected to everyday communal surveillance that makes religious self-expressions a practice they must negotiate.⁴

Some of these young Muslims continue to be bounded by self-doubt, and by the belief that they do not have enough indepth knowledge of Islam to write about high-level Islamic theology and laws. Others also fear they are demonstrating *riak*⁵ (arrogance)—a disvalue in Islam—by presenting themselves as pious Muslims. They also fear being judged for being unable to keep up with the religious expectations of living in a Muslim-majority country; therefore, there is a nagging feeling among some that they should not share their religious identity publicly since they are already living in a dominantly Muslim society. Young Bruneians thus prefer not to present themselves as pious, and mainly demonstrate the bare minimum of what is socio-culturally acceptable in their society. These complex communal surveillance and expectations explain why some young people are not keen on portraying their religious identity on social media, and this may have contributed to the emerging concern about young Bruneian Muslims being less pious than their forebears.

Working around these parameters, these young Muslims have been shaping their social and religious practices in two ways. First, they self-regulate their expressions of identity by supporting the country's socio-religious expectations of citizens having good moral values. Second, they also join the bandwagon and act as religious "enforcers" on behalf of their community. Individually or collectively, they correct any transgressions, such as public displays of affection among unmarried couples, and Muslims uploading photos of themselves not covering their *aurat* (what Muslims interpret as meeting modesty standards).

THE SHIFTING SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REALITIES OF THE YOUNG

The number of religious content creators sharing religious knowledge on social media sites has increased exponentially over the last few years. They utilise YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to share on Islam and its practices. Religious content taught in schools, such as the basic Islamic rituals, the dos and don'ts, and morality, are now reproduced, circulated and consumed in different digital formats. *Nasihat4qalby*, *MattersOfChoice*, and *Muhammad Adam @ Chong*,⁶ are among the local social media users on Instagram that work individually and collectively to share religious content. The use of Muslim comics, Muslim memes,

Dakwah-graphy (also available as hashtag #*dakwahgraphy*), religious quotes and images, supplication, and prayers, especially by young Muslims are now widespread.

To increase their content’s reach and to conjure a “Muslim narrative”, they apply hashtags #*muslimlives*, #*islam*, #*muslimcomedy*, #*muslimmemes*, #*selfreminder* and #*selfreflection*⁷ in their captions (see Figure 1). Often, their content is reposted from other profiles and sources such as Islamify,⁸ an Instagram profile focusing on Muslim news, reminders and quotes by well-known regional and global preachers. Religious videos created by the youths tend to include elements of fun and comedy, and leverage on the relatability to their peers. The Ramadhan content by MattersOfChoice on ‘5 THINGS TO AVOID in the REMAINING days of Ramadhan (see Figure 2) is an example of how these elements are combined, where young Muslims take it upon themselves the responsibility of reminding others of their religious obligations. This form of content is fun, non-obtrusive and easy to understand, and does capture the interest of young audiences.

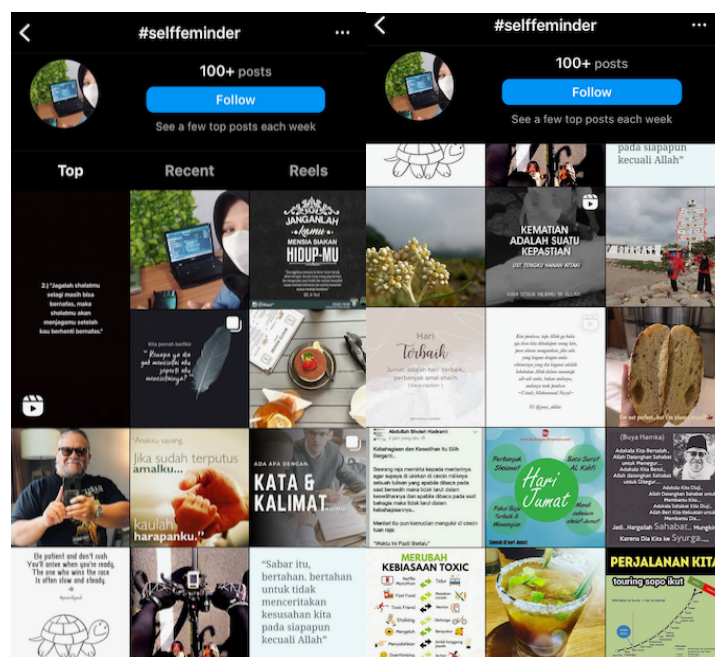


Figure 1: Screenshot of #selfreminder hashtag on Instagram used by Muslim users including Bruneian Muslims.



Figure 2: Screengrab of MatterOfChoice Instagram Post⁹

Interestingly, for a Muslim-majority state, Brunei does not have many religious influencers or homegrown Muslim religious celebrities, unlike in Malaysia (such as Ustazah Asma Harun) and Indonesia (Habib Husein¹⁰ or Abdullah Gymnastiar). This may be due to factors such as the formal certification needed to preach in the country online and offline, and the lack of interest among young Muslims to become religious influencers/preachers. To be a preacher in Brunei, one is required to apply for a certification from the Islamic Religious Council/*Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei* (MUIB).¹¹ There is at least one known officially “certified” young religious motivational speaker, i.e. Hanisah Othman,¹² who uses social media to share her religious knowledge, practices and daily reflections as a Muslim, a wife, and a mother. Her content is relatable for young people. She delivers her posts in English and her short religious talks are aired after the call to prayers (*azan*) by Kristal FM, one of the local radio stations.

More young Bruneians are producing and consuming religious content produced in English compared to their spoken language, Brunei Malay.¹³ These young Muslims’ use of different platforms and strategies to disseminate religious knowledge can be considered *Dakwah 2.0* which neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia have already witnessed, although on a more advanced scale.¹⁴ Regardless of their status as influencers, preachers, motivational speakers, or even ordinary individuals, everyone’s online presence contributes to building the country’s socio-religious reality and landscape.

Apart from local sources, Bruneian Muslims also consume content produced by preachers based in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Western countries. The more prominent ones are Ustazah Asma Harun,¹⁵ a Malaysian preacher and motivator; Yasmin Mogahed,¹⁶ an American educator and motivational speaker; and Ustaz Tarmizi Wahid (or Mizi Wahid),¹⁷ a motivational speaker from Safinah Institute in Singapore. Through her social media presence

and profiling, Ustazah Asma receives regular invitations to Brunei to give religious talks. In 2020 and 2023, she delivered a talk on ‘*Keluargaku Pengorbananku 2.0*’ and ‘*Titian Akhir Zaman*’. Over a thousand people attended a recent talk that she gave. In 2019 and 2022, Yasmin Mogahed 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’. Ustaz Mizi Wahid delivered both virtual and in-person talks in Brunei with specific themes such as ‘Staying in Faith’ in 2020, and ‘Regain Your confidence, Pursue Your Biggest Dream’ at the National Youth Day Convention in 2022. These speakers focused on different discourses of Muslim lives such as emotion, grief, family, self-worth, happiness, and relationship, which Bruneian Muslims can relate to in everyday lives, regardless of whether they consider themselves devout Muslims or not.

The young can also shape the religious discourse online through subtle means. As social media sites enable self-expression through intense self-disclosure, different expressions of religious identity can be observed. The young Muslims’ identities are portrayed via sartorial presentation, Islamic quotes and images, and consumption of shariah-compliant products. One prominent group among Muslim social media influencers are the *Hijabi* influencers (hijabi refers to women who don the hijab, or headscarf). These *Hijabi* influencers are not necessarily preaching about Islam but their online sharing of everyday lives and struggles as Muslims are highly relatable for young Muslim women. Local Muslim social media influencers such as Ajeeratul Abdullah¹⁸ and Sarah Mumtaz¹⁹ incorporate Islamic quotes and daily reflections in their postings to make sense of their lives and struggles while keeping to a modest *hijabi* style. Ajeeratul never claimed her fashion to be modest or compliant with an Islamic lifestyle. Yet, her layering of different clothes showcases her ability to mix style, modernity and elegance while being shariah-compliant. Sarah, a modest clothing entrepreneur, uses her social media account to advertise her *hijab* brand, Mumtaz Collection, while exhibiting shariah-compliant fashion. In both cases, Muslim women in Brunei can easily emulate their everyday fashion to what they consider to be satisfying of the religious requirements or to be covering *aurat*.²⁰

CONCLUSION: BRUNEI’S SOCIO-RELIGIOUS OUTLOOK GOING FORWARD

The religious practices examined in this article prove that Brunei is no longer solely relying on the mass-broadcasted and mass-produced religious information from religious institutions, and in a physical format. These digitally connected young Muslims behave as new religious agents via their seemingly banal production and consumption of religious content on digital platforms and self-expressions portraying Muslim identity and new socio-religious practices. Most importantly, socio-religious realities and landscapes are no longer shaped by physical interactions and engagements but have moved to another platform which Lily Kong calls ‘techno-religious spaces’²¹—new spaces of religious practice.

Bruneian Muslim youths’ digital practices indicate that they are modern and global in their outlook and in embracing different forms of Islamic knowledge. They shape the spiritual

landscape uniquely adapted to Brunei's context, where religious (Muslim) and ethnic (Malay) identities are conflated. They are moving towards a globalised Brunei anchored in *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) and *Negara Zikir*. It remains imperative that both lived religiosities and macro-scale structural transformations be examined to understand the context and the social fabric of the everyday lives of Bruneian young Muslims today.

Youth religious practices are the epitome of this transformation that is not limited to digitalisation and mediatisation of religion but also their lived religiosities which shape the socio-religious realities and landscape of the country. As Brunei continues to develop economically, social realities will continue to shift. Changes are expected, which could be disruptive to the existing practices.

While Brunei has a plethora of sources and individuals speaking about Islam and emerging youth religiosities, they do not point to a decline in official religious authority. Although previous non-digital practices may have been upended to some extent, religious authority and structure remain as they were. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and relevant agencies under it remain responsible for protecting the Islamic religion and all related matters, in addition to planning, implementing and evaluating programmes and activities for the benefit of Islam in Brunei.²² These Muslim youths' practices do, however, expand sources of religious information and expressions, which opens new challenges for both the state and society. There is a valid concern over the influx of religious information from resources that may have escaped the inspection and verification process. Different measures such as certification of religious preachers and scrutiny of physical documents such as religious books are no longer sufficient in this digital world. Controlling false or unverified information spread across various digital platforms remains to be answered in this new environment. At this juncture, the Brunei government, significantly MORA, would benefit by moving their practices to online spaces and encouraging more Bruneian preachers to utilise social media sites, following the current trends of consuming and producing religious knowledge online.

ENDNOTES

¹ Haji Mail, A. H. A, Ampuan Hj Tengah, A. H. B, & Hj Abu Bakar, H. T. (2019). History and Development of Islamic Education in Brunei Darussalam, 1900-1983: From Home Instruction to the Religious Primary School. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*. 5 (2).

² Laws of Brunei, chapter 215, Compulsory Religious Education. https://www.agc.gov.bn/AGC/Images/LAWS/ACT_PDF/cap215.pdf. Accessed 7 February 2023.

³ Mohamad, S. M (2023). Youth Religiosity and Social Media in Brunei. In Carnagie, P. and Kwee Fee, L. (Re)presenting Brunei Darussalam: *The Sociology of the Everyday*. Springer.

⁴ Mohamad, S. M (2023). Youth Religiosity and Social Media in Brunei. In Carnagie, P. and Kwee Fee, L. (Re)presenting Brunei Darussalam: *The Sociology of the Everyday*. Springer.

⁵ Also known as *Riya'* or *Riyaa*.

⁶ Instagram handle @nasihat4qalby, @matters.oc, and @cm.adam

⁷ This hashtag is also used by non-Muslims.

⁸ Instagram handle @islamify

⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc2blflhAgB/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> Accessed 8 February 2023

¹⁰ <https://fulcrum.sg/trendy-indonesian-habib-rides-the-waves-online/> Accessed 8 February 2023

¹¹ There are several requirements the applicant needs to fulfil, which include: being a Muslim following the creed of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah, being above the age of 18, holding at least a Diploma in religious studies, being able to read Al-Quran fluently with proper *Tajwid* and having a strong knowledge of *Fardhu Ain* and *Fardhu Kifayah*, and being knowledgeable in Brunei's custom, culture, and other practices.

¹² Instagram handle @hanisahothman.bn

¹³ Also, based on my conversation with young Bruneians on their social media use, there is a consensus on the use of English Language on social media. It is considered easier to use and to understand for Bruneians than Malay Brunei when delivering social media content. This is also linked to the portrayal of their identity as educated individuals and their social standing (at least middle class).

¹⁴ Weng, H. W. (2015). *Dakwah 2.0: Digital Dakwah, street Dakwah and cyber-urban activism among Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia*. In *New media configurations and socio-cultural dynamics in Asia and the Arab world* (pp. 198-221). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.

¹⁵ Instagram and TikTok handle @ustazahasmaharun

¹⁶ Instagram handle @yasminmogahed

¹⁷ Instagram handle @miziwahid

¹⁸ Instagram handle @jeerawithluv

¹⁹ Instagram handle @sarahmumtaz

²⁰ Body parts that they must cover. This differs according to gender and the presence of different groups of people.

²¹ Kong, L. (2001). Religion and technology: Refiguring place, space, identity and community. *Area* 33(4): 404–413.

²² <https://www.mora.gov.bn/SitePages/Pengenalan.aspx> Accessed 7 February 2023.

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