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# Digital religion: How digital immigrants access religious content during pandemic

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed human interactions including how they carry out religious practices and this situation has made them change everything that the activities now through media. Digital immigrants aged from 38 years old and above categorized as generation born before digital era that requires them more to adopt the technology. This paper aims at how digital immigrants in Jakarta search for religious content during pandemic Covid-19. Media dependency theory is used in this research for analysing the research results. Media dependency theory has evolved with the changing communication environment and expanded its theoretical framework to communication infrastructure theory to cover new relationships between individuals and media. The research method used is qualitative descriptive of ten informants categorized as digital immigrants and data were collected through interview. The results found that the informants depended on digital media in searching for religious contents and participated on some religious circles in some digital (social) media platforms.

**Abstrak**

Pandemi Covid-19 telah mengubah interaksi manusia termasuk bagaimana mereka menjalankan praktik keagamaan dan situasi ini telah membuat mereka mengubah segala sesuatu yang aktivitasnya sekarang melalui media. Imigran digital berusia 38 tahun ke atas dikategorikan sebagai generasi yang lahir sebelum era digital yang menuntut mereka untuk lebih mengadopsi teknologi. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk melihat bagaimana para imigran digital di Jakarta mencari konten religi di masa pandemi Covid-19. Teori ketergantungan media digunakan dalam penelitian ini untuk menganalisis hasil penelitian. Teori ketergantungan media telah berkembang dengan lingkungan komunikasi yang berubah dan memperluas kerangka teoretisnya ke teori infrastruktur komunikasi untuk mencakup hubungan baru antara individu dan media. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif terhadap sepuluh informan yang dikategorikan sebagai imigran digital dan data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara. Hasil kajian menemukan bahwa informan bergantung pada media digital dalam mencari konten keagamaan dan berpartisipasi pada beberapa kalangan keagamaan di beberapa platform media (sosial) digital.

## INTRODUCTION

People today use digital tools for their daily basis not only for their personal but also professional needs. Those who were born before the emergence of internet, gadgets, and software with they interact with as something eternally new (Lindgren, 2017) and furthermore digital immigrants are usually assumed to have some difficulty with information technology (Wang, Myers, & Sundaram, 2013) .

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed human interactions including how they carry out religious practices—in this case Islam religion—which are normally performed in houses of worship (mosques) and participate in Islamic circles (both in mosques and in other places) face-to-face, however this situation has made them change everything.

This major change is not an easy thing for digital immigrants who have difficulty using information technology. However, searching for Islamic religious information (content) through digital platforms forces them to familiarize themselves with this situation as engaging to religious content and community through digital media

platforms fulfilling spiritual needs (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). This paper aims at how digital immigrants in Jakarta search for religious content during pandemic Covid-19.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of digital natives and digital immigrants was first introduced by Marc Prensky in 2001. He proposed and linked those concepts to disruptive age where the usage of digital platform have become a major shift in human interaction (Prensky, 2001). According to Cambridge Dictionary, digital immigrant is a person who started using digital technology, computers, the internet, etc. during their adult life but did not grow up using them. Digital immigrants (pre-Gen Y) have progressed rapidly in moving into the digital world–adapting to and relying more on technology for work and personal use (Autry, Zane, Jr, & Berge, 2011). In order words, digital immigrants are baby boomers who were born in 1970s and 1980s (Pyöriä, Ojala, Saari, & Järvinen, 2017).

Digital religion was first emerged with the internet studies and it was also initially described as cyber-religion that explores religious practice in digital environments (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Furthermore, digital religion is a framework of religious practice both online and offline contexts occurred simultaneously. Digital religion is 'the technological and cultural space that is awakened when we talk about how the online and offline realms of religion are becoming unified or integrated (O'Brien, 2020).

In general, a study (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020) finds that scholars have recommended the name "digital religion" as a more extensive way to explain and scrutinize religious interchanges with digital media. Moreover, Campbell cites Campbell (2012) that digital religion is illustrated as a frame of references to assert the practice of religious practices online which are connected to online and offline contexts simultaneously". Thus, digital religion explores association and interdependency online and offline religious contexts and how these contexts become linked, merged, and blurred over time.

Media dependency theory is used in this research for analysing the research results. Media dependency theory has evolved with the changing communication environment and expanded its theoretical framework to communication infrastructure theory to cover new relationships between individuals and media. This creates connectedness derived the concept of dependency however it indicates a more neutral and interactive relationship compared to the term dependency. This concept also indicates relationships between individuals and different types of media (Jung, 2017).

Some previous researches are used as follow:

1. Armfield & Holbert in their research suggests that there is no strong relationship between individual religiosity and internet use, which strengthens Bedell's 2000 study which states that the more religious a person is, the less likely he is to use the internet. Armfield & Holbert's research uses the secularization theory which states that the use of mass media (including the internet) will have no effect on one's religiosity because mass media is part of modern secular society. Nevertheless, this research becomes the fundamental material for the study of digital faith when the internet pandemic will affect individual religiosity (Armfield & Hobert, 2009).

2. Cheong's research (2016) looks at how communication occurs between religious institutions and their followers. This adds to the nuances of collective religious practice because the use of digital media reproduces spiritual reality and also suggests further research to identify the diversity in the use of digital platforms and religious communication practices that refer to the concept of digital faith, which is currently a global phenomenon  (Cheong, 2016).

3. Brubaker & Haigh explored the use of Facebook for religious purposes which revealed the frequency of use, intensity, religious purposes and also the motivation of respondents. The results showed that respondents used the social media platform Facebook to obtain spiritual guidance, religious information and also as a means of relaxation and entertainment (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017).

**METHODS**

This research uses qualitative approach collecting data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. Qualitative research is research that aims to explore and understand the meaning experienced by individuals or groups of human social problems in which the process involves questions and procedures used; data collection in participant settings; analyze data inductively, building from specific themes to general themes; and make interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014).

Research subjects in this study were informants or respondents who were selected or predetermined. They are digital immigrants living in Jakarta. The selection of research subjects was carried out by purposive sample which is the selected sample based on certain characteristics, quality and criteria (Morissan, Wardhani, & Umarella, 2012).

Data were collected by interviews—interactions of two people that aims to exchange information and ideas through questions and answers so that meaning can be constructed in a particular topic according to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2020).

The interviews involves in unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2014).

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

At the beginning, dependency is the main concept in the theory of media dependency that often mistakenly understood as a powerful media and weak individual theory that this occurred due to the term dependency that also indicates a trait a dependent individual who confides in the media which leads to the relationship of a strong media and weak individual. However, Jung (2017) has stated that the most significant critique of media dependency theory is the changing media environment that initially it was meant for televisions as dominating media but after some decades, as the technology developed, there have been some other media that people access such as digital media and social media.

Media dependency theory evolved to adapt the changing media environment, though the core propositions are still valid, can support the concept of digital religion that focuses on religious groups' engagement with latest media environment and the ways new technologies form public perceptions of religion and spirituality enclosed by digital contexts. Websites and online forums, the first indications of online religious communities, have been somewhat substituted by, and coexist with, new forms of religious engagement through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This changes the usage of digital media and social media to demonstrate traditional and contemporary religious activity (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

The theory of media dependency has developed with the shift of communication environment in disruption era as well as the global phenomenon i.e. pandemic Covid-19.

During the pandemic, almost all kinds of activities that involve direct face-to-face interactions are restricted or even banned, including religious practices—congregational prayers in mosques to Islamic studies. For digital immigrants, this is not an easy thing considering the character of their use of media, unlike digital natives who devote all their daily activities using/through digital media include self-disclosing religious identity (Aunul, 2019).

There are ten informants categorized as digital immigrants are selected with different occupation as seen at table 1.

**Table 1. Informant Profile**

| No | Informant Initials | Sex Male/ Female | Age | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | HM | M | 44 | Employee |
| 2. | DK | M | 52 | Journalist |
| 3. | FY | M | 46 | Tenant Relation Officer |
| 4. | SR | F | 44 | PAUD Manager |
| 5. | FDR | F | 43 | Housewife |
| 6. | N | M | 53 | Entrepreneur |
| 7. | ELP | F | 54 | Lecturer |
| 8. | M | M | 43 | Employee |
| 9. | DS | M | 46 | Lecturer |
| 10. | AB | M | 52 | Teacher |

Source: Interview

A study in 2020 found that societies focus on physical well-being in order to survive in pandemic era without considering spiritual point of view and later they identify the fear of ill suffering would renew their spirituality by keeping hope and security sense (Kowalczyk et al., 2020). Without having sufficient experience in digital religious practice, digital immigrants in Jakarta have attempted to adapt with the situation of Covid-19 and this has made digital religion more visible and accessible to more people who utilize various digital platforms to support their religious experiences and practices (O'Brien, 2020).

Digital media play an important role as a forum for searching for religious content (da'wah) and are considered informative and also effective for some informants, but they feel it is ineffective if the search for content is only through the media, especially in studies where they usually follow it face-to-face but now this moment is being replaced through digital media and internet media.

People involved easily by da'wah operations from home using social media platforms (Sule & Abdulkareem, 2020). This statement can be one way to search Islamic religious contents for digital immigrants considering social media have various platforms and they can select the platforms to their preferences. The informants mostly have more than two platforms and most of them use Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Whatsapp as seen at figure 1. They also follow popular Islamic religious scholar accounts in social media where they obtain updates about Islamic teachings. In Islam, it is an obligation for its followers to implement religious teachings and whoever follow

the teaching, he/she will be rewarded in the hereafter (Hidayaturrahman, Husamah, Sudarman, Yanti, & Kusumawati, 2021).
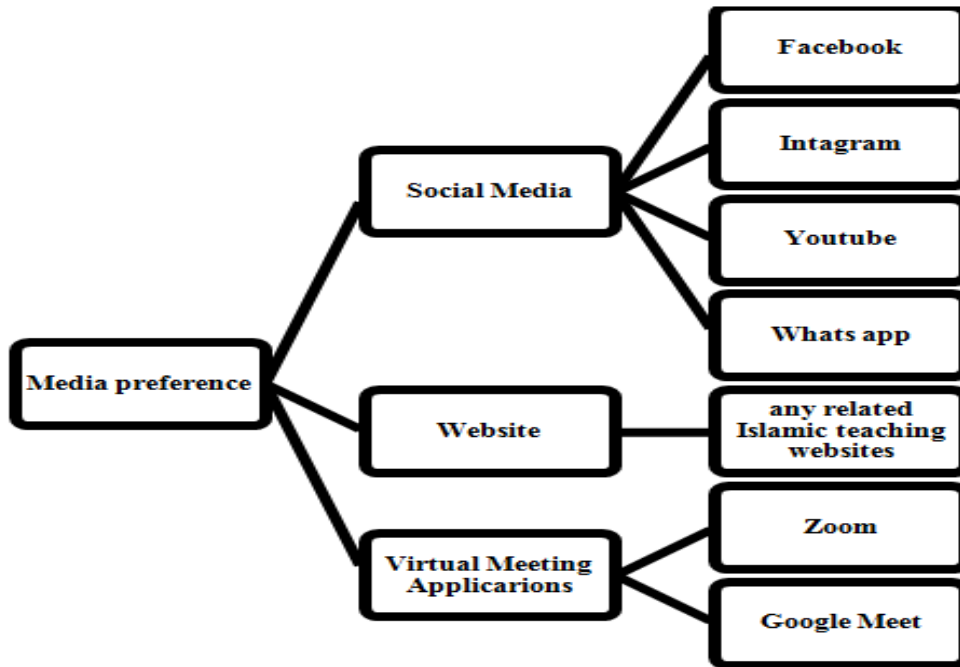


**Figure 1. Media Preferences**
Source: interview

Informants with their own preferences select accounts to be followed and they tend to follow famous figures of Islamic preachers with persuasive communication style (Abdul Rohman, 2019) that inspire followers with religious (motivational) contents from their status, feed, story even live program and informants experience rich context since some platforms connect to each other. Besides that, informants also could participate in discussion in comments sections/direct messages/messenger. Most of religious leader (ustadz), as seen at table 2, posses multiple platform to bring their *dakwah* so that informants could search for intensive topic for their needs (from Youtube which provide more time-length capacity compared to other platforms).

Besides that, some of the informants use the internet—websites, blogs in searching for religious contents mostly about fiqh, siroh nabawiah or shalafus sholih and also study relating to fatwa ulama about religious practice in pandemic era.

In term of the media, the informants prefer YouTube for gaining more comprehensive Islamic study to social media due to the fact that social media limited space capacity that may distract their understanding of the religion study.

In addition, the informants also take part in Islamic studies through virtual meetings (zoom/google meet), browse the internet to participate in the studies via live streaming Instagram or videos on Youtube. Multiplatform format enables informants to select media to reach and be connected.

**Table 2. Popular Islamic Preachers Followed by Informants**

| No | Name |
|----|------|
| 1. | Gus Baha |
| 2. | Ustadz Haris Hakam |
| 3. | Ustadz Ahmad Sarwat (Rumah Fiqh) |
| 4. | Ustadz Khalid Basalamah |
| 5. | Ustadz Hanan Attaki |
| 6. | Ustadz Zulkifli M.Ali |
| 7. | Ustadz Zaidul Akbar |
| 8. | Ustadz Oemar Mita |
| 9. | Ustadz Adi Hidayat |
| 10. | Ustadz Abdul Somad |
| 11. | Ustadz Nuzul Dzikri |

Source: Interview

Below are some opinions of the informants about their participation in Islamic study online

- *The interaction process is less flexible because we cannot socialize with other congregations in the same "room".* (HM)
- *I follow Islamic studies live streaming but it's better face-to-face because it's better in asking and answering questions.* (FY)
- *Participating in offline studies is more able to liven up your spiritual mood and spirit.* (N)
- *Less interactive* (FDR)
- *Access online a lot of distractions so I can hardly focus on the study* (DS).

Some reason informants use virtual meeting application is that they can visualize themselves among other audiences like in face-to-face forum (Venter, 2017). Although participating online study will fulfil spiritual need, another informant thinks that by attending offline forum could liven up the mood and spiritual spirit. Some of the informants join whatsapp group discussing religion under Islamic scholar supervision and this relates to an argument that there have been growing numbers of online

religious communities that share characteristics with varying levels of affiliation and commitment and later form specific online groups (Campbell, 2012).

Jung (2017) states that the concept of connectedness is the scope of the theory to explain an individual's relationship with mobile media where individuals have more choice and independence in accessing various content and services on mobile media. On the other hand, individuals tend to develop an intense and wide-ranging relationship with mobile devices. Meanwhile, in this study, it was found that there was a relationship between individuals and digital media in which informants joined a (several) forums such as whatsapp groups and facebook communities to be able to access religious content and this increased when the pandemic occurred in early 2020 to mid 2021.

Pandemic has made people sense an urgency to fulfil their spiritual needs and by joining this virtual circle makes them feel safe that they are guided by Islamic scholars as they have opportunities to ask questions and received immediate responses. The informants sense that joining whatsapp group is more comfortable than participating in Islamic circle live streaming or zoom that they feel limited in expressing their feelings/responses for limited time and opportunity in asking questions. However, they prefer face-to-face Islamic circles for they feel more focused and zealous and they can also participate more in the discussions and question-and-answer sessions. The informants are willing to share the contents when they think those will be suitable for current situation.

Pandemic Covid-19 situation may affect the informants' behaviour in searching for religious contents. They are more connected with digital media (social media) platforms. This relates to the media dependency theory Dependency is the main concept in the theory of media dependency that often mistakenly understood as a powerful media and weak individual theory that this occurred due to the term dependency that also indicates a trait a dependent individual who confides in the media which leads to the relationship of a strong media and weak individual.

In the context of the digital user category, the digital immigrants in this study did not find many difficulties in adopting digital technology. This may be due to their educational background, which on average is undergraduate, and also their jobs requiring them to use digital media. However, this study found that although they were quick to adopt technology in accessing religious content, especially in terms of participation in studies, they still preferred offline participation.

How the informants use and connect with media means that they depend on media for religious activity in terms of searching the contents. Although at the beginning media dependency theory was mass-media-centered approach, it has evolved with the changing communication environment creating connectedness concept—neutral and

interactive (Jung, 2017). This research results relate to connectedness indicating relationship between individuals (digital immigrants) dan different types of media (digital media/social media platforms). Besides that, the is a growing concern for the shift of religious to individual authority as a result of media dependency in search for Islamic religious contents (Hazim & Musdholifah, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Pandemic Covid-19 situation may affect the informants' behaviour in searching for religious contents as they utilize digital (social) media platforms—participate in virtual Islamic circle through social media live streaming/ virtual meeting platform, following Islamic contents social media accounts, joining WhatsApp group discussing Islamic religion.

They are more connected with digital media (social media) platforms. How they use and connect with media means that they depend on media for religious activity in terms of searching the contents. Although at the beginning media dependency theory was mass-media-cantered approach, it has evolved with the changing communication environment creating connectedness concept—neutral and interactive.

This research results relate to connectedness indicating relationship between individuals (digital immigrants) and different types of media (digital media/social media platforms).

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