

AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF REALITY TV SHOW ‘IMAM MUDA’: CONTRADICTIONS AND CONTESTED RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AMONG YOUNG MALAYSIAN MUSLIMS

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Abstract

These papers seek to examine the impact of religious programmes on young Muslims’ identity and religiosity. Drawing on findings from two separate studies conducted in 2011 and 2012, this paper conclude that the media do not have a single dominant effect over young people and their religious identity. Rather, their identity is contingent of their social world outside and within. It is indigenised and negotiated with other cultural resources together with the media. It is found that the various political and social conditions, occurring at the public and private sphere of their lives, that have served as a resources for young Muslims to make sense of how ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ should be. It is found that the various ‘contradictions’ from what Islam is about right up to how Muslims should conduct themselves led young Muslims to feel disenchanting with Muslims and its leaders. Hence, through their everyday media consumption practice, young Muslims negotiate and appropriate religious media content to recreate their own religious identity.

Keywords: Religious identity, youth, media consumption, Malaysia.

Abstrak

Kertas kerja ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kesan program agama terhadap identiti dan keagamaan remaja Islam. Berdasarkan penemuan daripada dua kajian berasingan yang dijalankan pada tahun 2011 dan 2012, kertas ini menyimpulkan bahawa media tidak mempunyai kesan dominan tunggal terhadap remaja dan identiti agama mereka. Sebaliknya, identiti mereka adalah bergantung dunia sosial mereka di luar dan dalam keluarga. Ia adalah hasil gabungan identiti diri yang asli dengan sumber budaya yang lain dan juga media. Kajian mendapati bahawa pelbagai keadaan politik dan sosial, yang berlaku secara umum atau peribadi dalam hidup mereka,

menjadi sumber untuk remaja Islam memahami bagaimana 'Islam' dan 'Islam' sepatutnya. Didapati juga, pelbagai 'percanggahan' tentang apa itu Islam sehingga kepada bagaimana umat Islam harus berkelakuan menyebabkan remaja Islam berasa kecewa dengan orang Islam dan pemimpinnya. Oleh itu, melalui amalan penggunaan media harian mereka, remaja Islam mencipta identiti agama mereka sendiri.

Kata kunci: *Identiti agama, remaja, penggunaan media, Malaysia.*

Introduction

The process of forming identity involves taking into account the external factors where individuals are embedded in. In this respect, this paper attempts to examine to what extent those external factors are shaping the religious identity of young Muslims in Malaysia.

The question of the construction or reproduction of religious identity among young Muslims in Malaysia become pertinent due to several major developments occurring that are related to the religion and to the other Muslims. Among those, are when 'religion' have become most newsworthy in Malaysian media both mainstream and alternatives. Numerous issues affecting interfaith relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the incessant bickering among Muslim political leaders, the rise of the voice of liberal Muslims who openly questioned and challenged Islamic authorities on various religious issues.

At the same time, there is an intense move by Malaysian broadcasting stations to promote 'Islam' and to lure young Muslims closer to their religion via various form of 'Islamic televangelism' unlike before. Thus, it raised several research questions such as how have these situations affect young Muslims' view towards their own religion and the centrality of religion to their life? What kind of religious identity that are being reproduced by them? This paper hoped to answer these questions by presenting findings from two studies conducted from July 2011 to June 2012.

Islam and Its Social and Political Landscape in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multicultural and multifaith country with about 28.3 million population (Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, 2010). However, Islam is the official religion of the country but the Federal Constitution recognized and allows freedom to practice other faiths. In terms of sociodemographic profile of its population, Islam is the most widely professed religion accounting for about 61.3 percent.

Although Muslims formed the majority of Malaysia's population, interfaith relations with other non-Muslim Malaysians have been close. Malaysia's close interfaith relations can be seen through the celebration of various non-Islamic religious festivities as public holiday, where non-Muslim communities of different ethnicities are free to celebrate and practise their religious customs and anyone (Barlocco, 2011). Malaysia, have always been praised as a more moderate and progressive Islamic country (Azmi & Shamsul, 2004). But it is not, without any internal problems among Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamization, is said to have progressed tremendously in the 1980's to 1990's particularly with the Islamization policies of the government occurred in the 1980's (Saravanamuttu, 2009). But what is seen to be more problematic is how Islam has been increasingly politicised purportedly in a more conservative way (Ahmad Fauzi, 2009).

The continuous traditional political rivalry between ruling party, Muslim-dominated UMNO with its rival the Pas Se-Islam Malaysia (PAS) saw a form of 'Islamization race,' has occurred which saw Muslims divided between UMNO and PAS (Liow, 2003).

Apart from the political bickering among Muslims leaders, Islam as an official religion was further challenged when it comes to issues of religious freedom. 'Malays' have always been defined as 'Muslims' under the Federal Constitution (Frith, 2006). But this was challenged when it involves 'Malays' wanting to embrace other religious faith as in the sensational case of Lina Joy. Lina Joy is a Malay woman, who converted to Christianity and have made several applications to the National Registration Department to have her original religion as 'Muslim' be removed from her identity card but her applications were rejected (Kortteinen, 2008). She then went to the High

Court (2001) and Court of Appeal (2005) but lost in both courts. In her final attempt at the Federal Court, her application was again rejected. While those sympathize Lina, may argue this is an infringement of religious freedom in Malaysia, incidences of converting Muslims to other religion has spur the growth of a Islamic civil society movement such as the *Himpunan Sejuta Umat* in 2011. The movement argued for the protection of Muslims from proselytization, marking tense interfaith relations.

In addition, the existence of liberal Muslims grouped in non-government organisations such as the Sisters in Islam (SIS), which consistently questioned Islamic authorities as male-bias their interpretation of the Quran (Nagata, 1997).

Malaysian Media and Religion

The use of television to broadcast Islamic programmes in Malaysia is a form of da'wah to disseminate a positive, universal and moderate version of Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Authorities such as the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) and Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) have been active in doing so. JAKIM, in collaborating with state-owned broadcasting stations – Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), have produced televangelism programmes like *Reflections* (Airil Haimi, 2010). Apart from that, Islamic shows are produced in various genres – talk-shows, documentaries and drama. The springing of religious talk shows, is said to be heavily influenced by former Premier Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's Islam Hadhari (*Civilisational Islam*) in 2003 (Juliana, 2011).

But in recent years, the introduction of Islamic-based stations and channels on free-to-air and pay-TV services is the latest development in the Malaysian broadcasting industry to balance the secularised content of its television programmes. The introduction of Astro Oasis, a pay-TV channel and TV AlHijrah, launched in 2010 aimed at disseminating knowledge about Islam by producing programmes that infuse Islamic values.

The latest move to rebrand Islam is through *Imam Muda*, the first Islamic reality-TV show in Malaysia. The show which was introduced in 2010 is a joint effort between Astro (the operator of Malaysia's first pay-TV) with the

Federal Territories Islamic Department (JAWI) (http://www.astro.com.my/imammuda/indices/index_1052.html). What is controversial about *Imam Muda* is that it adopts the format of *American Idol*, in selecting participants but for a religious reason. Aspiring participants go through audition and were tested for their basic religious knowledge and character. The idea behind the show was to recruit potential young Muslim men, to be groomed as the new Islamic leaders, taking on the role of an *imam*. While, they do not become full-fledged 'imams' like those in the mosques, they will served as a role model to other young Muslims in Malaysia, to be more closer and observant of their religion. Nonetheless, the whole idea of using reality TV for religious purpose such as *Imam Muda* is intriguing. Selected participants in *Imam Muda* have to undergo various tests and training on religion every week (<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2010/07/201073150366963.html>). Participants were taught the correct way to recite the Quran, performing prayers and so on. In fact, its popularity draws international attention as far as Germany and Switzerland (http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/Germany_Swissmediainfrenzyover_8216_Imam_MUda_8217_/Article) and most recently in Britain.

Imam Muda, is hailed as an alternative approach in da'wah unlike past religious programmes such as *Forum Perdana* and *Al-Kulliyah*. Following the success of *Imam Muda*, producers came up with another Islamic reality tv aimed at grooming younger female religious teacher (ustazah) called *Ustazah Pilihan* (Chosen Ustazah). What fuelled the frenzy towards using popular culture in Islam is, perhaps the emergence of young global Muslim singers such Maher Zain and Sami Yusuf, into these channels. The popularity of such figures which blends Islamic values, *zikir* into popular music appeals to many young Muslims in Malaysia, that to some extent, it help invigorate their interest for their religion.

Theoretical Framework and Method

Audience are never passive but are widely acknowledged to be active in making sense of the meaning constituted within media messages. Far beyond, audience studies have also acknowledged the importance of examining the context of their consumption of the media (Moore, 1993). As we lived in an

increasingly mediated society, the media served as one of the most important symbolic cultural resources where it mediates images and ideas for the construction of one's self-formation (Thompson, 1995).

As audience, research by Umar and Samsudin (2011) and Nilan (2008) points that young Muslims uses the media to reinforce their faith and practices and not to find God. This study on religious identity and the construction of young Muslims' religiosity differs from Krauss et al. (2005) who developed a Muslim Religiosity-Personality Inventory (MRPI), where this study adopts a more sociological approach to the issue.

'Identity' in the context of this study, view the formation of it involves a process of interactions between the self and the world outside. Drawing on from Lawler (2008: 144), identity must be understood as something that is socially-produced where it is 'embedded within and produced by the social world.' As socially-engaged actors, young people are constantly contrasting, negotiating and appropriating with what they saw, experience and understood from their social world and within, in order to reproduce their identity. Therefore, it is crucial to look at the living conditions that they are embedded in, that shaped their religious identity. It does not see the media, as the sole factor in forming their identity but rather how young people draw from the media, as part of forming their religious identity.

This study uses mixed method for a qualitative approach audience study. In order to gain a better understanding of young people and their consumption of the media for religion, a survey was conducted on 281 young people from the age of 18 – 25 years old, both gender, all ethnicity from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). To complement the data, a reception study on *Imam Muda* was being conducted. This involves five focus group and three individual semi-structured interviews were held involving 28 young people, of which the informants are a mixed of UMS and students from private colleges.

Findings: Quantitative Data

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed but only a total of 281 were returned. From the data, there are about 135 male (48 percent) and 145 female (51.6 percent) participated in answering the survey form.

In trying to see the centrality of ‘religion’ in their lives through their consumption of the media, it is found that young people divide their consumption between non-religious media content with religious content. Although it appears that their spent more time on entertainment, drama and news over religious programmes, it does not mean that religion is unimportant to them. In the case of their consumption for television, the difference in amount of time they spent watching non-religious and religious shows are rather minimal as can be seen in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1 Average hours spent on watching television programmes

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hours Watching News	2.83	1.304
Hours Watching Documentary	2.14	.847
Hours Watching Entertainment	2.95	1.121
Hours Watching Reality TV	2.78	1.441
Hours Watching Sitcom	2.65	1.109
Hours Watching Animation	2.91	1.153
Hours Watching Sports	2.34	1.372
Hours Watching Religion	2.67	.948
Hours Watching Drama	3.05	1.049
Hours Watching Game show	2.26	1.159

(N=281)

Table 2 Most frequent amount of time based on television programmes

Type of Programme	Most Frequent Hours of Consumption	%
Entertainment	30 min - 1 hour	42.7
Drama	> 1 hour	42.7
Anime	1 hour	40.6
Sports	< 30 min	35.6
Documentary	30 min - 1 hour	35.2
Religion	30 min	35.2
Gameshow	< 30 min	31.3
News	30 min - 1 hour	30.6
Sitcom	> 1 hour	28.1
Reality TV	15 min	24.2

(N=281)

Table 2 shows that young people largely spent between 30 minutes to 1 hour on entertainment every day, followed by drama which is more than one hour and animation for one hour. For religious programmes, young people records at the most 30 minutes on watching religious programmes.

A similar pattern is found in their consumption of newspapers where there is a section for religion. Findings from this study found that young people reads across religion, national and world news, entertainment but less prefer specialized news such as economic, sports, features, education, regional and other specialized columns like fashion featured in supplementary columns.

Table 3 Consumption pattern for newspaper

	Mean	Std. Deviation
National	1.11	.383
Regional	1.17	.411
Sports	1.26	.438
World	1.12	.323
Economy	1.43	.497
Religion	1.05	.225
Feature	1.26	.438
Entertainment	1.13	.337
Education	1.15	.362
Supplement	1.32	.468

(N=281)

Table 4 Most frequently read type of news

Type of News	%
Religion	88.6
National News	82.9
World News	82.9
Entertainment	81.1
Education	75.8
Regional News	74.7
Features	65.5
Sports	64.8
Economy	48

(N=281)

What this implies that young people try to prioritize religion with national, world news and entertainment news. Thus, this marks them as someone who negotiated between religion, active citizens, artistic and leisure, making their identity discursive, shifting between solidity and fluidity.

The potentiality of the media including television and the new media as a source of religious knowledge is however, rather low and insignificant. There are only 48 or 17.1 percent out of 281 respondents who used the media as their source of religious knowledge. In this respect, the new media and television are the two most frequently used media for religious purposes. But it only accounts for 22 respondents or 7.8 percent for the new media and 20 respondent or 7.1 percent for television.

This is in contrast with the traditional source such as religious schools which accounts for 78.6 percent or 221 followed by parents/guardians at 13.2 percent as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Source of religious knowledge

	%
Religious/School	78.6
Parents/Guardian	13.2
Private religious education	2.8
Religious schools & Parents/Guardian	1.4
Parents/Guardian & Peers	1.1
Peers	0.7
Parents/Guardian, Religious schools & peers	0.7
Religious schools & peers	0.4

(N=281)

What this means is that the social surrounding such as home, family upbringing, school and social life remained the main source of religious knowledge and not the media for young Malaysians to construct their religious identity. Nevertheless, this raised a question of ‘why’ despite the government and private broadcasters making every effort to make ‘Islam’ more humane and moderate to the audience, religious programmes is unable to draw the attention of young Muslims in Malaysia?

Imam Muda: A Contested Space for Young Muslims

Data gathered from the reception study on *Imam Muda*, shows that the programme became a site for young Muslims to debate and question various issues pertaining to Islam in the country. It is a contested space for them, to raise more pertinent issues about the state of Islam, which reveals the underlying views of young Muslims in Malaysia.

Receptions from among the informants on the programme show two positions of 'liking' and 'disliking' it. But these positions leads to bigger issue from 'who' they are as Muslims to the macro issue of the position of Islam in the country.

Using Thematic Analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), one central theme was identified. After constant comparing of similarities and differences of sub-themes across data, it is found that it all leads to one repeated theme of 'Contradiction'. By and large, informants talks about conservatism, hypocrisy as well as media stereotype of Muslims and Islam which directs to the problem of 'Contradiction'. Majority of the informants who are critical of *Imam Muda*, do so because they see the programme as another problematic depiction of a stereotypical notion of Islam from an official view. The stereotypical Muslims is a contradiction who are the real Muslims and how they should be. On the contrary, those who liked *Imam Muda* hailed is as the panacea to the problems of contradictions.

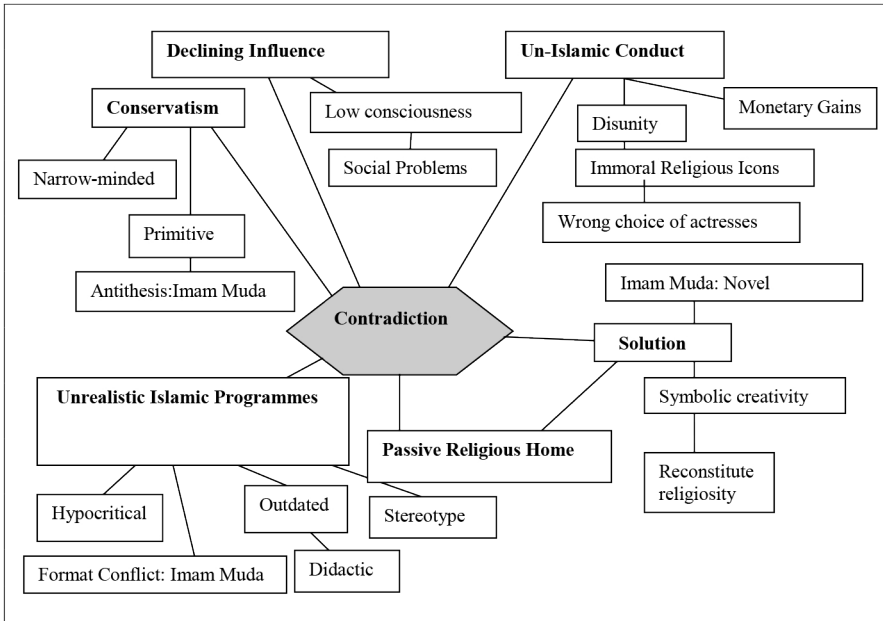


Figure 1 Thematic map of the reception of *Imam Muda*

‘Contradictions’

From the main theme of ‘Contradiction’, there are six subthemes identified and there are;

- 1) Un-Islamic Conduct
- 2) Declining Influence
- 3) Conservatism
- 4) Unrealistic Islamic Programmes
- 5) Passive Religious Home
- 6) Solution

Why ‘Contradiction’ is being identified and coded as the central theme to describe the patterned responses is because informants consistently expressed their concerned about how Muslim leaders and Muslims have often behaves, lived and act in contradiction with the true teaching of the religion. What disenchant them is how contradictions occurred rampantly, unchecked. ‘Contradictions’ in terms of Un-Islamic Conduct, Conservatism

and Declining Influence captures the contradiction that occurred in public among Muslim leaders and communities. ‘Inadequate Islamic programmes’, on the other hand is the manifestation of these contradictions. Informants also shares the contradiction of their life at home where parents do not create a religious home life contrary to what Islamic parenting is about. Consequently, informants are forced to seek for their own path to spirituality, through what Willis (1990) called ‘symbolic creativity.’ Informants use the new media and also information and communication technologies to download whatever religious informations such as *tazkirah*, lectures and how-to-do guide either into their hand phone or laptop to enhance their religiosity and religious knowledge.

Contradiction: Un-Islamic Conduct – The Social Context

Among the most compelling issue of ‘contradiction’ among informants is the constant use of certain religious icons that they see as unsuitable as role models because of their personal life in most religious programmes.

“I think *kan*... for example like *Akil Hayy*... I heard a lot about him. Like the rumours, like the gossips for me, if me, if that kind of person to be a religious figure, he needs to be perfect I think, for me *lah*. If I heard about him, for example, like the gossips, I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t listen to him anymore,” (Malay Girl 11 (MG11)/Focus Group 11/21-years-old).

Author: You’re not going to believe him?

MG11: Yes, because he’s a Muslim right? He should be perfect.

In addition, informants are critical of the use of non-hijab wearing Muslim actresses to play hijab-wearing roles in religious drama as a blatant form of contradiction when ‘hijab’ is compulsory dressing for Muslim women. In this context, they wanted real hijab-wearing actress to be cast in religious drama.

“Especially the Muslimah. They’re not supposed to be the actress, in this drama she wears hijab but in this drama she doesn’t wear hijab. So, it doesn’t show good (example) to the society. Because... wearing (the) hijab is like main-main *bah*. They’re not serious about it,” (MG13/ Focus Group 11/22-years-old).

One informant, disprove about the way 'liberal,' educated Muslims rose to challenge institutions like the National Edict Council in the media.

“Actually, they're (liberal) too radical to challenge our Fatwa institution. To me, they're creating problems within Islam. I mean...the council...they're humans...nobody is perfect... maybe they have erred. There's no harm in discussing it discretely,” (MB1/FG1/20-years-old).

The issue of how Muslims and Islam are being represented in *Imam Muda* lead to the subtheme of conservatism. Informants find the way Muslims were portrayed in most Islamic programmes are not acceptable and not align to Islamic teaching in contrast to the moderate image of *Imam Muda*.

“I think *Imam Muda* is not that extreme...like wearing a robe, turban etc.. cos, I did see them wearing suits, *songkok*...I think its ok. Cos if we look at ...Bob Lokman who joined PAS, he suddenly changed his appearance... (I mean) why change? Does it make you less a Muslim?” (MG14/FG11/25-years-old).

MG14 went on to question the problem of conservatism among Muslim leaders who she finds presents Islam as a very orthodox and primitive religion in the public sphere.

“Why are they (PAS) unable to convince voters? For example, my dad is a strong PAS follower. He would listen to PAS' sermons everyday... sometimes; I think ...why people find it hard to believe them (PAS) is because of their image. As a PR student, I think image is very important. Why must pious people wear the turban or robe? It is not that I'm condemning them but we now live in the millennium age. Why can't they wear like everybody else and still give sermons, disseminate information about religion... it's not a crime. A *songkok* is enough to show that one is a Muslim,” (MG14/FG11/25-years-old).

Informants believed that there must be consistency between discourse and practise. And in this respect, 'moderation' and 'modesty' as espoused in Islam must be practised particularly among religious leaders.

'Contradictions' is equally problematic when religion is seen as politicised among religious leaders whose sermons are driven under the influence of the dominant politics. One female informants, who

has lived abroad and in the opposition state of Kelantan is particularly critical of the conflict between religion and struggle for power among religious leaders and authorities. What is problematic for her, is how they are often featured in Malaysian religious programmes.

“The idea of the shows (religious programmes) are good but the people leading the shows, are hypocritical as well. Because in front they are, I don’t mean how they are behind the scenes. But I know a lot of them are very politically-connected. And they only do because of UMNO, UMNO so I don’t agree on that. So, if, if you’re a Muslim if you’re umm...you’re supposed to be a leader, mufti in Islam or an ustaz, just be one. There is no need to be a politician. Just take care of the religion and spread the teachings of this religion. But everybody is how do you say it? Like greedy for more. ‘Oh! This is an easier way for you to get something better in life. You go that way.’ That’s not the Islamic way of teaching. Islamic teaching is supposed to be modest. So, that’s why I don’t agree with the Islamic shows in Malaysia especially because of the people leading it. Not the idea behind it” (MG8/ /FG 4 /23-years-old).

Declining influence refers to when Islam is no longer seen as a major force in the lives of Muslims in Malaysia, is another theme that consistently repeated in some focus group interviews. *Imam Muda*, received mixed response as to whether this revolutionary form of dakwah have really address the various social problems affecting Muslims.

One male informants, who works as a volunteer at a shelter for Muslim converts, says Islam is like a ticking time-bomb waiting to explode. Low consciousness towards religion, makes religious television programmes like *Imam Muda* meaningless to most young Muslims.

“It’s a very major problem... one that is not taken seriously... that is why (religious) programmes like *Imam Muda* is difficult... it is hard for them to want to spread the religion around” (MB1/Individual Interview 1/20-years-old).

For others, *Imam Muda* is seen as another way to bring young Muslims back to the religion which they believed the relevant institutions and media have failed due to the out-dated approach of dakwah.

“That is most apt (thumbs up)...that is most appropriate... because people nowadays, are so (drawn) into entertainment like *Akademi Fantasia* and *Mentor*. So, they (producer) come up with something new. People will be stunned with *Imam Muda* because all this while, reality TV is only about acting and singing. Then suddenly, *Imam Muda* is about religion. People will be drawn (to it). Eventhough Islam is increasingly declining (influence) but someone will be influenced by it, insya-Allah, there will be someone who will promote and disseminate Islam especially in Malaysia” (MB5/FG 5/21-years-old).

Unrealistic Islamic Programmes

Owing to the various contradictions which shaped the social reality for young Muslims, they believed this is why Islamic television programmes are in such a pathetic state. The way Islam and Muslims are being constructed through the eyes of the widely criticised influential Muslims and Muslim community. Islamic television programmes have received strong criticism by informants, in which *Imam Muda* was not spared.

The most common criticism levelled at those programmes is that the media are not in touch with the social reality where young people are embedded within. Issues that are discussed in Islamic talk-shows like *Forum Perdana* and *Al-Kulliyah*, is viewed as outdated in communication approach and targeted more towards the older generation. In addition, Malay religious drama, are too narrow in scope.

“Personally, they (Islamic programmes) should touch more on gay relationships because most of my friends...previously, where I used to study.... the whole class is full of bisexual, homosexual and they are proud of it. As a friend I have done all I can but they need more discussion on why lesbianism is wrong, why gay is wrong because they know it is a sin but ‘why?’ Why do people do it? So, if religion uses the media to deal with this, for instance, use emotional appeal I think that can help” (MG14/FG11/25-years-old).

“Most of the (Islamic) drama is about witchcraft or relationships or marriage. It’s always about these two things. It’s very narrow” (MB1/ Individual Interview 1/20-years-old).

Contradiction in portraying the real lives and identity of Muslimah in the media, invites severe criticism from informants for its hypocrisy and stereotyping of Muslims.

“It is just a fantasy world that they (producer) create for them to sell the idea, ‘Oh! This is what a Muslim is supposed to be like. Or, say, someone who is not (holy), sebelum ni, ndak kuat iman semua-semua tapi semua perempuan ni terus fall in love, lepas tu, bla, bla, bla, bla terus suddenly, ‘Oh! Ya, I live the Islam way,’ now I don’t believe in that. If you change, you don’t change for a person or whatever, you change because you discover yourself in Allah. That is what I believe in,” (MG8/ FG 4 /23-years-old).

This is in contrast to *Imam Muda* for this informant because of the novelty it presents in concept and objective.

“I kind of agree with *Imam Muda*. It portrays that especially for youngsters, that youngsters nowadays, the Muslim youngsters are much Westernised. So for them to see such as a show, they feel ‘Oh! Yeah, it’s cool being an Imam. It’s cool... its cool to be proud of your religion, it’s cool knowing your religion. It’s cool praying five times a day. Yes, it’s a good thing for youngsters to go out there and mind your religion,” (MG8/FG 4/23-years-old).

The marriage between popular cultures with religion as in the form of *Imam Muda* which to them is a form of contradiction where entertainment should not be mixed with religion. The conflict between secular and religion is problematic for these informants, suggesting that producers are trivialising and commercialising religion.

“...I didn’t say that reality TV is not good at all... what I don’t like is, they make it (a) competition, for religious things. I think it is not appropriate to make it a competition. But (for) other programmes like *Soal Asyraf, Al-Kulliyah*... I like to watch it because they, they usually discuss current issue. For example, what is the *hukum* for dyeing our

hair, so we know from it what the hukum is? Because the world is becoming very modern...many issue has arise, like tattoo. So after watching that, we can learn something from and we can learn about religion from other resources, not only from *Imam Muda*. And for *Imam Muda*, all I want to say (is) I don't like it because they (producer) make it into a competition. It is the only way for Astro to make money, that is why they make it into a reality TV (show),” (MG12/FG 4/20-years-old).

Passive Religious Home Life and Solution

Contradiction at home where failure or the lack of parental involvement in providing religious guidance and education to their children meant young people have to be resourceful in recreating their religious identity and spiritualism. A passive religious home meant that many of the informants use various forms of information and communication technology to download and appropriate some of knowledge that they gather into their religious practice.

“(I) learn (to read the Quran) out of listening to the (showing headphone)...from Alif, Ba, Ta and all. My mum did taught me. But she doesn't always read the Quran” (MG3/Individual Interview II/18-years-old).

In this respect, *Imam Muda* provides useful knowledge in improving informants' religious practice. For MB8, he got see how a Muslim should be cleansed for funeral rites in one of the episodes of *Imam Muda*.

Discussion

What the findings derived suggests is that 'religion' not only remained central to the lives of young Muslims in Malaysia but it is in no way, waning amongst them. In fact, from their narratives, it is apparent that the political and social condition concerning Islam has made them more intent for Malaysia to be a much more 'Islamic' country. Their frustration at the inconsistency and ineffectuality on the part of the government in protecting and upholding the religion explains why many view Islam is in a state of constant contradiction. They are also disillusioned with the whole idea of 'popular Islam' that was projected through Malaysian Islamic television programmes, it does not truly reflect Islam. As they see life around them is

a world of contradiction from the true Islamic life, they are forced to build their religious identity and seek their own spiritual path through new media. Thus, this reflects a deep sense of religiosity among them. However, it raises the problem of credibility of the source of religious information that they downloaded from the new media.

Yet, there are multiple sets of Islamic identity among them. Those who are critical about the decline of Islam can be categorised as ‘Declared Identity’ while those who turn heavily to religion are seen as ‘Chosen Identity’ (Peek, 2005).

In terms of the role of the media in religion, Islamic televangelism should be in tune with the social reality of life and spoke on the applicability of religion to it. Relevance is key in order for young Muslims to support Islamic religious programmes.

Conclusion

It is indeed important to consider that although the media does not have a causal link to the shaping one’s religious identity, yet it does provide a powerful cultural resources for young people to negotiate, contrast, reflect and appropriate its content into their daily life. But in order for Islam televangelism to be effective, it is important for it to be a tool for spiritual growth and fulfilment, untainted by politics and power.

By and large, parents and community must play an active role in providing religious education to young people because it does appear that the new media is taking over their role as the new religious teacher at this moment.

Nota

¹ This paper was earlier presented at thei-Comme’12 Conference. And this version has been revised and redrafted. Correspondence with the author can be made through email contact at haryati@ums.edu.my or haryatiabdulkarim@gmail.com

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