

Constructed Virtual Identity of Muslim Women in Social Media

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Abstract

The phenomenon and the development of new media introduce a new communication's form of social media that requires an individual to have a virtual identity. This identity is an outstanding image of self-presentation that is built up deliberately by an individual in cyberspace. Through social networks, e.g., *Facebook*, a person acts as producer and simultaneously as gatekeeper of a message who can express a thought without any restraint. Basically, this study aimed to investigate how Muslim women created and constructed their virtual identity in a profile of *Facebook*. Furthermore, this study keened to determine the factors that affected the virtual identity of Muslim women on *Facebook*. The methodology was descriptive qualitative with discourse analysis approach. Data collection was carried out by examining documents obtained from the subjects' profiles in Facebook and interviews. Purposive sampling was conducted to select the subjects based on the research topics, which were the subjects actively used *Facebook*, understood the issues, and were trustworthy. Data analysis technique used in his study was discourse analysis approach as developed by Teun A. Van Dijk. It was employed to examine the textual, image, in this case *Facebook*'s profile of Muslim women. The conclusions in this study are there is a propensity of the masquerade of virtual identity including user's name, profile picture, and statuses carried out by Muslim women in *Facebook*. Subsequently, the factors of age, role, and their devotion on Islamic teachings also affected Muslim women in making up their virtual identity.

Keywords: Cyber identity, Muslm women; Social Media; Virtual identity

1. Introduction

Media representation, particularly the conventional media, has been a powerful source in affecting and depicting the construction of Muslim women's identity (Zubair, 2010: 190). Its power in creating news has limited the range of Muslim women. Nevertheless, the flare of social media or social networks led to an augmented number of women's engagement in social media, including *Facebook*. In 2014, The Indonesian Internet

Service Providers Association (*Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia (APJII)*) claimed that 51% of Internet users are women whose main reason was to have it as a means of socialization or communication by accessing social networks.

Basically, woman is the group that gains the most benefit from the existence of social media since it provides space for them to express their thoughts and to inspire others without any restraints. Despite of the risks that might exist in

the reality, women in Muslim countries began to demonstrate their freedom by having virtual identity. Ebrahimi and Salaveria (2015: 168) who focused their study on Iranian women as *Facebook* users found out that they were evidenced to portray dissimilar self-presentations between the virtual and the real life.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the majority of Muslim population is relatively inclined to adapt the Islamic teachings into the democratic norms (Maarif, 2015: 148). The integration of new media, society, and latest Islamic discourse, ultimately, has brought a number of implications. One of the implications is the ordinary thing for Muslim women to express opinions on their daily lives, including on social media or cyberspace.

In social media, one has potential to become a mass communicator. Luik (2011: 114) suggested that any person is capable to spread event/occurrence on the earth without any filter from the editor. Explicitly, an individual has lofty self-determination to use social media since she/he acts as producer and recipient as well as gatekeeper for the message. Ease of access is also a concern since merely an email is required to access everything in the media or so-called one-to-many. In contemporary era, social media has become a part of the basic human needs, which is the need for self-esteem.

In fact, modern Muslim women are provided by an ample access to construct their own identity in social media. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the construction of the Muslim women's virtual identity in social media, particularly in *Facebook*.

2. Research Methods

Facebook was opted out as social media to be analyzed in this study since it had been the most popular site in Indonesia. The Head of *Facebook* Indonesia, Adnan Tilak, mentioned that *Facebook's* users from Indonesia reached approximately 69 million and became the fourth largest in the world. In addition, the Nielsen research institute revealed the penetration of Smartphone in Indonesia amounted to 23% contributed to the active internet access by Indonesian people, including social media such as *Facebook* (Luthfi, 2014). Similarly, Campbell in

Berger (2014: 119) asserted that recent young generation has a propensity to be more tolerant for the habit of employing mobile phones.

The subjects were selected by using purposive sampling technique by applying the criterion sampling to obtain subjects based on certain criteria (Palys in Given, 2008: 697). In this study, the subjects were Muslim women with similar educational background and approximately the same age. They were 10 (ten) Muslim women who actively connected in *Facebook*, joined the group titled SMALSA IPA 1&2 '08, had a range of age between 25-27 year-old, and had become a friend of researcher in *Facebook*. This study was carried out in 6 (six) months, January to June 2016. Research methods included documentation research and interview.

Analysis techniques employed in this study was discourse analysis developed by Teun A. Van Dijk, which observes the textual aspect, social cognition, and context (Eriyanto, 2012: 224-225). Researcher observed the textual aspects that included the account name, profile picture and status shared in the subjects' accounts. The social cognition and context were analyzed through observations and interviews. In overall, the researcher implemented a qualitative descriptive method to portray the phenomenon and factors that contributed to the virtual identity by Muslim women.

3. Results and Discussion

Several findings were specifically derived from the data gathered in this study. *First*, Muslim women were fully aware of their behaviors and activities regarding with their virtual identities in *Facebook*, including the consequences. Such consciousness could be identified from their option in including or not including particular information in their profiles. *Second*, Assessment or testimony from of other users, particularly from the members of their joined group also affected their behaviors and activities on *Facebook*.

3.1 The Form of Virtual Identity of Muslim Women on *Facebook*

Most of the subjects attempted to create an image on the profile of their account. In order to

acquire an attractive impression, the profile was generally designed to portray user's professionalism and sociability. It was indicated from the statuses that could be incessantly read by friends.

The most common phenomenon in virtual identity was by not showing the original profile

(the most recent photo). From total 10 respondents, six of them did not provide their actual faces on profile view in the last six months. Some of them also did not show their real names. There were several respondents who preferred a more popular nickname, or e.g., "ummu" (Arabic: mother).

Table 1. List of Facebook Account's name and Profile Picture

No	Real Name	Account	Profile Picture
1	Izzatul Hasanah	Izzy	Faceless
2	Maryam Ummu Nailah	Maryam	Faceless
3	Amaliyah Qisthi Afidati	Amaliyah Qisthi Afidati	Faceless (backlit)
4	Fahmi Adiba	Fahmi Adiba	Faceless
5	Rizka Elfira Nur Istiqomah	Anifira Hikari	Faceless (the picture of user's child)
6	Qonita Amalin	Qonita	Half of the face
7	Farhana Aulia	Farhana Aulia	Faceless (user's back)
8	Maharini Retnomartani	Maharini Retnomartani	Wedding picture (with spouse)
9	Soraya Noor Fadhila	Sora Aya	Selfie
10	Annisa Choirul Hanifah	Annisa Choirul Hanifah	Selfie

Below are the timelines of several subjects of the study who did not display their real picture on *Facebook's* profile picture:



Figure 1. Profile Picture of Fahmi Adiba.



Figure 2. Profile Picture of Maryam.

Increasingly complicated networks and cultural assimilation allegedly contributed to be the sources of an individual's virtual identity. The more variety an individual's identity and role, the less the similarity, thus the process of an individual's identity verification would be more complex and it led to the virtual masquerade identity (Burke and Stets, 2009: 147). Smith in Holmes (2012: 128-129) revealed that the characteristics of the interaction in the computer-based communications media or virtual communication are flexible, spaceless, and textual-medium basis that leads to identity anonymity in virtual interaction. Holmes (2012: 130) reaffirmed there is a concern that the instability and ambiguity of virtual identity would potentially direct to a lack of responsibility. In some cases, it may prompt irresponsible people to conduct gender-transformation since there is no insurance a person on behalf of a particular user is the actual id user.

One's identity was usually built up based on face-to-face interaction hence she/he could preoccupy on displaying a particular role. Nevertheless, in the cyberspace, multiple roles could be blend into one. Even though the subjects of this study were determined by same-age range and in a private group, but each respondent has different role background. An individual could possess multiple roles such as a mother, housewife, student, employee, or a Muslim woman in a virtual world, depending on what sort of role was chosen.

Preferences to represent a distinctive identity surely involved the manipulation process, which was by selecting what kind of information or pictures a user wanted to display or not. In this context, Muslim women frequently paid attention

to the appropriateness of the information that they shared. Macdonald (1995: 132) claimed, women are perceived to have 'natural' properties such as affection and the capability to share with others accompanied by the language of manners. Consequently, Muslim women were inclined to express their opinions carefully, otherwise, there would be punishment or "bullying" from the public.

In the interview, the subjects of this study disclosed that there were differences between the content and interaction in Facebook with the characteristic and personality in the real world. However, several also claimed there was no difference at all. Nevertheless, the concerns about the consequences of the virtual identity had not been proven since almost the entire subjects of this study reported that the manipulation of information that they shared on *Facebook* was solely for discretion and self-protection.

3.2 The Messages Delivered by Muslim Women in Cyberspace

Study on Muslim women who were the members of a private group of Al-Islam Senior High School alumnae indicated that they were connected in *Facebook* in order to communicate with friends/relatives/ colleagues, to make new friends, to seek particular information, to socialize, and to disseminate religious (Islamic) teachings.

There were at least four categories of messages delivered by the users through the uploaded statuses: (1) Feeling and emotional sharing, (2) Information, (3) Activities/events memorizing, and (4) Islamic teachings dissemination. In the

association with the fourth category, *Facebook's* display and posts of the members of SMALSA IPA 1&2 '08 group, expressed their piety by sharing Islamic teachings or propaganda by quoting the Quran or Hadith. Ell in Berger (2014: 421) asserted that the membership in a group contributed to construct a person's identity in terms of social identity. Littlejohn (2011: 102) reaffirmed, "In Asia, identity is most often gained not through individual effort but through the collective group and reciprocity among humans". Therefore, the statuses embodying religious teachings could be a sort of encouragement from the group, due to the understanding of religious knowledge which had been possessed and adhered, to enhance one's positive self-concept in motivating others.

3.3 The Factors Affecting Constructed Virtual Identity of Muslim Women

The results of analysis and interview could be extracted into several factors that affected the masquerade of Muslim women's virtual identities in social media, which are:

- Age
In real life, age is presumed to play an important role for one's maturity in terms of behaviors. Nevertheless, the factor was indecisive in this study since the subjects had similar age.
- Occupation/Role; Either the user was a carrier Muslim woman or stay-at-home mother and either the user was married or single, became a significant factor that affected role identity in social network. It could be identified from the subjects' profile pictures and statuses. Rizka Elfira (account name: Anifira Hikari), for instance, were recorded to change her "selfie" profile pictures regularly. However, since she became a wife and a mother, she had a propensity to share statuses and information related with parenting methods and recipes. It was not significantly different with her daily activities as a kindergarten teacher and a mother. Burke and Stets (2009:5) suggested, "*People act to protect and verify their conception of who they are*". It means that people tend to realize their roles at a given time and subsequently act in

accordance to the role. In this context, Rizka Elfira who posted how to nurture children or recipes was constructing a conception on her role as a kindergarten teacher and a mother. On the contrary, Soraya and Annisa Choirul Hanifah who relatively changed their selfie profile pictures and uploaded their statuses regularly regarding with their status as single women. It demonstrated their roles and statuses as single.

- The Understanding of Islamic Principles and Teachings; A devout Muslim woman will always adhering to the Quran and the Hadith in every pace of life. The interviews with several respondents confirmed that Muslim women should have capacity to uphold the dignity and pride, both in the real life and in cyberspace. In the previous explication, Muslim women with single status conspicuously changed their profile pictures with diverse poses of "selfie". Nevertheless, a pious Muslim woman who understands Islamic teachings should not perform it. It was evidenced by several subjects who were also single such as Fahmi Adiba, Amaliyah Qisthi, and Farhana Aulia who never displayed their real faces on their timelines.
In Islam, a woman's beauty should only be viewed merely by her *mahram* (anyone whom she is permanently forbidden to marry due to close blood relationship), especially her husband. Thus, the Muslim women's virtual identity on *Facebook* that mostly did not display the real face of the user was not intended to deceive others, but rather as a form of self-protection and their devotion to the Islamic teachings.
- Ease of Social Media Access
The rapid development of technology has provided simplicity for people to access information. High variety of social network app features also became another *gimmick* or attraction. Moreover, the provision of Smartphone in diverse styles contributed to public involvement in accessing, uploading, and downloading information easily, anywhere and anytime.

4. Conclusions

From the discussion of analysis results, several conclusions could be derived as follows:

- 4.1 In overall, there is an inclination of virtual identity's masquerade carried out by Muslim women in social network, comprising of user's name, profile picture, and shared statuses. This virtual identity was made due to the development of network, cultural/habit assimilation, and the virtual meeting of numbers of individuals, both men and women, in a space collectively and simultaneously. The preference of virtual identity by Muslim women was intended primarily for self-protection.
- 4.2 Specifically, this study was aimed to reveal the kinds of messages implicitly delivered by Muslim women in *Facebook*, namely: (1) feeling and emotional sharing, (2) information, (3) experienced activity/event, and (4)

Islamic teachings dissemination. In addition, the aspects of age, occupation/role, easiness in accessing social media, and Islamic teachings are the factors that affect the virtual identity of Muslim women in social media, particularly *Facebook*.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express appreciation for the Chairman of Communication Science Master Program Study of Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta, Dra. Prahastiwi Utari, M.Si, Ph.D. Furthermore, the author also thanks to supervisors, Prof. Dr. Ismi Dwi Astuti N, M.Si and Dr. Andre Noevi Rahmanto, M.Si. Finally, the author expresses gratitude for author's mother, Dra. Alif Noor Anna, M.Si, and author's husband, Wahyu Budi Utomo, as well as author's bestfriends in SMALSA IPA 1&2 '08 for being the respondents in this study.

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