

## THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND MUSLIM PIETY IN ACEH: RETHINKING HABERMAS'S CONCEPTION OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

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### Abstract

This study offers insights into the transformation of social media platforms as an alternative to the digital public sphere for Muslim society in Aceh. The communicative action theory by Habermas is used as approach to respond to this challenge. Descriptive quantitative analyst were used to expose religious discourse about Islam amongst young Muslims in Aceh. The results show that WhatsApp has proven to be the most popular among social media platforms. WhatsApp has functioned as a new public sphere for Muslim society in Aceh. It has evolved into an essential part of mediated Islamic discourse in the digital era. In this regard, WhatsApp has created a universal public sphere, available to Muslim society as dialogic communication in Aceh. This research concludes that the Muslims in Aceh are not merely users of WhatsApp. They can also be digital preachers who can build individual narratives as a part of the religious struggle to increase their piety.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Public Sphere, Muslim, Habermas, Communicative Action

### Abstrak

*Kajian ini dilakukan untuk memberikan pemahaman mendalam tentang bagaimana transformasi platform media sosial sebagai alternatif ruang publik digital pada masyarakat Muslim di Aceh. Teori tindakan komunikatif Habermas digunakan sebagai pendekatan untuk menjawab tantangan ini. Analisis deskriptif kuantitatif digunakan untuk mengekspos diskursus keagamaan Islam di kalangan generasi muda Muslim di Aceh melalui lanskap media sosial baru yang lebih kontemporer. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa WhatsApp telah terbukti menjadi media yang paling populer di antara banyak platform media sosial. WhatsApp telah memberikan manfaat sebagai alternatif ruang publik baru bagi masyarakat Muslim di Aceh dan telah berkembang menjadi bagian penting dalam perkembangan diskursus keislaman di era digital. Dalam hal ini, WhatsApp telah menciptakan ruang publik yang universal, tersedia bagi Muslim sebagai satu bentuk komunikasi dialogis di Aceh. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa umat Islam di Aceh bukan hanya pengguna WhatsApp saja. Namun, mereka juga menjadi penceramah digital yang dapat membangun narasi individu yang dipilih sebagai bagian dari perjuangan dakwah untuk meningkatkan ketakwaan.*

**Kata Kunci:** Media Sosial, Ruang Publik, Muslim, Habermas, Tindakan Komunikatif

### Background

Unlike traditional mass media, the new advances on the internet, particularly social media, have provided a more liberated space for Muslims to participate and engage in the virtual realm of what is known as the digital public sphere. Moreover, a unique report by

smartinsight.com in July 2020 has researched the changes in social media use during the the COVID-19 lockdown. Notably, there was massive growth in online and digital activities. More than half of the world uses social media; 4.66 billion people use the internet, and 5.22

billion are unique mobile users<sup>1</sup>. Undoubtedly, social media platforms are now the new public sphere.

In recent years, one of the most significant transformations of Islam in Indonesia is the increasing support provided to Muslims on social media platforms when practising their belief. To a certain extent, media practices have become indiscernible from religious practices. Most importantly, Muslims in Aceh often regard their online activities as part of their piety efforts to build up their religiosity. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook are suitable because their use are so embedded in their lives.

In the digital public sphere, social media allows for the expression of thoughts, knowledge, and relevant discourse such as on religion and other social discourse. Through social media, Muslim society can present any information and arguments. The other side it sometimes causes misunderstanding that leads to hatred, anger, and so on between social media users regarding contending Islamic perspectives<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, further study is needed considering that studies on social media do not yet represent Muslim society in Aceh as a majority Muslim province in Indonesia, specifically in relation to their status as active users within the digital era, through a contemporary new media landscape.

Various social media platforms have revived the digital public sphere. Which social media platforms influences the young Muslim community in Aceh the most? How does it mediate Islam in the digital era? Many studies

claim that social media have also given limitless space and time that has exceeded the technical capabilities of a traditional public spheres such as mosques, Islamic boarding schools, and universities. This research is expected to reveal that social media is an alternative to the public sphere in Muslim society in Aceh.

### **Communicative Action and Religious Discourse**

The theoretical framework aims to define the transformation of the public sphere and social media through mediated Islam in a digital era. Habermas argues that society can communicate without manipulation and coercion through communicative action theory<sup>3</sup>. In every communicative act, Muslims as social media users must presuppose that they can use the same expressions in the same way<sup>4</sup>. As Habermas argues, "if we do not presuppose that we can give the same meaning to the same terms, we would not even to speak<sup>5</sup>."

Habermas developed the communicative conditions in an ideal speech situation: 1. All users have the same opportunity to start a discussion, express arguments, and criticize other participants' ideas; 2. Among the users, no difference in power can avoid those opinions that might be relevant; 3. All users express their thoughts sincerely, so one cannot manipulate the other without realizing it<sup>6</sup>.

Habermas offers prioritizes formal pragmatic relations: objective reality, social reality, and subjective reality that can produce three kinds of attitudes: objectivism, normative conformity, or critical and expressive perspective. Moreover, rationality is

<sup>1</sup> Global Social Media Research Summary 2020. (2020). Taken on 7 September 2020, From Smart Insights Website: <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/>

<sup>2</sup> Bhakti, Sufri Eka. "Exposure to Da'wah Message among Young Social Media Users in Aceh: A Reflection of Habermas's Communicative Action." *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 10.2 (2020): 217-234.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Beacon Press, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Jürgen Habermas; Trans. by Thomas McCarthy*. Heinemann, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Calhoun, Craig, ed. *Habermas and the public sphere*. MIT press, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "The theory of communicative action (vol. 2): System and lifeworld." *Cambridge: Polity* (1987).

understood as an argumentative discussion to obtain mutual agreement. According to Habermas, everyone should have the same chance to experience and share their ideas. The public sphere can be defined as a space between the society and the state where the public conducts rational discussion, develops ideas, and challenge the government<sup>7</sup>.

According to Habermas, communication activities in the public sphere must be oriented to valid claims that are real but related and complementary to each other, namely: truth claims which involve the objective natural world; claims of appropriateness which affect the implementation of social norms; claims of sincerity which concerning the suitability between mind and expression; and claims of comprehensibility which is agreement because the fulfilment of the three claims above is sufficient reason for consensus<sup>8</sup>.

### Public Sphere and Muslim Piety

Habermas' notion of the public sphere has historically been handed down to the next era through different contexts, with the same goal: egalitarianism or equality, by applying norms such as social criticism to influence political, social, cultural, economic, and morality<sup>9</sup>. However, Habermas has been criticised for ignoring religious discourse in the public sphere. Like most mid-century scholars,

Calhoun claims that Habermas believed religion declined as societies modernised<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast to Habermas's thesis, many prominent scholars offered the idea of the religious public sphere. Eickelman and Salvatore<sup>11</sup>, Casanova<sup>12</sup>, Hefner<sup>13</sup>, and Asad<sup>14</sup> have argued that religion had played an essential role in developing the public sphere. Through digital public sphere, people have been able to gain the same chance to start a dialogue, express opinions, and criticize other views. In this regard, Muslims have participated as equals in dialogical communication to seek the truth and the common good as part of their acts of piety.

The reason for this line of thinking is exciting. It would be relatively pointless to determine the right of the religious citizen to include their religious views in the informal public sphere if no complementary duties obliged other citizens to take those views seriously<sup>15</sup>. In Habermas' view, Muslim who use social media users would have the same opportunity to start a discussion, express arguments, and criticize other participants' ideas<sup>16</sup>. It seems clear that this theoretical lens reconceptualizes Habermas' views of the public sphere in relation to the new media ecology that features many-to-many channels, including social media platforms<sup>17</sup>.

Few previous studies have investigated religious relations in the public sphere. Studies

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<sup>7</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "Reconciliation through the public use of reason: remarks on John Rawls's political liberalism." *The journal of philosophy* 92.3 (1995): 109-131.

<sup>9</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "Reconciliation through the public use of reason: remarks on John Rawls's political liberalism." *The journal of philosophy* 92.3 (1995): 109-131.

<sup>10</sup> Calhoun, Craig, ed. *Habermas and the public sphere*. MIT press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Eickelman, Dale F., and Armando Salvatore. "The public sphere and Muslim identities." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 43.1 (2002): 92-115.

<sup>12</sup> Casanova, José. "Rethinking secularization: A global comparative perspective." *Religion, globalization, and culture*. Brill, 2007. 101-120.

<sup>13</sup> Hefner, Robert W. *Civil Islam*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Lafont, Cristina. "Religion in the public sphere: remarks on Habermas's conception of public deliberation in postsecular societies." *Constellations-Oxford* 14.2 (2007): 239.

<sup>16</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "The theory of communicative action (vol. 2): System and lifeworld." *Cambridge: Polity* (1987).

<sup>17</sup> Bruns, Axel, and Tim Highfield. "Social media and the public sphere." *The Routledge companion to social media and politics* (2015): 56-74.

working in these fields have focused on several major themes, namely, public sphere contestation<sup>18</sup>; Islamization, piety, fundamentalism; religious movement<sup>19</sup>; female ulama; mediating religious authority in a limited 'Islamic' public sphere in contemporary Indonesia<sup>20</sup>; a nethnography study of contesting #IslamNusantara on Instagram<sup>21</sup>. Through their analysis, these studies do not explicitly aim to uncover the transformative power of social media platforms as an alternative to the public sphere among Muslim societies in Indonesia, especially in Aceh as a Sharia Province.

Several latest studies have also studied Islam within the social media landscape, such as responding to Islamophobia by internalizing the value of Islam *Rahmatan lil Alamin* ("mercy to humankind") through using the media<sup>22</sup>; the new da'wah strategy among millennial generations through Tiktok during the pandemic<sup>23</sup>; religious expression of hijrah celebrities: accommodating protest and political economy of public piety<sup>24</sup>; and radical Islamic movements in West Sumatra: an early investigation and mapping<sup>25</sup>. Several of these studies do not employ the theory of the public sphere by Habermas, which would have

deepened their understanding of the communicative action.

There should be a theory of communicative action in the public sphere from a religious perspective. Social media can help Muslim society create and maintain its effort of maintaining piety. Social media's technical ability can increase social interaction and build more significant social connections. This growing social network in Muslim society can holistically change the character of Muslim piety and society's religious way of life at both the interpersonal and community levels. Therefore, social media allows Muslims to develop rational and critical discussions about Islam in Aceh actively.

### Shifting from Traditional to Digital Public Sphere

In the past, pursuing knowledge about Islam was mostly limited to mosques and educational institutions such as *Dayah*. *Dayah* in Aceh functioned as the centre for controlling da'wa (Islamic propagation), managing its shortcomings, and spreading the message of the religion. *Dayah* not only played as an educational institution but also as a community and Islamic intellectual institution<sup>26</sup>. These traditional learning options remain intact. Muslim societies can also learn, question, teach, and network through social media. For

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<sup>18</sup> Qodir, Zuly. "Public sphere contestation: configuration of political Islam in contemporary Indonesia." *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 1.1 (2011): 123-149.

<sup>19</sup> Alam, Lukis. "Islamization, Piety, Fundamentalism: Religious Movement In Campus." *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 4.2 (2018): 104-120.

<sup>20</sup> Hasanuddin, Muhammad Irfan. "Female Ulama: Mediating Religious Authority In A Limited 'Islamic'public Sphere In Contemporary Indonesia." *Islam Realitas: Journal Of Islamic And Social Studies* 4.2 (2018): 189-210.

<sup>21</sup>Rohmatulloh, Dawam Multazamy, and Asna Istya Marwantika. "Contesting# IslamNusantara on Instagram: A Shared Interest Pool." *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama dan Sosial Budaya* 6.2 (2021): 101-114.

<sup>22</sup> Parhan, Muhamad, et al. "Responding to Islamophobia by Internalizing the Value of Islam Rahmatan Lil Alamin through Using the Media." *Islam*

*Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 6.2 (2020): 137-149.

<sup>23</sup> Hakim, Fany Nur Rahmadiana, Ihsan Kamaludin, and Shifa Nisrina Sujana. "The New Da'wah Strategy among Millennial Generations through Tiktok During Pandemic." *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 7.2 (2021): 167-180.

<sup>24</sup> Muna, Afrida Arinal. "Religious Expression of Hijrah Celebrity: Accommodating Protest and Political Economy of Public Piety." *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 6.1 (2020): 90-99.

<sup>25</sup> Hendri, Novi, and Hardi Putra Wirman. "The Radical Islamic Movements in West Sumatra: An Early Investigation and Mapping." *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 6.1 (2020): 100-118.

<sup>26</sup> Duhri, Saifuddin, and Tarmizi Jakfar. "Māturidite Kalam among Southeast Asian Ash'arite: A Synthesis of Māturidite Influences on Dayah's Theology." *Al-Jami'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies* 58.2 (2020): 391-418.

instance, Muslims can watch a lecture on Youtube, Instagram and WhatsApp in any language they want, whenever they want. Social media as a modern public sphere is a medium to discuss relevant religious issues in Muslim societies<sup>27</sup>.

Social media has contributed to spreading understanding about Islam. It also changes communication practices and forms, mainly when dealing with the majority of millennial Muslim society. Because social media has become an essential reference for information on religious matters, social media can and should be used to communicate and disseminate Islamic knowledge. Since social media has become one of the references for religious issues, it is essential to dissect the transformative power of social media platforms as an alternative to the digital public sphere for Muslim society.

Many societies in Indonesia, including Aceh, widely use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook to deliver Islamic thought and knowledge through some activities on social media features. This is pursued only as a da'wah purpose. Rather, Muslim societies should also be able to involve and utilize social media development as a digital public sphere because social media has strengths that can be used effectively to spread Islamic values and strengthen brotherhood among Muslims.

Social media like WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook are some of the most crucial tools for the religious development of individuals and social groups in Aceh, as a channel of sharing, discussing, and disseminating religious issues. Social media, such as WhatsApp, must be used wisely to convey the message about Islam. If this runs smoothly, WhatsApp as a digital public sphere will be an effective medium for Muslims.

Under these circumstances, social media's emergence is an essential public sphere to practice and discuss religious issues and other relevant information about Islam among Muslim societies in Aceh. These social media, in many forms, can be seen as a public sphere to encourage and develop better communities in the future. While many research on social media has been carried out, there still some gaps in our understanding how Muslim society uses WhatsApp for religious discourse, especially in Aceh. Hence, this research is expected to continue several studies' results to explain how social media mediated Islam in the digital era.

### **Social Media Platforms' Transformative Power as an Alternative to the Digital Public Sphere**

This research used a descriptive quantitative method through an online survey approach. The population is active social media users, with a total sample of 118 Muslim students in Aceh. The online survey was conducted to explore the students' social media usage in the public sphere. Previously, pre-tests were carried out to assist this research in increasing survey validity. This survey is available for responses for two weeks using Google form. The scope of this research covered only the WhatsApp platform.

This study found that students in Acehnese Muslim society chose the most popular social media WhatsApp to discuss and disseminate information such as religious and other relevant issues about Islam. From the perspective of communicative action theory (Habermas, 1989), WhatsApp can be regarded as an alternative means of communication for Muslims. This research argues that individuals using social media can experience changes

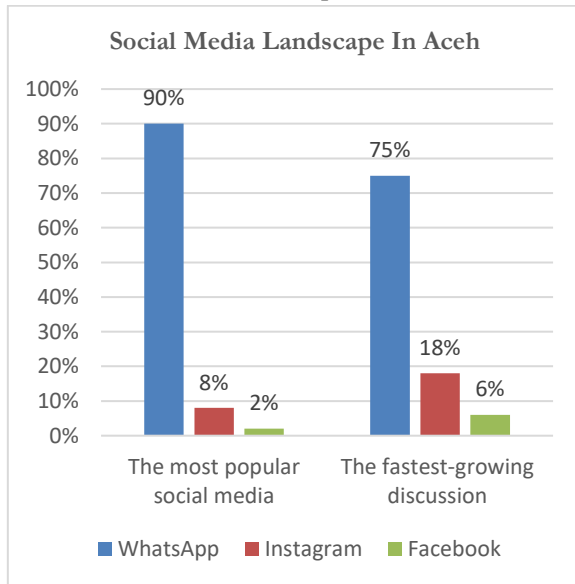
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<sup>27</sup> Omar, Faradillah Iqmar, Nor Azlili Hassan, and Iza Sharina Sallehuddin. "Role of Social Media in Disseminating Dakwah (Peranan Media Sosial dalam Penyebaran Dakwah)." *Islamic perspectives relating to*

*business, arts, culture and communication*. Springer, Singapore, 2015. 43-55.

influenced by mediated Islam in the digital era. The changes make Muslim society more open and faster, especially in Aceh.

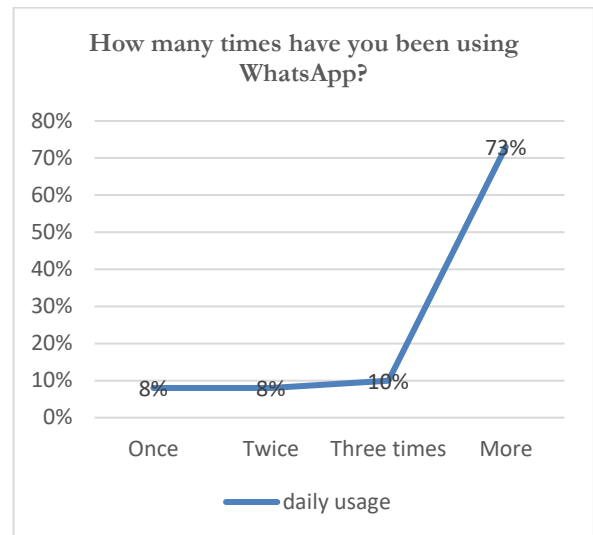
**Figure 1:** The Most popular social media in Aceh and the fastest-growing discussion about Islam on social media platform



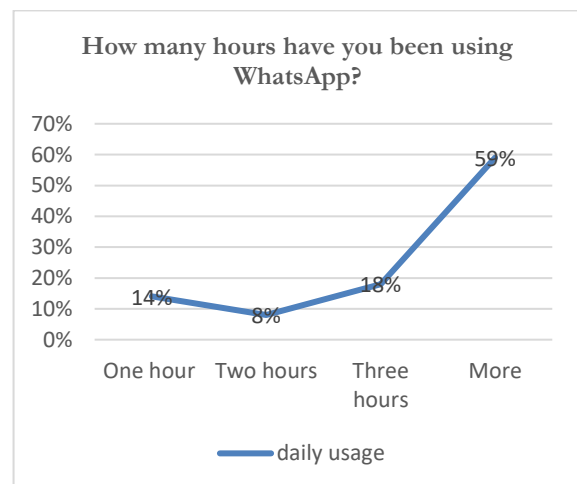
The 118 respondents to the Muslim public survey revealed that social media users used social media to discuss Islam. 90.7% of Muslim society used WhatsApp, and 8.5 % used Instagram. In Aceh, the Muslim public considers WhatsApp as influencing their religious life. Based on the data obtained, 75.2% of Muslim society in Aceh stated the fastest-growing discussion about Islam. It is appropriate to link this to Habermas' theory regarding the principles in the public sphere that ease access to information that technologies such as social media enable community members to access information about Islam without manipulation and coercion through the communicative action theory<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Beacon Press, 1979.

**Figure 2:** Daily frequency of using WhatsApp



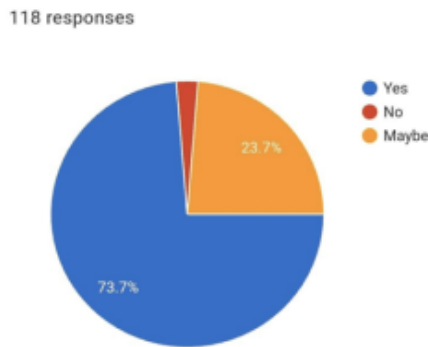
**Figure 3:** Daily hour frequency of using WhatsApp



Based on the data obtained, 118 Muslims showed that they used WhatsApp, which can also be linked to frequency. 59.3% of the Muslim public said that they use WhatsApp for "more than three hours a day", and 72.9% use WhatsApp "more than three times a day." Some Muslims believe that social media is a digital public sphere that allows individuals to convey public discourse in Aceh. It is relevant to Habermas's suggestion that the public sphere has easy access to information. In this sense, everyone has the same opportunity to

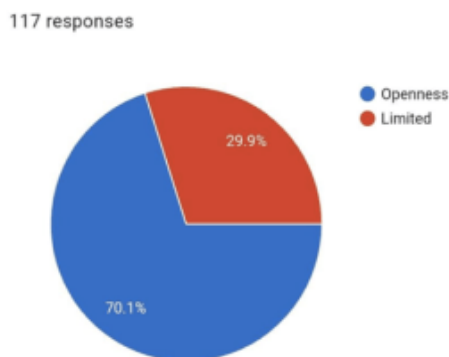
participate and convey their ideas through WhatsApp.

**Figure 4:** Opportunity to start a discussion and to express arguments about Islam on WhatsApp



Based on the survey of 118 Muslims in Aceh, the respondents say have the same chance to discuss and express arguments about Islam on WhatsApp. 73.7% of the Muslim public said "Yes," and 23.7% said, "Maybe." According to Habermas, the Muslim public in WhatsApp has the same opportunity to start a dialogue, express opinions, and criticize other participants' ideas<sup>29</sup>. It seems clear that Habermas' conception of the public sphere for social media platforms is being fulfilled.

**Figure 5:** Muslim behaviour when using WhatsApp

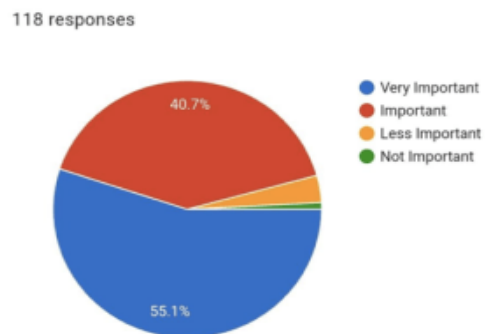


<sup>29</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "The theory of communicative action (vol. 2): System and lifeworld." *Cambridge: Polity* (1987).

<sup>30</sup> Lafont, Cristina. "Religion in the public sphere: remarks on Habermas's conception of public

media in WhatsApp. 70.1% said "openness," and 29.9% said "limited." These attempts are ethical enable Muslim societies to express their thoughts openly. To be sure, this data is related to identifying the freedom of WhatsApp users as religious views in the informal public sphere<sup>30</sup>. Hence, the Muslim public in Aceh who use social media will have the same opportunity to discuss and express arguments and criticize other participants' ideas.

**Figure 6:** The importance of WhatsApp



The Muslim public believe that WhatsApp is essential to build rational discussion and form an opinion about Islam. As many as 55.1% of the Muslim respondents said "very important," 40.7 % said "important." This data shows that WhatsApp also focuses on the quality or meaning of using social media. This new shape of the public sphere, which shows social media increase eligious belief and understanding through Islamic discourse. It is a process where Muslim society users try to convince other users on WhatsApp to accept the proposed Islamic knowledge based on reason in public in deliberative dialogue regarding religious discourse. In line with Habermas<sup>31</sup>, rationality is understood as an argumentative discussion to obtain mutual agreement.

deliberation in postsecular societies." *Constellations-Oxford- 14.2* (2007): 239.

<sup>31</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "The theory of communicative action (vol. 2): System and lifeworld." *Cambridge: Polity* (1987).

As a digital public sphere, WhatsApp has also increased Muslim interaction by establishing, fostering, and perpetuating social and religious texts regarding the development of Islam in Aceh. WhatsApp has practically mediated Islam in the digital era with the digital public sphere's power, giving unlimited access to space and time. To be sure, WhatsApp has had many positive effects on Muslim effort to increase piety in Aceh because it can reduce communication barriers in time and space. It can also improve the quality Islamic thought and knowledge more rationally and critically. In other words, the study results prove that WhatsApp, one of the digital social media, has become a significant public sphere for Muslim piety in Aceh.

### Conclusion

The fact the social media are becoming popular has created a digital public sphere for Muslim society to discuss religious knowledge and practices in Aceh. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp increasingly provide opportunities for piety and equality in deepening the user's understanding of Islamic values through practical discourse. In this regard, the Muslim community can play an essential role in Islamic development by forming a universal discussion accessible to all Muslim societies in Aceh regions without experiencing obstacles in voicing their thoughts and ideas.

Under this circumstance, they can also be digital preachers, who can build individual narratives as a form of religious struggle and improve their piety, while spreading their opinion and understanding of religion related to culture, society, and other aspects. It is important because social media's influence on public opinion in Aceh as a majority Muslim province will also influence sharia law and national regulations in the democratic system in Aceh.

This analysis is not a comprehensive and representative study of a detailed demographic. The results have shown that WhatsApp has become a digital public sphere where the Muslim public in Aceh can also discuss strategic and relevant ideas about Islam. Besides, WhatsApp has mediated Islam in the digital era. It has changed the communication pattern amongst Muslims, which has become more decentralized.

### Recommendations for Further Research

This research is sustainable. However, there should be further investigation into the representation of Islam in Indonesia in different social media platforms. Secondly, the key recommendation for future studies should explore the Muslim milieu as social media users in Indonesia, specifically among the most heavily populated of the Muslim majority provinces such as Aceh, West Sumatra and West Java. Last but not least, this research also recommends conducting more qualitative studies and in-depth interviews with Muslim activists on social media to understand their thoughts on this topic and other specific issues.

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