Worshipper Experience Management: Reshaping Community-based Communication on Religious Activities amidst the Pandemic

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Abstract

Aspects of religious life are inseparable in discussing the social side of the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Indonesia, various religious activities involving mass crowds are the fastest media in spreading disease. Inevitably, religious activities in the context of this pandemic are often considered a driving factor in the transmission of COVID-19. Worship and religious activities can no longer be carried out as usual. When in the early phase of the pandemic, houses of worship were closed. However, there was a policy regarding the re-functionalization of houses of worship in new normal conditions. People have started to return to worship in houses of worship, although with varying intensities. However, religious communities have experienced behavioral changes in religious life. Worship and religious activities have shifted through live streaming and online worship meetings. Here, mass media and social media play an essential role in delivering da'wah, appeals, and religious advice in helping to deal with the pandemic. Long-distance social relations have become the new normal in religious communities. This study explores communication management in religious communities in Yogyakarta and sees how digital media mediated communication dynamics between the members. This descriptive qualitative research uses a phenomenological approach. Data were obtained by conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in three different religious communities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The study results show the role of opinion leaders in maintaining tension in mediated communication and new habits in worship, forming solidarity and spirituality among members of religious communities.

Keywords: *religious community, community-based communication, online worship, communication management*

INTRODUCTION

Since President Joko Widodo officially announced the first case of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020, the government has attempted to prepare various measures and policies to handle and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on changes in religious life, ranging from worship procedures, religious activities, and social care. At the pandemic's beginning, religious leaders emphasized that each religious community in Indonesia worships at their respective homes. This call was conveyed in a press conference at the Graha Office of the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), which broadcast live streaming (n /a, 2020). In the religious field, the government has issued many policies, circulars, and appeals through the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag).

Table 1. Several government regulations in 2020 related to changes in the management of religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Number	Government regulations through the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) in 2020
1	*Circular Letter of the Minister of Religion Number SE.6 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for Worship Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr 1 Shawwal 1441 H during the COVID-19 Outbreak Pandemic*
2	*The appeal of the Director-General of Christian Community Guidance regarding Worship Services, Marriage Blessing Services, Burial Services Related to Covid Emergency*
3	*The appeal of the Director-General of Hindu Community Guidance Regarding Services in the Directorate General of Hindu Community Guidance and Guidelines for Body Care and Pitra Yajna Ceremonies for the Bodies of COVID-19 Patients*
4	*The appeal of the Director-General of Buddhist Community Guidance Regarding the Implementation of Worship, Prevention of the COVID-19 Virus and Treatment of the Body*
5	*Circular of the Minister of Religion Number 18 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Eid al-Adha Prayers and the Slaughter of Sacrificial Animals*
6	*Circular Letter of the Minister of Religion No. 15/2020 concerning Guidelines for Organizing Activities in Houses of Worship in Realizing Productivity and Safety in a Pandemic Period*
7	*KMA No. 719 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of Umrah during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Source: processed by researchers from various sources (2021).

This religious approach in preventing COVID-19 is seen as very strategic because religious leaders, in the eyes of the Indonesian people, are still a trusted reference in conveying information, including information about COVID-19. Practically, the policy of worshiping from home has become a new habit for religious people in Indonesia. Congregational and collective religious activities are then regulated and must follow strict health protocols. For instance, the Circular Letter of the Ministry of Religion Number 15 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for implementing Religious Activities in Houses of Worship was issued. It is a response to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and protect the public from the risk of its impact.

The phenomenon of worshiping from home can be seen in many places in Indonesia. The implementation of worship at mosques and churches changed completely, including the intensity and involvement of the congregation. Although prayer is still carried out, as usual, the attendance of the people is limited. In fact, for several months, the implementation of Friday worship was not carried out in the congregation at the mosque because it was closed in response to the government's appeal. Almost no churches have been found holding services on Sundays since the third week of March 2020. For Sunday worship, the implementation is in their respective homes with guidelines for worship procedures from their individual churches. Some of them try to broadcast live streaming using the YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram applications.

However, how do houses of worship (churches, mosques, monasteries, pagodas, temples) deal with the pandemic in response to this ban on worshiping in the congregation? Another critical question is the congregation's spirituality with the restrictions on worshiping in this house of worship is? Is there a new meaning for the experience of worshiping from home? Here, how are the communication dynamics between congregations in religious communities, and what changes have occurred in communication management among its members, which shifted into virtual communication. Long-distance social relations that occur certainly change the pattern of communication between members. The purpose of this

study is to explore the experiences of community members in responding to worship policies from home while at the same time explaining the use of new media in mediating social communication in religious communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most people, in general, know about the circumstances and information about Covid 19 from social media and online media. Not surprisingly, the spread of information, disinformation, and hoaxes on Covid-19 is moving as fast as the spread of the Covid virus. Through various media channels, information on COVID-19 is scattered (exposure) to the community, piercing the cognition structure of the community. So the different terminology related to the central message of COVID-19 became viral quickly. Terms such as lockdown, social distancing, quarantine, self-isolation, and others are so familiar in the social interaction of the community. Medical times such as rapid test, Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), or swab test, and their units such as reactive and positive are prevalent in social communication. Likewise, categorical terms in the health world such as People Under Monitoring (ODP), Patients Under Monitoring (PDP), and positive patients have also become very familiar. Such COVID-19 discourse then creates panic, and a high sense of anxiety hits the community. The panic situation was mainly caused not only by the value of the killing power of the coronavirus but also mainly by way of discourse itself (Wahyono, 2021).

Central and strategic figures in society, namely religious leaders, are fully obliged to assist the government's efforts to provide and disseminate knowledge, data, and information related to handling the Covid-19 pandemic that is easy to understand, accurate and reliable to religious communities. Strengthening and distributing correct expertise in anticipating the Covid-19 pandemic by central figures is very influential and needs to be supported by strict legal protection in implementation so that people obey and have a high awareness of the dangers of the covid-19 virus (Muchammadun et al., 2021).). In other words, the role of religious leaders is essential in efforts to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. For example, religious leaders can actively avoid the dissemination of hoaxes or misinformation through the WA Group for the local religious community.

On the other hand, the development of communication technology allows humans to carry out website-based communication and social media-based communication. The presence of new media provides an alternative medium of contact for the community during a pandemic, which does not allow direct face-to-face communication due to mobility restrictions and physical distancing rules. Changes in worship patterns from communal to personal previously carried out in places of worship are then carried out at home and work into a new tradition for the people (Jubba, 2021).

Regarding worship practices, prohibitions or restrictions on the number of congregations in worship meetings during the pandemic encourage the emergence of digital services in managing people's worship. Online worship services have become an alternative for pastors and fellow congregations to work remotely through technology through zoom meeting applications or live streaming. Online worship has become a new pattern of prayer for church members. In other words, the practice of worship is carried out with adaptations in many ways, including the time and place of worship. The changes that occur, in principle, do not change the substance of prayer as explicitly outlined in religious teachings.

New media presence during the pandemic provides opportunities for website-based communication and social media communication in religious communities. Changes in communication patterns are made possible by the existence of communication technology. For example, the increasingly massive use of smartphones allows the formation of mediated communication by messaging instances

(Whatsapp, Line, or other IMs), making the spread of messages very fast. During the pandemic, the congregation of the religious community performs worship from home or practices worship online. Remediation theory can be used in providing an understanding of the use of new media as a solution. Remediation is a media theory that explains that the presence of the media cannot be separated from the previous media; there is a process of incorporation or absorption of the prior media. Remediation itself involves a double logic, namely immediacy and hypermediacy (Luik, 2020). Here, remediation is understood as the process of refashioning or improving from previous media or media practices. Therefore, worship from home becomes something that can be done with new media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research uses a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological principles that emphasize how people relate to objects of experience understand and interact focus on everyday subjective meanings and experiences that explain how objects and experiences are meaningfully created and communicated in everyday life. Denzin and Lincoln, 2009). Patilima provides a more detailed explanation that using empirical data of the subject being studied comes from case studies, personal experiences, introspection, life journeys, interviews, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts. It describes moments and meanings of everyday life and problems in one's life (Patilima, 2016).

This study observed were members of the Catholic Community of Santo Yoakim, the Christian Women's Community of the Kayen Baptist Church, and the Muslim Community of UPN Sempu Housing in Yogyakarta. Each of these communities has one communication medium, the Whatsapp Chat Group, to facilitate information among its members. The stories of community members' experiences through focus group activities and in-depth interviews are the primary data sources in this research. Therefore, Observing group conversations on social media applications explain the understanding of communication dynamics in the community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mediated circulation of messages and information

Of course, restrictions on religious activities during the pandemic have resulted in long-distance relations between members of this religious community needing to be maintained. One of the communication strategies used is to form WhatsApp conversation groups. These WhatsApp chat groups have become an imaginary "real space," bringing real life into the new media space. The communication in it succeeded in forming social relations for the participants involved in this conversation group. Information sharing behavior occurs among participants who engage in group conversations more intensely. Dialogue almost always occurs even though sure participants often dominate it. It means that not all of the conversation group participants actively communicate, some of whom only act as 'silent readers,' actively monitoring the dialogue but not actively involved.

Among the many activities in conversation groups, seeking information and sharing information is interesting to be discussed further. First, the participants who actively post links to sources of information or news characterize the degree of activeness of participants in seeking and sharing information. Here, participants are active and seek information, and when the data is worth sharing, they share it in group conversations. Second, the types of postings or sharing of information sources in group conversations are usually steady and reflect the participants' views on values or ideologies. For example, in the UPN Sempu Muslimah community conversation group, the information shared includes themes around religious teachings and religious practices, from inspirational stories, news, and other light articles.
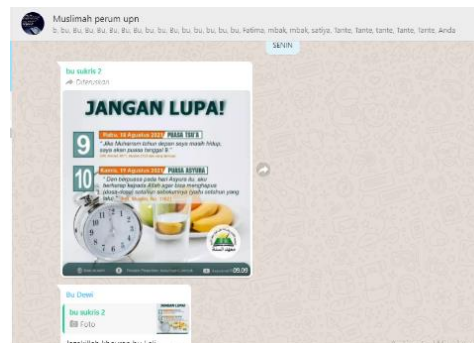
Figure 1. One posts in a WhatsApp group conversation

A similar experience also occurred in the Santo Yoakim community and the Kayen Church Community. They rely on WhatsApp informal communication in disseminating information about religious activities, which generally have turned into online meetings based on conference application-based applications via Google Meet or Zoom Meeting.

However, the circulation of messages and information is limited to the delivery of community activity agendas such as online mass or worship schedules, weekly worship service schedules, weekly reflections from the priest or pastor who is serving. Usually, those who act as gatekeepers for the circulation of messages and information in these conversation groups are the community leaders and administrators who also act as admins in these conversation groups. The pattern of selective behavior is also shown in information management. The community has built-in Whatsapp conversation groups to avoid tensions that might arise due to sharing posts. Delita, the secretary of the Santo Yoakim community, explained that as the smallest unit of the church organization, Whatsapp Group is a communication medium whose function is more to relay information from the Parish, such as information on liturgical or Mass management (FGD, June 24, 2021).

Pandemic spirituality in a new (online) worship model

This section provides an overview and explanation of fundamental changes during worship and patterns adapted to emergency conditions due to unfavorable environmental conditions. The experience of community members worshiping at home forms new meanings in spirituality and new adaptations in worship management strategies.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the usual worshiping in the congregation has changed drastically. Routine worship is no longer carried out in mosques or churches but is carried out in homes. The people involved are also minimal. In this case, it only requires family members who are at home. The prayer calling as a marker of the entry of prayer time is still echoed from the mosques, but the congregation continues to pray at home.

In the Christian community, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia) has appealed to all members to maintain a safe distance and worship at their respective homes as a form of support for the government's program in handling Covid-19. All worship that should be carried out in the Church, such as Sunday school coaching, youth coaching worship, catechism coaching, blessing, and others, should be held at home (n/a, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a significant change for the Christian religion in the way of worship. In this case, worship carried out in the Church by fellowshipping together between pastors, workers, and congregations is done entirely at home. DS, a pastor of the Kayen Church community, stated that the pandemic could be a touchstone for the

congregation's faith and obedience in worship. "This pandemic teaches us to be more obedient and closer to God and has more faith in us because in the end we are directed to rely on God and love people for real" (DS, FGD June 27, 2021). It leads to the realization that the essence of worship is not just an encounter with the whole body of Christ (communal), but the essence is an encounter with the Lord Jesus personally (personal). In this case, the new meaning of worship becomes worship and a call for believers to draw closer to God. Therefore worship cannot be limited by anything and can be done anywhere and anytime.

A similar experience from Mumu, an activist of the Kayen Church community, said that she joins online worship services not only at the Kayen church. Sometimes she joins with her hometown church in Pati or other churches whose church pastors motivate him. She says:

> "I listen to many sermons from pastors on youtube and various other social media. My husband and I also have online Bible studies with Christian communities outside the Church. From before we got married until after we married, my husband and I got used to worshiping together or what we currently call the family altar. We praise God, glorify His name, pray to God, and we meditate on God's words from home. However, it feels different from worshiping directly in Church with all congregation members with complete musical instruments. However, we believe that wherever the place is and with whomever we worship, even if only one or two people gather, we believe that God is there. be with us and bless us (Personal communication, July 9, 2021)"

Changes in worship patterns that occur in churches bring new spirituality for the people in general and community members specifically in the way of worship, namely: (a) from worship in the Church to worship at home, (b) worship activities centered at home or house churches, (c) from face-to-face worship to remote or online worship, (d) the head of the family acts as a priest.

The dynamics of community social communication in the new (media) space

The relationship between community members is, of course, not always dynamic, there are times when it takes place in harmony, but at other times it can also experience tension. Here, the length of time no regular face-to-face meeting can sometimes trigger tension or misunderstanding between community members in understanding the context of the conversation, on what is being discussed in WhatsApp group conversations. However, it also generates a deep longing from community members to return to direct fellowship.

The St. Joachim Community Community is the smallest unit of the organizational structure of the Catholic Church. The same is the case with the Kayen Church Women's Community in the Protestant Christian Church. Therefore, managing messages and information shared in Whatsapp conversation communications is often a relay from a higher authority, for example, Father or Pastor. In addition, these
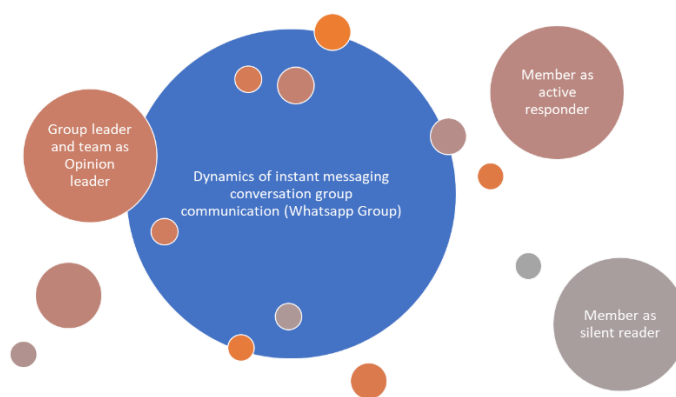
administrators carry out the function of opinion leaders who share messages and information about religious life, such as daily devotions, health appeals, or virtual visitation.

Figure 2. Dynamics model of research results construction communication

Opinion leaders are a trusted source of reference for participants involved in Whatsapp conversation groups looking for information. Not infrequently, opinion leaders also act as gatekeepers in social communication, filtering messages conveyed in Whatsapp conversation groups

In the Muslimah Sempu UPN community, opinion leaders are very active in disseminating information to remind members of sunnah worship that members should do to increase faith and piety to Allah SWT. For members, the information received is recognized as knowledge in the religious life and increasing the faith of its members. Indeed, there are no restrictions on prayer activities in mosques, but regular gatherings have long been abolished. Therefore, the conversation of the community moved in the mediated communication of the WhatsApps short message application.

In the Kayen church community, community leaders and administrators often share strengthening messages such as verses from God's Word, health information, and the latest information about Covid 19. *"We have received many messages and information, but we need to sort and choose which important and not cause anxiety to the congregation."* (DS, FGD June 27, 2021). Chat application-based communication is a form of adaptation in the pattern of service to the congregation.

However, the technique of conveying information in groups is fluid and not rigid like an organized group like in the organizational structure of the Church. In the Santo Yoakim community, for example, it is not uncommon for members to promote the products or food with the permission of all members.

CONCLUSION

The policy of worship from home encourages religious communities to make new adaptations in maintaining the worship experience of their community members. The communication strategy and management of dynamic message and information management aims to build community resilience in the face of a pandemic while at the same time forming a new normal in long-distance religious life. Changes in the pattern of communal worship becoming personal in the family sometimes face challenges in mastering new media technology, especially in the elderly category of the congregation. In this case, the role of the opinion leader becomes vital in assisting. This study recommends that it is necessary to follow up on how selective behavior patterns in managing information in conversation groups in religious communities are needed to model community resilience communication.

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