Kalijaga Journal of Communication,
Vol. 5, No. 1, 2023: 74-84, DOI: https://doi.org/10.14421/kjc.51.05.2023
ISSN (e): 2685-1334; ISSN (p): 2775-1414, http://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/dakwah/kjc/index

Kalijaga Journal of Communication

Understanding the Strength of Muslim Identity as a Way to Manage Anxiety and Uncertainty for Foreign Students While Communicate Digitally in the US

Millenia Rizki Ramadita[(a)], Muhamad Lutfi Habibi [(b),]

[(a)]Utah Tech University, St. George, United States, [(b)] Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

[*]Email: d00484093@utahtech.edu and muhamad.habibi@uin-suka.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
anxiety and uncertainty management, digital communication, Muslim foreign students

This study aims to provide recommendations to foreign Muslim students studying in the United States (US) so they can manage their anxiety and uncertainty when communicating digitally on social media. This research is motivated by the challenges foreign Muslim students face when they have to adapt to interactions that exist in conditions of society that are far different from their origin country, there is not much time, and the scope is now also expanding into the digital world. The method used in this research is qualitative with a case study approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews based on the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory by William B. Gudykunst with three foreign Muslim students from Turkey, Morocco, and Pakistan who were studying at Utah Tech University. The research results show that understanding the strength of Muslim identity contained in oneself is one of the most effective ways to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty they often experience. In addition to understanding Muslim identity, other recommendations include using social media to educate people about negative

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Islamic stereotypes, not giving opinions that conflict with local values, and trying to communicate like US netizens to familiar people. Suggestions for further research are to expand the scope of research by adding more participants from more diverse cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

In the Muslim diaspora in the United States (US) context, there are interesting problems related to their communication with local residents. These diasporas often face challenges conveying ideas that influence their identity and beliefs, leading to anxiety and uncertainty (O'Connor and Jahan, 2014). This situation became even more complex after the 9/11 tragedy, impacting their interactions (Selod, 2015). In a highly polarized US society (McCoy, Rahman and Somer, 2018), these Muslim diasporas need to overcome these challenges and find ways to communicate effective and safe to offer cross-cultural understanding and confront inaccurate perceptions of their religion and identity.

Many factors cause the Muslim diaspora to experience anxiety and uncertainty in communicating while living in the US. The influencing factors include weak self-defense of identity (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2020)(Ali, 2014); rampant issues of Islamophobia (Acim, 2019) and racism (Lajevardi and Oskooii, 2018); negative image framing of Islam in the media (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017)(Ogan *et al.*, 2014); environmental differences in worship practices (Westfall *et al.*, 2016); culture shock, language differences, and a sense of alienation causing an adjustment process (Rabia, 2016). All of this adds to the complexity of trying to communicate with the Muslim diasporas in the US. They moreover, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, which also posed many challenges for them in upholding Islamic values when facing difficult situations (Achour *et al.*, 2021).

One of the groups in the Muslim diaspora that often experiences anxiety and uncertainty comes from students from countries with predominantly Muslim populations who receive scholarships to continue their studies, short courses, or

exchange students (Lowe, Tineo and Young, 2019). The issues faced by diaspora Muslim students become more challenging when they, relatively young, have to expend extra energy in the limited amount of time to adapt to an environment with different languages, norms, and cultures (Yang, Zhang and Sheldon, 2018). Their adjustment practices with fellow Muslim students are no less unique. Even though they are both Muslim, their backgrounds from different countries will bring different religious traditions and practices.

In addition, how they build relationships with their peers, which is currently being done phenomenally digitally through social media, is also a new thing that has emerged amidst the issue of anxiety and uncertainty. Now, digital interaction patterns have been able to leave traces of personal information that others can access at any time. Thus, the younger generation's awareness of their digital footprint has become necessary amidst the rapid development of information and communication technology (Surmelioglu and Seferoglu, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to know how these Muslim students deal with their anxiety and uncertainty in communicating digitally through social media.

To be able to find out, it is necessary to conduct direct interviews with Muslim students who have been able to reduce their anxiety and uncertainty in communicating during their studies in the US. The interviews were conducted based on a questionnaire based on the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory by William B. Gudykunst (Griffin, 1997). It is hoped that the interviews and data analysis results can provide valuable insights into specific ways that other Muslim students can later use to overcome their anxiety and uncertainty when communicating digitally in the US environment.

Method

To determine how US Muslim students manage their anxiety and uncertainty, we used qualitative methods with a case study approach on several subjects to be interviewed. The subjects of this study were three Muslim students from countries with a majority Muslim population who were studying in the US, more precisely at Utah Tech University, St. George, United States. The three students were Beyza Osmani, Arkane Abidar, and Ali Murtaza. The three students were taken with the argumentation of the country of origin of the representatives of each continent. Beyza Osmani, who came from Turkey as the representative of the European

continent; Arkane Abidar, who came from Morocco as the representative of the African continent; and Ali Murtaza, who came from Pakistan as the representative of the Asian continent.

The data collection process was carried out by conducting structured interviews based on Gudykunst's AUM theory, which contains six primary axioms: self-concepts, motivation, reaction to strangers, social categorization to strangers, situational processes, and connection with strangers (Griffin, 1997). The theoretical basis was used to interview informants about their ways of reducing anxiety and uncertainty when communicating digitally through the Instagram application. In the US, Instagram is the most popular social media used by the diasporas as a place to express their identity (Deck, 2020). The findings were then analyzed by data analysis, which would later use the Miles and Huberman Model by carrying out three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Findings

The present study delved into the experiences of three Muslim students, Beyza Osmani, Arkane Abidar, and Ali Murtaza, studying abroad at Utah Tech University in the United States. Through in-depth interviews and analysis, their expressions as Muslims on the social media platform Instagram were examined within the framework of the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory. This expanded conclusion explores their backgrounds, their educational journeys, and their experiences in navigating social media.

Beyza, originally from Turkey, is a full-time student pursuing a four-year degree program, majoring in International Law at Utah Tech University. She is proud of her Muslim identity and clearly expresses it openly on social media. In her Instagram bio, she showcases her faith, emphasizing her commitment to Islam. *"I show it out loud. I show it in my bio clearly, O Allah, thank you for choosing me to be a Muslim; I'm proud of the fact I'm Muslim."* Beyza's expression as a Muslim on Instagram is not influenced by her surroundings or the cultural norms of the United States.

Arkane, hailing from Morocco, is also a full-time student pursuing a four-year degree at Utah Tech University majoring in Art and Animations. He exhibits a more subtle approach to expressing his Muslim identity on social media. Arkane

signifies his religious affiliation by writing his name in Arabic, serving as a hint to his Instagram followers. *"I write my name in 3 languages, English, French, and Arabic. Because I write my name in Arabic, I think that's a hint that I'm a Muslim."*

Ali, a Pakistani student, participated in a one-semester exchange program at Utah Tech University majoring in Mechanical Engineering. Although his time in the United States was shorter than Beyza and Arkane's, he also actively engaged with social media. While Ali does not explicitly reveal his Muslim identity on Instagram, he claims that he does not hide it either. He shares posts related to significant Islamic occasions such as Eid and Ramadan, and he raises his voice to support causes like the Palestine calamity. *"Personally, I don't reveal my identity as a Muslim on social media, but I also don't hide it. If there is an occasion of Eid, Ramadhan, etc. I don't hesitate to post those events. If there occurs calamity in Palestine, I do raise my voice."* Ali's expressions on social media are influenced by his pride in Islam and his desire to create awareness about his religion.

The participants also discussed their unique aspects compared to American netizens. Beyza highlighted her adherence to certain values, such as avoiding flirtatious interactions and maintaining a distinct lifestyle that differentiates her from some American netizens. Arkane mentioned his conscious effort to refrain from posting inappropriate content on his Instagram. Ali, while acknowledging regional differences, did not perceive any significant uniqueness beyond that.

Interestingly, when it comes to a sense of similarity with American netizens, the participants identified various factors. Beyza highlighted sharing stories on Instagram, which implies a sense of commonality and connecting through personal experiences. Arkane emphasized the shared sense of humor and enjoyment of funny videos. Ali highlighted the universal aspect of humanity that allows him to find common ground with American netizens.

Motivation played a crucial role in their communication and expression on social media. Beyza's motivation stemmed from building friendships, engaging in da'wah (spreading awareness about Islam), and combating negative stereotypes towards Muslims perpetuated by Western media. Arkane's motivation was centered around staying in touch with friends, and showcasing where is he come from, while Ali found warmth in embracing his religion and expressing it on social media, particularly during significant Islamic occasions or when advocating for social justice causes.

When it came to the perception of American netizens as good people, the participants had varying perspectives. Beyza acknowledged that not all American netizens are necessarily good, recounting experiences where someone unfollowed her due to her consistent posting about Islam. Arkane, on the other hand, limited his connections to people he knows personally, leading him to perceive them as good individuals. Ali expressed his belief in the potential goodness of the American netizens in his circle, as his interactions and knowledge about him often left a positive impression.

In terms of considering empathy and tolerance embraced by American netizens, the participants offered different insights. Beyza, while not specifically considering alignment with those values, emphasized maintaining respectful communication. Arkane highlighted that he never discussed controversial topics or posted content that went against American values. Ali, on the other hand, consciously ensured that his content did not promote hate towards any specific religion or country, aligning with the empathy shared among Americans.

The participants indicated that they do not categorize themselves as American netizens when expressing themselves on social media. They maintained their own unique identities, not explicitly identifying themselves as part of the American netizen community.

Beyza	:	*"No, I got the way I am."*
Arkane	:	*"No, I never told people that I am American, and I never try to."*
Ali	:	*"No, I cannot categorize myself as an American netizen."*

Even so, in certain situations, the three of them often communicate in American style on social media. Beyza revealed that she would sometime communicate in American style and slang if certain conditions were required. Meanwhile, Arkane said he often communicates similarly with US netizens but only with certain people. What is quite a contrast is Ali, who even requires himself to be able to communicate in a way that Americans are more familiar with.

Despite being students in a foreign country, their experiences on social media extend beyond their academic lives. Beyza's foster family provides a bridge between her Turkish roots and her American experiences, fostering a sense of respect and understanding toward all Americans. Arkane's personal connections

with American netizens contribute to his feeling of similarity with them. Similarly, Ali's interactions with his American friends have fostered positive perceptions and mutual respect.

Discussion

The three students have one voice in common, understanding that the strength of Muslim identity is the most effective way of managing the anxiety and uncertainty they experience when communicating digitally in the US. If we look deeper through the research that has been done before, these findings are in line, add to, and also complement each other, with a detailed explanation as follows:

In the axiom self-concept, the three of them confidently show their identity as adherents of Islam through the information in their profiles and expressions via status updates. Based on the results of previous research, understanding Muslim identity is a powerful way to improve international students' mental health when they face discrimination while studying in the US (Tineo *et al.*, 2021). Even though Beyza, Arkane, and Ali did not face discrimination while studying in the US, their confidence in their Muslim identity has helped them not feel anxious and doubtful when communicating online on social media.

This more profound understanding of Muslim identity strengthens and differentiates them from ordinary US netizens. Beyza, for example, does not carry out flirtatious interactions on social media, where it is normal and dominant for young adults in the US to have sex outside of marriage (Lykens *et al.*, 2019). Although some Islamic values conflict with US culture, some universal habits, such as accessing funny videos by Arkane, are also commonplace for US citizens, with a data percentage of 34.8% of US netizens also liking to watch funny videos online (Ceci, 2023).

On the motivational aspect, the three of them use social media not only to build friendships but also to awaken the views of Western society about stereotypes of Islam which are often negative. Some of the negative stereotypes that many US citizens believe in include supporting war and violence (Sides and Gross, 2013), backward life (Sadek, 2017), an uninhabitable country of origin (Zimbardo, 2014), and not supporting gender equality (Paul and Becker, 2017), and so on. These negative things make Beyza, Arkane, and Ali struggle against these stereotypes through their social media while building positive friendships

with local Americans.

In considering the reactions from their interactions with residents, the three assess upholding universal human values such as mutual respect and not spreading hatred. Regardless of these universal human values, Ali and Arkane prefer to remain silent when dealing with issues that have become legal in Western countries but are still illegal in other countries, such as LGBTQ. For foreigners in the US, these cultural differences are undoubtedly common because 64 countries in various parts of the world—especially in the Middle East and Africa—still apply penalties for citizens who are found to like the same sex (Team, 2023). Thus, Ali and Arkane prefer not to comment on these matters.

The three of them are also one voice when categorizing their social lives that are not part of the US at all. Apart from the relatively short study factor, they are reluctant to give up their unique identity, including how they communicate on social media. Although in certain situations, they will also follow the traditions of communicating adopted by Western netizens. This is in line with the results of previous research, which has examined hundreds of diasporas from India who use American-style English when communicating emotionally on social media (Hossain and Veenstra, 2017). Of course, this cannot be separated from the habits built up in the real world, such as the experience of Beyza, who has American foster parents, and Arkane and Ali, who have American roommates.

Conclusion

Based on the results of in-depth interviews based on Gudykunst's AUM theory, it can be concluded that understanding a solid Muslim identity within is the most effective way of managing the anxiety and uncertainty experienced by Muslim international students in the US when communicating digitally on social media. Apart from understanding Muslim identity, there are other ways, such as using social media as an educational tool to fight negative stereotypes of Islam, not violating local values, and communicating in the style of netizens in the US to people who are already familiar. The participants can carry out these methods because of a sense of pride in their unique identity, as well as the good relations between each participant and local US citizens in the real world.

To gain a deeper understanding of the influence of culture on anxiety and uncertainty management strategies, future studies could expand the research scope

by adding more participants from diverse cultural backgrounds and categorizing participants based on continents or regions, such as Middle East Muslim students, Asian Muslim students, African Muslim students, etc. This approach will enable a comprehensive cultural comparison of expressions of Muslim students on social media, allowing for a deeper understanding of how cultural factors influence anxiety and uncertainty management strategies across different geographic contexts.

In addition to individual interviews, future research could incorporate a group interview or a focus group discussion format to further enrich the exploration of expressions of Muslim students on social media. This method would bring together participants to shared experiences, diverse perspectives, and interactive dynamics.

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