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Religious Influencers and Their Roles in Enhancing Followers' Religiosity and Social Media Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Religious leaders use social media to create religious content. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of religious influencers' credibility on followers' religiosity and their engagement on social media. This study applies a quantitative approach, where primary data was acquired through online surveys to 204 Instagram and TikTok followers of the religious influencers. The PLS-SEM technique was utilised to assess the structural model in the study. The results show that the credibility of religious influencers respectively, has a direct and significant effect on followers' religiosity and their social media engagement. Followers' religiosity significantly mediates the effect of religious influencers' credibility on followers' social media engagement. Most previous studies on influencer credibility focused on consumer behaviour when consuming particular products or experiencing services, not specifically on religious-related behaviour. Filling the gap of existing studies, this research enriches the literature, particularly in the field of social marketing, which explores the significant roles of religious leaders as influencers in social media platforms in affecting consumer behaviour.

Keywords: Influencer credibility, religious influencer, religiosity, social media engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an inseparable part of human life. It contains any information shared by its users and act as a collaborative medium that emphasizes users' active interaction in creating and exchanging the content [1]. Given its use nowadays, social media is utilised to market products or services and inform one's existence or influence others. Social media leads to various new professions, one of which is marketing influencer. According to [2], influencer is an individual who create valuable content, has a high reputation in a particular field, and a large number of followers on social media. By 2020, marketing influencer represents a US\$10 billion industry and has become increasingly relevant for most companies, particularly those operating in a business-to-consumer environment [3]. Research by The Top Tens VR [4] revealed 300 most influential individuals in 2019 coming from various groups including actors, singers, fashion models, athletes, business people, politicians, to religious leaders who become the focus of this study. The trend of social media

utilisation by religious leaders to preach and create religious content is increasingly widespread globally. The COVID-19 pandemic has even triggered a massive use of social media. Along with the government's policy to suppress the spread of the COVID-19 virus through restrictions on religious activities in worship places thus, many religious leaders use social media to teach and interact with their people, especially the millennial generation. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are top three social media platforms mostly used by religious influencers to create content [5]. The content created can be in the forms of text and video. It includes inspirational quotes, short sermons, reflections, songs, and dance. Followers can be actively engaged by liking, sharing, commenting, or recommending the content they see. Interestingly, the followers are not only from one particular religion but can also be from different religions. This phenomenon is fascinating to explore further to see whether the response on social media is due to the impact of the influencers' credibility or other factors. Religious influencers can positively influence the

level of religiosity of their followers on social media, especially if the religious influencers have a large number of followers. Literature review shows lack of empirical studies discussing the influence of religious leaders from the marketing viewpoint. Concepts related to religious leaders are mostly examined from the religious domain [6]. This study aims to measure how the credibility of religious leaders as influencers can affect the level of religiosity and followers' engagement on social media used by the religious influencers. The results of this study is anticipated to shed a light on how the religious leaders can develop their digital marketing strategies to reach out wider followers and influence them in practicing their beliefs in the daily lives.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Survey Administration

This study employed a quantitative approach in which the hypotheses were tested to find the effect of religious influencer credibility on followers' religiosity, social media engagement, and donation intention. The population consisted of followers of religious influencers' Instagram and or TikTok accounts. Samples were selected purposively, meaning that they had to meet certain criteria, as follows: 1) aged minimum 18 years old; 2) have ever watched religious content of the religious influencer either on Instagram or TikTok accounts; 3) samples were followers of the religious influencers' either Instagram or TikTok accounts. Primary data collection was conducted through a survey with a questionnaire as the research instrument. Prior to the data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. A 7-point Likert Scale was selected to measure the examined variables, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. The PLS-SEM technique was utilised to assess the structural model, confirming the relationships between examined concepts in the research model and to test the hypotheses. It was applied as it is appropriate for causal-predictive analysis with a high enough complexity on the relationship between the variables.

2.2 Measures

All empirical indicators for each variable in this study were developed based on extensive literature review. Influencers' credibility was measured based on the following dimensions: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. The influencers' credibility indicators were globally measured by adapting them from [7] and

[8], consisting of four items of attractiveness, three items of expertise, and three items of trustworthiness dimensions. Followers' religiosity was measured by adapting the items from [9]. There were five dimensions of the Centrality Religiosity Scale (CRS): intellectual, ideological, public practice, private practice, and religious experience. Two items were developed to measure each dimension. Finally, social media engagement was measured by three dimensions which include two contributing items (likes), four contributing items (shares), and two creating items (commenting) from [10].

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Respondent Profile

The participants of this study was dominated by females (65.7%). The majority of respondents were aged 18 to 25 years, totalling 190 respondents (93.1%). Most of the respondents were private employees (45.1%), followed by students (41.2%), and entrepreneurs (9.8%). Based on the income, half of the total respondents (56.4%) had an average monthly income of IDR 3 million while 35.3% of respondents had an average monthly income of IDR 3-6 million. In terms of the frequency of watching religious influencers' content on Instagram or TikTok, a total of 41.2% respondents watched the content 1 to 3 times in 1 week.

3.2 Evidence for Measurement Fit

All items measuring the four variables had Cronbach's Alpha values greater than 0.60; thus, all variables were declared reliable. This study employed the Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) statistical technique, which focuses on testing a series of hypothetical relationships to develop theories in exploratory research. Partial least squares tested two models: the outer and inner models. The outer model is a measurement to assess the validity and reliability of a research model. In the outer model, the validity test is carried out by analyzing the convergent validity and discriminant validity, while the reliability test is carried out by analyzing the composite reliability (CR). First, in evaluating convergent validity, this study used the outer loading of each indicator and the average variance extracted (AVE).

The results of the convergent validity test showed that all indicators were valid because the AVE value of the three variables was above 0.5. The composite reliability value of all variables was also > 0.7, indicating that all variables in this study are reliable.

Table 1. Path Coefficients

Indirect Effect	Path Coefficients	T-Statistics	P Values	Decision	Path Coefficient	VAF	Remark
H1: IC → FR	0,653	8,056	0,000	Accepted			
H2: IC → SME	0,399	4,873	0,000	Accepted			
H3: FR → SME	0,224	2,759	0,006	Accepted			
H4: IC → FR → SME	0,146	2,653	0,000	Accepted	0,545	23,0%	Partial mediation

This study reduced the IC1 item (religious influencers have physical attractiveness) because it did not meet the minimum outer loading value requirement and two indicators of religiosity starting from the lowest outer loading to meet the requirements for the AVE religiosity value > 0.5.

3.3 Evidence for Structural Fit

The value of R² for the dependent variable was entirely greater than 0 (zero). The calculation results showed that the R² value of the religiosity variable was 0.423, which indicates that the magnitude of the influencers' credibility on religiosity was 42.3%, while the other 57.7% was claimed by other variables not explained by the study.

Furthermore, the magnitude of the influence of credibility and religiosity on social media engagement was 31.9%, while other variables explained the other 68.1%.

The value of path coefficients H₁, H₂, and H₃ was more significant than the t-table value of 1.96. Thus, H₁, H₂, and H₃ were accepted. The indirect effect of influencers' credibility on social media engagement with the mediation of followers' religiosity (H₃) was accepted.

The Variance Accounted For (VAF) value of influencers' credibility on social media engagement mediated by religiosity was 23%, meaning that religiosity explained 23% of the influence of credibility on social media engagement.

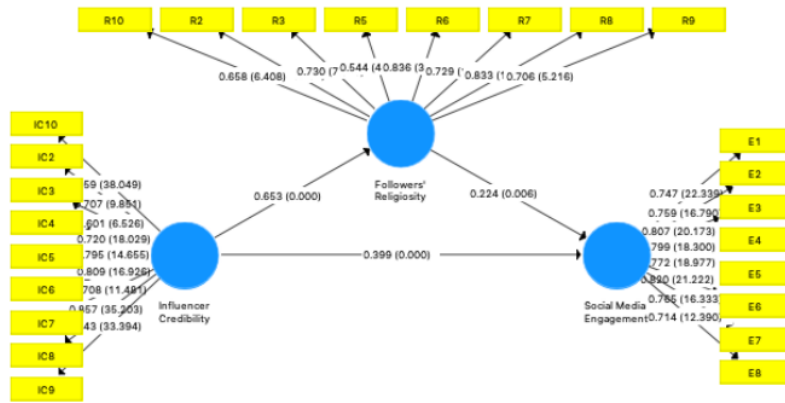


Figure 1. Path Coefficient Result

3.4 DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study have revealed that influencers' credibility positively and significantly shows a direct religiosity, social media engagement, and donation intention. The more a religious influencer is considered credible by followers, the higher the followers' religiosity values are. Furthermore, followers of religious content assess religious influencers as trustworthy; thus, followers also consider that praying privately and worshipping is a fundamental activity carried out as religious people. This confirms [12] study, showing that influencer credibility has been proven to be positive and significantly encouraged consumers to

increasingly believe in the religious values they adhere to, which ultimately affected consumer attitudes and behaviour.

In addition to affecting followers' religiosity, influencer credibility shows a positive and significant effect on social media engagement. This shows that followers of religious content perceived religious influencers as someone who can be trusted; thus, they "mention/tag" other people in the religious influencers' content and even share the influencers' content related to foundations or organizations they own TikTok and Instagram. The result shows that the prominent dimension was trustworthiness due to different contexts related to religiosity. Therefore, religious influencers must be sincere and trustworthy on religious values and teachings spread through social media. This leads to higher engagement with the contents posted by the religious influencers. This finding supports [1] study that

influencer credibility dimensions of attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise encouraged social media users to spend more time liking and commenting on the content of aesthetic dermatology businesses' social media in Jordan.

Further, the influencers' credibility positively and significantly affects the donation intention. This shows that followers of religious content perceived religious influencers as trustworthy; thus, followers were willing to make donations to organizations or social foundations owned by the influencers. These results supported a study that found trustworthiness as the key in changing consumer attitudes and behaviour [13], in this context, the behaviour to donate. [14] added that the effectiveness of advertising reflected in the higher influencers' credibility will encourage someone to spend time and donate money.

Religiosity is found to have a positive and significant effect on social media engagement. This shows that followers of religious content consider that praying privately and worshipping was an essential activity to carry out as religious people; thus, they 'mention/tag' other people in the religious influencers' content and even share the influencers' content related to foundations or organizations they own on TikTok and Instagram. This is supported by Yasin et al. (2020) that religious values had a positive effect on active social media engagement in terms of contributing (like and/or share) and creating (posting positive comments) brand-related content through online brand communities on social media.

By contrast, religiosity was found to have no significant effect on donation intention. This indicates that to encourage followers' willingness to donate to influencers' foundations or organizations, it is not enough only to increase followers' religiosity. This is probably because followers have not entirely recognized the foundation or organization owned by the influencers; thus, they do not know the clear direction and purpose of the donation funds, and followers may consider several well-known government or social institutions to donate their money. This confirms [15] study that found that religiosity had no positive and significant effect on the donation intention through social media platforms to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The result of this study reveals that religiosity affects the donation intention through a mediating variable: attitude towards online donations for those affected by COVID-19. The insignificant results of the direct influence of religiosity on the donation intention through social media platforms indicate the tendency of religious beliefs or religiosity in predicting attitudes rather than direct behavioural intentions. Attitudes towards online donations exert the most significant influence on individuals' intentions to

donate through social media platforms [15]–[17]. The theory of planned behaviour [18] stating that a firm attitude was considered a great positive predictor of behavioural intentions. Therefore, although religiosity did not directly affect behavioural intentions, when it is added to the followers' attitude as a mediator, it can significantly trigger their donation intention through social media platforms [15].

From the five mediation hypotheses, two were accepted (H_6 and H_8). First, religiosity is a variable that significantly mediates the influence of credibility on social media engagement. This shows that the more a religious influencer is considered credible by followers, the more followers' religious values increase, leading to the higher engagement or interaction of followers with influencers' content on TikTok and Instagram. These results support the research that has been done by [12] in Sudan that shows influencers' credibility has been proven to be positive and significantly encouraged consumers to increasingly believe in the religious values they adhere to, which ultimately affected consumer attitudes and their behaviour.

Second, social media engagement is a variable that significantly mediates the impact of influencers' credibility on the donation intention. This shows that the more a religious influencer is considered credible by followers, the more followers' interaction with the influencer's content on TikTok and Instagram is also higher, increasing followers' willingness to donate to influencer's organizations or foundations. This supports the study of [1], which measured that influencers' credibility (attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise) can encourage social media users to spend more time liking and commenting on the content of aesthetic dermatology businesses' social media.

The hypothesis involving joint mediation in this study was also rejected. Religiosity and social media engagement are not significant in mediating the effect of influencers' credibility on the donation intention. This shows that no matter how good the influencers' credibility is, this will not influence the religious values of followers, encourage social media engagement, and raise the intention of followers to donate to the foundations/organizations owned by the influencer. This finding indicates that two variables cannot intervene the impact of influencers' credibility on followers' donation intention at once, that is, followers' religiosity and social media engagement. Although, according to the results, the followers' belief in religious influencers related to Christian religious teachings on TikTok and Instagram can affect followers' engagement or interaction with religious content and even willingness to donate ($IC \rightarrow SME \rightarrow DI$) it is not in conflict with followers' religious values. In contrast, when it conflicts with the value of

religiosity, the credibility of the religious leaders is enough to make followers rethink their religious values and even make them more engaged with the content (CI \rightarrow R \rightarrow SME). However, if the donation intention is added, it becomes insignificant.

The three hypotheses (H₇, H₉, and H₁₀) were rejected because followers may have not entirely recognized the foundation or organization owned by the influencers; thus, they do not know the precise direction and purpose of the donation funds, and followers may consider several well-known government or social institutions to donate their money. There is a possible reason that the participants may not want to be viewed as if they have a high level of religiosity, which in turn, they are obliged to donate. On the other hand, if the respondent's level of religiosity is not too high, it does not mean that they will not donate. The younger generation in Indonesia tends to adopt universal values; they do not want to be fanatical about a specific religion or belief. One of the universal values is the kindness of helping others without being associated with a person's level of religiosity. Respondents intend to donate because they see the influencers' figures. This is in line with the research's results that support the effect of influencer credibility on the donation intention. When the religious influencer can be trusted or even become someone who is admired, the followers' donation intention to influencers' non-profit foundation would increase. A person's high level of religiosity does not necessarily encourage someone to donate. This could be because it is not the level of religiosity of the respondents that encourages them to donate but because of their universal values or sense of humanity. A study of [15] showed that religiosity can affect the donation intention through a mediating variable, that is, attitude towards online donations. That is, level of religiosity may become a better antecedent in predicting attitudes rather than direct consumer's behavioural intentions.

4. CONCLUSION

Along with the proliferations of social media platforms, more influencers including religious leaders are now used to persuade consumers' behavioral intentions. However, studies on religious influencers are still rarely discussed in previous research. Most studies that examine religious influencers only relate it to religion and religiosity, and no study has ever examined their influence on engagement with social media and the donation intention.

For Indonesians, donating and 'zakat' activities have become a form of worship or a declaration of faith. Therefore, this study focuses on examining the relationship of donation intention when it is associated with the credibility of its influencers. This study indicates that influencers' credibility encourages followers'

intentions to donate. The credibility of the influencers does have a direct effect on the donation intention, but when it is associated with religiosity, it does not affect the donation intention.

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