# Social Media and Islamic Ethics: An Insight to Instagram Use by Muslim University Students in Malaysia

Aida Mokhtar[*]
Che Amnah Bahari[**]

**Abstract:** Instagram is one of the more popular social media platforms in Malaysia and was the focus of the study. Muslims ought to use Instagram according to Islamic ethics, as Islam is a way of life that permeates their lifestyle. The study's purpose was to examine the usage of Instagram by Muslim students of an Islamic university in Malaysia. Using Social Cognitive Theory, the study adopted a phenomenological research design involving interviews of 24 students. The findings depicted that Instagram was used in an Islamic manner by most Muslim students interviewed but they were dissatisfied with some Instagram features and hence, gave recommendations on how to improve them. The study is important as it provides recommendations to Instagram and marketing communicators on the ideal ambience of a social media platform for the young Muslim market involving Muslim university students.

**Keywords:** Instagram use, Islamic Ethics, Social Cognitive Theory, university students, Malaysia

**Abstrak:** Instagram merupakan salah satu pelantar media sosial yang paling popular di Malaysia dan menjadi tumpuan kajian ini. Umat Islam seharusnya menggunakan Instagram mengikut etika Islam, kerana Islam merupakan suatu cara hidup yang merangkumi semua kegiatan seharian. Tujuan kajian

[*]Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)). Corresponding author. Email: aidam@iium.edu.my
[**]Associate Professor, Department of Usul al-Din & Comparative Religion, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Email: amnah@iium.edu.my

ini adalah untuk mengkaji penggunaan Instagram oleh pelajar-pelajar Muslim di sebuah Universiti Islam di Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan teori kognitif sosial, kajian ini menggunakan rekaan kajian fenomenologi yang melibatkan sessi temuramah dengan dua puluh empat (24) orang pelajar di Universiti Islam tersebut. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa Instagram telah digunakan secara Islamik oleh kebanyakan pelajar-pelajar Muslim yang telah ditemuramah  dan kebanyakan mereka tidak berpuas hati dengan ciri-ciri Instagram dan telah memberi cadangan penambahbaikan.  Kajian ini sangat penting kerana ia memberikan cadangan kepada pihak Instagram dan pakar komunikasi tentang adab media sosial yang  berkesan untuk pelajar-pelajar Muslim di Universiti.

**Kata kunci**: penggunaan Instagram, etika Islam, Teori Kognitif Sosial, pelajar universiti, Malaysia

## Introduction

The prevalence of social media usage by companies and the Muslim market begs the question of ethics by Muslim social media users for the formation of an ethical ecosystem on social media platforms from the Islamic perspective. Instagram is the third most used social media platform in Malaysia after Facebook and Messenger with 11,681 million users between March 2019 to March 2020. The largest group of users comprised of 24 to 34 year olds (36.8%) and secondly, consist of university students with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years old (30%) (NapoleanCat, 2020). Malaysia's official religion is Islam with a Muslim majority populace (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Islam is holistically central to the life of Muslims including their use of social media. In view of this, this study examined the usage of Instagram by students at an Islamic university in Malaysia and their recommendations of features that needed improving on Instagram that are more aligned with Islamic ethics.

### Research Questions

1. How do students at an Islamic university in Malaysia use Instagram in an Islamic manner?

2. Do the Instagram features ensure that university students use the social media platform in an Islamic manner?

## Literature Review

Islam plays a central role in the lives of Muslims, even in their usage of social media. The lives of Muslims ought to be holistically guided by the Islamic principle, "…enjoin good and forbid evil" as mentioned in the Qur'an (9: 112), marking the importance of using social media in an ethical manner. Other than social media usage, the Instagram ecosystem needs to be conducted in an ethical manner for ethical usage of the social media platform to take place effectively in IR4.0. Instagram policies ought to be formed with ethics in mind. The research gap on ethical usage of Instagram by Muslim university students in Malaysia is explained in the next section.

### *Islamic Ethics, Communication and Instagram*

It is mentioned in some Qur'anic verses that a Muslim's main purpose in life is to serve Allah (God) (6:162-163; 51:56). The role of a Muslim is as a *khalifah* (vicegerent) of Allah who has been entrusted to become a steward and custodian of the earth (6:165; 2:30). With this in mind, the mission of Muslims is to develop the earth and ensure that there is social order within it that opposes exploitative consumerism (Kamali, 2016). Conducting business the Islamic way is a form of *'ibadah* and the use of Instagram for engagement with customers should be done the Islamic way (Mokhtar & Samsudin, 2015).

Ethics or *akhlāq* in Islam focuses on character building that is congruent with one's *fiṭrah* or disposition (30:30). The behaviour of a person is demonstrated by actions and practices which are rooted in the soul. Al-Qur'ān, for that matter, enjoins Muslims to continuously practise good deeds as embodied in the concept of justice. Al-Qur'ān (16:90) clearly instructs people to uphold justice, to be good and to give relatives their due. At the same time, the verse prohibits three things: shameful acts, evil deeds and transgression. For Koroglu and Tingoy (2011), some of the principles of Islamic communication are: truthfulness (9:119), objectivity of information (69:44-46), usefulness of messages, respecting right to reply, privacy and focusing on significant news.

Islam prohibits people from giving publicity of any form of *fahsha* such as evil deeds, transgression and the spread of wrong information (4: 96-98), defamation (24:11), advertising of wrongdoings (36:66-68), and

elevation of pornography (Al-Hajjaj, 2007). For Hughes and DeVerter (2018), indecency and wickedness are often endorsed and broadcasted as a form of freedom of expression and entertainment, which is not Islamic. Muslim Instagram users should have positive attributes such as faith (63:8), knowledge (39:9) and *taqwa* (consciousness of God's Ordain) (49:13). In Islam, the human soul is a precious gem so anyone that nurtures it will enhance it and anyone who degrades it will throw it away (91:9-10). Muslim students should realise that their main duty in life is to fulfil their responsibilities as vicegerents, inhibit vices and invite virtue for the pleasure of God. Islam has clearly outlined the prerequisites to be productive, righteous and successful people in this life and in the Hereafter by striving to fulfil spiritual and communal responsibilities (2:77). With the popularity of Instagram, there is great concern surrounding its usage by university students in Malaysia.

*Studies on Instagram and Ethics in General*

Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that are formed on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and these permit the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is therefore important to scrutinise the ethics of social media use as it determines the ideal usage practices of platforms that allow for communication to anyone by anyone limited by age (for Instagram, users must be 13 years and above) (Instagram, 2020). Several studies have been carried out on the ethical use of Instagram in general, but not specifically focused on Islamic ethics. When the ethical perspective is associated with Instagram, most of these studies have focused on the usage of Instagram that has created a negative impact of Instagram exposure on the perception of users' body image, healthy diets and relationship conflicts (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Cohen et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2018; Kleemans et al., 2018; Pepin & Endresz, 2015; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Sharifi et al., 2016). A few other studies examined ethical concerns in relation to the use of Instagram in promoting products like cigars (Allem et al., 2017), cigarettes (Phua et al., 2018) and alcohol (Hendriks et al., 2020).

A few studies used mediating and moderating variables in examining the relationship between the effects of Instagram use upon one's body image. One such study found that university students' self-esteem levels gave a negative effect of Instagram usage on body

satisfaction, through the mediator's self-schema and self-discrepancy. With this being more significant for those with lower self-esteem (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017). Fardouly et al. (2018) found a correlation between greater overall Instagram use and greater self-objectification mediated by internalisation and by comparisons of appearances to celebrities. Suggesting that Instagram usage, by viewing fitspiration images negatively, influences women's concerns and beliefs about body images. Kleemans (2018) examined the effects of manipulated Instagram photos of adolescent girls' body images and whether social comparison tendencies moderated the relationship. The findings of these studies suggest that viewing manipulated Instagram photos directly resulted in lower body image. Girls with higher social comparison tendencies were negatively affected by exposure to manipulated photos, particularly among teenage girls who have greater tendency for higher social comparisons. Another study depicted the phenomenon that exposure to visuals of attractive celebrities and peer images contributed to undergraduate female students' dissatisfaction with their body image (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). The relationship that was mediated by state appearance comparison and celebrity worship moderated an increased effect of celebrity images on body dissatisfaction.

Other studies examined the direct effect between Instagram use upon body image. A study found that 18- to 29-year-old women (68% were students) who preferred seeing posts focused on appearances on Facebook and Instagram had their own concerns about body image, such as: thin-ideal internalisation (embrace of thinness and ideal body images), body surveillance and drive for thinness; compared to those who preferred looking at general pages on both platforms (Cohen et al., 2017). Another study on Instagram and body concerns was phenomenological as it examined female students at the University of Tehran in Iran who were between 24 and 34 years old (Sharifi et al., 2016). The themes generated centred on body image concerns among Iranian female students and how Instagram exposure affected the Iranian students by making them more concerned about their body image, with critical thinking skills put forth as a recommendation.

Another study with a more direct effect explored the impacts of social media on the body image of university students (Pepin & Endresz, 2015). The results demonstrated that while using social media, the students felt pressured to lose weight, look more attractive or muscular,

and change their appearance. Correlations were also found between Instagram, concerns with body image, and body surveillance. Between Pinterest, body shame, and appearance control beliefs. Between Facebook, Pinterest and perceived pressure. The final study by Turner and Lefevre (2017) investigated the relationship between Instagram and *orthorexia nervosa* symptom (an obsession with healthy eating) and found that social media users aged 16 to 75 years old who followed health-related accounts on Instagram had a greater tendency towards *orthorexia nervosa* compared to those who had similar exposure on other social media platforms.

Another study which was different from others looked at direct effects of Instagram use on body image. This particular study examined Instagram users that promoted their body image satisfaction in Instagram selfie posts, encountering the risk of Instagram-related conflicts and negative romantic relationship consequences (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016).

The next few studies examined Instagram and ethical perspective in its promotion of products that required tighter regulations as otherwise the effects could be detrimental such as cigars, cigarettes, vapes and alcohol. The first study by Allem et al. (2017) investigated the usage of Instagram by a big brand of cigars in the United States' market called Swisher. Of the Instagram images gathered, 32.3% included a Swisher wrapper that identified the Swisher product was utilised in blunt making whereby the cigar is hollowed and filled with marijuana. A suggestion was made to oppose it through health campaigns.

A qualitative content analysis study examined electronic cigarette content on Instagram and found that Instagram respondents associated electronic cigarettes with novel devices that were not cigarettes (Laestadius et al., 2016). Communities and identities formed around vaping were identified through their hashtags. Another study found that high product-celebrity image congruence and high consumer-celebrity risk-seeking image congruence led to significantly more positive advertising attitude and greater intention to spread electronic word of mouth and use of e-cigarettes (Phua et al., 2018). The relationships were mediated by para-social relationships.

The next study examined whether alcohol advertisers restricted access to youth or adolescents in terms of their interactions and exposure

to their promotions on Twitter and Instagram (Barry et al., 2016). The findings indicated that all users could fully access, view and interact with alcohol industry contents posted on Instagram and Twitter. All Instagram audiences were able to follow all alcohol brand pages and received an average of 362 advertisements within 30 days. The quantity of promotional updates increased throughout the week, reaching their peak on Thursdays and Fridays.

A content analysis of Instagram pages of 178 popular influencers was carried out and four key findings were found: firstly, the majority of influencers (63.5%) posted on alcohol during the study period; secondly, the alcohol posts were positive, depicting a social context and were frequently posted by lifestyle influencers; thirdly, although some alcohol posts (19.5%) showed a clear alcohol brand, only a few of these posts disclosed them as advertisements (#ad) and even fewer gave an educational slogan (e.g. "#no18noalcohol"); finally, posts with sponsorship disclosures generated fewer likes and comments than posts without disclosures (Hendrickse et al., 2017).

*Studies on Instagram and Islam*

There have been very few studies examining Instagram from the Islamic perspective compared to ethics and Instagram. The first study was on two Muslim female celebrities in Malaysia (Abby Abadi and Raisyyah Rania Yeap), who were trendsetters for Muslim women, due to their newly transformed Islamic images which caused Islamic messages to be spread on Instagram (Arisa & Hassan, Nov 2016). The study was a quantitative content analysis that used Social Cognitive Theory. Judging by the comments, there were positive ones for both celebrities on their new images and neutral comments about their online businesses, representing the close relationship of Islam with one's image rather than business.

The second study investigated Instagram use by a community of Muslim women in Indonesia who wore the *hijab* (head covering for Muslims). The findings that depicted the use of Instagram as a practice by middle-class women for *da'wah* (inviting people to Islam), represented the dynamic global digital culture and transformed the field of Islamic communication to something that had become electronically motivated (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018). Neutral comments of a Muslim's business ventures compared to one's new Islamic image demonstrated

the preference of users in associating Islam with one's image, rather than one's business. This reinforces the idea that perhaps business and Islam are possibly treated as separate entities.

*Social Cognitive Theory and Instagram*

There were also few research studies on Instagram and Social Cognitive Theory and the absence of studies on Islamic ethics, Instagram use and Social Cognitive Theory further underscores the research gap. A study on the relationship between what women view on Instagram and what they choose to post on their own accounts (Tyer, 2016) found that most respondents aged 18 to 35 years old did not follow the accounts of the top three celebrities that represent the ideal woman - Beyoncé, Kim Kardashian and Ariana Grande - and almost half of them mentioned that these celebrities did not affect their own postings.

Another study was with the objective of testing the effects of performance expectancy, effort expectancy and social influence towards Instagram's behavioural intention framed by the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) as influenced by several theories including Social Cognitive Theory (Sultan & Ramdhan, 2016). The key finding was a significant positive effect between performance expectancy (degree of user's belief that use of system will help him or her to obtain benefits in job performance), behavioural intention (user's intention of using Instagram continuously) and social influence (support from others) towards behavioural intention of using Instagram.

The final study analysed the frequency of physical activity posts by celebrities on Twitter and Instagram framed by the Social Cognitive Theory (Meisser, 2015). It found the depictions of physical activity more prominent on Instagram possibly because of the social media platform's more visual orientation.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study is Social Cognitive Theory by Albert Bandura. It was first conceived as Social Learning Theory (SLT) in the 1960s and subsequently developed into Social Cognitive Theory in 1986. The theory posits that learning occurs in a social context with the dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment and behaviour explained by its feature called triadic reciprocal causation (see Figure 1) (Bandura, 2001). The reciprocal

orientation provides a different way of perceiving human behaviour that has often been expounded in terms of unidirectional causation, in which behaviour is fashioned and controlled either by environmental influences or by internal dispositions. Regarding morality, Social Cognitive Theory adopts a cognitive interactionist perspective to moral phenomena where personal factors (moral thought and affective self-reactions), behavioural factors (moral conduct) and environmental factors (moral ecosystem) all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bi-directionally (Bandura, 1991). In the Social Cognitive perspective, it is apparent that moral thinking is a process in which multidimensional rules or standards are used to judge conduct.

Figure 1: Schematisation of Triadic Reciprocal Causation in the
Causal Model of Social Cognitive Theory
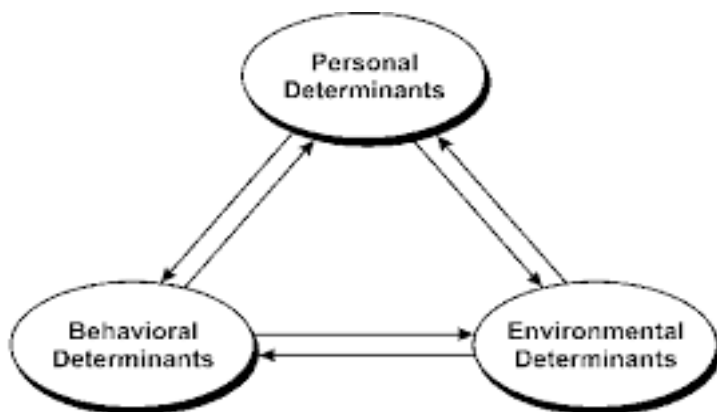


Source: Figure reproduced from Bandura (2001, p. 266)

When the theory is related to media, communication systems operate using two pathways: direct and socially mediated (Bandura, 2001). Bandura mentioned that for the direct pathway, the media promote change by informing, enabling, motivating and guiding participants directly. The socially mediated pathway, on the other hand, the media connect participants to social networks and communities that provide natural incentives (beliefs that there are desired effects) and continue personalised guidance for planned change. The theory further posits that we learn from modelled styles of behaviour depicted through electronic mass media. This characteristic, coupled with the heavily repeated images presented on mass media, allows for this to happen (Bandura, 2001).

Social Cognitive Theory has characteristics of triadic reciprocal causation of factors that include personal, behavioural and environmental determinants; the notion that people model after the behaviour of others that are depicted through mass media messages that are heavily repeated. The study is thus focused on identifying the effects of Instagram through the triadic reciprocal causation of determinants.

**Methods**

The research design for the study was phenomenological and case study in orientation. A phenomenological study aims to obtain the original meaning of a phenomenon by examining lived experience (Van Manen, 2017). The case study focuses on answering questions such as "how" and "why" the phenomenon works (Yin, 2018) among Islamic university students. The case study had the purpose of making sense of the phenomenon formed from the combined perspective of Instagram, Social Cognitive Theory and Islamic ethics, from data obtained through semi-structured interviews using an inductivist strategy (Bryman, 2016). The phenomenological researcher usually uses various interview techniques to collect data while appreciating the uniqueness of each interview as something potentially significant in understanding the phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). Several semi-structured interviews were conducted on 24 university students of an Islamic university in Malaysia using an interview guide with questions related to the research questions. Semi-structured interviews have flexibly worded questions and a combination of more and less structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The benefit of this type of interview is that it would allow for more focused data using a more relaxed and conversational approach without rigid questions.

Respondents ranged between the ages of 18 to 24 who were in their first to fourth year of their programmes. They were selected based on their primary or secondary usage of Instagram. Most use Instagram primarily (n=16) whilst others mentioned using it on a secondary level in combination with other social media platforms (YouTube, WeChat, Facebook and WhatsApp) (see Table 1).

Interviewees were informed of the research objectives and asked for their consent prior to the interview and its audio recording as part of the ethical considerations necessary of interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Purposive sampling was used. It is a non-random technique

form of judgment sampling with the researchers deliberately selecting respondents based on their characteristics (in this case, a homogenous sample focusing on the common qualitative of using Instagram, students of an Islamic university and Muslims) that do not require any underlying theories or fixed number of participants (Etikan et al., 2016). Thematic analysis was carried out by the researchers by coming up with codes and themes using the thematic analysis process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2016). The credibility of the findings and interpretation corresponded to the internal validity criterion of positivism and this was established through peer debriefing by determining whether the themes and codes were agreeable to both researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). While the codes and themes were generated, a discussion ensued between both researchers and an agreement was reached to establish credible data.

The limitation of the study was that the sample of students was small (24), and coming from only one university. This prevented generalisations on the total student population and comparisons with another university from taking place. On the other hand, a qualitative research design focuses on words rather than numbers (Bryman, 2016). In future, perhaps a multiple case study could be conducted by comparing students of an Islamic university with those from another university with a non-Islamic orientation; to better understand how the different educational environments influence students in terms of their use of social media platforms.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants of Study

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 18 | 1 | 4.17 |
| | 19 | 3 | 12.50 |
| | 20 | 1 | 4.17 |
| | 21 | 3 | 12.50 |
| | 22 | 7 | 29.17 |
| | 23 | 7 | 29.17 |
| | 24 | 2 | 8.33 |

| Year of Study | 4 | 8 | 33.33 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 3 | 6 | 25.00 |
| | 2 | 3 | 12.50 |
| | 1 | 7 | 29.17 |
| | | | |
| Gender | Male | 15 | 62.50 |
| | Female | 9 | 37.50 |
| | | | |
| Social Media Platform/s Used | Instagram | 16 | 66.67 |
| | Twitter & Instagram | 2 | 8.33 |
| | YouTube & Instagram | 1 | 4.17 |
| | WhatsApp & Instagram | 2 | 8.33 |
| | Facebook & Instagram | 2 | 8.33 |
| | WeChat & Instagram | 1 | 4.17 |
| | | | |
| Nationality | Local | 17 | 70.83 |
| | International | 7 | 29.17 |

## Findings and Discussion

There were two categories of themes that were generated from the findings. The first category answered the first research question on how students used Instagram in an Islamic manner, and the second category answered the second research question on students' examination of Instagram features in terms of their sufficiency.

## How Students of an Islamic University Used Instagram in an Islamic Manner

The themes that answered the first research question on how students of an Islamic university used Instagram in an Islamic manner touched on the students' behaviours, highlighting their preference of using Instagram the Islamic way, with only one student mentioning not being the type of person who would share obvious Islamic messages on Instagram (see Table 2).

Table 2: Themes and Codes on How Students of an Islamic University
Used Instagram in an Islamic Manner

| NO. | THEMES | CODES |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | **Shares information on Islam on Instagram** | Shares posts requesting funding |
| | | Shares Islamic quotes |
| | | Shares Islamic videos |
| | | Shares Islamic messages |
| | | Exchanges information with other users |
| | | Shares something that is of benefit to society |
| | | Shares Qur'ānic verses and Hadith or good messages in Islamic manner |
| 2. | **Maintains silence on Islamically offensive postings** | Stays silent instead of being on the offensive |
| | | Ignores negative vibes |
| | | Refrains from responding to provocations |
| | | Maintains silent disapprovals and prays or tells offender privately |
| | | Ignores unethical posts |
| | | Does not click the 'like' button |
| | | Does not report to Instagram as it will destroy the account holder |
| 3. | **Reports posts that are not acceptable in Islam** | Reports offensive messages as spam |
| | | Reports offensive messages to Instagram |
| | | Reports unknown accounts to Instagram |
| 4. | **Postings against Islam are not made** | No weird photos |
| | | No postings on nudity or violence |
| | | No posting on nudity |
| | | No backstabbing of other people but uses Instagram for noble purposes |
| | | No posts on free mingling |
| | | No slanderous posts |
| | | No posts on Islamophobia, racism and bullying |
| | | Practises Islamic communication principles learnt in university |
| 5. | **Learns from Islamic posts** | Views Islamic posts as educational |
| | | Regards celebrity lifestyle as an insight to the Islamic lifestyle |

| 6. | **Islamic posts are conducted by a certain type of people** | Does not post Islamic messages if they are not the type |
| 7. | **Instagram is used for entertainment** | Interpersonal communication used to share experiences, thoughts, life and challenges that affect Muslims<br>Funny pictures posted on Instagram |
| 8. | **Postings that are motivating are carried out/sought** | Provides messages of moral support to Palestinians<br>Seeks motivational messages |
| 9. | **Spams offensive messages** | Spams messages that ridicule Islam |

### Theme 1: Shares Information on Islam on Instagram

Most students mentioned the theme S*hares information on Islam on Instagram,* indicating their usual practice of sharing or exchanging information on Islam on Instagram. The theme is divided into several codes that could be categorised further into *one-way postings* and *reciprocal exchanges* on Instagram.

### One-Way Postings

The one-way postings are divided into sharing requests for funding, sharing Islamic quotes and giving something of benefit to society through Instagram. This is akin to the use of traditional media which is predominantly one-way with any feedback delayed (Wood, 2019).

> "…I post a picture of someone or any other organisations that need some help in donation then I post on my Instagram and ask my followers to help (with) funding. Yes, it is about getting support. And maybe like on Friday I post something like let's read Al-Kahfi" (Local Participant 3, 24 years).

> "Get the Islamic quotes on Instagram and repost again in other social media platforms" (Local Participant 4, 21 years).

> "Spread positive words (advice), share video of Islamic forum" (Local Participant 10, 23 years).

> "When I try to post my pictures or things that I want to show the most I will have put the Islamic quotes like Hadith (expressions of the Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him]) or Qur'ānic verse or I can put positive quotes so that people can understand this is how we live. This is the Islamic way so that they know" (Local Participant 14, 22 years).

> "Post something that gives benefits for society" (Local Participant 12, 19 years).

## Reciprocally Sharing of Information

Other students mentioned about reciprocally providing and receiving information on Islam, emphasising perhaps the person's underscoring of the importance of establishing rapport and a two-way relationship with others. Putting Instagram as a platform used more for discussions rather than one-way postings. This would uphold the interactive model which explains the sender and receiver of the message as having exchangeable roles (Moriarty et al., 2019).

> "Sharing and exchanging information. Listening to religious lectures" (Local Participant 11, 23 years).

> "Exchanging information" (Local Participant 13, 21 years).

The first theme, *Shares information on Islam on Instagram* is akin to performing *da'wah* similar to the practices of Muslim celebrities in an earlier study (Arisa & Hassan, Nov 2016). Social media is a platform where *da'wah* could take place in protecting Islam and in ensuring that people acquire truthful knowledge about Islam (Shompa et al., 2019).

### *Theme 2: Silent to Islamically Offensive Postings*

Most participants also mentioned their disapproval of Islamically offensive Instagram posts. But several preferred to keep silent while disapproving. They reasoned that the importance of remaining silent was the best therapy, avoiding commenting on provocative posts, ignoring them and leaving vaguely truthful messages alone. One participant claimed that the risk of getting the offender banned by Instagram was not something he looked forward to doing. A more passive way of showing disapproval by not liking the postings was preferred by many of the participants:

"I rarely share any post with my friends. I'd rather share on my own and if anything went viral on social media, I choose to keep silent because silence is the best therapy. If you have nothing to say keep quiet or your statement will spark hatred among people" (Local Participant 6, 23 years).

"I refrain from commenting provocations on Instagram" (Local Participant 8, 22 years).

"Just ignore negative vibes" (Local Participant 9, 22 years).

"I don't report but I just ignore" (International Participant 3, 24 years).

"I never reported a post before. I just read the post, my mind tells me whether it's true or not. It's obvious. It's easy to tell if it's true or not. Just leave it like that" (International Participant 6, 19 years).

"I don't like to report. Sometimes I write a comment to explain if there are misunderstandings or something. So, if they accept that, good for them. If they don't, leave them like that. Because you can destroy him, for example on YouTube, a big channel, a lot of subscribers. And if he is misunderstanding something, he'll be in trouble. They'll ban his account for that" (International Participant 6, 19 years).

"I think maybe it is (the) Islamic way. I do not hit the like button if the post is not covering the *aurah* (the parts of the body that are required to be covered in Islam when in the presence of people). You know if you like the post or you comment 'you're pretty' on the post not covering *aurah* I do not do like that. I think in some way it is an Islamic way, right?" (Local Participant 15, 23 years).

### *Theme 3: Reports Posts that are Not Acceptable in Islam*

Several participants reported postings that were not Islamic on Instagram. The images that were deemed by some as not acceptable in Islam were free mingling with the opposite gender (International Participant 1, 23 years), pornography (Local Participant 2, 22 years), Islamophobia, racism, and bullying (Local Participant 3, 22 years). They claimed that these messages should not be on Instagram as they offend Muslims. One student mentioned that approaching the 'offender'

privately is better than reporting to Instagram directly (Local Participant 16, 22 years):

> "Yes, I have (reported). Not in the comment but an unknown account followed me and they're not decent. I usually block them and report as spam, so they don't come around again" (International Participant 1, 23 years).

> "Yes. I always report these kinds of (non-Islamic) posts on Instagram" (Local Participant 4, 21 years).

> "We go to the account and we can report the account so that it will be suspended. Last month during Ramadhan, there was this one video. The man posted a video wearing a sexy dress and dancing to a song. It's inappropriate to do that. He is a boy wearing a woman's dress. So, I reported the account" (Local Participant 15, 23 years).

> "Yes, I have done [this]. For example, before this I already reported it to the Instagram user. The current issue here...I'm not reporting him because of his *pondan* (feminine demeanour) but I reported him because (although) he helped an event for the orphans, he insulted them for their 'poor performances'. I reported him for that purpose" (Local Participant 16, 22 years).

> "Yes. I always report these kinds of (offensive) posts on Instagram. Yes, I have done a lot of reporting everywhere" (Local Participant 2, 24 years).

It was found that there are several ways for students to express their dissatisfaction about unacceptable postings on Instagram. Several students had resorted to remaining silent or reporting offensive posts to Instagram. In view of this, it is natural and acceptable for disagreements to happen as long as they go by proper ethics of expressing and managing differences and not spurred by egoism than truth seeking (Alalwani, 2011). There are different ways to address disagreements of evil actions. A Hadith mentions:

> Abu Sa'eed said '…I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) say: "Whoever among you sees an evil action, and he is able to change it with his hand, then change it with his hand (by taking action); if he cannot, (do so) with his tongue then with his tongue (by speaking out); and if he cannot then with his heart (by hating it and feeling that it is wrong), and

> that is the weakest of faith" (Sahih [Darussalam], Vol. 1,
> Book 5, Hadith 1275).

The findings suggested that some students had chosen to express their dissatisfaction by reporting (or speaking out on) offensive postings while others had opposed them silently (in their hearts); their choice determined their degree of faith in Islam. The best amongst these choices of reacting to evil doings is by doing something about them. These ways of showing disagreement (behaviour) are affected by the ecosystem or the university that the student is being educated in (environment) and the person's ethical principles (person).

### Theme 4: Postings Against Islam are Not Made

The fourth theme revolved around the idea that postings on Instagram should be good ones, reflecting one's good character or ethics (*akhlāq)* in Islam. A student's behaviour is demonstrated in his or her actions and practices which are sourced from his or her soul as Al-Qurʾān enjoins Muslims to continuously do good deeds (16:90). Several participants mentioned the importance of not creating posts that are against Islam:

> "In an un-Islamic way if maybe you are sending weird
> picture, messages containing pictures that are un-Islamic"
> (Local Participant 1, 22 years).

> "Not posting on nudity or violence" (Local Participant 5, 21
> years).

There was a participant who spoke about not backstabbing other people on Instagram (Local Participant 1, 22 years), and another on not practising slander (Local Participant 17, 23 years). The use of the principles of Islamic communication was also practised by a student as it is learnt in the university programme:

> "I'm using Instagram in an Islamic way in terms of
> how I'm commenting to the post. Because I'm studying
> communication so I'm trying to fulfil the communication
> principle by using Instagram" (Local Participant 16, 22
> years).

### Theme 5: Learning from Islamic Posts

Instagram is also used in an educational manner through an Islamic approach. Several participants mentioned learning from how Mizz Nina

(a Malaysian female celebrity) and her husband depict their lifestyle, to gain Islamic knowledge from talks and learn from news and Islamic postings. The idea of modelling after people's behaviour on Instagram, a feature of Social Cognitive Theory, is upheld by this theme and found in another study (Meisser, 2015). The participants mentioned:

> "To see current issue and keep updating" (Local Participant 7, 23 years).

> "Okay. I saw a caption from... if I'm not mistaken Mizz Nina and her husband. How they live, how they get together to go the Islamic way, how they do things, how can they...I don't know what's it called…like never be separated and be there for each other" (Local Participant 14, 22 years).

> "I use Instagram sometimes for Islamic knowledge…I prefer to see Islamic talks by Ustaz Abdul Somad. Every night" (International Participant 3, 24 years).

> "I rarely use it in the Islamic way. But I read about Islamic news, like what happened to Somalis. So, I just read because I got a lot of friends who post a lot of *Hadiths* (Prophet Muhammad's [peace be upon him] sayings), news. So, I just read all and find something" (International Participant 7, 19 years).

One of the principles of Islamic communication mentions that social media platforms should provide beneficial information that people could learn from (Koroglu & Tingoy, 2011). Likewise, Instagram has been used as a language teaching platform in Malaysia and this has been perceived with optimism (Akhiar, 2017). The finding confirms with previous studies that have associated Instagram with education in a positive manner.

### *Theme 6: Islamic Posts were Conducted by Certain Types of People*

The Islamic posts that were more obvious in the form of Qur'ānic verses, Hadith or even supplications to Allah were by people of a certain type, as mentioned by one participant. It appears that most participants were of "the type" except one who was "not the type", making him or her the minority. Yet the same person was aware of the reporting feature on Instagram that tells us he or she can distinguish between right from wrong in terms of acceptable media content:

> "Actually, not at all. There are few of my friends, every
> day they uploaded the Surahs, *Hadith* or Du`a. But I don't
> feel like it's the right way. I'm not 'that" type actually"
> (International Participant 22, 22 years).

There were more obvious Islamic messages (Qur'ān and Sunnah) posted
by several students on Instagram, but there was one who did not carry
this out. Perhaps the person's expectations and environment did not
impact his or her behaviour in the same way they did on other students.

### *Other Themes*

Other less predominant themes were *Instagram is used for entertainment,
Postings that motivate are carried out or sought* and *Spams offensive
messages*.

The first theme is *Instagram is used for entertainment.* A participant
questioned the suitability of the social media platform for religious
discussions as he or she mentioned that interpersonal communication on
Instagram is better for religious discussions than as a place for seeking
entertainment.

*Postings that motivate are carried out or sought* by giving moral
support to other Muslims, such as the Palestinians, were practised by
a participant and this was considered Islamic (Local Participant 1, 23
years). Another participant searched for posts that boosted his or her
motivation (Local Participant 2, 22 years).

The final theme is *Spams offensive messages.* A participant claimed
that he or she spammed an offensive video so that it would not appear
again rather than report it to the authority (International Participant 3,
24 years).

The next category of themes focuses on providing recommendations
to improve the features of Instagram in order to build an Instagram
ecosystem that is agreeable to the Muslim market.

### **Features that Needed to be Improved on Instagram**

The second research question delved on whether the features on
Instagram ensured that students of an Islamic university in Malaysia
used Instagram in an Islamic manner. There were two general categories
of themes generated from the data: students who perceived the current

features of Instagram as insufficient and those who regarded the features as sufficient. Seven themes were produced (see Table 3). Six themes come under Instagram's features that are insufficient whilst only one theme belongs to the sufficient category. This shows that many improvements are needed for Instagram to be suitable for Muslims.

Table 3: Themes and Codes on whether the Features are Sufficient to Ensure Students use Instagram in an Islamic Manner

**CURRENT FEATURES ARE INSUFFICIENT**

| NO. | THEMES | CODES |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | **Deficient in reporting features** | Deficient in reporting feature for racial abuse <br> Deficient in reporting feature on plagiarism of unknown account <br> Reporting features slow, fewer reports should be acted upon <br> Instagram should give warning messages for inappropriate content <br> Instagram should rapidly detect inapt posts <br> Ban people who violate Instagram more than three times <br> Postings are too freely made and any enforcement by Instagram is reactive |
| 2. | **Improve technicalities** | Have a more Islamic interface <br> Make the pictures sharp like other social media platforms <br> Make it a multifunctional social media platform like WeChat |
| 3. | **Put restrictions on contents** | Ensure compatibility of messages with Muslim users <br> Deny people who post offensive and sensitive messages <br> Screen posts before allowing them |
| 4. | **Put a higher age limit requirement for users** | Users should be 18 years and above <br> Children should have their own version of Instagram <br> Parental guidance needed for young users |
| 5. | **Improve privacy setting** | Improve users' privacy setting <br> Maintain privacy setting |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 6. | **Form Department of Religious Sensitivities** | A special department needed that looks into the religious sensitivities for all; if not, Muslims have to screen postings themselves |

| **CURRENT FEATURES ARE SUFFICIENT** | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **THEME** | **CODES** |
| 7. | **Sufficient features on Instagram** | Reporting of offensive messages adequate<br>Plenty of Instagram features already<br>Instagram features are good enough |

### *Theme 1: Deficient in Reporting Features*

The most common problem is that the reporting feature was perceived to be deficient as it was slow, requiring many complaints before they were acted upon by Instagram. Many believe that it should be taken more seriously, even after one complaint. Also, there was no feature (on the complaint form) for reporting racism or stealing of another's account.

After some examination, it appears that there are Community Guidelines that include the allowance for reporting racial abuse to Instagram but this is not immediately obvious from the icons in the left bar of Instagram on the Privacy and Safety Centre page. A participant mentioned that it took too long and too many people to report for an account to be suspended (Local Participant 15, 23 years). Another participant said that one person's report should be enough for the post to be banned on Instagram (Local Participant 1, 23 years) while other said more than three reports is needed (Local Participant 4, 21 years old). Another had mentioned:

> "I'm not sure since I think it (the collective security features) is enough now. Maybe they should...the action should be immediate. An account to be suspended, they might need longer months, maybe years to investigate it. So, I think they should improve in terms of trying to take an action immediately. Yes, they take longer, and they need a lot of people to report it. Some people might not know this. And it might be too late, I mean the message has been spread to other people" (Local Participant 3, 22 years).

A participant recommended that an obvious icon that focuses on racism or a drop-down menu should be made available when searching for information on how to report racism by users. The Community Guidelines are too narrative-like and the types of abuse are buried in the explanation and difficult to locate immediately.

> "Maybe Instagram should have the feature where somebody offends you or attacks you… racially and you can report on that. Being on Instagram, the reporting on someone said mean things, they have the option to report someone abusive so that is already there. Where somebody posts indecent content and you can report it as nudity. But racial abuse, I haven't found much" (Participant 11, 23 years).

The self-regulatory feature of Instagram is obvious, but may not be agreeable to everyone.

> "…there are no limitations and people can post anything. Unless he or she posts any picture, then we read the content then we can get Instagram to block the post" (Local Participant 2, 24 years).

### *Theme 2: Improve Technicalities*

In order to create a more Islamic ecosystem on Instagram for the Muslim market, there should be some adaptations made as mentioned by most participants, for instance:

> "(Instagram) should add more Islamic application interface"
> (Local Participant 10, 23 years).

Being a sought-after social networking site for its visuals, better picture quality was expected by a Local Participant (15, 22 years). The idea that WeChat can do everything, represents the perception that it has more features than Instagram. Instagram must therefore improve its features and promote them better to the younger Muslim audience (International Participant 7, 19 years).

### *Theme 3: Put Restrictions on Content by Instagram*

Another common theme by participants is that Instagram ought to screen content and bar offensive postings from appearing. However, when asked whether it should be done on a self-regulatory basis, Local

Participant (15, 23 years) agreed that users need to have better self-control. Others preferred Instagram to filter posts because there were useless ones (International Participant 6, 19 years), offensive due to nudity (Local Participant 2, 24 years), and Instagram should explain the parameters of the postings more clearly (Local Participant 7, 23 years).

Upon investigation, more needs to be done by Instagram to make it clear, by explaining it more visually to young users on the settings available for them to use to make their experience of using the social media platform more pleasant. Also, this can attract the Muslim market for marketing communication. The notion of Instagram affecting younger audiences has been examined in previous studies (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2018; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Kleemans et al., 2018; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Sharifi et al., 2016; Turner & Lefevre, 2017).

### *Theme 4: Put a Higher Age Limit Requirement for Users*

Instagram only allows users to be 13 years old and above while those owned by children younger than this age must be managed by an adult. There is the recommendation that this should be more stringently implemented and that the age should be 18 years and above, not 13 years and above. More needs to be done in terms of parental guidance as children quickly become adept to using technology and social media. Some participants mentioned that there should be Instagram for children below 18 years with appropriate content (Local Participant 1, 23 years), while parental guidance is needed for children using Instagram (Local Participant 4, 22 years; Local Participant 16, 22 years).

### *Theme 5: Improve Privacy Setting*

Some participants indicated that the privacy setting needs improving and they felt that their privacy was intruded upon on Instagram. Better communication of this facility is needed by Instagram to create awareness and understanding, particularly for the younger Muslim market. The need for privacy and restriction of sensitive content was often mentioned by participants (e.g. Local Participant 11, 23 years; Local Participant 12, 19 years; Local Participant 13, 21 years) who underlined the earnestness of the issue. Another mentioned the importance of ensuring users'

privacy on Instagram (Local Participant 6, 23 years). Such perceptions of privacy issues are important for Instagram to address. A better way of explaining the parameters allowed on Instagram would improve confidence in using it. Previous studies have touched on the importance of privacy issues for students using Instagram (Hamid et al., 2015; Talib et al., 2014) and this is comparably found in this study.

### Theme 6: Form a Department of Religious Sensitivities

A recommendation from a participant was the need to have a department in Instagram that focuses on creating awareness about the sensitivity of religious content. It was perceived that Muslims are left to look out for sensitive content themselves, which should not be the case. Religious sensitivities on the whole ought to be considered for the proposed department mentioned by Local Participant (17, 23 years)**.**

### Theme 7: Sufficient Features on Instagram

On the other hand, a common theme was that the features of Instagram were sufficient and students were satisfied with Instagram in terms of fulfilling their need for entertainment and information, as mentioned by Local Participant 12 (19 years). Also, there was no need for the features to be improved, as it would result in wasting too much time on Instagram, said International Participant 2 (18 years). A participant (International Participant 3, 24 years) was satisfied with the amount of information Instagram carries.

Most features were perceived as good on Instagram but some contents like advertisements, which are necessary for businesses in the marketplace, were not welcomed. Of course, in this case, with advertising being an important source of revenue, Instagram could ensure that the advertisements were not intrusive (International Participant 4, 20 years).
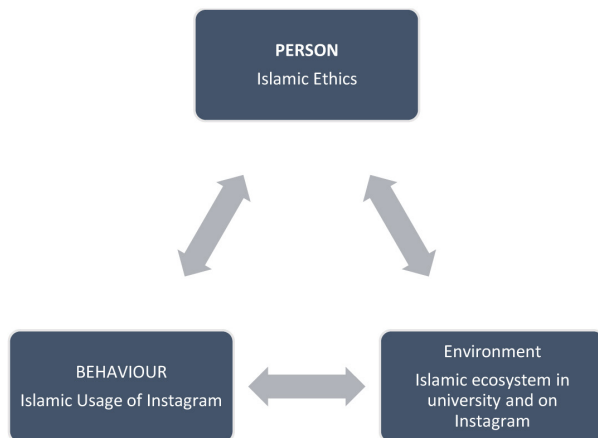
Meanwhile, one participant was satisfied with the current privacy setting and said that it had improved (International Participant 5, 22 years). However, there were very few responses that expressed the students' satisfaction of Instagram by Muslim students. This needs to be addressed by Instagram to make it better perceived and used by a larger Muslim audience.

*Theory Development and Recommendations*

When applied to the study, Social Cognitive Theory demonstrates the cognitive interactionist perspective to moral phenomena that upholds the interaction of personal factors (moral thought and affective self-reactions), behavioural factors (moral conduct), and environmental factors (moral ecosystem); all operating as interacting determinants that influence each other bi-directionally (Bandura, 1999). The study has found that most Muslim students examined were educated in an Islamic ecosystem (environment), used Instagram in an Islamic manner, and had no qualms in making recommendations to enhance the social media platform in order to reinforce Islamic behaviour and personal moral thoughts. This develops the Social Cognitive Theory further (see Figure 2). There was only one student who mentioned he or she was not the type of Muslim who would share explicit Islamic messages. like Qur'ānic verses, *Hadith* and *Du'a* (supplications), unlike his or her friends. Yet the student is aware of the reporting feature on Instagram for offensive postings. Most of the students understood what was expected of them as Muslims in terms of abiding by Islamic principles when using Instagram, which could have been reinforced by education at the university. Recommendations made to Instagram to improve its features for a more agreeable ecosystem for Muslims are:

1. Improvements on reporting features to make Instagram more effective and efficient;

2. Improvements on technicalities in terms of an Islamic interface, picture quality, and multitude of features;

3. Restricting offensive content by Instagram in a proactive manner;

4. Putting a higher age limit required for users from 13 to 18 years;

5. Improving the privacy setting and,

6. Forming the Department of Religious Sensitivities.

Figure 2: Triadic Reciprocal Causation of Social Cognitive Theory for
Instagram Use from the Islamic Perspective

**PERSON**
Islamic Ethics

**BEHAVIOUR**
Islamic Usage of Instagram

Environment
Islamic ecosystem in
university and on
Instagram

## Conclusion

The study has found that the triadic reciprocal causation of Social
Cognitive Theory explains the reciprocal roles of person (student),
environment (university with an Islamic ecosystem), and behaviour
in terms of the usage of Instagram. This can be developed into the
imbuement of the Islamic perspective for the usage to be carried out in
an Islamic manner. Most participants mentioned their usage of Instagram
to be Islamic, except for one participant. Recommendations have been
given to make the ecosystem of Instagram to be more Islamic. This
research is important for Instagram and marketing communicators to
understand that Muslim users are sensitive to offensive messages. They
have expectations that should be met for the promotion of brands that
would suit the Muslim market on the social media platform.

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