Exploring the social reality of waqf community using social media: the Netnography approach

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Abstract. The emergence of waqf institutions in Malaysia has attracted the attention of many. Considerable attention has been paid by various parties including the Federal government. In tandem with the revival of waqf, it has driven the emergence of a group of people who are passionate in matters pertaining to the development of Waqf (herein referred to as the waqf community). According to the Theory of Structuration, interaction between the agency and structure would induce changes. Therefore, this waqf community, being a part of the agency, is capable to influence the structure and bring about changes. Triggered by the existence of this waqf community, this study is interested in exploring their social reality. Having observed that a majority of people from this Waqf community had formed a specialized Whatsapp group dedicated to discussing matters pertaining to waqf, this study has considered the usage of netnography as an instrument to observe their social reality. Despite having limitations in narrowing down the research, this study was able to extract nine findings on their behaviour namely; their sensitivities, unity, spirit, willingness, commitment, the disclosure of information, influence, focus, gaps and frictions. Overall, the approach can be improved further by strategizing a refinement on the scope and technique in making observations.

1. Introduction
Waqf in Malaysia received greater attention during the tenure of the Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who had the vision to improve the waqf institutions in the country and wanted to see greater involvement of waqf in socio-economic development. Federal agencies like the Department of Awqaf, Zakat and Hajj (JAWHAR) and the Malaysian Awqaf Foundation (YWM) were all established during the tenure of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the platform to facilitate SIRCs to develop the waqf institution in the country further. Since then, waqf has received numerous attention from various parties such as academics, law-makers and practitioners, financial and capital market regulators, financial institutions, non-governmental organisations, cooperatives, property developers, ministries, and the public at large. Also, there is a positive change in the SIRCs who are placed as the sole trustee in administrating the waqf, whereby all SIRCs have now seemed to strategize their ways to revitalize the waqf through better administration structure, regulating enactments, imparting public awareness, developing more waqf lands, introducing many waqf products, providing innovative platforms for the public to be involved in waqf, opening up for more strategic partnering and many more.
Presently, there is a burgeoning waqf community in Malaysia that consists of people who are passionate about waqf. These people can be said to have a great understanding on waqf and strongly believe in the greatness of this Islamic social instrument, not only for this world but also for the hereafter. Intrigued by the growing interest to know more about this waqf community, this study intends to explore the social reality of this group by trying to further understand their culture and behavior among themselves. The strategy is to use social media as the instrument under the netnography approach. Conducting the observation in the virtual world may pose some limitations, but relatively it is the most convenient and cheapest approach to be utilized.

2. Brief overview of waqf
Waqf can be described as a religious endowment in Islam. It is a type of donation, but with religious influences and highly governed by its principles and laws that are not shared by other types of charity instruments. It can be defined as “to hold and prevent the consumption of an asset to reap or extracting the derive benefits or usufructs to serve the righteousness or philanthropy objectives” [1]. The objective of waqf is mainly to assist the disadvantaged groups and to provide a general wellness in the society [2]. Waqf can be said as a more robust charity instrument because it has been characterized by exclusive principles of perpetuity, irrevocability, and inalienability [3]. It should also be noted here that waqf should not be treated the same as other trust instruments. As waqf is influenced by the belief of Tawheed (oneness of Allah), properties which has been donated according to the principles of Waqf is now being held in the name of Allah, whereas conventional trusts is held by the trustee [3,4].

In the context of Malaysia, it is vital to understand that the administration of Islamic religious affairs (waqf being one of them) is under the purview of the State Islamic Religious Council (SIRC) of each respective state. As Malaysia adopts the principle of Federalism, there is a separation in the administration affairs between the Federal government and State government. Since the new millennia, waqf has received some greater attention from various parties including the public. It is interesting to see more people are now interested in waqf. Some are directly involved in the management and making the waqf grow; while others are giving support in the form of various approaches. Embedded by religiously motivated spirit, these people have become part of a distinctive waqf community who are ready to be involved and introduce changes to the waqf institution. The involvement of people from various affiliations and backgrounds have made the institution of waqf in Malaysia achieve progress. They are involved in applying pressure to the regulators through ideas and actions to lead the changes and open up for more opportunities. The interactions between the waqf community and the existing regulatory structure by way of fulfilling and manipulating the governing administration and legal framework, regulations, policies, as well as the bureaucracy structures, have met the idea of the Structuration Theory. These interactions also form parts of the reality that constitutes the nature of waqf institution in Malaysia.

3. Methodological aspects
Ontologically, the reality of any concerned subject can be understood when a researcher has delved into the process of finding it. In common understanding, the reality can be objective or subjective, with the possibility of having multiple realities for the concerned subject [5]. Depending on the position of the researcher, the stance for the reality existence could be in two forms, one, as independently and waiting for discoveries; and on another stance, the reality is created by the perceptions and interpretation of the social actors [6,7]. Understanding the nature of the subject would help the subsequent processes in the research including the selection of research approach and instrument.

In regards to this article, the objective is set as to explore the social reality of the waqf community. In the context of Structuration Theory, the said waqf community would be the agent or agency who will practice within the existing structure of the social system, which is characterized by the constraints and enablement that would reproduce practices inserted in time and space [8]. However, the process to observe the social reality of the waqf community may entail some difficulties due to
diverse backgrounds and being scattered in many locations. A more effective way needs to be explored by taking advantage of the advancement of current technology.

4. Netnography as research instrument
This article is considering the usage of social media as an instrument to observe the social reality within the waqf community. It was derived from the virtual ethnography [9] or netnography approach [10] that emerged in the mid 90’s. The term ‘netnography’ was derived from ethnography but is mediated by the contemporary computerized communications technology, or Internet-based communications to do online fieldwork [10,11]. It is a more appropriate instrument to provide an unobtrusive observation, connecting people with diverse interest and backgrounds, enabling an extra level of anonymity in researching for sensitive information, and utilizes relatively less time and cost consumptions [12,13]. It is also suggested for the researcher to engage and have full participation in the culture being studied to perform focused observations and explore the ‘thick descriptions’ of virtual communities and cybercultures such as the social power, attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and their ways of life [11,13,14]. However, attention should also be given to the boundary between reality and the virtual world by observing the similarities and differences of the subject matter, which resulted from different communication modes [14].

Social media that is specific to the online social platform has rapidly grown and evolved due to the increasing number of internet users. It has become a virtual platform for people to meet and communicate about the subject of their interest. Past studies have revealed that social media has been used mostly by teenagers and young people [15]. However, these social media now have been used by almost everybody regardless of age bracket. The mobile instant messaging application such as WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat, Line, Viber, Kakao Talk, Yahoo Messenger, Facebook Messenger and many more have become parts of cross-platform communication applications that have been appreciated by billions of users. Among the important features of these mobile instant messaging applications are the ability to minimize communication costs, communicate internationally, instant content delivery, ability to set read notification, shares a variety of media, location sharing, communication without cellular service and integration with a desktop platform [16]. Among the available mobile instant messaging applications, WhatsApp has become the largest and most popular application with 1.2 billion users worldwide (as of May 2017) that resulted in more than 1 billion Whatsapp groups being created, which delivered 42 to 64 billion messages and shared 1.6 billion photos daily (as of February 2016) [17]. Malaysian has been ranked as one of the top countries that uses WhatsApp with 60% of penetration into its population as of 4th quarter of 2016 [18].

5. Utilizing WhatsApp for research
As addressed in this paper, the exploration of the social reality of waqf community will be conducted on the WhatsApp platform. One WhatsApp group has been created by one of the waqf staff in JAWHAR on 8th January 2014 at 9.39 pm and he became the administrator of that group. He subsequently added more members from JAWHAR, YWM, SIRCs and a few related people from different organisations. Initially, the group was used as a platform to informally communicate among members about matters related to JAWHAR’s affairs that are mostly related to waqf and zakat. It was a closed group at that time. However, some members had left the group for unknown reasons as the researcher was not in that group since the beginning. A light conversation with one of the members of the group had revealed that among the reasons for their departure from the group were; feeling uneasy with the way the discussions had been carried out among members who like to criticize others, discussing out of context issues, discussion of sensitive issues which had offended their feelings, and the lack of interest in discussing the matter on social media.

The researcher was only added to that WhatsApp group circa August 2015 after the group administrator decided to make the group more open. Since then, more members joined with a variety of backgrounds and affiliations who were interested in the growth of waqf in the country. More members were appointed as co-administrators, including the researcher. Examining the researcher’s
mobile device that was used since 22nd September 2015, which was not long after becoming the member of that group, yielded some WhatsApp statistics referring to that group. Based on the retrieved statistics (as at 7th September 2017), the group currently has 180 members and contains 9,982 messages, 1,792 photos, 3 GIF media, 364 videos, 32 voice messages, and 23 documents. The daily discussions in the group are considered as moderate, fluctuating according to the issues.

6. Findings and analysis
Observing the behavior of the group members based on the daily discussions and materials that were shared in that group, this study able to identify a few pointers as the following:

- **Disclosure of information** - Most members did not thoroughly disclose information pertaining to their organisation. They would prefer to contribute to the discussions based on their personal opinions. Nevertheless, they would participate when the discussions were related to their organisation.

- **Sensitivity** - For some members who have been involved in waqf for so long or are attached to waqf governing agencies, they were cautious in delivering their comments but would be sensitive when having to discuss matters regarding to the authority or power to manage waqf. However, for several members, they were at times too pessimistic on the issue and tended to criticize others.

- **Influence** - Some members would react aggressively on influencing others to accept or adopt their ideas, instruments, mechanisms or initiatives that they have worked out at their organisation. It is not bad at all because the main intention was to see the fast progress of waqf growth. Also, it has been noted that members with an honorific title such as Datuk or Dato’ and academic titles of Professor, Associate Professor or Dr. (Ph.D.) may impart some influence on other members.

- **Focus** - The discussions often emphasised on the clarity of the issues and to find some hints for improvement. But, there were times where the discussions were jumping from one to another without clear focus due to too many things to discuss or probed by members. Although everybody realized the possibility of very small percentage of those ideas had been brought forward to the responsible agencies by the members, most of them seem to agree that the discussions were good for their knowledge enrichment.

- **Unity** - The members seemed to be very united in promoting any waqf agendas. Members appropriately supported ideas and actions from other members. Some were willing to take the lead and bring the force to the mainstream media by appearing on television programmes or write in newspaper columns which would be shared in the group.

- **Gaps and frictions** - Little gaps have been sensed between the members who are representing the Federal agencies and SIRCs. Both parties seldomly discussed topics or issues that they had in common or were both involved in. Rather, they became extra careful when to express anything related to each other, or refrain from commenting when other members raise the topic.

- **Commitment** - Some members found the opportunities to extend the potential of waqf through various great ideas. Any invites for programmes, events, discussions or brainstorming sessions outside the WhatsApp platform, although in a casual manner, would be accepted by members at their expense.

- **Willingness** - Some members are holding strategic positions in the Government Agencies or having good connections with authorities in the country. So, in certain circumstances, within their capacity or capability, they were willing to bring up any proposal for the betterment of waqf. Usually, they will pursue or push for policy changes or complementary mechanism. But require for perseverance and time, considering that government cannot simply change any policy.
• *Attachment* - Members were also personally very supportive of each other. It is done by way of congratulating or consoling each other in the event of success or grievance. Motivations and advice were also being regularly shared.

Overall, the observation of the social reality of waqf community by using social media is possible to be conducted. Applications such as WhatsApp are able to place the targeted population together and study their culture or behavior virtually. However, this study has some limitations that certainly affect the reliability of the instrument and validity of the findings, such as:

• No time frame has been set prior the study. The observation was conducted continuously ever since the researcher was in that group.

• The researcher has realized that not everybody was actively involved in every daily discussion. Despite no thorough checking on the level of members’ activeness, it somehow reflected the notion of 1% heavy contributors, 9% intermittent contributors and 90% lurkers for the rules of participation inequality in social media and online communities [19].

• No pre-set condition has been made prior to the study as a control. The behavior of the members was naturally observed.

Despite being able to explore some of the social realities that exist amongst the waqf community, this study prefers not to put much weight on the findings considering that this study was exposed to many limitations. Confirmation should be made with other research instruments.

7. Conclusion
The existence of a waqf community that is willing to work for the betterment of waqf institutions in Malaysia was intrigued this study to explore their social realities as part to know their behaviors and cultures. The usage of WhatsApp under the netnography instrument helped the study to observe this waqf community. Although in a virtual platform, the textual conversations between members of that social media were expressive enough to reveal themselves. The ability to extract nine important findings from the virtual platform was considered as important. However, this study cannot claim the approach that was used as superior due to various limitations. It can be improved by implementing a better strategy with refinement on its scope and technique to do the observations or having conciliation with other research instruments to confirm the findings.

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