

Humor, Piety, and Masculinity: The Role of Digital Platforms in Aiding “Conversations” Between Islamic Preachers and *Waria* in Indonesia

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Abstract:

This article explores the influence of digital platforms in opening up ways for Islamic preachers in Indonesia to conduct dakwah and connect with their Muslim audience using distinct affective mechanisms, such as localized humor, pious activism, and display of Islamic knowledge–authority. Since 2016, influenced by online preachers who have earned a loyal following through YouTube, there has been a spike in national interest toward the Islamic discourse of immorality associated with the globalized LGBTQ liberation movement. In this article, I will investigate the role of digital dakwah in perpetuating a moral discourse against gender nonconforming expressions and reinforcing the popular discourse of embodying daily Islamic piety to preserve the morality of the Indonesian nation. I am specifically interested in examining the digital presence of Ustadz Abdul Somad and Ustadz Felix Siauw, two prominent Indonesian Islamic preachers, and their particular “interactions” and views toward waria communities in Indonesia. Using evidence from YouTube, I distinguish and illuminate three affective mechanisms used by Islamic preachers and waria to engage in the broader discourse of LGBTQ rights and gender nonconformity in Indonesia: carpool dakwah, humor, and religious authority.

Keywords:

Digital Dakwah, Waria, Religious Activism, Indonesian Islam, Gender Nonconformity

Introduction

In Indonesia, popular attitudes surrounding LGBTQ communities took a radical turn in the past two decades, shaped by a growing number of Islamic preachers who began focusing on LGBTQ issues as a crucial part

of their message against the rise of immorality and secular attitudes in the country. Preachers' arguments against visible expressions of LGBTQ identity in Indonesia stand in tension with the growing circulation of globalized LGBTQ values that have also entered mainstream sociocultural spheres in Indonesia. Since 2016, influenced by *dakwah* (preaching) figures who have earned a loyal following through their popularity on mainstream media and digital platforms, there has been a spike in national interest toward the Islamic discourse of immorality associated with the globalized LGBTQ liberation movement.

The year 2016 was pivotal in transforming the Indonesian religious and political scenes. This year marked the rise of Islamist mass mobilizing efforts to denounce the leadership position of the former Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama; the first Christian and ethnically Chinese Jakartan Governor who was inaugurated in November of 2014 (Peterson 2020). Scholar of Islamic politics, Greg Fealy, reports that in 2016, Islamist organizations under the umbrella of the *212 Movement* organized the *Defending Islam Action*, mass demonstrations that sought “to demand action against [...] Purnama, for alleged blasphemy against Islam” (Fealy 2016). Fealy claims that the second rally held on November 4, 2016, “had attracted an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 people,” while the third rally on December 2, 2016, attracted 500,000 people in estimates, “making it probably the largest single religious gathering in Indonesian history” (Fealy 2016). The influence of these 212 mass demonstrations has also ignited debates among political commentators and scholars of Indonesian Islam about whether or not Islamist groups represent “genuine sentiments among the [Indonesian] population” and if these events “indicate a considerable shift in the religious, social and political attitudes of Indonesians” (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018, 2). Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi claim that while there is “a considerable decline in conservative and radical attitudes between 2010 and 2016,” their data show that there is a significant increase in feelings of intolerance shared among Muslims from different geographical, economic, and social backgrounds in 2016 (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018, 3).

The *212 Movement* provided a platform for Muslims from intersecting class backgrounds expressing certain ideologies of intolerance to take part in mass political actions and moral debates that affect the construction of modern pious subjects in Indonesia. By making spaces for intolerance, Islamic preachers and leaders within the *212 Movement* were able to challenge contemporary sociocultural phenomena they viewed as blasphemous, particularly LGBTQ activism and its role in sparking new expressions of rights and morality in Indonesia. As the *212 Movement* gained traction, Muslim political figures who were concerned about the wider discourse on moral panic, also took part in amplifying religious sentiments against the rise of LGBTQ discourse in the country. The Indonesian Minister of Higher Education, Muhammad Nasir, for instance, tweeted about his attempt to ban LGBTQ organizations on all university campuses on January 24, 2016, illustrating how 212 organizers were not the sole perpetrators and agents behind the spread of anti-LGBTQ discourses following the 2016 heightened political moment in Indonesia.

In 2016, *Human Rights Watch* (2016) claims that “the combination of government officials, militant Islamists, and mass religious groups stoking anti-LGBT intolerance led to immediate deterioration [and condemnation...] of LGBT individuals.” Within the *212 Movement*, two preachers who have focused significantly on addressing issues of gendered and homosexual deviance were *Ustadz* (an Arabic–Indonesian term that refers to Islamic teachers) Abdul Somad and *Ustadz* Felix Siau. Known for their rhetoric of humor and strong, emotional preaching tone, Somad and Siau’s public *dakwah* instantly attracted the mainstream Indonesian Muslim audience. Aided by the rise of YouTube as a popular digital platform in Indonesia, Somad and Siau’s *dakwah* content that was initially broadcasted on national television has now moved into the digital realm.

The work of Hew Wai Weng has illuminated how social media technology in Indonesia opens up new opportunities for Islamic preachers to urge “Muslims to uphold Islam as a way of life and a political ideology” through forming an intimate connection with their followers online

(2018, 61). Focusing on Siau, who communicates with his followers (mainly women) via YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram, Hew claims that through social media, Siau practices “visual *dakwah* and Islamist persuasion” strategy that is “fun yet radical, colourful yet conservative, [and] interactive yet dogmatic;” allowing Siau to use social media to “normalize religious radicalism” (Hew 2018, 76). It is through this context that figures like Somad and Siau begin relying on digital platforms to primarily conduct preaching, in an attempt to reinforce the idea that embodying heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality is crucial to the preservation of Islamic morality in Indonesia.

Today, one of the most marginalized, surveilled, and misunderstood communities within the Indonesian discourse on LGBTQ rights is *waria* (for consistency, I will use this term as singular and plural), a gender nonconforming community native to Indonesia. Despite the long history of acceptance and tolerance toward *waria* communities in Indonesia, in recent years, *waria* have begun receiving a spike in negative attention through their association with globalized LGBTQ discourses. Anthropologist Benjamin Hegarty suggests that *waria*, as a gender category, first emerged in the late 1970s and is “a combination of the Indonesian words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man)” (2019, 48). Indonesian scholar, Dian Maya Safitri, provides a more ambiguous interpretation of *waria*’s identity in her work. Safitri suggests that *waria* embody “a subordinate position within masculinity; not because they do not conform to the mainstream of heterosexual orientation, but rather because of their awareness that they are physically born as males, though some of them have undergone genital-changing surgery and practice [feminine self-expressions]” (2013, 93). Based on Safitri’s nuanced articulation of *waria*’s gender presentation and identity, I believe that ambiguous and pluralist values and language surrounding gender in Indonesia significantly influence how *waria*, as well as non-*waria* communities, understand their gendered subjectivity.

Within popular Islamic discourses on *waria*, there is often a conflation between *waria* and gay men, stemming from the presumption that *waria* feminine presentations reflect the deviant desire of gay men. While there

is much research to be done to distinguish the two subjectivities, for the purpose of this article, I will limit my focus on the experience of gender nonconforming *waria* to examine their specific online reactions to anti-LGBTQ discourses. Even though the mainstream Indonesian population still generally perceives *waria* as male, it is important to recognize that *waria*'s subjectivity embodies a sense of in-betweenness that should not be simplified through a primarily Eurocentric identity category like transgender or male transvestites. To honor the ambiguity of *waria*'s gender identity, I will use the local terminology, *waria*, to describe subjects who identify with this gender category in the digital data I draw on. I will also use the “she–her–hers” pronoun because I believe that it is the pronoun they may prefer in English (in Indonesia, the third person pronoun, *dia*, is gender-neutral), though I recognize that some *waria* still embody masculinity and may prefer identifying with a different pronoun.

This research is part of a broader project that will involve offline ethnography and interviews. Due to limitations from COVID-19, however, I was not yet able to integrate offline methods into this research. I am also aware that due to the popular reduction of *waria* as homosexuals and male in the scholarships, statements, and reports I cited in this article, gay men in Indonesia are also significantly affected by Islamic preachers' narratives on *waria*. Within the limit of my research, I have not delved into how gay men respond to anti-LGBTQ discourse (Thajib 2014), which certainly limits the data on feelings and emotive responses I examine in this article. In this article, I ask: How do *waria* respond to Somad and Siau's online preaching about their communities and gendered subjectivity? What cultural, linguistic, and emotive mechanisms do preachers and *waria* use to convey their stances toward the contemporary discourse of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia? Using evidence drawn from YouTube, I argue that there are three primary mechanisms used by Islamic preachers and *waria* to engage in discussions surrounding issues of LGBTQ rights and *waria* in Indonesia.

I call the (1) mechanism “carpool *dakwah*.” Utilized primarily by Siau, carpool *dakwah* illuminates the way Islamic preachers employ accessible

casual environments, such as a car ride, to deliver their *dakwah* and political stances against gender nonconforming expressions. The (2) mechanism is humor. In their *dakwah*, Siau and Somad can be seen tapping into the negative emotions (anger, shame) of their audience by articulating their gendered ideology through Indonesian metaphors and masculinized humor that point to *waria*'s failure to practice Islamic ideals of masculinity. Simultaneously, *waria* are also adopting humor as a response by reclaiming slurs used against them and returning to their religious communities to advocate for their agency as Muslims. The (3) mechanism is religious authority. Even though humor is commonly deployed by preachers and *waria* in their respective advocacy, both groups also significantly return to Islam and the Qur'an as a way to find legitimacy in their claims toward supporting or denouncing the existence of LGBTQ communities in Indonesia.

Using “emotive politics” as a theoretical framework, a concept put forward by young Indonesian scholars Aulia Nastiti and Sari Ratri, I will demonstrate how the three mechanisms described above reach their effectiveness due to their ability to activate certain emotions of shame, anger, and anxiety in their Muslim audience (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). For instance, “by claiming authoritative knowledge of religion, [Islamic preachers like Somad and Siau] exploit emotional aspects of piety to define the rights and the wrongs of political choices [such as supporting LGBTQ narratives and electing a non-Muslim official]” (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 198). While this article focuses on the politicization of emotions in online preaching, the phenomenon of affective *dakwah*, which signifies the use of emotion and intimacy for political–religious goals, has predated the internet. The work of James Hoesterey (2015) points to the great influence of emotions in shaping the *dakwah* performances of prominent male preachers in the early 2000s, like celebrity preacher Aa Gym. Locating his analysis in “the rise and fall of [Aa Gym],” Hoesterey claims that Aa Gym rose to prominence due to his uniquely emotive mode of preaching that combines Sufi elements of “the ethical heart with self-help slogans of Western popular psychology” (2015, 1).

Facilitated by the emergence of the internet as a new medium of preaching, there has been a significant increase in preachers' utilization of emotions to spread political messages in their digital *dakwah* that promotes elements of “emotional reciprocity, [...] community of trust,” and information sharing between people (Abidin 2017, 2). Before delving further into my examination of emotive politics, I will discuss the dynamics of digital *dakwah* on YouTube, followed by a comparative analysis of the three different strategies deployed by Islamic preachers and *waria* to assert their positionality toward issues of gender nonconformity in Indonesia.

Emotions, *Dakwah*, and the Rise of YouTube

Internet platforms and social media have opened up an opportunity for preachers in Indonesia to conduct *dakwah* widely and exercise their religious authority in defining moral, political, and cultural expectations for Muslims. As Muslims increasingly turn to online *dakwah* content for religious and moral guidance, Islamic preachers, as a result, possess a greater capacity to influence the inner emotions and ethical beliefs of their pious Muslim subjects. Anthropologist Martin Slama (2017) argues that digital platforms have aided a form of “mediated intimacy” between Islamic preachers and their followers, in which preachers use digital communication apps to directly contact their followers and introduce them to trendy, affective concepts to promote the daily embodiment of Islamic piety. Slama centers his analysis on the notion of “charging the heart,” a popular concept used by preachers and their followers to characterize their intimate, personal *dakwah* engagement, in which their direct communication is itself perceived as an act of embodying piety. This demonstrates the power of digital platforms in expanding the influence of *dakwah* forums and leaders in Indonesia, particularly as the internet allows them to promote religious teachings on a mass scale and connect more intimately with a wider audience.

In 2019, an Asia–Pacific focused network company, *Greenhouse*, published an article claiming that 88 percent of active internet users in Indonesia spend their time on YouTube, making YouTube the most

popular social media platform in the country (Greenhouse 2019). Due to its popularity, YouTube has become one of the most popular platforms for *dakwah* today. Using Google Trends, a free statistics tool provided by Google, I was able to track search statistics on YouTube using keywords. Through typing “Abdul Somad” as a keyword, I found that he appeared for the first time as a popular search term on YouTube in April of 2016; “Felix Siauw” appeared as a search term as early as 2012. Google Trends also show that the peak of searches for both Somad and Siauw happened in December of 2017.

As preachers possess a greater capacity to reach their followers and promote moral lessons online, Somad and Siauw’s *dakwah* content on *waria* and homosexual subjects has successfully garnered millions of views, turning them into two of the most important conversation leaders and spiritual guides in the broader discourse of morality that produces narratives against LGBTQ communities in Indonesia today. Somad and Siauw, who are known for their emotional gestures and tones in *dakwah*, turn their preaching and teaching into an affective mechanism to shape their moral, political pious subjects.

In their article *Emotive Politics*, Aulia Nastiti and Sari Ratri (2018) contextualize the growing political Islamization over the past two decades in Indonesia by examining the rising influence of Islamist organizations and political Islam in 2017. Nastiti and Ratri suggest that contemporary figures behind Islamist organizations utilize certain emotive mechanisms, such as a strong preaching tone that exposes anger and shame, to trigger certain reactions in their pious audience. Through the use of emotional tone and physical gestures (waving and pointing at crowds), preachers use their religious authority as a mode for controlling and shaping the collective attitudes of Muslims toward certain political ideologies (2018, 198). Nastiti and Ratri claim that “Islamic groups, by claiming authoritative knowledge of religion, exploit emotional aspects of piety [such as *malu* (shame) and *kegelisahan* (anxiety)] to define the rights and the wrongs of political choices,” such as their claims that LGBTQ practices and electing a non-Muslim official are inherently sinful (2018, 198).

The Islamist movement's claim about the way LGBTQ identity influences moral destruction successfully taps into mainstream Indonesian Muslim's consciousness of their public performance of gender, desire, and piety. In their attempt to invite their contemporary Indonesian pious subjects to strive toward protecting and embodying Islamic morality, religious authorities behind the mass mobilizing organization would often treat nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality as a marker of immorality and sin. Therefore, the effectiveness of Islamist organizations' mass mobilizing message that targets LGBTQ narratives relies heavily on their ability to "shape individuals into pious political subjects," which is possible due to the significance of Islamic piety and everyday religious practice in the lives of the Indonesian Muslim majority population (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 200). This political strategy of using theologically grounded moral articulations to reshape Muslims' emotional and religious sentiments toward the contemporary LGBTQ movement is exemplified in YouTube *dakwah* videos by Somad and Siau, as well as *waria* communities, which I will examine in the next sections.

Crash Course on Masculinity Through Carpool *Dakwah*

Once viewed as a loose outlet for expressing decadent and immoral behaviors, the internet has become one of the most accessible venues for enforcing and teaching the practice of Islamic piety in Indonesia today. As Eva F. Nisa has pointed out, internet platforms are "used by practicing Muslims in Indonesia to enhance their religious practices and conduct *dakwah*," transforming the internet into a space of "diverse interpretations of Islam" (Nisa 2018, 24). Through the internet, Felix Siau has turned into one of the most celebrated icons behind digital *dakwah* movements centering preachers who position themselves "as moral guardians that strive to introduce Islamic morality and combat moral decay" (Nisa 2018, 25). On his official YouTube channel, Siau has a series called *#NgajiEverywhere*, a hashtag he also uses in many of his posts on other digital platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Siau 2020).

Ngaji is a colloquial Indonesian term that refers to the recitation of the Qur'an, but it also generally means embodying or absorbing Islamic knowledge through the Qur'an and other religious texts. "Ngaji everywhere," in a sense, is a *dakwah* praxis created by Siauww that promotes the act of learning and embodying Islam anywhere, including in casual environments like a car. Siauww's unique methodology of preaching in a moving car in his YouTube channel is what inspires my concept of carpool *dakwah*. Carpool *dakwah*, on the one hand, demonstrates Islamic preachers' creative approach to digital *dakwah*; and on the other hand, also shines a light on Islamic preachers' way of reinforcing Islamic morality through emphasizing the sinfulness and immorality of the LGBTQ community.

In October 2018, Siauww uploaded a YouTube video titled *Perilaku Kaum Nabi Luth* (the behaviors of Prophet Lot's community). This video was released as a part of his *#NgajiEverywhere* series on YouTube. In this 20-minute-long video, Siauww is shown driving around a city with three younger men who seem to be his *santri* (pupils). Siauww and his pupils discuss the recent phenomenon of pro-LGBTQ celebrations and events in Indonesia. They frequently utilize homophobic jokes and local slurs for homosexual and transgender people to justify their Islamic stance against the lifestyle of *waria* communities. The young men in the video are also shown to ask Siauww many questions surrounding homosexual behaviors and "un-manly behaviors," creating a space where Siauww becomes the ultimate source of authority to the young men, legitimizing any religious interpretations he may offer regarding the position of LGBTQ communities in that instance (Siauww 2018).

In the video, Siauww and the three young men began their discussion by talking about *Miss Gaya Dewata*, a pageant show hosted by an LGBTQ organization in Bali that has a large number of transgender and *waria* participants (Siauww 2018, 0:10). The four of them are shown to laugh and chuckle, describing participants of the pageant as *anjing* (dogs). The term *anjing* is one of the most offensive terms that can be used to describe a person in Indonesian culture. While on the one hand, *anjing* (dogs) signify

one's *haram* (forbidden) and immoral behaviors, calling someone *anjing* is also a way of marking a person as shameful (*memalukan*), filthy (*najis*), and lustful (*bernafsu*). In the video, Siau and the young men then exchange to one another, “anjing ketemu anjing berantem, [alias] cowok sama cowok; tapi ini seanjing-anjingnya, ngeliat anjing lain bukannya berantem, tapi dia pengen jadi perempuan [when dogs meet dogs, as in boys, they fight; but these people, as much as they are dogs, (when) they see another dog, they don't fight, instead, they want to be a girl]” (Siau 2018, 0:56). From this statement only, the markings of shame onto the bodies and identities of *waria* and gender nonconforming communities occur on a multiplicity of levels.

First, as Siau and his students introduce the topic of Miss Gaya Dewata, they characterize the pageant participants as animals. By calling *waria* and transgender participants dogs, not only does Siau diminish the participants' full sense of humanity, labeling them as dogs also allows him to transform gender nonconforming subjects into a humorous topic because of their failure to submit to the macho and aggressive expectations of males as “dogs.” Second, using localized Islamic figurative speech that associates homosexual men and *waria* as *najis* (impure and unclean), Siau and the three young men's playful commentary turns into a powerful emotive mechanism for promoting gender norms and heterosexual ideals to the broader Muslim audience watching the video.

In his carpool *dakwah*, Siau effectively exercises his religious authority as an *ustadz* who is closely guiding young Muslim students to the right path; he draws on Qur'anic verses to justify his gendered stance, while simultaneously utilizes masculinized humor and anti-LGBTQ slurs to contextualize the “unnatural” lifestyle of *waria*. The combination of humor, which pokes fun at the notion of gender nonconformity or “being gay,” and Islamic figurative speech, such as “*astaghfirullah*” and “*nauzubillah*,” intensifies the marking of shame on to *waria* and their nonnormative gender expressions. In situations where one experiences tragedy, witnesses immorality, or undergoes hardships, these expressions are often conveyed as a way to seek God's forgiveness and refuge, in a sense

relieving oneself from sins. It is important to note that Siauw's conflation between the notion of being gay and being gender nonconforming shows that within the popular Islamic anti-LGBTQ discourse in Indonesia, gay men are often lumped together with critiques against *waria*'s gender nonconforming presentations. Siauw's carpool *dakwah*, in a sense, is a crucial site for defining normative expressions of gender and sexuality. As an emotive strategy, by delivering humor about *waria*'s failure as men and their immoral status under Islam, Siauw begins activating the emotions of shame and anxiety in his pupils, as his *dakwah* emphasizes the notion that *waria*'s lifestyle is punishable in the Qur'an and that supporting LGBTQ discourse will lead to one's moral destruction.

“I am not just a minority, I am a *Minori-Cong*.” Emotive Strategies in *Waria* Responses

On YouTube, members of the *waria* community have also contributed to the growth of Indonesian Islamic discourses about gender nonconformity by adopting humor as a weapon to combat the discomfort that Muslim communities express toward *waria*. As an emotive strategy, humor serves *waria* communities as a mechanism to negate and reduce the markings of shame and immorality imposed upon them by Islamic preachers. As an affect, conceptions of shame are “conditioned by sets of rules, technical approaches and history,” meaning that local Islamic understandings of shame, surrounding *waria* communities in the contemporary Indonesian cultural and religious context, are not static and can be shifted through creating dialogues that trigger emotions of empathy and tolerance (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 202).

The adoption of humor by *waria* as a way to connect with the larger Muslim community is visible in a video uploaded by *Islam Number One* in 2020 called *Banci ceramah di depan ribuan orang ini tanggapan ustaz Abdul Somad* (Banci spoke in front of thousands of people and this is ustaz Abdul Somad's opinion). *Bencong* is a derogatory terminology used to describe “gay” expressions, male transvestites, transgender women, and *waria* in Indonesia. Since *bencong* also generally means

“effeminate male” and marks the failure to perform masculinity and manliness, many *waria* communities find “the derisive tone” of *bencong*, as an identity category, offensive (Boellstorff 2004a, 162).

In the video, the *waria* stands in the middle of thousands of people, as if she is performing *dakwah* in a large mosque space. She begins her speech by expressing her gratitude for the space she has been given to talk about some of her community’s struggles. When she introduces herself, she asserts, “I am part of the LGBT community; however, I am not a minority, I feel like I am a *minori-cong*! Being a minority also includes my non-Muslim friends, but we are different, we are *minori-cong*” (Islam Number One 2020, 1:02). The *waria*’s reclamation of her identity automatically triggers the crowd to cheer and clap for her. Following the joke that she made about being a *minori-cong* rather than *bencong*, the *waria* expresses, “in this moment right now, I honestly feel like I am forming a new family with you all; so many of you have reached out to me on Facebook and Instagram, wanting to get to know me and sharing positive notes, I am very happy and grateful” (Islam Number One 2020, 1:29). The crowd then cheers and claps even louder, which further illuminates how the *waria*’s playful reclamation of *bencong*, a slur that is often used against her community, provides her with a way to humanize her community, which in turn pushes her Muslim audience to dissociate the notion of shame from *waria*.

After the loud cheering, the *waria* speaker begins addressing her past sins, which is then followed by another comedic performance to resolve the tension coming from her outward articulation of shame. She asserts, “for almost ten years now, how can I say this, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but for the past ten years, I have not been active, I am sorry to say this, but I have not followed any of my spiritual duties and I have, instead, committed *maksiat* [immoral actions]” (Islam Number One 2020, 1:49). She stutters as she speaks, illustrating a clearly visible position of discomfort and vulnerability. The word that she uses to refer to her past immoral actions, *maksiat*, is a loaded term that generally refers to actions prohibited by God. *Maksiat* can refer to a variety of things; however, the most severe acts of *maksiat* are “*zina* (illicit sexual relations), alcohol consumption,

theft, and murder” (Siregar 2019, 2). In the Malay–Indonesian cultural and religious cosmology, the term *maksiat* is often understood to refer to illicit sexual behaviors, such as prostitution, sex outside of marriage, and dating. Therefore, when the *waria* declares that she has committed *maksiat*, as an Indonesian, I understood her to refer to her past sexual history (possibly prostitution or engaging in same-sex relations).

As the *waria* notices the silence in her audience during the declaration of her past *maksiat* and her lack of spiritual nurturing, she then forms a joke and starts acting comedically. She says, “oooh, perhaps over here there’s a few of you who messaged me personally in the past, sending me gross messages!” as she playfully whips her hair, gestures pointy fingers at her audience, and catwalks on the stage (Islam Number One 2020, 1:55). The crowd then cheers once again, clapping loudly as they witness the comedic relief performed by the *waria* speaker. I also interpret the *waria*’s expression as her subversive way of reminding the crowd of their own past *maksiat* and sins; something she is attempting to redeem by returning to her pious duty as a Muslim. This act of collective reminder also demonstrates the *waria*’s active participation in broader *taubat* narratives (the act of repenting and purifying oneself from sins), often promoted by Islamic preachers.

From this video, it is evident that the *waria* subject stands on a precarious ground as she exposes her vulnerable position as a gender nonconforming Muslim who is seeking acceptance from the crowd in front of her. At the same time, she utilizes humor to turn conversations surrounding *waria*, a topic that brings a level of discomfort to her audience, into a more lighthearted topic. In a paradoxical sense, the humorous act of reclaiming an anti-*waria* slur and performing funny effeminate moves becomes an emotive strategy that allows the *waria* speaker to perform a sense of agency and express her gendered subjectivity in front of an intimidating crowd of Muslims. Thus, the *waria*’s performance of humor can also be interpreted as a significant display of power. Even though the *waria* perpetuates the marking of shame onto her body by referring to herself a “*minori-cong*,” the humor that she uses also enables her to engage with her Muslim crowd on a more intimate level. In contrast to Siauw’s use of humor as a way to create barriers

between pious Muslims (demonstrated through his pupils) and LGBTQ people, the *waria*'s humor is a bridging mechanism that illuminates her resistance to the physical, emotional, and religious boundaries that lie between her community and the pious Muslim crowd.

Constructing Authority Through Pious Engagement with Islam

The most frequent emotive mechanism used by Indonesian preachers, *waria*, and pro-LGBTQ advocates, in their response to the discourse of LGBTQ rights, is a return to Islamic teachings and holy book as a source of guidance. This use of Islamic authority is particularly visible in Abdul Somad's YouTube preaching, which, in contrast to Siauw's more informal approach to *dakwah*, has a more traditional format. In the majority of his videos, he is often the main speaker and subject of the video, either through addressing a congregation or speaking directly to the camera. Even though Somad is also known for his humorous and approachable *dakwah* personality, through observing his preaching style on YouTube, I notice that he treats religious justifications as the most effective way to challenge issues surrounding gender nonconformity and LGBTQ rights in Indonesia.

In 2019, *SM Channel* uploaded a preaching footage of Somad responding to issues surrounding *waria* identity and the influence of mass media in normalizing their existence in Indonesian society. The video is titled *UAS Bolehkah Bencong Menjadi Imam Sholat?* (UAS [*Ustadz* Abdul Somad] are *bencong* allowed to perform as *Imam* [prayer leaders]?) In the video, Somad is shown to be filled with contempt and disgust as he responds to a question on a piece of paper about whether or not *waria* (*bencong*) can lead prayers. As he looks down on the piece of paper, he responds:

I am sorry, but the person who asked this does not understand the distinction between *bencong* [*waria*] and *khuntsa*. This is a very serious issue. *Khuntsa*, according to *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence], excuse my language, are people who have two genitalia. For instance, when someone who looks like a man hits his puberty,

and suddenly he has menstruation, you bring him to the doctor, and you can seal the female genitalia to make him a man. But *bencong*, these are men! [Quoting a Qur'anic definition of male]: men are people who have a penis and testicles! Ask these people [*bencong*], what is your genitalia? They only got one kind [penis]! Then ask them again, why are you acting like a woman? And they go eh-h-h [making a high-pitch feminine gesture]. You know what, call the police department and put these people in a training program. And what's the program going to be called? BE A MAN. (SM Channel 2019, 1:38)

In a different YouTube video, Somad responds to the discourse of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia by denouncing a feminist–liberatory interpretation of a verse in the Qur'an, a verse that Aan Anshori, a pro-LGBTQ Muslim ally, claims to be an indication of how the Qur'an ethically recognizes the existence of gender nonconforming people. In his advocacy, Anshori emphasizes Muslims' duty to recontextualize Qur'anic verses through a liberatory approach stating that “a big failure within our Muslim community is our inability to comprehend that humans are complex beings; which leads to the failure of Muslims to read the Qur'an through a lens of equality” (Al-Khaf 2018, 0:29). Somad, however, disagrees with Anshori's take on the Qur'an's pro-equality message. He says, “the Qur'an is a text that should not be picked apart and manipulated, especially when it was written over a thousand years ago. What they do is take things out of context and fill in new interpretations” (Al-Khaf 2018, 5:51). Here, Somad makes a similar argument to Anshori, which is the need to contextualize the Qur'an and its verses; however, Somad believes that the Qur'an's truest context lies in its historicity as a product of the Prophet's time and must not be manipulated to fit into our modern context.

Somad then exclaims:

Yes, a verse in the Qur'an recognizes that some [biologically male people] do not have sexual desires toward women. Even though that verse can be interpreted to represent LBGT people, the Qur'an

also includes punishments for immoral behaviors, including theirs! An Imam at the Nabawi Mosque I met once told me that we must interpret these people as people with mental disorders, or people with sickness; it does not mean it accepts LGBT people. (Al-Khaf 2018, 7:12)

By claiming that the verse should not be interpreted as God's way of accepting LGBTQ communities, Somad once again taps into the discourse of what should be considered moral and immoral for Muslims. Through reminding the host of God's destructive punishment upon Lot's people in the Qur'an, Somad successfully intensifies the emotive elements of "fear, anxiety, and unpredictability" that comes with siding with pro-LGBTQ narratives as a Muslim (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). Additionally, Somad's anecdote about the Imam he once met at the Nabawi Mosque, a Mosque built by Prophet Muhammad in Medina, can also be interpreted as a strategy for further legitimizing his religious authority and credibility as an *ustadz*.

Somad's strategy of utilizing his authority as a preacher to legitimize his claims about issues of gender nonconformity and homosexuality is also adopted by many *waria* activists, particularly those who belong to *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah in Yogyakarta, Central Java. *Pesantren* is an Indonesian term that describes an Islamic educational institution. Enrolling in a *Pesantren* often includes an obligation for students to live in dorms alongside their peers and religious teachers, who also serve as their caretakers. *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah is an Islamic boarding school dedicated to *waria*, where they are "taught how to perform the *shalat* (daily prayer), memorize *doa* (the invocation of prayers), and [...] recite the Qur'an" (Safitri 2013, 95). Ever since its establishment in 2007, the religious activism of *waria* founders and members of the Islamic boarding school has been heavily featured through a variety of Indonesian and international news–documentary channels on YouTube. The digital representation of Muslim *waria*'s religious advocacy on YouTube popularly exists alongside preaching content that challenges their embodiment of gender and deems their pious practice immoral. It is worth

noting, however, that Muslim *waria* activists do not have official YouTube channels like Somad or Siauw, and that their digital representation on YouTube is aided significantly through the efforts and projects done by national and international media.

In 2012, one of the first YouTube documentary films on *waria* at *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah was uploaded by *VICE*, a Canada-based broadcasting media, which has garnered over four million views. In the video, the *pesantren* founder, Mariani, asserts that to her, “*waria* are humans” who were created by God, and as *waria*, they “all have the rights to worship” God (*VICE* 2012, 1:14). Mariani’s refusal to stand by the discriminatory attitude shared by her Muslim communities is also echoed by a local *ustadz* featured in the documentary, who has personally chosen to provide spiritual nurturing and religious education for *waria* at the *pesantren*. The teacher explains, “there are many communities that see them as *haram* [forbidden], which is why I am taking a personal stance in believing that this boarding school is *halal* [lawful]. I feel a strong calling in my heart to guide them [*waria*] because they long for spiritual guidance and they sincerely want to practice piety in their lives” (*VICE* 2012, 4:44). The documentary then shows a scene of the *ustadz* introducing the concept of *sabar* (patience), to *waria*, where he illustrates that patience can eliminate sins and turn one into a more virtuous person. The *ustadz*’s lesson on *sabar* demonstrates that not only do *waria* return to Islam as a way to reconcile with God, but it is also equally important for Muslim leaders to provide *waria* with Islamic resources on how to cope with the negative attention they regularly face from their Muslim communities.

More recently in 2019, *CNN Indonesia* uploaded a YouTube documentary about the current reality of *waria* at *Pesantren* Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah as part of their documentary series called *CNN Indonesian Heroes*. This was a major exposure because, on the one hand, *CNN Indonesian Heroes* is one of the most-watched segments on *CNN Indonesia*; and on the other hand, the fact that Muslim *waria*’s religious dedication is recognized as a heroic act shows that mainstream media are also actively responding to the discourse surrounding *waria* that Islamic preachers have popularized.

In contrast to how the *pesantren* looks in the VICE documentary – a small home with a few tiny rooms for religious lessons – the CNN documentary shows that the Senin-Kamis Al-Fattah *pesantren* has developed significantly. The documentary depicts a few large classrooms and a bigger number of religious teachers, as well as *waria* students in the *pesantren*. The documentary begins with a scene of Shinta Ritri, a veiled *waria* who took over the *pesantren* leadership after Mariani passed away, teaching a group of *waria* how to read Arabic alphabets and the Qur'an. In a scene where she addresses what message Muslim *waria* at the *pesantren* hope to share with their Muslim communities, Ritri asserts:

We [*waria*] are the same as you [Muslim communities]; we have the right to worship God. However, they [some preachers] say that *waria* can only worship God once they have fully become men. But what does that mean? What is our fault, exactly? Our worshipping is between us and God. If someone asks us in the past, whether or not we want to be *waria*, I can certainly say that we will say no. Why? Because being *waria* is filled with struggles and discriminations. We are the source of joke, insults, and we are deeply impoverished. How could you explain the way we choose to be *waria*? This is simply a destiny given by God. (CNN Indonesia 2019, 9:40)

Ritri's tone and facial expressions are deeply emotional as she attempts to represent the voices of Muslim *waria*, who demand their right to practice Islam and seek the acceptance of their broader Muslim communities in Indonesia. The sorrow, displayed on Ritri's face, becomes a powerful emotive visual that demonstrates the precarious position of Muslim *waria* in Indonesia and their strong desire to return to Islam as a mode of survival. Following Ritri's statement, the documentary depicts more scenes of *waria* conducting daily prayers, engaging in Qur'anic lessons, and holding religious meetings. There are also a few *waria* providing testimonies about how much the *pesantren* has helped guide them spiritually, and how through the *pesantren* education, many *waria* are now able to recite the Qur'an and have become better Muslims.

Through examining Somad's preaching and Muslim *waria* representation on YouTube, it is apparent that Islamic preachers and *waria* both strongly rely on Islamic theological concepts and religious texts to justify their views on the contemporary discourse surrounding *waria* and LGBTQ rights in Indonesia. It is important to note, however, that *waria* activism is significantly visible due to the efforts of Indonesian and international media in broadcasting their realities and religious activism. Even though *waria* are able to showcase their pious practices and religious commitment through mass media content on YouTube, *waria* do not have the same level of agency in expressing their theological interpretations because they do not have the authority possessed by Islamic preachers. In other words, while on the one hand, *waria* are able to demonstrate their pious gendered subjectivity and religious knowledge through YouTube documentary and news features, Islamic preachers still ultimately have a larger influence in the broader Muslim community because they earn legitimacy through occupying *dakwah* platforms, which allow them to exercise their Islamic authority over a large Muslim audience.

Conclusion: Between Recognition and a Non-Dialogue

In the past two decades, the religious and political spheres in Indonesia underwent a significant transformation through the development of policies that provided a platform for Islamic organizations to launch a discourse of moral panic in response to their perceived spread of immoral activities in Indonesia. One of the first policies that shaped the formation of a new consciousness toward the embodiment of piety in Indonesia is *RUU-APP*, an anti-pornography bill authorized in 2008 that sets up Islamic standards and guidelines for television and concert programs (Saat 2016, 558). Political scientist Norshahril Saat claims that the religious and legal endorsement of this bill by organizations like Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) shows that *RUU-APP* ultimately serves as a tool for Indonesian Ulema Council "to have authority in monitoring public morality" and to "obtain state recognition as moral gatekeepers" (Saat 2016, 558). The decades-long process of integration between mass Islamic organizations and the Indonesian state, which gained significant momentum in the

post-Suharto era, has paved the way for movements like 212 to attract participants across the nation. In 2016, the *212 Movement* became a unifying symbol that created legitimacy for Islamic organizations and preachers to utilize *dakwah* as a way to reinforce Islamic moral teachings on a mass scale, making *dakwah* a radically effective tool to shape Muslims' popular opinions and theological understandings of various social and political issues.

In a 2004 article, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff traces the contemporary “unprecedented series of violent acts against ‘gay’ Indonesians,” which he claims to be a result of the collective redefining of Indonesian national identity through a masculinist, heterosexist, Islamic lens since the fall of Suharto’s New Order regime in 1998 (Boellstorff 2004b, 465; see also Thajib 2014). Boellstorff asserts that the increase in negative attention toward homosexual and gender nonconforming communities in Indonesia stems from the emergence of political homophobia in the nation’s religious and political spheres. Through political homophobia, Muslim politicians and authorities bring “together the direct object of nonnormative Indonesian men with the indirect object of contemporary Indonesian public culture, making enraged violence against *gay* men intelligible and socially efficacious” (Boellstorff 2004b, 469). It is through the post-Suharto Islamist-cum-nationalist discourse of protecting the sanctity of the Indonesian Muslim majority population that issues of LGBTQ rights began entering the realm of *dakwah* on YouTube, where the existence of *waria* is interpreted as Muslims’ failure to embody ideals of Islamic masculinity.

Adding to Boellstorff’s analysis, I have shown how *waria*’s advocacy is influenced and to some extent championed by a globalized, secular, LGBTQ liberation movement, which challenges the alliance of local authorities like *dakwah* preachers and state officials who actively oppose LGBTQ rights. While there is a long history of LGBTQ activism in Indonesia, led by activists like Dede Oetomo and organizations like Lambda Indonesia (one of the oldest LGBTQ organizations in Southeast Asia), the popularization of Western LGBTQ discourse in the past two

decades has intensified Abdul Somad and Felix Siauw's desire to focus on issues related to *waria* in their YouTube *dakwah*. In recent years, *waria*, a gender nonconforming community native to Indonesia, has been one of the most heavily discussed subjects in *dakwah* content tackling issues of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia.

Contemporary Indonesian preachers powerfully deploy emotions of shame and guilt, often through humor, as a means to uphold normative gender roles and expressions of sexuality in response to the globalized LGBTQ discourse in the 21st century (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). By characterizing *waria* as animals, effeminate men, and destroyers of morality, preachers launch their theological stance by “inviting people's [...] guilt” and shame towards a certain political movement or social phenomenon they deem un-Islamic, such as the contemporary LGBTQ movement (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, 201). Preachers' fast-moving content on YouTube is also easily accessible, which allows Muslims across Indonesia to have the ability to self-educate themselves online on any issues through preachers' religious lens.

Waria communities, however, are not absent in online conversations taking place surrounding issues of LGBTQ rights in Indonesia. On top of mobilizing within their local communities, *waria* activists are also participating in many national and international digital projects that highlight their distinct approach to religious activism and advocacy for their rights in Indonesia. Some *waria* also adopt humor as a mechanism for survival as a way to reassert their agency and own up to the negative stereotypes used against them. In a sense, Muslim *waria* have reclaimed humor as a mode of emotive politics by transforming themselves into a lighthearted subject that triggers a feeling of normalcy and familiarity within Muslim communities – instead of giving in to Muslims' misconceptions and learned anxiety about their existence.

Even though YouTube has a great number of videos centering *waria*'s activism and preachers' *dakwah* on *waria* and LGBTQ issues, I could not find a video where Somad and Siauw directly take part in a discussion

with the *waria* community. As of now, the “conversation,” between the two preachers and *waria* occurs indirectly on YouTube and is significantly aided by algorithms, as well as content creators who put together juxtaposing videos of preachers and *waria* on YouTube, making it rather a *non-dialogue*. This demonstrates that in reality, it is still incredibly difficult, or rather impossible, to host a direct and reciprocal dialogue between Islamic preachers and *waria*. Even though physically and digitally, these direct conversations have not taken place, my analysis has demonstrated that neither preachers nor *waria* are in denial of living alongside each other, and in a way, both groups express their recognition of each other’s realities and Islamic positionalities. Despite the indirect nature of this communication, I have documented how preachers and *waria* are actively speaking *about* each other and participating in the broader discourse of Islamic morality in contemporary Indonesia rather than speaking *with* each other.

Using the concept of “emotive politics,” I have demonstrated the importance of affective triggers and emotions surrounding Islamic piety and morality in the ways Islamic preachers and *waria* articulate their distinct positionality on the issues of gender nonconformity and the broader LGBTQ discourse (Nastiti and Ratri 2018). Through poking fun at *waria*’s “failure” to embody ideal masculinity in their preaching, for instance, combined with their active display of gestures and strong facial expressions, Somad and SiauW effectively intensify the markings of shame and immorality on to the bodies of *waria*. Simultaneously, through defining *waria*’s gender performance and “lifestyle” as sinful through the lens of Islam, Somad and SiauW are also able to trigger the emotions of fear, anger, disgust, and anxiety in their Muslim audience.

These affective triggers are crucial to the workings of emotive politics in *dakwah* spaces because, in Indonesia, political outcomes and social cohesion are largely defined by what is perceived as deviant through a lens of Islamic piety and morality. Through addressing issues of gendered deviance, exemplified by the lifestyle of *waria*, preachers embark on a mission to reshape and reconfigure new ways of understanding pious

practices and embodying Islamic morality that conform to ideals of heterosexuality and masculinity in the country. In a sense, not only does the cultural relevance of *dakwah* indicate the importance of performing piety to the Indonesian Muslim majority population; *dakwah*, and online *dakwah* in particular, is also a crucial site for reshaping popular attitudes and reworking political dynamics in Indonesia, where preaching becomes a mode for asserting norms, articulating social expectations, and defining shameful behaviors in the modern context.

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