Reading the Digital Muslim Romance

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Abstract:

This article considers the practices of social formation on the online self-publishing platform Wattpad. Interactive and interfaced with other social media, Wattpad was founded in 2006 by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen to facilitate self-publishing by well-known and emerging authors alike. Wattpad is popular among Malay readers and authors in Malaysia with stories clocking up millions of reads each. Most stories are aimed at women readers and preoccupied with themes of love and romance. However, this article turns its attention to the much-read Wattpad stories about forced marriage and romantic Islamic masculinity, the kinds of affordances Wattpad provides for Malay language authors and their readership, and the reading publics they cultivate. This article frames Wattpad as an archive of affect for vernacular religious engagement that mirrors the alternative spaces that women occupy as digital labourers and as agents of religious knowledge. It shows that digital spaces are affective spaces as much as they are domains that replicate and rewrite sharia-compliant gendered and religious relations offline.

Introduction

Critique of the invisibility and under-representation of women in digital cultures (Light 1999; Abbate 2012), primarily in computing, software engineering, and gaming, is typically taken as the principal agenda in the scholarly corpus on gender and technology. But Malaysian women have stood out as an anomaly in this body of literature as belonging to a sequestered techno-utopia unlike anywhere else (Lagesen 2008; see also

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Mellström 2009). Driven by developmentalist goals and a visionary promise of the digital economy, state policies facilitated young women's access into higher education where they were encouraged to enroll in the fields of information and communication technology, inadvertently outnumbering men in university enrollment and graduation rates. Upon closer inspection, however, the "cyberfeminist utopia" that Vivian Lagesen (2008) alludes to, presumably with tongue in cheek, is anything but one. Perceptions towards work within the information and communication technology industries turned out to reinforce the gendered division of labour in the white-collar workplace. There is a preference among women for paid work in front of a computer in the office as opposed to the more "masculine" nature of "outdoor" work such as engineering on construction sites alongside working-class men. For these women, computer science and its occupational interiors replicate aspects of a "feminine" domain – secure, sedentary, and secretarial (Lagesen 2008, 18). As Lagesen's findings show, there is no escaping the intractable quandary of gendered labour that pervades even in the cyber world of computers. In the years after the advent of Web 2.0 women have emerged as productive and influential actors in the formation of digital intimate publics (Kanai 2018; Baulch and Pramiyanti 2018). It is a reflection more generally of Web 2.0's seemingly more "democratic" capacities, represented by interactive features fostered in blogging and social media platforms. However, we find a continuing trend in contemporary digital cultures that belies the cyberfeminist utopia that never was. As builders of content who often are either unpaid or under-compensated for their creative and "aspirational labour" (Duffy 2016), women's participation and influence in interactive digital cultures run up against and converge with the hallmarks of "women's work" in offline spaces, namely the reproduction of immaterial labour (Jarrett 2014).

This article considers how Muslim gender relations are reinforced and rewritten in vernacular digital discourses delivered as *dakwah*. Women have found ways to appropriate access to the mass media and emerge as influential agents of *dakwah* in Malaysia (Kloos 2019) and as similar illustrations in Indonesia show, younger women have taken up the mantle to propagate Islamic messages and teachings online (Lengauer 2018; Nisa

2018). However, insufficient attention is paid to the intersection of gender and labour in the networked practices of religious digital media considering the fact that the "internet is animated by cultural and technical labour through and through…" and firmly embedded in the development of a postindustrial society and its economic logic (Terranova 2000, 33). This article engages with the foregoing feminist critique of digital labour by demonstrating the affective foundations and labour that underpin the networked media practice of Islamic Wattpad love stories. Belonging to the wider repertoire of the romance industry, digital Islamic love stories on Wattpad fetch no more than a million online reads or "hits" by unique and repeat readers. In fact, the highest-rated stories are read between 100 thousand and 700 thousand times by online readers. Since its founding in 2006 by Canadians Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen, Wattpad's popularity has risen as a space for emerging and established writers to self-publish their work. With an estimated 40 million users every month (AFP Relax News 2015), Wattpad has not only grown from strength to strength but serves as a space for *vernacular* religious pedagogy and storytelling by under-represented social groups.

Here, the multifaceted meanings of the "vernacular" are offered to consider the conditions under which Islamic love stories on Wattpad are created and read. The vernacular has associations with the local, the "common" people, the "everyday" (Primiano 1995) along with the "mundane," "uncool" (Edensor et al. 2010), and even "pastiche" (Howard 2008). "Vernacular" and its meanings are called upon in this article to perform different kinds of work to address their modality in the realms of digital media, religion, and gender. The synergy of religion, gender, and the digital at the point of the "vernacular" is an opportunity for a critical reassessment of knowledge production and dissemination, both online and offline. The meaning of *vernacular* also expands beyond that of "folk" religious belief and practice that assumes an authentic, cultural indigeneity that exists in conjunction with "official" religion. Without reifying the binary of official and everyday religion, the vernacular should be seen as situated within a matrix of power rather than outside and separate from official institutions. Following this line of thinking, within an institution

are modalities of the vernacular that constitute the institution from the inside out. Thus, rather than operating outside "official" and "elite" institutions, the vernacular permeates through them. For instance, women's ritual practices related to the life course and sharing of religious knowledge may be dismissed and overlooked by religious authorities, but their social significance disrupts the artificial binary of institutional and everyday religion (Purewal and Kalra 2010). Practices that both reify institutional codes and have access to something beyond the control of the institutional yet operate within the assemblage of the institutional are characteristically a "hybrid of the institutional" (Howard 2008, 491). As the hybrid of the institutional, the vernacular might occupy spaces of the "everyday" and positions of marginality relative to one's gender, class, or ethnic identity but can still derive the legitimacy of institutions in ephemeral and precarious ways.

In a direction that departs from reinforcing the dichotomy of "new" and "old" media, this article builds on two lines of analysis: by drawing attention to how gender and affective labour blur the distinction between "new" and "old" media and between "official" and "everyday" religion by foregrounding their continuity. Related to this, it serves to further blur distinctions between online and offline narratives of Muslim gender relations. In the second line of analysis, this article frames Wattpad as an archive of affect for religious engagement that mirrors the alternative spaces that women occupy as agents of religious knowledge. It is consistent with other examples whereby "Islam is [seen] as a valuable resource for managing [women's] emotional lives" (Slama 2017; see also Hoesterey 2015 for affective exchanges between celebrity preachers and their female followers). This article proposes that the social-textual context of vernacular religion is a place for different types of digital labour performed by women and reinforces the necessity for emotion work in sharia-compliant gendered relations. This includes, but is not limited to, writing, reading, commenting, moderating, "liking," voting, and rating Islamic love stories made possible by the affordances (Gibson 1979) of the platform. I argue that affordances that allow for the creative and interactive reconstituting of gender relations are contingent upon the act of *working*

through emotions and a range of unpaid online labour[1]. In the next section, I demonstrate the ways in which orthodox, bureaucratic, and social-literary interpretations of love and emotions create conditions for romantic fiction writing and reading. This is followed by an elaboration on the affordances and socialities that Wattpad provides as an archive of affect and a discussion on the morphology of a typical digital love story delivered as *dakwah*.

Working through it: Emotionally driven free online labour

In an online survey[2] that details the preferences of romantic fiction readers, most of the respondents (78.9 percent) expressed interest in narratives depicting *cinta lepas nikah* (formation of love that occurs only after marriage), an implicit reference to forced or arranged marriage. Other responses filled in as individual replies included a preference for stories about "early marriage," "marital conflict," "hate later turning into love," "a strong and independent female character," and "the challenges of managing high costs of living." These highly emotive themes suggest a strong preference, often to the point of compulsiveness common amongst romance readers (Radway 1983), for *working through*, both in media content and interpersonal relations, struggles within the domains of intimacy. As I will show in this article, working through the personal coalesces with a range of free online labour such as writing, reading, commenting, up-voting, and rating Islamic love stories on Wattpad. These different types of online labour in turn furnish practices of self-expression, leisure, and religious knowledge-sharing.

Authors publish their stories on Wattpad through their free labour and are rewarded by a rating system. Similar to platforms that support the "sharing economy" (Vadde 2017), users on Wattpad can self-publish Islamic stories and educational content for readers who not only read but comment and rate or "vote" the content as a signal of their approval. Research on free digital labour have established the continuity between the voluntary labour of online content production, whether it is blogging or commenting on social media, and the unwaged domestic labour performed typically by

women (Terranova 2000; Jarrett 2014; Duffy 2016). The always "on" culture of mobile technology also signals the feminisation of work that has origins in women representing the reserve army of labour and whose efforts can be called upon all around the clock (Hochschild 1997; Gregg 2011). That women perform less glamorous, marginalised aspects of the digital economy, whether being exploited in the manufacturing of its hardware or erased altogether from its history, is nothing new. But in the neoliberalised landscape of the digital economy, women users have taken upon themselves to appropriate the grammar of digital interactivity and rebrand their under-compensated efforts as "aspirational labour" (Duffy 2016). Whereas the performance of free online labour perpetuates the hierarchy of value and exchange in the digital economy, what are the conditions that make unpaid digital labour possible, necessary, and even rewarding? To answer the foregoing question requires a conceptualisation of intimacy that crosses and blurs the lines between multiple spaces, online and offline, private and public (Gregg 2011) – an intimacy that is mobile, so to speak. As a platform that facilitates the reading and writing of stories on one's mobile device, Wattpad is best suited for the practices of mobile intimacy, whereby "the geographic and physical space is overlaid with an electronic position and relational presence, which is emotional and social" (Hjorth and Lim 2012, 478). But the mobile intimacy of Wattpad would not be possible without the exertion of emotion work that structures Muslim gender relations in Malaysia.

Emotion work is necessary to maintain the asymmetrical architecture of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in Malaysia. Coined by Arlie Hochschild in her early landmark study, emotion work is the effort involved "to change in degree the quality of emotion or feeling" (1979, 561) in social domains of intimacy. Gender relations in Malay society, as it is governed by the binary logic of *akal* (reason) and *nafsu* (passion; Peletz 1996), represent the basis for women's share of emotion work. According to this gender ideology, men's entitlement to roles of leadership and guardianship lies in their greater capacity to reason than women. As embodied vessels of emotion, women are regarded as spiritually weaker and vulnerable to temptation and supernatural influence (Ong 1987), placing the burden on

women to regulate their *nafsu* and those of men. Legal provisions that privilege Muslim men's sexuality have created friction with the cultural expectation that women regulate their emotions. Sharia reforms in Malaysia since the 1980s have facilitated men's access to contract polygamous marriage, initiate divorce from their wives, and claim shared matrimonial assets to support another wife (Mohamad 2011). These reforms have created further pressure on women to be *sabar* (show great emotional restraint) should their spouse desire another wife, among other demands. Objecting to a husband's marital "right" to polygamy and conjugal relations is tantamount to *nusyuz* (disobedience), a grave sin in Islam. Under these conditions, one imagines that love, although ubiquitous, does not come easy. In fact, these are the conditions that generate ambivalences, discontent, and divides about the place of romantic love in the lives of Muslim couples. There are several words that refer to "love" in the Malay language: *cinta*, *kasih*, and *sayang*, all with overlapping meanings denoting degrees of expression that are contingent on context. With love being the perennial preoccupation in local pop songs, poetry, television and film dramas, it would seem that the meaning-making practices surrounding "love" belong to a vernacular discourse of the everyday. But while these multiple terms exist in the Malay lexicon and love being "everywhere," there is a lack of emphasis on the significance of conjugal love in marriage in Islamic scripture (Musallam and Musallam 1983).

Love does not occupy a place of great importance in the bureaucratic Islamic discourse of marriage preparation courses compulsory for Muslim couples in Malaysia. Instead of sustaining the marital bond with romantic love, Muslim spouses are reminded that staying together involves meeting the terms of the marriage contract and responsibilities relative to their role as husband and wife (Mohamad 2020). A husband is obligated to provide maintenance (food, lodging, domestic expenditure) for his wife who fulfills a conjugal role (Ali 2010). The absence of love in marriage in orthodox Islamic discourse stands in stark contrast to the preoccupation with romance among Malay women. Vernacular love stories depicting everyday anxieties and priorities surrounding practices of intimacy outside

"official" discourse fill this void. Through them, sharia-compliant gendered relations are rewritten using cross-cultural popular material, Arabic loanwords, and points of affective engagement between authors and readers.

An archive of affect: Wattpad affordances and socialities

In a focus group discussion with readers of romantic novels at a bookshop in Kuala Lumpur organised one weekend in 2018, one participant, Siti, stood out for not being a great reader of print novels. She had attended the discussion along with her husband who seemed aware of her reading habits. But throughout the discussion, she remained guarded in her responses to questions about her reading practices and why Islamic romantic love stories appealed to her. She was, however, more forthcoming about the format of her reading patterns. Instead of physical copies of novels, of which she read very few, her reading practice was mediated through Wattpad on her mobile phone. Her preference for reading on her mobile phone is consistent with the founding impetus of Wattpad – to transform reading practices (Bold 2018) by facilitating access to self-published stories on mobile technology anytime, anywhere. Reading on her mobile phone also provided her with affective affordances such as discreetness and privacy when reading romantic fiction. Whether her reticence about sharing details of her media practices was related to the presence of her husband was hard to surmise at the time. But Siti's behaviour was not unusual. In interview responses with other readers, romantic fiction was an illicit pleasure best kept secret from family members. Siti's preferred mode of reading romantic fiction demonstrates Wattpad's affordances as mobile intimacy that are distinct from romantic fiction in print media. Every Wattpad story is published either as a standalone short story or serialised in multiple chapters. Its seriality firmly establishes its continuity with print traditions of a bygone era. Chapters that end with a tantalising cliffhanger only to be followed by a subsequent chapter in the future, recalling the 19th century commercial publishing approaches to the serialised works of Charles Dickens, settle the debate about Wattpad's fundamental newness as a media form quite apart from

"old" media once and for all (Bold 2018). Wattpad is, however, novel in other ways. Its mode of engagement belongs to a constellation of media moments that capture new media's intimacy, spontaneity, openness, and ephemerality that renders it novel and unprecedented. As a networked digital practice that combines the self-publishing capacity of blogging and the interactivity of social media, Wattpad is animated by the affective structures of "likes," votes, ratings, and rankings that influence author–reader engagement.

Online media are known to enhance access but they sometimes function as barriers to "offline" media spaces. Similar to the subculture of feminist zines, Wattpad storytelling exists in conjunction and symbiotically with print romance as a "digitally networked practice" (Clark-Parsons 2017, 562). Predating the internet, zines experienced a revival during the early years of Web 2.0 when zine-makers publicised and distributed their work online. Although the internet is typically regarded as facilitating the reach of distribution in greater numbers and distances, it is, however, also a "boundary space" for some zine-makers who refuse to use the internet to share their work (Clark-Parsons 2018, 569). Zine-makers appropriate the boundary space (through disengagement) to restrict access to their work only to individuals with authentic interest and commitment to feminism and limit the exposure to harassment and abuse that feminist content is vulnerable to. Their disengagement from the internet is a different kind of reach: inwards into established communities rather than outwards into the wider (digital) world. Clark-Parsons's findings demonstrate that groups with a mission of social consciousness and change do not necessarily operate with an agenda of openness and converting others to the cause but may be more interested in consolidating existing terms of belonging. Unlike the material spaces of romance bookshops and bookfairs that facilitate and consolidate the formation of crowds, gatherings, and counter-publics, digital spaces like Wattpad have instead the potential to achieve "feelings of community" (Dean 2010, 22) rather than firm connective bonds. Despite these spatial differences, there are parallels between romance writing on Wattpad and its counterpart in print publishing. Authors typically start out as ardent readers and given the

casual, nonliterary register of the stories, entry into publishing is set to a low bar. Wattpad love stories share a long history with romantic print fiction that dates back to the publication of the first modern Malay language novel, *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* (The Story of Faridah Hanum) published in 1925 by the male writer and Muslim reformist Syed Syeikh al-Hadi. A story about forbidden love between a young man and a woman with intellectual aspirations, it is a literary landmark that equates women's access to education with social progress (Bahjat and Muhammad 2010). Malay fiction written from a woman's perspective, while few during the early postcolonial period (Izharuddin 2019), experienced a revival in the 2000s with the proliferation of small publishing houses and controversial fiction about sexual violence and forced marriage recast as romantic love stories (Izharuddin 2021).

Wattpad users do not belong to a fixed, predetermined community. Rather, they belong to multiple social formations or socialities in which digital consumption of romantic fiction is one of many forms of media formats they engage with. Readers will flit from one media form to another, making Wattpad just one more option out of the sheer confluence of media choice. As a personal archive of affect, Wattpad facilitates the accumulation, retrieval, and customised collection of Islamic love stories. Its function is consistent with Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" that grants access to "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves, but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (2003, 7). The building of a user-generated archive is powered by the dynamic affective relations that determine which stories are rated highly and have the highest number of readers. Without access to consultation with booksellers at bookfairs and bookshops on what to read, readers may browse from the list of stories on Wattpad organised by descriptive tags such as *cintalepasnikah* (love after marriage), *ustaz* (male Islamic teacher), *kahwinpaksa* (forced marriage), and *cinta* (love). Another important affordance is interactivity and its solicitation of direct engagement. Readers can leave comments and feedback next to the body of text, "vote" or rate a story, and chat with authors in private messaging streams. The

comments range from emotional reactions to questions for further clarification from the author to an editing inquiry. To maintain convivial relations with readers authors promptly respond to these questions and comments. Their responses concerning specific queries from readers about Arabic phrases or aspects of Islamic practice become spontaneous pedagogical or *dakwah* moments. For example, one reader left a question to ask the meaning of *uhibbukumfillah* in Haura Mawar's Wattpad novel *Fi Hifzillah Wahai Yang Dirindui* (May God Protect You, My Dear Beloved), to which the author replied, "I love you because of Allah" in Arabic.

Writing for *dakwah*, with a twist

An argument consistent with the key premise that religion should be understood "*as* mediation" (Engelke 2010; emphasis in original), in that religion and media are practices co-constitutive of each other, can be made for Islamic love stories on Wattpad. Writers of Islamic stories on Wattpad cast themselves as mediators of religious consciousness who, as enlightened "friends," remind their peers to stay on the "right" path of Islam. The romantic idiom and drama of their digital stories do not obfuscate this message but operate instead as a transparent medium for *dakwah*, which echoes the perceived capacity of other formats of technology, such as PowerPoint, to deliver Islamic teachings with greater clarity (Rudnyckyj 2009). Those who write Islamic Wattpad stories have lofty moral ambitions of transforming as many readers into good Muslims as possible. According to one author whom I interviewed, Nurul Raihanah, who has published a popular novel with over 600 thousand reads, Wattpad's affordances facilitate direct connection and interactivity with readers and enhance the dissemination of Islamic knowledge across borders and cultures. The only impediment to her mission lies in Wattpad's intrinsic infrastructure. Nurul Raihanah complains that Wattpad does not protect the status of self-published works as intellectual property, making them vulnerable to plagiarism and unauthorised translation into other languages.

Romance being their chosen genre for this mission indicates a keen competency relevant to a specific audience – young, Muslim, and female – and their needs. Many may write for *dakwah* without conventional credentials of Islamic authority, but their vernacular mode of raising religious consciousness unlocks access to multiple domains of intimacy, by directly responding to comments from readers and forming friendship groups on WhatsApp with readers where they share religious knowledge and romantic ideals from an Islamic perspective. These WhatsApp groups are welcomed by Muslim women who may feel excluded from institutional, male-dominated spaces of worship and seek spaces of informal religiosity that deploy a more accessible, everyday delivery of storytelling and Islamic messaging (see Van Doorn-Harder 2006 for informal prayer and Qur'anic recitation groups in Indonesia; and Frisk 2009 – their Malaysian counterpart). The productive trifecta of gender, Islam, and the media occurs in a context where the structure of Islamic authority in Southeast Asia is subject to reconstitution and contestation, giving an opportunity to less traditional forms of religious preaching to gain credibility. Women preachers have benefited from this shifting landscape of religious authority as they gain audiences along with legitimacy and celebrity hitherto enjoyed by men (see the role of professional credentials in the rise of popular female preachers in Malaysia by Kloos 2019). Popular women preachers speak primarily to an all-female audience and lend their expertise, either as health or legal professionals, to their oratorial presentations on issues that concern intimacy and everyday Islam. Mass mediation of their public profile, expertise, and talent for connecting with "ordinary" Malay women points to the "media turn" of practitioners of popular religion and the mass mediatisation of religious publics. But being women, their heightened visibility within these publics is both welcomed and contested.

Authors and readers alike engage with Islamic love stories as material that crosses the genres of fiction, popular religion, fan fiction, self-improvement, and semi-autobiography, exemplifying the limitations of categorical, generic, and conceptual boundaries of what counts as "religious." For instance, stories about polygamy and forced marriage are not mere fiction nor fantasy but are read as a kind of instructional

manual should readers find themselves in situations similar to the characters in fiction narratives. Some authors with a background in traditional Islamic education write authoritatively from experience semi-autobiographical narratives about life in an Islamic school and university. In some of these cases, the authors themselves are still studying in Islamic schools which, along with the bedroom (Kearney 2007), should be seen as an extension to digital spaces as sites of cultural production and contemporary girl culture. Their stories switch between multiple languages – predominantly Malay but peppered with English, Arabic, and even Korean, signalling their cross-cultural competencies and cosmopolitan aspirations. That Wattpad, unlike the multiple materialities of romantic print fiction (physical books, bookshops, and bookfairs), exists digitally does not make it a trivial media form or less "real." Emerging authors publish on Wattpad to launch a writing career and plant seeds for opportunities and potential success across other media. Establishing a reputation with readers with the hope of landing a publishing contract and a television adaptation deal is a common strategy. In Indonesia, popular Wattpad stories have been adapted to film and television, elevating self-published authors to the status of micro-celebrity. Integrated within the profit-making networks of social media platforms, self-publishing on Wattpad cannot be regarded as an heir to the subcultures of zines and chapbooks. Profit generated from advertising adjacent to free content by authors is accrued only to Wattpad. For that reason, as a media format, it is limited in its subversive potential. Nonetheless, within the constraints of Wattpad are micro-moments of bricolage and pastiche reminiscent of "poaching" in fan culture (Consalvo 2003) and countercultural copy–pasting media practices like zines (Zobl 2009). In startling examples that underline the cross-cultural embrace of South Korean popular culture amongst young Muslim women in Asia are fan representations of Korean pop stars in collages and as characters in Islamic Wattpad stories. Authors take advantage of Wattpad's multimedia affordances to stitch together within their text visual images of cross-cultural intimacy that authors of print publishing typically do not do. In these stories, authors cut, copy and paste visual stills and promotional photographs of celebrities of South Korean pop music, television drama and films as a visual representation and stand-in for their fictional Wattpad characters to create a bricolage of romantic fantasy (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A bricolage of cross-cultural romantic fantasy (Haura 2020).

Enthusiastic responses to these reconstructed images suggest an establishment of gendered reading competencies or "spectatorial girlfriendship" (Kanai 2018). Even though it speaks for a specific Western context, *spectatorial girlfriendship*, defined as the "shared familiarity with [specific cultural discourses] and affects of youthful femininity" (Kanai 2018, 61), helpfully describes the skills and techniques that structure the affective engagement with Islamic Wattpad stories. To put it simply, only fans will "get it." Furthermore, these digital appropriations of images from South Korean popular culture are repurposed to circumvent the problem of visually depicting Muslim couples in physical proximity and intimacy. In stories set in South Korea, representations of deeply pious young Muslim women in hijab who speak with a romantic appreciation for male South Korean pop stars, sing and recite lines from songs and scenes from South Korean television dramas show the extent of the Hallyu wave's globality across the Muslim world in Asia (see for example Nugroho 2014 for the phenomenon of Korean pop fandom in Indonesia). But it is a cross-cultural embrace that stops at Islamic identity and its practices.

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South Korean women and men in Wattpad love stories, including fan representations of pop stars(!), find Islam profoundly compelling and convert to the religion when they encounter pious Malaysian Muslims. If mediation is about making the invisible visible (Engelke 2010), we find that *dakwah* and love are rendered visible, albeit conjoined and reconstituted, in the everyday vernacular mode of the romantic story and circulated through a range of affordances. To borrow a conceptual tool in classical approaches to folklore, the Islamic Wattpad love story is recognisable by its "morphology" or "a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole" (Propp 1998, 72). They also demonstrate, to some extent, the departure of Islamic love stories from the familiar tropes of western romance. In the next section, the character of the *ustaz* as a key component of the Islamic love story demonstrates how the turbulent nature of love and women's emotions should be worked through the Islamic way.

The romantic *ustaz*: the vernacularity of Islamic intimacy

As a medium for *dakwah*, most Islamic Wattpad love stories are structured by the triangulated dramatis personae comprising the deeply religious *ustaz*, the wayward young woman, and their respective parents who are invested in their children's marriage. Of the three, the young *ustaz*, a male Islamic teacher, is the main dramatis persona around whom the social drama of illicit physical proximity and forced marriage are contended with and contested. The centrality of the *ustaz* is suggested in the titles of Islamic Wattpad stories: (*Suamiku Ustaz* [My Husband is an Ustaz]; *Mr. Ustaz, Miss CEO*; *Ustazku ROMANTIK*! [My Ustaz is Romantic!]; *Suamiku Si Ustaz Sweet* [My Husband is a Sweet Ustaz]; *Dia Ustazku* [He is My Ustaz]; *Cinta Ustaz Pelik* [An Ustaz's Strange Love]; *Hacker Ku Ustaz dari Egypt* [My Hacker is an Ustaz from Egypt]; *Suamiku Ustaz Korea* [My Husband is a Korean Ustaz]; *Ustaz Baru Tu Suami Ku* [That New Ustaz is My Husband]; *My Lovely Ustaz Kampung* [My Lovely Village Ustaz]).

Islamic Wattpad stories are moral tales for women. Coercion, harassment, and abuse are dramatic tropes that serve as overt warnings to female

sexuality and desires that go unchecked. The taming of the Malay woman, who must confront her emotions and work through them, takes place in relation to the *ustaz* whose professional capacity lends moral rectitude to his control of the female protagonist. The *ustaz*'s characterisation as a romantic hero is not only a sign of intensified Islamic aspirations and public performativity of piety, but an assertion of desire that finds expression in a confluence of multiple cultural trends (Izharuddin 2018). The *ustaz* as hero in Islamic media should not be seen as an expression of a pure distillation of Muslim masculinity removed from context but embedded in competing socio-mediated and globalised understandings of what it means to be a young and modern Muslim man (Barendregt and Hudson 2016; Nilan 2009; Izharuddin 2017; Eliyanah 2019). Responses to the online survey question on reader preferences for types of romantic leading men suggest interest in a range of masculinities based on their occupation. Business owners, lawyers, and medical doctors represented the majority of male characters enjoyed by readers of Malay romance novels (70–81 percent), followed by love interests who were university students (52 percent) and the *ustaz* and Islamic preachers (44 percent). But in the respondents' other answers were fishermen, street burger vendors, and farmers as romantic leading men that left them with a significant impression. Since the launch of the widely reported reality television show, *Imam Muda* (Young Imam) in 2010, the *ustaz* has emerged as a new kind of man that embodies modernity and religion (Stanton 2018). On *Imam Muda*, young men compete in a range of moral, technical, and theological challenges in a mass mediatised arena that blends modern sophistication with Islam. Following the footsteps of 21st century celebrities who rise to fame from the world of reality TV, the *ustaz* has earned glamour and adoration, particularly from women who regard him as an ideal husband (Barendregt and Hudson 2016). It is not unknown for women to respond enthusiastically to the oratorical performances of a male Islamic preacher at pedagogical events (Millie 2011), which highlights the intensity of female spectatorship under conditions where women's opportunities for public enjoyment and pleasure are more restricted than men.

"Love" in the Islamic Wattpad story occupies a turbulent place, torn in a struggle between heteronormative love and a love for God. A good Muslim

must constantly wrestle with the overwhelming power of romantic love that comes freighted with emotions and erotic desire (van Wichelen 2009). Thus, "love" is fundamentally dangerous, requiring the constant restraint of *ikhtilat*. An important social principle, *ikhtilat* is an Arabic-derived term for gendered segregation and the boundary between unrelated women and men from free and casual interaction. References to maintaining *ikhtilat* point to the anxiety that public spaces can generate where boundaries between unmarried Muslims are intangible and must be reinforced through social behaviour, placing the moral responsibility on individuals *in situ*. Readers encounter other words with Arabic origins, some for the first time, that refer to subjecthood related to marital status and practices that adhere to an idealised model of Islamic intimacy. These terms include *zauj* and *zaujah* for future husband and wife respectively, and *ajnabi* to refer to women and men who are eligible candidates for marriage. Pedagogical moments of the *dakwah* love story hinge on these kinds of terms and practices. The stories follow a particular narrative arc: a young wayward woman's life takes a dramatic turn when she is faced with the prospect of a forced marriage to an *ustaz*. Pivotal scenes punctuating the narrative push the romantic heterosexual couple into "accidental" intimacy and marriage. The female character accidentally tripping and falling into the arms of an *ustaz* is an emotionally turbulent moment that can incite forbidden desire. In a more consequential event, an elaborate plot to entrap the *ustaz* and the heroine into an intimate situation and falsely accuse them of illicit proximity leaves them with no choice but to marry. With a belief that the *ustaz* is a gatekeeper to a woman's eternal salvation, the heroine's parents are convinced a forced marriage is a small price to pay. Her brashness and free-spirited attitude towards romance are challenged and reined in by a marriage she strongly objects but proceeds with it anyway to please her parents. As a wife of an *ustaz* she is harassed and coerced into wearing the hijab, pray, and recite the Qur'an with diligence. What follows from this scenario are events that require the female protagonist to work through her emotions under the guidance of the *ustaz* and lead her to eventually fall in love with him. These scenes function to "test" the faith of the characters and for readers to work out how to morally conduct themselves when faced with the temptation to stray from the moral path.

Informed by cultural frameworks of emotions, the *ustaz* embodies the bulwark against the overpowering nature of *nafsu* (desire) that is difficult to suppress without reason, morality, and piety. In happier moments, his emotional hinterland is portrayed as overlaid with tenderness and sensitivity, qualities publishers of romantic fiction argue are seldom found among Malay men "in real life." But he is not without flaws. An *ustaz* who is forced to marry a woman he does not love is emotionally abusive towards her. His violent mood swings are hard to predict and his wife must walk on eggshells to avoid his wrath. In these passages, readers respond with objections to his behaviour in their comments tagged to the text. Readers of *Dia Ustazku* [He's My Ustaz] reacted with alarm and disdain towards the behaviour of an *ustaz* who demeans and controls his wife's whereabouts outside the home: "Ugh this *ustaz*. If he's really an *ustaz* he would not behave this way. A real *ustaz* would speak with kindness and not with aggression towards his wife. [emoji: face with steam from nose]" Another reader agrees with the foregoing comment: "At the end of the day, we're all humans. Just look at all the badly-behaved young imams out there." By contrast, forced marriage is a dramatic narrative device towards which readers show no objection or distaste when given the opportunity to engage on Wattpad. Unlike the western romance where premarital intimacy is expected, forced marriage in an Islamic love story allows authors to portray scenes of intimacy under *halal* (permitted) conditions. Moreover, scenes of nonconsensual intimacy and sexual violence are not objectionable as marital rape is not recognised as a crime in Malaysia (Steiner 2019). Forced marriage is also a situation in which characters, especially women, must work through a range of emotions – anger, fear, and anxiety, feelings that must be resolved not just with love but also *sabar* (patience) and *pasrah* (stoic resignation). It would not be a stretch to presume that readers who identify with the characters work through similar emotions, too. For example, connecting with stories about forced marriage had been a means for Murni, a reader I interviewed, to come to terms with the aftermath of her own forced marriage, claiming that the stories give her strength to carry on as a single working mother.

Conclusion

A national agenda that pursues the promise of a techno-utopia that will fast-track the country into a futuristic knowledge economy has inadvertently created, and assisted by the global economy no less, a society reliant on forms of mobile intimacy and adept at appropriating digital archives of affect towards personal ends. But it is a vision of utopia that has yet to solve the labour inequality that underpins the digital economy. In the meantime, digital platforms like Wattpad rewrite and reinforce, distribute and amplify vernacular religious ideas about love and romantic Islamic masculinity to readers who perhaps feel short-changed by cultural and bureaucratic institutional frameworks of emotions and intimacy. This article offers a case for the definitional expansion of vernacular religion that plays out in the digital realms of "new" media and a critical consideration for the reproduction of digital labour and its gendered consequences. The offline contexts of digital labour will enrich our understanding and appreciation for "the social" that lies behind the online mediation of religion. In the case of Islamic love stories on Wattpad, the affordances of new media platforms provide opportunities for religious pedagogical moments and rewarding affective engagement in a context of emotional asymmetry. However, the conditions and work of popular religious engagement in these spaces replicate aspects of feminised labour – free, undervalued, and always "on." These are nevertheless mobilised in the dynamic relations that build the digital archive of affect made up of user-generated media moments. Ambivalences and discontent about romantic love are both conditions and remediated content in this networked digital landscape where the currency of new forms of Islamic authority and knowledge are necessarily social, emotive, and intimate.

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Notes

[1] The findings of this article are derived from a larger project on the social and material cultures of the Malay-language romance industry in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Between 2016 and 2019, I collected more than a hundred responses from women who were part of the Malay romance industry as writers, readers, booksellers and publishers. They participated in a preliminary online survey, focus group discussions, and structured and semi-structured in-depth interviews. These audio-recorded and handwritten interviews were conducted face-to-face, others were via email, WhatsApp, and private messaging on Wattpad. Many of the participants have a heterogeneous approach to romantic fiction, reading and writing in print and online media, while a smaller number engage almost exclusively with Wattpad as authors and readers. The names of research participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

[2] In a small preliminary online survey conducted with 87 respondents in early 2016, nearly half were between ages 21 and 25 years old (44.5 percent), and about a third were still in tertiary education (65.5 percent). Most (32.2 percent) counted themselves as dedicated readers who finish on average more than eight romance novels a month. The preliminary survey was carried out to identify themes that readers seek in romance novels and included questions about recurring plot

devices and the typology of protagonists in Malay language romantic novels. "*Kahwin kontrak* [Contractual marriage]," "*kahwin paksa* [forced marriage]," and "sharia-compliant romance" were subjects that appealed to them and are notable in their popularity after the bestselling publication and controversial 2011 film adaptation of Fauziah Ashari's 2002 novel *Ombak Rindu* (Waves of Longing), a story about sexual violence and female sacrifice, revived and reinvented the Malay popular romance.