

EXPLORING RELIGION BASED PERSUASIVE FACTORS TO RATIONALISE VIOLENCE AMONG MUSLIM YOUTH IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The current study presents a qualitative experimental design that combines the elements of an experiment with qualitative design to investigate the persuasive factors that rationalize violence among youth in Malaysia. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews from twenty-four participants who were exposed to an intervention of videos and PowerPoint slides to elicit their responses on a situation. This study provides a way to understand factors that could lead selected youths to rationalize extremism in a society. The findings provide insight into the role of persuasive messaging in recruiting youth towards extremist behaviours.

Keywords: extremism; communication; youth; persuasion

INTRODUCTION

Youth are an essential part of a society that plays a significant role in a nation's success. Various factors such as social and economic inequality (Piazza, 2006), political polarization (Abadie, 2006), globalization (Li & Schaub, 2004), declining levels of trust in institutions (Chanley, 2002), disaffection (Bader & Berg, 2013; Brynjar & Skjølberg, 2000), belonging and identity crises (Lynch, 2013), and discrimination can considerably affect the quality of youth development. Failing to resolve these issues may result in deleterious outcomes for a nation as the youth will indulge in violence (Dahlberg & Potter, 2001), and religious extremism (Piazza, 2006; Pratt, 2010).

Extremism among youth is increasingly recognised as a serious, worldwide security concern. A key aspect of extremism is, believing one's ideology is right and deploring other's view that is not aligned with the accepted ideology. Recent development in the area of modern terrorism has categorized terrorism into four levels, namely, doctrine establishment, national determinism, internationalism and religion (Rapoport, 2013). The latest development of research on extremism is mostly related to religion and in the present study case, it refers to Islam and terrorism. However, it has been argued that extremism in religion is not exclusively related to Islam alone. Other religions such as Christianity, Jewish, Buddhism, and Hinduism also have the share of extremism cases (Rapoport, 2013). It is important to note here that those who use religion as extremism platform has misinterpreted religion and use it as a tool to persuade the so-called believers to be part of the group and involve in violent acts.

Malaysia has faced various terrorism threats since its independence (Osman & Arosoaie, 2018). Starting in the 1960s, Communism Party of Malaysia had terrorised Malaysian soils with its military campaigns and attacks. Later in the 1980s, another group under an allegedly Islamic based group that is locally based had threatened the security of the nation. However, the huge challenge was in the late 1990s where transnational Islamist terrorist groups had entered Malaysia

to recruit followers and gain supporters. They are Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM). Then in 2014, ISIS was established and entered Malaysia through a group under the name of Katibah Nusantara. The incident of bombing a Movida nightclub in Puchong in June 2016 was among significant cases that highlighted ISIS followers' determination to create havoc in the country (Malik & Kepli, 2018). Thus, since 2015, Malaysian police under the Counterterrorism Unit reportedly arrested over 250 individuals for links to ISIS with the majority were charged under The Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill 2012 or better known as SOSMA (Malik & Kepli, 2018; Osman & Arosoaie, 2018).

In addition, the supporters have travelled to Syria for the sake of fighting the war, marrying local or international fighters and offering services to the group such as cooking and teaching. It was reported that Malaysian who are at the aged of 20 to 38 are involved in these acts. This finding is important as Malaysian youth represent the majority of the population. Youth population in Malaysia is considered significant as the median age of the country is 28.6 years old (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). Malaysia represents a unique case in term of the diversity of ethnicity with Bumiputera (69.1%), Chinese (23.0%), Indians (6.9%) and others (1.0%). The estimated population for 2018 is 32.4 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). The national religion is Islam with mostly Bumiputeras are Muslims. In a survey carried out by Pew Research Center (2010) on extremism and terrorism globally, 81-99% of Malaysian Muslims stated that they were very concerned with the extremist religious group in the country. Thus, this further emphasizes the concern of Malaysian Muslims in extremist activities in the country (Lugo & Cooperman, 2010).

The Malaysian government has been lauded as having one of the best Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) programs in the world (Program Pemulihan Kita Terbaik di Dunia, 2017). Nonetheless, the escalation of terrorism is worrying. With the government vigilance to manage CVE programme and Islam is the religion of Federation, the question is that why do people still involve in extremism. Among the answer given are due to personal motivation, social media influence, allegedly promising ideology, and peer's influence. Malaysians have been involved in extremism that related to religion since KMM and now ISIS. Being an institution, ISIS group in Malaysia has an international network. It has managed to influence professionals, housewives, students, and preachers. The profiles of those involved are diverse but one thing remains the same that is the sympathy towards Muslim suffering at international levels such as Palestine and Syrian cases. What they do not realise is that they have been endangering their life and others living in this mission to support extremism group such as ISIS. Thus, the research aims to investigate the persuasive factors that rationalize violence among selected youth in Malaysia.

YOUTH AND EXTREMISM

Youth and extremism is not a new phenomenon. Decades of research on youth and extremism focus on gang (Pyrooz, LaFree, Decker, & James, 2018), and cult (Dawson, 2018; Dawson, 1998). The causes of involving in extremism are many. They are peer pressure, for fun, rewards and charismatic leadership. Youths are motivated by short or long terms goals of the so-called extremism group. It is an advantage to have youth in their groups as they are more mobile, hot-headed and easy to be influenced by the group leader. The crowd factor is important to youth. To be part of it making one feel not a stranger among the crowd. Specifically, youth and extremism in religion are one of the significant issues to be pointed out here. From Christianity (Wilcox, 2018;

Wilcox & Robinson, 2010), Buddhism (Gunaratna, 2018), Hinduism (Howard, 2018), leaders of an extremist group has been galvanizing efforts to recruit youth to be part of their group. Among the examples are in Algeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, India and Indonesia (Özdem & Podder, 2011). What is interesting in this area of youth and extremism is the continual growth of research in the area of security. Samuel (2018) has conducted a study on Undergraduate Radicalisation in Selected Countries in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Quantitative Analysis on the Perception of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism among Undergraduates in Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In the chapter on Malaysia and terrorism, the finding indicates that one in five Malaysian undergraduates feel terrorism is an effective platform to justify one's goal. It is indeed a scary implication in the context of safety and security measures in Malaysia. What's more, the ISIS is famously known as having no mercy to others. Believe in one goal and denouncing others who do not believe in their ideology.

PERSUASION AND EXTREMISM

Persuasion is an important element in managing influence within the group. Normally the persuasion process involves elements of source credibility, messages, recipients', trust and sustainability of persuasive messages. Leaders normally carrying an important message that could penetrate the psychological aspects of the believers that they are in the right path is the key aspect of persuasion. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is suitable to explain the situation of this research. Developed in the mid-1970s by John Cacioppo, a social neuroscientist, and Richard Petty, a psychologist, ELM seeks to explain how a human can be influenced by central and peripheral routes. The theory is still widely applied to date in contexts such as business (Cyr, Head, Lim, & Stibe, 2018), politics (Holt, 2018) and media (Shi, Hu, Lai, & Chen, 2018). The model suggests two routes that normally influence audiences that are central and peripheral routes. The model predicts that to achieve long-term persuasive impacts, persuaders have to use central routes strategies. Examples are strong, neutral and weak arguments. The predetermined conditions for this strategy to be successful fall under two reasons: the audience is highly motivated to know about the issue and 2) the audience is able to process the message rationally and critically. On the other hand, peripheral routes refer to taking shortcuts in persuading others to believe in one's message. The strategies for peripheral routes are using authority, relying on commitment or dedication on a certain cause, providing two-sided arguments, linking the importance of the message to the audience, creating a reciprocal message, developing scarcity needs in the audience self and emphasizing on social proof. These seven strategies are effective to persuade audience when the audience is not highly motivated in the issue in the first place. This route has a short-term impact but can be effective if the group using it skilfully to convince the audience who has less knowledge in the area where the persuaders are influencing the audiences.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Persuasive elements that persuade youth to extremism group are widely regarded in the academic literature as powerful elements in drawing people into (Cohen, 2009; Hills, Jackson, & Sykora, 2015). While it is impossible to measure the extent of this influence, the growing research on the persuasion of an extremist group (Prentice, Taylor, Rayson, & Giebels, 2012) suggests it plays an important role in what the scholars have categorized as Psychology of humiliation (Kruglanski,

Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017). As they argue, a key to influence people to join extremism group is to amplify the ideology of violent extremism using a soft approach that is fighting in the name of religion and it is a duty of every believer to fight to eradicate injustice that prevailed in the affected community. To achieve such a goal, it is important for us to better understand the motivations of the stories and issues and the persuasive devices through which the group used to convince others to join them. A number of researchers have examined how those seeking to promote Islamic extremism from the perspective of media (O'Loughlin, 2018), political sciences (Al-Rawi, 2018), and sociology (Juergensmeyer, 2018). Some have undertaken quantitative analysis but few ventures on qualitative analyses. Nonetheless, the research collection on extremism and persuasion suggest that there are limited studies on understanding persuasive factors that rationalize violence disposition from the communication perspective. The present study aimed to explore the persuasive factors that rationalize violence among youth in Malaysia. Therefore, it utilized "comparative grouping technique" in the qualitative experiment as "it offers a way to investigate mediated communicative processing and responses to content presentation." (Mason, 2006: 2).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative experimental design as according to Mason, (2006: 4), "it helps a researcher to cross from micro-findings into macro-interpretation by contextualizing from mixed methodological data". The details of which are provided in the procedure section.

Participants

The sample of the present study comprised of Muslim Malay students from the public university of Malaysia which were recruited through purposive sampling. A total of twenty-four university students ranging in age from 19-25 participated in the study.

Procedure

The principal researcher appointed a research assistant to gather the participants. The participants were recruited using social media such as WhatsApp and email, those who responded were then interviewed and selected based on the inclusion criteria of the study. The study started with the registration of selected participants at the counter. They were given the table number to go and sit. Participant's table No. would be predetermined based on their demographic. Each table was equipped with a desktop computer, table, pen, and earphone. The respondents were instructed to watch a number of video clips showing ISIS atrocities and attacks with a brief commentary with the use of PowerPoint presentation slides where explanations from sources such as supported by religious text that are from al Quran and hadith and sources such as speeches by famous and not so famous religious leaders were presented to show why are people in the video are being violent. They were informed that at any point in time if they felt uncomfortable, they could leave the room without any hesitation. After watching the video and the power point, the participants were interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the views of post viewing the videos and

slides. Robinson and Mendelson (2012: 29) describe interviews “a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings in a natural setting”. Moreover, Creswell (2003) and Wisdom and Creswell (2013: 15) believes that it helps the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting”. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews as the participants have ample time and scope to express their diverse views (Creswell, 2003).

The researchers started the interview by building a rapport by asking general questions to the participants. Then, the researchers used interview protocol where they asked questions such as why you think people join ISIS, what do you think motivates them to so, If given a chance would you join too, and Do you think terror act is the final resort to reconcile enemy. Each interview lasted between 30-40 minutes. The researcher asked the students to the response using their preferred language (English or Malay). All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

In the end, the principal researcher conducted a debriefing to explain the manipulation check and the reiterating the reason, the video and PowerPoint messages were designed for the research. The following statements are part of the research debriefing: i) ...Dear students, thank you again for attending this session, ii) We hope you have some idea what this study is all about. Our nation is currently struggling with the issue of extremism. Each day you hear this news in the media. In this study, we are trying to uncover what kind of messages persuade Malaysian youth to pursue the violent path. Your responses will help us analyze that..., iii). We hope that you realize how we shrewdly crafted the messages and manipulated the source to convince you. Please understand that the religion did not propagate it. Each Prophet’s Tradition (hadith) and Quranic verse (surah) has its own local context, which these recruiters manipulate and use to entice innocent youth like you. Thus, please understand your religious text and always verify the source and iv) Thank you for listening. Please before you leave, sign and collect your reward for participating in this study. If you have any questions you can contact us again.

The present study was built on the prior study that examined the interaction of pictures and text in the context of a National Geographic Magazine (NGM) story on Saudi Arabia (Robinson & Mendelson, 2012). This research was illustrated based on the previous literature from media and educational psychology where video affect persuasion (Aly, Weimann-Saks, & Weimann, 2014; LaFrance, 2017) as well as commentary by famous people (Sageman, 2011; Weimann, 2014) which was designed to investigate the way video and commentary can influence viewers and persuade them to join religious extremist groups.

Ethical Considerations

Mertens and Ginsberg, (2009: 23) suggest that ethical issues are “an integral part of the research planning and implementation process, not viewed as an afterthought or a burden”. The primary consideration of the researcher was an “informant’s rights” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 90) and “do no harm” (Tisdale, 2004: 30). Written consent was obtained from the participants that stated the nature of the study, confidentiality was ensured, and participants were given the assurance that they could withdraw from any time they wish to and were encouraged to give honest opinions. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant so that their identities are not revealed. A post-intervention a debriefing session was also conducted to ensure participants do not take the videos at face value.

Data Analysis

All the researchers individually read the transcripts. Qualitative data was analysed using line by line coding and categorising the data by each researcher individually. Coding is defined as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 2009:186). There are three levels in the coding process namely, sub-codes, codes and themes which help to categorize the data on different levels of abstraction and give them labels to help to generate meaning from the data. Data was summarized which led to the emergence of initial themes (Patton, 2005). The researcher describes the details of how they coded and categorized the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers then compared their analysis reviewed the data again, and discussed if there is any discrepancy until consensus among researchers was achieved and to avoid the researcher bias (Yin, 2009). The themes that were found common among researchers was then further analysed in the light of the previous studies. Thus, a shorter list of final categories emerged that consist of common themes.

Rigor And Trustworthiness

The validity of a qualitative study is the rigor which is associated with the study. In the present study rigor was which can be determined using the criteria of credibility (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). Credibility implies “how vivid and faithful the description of the phenomenon is” (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003: 430). In this research, member checks were carried out with the participants to ensure that the data that was transcribed by the researcher captured what the participants said.

RESULTS

Findings and the verbatim are presented in this section based on the three themes that are identified in the interviews which are as follows:

Authority

The results of the interview suggested that most of the participants think people join terrorist groups as they are persuaded by some authority. Authority in the context of persuasion refers to the ability of the persuaders to manipulate and amplify the persona of the authority in winning over the hearts and mind of the targeted audiences to accept beliefs or behaviors presented. In the experiment, the participants were shown a video that depicted violence behaviour that was exercised by ISIS group. The conviction of what the group is doing as part of their duty to free Muslims in Syria and Iraq from the Western armies who are against Islam. Most of the respondents voiced their concerned regarding violence and cautiously stated that they could fight the terrorism when it is the last resort as it is ordained in Quran and Sunnah. For example, participant 1 said:

‘Violence is acceptable if it does not conflict with the Quran. Terror is only used as a last resort to reconciliation or to insult the enemy about their ignorance’ (R01).

People are persuaded in religious activities as they see the violation in their religious rights as highlighted by participant 5:

‘Fighting due to religion is required if our religious rights are violated by those who try to destroy religion’ (R05).

Moreover, using a credible source such as Quran and Hadith will have more impact than that of non-credible source as participant 11 said:

‘To oblige me to participate in the war, I have to study in more depth and detail about the code of ethics of religion’ (Quran and Hadith) (R11).

Additionally, R24 stated that:

‘The religious code of ethics (Quran or Hadith) should be the main reference ... but in the battle of his own, God sets the right 'way' to fight’ (R24).

Moreover, people find that it is their religious duty to protect their religion which is evident in the interviews. For example:

‘Undoubtedly through the Qur'anic verses and Sunnah encourages Muslims to strive to defend the religion of Islam’ (R19).

These evidences suggest that the decision of participating in a religious extremism depends on the persuasion that is being supported with a credible source such as Quran and Hadith. Evidence from the literature have suggested the similar idea. For example, the results of Tormala, Briñol, and Petty (2006) study revealed that high credible source message can influence the thoughts of people and they gain more confidence which results in more attitude change in response to persuasive messages with low credibility.

Commitment

Another emergent theme as a potential explanation for Malaysian youth’s involvement in religion-based extremism was commitment. The findings under this category refer to a person’s strong dedication to promote and justify why others should commit to the certain cause, association, and product. For example, some people publicly announce their commitment to a certain group or cause. They attend rallies, campaign for a cause and working hard to ensure that the group multiplies in a long term. For example,

‘Fighting for religion is important because in Sunnah and Al-Quran also encourage a Muslim to fight for the sake of religion is not wrong. Before the war we need to negotiate and get the word break or try to avoid war with the consultants’ (R01). Individual feels it’s obligatory to fight for their religion. For example: ‘It is important to fight to defend Islam for those who are capable of fighting’ (R02).

The feeling of commitment to fight against religious enemies even with the weapon was found justified as highlighted by the participant R13 where he mentioned that:

‘Fighting if meant to use weapons on me is not important, but if the war meant to deal with evil in the right way, it's important’ (R13).

Furthermore, compounded with this fact of religious obligation will lead the youth to join an extremist group. As R13 stated:

‘As Muslims say it is obligatory to strive to safeguard the dignity of Islam. If the dignity of Islam is violated it becomes a duty to all peoples to strive but not to use violence’ (R20)

Additionally, R23 stated that:

‘It's important to fight. In Islam, Muslims must defend religion because religion is the basis that can guide one to the right path’ (R23).

These evidences suggest that most of the participants have weakly held beliefs and they were not based on credible sources such as Al Quran and Hadith or famous religious scholars which are sufficient to make a person agree to join an extremist group. Evidence from the literature in the past have suggested the similar idea. For example, Amjad and Wood (2009) stated that people who have weakly held beliefs can be easily influenced to join an extremist group and once the person joins the group, they become locked and are not permitted to leave the group. Therefore, people's underlying beliefs play a significant role in their commitment and willingness to join the extremist group to engage in aggressive and extreme acts. Hence, by offering the credible sources against extremist groups can change the normative beliefs about joining terrorist activities.

Social Proof

Social proof refers to on the notion of peer pressure in the context of a conventional community as the statement “everyone's doing it”. Living in a community normally make some of adult succumb to the idea that let's do it as others have been doing it for so long. The term get on board or jumping into the bandwagon are appropriate to describe social proof.

‘Yes, we will not be Muslims if we do not follow the Quran and hadith. All who embrace Islam will surely follow every command that has been written in the Quran or hadith. This is what really affects the Islamic extremist’ (R01)

Additionally R02 stated;

‘Yes, because in the Quran many mention of the duty of war to protect the religion and the weak from oppressed and in the hadith there are also various prophetic stories during war to understand and take lessons in every war’ (R02)

‘Because the Prophet's era has already existed for the defense of Islam’ (R04)

‘It's important to fight. For the Prophet's time they fought with the infidels if the rights of Muslims were violated or any agreement entered between Muslims and infidels was violated, as Muslims only wanted to obey the Islamic sharia and obey the messenger of Allah and the Prophet’ (R10)

‘Yes I think that's very important. During the time of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), he fought to uphold Islam from unbelievers’ (R24)

The idea of the social proof has been found as a recurring theme in the previous literature of religious extremism as social networks such as friendship offer opportunities for socialization with radicals which leads to the diffusion of extreme beliefs. Hence, it could satisfy the psychological needs of those individuals who believes that involving in terrorist activities are the way to fight against the enemies of Islam. Moreover, this socialization entraps the youth through the dynamics of peer pressure, groupthink, and ideological encapsulation that increase exit costs and solidify commitments to violence (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the literature review, extremism in religion is serious threat to a national security. The present study was designed to investigate the persuasive factors that rationalize violence disposition among selected youth in Malaysia. Using experiment as the method, the aim is to explore the persuasive factors that have the youth rationalize violence.

The qualitative finding indicates that peripheral sources can be persuasive when the issue is not being critically analysed by the audiences. It seems possible that these results may be due to using religion and community values as platforms to gain sympathy and support for extremism in the case of ISIS. The idea of extremism among the respondents in this study is aligned with the peripheral route of persuasion strategy. As most of them are against extremism, however, the idea to be persuaded is kind of possible if we are not cautioned with the strategies being utilized by the ISIS group. As religion is a good cause to persuade people to change their thoughts and behavior. Especially with the strong authority backing, using the Quran and Prophet's Tradition literally can create blind interpretation and injustice to the religion. To add, the idea of holding on what people have said, the tradition might lead us to live in fear and succumb to community pressure without critically question what is right and wrong in the community practices.

It is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these responses. These findings may help us to understand that religion, the source of authority and community values are delicate issues in a community. Further work is required to establish the viability of a persuasion strategy in extremism organization in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The paper has argued that source credibility; authority and community values are important

elements in persuading an audience to be involved in a certain cause. Taken together, these findings suggest a role of respective authority to intervene in extremism matters at an earlier stage. For example, the authorities need to monitor social media newsfeeds and deviant community practices in the country. The findings will be of interest to the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia. The generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations. For instance, it has to be longitudinal studies. In spite of its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the factors that rationalize violence disposition among youth. The issue of extremism among youth is indeed an intriguing one which could be usefully explored in further research. A key policy priority should, therefore, be to plan for the long-term care of extremism among youth in Malaysia.

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