Elucidating a Muslim Scholar's Speech Skills through Digital Storytelling: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the globalized era, Muslim scholars use digital storytelling to talk about situational issues. With millions of social media followers, they are deemed influential. However, studies to understand their speech skills are too scarce, although they deal with communication the most. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it aimed at understanding the speech skills employed by a Muslim scholar chosen as one of the World's 500 Most Influential Muslims in the year 2020. Secondly, it aimed at exploring the advice put forth by him about the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used a qualitative content analysis with the directed approach research design. A purposive sample of an influential Muslim scholar was selected. The data source was his digital story posted on YouTube about the COVID-19 issue. The findings indicated that he had utilized a repertoire of speech skills, such as soft conversational tone, easily comprehended words, clear narration and being respectful of the audience. The advice delineated was to remind all that everyone is equal, with death being the greatest equalizer, all possessions are only temporary, and submission to Allah in both good and bad times is unsurpassed. The speech skills may provide a useful point for class practitioners who wish to provide some guidance for their students about communication techniques. The advice may relieve the restlessness felt by many while fighting the invisible but threatening COVID-19 pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Speech skills are oral communication techniques that can be learnt and used by many so that information can be effectively conveyed to and shared with others besides allowing them to be persuasive (Lucas, 2015). In the light of the benefits, speech skills are taught to students of all stages across the world to empower themselves and others (Al Jahromi, 2020), especially when much sooner they have to face the never-ending demands of the career world. Thus, this will require them to be orally competent, which can also lead to the development of their self-esteem and interpersonal relationships (Bobkina, Romero & Ortiz, 2020). The arguments put forth by the researchers aforementioned brings an inference that being orally competent is crucial as it can make a difference in people's personal and professional lives.

Studies on speech skills have been administered to analyze how successful people exercise them so that these skills can be propagated for the benefits of others. For example, there were some studies done on speech skills of those who belong to managerial posts like leaders (Barrett, 2006), CEOs (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015) and planners (Elliot, 2019). However, studies to understand the speech skills of Muslim scholars are scarce. This inattention is interesting given that Muslim scholars, whose speech skills can be studied, offers such a rich context.

The representation of Muslim scholars in past research is mainly shown with respect to their *dakwah* or sermons (Hirschkind, 2012). Dakwah is communication that entails information being shared. This communication has been made possible among people living in almost all parts of the world with tremendous technological advancement. Since English is becoming the world's most widely spoken language in this globalized era (Abdalgane, 2020), it is understandable that Muslim scholars who speak eloquent English would be better able to connect to voluminous social media viewers around the world to disseminate their dakwah through digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling is a practice that involves the use of digital media in empowering individuals to broadcast their honest and simple stories in videos whose contents are either in the form of textual, spoken or visual or the combination of all of them (Lambert, 2010). Lambert (2010) claims that it is widely used by community activists, health and human agencies, and business professionals. It is also used in education (Aboo Bakar, 2019) and religion (Kaare, 2017) contents. Although digital storytelling has its specific particular approach, Aboo Bakar (2015) wrote that in her personal communication with Amy Hill, the Director for Center for Digital Storytelling, the latter agreed that digital storytelling had been modified or adapted in various parts of the world and thus whatever interpretation that was brought to the material are added value. In this paper, digital storytelling was interpreted as a short dakwah video that was featured on YouTube by a famous and prominent Muslim scholar.

Effective speakers can not only talk about various subjects but are also those who care about situational issues and demands (Muhammad & Omer, 2016). The most pressing situational issue that is plaguing the world now is none other than the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As this paper was being written, more than twenty-two million people had been affected worldwide, and the death toll had amounted to nearing 800,000 deaths (WHO, 2020). In this time of adversity, Muslim scholars have a role to play to help others cope with their stress. Previous studies on the qualitative content analysis of Muslim scholars' digital storytelling presented on Youtube are scarce, and most are on issues of conserving moderate Islam in Indonesia (Salik, 2019) and Malaysian Muslim scholars practising rhetorical styles to attract an audience with skillful, powerful, and effective speeches about various issues in

Islam (Zain, 2018). Thus, conducting a study on a world-renowned Muslim scholar's digital storytelling on Youtube is called for.

Thus, the purpose of this paper was twofold. First, it was to understand the speech skills employed by a Muslim scholar in disseminating his dakwah. It was aimed to answer the question of how a Muslim scholar communicated with audiences using different speaking skills. Findings may then be utilized with students learning speech skills. Second, it aimed to explore the advice put forth by him to the social media viewers about the issue of COVID-19. It aimed to answer what guidance he offered others in coping with COVID-19. By combining the analysis of speech skills and guidance put forth about COVID-19, the authors aimed to contribute to a more profound understanding of how and what a prominent Muslim scholar communicated through digital storytelling.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

In this study, the speech skills of a prominent Muslim scholar in disseminating dakwah and the advice he gave about the COVID-19 issue were interpreted using directed qualitative content analysis. Directed qualitative content analysis requires subjective interpretation and starts with a theory or model from which codes or relationships between codes are initially determined before and during data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, the Islamic Communication Skills model by Muhammad and Omer (2016) was used as a base to understand prominent Muslim scholars' speech skills. The categorization matrix was developed with respect to the model. Table 1 presents the categorization matrix used in this study and examples for each sub-category.

Table 1. Categorization matrix and examples

Category	Sub-category	Example
Tone of voice	Soft-tone and low (per demand of situation)	The audience feels comfortable listening to him
Selection of words	Easy and graspable	"We ask Allah to forgive us."
Mental level of the listener	The audience should be able to grasp the narration	The message is clear, and understanding is easy.
Avoiding reproaches	Caring for the feeling of others	"It's very humbling for us to be in this situation."

The first category, 'tone of voice', focuses on preachers using a soft tone so that listeners would feel comfortable listening to them and long for their company. Islam also advocates selecting a suitable volume of voice according to the number of listeners. A loud voice that can cause nuisance and irritation is disallowed. The second category 'selection of words', focuses on suitable and graspable words being used so that messages can be easily sent across and comprehended by the listeners. The third category, 'mental level of the listener', emphasizes that the IQ levels of the listeners are considered as messages need to be related to their lives and can be easily digested by them. The final category, 'avoiding reproaches', advocates that preachers should consider the feelings and emotions of the listeners. Messages need to be relayed in a respectful way full of tolerance and mutual understanding.

2.2 Sampling

Convenience sampling was used to select a prominent Muslim scholar to be studied in this paper. This derives from the explanation put forth by (Bengtsson, 2016) that in qualitative

studies, data commonly come from one to thirty informants and that there are no established criteria when using content analysis. However, the sample size should be determined on the basis of informational needs so that the research question can be answered with sufficient confidence. Thus, the researchers assumed a digital story from an individual should offer enough data to classify themes and conduct cross-case theme analysis.

The prominent Muslim scholar chosen to be studied in this paper was Omar Suleiman, who was named among the World's 500 Most Influential Muslims in 2020 (RISSC, 2020). This American Muslim scholar was born in 1986 and a Professor of Islamic Studies at Southern Methodist University, USA. Collectively, he has millions of social media followers and each of his digital stories being watched by thousands of viewers.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from Omar Suleiman's digital story posted on YouTube entitled 'Neglected blessings and unique opportunities'. The length of the digital story was 31 minutes, with viewers amounting to more than 86 000. The digital story was transcribed into a written form following the steps by Bailey (2008).

In a qualitative study, validity means that the results reflect the phenomenon studied, and reliability entails that the same results will be obtained if the study is replicated (Richards et al., 2015). To increase the validity of this study, the researchers had performed their analyses separately and then discussed the results to obtain consensus following the methods suggested by Graneheim & Lundman (2004), known as a form of triangulation.

The data were then again sent for validity and reliability check (Stemler, 2001). Speech skills that were identified from the digital story were listed with examples for each category and sent for validation through the approval of another two coders. The two coders chosen were an Islamic Studies lecturer and an English Public Speaking lecturer with broad knowledge and independently working in their respective fields. The percentage of approval was calculated, and the results achieved 100 per cent agreement which means the data were valid with perfect agreement from both coders.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The findings are presented according to the categories outlined by the Islamic Communication Skills model (Muhammad & Omer, 2016). For each category, the speech skills employed by the Muslim scholar in disseminating dakwah and the advice given by him about Covid-19 were interwoven, discussed with examples, and presented in Table 2.

3.1 Tone of Voice

The analysis of Omar Suleiman's digital story showed that he normally used a quiet, conversational and calm tone of voice which suggested that he was someone balanced and people may want to hear from him much more. The messages he sent to others were clear and precise, making the audience feel comfortable listening to him.

3.2 Selection of Words

The analysis of Omar Suleiman's digital story showed that he used words that were soothing and could easily be understood by the audience. He said:

> *"We ask Allah to protect everyone. We ask Allah to accept the intention for the good deeds that we had planned to do. We ask Allah to write down for us fully. … We ask Allah to forgive us for our inability."*

In the speech, the word 'we' was used oftentimes, indicating that he and the audience should be together in undergoing the difficulty and uneasiness when COVID-19 struck. Also, the phrase "We ask Allah" was repeated in all the lines signifying that the Muslim scholar was pleading with the audience to ask for Allah's protection and mercy.

3.3 Mental Level of the Listener

The analysis of Omar Suleiman's digital story showed that the messages he put forth were clear, complete, not complicated and could be related by the audience to their lives. He mentioned this:

> *"I want to start with this point. Allah has all of these things that are destined for us that essentially flatten all sorts of differences in terms of status, health, wealth, whatever it may be. The ultimate equalizer is death, right? Because, when we die, it doesn't matter what we had in this world. … Ultimately, we all reside inside of our graves, and our status is taken away from us. Our wealth is taken away from us. The praise of people is taken away from us. All of that is taken away from us. So, it's the great equalizer, right? And that puts us all in the exact same situation."*

He was advising all that although we may differ in status, wealth and other aspects, we, in the end, are equal as death awaits each of us. Next, the phrase "… taken away from us" was resonated in many lines, and this may indicate that whatever we possess may be relinquished anytime.

3.4 Avoiding Reproaches

The analysis of Omar Suleiman's digital story showed that he used the phrase "Dear brothers and sisters" often. This signified that he was respectful of the audience, and it may also suggest that he wanted the audience to know that religion unifies them and that he cared about them. Next, at the start of every important message, the phrase "We ask Allah Subhanahu Wa Taala" was also uttered. Those words imply that the speaker wanted the audience to always have faith in the Creator and surrender to Him in all good and bad situations. With his speech comes the thematic advice directed to the audience about the COVID-19 pandemic. The speech skills and advice by the Muslim scholar are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of speech skills and the advice

Speech skills	Findings	Advice
Tone of voice	Quiet, conversational and calm; the audience may follow up with his speech	
Selection of words	Soothing, hopeful, easily comprehended	Beg for Allah's mercy and have faith in him
Mental level of the listener	Messages were clear, complete and could be related to lives	However different, we are all equal; death is the equalizer; possession may be relinquished anytime
Avoiding reproaches	Respectful of the listeners; all are unified in the name of religion	Have faith in Allah and submit to him in good and bad times

4. DISCUSSION

The study was administered with a twofold purpose. First, it sought to understand the speech skills employed by a Muslim scholar. The study found that the Muslim scholar had utilized a repertoire of speech skills, namely the quiet, conversational and calm tone of voice, the hopeful and non-bombastic choice of words, being mindful of the audience's mental level by choosing to be clear and being respectful of the audience always. Second, this study is intended to explore the advice put forth about the issue of COVID-19. This study found that the Muslim scholar had advised the audience to remember that we are all equal and death is the greatest equalizer, to understand that our possessions may be relinquished at any time at all, and to submit to Allah both in times of happiness and adversity like when facing the pandemic of COVID-19.

Speech and communication is a field that has been dominated by Western-oriented perspectives (Khalil, 2016). However, in this study, the speech skills portrayed by the Muslim scholar were informed by and analysed through the lens of Islamic Communication Skills (Muhammad & Omer, 2016) which emulate the Prophet Muhammad's communication principles which dated back more than 1400 years ago. Even then, the speech skills found exercised by the Muslim scholar is no different from the perspectives put forth by many Western experts in speech and communication and whose ideas are used a lot in teaching oral communication in universities across nations. For example, one of his speech traits is consistent with the idea that to be a great speaker, one should practise a natural conversational style that touches the heart of the audience (Writer, 2014). Then, the Muslim's scholar's clear and simple speech resonates with the classic, famous seven rules of effective communication, especially that of clarity and completeness (Cutlip, 1958). Being respectful of the audience also reverberates a suggestion that a speaker needs to be sensitive to them and the occasion they are in or facing (Lucas, 2015). A new but interesting trait to learn is that the Muslim scholar oftentimes repeated the phrase "brothers and sisters" as opposed to the common phrase "ladies and gentlemen" that is used by many great speakers. This may indicate that the audience and he are related in religion, undivided by the different origins or geographical locations, and thus should be united in undergoing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having trust in God during tough times is recommended and common among many people. For example, in a study done by Pirutinsky et al. (2020) among American Orthodox-Jewish, they found that those who had put their trust in God during the COVID-19 pandemic had experienced a positive impact. However, the advice that the Muslim scholar puts forth to the audience is that we should not only keep a strong faith in tough times, but we should also do so in good times. Next, the reminder that we, regardless of our races and origins, are equal is also found by Domínguez et al. (2020), who wrote that there is a need for a coalition among health experts, health organizations, policymakers and the likes so that they are mindful about the physical and psychological health and equity for all. Besides, however fearful or angry and frustrated we may be because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to submit to the Creator. This is also written by Egunjobi (2020) who proposes that one, across races and religions, should take care of his or her own religious or spiritual self now during the COVID-19 pandemic more than ever.

5. CONCLUSION

This research reveals the benefit of using qualitative content analysis to discover the speech skills practised by a Muslim scholar that are rarely researched. Findings have revealed that the speech skills are similar to the ones suggested by Western experts. The results highlight and

confirm our understanding that Islam is a religion that celebrates good communication between its scholars and others. In fact, these skills can also be utilised with students who learn oral presentations or communication skills. Further results of this study revealed that the advice the Muslim scholar gives others while undergoing the COVID-19 pandemic is also resonated by other preachers and researchers. Further exploration in future research using qualitative content analysis on more Muslim scholars may shed more light on the speech skills and advice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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