

Religious Commodification: Media Construction in the Celebrities' Hijrah (Repentance)

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Abstract. *Hijrah* (repentance) is defined as the transformative journey wherein individuals transition from behavior that deviates from the principles and Shari'a teaching to behavior that wholly conforms to its guidelines. Nowadays, *hijrah* is predominantly embraced by celebrities who serve as prominent role models, as it holds extensive societal references and impact. The main objective of this research is to investigate whether *hijrah* adopted by celebrities can be classified as a form of religious commodification and to examine the extent to which media construction predominantly attracts renowned celebrities. Media wields significant influence over the prominence and prevalence of celebrities' *hijrah*, marking it as a notable phenomenon. Moreover, within the academic discourse, media plays a crucial role in disseminating public figures' information, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their presence and impact. This study adopts a qualitative method with a descriptive approach and incorporates the theory of agenda setting. The findings reveal that the media portrayal of celebrities' *hijrah* has led to a new form of commodification within the realm of religion. In general, society perceives celebrities' *hijrah* as an emerging trend that significantly contributes to their popularity.

Keywords: Religious Commodification, Media Construction, Hijrah, Celebrities

1. Introduction

Religion holds a sacred position in societies. The study of the commodification of religion becomes intriguing when it intertwines with economic, social, and political factors. "Commodification" is derived from the English term "commodification," which translates to "*komodifikasi*" in Indonesian, signifying the transformation of religious elements into commodities for trade, consumption, and enjoyment. This phenomenon highlights an intricate interplay between the market and religion, where commodification is defined as the commercialization of activities that were once non-commercial in nature [1].

Religious awareness has emerged as a positive and creative response amidst the crisis of modernity. The desire to draw closer to religion is deemed favorable, especially considering that Islam comprehensively covers all aspects of life, regulating every facet of human existence, from the minutest to the most significant matters. Islamic teachings are inseparable from everyday life. Furthermore, it is well-known that Muslims exhibit the ability to embrace

diversity by maintaining tolerance between different schools of thought. The existence of diverse opinions from various Islamic schools of thought serves as an ongoing source of motivation for the community. In other words, it represents a practical and critical step towards religious transformation [2]. The paper examines the commodification related to the popularity of celebrities who decide to undertake *hijrah* (repentance). When traced back to its origin, *hijrah* is not a new phenomenon and holds historical significance dating back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Repentance, or *hijrah*, is defined as the act of moving away from wrongdoing and turning towards righteousness. In its historical context, *hijrah* refers to the transfer of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, along with his companions and followers, from Mecca to Medina to seek refuge from the Quraysh infidels during the 13th year of his prophethood. The word "*hijrah*" is mentioned 31 times in the Qur'an, with one notable instance found in Surah Al-Muddassir (74: 5), where it is interpreted as an exhortation to abandon evil and disobedience. The process of repentance, or *hijrah*, brings about a transformation in the dimensions of life, as it involves leaving behind negative aspects in pursuit of goodness and righteousness [3].

The phenomenon of *hijrah* is regarded as a significant indicator of the Islamization of public space in Indonesia. Hijab, as a religious identity, transcends its religious essence and adapts to the changing social and political contexts over time [4]. Nowadays, individuals who choose to undertake repentance (*hijrah*) can openly exhibit physical transformations and actions, expressing a more pronounced Islamic identity that extends beyond the confines of private space. Bagir [5] observes that the repentance phenomenon is no longer restricted solely to the pursuit of Islamic knowledge for religious compliance but also serves to fortify one's identity as an integral part of an ideology. In Indonesia, *hijrah* becomes a representation of one's evolving identity, symbolized by the transition from not wearing the hijab to adopting it, and subsequently engaging in exclusive practices associated with specific groups, such as the Salafi community and others.

Hijrah undertaken by celebrities represents a transformative process of delving deeply into religion which is *kaffah* (thoroughly) – both in physical and non-physical aspects. This journey allows those who previously had limited knowledge or no knowledge of religion to become more well-versed in religious teachings, aligning themselves with the concept of '*alim* (knowledgeable). These changes are evident through symbolic alterations in attire, particularly women adopting more modest clothing and wearing the hijab, as well as shifts in language and behavior, reflecting a stronger adherence to the principles of the Sharia. When celebrities choose to embark on this journey of repentance, it inadvertently becomes a form of indirect propaganda, attracting media attention. As mentioned, [6] the lifestyle of a prominent and beloved public figure serves as a role model for society, influencing others to contemplate the idea of repentance. Consequently, the increasing prevalence of repentance among celebrities directs this phenomenon towards commodification, primarily driven by the media's role in shaping and highlighting the concept of celebrity repentance, particularly for economic gains. The rise of repentance on public figures is all due to the agenda of the television producers themselves.

According to Lipmann and Bernard Cohen [7], the theory of agenda setting is an effort to report to the public not only to attract public attention but also to make the news important to society. There is a news reporting strategy to make news go viral. This means that there is a certain agenda that is regulated by the media to suit their interests [8].

The research focuses on how media construction highly emphasizes religious practices and their significance in the process of repentance among celebrities. According to We Are Social's data for January 2023, there were 167 million internet users, with 60.4% of the global population being active users of social media. With such statistics, it becomes evident that the media greatly benefits by showcasing special broadcasts for repenting celebrities and featuring them as hosts for events such as religious lectures and motivational stories on the journey of repentance. Additionally, celebrities are sought after as guest stars or advertising personalities for products promoting halal branding.

2. Method

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to elucidate the description of social phenomena [9]. Supporting data were obtained through observations on the mass media platforms, YouTube, and the celebrities' Instagram accounts, subsequent to their repentance to social media. Interviews were conducted with several individuals to assess the impact of celebrities' repentance on society. Finally, a literature study was conducted, reviewing previous research and books specifically addressing the commodification of religion in celebrities' repentance. The concepts and theories employed in this study are related to media sociology, specifically the agenda-setting theory.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Commodification of Religion and Artist Hijrah

Etymologically, the word "religion" originates from Sanskrit, where "re" signifies "not," and "gam" means "chaotic." Consequently, "religion" denotes "not chaos," implying that adhering to religious principles brings order to one's life, avoiding chaos. When traced back to Arabic, "religion" is known as "ad-Din," which conveys the notion of mastery and positioning oneself in servitude to Allah. This understanding extends beyond the relationship between humans and God (*Hablum Minallah*) to encompass interactions among individuals (*Hablum Minannas*) [10].

Over time, religion has been interpreted not only as a guide for attaining happiness in this world and the hereafter but also as something susceptible to commodification. In other words, religion is viewed as possessing a sale value, akin to merchandise that can be consumed by the public. Consequently, religion undergoes a transformation into a commodifiable entity.

Commodification and its relationship with the media are inseparable. It is defined as the process of transforming goods or services into valuable commodities in line with market interests. According to the writer's perspective, in this case, value is closely tied to material aspects. This commodification extends its influence to various aspects of life, including religion and television media, which adapt to the interests of society. The media acts as a crucial link for obtaining information, facilitating faster access to any desired knowledge [11]. Through mass media, we effortlessly obtain various information about people and things. Millie's concept of religious commodification [12] highlights that it is an integral part of the broader commodification of values. The prevailing consumer culture not only fuels competition for material possessions but also gradually embeds itself into a value system that shapes our mindset and behavior. From this, he aims to explain that the growing appeal of religion strongly supports the sense of closeness to religious values.

Commodification is intricately connected to various aspects of human life, including the phenomenon of artist migration. The question arises: how are commodification and the migration of artists intertwined? The answer lies in the process of "selling" everything associated with artists who are currently undergoing migration, and the media plays a significant role in this intricate relationship.

The examination of celebrities' repentance is intricately associated with Dewi Sandra's significant role in this context. Prior to her undertaking of repentance, Dewi Sandra was renowned as a prominent actress known for her glamorous persona. During that period, the media extensively deliberated on her process of *hijrah*, a term denoting her decision to adopt the hijab as a symbol of religious devotion. Subsequently, following her embracement of repentance, Dewi Sandra ventured into notable roles, featuring as the main character in the widely popular soap opera "*Catatan Hati Seorang Istri*" (CHSI). Furthermore, she assumed the role of an advertising figure for aromatherapy oil products and halal cosmetics, concurrently serving as a brand ambassador.

Presently, the phenomenon of a previously glamorous artist transitioning to embrace the hijab remains relatively uncommon, elevating Dewi Sandra as a new role model not only for her peers but also for the wider public. Fellow celebrities who have embarked on the path of repentance have served as a source of inspiration for her and others within the industry. Consequently, this emerging role model has exerted considerable influence on the market's interest in hijab trends and Muslim fashion, with the names of repenting celebrities significantly impacting product sales. Before her repentance, Dewi Sandra's public presence was comparatively less prominent. However, following her decision to embrace repentance, news about her transition reverberated across various media platforms. Many observers have commented that since donning the hijab, Dewi Sandra exudes a heightened sense of beauty, while her aura radiates even more brightly. This noteworthy transformation has motivated other artists to emulate her example and embark on their own journeys of repentance.

The subsequent narrative of repentance involves Laudya Cynthia Bella. Preceding her adoption of the hijab, Bella was recognized as a prominent public figure renowned for her

fashionable and contemporary attire. Nevertheless, following her completion of the Umrah pilgrimage in 2015, she resolved to embrace the hijab. Prior to her decision to undertake repentance by donning the hijab, she experienced a growing sense of ease with wearing it during her involvement in the film "*Assalamu'alaikum Beijing*" [13].

Soap opera artist Shireen Sungkar's career skyrocketed after her role as Fitri in the soap opera "*Cinta Fitri*" produced by MD Entertainment, which aired for 7 seasons. Subsequently, she decided to undertake repentance, starting from regularly attending recitations and gradually changing her appearance by wearing the hijab after marrying her co-star in the same soap opera, Teuku Wisnu. Symbolic changes in Shireen's journey of repentance were evident as she transitioned from not wearing the hijab to embracing it. Following their respective repentance, these three artists, according to the author's observations, had a significant impact on both their careers and society at large.

The halal label extends beyond its association with food and has also permeated into cosmetic products. It serves not merely as a marketing strategy to boost sales, but there is also a perspective that considers halal products as facilitating acts of worship. The halal symbol holds profound significance related to the commodification of religion, not solely restricted to a symbol of adherence for Muslim women. Notably, data from the Global Islamic Economy for 2018/2019 [14] reveals that Muslim spending on halal cosmetics amounted to US\$ 61 billion in 2017, and this figure is projected to reach US\$ 90 billion in 2023.

3.2 Media Construction on Hijrah Celebrities: An Analysis of Agenda Setting Theory on the Commodification of Religion

The media serves not only as an information disseminator but also as a catalyst for viral news that captures the attention of the community, eliciting various responses from the public. This is evident in the recent emergence of celebrities' *hijrah*, a result of the reciprocal relationship between these celebrities and the public. The rapid popularity of these repenting stars has garnered diverse responses from the audience. Interestingly, this phenomenon has spurred more celebrities to embrace repentance and demonstrate religious inclinations. Consequently, television producers have created entertainment products closely related to religious lifestyles and practices, aiming to cater to public interests and maintain relevance in the public sphere.

The media strategically constructs and directs public attention towards news related to celebrity repentance, capitalizing on its widespread appeal. This phenomenon is closely tied to the interests of media producers [8]. The presence of the general public becomes essential for sustaining the careers of these celebrities. In the entertainment industry, public figure strives to capture public attention, creating a symbiotic relationship where both parties benefit. Without public interest and news coverage, celebrities' lives would lose their intrigue. As a result of this symbiosis, the boundary between the world of *da'wah* (Islamic preaching) and artistry has become more intertwined, challenging the past perception of celebrities' lives being synonymous with indulgence and hedonism.

The emergence of role models for repentance has influenced numerous artists to adopt new roles as *ustadz/ustadzah* (Islamic preachers), frequently appearing on television screens to deliver morning sermons or endorsing halal-labeled products. Additionally, on social media, these celebrities have transformed the content of their posts, incorporating hadiths, fragments of Quranic verses, and activities related to religious practices such as recitation. By embracing repentance, these celebrities have indirectly engaged in da'wah through platforms like YouTube, sharing their decision to embark on this transformative journey and life after repentance.

The process of *hijrah*, as a transformation in line with Islamic religious principles, has led to an increased commodification of religion, largely driven by media constructions that promote products associated with religious attributes. The media leverages the term "halal" as a branding strategy and enlists *hijrah* celebrities as advertising stars to endorse various halal-labeled products. Notably, Dewi Sandra, as a *hijrah* celebrity, has become an advertisement star for "Fresh Care", an aromatherapy oil products, aligning her image with the halal tagline, which is perceived not merely as a lifestyle choice but also as a necessity. This trend reflects market demands and supply dynamics [15]. Research also indicates that television advertisements significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions, with 50% of people now choosing halal makeup products due to TV commercials [16]. Thus, religion commodification has expanded to encompass products' halal status, emphasizing the religious aspect of consumer goods.

The impact of media constructions on celebrities' repentance is evident in their increased visibility and popularity among the public. After embracing repentance, celebrities often receive invitations from media outlets to participate as guest stars on talk shows and feature in advertisements. Dewi Sandra's career, in particular, has seen a significant boost following her repentance. As a brand ambassador for "Wardah", Inspiring Women, her association with the brand has strengthened her name recognition and enhanced consumer interest in *Wardah* products [17]. Her decision to wear the hijab has also inspired many to follow her hijab style, indirectly contributing to her soaring career trajectory. The media's interest in her transformation led to opportunities for hosting television programs, appearing in various films, and featuring in soap operas, such as "*Catatan Hati Seorang Istri*" (CHSI). Furthermore, her hijab business, DOA, has become a primary focus, with products available in both offline outlets and online stores.

Bella's journey of *hijrah* has its unique narrative. Prior to embracing the hijab, she had a considerably successful career. The pivotal moment of Umrah marked her decision to wear the hijab, which subsequently drew significant media attention. The public became intrigued by Bella's post-repentance lifestyle. Her career further flourished after adopting the hijab, evident from the success of her first film in hijab, titled "*Surga yang tak di Rindukan*," which garnered over two million viewers. Since her *hijrah*, Bella has deliberately chosen roles that embody Islamic values and even hosted the reality show "*Diary Laudya Cynthia Bella*" on TransTV.

As a celebrity, Bella also serves as an advertisement star and brand ambassador for beauty products, including shampoo and headscarves, for the Zoya Hijab brand, leveraging the appeal of halal branding. Her popularity as an artist who underwent repentance significantly contributes

to the success of these endorsements. This aligns with the findings of [18], which illustrate that celebrity Laudya Cynthia Bella's credibility and appearance as an ambassador for the *Sunsilk Hijab shampoo* brand resonate positively with 50% of respondents. Bella's *hijrah* also served as an inspiration for Dewi Sandra to embrace the hijab [19].

Furthermore, Bella's commodification efforts extend to her own merchandise, featuring her online fashion business under the names @lbylcb (Instagram account with 692k followers) and L by Laudya Cynthia Bella (YouTube channel with 17.8 thousand subscribers). In this aspect, Bella herself serves as the advertising model, establishing a unique connection with her fanbase and followers. The conscious use of her personal brand in her ventures highlights the successful integration of her celebrity status and *hijrah* journey into her entrepreneurial endeavors.

Shireen Sungkar, too, has garnered considerable attention since her decision to embrace repentance. The commodification process she undertook extended beyond business ventures, encompassing her *da'wah* efforts as a host in an Islamic program titled "*Berita Islam Masa Kini*" aired on TransTV. However, public comments indicated that the selection of hosts was not solely based on religious knowledge but also on the celebrity's popularity. Although she reduced her involvement in soap operas, which initially contributed to her fame, Shireen Sungkar ventured into the online business world with @zashi.id (451,000 followers) and Jasahawa (525,000 followers). Both ventures also feature her and her husband, Teuku Wisnu, as advertising models. Additionally, she serves as a brand ambassador for Reglow.official cosmetic products. Her personal Instagram account reflects a combination of daily posts, business promotions, and endorsements, demonstrating the integration of her religious transformation with entrepreneurial endeavors.

With the economic and media industries continually influencing religiosity, celebrities leverage social media as a career platform and demonstrate a growing awareness of religious values in their lives. However, the economic industry capitalizes on celebrities' *hijrah* as a marketing strategy to promote products. The media plays a crucial role in meeting public demands and capitalizing on celebrity's popularity to enhance product sales, resulting in the commodification of religion.

As public figures, celebrities are sought after by the media for endorsements. Their popularity and influence positively impact people's purchasing power, as consumers trust artists promoting commercial products. The profession of an artist inevitably becomes a commodity, leading to a shift in focus towards business and entertainment rather than solely religious practices [20]. The presence of *hijrah* is increasingly becoming a social phenomenon among religious communities. A number of reasons are behind this phenomenon [21]. Hence, the repentance of celebrities towards a more religious lifestyle is accompanied by economic commodification, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the media and the artists.

4. Conclusion

As public figures, celebrities' personal lives are subject to public consumption, with the media consistently highlighting their every activity, including their lives after undergoing the process of *hijrah*. The term "*hijrah*" refers to a transformative journey towards a better life, where artists choose to leave behind the world of hedonism and glamour, embracing a path of serious religious study. As time goes by, the phenomenon of celebrity repentance that is receiving more and more attention is often used as momentum by a public figure who has disappeared from the media to reappear after publicizing his decision to emigrate. Because the public is very interested in this phenomenon, the act of celebrities' repentant is often used as a new business opportunity. For example, the emergence of halal products such as food, cosmetics, headscarves, etc. Celebrities who repent frequently make various Islamic films, which in turn contribute to their various religious observances. For this reason, the phenomenon of public figures who repent always elicits various responses, both positive and negative, from various circles of society."

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