

Religious Online Information Behaviour Among the Malays in the Digital Era



Haslin Hasan, Hamdzun Haron

Abstract - Seeking knowledge is among the most important virtue in Islam. The Internet era offers more sources and new ways in gaining and producing information including religious information. However, the perception that the religious information behaviour among the Malays is not yet being studied empirically. A framework has been developed based on theories, previous related studies and interviews with Internet users. Three main aspects of behaviour being studied: usage, information seeking and verification. Data is collected using printed and electronic questionnaires. There are 616 usable data successfully gathered and analyzed through SPSS. Related to usage, the result shows that the Malays have adapted well with the Internet medium for searching the religious information. The results also show that there are changes on the technical aspect of information acquisition and delivery via the new media. However from the procedural aspect, the information behaviour among Malays are still traditional in nature based on their seeking information methods. The results suggest that the religious offline behaviour continues online, demonstrating their conservative nature. Analyzing the behaviour against the users' background suggests that there is a statically relationship between them. A high percentage of users claimed that they verify online religious information, even though they differ on this in practice. This paper ends with recommendations to improve the information behaviour among the masses.

Keywords: Religious, Online Information, Malays, Digital Era.

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet offers many channels to the cyber population to access almost any type of knowledge including religious knowledge. Since Internet become popular, among the earliest content that fill up the cyberspace is the religious information. The online religious content is not just always keep increasing, but there are also variety of scopes and characters [2]. Search result from Google [28/7/2019] combining key words of 'religion' and 'blog' for example shows almost a billion listing!

In the social history of Malaysia, the change of religious knowledge sources usually resulted in the social religious change. Internet presents many advantages as religious sources: a great medium for creating, storing, transferring, distributing, and acquiring religious information.

Internet is therefore has a lot of potential to be an alternative religious sources for the contemporary Muslim. Not surprising that in the earlier research, 64% of religious online activity in the United States is information seeking [10]. The same trend may also happening in Malaysia [9, 11, 12].

Study on the Muslim's online information behavior may therefore help us in understanding the phenomena of the current Muslim society [14], especially the potential of societal change brought by this new behavior. Campbell [3] also thinks that the Internet study now should embark on the third phase, i.e. the study on specific online practices. By studying the online information seeking and behavior, we may observe the change of the current trend of this practice (if any) and predict the future change or outcome of this practice in the society.

II. RELIGIOUS INFORMATION BEHAVIOR AMONG THE MALAYS

This research is to study the online religious information behavior among the Malay Muslim in Malaysia in three aspects: usage, information seeking and information verification. Information here refers to online religious information. The framework for this research is as below. It is adapted from the Johnson's information seeking model, Theory of Planned Behavior, Information Influence discourse [17], the new media discourse [1, 6, 7], Islamic sciences especially the 'usul' (i.e. principles or methodological theories in Hadith, Creed and Fiqh), Media System Dependency Theory (1976), previous studies [14, 15] and author's own interview [9].

A questionnaire survey form is designed both in printing and online format based on the above framework (Figure 1) and distributed by hand and through Internet. For Likert scale questionnaires, 5-point agreement is being used to represent (from the score 1) Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Less Agree, Agree and Strongly Agree. The distribution of the questionnaire started from 15/1/2016 to 15/4/2016. There are all together 616 usable data has been collected from which 386 are from the online survey and 230 are from the printing form.

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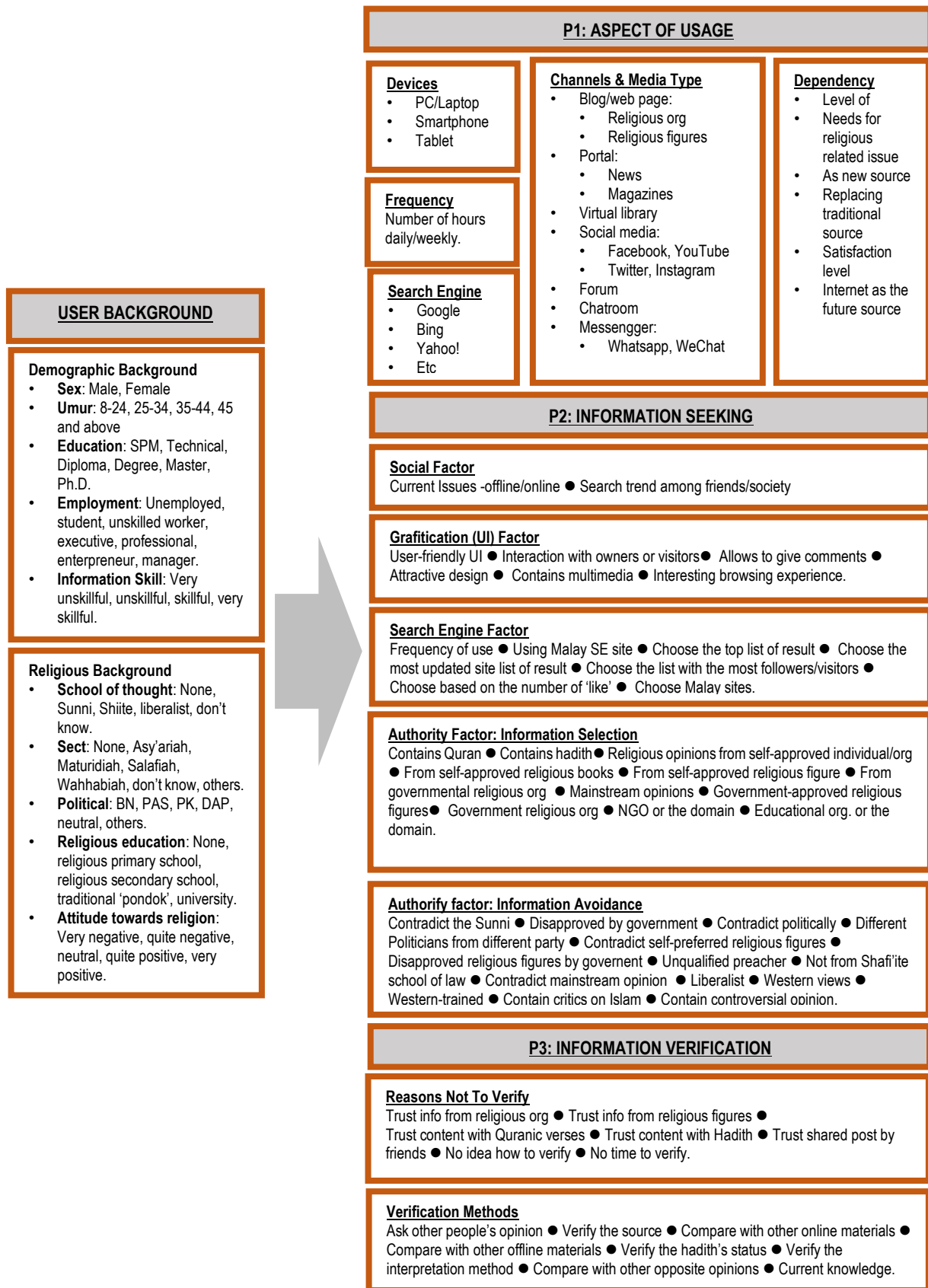


Figure 1: The research framework

A questionnaire survey form is designed both in printing and online format based on the above framework (Figure 1) and distributed by hand and through Internet. For Likert scale questionnaires, 5-point agreement is being used to represent (from the score 1) Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Less Agree, Agree and Strongly Agree. The distribution of the

questionnaire started from 15/1/2016 to 15/4/2016. There are all together 616 usable data has been collected from which 386 are from the online survey and 230 are from the printing form.

III. THE RESULTS

From the 616 respondents, the demographic profile consist of 56% male and 44% female. Most of them (41%) aged between 18-24 years old, 26% between 25-34 years old, 25% between 35-44 years old, and the rest are above 44 years old. For education, 33% own bachelor degrees, 24% own a diploma certification, 22% secondary-level school certification, 2% own a technical certification, 17% have a master degree, and 2% have a Ph.D. Most of them are on employment or running a business (65%), with 4% unemployed and 31% still studying. More than 85% of them think that they are sufficiently capable of seeking information online.

In terms of their attitude towards Islamic religion, 79% have a positive attitude towards religion, 18% are neutral, and 3% have a negative attitude. Majority of the respondents (87%) claim that they belong to the Sunni. In term of political thoughts, 57% of them take a neutral stand, whereas 8% support *Barisan Nasional* (BN) – which was at the time the ruling party – and 25% support the PAS party.

On the reliability test, all the items have the value of Cronbach's Alpha within the acceptable range, which is 0.65-0.95. For KMO test which is the validity test for the authority factors (that will be used for factor analysis) is 0.809, also within the acceptable range. Pearson Correlation test between the information searching's items or variables (refer Figure 1), for example the information selection factors and information avoidance factors show a strong correlation between the factors' variables, i.e. the value of $r > 0.5$. Correlation between the authority factors of Quran and Hadith for example is $r = 0.852$.

On the usage aspect, 33% of respondents use both personal computers and smartphones to search religious information, whereas 29% use only smartphones. Although 65% users claim that they access Internet 4-12 hours daily, but the religious information seeking activity is only 34 minutes daily in average. Social media is the main platform among them to gain religious information (YouTube and Facebook), followed by publications' websites, Whatsapp and religious website. 77% agree that they use search engine to search for religious information, and among them 95% use Google search engine. The respondents however are less agreeable that they are dependent on the Internet as their religious sources (with $\min = 3.17$). They are less agreeable that they are satisfied with the Internet as the religious sources ($\min=3.17$). They are also less agreeable ($\min=3.42$) that they will continue use Internet as their religious sources.

For the aspect of information searching, we are here surveying on the reasons or factors that influence them in their searching activity. Almost all items under this category show the min value of more than 3.5 except for the item choosing links with many followers and links with many 'likes' (for the search engine factor), and following the mainstream opinion (for the information selection factor). For information avoidance factors, the min score for the following is below 3.5: individual who are trained in West, independent

preacher, religious figures (or *ulama*) who are not approved by the government, opinions that are different from the mainstream, opinions that are different from their preferred religious figures, opinions that are different from their political views, and opinions from the politicians that do not belong to their preferred political party. The last item has the lowest min i.e. 2.86.

On the aspect of information verification, almost all (88%) claim that they verify the religious information they get online. The respondents agree that they use all the listed verification method in the questionnaire. For those who are not verifying their information, they only agree on the first two items: Trusting the information which contains Quranic and Hadith quotations. All other items have the min score between 3-3.5. Confirming with the authority items in this study is considered as a traditional behavior among the Malays in religious information seeking.

Multiple Regression test is then performed to compare selected information behaviors (based on the items under the authority factor) against the respondents' background variables to see if there is any relationship between them. In this case, the background variables are treated as the predictor for the information behavior that is common for this kind of research. The background variables that are tested are sex, age, education level, religious education level, attitude towards religion, the school of thought that they are belong to and their political party. The significant value $p = .000$ shows that all the background variables have influence on their information behavior with the value of $R = .282$ and $R^2 = .080$. The coefficients result with the Enter method gives the constant value of 3.417, and for a score of 1-5, shows almost the middle score for $X=0$. The regression results, among others, show the following: Women confirming to authority more than men; younger age are more conforming than the older age; the lower the education level (both secular and religious) are more conforming than the higher; more positive attitudes toward religion is more conforming; the Sunnites are more conforming, and parties other than BN are not conforming.

The factor analysis test has also been performed to the information seeking items to verify our research model [4, 5]. The result of Barlett's Test of Sphericity has the significant value of $p = .000$. This shows that there are enough correlation between the items for the factor analysis test. All the items under the information searching is 42. The result of the Total Variance Explained table for the first time shows that there is a nine factor or less for a group of factor and construct which can be extracted from all the original 42 items. Using the Pattern Matrix procedure, the numbers of the factor group at the end can be reduced to 6 factor groups by eliminating two of them which are multi-dimensions.

After studying the items in each of the factor group produced by the factor analysis test, the factor groups are then given new names to match the items listed under the group as shown in the Figure 2 below. The numbering of the factors here are based on descending loading value of the variants.

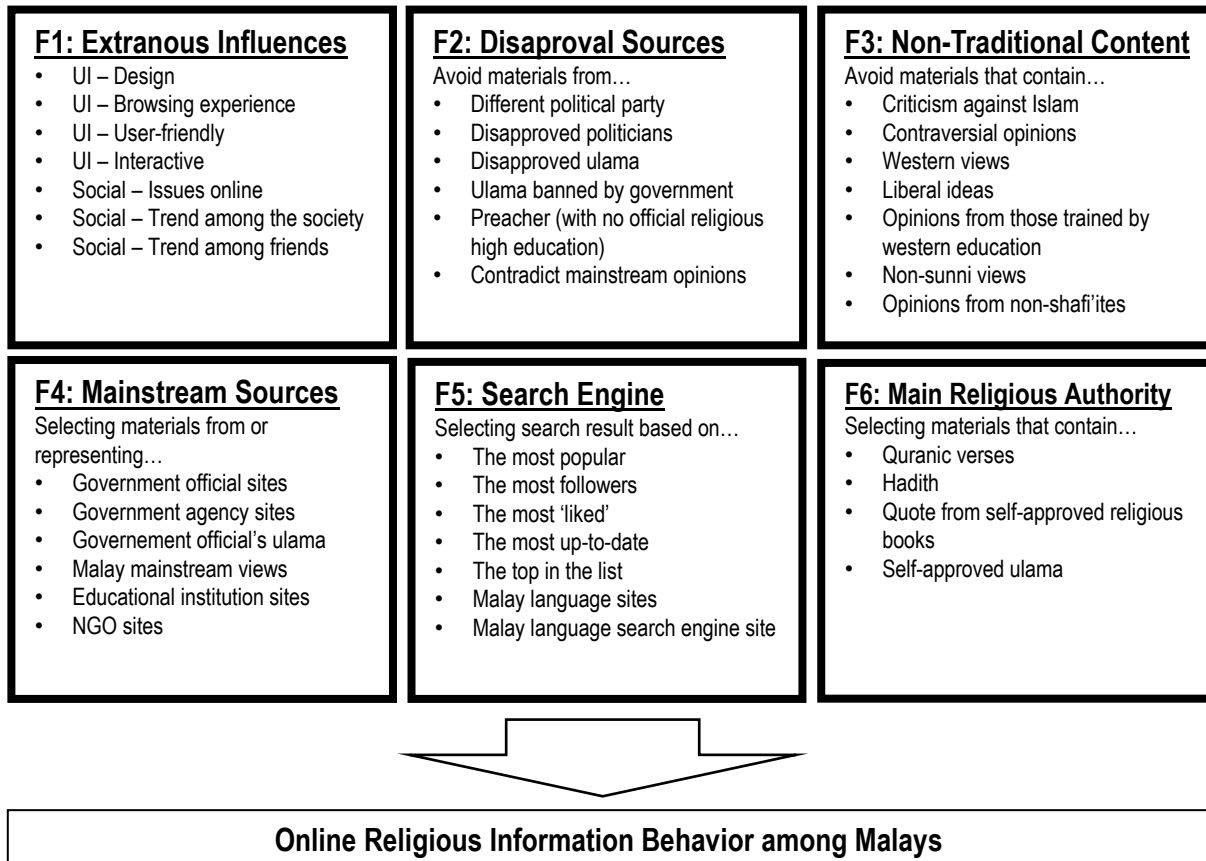


Figure 2: Rearrangement of information searching items after performing the factor analysis test

IV. DISCUSSION

On the aspect of usage, the Malay users – regardless of background – are very adaptable not just to the new media, but using it as a source for religious knowledge. In any case, this global online trend is also a trend here. The social media apps are more popular among the Malays especially the teenagers for religious knowledge source compared with other platforms. This may not just an example of how this trend may reflect the trend in other parts of the world, but demonstrates how offline practice transferred to online. In this case, the practice of attending religious lectures in the worship centers are replaced or extended to watching religious lectures in YouTube videos. The general behavior of searching information with Google search engine is also adapted to the practice of religious information searching. The active use of Internet as a religious knowledge source confirms the previous study that Internet does not change ones' religious behavior but strengthening it.

Even though the respondents disagree that they are dependent on the Internet for religious knowledge, the author's previous interview found something intriguing. While they claimed that they are not depending on Internet, on deeper interview however they acknowledged their high dependency on Internet as their religious sources. In fact many of them refer to the Internet first compared with other sources when they need answers to religious problem [9]. This has to be due to the convenience of Internet as a knowledge source especially for smartphone users. The initial denial probably due to their awareness that Internet should not be their first reference or source for religious knowledge.

Continuation from general online trend to specific religious online trend is also shown in respondents' score on both the user-interface and social factors (Figure 1) which can be considered here as a universal factor, i.e. general to all Internet users. The high score for many items in the authority factor points to the same trend that the practice of information seeking is still traditional in procedure, same like religious knowledge seeking before Internet, even though the new media offers much more alternative ideas. This also suggest the conservative nature of the Malays in religion: preserving the traditional method of religious knowledge seeking even with new medium and tools.

Comparing between the items which are agreeable and less agreeable under the authority factor can be interpreted that the respondents emphasize more on core matters of religion such as belief (*aqeeda*) and practice/ritual (*fiqh*), whether in selecting or avoiding information. This suggests that the Malays can differentiate between the essential and non-essential matters in Islam.

Based on the results of correlation and regression tests to analyze the relationship between the information behavior and the respondents' background, a few patterns could be detected. For example the female sex, the younger the age, and the lower the education level is, the behavior is more traditional compared with other groups. The group BN (political thought) and Sunni (school of thought) also demonstrate traditional behavior in information seeking more than others. This behavior can also be interpreted as a less critical attitude towards the information sources.

All these five backgrounds could predict consistently the information behavior of respondents participated in this survey. But this observation only explains the statistical relationship between the two variables: the respondents' background and their information behavior. In general, the Malays, as demonstrated in this survey population sample as taking a traditional and conservative attitude in this aspect of religious activity. There are no procedural changes, only the modality.

The new model information seeking factors as shown in the Figure 2 above, if further interpreted into processes or steps in information seeking, could be shown in the Figure 3 below. The steps are described as follow: (1) Scanning and collecting the potential materials to fulfill the information need; (2) Filtering the materials which are potentially contradict the religious authority; (3) Ending the search by aligning the materials and the information to conform them with the mainstream thought. The step of using the search engine is put on the entire process due to the fact that search engines are used directly and indirectly during the entire process of online information seeking. We should also note that the positive score of all items under the search engine factor shows that the search result of Google search engine may reflect the overall view of the society using the Internet, partly due to the search engine's algorithm [16]. On the aspect of usage, the Malay users – regardless of background – are very adaptable not just to the new media, but using it as a source for religious knowledge. In any case, this global online trend is also a trend here. The social media apps are more popular among the Malays especially the teenagers for religious knowledge source compared with other platforms. This may not just an example of how this trend may reflect the trend in other parts of the world, but demonstrates how offline practice transferred to online. In this case, the practice of attending religious lectures in the worship centers are replaced or extended to watching religious lectures in YouTube videos. The general behavior of searching information with Google search engine is also adapted to the practice of religious information searching. The active use of Internet as a religious knowledge source confirms the previous study that Internet does not change ones' religious behavior but strengthening it.

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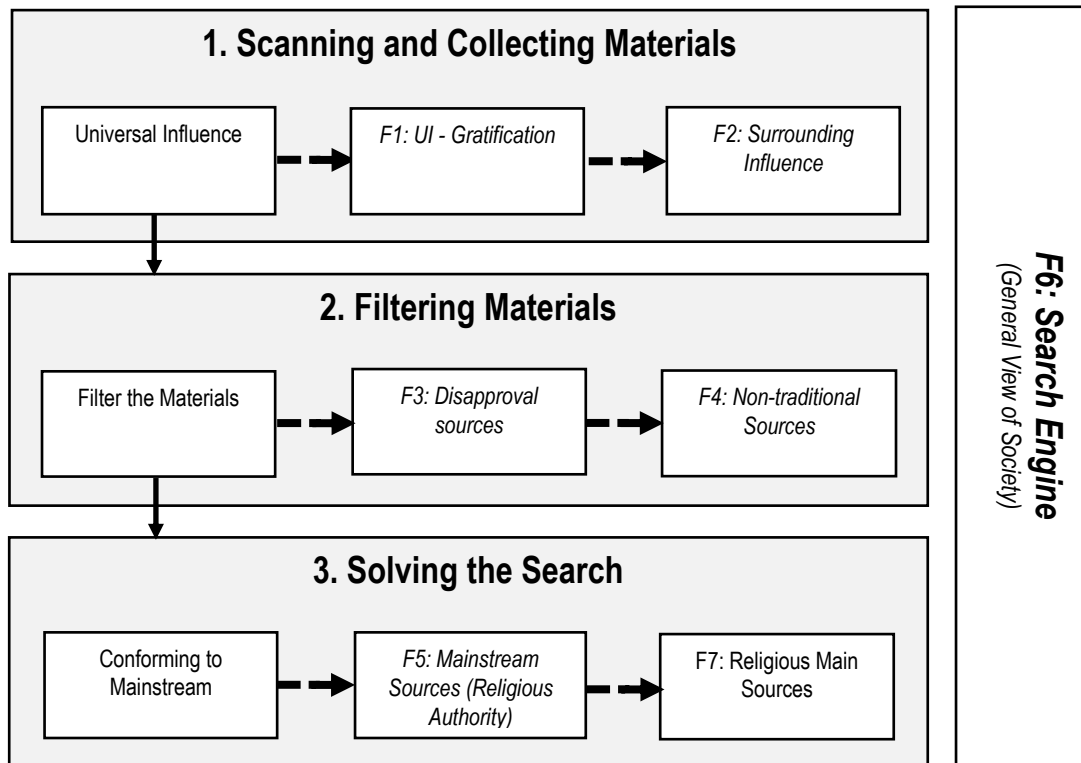


Figure 3: Steps in information seeking based on the results of factor analysis test.

The steps shown in the Figure 3 here again emphasize the conservative attitude among the contemporary Malay society as discussed in many sociological discourse [7]. There are two reasons to be offered in explaining the conservative behavior of the Malay respondents shown here: conformity and social identity.

Conformity – in the case of the Malays – is aligning their belief and behavior to match with guidelines that are acceptable among the current society. This conformity towards authority is shown to have positive score to almost all items related to religious authority. Both sociological explanation on the motivation of conformity – i.e. psychological and pressure from the society – could be extended to the Malays. Both motivations can also be related to the Islam as it is interpreted by the Malays – i.e. the importance in ensuring the belief and behavior limited to those that are acceptable by the Sunni Muslims as understood by them, which mostly influenced by the opinions of the ‘reference group’ who are the community’s religious elite and the source of community’s religious authority.

This result can also be interpreted as a reaction of the Malay respondents to assert their social identity, i.e. as a community that upholds what they understand as traditional religious values that have to be believed as true and must be practiced. This conclusion is drawn from the scores of the authority factor. This identity however is not necessary a continuation from the Malay identity throughout the history, but more of their collective compliance to the Sunni identity in the scope of belief and practice as interpreted by the reference group.

Even though majority of respondents think that they verified the information they acquired online, but from the author’s own previous interview study, this is not the case [8, 9]. Upon deeper interview, the respondents realized and admitted that they do not know the method to verify religious information

and just using their gut feeling or comparing the received information with their current knowledge. Interestingly, this method is scored less in this survey compared with other verification method. The same also goes for Internet dependency for religious information. Even though the survey has a low score among the respondents, the previous interview by the author shows that they usually refer to the Internet first when they have religious information need.

V. CONCLUSION

The emergence of Internet has transformed many aspects of people’s life including the Muslims. The Internet exposes its netizens to many channels of new religious information, and unlike the old media, it also allows them to participate in creating and spreading religious information. The Internet is mobocracy by nature – no control and the content is driven by the mass – not by any individuals with power. Like other new technology which assumed by many will change one’s religious behavior, the Internet also seen as such.

Three aspects of information behavior is studied here to see if there are any changes among the Malay Muslims. The first is the aspect of usage to see the adaptation level and technical changes in seeking religious knowledge. The second aspect is seeking information i.e. the reasons of them selecting and avoiding information. Lastly is the aspect of verification to see the methods used in verifying information or reasons not to verify information.

These behaviors are then compared against the respondents’ background – which are the common factor variables used in the information behavior research.

Previous studies indicate that the offline religious behavior continues to online behavior further confirmed by this research empirically. The continuity of general information behavior to specific religious behavior is also confirmed here empirically. Based on the one's background, we may also predict their information behavior either more traditional or critical. The steps that the Malays generally use to seek the religious information has been verified with statistical method and can be adapted as a new model for religious information seeking. The Malays, as claimed in many social researches as taking a conservative attitude towards religious life, is also shown empirically in this study for religious information seeking activity. The religious information behavior today can be improved by increasing the information skill of the Internet users through official and unofficial educational program with the purpose that they achieve the level of 'wisdom' in seeking, evaluating and interpreting their information.

As with the previous studies, this research also shows that technology strengthens one religious life individually and collectively. Through this research, we open the reality of religious phenomena and practice. But history shows that the society will always change due to external and internal factors. The current era witnesses more frequent changes than before. Because of the Internet as one of the major players, the Malaysian political landscape has changed. The 14th general election has witnessed the first change of a ruling political party in the history of the country's democracy. Will this change the religious behavior of the Malays generally, specifically their information religious behavior? An observation on the users' online behavior is one the fastest way to analyze this phenomena.

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