Affirmative Religious Response Culture to HIV and AIDS: Understanding the Public Relations Role of JAKIM in Curbing the Epidemic among Young Muslim Couples in Malaysia

Tham Jen Sern
Hasnah Zanuddin
jason87_tham@yahoo.co.uk
Department of Media Studies, University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract
In regards to containing the spread of the deadly disease namely HIV/AIDS, it is particularly troublesome that the culture of information sharing in terms of sexuality still remains as a private subject and taboo for discussion not only among the Muslim communities but among the Asian communities as well. Despite the fact that Islam is concerned in placing a high value on chaste behaviour, prohibiting sexual intercourse outside marriage and homosexuality, the HIV/AIDS infection will not suppress just because this strict Islamic doctrines are mostly adhered by fellow Muslims. While the HIV/AIDS scourge is disastrous in disregard of the religious, signaling a dire need to understand the role of religious response in curbing the disease so as to reach out to the target audiences effectively. This study is specifically to explore the responsibility of the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or the Malaysia Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) in respect to how they convey the accurate information to the Muslim communities in general and among the young Muslim couples in specific. Therefore, semi-structural elite interview with the officer was conducted in order to dwell into the plight of how the religious institution addresses the epidemic. On top of that, content analysis also being conducted in ascertaining the role of local print media on covering the HIV/AIDS-related news from an Islamic point of view.

Keywords: Islam, HIV/AIDS, JAKIM, information sharing, religious institution

Introduction
Speaking of the devastating disease in the world—Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)—is replete with sensitivities especially when it comes to religious perspectives. In many cases, HIV/AIDS is always attributed by the blames of immorality, dangerous lifestyle and illegal drug use (Maikh Badri, 1997; Dorothy Nelkin, 1991). In order to overcome those unhealthy behaviours, religion has been instrumental as means to teach and disseminate accurate information in terms of protection and rectifying discrimination and stigmatization towards HIV/AIDS and People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHV) to the populace. While the world gives an insight into the role played by a wide variety of religions in responsibly halting the deadly disease to its community per se, new challenges are eventually posed to the religions.

Over the span of 30 years since the first case of HIV/AIDS was identified in the United States in 1981 (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report [MMWR] 2001), the culture of information sharing in terms of sexuality still remains as a private subject and taboo for discussion not only among the conservative countries but among the Asian communities as well and has become particularly troublesome (Memoona Hasnain, 2005; Jenny Trinitapoli, 2009). Moreover, there are a few governments in the...