

# “This is Not a Hoax!”: A Thematic Analysis Investigating a Muslim Scholar’s Advice about Covid-19 Pandemic through Digital Storytelling

Rofiza Aboo Bakar<sup>1\*</sup>, Hanani Ahmad Zubir<sup>1</sup>, Farina Nozakiah Tazijan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Penang, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author: rofiza@uitm.edu.my

Accepted: 15 October 2021 | Published: 1 November 2021

**Abstract:** *In this era of globalization in which information is disseminated easy and fast, Muslim scholars who are proficient in English use digital storytelling, particularly on YouTube, to spread dakwah and advice about situational issues. Having millions of social media followers, they are regarded as very popular. However, previous studies failed to consider their advice on the pressing situational issue of the Covid-19 pandemic. This study, thus, is meant to give an analytical account of the advice given by a Muslim scholar, Mufti Menk, on the Covid-19 pandemic. The data source was his digital stories posted on YouTube about the issue. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) suggested that the overarching themes apparent from transcript analysis was that of ‘religious leaders giving the right advice’, ‘marrying Islamic knowledge with medical knowledge’ and ‘having conviction in Allah means taking the right precautions’. It is suggested that religious leaders whom people always look up to during times of crisis give the right advice that goes in line with medical knowledge to improve people’s calmness.*

**Keywords:** Mufti Menk, advice on the Covid-19 pandemic, digital storytelling, thematic analysis

## 1. Introduction

In this era of globalisation, English is rapidly becoming the world’s most commonly spoken language (Abdelgane, 2020). Also, this era has continuously witnessed the vast change of technology which have permitted individuals around the globe to enjoy the increased and speedy access to information through social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube (Shonhe & Jain, 2017). Speaking in articulate English coupled with disseminating dakwah (the call to Islam) and situational issues through social media have thus allowed many Muslim scholars to connect to millions of multicultural social media viewers around the world. It is observed that English-speaking Muslim scholars can have millions of subscribers for their YouTube videos, a form of digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling is defined as the use of digital media for individuals to share their simple stories in videos whose contents can either be textual, spoken and visual or the combination of all these elements (Lambert, 2010 – Digital Cookbook). Though digital storytelling has its specific approach, Amy Hill, the Director for Center for Digital Storytelling, in a personal communication with the first author, agrees that it can be modified and adapted and affirms that interpretations for digital storytelling are welcome (Bakar & Jaafar, 2017). In this paper,

digital storytelling means a short dakwah video which is featured on YouTube by a famous and prominent Muslim scholar.

Some famous and prominent Muslim scholars are Mufti Menk, Dr. Zakir Naik, Nouman Ali Khan, Omar Suleiman and others. All of these scholars are undoubtedly effective speakers as they are aware of global situational issues and demands. This can be seen from their latest social media postings that are mainly linked to the latest global news, such as the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19). The Covid-19 pandemic is by far the most severe situational concern that is plaguing the world now. As this paper was being written, cases of people being inflicted with the disease were amounting to 219 million, whereas the death tolls were marked at 4.55 million people, worldwide. The far-reaching effects continue to unfold internationally and have continuously caused millions to endure the loss of their loved ones and the loss of jobs besides experiencing a wide spectrum of psychological trauma.

The pandemic has caused a life-changing routine to almost everyone all over the world. People have to adapt and cope with the new norms. According to Khor et al. (2020), Malaysia was among the first countries to implement movement control order as a preventive measure taken by the government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the South-East Asia region. The movement control order has among others forced the temporary closing down of prayer centres, such as churches, temples and mosques, for any religious activities. Some quarters had positively accepted this but not some others. They even debated that the closing down of prayer centres would only bring people far away from God when they should have been closer to Him in pressing time such as this.

Religious scholars all over the world have a role to play in explaining to the believers what exactly should be done in this time of hardship. However, to our knowledge, there has been no study done to understand the advice on Covid-19 pandemic except of that by Omar Suleiman written by Bakar (2021). She found that the advice put forth by Omar Suleiman was that no one is different and everyone is equal, all worldly possessions are only transient, and submission to God in both good and bad times is needed more than ever.

Realising that such study is scarce, this article thus, focuses on unveiling another world famous Muslim scholar's advice, specifically that of Mufti Menk's, that was relayed to others irrespective of their religions and beliefs in coping with their distress. It sought to understand what guidance was provided to social media viewers about the Covid-19 issue.

Esmail ibn Tata Menk, also known as Mufti Menk, whose advice is studied in this article is one of the world most prominent Muslim scholars. He had been named as one of the 500 Most Influential Muslims in the world by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre of Jordan in 2013, 2014 and 2017. He holds a degree from the University of Madinah in Shariah and a Jurisprudence specialization from Darul Uloom Kantharia in Gujarat. Also, Mufti Menk holds a doctorate from the Aldersgate University in Social Guidance. Not just that, he is currently the Head of the Fatwa Department of the Council of Islamic Scholars of Zimbabwe.

Speaking impeccable English and relaying easily understood messages through digital stories posted on YouTube have allowed him to link to millions of social media viewers all over the world. Mufti Menk undoubtedly has many social media followers. To date, Mufti Menk has had 6.9 million Twitter followers, 4.1 million Facebook followers, and 2.7 million Instagram followers. Besides that, up to 1.58 million subscribers are on his official YouTube channel. This makes him by far the most popular Muslim scholar on social media and whose advice is

worth studying. His digital stories which focus on daily life affairs, struggle, stress, family relationship through the Islamic lens have attained the attention of some researchers like Anwaar (2018) and Shahbandari (2019).

Religious scholars all over the world have a role to play in explaining to the believers what exactly should be done in this time of hardship. It is believed that people all over the world are still contemplating in accepting and dealing with how to cope with Covid-19 pandemic, as there are also some conflicting ideas received from others especially whether or not Covid-19 is dangerous. It is pertinent that a world-famous Muslim scholars' advice, specifically that of Mufti Menk's, was relayed to others to help them cope with their distress. This advice can certainly be learned and used not only by lay people but also by other religious and general educators as well as counsellors to share these positive messages with others to evade negativity. Since there is a scarcity in such studies, this present study is called for. Thus, this study, employing a thematic analysis, sought to understand what guidance was provided to social media viewers about the Covid-19 issue.

## 2. Methodology

### Research Design

The method of analysis employed in this study was the thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). They describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data known as inductive analysis or bottom-up. It is argued as the most influential approach in social sciences (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The six-step framework includes: (1) Become familiar with the data; (2) Generate initial codes; (3) Search for themes; (4) Review themes; (5) Define themes; and (6) Write-up. However, the six-step framework was not linear and authors had to move back and forth among them since the data were complex.

### Materials

In this study, three Mufti Menk's digital stories on Covid-19 were selected. Bengtsson (2016) explains that in qualitative studies, data can commonly come from one to thirty documents and there are no established criteria; however, the sample size should be determined on the basis of informational needs so that the research question can be answered with sufficient confidence. Next, in qualitative analysis, there is no hard-and-fast rule to what amount of data needs to demonstrate proof of each specific theme for it to be considered a theme (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thus, the researchers took on that three digital stories from Mufti Menk should offer enough data to classify themes and conduct cross-case theme analysis. The digital stories chosen were the ones uploaded in March, 2020 during which most parts of the world were experiencing movement control order. Brief information about the selected digital stories is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Specifications of selected digital stories**

Title	Upload date, length & viewers	Description
Is Corona fake? Or a conspiracy? (ICF)	March 2020 2:53 minutes 439 000 viewers	To save lives is more important than finding out who started the virus.
Important advice on Coronavirus (IAC)	March 2020 4:40 minutes 219 000 viewers	To take every possible precaution so as not to be inflicted by the disease.
Take precautions in the Masjid (TPM)	March 2020 5:04 minutes 16 000 viewers	To not commit oneself into destruction.

### Procedures

Mufti Menk’s digital stories were treated as written communication. Therefore, they can be read, coded, re-read, and re-coded in order to search for themes (Kim, 2014). In this regard, themes were identified to detect important patterns across and within the four digital stories listed in Table 1. For the first step, these digital stories were watched several times by authors in order to be familiar with the data, and narratives of Mufti Menk were transcribed verbatim. Then, for the second step, initial or potential codes that were interesting to researchers were generated. The initial codes among others include: (1) “As a leader, you should never say those words (that Covid-19 is exaggerated)”; and (2) “But what I’m saying is it’s our duty as leaders to guide the people who look up to us to tell them listen from a religious perspective”. After having a list of initial codes, the third step was to reanalyse and sort the codes into candidate themes. The candidate themes among others include: (1) ‘Leaders cannot tell others that Covid-19 is exaggerated’; and (2) ‘Religious leaders should guide others’. The fourth step included the refinement of the candidate themes. An example of this is ‘Leaders are to guide others about Covid-19’. The fifth step was to define, combine and further refine the candidate themes or to identify the quintessence of what each theme was about. When no new themes could be identified, the data were considered saturated. The final step was to write the analysis in a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006; pg.23).

### 3. Results and Discussion

Three main themes emerged during the research and each of them is individually explained in this section. The main themes are: (a) religious leaders should give the right advice about Covid-19, (b) marrying religious knowledge with medical knowledge and (c) having full trust in Allah means taking the right precautions.

Prior to that, two examples of initial codes and candidate themes are presented to arrive at a big theme, i.e. ‘Religious leaders should give the right advice about Covid-19’. This is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Examples of coding**

Initial code	Candidate theme	Theme
“As a leader, you should never say those words (that Covid-19 is exaggerated).” (ICF)	Leaders cannot tell others that Covid-19 is exaggerated	Religious leaders should give the right advice about Covid-19
“But what I’m saying is it’s our duty as leaders to guide the people who look up to us to tell them listen from a religious perspective.” (TPM)	Religious leaders should guide others	

#### Religious leaders should give the right advice about Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has caught us by surprise and it is unprecedented in our living memory. Hundreds of thousands have passed on and many others are dying. Many probably do not feel strong and do not feel safe since this virus could strike us anywhere. During this imminent crisis, people, across faiths and beliefs, look up to religious leaders for guidance (Meza, 2020). Similarly, Mufti Menk asserted that, “... it’s our duty as leaders to guide the

people who look up to us,” although he said some may ruminate that “... there may be a conspiracy theory.” As religious leaders, he said, “... what is of importance for us is to save lives, to ensure that we don’t give the wrong advice.” Harping on Covid-19 as an exaggeration does not help since action must be taken by all to help curb this pandemic through any possible ways. Thus, religious leaders, according to Mufti Menk, should give the right advice about Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, UNICEF (2020) and faith groups had joined hands in providing a document that can help religious leaders tackle issues, such as misinformation, fear, rumours and hopelessness when their guidance is sought by others.

### **Marrying religious knowledge with medical knowledge**

Another theme that emerged from Mufti Menk’s digital stories was the urge to marry religious knowledge with medical knowledge. He strongly suggested that people with religious knowledge should clarify and make it clear to the public that religious knowledge, i.e. the understanding and practice of Islam as a way of life, complements with medical knowledge, i.e. the understanding of preventive measures needed to be taken to protect people from the COVID-19 pandemic. Both go hand in hand and nothing that the medical experts advocate is against Islam. He said, “The religious knowledge that they have needs to be translated in the light of what is happening on the ground and based on what the medical experts are telling. So if the experts are letting you know, and you know that it is a massive looming crisis, you better take heed.” He said this as an answer to people’s worry about mosques having had to be closed during the lockdown and that there would be no congregational prayers since public gathering was banned. Their concern was valid because congregational prayers are mandatory for every Muslim man who has no reason for not performing. Mufti Menk also understood that most who always prayed their obligatory in mosques would be extremely sad. He said, “... at the time that they did all the shutdowns, we were very very pained, hurt and we to this day are weeping.” However, those shutdowns were done as an act of saving all from destruction. If people were allowed to meet and mingle, there would be a probability that Covid-19 would be spread and people would be infected. He mentioned, “In fact, it would be prohibited knowing, prohibited knowing that you are unwell somehow, or knowing that you’re throwing yourself into destruction to actually come to a Masjid.” Islam is a comprehensive religion. Accepting and practising the precautions or advice given by the medical experts is not against Islam at all. Rather, this reflects the comprehensiveness in Islamic teaching which is in line with what Mufti Menk said, “... have the concern for humanity,” and “... care for everyone, not just yourself.”

### **Having full trust in Allah means taking the right precautions**

Most of the contents found in Mufti Menk’s digital stories touched on the precautions that must be taken by all in protecting each other from being inflicted by Covid-19. He said that we cannot “just sit and watch” but to “keep a little bit of a distance between each other when talking”, “put on masks”, “bring our own musolla sajadah when coming to the masjid, so that there is no contamination”, “wash up at home, use the toilet at home”, and “make sure we come in (the mosque) not shaking hands”. This advice is akin to the precautions listed by the World Health Organization (2020) for the public in protecting ourselves from Covid-19. However, Mufti Menk went a step further by reminding all that “it does not negate your iman (conviction in Allah) to be concerned and take precautions” because “if anything, conviction in Allah and laying full trust in Allah would only be true if we take every possible precaution. If you do not take the precautions, then you do not have trust in Allah”. What he said is understandable since there are Muslims who believe that their fate or divine predestination, known as qadar, is dependent on the will of Allah and, for that reason, they are unable to protect their health. For example, there are those who believe that if they are destined to die, then death be it. However, Mufti Menk, who embraces the opposite Islamic conception of qadar, believes that Muslims

must take every possible action and be proactive in protecting themselves from this pandemic. He cited a hadith which explains an analogy that “the bird comes out of its nest in the morning, and it struggles all day and it comes back with the food, which means that it goes out and makes the effort the whole day, and that’s where Allah wrote its sustenance somewhere and it went and it got it”. There is nothing wrong with being proactive and protective of one’s health because it is an obligation in the Islamic teaching.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this study, three themes emerged from Mufti Menk’s digital stories on Covid-19: (a) religious leaders should give the right advice about Covid-19, (b) marrying religious knowledge with medical knowledge and (c) having full trust in Allah means taking the right precautions.

Blending the three findings into one, it appears that the supreme discovery lies in religious or spiritual leaders, specifically Muslim scholars, providing the right advice to others about the Covid-19 pandemic. This recommendation is timely since this pandemic has resulted in countless people facing the terror of infection, the anxiety of lockdown, the loss of lives of their loved ones and the loss of jobs to name a few which are very impactful. People are desperate and traumatized, and normally they would turn to religious leaders whom they look up to for guidance. This echoes with previous research done by Meza (2020) and Fardin (2020) who report that religion can help people in times of crisis and sadness.

However, Muslim leaders must be mindful so as not to lead people to believe that having faith in Allah is enough and all they could, and not having to take preventive measures like closing down the mosques for obligatory and congregational prayers. This notion of conviction is very wrong. Similar to what this study has found, a true conviction teaches Muslims to employ the precautions to protect themselves along with keeping their trust in Allah (Ashraf, Faraz, Raihan & Kalra, 2020). Muslim leaders must understand that it is the Qur'an that highlights professional ethics, formal washing, such as ablution, and cleanliness which gives rise to the use of water in Islam, thus pointing towards preventive medicine (Hehmeyer & Khan, 2006).

A limitation of this study is that the results obtained only reveal the findings from three digital stories by Mufti Menk on Covid-19. Further research should investigate the advice given by other world famous Muslim scholars to provide more extensive, conclusive and on-going advice on this pressing issue.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not fake. It has led many of us to experience anxiety in various forms. However, religious leaders can play a role in easing the anxiety. With their right advice, the bleak outlook on life can inevitably be shed some light.

#### **References**

- Abdalgane, M. A. (2020). English language and globalization, *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 7(1), 5–11.
- Anwaar, A. (2020, November 26). Mufti Ismail Menk: A remarkable human being. Retrieved from <https://www.islamicfinder.org/news/mufti-ismail-menk-a-remarkable-human-being/>
- Bakar, R. A. & Jaafar, N. F. N. (2017). Developing reading comprehension through digital

- storytelling, 20(1), Gading Journal for the Social Sciences, 1-6.
- Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis, *Nursing Plus Open*, 2, 8-14.
- Bennett, J. (2017, March 22). 5 qualities of an effective speaker. Retrieved from <http://drjohnbennett.com/5-qualities-of-an-effective-speaker/>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Journal of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Fardin, M. A. (2020). Covid-19 epidemic and spirituality: A review of religion in times of crisis. *Jundishapur Journal of Chronic Disease Care*, 9(2), 1-4. doi: 10.5812/jjcdc.104260.
- Hehmeyer, I. & Khan, A. (2006). Islam's forgotten contributions to medical science, *Canada Medical Association Journal*, 176(10), 1467-1468. doi:10.1503/cmaj.061464
- Khor, V., Arunasalam, A., Azli, S., Asri, M., & Fahmi, O. (2020, July). Experience from Malaysia during the COVID-19 movement control order. Retrieved December 03, 2020, from [https://www.goldjournal.net/article/S0090-4295\(20\)30454-4/fulltext](https://www.goldjournal.net/article/S0090-4295(20)30454-4/fulltext)
- Kim, K. B. (2014). Narratives about the media, diet, and body image: A cross-cultural comparison between young female adults in the Midwestern United States and South Korea. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 43(4), 283–303. doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2014.952768
- Lambert, J. (2003). *Digital storytelling cookbook and travelling companion*. California: Digital Diner Press.
- Maguire, M. & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 8(3), 3351-3364
- Meza, D. (2020). In a pandemic are we more religious? Traditional practices of catholics and the COVID-19 in Southwestern Colombia. *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, 4, 218–234. doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00108-0
- Muslim Central. (2020, March 21). Important advice on coronavirus - Mufti Menk. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJAqDGf0-Fs>
- Muslim Central. (2020, March 21). Is Corona fake? or a conspiracy? - Mufti Menk. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVvi9zH5HOs>
- Muslim Central. (2020, March 23). Take precautions in masjid - Mufti Menk. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSNPpweVHyY>
- Ozalp, M. (2020, December 02). How coronavirus challenges Muslims' faith and changes their lives. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/how-coronavirus-challenges-muslims-faith-and-changes-their-lives-133925>
- Shahbandari, S. (2019, March 04). Why this Muslim scholar is followed by millions? Retrieved from <https://gulfnnews.com/uae/why-this-muslim-scholar-is-followed-by-millions-1.62432457>
- Shonhe, L., & Jain, P. (2017). Information dissemination in the 21st century: The use of mobile technologies. In N. Mnjama, & P. Jain (Ed.), *Information and Knowledge for Competitiveness* (pp. 425-447). Gaborone: Department of Library and Information Studies-University of Botswana.
- Unicef. (2020). Unicef and faith groups release new guidance on how to support communities in times of Covid-19: Guidance advises faith leaders and communities on how to practice faith safely, fight mis- information, and support children and vulnerable populations. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-faith-groups-release-new-guidance-how-support-communities-times-covid-19>
- World Health Organization. (2020). Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) advice for the public. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>