

# Social Media and Christian Identity in the Age of Internet

Brury Eko Saputra

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Aletheia,  
Lawang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia  
brury@sttaletheia.ac.id

**Abstract—** Recent advancements in the application of the social-scientific approach, especially the gossip theory in identifying the early Christian identity, have provided us tools for assessing modern Christian identity constructed by social media in the age of the internet. This article will first highlight some scholarly contributions of the gossip theory to the study of early Christian identity. Secondly, it will relate the previously highlighted studies with modern religious identity construction of which social media play an essential part. Finally, it will suggest that the way the early Christians responded to the gossip-constructed identity helps their modern counterparts to deal with the latter's situation. **Research Contribution:** This study aims to shed light on the modern Christian identity impacted by social media using the gossip studies done to observe the gossip-constructed identity of the early Christian. It also suggests that contemporary Christians will be prepared with the necessary tools at their disposal to respond to their situations.

**Keywords**—*early christian identity; modern christian identity; the gossip theory; the age of internet; social media*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The study of Christian identities is an important and exciting area to explore. Recently, Lovemore Togarasei has stated that there are already growing interests in studying Christian identities [1]. However, those studies mainly focus on the genealogical element of the identity, and “little attention has been paid to the role of modern media appropriation in Christian identity formation” [1]. While agreeing with Togarasei that scholars should pay more attention to the modern media and its impact on Christian identity, this study argues that it can be done not in isolation but in conjunction with the studies focusing on the genealogical element. To loosely allude to Freiberger’s proposal on the Comparative Method in Religion, one way of achieving that goal is by illuminating the modern religious identity constructed by the media with genealogical studies [2]. Therefore, this study attempts to provide some insights from the Gossip Studies of early Christian identity to shed some light on the contemporary Christian identity impacted by social media.

## II. METHOD

The working methodology of this study is the qualitative research method in the field of religious studies. Therefore, its task is primarily descriptive. In addition, the approach chosen as a framework is a model from the social-scientific approach, namely the Gossip Theory. Therefore, this study will first describe the recent advancements in the gossip studies of early Christian identity. Secondly, it will propose some points of contact between the gossip as an identity construction tool with social media having similar functions. Finally, it will attempt to provide some suggestions to deal with social media constructed identity.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Gossip Studies of the Early Christian Identity

The application of the Gossip Theory in the study of the New Testament is not a new feat. As early as the 90s, Pieter Botha has already used the Theory in his analysis of Paul and his communities [3]. He believes that Paul was often a subject of gossip in his ministry (pp. 269-79). That is why Paul was often in conflict with the communities he served. According to Botha, one “important function of gossip is to clarify group membership,” and “those who push the boundaries of acceptable behavior and ‘identity’ too far are quickly penalized by the gossip network” (p. 284). That was what happened to Paul; his identity was questioned because of the circulating gossip about him.

Recently, in his 2012 article, Daniels, Jr. has briefly summarized the use of gossip theory in New Testament Studies [4]. One of his findings concerning this study is that gossip in the New Testament often functions as an identity, both personal and social, construction tool (pp. 209-11). Similarly, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow argues that gossip was not always perceived as something negative. Instead, it could also function as religious storytelling, a religious platform for establishing identity [5]. She concludes her research by stating that “...in short, the gospel almost looks like gossip” (p. 16) to stress the importance of gossip in constructing early Christian identity. Such a conclusion is in line with Rohrbaugh’s works

highlighting the existence of gossip reports [6]. In addition, despite being used to the idea that gossip appears exclusively in oral form, as seen in Kartzow's research, Daniels, Jr. has convincingly demonstrated that it can also occur in the literal form [7]. As an instance, Paul deliberately wrote epistolary gossip as a platform for communicating his version of Peter's identity [7].

Stressing the ancient oral culture in which the early Christian belongs, Ernest van Eck argues that gossip does not necessarily have negative connotations, such as "a malicious activity that should be avoided" [8]. A positive attitude towards gossip can also be found in a work published by Donald Capps [9]. Van Eck states that he aims at adding Rohrbaugh's three texts about gossip [6] with "texts which have as content the result of gossip" (p. 4). In reading in Luke 14:18–20 in light of the Gossip Theory, he sees the excuses in the passage resulting from gossip operating in the Mediterranean culture (pp. 7-8). In connection with identity construction, Van Eck's study highlights the importance of the Honor and Shame culture of the first century Mediterranea in which the gossip circulates. Those who conform to the circulating gossip become honorable and vice versa.

In his 2017 research, Daniels, Jr. presents the data that gossip in the gospel of John has a particular social function in constructing the identity of Jesus [10]. To support his claim, Daniels, Jr. provides three kinds of gossip that concern with Jesus' identity: gossip among the first followers (John 1:19-51), Gossip within and without Israel (John 2:1-4:54), and Gossip at the Feasts of the Jews (John 5:1-10:42) (pp. 14-21). In the end, he concludes, "the generative font for gossip in John are Jesus' words and deeds to which outsiders, and sometimes insiders, react in an effort to make sense of the instability brought on by Jesus" (p. 21). This conclusion is in line with his more extensive work on gossip function in the gospel of John to construct Jesus' identity as a shaman [11]. Correspondently, the work of Philip Esler on the role of gossip in constituting the identity of Ruth before Boaz has also affirmed Daniel, Jr.'s findings [12].

One more important work on gossip and early Christian identity construction is a monograph published by Marianne Bjelland Kartzow in 2009 [13]. In her monograph, entitled *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*, Kartzow argues that gossip often refers to the inferiority of women in the Pastoral Epistles (pp. 133-75). In other words, it is used as a stereotypical reference to the women's status in the congregation. This train of thought can also be found in the recent article, "And the word became . . . gossip?", by Angela N. Parker [14]. Moreover, it is also evident that gossip can be used to degrade men in the community by feminizing them with accusations (pp. 177-201). One final remark worth noting is that gossip can destabilize potential in the community (pp. 206-8). In this case, it is the potential of women in the community. What's important about Kartzow's finding is that she underscores the existence of power struggle in which the gossip presents.

### B. Gossip, Social Media, and Christian Identity

The brief survey above shows that gossip permeates the social networks of the early Christian. The presence of gossip plays a significant role in establishing early Christian identity. However, it should be noted by now that gossip can function positively or negatively in constructing identity. Moreover, it is even true when power is in play. One last point, gossip also serves as a platform for people in the first-century Mediterranean culture to construct their personal and social identities.

The gossip functions mentioned above have some similarities with social media in the age of the internet. In the following, this study will present some studies done showing the impact of social media in constructing religious identity [15]. The first similarity is social media provides a platform to construct identity. For example, Shanny Luft, in his work entitled *Hardcore Christian Gamers*, shows online media such as the website "Hardcore Christian Gamer" becomes a platform for Christian gamers to formulate their hybrid identities [16]. In that online media, the gamers play games and express their Christian faith by sharing their lives at the same time. Similarly, Torger A. Olsen contends that online media can be used as a medium for expressing Christian identity formation [17]. In his experiment, Olsen creates online media to help the Sami tribe express the contemporary formation of the Sami identity in conjunction with the Christian education program. In her recent study, Anna Neumaier has concluded that social media can become an online community that shapes Christian identity [18].

The second resemblance between gossip and social media is their presence in society, and they literally permeate every aspect of human lives. Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman show that the internet provides us with networks to interact with others. This interaction is what makes identity construction possible [19]. Expectedly, the interaction is even higher in Young People [20]. The striking similarity worth noting here is that both gossip and social media (and the internet) provide resources and restrictions at the same time. Resources refer to the possible networks provided by gossip and the internet for interactions. There are countless possible networks. However, the restrictions are also valid for both. Both gossip and the internet are still subject to power-play in society. For example, women experience second-class treatment rather than men in identity construction (cf. pp. 125-6).

More available studies can be presented; however, it does not seem necessary for our purposes here. The presented studies have shown that gossip and social media function similarly in constructing identity. Therefore, this study suggests drawing some insights from gossip studies to illuminate modern Christians experiencing social media today.

### C. Insights from the Gossip Studies

Daniels, Jr. has carefully shown that Greco-Roman, Israelite, and the New Testament's appraisals of gossip are

mainly negative (pp. 207-9) [4]. But it is important to remember that gossip itself is not necessarily negative. Instead, it can serve as a platform of religious identity construction, and it permeates every aspect of life. Therefore, this section will try to draw some insights from the gossip studies of early Christian identity for modern Christians facing the intensive use of social media in the internet age.

The first insight comes from Daniels, Jr.'s study on the function of gossip in the gospel of John in constructing the identity of Jesus [10]. At the end of his article, Daniels, Jr. refers to important work on social identity by Philip Esler, saying that "a considerable portion of an individual's self-concept emerges from being categorized by one's group – one learns who one is from one's group" (p. 24). Daniel, Jr.'s observation has rightly captured the identity-making process of gossip in the first-century Mediterranean culture. However, his observation is also applicable to the identity-making process by social media in the age of the internet. One's identity is being reconstructed in the social networks available to everyone and every community. As previously noted, both gossip and social media are capable of being platforms for social interactions. So, it is always prudent to choose or even to create what kind of community in social media we are going to participate in; it is not only a platform but a platform to construct our social identity.

The second insight has something to do with a suggestion to carefully observe the social functions of social media in our society. According to Rohrbaugh, there are four functions of gossip: "clarification and enforcement of group values; group formation and boundary maintenance; moral assessment of individuals; leadership identification and competition" (pp. 138-44) [21]. Those four functions are also present in identity construction by social media. Interaction in social media forces one to clarify his own and his group's values. It is evident from the studies of Luft, Torjer, and Neumaier presented above. Group boundary maintenance function in social media often connects with the moral assessment of individuals involved in social interactions. Andrea Rota's recent research supports this conjecture by showing boundary maintenance can be achieved primarily by the joint commitment of its members, which includes the moral assessment of the members [22]. The last function, about leadership and competition, has become more apparent in the last couple of years, in which social media is used in business marketing and politics.

The third insight comes from the fact that both gossip and social media are not neutral for establishing one's and group's identity. On the contrary, there is always power in play, as shown by Kartzow, Lövheim, and Linderman above. So, it is always important to note that although one can express his/herself freely in social media, it does not mean he/she is constructing her ideal identity. This fact pushes us to look at reality differently. This study suggests integrating postcolonial and feminist studies in scrutinizing our social media

interactions. The applications of such studies in gossip analysis have been proven fruitful [13].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that both gossip and social media have functions to construct identity. While studies about social media and modern Christian identity construction are still scarce, the advancements of gossip studies of early Christian identity can illuminate the former. This study suggests that studies about social media and modern Christian identity should pay attention to the social identity theory, the social functions of gossip/social media, and the need for postcolonial and feminist studies in scrutinizing power-play in social interactions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Aletheia (Aletheia Theological Seminary) for the support given to conduct this research through its research unit (Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] L. Togarasei, "Christian Identity in the Context of New Media Technologies: Ecclesiological Reflections from An African Perspective," in *New Media and the Mediatisation of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.
- [2] O. Freiberger, "Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion," *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 1–14, Jan. 2018, doi: 10.3390/REL9020038.
- [3] P. J. J. Botha, "Paul and gossip: a social mechanism in early Christian communities," *Neotestamentica*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 267–88, 1998.
- [4] J. W. D. Jr., "Gossip in the New Testament," *Biblic. Theol. Bull.*, 2012, doi: 10.1177/0146107912461876.
- [5] M. B. Kartzow, "Resurrection as Gossip: Representations of Women in Resurrection Stories of the Gospels," *Lectio Difficilior*, vol. 1–28, 2010.
- [6] R. L. Rohrbaugh, "Gossip in the New Testament," in *Gossip in the New Testament*, in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible: Essays by the Context Group in Honor of Bruce J. Malina*, J. J. Pilch, Ed. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
- [7] J. W. D. Jr., "Engendering Gossip in Galatians 2:11–14: The Social Dynamics of Honor, Shame, Performance, and Gossip," *Biblic. Theol. Bull.*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 171–9, 2017, doi: 10.1177/0146107917715589.
- [8] E. van Eck, "Invitations and excuses that are not invitations and excuses: Gossip in Luke 14:18–20," *HTS Teol. Stud.*, vol. 68, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 2012, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1243.
- [9] D. Capps, "Gossip, Humor, and the Art of Becoming an Intimate of Jesus," *J Reli. Heal.*, vol. 51, pp. 99–117, 2012, doi: 10.1007/s10943-010-9382-3.
- [10] J. W. D. Jr., "Gossip in John's Gospel and the Social Processing of Jesus' Identity," *J. Early Christ. Hist.*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 9–29, 2011, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2011.11877242.
- [11] J. John W. Daniels, *Gossiping Jesus: The Oral Processing of Jesus in John's Gospel*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2013.

- [12] P. F. Esler, “All that you have done . . . has been fully told to me’: The power of gossip and the story of Ruth,” *J. Biblic. Lit.*, vol. 137, no. 3, pp. 645–66, 2018, doi: 10.15699/jbl.1373.2018.348544.
- [13] M. B. Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.
- [14] A. N. Parker, “And the word became . . . gossip?” Unhinging the Samaritan woman in the age of #MeToo,” *Rev. Expo.*, vol. 117, no. 2, pp. 259–71, 2020, doi: 10.1177/0034637320928113.
- [15] M. Lövheim, “Identity,” in *Digital Religion Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, H. A. Campbell, Ed. London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 41–56.
- [16] S. Luft, “Hardcore Christian Gamers: How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play,” in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, R. A. Brookey and D. J. Gunke, Eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 154–69.
- [17] T. A. Olsen, “From Nature to iNature: Articulating a Sami Christian Identity Online,” *Nordlit*, vol. 30, pp. 157–70, 2012.
- [18] A. Neumaier, “Christian Online Communities: Insights from Qualitative and Quantitative Data,” *Dyn. Relig. Media, community*, vol. 14, pp. 20–40, 2019.
- [19] M. Lövheim and A. G. Linderman, “Constructing religious identity on the Internet,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, M. T. Højsgaard and M. Warburg, Eds. London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 121–37.
- [20] M. Lövheim, “Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, L. L. Dawson and D. E. Cowan, Eds. London: Routledge.
- [21] R. L. Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Eugene: Cascade, 2007.
- [22] A. Rota, “Religion, Media, and Joint Commitment Jehovah’s Witnesses as a ‘Plural Subject,’” *Dyn. Relig. Media, Community Relig. Media, Jt. Commit. Jehovah’s Witn. as a ‘Plural Subj. Andrea Rota Abstr. Draw. Ex. Jehovah’s Witn. this Contrib. I will Explor. role media*, vol. 14, 2019.