Aligning the Concept of Digital Philanthropy with Islamic Ethics of Technology

Ulfah Mansurah, Z. (Corresponding Author)*
Tel:03-55442365 Email:ulfah@uitm.edu.my

Aishah, A.*
Tel:03-55442365 Email:aishah@uitm.edu.my

Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40540 Shah Alam, Selangor

Abstract

Philanthropy is a universal concept that exists far beyond time, but has since evolved due to technological advancement. The development of technology has changed the social behaviour and interactions between people, and consequently, so too has the concept of philanthropy and the way it now operates changed. The opportunity to reach and commit to philanthropy is made much possible by adapting the digital technology to ease the process. This paper seeks to examine the concept of digital philanthropy and the idea of Islamic ethics of technology, and to analyze the extent to which existing digital philanthropy conforms with Islamic ethics of technology to ensure that both are aligned. This paper employs qualitative methods through library-based research of relevant literature comprising of books, article journals, guidelines, and others. The study uses content analysis to derived facts from the relevant literature related to the topic. Based on the findings, the concept of digital philanthropy can be widened in its application so as not to confined it only to monetary aspects. The idea of philanthropy from the Islamic perspective encompasses more than financial issues. The practice of digital philanthropy should be in line with the principles of Islamic ethics of technology to achieve the objectives of the Shariah in promoting good and avoiding harm and evil.

Keywords: Digital Philanthropy, Islamic ethics of technology

Introduction

The practice of philanthropy has changed with the evolution of time due to the rapid development of technology. The modern tradition of philanthropy is no longer confined to traditional or conventional methods but has evolved with innovation and creativity in adopting the practice of philanthropy through technology. In some jurisdictions, technology is the key to a strategic plan of philanthropy even though some populations are absent from access to technology (Anheier et al., 2007).

Technological usage, particularly in terms of internet connection, has increased since the millennium year of 2000, resulting in philanthropy activities able to be held domestically and globally. The technological innovation makes it possible for philanthropy organization to set up digital platforms. Technological change transforms the digitalization of money circulation and results in a diverse mode of linkage and interconnection (Gajala, 2017).

The rise of digital technology across the world makes it easier for people to donate through a digital platform. In China, for instance, online fundraising is engaged through innovations by
Alibaba and Tencent. Participation in online fundraising and total fund donation value in China has rapidly increased over the past five years (Yin et al., 2018).

Philanthropy innovation like mobile applications has been developed, such as ShareTheMeal application launched by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to prevent global hunger, especially in crisis countries. The short messaging system (SMS) started by the American Red Cross has also managed to raise donations due to natural disasters (Jan, 2017).

Indonesia established Aksi Cepat Tanggap (ACT) in 2005. It is one of the largest humanitarian organization in Indonesia that focuses on social works and humanitarian relief. This organization practices digital philanthropy in four ways, namely web 2.0 facilities, social media, online shopping sites, and messenger applications (Nurdiyanti & Suryadi, 2019). In India, spiritually based organization enabled their function to diversify with the application of technology as a vital role to achieve the organization’s objectives, including philanthropy (Meena et al., 2020).

In the Malaysian context, online cash waqf is a digital method to contribute to online banking. Online cash waqf can improve the collection of waqf, motivate internet banking users to obtain a religious reward, and improve the bank’s investment by generating more funds. (Amin et al., 2014). Besides that, (Yusof et al., 2014) proposed the concept of e-philanthropy to materialize cash waqf and infaq with maximum participation of people. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has escalated digital application for donation and contribution, especially in assisting the Ministry of Health of Malaysia. The movement control order had made it impossible for donations through the conventional way that digital platform was the central platform for collecting donation and fundraising from the public.

The discussion on digital philanthropy existed in previous literature. However, the usage of terminology might differ according to the respective authors. Most previous research focuses on the operation of the digital philanthropy itself without any relation or discussion from the ethics point of view, especially from the Islamic perspective. Even though studies on philanthropy and ethics are previously present, the focus is more on the traditional and conventional application that does not suit with the modus operandi of digital philanthropy. Thus, this research seeks to explore the concept of digital philanthropy, the concept of Islamic ethics of technology and the interrelation of both concepts.

The methodology of this research is through qualitative research involving resources from books, journals, and articles from the relevant online databases for social sciences. The qualitative study seeks to use descriptive, explanatory and critical methods. The descriptive method refers to the ascertainment of state of affairs in respect of a subject matter. In contrast, the explanatory method extends beyond the descriptive method in explaining a particular phenomenon. On the other hand, the critical method refers to the examination and evaluation of a subject matter to draw an inference. The research employs content analysis to derive facts from relevant literature and documents related to the subject matter.

To achieve the objectives of this research, it will first start with the description of the concept of digital philanthropy, which is of utmost importance to comprehend the subject matter. The phenomenon of digital philanthropy is explained through an explanatory method in understanding the process of digital philanthropy. The discussion is followed on the description of the Islamic ethics of technology. Finally, the concept of digital philanthropy will be analyzed from the Islamic ethics of technology perspective, together with the possible issues and challenges to ensure the alignment of both concepts.

**The Concept of Digital Philanthropy**

In understanding the concept of digital
philanthropy, it is pertinent to comprehend the literal and conceptual meaning of the terminology. It is important to note that elaboration on the essence of the concept is not confined to the wording of the terminology itself. The reason is that other terminologies connote a similar substance of explanation. Thus, the essence of the elaboration is of vital focus.

The concept of digital philanthropy is also known as e-philanthropy. Digital philanthropy is an efficient establishment of internet-based methods implemented to ensure the success of philanthropy organizations. The internet-based techniques will be able to enhance the relationship with the interested stakeholders involved. Furthermore, the internet plays a role in building a relationship with supporters of philanthropy. The contribution may be in the form of monetary, tangible assets, purchase of products and services beneficial for the philanthropy institutions to include electronic services and data to support the philanthropic activities (Hart, 2007).

The practice of philanthropy has gone through a series of evolution with certain inherent criteria in every stage illustrated below:

![Operating System of Philanthropy (Kuziibo, 2015)]

Based on the above, the application of technology in philanthropy started in the second phase of philanthropy 2.0 in which Morozov (2009) described as a stage of intimate connection in the practice of philanthropy as compared to philanthropy 1.0. Philanthropy 1.0 is the traditional method that presumes that the contribution is impactful to the receiver. However, according to Ricigliano (2018), the emergence of technology started only in the stage of philanthropy 3.0. Despite the difference of opinion on the timeline in the existence of a technology role in philanthropy, it was significant in widening the population segment of philanthropy. Some philanthropy institutions are presently involved in philanthropy 4.0 by adopting a more sophisticated approach. Philanthropy 4.0 emphasis on producing social good for a better eco-system instead depending on solution per se.

Digital philanthropy is commonly associated with the involvement of “cash” or “monetary” (Sullivan, 2018) basis that one tends to ignore the fact that the concept of philanthropy either digital or online is very broad and extensive. It is vital to note that the concept of digital philanthropy involves other types of activities that come under the boundaries of digital philanthropy.

Nurdiyanti & Suryadi (2020) elaborated on the concept of digital voluntarism. According to them, there was an increase in volunteerism and humanitarian involvement through a digital platform. Besides that, Gökaliyer & Sauçüncü (2019) discussed the role of celebrities in digital activism in which technology is a tool used in the new era of activism. The celebrities use their digital platform to either spread awareness or fundraising activities for a good cause. On the other hand, Stanford University Libraries has undertaken the initiative to make some rare and unique collections to be accessed online for the benefits of the community (Sweetkind-Singer, 2013). This philanthropic activity involves donors who are not able to make their collections accessible and collaborates with the university.

It is crucial to note that the concept of digital philanthropy is not confined and limited to the activities involving the collection or donation based-crowdfunding based on a cash or monetary basis but extends to the contribution of research ideas for innovation. (Özdemir et al., 2015). As clearly pointed out by Othman (2017), Islam does not only encourages and supports philanthropy in monetary contribution only but also includes any good deeds for the pleasure of Allah SWT. Philanthropy encompasses all the functional activities that are beneficial to others for the pleasure of Allah. Thus, good deeds are made possible through the usage of a digital platform, either in an
individual or organizational capacity. Therefore, the notion of digital philanthropy should be looked at and practised more extensively as to promulgate that everyone has a potential or a role to exercise digital philanthropy most efficiently based on one’s affordability.

The Concept of Islamic Ethics of Technology

Islam enforces Tawhid as the fundamental doctrine that functions as the framework of the Muslims’ worldview. Despite the technological advancement achieved by secular western science, Muslims should persistently uphold Tawhid as the principle that guides them towards enjoying the fruits of technology or contribute to the further development of technology. Among the concerns that must be addressed is our ethics of utilizing technology to fulfill our interests as the moral consequences of technology might either comply with the teachings of Islam or serve against it (Bakar, 2008).

“Ethics” is a term that originated from the Greek word “ethos”, which means character. Meanwhile, morality is from the Latin word “mores”, which translates to character or custom and habit (Becker & Becker, 2001). According to the Online Cambridge Dictionary, ethics is defined as “the study of what is morally right and wrong, or a set of beliefs about what is morally right and wrong” (ETHICS | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.). Both terms, ethics, and morality, are usually used interchangeably. Nonetheless, some people adopt those words with different meanings, in which the word ethics is used to refer to the theory of right and wrong, whereby the word morality is used to refer to practical moral problems (Barrow, 2007). Albeit the different connotations, both words lead to the discourse of virtues and vices that forms the principle of morality to guide one’s practical ethical behaviour.

The principle of ethics, according to the Islamic tradition, can be discussed by referring to the revealed sources; the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition. The Qur’an made a clear distinction between virtues or salihat, from vices or sayyi’at by stating the consequences of each action. One’s good actions will be rewarded, while evil actions will receive punishment from the wrath of Allah (Al-Aidaros et al., 2013). The provided set of rules from the revealed sources are to form a Muslim’s righteous akhlajq, which refers to moral philosophy, and to formulate a Muslim’s virtuous adab, which refers to the application of moral philosophy (Hashi, 2011). The discourse of Islamic ethics develops endless discussions to address arising contemporary issues that require meticulous interpretations of the revealed sources and fair judgment of the Islamic ethical rules.

The ethical teachings of Islam pursue primary objectives, which are to fulfill human interest or jalb al-maslahah and to avoid corruption or dar al-mafsadah (Hashi, 2011). To seek resolutions to the challenges of modern technology from the Islamic perspective, one should refer to the objectives of Shariah to guide him to utilize any form of technological advancement responsibly. The Muslim jurists have derived five objectives of the legislation of Islamic laws, which are to preserve five things; religion, life, intellect, wealth, and lineage, either to serve the interest of an individual or for the community.

Technological advancement reflects contemporary modern culture. The creation of technology is to cater to the needs of human beings to seek efficiency to the extent that it subtly deviates oneself from observing the ethical aspect of using technology. The implication of pursuing technological development does not only limited to mechanistic measures, instead, but it also alters an individual’s worldview, his understanding of the reality, and his perception of selfhood. Subsequently, this leads to a significant discussion of rules and regulations of using technology. Islam came forth to provide a solution to this crisis by highlighting the ethical point of view to address technological advancements (Raquib, 2015).

Islamic ethics of technology address this crisis by providing an ethical framework to ensure technology does not derive one from his rights,
and to prevent oneself from overriding others’ rights, for instance, one’s right to health, safety, and privacy. The repercussions of technology would also include altering socio-cultural and intellectual environment, which ultimately will reorientate the ethical and spiritual foundation of a Muslim. The Islamic ethical framework of technology abides by the Maqasid approach of protecting five rights, including the protection of religion, life, intellect, wealth, and lineage. Allah has reminded us to beware of the consequences of our desires that might mislead or corrupt us, as we are merely human beings with limited knowledge. The Qur’an stated that “But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you, and perhaps you love a thing, and it is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not.” (Qur’an, 2:255). Hence, it is our responsibility to utilize technology with guidance from the Qur’an and Hadith in accordance with the objectives of Shariah. The Islamic ethics of technology aspires to restore the ethical and spiritual element in modern technology (Raquib, 2015).

Aligning Digital Philanthropy with Islamic Ethics of Technology

The notion of aligning digital philanthropy with Islamic ethics of technology is to respond to the prevalent practice of digital philanthropy. As mentioned by Raquib (2016), engagement of religion with modern technology is necessary to ensure that the principles in line with Shariah guide the practice. Besides, it is much more important to stress on digital philanthropy to be following Islamic ethics of technology due to its nobility features.

The technology is a creation of humankind does not pose the ‘mind’ as a normal human being. The technology could never be independent in its operation that ‘human touch’ is still necessary to ensure the order of process. Human touch refers to the wisdom of humankind, which is needed to operate together with the digital or technological platform to include digital philanthropy.

The relation between philanthropy and ethics has been discussed even before the emergence of digital philanthropy. Specific concerns on ethics and accountability were raised, particularly in terms of the governing regime for philanthropy and the possibility of impropriety of operation (Raymond, 2004). Corruption and abusive use of donation money was another ethical issue which warrants the ‘good practice’ of philanthropy to curb ethical impropriety (Zhang & Santos, 2019). The legal system governing philanthropy activities has also existed in certain jurisdictions. The author thought that the legal system acts as a mechanism to mitigate the risk of fraud and abuse (Sidell & Zaman, 2004). Uniform statute on the charitable organization is present and available in specific jurisdiction while the law and regulation are scattered in other jurisdiction (Ali & Hassan, 2017).

Furthermore, a high-level security system is established to protect the confidential personal data of the donors and those involved to maintain integrity. The practice is following the e-philanthropy code of ethics (NetworkForGood, 2008). This code aims to implement a high ethical standard to maintain the trust of the people involved. Morozov (2009) has raised some concerns with regards to digital philanthropy. He pointed out that one of the challenges is to convert online enthusiasm into tangible action or in other words, to make the online enthusiasm to happen in reality. The digital platform and technology are only how the outcome of the philanthropy itself is to materialize and achieved in the “real” world. The concerns between philanthropy and ethics are in line with the spirit of Islamic principles which view corruption and trust violation as against the divine revelation of the Qur’an and Hadith. Corruption will inflict negative consequences in the absence of balance practice based on justice (Alazzabi et al., 2020).

In relating digital philanthropy with Islamic ethics of technology, the Islamic guideline of utilizing technology should preserve these five elements as mentioned above by either strengthening them or by preventing harm that might be inflicted upon them and to maintain the attainment of the best interest (El-Mesawi, 2006). The principles of Islamic ethics have been
laid out in Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, further application of these principles in the light of maximizing the use of technology needs to be established.

Pursuing the preservation of religion implies the obligation to protect the faith of every Muslim. Muslims are to abstain from any elements that might corrupt their faith or the community’s faith as a whole. Practically, protecting religious beliefs suggests the responsibility to uphold Islamic education, which serves as one of the initiatives to strengthen the Muslims’ faith (El-Mesawi, 2006). Islam acknowledges science and technology as part and parcel of daily necessity that helps to ease humans affairs. Science plays its role as a tool that enables human attaining the right knowledge and paved the path towards the comprehension of the ultimate truth. Hence, the Tawhidian consciousness of a Muslim plays the role to guide oneself to distinguish between the use of technology to fulfil one’s purpose as the servant of Allah, from the use of technology for the sake of pursuing self-interest as promoted by the modern Western culture (Bakar, 2008). The misconduct of contemporary technology may lead to the corruption of faith if it stirs a desire for consumerism that will cause existential crisis and discontentment. Consequently, this will affect the corruption of life, intellect, and wealth simultaneously (Raquib, 2015).

Conclusion

Theoretically, it is affirmative in aligning the concept of digital philanthropy with the Islamic ethics of technology. However, aligning the concept of digital philanthropy with Islamic ethics of technology in the practical aspect is dependant on the actual operation of the digital philanthropy itself. The practice of digital philanthropy is to be evaluated based on the real substance of operation. Thus, it still poses a question on its actual application as to its conformity with Islamic ethics of technology. The nobility and good intention of philanthropy should be protected and preserved to ensure that it is not tainted with elements that are against the principles of Shariah. It is pertinent as to ensure the continuity of promoting the best interest and avoiding harm which the Shariah seeks to achieve. The practice of digital philanthropy poses some challenges to be aligned with the Islamic ethics of technology subject to monitoring and good governance of operation.

References


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