Digital British Islam: How do Cyber Islamic Environments impact everyday life?

Summary Report

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1. Introduction

Between 2022-2025, the DBI project used a range of research methods[1] to study the everyday digital lives and experiences of Muslims in the UK. Our findings shed light on trends, concerns and aspirations regarding the place of the digital in everyday Muslim lives, as expressed by those who participated in the research. Our research focused on Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs) which comprise different kinds of digital spaces and platforms with a variety of purposes – commercial, religious, social or otherwise. Such platforms have become increasingly important for everyday Muslim life and for Muslim interactions with wider society.

We provide here a concise summary of findings under three key themes – political agency, religious authority and gender – and conclude with a focus on the UK context.

2. Political Agency

Digital platforms, which facilitate networking across geographies, are important tools for Muslim activism on topics including Islamophobia and encouraging voter registration. Participants experienced online networking spaces as 'double edged': on one hand, they present fluid and dynamic spaces for activism, allowing efficient communication and a free-flow of ideas. On the other hand, the unregulated nature of many spaces gives free rein to hate speech and what have been described as hostile 'pile-ons' or 'cancellation'.

Men and women both cited that they habitually self-censor in their online interactions. For male participants, this was often attributed to concerns around surveillance or 'doxxing'. Female participants additionally cited fears around safety if they shared controversial opinions.

> Only 17% of Muslims feel entirely free to express their views on conflict around the world online compared to 27% in the national sample.

> How can the political agency of British Muslims be harnessed to create trusted online spaces for positive exchange? CIEs can become spaces of reciprocity where policy makers understand Muslim needs and where Muslims encourage active citizenship. **Policy makers must work with communities to enable such spaces of trust.**

3. Religious Authority

Social media has proved to be a democratising force. Our participants appreciate the direct communication with influential and religious authority figures that digital media allow. They also express cynicism about how easy social media has made it for 'self-styled' figures of authority to emerge: 'all you need is a camera and a thobe'.

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[1] These included 10 focus groups across the UK and online, an archive of British Muslim websites, an online survey of 2000 people, 20 interviews with Muslim organisations and influencers, and 15 participant diaries.

Traditionally if you said a scholar was legitimate [it was] because they've got *ijaza* [religious qualification] and they've trained under somebody. [Nowadays and online] that seems to be slightly overshadowed by how slick the production is.
Abdul Azim Ahmed, Secretary General, Muslim Council of Wales

Norms of Islamic authority have completely changed. Muslim leaders in digital and analogue contexts have different spheres of influence that should be carefully considered. Muslim actors must continue to work together to reflect on what these changes mean for their leadership. **Policy makers must consider who they work with as a 'Muslim leader' and not rely solely on digital presentations of individuals and organisations.**

4. Gender

Women report experiencing improved access to religious discourse and programming via digital platforms. Digital platforms have also facilitated a foregrounding of Muslim female scholarship and expertise. As one participant noted:

I think this culture of women being *that* authority figure online is changing the discussion on what women can and can't do, because for a long time [...] the discussion was very one-sided, it wasn't as relatable for women.
Focus Group Participant, female, 20s, Cardiff

However, topical debates around gender roles, including Muslim iterations of the 'manosphere', 'alt-right' and their intersection with identity has occupied Muslim online discussions. There are concerns about an entrenchment of polarised perspectives as culture wars pervade Muslim discourse spaces just as much as they do any other social group.

Among Muslims, females are more likely to strongly disagree with the statement that they are willing to share views online (32.8%) compared to males (23.7%)

CIEs are often spaces where Muslim women can more freely assert their views and leadership. However, polarised debates on gender persist. Can Muslim women's digital visibility be harnessed to enhance their social, political and economic impact? **Policy makers and community groups must raise their own digital literacy to address enduring gender inequalities and digital safety.**

5. The UK Context

Individuals we interviewed from British Muslim organisations highlighted the challenges of communicating with a geographically-dispersed Muslim community in the UK and the advantages of that digital media in facilitating this:

Our biggest challenge is how do we really be visible [...] in a world that's more digital and which is spread all over the UK [...] We can't just do [an in-person event] in London! The digital has helped us take away barriers.

Zara Mohammed, former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain

These sentiments were echoed by focus group participants who cited online streaming of religious events and courses and the accessibility of content as empowering. This was especially true for Muslims living in areas with a lower Muslim population and less developed Islamic facilities than places like Birmingham and London.

On the other hand, participants cited a decline in interest and quality of participation in 'in-person' community events and interactions from local community figures, teachers and role models. The implication is that many are prioritising online content over in-person interactions and physical presence at events.

There is a need to empower Muslim community groups to synchronise digital and in-person programming, to allow people to access the benefits offered by either medium. **Policy makers and community groups should collaborate to facilitate digital and in-person synchronisation of events.**

Summary - Priority Areas:

1. *Political Agency* - How can the political agency of British Muslims be harnessed to create trusted online spaces for positive exchange? CIEs can become spaces of reciprocity where policy makers understand Muslim needs and where British Muslims encourage active citizenship. **Policy makers must work with communities to enable such spaces of trust.**
2. *Religious Authority* - Norms of Islamic authority have completely changed. Muslim leaders in digital and analogue contexts have different spheres of influence that should be carefully considered. **Muslim actors must continue to work together to reflect on what these changes mean for their leadership. Policy makers must consider who they work with as a 'Muslim leader' and not rely solely on digital presentations of individuals and organisations.**
3. *Gender* - CIEs are often spaces where Muslim women can more freely assert their views and leadership. However, polarised debates on gender persist. Can Muslim women's digital visibility be harnessed to enhance their social, political and economic impact? **Policy makers and community groups must raise their own digital literacy to address enduring gender inequalities and digital safety.**
4. *The UK Context* - There is a need to empower Muslim community groups to synchronise digital and in-person programming, to allow people to access the benefits offered by either medium. **Policy makers and community groups should collaborate to facilitate digital and in-person synchronisation of events.**