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# Examining the Influence of the Internet and Globalisation on Politics, Culture, and Religion in Contemporary Muslim Societies

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the internet and globalisation, and how these two forces have significantly impacted contemporary Muslim societies. With the rise of technology and globalisation, there have been changes in politics, culture, and religion within Muslim societies. By examining cases in Muslim countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, this article uncovers a complex blend of opportunities and challenges resulting from these dynamic interactions. The internet has provided a platform for discussions, cultural exchanges, and religious expressions among Muslims. However, it has also posed challenges by questioning authority and orthodoxy. Globalisation's cultural diffusion has raised concerns about preserving identities amidst a flood of global influences. The formation of the Muslim Ummah as a community has been both facilitated by platforms that connect Muslims across borders, while also complicated by geopolitical tensions and ideological divisions that challenge unity, within the Ummah. This article emphasises the importance for Muslim societies to embrace the advantages of the new age while simultaneously addressing cultural and religious challenges to maintain unity within the Muslim Ummah. It is essential to comprehend the effects involved in order to navigate the changing dynamics of contemporary Muslim societies.

## INTRODUCTION

The merging of the internet and globalisation has changed the political, cultural, and religious aspects of Muslim societies in profound and often conflicting ways. Digital technologies have removed geographical barriers, opened new spaces for international engagement, and accelerated the sharing of ideas and practices throughout the Muslim world. These changes go beyond mere technology; they are part of larger trends in media globalisation (Thussu, 2006) and the restructuring of the Islamic public sphere (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003), where authority, identity, and power are constantly debated.

While much of the current research focuses on political mobilisation, religious revival, or cultural adaptation separately, this paper takes a more integrated approach. It explores how digital connectivity, and global interactions intersect in these areas. These intersections lead to outcomes that can both empower and unsettle. The paper employs media globalisation theory to frame the structural

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factors involved and draws from studies on Islamic public spheres to understand how digital spaces transform authority, participation, and identity in Muslim societies.

The main argument here is that the internet's impact on Muslim societies is paradoxical. On one side, it allows for new levels of religious expression, cultural innovation, and political engagement, creating what can be seen as a "digital ummah"—a community of Muslims that is dispersed yet connected. On the other side, it challenges traditional authority structures, accelerates the commercialization of Islamic identity, and increases competition from global cultures.

To examine these dynamics, the paper provides a cross-regional comparison of Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. By combining real-world case studies—including the *Reformasi* movement in Southeast Asia and the Arab Spring in the Middle East—with theoretical perspectives, this paper presents a detailed view of how Muslim societies navigate the opportunities and challenges of the digital age.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to explore how the internet and globalisation intersect to reshape political, cultural, and religious dynamics within Muslim societies. The research design is conceptual and exploratory, drawing upon theoretical frameworks of media globalisation (Thussu, 2006) and the Islamic public sphere (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003) to guide the analysis. Data were derived primarily from secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy reports that examine digital media, globalisation, and Islam. In addition, documented case studies such as the *Reformasi* movement in Southeast Asia, the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the growth of Islamic popular culture, and the spread of digital *da'wah* were used to provide empirical grounding. These sources enabled a comparative analysis of Muslim societies in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, highlighting both shared patterns and region-specific trajectories.

The analytical process employed thematic interpretation, focusing on three interrelated domains: politics, culture, and religion. Within each domain, the study examined how global communication flows and digital technologies foster empowerment while simultaneously generating new challenges to authority, identity, and authenticity. The aim was to uncover the paradoxes that define the emergence of a "digital ummah"—a dispersed yet interconnected Muslim community shaped by global forces. As a qualitative document-based study, the findings are interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. Limitations arise from the reliance on secondary data and the predominance of English-language sources, which may restrict perspectives from other linguistic or local contexts. Future research should complement this conceptual approach with fieldwork, surveys, or interviews to capture the lived realities of Muslim communities navigating globalisation and digital transformation.

## INTERNET AND GLOBALISATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM WORLD

The intersection of the internet and globalisation has profoundly reshaped the Muslim world, altering how politics, culture, and religion are practiced, perceived, and contested. As Thussu (2006) notes in his work on media globalisation, the contemporary communication landscape is characterised by the rapid flow of information, symbols, and cultural products across national boundaries, facilitated by the dominance of global media networks. These networks create both opportunities for participation in a global dialogue and pressures to conform to dominant cultural and ideological paradigms—pressures that carry implications for Muslim societies negotiating their place within the global order.

The internet functions as a critical infrastructure enabling these flows, collapsing distances, and allowing for the near-instantaneous exchange of ideas, commerce, and culture. Globalisation, meanwhile, has intensified the interconnectedness of nations, economies, and cultures, embedding local communities within transnational circuits of production, distribution, and influence. Together,

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these forces have created new channels for Muslim societies to project their voices, mobilise support, and engage with global audiences.

However, as Eickelman and Anderson (2003) argue in their study of the Islamic public sphere, these new media spaces are not neutral arenas. They are contested fields where authority, legitimacy, and authenticity are constantly negotiated. The expansion of the Islamic public sphere into the digital realm has enabled a greater diversity of actors; beyond traditional religious scholars and state institutions to participate in shaping Islamic discourse. This democratisation of religious and political communication challenges established hierarchies and raises questions about who has the right to define religious and cultural norms in an era of unprecedented connectivity.

In the context of Muslim societies, the diffusion of digital technologies has been uneven, shaped by factors such as infrastructure, political will, education, and openness to external influences. This diversity of experiences underscores a key paradox: while the internet and globalisation provide Muslim societies with the means to strengthen transnational solidarity and cultural confidence, they also expose them to intensified ideological contestation, cultural commodification, and political surveillance. Understanding these dynamics requires situating each case within the dual contexts of media globalisation, which illuminates the structural forces driving transnational media flows, and the reconfigured Islamic public sphere, which captures the internal contestations over meaning, authority, and identity in the digital age. The section below describes the development of internet and globalisation in selected Muslim nations.

**Middle East and North Africa**

The development of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is closely linked to the region's economic, political, and cultural independence. According to Farris (2013), internet access varies significantly by income and country across the Arab world. Internet penetration was exceedingly low in the 1990s, and Arabic-language web content was virtually non-existent. Several factors contributed to this deficiency, the most significant being a lack of digital infrastructure, unequal connectivity across the region, literacy challenges, and issues with Arabic language adaptation. Another source of disparity was literacy policy (Armbrust, 2012). While Morocco did not implement an internet education plan, the UAE invested substantially in digital literacy in schools and institutions. Similar patterns were observed in the Levant, where education and information access influenced internet adoption (Anderson, 2000).

Socioeconomic characteristics, income, and education were important in distinguishing adoption trends within the Gulf Cooperation countries (GCC). As a result, most Arab states remained complacent during the Web 1.0 phase, dismissing the influence of new technologies. Bottom-up pressures forced Arab regimes to be more open to emerging technologies. The Arab people's adoption of modern technology compelled their governments to take these technologies more seriously. With the growth of social media, Arab populations were able to circumvent the strict media regulations that had previously limited their exposure to the rest of the world. At the same time, global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as telecommunications and development organisations, exerts considerable pressure on Arab states to liberalize their economies (Abdullah, 2007).

Consequently, by the 2000s, with the rise of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0, the vast majority of Arab states had embraced ICT and the globalisation process that it entailed. While there are still discrepancies in the level of acceptance among Arab countries, the scale and speed of adoption have undoubtedly increased. In less than a decade, Gulf states such as Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia developed some of the world's most advanced internet connectivity and digitisation processes. Indeed, the Middle East was one of the first regions to adopt 5G wireless technology, which allows for faster and more efficient data transfer (Jaradat et al., 2021).

The MENA region’s trajectory illustrates how infrastructural investment, and external pressures can accelerate ICT adoption even in politically conservative contexts, yet the digital sphere remains closely intertwined with state power. From a media globalisation perspective, the Arab states’ selective integration into global networks reflects an attempt to harness connectivity for economic and

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reputational gains while constraining its disruptive potential. This duality—embracing the global economy while managing information flows—prefigures the political paradoxes later observed in movements such as the Arab Spring.

**Central Asia**

In Central Asia, the pathways into the global information economy have been shaped by geopolitical isolation, infrastructural limitations, and political caution. Thussu (2006) emphasises in his account of media globalisation the unevenness of global connectivity, where geography, economic capacity, and policy choices determine the pace and nature of integration. In their efforts to integrate the internet and new technologies into their societies, Muslim nations in Central Asia faced substantial hurdles. When ICT began to dominate the global arena, Central Asian states were still struggling to construct their own nations. The post-communist countries were disadvantaged in practically every way. Economically, they were unable to fully implement the technologies, and politically, they were unwilling to open their borders to foreign ideas and values linked with the internet and globalisation. Furthermore, the physical geography of the Central Asian region posed a significant difficulty for the states in properly build telecommunications and internet infrastructures. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and even Azerbaijan are landlocked countries that cannot benefit from direct undersea cable connectivity. Landlocked nations must either rely on satellite connectivity, which can be excessively expensive and slow. As a result, landlocked countries must incur bandwidth transit and connectivity expenses imposed by their neighbours, in addition to the cost of cable infrastructure (Schwab, 2016).

Nevertheless, recognizing the importance of participating in the global economy, these countries persisted and have been aggressively adopting internet and ICT throughout the twenty-first century. While still lagging behind the global average, internet availability in these countries is increasing. Countries with higher economic positions and more liberal socio-political policies, such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, have better internet systems and infrastructure, as well as internet penetration rates that exceed 50%. On the other hand, internet penetration remains quite low in economically and politically restricted nations such as Turkmenistan and Tajikistan (Freedman & Shafer, 2011).

The countries of Central Asia are collaborating to keep the region competitive with the rest of the globe. Currently, the countries of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are working together to strengthen their fibre optic infrastructures, solve common challenges, and advance the development of Central Asian states using digital technology. Increased digital literacy among the populace is one of these countries' top priorities. Each government responded by developing its own long-term digitalization plans.

Uzbekistan is likely to have the most methodical approach to ICT. Since 2012, the Uzbekistan government has made tangible measures toward incorporating digital technology, launching two plans to further the country's digital development: the "ICT Infrastructure Development Program 2015-2019" and the "E-Government Development Program 2013–2020." These projects are overseen by the Ministry of Development of Information Technology and Communications. Similarly, the Kazakh government intends to enhance the economy with contemporary technologies as part of its "Digital Kazakhstan 2020" programme. Since 2016, the Kyrgyz government has defined a roadmap for "Digital Kyrgyzstan 2020-2025," which has permitted the establishment of an e-services portal, including municipal services for citizens, and the provision of Government-to-Business (G2B) services. Likewise, in the first half of 2016, Tajikistan's government launched the "National Development Strategy 2030," which emphasized ICT for the country's long-term development. As a result, assuming current trends continue, Central Asian countries are on track to become fully digitalized in the near future (Malikov, 2020).

The Central Asian experience underscores the importance of geopolitical and infrastructural factors in shaping digital integration. Landlocked geographies, limited capital, and cautious political cultures have slowed the formation of a robust Islamic public sphere in this region. Nonetheless, the gradual expansion of connectivity has opened channels for transnational religious discourse and

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political engagement, revealing that even delayed or partial integration into global networks can generate both opportunities for participation and anxieties over external ideological influence.

**Malaysia**

Malaysia presents a markedly different trajectory—one of deliberate, state-led integration into the global digital economy. In Thussu (2006) terms, Malaysia positioned itself early as an active player in media globalisation, seeking not merely to consume but to produce and export digital content and services. Malaysia took the bold move of leapfrogging into "cyberspace" and the "information age" under the leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Malaysia launched a long-term strategy in 1996 to transform the country into a knowledge and technology-based society by 2020. One of the most significant phases in this project was the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor, or MSC. The MSC begins as a physical corridor 15 kilometres wide and 50 kilometres long running south from Kuala Lumpur to the new international airport and two new cities: Putrajaya and Cyberjaya. The former, which serves as the new government headquarters, and the new "e-commerce centre," Cyberjaya, was officially opened in 1999. A high-speed, high-capacity fibre optic internet backbone was constructed between these new cities and Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian government wanted to give all the technologies and points of access required for any individual, educational institution, or corporate operation to have complete access to the internet within that corridor. The MSC was envisioned as a counterpart to Silicon Valley in the United States (Mohamed & Azzman, 2018).

The Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) is the formal body established to address the entire spectrum of technical, economic, human, and legal issues that must be overcome for the MSC to become a functional and successful economic reality. Recognizing that the country lacked the talent needed to drive the MSC, the government also established Multimedia University in the hopes of producing enough trained and knowledgeable professionals to maintain Malaysia's digital ambitions. With so much planning, the Malaysian government aimed for a technologically advanced and economically open Malaysia would entice foreign investors, particularly technology firms, to set up shop there.

Malaysia even signed the Bill of Guarantees in 1996, which stipulated that the Malaysian government will not control the internet, to further persuade investors (Mohamed, 2018). This was a daring move for Malaysia, which has historically maintained tight control over its media system. Nevertheless, after a protracted battle with online dissidents, Malaysia's government began to regulate the internet in 2014. Malaysia's grand plan proved economically and socio-politically advantageous, as the government secured foreign investments and developed a digitally savvy citizenry. Nonetheless, the success was not without difficulties, particularly in the form of political disputes and economic slowdowns, which caused the MSC dream to waver slightly, especially as it failed to compete with other growing Asian republics such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea. When compared to other Muslim countries, Malaysia remains a forerunner.

Malaysia demonstrates how proactive state-led ICT strategies can position a Muslim-majority nation as a regional technology hub, creating fertile ground for political activism, cultural innovation, and religious outreach. However, the eventual reintroduction of internet regulation highlights a recurring tension in the digital ummah: governments often oscillate between promoting openness to attract global investment and tightening control to safeguard political stability. This tension reflects the broader challenge for Muslim societies seeking to reconcile global competitiveness with domestic socio-political cohesion.

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## THE IMPACT OF INTERNET AND GLOBALISATION ON MUSLIM SOCIETIES

By the 2020s, the internet and globalisation had reached a tipping point in the Muslim world. As a result, the social and cultural landscapes of Muslim civilizations had evolved correspondingly. Social media has particularly altered the communication habits of historically communal and hierarchical Muslim civilizations. The effects of these new technologies and the democratisation of communication on Muslims can be viewed in areas like politics, religion, and culture.

### Politics

The political impact of the internet in Muslim societies can be best understood through the dual lenses of media globalisation and the Islamic public sphere. According to Thussu (2006), global communication networks undermine traditional gatekeeping by enabling the transnational flow of news, images, and activist discourse. This dynamic has eroded state monopolies over information and created new arenas for political participation. For Eickelman and Anderson (2003), such changes are integral to the reconfiguration of the Islamic public sphere, where political authority and legitimacy are contested not only within national borders but also in transnational online forums. This dynamic can be seen from the experiences of political movements such as *Reformasi* in Malaysia and Indonesia (1998) and The Arab Spring (2010–2012).

### *Reformasi* in Malaysia and Indonesia in 1998

The *Reformasi* movements, which peaked in Malaysia and Indonesia in 1998, are classic examples of how the internet enabled political disturbances in politically conservative Muslim nations. While many other causes, like corruption and abuse of power, led to the people's mistrust of their government, it was the opportunity to openly express pent-up rage that accelerated the upheavals. Malaysians and Indonesians experienced a type of political emancipation in 1998, as people began to seize control of politics and demand change. Activists took their campaigns to the streets after learning about events on the internet, thereby putting pressure on governments to meet their demands.

Following Anwar Ibrahim's removal as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister in September 1998, and his subsequent detention on sex and corruption charges, Malaysians gained a new political consciousness, sparking debate about the possibility of regime change. Despite the government's stringent control over alternative media, the internet provided a significant avenue for political activists to spread their message without fear of violating official rules. Various anti-government websites appeared during the *Reformasi* movement's height in 1998-1999, presenting news and stories not available in the mainstream media (Brown, 2005). The public was able to debate and learn about other people's points of view thanks to electronic bulletin boards. Although Anwar Ibrahim was not the first political figure wrongly imprisoned and punished by the Malaysian government, his case was the first to be widely discussed on the internet, allowing Malaysians to access uncensored political content for the first time. The use of fax machines and copiers reinforced the impact of the internet, increasing the reach of the news to a larger audience (George, 2005).

During this period, there was a surge in the number of new political and anti-government websites. According to George (2005), there were at one point approximately 40 anti-government websites, including AgendaDaily, Reformasi Online, Laman Reformasi, Reformasi.com, Freeanwar.com, Mahazalim, FreeMalaysia, and many others. Electronic message boards and forums provided a fertile ground for public debate. While existing alternative presses were hampered by licencing and circulation restrictions, the same restrictions could not be imposed on the internet because Malaysia was bound by the Bill of Guarantee, which promised not to impose any internet censorship in line with the promotion of Malaysia's ambitious IT venture, the Multimedia Super Corridor, in 1997. While Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad survived the *Reformasi* and remained in office until 2003, the Malaysian political landscape was fundamentally altered. The political powers could no longer deny the ability of the people to demand change.

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The Asian financial crisis, which weakened the Indonesian economy, and the growing unhappiness of the Indonesian people with the Suharto-led administration at the time, prompted large-scale demonstrations in numerous parts of Indonesia by various student organisations. The year 1998 marked the 30th year of the president's reign, during which he sustained an extremely tight and rather autocratic political system. The internet immediately became a site of resistance to Suharto's dictatorship, which closely controlled media spaces. The internet created a new forum for political debates that would have been impossible in a traditional setting. These debates were conducted through email lists, the most well-known of which was *Apakabar*. The mailing list evolved into a platform for opposing the Suharto regime's policies. The messages circulated on the internet were also usually direct, rarely seen in mainstream media, such as "hang Suharto" and "destroy Suharto." Protests in the streets were also widely publicized on the internet (Hill & Sen, 2000). At the height of the movement, up-to-date information about student movements was communicated on mailing lists such as *Apakabar* and *IndoProtest* on an hourly basis. When several students were killed during the Indonesian *Reformasi*, protests erupted throughout the country. Due to the intense pressure from both within and outside the country, Suharto resigned on 21 May 1998. After Suharto was deposed and Indonesia entered the *Reformasi* era, the internet's political function shifted: it was no longer a tool for activists to demolish the network of authoritarian forces, but rather a catalyst for the republic's democratic consolidation. This function became highly important as more ordinary Indonesians gained access to the internet, driving it to grow enormously (Hill & Sen, 2000).

The *Reformasi* movements demonstrated how early internet adoption can catalyse a grassroots public sphere that bypasses traditional media gatekeepers. By enabling alternative narratives and mobilising citizen activism, the internet embodied the democratising promise of media globalisation. Yet, the absence of institutional reforms to safeguard these gains also highlighted the fragility of digitally driven political change in Muslim societies—an issue echoed in later uprisings across the Arab world.

**The Arab Spring**

The impact of the internet on socio-political transformation in the Arab world coincided with the advent of social media in the early 2000s. The significance of social media in the Arab Spring, a revolutionary wave of rallies and protests that swept the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2012, is still heavily contested. Early interpretations of the revolts were technologically determinist, with too much credit given to social media as the driving force behind the upheavals, to the point where some associated the Arab Spring with the Facebook revolution. A more recent and practical interpretation of the Arab Spring provides a more balanced perspective on social media's involvement in sparking the major political movement that swept the Middle East and North Africa. Almost a decade later, the role of social media during the Arab Spring was seen as less revolutionary and more mobilising.

By the 2000s, most Middle Eastern and North African states were ruled by established regimes whose decades of iron-fist rule had sown years of discontent among populations exposed to democratic practices. Tunisia's uprising began in response to corruption and economic deterioration. Tunisia's protests spread to five additional countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, where either the leader was toppled, or major revolutions and societal unrest such as riots, civil conflicts, or insurgencies occurred. Long-running public protests also took place in Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Sudan. Minor protests were also held in Djibouti, Mauritania, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

Social media's impact varied by country. Social networks played a critical role in the rapid and relatively peaceful demise of at least two regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, where the reigning regimes either had or lacked social support. Additionally, they aided in social and political mobilisation in Syria and Bahrain, where the Syrian Electronic Army, a still-active Syrian hacktivist group, was founded to target and launch computer attacks against political opponents and news websites (Stepanova, 2011). Activists were not limited to using social media to publicise their activities;

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demonstrators in countries with limited internet access, such as Yemen and Libya, organised and garnered worldwide support via electronic media devices such as cell phones, emails, and video clips.

Additionally, government responses to social media activity differed significantly across countries. While Tunisia's government restricted access to specific protest routes and websites, Egypt's government went further, initially blocking Facebook and Twitter and then completely shutting down the country's internet on 28 January 2011 by shutting down the country's four national Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and all mobile phone networks. The Egyptian Internet blackout did not put an end to the protests; rather, it seemed to exacerbate them.

By mid-2012, the initial wave of revolutions and protests had receded, as authorities and pro-government militias, counterdemonstrators, and troops reacted violently to several Arab Spring rallies. The Syrian Civil War; the establishment of ISIL and the accompanying civil war in Iraq; the Egyptian Crisis, coup, and subsequent unrest and insurgency in Egypt; the Libyan Civil War; and the Yemeni Crisis and subsequent civil war were all the result of large-scale conflicts. Regimes that lacked substantial oil wealth and hereditary succession systems were more likely to undergo regime change (Seib, 2007).

The Arab Spring failed to bring about the desired democratic revolution in the Arab World. Instead, it plunged most Arab states into bloody civil conflicts and turmoil. As a result, experts argue that the initial excitement about the importance of social media in political processes in Maghrebi and Middle Eastern countries has waned. Social networks made a significant contribution to political and social mobilisation, but they did not play a crucial or autonomous role in it. Rather, social media served as a catalyst for change, but it was unable to sustain the revolution and resist the political elite, who retained the ability to simply turn off the people's internet access.

The Arab Spring exemplifies both the mobilising potential and structural limitations of the digital public sphere. While social media lowered barriers to political participation and amplified dissent, entrenched power structures and coercive state apparatuses ultimately constrained transformative outcomes. From the perspective of the Islamic public sphere, these events reveal how connectivity can ignite collective action but cannot, on its own, dismantle the socio-political frameworks that shape Muslim governance.

## Culture

In the cultural domain, media globalisation has accelerated the circulation of both Western and Islamic popular culture, while the digital expansion of the Islamic public sphere has given Muslim creators new avenues to shape representation. Thussu (2006) emphasises that global media flows are asymmetrical, with Western cultural products still dominating. Yet, digital platforms have enabled Muslim artists, musicians, filmmakers, and designers to produce content that resonates globally while affirming Islamic values.

Digital technologies have not only enhanced Muslim political activism, but have also highlighted Muslim 'artivism,' a term used to describe Muslims' involvement in popular culture. Popular culture can be defined broadly as a collection of habits, beliefs, and items that are popular or prevalent in a society at any given moment (Van Nieuwkerk et al., 2021). The fundamental driving force behind popular culture is public appeal, which is significantly shaped by mass media today. It is commonly considered in contrast to other types of culture, like folk cults, working-class culture, or high culture. Western imports of commercial lifestyles in the forms of entertainment, fashion, sports, and trends are frequently associated with popular culture. The fundamental criticism levelled at popular culture is that it is a capitalist tool for promoting materialistic values, ultimately serves to sustain the capitalist status quo. At its most extreme, popular culture is viewed as fostering cultural imperialism by extolling Western, secular, and capitalist ideals and beliefs. In the same vein, the concept of popular culture does not fit well with the Islamic ideal of submission and piety.

The mass media has long been dominated by the Western world, notably the United States. Even in the Muslim world, American TV shows, movies, and music are warmly welcomed; however, they have been heavily criticized for influencing Muslims with American fashion, music, and lifestyles. At

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the same time, Muslims are not always portrayed positively in mainstream American media. Images of traditional, backward, and mostly aggressive Arab men, as well as subservient and veiled Muslim women, dominate media representations of Muslims, which later became widely accepted stereotypes of Muslims. There were no Muslim TV shows or big-budget films to dispute this narrative (Moll, 2020).

The ability to generate and share information made possible by modern media technologies provided Muslims with new opportunities to produce their own content and participate in popular culture. Muslims are now producing their own content and defining what is popular, rather than merely acting as passive recipients. Muslim-produced music, films, arts, and other forms of media output are now available to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While not all Muslim-produced pop culture is Islamic, some of it seeks to spread Islam through popular culture. The problem with Muslim pop culture is that, while it portrays Muslims in a more favourable light, it also promotes commercial and materialist values.

For instance, Islamic fashion is currently a very valuable industry, fueled by the supply and demand created by Muslim women. This industry is sustained by linking fashion and Muslim culture. On the one hand, images of veiled but trendy Muslim women have rekindled admiration for sophisticated, accomplished, and modest Muslim women. However, Islamic fashion has also resulted in the development of the *hijabista* culture. Traditionally, the norms and suitable instructions on hijab wear originated from qualified religious authorities. On social media, however, it is the young, stylish, cheerful, and media-savvy Muslim girls who set the tone. These young women are essential to the highly materialistic and commercial hijabista culture that is producing billions of dollars for the fashion industry. On Instagram and Facebook, these Muslim girls post photos of themselves wearing various hijab types, applying heavy make-up, and striking gorgeous poses, all while bragging about their material and stylish possessions. These *hijabista* figures are redefining what it means to be youthful, modern, and Muslim, with hundreds of thousands of followers (Weng, 2017).

The rise of Muslim celebrities has been aided by the globalisation of the media. As technology enables Muslims to interact and be exposed to a wide range of Western, International, and Islamic beliefs, they have begun to demand new types of cultural products. Since the mid-1990s, Malaysia, Canada, South Africa, and the United Kingdom have witnessed the pop *nasheed* or Islamic pop music movement. Singers such as Opick from Indonesia and Malaysian groups like Raihan have sold millions of CDs and gained international recognition. Singers such as Sami Yusof and Maher Zain have recently developed a global following, largely because they can now distribute their songs to a larger audience through worldwide distribution channels and various music sharing platforms. The success of Indonesian Islamic literature and films demonstrates the viability of Islamic content. Habiburrahman El Shirazy's novels became instant successes and were adapted into films. El-Shirazy was able to capture the minds of Muslims seeking an alternative to secular romance novels with stories that combine notions of romance, Islam, and activism. His writings, such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2004), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (2007), and *Dalam Mihrab Cinta* (2007), were well received by Muslim readers, particularly in Southeast Asia. These novels have been translated into a variety of languages, including English, Bahasa Malaysia, and Arabic. The novels were sold in major worldwide bookstores, demonstrating their commercial worth. These novels were also adapted into films that became commercial hits.

The need for current Islamic content indicates a cultural shift among Muslim societies, which increasingly desire both popular culture and Islamic content (Fauzia, 2017). The most difficult task for Muslim media is balancing business and religious demands, which rarely coincide. The worldwide media sector is predominantly Western and capitalist. As a result, it's all too easy for Muslims in pop culture to fall into the trap of abandoning Islamic content for commercial gain and popularity.

The evolution of Muslim participation in popular culture illustrates the double-edged nature of digital globalisation. On one hand, Muslims have leveraged global media networks to reclaim representation, diversify cultural narratives, and build transnational audiences. On the other, the increasing commodification of Islamic symbols—whether through *hijabista* fashion or commercial Islamic music—aligns religious identity with market logics, raising concerns over authenticity and

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spiritual integrity. This tension underscores a central paradox in the digital ummah: cultural empowerment is often inseparable from processes of commercialization that risk diluting the very values they seek to promote.

**Religion**

Thussu (2006) highlights how global communication networks allow religious messages to cross borders instantaneously, creating new opportunities for *daʿwah*, transnational religious movements, and interfaith dialogue. At the same time, Eickelman and Anderson (2003) argue that the public sphere's digital expansion disrupts traditional hierarchies of religious authority, enabling a multiplicity of actors — from established scholars to self-taught preachers and influencers — to participate in shaping Islamic discourse. This is exemplified by the fact that many Islamic leaders place a high value on communicating with and gaining the hearts and minds of believers and nonbelievers through *da'wah*. Nowadays, social media has proven to be a vital tool for pursuing da'wa and spreading Muslim ideas. This has led to the development and launch of halal social media sites that are Shariah-compliant. Several digital activities and projects were carried out in response to these demands. Islamic websites such as Muslimsocial.com, Muslim.com, and SalamWorld, have begun to emerge.

Recognizing the importance of apps in the dissemination of religious information, several local religious bodies and institutions have created their own applications. The most visible is the *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, or JAKIM), which has its own app through which users can obtain all Islamic-related information. The JAKIM app also includes prayer times, Quranic verses, and significant Islamic regulations and references. JAKIM also manages several additional Islamic-focused apps, including VerifyHalal, MyHadith, and SmartQuran. VerifyHalal is a mobile app that allows consumers and suppliers to instantaneously verify a product's halal status by scanning the barcode with their smartphones (Mohamed, 2020).

Some Islamic preachers have used social media to reunify the ummah via an e-ummah. They believe that digital social networks can aid in the establishment of virtual communities, paving the way for the eventual formation of physical communities (Ibahrine, 2014). As a result, social media can contribute to the strengthening of Muslims worldwide by linking community members across the world. Islamic social media platforms have aided in the spread of Islamic iconography and symbolism among members of the Muslim diaspora in urban areas of North America and Western Europe. Recent research indicates that young Muslims in Western nations are more receptive to religious beliefs and aspirations, and Islam plays a significant role in defining their identities (Choudhury, 2007).

In addition, Digital Da'wah projects on social media platforms have become increasingly popular for spreading Islamic teachings and promoting religious awareness (Rahim et al., 2018). These projects utilize various social media tools and strategies to engage with a global audience such as Islamic YouTube channels, Islamic podcast, as well as numerous Islamic Instagram, Facebook and Tiktok pages owned by individuals and organizations. Celebrity preachers are using YouTube to address global Muslim audiences. For example, to date, Mufti Menk has 4.74 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, Ustaz Abdul Somad of Indonesia has 3.97 million and Nouman Ali Khan has 1.88 million subscribers.

Islam's recent renaissance and ascension have been astounding. According to some, the convergence of small media and social media benefited Islam by establishing or re-establishing a foothold in contemporary daily life. However, Islam faces a challenge from the ongoing digitisation of Islam, or the Islamisation of the digital world, because for centuries, interpretations of the Quran were restricted to a small group of *ulama*' (scholars of religion). Nowadays, social media platforms have evolved into venues for the exchange of sacred ideas, occasionally undermining established religious institutions. Additionally, the growth of digital fatwas reflects the fracturing of orthodoxies and the emergence of heresies. As a result, Islamic authority has become a point of contention among contemporary Muslims, rather than an accepted reality.

The digital transformation of religious life in Muslim societies highlights both the democratising and destabilising effects of online platforms. Social media and digital *daʿwah* have expanded access to religious knowledge, fostered new forms of community, and enabled global dialogue among

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Muslims. Yet, by bypassing traditional scholarly gatekeepers, these same platforms have fragmented religious authority, amplified competing interpretations, and intensified doctrinal disputes. In the context of the Islamic public sphere, this decentralisation both energises religious engagement and challenges the coherence of collective religious authority, reinforcing the paradox at the heart of the internet's role in Muslim societies.

## CONCLUSION

The convergence of the internet and globalisation has transformed Muslim societies in ways that are both enabling and destabilising, producing paradoxes that cut across political, cultural, and religious life. Taken together, these dynamics highlight the double-edged nature of digital connectivity: it democratises participation and amplifies diverse expressions of Muslim identity, yet it also embeds them in systems of global media power, market logics, and political control. The challenge for policymakers in fostering digital openness and innovation while ensuring that legal, educational, and regulatory frameworks protect the integrity of religious and cultural expression. For religious leaders and institutions, the priority must be to engage with the realities of a decentralised digital Islamic public sphere, developing strategies to maintain credibility and relevance among digitally fluent audiences. For cultural producers, the task is to balance creative freedom with ethical responsibility, ensuring that representation does not become merely another commodity in the global marketplace. Future research should move beyond descriptive accounts to examine the long-term implications of these transformations, particularly the evolving relationship between digital authority, community cohesion, and global cultural flows. Comparative studies that track these changes across regions could yield deeper insights into how socio-political context shapes both the benefits and risks of digital globalisation for Muslim societies. Ultimately, the sustainability of the digital ummah will depend on whether Muslim communities can navigate these paradoxes in ways that harness the opportunities of global connectivity while safeguarding the political autonomy, cultural richness, and religious integrity that define their collective identity.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Shafizan Mohamed is the sole author of this manuscript. She conducted the research and wrote the content.

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