

## **Evaluate the significance of the Internet as a networking tool for Muslims in the United Kingdom.**

The internet has the potential to be a valuable tool for many in day to day life. From providing access to new information, offering virtual trips to new places and the opportunities to network with counterparts old and new. Social media can be great provider of comfort. On all platforms you have the opportunity to search for and follow like minded individuals providing experiences to learn and develop. By today, Muslims come from different and diverse cultures across the world which are separated by their own cultures and geography. Muslims are using the internet for a variety of reasons. This briefing paper will offer a general overview to the significance of the Internet specifically as a networking tool for Muslims in the UK.

Though the internet has its flaws, it does provide opportunities for individuals to connect with others that are similar to them. Through connecting with others who are similar to them Muslims can bring their communities together online and even begin to form new communities all together. Brenda E. Brasher<sup>1</sup> notes the opportunities the internet provides to all religions when it comes to connecting and developing. Connecting and developing is a key aspect of networking. Through discussion and learning from each other, this can lead to creating a safe space for expression of both a religious nature and otherwise within the online communities which reflects the significance of the internet as a networking tool in the UK.

In 2021 it is important to reference the important role of social media when it comes to networking. A quick search on social media can offer groups and individuals to follow and network with. Whilst conducting research in to this field it was interesting to stumble across a Muslim specific social media platform MuslimSpace<sup>2</sup>. Whilst the networking potential of this one site is hard to determine, it is interesting to see how it thrives on only Muslim members. The establishment of these 'exclusive' online communities shows again that the internet does play a significant role for Muslims to network within the UK.

With changes and developments in softwares and programmes, the internet is offering more and more opportunities and platforms for people to use. This growth of new networking that is becoming available can provide Muslims with more opportunities to successfully network with each other through the many traditional social media platforms as well as some platforms specifically created for Muslims to network exclusively. These platforms can provide others to seek further clarification or to ask questions to others about faith or other aspects of Muslim life. This kind of interaction and networking leads to a chance for Muslims to collaborate with one and other using these networks, as opposed to just using social media platforms alone<sup>3</sup>. One example of this is Linux which was created by Linus Torvalds. In his book *iMuslims: wiring the House of Islam* Bunt explains how this platform is used for collaboration and that it lends itself to being a good model of networking and collaboration between Muslims and others<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to social media platforms for Muslims, there are also groups and charities that offer support for Muslims online. One of example of this comes from the charity Muslim Hands UK<sup>5</sup> who offer advice on how to use social media and ensure that you are safe and sensible when posting. This helpful advice shows that even charities within the religion are aware of the risks and benefits of using the internet and social media as a Muslim in the UK. In the UK some of the groups formed and sustained through the internet can

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda E Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Engdahl, *Online Social Networking* (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Gary R Bunt, *Imuslims* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 1-54.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "To Post Or Not To Post: The Muslim Hands Guide To Using Social Media | Muslim Hands UK", *Muslimhands.Org.Uk*, 2020 <<https://muslimhands.org.uk/latest/2020/08/to-post-or-not-to-post-the-muslim-hands-guide-to-using-social-media>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

provide opportunities for Muslims to learn what it means to be a Muslim within the UK<sup>6</sup>. As mentioned in the above argument, networking provides Muslims in the UK and beyond with the chances to collaborate on projects and to learn from each other. As a result of this it could help Muslims in the UK further develop a form of identity which may not be possible without the connections made through the internet. This is a strong argument for the importance of the internet as a tool for networking for Muslims in the UK.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, networking has become and even more important part of day to day life for us all. With many places of worship forced to close for extended periods of time, we can see that some Mosques have embraced the digital possibilities. Through providing worship and seminars online Muslims are able to keep in touch with other members of their Mosques, or even connect with others in other Mosques. Through conducting research you can see that there are hundreds of videos offering instruction on prayers and other areas of worship available on websites such as YouTube. In addition to streaming during the pandemic, it is possible to suggest that this opens the door to further developments to create a more inclusive Muslim community in the UK without leaving your home.

The arguments already presented in this paper shows that internet does provide useful ways for Muslims to keep in touch and network with others and that it clearly has a significant role to many Muslims in the UK today. However it is still possible to argue that you cannot fulfil all aspects of networking online and that the need for physical networking is still there. The internet provides us all with a chance to experience things we may not be able to usually, for example a teacher could take her classroom on a virtual field trip to a The Grand Mosque in Dubai. Whilst this is a valuable experience and a brilliant educational opportunity, it would not be as beneficial as seeing the real thing. Gary Bunt's<sup>7</sup> work strengthens this argument where he notes that some virtual experiences are not the same as real life pilgrimages. Though a counter argument for this could be that whilst the internet is still a key part of networking for Muslims in the UK, there is nothing to say that this has to be the only form of networking that is used.

In addition to the argument of needing physical networking to provide Muslims in the UK with more real life experiences, we learn that as with all things online, there are risks. When you are solely networking online, there are dangers which need to be considered when discussing the significance of using the internet as a networking tool. One potential danger is the amount of unregulated content online. Research shows that there are over 400 religious applications available for download on the Apple App Store alone<sup>8</sup>. Whilst these are basic arguments to consider they are still important to consider as they could result in significant issues as opposed to a significant aid when it comes to networking in the UK for Muslims.

The Muslim population makes for a substantial amount of the global population. Whilst for Muslims in the UK that are able to afford broadband this is a wonderful opportunity however some Muslims in less developed countries<sup>9</sup> (and maybe even some areas of the UK) will not have access to the internet and a device that connects to the internet and is therefore missing out on having the same opportunities. Therefore whilst the internet is a key tool in networking, it should be noted that it cannot completely replace all other forms of networking for Muslims in the UK.

Therefore to conclude, this briefing has shown an overview of how the Internet can be used as a networking tool for Muslims in the UK. The internet is evolving and growing every day. Social media and other media

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<sup>6</sup> Gary R. Bunt, "Islam@Britain.Net: 'British Muslim' Identities In Cyberspace", *Islam And Christian-Muslim Relations*, 10.3 (1999), 353-362 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419908721192>>.

<sup>7</sup> Bunt, *Imuslims*, pp. 1-54.

<sup>8</sup> Moch Fakhruroji, "Muslims Learning Islam On The Internet", *Handbook Of Contemporary Islam And Muslim Lives*, 2019, 1-17 <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73653-2\\_70-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73653-2_70-1)>.

<sup>9</sup> Stefano Allievi and Jorgen S Nielsen, *Muslim Networks And Transnational Communities In And Across Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 1-27.

outlets are developing and more features being created. With the examples above in mind it is clear to see that the internet can be an extremely important for networking and learning for Muslims in the UK.

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