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In the Name of Allah?

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In the Name of Allah?

A study of motivations among British Muslims in religious content production online

Alison Jarrett

ABSTRACT

British Muslims who are active in online content production are in a unique position to have influence over the future of Islam in the West. Because of their involvement in the U.K.'s Muslim communities, they have insight into the traditional religious practices of their parents, and by extension, their homelands. Because they are raised as native English speakers, able to familiarize with British culture at an early age, they are many times better equipped than their parents to understand and work within British society. Finally, because they are part of a content production culture, with access to new media technologies and social networking, they are able to express their religious ideas to, and exercise their religious influence over, a more expansive audience.

This empirical dissertation contributes to a limited body of research regarding motivations among British Muslims for creating religious content online. Through semi-structured interviews it provides insight into their personalities and values, their processes of online content creation and how they define themselves in respect to Muslim communities, British society and other users with whom they interact online.

It elaborates on research which explores the content of Britain's cyber Islamic environment by focusing on why its various elements exist. By increasing academic awareness of increasingly influential actors within western Islam, this research hopes to contribute to a heightened awareness of Islam in Britain and to better equip British citizens to accommodate a more thorough and productive integration of Muslims into British societies.

ISLAM IN BRITAIN

Muslims are one of the fastest-growing diasporas in Britain. With significant immigration beginning in the 1960s and '70s, The Muslim Centre of Britain estimates there are now around 1.6 million Britons who practice the Islamic faith (Muslim Council of Britain, 2010). The steadiness and speed of growth is attributed to a young average age and the cultural family structure. Muslims have one of the youngest age structures of any religious British community, with one-third of the average Muslim community under 15 years of age and only 6% over the age of 60. Muslim families tend to have more children, and the youthful nature of Muslim communities coupled with increasing financial successes and investments ensure continued growth of these communities (Lewis, 2007).

As Muslim diasporas began to immigrate to Britain for employment in the 1960s and '70s, they brought with them cultures and societal norms rooted in the Islamic faith. Muslim communities in Britain maintain methods congruent with traditional teaching practices to educate and socialize their children. There are roughly 130 Muslim grammar and secondary schools in Britain and mosques run Arabic programmes for children to attend in the evenings (Association of Muslim Schools, 2010). Islamic authority is based on scholarship, with the access of Islamic knowledge requiring a learned intermediary in the form of an *alim,* a *shaykh,* or *imam* (Bunt, 2009). The Islamic practice of training and distributing *Ulama* (plural of alim, a learned man) is criticised in contemporary Muslim societies for being incongruent with modern culture and disconnected from modern scholarship. Lewis's study of Bradford mosques found that much of the material used to teach Urdu is produced in and complies with the education regulations of Pakistan (Lewis, 2007). Lewis credits the establishment of these educational institutions and mosques in the 1970s and '80s with marking the shift in Muslim immigrant identity from sojourner to settler (Lewis, 2007). Tariq Ramadan also acknowledges this shift, and attests that British Muslims are on the verge of another—from one of settling to integration (Ramadan, 2010).

Intergenerational tensions

Ramadan's and other theorists' discussions of this integration period identify intergenerational tensions as increasingly evident in British Muslim communities (Ramadan, 2010; Lewis, 2007). These tensions partly arise from a difference in how older and younger generations approach Islam; parents may have studied under a Muslim scholar, being taught to recite verses and memorize texts. Because Muslim scholars are often brought over from the homeland, they can lack insight and knowledge regarding the British society within which

they are brought to serve. This is a growing problem, as British Muslims of younger generations prefer to learn from someone more familiar who engages with western culture (Mandaville, 2001a).

A three-year research project led by Abdullah Sahin revealed traditional Islamic education also neglects to provide British Muslims with the knowledge and skills to respond to the society around them (Sahin, 2005). British writer and lecturer Yahya Birt assessed,

> Young Muslims are searching for a form of Islam that makes sense in a multicultural context. They find it hard to get answers…Imams should be giving young people the tools to integrate on their own terms. Too often they have tended to say 'live at peace with your neighbours' and at the same time, 'we don't want to live like them' so the message has been 'be good, but be separate' (Lewis, 2007: 150).

The Sahin-Francis scale created a typology of varied approaches to adopting an Islamic identity. Some seek to adopt their parents' faith without question, others reject the faith with indifference, and a third category takes a more exploratory approach (Francis, Sahin and Al-Failakawi, 2008) Sahin found in his research that the majority of his respondents adopted the last approach, exploring their religious identity within a new, non-Muslim society, and displayed what Sahin terms 'a newly emerging phenomenon of multi-layered relatedness' (Sahin, 2005: 176). These new elements of identity can make it difficult to separate the Muslim aspects of one's life from the British aspects.

Developing added layers of identity is not just challenging for the new generation. Intergenerational tensions can also arise from a parent generation unsure of how elements of 'British-ness' adopted by their children will resonate within their Muslim communities (Lewis, 2007).

Differentiating between culture and religion

One of the most reported issues facing Muslim communities in the West is the differentiation between culture and religion. Ramadan writes that while the first generation of immigrants found it difficult and unnecessary to distinguish between the two, subsequent generations who are perhaps more educated and integrated have a greater desire to do so (Ramadan, 2010). Muslim communities in Britain can trace their roots across the globe, from South Asia to North Africa. As dialogue across different Muslim communities increases, the differences among cultures become more evident and the distinction between what is 'Islamic' and what

is 'Pakistani' or 'Arab' becomes clearer as well. A study by Smeetra Mishra and Gaby Semaan examined a younger generation's perceptions of the religious practices of their parents, and found that some respondents had a greater awareness of the religion-culture distinction than their parents (Mishra and Semaan, 2010).

Ramadan theorizes that this ability to critically compare and contrast communities is also leading young Muslims to be able to apply the principle to the broader British society. Ramadan characterises this stage as 'integration', where children of immigrants are growing up speaking western languages, attending western schools and universities and engaging in intercultural dialogues (Ramadan, 2010). This generation, however, experience new difficulties in regards to practising Islam within the greater British society. Events like 9-11 and 7-7 have laid the foundation for what has widely become known as a media-fed 'Islamophobia'. British Muslims can find this environment increasingly threatening and confusing, leaving them vulnerable to extremist groups, which can thus continue the cycle (Sahin, 2005; Elbaum, 2006). Ed Husain gives one example in an autobiographical account of his descent into British Muslim extremism, in which he illustrates the distinction between the majority of Islamic practices and the few overly-mediatized extremist belief systems (Husain, 2007). Unfortunately, a lack of education in both media sectors and the general public means many Muslims still feel the effects of what Amartya Sen refers to as 'the miniaturization of people' (Lewis, 2007: 1).

Activists like Ramadan, Hamza Yusef and Tawfik Hamid are advocates of a more proactive Islamic youth culture. They maintain that this 'Islamophobic' atmosphere is self-perpetuating, due to an under-representation of the faith among young western Muslims (Ramadan, 2010; Yusef, 2010; Hamid, 2010). Western Muslims are being encouraged to use their cross-cultural knowledge for a more thorough integration into the West. In an address to students at the London School of Economics and Political Science, historian Abdal-Hakim Murad recommended the implementation of a national mosque with young, integrated leaders whose communication skills would allow them to more accurately represent Islam in the media (Murad, 2010).

ISLAM IN MEDIA PRODUCTION

'It is through information technology that we are able to reach the hybridity of the new Islamist project' (Mandaville, 2001b: 177).

From a media perspective, Islam's integration into the West is well under way. Muslims growing up in Britain are faced with questions of heritage, identity and relations within the wider British society (Mandaville, 2001b) that give them a unique yet complex perspective when involved in media production. Muslim magazine Q-News's editor Fareena Alam experienced this as she entered the media field: 'I was struggling with questions of who do I want to be: a Muslim journalist or a journalist who happens to be Muslim?' (Aspden, 2006).

Ziaruddin Sardar's autobiographical *Desperately Seeking Paradise* provides a clear example of Sahin's exploratory approach to religion. After growing up in Tower Hamlets[1], Sardar seeks to define his Islamic faith by accepting and immersing himself in various Islamic environments. 'What I had to resolve was what kind of a Muslim I could be; and how to be a Muslim for and in the better world my generation was committed to creating' (Sardar, 2005: 39).

Mandaville writes about how second and third generation British Muslims are increasingly encouraged to use new media technologies to take a fresh look at the Qur'an and discover how it speaks to their contemporary lives (Mandaville, 2001b). Open-source movements like Sabily[2] have created operating software and internet safety features to accommodate Muslim sensitivities (Bunt, 2009). Some theorists are sceptical, however, of religion-oriented software and its ability to distort beliefs and practices. They argue that information technologies should be used for systematizing existing Islamic knowledge to be used for reference and not as a substitute for offline practices (Mandaville, 2001b). However, both proponents and opponents agree that technologies are transformational to Islam, making its teachings and scripture accessible and interactive. Bunt's research into Islamic activity online found that the web has become a natural source of religious knowledge for many Muslims, taking it out of its traditional sphere of discourse and influence (Bunt, 2009). Accordingly, scholars and religious authorities are finding an online presence is essential to retain the loyalty and interest of their readers and followers (Bunt, 2004).

Muslim organizations online serve many aspects of Islam's transition into the West. Organizations like FOSIS (Federation of Student Islamic Societies) and the Muslim Council of Britain's Youth Committee connect youth from different communities and provide a platform upon which to exchange views and ideas (FOSIS, 2010). Organizations like Radical Middle Way and Campusalam have extensive resources online and exist to facilitate deeper

[1] Tower Hamlets in London is home to 36% of Great Britain's Muslim population (MCB, 2010)

[2] Sabily is an open-source operating system, which includes applications for prayer times, an Islamic calendar and Qur'anic study tools among other features.

integration of young Muslims into British society. Radical Middle Way describes itself as a 'grassroots initiative' aimed at teaching an understanding of Islam that is 'dynamic, proactive and relevant to young British Muslims' (RMW, 2010). It does so by organizing events with inter-faith dialogues, panel discussions and contemporary Islamic speakers. Campusalam describes itself as 'a community living and learning in peace' and equips campus student societies with the skill sets to communicate and collaborate with each other better (Campusalam, 2010). In London alone, there are dozens of committees and organizations addressing the social and mental issues of second and third generation British Muslims, and most have a presence online.

Islamic information exchange also takes place at the peer-to-peer level: on blogs, religious forums like *Deenport.com* and *AIMIslam.com* and social networking sites like Facebook. Theorists liken this new dialectic and open dialogue to the Islamic notion of a 'globalised ummah' (Bunt, 2000; Kort, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW: RELIGION ONLINE

Religion began appearing online as early as 1985 (Helland, 2004). Some theorists hail the internet as a natural home for religion, likening its immaterial nature to the spiritual realm (Cobb, 1998; Wertheim, 1999). For others, the relationship is less dramatic. Don Slater conceptualised the internet simply as a social space (Slater, 2002), while Manuel Castells highlighted an entrepreneurial culture online that encourages an ideology of religious freedom (Castells, 2001).

Classifying activity

Religious activity online has been categorized by several different theorists (Bauwens, 1996; Campbell, 2005; Helland, 2000). Helland's concepts of 'religion-online' and 'online-religion' concern how religions relate to the internet; religion-online refers to the practice of uploading pre-existing ideas and practices into an interactive and accessible space, while online-religion refers to religions that adapt to the online environment, creating new practices and attributes for the religion (Helland, 2000). Campbell dichotomises religious activity online into sacramental and spiritual activity. Sacramental activity is considered sacred by the user, as a substitute for offline forms of religious activity. This can include witnessing to non-believers, typing prayers of supplication *(or du'a)* or donating money to religious causes. Spiritual activity is defined as experimental and experiential, such as taking part in a religious forum (Campbell, 2005). Although religious activity online takes many forms, it is important to note

that online-religion, religion-online, sacramental and spiritual activity function according to prerogatives; users only participate in activities they seek out or choose to accept.

Interpretive agency and authority

The internet is attributed with providing what some theorists term 'interpretive agency', with which individuals can disseminate and exchange information on a socially-levelled platform (Helland, 2004). In an Islamic context, interpretive agency moves authority from traditional scholarship to the hands of Muslims predominantly in the West (Karim, 2009). Interpretive agency online allows for Muslims to 'take religion into their own hands' and decide for themselves whether to follow traditional scholars, interpret their own readings, or ascribe to interpretations by new 'reformist' intellectuals (Mandaville, 2001b). Mandaville points out that by nature of their socio-geographic situation, Muslims in the West tend to favour the latter two.

> As Islamic sources provide little advice on the correct course of action in hybrid contexts, diasporic Muslims have to engage in *itjihad* or the exercise of 'independent judgement' by reinterpreting Islamic values and principles in the context of their specific situations (Mandaville, 2001b: 183).

Interpretive agency and the ability to command authority in religious discourse online are an effect of the lateral nature of the internet (Zaleski, 1997; Dawson and Hennebry, 2004; Cowan, 2004). Religions of the book, such is Judaism, Christianity and Islam, traditionally function on vertical planes of accessibility, meaning that a sense of hierarchy is established in terms of religious authority. The internet's lateral plane, however, allows users to exchange information more directly and fluidly (Cowan, 2004; Zaleski, 1997; Slater, 2002). Juxtaposing a vertically-organized belief system onto a lateral plane has resulted in religion 'losing its trappings on the internet'; in other words, the walls supporting the structuration of authority have been removed. Furthermore, the anonymity available online inserts ambiguity into a discourse's foundation of trust. Anyone can declare himself a religious authority and upload his 'truths' to an accessible platform with an eager audience (Bunt, 2009). 'For the new intellectuals, neither the transmission of knowledge nor the place of this transmission is institutionalised; everyone is authorised' (Roy, 1994: 95).

The political-economic perspective of religion online highlights the negative aspects of a lateral system of authority. Critical theorists agree that everyone with internet access and a level of media production literacy is authorised, but would argue that not everyone is able to

exercise the same amount of authority. The invisibility of online convergence and information sharing networks allow for religious authority to be held by a relatively small number of hands, who can then interpret and synthesise information at will (Bunt, 2009: 136). This becomes an issue when coupled with authenticity online; in religious discourse online, authenticity is much of the time measured by the political savvy and persuasiveness of the loudest voices (Mandaville, 2001a).

Social and developmental empowerment

Heidi Campbell describes the internet as 'a wonderful, pluralistic world, opening society to new potential ways of governing, relating and being' (Campbell, 2005: 6). Within this new world, users are empowered with control and autonomy over their self-representation and relationships. Other theorists recognise empowerment in terms of time and space distanciation; users are able to access events proximally distant and encouraged to explore and challenge personal belief systems previously unchallenged (Slevin, 2000). Campbell also terms the internet an 'identity workshop', home to a 'Mecca of multi-personality possibilities' (Campbell, 2005: 22). Theories of multi-layered identities are characteristic of the current post-enlightenment era (Giddens, 1991; Turkle, 1995; Sahin, 2005), and the ability to have a multi-layered identity affects not only the individual but communities the individual is affiliated with as well.

Community

Existing research argues that 'all text-users develop interpretive communities' and those online communities can be seen as arenas for identity construction (Fornas, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden, & Sveningsson, 2002). Part of the identity construction process is the positioning of oneself within a community. By establishing a presence online and linking to other sites or 'presences', the user is 'extending his border…signifying cooperation and mutual interest' (Fornas, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden, & Sveningsson, 2002: 118).

Some theorists argue that online religion allows one to 'believe without belonging' if one prefers an individualist approach to exploring religion (Campbell, 2005). Research suggests this approach is also more common in a post-enlightenment era that encourages individuality; the internet reflects this atmosphere by allowing for 'the creative enactment of pluralism at the individual or psychological level as well as the social, cultural and collective level' (Dawson and Hennebry, 2004: 166). Dawson suggests the freedom to have multiple associations may impede the growth of traditionally-defined communities online (Dawson

and Hennebry, 2004). This creates the possibility for new forms of religious communities, which some theorists propose can act as replacement communities (Rheingold, 1993); Campbell suggests that new kinds of networked communities are taking shape online, where users can be alone together, separated by 'the veil of the screen' (Campbell, 2005: 46).

Horsfall offers an alternative view of the internet's effects on religious communities. She argues that religious activity online simply serves to augment and extend activity offline (Horsfall, 2000). This is supported by research that indicates the individuals who partake in religious activity online tend to be more serious about their beliefs than those who confine themselves to offline practice (Hoover, Clark and Rainie, 2004).

ISLAM ONLINE: THE iMUSLIM

'New networks drawing upon web 2.0 innovations show that cyber-Islamic environments continue to evolve, with iMuslims playing a proactive role in presenting Islam for the 21st century' (Bunt, 2009: 289).

Bunt has created the profile of the 'iMuslim', or a believer who is active in CIEs (Cyber Islamic Environments). Some iMuslims use blogging to network about religious issues, and the content of these blogs gives insight into the personal life and narrative of the writer (Bunt, 2009). Thousands of Muslim blogs exist online and the number is expanding rapidly (Bunt, 2009), with content ranging from Muslim fashion to Qur'anic interpretations. These sites are usually created by Muslims who've had access to higher education and have acquired the skills to navigate and contribute to information sharing online (Bunt, 2009; Fornas, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden, & Sveningsson, 2002).

Much research has been conducted concerning the content and effects of Islamic material online (Larsen, 2001), but academics have highlighted the lack of existing research concerning the motivations behind creating it (Ho, Lee, & Hameed, 2008; Campbell, 2005). Campbell attributes this lack to the range of motivations for religious activity online being too wide (Campbell, 2005).

Bunt suggests the act of sharing religious information online stems from 'the primary ethos of religious knowledge and expression: in the eyes of believers, [sharing] transcends the digital and connects the individual with God' (Bunt, 2009: 114). By sharing the information, the believer not only seeks to encourage and enlighten others but also understands the act as servitude, or in accordance to the wishes of a higher being.

A survivalist approach argues that diasporic cultures create online content to counteract the imposition of an overbearing dominant culture (Karim, 2009). However, this explanation doesn't address the believer who uses the internet as a reflexive platform to strengthen his faith.

Research in the late 1990s on North American Muslim leaders and their motivations for putting content online found that information was uploaded to supplement offline practices and attract visitors to the faith (Zaleski, 1997). This research doesn't, however, address content producers who are not held accountable as leaders of religious organizations.

Bunt mentions pride in religion, protection and reinforcement of culture, and defence mechanisms as possible motivators. He also theorizes about how religious sites could be inherently competitive, because they are created as reactive responses (Bunt, 2009).

Howard takes a non-competitive approach, as he found that people engage in general religious discourse to either negotiate ideas and interpretations or to explore a revelatory truth (Howard, 2000). Howard's findings are broad and allow for the possibility of both causal and arational motivation (Hursthouse, 1991).

An arationalist approach would argue that motivations are not necessarily conscious and planned. As arational action, motivation can exist simply as an emotion, desire or impulse (Hursthouse, 1991). Bunt posits that the internet encourages emotional and impulsive activity among Muslims due to its accessibility and the immediacy of action (Bunt, 2009).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

With respect to relevant research and literature, this research explores the socio-psychological aspects of religious content production online; therefore, the conceptual framework that both justifies and guides the research methodology includes:

- Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory
- Affiliative Motivation and Public Narratives
- A consideration of Daniel Pink's theory on motivations in the post-enlightenment era

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) emphasizes the influence of intergroup relations on the individual and maintains that social constructs have a large impact on behaviour. They can encourage competition within social groups, empower the individual with group support, or cause the individual to take action on behalf of a social affiliation. SIT also assumes that individuals have a collection of identities through which to act, and that these identities become salient in their relative social contexts. SIT seeks to explain individual behavioural choices as products of social interaction, relative to the strength of the social construct affiliation (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995); 'the chronic relative salience of a person's identity determines his or her behavioural responses' (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995: 265).

Self categorization theory (SCT) builds on the SIT assumption that individuals have a multitude of identities relative to social constructs and that these affiliations vary in strength. However, SCT argues for a hierarchy of identities linked to group affiliation. This means that, for the individual, some social construct affiliations are stronger and more influential to behaviour than others (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell, 1987). This concept is integral to the framework of this research because it validates a comparative analysis of the strength of motivations, and by extension, the strength of the group affiliation creating the motivations.

Affiliative Motivation and Public Narratives

The concept of Affiliative Motivation addresses the desire for social interaction within a certain group as an agent for action. Actions as a result of Affiliative Motivation are in the intent of 'establishing, maintaining or restoring a positive emotional relationship with another group' (Heyns, Veroff and Atkinson, 1958). Incorporating Affiliative Motivation into the conceptual framework is important because of the relationship Ammerman draws between identity formation and communities. Similar to SIT, each social construct and the solidarities within it contribute to a part of the ascribing individual's identity and thus to his agency for action. Ammerman emphasizes however, that the aforementioned multiplicity of identities means that agents for action must originate from affiliation with different communities. Furthermore, the 'core self' of the individual is continuously renegotiating itself in response to different social contexts, retaining elements from those contexts as influential factors for future action (Ammerman, 2003).

Affiliative Motivation can also be subconscious. Public narratives are created by social constructs and can subconsciously shape the actions of the individual. 'Social institutions provide recognized accounts one can give of one's behaviour, accounts that identify where one belongs, what one is doing and why' (Ammerman, 2003: 214). Individuals can therefore experience Affiliative Motivation intrinsically, without having consciously rationalized the motive. Ammerman attests that all identities are affected by public narratives, and that action is a result of the multiplicity of public narratives (Ammerman, 2003).

Community affiliation is integral to identity formation (Dawson, 2004). Recognizing the multiplicity of affiliations and the influence those affiliations play in shaping the action of the individual, it is useful to conceptualise second and third generation British Muslims as members of multiple communities, therefore ascribing to multiple public narratives. By asserting that the activities of online content producers are influenced by affiliation with multiple public narratives, the conceptual framework allows for the categorization of motivations as associated with particular social constructs, thus facilitating comparative analysis.

Autonomy, mastery and purpose

Daniel Pink writes about intrinsic motivations, and asserts that in a post-enlightenment era, intrinsic motivations are stronger than what he terms 'reward-based' motivations. Pink proposes the three strongest intrinsic motivators are autonomy, mastery and purpose. Autonomy addresses the desire to take control over the experiences and relationships in one's own life. Mastery includes both the desire to excel at a task and the ability to choose what the task is. Finally, purpose as a motivator is defined as the desire to contribute to the greater good of a society. Pink's assessment of post-enlightenment motivators is particularly suited to research in religious content production online. An increase in control over social activity, or autonomy, is a predominant characteristic of online activity (Dawson and Hennebry, 2004). Mastery in content production online, a level of media production literacy (Livingstone, 2009), is increasingly valuable to self-representation, and acts as a motivation both in the process of achieving the skills and the achievement itself (Pink, 2010). Fulfilling a sense of purpose as a motivator is not a new concept, but with advances in information sharing technologies, the act of sharing knowledge and ideas online is increasingly effective in collaborative work and the democratization of ideas. (Slevin, 2000; Hadden and Cowan, 2000). Hence the spectrum of possibilities for purposeful content production online broadens with advancement in information sharing technologies.

Application of conceptual framework

This research will conceptualize British Muslims who are active in a religious content production culture as affiliated with three distinct yet overlapping social constructs. Together, the research literature and conceptual framework create the following social constructs to be explored in identifying motivations:

- As Muslims, or members of diasporic religious communities, there is the possibility of intergenerational tensions and a shift in religious authority that may impact how individuals see themselves and communicate within the Muslim community through online content production.
- As British citizens, there is the opportunity for inter-religious dialogue and communication. There is also a possibility of sensitivities and defence mechanisms created by the current environment of 'Islamophobia' and societal misconceptions about the nature of Islam, all of which may have an impact on online content production.
- Finally, as part of a content production online culture, second- and third-generation British Muslims are finding new ways to critically discuss and disseminate ideas concerning their religious beliefs, which may impact the nature of the content production.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

This empirical research has two aims:

First, it will attempt to identify motivations for religious content creation online among second- and third-generation British Muslims who voluntarily maintain blogs and websites. These motivations will be identified in respect to the three aforementioned social constructs and guided by the following sets of secondary questions:

- In relation to being a member of a Muslim community, do they feel an obligation to share their knowledge as highly educated Muslims? Are there intergenerational tensions regarding online participation in religious dialogue which affect content creation? How do they approach religious discussion with other Muslims?
- In relation to being a member of British society, is there a sense of wanting to defend Islamic beliefs and practices against societal misconceptions? Is there a desire to engage in inter-religious dialogue with British peers of differing beliefs?

- In relation to being part of a religious content production culture, is content production simply a hobby? Is it collaborative or does it contain elements of competiveness? What role do online communities play?

The second research aim is to identify trends, patterns and themes of motivation within and across the social construct affiliations. This will allow for a comparative analysis of the relative strengths of the affiliations, and seek to determine whether or not one social construct affiliation provides stronger motivations than another for creating religious content online.

Clarification

Because the distinction between culture and religion is frequently blurred in western discourse regarding Islam, the focus of this research will be narrowed to content creators producing Islamic-oriented content, as opposed to Muslims creating content related to cultural issues like appropriate clothing or *halal* food. If respondents produce content on a variety of subjects including Islam, it will be made clear to them that the research only pertains to their Islam-related content.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Much of the research on Islamic activity online has applied either content analysis (Bunt, 2009) or ethnography (Howard, 2000) as the principle methodology. This has enabled researchers to map the religious activity of Muslims online and study the content of the discourse. However, with content analysis the researcher is restricted to the information provided online. Ethnography, whilst it provides psychological insight into interaction among users, fails to engage the respondent in self-reflection. Ethnography has also been applied to research in media production among Muslims, but the research tends to focus on media created as a response to 'Islamophobic' sentiment in the West (DeLeeuw and Rydin, 2007). Finally, western research in general has been criticized for homogenizing representations of Muslims online and disregarding the diversity in religious practices (Bunt, 2009). Therefore, in order to attain personal accounts containing self-reflection and individuality, I will conduct my empirical research in the form of semi-structured individual interviews.

In order to look for trends and patterns in the motivations of content producers, the research method needed to allow my respondents to express themselves fully, thus providing me with a thorough and reflexive account of their content production online. This increased amount of information is also useful in comparative analysis, as interviews are the most reliable

method for providing enough information to identify commonalities among narratives of respondents (Warren, 2002). Interviews also allow for discussion regarding both the production of the content online and influential, offline elements of the respondent's personality.

Because this research explores the origins of individual motivation, data collection also needed to be at a very personal level. The semi-structured interview was determined to be the most useful method of research, as it provides personal accounts on an individual basis, allowing the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and motivations of individuals in relation to the social constructs with which they engage (Gaskell, 2000).

Finally, it was decided that the interviews could be either computer-mediated or conducted face-to-face. Computer-mediated communication affords the respondent an added level of comfort, allowing him to thoroughly consider and respond to the questions in his own time. Some research suggests this comfort can lead to greater self-disclosure (Hargie, 2006). However, typing out answers can also be laborious and time-consuming, so respondents were also given the option of a face-to-face interview.

Sampling and data gathering

The first step in indentifying possible respondents was to search through British Muslim organizations online and find the 'blogroll' or 'links' section on their pages. Emails were sent out to these organizations explaining the research and asking if they could recommend any blogs or places to find them. This was moderately successful, evoking several responses with links to independent sites or other organizations. Facebook was also used to locate Muslim organizations; I was able to post messages on the 'wall' of the organization, asking if any of the members kept their own blog containing Islamic content or if they knew anyone who did. This was a very successful technique; several people responded directly and offered to contribute to the project. Academics with similar areas of research were also contacted and asked if they had come across anything relevant; this was also moderately useful.

The majority of the search, however, was through the blogs themselves. The networked nature of the blogosphere led to the discovery of dozens of Muslim bloggers in Britain very quickly. Most bloggers had enough information on their pages to indicate whether or not they lived in Britain. Personal emails were sent to bloggers, explaining the project and asking if they would be interested in enriching the research. The site was then scanned for 'blogrolls' or links to other personal blogs. Most blogs had over ten links to other personal blogs, so this

technique, though time-consuming, proved the most effective way of locating respondents. The initial process of searching for respondents spanned two weeks, with around 150-200 emails sent to organizations, academics and bloggers. The emails emphasized that the blog or site had to be maintained voluntarily, in order to exclude monetary incentive as a variable for motivations.

Thirty-four people responded with advice, information about themselves or offers to be interviewed, from which 13 were selected who fit the criteria of (1) being British, (2) practicing Islam and (3) creating content that directly relates to Islam for a personal blog or voluntarily maintained religious website. The respondents varied in age, with the youngest being 19 and the eldest, 42. Lifestyles varied as well; most lived in Britain, but the few who didn't had grown up in Britain and were currently abroad. Some were working professionals, while others were students or stay-at-home mothers. The variety of backgrounds was advantageous, because respondents still shared affiliations with the three social constructs outlined in the conceptual framework.

Obstacles in sampling

As expected, research into Islamic content production online was a sensitive subject. Several respondents were wary of the research intentions at first, presumably because of the current perceptions of Islam in British society and the amount of research regarding extremist activity online. Some were hesitant in agreeing to become respondents until motivations for conducting the research were explained; some even enquired into my personal impressions of Islam. However, after being assured that the research was not related to extremist activity and was focused on the individual creating the content rather than the content itself, all enquiring respondents agreed to take part.

It also became evident throughout the sampling process that there were private social networks within the sampling group. Some respondents admitted that they waited to commit to an interview until an acquaintance had been interviewed first. Another interviewee mentioned that he'd encouraged a friend who'd also been contacted to respond to my email. One of the difficulties in the sampling process was a lack of initial points of contact in Muslim communities. Contacts were made as interviews progressed and trust was established with interviewees; this possibly lengthened the process of securing interviews.

Proximity to respondents also created difficulty in trying to have face-to-face interviews. One of the respondents lived in Manchester and another in Leeds, and funding limitations made it

impossible to offer compensation for train journeys or travel to meet them. One Skype audio-chat was conducted with an interviewee in Bradford, but with other interviewees, such Respondent F in Saudi Arabia, time-zone differences negated the possibility of live correspondence. Therefore, three live interviews were conducted: two face-to-face interviews in London and one Skype chat; ten of the interviews were via email.

Topic guide

The topic guide for the interviews was divided into three categories: motivations related to affiliation with Muslim communities, motivations related to affiliation with the wider British society and motivations related to online content production culture. The categories were not made apparent in the interview, lest the respondent be led to answer affectedly. A point was also made not to ask questions using words like 'motivation' and 'purpose'; instead, questions addressed views, beliefs and personal feelings and how they related to the blog or site. The questions were designed to be open-ended with room for elaboration if responses were particularly strong.

Regarding the respondents' Muslim communities, questions focused on the reactions and levels of support from older generations and peers. This was meant to elicit information regarding intergenerational tensions and whether or not those tensions served as motivations for creating content. Respondents were also asked about their personal faith, including where they go for guidance and what issues they see with regards to Islamic religious authority online. It was noted that many of the respondents methodically and thoroughly referenced scripture and religious scholars in their writings or posted links to other sources of Islamic knowledge. Therefore, some interview questions allowed respondents to discuss why they included this content and why religious authority was so important to them.

Regarding the respondents' affiliation with the wider British society, questions focused on interactions and perceptions. Questions revolved around the value of interreligious dialogue and how the respondents' opinions of said value are reflected in their online content.

Regarding perceptions of British society, questions like 'what would you want a non-Muslim to think if he/she visited your site?' allowed respondents to discuss both what they sees as the non-believer's current perception of the Islamic faith and idealist notions of the non-believer's perception of Islam. Being able to compare the depths with which the respondents chose to discuss their interactions, perceptions and ideals allowed for a comparison of

whether motivations were stronger in wanting to defend Islam or learn from inter-religious dialogue.

Regarding online content production, questions revolved around motivations of mastery. Questions focused on emotional, creative and intellectual expression, technical discovery and communities or networks online. This section of the interview was the most heavily personalized to individual sites; questions addressed specific site elements, such as blog-rolls, graphic elements, feedback and running conversations in 'comment' sections. These questions were particularly important because the technical aspects of the sites varied greatly and needed to be discussed so as to avoid false assumptions about the relationship between site design and faith. These questions also helped to avoid assuming that Islamic belief is a primary motivator, when a respondent's Islamic identity could be secondary in comparison to his love of technology or writing. Finally, questions about feedback were included to explore topics like self-expression and mastery.

The ends of the interviews included some generically provocative questions, such as 'what surprised you most about keeping a blog?' and 'talk me through the emotional cycle of composing a lengthy blog post', both to end on a light-hearted note and to allow respondents to include any thoughts they hadn't been able to bring up during the interviews.

Observations on the utility of the semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview format is designed for self-reflexivity and improved effectiveness in the data-gathering process (Flick, 2004), allowing the researcher to adjust the interview topic guide and apply best practices in phrasing and language throughout the process. This proved to be a particularly useful aspect of the methodology. For example, one of the initial questions was, 'do you consider yourself a part of an online community, and if so, how do you know it's a community?' The first few respondents seemed apt to say that they weren't a part of a community if they could not recall a specific group of people with whom they affiliated. So the question was altered to reference something on the respondent's site reminiscent of community behaviour, such as a 'I Support Muslimah Bloggers' graphic or a link to the 'Muslim Bloggers Directory'. After identifying an element on the site common to communities, respondents seemed to recognise an affiliation and give more insightful responses. This aspect of the semi-structured interview process allowed for the conceptual framework to exist in the topic guide throughout the 13 interviews, ensuring all respondents addressed affiliation with the three social structures. At the same time, the structure allowed

for the flexibility to tailor interview questions to each respondent's site and content. This allowed respondents to elaborate on issues about which they felt more compelled to talk.

Coding and analysis

The coding and analysis for this research was largely inspired by methods of qualitative data analysis used by Jorgenson and Charmaz as discussed by Seidel (Seidel, 1998). Jorgensen highlights the importance of 'separating or disassembling of research materials into pieces', stating that searching for patterns in the pieces facilitates reassembling the coded data into something new (Jorgensen, 1989: 107). Charmaz describes how his analysis usually consists of repetitively coding and synthesizing. Codes are used to 'pull together and categorize a series of otherwise discrete events, statements and observations which they identify in the data' (Charmaz, 1983: 112). This process of breaking down the data and reassembling it repetitively, using codes to look for patterns and themes, was a useful approach to analysing the qualitative data amassed from 13 semi-structured interviews.

The 'sorting and sifting' process of the data analysis included several rounds of reorganizing the data. Reorganizing data as a method of data analysis is useful on three levels: it allows the researcher to revise the coding scheme, it reveals new things in the data, and it encourages new ways of thinking (Seidel, 1998). A variety of approaches was adopted in the multiple rounds of data reorganization, which allowed for the data to be depicted spatially, qualitatively and quantitatively. Side notes were taken throughout reorganization rounds.

The process

The repetitive reorganization method allowed for results to emerge at several stages in the analysis; therefore, details of the process will also include chronological commentary on the analysis. The repetitive reorganization analysis has been divided into steps for ease of reference.

Step 1: After all audio interviews were transcribed and email interviews formatted, the interviews underwent a primary coding to identify phrases or words that were emotional, descriptive or anecdotal and could be relevant to motivation.

Step 2: After the preliminary coding, subcategories of motivations were created under the initial categories of social constructs. For example, the Muslim community social construct contained subcategories like 'to promote genuine scholarship', 'to deepen personal faith' and

'to connect with an international Muslim *ummah* (community)'. Over twenty subcategories were created, written on note cards and arranged as labels on a grid, leaving one area for 'outliers' that did not fit into a subcategory.

Step 3: The data was then cut into over 300 slips of individual interview question responses; the slips were divided further if they contained more than one relevant idea. Responses were then sorted into the grid of motivation subcategories to give a visual representation of the spread of motivations across the categories and subcategories. After sorting, two motivation subcategories that had received no responses were eliminated. It is noteworthy that the initial outliers pile contained over 68 responses.

Steps 1-3 provided the first visual evidence that motivations were not evenly spread over categories of social constructs; the 'British society' social construct contained the least number of responses and the least variety of motivations.

Step 4: After sorting the responses into the grid, a qualitative spreadsheet was created for each category, containing all of the responses within its subcategories of motivation. This process facilitated summarization of lengthy responses and double-checked that responses were in the right subcategories. On occasion, this required reference back to the original transcript of an interview to check the context of the response. Creating the spreadsheets facilitated a renaming and synthesis of subcategories and the creation of a third tier of sub-subcategories of even greater specificity.[3]

Step 5: Putting the data into categorized spreadsheets also allowed for the data to be analysed quantitatively. Quantifiable data can be used in cross-referencing to highlight relationships that can then be explored qualitatively (Flick, 2004). In this research, responses within each subcategory were numbered with respect to the frequency of responses and not the content. For example, if two respondents both referred to their content as expressions of their personal faith, 'self-expression' included two separate entries of the same response. Furthermore, if one respondent referred to his content as serving Allah and educating non-Muslims, it was also treated as two separate responses.
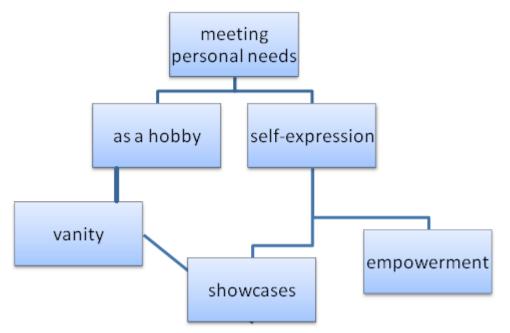
Quantifying the data in this way facilitated a reconsideration of subcategories containing few responses and led to the refinement of subcategories with too broad a range of responses. This refinement protected against generalizations. For example, 'deepening faith' and

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[3] See Appendix A for an outline of the spreadsheets that displays the categorization.

'accountability' were initially one sub-subcategory, until the data was transcribed into spreadsheets and it became clear they were connected yet separate.

Step 6: Concept maps were then drawn to explore connections within the categories. Connections and patterns discovered during mapping were then compiled with notes taken throughout the analysis process to collect themes and allow for a cross-reference of the categories. A separate concept map was drawn for each social construct category.

Concept maps allowed for the categorization to be depicted visually, enabling the drawing out of relationships, which led to major themes being constructed. For example, within the 'content production culture' category, 'hobby' and 'self-expression' as motivations had both been classified under the 'meeting personal needs' subcategory as separate and unconnected. However, after key words from responses were plotted onto the concept maps, including 'showcases', 'empowering' and 'vanity', a connection between 'hobby' and 'self-expression' was evident and a theme began to emerge. Figure A provides an illustration of the finding, taken from the 'content production culture' concept map.

Figure A

Step 7: Diagrams were then constructed to illustrate and organize new cross-category themes. A process which began with three categories and over 20 subcategories regarding motivations for creating content online produced four major themes and several additional observations.

Step 8: Finally, the original interviews were checked for evidence of the themes synthesised in the repetitive reorganization process. This was to ensure themes were not being synthesized from data taken too far out of context.

The final steps allowed for refinement and analysis of the themes, strengthening them with evidence from the original interview transcripts. Themes are useful because they summarize common attitudes and mentalities among respondents, giving a more holistic view that allows all three categories of motivation to overlap as they naturally would in the respondents' identities (Sahin, 2005). Themes also suggest future research areas and questions, which are noted in the following chapters.

INTERPRETATION: THEMES OF DESIRE AND OBLIGATION

Analysis revealed a theme of interplay between obligation and desire in writing about Islam-oriented issues. Respondents who desired to share learned religious knowledge with other Muslims perceived their audiences as either less fortunate in the ability to access knowledge or unidentified bar an eagerness to learn. The quantitative analysis revealed 37 direct references to a desire for sharing learned religious knowledge with others, including:

> 'I am lucky to live where there are resources' (Respondent G);
> 'To enlighten other Muslims…who may be younger' (Respondent C); and
> 'People who may not have had the same access to information I did' (Respondent C).

The above responses represent an approach where the audience is perceived as less fortunate. Alternatively, there were over twice as many references to a desire for sharing that took a more revelatory approach. These included:

> 'I was learning great things and sharing it with the world' (Respondent E);
> 'I post verses I feel are underused and compelling' (Respondent D); and
> 'By imparting knowledge, I'm equipping many more' (Respondent C).

Some references suggested the possibility of an obligatory nature, such as, 'Because it's beautiful, I have to frame it publicly…an injustice to keep beauty to yourself' (Respondent B).

However, it was unclear to whom or what the respondent felt obliged. Obligation was more directly expressed in the promotion of genuine scholarship. The majority of respondents referenced their sources and content meticulously. In the interviews, respondents accounted

for this in terms of an obligation to the faith to promote genuine scholarship. Quantitative analysis revealed 37 related responses, which included:

'I visit only reputable bookshops for my material' (Respondent J); and
'Any religious text I quote from is attributed to a higher authority therefore faults in representing them would be an avoidable mistake' (Respondent D).

Analysis of the original interviews revealed a correlation between the desire to share learned religious information and an emphasis on assuring the audience that the respondent's religious knowledge is of a high standard.

It is also important to note that in the majority of responses related to the promotion of genuine scholarship, there is a sense of possession that accompanies the promotion. When asked where they acquire their content, several respondents referred to having personal collections of Islamic books. One respondent developed a collection of sites which she personally rated for quality (Respondent D). Another wrote, 'I have a list of reliable and authentic scholars' (Respondent J).

It is worth noting, however, that themes of obligation and desire must be treated carefully when analysed in a religious context. A common idea in religious doctrines, including those of Islam, is that obligations coming from within the doctrine ideally become desirable in the mind of the believer as he progresses in the faith. For example, worship is an obligation of the Christian doctrine, which also attests that a believer will come to regard worship as a joyous and fulfilling activity.

THEMES OF EMPOWERMENT

Information sharing can also be looked through the theme of empowerment. The connection between sharing and empowerment became evident in responses regarding affiliation with 'content production culture'. During analysis, subcategories of motivation within the social construct of 'content production culture' included 'as a means for self-expression' and 'as a hobby or skill to cultivate'; quantitatively, these were the two most prevalent subcategories for motivation with 39 and 44 responses respectively.

Self-expression was widely referred to as motivation across the interviews, but it was noted that the language used in discussing this self-expression often contained words or phrases of empowerment, including: 'liberates', 'showcases', 'doesn't apologize', 'amplifies', 'captures',

and 'write about anything'. Once a theme of empowerment had been recognized within the subcategory of 'self-expression', analysis revealed an interesting correlation with the motivation as 'a hobby or skill to cultivate'.

Responses referring to religious content production as a hobby or skill were the most numerous of all motivations in this research. Responses were sorted into this subcategory if they proclaimed a love for production technologies, talked about taking the initiative to learn web production skills or reported acquiring production skills through instruction. Other responses that fell into this subcategory included:

> 'If I wasn't blogging, I'd be writing on a notepad' (Respondent H);
> 'Blogging is a hobby...if I wasn't blogging I'd be reading or designing' (Respondent E);
> 'I like to play around with the look of my page when it gets old...I do the same thing with my house' (Respondent E).

An interesting connection occurred in drawing the concept maps, when the 'empowerment of self-expression' was linked with 'content production as a hobby' and 'information sharing'. It was surmised that respondents not only enjoy the hobby and find satisfaction in cultivating the skill, but also may be empowered by having their products 'amplified' and 'showcased'. This amplification can, by nature of its accessibility online, also be interpreted as information sharing. Information sharing was revealed to be linked to production as a hobby, as demonstrated in responses such as:

> 'Thank God for all the Geek-ish bloggers who share their tricks' (Respondent A);
> 'I played with someone else's design' (Respondent M);
> 'I was honoured to be a moderator [for an online forum]...I learned how to use *Wordpress*' (Respondent J); and
> 'Sometimes it takes another to help you mould your content into something presentable' (Respondent L).

Original interviews were checked for the coexistence of the three motivations, revealing a positive relationship among the empowerment of self-expression, content production as a hobby and networked information sharing. Networked information sharing is a way of facilitating and expediting cultivation of production skills, which are then empowered by the freedom of self-expression. Through self-expression, the content (or product of the skill) is made available for networked sharing. Figure B depicts this relationship as a cycle. This cycle is not an exclusive idea; it is common with many types of secular online content production.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that a comparatively strong set of motivators for creating religious content is not related to religious beliefs or affiliation.
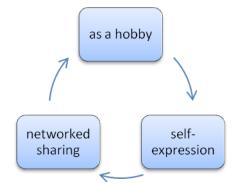

Figure B

THEMES OF REACTION AND INTERACTION

Within the category of 'as a British citizen', themes of reaction and interaction began to emerge in the subcategories of 'see value in inter-religious dialogue' and 'desire to defend/positively represent Islam'.

A quantitative analysis revealed 38 responses related to wanting to defend/positively represent Islam, among which there were several common ideas. Firstly, the majority of responses referred to a widespread misunderstanding of Muslims by the wider British society as uneducated, dissimilar, treating women as 'slaves to men' and followers of a 'brain-frazzling extreme' (Respondent D). One respondent remarked, 'I feel that Islam is the most misunderstood religion on the planet' (Respondent J).

Secondly, although respondents attributed misunderstanding of Islam to ignorance and misrepresentation on the part of British society, the majority of respondents also revealed a desire to proactively and constructively address misunderstandings. Respondents used positive verbs like 'impress', 'rectify', 'clarify', 'relate to', 'give insight', 'educate', 'introduce' and 'clear up'. There was a clear commonality among responses in this subcategory in that respondents expressed a desire to help non-believers regard Islam as they regard it. Examples of this include:

'I want people to see that Islam is not difficult, it's beautiful' (Respondent J);
'I will take the opportunity to introduce others to this peaceful and content attitude' (Respondent D); and

'I hope to give insight into Muslim women—that we have voices and brains' (Respondent K).

Analysis revealed that this proactive and constructive reaction as a motivation to create content was linked to the subcategory of 'value interreligious dialogue' as a motivation. Respondents who did see the value in inter-religious dialogue spoke of it in terms of 'finding common ground' and using that common ground to foster mutual understanding. This is demonstrated by the following examples:

'People fear what they don't understand and dialogue helps' (Respondent E);

'There is lots of value in dialogue with non-believers...to build understanding and clear misconceptions' (Respondent G); and

'It is aimed to bring out the human understanding behind a person's decision to change their life forever' (Respondent L).

Interreligious dialogue is referred to as 'important', 'useful', 'valuable', 'really nice', 'interesting' and 'progressive' among its 23 responses. Upon checking against the original interview transcripts, it became apparent there was a positive relationship between the subcategories of 'desire to defend/positively represent Islam' and 'value interreligious dialogue', meaning the same respondents who desired to defend/positively represent Islam also saw the value in inter-religious dialogue. Therefore, it is possible that respondents who 'value interreligious dialogue' do so as a reaction to the initial recognition of misunderstanding among the wider British society. The relationship is visually depicted in Figure C.
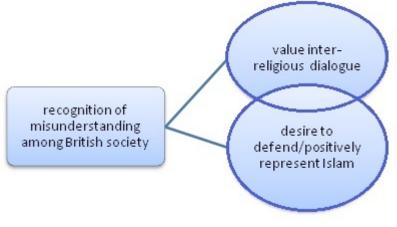

Figure C

Further research could be done to investigate the extent to which content creators, upon recognition of the value of interreligious dialogue, continue the activity as an obligation rather than a desire.

It is interesting to note, however, that discussions about interreligious dialogue prompted no desire or mention of evangelism. As aforementioned, a desire for mutual understanding and a desire to clear up misconceptions existed among respondents, but recruiting non-believers for the Islamic faith did not appear to be a primary motive. Two respondents specifically addressed this (Respondents D and B), but the rest made no direct mention.

THEMES DEVELOPED FROM 'OUTLIER' MOTIVATIONS

In the initial sorting of responses, an 'outlier' category was created for responses that conveyed motivation but did not fit into any of the three categories. These 'outliers' proved to be significant components throughout the repetitive reorganization, as they were eventually incorporated into subcategories and aided in developing themes that were not anticipated in the literature review.

'The stepping stone'

A recurring theme among respondents was the reference to religious activity online as a sort of 'stepping stone' to future opportunities. One respondent remarked,

> As a Pakistani Muslim sometimes I do hear the question, 'why are you wasting your talent online?' But that's from individuals who forget that the www [internet] is a stepping stone (Respondent D).

Another respondent remarked that online space acted as a platform for moving ideas to another space (Respondent H); others viewed online spaces as showcases that led to job opportunities in writing about Islamic issues (Respondents C and D). One respondent saw himself as having evolved spiritually as a result of his content production:

> If you'd asked me this stuff 2, 4 months ago, I probably would have given much more definitive answers...but probably as a result of blogging and as a result of the interaction I've had with people, I've had to re-evaluate that stance and assumption (Respondent B).

In referring back to the original interviews, analysis revealed this mentality of viewing content production as a tool had a positive relationship with motivations to deepen personal faith and build relationships within communities. This was interpreted to mean that religious content production can be regarded as one of many ways to exercise religiosity, and that the production of religious content is not necessarily the ultimate goal of the creator. This finding supports research that dichotomises the internet as being either a tool for use within a wider social construct or as a space for experimentation through communication yet points out the likelihood that activity is of the former (Poster, 2005).

This approach of viewing content production as a tool or step in religious exploration instead of the product or end result provides a new direction for future research. It would be worthwhile to compare online content production with other ways of exploring beliefs and religiosity, such as focus groups or family discussions, and identify any common characteristics among believers who choose online content production regarding how they perceive their personal faiths.

Secondary motivations: maintaining a Muslim community

Originally, the 'desire to maintain a Muslim community' was categorized as a motivation in itself. However, through analysis it became evident that the desire to maintain a community was linked to other motivations as a means of support and thus became a secondary motivation. When asked about the importance of maintaining a community online, respondents alluded to the community as facilitating activities such as sharing learned knowledge, promoting genuine scholarship and expressing oneself. This is evident through references to the online community including:

> 'My blog is hugely appreciated by many...I dedicate all my free time' Respondent J);
> 'Relationships of friendship and affection keep the blog going' (Respondent J); and
> 'At one point I was thinking of closing [my blog] and I received emails and comments with readers telling me that they have benefited from my blog' (Respondent E).

Referring back to the original interviews revealed that motivations to 'maintain Muslim community' online were common among nearly all of the respondents, indicating that an online community is flexible enough to support a range of activities. Communities were described as crucial to maintaining online activity; however, no respondent spoke of maintaining the community as the goal or end. The community was frequently referred to as a beneficial bi-product or an unexpected perk of keeping a blog or site.

Some respondents also spoke about how online communities sometimes extended support to offline activity.

> 'We look out for each other...when [friend of respondent] was having trouble supporting herself and wanted to go to the States, bloggers donated and raised the money for her and her children's flights. Another example is [friend of respondent]. His son is autistic and when he wrote about how he and his wife are having trouble paying for therapy for his son, bloggers lent a hand (Respondent E).

More research could be done into the relationship between offline and online support for religious activity and communities.

Differentiation between culture and religion

The ability to distinguish between culture and religion was discussed by many of the respondents. One respondent recounted how he made the distinction between Pakistani culture and Islamic practice while in his twenties and can now recognize the problematic lack of discernment in some of his family members:

> It borders on being quite disturbing sometimes. I'm sure that a lot of Muslims in the West are going through the same thing, where they sort of separate the Muslim identity from the ethnic identity to figure out, you know, what does a British Muslim mean? (Respondent A)

Another spent roughly two minutes describing the differences and tensions between Salafi and Sufi beliefs, which is an influential area of contention in his writing (Respondent B). He spoke about how his blog frequently addresses the religious perspectives of Sufism in Islam, and how it introduces other Muslims to interpreting scripture with a different approach. 'I often revisit what we call the difficult verses. Jihad is a difficult verse...it makes a lot of progressive Muslims uncomfortable' (Respondent B).

Another respondent discussed older generations taking a cultural approach to faith because, 'they didn't necessarily have the tools in front of them to actually critique their faith' (Respondent C). This was in reference to his reasons for wanting to equip Muslim youth with

communication skills. Another respondent said he sometimes, 'Takes care to lay out the issues because Deshi[4] people may not understand' (Respondent M).

However, misconceptions of the culture-religion distinction were attributed to both Muslim communities and the wider British society. One woman discussed how aspects of her culture lead non-believers to confuse it with misconceptions about her religion:

> 'I live in a diverse community in North England where even my neighbours living 100 yards away think my skin colour (brown-ish) and dress (khimar = headscarf) means I am a slave to a man and I will have many, many children (they have said this to me)' (Respondent D).

This means that the social constructs of both 'British society' and 'Muslim community' could provide motivation for addressing the distinction between culture and religion in online content production. Quantitatively, there were more responses concerning the ability to differentiate between culture and religion within Muslim communities, suggesting that addressing the distinction has stronger motivations coming from affiliation with Muslim communities.

Intergenerational tensions

Aside from comments on the difference between generations in their abilities to differentiate between culture and religion, intergenerational tensions were not a frequented topic. This was counterintuitive to existing research into Muslim communities, which suggested intergenerational tensions were a heavily discussed issue in Muslim societies. In regards to creating religion-oriented content online however, most respondents remarked that their older friends and relatives knew little about their online activity and that this was predominantly due to lack of interest.

Conflicting content

It is worthy of note that content analysis of the selected sites in this research could have yielded very different and inaccurate results in terms of identifying motivations. In preparing the semi-structured interviews for this research, sites were scanned for an idea of content and topic tendencies. The majority of the religious content created by the respondents contained

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[4] "Deshi" is a term referring to peoples from South Asia.

messages of praise to Allah or encouragement for readers, who were assumed to be believers, to become more devout. An initial scan of the sites gave the impression that content was created in service to Allah or as a religious act. However, analysis of individual semi-structured interviews revealed only three brief references to creating content in service to Allah. This suggested that service was not a primary motivator.

This finding correlates with Campbell's dichotomisation of religion. In respect to Campbell's theory, this body of research would suggest that religious content production online is spiritual rather than sacramental. Furthermore, it supports a body of research which suggests online activity augments offline activity rather than replacing it (Horsfall, 2000; Helland, 2000; Dawson, 2004; Bauwens, 1996).

Islam in the west: over-hyped?

Existing research into the effects of religion online and current shifts in Western Islam also suggests content creators are involved in 'updating' Islam or at least supporting progressive movements in doing so. However, very few of the respondents voiced any desire to change the religious beliefs and practices within western Muslim communities, instead focusing on desires to improve western understanding of existing beliefs and practices. However, these progressive Islamic movements are active and well-organized (Respondents B and C) in the West, so it is possible that a more thorough understanding would require interviews with these particular activists as well.

THE SUMMARY: A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Campbell noted that motivations among content creators are difficult to research because of the broad range of responses (Campbell, 2005); there is a danger that themes can over-generalize. The process of disassembling interviews into pieces of data indeed allowed for reorganization, synthesis and discovery of themes, as existing research suggested it would. However, it is important to keep in mind that the interview transcript contains the narrative of a multi-layered person; the products of research are themes and observations reconstructed and synthesized from the narratives of holistic beings. Therefore, themes discovered in this research were checked against original transcripts for evidence of elements integral to the themes to ensure reconstructions accurately represented the sample.

Surprisingly, three of the four themes discovered in this research were strongly associated with the social constructs surmised from existing research and the conceptual framework. The theme of 'sharing versus obligation' functioned almost entirely within the social

construct of 'Muslim communities'. The theme of 'empowerment' was drawn from motivations relating to 'content production culture' and could easily be applied to secular content production as well. The theme of 'reaction versus interaction' largely applied to affiliation with 'British society'. The tendency for the themes to exist primarily within the social construct categories creates an interesting point of contention with existing research. Muslim scholars like Ramadan suggest British Muslims can utilize skills of differentiating between culture and religion to integrate Islam into British society because they are able to recognize their own overlapping layers of British and Muslim identity. Social psychology research adds that social construct affiliation shapes these layers of identity and actions. However, the fact that the emergent themes of motivation in this research fit neatly into the social constructs with minimal crossover suggests that the respondents' layers of identity are not overlapping or connected. In other words, this research suggests that in the minds of respondents, their identities as Muslims, British citizens and members of an online content production culture are kept relatively separate.

Findings also challenged existing research in terms of methodology and expert opinions. Recent research into Islam in the West suggests Islam could be headed for significant changes in its western practices and beliefs and that tech-savvy British Muslims have the power to instigate these changes. The argument that Islamic practices may be evolving remains unchallenged; however, the respondents in this research made no significant references to desires to change religious practices in the West. Respondents did display strong desires to protect and support legitimate sources of religious authority, however, and remain influential in their abilities to disseminate that knowledge. In other words, respondents indicated desires to protect existing beliefs and practices, but not to create new ones. This is supported by the 'stepping stone' theme, which challenged the notion of content production as the ultimate goal; instead, it suggests content production can exist as a step towards other achievements, such as deepening one's faith or connecting with other producers.

If the opinions of experts don't match the sentiments of the demographic they're assessing, future research needs to be refocused on the content creators themselves. Furthermore, future research needs to employ methods of interviewing as well as content analysis, as this research pointed out the possibility for severe incongruence in findings between the two methodologies.

In comparing the themes of motivation, the desire and obligation to share knowledge within the Muslim community appears to be the strongest. This includes motivations of wanting to

promote genuine scholarship, share learned knowledge and deepen personal faith. However, the theme of empowerment existed in all of the respondent transcripts as well.

Empowerment by way of self-expression, cultivation of skills and hobbies, and information sharing is strengthened further with support and encouragement from online communities; future research could focus on the kinds of support online communities provide in a British Muslim context. Regarding religious content, producers are motivated to share and produce information by support from both the Muslim communities and the current environment of misconceptions and 'Islamophobia' in the wider British society.

This research reveals that the desires to share information, cultivate skills and attain empowerment and support from a community all exist as motivations for creating religious content online. The secular nature of these motivations should be promising to Muslim scholars like Ramadan, Yusef and Hamid who desire integration for British Muslims through foundations of common ground. A culture of online content production may indeed provide a new space for British Muslims to integrate Islam into the West, allowing them to relate through motivations of self-expression, information sharing, and interreligious dialogue in new online communities.

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Names and websites have not been included in this publication, in respect of interview respondents

Appendix A

Step 4 in Coding and Analysis
Organizational database of spreadsheets
Visually depicts:
> *(1) social construct categories*
> *(2) motivation subcategories*
> *(3) refined motivation sub-subcategories*

As a Muslim	As a British citizen	As an online content producer
For Self	Reactionary	Meeting personal needs
-Deepening Faith -Accountability -Desire to maintain a Muslim *ummah* -Connect to a British Muslim *ummah* -Connect to an international Muslim *ummah*	-Defend Islam -Represent Islam positively	-Form of self expression -Emotional Effects -As a hobby/enjoy cultivating skill
For other Muslims	Interaction	Interaction with others
-Desire to share learned knowledge -To discuss issues within Muslim *ummah* -To address the diversity of Islam	-See value in inter-religious dialogue	-Preferred to offline communication -Fast information sharing -Self-reflexivity aspect -Competition
For the practice of Islam		
-Support/promote genuine scholarship		
For Allah (God)		
-For his pleasure -Obligatory as Muslim		