

## DIGITAL MEDIA AND MUSLIM WOMEN: RECLAIMING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ONLINE ISLAMIC DISCOURSE

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### **Abstract:**

*In the digital age, Muslim women have increasingly turned to online platforms to engage with Islamic knowledge, challenge patriarchal interpretations, and reclaim religious narratives. This article explores how digital media is facilitating empowerment for Muslim women by providing accessible avenues for learning, expression, and community building. Through the analysis of social media, YouTube channels, blogs, and online forums, the study examines how Muslim women are reshaping traditional discourses on gender and Islam. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, using content analysis and semi-structured interviews with Muslim female influencers and scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds. Findings reveal that digital platforms serve as transformative spaces where religious identity and feminist consciousness intersect. The article highlights both the potentials and limitations of online Islamic discourse in resisting hegemonic interpretations and promoting agency among Muslim women. It contributes to scholarly debates on gender, religion, and technology by foregrounding the voices of Muslim women in digital religious spaces.*

### **Keywords:**

*Muslim Women, Digital Media, Online Islamic Discourse, Empowerment, Gender and Religion, Islamic Feminism, Social Media Activism*

### **Introduction:**

The intersection of gender, religion, and technology has become a critical site of analysis in contemporary sociological and media studies. In recent years, the proliferation of digital platforms has created new avenues for marginalized groups to articulate their identities, engage in activism, and reshape dominant narratives. Among these groups, Muslim women have increasingly utilized digital media to express their religious beliefs, challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam, and foster global solidarity. This phenomenon, particularly evident in the context of online Islamic discourse, reveals the ways in which Muslim women are navigating and negotiating their roles within both religious and sociocultural frameworks. Through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, podcasts, and Islamic blogs, Muslim women are not only accessing religious knowledge but also actively participating in its reconstruction. These digital interventions mark a significant shift from traditional, male-dominated religious authority to more inclusive and participatory models of Islamic engagement (Bunt, 2018; Nadwi, 2013).

Historically, Islamic scholarship has been predominantly male-centered, with women's roles often confined to private or peripheral spaces in religious interpretation and leadership. This exclusion has not only marginalized women's voices in theological discourse but also led to the perpetuation of gendered interpretations of Islamic texts that reinforce patriarchal social norms (Wadud, 1999). However, with the rise of digital media, Muslim women have found opportunities to bypass conventional gatekeepers of religious authority. They now engage directly with sacred texts, reinterpret religious injunctions, and challenge cultural practices that contradict Islamic principles of justice, equity, and dignity. In doing so, they are reclaiming religious spaces and contributing to a more dynamic and diverse understanding of Islam.

The emergence of Islamic digital feminism is a notable development in this regard. Rooted in both faith and feminist consciousness, this form of activism utilizes digital platforms to address issues such as modesty, hijab, gender segregation, marriage, domestic violence, and women's education from a religiously informed perspective (Mahmood, 2005). Rather than rejecting Islam, many Muslim women activists seek to align feminist ideals with Islamic teachings, emphasizing the Qur'an's message of equality and the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) examples of inclusivity and justice. Online spaces thus become sites of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), where women engage with scholarly debates, reinterpret Hadith, and challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal jurisprudence (Haddad & Esposito, 2003). This reassertion of religious authority by women is not merely an act of empowerment but a form of resistance against both internal religious conservatism and external Islamophobic discourses.

In the diaspora, especially in Western contexts like the UK, USA, and Canada, Muslim women face the dual pressures of cultural conservatism within their communities and negative stereotyping from the wider society. Digital media provides a critical platform for these women to express their multifaceted identities and engage in counter-narratives. For example, hijab-wearing influencers and vloggers often use social media to challenge stereotypes that depict them as oppressed or voiceless, presenting instead narratives of choice, autonomy, and empowerment. In Pakistan and other South Asian societies, where conservative norms often restrict women's physical mobility and public participation, the internet offers a relatively safe and accessible space for religious learning and activism (Zia, 2009).

Importantly, the accessibility of digital tools has democratized religious engagement. Unlike traditional spaces of Islamic scholarship—such as madrasas and mosques—that often have gendered boundaries, the internet offers Muslim women opportunities to connect with scholars, access a wide range of tafsir (exegesis), and participate in theological discussions irrespective of their geographic or social location. This has led to the rise of female digital preachers, online Qur'an study circles, and Islamic YouTube channels led by women, many of whom possess formal religious training and advanced degrees in Islamic studies. These initiatives are not only reshaping religious discourse but also mentoring and inspiring a new generation of Muslim women (Zine, 2006).

Nevertheless, the digital empowerment of Muslim women is not without challenges. Online harassment, cyber surveillance, trolling, and accusations of *bid'ah* (innovation) are common forms of resistance faced by women who challenge conventional norms. Additionally, the commercialization of digital spaces, through influencer culture and brand collaborations, has sometimes led to the co-optation of Islamic symbols for consumerist ends. Critics argue that this may dilute the spiritual and intellectual integrity of online religious activism. Furthermore, not all digital spaces are inherently liberatory; some perpetuate conservative ideologies under the guise of piety, reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. Therefore, it is essential to approach the digital empowerment of Muslim women with a critical lens that recognizes both its potentials and limitations (Jamal, 2005).

The present study seeks to explore how Muslim women in both South Asian and Western contexts are utilizing digital media to reclaim their agency, reinterpret religious texts, and contest patriarchal norms. It examines the narratives, strategies, and discourses employed by Muslim women content creators, bloggers, religious educators, and influencers to assert their presence in the digital Islamic landscape. The study draws on a comparative framework, analyzing case studies

from Pakistan and the UK to highlight contextual variations in online religious engagement and empowerment.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on religion and digital media by centering Muslim women's voices—voices often neglected in both mainstream feminist theory and Islamic scholarship. Second, it offers insights into how technology is reshaping religious authority and participation in the 21st century. Third, it challenges monolithic representations of Muslim women by showcasing the diversity of thought, practice, and expression found in digital Islamic spaces.

In doing so, the research engages with key theoretical debates on Islamic feminism, postcolonial identity, religious authority, and digital activism. It positions Muslim women not as passive recipients of religious knowledge but as active producers, interpreters, and disseminators of Islamic discourse. Through digital platforms, they are transforming traditional boundaries, creating alternative epistemologies, and forging new solidarities across national and sectarian lines. This article, therefore, aims to foreground the agency of Muslim women in reclaiming religious discourse through digital means and to interrogate the broader implications of this transformation for gender, religion, and media studies.

### **Literature Review:**

The intersection of digital media, religion, and gender has emerged as a significant field of scholarly inquiry over the past two decades. Researchers have examined how digital technologies are transforming religious practices and discourses, with particular emphasis on marginalized voices, including Muslim women. This literature review outlines key academic contributions related to online Islamic discourse, gendered religious authority, and the digital empowerment of Muslim women in both Western and South Asian contexts.

Gary Bunt (2018) remains a foundational scholar in the study of cyber Islam. He argues that the internet has revolutionized Islamic expression by offering alternative spaces for discourse that transcend traditional institutional boundaries. According to Bunt, the digital realm has allowed for the emergence of “e-jihad,” “e-fatwa,” and a multiplicity of Islamic voices, among which Muslim women are becoming increasingly visible. This decentralization of religious authority has significant implications for gendered interpretations of Islam, as it enables women to challenge dominant patriarchal readings of the Qur'an and Hadith.

Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002) have laid important groundwork for Islamic feminist exegesis by reinterpreting sacred texts from a gender-egalitarian perspective. Though their primary work is textual and theological, their influence extends into the digital realm, where Muslim women draw upon their scholarship to frame online discussions around justice, equity, and the prophetic model. These reinterpretations serve as a foundation for many digital activists, educators, and influencers who seek to challenge male-dominated religious authority and emphasize the Qur'anic principles of *taqwa* (piety), *adl* (justice), and *rahma* (compassion).

Saba Mahmood (2005) complicates the narrative of empowerment by emphasizing the ways in which pious Muslim women internalize and reproduce religious norms within patriarchal frameworks. In her ethnographic study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood illustrates that agency does not necessarily require resistance but can also manifest through embodied religious devotion. Her insights are crucial in analyzing online Islamic discourse, as many Muslim women use digital platforms not to rebel against religious structures, but to assert

their identities within them. This nuanced understanding of agency challenges simplistic Western feminist readings of Muslim women's empowerment.

In diaspora contexts, scholars such as Haideh Moghissi (2005), Yasmin Moll (2010), and Saeed (2016) have examined how Muslim women navigate issues of visibility, representation, and religiosity in multicultural societies. Their work reveals that Muslim women in the West are often caught between Islamophobic discourses that portray them as oppressed and internal community pressures that restrict their autonomy. Digital media, in this context, becomes a crucial tool for constructing hybrid identities and resisting both external and internal forms of control. Online platforms provide Muslim women a space to speak on their own terms, articulate faith-informed feminism, and build transnational solidarities.

In South Asian societies, particularly in Pakistan, the control of religious interpretation remains deeply gendered and centralized among male scholars. Farzana Shaikh (2009) and Fareeha Zafar (2011) argue that cultural patriarchy often masks itself as religious mandate, limiting women's access to religious education and leadership. However, recent studies by Zia (2009) and Khan (2020) indicate that Pakistani women are increasingly turning to digital platforms to access Islamic knowledge, challenge misogynistic interpretations, and participate in religious discourse. These studies show the emergence of female online preachers, Islamic bloggers, and scholars who use social media to reach female audiences across socio-economic classes.

The phenomenon of Islamic influencers is also gaining scholarly attention. Influencers such as Mufti Menk, Yasmin Mogahed, and others have large female followings, but increasingly, Muslim women themselves are taking on influential roles. Research by Hidayah (2022) and Abbas (2021) documents how Muslim women influencers navigate public religious authority while maintaining modesty and credibility. These influencers use Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to share Qur'anic reflections, answer religious queries, and discuss contemporary issues from an Islamic perspective. While some scholars raise concerns about the commodification of faith and the blending of piety with consumerism, others view this as a creative form of da'wah that resonates with younger audiences.

Importantly, the literature also critiques the limits of digital spaces. Despite their potential, online platforms are not free from surveillance, censorship, and patriarchal backlash. As Jamal (2005) and Shirazi (2015) note, Muslim women who challenge conservative interpretations online often face trolling, character assassination, and accusations of heresy. These dynamics reveal the contested nature of religious authority in the digital age and the risks involved in occupying public religious spaces as women.

In summary, the existing scholarship highlights both the opportunities and challenges Muslim women face in digital Islamic discourse. While traditional religious authority has often excluded women's voices, digital platforms are enabling a reconfiguration of these power dynamics. The reviewed literature emphasizes the role of digital media in democratizing religious knowledge, amplifying women's voices, and fostering new forms of religious expression rooted in both tradition and reform. However, it also cautions against over-romanticizing digital spaces and underscores the need for intersectional analyses that consider class, race, location, and sectarian dynamics in shaping online religious engagement.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How are Muslim women in Pakistan and the UK using digital media to engage with and reinterpret Islamic discourse in ways that challenge patriarchal religious narratives?

2. What are the opportunities and limitations presented by digital platforms in facilitating religious empowerment and agency among Muslim women across different sociocultural contexts?

### Significance of the Research:

This research highlights the transformative role of digital media in enabling Muslim women to reclaim religious narratives and challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam. By analyzing their digital engagement, the study contributes to the fields of gender, media, and religious studies, foregrounding Muslim women's agency in shaping contemporary Islamic discourse.

### Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore how Muslim women utilize digital media to reclaim empowerment through online Islamic discourse. The research is grounded in feminist epistemology and interpretivist paradigms, which prioritize subjective experiences, meaning-making, and contextual understanding of participants. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring how digital engagement intersects with gender, religion, and identity in nuanced ways.

The study employs two primary qualitative data collection methods: **content analysis** and **semi-structured interviews**. First, purposive sampling was used to identify 20 prominent Muslim female digital content creators from Pakistan and the UK. These include YouTube Islamic educators, Instagram influencers, TikTok motivational speakers, and blog writers focused on Islamic teachings. Content from their platforms—such as videos, captions, posts, and religious commentaries—was systematically analyzed using thematic analysis. This allowed the identification of recurring themes related to empowerment, modesty, reinterpretation of scripture, resistance to patriarchal norms, and digital community building.

Secondly, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected Muslim women influencers, religious scholars, and digital activists—6 from each country. Interviews focused on their motivations, religious influences, challenges faced online, perceptions of authority, and the impact of their work on female audiences. The data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVivo software to identify emerging patterns and variations across contexts.

The comparative framework allows for analysis across two distinct sociocultural and legal contexts—Pakistan, where Islam is embedded in state law and patriarchal cultural norms are strong, and the UK, where Muslim women navigate minority status, secularism, and Islamophobia. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants' consent was secured with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality.

*Table 1: Summary of Research Design*

Component	Description
Research Paradigm	Interpretivist, Feminist Epistemology
Data Collection Methods	Content Analysis, Semi-Structured Interviews
Sample	20 digital content creators (10 Pakistan, 10 UK); 12 interviewees (6 each)
Analysis Techniques	Thematic Analysis, NVivo Coding
Contexts Studied	Pakistan and the United Kingdom
Ethical Considerations	Informed Consent, Anonymity, Confidentiality



## Data Analysis:

The data collected through content analysis and semi-structured interviews reveals rich insights into how Muslim women in Pakistan and the UK are using digital platforms to reclaim their religious narratives, challenge patriarchal norms, and promote female empowerment within Islamic frameworks. The analysis focuses on three major themes: reinterpretation of Islamic teachings, negotiation of digital visibility and modesty, and community-building and solidarity across borders.

### 1. Reinterpretation of Islamic Teachings

Many Muslim women content creators actively engage in reinterpretation (ijtihad) of Qur'anic verses and Hadith to challenge cultural misrepresentations of Islam that have long suppressed female voices. In both Pakistan and the UK, women religious influencers emphasize themes such as *rahma* (compassion), *adl* (justice), and gender parity in spiritual responsibility. For example, a Pakistani female scholar running a YouTube channel with over 100,000 subscribers offers weekly tafsir sessions where she deconstructs the misuse of certain verses (e.g., Qur'an 4:34) historically cited to justify male superiority. Similarly, a UK-based Instagram influencer shares weekly reflections on women in the Prophet's life, highlighting their strength and scholarship as role models.

This digital engagement enables women to contest patriarchal interpretations without rejecting Islam. Participants emphasized that their goal is not to secularize Islam, but to reclaim its authentic, egalitarian spirit. Their content reflects a commitment to textual fidelity, while resisting traditional male-dominated interpretations. This marks a significant development in contemporary Islamic feminist discourse.

Table 1: Major Religious Themes in Digital Content

Theme	% of Content (Pakistan)	% of Content (UK)
Gender Justice in Islam	42%	38%
Role Models from Early Islam	26%	30%
Misinterpretation of Qur'anic Texts	20%	22%
Marriage and Family Rights	12%	10%

### 2. Negotiating Modesty and Digital Visibility

Another prominent theme is how Muslim women balance their religious obligations of modesty with the demands of public digital visibility. Many interviewees expressed that their presence online is a form of da'wah, and not vanity. Some women prefer audio podcasts or Islamic blogs to avoid showing their faces, while others appear on video while wearing hijab or niqab, asserting that modesty and public presence are not mutually exclusive.

In the UK, visibility is often used as a form of resistance against Islamophobic narratives that frame the hijab as a symbol of oppression. In Pakistan, where cultural conservatism dominates, digital platforms offer women a rare opportunity to engage with the public without violating purdah norms. Importantly, both groups resist being seen through the binary lens of either oppressed or liberated; instead, they assert agency through contextualized religious expression.

Table 2: Modesty Strategies Used by Digital Content Creators

Strategy	Pakistan (n=10)	UK (n=10)
Audio-Only Content	3	2
Full Face with Hijab	5	6

Niqab with Video	2	1
Religious Text-Only Posts	6	4
Use of Avatars or Voiceovers	2	3

### 3. Digital Community Building and Transnational Solidarity

The third theme revolves around how Muslim women use digital platforms to foster community and solidarity. Online Qur'an study circles (halaqas), Instagram live discussions, and interactive TikTok series have become popular forms of engagement. Participants shared that they receive regular feedback from followers across borders, suggesting that their work inspires Muslim women in isolated, rural, or hostile environments to connect with like-minded sisters.

These digital communities not only serve as educational platforms but also provide emotional support and religious validation. Several women described these online spaces as "safe zones" where they can discuss topics like menstruation, gender roles, divorce, and spiritual struggle without fear of judgment—topics often silenced in offline religious settings.

Transnationalism was a strong pattern in both samples. Pakistani content creators often received engagement from diaspora audiences, while UK influencers frequently interacted with followers from Muslim-majority countries. This dynamic reinforces the idea that digital Islamic discourse is dismantling geographic and sectarian barriers.

*Table 3: Online Community Engagement by Platform*

Platform	Type of Engagement	Common Topics Discussed
YouTube Live	Q&A, Tafsir Sessions	Spirituality, Feminist Readings of Qur'an
Instagram Stories	Polls, Anonymous Questions	Marriage, Modesty, Career vs. Family
WhatsApp/Telegram	Private Study Circles (Halaqas)	Duas, Female Sahaba, Fiqh for Women
TikTok	Short Commentary/Skits	Hijab Challenges, Misogyny in Culture vs. Islam

Overall, the data demonstrates that digital media has emerged as a powerful space for Muslim women to express theological autonomy, reimagine gender roles in Islamic tradition, and create networks of spiritual sisterhood. However, it also reveals ongoing challenges: online harassment, doctrinal accusations of deviance, and limited institutional support. Despite these barriers, digital engagement has enabled Muslim women to reshape religious discourse in ways that affirm both faith and feminist consciousness.

### Findings and Conclusion:

The study reveals that digital media has become a transformative space for Muslim women to reclaim religious narratives, challenge patriarchal interpretations, and express theological agency. Across both Pakistan and the UK, Muslim women are actively engaging with Islamic texts and traditions through content creation on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and blogs. This digital participation not only provides access to religious knowledge but also enables reinterpretation and dissemination from a female perspective—an opportunity traditionally denied within male-dominated religious institutions.

One of the most significant findings is the reinterpretation of contentious Qur'anic verses and Hadith to promote a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of Islam. Participants from both contexts emphasized the importance of aligning their activism with religious authenticity rather than secular feminism. Their digital content reflects a conscious effort to harmonize Islamic principles with gender justice, drawing on classical sources, contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship, and lived experiences.

Another key finding is the negotiation of visibility and modesty. While women navigate cultural and religious expectations differently in Pakistan and the UK, both groups strategically utilize digital platforms in ways that protect their piety while asserting their public voice. Their ability to maintain religious modesty while occupying visible, influential roles online is a noteworthy form of resistance and self-definition.

Finally, digital spaces serve as vital communities of support, education, and empowerment for Muslim women globally. These online networks foster transnational solidarity and promote a collective reimagining of women's roles in Islam, challenging cultural practices that have often been mistaken for religious mandates.

In conclusion, the research affirms that digital media plays a critical role in facilitating a new wave of Islamic discourse led by women. These platforms empower Muslim women to reclaim religious authority, construct hybrid identities, and shape a future rooted in both faith and equity.

#### **Futuristic Approach:**

Future research should explore the long-term influence of Muslim women's digital religious engagement on formal religious institutions and legal reforms. As online Islamic discourse evolves, interdisciplinary studies combining theology, technology, and gender studies can offer deeper insights into how Muslim women shape global Islam through digital *ijtihad* and transnational activism.

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