

Digital Discourse: Exploring the Impact of Digital Media on Muslim Perceptions of Religious Authority and Power Dynamics

Mubashir Hanif¹, Mansoor Al-Khater², Onaedo Ilegbune³,
Rizwanul Islam⁴ and Olzhasbek Zhakenov⁵

Northwestern University in Qatar, Qatar

ABSTRACT

This research explores the profound transformations in Muslim perceptions of religious authority induced by digital media and evaluates the implications for power dynamics between the laity and religious scholars within the Islamic community. The advent of digital media has afforded unprecedented access to religious texts and scholarly interpretations, facilitating a shift from traditional, localized forms of religious education to a more accessible, globalized framework. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining the results from 134 quantitative surveys with qualitative case studies analyzed through thematic analysis to assess how digital platforms influence religious engagement and authority perceptions across different age groups and within varied contexts. Our findings reveal a persistent preference for established religious authorities over personal interpretation, despite the increased accessibility of digital media. However, this preference is nuanced by age, with some younger Muslims inclined towards personal interpretation of religious scriptures, suggesting a gradual transformation in the locus of religious authority. Qualitative insights from online forums like Reddit highlight the democratization of religious discourse, allowing laypersons to actively engage in shaping religious narratives, although this has largely raised concerns about misinformation and the quality of self-directed interpretations. The research concludes that digital media, while disruptive, has not eliminated traditional religious authority but has redefined its engagement with the laity, promoting a more collaborative and scrutinized approach to religious discourse. This study contributes to the understanding of the evolving dynamics of religious authority in the digital age, offering insights for scholars and practitioners in religious studies and digital humanities.

Keywords: religious authority, digital media, scripture interpretation, online community, religious communication.