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Millennial Muslims and Use of Cyber-Islam: A Case Study of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk on Twitter and their Impacts

Muslim Milenial dan Penggunaan Islam Siber: Kajian Kes Bilal Philips dan Mufti Menk di Twitter dan Kesannya

Mariet Rosnaida Cabrera Cusi* and Abdelaziz Berghout**

Abstract

This study attempts to use Big Data Analytic Techniques to investigate the views of Millennial Muslims on the effectiveness of scholars/preachers on cyber-Islam. Two eminent scholars, Bilal Philips, and Mufti Menk have been chosen for this purpose. It examines the changing expressions and manifestations of Islam because of historical epochs and contexts. For example, the modern world is in its "post-postmodernist" stage and context, which necessitates a rethinking of previous debates and discourses on Islam. The Millennial Age is discussed, as well as its characteristics and their implications for Muslim expression of Islam. Cyber-Islam is the study of the intersection of Islam and online platforms. There is a review of academic literature on Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk. This study's methodology is to incorporate data mining methods to create a framework that can be used effectively to analyze the Twitter content and followers of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk from an Islamic perspective. The study reveals various facts about Millennial Muslims as well as the way Islamic knowledge is communicated via social media. The study concludes that combining social media studies with Islamic studies can provide a more complete picture of contemporary Muslims and their online engagement with Islam.

Keywords: Cyber-Islam, Millennial Muslims, Use, Impacts, Bilal Philips, Mufti Menk.

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الملخص

تحاول هذه الدراسة استخدام تقنيات تحليل البيانات الضخمة للتحقيق في آراء المسلمين من جيل الألفية حول فعالية العلماء / الدعاة في الإسلام السيرياني. وقد تم اختيار اثنين من العلماء البارزين ، بلال فيليبس ومفتي منك، لهذا الغرض. وهو يبحث في التعبيرات والمظاهر المتغيرة للإسلام بسبب العصور والسياقات التاريخية. على سبيل المثال ، العالم الحديث في مرحلته وسياقه الحالي "ما بعد الحداثة"، الأمر الذي يتطلب إعادة التفكير في المناقشات والخطابات السابقة حول الإسلام. تتم مناقشة العصر الألفي، وكذلك خصائصه وآثره على التعبير عن الإسلام في وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي. الإسلام السيرياني هو دراسة تقاطع الإسلام والمنصات الإلكترونية. ومن أجل هذا الغرض تقدم الدراسة، مراجعة للأدبيات الأكاديمية حول بلال فيليبس ومفتي منك. وتستخدم هذه الدراسة منهجية دمج طرق استخراج البيانات لإنشاء إطار عمل يمكن استخدامه بشكل فعال لتحليل محتوى تويتر ومتابعي بلال فيليبس ومفتي منك من منظور إسلامي. تكشف الدراسة عن حقائق مختلفة عن المسلمين من جيل الألفية، وكذلك الطريقة التي يتم بها توصيل المعرفة الإسلامية عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الجمع بين دراسات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي والدراسات الإسلامية يمكن أن يوفر صورة أكثر وضوحاً للمسلمين المعاصرين ومشاكلهم عبر الإنترنت من أجل نشر القيم الإسلامية والتعبير عن الإسلام من خلال هذه الوسائط الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنترنت، الإسلام، مسلمو الألفية، الاستخدام، التأثيرات، بلال فيليبس،

مفتي منك.

Abstrak

Kajian ini cuba menggunakan teknik analisis data besar untuk menyiasat pandangan umat Islam milenium mengenai keberkesanan ulama/pendakwah mengenai Islam siber. Dua ulama terkemuka, Bilal Philips dan Mufti Menk, telah dipilih untuk tujuan ini. Ia mengkaji perubahan ungkapan dan manifestasi Islam kerana zaman dan konteks sejarah. Sebagai contoh, dunia moden berada dalam tahap dan konteks "pasca-postmodernis", yang memerlukan pemikiran semula perdebatan dan wacana sebelumnya mengenai Islam. Zaman Milenium dibincangkan, serta ciri-ciri dan implikasinya terhadap ungkapan Islam Islam. Cyber-Islam adalah kajian persimpangan Islam dan platform dalam talian. Terdapat ulasan mengenai kesusasteraan akademik mengenai Bilal Philips dan Mufti Menk. Metodologi kajian ini adalah untuk menggabungkan kaedah perlombongan data untuk mewujudkan rangka kerja yang boleh digunakan dengan berkesan untuk menganalisis kandungan Twitter dan pengikut Bilal Philips dan Mufti Menk dari perspektif Islam. Kajian ini mendedahkan

pelbagai fakta mengenai umat Islam Milenium serta cara pengetahuan Islam disampaikan melalui media sosial. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa menggabungkan kajian media sosial dengan kajian Islam dapat memberikan gambaran yang lebih lengkap mengenai umat Islam kontemporari dan penglibatan dalam talian mereka dengan Islam.

Kata Kunci: Cyber, Islam, Millennial Muslim, Penggunaan, Kesan, Bilal Philips, Mufti Menk.

Introduction

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become abundantly clear that social media is an essential communication network that has kept people connected all over the world. People could still interact transnationally even during national lockdowns. In this regard, the potential of social media to open new avenues for human interactions is only just beginning to be realised. According to Regina Luttrell, social media is catalysing one of the greatest global transformations in history.¹ While social media is changing the present and the future, it has also changed the past. Jason Steinhauer provocatively argued that history has been transformed into “e-history,” where the very notions of the past are radically inscribed onto the internet and social media platforms.² The curious question is to see if and how social media has affected the understanding and expression of Islam.

Muhammad Ali has suggested that the internet made Islam more complex than ever. The commonly espoused binary of ‘devout Muslims’ and ‘nominal Muslims’ break down on the Internet.³ The internet ushered in new ways of Muslims interacting with one another as well as with others. Rosemary Pennington advised Western reporters and

¹ Luttrell, R. (2015). *Social Media: How to Engage, Share, Connect*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 38.

² Steinhauer, J. (2022). *History, disrupted: How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Ali, M. (2011). The Internet, cyber-religion, and authority: the case of the Indonesian Liberal Islam Network. In Weintraub, A. N. (Ed.), *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*. New York: Routledge, p. 102.

researchers to tune into Muslims on Twitter when they are covering the Muslim communities. As an example, she says that when terrorist attacks occur, a usual search on Twitter will show Muslims condemning the terrorist attacks. Pennington sees this as a good critique of the ‘why don’t Muslims condemn terrorism?’ canard.⁴ In instances, social media is the key medium by which to spread Islamic knowledge. Due to the anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union, many Muslims in Kazakhstan were uneducated about the religion. Wendell Schawb found that the “piety movement” in Kazakhstan promoted Islamic knowledge by simplifying Islamic knowledge for social media consumption.⁵ The multifaceted intersections between Islam and social media are numerous.

This research paper attempts to shed some lights on how important and influential social media is to the communication of Islam in contemporary times. It focuses on the social media interactions of two popular religious authorities: Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk. By investigating how both Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk portray Islam online, several objectives can be met. The research will use Big Data Analytics techniques to see if a synergy arises, where the benefits of both are taken advantage of in advancing the cause of Islam as well as the Millennial Muslim’s effective use of cyber-Islam. The research aspires towards suggesting some useful ways that will motivate the other scholars in Academia to emulate the example of both Bilal Philips’ and Mufti Menk’s ideas on using the social platform effectively to address Millennial Muslims.

Importantly, this research will seek to detail the characteristics and traits of the Muslim audiences who interact online with both scholars. This research will thus integrate new methodologies into Islamic studies, correct mistaken or misconceived perceptions on Islam, as well as provide a typology of the online Muslim Ummah.

The second section grounds the entire research on a firm basis of historical processes and their effects on the expressions of religion in general and Islam in particular. This section will critique some of the

⁴ Pennington, R. (2018). New Media and Muslim Voices. In R. Pennington & H. E. Kahn (Eds.), *On Islam: Muslims and the Media*. Indiana University Press, p. 116.

⁵ Schawb, W. (2018). Visual Culture and Islam in Kazakhstan: The Case of Asyl Arna’s Social Media. In M. Laruelle (Ed.), *Being Muslim in Central Asia: Practices, Politics, and Identities*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 159-160.

standard discussions held on Islam in the contemporary world by highlighting their inadequacies. The third section delves into the 'Millennial Age' and explores the characteristics and unique features of the Net Generation, Generation Z, and the Millennial Generation. The fourth section provides an overview of the field of Cyber-Islam and explains important concepts and contributions to the study of Islam's online presence. The fifth section discusses the academic literature regarding Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk, highlighting the important themes used in understanding their thought. The sixth section provides the methodology of Big Data Analytics alongside in analysing the moderate approaches to Islam. By fusing both the methodology with the approach, a unique framework can be utilised in understanding Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk's social media interactions. The seventh section analyses the Twitter accounts of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk, alongside the content of their posts on Twitter. The eighth section analyses the Twitter followers of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk, seeking to determine their traits and characteristics. The ninth and final section provides an interpretation of the results, emphasises the significance of the results, as well as concludes the research paper on the optimistic note that further research can be done in this field.

Expressions of Islam in Context and the Millennial Age

The intersection of historical criticism and religious studies has a long history. The historical-critical method enabled European academics, intellectuals, and scholars to comprehend religious texts as part of a larger historical context. It is widely assumed that the Enlightenment introduced the historical-critical approach to religion. David R. Law corrects this view, by showing how the historical-critical method has its roots in the Renaissance and Reformation.⁶ Related to this is the historicising tendency in religious studies. Giovanni Casadio argues that expressions of religions are part of a complex historical process.⁷ He finds this historicising tendency in the "Islamicate Western Asia" among Islamic scholars like Abu Rayhan al-Biruni and Abd al-Karim al-

⁶ Law, D. R. (2012). *The Historical-Critical Method: A Guide to the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, p. 26.

⁷ Casadio, G. (2016). Historicising and Translating Religion. In M. Stausberg & S. Engler (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*. Oxford University Press, p. 34.

Shahrastani. Both these scholars pioneered the historical and anthropological study of religions.⁸

Contemporary research in Islamic studies recognises how Islamic theology arose from historical configurations. Nimrod Hurvits studied the famous *Mihna* of Caliph Al-Mamun and Ahmad b. Hanbal. Hurvits finds that such an event makes clear how historical power struggles had widespread ramifications on Islamic thought.⁹ The study of religion must be done in tandem with the historical circumstances defining the expressions of religion.

Given how historical developments invariably affect religious expression, the question naturally arises as to whether the contemporary milieu affects Islamic expression. Many academics and scholars have already responded to this question. Oliver Leaman shown how Muslims in the contemporary world are grappling to understand Islam in the face of contemporary challenges.¹⁰ John L. Esposito & John O. Voll chart the many figures who helped form “Contemporary Islam”. Among these figures are intellectuals like Ismail Ragi Al-Faruqi and politicians like Anwar Ibrahim.¹¹ Carl W. Ernst recognises that the contemporary concept of Islam is influenced largely by the East-West interaction, including colonialism.¹²

While the subject of Islam and its involvement in the modern world is fascinating, one might wonder if it has also become dated. Jeffery T. Nealon has provided a tantalising suggestion. He argues that the contemporary world has gone beyond postmodernism and is now in a state of “post-postmodernism”.¹³ Following up on this suggestion, it can be stated that if postmodernism is already dated, then modernism is also outdated. In their discussions of Islam in the contemporary world, Leaman, Esposito, Voll, and Ernst refer to issues of modernity, the

⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹ Hurvits, N. (2016). Al-Mamun (r. 198/813-218/833) and the Mihna. In S. Schmidtke (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*. Oxford University Press, p. 658.

¹⁰ Leaman, O. *Controversies in Contemporary Islam*. New York: Routledge.

¹¹ Esposito, J. L. & Voll, J. O. (2001). *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. Oxford University Press, chapter 1 & 8.

¹² Ernst, C. W. (2003). *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. The University of North Carolina Press, p. 200.

¹³ Nealon, J. T. (2012). *Post-Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

modern world, modernisation, the modern age.¹⁴ This means that such discussions, while no doubt beneficial, do suffer from a severe problem. They hardly consider socio-historic developments in the contemporary world that occurred after modernity and even after postmodernity.

To understand Islam in the contemporary world, one must acknowledge that the modern society has already changed dramatically. These changes have had an unprecedented impact on how Muslims interact and engage with Islam today. Social media is an important part of contemporary Muslim engagement. The social media age is known as the "Millennial Age." A look at the characteristics of the Millennial Age is required to better understand how Islam is represented in contemporary times. This will be explained further in the following section.

Don Tapscott interviewed 11,000 young people to see what the qualities of the "Net Generation" were. Tapscott held that young people differed from previous generations primarily due to the effect of the internet. In his comprehensive survey and study, he found eight characteristics of the "Net Generation". These characteristics are: freedom, customisation, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed, and innovation.¹⁵ Tapscott holds these eight characteristics are "rooted" in the "media diet" that younger people grow up on.¹⁶

In his research, Tapscott presents a bold thesis. The key difference between the "Net Generation" and past generations is the matter of "digital immersion". Younger people are connected to the internet from their youth to adolescents and beyond. This "digital immersion" leads their brains to being rewired differently than usual.¹⁷ In short, the young generation think digitally, because their brains are formed digitally.

Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace define Millennials as anyone born from 1981 till 1995. They describe the common traits of Millennials

¹⁴ E.g. Leaman, p. 73; Esposito & Voll, p. 136; Ernst, p. 130.

¹⁵ Tapscott, D. (2009). *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 74.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tapscott, pp. 101-119.

as digitally connected, optimistic, and focused on self.¹⁸ Interestingly, Seemiller & Grace hold that Generation Z comes *after* Millennials. That is, anyone born after 1995 is not a Millennial; rather, he or she belongs to Generation Z. Seemiller & Grace provide important statistics regarding Generation Z and their relation to technology. 91% of them use smartphones to access the internet. They prefer smartphones to all other electronic devices, even including laptops. The median age for Generation Z to get their first smartphone is 12 years old. Adults use the internet on their smartphones for 3 hours as a daily average.¹⁹ Surprisingly, young people aged 16 to 24 use 1/3rd of their online time on social media.²⁰

Andrea Hershatter & Molly Epstein refer to the “Millennial generation,” particularly regarding the attitudes to work and management. Hershatter & Epstein find that Millennials have a greater propensity for online “content creation” and “engaged interaction” with internet domains. For instance, the December 2008 Pew Internet and American Life survey found that 59% of teenagers create online content. Other studies found that 1/3rd of all college students already have their own blogs.²¹

Abhishek Dwivedi & Clifford Lewis examined how millennials used social media. They found that social media offered millennials a coping mechanism for their personal problems, a reduction in loneliness, and a way to strengthen self-identity.²² Thus, social media usage plays a crucial role in the personality and identity of millennials.

Admittedly, there is some ambiguity. The “Net Generation,” “Generation Z,” and “Millennial Generation” are not identical. What is similar to all three of them is the emphasis on using the internet, digital interactions, and social media usage. While a “Millennial Age” is not strictly accurate, the notion covers what is considered as the “Digital

¹⁸ Seemiller, C. & Grace, M. (2019). *Generation Z: A Century in the Making*. New York: Routledge, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²¹ Hershatter, A. & Epstein, M. (2010). Millennials and the World of Work: An Organization and Management Perspective. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25, pp. 213-4.

²² Dwivedi, A. & Lewis, C. (2021). How millennials’ life concerns shape social media behaviour. *Behaviour and Information Technology*, 40(14), pp. 1478-9.

Age". Alberto Acerbi understood that the Digital Age has led to considerable cultural change across the world.²³ Rosamund Sutherland speaks of the "21st-century digital age" and how it affects education and also social issues.²⁴ Ayala Fader has detailed how the "Digital Age" has brought religious doubt amongst Orthodox Jews.²⁵

While the "Digital Age" is a more concrete term than "contemporary world" for understanding Muslim interactions and engagement with Islam today, the "Millennial Age" will be kept for its nuance. The term Millennial refers to youth and a generation, whereas the term Digital does not. To understand how Islam is portrayed in contemporary times among Muslim youth, one must investigate, among others, how Muslims interact with their religion online. This will be addressed in the following section.

On Cyber-Islam & Cyber-Muslims

Gary R. Bunt has done much to shed light on contemporary Muslim engagement in the Digital Age. A crucial notion for Bunt is what he calls "Cyber Islamic Environments". He justifies this notion by arguing that it is a "significant task in its own right" for academics and researchers to outline the online landscape of which Muslims interact in.²⁶ One of the most important aspects of the Muslim reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 is the "Cyber Islamic Reactions" for which Bunt provides three chapters of analysis.²⁷ The upshot of Bunt's position is that a major way in which Muslims engage with issues relating to Islam is via online interactions.

In a later work, Bunt developed his notion of Cyber Islamic Environments (CIE) into a corollary notion of *iMuslims*. According to Bunt, *iMuslims* are cyber-Muslims who engage within CIEs, by

²³ Acerbi, A. (2020). *Cultural Evolution in the Digital Age*. Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Sutherland, R. (2014). *Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age*. University of Bristol, Policy Press, p. 55.

²⁵ Fader, A. (2020). *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton University Press.

²⁶ Bunt, G. R. (2003). *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas, and Cyber Islamic Environments*. London: Pluto Press, p. 5.

²⁷ See: Bunt, chapter 4, 5, 6.

expressing their faith in digital contexts.²⁸ Bunt provides a sophisticated approach to CIEs and iMuslims. He utilises Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological approach to Islam, where she unpacks the various symbolisms used by Muslims. In the same way, Bunt considers CIEs as providing a phenomenology of how iMuslims experience their religion.²⁹ From this perspective, CIEs is an important source of knowledge, for it provides details of the Muslim subjectivities towards Islam which usually are hard to gain from a simple study of canonical texts.

Bunt goes further in another work, showing how CIEs challenge the standard notions of religious authority on Islam. Because of the plethora of views on Islam espoused in CIEs, a useful Fiqh tool that can help navigate the vast data on Islam online is that of *Ijtihad*. In Bunt's view, the concept of *Ijtihad* can make sense of CIEs where a plurality of often dissimilar views are espoused about Islam.³⁰ This has led to the rise of "celebrity religious figures" whose views are popular, despite these figures not being traditional religious scholars.³¹ The study of such celebrity figures in CIEs can shed light on how *Ijtihad* allows Muslims from different parts of the world to articulate their own views by infusing these views with Islamic elements.

Mohammed el-Nawawi & Sahar Khamis hypothesise that the cyberspace has become a "virtual *Ummah*" for Muslims to unite under a multiplicity of identities. El-Nawawi & Khamis borrow Benedict Anderson's notion of "Imagined Communities" and applies it to the "virtual *Ummah*".³² While there are differences amongst Muslims in cyberspace, there are also important similarities and agreements. For instance, on the issue of Palestine-Israel conflict, Muslims in cyberspace seem to share the same political views.³³

Sana Patel recognises that Muslim youth usually connect to religious authorities via social media interactions. Patel says a common way to

²⁸ Bunt, G. R. (2009). *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*. The University of Carolina Press, p.6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁰ Bunt, G. R. (2018). *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*. The University of Carolina Press, p. 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.72.

³² El-Nawawi, M. & Khamis, S. (2009). *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Cyberspace*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 113-4.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

sustain a connection is via Muslim youth engaging in follows, likes, and retweets of content uploaded by religious authorities on social media.³⁴ Saminaz Zaman uses the notion of “Cyber-Mufti” to make a similar point. Zaman speaks of the popularity of “virtual Islam” which is “radically transnational”.³⁵ This transnational quality allows Muslims to explore Islamic content not limited to their own locales or narrowed to their own specific communities.

Even serious academia has begun to gravitate towards the potentials of digitisation. Dagmar Riedel points out how the digitisation of Islamic manuscripts has led to many scholars of Islamic studies keeping prominent social media accounts, on Facebook and Twitter, to cater for enthusiasts of the Muslim textual heritage.³⁶

Philip N. Howard has shown how Twitter and Facebook are used in “Political Islam”.³⁷ In another work, Philip N. Howard & Muzammil M. Hussain demonstrated how the Arab Spring occurred due to the use of social media platforms.³⁸ The interactions between Islam and politics cannot be understood properly without also considering the social media aspect. It is hard to disagree with Jon W. Anderson who said that the internet radically changed how Muslims network with one another.³⁹ *Indonesia and the Malay World*, the academic journal published by Routledge, had a special issue on “Practicing Islam through social media in Indonesia”. Martin Slama argued that the intersection of Islam and “New Media” is a field that is “so dynamic today” due to the advancement

³⁴ Sana Patel. (2022). Hybrid *Imams*: Young Muslims and Religious Authority on Social Media. In R. Rozenhal (Ed.), *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Internet Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 38-9.

³⁵ Zaman, S. (2008). From Imam to Cyber-Mufti: Consuming Identity in Muslim America. *The Muslim World*, 98(4), pp. 469-470.

³⁶ Riedel, D. (2016). Of Making Copies There Is No End: The Digitisation of Manuscripts and Printed Books in Arabic Script. In E. Muhanna (Ed.), *The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 68-9.

³⁷ Howard, P. N. (2011). *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*. Oxford University Press.

³⁸ Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2013). *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press.

³⁹ Anderson, J. W. (2005). Wiring Up: The Internet Difference for Muslim Networks. In C. W. Ernst & B. B. Lawrence, (Eds.), *Muslim Networks From Hajj to Hiphop*. The University of North Carolina Press, p. 252.

of digital technologies.⁴⁰ Slama's point is true for Muslims communities across the world, not just in Indonesia.

This article will look at how Muslims in the Millennial Age perceive and **practice** Islam through online interactions with two well-known and popular religious leaders: Dr Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk. While their reputations precede them, it is worthwhile to sketch the academic literature on their views, works, and perspectives. This will be addressed in the following section.

On Bilal Philips & Mufti Menk

Bilal Philips was born in Jamaica in 1947. He went to live in Canada where he converted to Islam in 1972. He studied Islam in Saudi Arabia and got his doctorate from University of Wales.⁴¹ According to Roald, Bilal Philips "deliberately avoids" calling himself a Salafist, even though his ideas are in line with Salafism. She also accuses Philips of supporting underage marriage with girls below puberty.⁴²

In another work, Roald provides perhaps the most in-depth analysis of Bilal Philips' views. Many new Muslims in Scandinavia read the works of Bilal Philips. They typically read more books by Bilal Philips than by any other scholar.⁴³ Roald characterises Bilal Philips' books as "convert writing within the Salafi approach".⁴⁴ She criticises Bilal Philips for his condemnation of Ibn Arabi, the famous Sufi, as a pantheist and Kafir.⁴⁵ She likens Philips' view to that of the Khawarij, who declare a Muslim to be a disbeliever just for sinning. Roald records a convert to Islam who complained that Bilal Philips was too strict in his judgement of Muslims who sin.⁴⁶ Roald also criticises Bilal Philips for rejecting the Darwinian Theory and for being anti-scientific. She blames such a position for lowering the education of Muslims in the West, as they reject

⁴⁰ Slama, M. (2018). Practicing Islam through social media in Indonesia. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 46(134), p. 1.

⁴¹ Roald, A. S. (2012). The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23(3), p. 351.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁴³ Roald, A. S. (2004). *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*. Leiden: Brill, p. 213.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216-7.

science for the sake of religion.⁴⁷ Bilal Philips' most popular book in Scandinavia is his work entitled *The Evolution of Fiqh*.⁴⁸ Roald critiques this book by saying that Philips rejects a synthesis of Fiqh views and instead advocates for a unified fixed view on Fiqh.⁴⁹

Lasse Lindekilde says Bilal Philips is intolerant towards homosexuals, Shia, supports Shariah rules of beating women, as well as expressing "violent jihad" and even performing this on Youtube.⁵⁰ At the same time, Lindekilde analyses the Dutch media for its reaction to Bilal Philips' visit to Denmark. Fifty-two instances of intolerant remarks against Bilal Philips was found in the Dutch media coverage of his visit.⁵¹ The mainstream media, at least in Denmark, is highly critical of Bilal Philips.

Studying *Dabiq*, the magazine produced by ISIS, Göran Larsson found that Dabiq (ISIS) had officially labelled Bilal Phillips as an apostate from Islam.⁵² In the 14th issue of Dabiq, ISIS declared that Bilal Philips was equal to Christians and Jews.⁵³ Clemens Holzgruber has provided an in-depth study of Bilal Philips and ISIS. Holzgruber refers to J. M. Berger who alleges that Bilal Philips converted American soldiers to Islam, and then used them in the Bosnian War in 1992. Bilal Philips is said to have had connections with Al-Qaeda members which is why he was listed as a co-conspirator in the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing. Bilal Philips denies the allegations.⁵⁴

Bilal Phillips founded the Islamic Online University in 2007, which provides free online lessons on Islam. His Facebook page has over six million followers. Bilal Philips has been banned from entering the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 220.

⁵⁰ Lindekilde, L. (2014). The Mainstreaming of Far-Right Discourse in Denmark. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 12(4), pp. 364-5.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 368.

⁵² Larsson, G. (2017). Apostasy and Counter-Narratives—Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Example of the Islamic State. *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 15(2), p. 48.

⁵³ Spier, T. E. (2018). Extremist Propaganda and Quranic scripture: A 'radical' corpus-based study of the Dabiq. *Discourse & Society*, 29(5), p. 561.

⁵⁴ Holzgruber, C. (2020). Pierre Vogel's and Bilal Philips' Criticism of Jihadism. *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 9(2), p.153.

United Kingdom, Germany, and Denmark.⁵⁵ In 2016, ISIS published an article in Dabiq entitled: “Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West”. ISIS urged Muslims to murder Bilal Philips because he was an apostate from Islam.⁵⁶ Interestingly, Bilal Philips was arrested in 2014 on charges of being an ISIS recruiter.⁵⁷

Holzgruber carefully analyses Bilal Philips’ critique of Jihadism. According to Holzgruber, Bilal Philips’ critique revolved around four themes, which include the need to follow *wasatiyya* (moderation) and reject *ghulu* (extremism).⁵⁸ Holzgruber understand Bilal Philips to hold the view that Jihad primarily is a matter of struggling against yourself to become a better Muslim. Philips gives priority to the inner struggle of becoming a better Muslim than to violence against others.⁵⁹ Bilal Philips attacked the *Takfiri* tendency of Jihadists who say rulers are disbelievers simply because the rulers’ sin.⁶⁰ Bilal Philips rejected the idea of establishing Shariah Law in Western countries. Moreover, even within Muslim countries, Bilal Philips held that education was the key to spreading greater awareness amongst Muslims. He felt this was the correct way to reach Islamic rule, not through use of force or social impositions.⁶¹ Holzburger concludes that Bilal Philips showed “clear-cut and consistent opposition” to Jihadism.⁶²

Shady Elmasry identifies Bilal Philips as one of the “founders of the Salafi movement in America”. Bilal Philips was the first Westerner to have enrolled at the Islamic University of Medina.⁶³ Dean Beekers sees Bilal Philips as part of the “new kind of leaders” in Muslim communities. Bilal Philips is among the “English-speaking transnationally travelling preachers” who enjoy great popularity amongst young Muslims.⁶⁴ Iman

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 150.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 151.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 162.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 165.

⁶² Ibid., p. 169.

⁶³ Elmasry, S. (2010). The Salafis in America: The Rise, Decline and Prospects for a Sunni Muslim Movement among African-Americans. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30(2), p. 222.

⁶⁴ Beeker, D. (2015). A moment of persuasion: travelling preachers and Islamic pedagogy in the Netherlands. *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 16(2), p.202.

Dawood points out that Bilal Philips was initially accused of being an *Ikhwani*. In 2001, Bilal Philips responded to this accusation, by openly declaring he was Salafi.⁶⁵ Adis Duderija considers Bilal Philips as being a “Neo-Traditional Salafi” in the western context.⁶⁶

This overview of the academic literature on Bilal Philips shows the major areas in which his thought is studied. He is discussed as a convert to Islam, a person who holds intolerant views towards other Muslims as well as non-Muslims; he is discussed in relation to matters of Jihad and violence, as well as often referred to in the context of sectarianism amongst Muslims.

Sana Patel explains that Mufti Menk, the Zimbabwean scholar, is a popular religious figure online. He has seven million followers on Twitter. He is known best for his motivational tweets that use humour to attract young Muslims.⁶⁷ His style of communication is comforting and encouraging, not preachy. His approach and soft tone appeal to many Muslim youth in contrast to the sternness found in preachers like Yasir Qadhi.⁶⁸ Menk’s approach to conveying Islam strikes a chord with people nowadays, such that even Nicki Minaj, the famous hiphop singer in America, follows Mufti Menk on Twitter.⁶⁹ No other Muslim religious figure has attracted an American female singer to his social media account, apart from Mufti Menk.

Mulki Mohamed Al-Sharmani identifies Mufti Menk as a popular online source for religious learning for Somali Muslims in Finland.⁷⁰ Despite the popularity of Mufti Menk on CIEs, the academic literature has hardly anything to say about him. What sparse information is provided usually refers to his run-in with the Singaporean authorities. In 2017, Singapore banned Mufti Menk from giving a lecture. Kumar Ramakrishna

⁶⁵Dawood, I. (2020). Who is a ‘Salafi’? Salafism and the Politics of Labelling in the UK. *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 9(2), p. 249-250.

⁶⁶ Duderija, A. (2014). Neo-Traditional Salafis in the West: Agents of (Self)-Exclusion. In S. Yasmeen & N. Marković (Eds.), *Muslim Citizens in the West: Spaces and Agents of Inclusion and Exclusion*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, p. 135.

⁶⁷ Patel, p. 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Al-Sharmani, M. M. (2015). Striving Against the ‘Nafs’: Revisiting Somali Muslim Spousal Roles and Rights in Finland. *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 8(1), p. 118.

sees this as a negative result of Singapore's "Muscular Secularism".⁷¹ Muneerah Ab Razak says Singapore considers Mufti Menk as a threat, because Singapore looks at Islam through the lens of securitisation where every articulation of Islam is considered as potentially undermining national security.⁷² Even before 2017, Mufti Menk ran afoul of Singaporean authorities. In 2015, Singapore banned Mufti Menk from entering the country, because Singapore considered Mufti Menk's view of not saying 'Happy Christmas' as an expression of extremism.⁷³ Outside of the Singapore debacle, Nerina Rustomji praises Mufti Menk's use of humour and modesty when discussing matters of sex.⁷⁴ Conversely, Nadeem Mahomed accuses Mufti Menk of being a homophobe.⁷⁵

According to the academic literature, Bilal Philips appears to be more studied than Mufti Menk. While the academic literature has hinted at Bilal Philips' and Mufti Menk's social media and online influence, there is a clear gap in the academic literature when it comes to studying closely both their online presence, religious messaging, and engagement with Muslims in the Millennial Age. The following section describes the methodology for a more in-depth examination of Bilal Philips' and Mufti Menk's roles in the Cyber Islamic Environment.

Methodology & Approach

Twitter was chosen as the social media platform for analysis in this study. This is because of two factors. For starters, because of the various data mining tools available, Twitter is better suited for extensive textual analysis than other social media platforms. Text metadata can be processed faster than videos on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Because of the 280 character word limit, tweets are short and to the

⁷¹ Ramakrishna, K. (2018). 'Diagnosing "extremism": the case of "Muscular" Secularism in Singapore'. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 11(1), pp. 26-47.

⁷² Ab Razak, M. (2019). "World-class Muslims": Examining the Discursive Construction of a Singapore Muslim Identity. *The Muslim World*, 109(3), p. 427.

⁷³ Abdullah, W. J. (2017). Conflating Muslim "Conservatism" with "Extremism": Examining the "Merry Christmas" Saga in Singapore. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 37(3), pp. 344-356.

⁷⁴ Rustomji, N. (2021). *The Beauty of the Hour: Heavenly Virgins, Feminine Ideals*. Oxford University Press, p. 160.

⁷⁵ Mahomed, N. (2016). Queer Muslims: between orthodoxy, secularism and the struggle for acceptance. *Theology & Sexuality*, 22(1-2), p. 66 n10.

point, conveying the message as directly as possible. This favours textual analysis of Twitter over textual analysis of Facebook. Second, according to Twitter's User Profile Study, 80% of users access Twitter via their smartphones. Furthermore, 81% of users use Twitter at least once per day.⁷⁶ The User Profile Study shows that Millennials use Twitter regularly. This helps this study analyse the regular user interactions with Bilal Philips' and Mufti Menk's Twitter accounts.

This study has mined a sample of 5000 Twitter for each scholar. The scraping timeline covers till January 2022. The tweets were mined using Git Hub's Twin Project. The pattern discovery was partly made with Python's Pandas library. The following steps will be taken when analysing the content of both scholarly accounts. Within tweets, specific words will be targeted. Because tweets are only 280 characters long, specific words appearing in a single tweet can be considered keywords conveying important information. To avoid counting repeated words in a tweet multiple times, the search algorithm will only count one word per tweet, even if the same text is posted with a different date. Mufti Menk's replies have also been classified as tweets.

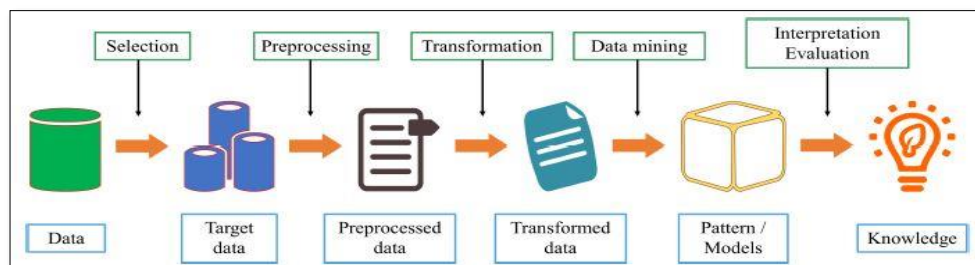


Figure 1. Overall processes of pattern discovery in Big Data analytics. Note: Adapted from *Review on the application of machine learning algorithms in the sequence data mining of DNA* (p. 5), by Y. Aimin et al, 2020, *Frontiers in Bioengineering and Biotechnology*.

⁷⁶ See: Aaron Moy, "Four insights about millennials on Twitter", *Twitter Blog*, 2014, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2014/four-insights-about-millennials-on-twitter

The Rahma Lil 'lammn concept will be used to calibrate the specific word search into an efficient information extraction method. This notion comes from Qur'an: (21:107) which states:

*{It was only as a mercy that We sent you [Prophet] to all people}*⁷⁷

H. R. H. Prince Ghazi held that the Prophet had sympathy and compassion for all people, "not only to the believers".⁷⁸ He cites Q.21:107 as the basis for this idea. He also cites Q.21:107 as evidence of the Divine Love towards non-Muslims.⁷⁹ In another work, Prince Ghazi describes Islam's concept of God using the twin notions of Mercy & Love.⁸⁰ He also describes the purpose of the creation of mankind as to do kindness to others.⁸¹ For the purposes of this research, the notion embodied in Q.21:107 translates onto the cyberspace. The prophetic message has a merciful stance towards all the users in cyberspace. Mercy, love, and kindness all arouse what is called "positive affect". In behaviour studies, positive affect is positive emotions that bring a positive mood to a person.⁸² It can be suggested that Q.21:107 emphasises that Islam has within it elements that arouse a positive effect in everyone. In tandem with positive affect, there is also "negative affect". In behaviour studies, negative affect includes negative moods such as guilt, shame, fear, anger etc.⁸³ In Islam, notions of fear and anger, for instance, exist too. Thus, the elements of Islam can be broadly characterised as those which produce positive affect and those that produce negative affect. Since these are scientific terms with specific meanings, it must be kept in mind that no normative judgement is passed on either affects.

⁷⁷ Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. (2005). *The Quran: A New Translation*. Oxford University Press, p. 208.

⁷⁸ Prince Ghazi, H. R. H. (2010). *Love in the Holy Quran*. Chicago: Kazi Publications, pp. 82-3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁰ Prince Ghazi, H. R. H. (2018). *A thinking person's guide to Islam: the essence of Islam in 12 verses from the Qur'an*. London: Turath Publishing, chapter 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, chapter 4.

⁸² Miller, D. N. (2011). Positive Affect. In S. Goldstien & J. A. Naglieri (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Child Behaviour and Development*. New York: Springer, pp. 1121-2.

⁸³ Stringer, D. M. (2013). Negative Affect. In M. D. Gellman & J. R. Turner (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Behavioural Medicine*. New York: Springer, pp. 1303-4.

Using the notion of *Rahma Lil 'Ālamīn*, this research will categorize key Islamic terms into two categories: positive words and negative words. Examples of pairs will illustrate this: reward/punishment, good/evil, halal/haram, forgiveness/guilt, paradise/hell, etc. The positive words are related to the *Rahma* (Mercy) of Islam, which all people regardless of faith will feel positively about.

Words that evoke a positive mood, such as "friendship," will be considered positive. Other words that evoke a negative mood, such as 'hudd law,' will be considered negative. Because of their connotations within Muslim culture, neutral terms that are not immediately negative, such as Companions (Sahaba), will be considered positive. Whether or not the evoked moods are justified is unimportant in this study; what matters is how the audience reacts to these terms. Whereas, negative words will inform on the preferences and communicative choices that both scholars make.

In addition to examining the content of both scholars, this study will examine their followers. Each scholar will have 5,000 followers chosen at random and analysed. Key characteristics and traits of these online users will be identified, and a typological portrait of the audience base will be created. The analysis of followers also aids in determining whether there is any correspondence between the positivity or negativity advocated by these scholars and their audience base. The following section begins with an examination of the contents of Bilal Philips' and Mufti Menk's accounts.

Mufti Menk & Bilal Philips Twitter Content

An overview of both Twitter accounts is necessary. Mufti Menk joined Twitter on February 2011. He posted 11,485 tweets from then till January 2022. In this time frame, he accumulated 8.3 million Twitter followers. Bilal Philips joined Twitter on May 2011. He posted 35,600 tweets from then till January 2022. In this time frame, he accumulated 1.1 million Twitter followers.

Both Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips were active on Twitter for over a decade. Yet a disparity between them can be noticed. Bilal Philips has posted over 300% more Twitter content than Mufti Menk. In contrast,

Mufti Menk has gained over 700% more followers on Twitter than Bilal Philips.

Paul Wouters, Zohreh Zahedi, and Rodrigo Costas have introduced the notion of *social media metrics* to understand the impact of scientific research on social media.⁸⁴ They discuss “comparative approaches” to social media metrics, which is concerned with questions of higher/lower, etc.⁸⁵ Taking cue from this, it can be said that Mufti Menk’s tweets have more impact than Bilal Philips’ tweets. With roughly one-third of the number of tweets that Bilal Philips posted, Mufti Menk was able to attract over seven times the followers that Bilal Philips has. Mufti Menk has lower number of tweets, higher number of followers. Bilal Philips has a higher number of tweets, lower number of followers.

Crucially, both Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips joined Twitter in 2011 and sustained their engagements on Twitter for over a decade. This shows both scholars are aware that social media is a long-term medium for the dissemination of Islamic knowledge. They did not see social media as a passing fad, or short-term exigency. In other words, they took social media seriously.

Following the *Rahmat lil-‘Ālamīn* concept, a thematic content analysis can be made of the tweets for both Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips. Positive themes are espoused by linguistic tokens, just as negative themes are shown via linguistic tokens. It is well-known that language can be categorised into positive and negative. Paul Rozin, Loren Berman, and Edward Royzman discuss how in the English language there are more positive words than negative words. This is due to language describing the world where positive events are more frequent than negative events.⁸⁶ In written and spoken corpuses, there is a positive bias where more positive words are used often while negative words are used less.⁸⁷ For the purposes of this research, positive words in English will map out the positive themes in Islam that induce a positive mood in

⁸⁴ Wouters, P., Zahedi, Z., & Costas, R. (2019). Social Media Metrics for New Research Evaluation. In W. Glänzel, H. F. Moed, U. Schmoch, & M. Thelwall (Eds.), *Springer Handbook of Science and Technology Indicators*. Springer Nature Switzerland, p. 688.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 697.

⁸⁶ Rozin, P., Berman, L., & Royzman, E. (2010). Biases in use of positive and negative words across twenty natural languages. *Cognition and Emotion*, 23(4), p. 537.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 538.

Twitter users. Negative words in English will map out the negative themes in Islam that induce a negative mood in Twitter users. It must be kept in mind that the words 'positive/negative' do not relate to moral categories; rather, they refer to moods generated in readers of the text.

The top eight positive words in Mufti Menk's tweets are, in descending order, love, peace, allow (halal), forgive, mercy, face (dealing with calamities), paradise, and kindness. The word 'love' appears over 400 times. Over 150 times, the word 'Paradise' appears. 'Mercy' appears nearly 200 times. Mufti Menk values positive human emotions like love and mercy over positive theological concepts like paradise. This enables Mufti Menk to present a positive view of Islam that can reach out to all people, regardless of their theological beliefs. Despite their rejection of paradise, agnostics and atheists can recognise the value of love and mercy. Mufti Menk's presentation of positive themes in Islam is like William Schweiker's discussion of religion's humanization. Schweiker believed that remembering death (a negative theme) provided the foundation for human responsibility but not for goodness. It was the love of life (a positive theme) that enabled humans to feel good.⁸⁸ By emphasising the human sentiments such as love and mercy, Mufti Menk can portray Islam as close to the human condition.

For Bilal Philips, the three key positive words are: Allah, peace (to the Prophet), and Islam. By far, 'Allah' is the main positive word for Bilal Philips who mentions it over 2,500 times. In contrast, Mufti Menk mentioned the word 'Allah' less than 100 times. In Bilal Philips' twitter, the words 'love,' 'mercy,' 'forgive,' 'allow (halal),' 'kindness' are mentioned too few times to be of any statistical significance. Surprisingly, even the word 'Paradise' is rarely mentioned.

⁸⁸ Schweiker, W. (2009). Humanising Religion. *The Journal of Religion*, 89(2), p. 216.

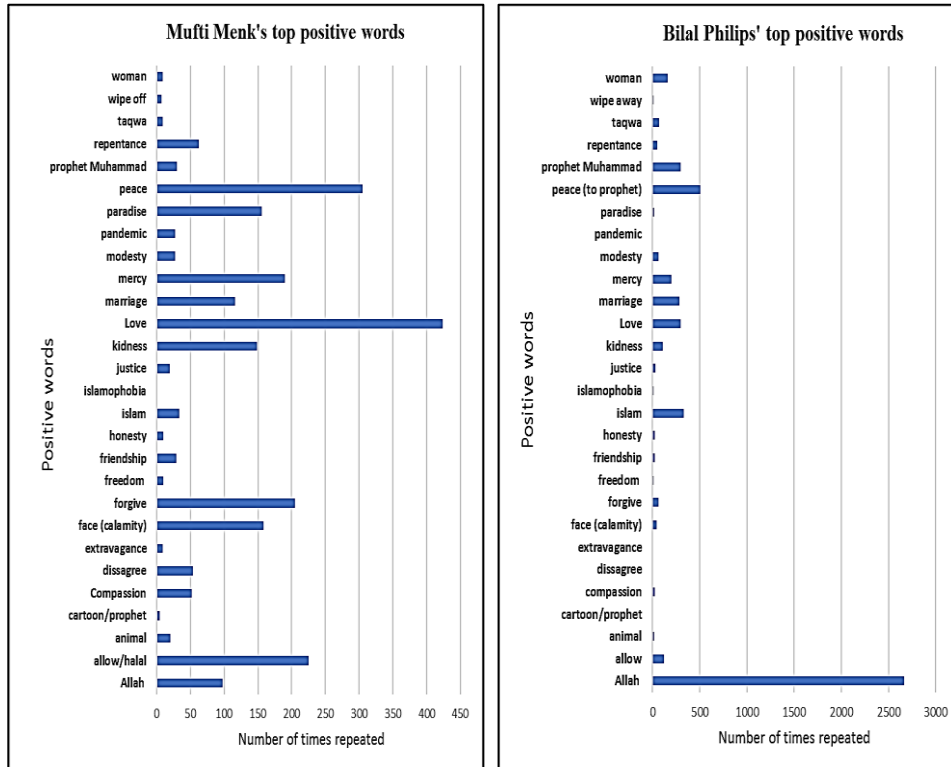


Chart no. 1 Mufti Menk's topmost positive words usage on Twitter

Chart no.2 Bilal Philips' topmost positive usage on Twitter

The positive themes of Islam, according to Bilal Philips' twitter, is focused primarily on Allah and on the Prophet. In this, Bilal Philips is following closely the traditionalist portrayal of Islam. In his messaging, Bilal Philips conveys Islam as a religion where people must obey Allah and the Prophet. Mufti Menk conveys Islam as a religion where people must love others and live peacefully with others.

For negative words, both Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips mention the word 'sin' more than others. While they both emphasis the theme of 'sin,' there are crucial distinctions in their overall negative portrayal. Mufti Menk refers repeatedly to 'drugs,' 'alcohol,' and 'pornography'. Bilal Philips mentions these terms rather less. Instead, Bilal Philips focuses more on 'music,' 'hijab,' 'haram,' 'beard,' 'zina'. Interestingly, Bilal Philips refers to 'Christianity,' 'Feminism,' 'Innovation,' and 'Atheism' whereas Mufti Menk rarely ever mentions these terms.

At least in terms of social media engagement, Mufti Menk often links the concept of 'sin' to drugs, alcohol, and pornography. Bilal Philips often links the concept of 'sin' to hijab, music, beard, zina, as well as other religions, Muslim sects, and ideologies. Mufti Menk's portrayal of sin is restrictive, whereas Bilal Philips' portrayal of sin is expansive. Most people, Muslim or non-Muslim, will agree that drug addiction is dangerous, that alcoholism is hurtful, and that pornography is misogynistic. Contrariwise, the issue of a man having a beard is controversial or at least debatable.

Mufti Menk conveys Islam by focusing on the haram issues that most people, regardless of religion, agree are bad. Bilal Philips conveys Islam by focusing on haram issues that most non-Muslims will disagree with, and some Muslims may find debatable.

A central part of *Rahma Lil 'Ālamīn* is universality. The Islamic message is a mercy to everyone, regardless of race, religion, or orientation. This can be further elucidated by borrowing an idea from Sissela Bok. She held that a minimal ethics could be accepted by everyone, no matter their own faiths or culture, because some form of minimal ethics is needed to facilitate communication and interpersonal relations.⁸⁹ In other words, without even a basic sense of ethics, all interpersonal and social interactions become untenable. Similarly, if Islam is presented in a way that emphasises the universality of its message, such as by focusing on a minimalistic ethics on which everyone can agree, more people around the world will agree with Islamic teachings. Based on this, Mufti Menk's negative portrayal of sin appears to resonate more with a universal minimal ethics, whereas Bilal Philips' negative portrayal of sin appears to be more specific to Muslims. After investigating the overall Twitter accounts of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk, as well as the content of their tweets, it is now necessary to investigate how Twitter users engage with and respond to their messages. The following section will deal with this.

Mufti Menk & Bilal Philips Twitter Followers

Analysing the Twitter followers of Mufti Menk's and Bilal Philips' Twitter accounts provides a more detailed picture of their effectiveness

⁸⁹ Bok, S. (1995). *Common Values*. University of Missouri Press.

in communicating Islam's message. It also helps to gain a better understanding of the qualities and characteristics of those who follow the two scholars on social media. It is critical to understand the audience because it provides a cross-section of I-Muslims or a snapshot of the Virtual Ummah. 'Engagement' is the technical term for the total number of times users interact with a tweet, such as retweeting, commenting, liking, and so on. Mufti Menk's engagement on Twitter is 30.3 thousand per tweet, with an average of 2.5 tweets per day, according to Twitter Analytics. That means for every one tweet Mufti Menk posts, over 30,000 users interact with it. For all his accumulated tweets, Mufti Menk received 97 million engagements across 10 years.

According to Twitter Analytics, Bilal Philips's engagement is 1.3 thousand per tweet with the average of 9.1 tweets per day. For his accumulated tweets, Bilal Philips received 4.3 million engagements across 10 years. There is a stark difference between both accounts. Mufti Menk has 3000% more engagements than Bilal Philips. In contrast, Bilal Philips posts 400% more daily content than Mufti Menk. In other words, Mufti Menk reaches thirty times more audience with (almost) one-fourth less content than Bilal Philips. Moreover, over ten years, Mufti Menk was able to amass 90 million more followers than Bilal Philips.

These results show that Mufti Menk's presentation of Islam is more popular than Bilal Philips' presentation of Islam. It also shows that exponentially more people consider Mufti Menk to be a source of Islamic knowledge than they do Bilal Philips. The religious authority of Mufti Menk is far more, in terms of followers, than that of Bilal Philips.

Studying a random sample of 5,000 Twitter followers of Mufti Menk, the following user traits can be delineated. Four key traits can be enumerated:

1. Majority of the followers do not put their formal name on their Twitter accounts. Instead, they use symbolic names or emojis to identify themselves.
2. 80% of the followers are young people. This was ascertained by extracting information from their profiles, media, and contents of their user accounts. The age range of sample users was from 20-35.
3. Many of the followers who identified themselves as both women and Muslims did not identify themselves as overtly religious.

4. Out of the 5,000 users sampled, 4,122 did not specify which country or region they are from.

Based on the metadata, majority of Mufti Menk's followers are Millennials and Generation Z.

Studying a similar random sample of Bilal Philips' followers, several key traits can be listed. These are:

1. Majority of the followers place a short form of their formal names, description of their professions, and either a verse of Quran or Hadith which they identify with.
2. Majority of the followers are above 30 years of age.
3. Majority of users who identify themselves as woman and as Muslim also overtly portray themselves as religious.
4. Out of the 5,000 users sampled, 3,599 did not specify which country or region they are from.

Based on the metadata, the majority of Bilal Philips' followers belong to the Baby Boomers and Generation X.

From the analysis so far, Mufti Menk caters to the younger generation of Muslims, whereas Bilal Philips caters to the older generation of Muslims. Thus, there can be seen some form of a generation gap, or attitude gap, between the audience base of each of the scholars.

In order to understand how geographically distributed the messages of Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips are, a closer analysis of geographic locations of account users was done. The small sample of user accounts that positively identified their country or region was considered. The results are enlightening.

Bilal Philips' followers encompass 67 countries. The top countries that users identify with are: Nigeria, Pakistan, India, United States, Bangladesh, Malaysia, United Kingdom and Indonesia. From this we can identify that North America, the Indian Subcontinent, and South East Asia are the main regions where his content is engaged.

Surprisingly, Nigeria is the number one country where followers of Bilal Philips come from, despite Nigeria being a non-Muslim, Christian

country. Also, North America is a popular area of followers for Bilal Philips. This is less surprising given how Bilal Philips lived in Canada and converted to Islam there. Bilal Philips' content, however, does not reach Latin America, Central Africa, majority of Europe, Central Asia, and China.

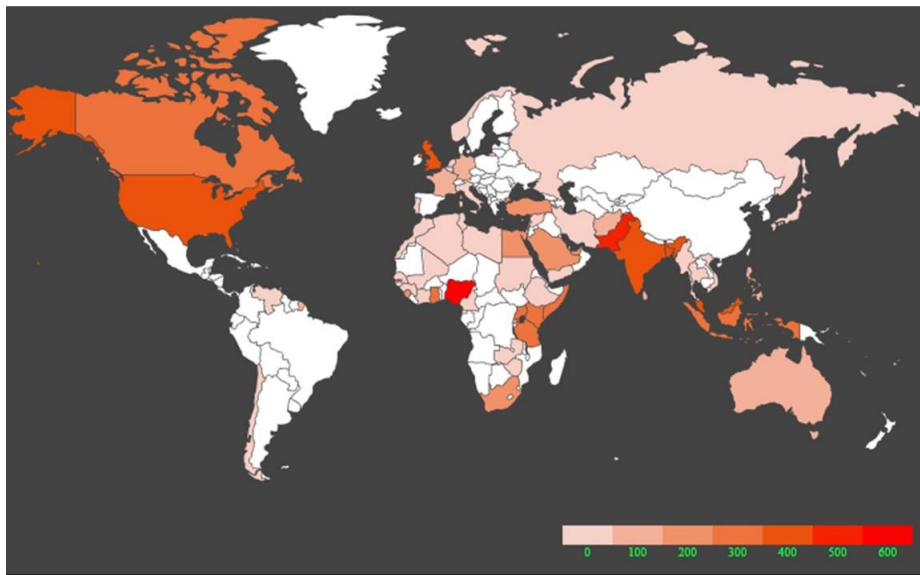


Figure 2 Bilal Philips' followers' distribution around the world

Mufti Menk's followers encompass 72 countries. The top countries that users identify with are: Nigeria, Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, South Africa, United States, and United Kingdom. Unlike Bilal Philips, Mufti Menk's content reached Latin America, half of Europe, and China. Language poses no barrier since Twitter offers options to translate tweets to any other language.

Overall, the data shows that the West, Nigeria, and Southeast Asia are the geographic areas that followers of both scholars identify with. The Southeast Asian region was found to have more combined users than either the West or Nigeria or even the Middle East. This indicates that Islam in the Millennial Age is slanted towards Asia more than any other region. Mufti Menk's content reaches more countries than Bilal Philips' content. This suggests that Mufti Menk portrays Islam in a way that appeals to a more diverse audience than Bilal Philips does. Having

analysed both the accounts/content and followers of Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips on Twitter, it remains to interpret the findings as well as see the significance of these findings to contemporary understanding of Islam.

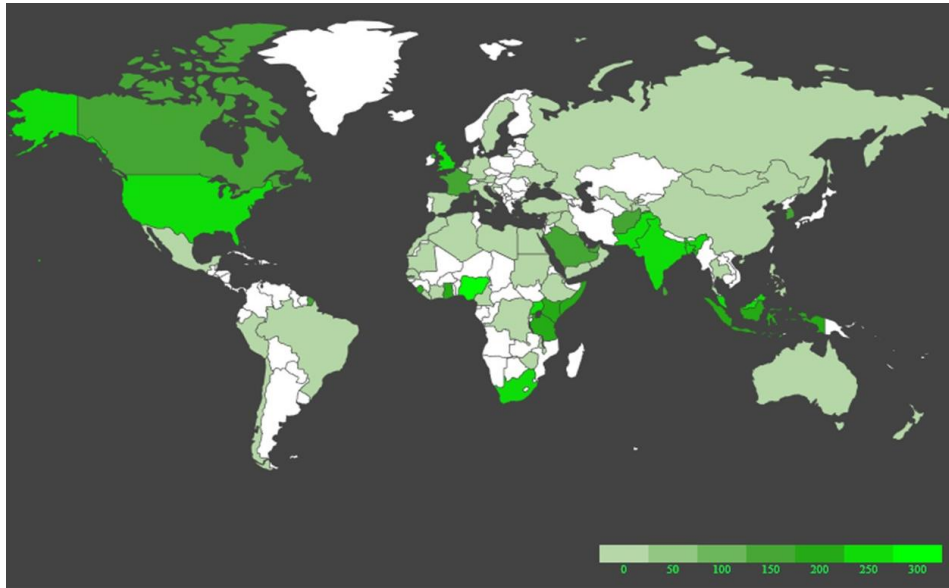


Figure 3 Mufti Menk's followers' distribution around the world

Interpretation, Significance, Conclusion

Traditional approaches to understanding a scholar's view is to analyse his written and published works. Bilal Philips has written several books that are freely available from his website: <https://bilalphilips.com>. Mufti Menk does not seem to have many books to his name. Methodologically, there is a problem with the traditional approaches, which is exemplified in this research paper.

Long ago, Joanne M. Golden spoke of Reader-Text Interaction.⁹⁰ To understand a work, one must also understand how the reader interacts with the work. A simple perusal of Bilal Philips' published works cannot tell how his Muslim readers react to his work. The readers, in such a perusal, are missing. The use of social media analysis opens a

⁹⁰ Golden, J. M. (1986). Reader-Text Interaction. *Building Literacy*, 25(2), pp. 91-6.

way to gather a more accurate and detailed picture on reader-text interactions.

The academic literature has focused more on Bilal Philips than on Mufti Menk. In the Cyber Islamic Environment of online Islamic knowledge, more Muslims flock to Mufti Menk than to Bilal Philips. A clear chasm exists between how academics in the West approach Bilal Philips, and how Muslims across the world approach him. For many Muslims, Mufti Menk provides a more contemporary understanding of Islam than Bilal Philips.

Analyzing the content of both accounts reveals that neither Mufti Menk nor Bilal Philips are particularly concerned with the issue of homosexuality. While they both oppose homosexuality, they do not actively condemn it on their social media accounts on a regular basis. Bilal Philips has a more sectarian view of Islam, condemning 'innovation,' on which Mufti Menk remains silent. Academics frequently discuss jihad, violence, salafism, and other related topics when discussing Bilal Philips. None of these themes were prevalent in his portrayal of Islam on social media. This is not to say that certain of his tweets do not address these issues. It is only to place such tweets in the context of Bilal Philips' overall online communication of Islam. Jihad, violence, and salafism are not major concerns for Bilal Philips.

Considering the data examined, Singapore's ban on Mufti Menk for alleged extremism appears strange. Mufti Menk prioritises humanistic elements such as love and mercy over theological doctrines such as paradise. His portrayal of 'sin' emphasises a shared ethics, in which he condemns drug addiction, alcoholism, and pornography. How this ethics can be viewed as 'extremism'. How this ethics can be seen as 'extremism' is a puzzle.

The age gap between Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips followers supports the notion that Millennials and Generation Z have different perspectives on Islam than Baby Boomers and Generation X. This is a significant insight because discussions about Islam frequently overlook the fact that what were pressing concerns for previous generations may not be pressing concerns for future generations. Based on the data, it is possible to hypothesise that young Muslims are more concerned with the positive and humanistic aspects of Islam, whereas older Muslims are

more concerned with the prohibitive and particularistic aspects of Islam. Which focus is correct or incorrect is irrelevant to this study. Delineating the online landscape of Islamic discourse is a sufficient contribution to the fields of Islamic Studies. What is evident is that the subjectivity regarding Islam is demarcated, at least faintly, by generational differences.

The issue of traditionalism/fundamentalism versus modernism/westernisation has been much discussed in the academic literature.⁹¹ As mentioned early on in this research paper, modernism is already outdated per Jeffery T. Nealon. Regardless, a methodological flaw in this discussion is the matter of quantifiability. How many Muslims can be said to follow traditionalism? What is the exact figure of Muslims following modernism? Definite numbers are hard to come by. The social media analysis of Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk provides concrete numbers. While numbers may not tell the entire picture, they are important in any detailed discussion. Comparing and contrasting the engagements with Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips, more Muslims appreciate Mufti Menk's portrayal of Islam than Bilal Philips' portrayal. Mufti Menk's humanising communication of Islam has wider approval than Bilal Philips' traditionalist communication of Islam. Based on this, sensational and alarmist rhetoric of 'rising traditionalism' seems to be overblown. At the very least, the data from CIEs shows that traditionalism is *not* the majority position amongst cyber-Muslims.

Amongst followers of Mufti Menk and Bilal Philips, there are clear differences. Those who follow Bilal Philips are typically mature adults with professions; they strongly identify with religiosity. Those who follow Mufti Menk are typically younger adults who do not strongly identify with religiosity. Such a distinction complicates the simple 'Islamic/not-Islamic' dichotomy; since, Muslims who follow Mufti Menk and learn Islamic knowledge from his tweets cannot be deemed 'not-Islamic'. While further research needs to be done on the spectrum of religiosity amongst Muslims as portrayed online, it can be tentatively suggested that Muslims who are keen to learn Islam but are not conservative in their lifestyle prefer Mufti Menk, whereas more conservative Muslims lean towards Bilal Philips. This evinces that

⁹¹ E.g. Moaddel, M. (2005). *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse*. University of Chicago Press.

Muslimness (as identifying with Islam) and religiosity (as conservative lifestyle) are not identical. This insight can have major ramifications for the study of Muslim engagement with the contemporary world. Often an implicit assumption of Orientalism is that Muslimness equals religiosity, such that Orientalism de-humanises Muslims, by portraying them as Islamic automatons bereft of human agency. Victoria M. Esse, Stelian Medianu, and Alina Sutter have pointed to the similarities between de-humanisation and Orientalism.⁹² David Livingstone Smith has discussed how de-humanisation causes atrocities including the persecution of Muslims.⁹³ The results of the social media analysis can help counter de-humanising assumptions against so-called monolithic Muslims.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To summarise, this research paper investigated how different historical epochs advocate for various expressions of Islam. Because we live in the Millennial Age, it is possible to ask how Islam is expressed among Millennials and Generation Z. The Millennial Age is defined by "digital immersion," in which most people interact online through social media. Although much research has been done on the interaction of Muslims and cyberspace, very little has been done on Bilal Philips' and Mufti Menk's communication of Islam on social media. The academic literature on both of these scholars is limited, and what has been written focuses on Jihad, violence, and homosexuality. By fusing Big Data Analytical Techniques with the Rahma Lil 'Ālamīn approach to Islam, this research was able to uncover a more detailed description of Bilal Philips' and Mufti Menk's dissemination of Islamic knowledge. The results of this analysis upend the current discourse about Bilal Philips and Mufti Menk, by showing that these two scholars have far more nuanced positions on Islam than previously acknowledged. The audience base for both scholars provided a snapshot of the Virtual Ummah, with a generational difference constituting a seismic shift in how Muslims today perceive Islam.

⁹² Esse, V. M., Medianu, S., & Sutter, A. (2021). The Dehumanization and Rehumanization of Refugees. In M. Kronfeldner (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanisation*. New York: Routledge, p. 280.

⁹³ Smith, D. L. (2020). *On Inhumanity: Dehumanisation and How to Resist It*. Oxford University Press.

This study aims to demonstrate how Islamic studies can be enhanced by incorporating social media analysis. A richer and far more sophisticated picture of the contemporary Muslim world can be obtained by combining such analysis with Islamic concepts and methods. A picture like this would aid in dispelling myths, distortions, and prejudices about Islam and Muslims in today's globalised world. This research is not without flaws. While 10,000 user accounts were examined, a larger set of user accounts can provide a more complete picture. As of January 2022, both scholars had nearly 10 million followers combined. More in-depth research could be conducted on this topic, such as examining how both scholars reacted to specific world events or ideas. Such studies would provide a more concrete understanding of the differences and similarities between both scholars in addressing real-world issues affecting Muslims and non-Muslims. The Covid-19 pandemic is an excellent example. Finally, this study did not consider the full scope of both scholars' activities. Mufti Menk travels widely and gives speeches to an international audience. Bilal Philips runs the Islamic Online University. To better understand the impact of these two scholars, their social media engagement must be seen in tandem with their other efforts in spreading Islamic knowledge.

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