2-1-2013

Beyond political Islam: exploring discourses and uses of three popular global Islamic social media initiatives

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School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

Beyond Political Islam: Exploring Discourses and Uses of Three Popular Global Islamic Social Media Initiatives

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by Dina Mohamed Basiony

under the supervision of Dr. Mohamad Elmasry

Fall 2013

DEDICATION

To my most Beautiful Creator …

For *Your* incomparable Beauty…

For *Your* soothing help that accompanied me every step of the way.

For that night when *You* turned my complete despair and helplessness into astonishing relief and success…leaving me at awe…in deep gratitude.

For all the merciful people you put on my way to help me. I know their help and mercy are a reflection of *Your* Help and Mercy.

This was a full-fledged learning experience for me….and again *You* teach me that it is *You* who is Beauty upon beauty… and Light upon light!

Alhamdul-Allah (All praise is due to Allah)!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to extend my thanks to all the people who have been part of my MA experience.

Thank you, Dr. Masry, my advisor, for your patience, hard work and making this entire experience very easy on me. I am truly grateful. You worked on very tight schedules and went the extra mile to help me out. I pray that you continue to be a means of benefit to people through your various endeavors.

Thank you to my committee members. Dr. Amin, I'm really thankful to your immense kindness. I also appreciate how you respect your students. Thank you for the helpful remarks on my thesis.

Thank you, Prof. El Khalili, for the time and effort you put into providing me with detailed comments on this work. You have a heart of gold. Hope you keep it that way.

Thank you to all my friends and colleagues who gave me sincere words of encouragement.

Thank you to all the spectacular people of the Journalism and Mass Communication Department at AUC.

Dr. Naila Hamdy and Prof. Mervat Abo Oaf, thank you for the indescribable kindness and encouragement you've always shown me. Your doors and hearts have always been open to me. Thank you.

My family (Mom, Dad and brother Kareem)…you are simply beautiful! You bring new definition to love, care and mercy. Allah taught me a lot through having you in my life. Last but not least, thank you to my principled, sincere and softhearted uncle Medhat for all the support and for encouraging me to start this MA in the first place.

Alhamdul-Allah (All praise is due to Allah)!

ABSTRACT

This study explores the discourses employed in three growingly popular global Islamic social media pages (GISMP), and examines their potential impact on identities of young Muslim followers across the globe. The initiatives are; *Celebrate Mercy*, *Productive Muslim* and *Quran Weekly.* The three sites are among today's most popular Islam-based social media pages. The analysis highlights each site's discourses about the Muslim identity, relevance of Qur'an to youth, and representation of central figure, Prophet Muhammad- as well as how the pages address issues like terrorism, violence and the religious other. The aim is to examine how major Islamic tenets are being propagated to masses of Muslim youth around the world today via social media, how this influences our understanding of the uses of social media, and how this potentially influences followers of the world's second largest religious population. A survey of site users was conducted to examine the uses/reactions of followers towards the initiatives' work. The survey yielded 900 responses from Muslim youth in eight different regions across the globe. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with the pages' founders to provide insight into their motivations and how they see their work influencing both page followers and the global Muslim community.

Survey results illustrated that mainstream Muslim youth find leaders of Muslim majority countries unrepresentative of Islam, and feel under-represented in traditional media. They use social media outlets to reclaim their own narrative, express and boost their Muslim identity, and connect with members of the global Muslim community, the *ummah*. The study shows how certain GISMP have the potential to indirectly counter anti-Islam discourses in mainstream traditional/social media outlets. The study also points to the potential influence of popular GISMP in connecting and mobilizing young Muslims around the world.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"*As a youth who is concerned about the future, I really believe the leaders of the Muslim countries distort the views of what a good human being, not just a Muslim [should be like]. We need to somehow change the horrible situations of the Middle East. Also, we need to help people who are caught in the midst of this chaos. I think we can use social media to do this. Quran weekly team…u rock!!*" – Youth survey respondent.

Beyond heated contemporary discussions on the rise or downfall of political Islam, one witnesses the unfolding of an important phenomenon related to the world's Muslims – the notable rise of a virtual universal Muslim *ummah* mobilized by Islamic social media pages drawing hundreds of thousands of young Muslim followers across the globe.

This is occurring whilst mainstream Muslim voices around the world appear to be undermined in traditional Western media discourses. Esposito and Mogahed (2007) presented one of the largest and most comprehensive polls of global Muslim public opinion. They confirmed the notion that the voices of the majority of Muslims around the world are silenced and marginalized, whether by mainstream media or political representations. Their polling also showed that, beyond the negative framing of radical Muslims in the media, average Western citizens don't have any information about Islam or Muslims. This problem widens the gap between world communities. The Muslim population, with over 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, constitutes the second largest religious population in the world (Pew, 2012).

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To enhance global communications, there needs to be adequate understanding of world communities. The question here is how do the mainstream Muslims around the world channel their views?

With the notable growth, popularity and outreach of global Islamic social media pages, this study aims to examine whether these sites could be serving as platforms through which mainstream Muslims around the world present their own narrative and voice their opinions. The purpose is to uncover the discourses employed in these sites to channel Muslim views, as well as, understand the uses and gratifications of these sites from the followers' perspectives.

The global Islamic social media pages addressed in this research refer to social media-based initiatives with Islamic content, run by Muslims and targeting, primarily, Muslim audiences beyond geographical barriers or political affiliations.

Three global Islamic social media pages have been identified as a sample for this research. The outlets are; *Quran Weekly*, *Celebrate Mercy* and *Productive Muslim*. The outlets are significant because they enjoy a large and growing base of followers on social media, and also because they deal with major Islamic tenets in a contemporary, global and youth-oriented framework. Both factors raise questions on the influence of these sites on Muslim followers, and the *ummah* at large.

Schmidt (2005) interrogated the concept of transnational Muslim *ummah* and whether it is a myth or reality. The researcher noted that the "*ummah*" as a notion is growingly popular among communities of Muslims in the West, in particular, who have a need to belong to a larger community. Schmidt said that the specific

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manifestations and larger implications of this phenomenon still need to be investigated.

"*Ummah*" is an Arabic word meaning nation or community, and refers specifically to the global community of Muslims. The "*ummah*" as a concept is not confined by geographical boundaries. It refers to unity of Muslims based on shared values, beliefs and principles (Armstrong, 2009; Lings; 2001).

In mainstream public, media and academic discourses, addressing Islam in global or universal context seem uncommon since the religion is frequently depicted in an Arab/Middle Eastern context (Ibrahim, 2009, 2010; Said, 2003; Poole 2001, 2006; El-Nawawy & Khamis 2009, 2010; DeSilver, 2013).

But, contemporary scholars, like Karen Armstrong (2009) and Martin Lings (2001), emphasize a core universal dimension to the Islamic message. The emphasis is drawn from the Quranic text's discourse that seems to address "human beings" beyond ethnicities, nationalities or geographical boundaries.

Modern day divisions based on political affiliations and ethnicity in Muslim - majority countries seem to suggest a diversion from the aforementioned discourse that highlights universality (Seib, 2007). Muslim produced social media websites, however, may be presenting an opportunity to establish a type of global, transnational Muslim identity, at least for some Muslims.

Guo-Ming (2012) suggested that rapid developments in new media are having major global effects on individuals and communities. The relationship between new

media and global communication between individuals/groups are, thus, growingly important and require further research.

On the issue of global or transnational Muslim community, Bunt (2002, 2003 and 2009) suggested that this phenomenon could be positive in terms of giving power and voice to Muslims worldwide who're under-represented in mainstream traditional media. While other researchers; like Bhui and Ibrahim (2013) suggested that this might give rise to terrorism groups/activism, as well.

This study corresponds, on the one hand, with the work of Bunt (2002; 2003 and 2009) that suggested the growing influence of the "iMuslims" (i.e. Muslims on the Internet) and how this phenomenon may affect discourses on Muslim identity and the *ummah*, at large. On the other hand, this study also corresponds with Esposito and Mogahed's 2007 work that showed how mainstream Muslim voices around the world- that seem to be dismissed- ought to be heard in order to further the global understanding of the ever-growing Muslim population.

This study examines how mainstream Muslim youth around the world today are using social media outlets, and whether they're successfully employing it as a tool to voice their opinions and/or to create a sense of belonging with the larger global Muslim population—even if only in the virtual world.

The intercultural communication in new media that Guo-Ming (2012) discussed could be observed today in the manifestation of a global Muslim culture on social media encompassing a wide array of representations.

Today, global Muslim artists, intellectuals, scholars, and fashion icons have used social media sites effectively, and some sites attract millions of followers. For example, with nearly nine million followers on Facebook, Maher Zain, a young Swedish-Muslim singer and song writer says he aims to create "modern Islamic music […] to inspire […] and send a message of peace and hope to the world." Hijab fashion figure 'Amenakin' - a British-Indian female – has drawn over 25 million views to her YouTube channel that features hijab (veil) tutorials and thoughts on current issues in the Muslim *ummah.* Figures like American-Muslim intellectual Hamza Yusuf, Pakistani-Muslim Quran interpreter Nouman Ali Khan, British-Muslim photographer Peter Sanders, and Chinese-Muslim calligrapher Hajj Noor Deen also have significant internet followings. Does the emergence of Muslim social media stars suggest some kind of reemergence of a global Muslim identity? This is one broad question addressed in this research.

Classical Islamic knowledge seems to also be moving from traditional mosques, schools or universities to the virtual (and borderless) world. With initiatives like "*Halal* Tube" compiling a vast resource of Islamic lectures from more than 90 international speakers covering over 300 topics and making them freely accessible to people worldwide, thus, revolutionizing the dissemination of Islamic knowledge- especially among youth - the primary inhabitants of the virtual world.

Accordingly — and in light of the above — this research aims to explore the uses of three growingly popular global Islamic social media pages and their potential influence on identities and world-view of young Muslim followers across the globe.

The sampled sites enjoy popularity in terms of followers, are practical manifestations of the "global" Muslim representations discussed earlier, and reflect diverse utilizations of social media today.

Given the scarceness of research on this emerging topic, this study will provide essential accounts on discourses, uses and implications of three popular global Islamic social media pages. Previous research has indicated that young Muslims' lives are largely shaped by new media (El Nawawy & Khamis, 2010). It is thus important to explore the potential impact of these outlets on identities and world-view of Muslim youth across the world.

In addition to possible empirical and academic contributions, the research may help create better understanding and lessen the fear of "the religious other", as suggested in the social identity theory (Scott, 2007).

The research employs a variety of methods to deepen the understanding of the topic and the population under study. First, a discourse analysis of the strategies utilized in the three outlets is conducted to present an in-depth view of the intricate workings of these outlets. The analysis will explore trends and patterns employed to present the Muslim identity, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad in a contemporary global communication context. The analysis will also look at how issues like terrorism, violence and the religious other are discussed on the three sites. A comparison will also be made between the outlets' representations of the aforementioned points of analysis, and the mainstream anti-Islam representations of the same points of discussion.

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Secondly, a survey with followers of the three pages will present an understanding of the uses and gratifications of these emerging social media outlets.

Thirdly, in-depth interviews with the founders of the three initiatives will provide insight into their own identity, motivations and perspectives on influencing Muslim youth and the global Muslim *ummah*- at large in the short and long term.

1. Relevance of this topic today in a global communication context

The discussions among mass communication researchers in recent years have scrutinized the manifestation and impact of global communications or technologies on the world's cultures, religions, economies—and even the world order at large (Kraidy, 1999; Guo-Ming, 2012).

From "many voices, one world" to "one world, many voices", the intricate debate continues while developments in new media are challenging earlier findings (Kraidy, 1999; Kraidy & Mourad, 2010; Bunt, 2002, 2003, 2009; Ayish, 2005; Kamalipour, 2000; Eickelman & Jon 2003; Poole & Richardson, 2006).

In the global communication context, fear of the demolishment or suppression of world cultures or religions in the fast paced, Western-oriented communication technologies was posed (Ayish, 2005). However, other researchers suggested that global communication's impacts on the world's cultures is rather complex and needs

to be placed under further examination (Kraidy, 1999; Kraidy & Mourad, 2010; Guo-Ming, 2012).

Peter (2010) showed how Lebanese-Nigerians Diasporas have utilized transnational networks to remain connected with their counterparts across the globe. Similarly, Sadek (2010) elaborated on how Iraqi diaspora in Egypt used transnational networks to cope and adjust to living in a foreign country.

In recent research, Guo-Ming (2012), suggested further study of: "1) The impact of ethnic culture on the development of new media 2) the impact of new media on cultural/social identity, and 3) the impact of new media (especially social media) on different aspects of intercultural communication."

Building on such work, this study discusses the potential impact of global Islamic social media pages on the identities and perspectives of Muslims around the world, and the discourses in mainstream media that might not be adequate representations of the Muslim population, identity or culture.

As of late, it has been noticed in different social media outlets that several activists and commentators criticized Western media discourses that directly link Islam/Muslims with terrorism, despite recent FBI's report indicating that 94% of terrorist attacks in the United States are carried out by non-Muslim groups. Greater risks, according to the report and research conducted by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, an initiative run by Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, were posed by other groups like the Jewish Defense League - which doesn't receive the same type of negative media

treatment (Iftikhar, 2013; "Terrorism 2002-2005"; "Study: Threat of," 2010; "Non-Muslims carried out," 2013; Danios, 2010;).

In the realm of these findings, existing studies that limit analysis of Muslim youths' utilization of media to "extremism", "terrorism" and "radicalism" (Cilluffo, Cardash, & Whithead, 2007; Drissel, 2007; Horgan, 2009; Jenkins, 2009; O'Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009; Rogan, 2006; Rogan & Stenersen, 2008; Stemmann, 2006), might be misleading since it might be dismissing the complex and diverse nature of the mainstream Muslim population (Esposito & Mohaged, 2007).

Accordingly, this research aims to look specifically at how global Islamic social media pages present the mainstream Muslim views.

Future multidisciplinary research might draw on the findings of this work to explore the political, social, psychological, and media effects of the uses of global Islamic social media outlets and their influence on the global Muslim youth, and global Muslim community at large. The diversity of research methods employed in this study will provide a panoramic understanding of the topic, and might broaden the scope of work for future research. The large response rate of the survey (n=900) might also provide rich analysis and perspectives from mainstream Muslim youth around the world.

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2. Importance of the topic:

- The new developments in social media provoke further studies on the impact of this phenomenon on users' identity, perspectives and world-view.

- The growing outreach of global Islamic social media figures/pages- like the three selected sites- that are reaching millions of followers around the world pose questions on the uses of these outlets and their potential influence on followers' identities.

- The Muslim population, in particular, is important because, not only is it already large, but also Pew expects it to grow at twice the rate of non-Muslim populations in the coming two decades (Pew, 2012).

- This study is important today because recent world events, like the Arab uprisings, indicated that youths' utilization of social media ought not to be underestimated, given their ability to transform virtual activism into real events of significant global impact on the ground, like ousting presidents and leading to political, social and regional changes (Khamis & Vaughn, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

- Social media is enabling Muslims around the world to connect with one another in manners that were not possible before via traditional media or other means. The implications of this phenomenon need to be investigated.

- The findings of this study could be further analyzed in political, social, psychological and media contexts.

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II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on Islam and media largely focuses concepts of "terrorism", "radicalism" and/or "Jihadism" (Cilluffo, Cardash, & Whithead, 2007; Drissel, 2007; Horgan, 2009; Jenkins, 2009; O'Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009; Rogan, 2006; Rogan & Stenersen, 2008; Stemmann, 2006). Other research demonstrates that there seems to be a dominantly negative frame in which Islam and/or Muslims are being presented in Western media specifically (Poole 2001; 2002; 2006; Richardson 2004; 2006; Ibrahim 2009, 2010; El Gazzar, 2013).

Since discussions on radical Islam and negative framings of Muslims seem to be principally present in the literature, the gap appears to be in understanding the voices of ordinary, mainstream Muslims across the globe. This was noted by Esposito and Mogahed (2007).

1.   **How Islam/Muslims are portrayed in the Media**

A large body of literature focused on how extremists, terrorists and/or Jihadists propagate their views through traditional or new media outlets (Bunt, 2003; Stemmann, 2006; Cilluffo, Cardash & Whithead, 2007; Rogan & Stenersen, 2008; Torres, Jordan & Horsburgh, 2006; Weimann & Winn, 1994).

Intriguingly, this finding corresponds to what Edward Said (1997) wrote. Said argued that Islam is presented to the West in a radically oversimplified and distorted manner. He argued that this issue goes back to the history of Islam and Christianity in the West. Islam was posed as a rising power and a challenging

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competitor to Christianity, accordingly, it was viewed as an evil that needs to be overcome (Said, 1997).

In Ibrahim (2009), it becomes clear through the researcher's analysis that Islam has been portrayed rather negatively in Western- particularly US-, news networks since the events of 9/11. The researcher highlighted how the coverage in the news networks has linked Islam with certain Arab countries that have been framed as the "enemies" of the United States (Ibrahim, 2009).

Again, this is consistent with what Said (1997 and 2003) suggested. He argued that unlike the Europeans who've colonized Muslim countries at some point in their history, Americans haven't had direct encounters with the Muslim world. Because of the lack of exposure to Islam, along with an oversimplified and distorted news media coverage, Americans started viewing Islam and Muslims as enemies through a rather misleading lens (Said, 1997; 2003).

Hafez (2000) highlighted the rather fragmented images and portrayals of Muslims in global media through various essays focusing on the portrayals of Islam in the media.

In British media coverage, for example, researchers like Poole (2000, 2002, and 2006) and Richardson (2001, 2006) examined the negative framing of Islam and Muslims in mainstream newspapers. Both researchers analyzed specifically newspapers' coverage post 9/11 and how this impacted negatively the public perception of British Muslims.

On the same note, Richardson (2004) analyzed what he called "racism" in the discursive representation of Islam and Muslims in British newspapers.

It appears in Goldstein (2001), that part of this framing could be directly connected to discussions that link Islam with Jihad and the wide debate on the nature of Jihad; whether it's a spiritual struggle or unjust war strategy.

Not just terrorist acts committed by Muslims, like 9/11, but also wars committed by Western powers in Muslim lands are part of this ongoing discussion on the framing and representations of Islam and Muslims in media. The war on Iraq was tackled in the works of Poole (2006) and Richardson (2006), with emphasis on how this political event negatively affected the coverage of Islam and Muslims. The researchers suggested that news networks covered the subjects in a political lens through officials' perspectives, dismissing, thereby, mainstream Muslim voices and marginalizing public opinions in countries that were linked with Islam like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq.

The findings of Strömbäck, Shehata & Dimitrova (2008) also confirm the notion of politicized coverage of Islam-related topics. The researchers studied how Swedish and U.S. newspapers framed the coverage of the anti-Prophet Muhammad Danish cartoons. They concluded their work by highlighting that "[The] coverage relies more on governmental sources [...] Consequently, governmental sources might have more power in the frame building processes [...] When framing foreign events, the news media will most often choose frames that fit already existing schemas, and

these will likely be the frames that are promoted by the domestic government" (Strömbäck, Shehata & Dimitrova, 2008).

On the other end of the spectrum, Esposito and Mogahed (2007) analyzed through a six-year series of polling and interviews with Muslims globally, what mainstream Muslims- who don't frequently make the news- really think about issues like democracy, women's rights and American values. This work highlighted the degree to which mainstream Muslims are stereotyped in media.

Further elaboration on this point is found in Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2006. The work elaborated on the stereotyping of Muslims and how this largely and deeply affected the community of Muslims in America. The study specifically criticized the US media- intentional or unintentional- direct linkage of Islam with terrorism and how this negatively impacted American Muslims.

This is also what Gottschalk and Greenberg (2007) highlighted in "*Islamophobia: Making Muslims the enemy*." The book particularly focused on the ways Muslims are villainized, demoralized and depicted as violent, oppressive group that necessarily clash with Western values. The analysis put in consideration five decades of political cartoons that essentially enticed and provoked Islamophobic sentiments and accentuated a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2007).

According to Karim (2003), the continuous negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims seem to be directly related to the US and allies' need to fill the "threat

vacuum". Karim critically scrutinized the deeply "stereotyped, demeaning and loaded" portrayals of Islam and Muslims in Canadian, US and British print media. His analysis presents valuable accounts of the longstanding and deeply rooted negative portrayal of Islam, its message and perspectives of its followers.

In a later study, Ibrahim (2010) examined the discourses in network news coverage of Islam within and without the United States, with emphasis on what the coverage intently highlights or omits with discussing Islam.

She concluded, "Objective coverage of Islam is a myth, not just in America, but across the world" (Ibrahim, 2010).

This seems to be the case even in an Arab country like Egypt. El Gazzar (2013), highlighted how anti-political Islam users of Facebook and twitter in Egypt have utilized these platforms to attack Islamists in their country.

Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz (2013) encapsulated their observation of the state of Islam on YouTube by quoting the Prophet Muhammad as saying "there will be time when your religion will be like a hot piece of coal in the palm of your hand; you will not be able to hold it." By using this reference, the researchers argued that Islam on a social media platform like YouTube, seems to be highly controversial given the discourses used by those who attack it, and even, those who praise it. Sensationalism, stereotyping, profanity seemed to be dominating the discourses of the viewers on YouTube while commenting on Islam-related videos (Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz, 2013).

On this note, Said had explained earlier that for a long period of time, coverage of Islam and the Muslim world was sensationally-driven, deliberately dominated by what inflicts and emphasizes stereotypes to attain "newsworthiness". This left people, accordingly, unaware of what Islam really is or who Muslims are, apart from sensational news coverage. (Said, 1997). This seems to also be the premise of Esposito and Mogahed's work (2007).

2. Negative Muslim framing and Anti-Islam sentiments

Through net-no-graphic observations (ethnographic observations on the net), Laudone (2012) shed light on the anti-Islam discourses that have been growing on Facebook between 2008 and 2010. The researcher noted the presence of bigotry and hostile sentiments like "banning Islam from the world, encouraging violent attacks against Muslims and making negative jokes /stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims." Anti-Islam FB pages like "Infidel", "Stop Islamization of the World," and "Anti-Islam" were studied by the researcher for their blatant racist discourses, as the study highlighted (Laudone, 2012).

Growing anti-Islam sentiments have been notable in recent years (Smith, 2013; Geddes, 2013; Laudone 2012; Corcoran, 2010; Ansari, 2012; Latif, 2012; Mayton 2013; Altman 2010; Gallup, 2011).

Smith (2013) reported that people who don't have enough knowledge of Islam are more vulnerable to the negative mainstream media portrayals of the religion and its followers. The study concluded that education about Islam is an important

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tool to respond to growing anti-Islam sentiments, "but education alone is unlikely to offset the effects of the highly politicized portrayals of Islam in the American news media" (Smith, 2013).

Andersen, Brinson, & Stohl (2012) investigated the impact of the negative framings of Muslims in the US news media outlets. Through their experiment, the researchers highlighted how watching negative political portrayals of Muslims in the news might lead viewers to compromise civil liberties and approve further restrictions or oppression of a group that they perceive negatively.

Elaborating on the impact of politicized coverage of Islam in the media, Latif (2012) discussed incidents of physical attacks against Muslim and attributed blame to politicians saying "[politicians] make comments that incite hatred and justify bigoted actions against innocent people" (Latif, 2012).

The observed anti-Islam sentiments are not surfacing only in the US. In Germany earlier in 2009, a Muslim woman was stabbed 18 times- allegedly for wearing a head scarf- after she asked the attacker to let her three-year-old son sit on a swing in the park (Connolly & Shenker, 2009). Similarly in Canada, anti-Islam sentiments have been reported in Geddes (2013) who quoted a poll illustrating the rise of those sentiments and reported an incident in which a teenage Muslim girl was beaten up by three other girls who started bullying her as she walked out of her mosque (Geddes, 2013).

Terrorism attacks that happen in the name of Islam must have contributed to creating the negative schema among non-Muslim populations. On the same note,

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political scientist, Robert Pape, studied every terrorism attack around the world since 1980 (a database of over 460 attacks) and concluded, "There is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions. Rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland" (Pape, 2005).

This finding corresponds with Esposito and Mogahed's conclusions (2007). Based on a poll of more than 35 Muslim countries, the authors found that "The majority of Muslims overwhelmingly oppose terrorist acts (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz (2013) indicated that the rise of social media pages is leading- to a certain degree- to balancing the existing discourses on Islam. This is because of the attempts made by online Muslims across the globe to present their religion in positive frames through user-generated content (UGC) on different social media platforms.

3. How Muslims are using the media

While study like Maguire's (2012) focused specifically on Islamism or Islamists' utilization of media in the pre-social media period, the work of Bunt (2002; 2003; 2009) sheds light on the diversity of Muslims' representations in social media.

Bhui and Ibrahim (2013) focused on Al-Qaeda's online marketing strategies to promote their "radicalization", and suggested that the Internet's ability to surpass geographical boundaries facilitated the formation of a common identity among young people, especially in Muslim Diasporas across the world. It also facilitates for extremists- as implied in the research- attracting or recruiting people from across the globe to adopt their views.

However, Bunt (2009) produced a new dimension to the analysis. He focused on how Muslims activities on the Internet are rather diverse and complex. He highlighted how the Internet enabled Muslims to change discourses on Islam, the Muslim identity and the world's Muslim community, *ummah*. The work focused on the attitudes of those Internet Muslims, how their religious and intra personal activities are affected by the transnational nature of the Internet outlets.

On this note, Hirzalla, Zoonen & Müller (2012) investigated how comedy shows on YouTube, for example, could ease the tension about controversial issues linked to Islam, like the then-recent anti-Islam film, "Fitna".

Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz (2013) also found that there seems to be large masses of videos on YouTube covering the topic of Islam. Despite the observed

stereotyping and labelling of Muslims on YouTube, the research indicated that growing number of Muslim You Tubers started video-blogging *primarily* to refute misunderstandings and stereotypes about their religion and identity, and to communicate the core message of Islam that promote justice, peace and equality- as they view it. This could be one of the dimensions Bunt (2009) highlighted in terms of the Internet and new media contribution to changing the discourses on Islam and Muslims.

Researchers like Anderson (2003) noted that new media seem to be giving Muslims worldwide a platform through which they could speak for themselves and their beliefs. Eickelman & Jon (2003) showed that new media have changed the global Muslim sphere through this media's nature that transcends local and state barriers and connects world-Muslim communities together.

In Aydin & Hammer (2010), the analysis expanded to address Muslims usage of new media, their participation in it and how this could change discourses on Islam and Muslims.

Several studies (Hirzalla, Van Zoonen & Müller, 2012; Van Zoonen and Mihelj, 2011; Van Zoonen and Mihelj, 2010) also examined how social media outlets could alleviate some of the controversies surrounding the religion and identity of its followers.

This could be observed in the findings of Ho, Lee & Hameed (2008) that indicated how a growing number of Muslim youth across the globe today are using

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the Internet to exchange information about their religion. The researchers found that the majority of Muslims use the Internet to acquire or exchange information with users across the virtual world of the Internet (2008).

Bunt (2002) and (2009) also elaborate on this point. The studies showed that recent technologies changed the way Muslims are acquiring their religious information, and how these technologies enabled Muslims around the world to connect together in a way that may be changing the face of the Islamic *ummah*.

Ho, Lee & Hameed (2008) illustrated how online activities of Muslims, particularly in Singapore, are contributing to enhancing the relationship between the self (i.e. the Muslim individual) and the in group, (i.e. the Muslim community or *ummah*). The study also showed how Muslims have "Islamized modernity" by employing technological advancements for attaining religious purposes.

The study recommended for future research the examination of the presence of transnational links between Muslims via the Internet and their effect on the worldwide Islamic community (*ummah*).

Similar recommendation were made in the studies of El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) and (2010). The two researchers' book (2009) is rich material for understanding the discourses used in three popular Islamic sites on the Internet; "IslamOnline", "amrkhaled.net" and "IslamWay." On the same topic, the researchers produced a research (2010) that highlighted how literature available today could be

dismissing the contemporary utilization of social media by Muslims across the globe and what the implications of this phenomenon might be.

Recently, two cases were used to demonstrate how Muslims in the US employed social media tools to respond to current anti-Islam sentiments (Krishnamurthy, 2012). In July 2012, a film denigrating the Prophet Muhammad surfaced the Internet. Shortly after, in September 2012, anti-Muslim ads were posted in the New York Subway stations (Fermino, 2012; Krishnamurthy, 2012). Unhappy with extremists actions on both the Muslim and non-Muslim ends, a social media campaign was launched under the title "My Jihad". In few days, the campaign's hashtag on twitter yielded nearly four thousand tweets from across the globe (Krishnamurthy, 2012). The peculiar observation is that many non-Muslim followers participated in #MyJihad to tell stories about their own daily "jihad".

The observation was that global Islamic social media initiatives have the ability to reclaim the narrative of Islam from framed, sensationalized or stereotyped approaches in mainstream media/public discourses and provide a platform for shared universal values through the virtual world.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two major factors are under investigation in this study: the uses of global Islamic social media pages and their potential impact on followers' identity.

Accordingly, this research will address the topic in light of a) the uses and gratifications (U&G) approach, and b) the identity formation approach.

1. Understanding the "Uses & Gratifications" approach

The uses and gratifications theory helps researchers examine how people use a specific medium, as well as, how this medium, in turn, gratifies their needs (Katz, 1959; 1974; 1973). This approach helps in understanding the user as an active player in the mass communication process, rather than a passive recipient of media messages.

The theory was introduced by Elihu Katz in 1959. Initially, the theory opted to re-examine the question of what media do to people (Katz, 1959), and further work on the theory led to addressing how mass communication is utilized by the individuals, i.e. the users (Katz, 1973).

Later the founders introduced key factors to further provide a framework for their approach. The factors are:

1- The social and psychological needs of the users

2- Expectations of the given medium

3- The exposure to that specific medium to gratify users' needs (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974).

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The audiences' needs and gratifications have been classified and discussed in several works. McQuail, Blumler and Brown's introduced four categories in 1972:

1- The "diversion" category wherein the users' seek a diversion from their routine or emotional stresses.

2- The "personal relationship" category in which the users seek companionship of other users (via chatting or other form of communications provided through the medium).

3- The "personal identity" category in which the users seek further understanding and reinforcement of their own values and identities.

4- The "surveillance" category in which users pay close observation to specific medium to help them attain a specific need (McQuail, Blumler & Brown, 1972).

Developments on this model led to the emergence of five categories that encompasses an even larger understanding of users' needs of mass communication. The five categories are;

1- Cognitive needs,

2- affective needs,

3- Personal integrative needs,

4- social integrative needs,

5- Tension release needs (Katz, Gurevitch &Haas, 1973).

The five categories, along with the aforementioned four will be addressed in this study's survey.

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2. U&G application to traditional media research

The U&G has long been used to examine traditional media uses. In an earlier study, Bantz (1982) applied the uses and gratifications to investigate television programs usages. The study found that the medium, as well as, the content need to be put in consideration while using U&G in research.

Similarly, in Eastman (1979) the researcher examined uses of Television in relation to consumers' life style. The work showed that respondents' usage was driven by their needs to have background noise, emotional arousal, companionship and substitutes for social interactions.

In radio research, Herzog (1944) examined females' usage of radio soap operas. The researcher found that emotional needs- like the desire to feel good about oneself or one's emotional circumstances, the need for advice and wishful thoughts- were all primordial factors for females' usage of radio soap operas.

The degree to which users become heavily dependent on traditional media outlets; like TV and newspapers, was observed in DeBock (1980). The study compared reactions of Netherlands and US audience in response to strikes that led to a brief suspension of major newspapers and black out of TV. Audience in both contexts showed major signs of frustration due to be being deprived of the media outlets that gratify their needs throughout a large portion of their day to day life.

Television in particular provides users with news, entertainment and companionship according to Tan (1977). The researcher found that the sampled population were unwilling to give up their TV usage –in exchange for a sum of

money- even for a seemingly short period of time. This suggests how important media uses become in gratifying consumers' needs.

The audiences' activity in relation to the medium they're exposed to was also examined in Rubin (1993). The study investigated the issue in terms of users' involvement in the media. For example, users of TV soap-operas seemed to get absorbed in a TV drama and identify themselves with the personalities and characters. Users involvement, as the study concluded, could be cognitive, affective or behavioral (Rubin & Perse, 1987).

3. U&G application in Internet and new media research

Mass media researchers (D. Atkin, Jeffres, & Neuendorf, 1998; Jeffres & D. Atkin, 1996; Morris & Ogan, 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Ruggiero, 2000; Williams, Strover, & Grant, 1994) have long employed U&G in their attempt to understand the intricate relationship between new forms of media and the users.

In an earlier study, Leung and Wei (2000) applied the uses and gratifications theory to examine the uses of cellular phones. They found that cellular phones satisfy needs like reassurance, immediacy, mobility, as well as, affection and/or sociability for a variety of users including; women, workers and youth.

Another dimension was added by Odell, Korgen, Schumacher & Delucchi (2000). The researchers argued that ethnicity plays a role in determining Internet uses, especially among college students. The conclusion came after surveying college students of private and public colleges who come from White, Asian, Black and Hispanic backgrounds.

More specific factors were examined in Papacharissi & Rubin (2000) who identified five motives for using the Internet after surveying 279 college students. The factors are:

1- Interpersonal utility (which includes; helping others, participation in discussions, expression of the self, belonging to a group and meeting new people).

2- Pass time (which includes; passing time when bored or when having nothing to do and to occupy one's time.)

3- Information seeking (which includes; exploring new way to do research and looking for information)

4- Convenience (which includes; communicating with friends and family through a cheaper mean)

5- Entertainment (which includes; using the Internet simply because it's enjoyable and entertaining).

The categories above seem to be applicable even to the earlier study of Perse & Greenberg (1998) in which they tested home computers usage, in particular. Again in this study, entertainment appeared to be a main factor for usage, along with passing time and escaping distress.

More perspectives on the U&G were implied in Skog (2002) who found that Norwegian teens' usage of mobile phone emerge through their need to be "in control" of the medium they use. In other words, their needs to- not only be consumers- but also producers of their own medium's features. The usage enabled

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the sampled population to come up with their own abbreviated, sms-tailored language. It also enabled them to be creators of a whole mobile theme that identify them through their ring-tone choices and other downloaded materials on their phones that reflected their personality choices and identity.

Also, Stafford, Stafford and Schkade (2004) examined how consumers of prominent Internet Service Provider (ISP) utilized the medium. They found that the process and content gratifications, as well as, the convenient environment are important factors in the utilizations of the medium.

Ebersole (2000) used computer administered survey to examine the uses of World Wide Web (WWW) among college students in the US. Intriguingly, the results show that while students largely reported that they use the web for educational reasons, the sites they identified as the primary outlets they use are not suitable for such educational purposes.

It is worth noting that, recently, the uses and gratifications model have been used to understand emerging media trends. For example, Quan-Hasse & Young (2010) examined why users choose Facebook as opposed to instant messaging and the differences in the users' gratifications of both types of media.

Smock et al (2011) examined how Facebook users' needs determine which features of Facebook they utilize.

4. Exploring Identity formation through media

Tajfel and Turner (1979) highlighted that the social identity theory assumes people's need to create positive social identification of themselves. Accordingly,

people seek to make comparison between the (in groups) that they identify with and the other groups. In light of that, members of the "in-group" have an inclination to "defend" their group against external attacks or threats. They also seek to boost the individual/group status that they identify with. These factors have impact on the individuals identity perception whether positively (if one managed to defend his/her in-group and find means to enhance its status), or negatively (if one failed to do so).

The work of Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel in 2002 studied identity in terms of two key questions. "Who we are?" and "How we position ourselves in a given time and space?" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002). This is particularly relevant and helpful in this study since the aim is to understand two aspects: how the Islamic social media outlets construct a Muslim identity; and how young Muslims identify themselves in light of following the Islamic social media outlets.

This concept of a seemingly transnational media effect on the individuals' identity was also studied by Nisbet and Myers (2010). The researchers explored how transnational TV stations "challenged the state TV" in the Arab world, which had an effect on viewers' individual and collective identity. The researchers reported evidence linking the exposure to transnational Arab TV with the formation of a Muslim Arab political identification, rather than a national political identification. The researchers explained that viewers started to view themselves in light of the Arab/Muslim *ummah* when they started to connect with their larger Arab/Muslim links- rather than being solely connected with their national identity through national state TV.

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This framework was also useful in El Nawawy and Khamis's study (2010). The researchers examined the presence of a collective identity among users of the Islamic public sphere. The users came from different nationalities in the Arab world, yet they seemed to connect with one another on common groundings related to their larger group belonging, the Arab/Muslim *ummah*.

In the earlier study of Witteborn (2007), a suggestion was also made of the presence of a collective Muslim identity in the realm of the virtual *ummah*. The study examined how first and second-generation Arab Americans express their collective identity. While some respondents seemed to start dropping their identity as "Arab", and identify themselves as "Americans," to avoid being stereotyped or discriminated against, others maintained their identity as "Arabs" and "Muslims." This highlighted the respondents need to relate with a large identity group virtually-especially in the wake of 9/11 when some respondents faced discrimination in their own country.

On a similar note, Brinson (2010), studied Muslims portrayal in the traditional media and the impact of this on their collective identity and self-esteem. The researcher conducted an experiment comparing the impact of positive and negative portrayals of Muslims on both; Muslim and non-Muslim Americans. The study used a seven-minute video showing Muslims as either; positively integrated in the society, or as a group inclined to commit violent acts. The experiment tested the effect of the portrayals on American Muslims ethnic identity, collective self-esteem, socialization attitudes. The same experiment was applied to test non-Muslim Americans reactions and their attitudes/perceptions of Muslims. The study

indicated a significant effect of the media portrayal on both Muslims and non-Muslims. The study brought significant findings highlighting the effect of negative portrayals in media on the individual/collective identity, intergroup isolation and conflict with the other (Brinson, 2010).

What new media is offering to the study of identity is also intriguing. In a recent study, Heivadi & Khajeheian (2013) examined identity formation among Iranian users of the social media network, Facebook. The study showed that social media like Facebook helped users create or design their own social identity, in which, they might disguise their full names or use fake profiles but express their opinions about issues that might be tabooed in their real life. The privacy settings available in platforms like Facebook helped users' express certain aspects of their identity freely among their selected group of contacts, in a way that wasn't available for them in reality or in their everyday lives.

This corresponds with what Turkle (1995) also suggested. The researcher showed that spaces or outlets on the Internet help users create and/or express certain dimensions of their identities that they weren't able to express in real life. Turkle argued that Internet presence/usage is paving the way for the creation of a new sense of decentered identity among users that function in a virtual environment. This, accordingly, influences one's perception of the self, the other and the world through the new horizons made available in the virtual space.

On the same note, Schmidt (2005) suggested that members of Muslim communities in the West are making use of the virtual presence of the *ummah* online to acquire traditional knowledge in a non-traditional way. This, again, has

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influence on the creation of a sense of belonging, as well as, the establishment of what seems to be transnational community they identify with- even if only in the virtual world.

Mehdizadeh (2010), highlighted that online social networks enable consumers to have a new self-representation that might influence or shift one's perception of his/her own or original identity. The researcher examined Facebook's influence on users' narcissism and self-esteem. A sample of 100 Facebook users from York University was used. The study showed that narcissism was manifested through individuals' self-promotion in their profiles. This self-promotion and people's acceptance or rejection of it- accordingly influences the person's self-esteem and leads to development of one's sense of identity.

The prospects of the virtual existence of social media users and its impact on their identities still needs further investigation in academic research. But, Zak (2013) suggested how one's identity on a medium like Twitter could take over one' real life identity. Examples were made showing how people might know one another intimately and closely on Twitter through their avatar names/images, but might not even recognize one another in real life. This idea corresponds with what Schmidt (2005) was suggesting in terms of critically evaluating virtual communities and virtual identities since they might not necessarily reflect real or adequate existence in real life.

Zemmels (2012), argued that, today, the study of new media on youth identity in particular- is more than ever- relevant and essential. The study highlighted that media's impact on identity is connected to the amount of time people spend

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consuming that medium. With new media tools today that are feasible and accessible, young users in particular become connected 24/7 with various mediums (texting, messaging and communicating via social media platforms), which makes the study of identity formation, and/or impact of new media on identity rather complex and in need for further research.

5. Summing up the conceptual framework for the study

This research's conceptual framework intently involves two concepts; 1- the uses and gratifications and 2- the identity construction/formation.

This is important because it will contribute and add to earlier studies that examined new media outlets' usage and their potential effects on consumers' identity. The sampled outlets are new, intriguing and provoke further research especially that they link the individual users (Muslim youth) with a rather large group (the Muslim population worldwide). Thus, it is essential to explore this phenomenon and examine its implications.

Research questions & hypotheses

RQ1: What are the dominant discourses used by Qur'an Weekly, Celebrate Mercy and Productive Muslim in their attempt to present the Muslim identity, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad in a contemporary global communication context?

RQ2: Why do Muslim youth use Qur'an Weekly, Celebrate Mercy and Productive Muslim?

RQ3: What are the motivations of the founders of Qur'an Weekly, Celebrate Mercy and Productive Muslim for producing their work?

There are a number of hypotheses with regards to followers' uses of the sites. The hypotheses are:

H1: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that the sites help them learn about their religion in a modern context.

H2: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites.

H3: Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics and mainstream media will indicate that the sites provide a platform to voice their opinions.

H4: Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam will use social media as means to refute misconceptions about their religion.

IV.   METHODS

In order to answer the proposed research questions and hypotheses, this study employed three methods; discourse analysis, an online survey, and in-depth interviews. The purpose for using discourse analysis is to provide an in-depth understanding of the content and the type of information and materials displayed for the users through the three sampled outlets. The purpose for using the online survey is to understand how the users perceive, use and react to the materials in the three sampled outlets- and similar sites. The survey yielded 900 responses (n=900). As for the interviews, the purpose was to understand who the individuals behind these largely popular outlets are. In the virtual world of social media, identities of admins and/or founders of pages are not always clear or known. Accordingly it was necessary to investigate the identity of the founders of the three outlets, their motivations, world view and plans for developing their works.

Samples and Procedures of Each Method

1. First: Discourse analysis

The research examines three cases of global Islamic social media pages. These pages constitute the purposive sample for the discourse analysis.

Global Islamic social media pages in this study refer to social media-based initiatives, with predominantly Islamic content, run by Muslims and addressing Muslims beyond geographical barriers or political affiliations. The initiatives

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conduct their work mainly in the English language, which is a global/universal language relevant to a wider global audience.

Sample & Procedures

In the process of selecting the sampled sites for this study, certain criteria were being considered to guarantee the significance and relevance of the selected sites. The criteria included that the sites had to be; 1) based on initiatives that exist on the ground 2) have large number of active followers that are interacting dynamically on the pages' posts 3) Work is conducted in English 4) the work is not aimed at a specific group 5) the work deals with the main/major Islamic tenets that are essential components of the Muslim theology and have direct importance and relevance to all members of the Muslim faith.

The final sample, accordingly, is: Celebrate Mercy, Quran Weekly and Productive Muslim. The three are diverse sites, highlight new trends in social media and tackle major topics that are of relevance to the wider Muslim population. The three also reflect diverse means through which Muslims use social media today.

Further, in El Nawawy and Khamis's 2010 study, the researchers examined two online Islamic outlets – "IslamWay" and "IslamOnline" – citing the outlets' popularity. For this study, each of the three selected outlets have more followers on the popular social media platform, Facebook, than El Nawawy and Khamis's two selected sites combined, according to official Facebook statistics of these pages (see Table 1).

The number of followers of the three pages are also increasing rapidly. Upon documenting the number of followers of the three pages for this research, the data had to be adjusted several times to keep up with the outlets' increased rate of followers. Productive Muslim, for instance, moved from 500 thousand to over 800 thousand followers in only few weeks- and the numbers are still increasing.

In addition, while IslamWay and IslamOnline studied in El Nawawy and Khamis (2009 and 2010) are mainly popular in Saudi Arabia and Cairo consecutively (according to their Facebook pages' statistics), the three selected sample of this study are popular outside of the MENA region. It is, thus, important to understand how the Islamic content is being propagated to followers outside the Arab world.

Table 1. Followers of each of the three sampled outlets on social media platforms as of Dec. 2013.

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
Productive Muslim	817,617 + followers	48,000+ followers	2,000,000+ views
Celebrate Mercy	555,415 + followers	9,000 + followers	755,000+ views
Qur'an Weekly	144,847 + followers	45,000+ followers	4,000,000+ views

Background of the sample:

- **Celebrate Mercy:**

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/celebratemercy

Website: http://www.celebratemercy.com/

The title "Celebrate Mercy" insinuates celebrating the Prophet Muhammad who is identified as, "a mercy to mankind" according to Qur'an chapter 21 verse 107. Celebrate Mercy seems to be working on the global appeal of Islam and present this image to the global audience of the Internet and social media. The initiative conducted six webcasts to date. Each webcast featured an array of global celebrities like Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens).

- **Productive Muslim**

Facebook: (https://www.facebook.com/productivemuslim)

Website: http://productivemuslim.com/

Productive Muslim is a youth-oriented initiative. Their motto- as it appears on their social media platforms- is: "towards a productive *ummah*". The emphasis on the global Muslim community or *ummah* heavily appears in Productive Muslim's work. The initiative seems to work on intertwining the Islamic culture with the up-to-date technologies.

- **Quran *Weekly***

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/QuranWeekly

Website: http://www.quranweekly.com/

Quran weekly was launched in 2010, and it attempts to present classical Islamic knowledge to youth in a contemporary approach. It features popular young popular Muslim speakers in short (mostly less than 10 minutes) videos that are posted on their website, Facebook and Youtube pages.

The Analysis

Discourse analysis was used in this research to understand the nuances and discourses utilized in the three outlets in delivering their message.

Van Dijk (1997) provided a wide definition of discourse analysis that entail looking at written, spoken, storytelling and argumentation processes in the given medium. The definition also entailed looking at texts, images, videos, films and making an informed interpretation about the context- which may vary from one researcher to the other. Van Dijk summed his 35-plus experience in the field saying, "We only now have begun to study discourse in the much more relevant framework of serious social issues, such as racism and sexism. […] the real value of discourse analysis as a discipline in society depends on its contributions to the solution of such problems" (Van Dijk, 2004).

Discourse analysis has proven to be key in understanding the construction of messages. Michel Foucault introduced the approach in 1972. The framework of inter-discursive analysis, as explained by Fairclough, entail a close analysis of the genres and styles in the text under examination (Fairclough, 2003).

Examining the discourses in light of a given outlet's general framework helps in understanding how people make sense of the world in their own terms (McKee, 2003). This analysis helps researchers make an interpretation of a mass communication message, while acknowledging that this interpretation might not be the only correct understanding or interpretation of the text (picture, video…etc.) (McKee, 2003).

El Nawawy and Khamis (2010) utilized this approach. The researchers adopted Hall's 1975's framework of analyzing the representations in the sampled texts through three steps.

1- First, paying close attention to the text through a relatively prolonged observation enabling the researcher to grasp the "big picture" of the work.

2- Second, reading this big picture in light of the selected discursive strategies and themes utilized in the Islamic outlets.

3- Third, making an educated interpretation of the findings in light of the larger context and framework of the study (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2010; Hall, 1975).

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The analysis in this research will follow the three steps above in investigating the representation of the Muslim identity, representation of the Quran and the representation of the Prophet Muhammad.

This will be conducted through a number of techniques:

1- Looking at the "About us" and similar sections to understand how the initiatives present their work to the public and how they present the points of analysis above.

2- Looking at the outlets' main website (that is linked in the 'about us' sections) to investigate how the main website correspond or differ from the work on social media.

3- Looking at the social media venues in which the initiatives propagate their work, and what messages are disseminated in each outlet.

4- Analyzing the main content produced by each outlet including videos, info-graphics, texts and/or other posts.

2. Second: Online Survey

Sample & Procedures

The second step for this research is the survey with the sampled outlets' users. Researchers such as (D. Atkin, Jeffres, & Neuendorf, 1998; Jeffres & D. Atkin, 1996; Morris & Ogan, 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Ruggiero, 2000; Williams, Strover, & Grant, 1994) have recommended the uses and gratifications theory to understand

how users of new media outlets use them and why, and surveys are often used in uses and gratifications research.

In this study, an online descriptive survey was conducted with the followers of each of the three selected samples on Facebook. The social media platform, Facebook, was chosen particularly because it is the outlet in which the three initiatives enjoy the highest number of followers, as well as, significant interactivity and trafficking rates (according to the official Facebook statistics of their pages). The population of the survey is composed of the followers of the three initiatives on Facebook. The sample- given the research method- was a non-random volunteer sample. The survey link was posted to all followers, only those who were interested volunteered to take the survey. This is also purposive since the target is to study the opinions of the users of the three pages.

Three survey sheets were created using Google forms. Since it is next to impossible to acquire emails of the millions of followers across the globe who follow and use the selected sites, this ruled out the option of random sample in which a list of all the population could be acquired. Accordingly, a non-probability sampling technique was employed. The survey link was sent to the founders of the three sampled outlets, who agreed to post it to their followers on Facebook.

Emails were sent to the addresses that were available on the three sites' "About" section on Facebook. Quran Weekly's email address is QuranWeekly@Gmail.com, Celebrate Mercy is info@celebratemercy.com and Productive Muslim is productivemuslim@gmail.com.

The email was sent to each address individually introducing the research and making two requests; contacting the founder of the initiative for an in-depth interview (which will be discussed in the coming section), and asking the admin to post the survey link to their followers on Facebook for a period of four days.

It is worth mentioning that asking the founders or the page admin to post the survey on the page is more adequate than having the researcher post the survey independently on the page. The reason is that if any user/follower or visitor posted any information independently on an FB page, it will only appear in the small "other" section on the left side of the screen, which is not widely viewed. But when admins post it, the link will appear on their main page and on all followers' timeline. This way, the survey would be available to all followers of all three pages.

The emails were sent to the three addresses on the same day. Communications between with the researcher, the founders, admins of the three initiatives took approximately 15 days before the surveys eventually got posted on the Facebook pages.

It is understandable that the communication with the outlets would take time given the differences in geographical locations, time and their work schedules.

A pilot study was also conducted prior to sending the survey in order to test its clarity and whether respondents find it feasible and relevant. The survey of the pilot study was sent to Islamic pages that often link and share content from the three selected global Islamic social media pages. The pilot study yielded a total of 40 responses. In the comments section at the end of the survey, several respondents

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highlighted that the survey was quick and easy, which made it possible for them to answer it given their fast-paced online attitudes. Other respondents reported that the survey was discussing an important issue that they have been considering for a while- which confirmed the relevance of the study. The survey also yielded negative comments on a couple of questions that had a "yes/no" answer, when the respondents felt that "maybe" is more suitable. This was considered in the actual survey. However, this seems to be a limitation, questions that had yes/no/maybe answers still needed to have more specific and wider range of options to get more accurate answers from the respondents.

Uses, identity formation & measures

Building on McQuail, Blumler & Brown (1972) and Katz, Gurevitch &Haas (1973), the questions of the survey attempted to understand the uses and gratifications needs that have been identified by the researchers. These are; 1- diversion & tension release 2- personal relationships & affection 3- personal identity 4- cognitive needs 5- personal integrative 6- social integrative needs.

- The "diversion" & "tension release" needs wherein the users' seek a diversion from their routine or emotional stresses.

To examine this, a question was added in the survey asking users to respond to the statement: "I use global Islamic social media pages like Productive Muslim, Celebrate Mercy and Quran Weekly to….." [See table 4]. The users had a selection of nominal choices including "to spend time" and to "escape sadness and emotional distress."

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- The "personal relationship" & "affective needs" in which the users seek companionship of other users (via chatting or other forms of communication provided through the medium).

To examine this, the same question on the uses which is: "I use global Islamic social media pages like Productive Muslim, Celebrate Mercy and Quran Weekly to....." also included choices like "to make friends" in order to examine the personal relationship needs [See table 4].

- The "personal identity" needs in which the users seek further understanding and reinforcement of their own values and identities.

  Survey questions included the following choices:

  - "To learn more about successful global Muslim figures"
  - "To learn more about Muslims from different nationalities"

The options include items that contribute to shaping one's personal identity. The use of the word "successful" global Muslim figure was based on Tajfel and Turner (1979) who argued that the individual's identity reassurance comes from seeking to boost the status of the group they belong to. In other words, individuals are inclined to believe that the group they belong to is "successful, popular and –possibly even- of global relevance" in order to reaffirm their own sense of identity and belonging.

This notion happens when individuals observe threats to their identity as Tajfel and Turner explained (1979). The presence of threats lead the individuals to seek refutation of the criticism concerning their identity or the identity of their group.

To test this notion, the survey asked about potential threats to users' identity; including, threats they perceive through media. Brinson (2010) noted that the negative portrayals of Muslims in media have direct negative impact on their sense of identity and self-esteem.

The survey noted a number of threats, including negative media representation. The question asked:

- *"Muslim youth around the world are under-represented in media today"* [See table 9]

The answer relied on Likert scale to test the degree to which users agree. Then, negative political representation was also addressed in the question:

- *"Do leaders of Muslim-majority countries correctly reflect the message of their religion?"* [See table 7]

Negative social representation/threats were also investigated through the question:

- *"Do Muslims today correctly reflect the message of their religion?* [See table 8]

This was to test how Muslims as a group conduct themselves in their respective societies and how this might impact the individual. Similar to the question above, the notion needed more comment from the respondents. Accordingly, yes/no choice was given to the users with the possibility of discussing their opinion further in the comments section.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that- in response to perceived threats- individuals would seek to "defend" their identity or their group against external

threats. Accordingly, users were asked whether social media is enabling them to accomplish that:

- Is social media helping in countering anti Islam messages? [See table 19]

- Do global Islamic social media pages help you in refuting misconceptions about your religion? [See table 18]

- Do you think the coming Muslim youth generation-with the help of social media- will better represent Islam and its message? [See table 17]

The question was asked repeatedly to check for the reliability. All questions used yes/no answers with the possibility to further comment and elaborate on their answer in the comments' section.

- Cognitive needs

For the cognitive need, a question was added on whether the users depend on GISMP to gain information. The question asked the users to respond to whether:

- *"Global Islamic social media pages are important because they help me learn about my religion in a modern context"* [See table 5]

And whether GISMP are used to

- *"Learn more about Islam, Qur'an and Sunnah [tradition] of the Prophet"* [See table 4]

The measures used Likert Scale to test to what extent users agree with these statements.

- Personal integrative needs

The survey asked the users whether the outlets help them "*learn more about successful global Muslim figures*" [See table 4]. This corresponds to how users seek to integrate themselves and with which groups.

▪ social integrative needs

In this category, the users tend to seek social integration. It is thus essential for them to understand the groups they belong to. Given that all three outlets frequently use the term "global" and insinuate "global identity" of users, there was a need to test whether these notions were true from the users' perspectives. They were asked:

- *"Following global Islamic social media pages help me realize that being Muslim is a global identity not confined by ethnic or geographical boundaries"* [See table 14]

- *"Global Islamic social media pages are succeeding in creating a global ummah online beyond geographical barriers"* [See table 16]

This helps understand the social context the users aim to integrate with, even if it is virtual. Users were also asked how they identify themselves; whether through their religion, ethnicity, nationality or other identification to further investigate the identity question.

The survey then sought to understand how this social identification correspond with those who belong to external group. Users were asked:

- *Global Islamic social media pages encourage terrorism* [See table 20]

The answers to the above statement were measured using Likert scale.

In addition to that, the survey aimed to investigate the identity question. Several questions were asked differently throughout the survey to test for the reliability and the respondents' consistency in answering the question. They were asked:

- *"Islamic social media pages help in creating global Muslim identity among youth today"* [See table 12]

- *"Global Islamic social media pages have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers"* [See table 13]

- *"Following global Islamic social media pages help me realize that being Muslim is a global identity not confined by ethnic or geographical boundaries"* [See table 14]

Answers above measured through Likert scale.

- *How do you identify yourself?* [See table 15]

This provided nominal answers were respondents identified themselves through religious identity, ethnicity, nationality or other.

Ordinal measures were also used in basic questions such as; respondents educational degree, hours spend online and hours spent surfing GISMP. In asking about respondents' regions and gender, nominal measures were used.

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The survey results also responded to the hypotheses of this study. The hypotheses were answered through the following questions:

H1: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that the sites help them learn about their religion in a modern context.

Question asked in the survey was:

- "Global Islamic social media pages are important because they help me learn about my religion in a modern context" [See table 5]

H2: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites.

Questions corresponding to this hypothesis were:

- "Islamic social media pages help in creating a global Muslim identity among youth today" [See table 12]
- "Global Islamic social media pages have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers" [See table 13]
- "Following global Islamic social media pages helps me realize that being a Muslim is a global identity not confined by ethnic or geographical barriers" [See table 14]
- Is social media helping in countering anti Islam messages? [See table 19]

H3: Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics and mainstream media will indicate that social media provides a platform to voice their opinions.

- "Do leaders of Muslim majority countries correctly reflect the message of Islam?" [See table 7]
- "Muslim youth around the world are underrepresented in media today" [See table 9]
- "Social media provides a platform for Muslim youth around the world to voice their own opinion." [See table 11]

H4: Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam will use social media as a means to refute misconceptions about their religion.

- "Do Muslims today correctly reflect the universal message of their religion?" [See table 8]
- "Do global Islamic social media pages help in refuting misconceptions about your religion?" [See table 18]
- "Do you think the coming Muslim youth generation-with the help of social media- will better represent Islam in a global context?" [See table 17]

In addition to that, an open-ended question was placed at the end of the survey asking respondents if they have further comments on the issue. The purpose was to provide the respondents with a space to reflect or elaborate on their answers, the topic of discussion, and/or the survey questions.

The survey yielded- in a period of four weeks in each outlet- a total number of 900 respondents- as will be discussed in coming chapters.

3. Third: In-depth interviews

The third and last method employed in this research is the interviews. The interviewees were purposively selected as they are the founders of the three initiatives in question. The interview's purpose is to investigate more in-depth- and beyond the social media's avatars and hidden identities- who the founders are, what are their motives, world-view and work plans in order to understand the potential implications of their work.

As a qualitative research method, the in-depth interview is an effective way of "soliciting and documenting, in their own words, an individual's or group's perspectives, feelings, opinions, values, attitudes and beliefs about their personal experiences and social world, in addition to factual information about their lives" (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas, 2011).

The interviews had a total of 16 questions investigating the founders' identities, reasons for using social media as platform for their work, how and why they conduct their work, how their work would develop in the short and long runs, and what are their perspectives on the uses of GISMP, Muslim youth, status of the Muslims *ummah* online and beyond, as well as, potential impacts of their works [see interview questions in the Appendices].

The questions were sent via email to all three outlets' founders. Productive Muslim's Editor in Chief who responded to the initial email forwarded the email to the founder who then replied to the questions. Quran Weekly's founder responded

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to the email after posting a comment on their Facebook page. As for Celebrate Mercy, the interview was conducted over the phone with the founder.

The interviews provided more information for consideration regarding the intricate workings of global Islamic social media pages and the personalities behind these pages.

It is highly recommended for future research to also use in-depth interviews with the founders of social media pages in general because the anonymity and virtual nature of social media make it hard to assess the importance and implications of these pages (Schmidt, 2005; Zak, 2013) – especially if the real persons behind the pages weren't identified or didn't seem to have real existence/work on the ground offline.

An intriguing aspect about the importance of the sampled outlets is that all three of them do not only have virtual existence, but also real work on the ground. This was an important criterion for selecting the outlets since Schmidt (2005) suggested that virtual existence should be analyzed critically, especially if it's not accompanied with real presence on the ground. These outlets, accordingly, seemed important because their virtual activism is being implemented on the ground through seminars, workshops and various other events. This is essential for investigating the extent to which these outlets could lead to real change on the ground on the long run.

This section corresponds to *RQ1:* What are the dominant discourses used by Q*ur'an Weekly, Celebrate Mercy* and *Productive Muslim* in their attempt to present the Muslim identity, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad in a contemporary global communication context?

The discourse analysis of the three samples will start below alphabetically, as per initiatives' titles.

1- Celebrate Mercy

a) The Overall picture/framework:

Celebrate Mercy's (CM) work primarily concentrates on the life and character of Islamic central figure, Prophet Muhammad.

A line written across the homepage of their main website, celebratemercy.com, reads, "Instilling a <u>deeper understanding</u> of the Prophet Muhammad". This line along with, "<u>Celebrate Mercy</u>. <u>Celebrate Muhammad</u>. Let's make history by telling his story" -which is a motto also featured on their main website- constitute the overall framework of CM.

As the language suggests, CM equates the "Prophet Muhammad" with "mercy". They insinuate that "instilling deeper understanding" of the prophet is an act of "making history"—this reflects CM's perception of the Prophet as a "historical" figure of importance or relevance to wider audience. This is a different image from

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the ones highlighted in Laudone (2012), Donnelly, (2012) and Roche (2012) - that mainly depict the Prophet in a more extremist and outdated image.

Celebrate Mercy presence on social media

CM's presence on social media is observed through its three main accounts; Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The website, celebratemercy.com, is the main host of CM's work and archive of all their major videos to date. The Twitter and Facebook accounts disseminate CM's updates, news and short reminders/anecdotes pertaining to the Prophet, along with other announcements. The most important and primary product of CM is their webcasts. Since its inception in 2010, CM has organized six major webcasts. All webcasts tackle the life and character of the Prophet Muhammad through different lights.

The webcasts are broadcasted online live. Each webcast lasts from 2 to 3 hours and they're accessible to anyone on the Internet. Usually the webcasts feature around 20 international speakers/scholars/entertainers to talk about certain aspects of the Prophet's life.

One of the major aspects about CM's representation is the diversity of Muslim speakers highlighted in the webcasts. This aspect significantly contrasts several anti-Islam discourses that depict Muslims as Arab/Middle Eastern, backward or outdated looking characters (Ansari, 2012).

Highlighting a "global dimension" of Islam

Describing their own webcasts, CM wrote in the description section of their website:

"*One feels a global presence in this webcast as others from around the world unite in their love of the Prophet. [...] the entire combination of scholarly insights, entertaining performances, live interactions from the global audience create a unique and fun experience.* "

As it appears, CM continuously focuses -and tends to promote- a "global" dimension of Islam, the prophet and the Muslim *ummah*, at large.

Through observation, there seems to be four main ideas, or common threads, propagated through the producer-generated content and selected guests' contributions of CM, which may be summarized as follows:

a) Muslims and non-Muslims can relate to the character of Prophet Muhammad.

b) Islam is global. As an evidence, Muslim speakers of different colors, nationalities, ethnicities and backgrounds are usually featured in the webcasts- suggesting the "diversity" of the *ummah*, and possibly, the notion that "anyone" could be a Muslim. There is no static mold for the Muslim character or Muslim identity.

c) The prophet Muhammad is a "non-violent, merciful figure", with much emphasis on his "merciful nature".

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d) Violent Muslims frequently making western media's news and headlines do not represent the mainstream Muslims across the globe.

The four ideas mentioned above could be clearly observed, for example, in the testimonials that CM chooses to feature- almost permanently- on their main website.

To get a sense of this observation, the testimonials and a short analysis are presented below for illustration.

First, corresponding to the idea which suggests that "Muslims and non-Muslims can relate to the character of Muhammad", CM chose to feature the following two testimonials from two viewers in the United States and New Zealand respectively:

> *"As a <u>non-Muslim</u>, I had expected to feel <u>isolated</u>, left out, not least of which is because my knowledge is so limited. But the webcast was so amazingly <u>inclusive</u> and heart-touching... I learned so much, and "met" so many incredible speakers... I have relayed all of this to several friends, because if I don't share it with them, who will?"*

--- Viewer from USA

The underlined words reflect the notions discussed above. CM chose to display a comment from a non-Muslim viewer explicitly saying that he/she didn't feel "isolated", but rather "included" in the message of the webcast. Here, it could be implied from the choice of this testimony that CM want to propagate that non-Muslims are not "outcast," but rather included among the targeted audience of their work that primarily tackles the life of the Prophet who is largely attributed in mainstream discourse to the religion of Islam, solely.

It is worth noting here that the initiative might have received negative comments as well, but chose not to display them.

Again, there is no platform for "confrontations" or elongated discussions with people of other faiths- and negative remarks don't seem to surface in any of CM's platform.

Nevertheless, the initiative continuously suggests, through webcast speakers or producer-generated content, that the religious other is included and welcomed as audience of their work.

> "*Muslims, Non-Muslims and converts came together and it was probably one of the most beautiful sights, Masha'Allah* [what God willed], *the community coming together celebrating the Prophet Mohammed's life (peace and blessings be upon him) in the best way. As the broadcast was over, some said 'as I walk out of that door, I know my faith and love for our Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him) has increased. Masha'Allah. Others said the highlight were the stories that made them love our Prophet Mohammed more (Peace and blessings be upon him)*"

> – Viewer from New Zealand

The focus here, again, through the highlighted wordings and nuances, is the "relevance" of the prophet's character to Muslims, non-Muslims and converts alike. One remark here is the persistency of highlighting the presence of "converts". Conceptually, the person who converted to the religion should be identified as a "Muslim", and not singled out still as "convert" or an outsider. The nuance CM may be suggesting here is that Islam is attracting "new comers", and that not all Muslims are "born Muslims." This idea could also be observed in the comment below:

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"At a time when I was in my darkest moments since <u>reverting to Islam</u> in 2009, when I was on the edge, close to leaving Islam, this webcast has renewed my faith. It brought me back to the moment when I first said the shahadah [testimony of faith], heart full of imaan [faith] and light. It has made me look at the Prophet in an entirely different way than I could have ever imagined, and I must say, <u>I am truly in love</u>...This webcast has changed my life!"

– Viewer from USA.

The portrayal of the character of the Prophet above as the subject of the viewer's "love" contrasts the images portrayed in mainstream Western media discourses that paint a "harsh" , "fanatic" or "unlovable" image of the prophet (Donnelly, 2012; Magdzik, 2012). Rather, the Prophet is portrayed as an element that attracts the followers to their religion and rejuvenates their faith.

Celebrate Mercy's emphasis on "unity of the ummah"

Second, corresponding to the idea of "the unity of the *ummah* or its diversity", the following testimonials were highlighted:

"The most beautiful thing about the webcast is <u>the sense of solidarity</u> and <u>togetherness you feel with the <u>Muslim ummah</u>. To know there is someone in <u>Japan</u> or <u>Bosnia</u>, watching at the same time, possibly going through the same emotions is uplifting"

--Viewer from United Arab Emirates.

It is very clear here that highlighting the different locations Muslims may be inhabiting; like Japan or Bosnia- seem to contest the stereotypical idea that Muslims are merely Arabs or inhabitants of the MENA region (DeSilver, 2013). In addition, as underlined above, much emphasis is put on the "togetherness" and "solidarity" of the "*ummah*".

The same nuance was captured in the comment below that highlighted the influence of this tool on the "unity" of Muslims globally:

"*The most important thing for me was that it made me remember the Prophet. Hearing different stories from his life re-kindled the yearning to want to know more about him, to want to remember him and send salat and salam [blessings and peace] on him every passing second. Afterwards you feel like [you] want to pick up Martin Lings' book again and re-read all about his life, so it brings back that spark and motivation that you tend to lose overtime from getting caught up in dunya [worldly life]. I had already told my friend about [the webcast] and got her to register for it (it was the first time being a part of CM for both of us), so yes, I would definitely recommend this to all my friends. Loved the interactive portions. It was really amazing knowing you're watching this with hundreds of other people from all around the world.*"

--Viewer from Turkey

Similarly, the testimony above not only emphasizes the "diversity" of the members of Muslim "*ummah*", but also brings to attention how CM's webcasts bring those Muslims that are scattered in different parts of the world to directly connect with one another.

This also highlights the diverse ways in which users seek to use this social media outlet.

The webcasts, as highlighted in the testimony, is interactive in the sense that it allows the viewers across the world to chat, possibly exchange contacts and also broadcast video messages to one another.

Celebrate Mercy focusing on the misrepresentation of Islam

The testimonials also tend to highlight the "non-violent" character of the prophet and the fact that his character might have been "misunderstood or misrepresented" in different media or public discourses:

"*[The webcast is] so inspiring and eye-opening, it's amazing getting to know so many details about private aspect of the Prophet's life, especially when there are so many prejudices and misunderstanding about his teachings*".

--Viewer from Italy

"*I always prayed to Allah [almighty] to show me a way to become a better muslimah [Muslim woman] and a better person. I see this webcast as an answer to my prayers because we got examples about the best person, Prophet Muhammad [May the peace and blessings be upon him]. I gained a lot of knowledge.*"

– Viewer from the Republic of Suriname (Northern South America)

How Celebrate Mercy May Counter Negative Muslim Portrayals

With regards to emphasizing the idea that mainstream Muslims are misrepresented, CM launched a peculiar initiative that allowed them to get

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traditional media coverage. This took place in the aftermath of the controversial YouTube video about the Prophet (Roche, 2012). Some Muslims in different parts of the Arab world reacted violently in response to the film that they found offensive. The violence resulted in the killing of the United States' Ambassador to Libya (Roche, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Williams, 2012).

In response to that, CM launched a campaign through their website called, "Mercy-Mail Campaign". The target was to gather letters from Muslims around the world to express condolences to the family of the deceased ambassador. The campaign received a sum of 7, 500 letters from Muslims in 115 countries around the world. El Messidi, founder of CM, met with Anne Stevens, sister of the ambassador and presented the collage of letters in a book in memory of her brother and "expression of support from Muslims around the world" (Taylor, 2012; Williams, 2012).

Celebrate Mercy's Ability to Mobilize Masses

There are a number of intriguing, noteworthy aspects in the aforementioned incident. One, it reflects CM's ability to mobilize Muslims around the world. The founder said that he received thousands of letters in a matter of hours after he announced the mail campaign. Two, it poses questions for research on how such global Islamic social media initiatives could be utilized to adjust the discourse in mainstream media on Islam and Muslims.

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CM's initiative garnered coverage in world news outlets like BBC, CNN and others. The coverage gave a platform for CM to express that "violent acts by individuals don't represent the vast majority of mainstream Muslims or the teachings and character of their Prophet" (Taylor, 2012; Williams, 2012). The ambassador's sister responded to the CM initiative in the press, saying: "It's just tremendous, the amazing response and this beautiful book [...]. We were just really, really touched by the sentiment, from people who didn't know us or our brother" (Williams, 2012).

Again, this social media-based initiative managed to influence the discourse in mainstream international media in a given incident through their virtual existence and virtual work on social media.

This incident, in a sense, summarizes CM's influence. While some Muslims who make the Western news are featured as "violent", CM, with its capacity to mobilize Muslims around the world, attempts to project a more "positive" image of Islam. They also usually attribute their positive acts to the teachings of the prophet, thus presenting his own character in a "global, positive" context.

b) The character of Muhammad

CM had organized six webcasts at the time of this writing. Each webcast is carried under a specific title which presents the character of the Prophet Muhammad through different lights. Looking into the content of each of the

webcasts would help develop a comprehensive understanding of how CM presents the character of the prophet in their work. This will be presented below.

Webcast 1: Celebrate Mercy:

The first webcast of CM was entitled "Celebrate Mercy". By "Mercy", CM indirectly draws attention to the Qur'anic verse that calls the Prophet a "mercy to mankind" (Qur'an 21:107).

This webcast- like all their webcasts- feature diverse types of speakers from different parts of the world. Again, it seems to be CM's attempt to express that Muhammad is relevant to this large group of people despite their differences and diversity. Going back to the literature discussed earlier, this attempt seems to be geared towards decentralizing Islam and Muslims- highlighting thereby the universal nature of the religion and its followers.

For example, the webcast featured the popular Persian-British singer, Sami Yusuf, saying, "It is amazing how <u>one person</u>… one human being [i.e. Prophet Muhammad] can <u>bring us all together</u>." This statement captures the point discussed earlier.

Again here, the emphasis is on the unity, in spite of, the diversity of the *ummah*. Seib (2007) reflected on contemporary divisions or sectarianism in Middle East and/or Muslim world. The focus in Celebrate Mercy's work, however, is on uniting individuals or communities that may be scattered or divided in the physical, real world.

Also, Yusuf, the singer, is a largely popular figure among youth around the world. He has nearly four million followers to date on Facebook alone. Celebrate Mercy's

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decision to choose him for the webcast would have some influence on the masses of followers he has worldwide.

It seem throughout their work, Celebrate Mercy intently chooses high profile rather than low profile speakers. This may be driven by their desire for popularity and large outreach. In any case, this affects their ability to mobilize masses through the messages they ask their widely popular speakers to deliver in the webcasts.

Other scholars and famous speakers who appeared in the videos include; Faraz Rabbani (founder of *Seekers Guidance*, another initiative that provides Islamic knowledge for "seekers" online and offline), Usama Cannon (founder of *Ta'leef* Collective, an initiative that provides space for new Muslims to adjust to their new way of life), and Habib Umar Bin Hafiz, well known Yemeni scholar.

All speakers highlight "the prophet's embodiment of merciful characteristics." Given that this is the focus and title of Celebrate Mercy's work, the speakers may have been asked to focus on these aspects in particular. Nevertheless, the speakers, by and large, seem rather convincing in their messages. Celebrate Mercy also frames their messages in a rather emotional appeal that makes viewers more prone to relate to CM's messages.

Bin Hafiz specifically identified the character of Muhammad as "*mo'alej*" which is an Arabic word for "solver" or "healer", referring to prophet's ability to solve and heal his followers' problems.

The well-known British artist, Cat Stevens, was also featured as saying, "*The religion brought by Muhammad is an opportunity for the whole world to change for the better*". This message is deeply nuanced given that it is coming from a global

artist who, after embracing Islam in 1977, said "he found something pure, sacred that gave him all the answers and changed him to the better" (Bilal, 2012).

The video also featured a rather emotional and sentimental performance by Stevens of a song he composed about the prophet [link:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs-Ssm3H_S8]

The song ended by saying:

"Whatever you [i.e. the prophet] say lightens up the burdens of the day,

whatever you do makes us ever want to follow you.

Whatever they [i.e. any attackers of the prophet] say,

Whatever they do,

We'll always love you...."

The artist's sentimental performance and personal accounts on how he intimately connects with the prophet-- all seem to be tools that would influence the viewers on a rather emotional level.

Additionally, CM's strategic decision to include global figures; like Cat Stevens, make it hard to envision the same subject of discussion, the Prophet Muhammad, in light of "barbaric, terrorist, or radical" discourses- since widely recognized, sophisticated artists can relate to him on an emotional, existential, philosophical levels. All these aspects seem to be deeply nuanced in CM's webcasts.

Webcast 2: The Man & Month of Mercy. A Glimpse of Ramadan with the Prophet

This webcast mainly discusses the life and character of Muhammad in light of Muslims' holy fasting month, Ramadan. The video represent Ramadan as "a month of purity and reflections", and present Muhammad as the person who is "ultimately pure and achieved high status through reflecting upon the Creators' creations."

One speaker, Suhaib Webb, an American Azhar University graduate and famous Imam in Boston, said about the prophet, "*the trees of paradise have his name on them... Muhammad, the Messenger of God. The gates of paradise have his name on them. The [luxurious] tents of paradise have his name on them.*" Obviously, Webb was creating a dramatic image of the Prophet. The choice of Webb, an American formerly hip hop DJ artist- turned Muslim scholar, seem to be suggesting that the character of Muhammad is one that would have "drastically transforming" impact on those who get to know him [link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-i1N17OT0Yk].

Additionally, another artist, Baraka Blue, a popular American spoken-word poet artist- was also featured in this webcast.

The choice of Blue also seems peculiar. The image of the young, blonde, "exotic-looking" artist seem to conflict with the image of Muslims depicted in anti-Muslims' cartoons, for example, that usually feature fat, dark skinned men in oriental outfits as in Laudone (2012), Donnelly (2012) and Magdzik (2012).

Again, here, CM seems to be changing or reframing traditional, stereotypical images of Muslims that an average person might have.

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In the webcast, Blue performed a poem about the prophet, which ends by saying:

"We are yours, we are yours
We pray to meet you at Heaven's doors
And smell perfumes straight from your pours
Nothing more…nothing more
There is nothing that we ask for
Nothing more….nothing more
But to see your face smiling at Heaven's door
Nothing more…nothing more."

Again here, the salient observation is of the "intimate" relation the poet seem to have with the prophet. This nuance would contrast the "radical, sub-Saharan" image painted of the prophet, and suggest a character whose followers are "spiritually" "intimately" or "passionately" connected with [link:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xuGWvdhCmQ].

Webcast 3: An Orphan's Odyssey. Muhammad: The Toddler, The Teen, The Tender Guide

This webcast focused on the upbringing of the Prophet. It narrated how he was orphaned at early age. According to the speaker, Yemeni scholar Habib Ali Jiffri, "God was removing the caregivers from Muhammad's life at early age so that He, God, would be his one and only love and caregiver." Given that the Prophet was an orphan, the webcast speakers also urged viewers to take care of – and honor the orphans around them.

In the webcast, the character of Muhammad was used as "a motivation" for the viewers to adopt activities that serve orphans.

One speaker said, "It is not befitting for a human being and a follower of Muhammad to not have mercy…to be one whom mercy has been extracted from his heart. Mercy is to be manifested to all human beings, plants, animals and even objects."

For an average non-Muslim viewer subjected to traditional Western media representations of Muslims as "angry and violent", the above representation would provoke mixed feelings. The speakers usually- indirectly- refer to that any "angry" or "violent" attitudes of Muslims are inconsistent with the legacy of the "merciful" Prophet. Again, this reflects on what Van Dijk (2004) suggested on the ability of discourse analysis to deal with or solve problems of racism or stereotyping.

Webcast 4: Love & the Beloved. Muhammad: Lessons from His Married Life

This webcast talked about the marital life of the prophet Muhammad and how he acted with his wives, what were the conditions through which he married his wives, as well as, responding to criticism.

Among the criticism often made against Muslims is the multiple marriages of the prophet Muhammad. It is worth mentioning, on this note, that biblical prophets also had multiple wives; like Solomon, David, Abraham, Saul and others.

Nevertheless, in the webcasts, the speakers emphasize on Muhammad's "successful" marriage to Khadija for 25 years. This webcast seemed to be dealing with criticism while highlighting the context of the prophet' marriages.

The video featured famous female figures reflecting on the marital life of Prophet Muhammad. Dalia Mogahed, author of "who speaks for Islam?" who was also former executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, was among the speakers.

She reflected on how the prophet had strong relation with his wife Khadija, who was his confidant. Many viewers of Mogahed's segment found her take on Muhammad's character to be "emotional" [link:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeNVtJkW1RY].

Sentimental nuances in Celebrate Mercy

It is worth noting that across the video (s), a rather dramatic and emotional jingle continuously emerge. It says, "rasol Allah, habib Alla, shafee' Allah" [Arabic for "The Messenger of God, The Beloved of God, The Intercessor of God"]. This nuanced jingle also paints "emotional" "romantic" image of the prophet for the viewers.

Webcast 5: The Dawn of Mercy Muhammad in Mecca: Revelation & Resolve

This webcast narrates the mission of the prophet Muhammad as it started in Mecca. Peculiarly, CM features among the speakers a non-Muslim female scholar, Karen Armstrong [link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lahXSUkuaIA].

Armstrong, while a non-Muslim, paints a rather "universal" image of the prophet Muhammad. This could be why she was selected as a speaker in the first place. Her presentation seems to be an elaboration on the discourse she employed in her book, "Muhammad, a prophet for our time."

Armstrong's analysis was comparing Muhammad as "a leader"- based on early Muslim and non-Muslim sources-- to contemporary global leaders. Her analysis also highlights the strong "adoration" Muhammad enjoyed among his followers [link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lahXSUkuaIA].

The decision to feature figures like Armstrong, seem to correspond with CM's overall discourse that imply "Muhammad's universality" and "appeal to Muslims and non-Muslims".

Webcast 6: The Rise & Call of Muhammad. Prophetic Patience in Mecca: Resolve without Revenge

This webcast focused on the character of Muhammad in light of how he deals with hardships. Some of the speakers attempted to make this message relevant to viewers, irrespective of whether they're Muslims or non-Muslims. Female speaker, Haleh Banani, clinical psychologist, particularly focused on that. Benani said in introducing her segment:

"If you're having trials and tribulations, if you're feeling depressed, anxious and overwhelmed, if you're feeling like everything around you is falling apart, I urge you to tune in and to learn about the life of the greatest man, the prophet Muhammad."

Evidently, Benani made the prophet's character relevant to the viewers from a psychological point of view.

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While the above message seems to be inclusive, other messages in the webcast might emerge as "confrontational" or "intimidating" to non-Muslims, as in the segment of Dr. Umar Faruq AbdAllah.

AbdAllah, Chairman of the Board and Scholar-in-Residence of Nawawi Foundation in Illinois, was a Protestant before embracing Islam in 1970. While the message of Armstrong, mentioned earlier, focused on relevance of Muhammad to non-Muslims on a humanistic level, the message of AbdAllah in the webcast focused on the relevance of Muhammad to Jews and Christians on a religious level- which might seem intimidating to non-Muslims who perceive Islam as "the other" (Ibrahim 2009, 2010).

To elaborate, below are excerpts of AbdAllah's talk, followed by analysis:
"We're here to tell the story of the greatest of the prophets. The <u>brother of Jesus</u>, the <u>brother of Moses</u>. The <u>most beautiful human being to ever walk this earth</u>. <u>All</u> should read about his life story. The best book available is the book of Martin Lings. <u>Every Jew and Christian must read this book</u>. This is <u>an obligation</u> that every Jew and Christian <u>owe to God</u>, to learn about the prophet of the end of time, the Deuteronomy prophet [Deuteronomy 18:18] and to follow him."

In this segment, it seems AbdAllah is "urging" non-Muslims to know Muhammad as a "religious obligation." AbdAllah, being also an expert in biblical scriptures, is using his knowledge to imply the relevance of Muhammad to non-Muslims in light of their own scriptures. It is hard to predict whether this message will be taken lightly or casually by non-Muslim viewers, even though, there were no "dislikes" or

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negative comments–to date-on AbdAllah's clip that was posted on YouTube. [Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgkULEV0VaU]

The nuances AbdAllah used to frame the "sharia" Islamic law, was also peculiar. Below, is an excerpt of his talk to provide an insight into how he framed his message:

"In the Meccan period for 13 years there is a gradual built of [Muhammad's] message. [...] messengers are those who're sent to people at large, to nations, in order that they receive the law of God, the "sharia", the path that leads to life/light, the path that leads to water [faith], the blessed prophetic law that protects animals, the environment, human beings, the family, that gives us freedom and everything that we need [...] Then at the end of the three years, the command is given [by God] to come out, to teach the oligarchy of Mecca and the different tribes of Arabia and all human beings this blessed message. During this early period of Mecca, the focus is on the foundation of faith, the oneness of God, the absolute glory of God, the need to rely on God, the belief in the hereafter, the Garden and the Fire, which are ancient Christian, Jewish and human beliefs."

Above, it can be observed how AbdAllah attempts to relate the message of Muhammad to Jews and Christians. Given that the message is coming through a producer-generated content, and that there is no platform to debate this analysis with people of other faith, it can thus be problematic for some viewers.

In the last bit of his segment, AbdAllah then subtly implies the possibility of embracing Islam for new Muslims, and that the foundation of Islam are the same foundation of all faiths:

"We should never forget this because as Muslims, as new Muslims coming into this great faith of Islam, this beautiful faith of mercy, this civilization of Islam, we have to always develop this foundation first, and we have to preserve it at all times."

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Again, here Celebrate Mercy speaker's discourse that highlights Islam as a civilization and "beautiful faith of mercy" contrasts significantly with perceptions in anti-Islam sites highlighted in Laudone (2012). Facebook pages like "Anti-Islam" and "Infidel" present the extreme opposite of the messages presented in CM.

Here, AbdAllah's message while deeply nuanced, but all in all, the webcast focused on introducing the early message of Muhammad in a way that is based on scholarly accounts, dispelling misconceptions and creating common grounds with people of other faiths.

c) <u>**Muslim Identity**</u>

Since people identify with speakers, CM seems to have worked on bringing a wide range of speakers who would "appeal and/or be of relevance" to wide range of viewers. This could easily be observed through reviewing the "speakers" list in CM's main website. The long list of speakers include male/female scholars, artists, comedians, psychologists, writers, poets, historians and entrepreneurs of different colors, ethnicities and nationalities.

This seems to imply that, again, there isn't "a static mold" for the Muslim identity. A Muslim, according to CM's portrayal, could be "anybody".

Such attempts counter stereotypical schemas about Muslims in some anti-Islam cartoons that feature Muslim men and women as sub-Saharan fat men and fully covered women (Donnelly, 2012).

This notion of diversity seems to be emphasized as well through the interactive part of CM's webcasts. This interactivity of Muslim viewers across the world, with their different languages, outfits, looks, backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities—

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tend to be a factor that creates a new or different schema of Muslims' identity today via social media.

d) Relevance of Qur'an to youth

While the webcasts and speakers tend to imply "universality" and "diversity" of Muslims, the Qur'an is always featured as "the link" that brings those Muslims around the world together. For example, one speaker, Ingrid Mattson, Professor of Islamic Studies and Director of Islamic Chaplaincy at the Macdonald Center for Islamic Studies, was featured as saying: "We [Muslims today] are <u>the guardians</u> and <u>carriers of the Quran</u> in our time."

This gives the viewers- especially Muslim youth- a sense of connection and/or responsibility towards their Sacred Text.

Verses of the Qur'an like the two below, quoted frequently by the speakers, also tend to support CM's overall framework:

"And of His signs [God] is the creation of the heavens and the earth a<u>nd the diversity of your languages and your colors</u>. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge." (Qur'an 30: 22)

"O <u>mankind</u>, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may <u>know one another</u>. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most [conscious of Him]. Indeed, God is Knowing and Acquainted. (Qur'an 49: 13)

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Again, the above verses emphasize a) diversity b) how diversity leads to knowledge rather than conflict, and c) how Qur'an addresses "mankind" not "Muslim-kind".

2- Productive Muslim

a) The Overall picture/framework:

ProductiveMuslim.com blog is the main host of Productive Muslim's work. After posting materials on the blog, the work then gets disseminated through the initiative's different social media platforms. PM has Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Google-Plus presence. The most popular of their social media pages- in terms of the number of followers- is Facebook with nearly a million followers.

In addition to the social media pages, PM created an iPhone app called "iTaskinator". The app is designed to organize day to day tasks of customers- with an emphasis on maintaining Muslims' daily prayers and planning daily tasks around them. While the app seems to be primarily catered for Muslims, one of the survey respondents of this research wrote the following comment:

"These pages like Productive Muslim, help us youth who have lost interest in their deen [faith/religion] to revive their enthusiasm. It does not separate us from other faiths, in fact the other day I saw a comment from someone who wasn't a Muslim [asking] whether [he/she] can use the itaskinator because it was really helpful!! Well that's one thing says it all!"

The comment of the respondent seem peculiar since the focus of PM's work- and iTaskinator- are obviously directed to Muslim audience, as will be discussed below. Also, those of other faiths might disagree- but this requires more studies.

Productive Muslim's Focus

Looking deeply into the overall framework of PM suggest that four key words frequently emerge in the initiatives' posts. The four words are; "productive", "*ummah*", "Muslim" and "youth".

The repetition of those four words is key to understanding their influence on their followers. Several of the respondents who took the survey for this study also used the same keywords while commenting on PM's work. While a direct correlation cannot be proven, it is safe to say that initiatives like Productive Muslim are encouraging followers to think beyond the individual and consider the larger community or the ummah. In other words, the initiative heavily focuses on connecting the Muslim member or follower with the larger community of global Muslims, the ummah. This seem to correspond with the works of Schmidt (2005), Guo-Ming (2012) and Bunt (2002, 2003 and 2009). The researchers implied the transnational ability of social media and its potential impact on followers' perspectives and collective identity. Guo-Ming (2012), in specific, suggested further studies on "the impact of new media on cultural/social identity, and the impact of social media on intercultural communication." Those two factors seem to manifest in PM's work. The social media initiative seems to be influencing the culture, identity and/or world-view of followers.

How emphasis on "the ummah" emerge in PM's work

In the main PM website, the "About us" section reads:

"ProductiveMuslim.com is a brand that inspires <u>young</u> <u>Muslims</u> to become <u>Productive</u> through Islam and applying the latest <u>productivity</u> techniques."

On Twitter:

"Our vision: a <u>Productive</u> <u>Ummah</u> inshaAllah [God willing]!"

On Facebook:

"Towards a <u>Productive</u> <u>Ummah</u>!"

On iTaskinator:

"Join the <u>Productive</u> <u>Muslim</u> Revolution with a new simple app to help you manage your day to day tasks! ProductiveMuslim Ltd is an online social enterprise dedicated to boosting <u>productivity</u> in the <u>Muslim</u> <u>Ummah</u>. Through articles, interviews, animations, online & offline training, as well as tools and software, Productive Muslim is a one stop shop for a <u>Muslim's</u> <u>productivity</u> needs."

Productive Muslim's focus on Youth

The emphasis of PM's work seem to be clearly on youth. This corresponds to statistics highlighted earlier in the literature review indicating that a) youth are the major component of the Muslim population worldwide today b) Muslim youth on social media are better educated than their counterparts, and c) growing number of online outlets are emerging to cater to the needs of this population (DeSilver, 2013).

Productive Muslim Animations

PM's most popular feature since its launch is their short animation videos. An archive of all their animations is available on both; their blog and YouTube channel. There are around 20 animations- as of November 2013.

The animations, as well as the brand logo, feature the main PM character called, "Abu Productive", which is an orange stick figure wearing traditional Muslim skullcap and holding what seems to be coffee/tea while looking confident and "in control".

The word "Abu" in Arabic means father. In the Muslim/Arab tradition, many earlier Islamic figures carried the name "Abu so and so"; like Abu Huraira (a companion of the Prophet Muhammad) (Lings, 2001). "Huraira" in Abu Huraira means kittens. The man was named as such due to his habit of carrying small kittens in his garments' sleeves throughout the day (Lings, 2001).

In "Abu" Productive, the insinuation is that productivity is a habit to be maintained and manifested throughout the day as well. The name literally means "father of productivity". Also worth noting, Abu Productive is a slim, seemingly healthy character which contrasts the stereotypical Arab/Muslim images that feature chubby men with large bellies (Laudone, 2012; Donnelly, 2012; Magdzik, 2012).

The "productivity" that PM is suggesting seem to revolve around two keys themes. One, overcoming common negative habits among Muslims worldwide. Two, reconciling religious obligations with average Muslims daily life.This could be

observed throughout their animation videos. The videos are usually short, between 0:44 to 4:41 minutes.

The longest video is "Productive Muslim Animation 1: The daily life of a Productive Muslim" [link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptoobtYPv9s].

The video captures the two themes above. To elaborate, below is a timeline of the way the video features Abu Productive's day. Enlisting the content of this video is important because it reflects what PM promotes as "productive day". This also reflects PM's world-view and the kind of activities they encourage or promote among their viewers.

"Productive Muslim Animation 1: The daily life of a Productive Muslim.":

> **4:00 am**. Abu Productive, wakes up to pray night prayer while a recitation of Qur'an 17:79 goes on in the background. The recited verse encourages people to read the Qur'an during night prayer implying that time afterwards will "carry blessings, productivity and their status will be raised in the sight of their Creator". The night prayer is not a religious obligation, it is a voluntary ritual. PM's video is encouraging it while showing that the person who woke up at 4 am for the ritual also managed to get work done afterwards in the early hours of the day- which is a nuanced suggestion.
>
> **5:00 am.** Abu Productive conducts some work on his computer.
>
> **6:00 am.** He gets up for the Fajr (dawn prayer). The video shows Abu Productive praying Fajr in congregation in the mosque.
>
> **7:00 am.** He eats breakfast.
>
> **7:30 am.** He rides his bike to work.
>
> **8:00 am.** He reaches his office and carries on working for four hours.
>
> **12:00 pm.** He gets up for Dhuhr (noon) prayer, which he also conducts in a mosque in congregation.
>
> **1:00 pm.** He eats lunch.
>
> **2:00 pm.** He resumes work and goes on a work meeting/presentation for two and a half hours.

4:30 pm. He goes for Asr (afternoon) prayer, also in a mosque. While in the mosque, Qur'anic verse 2:238 is recited which says, "Maintain with care the [obligatory] prayers and [in particular] the middle prayer and stand before Allah, devoutly obedient."

5:00 pm. He rides his bike back home.

6:00 pm. He again catches the Maghrib (sun set) prayer at the mosque. Again, Qur'anic verse encouraging the act is recited.

7: 00 pm. He rides his bike to the gym and works out for half an hour. He then returns home to have dinner.

8:00 pm. He gets up for evening Isha prayer, in the mosque verses from the Qur'an are recited implying a "high status of those who maintain the remembrance of God throughout their day, and that rizq (sustenance) is in His Hands and it is upon Him to reward those who remember Him abundantly both spiritually and materially"- as the verses suggest.

9:00 pm. Finally, Abu Productive goes back home, makes a hot drink, leans on his kitchen table crossing his legs, looking relaxed and "victorious" while the Productive Muslim logo appears in the middle of the screen apparently describing Abu Productive's day with a question underneath it that reads: "Are *You* a productive Muslim?"

The message PM seems to construct above is that an average Muslim can utilize his day, conduct religious obligations, be reminded of Qur'an/God, take care of the health and physique-- and at the end of the day, feel "successful, triumphant and productive" like 'Abu Productive'.

Obviously, not all viewers would agree or find this realistic.

The video yielded 50 thousand views on YouTube. It received mixed reviews. Some found it unrealistic, like the comment below: [unedited]

"LOL where does this guy find the energy. That was like an 18 hour day :O … No naps, nothing. It must be awesome to be an <u>unrealistic</u> stick figure."

Others disagreed, like the comments below: [unedited]

> *"Best animation yet.... portrays Islam as "a way of life' and not JUST a religion...*
> *Great JOB!"*

> *"Fantastic clip!! Keep up the amazing work that you do, and we'll share like*
> *crazy... :) Sallam alaykum [peace be upon you] from <u>Bosnia</u>!!"*

The collage of animations PM has in their playlist all revolve around replacing bad habits with good ones. A contrast is frequently made between "Abu Productive" and the opposite character, "Abu Unproductive".

For example, in one video called, "Purify your Gaze & Stay Productive". The video features Abu Productive and Abu Unproductive getting yelled at by their boss at work. After the incident, Abu Productive goes to his desk, puts on something in his ear to listen to (probably Qur'an), a few hours later, he manages to fix the work and leaves the office. On the other hand, Abu Unproductive who was frustrated with the boss went to his desk infuriated. Then he unleashes his anger by logging into what seems to be inappropriate or pornographic material on his computer. Hours pass by, and while Abu Productive "utilized the time and produced some work", the other character seemed fully drained, staying in the office until the night while not producing any work.

The remaining PM videos cover topics like; "managing one's budget as opposed to over spending", "utilizing weekends in volunteering and charity instead of watching re-runs at home while eating junk in front of the TV and "burping""- as it

shows in the video, "praying on time", "making Ramadan healthy spiritual and productive" and "having sincere intentions".

Aside from the "spiritual/ religious" dimensions, the productivity tips propagated by PM could apply to any viewer/individual.

PM doesn't seem to touch upon any political issue or champion for any political groups. Throughout the videos, neither Abu Productive nor Abu Unproductive commit "violent" acts, speak badly about those of other faiths or make nuanced political moves.

b) <u>Muslim Identity</u>

The Muslim identity could be significantly observed and summarized in one of PM's videos called, "We are Productive Muslims," [link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg_2gQ7ZKvI]. This is the main video featured on their YouTube channel's homepage.

As the title suggests, the video identifies and responds to the "who we are" and "what we are" questions that encapsulate major aspects of a person's identity (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002).

The video features Abu Productive waving at the viewers, then he gets identified through the title "I am a Muslim". Then a female character appears in red dress, veil and a flower accessorizing her veil (possibly to reflect that veil is "not oppressive") she gets identified as "I am Muslimah" (Arabic for female Muslim).

The video goes on to highlight ten aspects about the Productive Muslim/Productive Muslimah identity which are:

1) *"I pray on time"*

This came as the first identification, and it reflects that PM perceives religion and religious practices as a primordial aspect of the identity they promote.

2) *"I work well with others"* &

3) *"I help the needy"*

Both 2 and 3 reflect that the "productive Muslim" is not "detached or isolated" from other people or people of other faiths. The identifications point to "working well with others" without saying, "working well with other *Muslims*" for instance. It also says, "I help the needy" while not specifying that the "needy" has to be "a Muslim".

4) *"I exercise"*

Here again it seems to insinuate that being a productive Muslim involves taking care of one's physique and being fit. Both the female and male productive Muslim characters are featured exercising in a gym, looking slim and "fit".

5) *"I am spiritual"*

Mentioning yet another religious identification seem to reflect that being productive, in the perspective of PM, means that one doesn't only have to do the religious obligations, but more voluntary spiritual work as well. In #1 the

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identification already pointed to praying on time. Here in # 5 it indicates being "spiritual" and the image in the video associated with this point showed a group of men and women in spiritual circles where they read religious books collectively, as well as, in solitude.

6) *We are Muslims 7) We are productive 8) We live healthy 9) We work hard 10) We strive to be better*

The description starting six to10 moved from "the individual" to "the group". From "I" to "We". This corresponds to the social identity theory that describes the individual's identity with connection to the "in group" (or the group he/she belongs to). PM first focused on the individual and then connected this individual with the larger unit. The unit here is the" *ummah*."

Again, here, PM looks at the productive Muslim individual in light of the larger group, the *ummah*. This reflects why they always include the key word "*ummah*" in their identifications like the "About us" page, their App description and so forth.

This video ended with the title, "We use Productive Muslim towards a productive *ummah*", which summarizes the notion PM seems to stand for.

To connect this seemingly ideal picture with reality, the PM blog features stories of successful "productive Muslims" who appear to embody the characteristics they identified. For example, the profile of British hockey player, Darren Cheeseman. PM's interview with Cheesman focused on their main interest areas "youth, Muslims and productivity," as they wrote below in their introduction of his story:

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"Playing hockey for England and Great Britain, Darren Cheesman has been recognized as one of Britain's <u>most skilful</u> and <u>exciting players</u>. He is <u>also the owner and lead coach</u> of DC17 Coaching. Combining his experience of being in an elite environment from a <u>very young age</u> and <u>his many achievements</u> in hockey, there is a lot one can learn about <u>personal excellence</u>, hard work, dedication, and success from this <u>young</u> and <u>productive Muslim</u>."

Cheesman is a recent convert to Islam (Mott, 2011). PM's selection of a young, British new convert for their interview insinuate certain messages like Islam in not monopolized by Arabs, converts are easily integrated and/or role models don't have specific criterion and/or don't have to be born Muslims as long as they're "successful and productive".

c) <u>Relevance of Qur'an to youth</u>

PM incorporates Qur'an verses and teachings throughout their work. One of the popular videos on PM YouTube Channel is a series called, "*Naseeha*" (Arabic for advice). In this series, the founder of PM gives a weekly *naseeha* to youth that is based on a Qur'an verse or Qur'an teaching.

For example, a video called, "Do you want to be king?" In this video, the founder gives an advice to the audience on how to "embody the characteristics of a "king"". But the message appeared to be deeply nuanced, and rooted in the Quranic discourses. The advice didn't involve instructions on how to acquire wealth, power or authority. Rather, it focused on controlling one's ego. The *naseeha* used Qur'an verse 12:101, in which Prophet Joseph invokes God saying that He, God, has given

Joseph power and authority "like a king". But the power and authority refers to Joseph's "self-discipline" and refusal to "fall into desires" or lose focus in life. The Qur'an as seen here is "the criterion" upon which PM perceives the world. It could be argued that Qur'an leads PM's world view that they promote among their followers.

It seems here also that PM tries to place the "Qur'an and God" as references in the followers' life, use Qur'an verses to extract tips that would "help in solving personal/psychological problems", and highlight that Qur'an is "relevant today and that youth can connect with it" in dealing with their contemporary personal problems.

d) The character of Muhammad

The character of the prophet throughout PM is nuanced as the "model" for success. For example, PM published an article titled, "5 Easy Ways to Incorporate the *Sunnah* (the example of the Prophet) in Your Life. In this article, PM creates a rather idealistic role model image of the Prophet. To get an understanding of the picture PM paints of the Prophet Muhammad, one particular segment of the article could be discussed. The description below provide an understanding of the character of Muhammad that PM propagates among their followers:

> *"There have been many great people in the history of humanity, and many of them have been taken as examples and role models by the people of their time and future generations. However, our Prophet is unique in that he is a flawless, timeless, universal role model: every other human had some flaws and negative sides to their character, but he is the only one whose every aspect of life can be taken as a positive example. He fulfilled a number of different roles in his life: he was the leader of the Muslim community, a husband, a father, a teacher, an*

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*army commander, a statesman and much more. **Look at all his roles and find one that relate to your own life** – for example, if you're a teacher, study the aspects of his seerah relating to his teaching methods. Take him as your ultimate role model in your job – learn his sunnahs as a teacher and try to incorporate that into your own teaching style.*

By making the sunnah very specific – instead of letting the whole body of it overwhelm you – you can find in our Prophet your ultimate role model for any important role you play in life."

This image of the prophet is significantly in disagreement with the image painted in the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo, for example, that portrayed the prophet in a rather "fanatical" image (Donnelly, 2012), or the Danish cartoons that pictured him as "an extremist with a bomb" (Magdzik, 2012).

Also, PM seems to connect young Muslims significantly with their religious icon, Prophet Muhammad.

3- **Quran Weekly**

a. **The Overall picture/framework:**

As the name suggests, the work of the Quran Weekly initiative (QW), is largely based on the Qur'an. This includes their videos, activities, reminders and commentary on current events. This notion could be captured in the description sections of QW on the different social media outlets. The "About Us" section on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the main website- quranweekly.com-, reads:

> "*Quran Weekly's vision is to become the primary contributor for enlivening hearts and enriching minds through Qur'anic advocacy.*
> *The mission of our group is to provide high value Islamic content through multiple media platforms, which will be an invaluable source of knowledge, inspiration, and reminder.*"

The focus, as highlighted above, is on the Qur'an and dissemination of classical Islamic knowledge. It also appears that the initiative's goal is to utilize new media techniques into presenting the Quranic message. This corresponds with Guo-Ming (2012) who suggested that ethnic culture would have an impact on the uses of social media. In Quran weekly it can be seen that classical theological information is tailored to fit youth's technologically-advanced, fast-paced life style.

This notion was confirmed in the interview conducted for this research with Mehrab Reza, the founder of QW. Reza said in the interview:

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"Many people do not have time or interest to read books or commentaries, they may not enjoy reading blog posts or long articles, but everyone has time to listen to a short video. Teens listen to our videos while browsing the web, connected to the audio playing in the background. Parents who stay at home listen to the videos while carrying out daily chores (ironing, cooking, etc.). Working people and students watch or listen to the videos during their commutes. And athletes are also tuned in while working out. When you facilitate convenience for people, they are more inclined to tune in."

The most widely spread of QW's social media platforms, to date, is their YouTube channel with over four million views. This also provoke future research on the impact of the messages in these videos on the millions of viewers around the world and how this affects the global Muslim ummah.

The website, quranweekly.com, also hosts all QW's videos. The work that appears on the main website is divided into sections classifying the videos into categories or series like; "Quranic Gems", which are short videos that carry "significant observations from the Qur'an", "Super Stars Series", which are narrations and interpretations of the lives of the prophet's companions in contemporary context, and "Ramadan Prep" which are advices related to Ramadan, worship and spirituality.

QW's productions are mainly videos. The videos are usually short; from -1:00 to 8:00+ minutes, with the exception of a few one-hour-plus videos. QW is quite obviously youth-oriented. Noteworthy is that, according to their Facebook

statistics, the largest base of followers are between 18-24 years old. The Facebook "timeline photos" that feature QW crew and volunteers filming/producing the videos or organizing events showcase a group of youth (age range from 20 to 30 for the most part). Reza, QW founder, said in the interview:

"While every age group watches our videos, we cater our message and videos for high school and college-going ages specifically. They are the ones who are still wrestling with their identity and molding their lifelong character. At this critical age, they need sources that can help them understand truth from falsehood and right from wrong. Muslims believe that the Quran is the ultimate standard for morality and lofty humanistic behavior. That's why our message is very Quran-centric and free (students don't have disposable incomes)."

Evidently, QW's work is conducted by youth and for the youth, which makes it peculiar to understand the exact message (s) that those youth want to propagate through social media. Through elongated observation, one can identify a few main notions that appear to constitute QW's overall framework. The notions are:

a- Young people can relate to- and connect with their old theological texts and heritage in a modern context.

b- All speakers featured through QW are young speakers who appear to be acquainted with the technological updates and the "language" of the youth today, as opposed to old and/or "outdated" figures whom youth can't relate to.

c- Videos are intended for Muslims world-wide, thus, the work is framed to adjust to this "global" audience. One observation here is that- since YouTube is banned in certain parts of Pakistan- QW intentionally posts their videos twice; once via YouTube for the general audience, and another version via Vimeo for the Pakistanis or those around the world who don't have access to YouTube. Here it seems, QW is putting into consideration the diversity of their audience.

d- Qur'an, for QW, is the "source of guidance" and Qur'anic verses/teachings are the primary reference for interpreting and commenting on events at large.

The Type of Speakers Quran Weekly Features

Elaborating on the point that deal with the relevance of QW's speakers to youth, below is a brief identification of the character of speakers QW frequently features in their videos. There are around six main speakers. The most prominent of whom is a Pakistani-American called, Nouman Ali Khan. Khan is in his early thirties. His popularity appear to date back to 2007 when he was in his late twenties and started modern presentation of Qur'an exegesis that focus on "Quran linguistic miracles" and in-depth analysis of its nuances and discourses. Khan's YouTube videos have been shared extensively among young Muslims in the virtual world. His videos have millions of views on YouTube. Many of those viewers point out, through their

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comments on his videos, that Qur'anic exegesis by Khan brought "a new flavor" to the field of Quranic exegesis and helped youth "build connections" with their 1400-year-old text.

Many websites and social media pages have been founded to collect and share the work of Khan; like a website called Nouman Ali Khan Collection (http://www.nakcollection.com/), as well as other pages across social media disseminating his recent talks and *khutbas* (Friday sermons). There are also initiatives created to present Khan's Qur'anic lectures in the form of short illustrations and kinetic typography.

 [Links: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7pv-q6WXOs,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uf_l1uhYNXA].

Utilizing this "popularity", QW seem to have strategically selected Khan to deliver many of their videos. Again, this seems to be a tool that guarantees for the initiative a large outreach among the speakers' fan base, as well as, enable the initiative to influence and even mobilize young Muslim viewers/followers—which is a notion posed for study by Schmidt (2005), Guo-Ming (2012) and Bunt (2002, 2003 and 2009).

Like Khan, two speakers, Abdul-Nasir Jangda and Omar Suleiman are frequently featured.

Jangda is the Founder and Director of Al Qalam Institute, also US-based institute specialized in Arabic and Islamic studies. He is in his early thirties. His approach is

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specifically "down-to-earth" and "humorous". He directly and personally communicates with his followers and students through the different social media platforms- which speaks of the new trends in Islamic scholarship and Islamic knowledge dissemination. On his personal website, abdulnasirj.com, this is how he introduces himself:

"Abdul Nasir Jangda is a real Texan, unlike most of y'all.

His preference in vehicles is American muscle, not wimpy imports such as Lexus and Hyundai (cough – Nouman and Wisam – cough).

He only plays tackle football (flag is for wimps and 2 hand touch is makruh), has a deadly 3-point shot, and refuses to engage in an activity as un-American as soccer (Astaghfirullah).

He is a son, brother, husband, and father. Contrary to what his family members might say (don't listen to them) he is very awesome (MashaAllah).

He sleeps well at night knowing his students are making Dua for him (yes, even Nihal).

You can find lectures by AbdulNasir online on HalalTube or at MuslimMatters.

You can also stay in touch with him on Twitter (@AbdulNasirJ) or on his Facebook page."

Evidently, Jangda introduces himself in a rather "humorous", "down to earth" and/or "approachable" manner. He doesn't fit schemas of "uptight" or "serious" religious scholars. This may be one of the factors many youth are attracted to QW's work.

Like Jangda, Suleiman is part of an Islamic institute in the US called, Al Maghrib. Fan pages created for Suleiman label him as "the friendly giant from New Orleans"

and "a die-hard fan of the New Orleans Saints NFL team," as mentioned on Al-Maghrib Institute website. Suleiman is also being identified by his followers in an "approachable" manner. He has the same interests as youth while being a main source of Islamic knowledge, which seems to be sending the message that Islamic knowledge is "approachable" and relevant to youth.

Slightly younger than the three speakers above are; Wisam Sharieff, Ahmad Saleem and Abdel Rahman Murphy. Sharieff is specialized in Quranic recitations "tajweed", Saleem produces short advices based on Islamic tradition, and Murphy more frequently produces videos on "love and relationships" in Islam. The three speakers are in their twenties.

All six speakers mentioned above are Americans of "desi" [i.e. Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi] or Arab origins.

Profiling the speakers above is important because it gives an idea about the type of images or role models QW wants to promote among their viewers, and how this might influence followers' identity development.

b. **Muslim Identity**

Through the selection of the speakers; certain identity characteristics seem to be propagated via QW's work. The identity query, as mentioned earlier in the research, corresponds to questions like "who we are" and "what we are" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002). In several of the videos produced by QW, the speakers talk about their own personal lives- in light of the Qur'an or Qur'anic teachings- and

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imply frequently what Muslim youth are, what they should or shouldn't do/ought or ought not to be.

For example, several of the QW's videos, while tackling serious Quranic messages, feature the speakers with their little children. Like Khan and Suleiman who appeared with their little sons/daughters [links:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huhwjalaonY,

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9nMCACgvqk]

In addition, all speakers appear to be outwardly expressing their Muslim identity. All male speakers, for example, have beards [though trimmed and styled not bushy] which might be sending a message to youth that they could outwardly express their Muslim identity and that this is acceptable or "cool". Some speakers also appear in Muslim skullcaps, traditional Muslim "thowb" or "jilbab" like Suleiman and Sharieff. So, it seems here that there is an encouragement for youth to "embrace" their tradition and their Islamic culture/clothing- even though these clothing items might not be popular, or the mainstream trend on the highly visual social media platforms, for instance.

It is worth mentioning here that QW didn't feature any female scholar to date, despite the fact that their timeline photos on Facebook feature many female crew members and volunteers.

In addition to that, joking and laughing are also common throughout the videos, despite talking about serious classical knowledge. This may be suggesting that

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classical knowledge is "fun" activity and/or "people of knowledge have fun and they're not fanatical."

Additionally, all speakers appear to be multilingual, they all speak classical Arabic, English and other languages like Urdu.

All in all, the Muslim identity presented via QW is largely connected with classical Muslim tradition but in a multilingual, high tech- oriented, global communication context.

One can observe other characteristics also emerging through the videos. For example, in a three-minute video by Khan entitled, "Tips to improve your character", he identifies the kind of "characteristics" promoted or encouraged among young Muslims. Below is an edited transcript of what khan said in the video to help create an understanding of the Muslim characterization promoted among youth through QW's work:

"First step [to improving your character is], do no harm. Don't talk about good deeds until you stop the bad deeds [...] So you need to stop the entertainment addiction. Stop watching "filth", lower your eyes when you're walking down the street, because you're becoming less of a human every time you stare at a woman like she is a piece of meat, like she is an animal [...] Regain your humanity first …and then beautify it with good deeds. So do simple small things. Perfect your prayer. Memorize a few supplications. Be honest in your workplace. Be kind to your mother. These are not complicated things. This is what the Creator wants from us. Someone would ask "why?" That's a great question. One of Allah's names is Al Ghanyy [The Free of Need]. He doesn't need anything. And He told us that in [Quran 47:38]. He tells us to do a few good deeds, and if you do a few good deeds, He will make you free of need. He will shower you with blessings. [...] Last comment, many

people ask "what does God want?" There are a few ayat [verses] that tell us the answer; one of them is "Allah wants to lighten for you [your difficulties]; and mankind was created weak" (Quran 4:28). [Allah says] "I want ease for you," "I want to take the burden off of you."

Now, the segment above illustrate a few things. First the speaker asks the audience to "lower their gaze", this clearly contradicts the images in Laudone 2012 of Facebook pages like "Anti-Islam", "Infidel" and others. The aforementioned pages paint an image of overly-sexualized Muslims. Quran Weekly on the other hand promotes discipline in this regard. Also, the advice by this widely popular speaker- who gets millions of views- focuses on issues relevant to any viewer like respecting parents and removing harm. Throughout Quran Weekly's work, these are the types of advices made. While the context is Islamic, the messages are relevant to any individual.

Also, throughout QW's videos, violence is never- at least to date- promoted as the road to righteousness. This also contradicts the messages that are framed in anti-Islam materials that depict Muslims' ultimate concern as "suicide bombing" "extremism" and/or similar discourses (Donnelly, 2012; Magdzik, 2012).

c. <u>Character of Muhammad</u>

Throughout QW's work, there is much emphasis and "reverence" given to the Prophet Muhammad. In one of the videos entitled, "respect for Muhammad", the speaker encourages the listeners/viewers to maintain etiquette while speaking about the prophet, and not to engage in gatherings that might include

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condescending or foul remarks against him, Allah or the Qur'an. But they are not asked to "bomb or kill" those who insult them, for example.

Throughout their work, QW portrays Muhammad as "the role model and leader of the Muslim civilization".

There are different lights through which the character of Prophet Muhammad is presented. For example, in one video by Suleiman, titled, "Aisha's necklace", the speaker talks about the prophet's "romance" and "respect for his wife's smallest needs." [Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BY3E3p-Ty4I].

He narrates a story of the prophet when his wife Aisha lost her necklace while they were in a Caravan in the desert and the prophet ordered the whole Caravan to stop so that he would go back and search for Aisha's necklace. The speaker seemed to be emphasizing that Muslim husbands need to be attentive to their wives' smallest needs and that this is "the prophetic tradition". The video also narrated that the prophet used to get on his knee so that his wife would climb on it to ride the camel. Again, these are all romantic and sentimental nuances in portraying the Prophet. These kind of messages would obviously be relevant to females.

Other controversial issues, like Aisha's age, nevertheless, seem absent from QW's videos- at least to date.

d. Relevance of Qur'an to youth

The Qur'an is featured in QW's work as "the source of guidance". Frequently the speakers highlight the Qur'an "miraculous" nature and applicability to solving

contemporary problems. One of QW's sections is called, "Quranic Gems". A "gem" according to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, is something that is "admired for its beauty or excellence." QW's "Quranic Gems" are usually short messages highlighting an "admirable, beautiful or excellent" aspect about the Quran- according to the speaker- who is mostly Khan. In one segment of those videos, Khan highlighted how the aya (verse) that talks about Muslims being a "Middle nation" [i.e. moderate and modest] is actually located in the exact middle of the chapter "Al Baqara" even though, the prophet didn't plan this since the Qur'an was revealed to him in spoken not written form. Here the speaker attempts to imply the "Quranic linguistic significance".

All in all, the work of QW make an outsider viewer ponder the reasons why there would be attempts for "burn the Koran day" for example (Laudone, 2012).

VI.   SURVEY RESULTS

This section corresponds to RQ2: Why do Muslim youth use Qur'an Weekly, Celebrate Mercy and Productive Muslim? It also corresponds to the four hypotheses of the study. To answer the question and hypotheses, a survey was conducted with the followers of the three outlets on Facebook. The survey yielded a total of 900 responses (n= 900). The majority of respondents were females (n=586) [See Table 2]. Respondents came from eight different regions around the world [See Table 3].

In terms of the analysis strategy, as per the uses and gratifications theory, a number of uses have been identified by earlier researchers to help address and understand the users' needs of a given medium. The uses and gratifications theory directed the analysis with regards to considering the social and psychological needs of the users that provoke their expectations of the medium and influence their exposure to it. The work of McQuail, Blumler and Brown's (1972), provided four useful categories of users' needs, which have been examined through this survey. The scholars highlighted the following categories. First, "diversion" wherein users' seek diversion from their routine or emotional stresses. Second, "personal relationship" in which the users seek companionship of other users. Third, "personal identity" in which the users seek further understanding and reinforcement of their own values and identities. There is also "surveillance", but survey results support the first three uses in particular [See Table 4]. To add more dimension to the understanding of the uses, the five categories explained by Katz, Gurevitch &Haas (1973) were also considered since they provide a more

comprehensive understanding of users' needs. The five categories are; cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and tension release needs.

In addition to the uses dimension, the RQ also explores the identity dimension. As discussed earlier, one of the useful ways to look at the identity question is through two key questions; "Who we are?" and "How we position ourselves in a given time and space?" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002). Survey questions were placed specifically to analyze this notion [See tables 6, 10, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26].

Also, the hypotheses were answered through the results featured in tables 5, 13, 14, 7, 9, 11, 8, 17 and 18, as will be discussed in the coming pages:

H1: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that the sites help them learn about their religion in a modern context. [See table 5]

H2: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites. [See tables 12, 13, 14, 19]

H3: Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics and mainstream media will indicate that the sites provide a platform to voice their opinions. [See tables 7, 9, 11]

H4: Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam will use social media as a means to refute misconceptions about their religion. [See table 8, 17, 18]

The analysis below will start with providing some demographics, then responses to the aforementioned key points of analysis will be presented.

Table 2. Survey respondents' gender

Gender	Female	Male
N of respondents	586 (66%)	305 (34%)
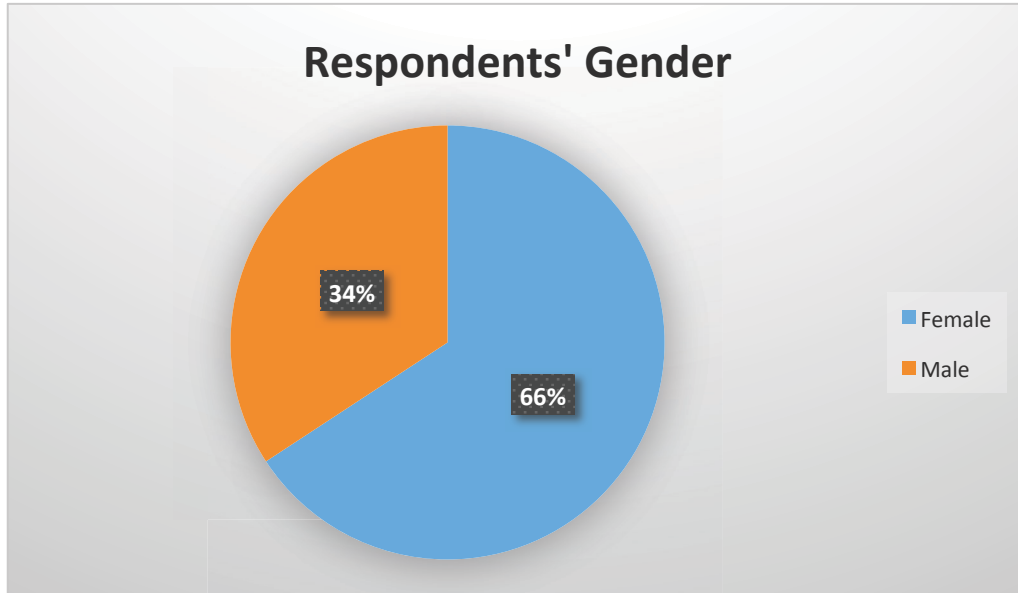
Out of the total number of respondents who took this survey (n= 900), a number of 891 successfully answered the gender question. The results show that a majority of 66% (n= 586) were females, and 34 % (n= 305) were males. This observation was particularly interesting since mainstream public/media discourses of Muslim women often depict isolated, oppressed and/or uneducated personalities. But, having a majority of females reflect that they at least have a fair amount of education, English language proficiency and a socioeconomic strata that enable Internet usage/interactivity.

Table 3. Illustrating respondents' regional distribution

Region	N of respondents
1- Arab Middle East and North Africa	70
2- Asia	**319**
3- Australia	21
4- Central or South America	11
5- Europe	**123**
6- Non-Arab Middle East and North Africa	59
7- Non-Arab section of Africa	93
8- North America	**125**
9- Other	79

Respondents' Regional Distribution

	Asia	North America	Europe	Non Arab section of Africa	Arab Middle East and North Africa	Non Arab Middle East and North Africa	Australia	Central or South America	Other
n of respondents	319	125	123	93	70	59	21	11	79
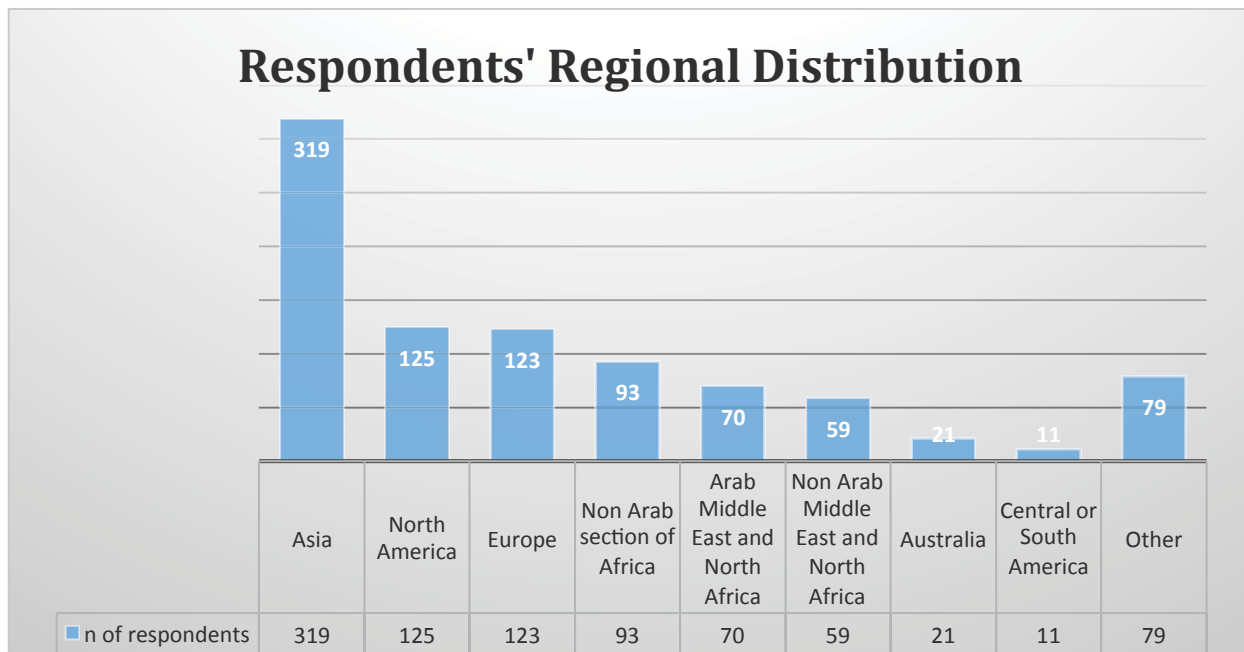
The widespread distribution of Muslims manifested in this survey result is in consistence with Esposito and Mogahed (2007) as well as Pew 2013 statistics that highlight the Muslim population's large widespread today, and how this contrasts mainstream understanding of Muslims' geographical locations (DeSilver, 2013).

Table 4. Illustrating the uses of global Islamic social media pages.

Uses	N of respondents
Learn more about Islam, Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet	829 (40%)
Learn more about successful global Muslim figures	381 (18%)
Learn more about Muslims from different nationalities	325 (16%)
Make friends	83 (4%)
Spend Time	144 (7%)
Overcome sadness or emotional distress	320 (15%)

Why do you use Global Islamic Social Media Pages?

OVERCOME SADNESS OR EMOTIONAL DISTRESS — 320
SPEND TIME — 144
MAKE FRIENDS — 83
LEARN MORE ABOUT MUSLIMS FROM DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES — 325
LEARN MORE ABOUT SUCCESSFUL GLOBAL MUSLIM FIGURES — 381
LEARN MORE ABOUT ISLAM, QUR'AN AND SUNNAH OF THE PROPHET — 829
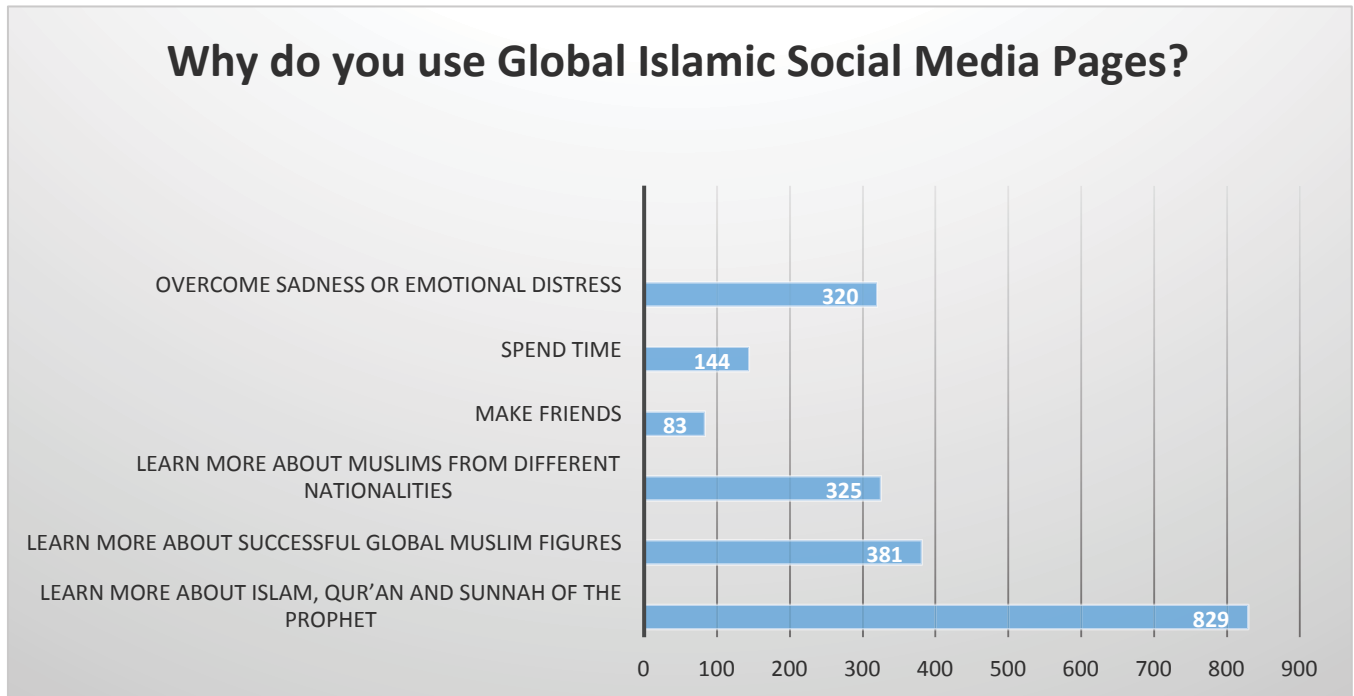
Answers to the question on "why do you use global Islamic social media pages?" correspond to the categories of diversion, personal relationships and personal identity. The category that reflected the highest number of responses is the "personal identity". This refers to users' pursuit of understanding and reinforcement of their own values and identities. The three answers that were selected by users the most are the ones that deal with reinforcing their personal identity. First, around 40% of the respondents (n= 829) said their usage is primarily directed by the desire to "learn more about Islam, Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet". Second, 18% (n= 381) identified their need to "Learn more about successful global Muslim figures". Third, 16% (n=325) identified their need to "Learn more about Muslims from different nationalities". [See Table 4].

All three categories reflect users' need for personal identity reassurance and reinforcement, as well as, personal integrative needs since learning about the substance of their faith gives more knowledge and understanding of who they are. Also, Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that members of a group would seek to defend or find means to perceive their group positively in order to further reassure their sense of identity and belonging to this group. The respondents here confirm this notion and highlighted their desire to learn more about "successful" global Muslims figures which gives reassurance that this identity could be integrated successfully in a global context.

The following needs identified by the users were the "diversion" and "tension release needs". These categories highlight users' desire to overcome routine and/or

release emotional distress or sadness. Around 7% (n=144) identified their need to "spend time" corresponding to the diversion category. Also, 15 % (n=320) of the respondents identified their need to overcome sadness or emotional distress. This speaks of the ability of global Islamic social media pages- as operationally defined earlier at large- and the three selected sample- in specific- to relate on an emotional and psychological level with the followers.

This is also a finding that needs to be put in consideration as media outlets' influence on users' psychological and emotional conditions make them highly powerful tools.

As for the social integrative usage, it was illustrated in respondents' identification of the need to "make friends" which yielded 4 % (n=83) of the responses.

By and large, it appears that respondents seem more inclined towards personal identity reassurance.

Illustrating on this point, one of the survey respondents said in the comments' section of the survey:

"I have always believed that Islam is a universal religion, [...] I actually follow mostly North American/European/British Muslim social media pages [...] I also find that Islamic social media sites really, really help foster understanding of Islam when I share posts on my own Facebook. Often non-Muslim friends will 'like' or comment on these posts as well, and so they benefit not only me but also others as well. I really appreciate this since I would never be able to have the knowledge or resource to write

these posts on my own, but by sharing the statuses or posts [of these pages] from a

learned scholar or well-researched article, this is now possible."

The comment above shows how certain global Islamic social media pages could

provide knowledge, as well as, reassurance of one's identity. As the comment

suggested also these Islamic social media pages may also be used as means that

enable the users to express and/or share their identity with others in a way that

makes them feel good about themselves or proud of their identity- and so it may

also increases one's self-esteem and confidence.

Table 5. *"Global Islamic social media pages are important because they help me learn about my religion in a modern context"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
5	18	72	321	466

Global Islamic socia media pages are important because they help me learn about my religion in a modern context

5	18	72	321	466
Strongly Disgree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
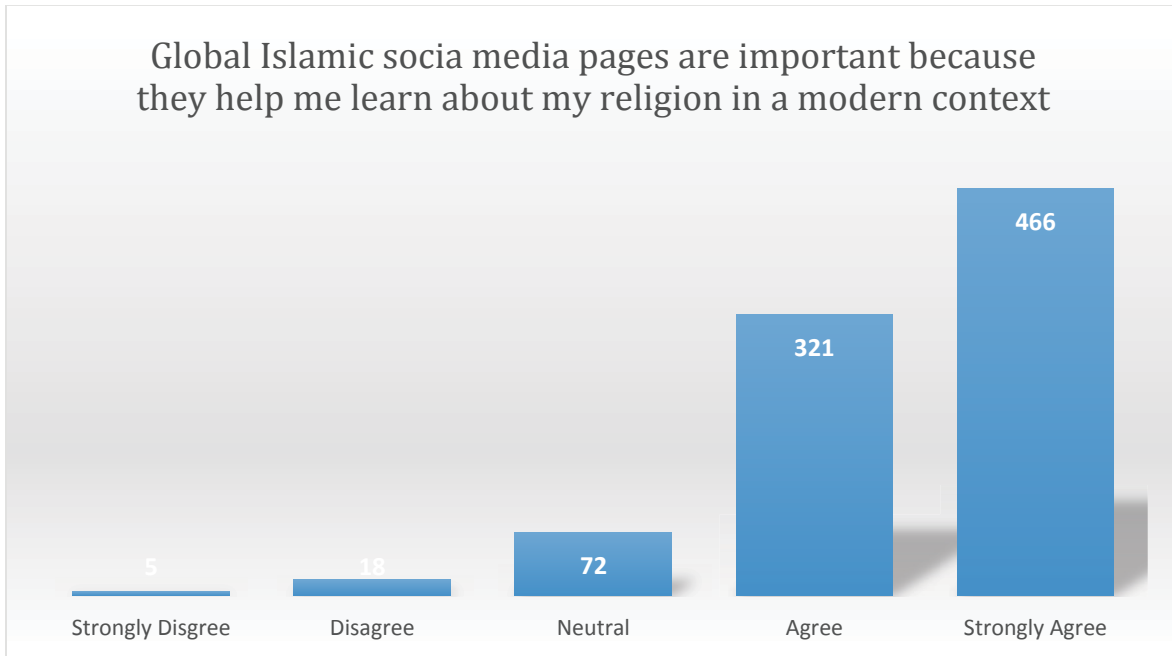
This question responds to **H1:** Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that the sites help them learn about their religion in a modern context.

A majority of 89% (n=787) either strongly agreed (n= 466, 53%) or agreed (n= 321, 36%) to this notion (*M*=4.39). This also illustrates a new dimension of the uses of social media outlets.

Now, the questions/analysis below aim to address the issue of respondents' social and psychological needs and how this affect their usage of Global Islamic social media pages.

There were a few premises or assumptions made in this research as a starting point for the analysis. The assumptions were based on earlier studies found in the literature, and they were then tested through the survey. The assumptions deal with; a) respondents' perception of their faith, b) how this faith is represented worldwide politically, socially and in the media, c) how respondents feel about that and d) how global Islamic social media outlets help in readjusting the unfavorable discourses or representations of followers' identity.

To test those premises/assumptions, the respondents were asked the following questions:

- *"Islam is a universal religion?"*

This question would correspond with Tajfel and Turner (1979) as well as Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002). The researchers suggested that members of a group would tend to perceive their group in a rather positive light that boosts their sense of identity and belonging to the group. This question also aims to highlight respondents' perception of the nature of their own religion. This is also important as it shows the major contrast between Muslims perception of themselves/their religion, and mainstream anti-Islam discourses of this religion.

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The anti-Islam discourses depict Muslims as Arab/Middle Eastern, backward group (Smith, 2013; Geddes, 2013; Laudone 2012; Corcoran, 2010; Ansari, 2012; Latif, 2012; Mayton 2013; Altman 2010; Gallup, 2011), while Muslims perceive their religion differently. Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Brinson (2010) suggested that if the negative representation from external groups overpowered the positive representation of the inner groups, members of this inner group would tend to have identity problems and isolation from "the other" groups.

The responses highlighted an overwhelming majority of (n=869) nearly 99%, either strongly agreed (n= 802) or agreed to the premise (n= 67), (*M*= 4.89).

Table 6. *"Islam is a universal religion"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
3	2	5	67	802

"Islam is a universal religion"

113
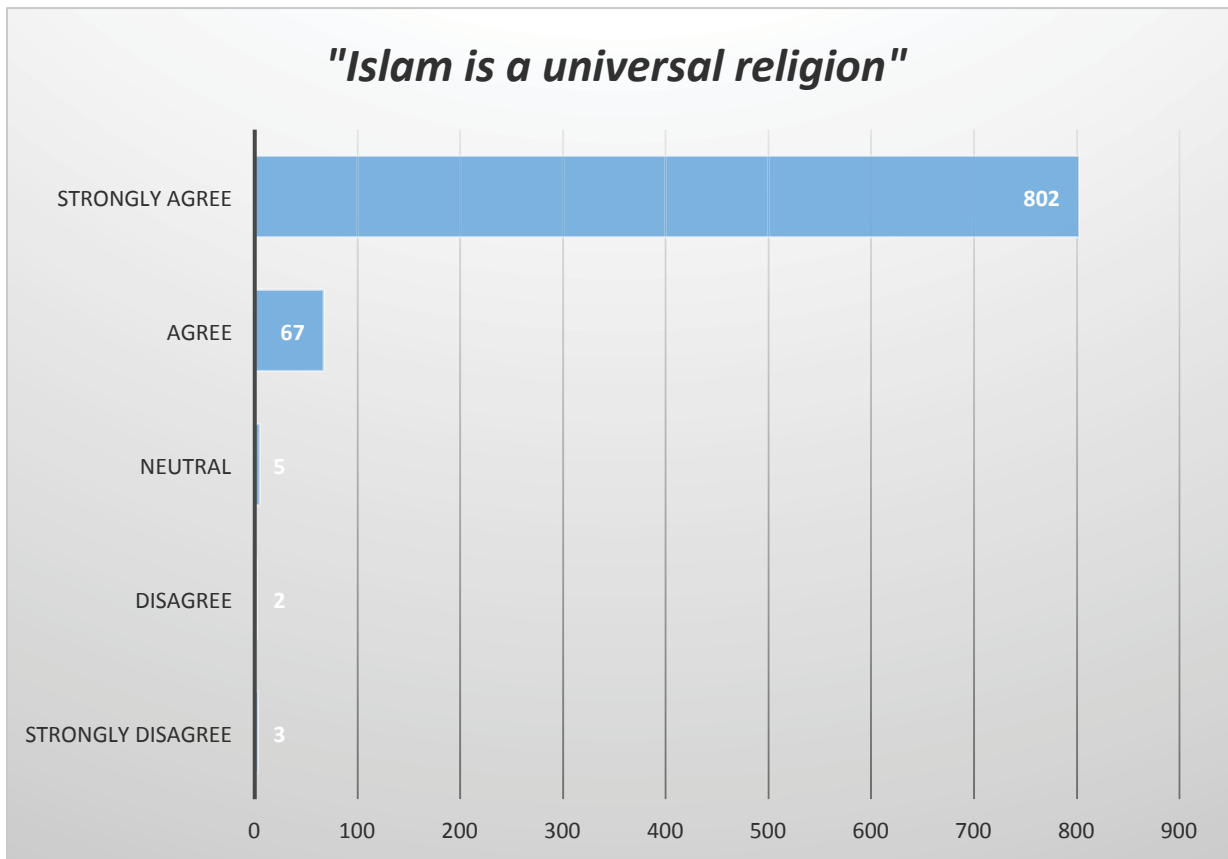
- *"Do leaders of Muslim-majority countries correctly reflect the message of Islam?"*

The question responds to the first section of **H3:** Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics and mainstream media will indicate that social media provides a platform to voice their opinions. The responses highlighted that the overwhelming majority of participants 91 % (n= 790) indeed find the political representation of Islam inadequate.

Table 7. "Do leaders of Muslim-majority countries correctly reflect the message of Islam?"

	Yes	No
N of respondents	81 (9%)	790 (91%)

"Do leaders of Muslim-majority countries correctly reflect the message of Islam?"
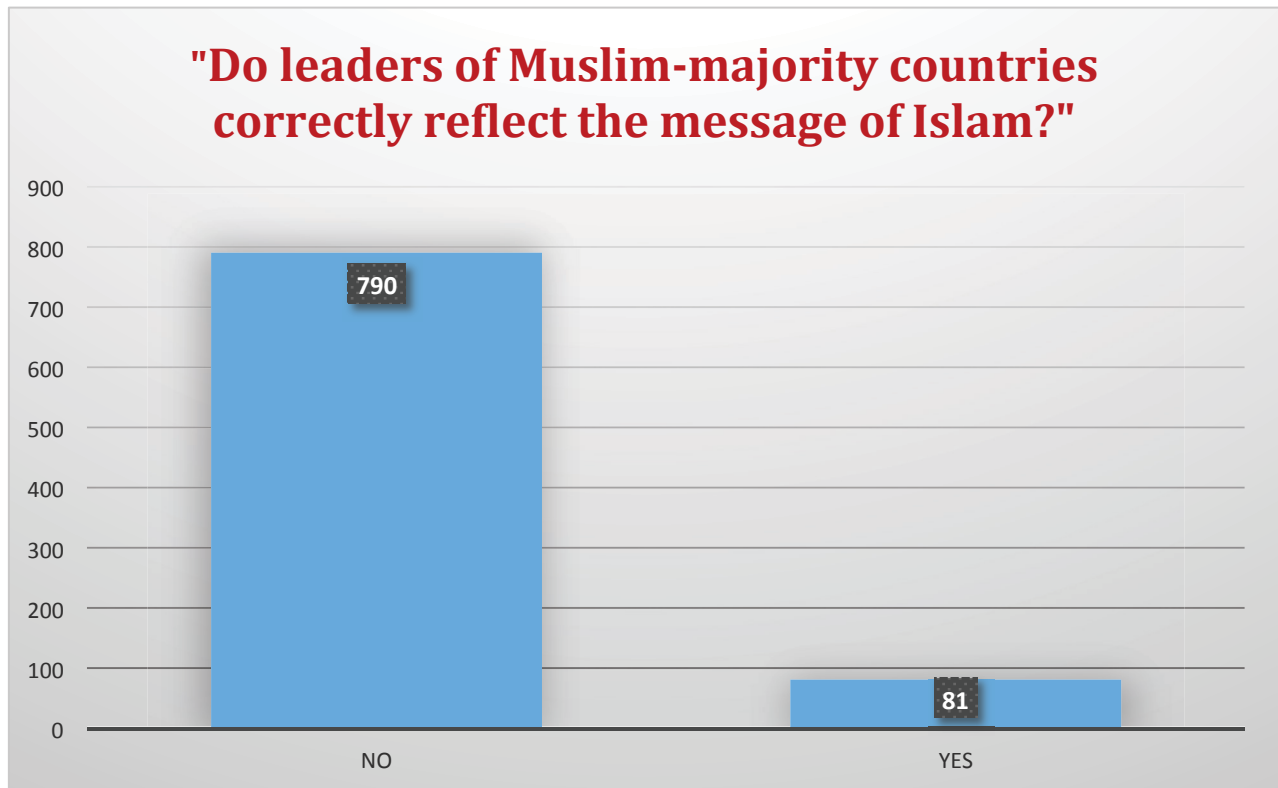
- *"Do Muslims today correctly reflect the message of their religion?"*

This question aimed to test the first section of **H4:** <u>Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam</u> will use social media as a means to refute misconceptions about their religion. Results show that majority of respondents indeed find Muslims do not correctly reflect the message of their religion.

Table 8. *"Do Muslims today correctly reflect the universal message of their religion?"*

	Yes	No
N of respondents	203 (24%)	660 (76%)

Do Muslims today correctly reflect the message of their religion?
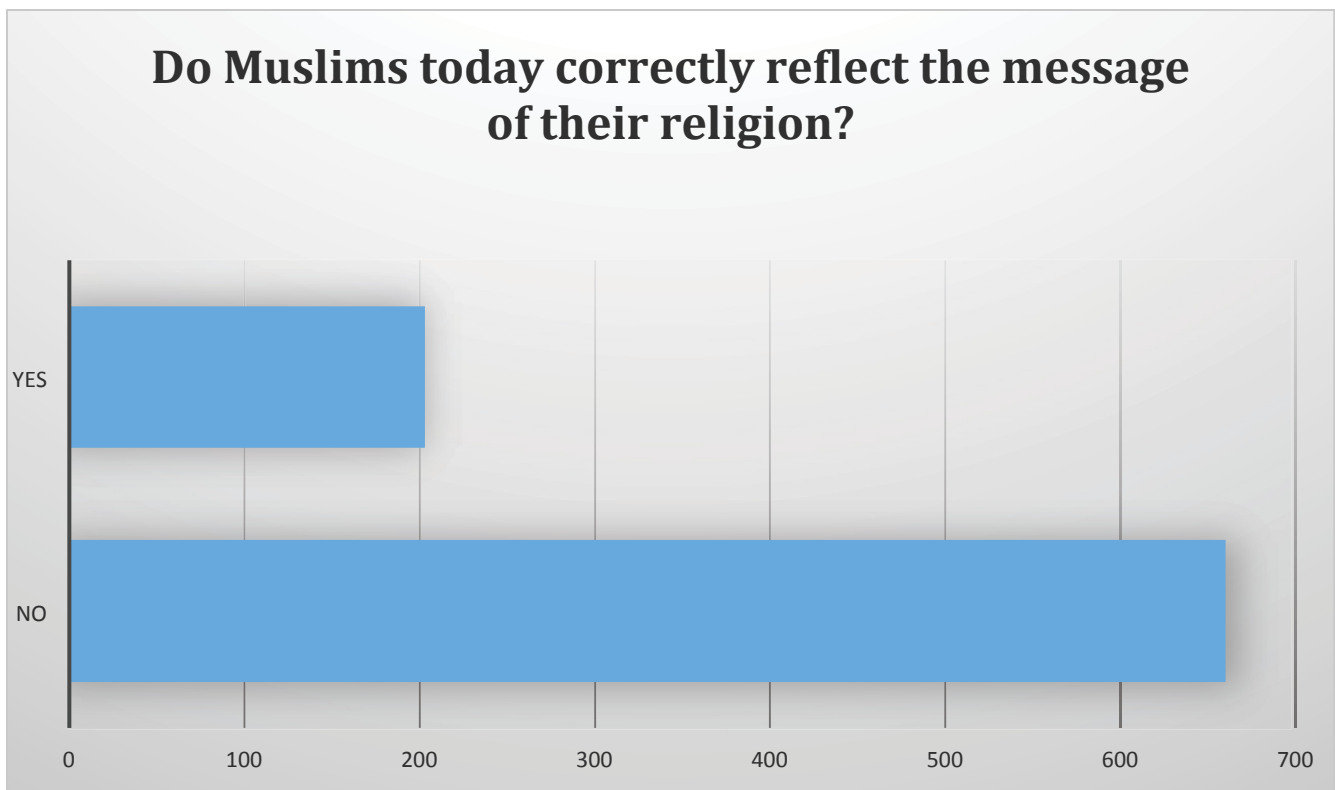
- "*Muslim youth around the world are under-represented in media today*"

This question responds to the second section of **H3:** Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics <u>and mainstream media</u> will indicate that social media provides a platform to voice their opinions. The purpose is to understand how the respondents perceive their representation in the media, and whether this may be a factor for their inclination towards GISMP as platforms to represent themselves. The answers show the majority (n=709, 78.7%) find themselves under-represented in media today, (*M*= 4.1).

Table 9. "*Muslim youth around the world are under-represented in media today***"**

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
6 (1%)	42 (4.7%)	112 (12.4%)	354 (39.3%)	355 (39.4%)

Muslim youth around the world are under-represented in media today
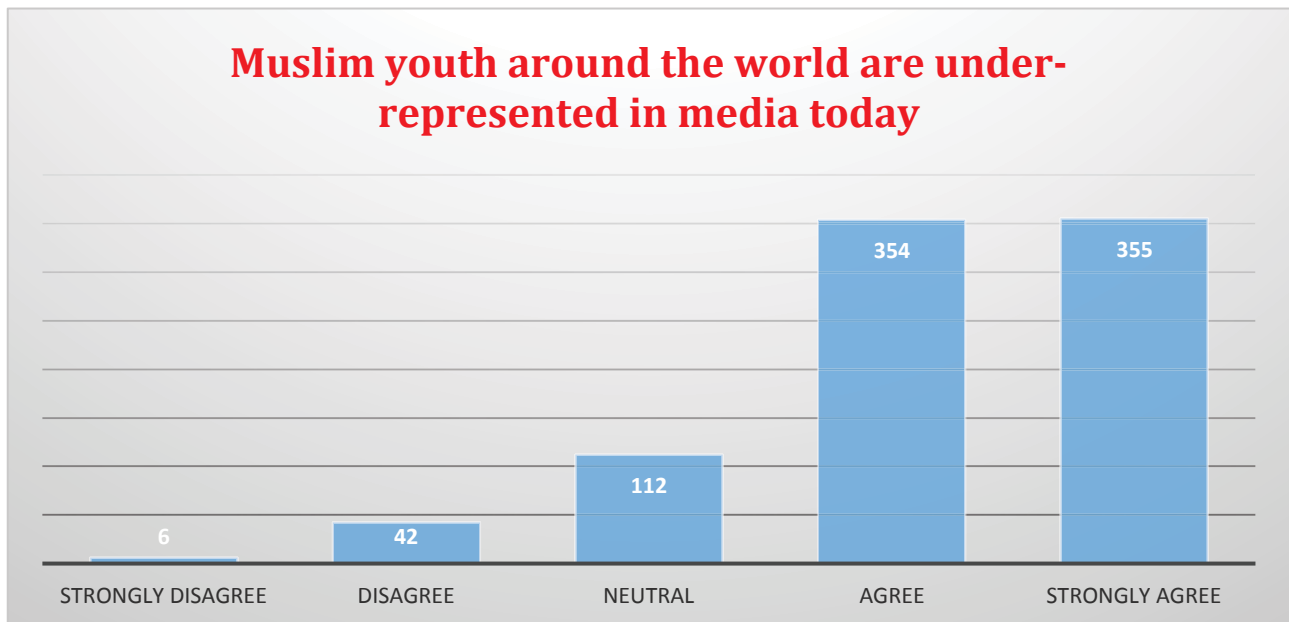
Now, in light of the above circumstances and findings, the researcher wanted to understand the uses of global Islamic social media pages in terms of dealing with the aforementioned social/political/psychological problems manifested in the overall inadequate representation of Muslims in their societies, through the political leadership and through the media. The following questions were, thereby, asked:

- *"Global Islamic social media pages that feature global Muslim speakers reflect that Islam is a universal religion"*

Here the researcher wanted to see whether GISMP represent the image the users perceive of their own religion. The results appeared to be largely positive (*M*= 4.5).

Table 10. *"Global Islamic social media pages that feature global Muslim speakers reflect that Islam is a universal religion"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
3 (0.3%)	9 (1%)	59 (6.6%)	245 (27.2%)	565 (64%)
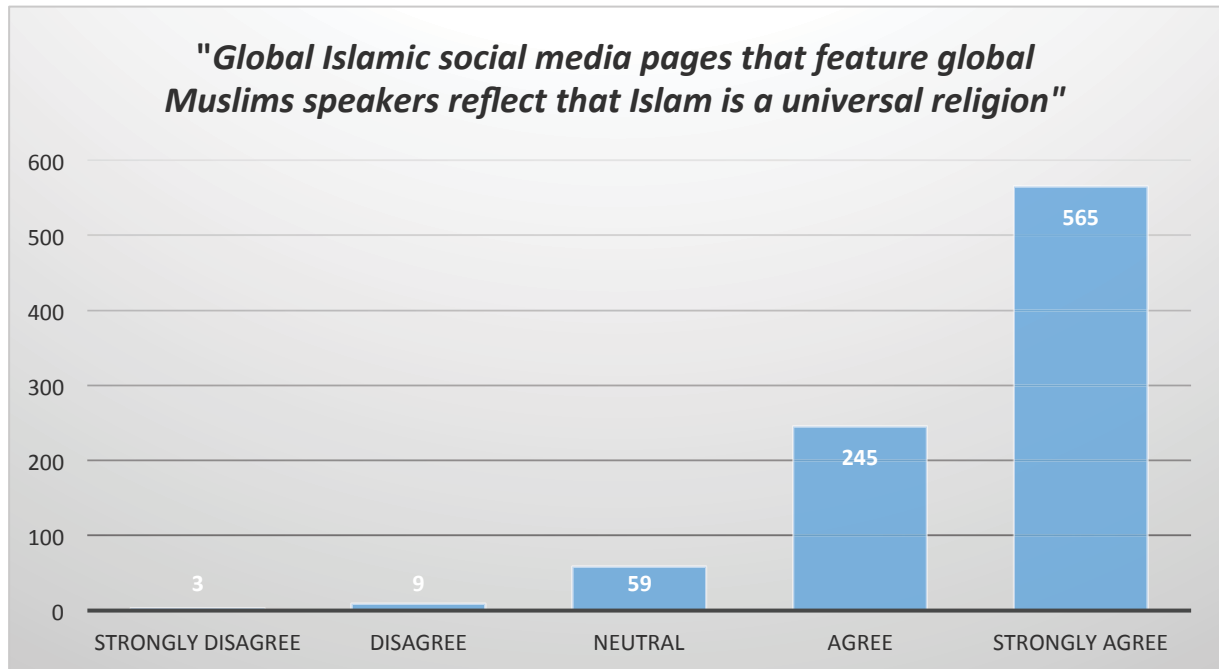
"Global Islamic social media pages that feature global Muslims speakers reflect that Islam is a universal religion"

- *"Social media provides a platform for Muslim youth around the world to voice their own opinions"*

Here, the researcher wanted to see whether social media could serve as a tool that handle inadequate media representation of Muslim youth.

This responds to the last part of **H3:** Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics and mainstream media <u>will indicate that social media provides a platform to voice their opinions.</u>

Respondents seemed to largely agree (*M*= 4.2).

Table 11 *"Social media provides a platform for Muslim youth around the world to voice their own opinions"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
6	35	101	359	379

"Social media provides a platform for Muslim youth around the world to voice their own opinions"

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
6	35	101	359	379
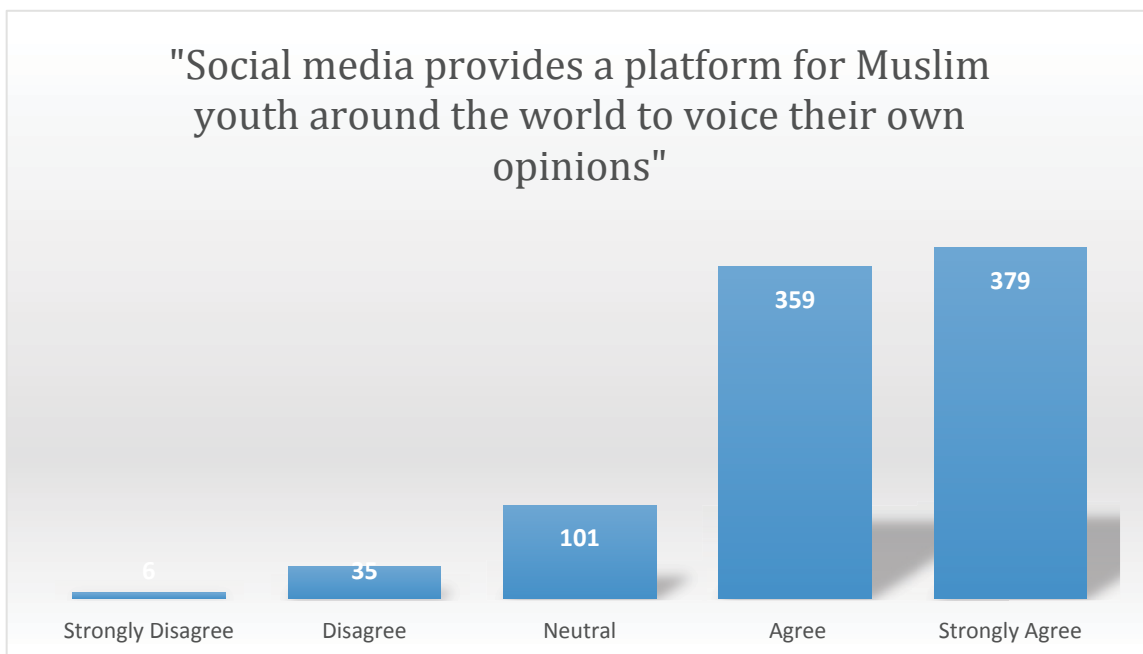
The researcher, then, wanted to test whether global Islamic social media pages have an influence/impact on followers' identities. The question was repeated in different forms and locations throughout the survey to test the reliability and respondents' consistency in answering this question. This was implemented through the following questions:

- *"Islamic social media pages help in creating global Muslim identity among youth today"*

This question also responds to **H2:** Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites.

Respondents largely agreed with this notion (*M*= 4.2).

Table 12. *"Islamic social media pages help in creating a Global Muslim identity among youth today"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
3	22	105	350	400
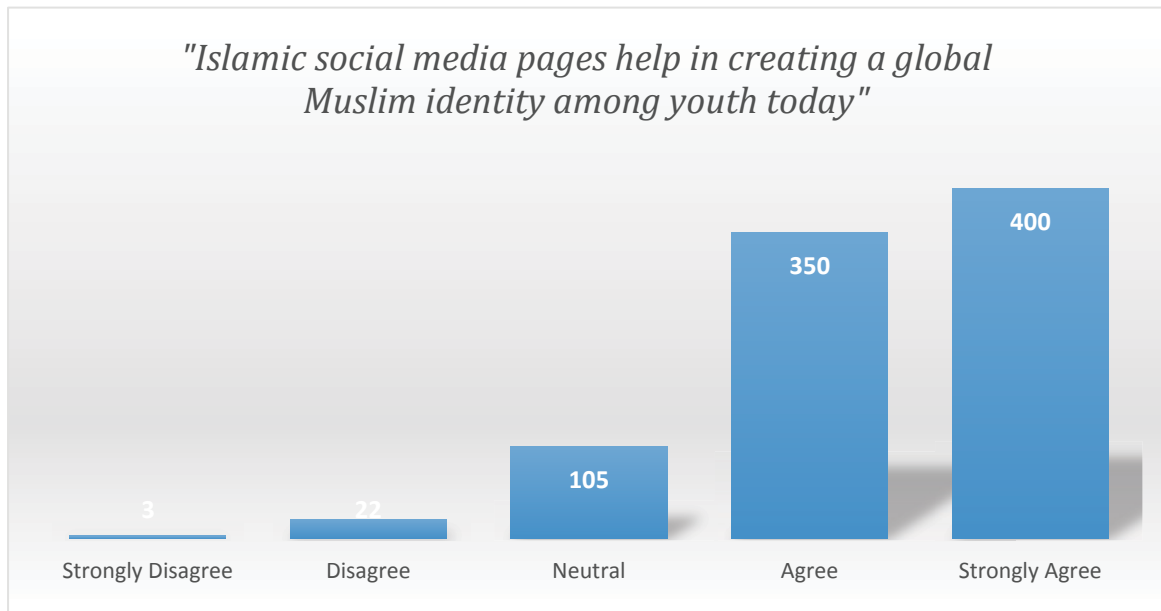
"Islamic social media pages help in creating a global Muslim identity among youth today"

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- *"Global Islamic social media pages have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers"*

  This question responds to **H2:** Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites.

  In this question, respondents also seemed to largely agree with the hypothesis (*M*= 4.2).

Table 13. *"Global Islamic social media pages have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
2	17	91	384	381

"Global Islamic social media pages have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers"
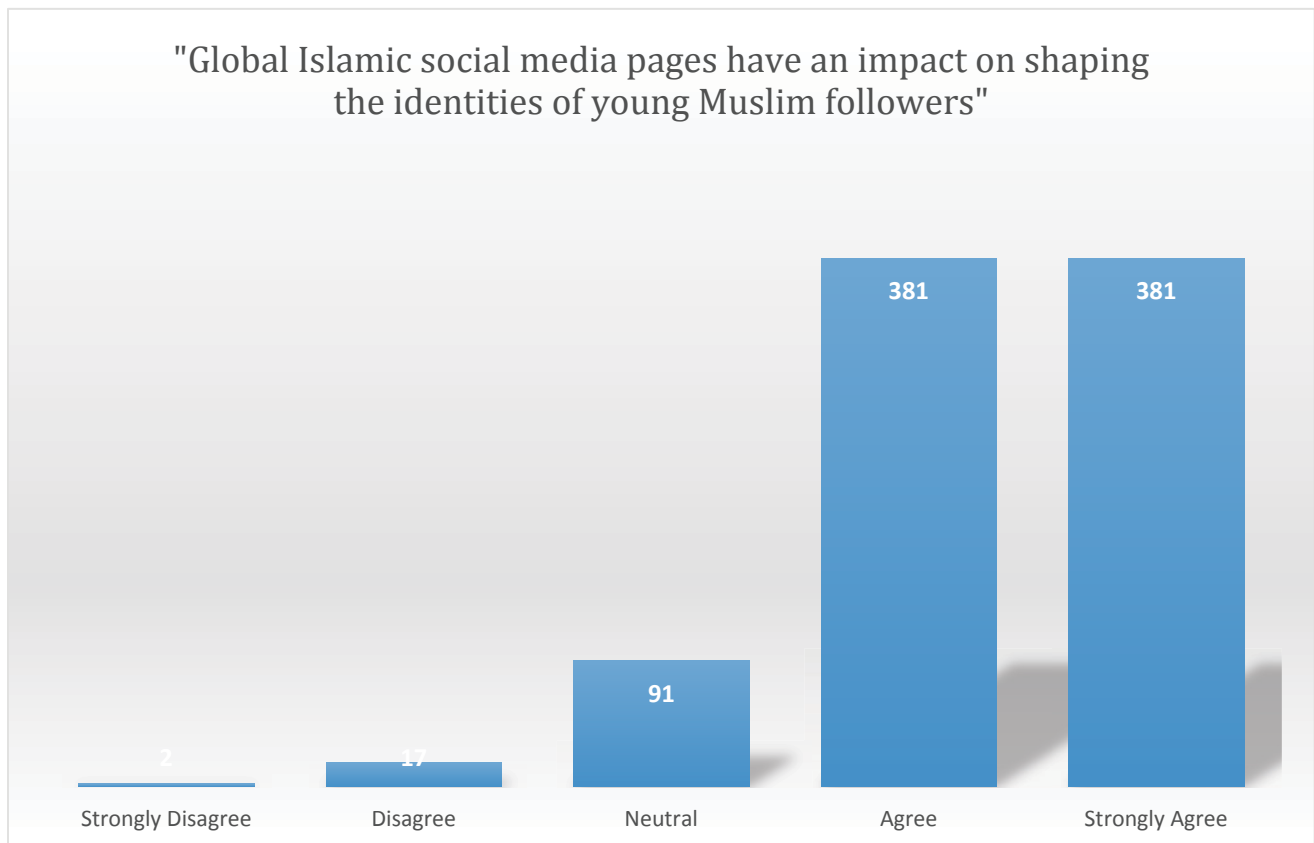
- *"Following global Islamic social media pages help me realize that being
  Muslim is global identity not confined by ethnic or geographical boundaries"*

This question also responds to **H2:** Users of global Islamic social media sites will

indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites.

Here also respondents confirmed that GISMP help them perceive their identity in

global context (*M*= 4.4).

Table 14. *"Following global Islamic social media pages help me realize that being
Muslim is a global identity not confined by ethnic or geographical boundaries"*

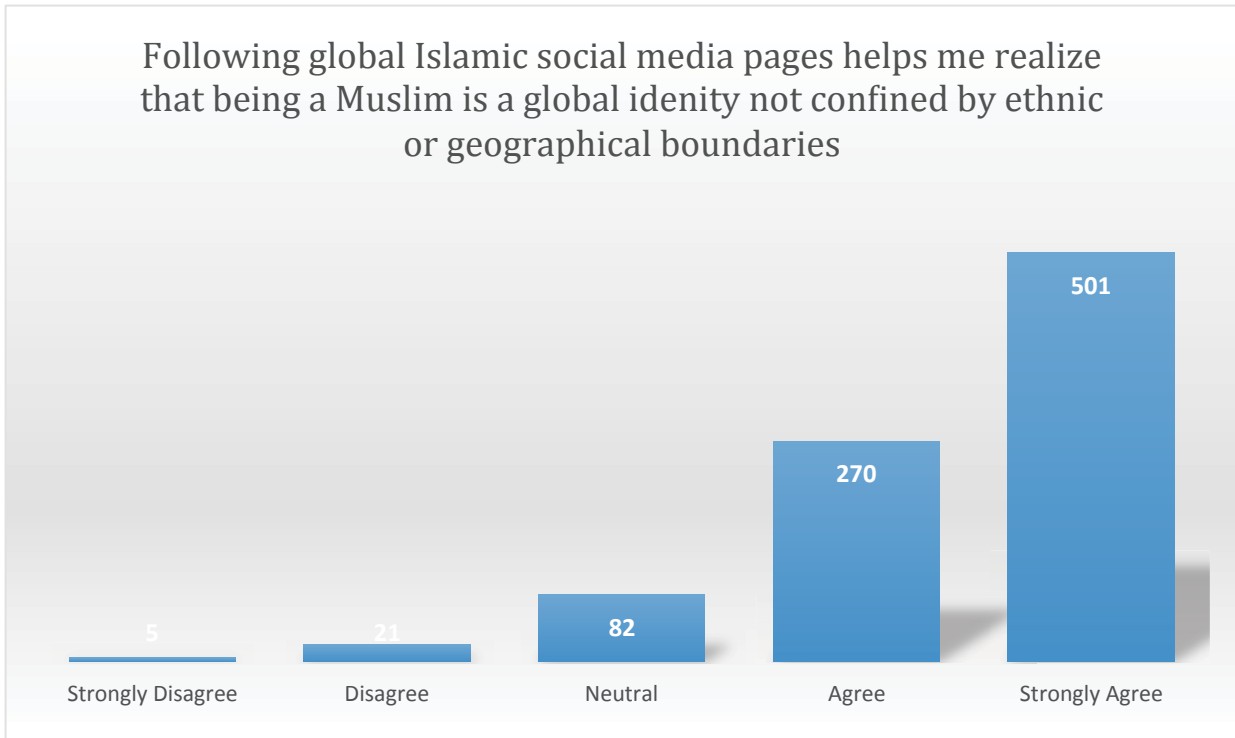| Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
5	21	82	270	501

Following global Islamic social media pages helps me realize
that being a Muslim is a global idenity not confined by ethnic
or geographical boundaries

- *How do you identify yourself?*

This question, then, encapsulated how respondents' felt they can identify themselves. Majority identify themselves as Muslims, prior to nationality, ethnicity or other belongings.

Table 15.   How respondents identify themselves

Identification	N of respondents
Ethnicity (*identifying yourself through your ethnicity comes first*)	19
Muslim (*identifying yourself as a Muslim comes first)*	782
Nationality (*identifying yourself through your nationality comes first*)	75
Other	19
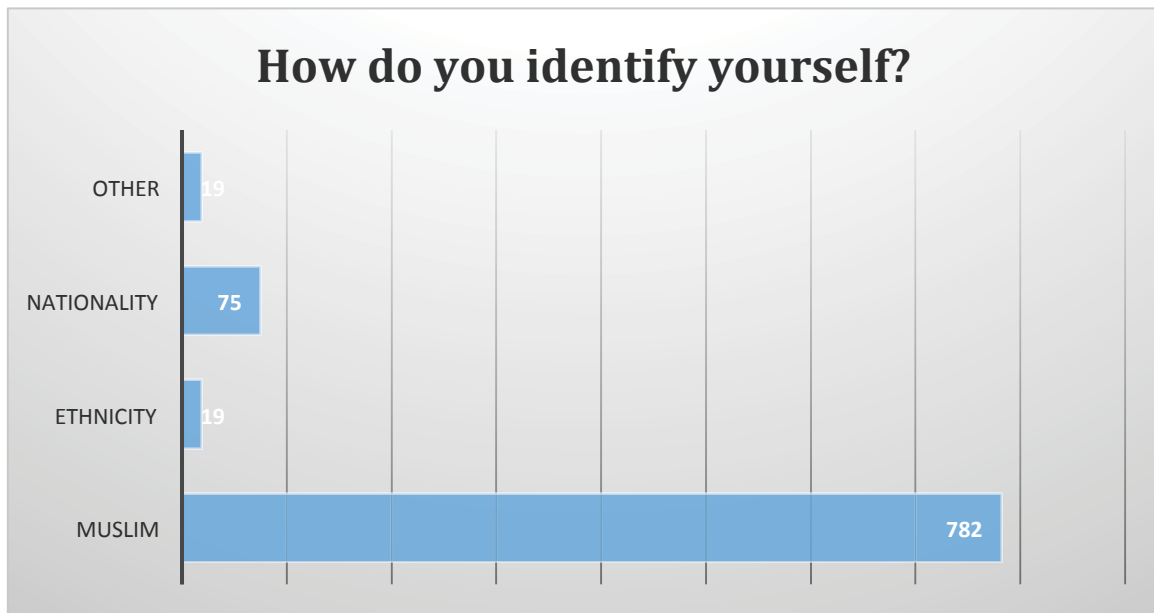
> ➤ *"Global Islamic social media pages are creating a global ummah online beyond geographical barriers"*

This responds to the identity question of "How do we place ourselves in a given time or space". Majority of respondents confirmed that GISMP seem to positioning them within a global ummah online (*M*=4.2).

Table 16. *"Global Islamic social media pages are succeeding in creating a global Ummah online beyond geographical barriers"*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
8	22	95	340	416
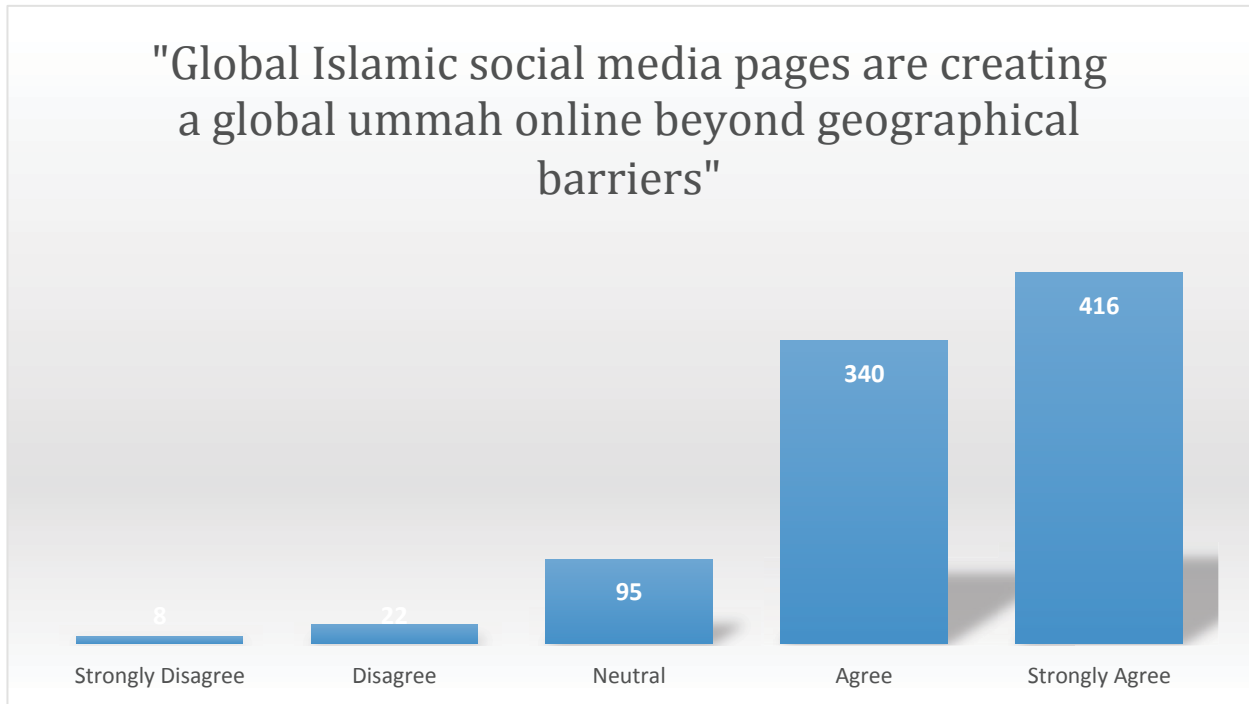
"Global Islamic social media pages are creating a global ummah online beyond geographical barriers"

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> ➢ *"Do you think the coming Muslim youth generation-with the help of social*
>
> *media- will better represent Islam and its message in a global context?"*

This question was important in determining whether social media could be used as a tool to give voice to groups frequently misrepresented in mainstream media. It responds to **H4:** Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam will use social media as a means to refute misconceptions about their religion.

This was essential to ask as it helps in bringing more insight into how social media could be used today. This also suggests more uses to be considered while analyzing the uses & gratifications of new media.

Table 17. "Do you think the coming Muslim youth generation-with the help of social media- will better represent Islam in a global context?"

	Yes	No
N of respondents	739 (84%)	139 (16%)

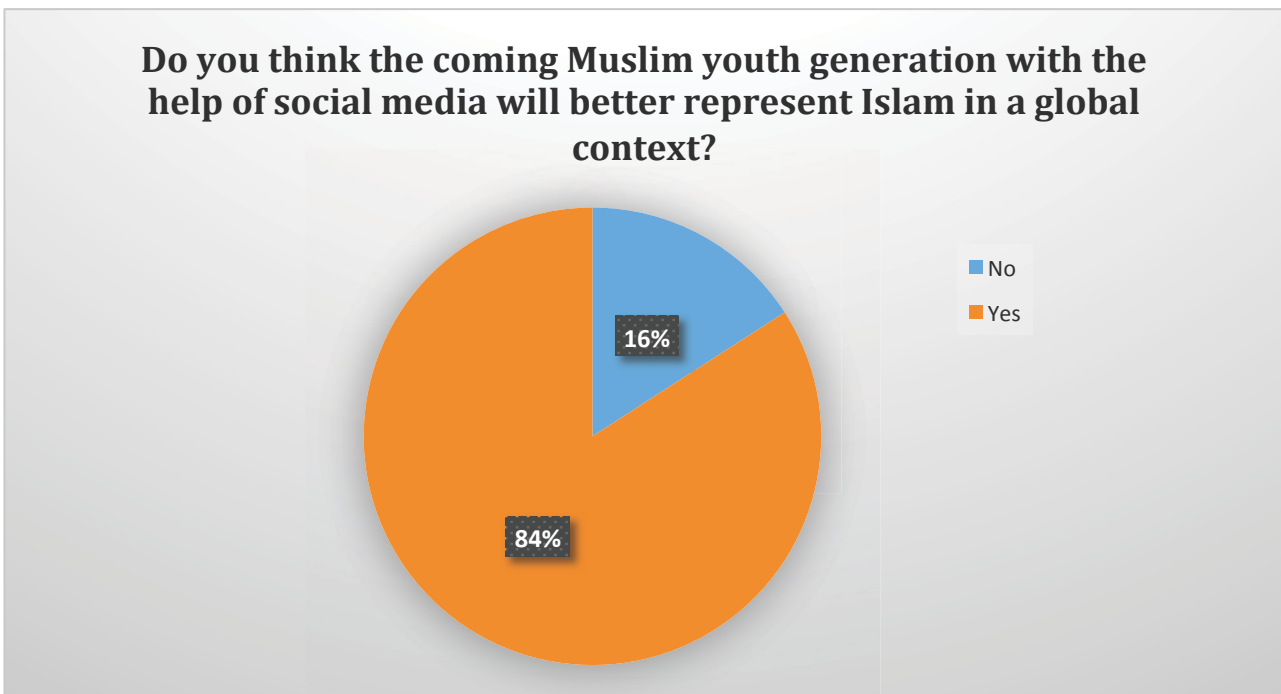**Do you think the coming Muslim youth generation with the help of social media will better represent Islam in a global context?**

No
Yes

16%

84%

The remaining dimensions analyze social media's ability to deal with misconceptions about respondents' religious identity. Accordingly the following questions were asked. The researcher intended to ask general questions first about GISMP, and then ask specifically about the three sampled outlets; Productive Muslim, Quran Weekly and Celebrate Mercy. The question were:

> *Do global Islamic social media pages help in refuting misconceptions about your religion?*

This responds to **H4:** Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam will use social media as a means to refute misconceptions about their religion. The results largely affirmed the hypothesis as expressed in table below.

Table 18. Do global Islamic social media pages help in refuting misconceptions about your religion?

	No	Yes
N of respondents	67	805

Do global Islamic social media pages help in refuting misconceptions about your religion?
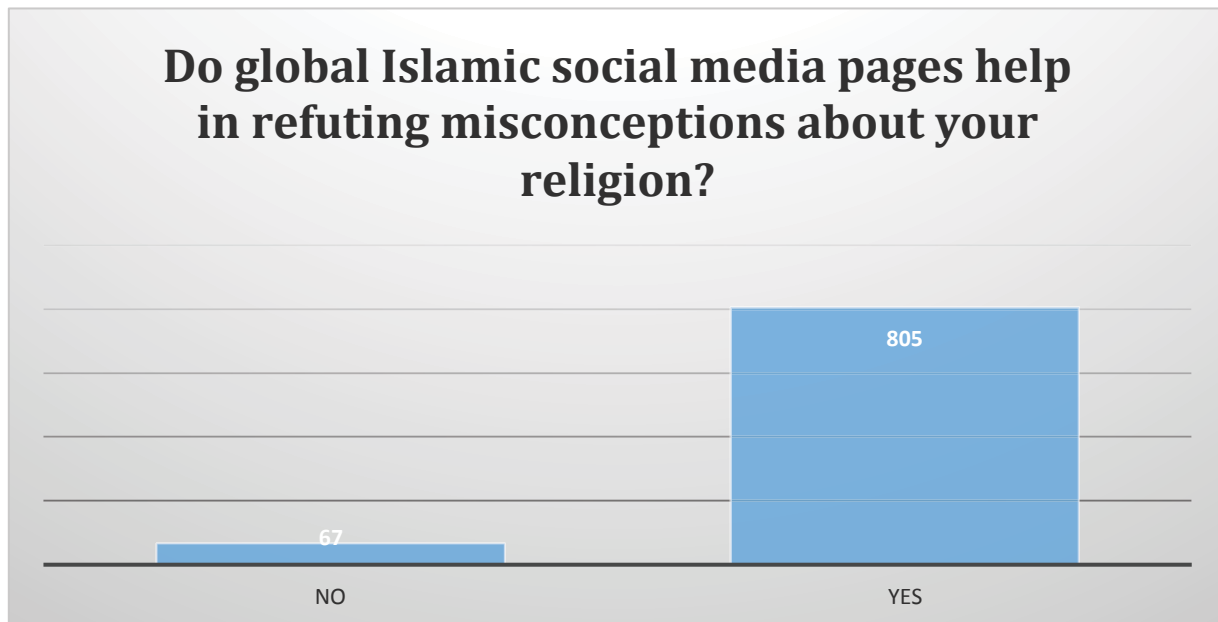
> *Is social media helping in countering anti Islam messages?*

This responds to **H2:** Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites. This also corresponds with Tajfel and Turner (1979) who suggested that members of a group would seek means to defend their group against external threats, in order to reaffirm their sense of identity.

Respondents reaffirmed this hypothesis, as explained in the table below.

Table 19. Is social media helping in countering anti Islam messages?

	No	Yes
N of respondents	165	708

Is social media helping in countering anti-Islam messages?

165	708
NO	YES

126
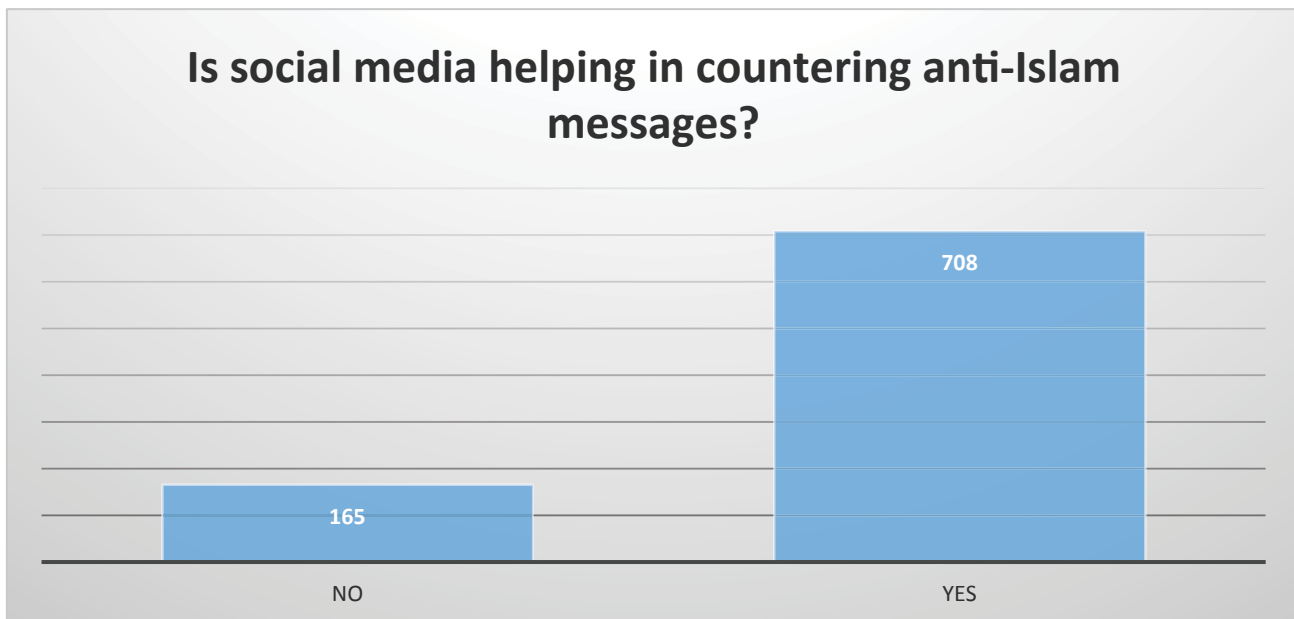
➤ "*Global Islamic social media pages encourage terrorism*"

This question sought to investigate the presence of GISMP that promote radicalization. Respondents, by and large, negated this notion, from their own experiences, they didn't seem to find that GISMP encourage terrorism (*M*=1.56).

Table 20. "*Global Islamic social media pages encourage terrorism*"

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
586	115	58	62	14

"Global Islamic social media pages encourage terrorism"
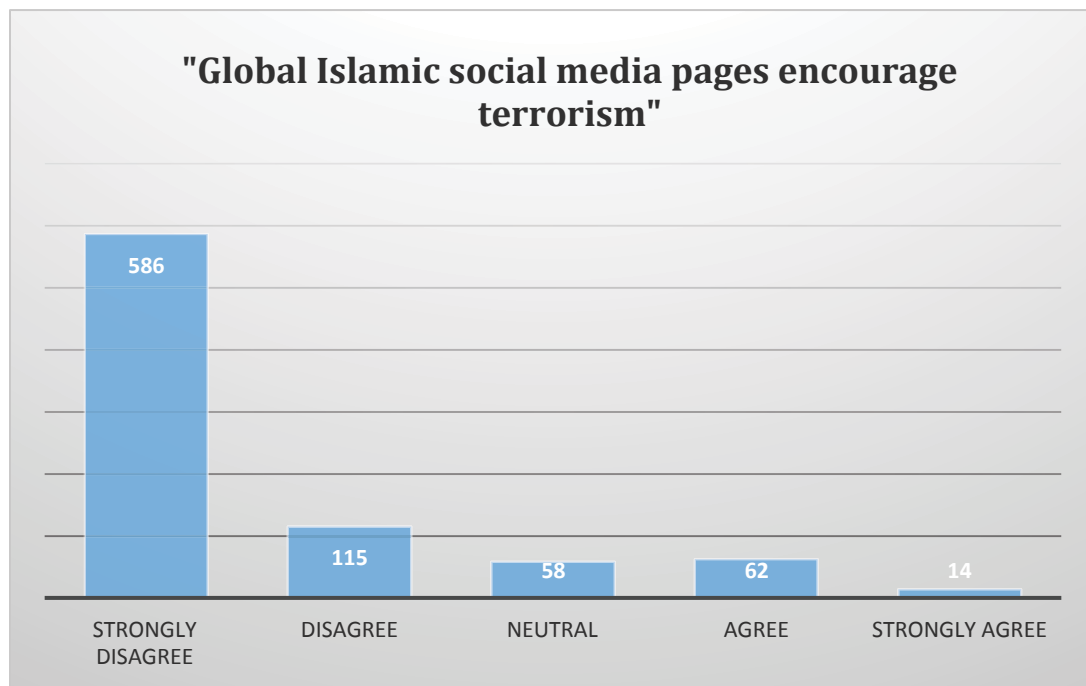
➢ **"***Do you think Productive Muslim isolates you from people of other faith?***"**

Regarding this question, one survey respondent said in the comments' section:

"Isolation in terms of religion, meaning that it instills the thought of a 'separate and unique identity' among Muslims, suggesting that they should take pride in their religion, then YES. But isolation in terms of cutting off one from the people of other faith so as to make the people of other faith look degradable , then the answer would be of course, NO. "

Table 21. **"***Do you think Productive Muslim isolates you from people of other faith?***"**

	Yes	No	Maybe
N of respondents	8	280	17

Productive Muslim isolates you from people of other faiths?

www.manaraa.com
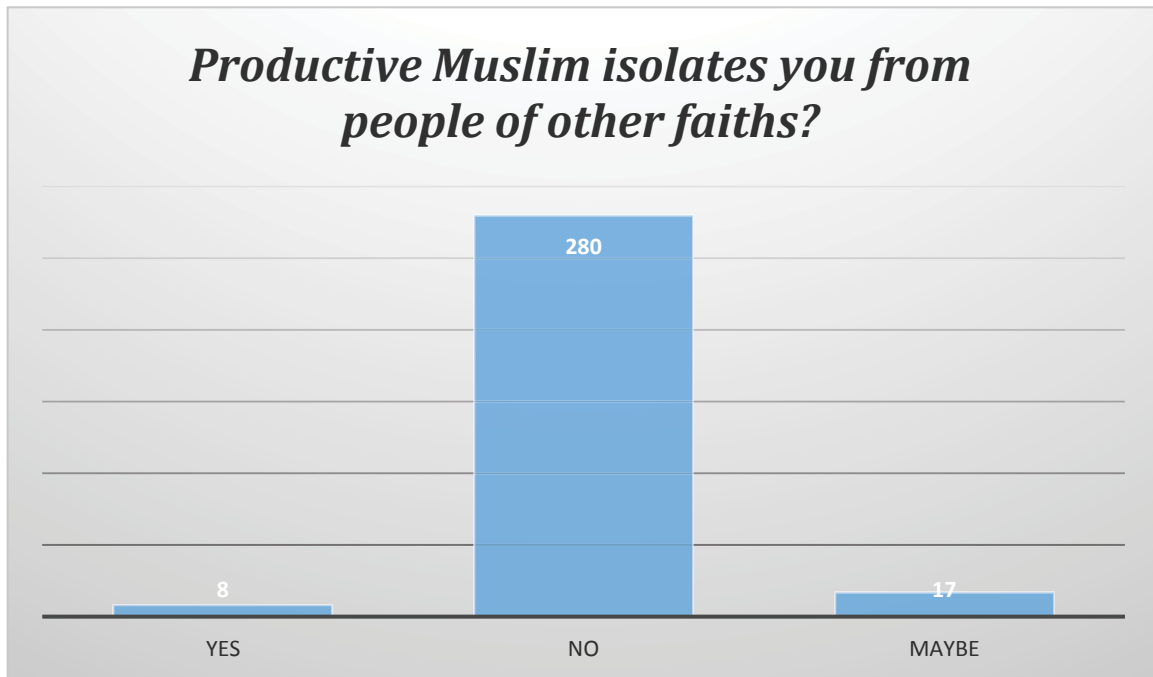
> *"Do you think Quran Weekly isolates you from people of other faith?"*

Table 22. *"Do you think Quran Weekly isolates you from people of other faith?"*

	Yes	No	Maybe
N of respondents	22	409	20

129
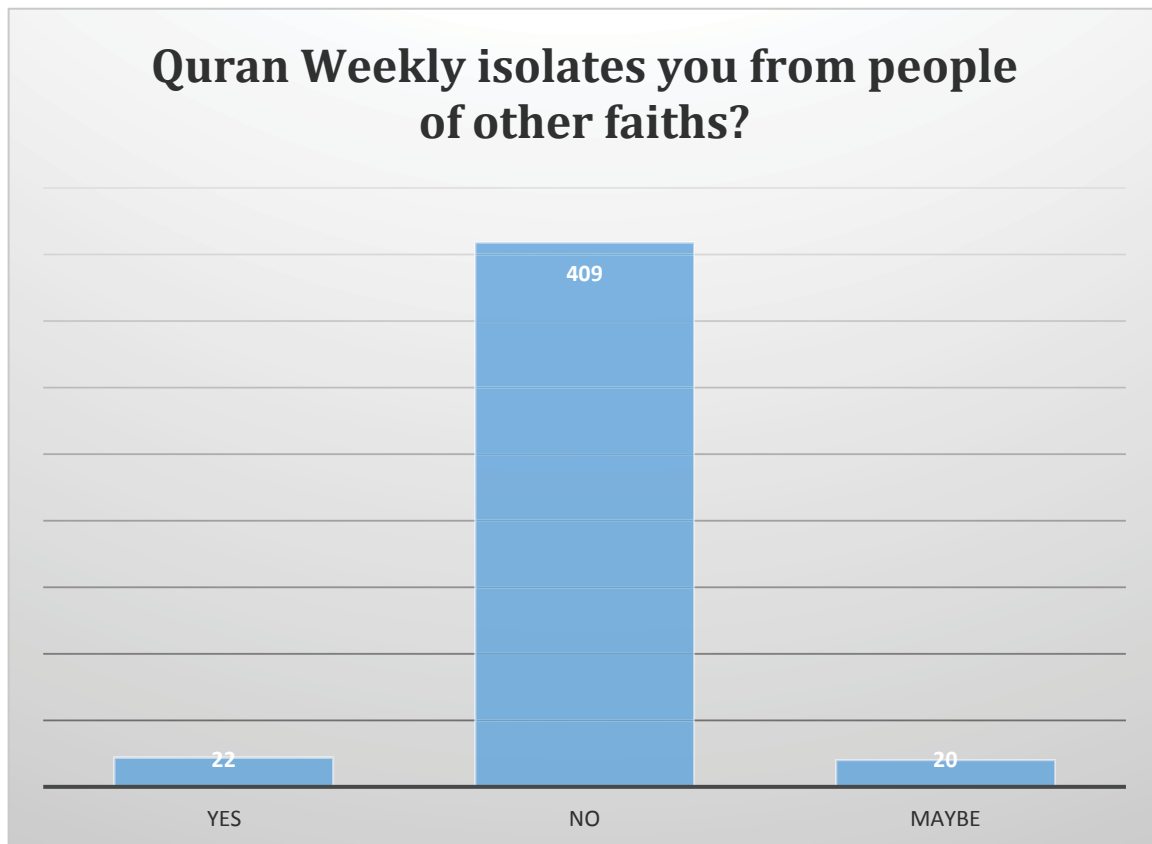
➤ "*Do you think Celebrate Mercy isolates you from people of other faith?*"

Table 23. "*Do you think Celebrate Mercy isolates you from people of other faith?*"

	Yes	No	Maybe
N of respondents	2	110	9

Celebrate Mercy isolates you from people of other faiths?

YES	NO	MAYBE
2	110	9

> *"Do you think Productive Muslim is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?"*

Answers of table 24, 25 and 26 intend to highlight whether the selected sample of GISMP make a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth. This is essential in understanding why users are inclined towards these outlets.

Table 24. *"Do you think Productive Muslim is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?"*

	Yes	No	Maybe
N of respondents	298	3	6
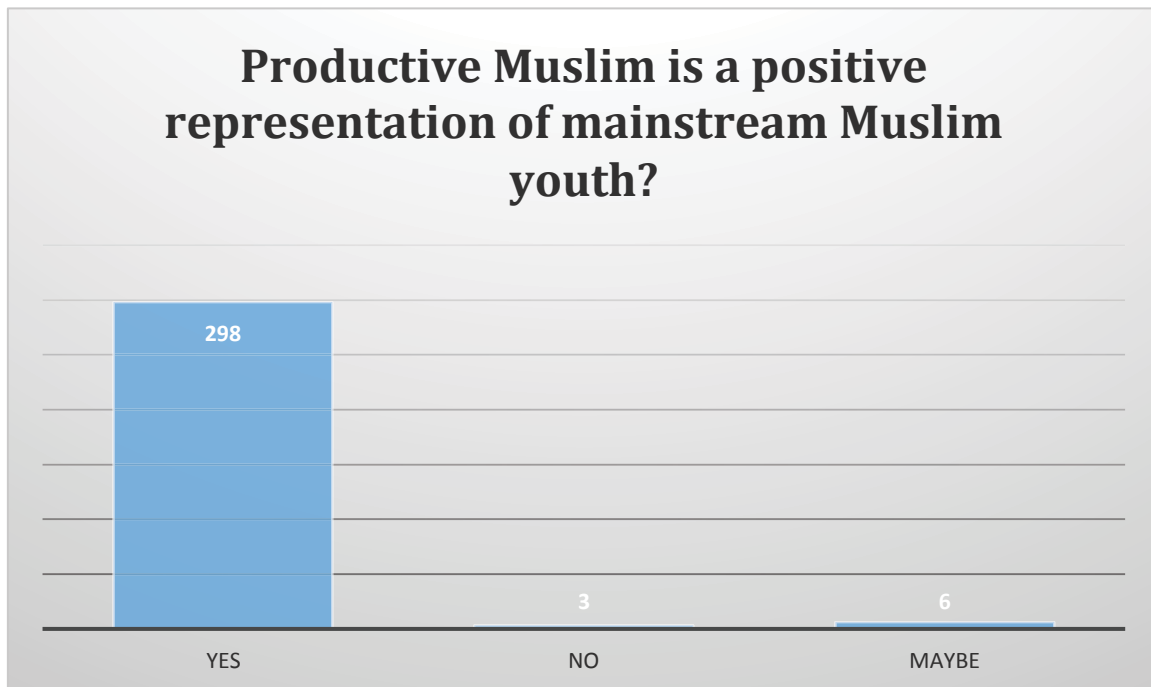
Productive Muslim is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?

Category	Value
YES	298
NO	3
MAYBE	6

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➤ *Do you think Celebrate Mercy is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?*

Table 25. *Do you think Celebrate Mercy is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?*

	Yes	No	Maybe
N of respondents	101	1	20

Celebrate Mercy is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?
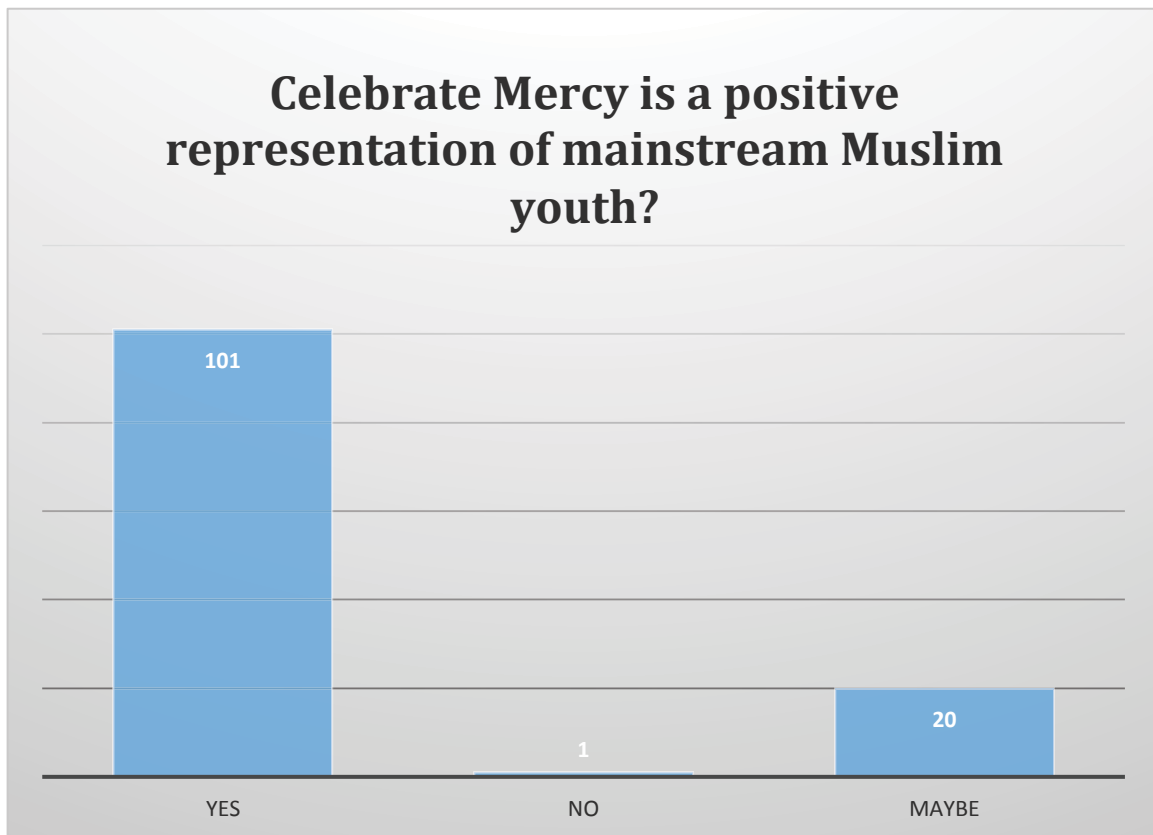
YES	NO	MAYBE
101	1	20

➢ *Do you think Quran Weekly is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?*

Table 26. *Do you think Quran Weekly is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?*

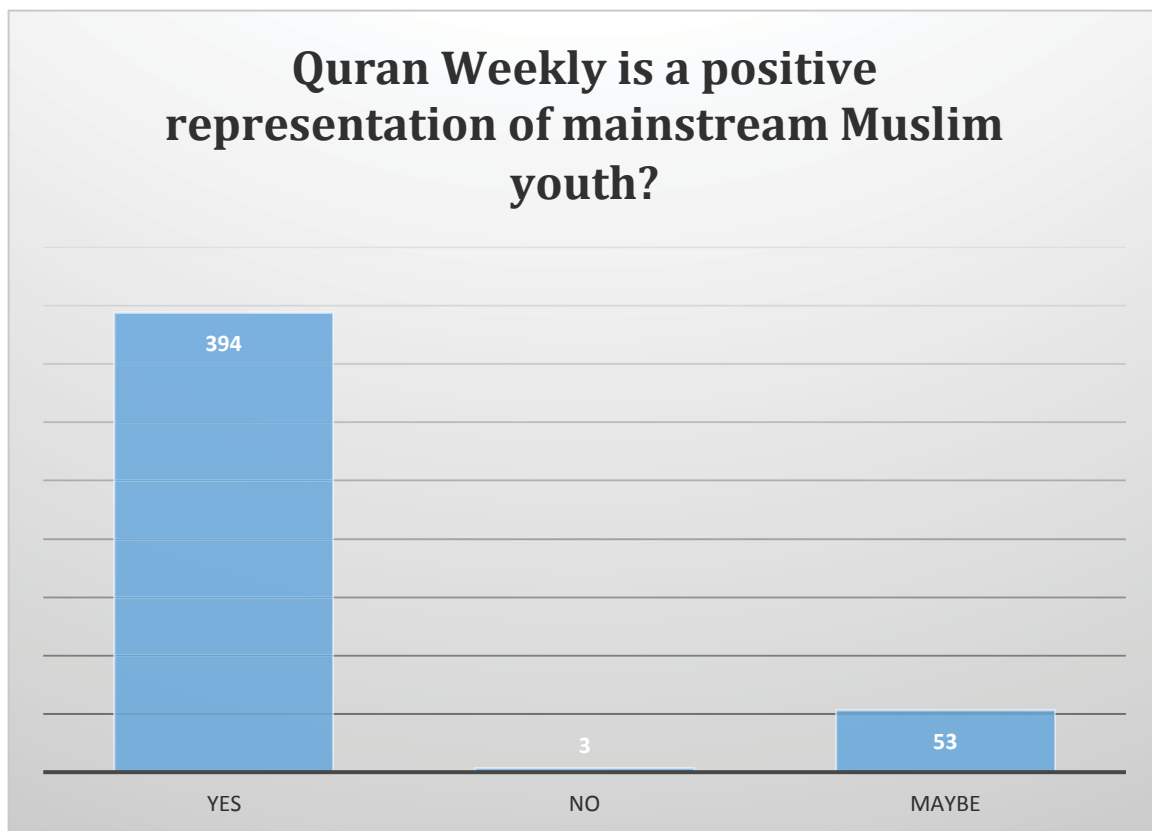|	Yes	No	Maybe
N of respondents	394	3	53

Quran Weekly is a positive representation of mainstream Muslim youth?

YES	NO	MAYBE
394	3	53

The remaining statistics provide insights on respondents' age, time spent surfing the GISMP and educational level.

The majority of respondents appeared to be young, ranging from under 18 to 35 years old. Heivadi & Khajeheian (2013) suggested that social media's effect is greater on younger users, this reflects why the followers of the three sites may be largely affected by them.

Results also showed the time spent surfing GISMP among users range from 5 to over 30 hours per week. Zemmels (2012) suggested that the longer the period of time people spend online (following a specific medium) the more likely this medium would have major influence on users' sense of identity.

Also, the majority of respondents appeared to be in college, have college degree or post graduate degree- which speaks of their seemingly high educational level. This contrasts anti-Islam sentiments expressed- for example- in Ansari (2012) and Laudone (2012) that depict Muslims as "ignorant and uneducated".

Table 27. Illustrating respondents' age range

Age	N of respondents
Under 18 years	53
19-25 years old	391
26-35 years old	278
36-60 years old	153
Above 60 years old	5

Respondents' Age

19-25	391
26-35	278
36-60	153
ABOVE 60	5
UNDER 18 YEARS	53
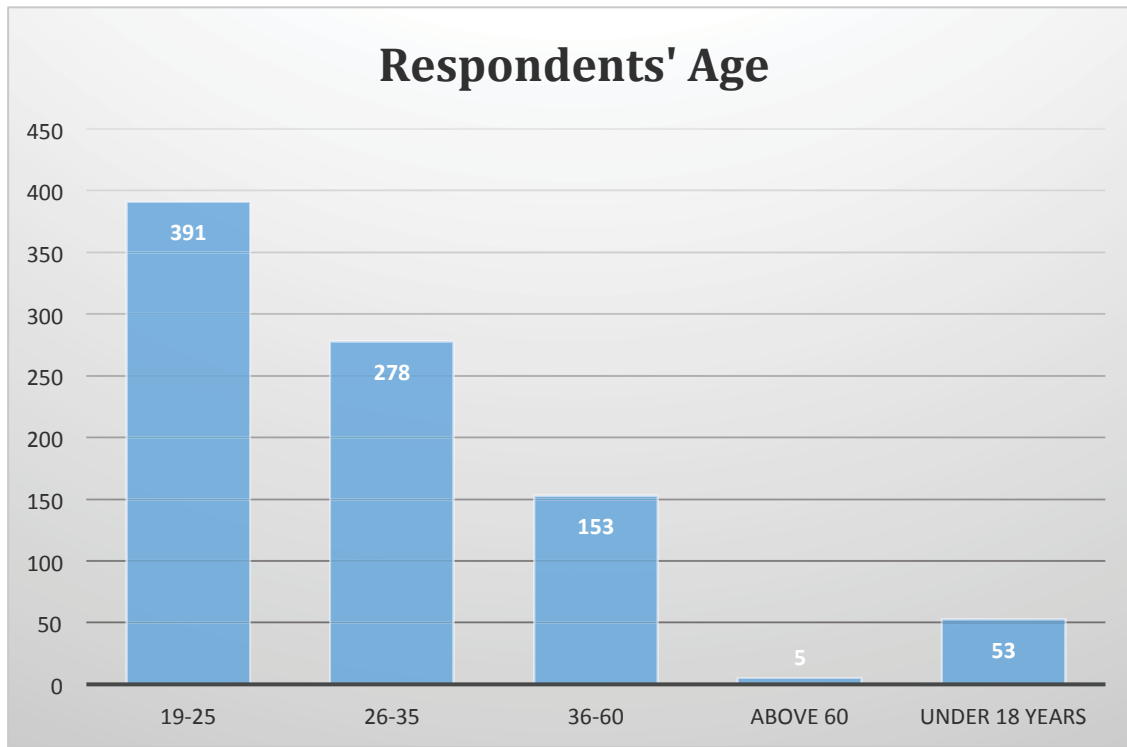
Table 28. Time spent surfing Islamic social media pages per week

Region	N of respondents
0-5 hours	482
6-10 hours	229
11-20 hours	93
21-30 hours	41
More than 30 hours	25

Time spent surfing Islamic Social Media Pages per week
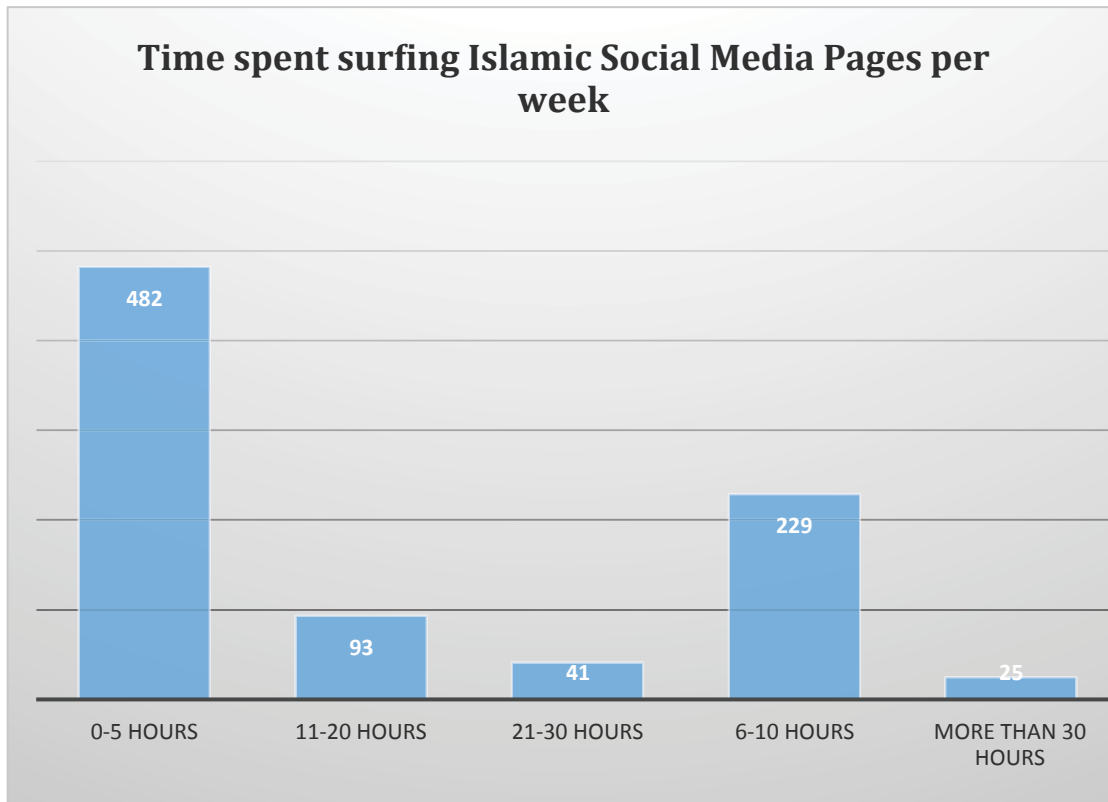
Table 29. Respondents' educational level

Degree	N of Respondents
College degree	454
High school Diploma	109
Post graduate degree	242
Some high school diploma	53
other	42
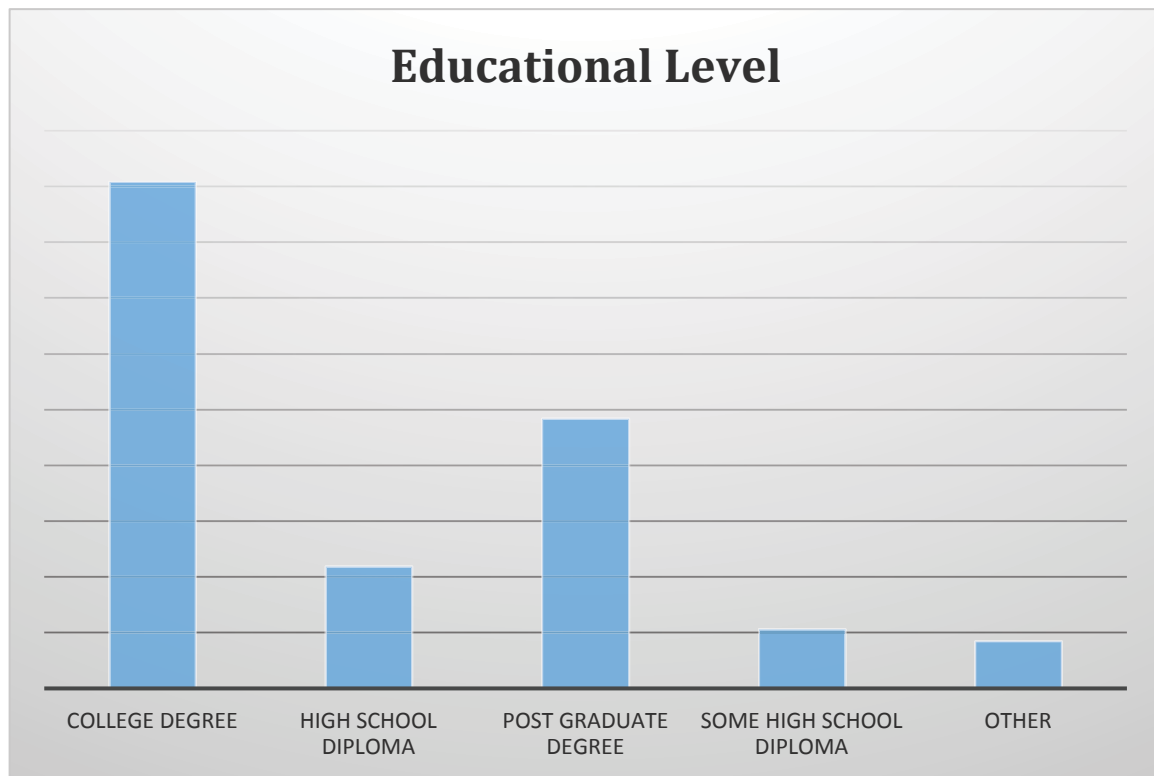
1. Insights from respondents elaborating on survey questions:

The survey included a final open-ended question that asked respondents if they had further comments to add or elaborate on. This generated a large number of comments. Respondents elaborated on a variety of issues highlighted in the survey. The purpose of this section is to personalize the statistical data provided earlier, and shed more light on what users have to say about the sites in their own voice.

Several of the answers elaborated on why users follow the global Islamic social media sites and what gratifications they get from them. Respondents who come from non-Arab countries reflected on the way the outlets help them connect with their faith/identity especially if this dimension of their personality is hard to express in the countries they live in. The comment below gives insight on this notion in the respondent's own voice:

> "It's truly really hard to stay Muslim in France. The concept of [secularism] instead of promoting neutrality, promotes atheism and spread a strong hate for religions, especially Islam. [...] Productive Muslim truly helps me to "combine" deen and "life amongst an atheist culture". This website makes us realize that Islam is a healthy, natural and timeless way of life. Social Medias and Website such as Productive Muslim reconcile Youth with the deen and it's a very important matter since young people are the most influenced by impulsiveness. PM helped me to organize time, to focus at university, to make efforts to be a satisfactory employee even if the job I run during my studies aren't interesting. PM helped me understand that the Deen shall NOT stay at home, that it's part of us and shall be expressed in all the faces of our lives. That we have nothing to be ashamed of, and that we shall be exemplary"

Other respondents also elaborated on how they use global Islamic sites to stay connected with the larger Muslim community (*ummah*), as well as reinforce their sense of Muslim identity. The response below highlights this notion:

"*Pages like "Quran Weekly" are especially important for those, like me, who are a little bit more isolated from a Muslim community. Quran Weekly not only helps me learn more about Islam, but it also helps me keep sight of my Muslim identity.* "

While respondents who came from Western societies reflected on how the global Islamic sites help them connect with the Muslim *ummah* and their Muslim identity, respondents who came from Arab/Muslim-majority countries highlighted other uses. Several of the respondents commented on how these sites reinforce their self-esteem, help them find successful religious role models in the West to look up to, as well as, help them perceive their religion in a global context. The comment below reflects this notion:

> *"I would like to say that for me an Arabic speaker, listening to these voices in the West like those of Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Yahya Rhodus, Tariq Ramadan…, etc. [featured in Celebrate Mercy and other pages] help me know my religion better than the majority of voices we here in the Arab world have. It seems that these Islamic social media pages succeed in making Islam closer to us, in a way that made us feel modern, up to date and active. These Islamic websites like Zaytouna College or Seekers guidance or Celebrate mercy made me believe in me, as a Muslim youth. I feel I can change the world now by being a good Muslim. They made the life of the prophet more interesting and can be understood nowadays and be applicable too. They made the laws of Islam or Sharia seem so easy and in the benefit of the human beings not in the benefit of the state or the religious man."*

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By and large, the respondents' comments seem important in terms of highlighting a growing power and influence of Islamic social media pages- beyond political Islam contexts.

Several respondents suggested that social media has a role in reinforcing their religious knowledge. The comment below is an example:

> "Quran weekly is helping me a lot to understand more about Islam ... I am [Muslim] by birth but was living like a non-Muslim all these years. Now I changed, trying to be a Muslim in a well manner... I will give my full credit to SOCIAL MEDIA for this change."

Other respondents also highlighted how social media present Islamic knowledge in a modern context that help users connect with their religion in ways that are better than traditional means:

> "Quran Weekly promotes the basic premises and teachings of Islam [in approachable ways]. Since its videos and posts on Facebook are not lengthy, they tend to appeal to youths (who are, unfortunately, not keen on reading or watching long lectures). The Quranic Gems series for example, was a huge success this Ramadan. Such pages help renew faith, and seek to integrate the youth into the fold of Islam. The disobedient child, the adulterer, the pious Muslim father, all can connect to it and can try to better themselves. So yes, such pages promote a strong sense of Muslim identity, irrespective of class, gender, geography, etc."

The intriguing observation seemed to be youth's criticism of the lack of proper direction of their efforts, lack of unity or proper planning within their community whether online or offline. Some highlighted the need to unite the "*ummah*" on a common goal whether on the short or long runs.

"CM is a very good source to learn about Seerah. It promotes deep understanding about Islam. It still needs a lot of improvement to address many issues surrounding the Ummah. The Ummah which has now turned into the sick old man of the East. It is simply because we have forgotten the teaching of our Prophet (Be Peace upon him). CM must take some active step to further avert the impending catastrophes."

"Muslim youth want to do many things for society but they aren't organized."

As per the comment above, respondents expressed a desire to express their faith adequately, but there is general lack of representation of their views-whether politically or in media as survey results shown. It seemed many youth might have turned to such GISMP for more adequate representation of who they are and/or to get a sense of direction. While many expressed that on a personal level such pages are succeeding, there is generally a lack of vision or long term planning.

VII. Results of In-Depth Interviews

To answer **RQ3** pertaining to the motivations, perspectives and world view of the founders of each of the three initiatives, in-depth interviews were conducted. The insights driven from the interviews highlight some commonalities between the three initiatives. All founders appeared to be males in their late twenties/early thirties. Their teams; however, constitute of mixed, diverse members located across the world. Productive Muslims' website Editor-in-Chief and Celebrate Mercy's Project Manager are females. This seem to contrast with anti-Islam discourses that reflect a marginalized image of Muslim women (Smith, 2013; Geddes, 2013; Laudone 2012; Corcoran, 2010; Ansari, 2012; Latif, 2012; Mayton 2013; Altman 2010; Gallup, 2011).

There doesn't seem to be strict centralization of the three projects' work or management, which corresponds with notions made by earlier scholars on the transnational dimension of social media and its ability to connect groups in different parts of the globe (Turkle, 1995; Schmidt, 2005; Guo-Ming, 2012; Bunt 2002, 2003 and 2009).

The initiatives, especially Celebrate Mercy and Productive Muslim, rely remarkably on young Muslim volunteers across the globe- which speaks of their ability to mobilize masses of youth and pose questions on the implications of this phenomenon. Also, this doesn't correspond with any of the uses and gratifications categories highlighted earlier- which pose questions on whether more uses

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categories need to be added in light of the new developments of social media and different group's utilization of this medium.

The purposes for launching the initiatives' appeared to be diverse- yet all the work was made possible because of social media. All three initiatives realize their large influence on youth across the globe and recognize their ability to mobilize Muslim youth as per their work's objectives.

> **Founders identity, backgrounds and motivations**

This question correspond with Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) discussion on identity that involved responding to questions of "Who we are?" and "How we position ourselves in a given time and space?"

The question showed that Productive Muslim was founded by Tanzanian-born, Mohammed Faris. The young man holds Bachelors and Masters in Economics & Finance from the UK and works as risk management specialist in Saudi Arabia. This correspond with Turkle (1995) who spoke of the decentralization possibilities in new media, as it shows, Faris's frequently changing locations doesn't affect the functionality of Productive Muslim.

Faris's own Facebook profile introduces him as "Abu Productive." Through communicating with PM's team for the research, it appeared that the team also identifies Faris as "Abu Productive". It also appeared that PM's logo and main character are inspired by the looks and character of Faris himself. This reflects how

social media helps individuals accentuate certain dimensions of their identity/character in the virtual world.

About his motivations to launch PM, Faris said in the interview:

"When I was at University; I was doing my MSc, had 2 jobs, and was President of the Islamic Society at the University amongst other responsibilities. People always asked me "How do you do it?! How do you balance it all?" At first, I didn't quite have a clear answer but soon thereafter when thinking about this question and reading some of the productivity books and websites of the time, I started to realize the answer to that question and decided to share what I learnt and what works for me to my fellow brothers and sisters in Islam" (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013)

Again, this reflects social media's ability to provide a platform for users to organize, run projects, share it with like-minded groups and interconnect in ways traditional media doesn't allow.

As for Celebrate Mercy, the founder, 33-year-old Tarek El Messidi, was triggered to launch his initiative after taking part in a global webcast for an organization he was volunteering for. *"I realized that a global webcast would be a great idea to present the Seerah [biography] of the Prophet, his life and character [to large, diverse audience]"* (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

El Nawawy and Khamis (2010) also highlighted that ability of social media to provide platform for users to express this dimension of their identity/religion. This also corresponds with Ho, Lee & Hameed (2008) who spoke of how Muslim users

"Islamize" new technology, or in other words, use it as a tool to express and share their religious beliefs.

El Messidi said that after convincing famous artist, Cat Stevens (aka Yusuf Islam) to appear in the webcast, many more famous speakers were encouraged to participate in the webcast as well. El Messidi reported that the last CM webcast was viewed in over 78 countries—which speaks of the initiative's transnational potentials and how online initiatives rely on popular characters to draw large base of followers to their work.

Worth mentioning is that El Messidi comes from an Egyptian origin, but was born and raised in the United States. Similarly, Mehrab Reza, 28-year-old founder of Quran Weekly, comes from desi background, yet raised in the US. Reza was a 25-year- old mechanical engineering student when he found out that, *"there was a lack of free and reliable commentary on the Quran. We wanted to give Muslims, who are constantly connected to the internet and social media, an easily accessible and reliable source [of information]. The little that existed usually contained poor video and audio quality, and in our opinion, that level of effort was unworthy of the religion and the message [of Islam]"* (M. Reza, personal communication, November 12, 2013)

In anti-Islam pages on Facebook, as reported in Laudone (2012), comments were continuously made asking Muslims to "go back to their countries". In this context, two of the founders are multi-generation Americans. They already are in their country, yet, they integrate their Muslim background with their American

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nationality. This is essential component of their identity, and reflect that the identity question need to be viewed in broader terms in today's highly globalized context.

> ### ➢ How the three outlets are run and managed

El Messidi, CM founder, said there are nearly 2000 CM volunteers across the globe who help the founder, project manager and the ten other members in the management team to run their project. (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013)

Similarly, Productive Muslim is run by a team of 55 volunteers located in the UK, US, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, UAE, France and other countries, (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013)

As for Quran Weekly, the team is specifically located throughout the south and northeastern United States (M. Reza, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

Again, the fact that all initiatives are run by volunteers in different parts of the world confirms analysis of Turkle (1995) that showed how spaces or outlets on the Internet help users develop a sense of decentralized identity (or goals) that unite them with other groups in different geographical locations. This also elaborates on El Nawawy and Khamis's study (2010) that talked about the collective identity among Arab users of the Islam-sphere. In the case of this study, the collective identity goes beyond the Arab world and have a more global dimension.

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> ➤ **The value of social media as a platform for new initiatives**

All three initiatives' reported that social media played a crucial role in their work. Faris, Productive Muslim founder, said, *"[Social media] seemed the most logical place to be if I want to reach out to a mass audience and share my message to Muslims worldwide. I really wanted ProductiveMuslim.com to become a movement amongst the youth and social media seemed the right place to be."* (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

El Messidi, Celebrate Mercy, said that social media is "all they have", but added that they want to engage more with mainstream media and that they want news media outlets to cover their stories (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

El Messidi noted that when CM approached traditional media to get coverage for the "Mercy Mail Campaign", in which they sent letters of condolences to the family of the US Ambassador who was killed in Libya, the media responded positively. He thinks Muslims, especially in the West, are not doing enough to get their positive stories in mainstream media. *"A lot of Muslims in the West are immigrants and the [parents] want their kids to become doctors or engineers. We don't find enough Muslims engaged in journalism, media or marketing to influence the public opinion,"* (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

Faris, PM, added, *"I think there are many good attempts for Muslim youth to represent themselves in media today, but there are very few "high quality"*

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representation. We live in a world that's always looking for the slick, creative type and very few youth dedicate the energy and time to come up with such media that people would want to follow and watch." (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

The finding of this question correspond with the survey result that showed how a majority of respondents find themselves under-represented in traditional media outlets, and that they find outlets like Celebrate Mercy, Quran Weekly and Productive Muslim to be platforms to voice their opinions. This, again, elaborates on the discussion of the uses of social media today, and suggests the identification of new uses that correspond with the contemporary utilization of social media outlets like the global Islamic outlets.

➢ **Main problems conducted by Muslims today**

The founders were asked about the main problems committed by Muslims that may be contributing to the presence of misrepresentations of their identity. They had different views. This corresponds with identity questions that have to do with how Muslims perceive their own group and how this reflects-positively or negatively- on their sense of belonging (Brinson, 2010).

"The real problem of Muslims - especially youth is lack of focus. If they only think and focus on their lives just a little bit, and put in just a little bit of effort, they can become truly amazing. Also, lack of patience is a major problem by Muslim youth today. We live in a fast moving culture, but good things take time. ProductiveMuslim

didn't grow overnight, it came about after years of continuous development, improvement and consistency," (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

Clearly, PM's perspective focused on work and productivity. Quran Weekly's, however, criticized the religious conduct of youth today. *"Youth today are falling into the pitfalls of shamelessness; they care little about censorship in their language and actions, and have a general disregard for others. They have not been taught to respect themselves and in turn, they do not respect anyone else. These problems aren't specific to the Muslim youth, but to all youth in general. Specifically, Muslim youth in the West struggle with a spiritual identity crisis,"* (M. Reza, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

El Messidi, Celebrate Mercy, highlighted that *"[Muslims] are not too active in their societies,"* focusing on Muslim communities in the West and the lack of engaging more actively with communities of people of other faiths.

➢ **How do founders' identify themselves?**

All three founders identified themselves in different terms. Both QW and CM's founders identified themselves as Muslims first. Reza, QW, said when asked how he identifies himself, *"Muslim, still learning, still trying to improve, not judgmental, and hopefully making a positive impact on those around me."* (M. Reza, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

El Messidi, CM, identified himself through his religion and nationality:

"[I am] American- Muslim. I do not see myself living outside of the US. All people here [U.S.] are my people." (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

PM's founder, on the other hand, reflected on his personality, work goals and relationship with the ummah at large, *"I guess I'd define [my identity] as someone who's introverted but has high hopes to do something meaningful in the Ummah today,"* (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

The finding here also correspond with the findings of Esposito and Mogahed (2007) that highlighted how Muslims around the world- despite their diversity- mainly identify themselves primarily through their religion, and that this is the common thread or source of their unity- even if only conceptually.

> ➢ **Does having a Muslim identity mean you are excluded from other identities or that you exclude those who are foreign to your identity?**

Brinson (2010) suggested that negative portrayals of Muslims in media result in the group's tendency to isolate themselves from 'the other'.

However, all three interviewees reflected on this question through different perspectives. Faris, PM, said, *"Not at all. Having a Muslim identity is about having a compass in your life that directs your decisions and the way you treat life and others around you. It gives you a solid base to stand on your two feet before standing up to face the world and help those around you,"* (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

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Reza, QW, said, *"Having a Muslim identity guides one's decisions and behavior. A Muslim does not separate himself from non-Muslims completely. And he is expected to deal with non-Muslims with the best manners and give them the best treatment."* (M. Reza, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

El Messidi, CM, on the other hand, said that masjids (mosques) need to engage more with people of other faiths. He said that masjids should invite and engage other communities in their activities. He added that Muslims should invite their neighbors to "nice meals and develop strong relations with them" (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

These findings contradict Brinson (2010) 'isolation from the other' notion. Also, in light of the initiatives work that currently doesn't engage deeply with people of other faiths, it seems that more work needs to be done on the initiatives' part to turn the words into actions.

> **How would the initiatives' work grow in the short/long run**

The three initiatives goals varied between their business, religious and global community goals. PM's Faris said, *"In the short run, I see my work establishing itself as a reputable authority in the field of productivity for the Muslim world. In the long run, I hope to become a full-time productivity training and consulting organization for the Muslim world,"* (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

QW's Reza added, *"We attracted a growing viewer-base as people began to notice the quality of our videos. As our project continues to grow with the Help of God, we*

continuously improve our production value and style. We will always be what we started out as—a free resource on the Quran. But we have plans to create DVDs, publish our content on satellite channels (many companies have already asked us to release our content to their satellite network), and hold educational conventions," (M. Reza, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

While El Messidi, CM, said *"We had 10% non-Muslim viewership. We aim to increase this percentage […] and engage with mainstream media. We want to introduce the character of the Prophet in a way that is relevant to [mainstream media]. [Also], strengthen the identity of Muslims, increase their level of understanding and appreciation of diversity. [we want] to bring the ummah closer [to one another],"* (T. El Messidi, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

> **Implications of initiatives' work on the "global virtual ummah"**

El Messidi, CM, said that his work focuses on spreading education and knowledge since he finds this lacking in the actual ummah.

Faris, PM, said, *"I pray that our work influences the global Ummah; sometimes I worry whether our messages gets drowned with the many messages sent out each day by millions of other people and organizations. But I pray that with sincerity, hard work and consistency we can become an established platform that people refer to learn how to become productive. It's very difficult to measure the success of a website like Productive Muslim, I don't know how many people actually changed for the better because of our website or social media pages, but the testimonials and e-mails we*

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receive are a good indication that we're heading in the right direction inshaAllah [God willing]," (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

He added, *"The essential characteristics [of the ummah] should be continuous learning, growing and collaborating as well as a burning desire to achieve Excellence. We should not settle for mediocre anymore, we should be Excellent." "I believe that the brands that are developed via these global social pages have an impact on shaping identities, just like the corporate brands have an impact. We've been very blessed at ProductiveMuslim.com to become a household name in many Muslim homes and part and parcel of people's life. The more people engage with us - via social media or other means - the more we'll have more impact on shaping identities and helping them implement our message."* (M. Faris, personal communication, November 10, 2013).

VIII.   <u>DISCUSSION</u>

This study examined the discourses, uses and impacts of three growingly popular global Islamic social media pages. To thoroughly investigate the topic, the study employed three methods; discourse analysis, survey and in-depth interviews.

1. Discourse analysis discussion

A discourse analysis expert, Van Dijk, highlighted that the significance of this approach could be accentuated in its ability to deal with major problems like racism (Van Dijk 2004). Accordingly, the discourse analysis in this study sought to understand whether the sampled outlets have the capacity to address or respond– even indirectly- to anti-Islam sentiments that have been observed and analyzed in literature.

By and large, the analysis of Celebrate Mercy, Productive Muslim and Quran Weekly revealed that the main aspect that seems lacking from the three initiatives' work is a dialogue with 'the other' communities. Ansari (2012) discussed how the dialogue could end up positively and might create understanding between different religious groups. The messages embedded in the three initiatives' work subtly and indirectly address major anti-Islam sentiments. But there are hardly any confrontations or dialogue with people of other faiths.

In Celebrate Mercy, the common thread that appear to be embedded throughout the work is that the Prophet Muhammad is someone whose followers could "intimately", "passionately" or even "artistically" connect with. This may seem

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confusing to Western audience who are encountered with a more negative, violent image of Islam in traditional media. Esposito and Mogahed 2007 polling results also highlighted that -beyond the negative framings of Islam in mainstream traditional Western media-, the average Western citizen doesn't seem to know much/anything at all about Islam/Muslims. In light of that, sites like Celebrate Mercy that utilizes social media techniques to introduce mainstream Muslims' perspectives and world-view might be useful to Muslims, as well as non-Muslim audience who seek further knowledge of the religious other.

In response to this point, the following comment was made in the survey's comments section:

"I am not a Muslim but have Muslim friends on social media. By coincidence I found Celebrate Mercy and I find it a very positive page and love to see what's going on there once in a while. They are absolutely doing a marvelous job and show Islam and Muslim people in a wonderful positive way."

This comment affirm the aforementioned discussion.

The analysis of Celebrate Mercy also reflected how their work may be consistent with Tajfel and Turner (1979) discussion on how members of a group construct their identity in light of the larger group they belong to, and that members of a group would be prone to defend this group against external threats. The work of CM seems to present a positive image about the Muslim *ummah*, as well as defend this group against outsider criticisms through producer-generated content, the selection of speakers and the topics discussed in the webcasts.

Additionally, Turkle (1995) and Heivadi & Khajeheian (2013) also implied that transnational media (like social media outlets) would have an effect on creating or introducing dimensions of individuals' identity in the virtual world that wasn't possible in real world. This seems to be what initiatives like Celebrate Mercy are doing in terms of highlighting a sense of global Muslim identity. It also reflects how initiatives like Celebrate Mercy are using the virtual sphere to connect and mobilize users from across the globe.

In Productive Muslim, like Celebrate Mercy, there doesn't seem to be a space for debate or dialogue with people of other faiths. This may be understandable given that the work is primarily directed to Muslims. However, opening platforms for dialogue might also be "productive" in terms of dealing with anti-Islam discourses (Ansari, 2012).

By and large in PM, there is much emphasis placed on connecting the members or followers with the larger global Muslim community, or the *ummah*. This is the same notion suggested in Witteborn (2007), Schmidt (2005), Guo-Ming (2012) and Bunt (2002, 2003 and 2009). The researchers suggested that social media may be a tool to connect world communities in ways that traditional media couldn't facilitate, and this seems to be what Productive Muslim is doing.

Productive Muslim seem to be presenting the Muslim faith as means through which followers could enhance their daily activities and boost their productivity. Some users who took the survey highlighted that this fulfills "needs" that they have. The following two comments highlight this point:

"Productive Muslim has helped me find a <u>purpose in life</u> through Islam & showed me <u>how to live life</u> for Islam and not just with Islam (as my religion; which to me used to be all about doing prayers as if they were chores & abiding by rules when I couldn't even understand the purpose of its presence) [...] But I hope that Islamic Social Media pages like Productive Muslim spreads to more teens & youths worldwide as it can have a great impact in these young lives that need the guidance ..."

Another comment:

"I went through the page only yesterday for the first time and it was packed with practical information which we may imbibe and benefit from in our day to day life...the articles and videos posted cover an array of subjects to enhance our heart mind body and religious wellbeing in totality"

It would be interesting to investigate if this aspect (use, need, gratification) is also highlighted in social media pages of other religious groups. This may be expanding the horizons of the uses and gratifications theory. It would be intriguing to examine whether other religious groups are using social media to connect their followers on a personal/ intimate level with their religious figures, or if this phenomenon is pertaining only to the Muslim population.

The overall observation is that works like PM, may help balance global discourses on Islam and the Prophet's character which is essential for creating further global understanding and tolerance between world communities.

In Quran Weekly, the work also seems to correspond with Tajfel and Turner (1979) in that members of a group would tend to present a positive image and 'defend' their large group against external threats, in order to boost the status of the

group's identity. The Quran is a major part of the Islamic theology. While there may be extreme interpretations of Quranic verses that lead to terrorism, Esposito and Mogahed (2007) concluded that such acts are driven by "political grievances and not medieval exegesis". Quran Weekly is promoting a modern representation of the Quran through young, multi-lingual speakers. But, like the comment made earlier on Celebrate Mercy and Productive Muslim's work, Quran Weekly also does not engage in debates or dialogues with people of other faiths who may have questions regarding the Quran.

Nevertheless, the initiative seems to –subtly or indirectly- deal with anti-Islam sentiments as mentioned in (Laudone 2012; Corcoran, 2010; Ansari, 2012; Latif, 2012; Mayton 2013; Altman 2010). Quran Weekly's work addresses issues like violence and the religious other through their videos. This may be an opportunity or a platform to clear misconceptions about those issues through producer-generated content.

The discourse in the initiative may have influence on youth's identity, especially that Quran Weekly- like Productive Muslim and Celebrate Mercy- is presenting a rather positive image of Islam and Muslims that would essentially lead youth to reconnect with their Muslim identity, boost their self-esteem and encourage them to engage confidently with the other, as Brinson (2010) argued.

2. Survey discussion

Survey results of this study featured opinions of 900 Muslims from eight different regions around the world. The widespread distribution of Muslims

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manifested in this survey results is in consistence with Esposito and Mogahed (2007) as well as Pew statistics (2013) that highlight the Muslim population's large widespread today, and how this contrasts mainstream understanding of Muslims' geographical locations.

This finding urges discourses that strictly link Muslims with Middle East or Arab countries to adjust these frames as they may be factually incorrect.

The majority of respondents/users of the three global Islamic social media outlets appeared to be females. This finding is important as it reflects Muslim females' large participation and influence in the contemporary global Islamosphere, which is a matter that needs to be put in consideration and examined further in future research.

The results showed that mainstream Muslim youths' usage of social media is primarily driven by a desire to gain more Islamic knowledge through contemporary methods. This is a reflection of the "cognitive need". This result was surprising, the researcher had expected the followers to be more driven by "affective needs" or "diversion", in the sense that they seek diversion from their routine or emotional stresses. However, respondents seemed to be following the sites for clear and serious cognitive reasons which is to gain more knowledge about their religion. Respondents' analysis in the comments' section of the survey also highlighted that they're highly driven by their desire for Islamic knowledge, even those who came from Muslim-majority countries highlighted this aspect. The following comments from three survey respondents help capture this idea:

"Islamic pages are very important part in the lives of youth today. Youth who do not come from a very religious background find them as their only source of Islamic Knowledge."

"I live in a country of Muslim majority in Europe. In the media there are NO educational program whatsoever […] Quran Weekly is educational in many ways."

"Quran Weekly helps me [in] learning properly [about] my religion in the comfort of my home [same with] all Islamic social media outlets. Since I work and have a busy life, before going to sleep I feed myself with Islamic knowledge and this has changed my life in a positive way."

The majority of respondents also highlighted that global Islamic social media outlets (like the three sampled outlets) serve as means to strengthen their sense of identity and belonging to the global *ummah*, help them learn about successful global Muslim figures, and enable them to communicate with fellow Muslims around the world.

It was interesting to find that the majority of respondents' identified themselves as "Muslims", prior to nationality, ethnicity or other identifications. This finding is important for two reasons. First, it is essential to understand that majority of groups in the Muslim population are largely affected by their religious identity, and thus, anti-Islam sentiments in media or politicians' discourses would have to fire back and/or result in uproar among a large world population (over 1.6 billion Muslims). On this note, it is worth mentioning that the International Debate Education Association (IDEA), a Belgium based initiative that organizes debates among

communities around the world, carried out a debate with the motion, "that Danish newspapers should not have published cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed," in the aftermath of the controversial anti-Islam Danish cartoons. The motion yielded an overwhelming 100% voting for the motion. Several arguments referred to that similar cartoons- in addition to promoting violence- widens the gap of misunderstanding among world communities (Magdzik, 2012). Accordingly, sites like the ones under study might be helping in bridging this gap.

Second, finding that Muslim youth identify themselves mainly through their religion may be useful in future studies that compare attitudes of religious populations towards their faith and how this affect their social media uses.

The findings of the survey also highlighted that global Islamic social media sites, in general, and the three samples, in particular, help reinforce users' identity. This may be reflected in the comment below from one of the survey respondents:

"The sites provide Muslim youth (who have a non-practicing environment) with a sense of belonging and confidence!!! Just like [prayers] in the masjid (mosques) gives life to communities....social media with its Islamic pages gives life to our Imaan [faith]!!"

The religious reinforcement use was not identified in earlier studies, and based on the results here, it may be intriguing to consider it/test it in future studies with different samples and/or different religious groups.

The survey has also shown that the majority of respondents find leaders of Muslim majority countries to be inadequate representation of Islam. They also think

Muslim youth are under-represented in mainstream media. These seems to be reasons why they're inclined towards using the global Islamic social media sites.

The respondents highlighted that such sites provide a platform for them to voice their opinions and refute misconceptions about Islam.

These sites- unlike traditional media outlets- are interactive. Users do not only follow these sites, they also post, comment and connect with the producers and fellow users. Outlets like Celebrate Mercy also help Muslim viewers from across the globe connect together via a live webcast/webinar. This was not possible for this population through any other medium. The implications of this aspect needs further research.

The survey respondents also indicated that global Islamic social media pages help them perceive their religion in a global context. The sites also help create a sense of "global Muslim identity" and a "unified global *ummah* online", which might not be reflected in reality on the ground. Again, the implications of such notions need further monitoring and examination.

By and large, the survey results confirmed all four hypotheses of the study, which are:

H1: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that the sites help them learn about their religion in a modern context.

H2: Users of global Islamic social media sites will indicate that their sense of Muslim identity is reinforced by the sites.

H3: Muslim site users who feel under-represented in politics and mainstream media will indicate that the sites provide a platform to voice their opinions.

H4: Muslims who think fellow Muslims misrepresent Islam will use social media as a means to refute misconceptions about their religion.

The implications of these notions require further examination through longitudinal studies to measure potential impacts on the followers on the long run.

3. Interviews' discussion

Interviewing the founders of the three global Islamic social media initiatives under study revealed a few commonalities between their backgrounds. All three male founders come from diverse backgrounds, are multilingual and find social media to be a tool for them to better represent and propagate the message of their religion.

The interviews showed that there is no centralization of the work of the three initiatives. The teams of the outlets are dispersed across the globe. This highlights how social media could bring like-minded individuals across the globe to connect, work on common projects and sustain them.

As the survey results highlighted that the majority of followers are females, it seems the initiatives are also trying to cater for this audience. For example, Productive Muslim are currently producing, "Productive Muslimah" which is the all-female sister outlet of Productive Muslim. Also, unlike anti-Islam discourses that

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feature oppressed, marginalized, uneducated Muslim women—all three outlets invest in the female image or female representation.

The interviews highlighted that the Editor-in-Chief of Productive Muslim is a female, as well as, the Project Manager of Celebrate Mercy. Again, here- as suggested in Esposito and Mogahed (2007) - this may help Muslim women speak for themselves rather than being silenced or framed by extreme members of their religious group or by stereotypical media discourses.

Overall, founders acknowledge having large impact on followers across the globe, but there seems to be lack of concrete long-term planning. The current influence and growing popularity should, nevertheless, make these sites peculiar for further research, especially in terms of their influence on identities of followers and their relationship with "the other".

Furthermore, in the interview Tareq El Messidi, founder of Celebrate Mercy, highlighted that bringing Muslims around the world together is one of the main goals of the initiative. "People in [nearly] 90 different countries are watching [the webcasts] at the same time […] a Muslim in Texas [gets to connect] with a Muslim in Bosnia, Japan and Africa […] this is very powerful," he said.

Also, the current uses and gratifications categories highlighted in the conceptual framework doesn't seem to encompass the multivariate uses of global Islamic social media outlets today. This poses questions on whether more uses categories need to be added to meet the new developments currently manifesting in social media.

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The study showed that, though un-politicized, these Islamic sites are attracting, reaching and influencing masses of followers. This may indicate growing power of online Islamic organizations–beyond political Islam.

4. Concluding remarks

The study sheds more light on the uses and gratifications of social media today. The growing popularity of global Islamic social media pages necessitates that this phenomenon would get further academic attention. On the one hand, the GISMP are only virtual spheres. On the other hand, current global events suggest that youth today- with the help of social media- have the potential to move virtual activism into real events with significant global impact- as in the case of the Arab uprisings (Khamis & Vaughn, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

The research showed that certain global Islamic social media pages, and specifically the selected sample, do have the potential to mobilize Muslim youth around the world. The case of Celebrate Mercy is an example. The "Mercy Mail Campaign" they launched to collect letters of condolences from Muslims around the globe for the family of deceased US Ambassador to Libya was significant (Roche, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Williams, 2012). While the events that led to the killing of the ambassador created negative coverage of Muslims in Western media, Celebrate Mercy's initiative managed to re-adjust this coverage when their letters received positive welcome from the family of the ambassador, and accordingly positive coverage in the media.

Brinson (2010) suggested that negative portrayals of Muslims in media affects both; Muslims (by lowering their self-esteem, sense of identity, belonging and connection with "the other"), and non-Muslims (by negatively affecting the way they perceive and interact with Muslims).

This research is arguing that- with the help of social media- a seemingly marginalized group in Western media -like Muslims- can utilize this medium to "de-victimize" themselves, carry on positive activities organized online and implemented on the ground, and accordingly, re-adjust negative coverage in mainstream media.

Additionally, one issue that keeps surfacing in the three sampled outlets is the "universality" and "global" dimension of Islam or the Muslim *ummah*. Whether this notion is accurate or not, a number of facts need to be considered. Pew reported that the Muslim population is more widespread than commonly perceived. While Western media mainly cover Muslims in Arab/Middle Eastern contexts as discussed in the literature, Pew showed that Arabs constitute only 20% of the global Muslim population. Two countries in Asia, for example, have more Muslims than the entire MENA region. This is important for the global understanding of the Muslim population. It also needs to be more adequately reflected in mainstream media and academic research that might dismiss these findings. The survey results of this research showed that Muslims come from -at least- 8 different regions across the globe. The majority are Asians, and many more ethnicities were reported in the comments section, which highlight the diversity of the Muslim population.

Some might argue that these sites are religious propaganda or that they're focusing on issues that will be viewed positively by global audiences. Nevertheless, the sites are in fact reaching millions of followers worldwide-and numbers are increasing. Whether the positive discourses are propaganda or not, they are already impacting millions of followers- especially young Muslims. The implications of this phenomenon would necessitate further study.

Additionally, it might not be surprising that people who visit the sampled sites would have favorable views of them. Nonetheless, it's important to confirm assumptions empirically and know how users perceive and interact with these sites. The findings of this research can be a launching off point for examining the effects of the three sites in question.

Researchers like Schmidt (2005), Guo-Ming (2012) and Bunt (2002, 2003 and 2009) suggest that social media may be a tool to connect world communities in ways that traditional media couldn't do, and this seems to be what the sites analyzed in this study are currently doing among members of the global Muslim *ummah*.

It is worth noting that Muslims who're dispersed across the globe were not able to meet/connect with one another except through occasions like the yearly Hajj (pilgrimage). What sites like Celebrate Mercy, for example, is doing is organizing a regular global summit for Muslims.

The implications of this phenomenon require further research.

Additionally, speakers in these outlets are not merely addressing viewers in Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey or US. The speakers are reaching Muslim youth across the globe, which is adding more power and influence to those speakers. It would be intriguing to observe the implications of this phenomenon in the years to come.

5. Limitations

There were a number of limitations in this study. The three sampled sites are largely positive. While the aim of the research was to understand how mainstream Muslims use social media given that the common extremist/violent/terrorist dimensions have already been explored in previous work (Said 1997, 2003; Ibrahim 2009, 2010; Hafez, 2000; Poole, 2000, 2002, 2006; Richardson 2001, 2004, 2006; Goldstein 2001; Strömbäck, Shehata and Dimitrova, 2008; Esposito and Mogahed, 2007; Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2006; Gottschalk and Greenberg, 2007; Karim, 2003; Mosemghvdlishvili and Jansz, 2013)—nevertheless, this might be a limitation with regards to the external validity.

Similarly, the samples (the selected outlets) might not be representative of the entire population. However, it is worth noting that these outlets are currently reaching millions of followers across the globe. The number of followers are also increasing by the day. As noted earlier, an outlet like Productive Muslim moved from 500 thousand followers to over 800 thousand followers within few weeks, and the number is still increasing. It is, thus, essential to test the implications and potential impacts of these growing outlets.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this research propose a few points for consideration:

- First, female Muslims appear to have large participation in the global Islamosphere. What are the implications of this? How does it affect our understanding of global Muslim women?

- Majority of Muslim youth find leaders of Muslim majority countries inadequate representation of Islam. What are the implications?

- Muslim youth find social media, therefore, a platform through which they could reclaim their own narrative. What do Muslim youth have to say through these social media platforms?

- GISMP enable Muslims to connect with their counterparts across the globe in ways that weren't feasible in real life or through traditional media outlets. What are the implications of that? What are the potential implications of GISMP on the global virtual and actual Muslim *ummah*?

As one survey respondent highlighted in the comments' section:

> *"Sharing as much information [on social media] about Islam with the target audience being youth will develop a generation [of youth] who are confident enough to stand for their religion and work with other human beings to clear and remove hatred and pointless remarks from those who don't even know what this religion is about."*

It would be intriguing to observe how the GISMP might influence the face of the

Muslim generations in the decades to come. The suggestion for future research is to

study the political, social, psychological, and media implications of this

phenomenon.

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SURVEY CONSENT FORM

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Documentation of Informed Consent for Participation in Research Study

Project Title: Beyond Political Islam: Exploring Discourses and Uses of Three Popular Global Islamic Social Media Initiatives

Principal Investigator: Dina Mohamed Basiony.

* You are kindly being asked to participate in this survey for an MA thesis that discusses the uses global Islamic social media pages like "Productive Muslim", "Celebrate Mercy" and "Qur'an Weekly" ("Productive Muslim" https://www.facebook.com/productivemuslim , "Celebrate Mercy" https://www.facebook.com/celebratemercy , and "Quran Weekly" https://www.facebook.com/QuranWeekly). The survey aims to understand how followers of these pages use them and why. Your contribution is much needed and deeply appreciated. Answering the survey, as honest as possible, will be truly valuable for this work.

The survey should take 5 minutes or less, your contribution will be public so that it enhances our academic knowledge upon interpreting the survey results.

You will be completely anonymous. No information about respondents' identity will be collected, other than basic demographics like gender, age, region…etc.

The findings of the survey research might get published in an academic journal and/or presented in an academic conference.

No inconvenience whatsoever should befall you as a result of participating.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will not involve any disadvantages to you. You may discontinue participation at any time if you so wish.

The consent I get for your participation is your decision to proceed with answering the survey.

Your contribution is of significant importance to this academic work and I thank you in advance for your willingness to be of such valuable help.

SURVEY

1- **What is your gender?**
   Male
   Female

2- **I use Islamic social media pages to (Choose all that apply)**

   Learn more about Islam, Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet
   Learn more about successful global Muslim figures
   Learn more about Muslims from different nationalities
   Make friends
   Spend time
   Overcome sadness or emotional distress
   Other

3- **Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:**

	Strongly Disagree	*Disagree*	*Neutral*	*Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
"global Islamic social media pages that feature global Muslim speakers reflect that Islam is a universal religion"					
" Muslim youth around the world are under-represented in media today"					
"Social media provides a platform for Muslim youth to represent themselves and voice their opinions"					
"Global Islamic social media pages are important because they help me learn about my religion in a modern context"					
"Islam is a universal religion"					
"Islamic social media pages help in creating a Global Muslim identity among youth today"					
"Global Islamic social media pages are succeeding in creating a global Ummah online					

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beyond geographical barriers"					
"Following global Islamic social media pages help me realize that being Muslim is a global identity not confined by ethnic or geographical boundaries"					
"Global Islamic social media pages have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers"					
Religion is a major part of the person's identity					
Global Islamic social media pages encourage terrorism					
Global Islamic social media pages isolate Muslims from people of other faiths and from the rest of humanity					

4- **How would you define your identity?**

Muslim (identifying yourself as a Muslim comes first)
Nationality (identifying yourself through your nationality comes first)
Ethnicity (identifying yourself through your ethnicity comes first)
Other (another identification comes first)

5- **Is social media helping in countering anti Islam messages?**

Yes
No

6- **Do global Islamic social media pages help you in refuting misconceptions about your religion?**

Yes
No

7- **Do Muslims today correctly reflect the universal message of their religion?**

Yes
No

8- **Do leaders of Muslim-majority countries correctly reflect the message of their religion?**

Yes
No
Comment ………

9- **Do you think the coming Muslim youth generation-with the help of social media- could better represent Islam and its message in a global context?**

Yes
No

10-   **What region do you currently live in?**

Non-Arab section of Africa

Asia

Arab Middle East and North Africa

Non-Arab Middle East and North Africa

Central or South America

North America

Europe

Australia

11-   **What is your age?**

Under 18 years

 19-25 years

26-35 years

36-60 years

Above 60 years

12-   **How many hours do you spend online each week?**

 0-5 hours

 6-10 hours

 11-20 hours

 21-30 hours

More than 30 hours

13- How many hours do you spend <u>surfing Islamic social media pages</u> each week?

0-5 hours

 6-10 hours

 11-20 hours

 21-30 hours

More than 30 hours

14- What is your marital status

Single
Married
Divorced

15- What is your educational level?

Some High school diploma
High school diploma
College degree
Post graduate degree
Other

16- Would you like to add anything?
……………………………………………………………………

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INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Documentation of Informed Consent for Participation in Research Study

Project Title: Beyond Political Islam: Exploring Discourses and Uses of Three Popular Global Islamic Social Media Initiatives

Principal Investigator: Dina Mohamed Basiony.

* You are kindly being asked to participate in this research study. The purpose of the study is to understand the uses of global Islamic social media pages like *Productive Muslim*, *Celebrate Mercy* and *Qur'an Weekly*, and their effects on young Muslim followers across the globe.

You will be identified in this research as the founder of the social media pages you represent (the identification you use in the interview questions attached will be the one used in the study.)

The findings will be public; they might get published in an academic journal and/or presented in an academic conference.

The expected duration of your participation is 10-15 minutes.

Your contribution is of significant important to this academic work and I thank you in advance for your willingness to be of such valuable help.

No inconvenience whatsoever should befall you as a result of participating.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will not involve any disadvantages to you. You may discontinue participation at any time if you so wish.

Your Signature:

Printed Name

Date

www.manaraa.com

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1- What triggered your desire to launch your initiative? [Any specific event, for example?]

2- Could you give me a background about the founder (s) of the initiative? (Where are you located currently? Education? Nationality? Age? Occupation? ...etc.)

3- Could you give me a background about your team and how you conduct your work? (How many members? Where are they located?....etc.)

4- Why did you choose social media as platforms for your work?

5- How do you see your work developing in the short and long run?

6- Do you think global Islamic social media pages like yours have an impact on shaping the identities of young Muslim followers? Could you elaborate on this please?

7- Do you think Muslim youth around the world are adequately represented in media today? How and/or why?

8- How can your work influence the global *Ummah* today, given that your online existence surpasses physical and other barriers?

9- What are the essential characteristics of the Muslim character in your opinion?

10- What are the essential characteristics of a Muslim *Ummah* in your opinion?

11- How would you define your own identity?

12- What do you think is the main misconception about Muslims today?

13- What do you think are the real problems committed by Muslims- especially youth- today?

14- Does having a Muslim identity mean you are excluded from other identities or that you exclude those who are foreign to your identity?

15- Is your message directed to Muslims only or does it accommodate others of different faiths or identities as well?

16- What is universal about your message? How does your work relate to people of other faiths and/or what common grounds do you have with people of other faiths at large?

Your contribution is genuinely appreciated. Thank you sincerely for your time and effort.