


CYBER INDEPENDENCE: THE SENTIMENT OF MILLENNIALS IN A MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRY

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 22 Sept 2024 Revised: 4 Oct 2024 Accepted: 18 Oct 2024 Published: 1 Nov 2024</p>	<p>The influence of social media in challenging established views on religion and power can be observed through its facilitation of discourse among individuals and specific groups. Within the Muslim world, a new cohort of social media influencers is beginning to emerge. These individuals are characterized by their Western education, proficiency in digital media, and distinct storytelling abilities. This trend prompts an examination of the future of Islam, as it introduces new dimensions of openness through technology within societies that are often perceived as closed due to religious and cultural structures. The internet offers a platform for freedom of expression and the sharing of knowledge, yet it also imposes restrictions aligned with societal norms rooted in traditional values. This enigma forms the basis of research exploring the juxtaposition of increased cyber independence against religious and cultural sensitivities. The study examines evolving attitudes among young people regarding censorship, freedom of speech, and the extent of government intervention in regulating social media.</p>
<p>Keywords: Cyber independence Sentiment analysis Millennials Muslim-majority country Thematic analysis</p> <p> OPEN ACCESS</p>	

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INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers and other users have been able to create, consume and share religious content with different online communities via digital technologies and platforms (Zaid et al., 2022). The millennial generation consists mainly of young, urban, educated, and cosmopolitan individuals with a strong command of technology, particularly in Muslim-majority nations. Social interaction has shifted from physical to digital and now influences nearly every aspect of life, including discussions about politics, culture, and religion. It has shifted from physical to digital spaces, reshaping power dynamics and religious discourse (Zekrist, 2023). Described as digital natives, millennials are those individuals who have grown up with internet technology being fully part of the public domain (Roza, 2020). Nevertheless, in Muslim-majority countries where religious and cultural values influence society highly, the search for cyber independence is a challenge.

Cyber independence is a term linked to people's freedom in online interactions about restrictions by outside forces. Cyber independence and autonomy have gained importance in the digital age. As nations become increasingly reliant on information and communication technologies, the need to protect digital assets from cyber predators has grown (Dutta, 2020). Some advocate for a declaration of independence in cyberspace, rejecting government attempts to regulate online communication (Barlow, 2021). Millennials in Muslim-majority countries have embraced the Internet as a tool for education, advocacy on social issues, and establishing connections. However, they encounter challenges due to strict cultural norms enforced by authorities and state regulations to uphold order, integrity, and conformity to Islamic standards. (Suud et al., 2024). Such restrictions may prevent users from accessing material, hinder freedom of speech and expression and foster feelings of being under a watchful eye. The conflict between preserving cultural identity and enjoying the liberties of the current world is the main problem of the cyber independence issue.

Therefore, this research will seek to establish millennials' attitudes toward cyber independence in most nations. It aims to know how they think about the balance between culture and the need for digital freedom. The study focuses on how the government, culture and social norms influence it and how millennials, in particular, use creativity to reclaim their freedom on the internet. In this paper, the author adds to existing debates on digital freedom, censorship, and the emerging role of the internet in the construction of self and community among millennials in Muslim-majority countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Natives are individuals born after the advent of computers and digital technologies, making them inherently familiar with these platforms from a young age. As part of this group, Millennials use the Internet for education, communication, activism, and identity formation. Studies show that while many young Muslims possess digital skills, they do not always apply them effectively (Kusumalestari et al., 2022; Raharjo et al., 2020). Despite learning internet use independently, some millennials contribute to spreading misinformation due to a lack of fact-checking (Raharjo et al., 2020). Social media usage differs between digital natives and immigrants, with natives preferring platforms like Instagram and immigrants favoring Facebook and WhatsApp (Nurdin, 2021). In religious learning, millennials show a preference for online platforms, particularly YouTube, over traditional methods (Aditoni & Rohmah, 2022). They also prioritize topics like Islamic ethics and beliefs over Sufism and Islamic politics (Aditoni & Rohmah, 2022). These findings highlight the need for improved digital literacy education and adaptation of religious teaching methods to meet the preferences of Muslim millennials in the digital era.

CYBER INDEPENDENCE AND ONLINE FREEDOM

Digital independence, a concept similar to cyber independence, refers to the liberty of accessing and sharing information online without restrictions. Although the Internet was initially designed as an open system, increasing restrictions are imposed for security, cultural, and political reasons. In Muslim-majority countries, social and religious pressures further complicate digital freedom. Research indicates that millennials in these areas experience many restrictions, with government censorship usually justified by the need to maintain religious and cultural diversity (A Pitchay et al., 2023). Muslims actively engage in online religious activities, influenced by factors such as attitude, community norms, and religiosity (Rahman et al., 2015). However,

governments in countries like Malaysia have implemented digital authoritarianism, using religious rhetoric to justify online censorship and control (Shukri, 2023). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, established in 1998, oversees internet content removal, particularly targeting material deemed offensive to Islam (Shukri, 2023). Despite these challenges, digitalization in the Muslim world is contributing to new forms of social, cultural, economic, and political capital, potentially fostering capacity building among various stakeholders (Yusof, 2019). This digital landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for cyber independence and online freedom in Muslim-majority countries.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study involves a qualitative approach to understand the perceptions of millennials in a Muslim-majority country regarding cyber independence. Through the use of open-ended survey instruments, the researchers aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of the respondents. The survey items were designed to explore various aspects of digital independence, including government censorship, social customs, and the respondents' own adaptations to censorship. By employing open-ended questions, the researchers sought to gather rich, in-depth insights into the participants' views and experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding cyber independence in the context of a Muslim-majority country.

Furthermore, the targeted selection of millennials aged 25-35 living in Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, aimed to provide a focused understanding of the specific demographic group most likely to engage with matters related to cyber independence and online freedom. The deliberate selection of active users of social media, forums, and news websites also aimed to capture the perspectives of individuals who are actively involved in online discourse and information consumption. This targeted approach not only ensured that the respondents were well-versed in digital platforms but also facilitated the gathering of insights from individuals likely to have encountered and navigated issues related to cyber independence and online freedom within the context of a Muslim-majority country. The gathered data were analyzed qualitatively using sentiment analysis and thematic analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The survey data provides a comprehensive understanding of how millennials from Muslim-majority countries perceive cyber independence. The data has uncovered several key insights. Firstly, the respondents expressed a strong desire for digital freedom, with 80% stating that they consider freedom of speech on the internet to be important. However, they also acknowledged that societal norms, cultural expectations, and religious beliefs significantly influence their online behaviors. For example, many mentioned that they felt the need to practice content moderation on social media to avoid negative reactions. This conflict between individual autonomy and adherence to societal rules and regulations highlights a significant challenge for millennials seeking cyber independence.

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

Closely related to the issue of religious and cultural sensitivity to freedom of speech was the issue of restriction. 50% of the respondents indicated that while they value freedom of speech, they also recognize the importance of respecting restrictions in order to uphold religious and cultural values. This suggests a conflict between the personal ethics of the users and the societal norms they encounter in the digital space. These findings shed light on the complex interplay between individual desires for digital autonomy and the influence of societal constraints, offering valuable insights for understanding the dynamics of cyber independence among millennials in Muslim-majority countries. Table 1 shows the sentiment analysis of the gathered responses.

Table 1: Sentiment analysis of cyber independence among Malaysian youths

Response	Sentiment	Magnitude	Sentiment Score
Yes, it could weaken the ability of governments to control their borders and economy.	Negative	0.8	-0.7
I'm not sure, but I think it might affect national identity more than sovereignty.	Neutral	0.5	0.0
Definitely. A borderless world would mean less control over policies and security	Negative	0.9	-0.8
Yes, especially in terms of regulation and maintaining cultural identity.	Neutral	0.6	0.1
No, I think it could increase collaboration rather than affect sovereignty.	Positive	0.7	0.7
Yes, it would reduce the power of the state and give more influence to corporations.	Negative	0.85	0.75
It could, but it depends on how the concept is implemented. It might help economically but hurt politically.	Neutral	0.65	0.2
Yes, a borderless world would compromise a country's ability to enforce laws and control resources.	Negative	0.85	-0.75
Maybe, but I think it would also help in terms of trade and international relations.	Neutral	0.6	0.15
Yes, countries would lose the ability to fully control their own decisions.	Negative	0.85	-0.8

The sentiment analysis of the responses in Table 1 shows a variety of feelings about the idea of a "borderless world" and its potential impact on national sovereignty and independence. The analysis sorted the responses into negative, neutral, and positive sentiments, along with their respective magnitude and sentiment score. Most responses (6 out of 10) express a negative sentiment, indicating concerns about how a borderless world could reduce government control, particularly in areas like border regulation, security, and sovereignty. These responses have high magnitude scores, such as 0.85 and 0.9, showing strong emotional weight and sentiment scores ranging from -0.7 to -0.8. For example, statements like "Yes, a borderless world would compromise a country's ability to enforce laws and control resources" clearly highlight a fear of losing control, contributing to the negative sentiment.

The survey results indicate that most respondents view a borderless world as a potential threat to national sovereignty and independence. Out of 10 responses, 4 were neutral, reflecting uncertainty or a balanced view with lower emotional intensity. One respondent expressed a positive sentiment, believing that a borderless world could enhance collaboration rather than diminish sovereignty. Although this view is not widely shared, it provides an optimistic outlook on global integration and cooperation. In conclusion, there are nuanced opinions and optimism about the economic potential of a borderless world in certain contexts.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This study extends the analysis using thematic analysis and a manual coding technique to better understand millennial perceptions of cyber independence. The results of this thematic analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Thematic analysis of cyber independence among Malaysian youths

Theme	n	%
Loss of Sovereignty and Control	5	50%
Economic Collaboration	1	10%
Cultural and National Identity	2	20%
Regulation and Law Enforcement	3	30%
Uncertainty/Neutral Opinions	4	40%

The analysis of the respondents' views on a borderless world and its impact on national sovereignty revealed several key themes. The most prevalent theme, identified in 50% of the responses, was "Loss of Sovereignty and Control." This indicates that many respondents are concerned about the erosion of government authority, particularly in managing borders, security, and internal policies due to globalization and diminished boundaries. Another significant theme, present in 40% of the responses, is "Uncertainty/Neutral Opinions." These respondents expressed a mix of opinions or uncertainty, reflecting hesitation about the impact of a borderless world. They were unsure of the potential consequences, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects.

"Regulation and Law Enforcement" was another common concern, appearing in 30% of responses. This theme focuses on the ability of countries to maintain their legal systems and enforce laws in a world with fewer boundaries, which many respondents feel could be compromised in such a scenario. "Cultural and National Identity" emerged in 20% of the responses, with participants expressing concern over how a borderless world might affect preserving their cultural values and national identity. They fear that these elements could be diluted or overshadowed by external influences without clear borders.

Lastly, 10% of respondents mentioned "Economic Collaboration," reflecting a more positive outlook. These individuals saw the potential for greater international collaboration and economic benefits from a borderless world, though this was a minority perspective. Overall, the analysis shows a dominant concern over losing control and sovereignty, with a significant portion of respondents expressing uncertainty or mixed feelings. Concerns over law enforcement and cultural identity are also prominent, while positive views on economic collaboration are less common.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The exploration of cyber independence among millennials in Muslim-majority countries highlights the complex interplay between digital autonomy, government regulations, and societal norms. While the internet provides millennials with opportunities for education, activism, and self-expression, they often face restrictions rooted in cultural, religious, and political expectations. These limitations shape their online behaviors and challenge their ability to express themselves wholly in digital spaces, underscoring the delicate balance between maintaining traditional values and advocating for greater online freedom.

To promote cyber independence while respecting cultural values, policymakers in Muslim-majority countries should consider creating more flexible frameworks that balance regulation with digital freedom. Governments might encourage open dialogue with younger generations, ensuring their voices are heard in policy decisions affecting the digital space. Additionally, educational programs focused on digital literacy and responsible online behavior could help millennials navigate the complexities of the digital world while respecting societal norms and promoting a more harmonious and inclusive online environment.

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