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Faith News through Radio and Digital Media: An Exploratory Study of Expats Seeking Islamic Information in Dubai, UAE

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COMMON
GROUND

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Faith News through Radio and Digital Media: An Exploratory Study of Expats Seeking Islamic Information in Dubai, UAE

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Abstract: When non-Muslims become immersed in an Islamic way of life—a common occurrence in the UAE, a Muslim country where the majority of the resident population is foreign born—some become interested in learning more about the Islamic faith. This interest is also evident among new converts to Islam from other countries when they reside in the UAE. Little is known about how information about Islam is disseminated to non-Muslims and new Muslims in the UAE, how these expatriates search for the religious information they desire, and the challenges they encounter in their inquiries. This study applies the theory of diffusion of innovations as a guiding framework to understand the target audience, explore the informational gaps in their knowledge, and propose an innovative media model. The personal interviews were conducted with nineteen expat residents within Dubai and their response results were analyzed. The researcher identified lack of organization in the methods of dissemination of Islamic information and limited access among foreign-born residents to reliable and accurate information on Islam. The study considered a media model for the use of a radio with digital media to disseminate information about Islam among specific expatriates in the UAE.

Keywords: Islamic Centers, Dubai Expatriates, Non-Muslim, New Muslim, Media Representation, Digital Radio

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge in interest related to media representation on issues such as ethnicity, race, religion, feminism, and multiculturalism (Elias, Mansouri, and Sweid 2020; Montero 2014; Nguyen 2020; Triandafyllidou 2011). Scholars argue that the media does not present the objective reality—that it is a representation, depiction, likeness, or constructed image of reality (Hall 1995; Poole 2002; Van Dijk 1991). A representation can be of an individual, people, social groups, ideas, or events. In this study the focus is on the representation of a specific group, that is, Muslims. Among the many minorities discussed in world affairs, Muslims (and Islam) have been the focus of much censure and debate (Ahmed and Matthes 2017). The media plays a fundamental role in building perceptions of such groups (Pandolfi 2016). There are 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, and Islam is currently the second-largest religion in the world (Lipka 2017). Despite this, there is a lack of understanding among non-Muslims about Muslims and Islam (Mohamad 1996; Abidin 2007; Jones et al. 2019). For non-Muslims who have limited opportunities for interpersonal interaction with Muslims, in the absence of direct first-hand experience of people, places, or events, the mass media generally becomes the primary source of information (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Zillmann and Bryant 2002).

The mass media wields considerable power to influence the perceptions of the general public about certain news events and issues. Journalists, news presenters, filmmakers, and entertainers are also shaped by various social forces that contribute to their understanding of Muslims and Islam (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005). Insofar as the media is able to discredit the public image of Islam, it also has the power to restore and inform the public about this religion. Hence, in addressing these issues, the current study focused on audience perceptions about Islam on the basis of its representation in the Western media, examining how the target

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audiences currently receive information on Islam and suggesting how the media might more effectively disseminate accurate and balanced Islamic information from authoritative sources.

Problem Statement

Dubai is a metropolitan city that is popular within the UAE and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region; it attracts many foreigners due to its growing economy and tourism (Martens and Reiser 2019). However, according to Godinho (2020), Dubai seems to be caught in an identity crisis—aspiring, on the one hand, to be a top tourist destination with flexible laws for foreigners and tolerance of other religions, and on the other hand, adhering to Islamic traditions that are embedded within the local culture, norms, and traditions. A study by Martens and Reiser (2019) showed that Dubai was perceived mostly as a luxurious and modern destination, although visitors expressed an interest in learning about UAE culture and traditions. When non-Muslim residents take an interest in the Muslim way of life, the interest often leads them to explore the values, beliefs, and principles that Muslims follow (Ashry 2014). Many Dubai residents who are non-Muslims or new Muslims (i.e., converted to Islam recently) are interested in knowing more about Islam (Crompton 2016). However, limited initiatives have been implemented for disseminating information about Islam to these interested residents.

The current study focused on residents who did not have sufficient information about the Islamic faith and those who had been influenced by negative media representation but were attempting to gather Islamic knowledge to understand the faith better. The study also attempted to ascertain the ways in which respondents navigate existing media outlets and venues in Dubai and to determine whether these outlets and venues played an effective role in disseminating information on Islam. Accordingly, two research objectives were developed:

> **Objective 1** (Access to sources): To understand respondents' perceptions about Islam and Muslims and their accessibility to various sources to learn about the Islamic faith

> **Objective 2** (Media preference): To gather opinion about the radio as a source of Islamic information, in addition to other digital mediums

Literature Review

Understanding the Notion of Da'wah

Da'wah is an Arabic word indicating an invitation or a call to something (Al-Faruqi 1976) that is performed systematically and strategically (Safei 2007). Many scholars (Ammar 2001; Bawer 2006; Mowlana 2007; Jamal 1991; Khiabany 2003) apply the term "Islamic propagation" in English instead of Da'wah, although they mean much the same. Da'wah has two aims: (i) to convey the Islamic message, and (ii) to remove misconceptions of Islam (Ashry 2013). It seeks to introduce truth from an Islamic perspective and allow individuals to decide for themselves whether to believe the facts presented or not. The current study has related objectives: to disseminate information about Islam and explore the available mediums or sources of information, but not to convert non-Muslims or even remove their misconceptions. It applies a form of external Islamic propagation, utilizing the term Da'wah in disseminating information about Islam through this study.

As digital media impacts individuals' thought processes, spreading the right knowledge through online media has become vital for Da'wah experts, especially within non-Muslim countries (Briandana et al. 2020). Da'wah scholars such as Abdel Rahman Murphy, Mufti Menk, Nouman Ali Khan, and others have adapted and applied new media tools effectively, thus reaching out to non-Muslims and Muslims on a regular basis. These intellectuals have been

popular in implementing their own digital media channels, which has led to millions of followers around the world (Qayyum and Mahmood 2015). They have been popular for their persuasiveness, linguistic abilities, leadership, steadfastness, and persistence for knowledge, making them capable of opening communication channels with both non-Muslims and Muslims in a way that encourages stimulating discussions (Siddiqi 1998, as cited in Račius 2004; Ali, Liu, and Humedian 2004). They have linked Islam with contemporary topics such as business, sociology, economics, politics, psychology, history, astronomy, and human equality (Siddiqi 1989). Likewise, they are aware of current events and issues within the community and the world, which makes them more engaged with their audience.

Though the Da'wah application is more popular among non-Muslim countries, one of the important aspects of Da'wah is that it also has to be applied within Muslim countries where non-Muslims reside. The Islamic scholar Zakir Hussein has stated, "Da'wah has to be two way, rather than one way. Muslims within the Islamic nations should emphasize on Da'wah, so that it is beneficial to themselves and the non-Muslims living with them" (Gardner, Mayes, and Hameed 2018, 357).

Da'wah with New Media

New media has introduced the phenomenon of user interaction within the digital media, rather than mere consumption of media information. Media messages and news information can be replicated many times over through social media and internet, and thereby, mass-produce a genre. For this reason, digital media continues to serve as a growing platform for the distribution of video and audio materials about Islam (Campbell 2010).

While the internet today is a huge reservoir of information and knowledge, there is also an increasing concern about the dangers of unverifiable and unreliable information about Islam that could mislead people searching for true knowledge (Engel 2015; Klausen 2015; Neumueller 2012; Suleiman 2013). New converts who rely heavily on the Internet without human guidance in seeking Islam could be exposed to non-mainstream and hardline materials (Baba 2017). For instance, the online presence of terror groups, such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda, has created misconceptions because of them misrepresenting Islam on several digital platforms (Engel 2015; Klausen 2015; Singer 2015). Articulating this, the leaders of Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia, with the support of the UN General Assembly, announced in 2019 the joint launch of an anti-Islamophobia television channel in English (Butt 2019). The agenda included deploying communication channels such as documentaries, video news, call center hotlines, films, social media campaigns, periodic reports, and book publications for widespread access. The initiative aimed to become a strategic communication channel between the Islamic and the Western worlds (Altun 2019).

Following a similar strategy, many researchers and Muslim scholars were seen adopting various digital technologies and media models suited for specific Da'wah purposes for disseminating information in countries such as Bangladesh (Kalam 2014), Egypt (Abdulla 2007), Ghana (Pontzen 2018a; Pontzen 2018b), Indonesia (Nurdin and Rusli 2013), Japan and Korea (Fathil and Fathil 2011), Malaysia (Chuah 2002), Nigeria (Ibrahim 2015), Singapore (Lee 1999), and Tanzania (Ng'atigwa 2013). Limited studies on a similar theme have been conducted in the GCC countries, particularly the UAE. Hence, the next section discusses the application of Da'wah within the UAE, specifically in Dubai.

A Case Study of Dubai, UAE

The UAE is one of the Middle East's top tourist destinations with a high expatriate ratio (Kumar 2019a; Emirates 24|7 2013). Despite media representations suggesting Arab nations are close minded, backward, and risky (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Office of the Deputy Chief of

Staff for Intelligence 2006; Shaheen 1985), the UAE is considered one of the safest and most liberal countries in the world (Kawach 2002; Abbas 2017). It is ranked sixth in the world and second among Muslim nations as a migrant host country (The World Bank 2021). However, it was reported that some non-Muslim expatriates were still asked by their friends and family whether the UAE was a safe country to live due to the instability in its neighboring countries and lack of human rights within UAE or whether the Emirati are tolerant of others' beliefs (Hammond 2019; Iyer 2017; Gulf Takeout 2019).

Dubai was selected for the present study as it is one of the most cosmopolitan cities within the GCC region. Dubai enjoys a favorable strategic and central location between Europe and the Far East, making it a potential financial center for both regions (Jacobs and Hall 2007; Balakrishnan 2008). In the twenty-first century, Dubai became one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, according to a survey of 300 cities (Everington 2015). It has a population of over four million, of which 87 percent are expatriates (The Media Lab 2019). Although Arabic is the official language of the emirates, English is widely used, which helps foreigners to adapt to life and work within the country (Lauria 2018). Besides offering economic opportunities and career prospects, Dubai claims to offer its residents a multicultural environment (Bashir 2016). It is home to over 200 nationalities, aided by laws that allow residents to practice any faith and by substantially more centers of worship than the other cities in the GCC region (Al Suwaidi 2017; WAM 2008). Consequently, Dubai, and the UAE generally, has experienced a surge in its non-Muslim expatriate population over the past ten years. This trend is expected to continue, with predictions of further growth in the non-Muslim population from 24 percent in 2010 to 29 percent by 2050 (Figure 1) (Pew Research Center 2016; Al Shaykh 2017).
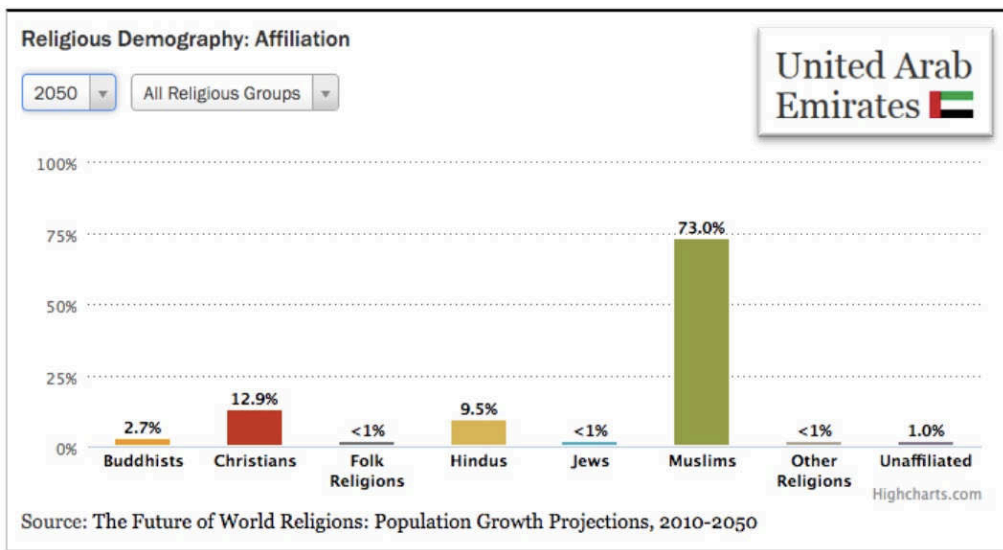
Figure 1: Population Growth by Religion in the UAE by 2050
Source: Pew Research Center 2016

The Anti-Discrimination Law in Dubai

Although Dubai is known to be a progressive city economically and multiculturally (Kantaria 2016), it does have some strict social policies. While the official religion of the UAE is Islam and it follows Sharia law, it has a royal decree that strictly prohibits discrimination against Islam and other religions within Dubai and the other emirates (McDowall 2015; Al Suwaidi 2017). The anti-discrimination law not only prohibits religious discrimination but also

criminalizes public acts of expression the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting toward a religion (McDowall 2015). Recent cases of blasphemy involving Islam (Al Amir 2019; Sengendo 2019; Khaleej Times 2019; Za'za 2016, 2018) resulted in the offenders receiving jail terms of five years or fines up to two million AED, and in some cases, deportation of the expatriates (Ahmad 2020; Office of International Religious Freedom 2018).

In 2016, the UAE Ministry of Tolerance (MOT) was created to implement the anti-discrimination law, especially with a view to online platforms such as social media where most blasphemy cases arise. The MOT also launched the world's first formal "tolerance charter" to spread tolerance of each other and promote peace and coexistence throughout the country, while also encouraging cultural diversity (McFarlane 2016). The National Tolerance Programme in the UAE was part of Sheikh Mohammed's vision for 2021, which aimed to follow five main edicts: international conventions, common human values, the UAE constitution, Sheikh Zayed's vision, and the teachings of Islam (Al Maktoum 2016; Gouveia 2016). The UAE's strategy for promoting tolerance included the formation (in 2011) and active involvement of the Hedayah Institute (Gulf News 2016; Bashir 2016). While many Islamic centers and institutes already exist (including Awqaf and the Dubai Islamic Center), Hedayah focuses on key academic Islamic institutions and scholars. The institute organizes discussions on combating extremism and promoting interfaith dialogue at an international level (Moran 2016).

Political leaders in the UAE have recently become keen to promote tolerance and understanding of Islam within the society. The first International Muslim Minorities Congress was organized in 2018 and attended by over 400 prominent Islamic personalities from 130 countries. The forum discussed the issues of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and Islamophobia (Sebugwaawo 2018). However, the initiatives discussed by the congress participants were broadly conceived. The forum's objectives were to establish the UAE as an example of a country of peace and tolerance and encourage foreigners to visit the country. The tolerance charter and forums do not specifically discuss how such objectives would be achieved. They do not specifically consider the problem of foreigners who arrive in the UAE interested to learn about the Islamic faith, and how information could be disseminated to them, nor do they explore the challenges faced by expatriates who are actively seeking information on Islam at present or discuss strategies for how the local media or digital media could help educate non-Muslims about Islam. They also ignore any understanding of UAE expatriate demographics and their media preferences for receiving Islamic information.

Da'wah Initiatives in Dubai

Today, many non-Muslims within the UAE are interested to know more about Islam and its way of life (Al Ghalib 2008; Crompton 2016; Khaleej Times 2017). Non-Muslim expatriates residing in Dubai are exposed to Muslims every day, making some of them curious to learn about the culture and about Islam (Kumar 2019b). They observe Muslims' way of life, including their moral beliefs, characters, and day-to-day practices, especially during Ramadan (Ashry 2014; Mojib 2020). Some have reported becoming influenced by factors such as charity, assembly for prayer at designated times, and the sociability of Muslims. In 2018, it was reported that 2,186 expatriates in the UAE converted to Islam, of which 1,993 were from Dubai (Salman 2018).

When it comes to seeking knowledge or reducing misconceptions (Salman 2018), traditional channels—such as Islamic centers, cultural and heritage centers, Islamic conferences, educational institutions, Dubai's Quranic Park, libraries, local television channels (mostly in Arabic), and personal interactions with Muslims in Dubai—are the available sources. Of all the channels, the most popular are the Islamic centers. The Dubai Islamic Information Center (DIIC), Mohammed Bin Rashid Center, Islamic Culture of Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (IACAD), and the Abu Backer Al Sideeque Islamic Center are the three most visited centers where people in Dubai may learn about Islam. In 2019, 1,248 students from

forty-nine nationalities, including new Muslims and non-Muslims, attended special classes organized by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Center on the basic tenets of Islam (Mojib 2020).

An Islamic summit held in Dubai in 2014 addressed the specific issues that new Muslims were encountering. The summit concluded that there was a problem with the current Da'wah system. The needs of new Muslims were not being met effectively due to the lack of access to accurate information on Islam (Ponce de Leon 2014). Moreover, the summit highlighted the lack of a systematic education system for new Muslims. Gurung and Shreeraman (2017) highlighted similar issues among non-Muslim expatriates. They stated that many non-Muslims relied on word-of-mouth communication with Muslims, who themselves lacked proper knowledge of Islam. This led to confusion and misconceptions among non-Muslims. Irshad (2003), Ruiz (2010), and Schoorel (2016) have reported that limited initiatives are taken in teaching and making people aware of Islam, and that the difficulties faced by non-Muslims in pursuing Islamic knowledge have yet to be properly investigated.

The UAE, which is a nation considered tolerant of other cultures (Hilotin 2018), may possess the potential to bring Muslims into a more positive light, nationally and internationally. However, current evidence suggests that the use of media channels for disseminating Islamic information has been patchy. There have been limited reports or research studies that identify the reasons for the limited application of modern media to disseminate Islamic information.

The Radio Market in Dubai

The radio has been in widespread use in the UAE for more than sixty years (Dubai Press Club 2015; Chaudhary 2014). Despite its relatively small population, the UAE remains the largest radio market in the GCC and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions with more than fifty terrestrial AM and FM radio stations (Schoenbach, Wood, and Saeed 2016; Aliouat et al. 2016). The UAE radio is also a sophisticated and mature radio market, reaching 80 percent of the population and offering diverse content (Schoenbach, Wood, and Saeed 2016). The radio market typically does well during economic downturns and provides consistency to listeners (Aliouat et al. 2016).

About 80 percent of radio listeners in the UAE are car drivers or commuters (Flanagan 2011; Nielsen Company 2018). The lifestyle, ease of access, no cost to the consumer, and number of hours an individual spends outside their home helps to strengthen the radio's significance in the media. The radio works well with the day-to-day routine of a 9 am to 5 pm work culture. The majority of radio listeners use car radio or portable radio to access their radio stations. In Dubai, in an average week, about 92 percent of residents listen to the radio. Although the listenership includes both Emirati and expatriate Arabs, the reach of the radio was highest among Westerners, Filipino, Indian, and other South Asian listeners, as per Figure 2 (BroadcastPro Middle East 2019). Media experts, such as the Arabian Radio Network and the UAE Media Index interpret these results as strengthening the position of the radio as a significant entertainment medium for UAE residents (Nielsen Company 2019) (Figure 2).
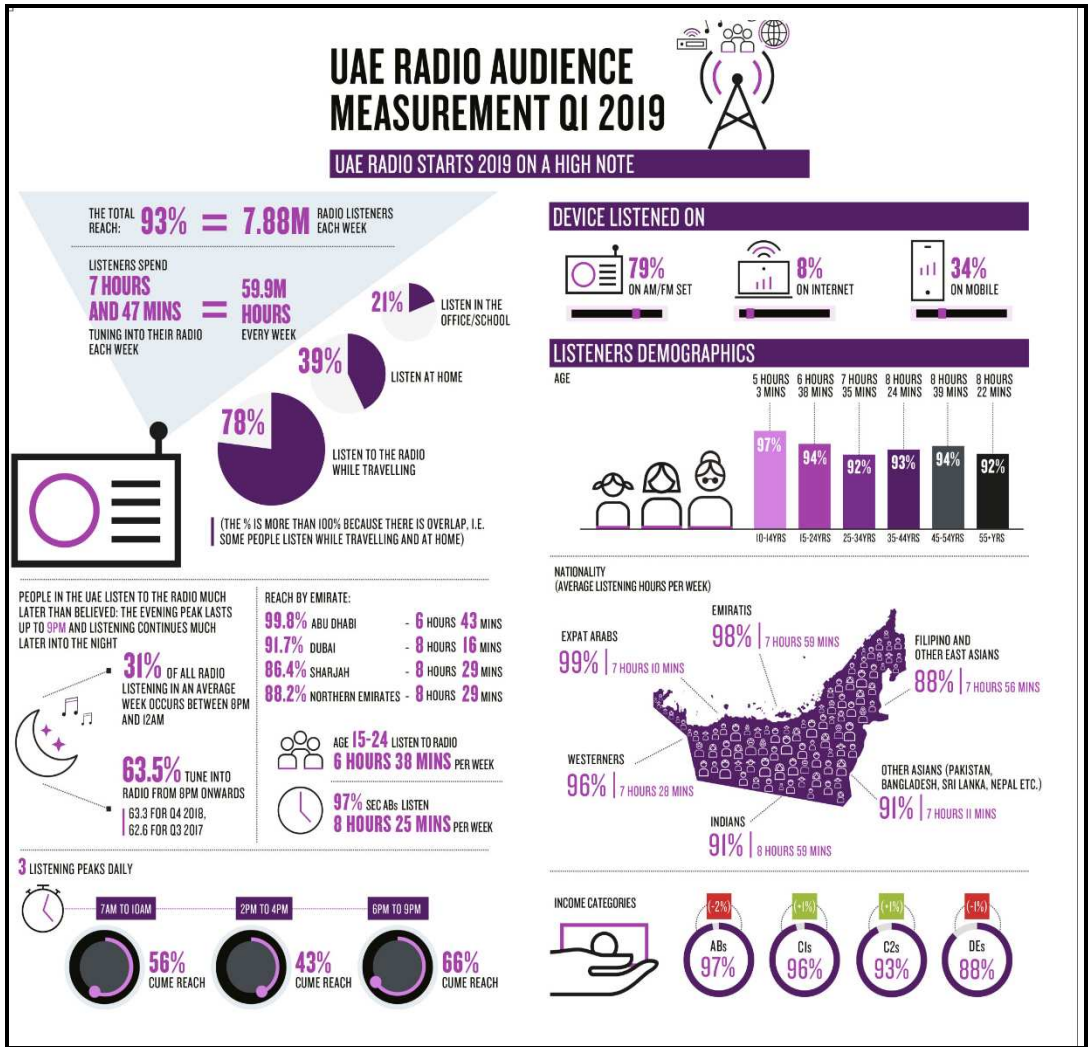
Figure 2: UAE Radio Audience Measurement, First Quarter 2019
Source: Nielsen Company 2019

In measuring the public's reliance on the radio, a public confidence survey conducted by the UAE's National Media Council in 2018 found that the radio was in second place (at 72%) to newspapers (at 98%) when it came to reliance on local UAE media for news (National Media Council 2018). Abu Dhabi Media and ARN (part of Dubai Holding) are the key operators in the radio market. The primary reason for listening to radio in the UAE is music, followed by news and then religious programs in Arabic.

Diffusion of Innovations (DoI) Theory

Considering the aforementioned issues, the current study attempted to bring all the informational factors together within a theoretical framework suitable to inform an academic discourse on the research findings and their implications. The DoI theory was chosen as suitable for the study.

The DoI theory was developed in 1962 by an American communication theorist and sociologist, Everett Rogers. The theory, based in Western society, sought to understand how new technology and ideas were created and propagated within society. In Rogers's conception, diffusion is a social change or process by which an alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system (Rogers 2014). The theory emphasizes understanding the characteristics of the target population who will adopt a new idea or an innovation.

As per Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan (2014), diffusion of an innovation occurs through a five-step process (Figure 3). The first step is knowledge, where the audience becomes aware of the innovation's existence. Then comes persuasion, where the audience develops an attitude toward the innovation. Third is decision-making, where the audience decides whether or not to adopt the innovation. This leads to implementation, the fourth step, where the audience starts using the innovation and continues learning about it. Lastly comes the confirmation from the audience, that the innovation has been adopted and implemented.
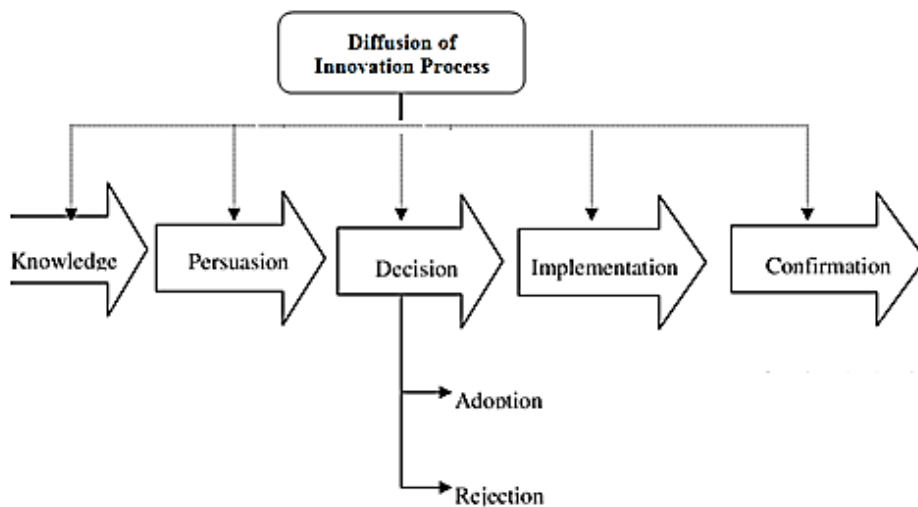
Figure 3: Five Stages in the Diffusion of Innovation (DoI) Process

The current study aimed to use the DoI theory as a guiding framework. DoI is manifest in various cultures and fields and is highly dependent on the type of adopters and the nature of the innovation decision process. For this reason, the study aimed to explore whether a Western theory such as DoI could be applied to a non-Western setting, that is, Dubai, UAE. The study focused on a target audience: new Muslims and non-Muslims. It attempted to comprehend their demographics, informational needs, and perceptions about personal experiences and challenges encountered while they were gathering religious information on Islam. Once these factors were recognized, the study applied the DoI framework and identified a reliable medium that could help fill an existing knowledge gap in Dubai.

Methodology

Under the qualitative analysis phase of the study, a personal interview method was employed. According to Patton (2002), interviews help in conveying the real social experience of the participants by inquiring into their living experiences, perceptions, opinions, behaviors, and culture (Rahman 2017). The interview questions were divided into two sections. The first set sought to understand the knowledge respondents had about Islam and inquired about the accessibility and reliability of the information resources they used. It also aimed to understand

the experiences non-Muslims and new Muslims had while gathering this information. The second set of questions sought to determine the respondents' opinion about the role of the radio in the dissemination of religious information.

Sample Selection

The participants chosen for this study were non-Muslims and new converts to Islam residing in Dubai for three or more years. The researcher chose three years as the minimum period of residence, as this indicated that the participants had become embedded in UAE society and were relatively familiar with UAE laws and culture. The age of 18 was chosen as the minimum as this is generally considered the age of majority, which is the threshold of adulthood, as recognized under UAE law (Bobker 2017). Prior to the interview, participants were required to complete the consent form and demographic survey. Each respondent's proficiency in the English language was checked by the interviewer through an introductory conversation. This method helped the interviewer pursue an in-depth conversation on the relevant topic.

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017) recommend twelve to twenty personal interviews with those who have relevant information on the research topic. However, several researchers (Mason 2010; Morse 1991) state that the number of interviews depends on the researcher's judgment as to when a "saturation point" has been reached. The saturation point here is that point where variability in knowledge of the research topic starts to show patterns or themes. Bearing this in mind, a total of twenty-five interviews were conducted, out of which nineteen met the criteria of good linguistic skills, strong knowledge about the topic, and a willingness to share information in detail. The data collected from the personal interviews was recorded and transcribed manually using Transcribeme and Google Transcribe for the transcription. Respondents were coded by number (01 to 19) to maintain anonymity.

The researcher carried out interviews at Islamic and cultural centers in Dubai. The researcher contacted the directors of these centers to obtain the permission for the research study. Of the seven centers contacted, three agreed to participate—DIIC, the IACAD, and the Dubai Cultural and Heritage Center. The DIIC was highly preferred among the respondents as it was the oldest and best-known among visitors. The non-Muslims and new Muslims were randomly selected by the administrators of the centers. The questionnaire and consent forms were reviewed by the center administrators and permission was granted to conduct interviews with the respondents. The interviews took a total of six months to complete, from March to August 2019, as the three centers were responsible for organizing, and scheduling the interview days and time, based on respondent's availability. Due to the nature of the topic, most participants requested to remain anonymous. Respondents were asked a set of ten questions within semi-structured interviews. Each interview was conducted face-to-face by the researcher, within the chosen premises and in a private room after consent from the director of the center. All participants were informed about the confidentiality of their contributions.

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the interviewees. A total of thirty visitors were shortlisted by the center administrators, of which only nineteen were deemed suitable. The majority of the interviewees who were frequent visitors of the centers were Filipinos by nationality. The Filipinos met most of the interview criteria, such as proficiency in English language, knowledge of the topic, and the willingness to participate.

Table 1: Frequency Table of the Interviewees

Variables	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*	
Gender	Male	10	52.63
	Female	9	47.37
Education	High School	4	21.05
	Bachelor	14	73.68
	PhD	1	5.26
Age Range	Age 17–24	2	10.53
	Age 25–30	4	21.05
	Age 31–35	6	31.58
	36 and above	7	36.84
Residency	Years 1–4	5	26.32
	Years 5–9	6	31.58
	Years 10 and above	8	42.11
Nationality	Philippines	9	47.37
	India	2	10.53
	Nigeria	1	5.26
	Russia	2	10.53
	Norway	1	5.26
	USA	1	5.26
	Uzbekistan	1	5.26
	UK	2	10.53
Religion	Non-Muslim	9	47.37
	New Muslim	10	52.63
Work Hours	Hours 8–9	6	31.58
	Hours 10–12	9	47.37
	Hours 12 and above	3	15.79
	Unemployed	1	5.26
Occupation	Security guard/Lifeguard	5	26.3
	Student	2	10.5
	Manager	1	5.3
	Administrator	1	5.3
	Athlete	1	5.3
	Domestic helpers	6	31.6
	Instructor	1	5.3
	Entrepreneur	1	5.3
	Unemployed	1	5.3
	Total	19	100

Findings

The qualitative data findings were coded and sorted into research themes. The research questions (RQs) were as follows:

> RQ1: What perceptions do non-Muslims and new Muslims have about Islam and how do they access information about Islam?

> RQ2: What challenges do they encounter while gathering information about Islam?

> RQ3: What is the opinion of non-Muslims and new Muslims about English Islamic radio as a source of disseminating information about Islam?

Perceptions and Experiences

The first set of questions sought to understand respondents' perceptions of Islam and their experiences with Muslims. It also intended to comprehend the media's influence on their views about Muslims. Fourteen respondents from non-Muslim countries shared their prior experiences. They acknowledged that before arriving in the UAE they had a negative view of Muslims, and that this was a common view in their native countries. They were aware of Western media representations of Islam and Muslims, especially after the 9/11 incident. The majority of the respondents indicated that Western media does not influence their perception of Muslims since their decision to reside in the UAE and meet Muslims had enabled them to have their own opinions and judgments about Islam. Ten new Muslim respondents claimed that were "open," "happy," "curious," or "interested to learn more" when conversations about Islam and Muslim culture were initiated.

Non-Muslim respondents gave some varying responses. Although they admitted that they were familiar with negative media representations, the reasons that motivated them to seek information about Islam was to become familiar with the "local culture, or traditions among locals," "curiosity," or "to understand UAE laws." They specifically stated that they preferred inquiring first about UAE culture, traditions, and Islamic practices that had triggered their interest.

This point had been affirmed by a study conducted in 2012 by Dubai Police of 2000 UAE expatriates and their level of knowledge of UAE customs, traditions, and Islam, which was mostly through word of mouth. Two concerns highlighted by the Dubai Police were the large knowledge gaps among expatriates, especially among those who had been UAE residents for more than a year, and the high reliance on word of mouth. The study showed that most relied on other expatriates for information about UAE culture and traditions, which increased the risk of miscommunication or incorrect information being passed on (Remo-Listana and Procter 2012).

Access to Islamic Information and Challenges

The second set of questions sought to comprehend the respondents' access to resources and identify obstacles they had encountered. Several non-Muslim respondents stated that they preferred to acquire basic information about Islam (e.g., call to prayer, Ramadan, halal versus haram) through Muslim friends. They preferred not to seek "profound" knowledge as they held that it better suited to those who were interested in the philosophy of life. The challenge they faced in their interactions with Muslims was the varying information they received. They recalled encountering some Muslims who had limited information about a certain religious topic when asked. This experience led some non-Muslim respondents to limit their questioning

or to feel hesitant to discuss in detail. The commonly used words were "confused" and "being careful" or "being cautious."

> I observe how confused some Muslims are while answering, they might teach me a wrong concept and I'm not ok with that. (NonM 4)

Four non-Muslims admitted visiting cultural heritage centers because they wanted to learn more about UAE culture and Muslim traditions than about the religion itself. Islamic centers were highlighted by new Muslim respondents as a reliable medium to learn about Islam. Five respondents mentioned that they came to know about Islamic centers in Dubai by word of mouth as a Google search "confused" some of them. They did not rely on social media accounts as the content was chiefly in Arabic or provided limited information. Respondents had also created personal contacts with other visitors through WhatsApp and Facebook to stay connected. One stated as follows:

> I was searching for Islamic centers in Dubai through Google and I called the numbers which was on the website, no one would respond and if they did, they would transfer my calls. After a lot of struggle, I decided to make some personal visit to centers.

Most respondents claimed that most of the classes were congested and that they had to wait long hours for their mentors to show up for lectures. Some respondents found their teachers to be "boring" or "less empathetic." They found it difficult to find good preachers, with whom they could "connect." This was supported by an example given by two respondents who stated that finding the right teacher was important to them. They had spent three years searching for a good Islamic center in Dubai that had good mentors/preachers to whom they could relate. They also visited libraries, bookstores, and Islamic centers in other emirates to find information.

> It's very difficult for me to come all the way to attend Arabic classes. I live a faraway distance, so I have transportation problem and time issue. (NonM 9)

A related issue revealed by participants was acceptance within their workplaces. Three new Muslims recalled experiencing bullying and blasphemy from colleagues who had limited knowledge about Islam. They also shared some experiences where they were looked down upon due to their job rank, making them less confident to open up and inquire about the Islamic faith.

Respondent/Visitor Preferences

This section aimed to probe participants about their preferences in receiving information about Islam. Respondents were asked to recommend steps that could help reduce the aforementioned challenges.

Respondents suggested that the DIIC and the IACAD could be more engaged with their visitors and become more media active. They also wanted centers to be accessible through online services (phone calls, emails, chat groups) and stay connected with new Muslims after they took Shahadah (acceptance of Islam). They also wanted the classes to be available according to their convenience, rather than the mentor's suitability.

When asked whether they would prefer an Islamic radio in English that could meet their information needs, respondents had mixed reactions to the proposal. These were categorized into three common responses, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Three Common Responses to the Media Proposal

First Response	"Yes, it's an interesting idea." or "Absolutely"	Ten respondents
Second Response	"Could you elaborate more?" or "How can radio provide me with Islamic information/ sort my queries?"	Three respondents
Third Response	"It could be, but radio is not enough."	Six respondents

It was also noted that the new Muslims differed in their attitude to radio from non-Muslim respondents. New Muslims emphasized that the radio programs should not focus on converting non-Muslims, as this would discourage them from tuning in. They preferred the notion that Islamic radio should be focused on providing information. Most respondents talked about content and what information they preferred to hear on the radio. Non-Muslim participants suggested learning about UAE culture, traditions, and Islamic laws, and they wanted topics such as Islam playing a role in politics, business, society, history, science, medicine, and mathematics. They also suggested the topic of women's rights. It was observed that their focus was more on factual knowledge than spiritual.

In contrast, new Muslim participants were more interested in spiritual knowledge. They preferred topics that communicated the importance of prayers, the five pillars, hadiths, prophet stories, and dealt with misconceptions about Islam, as well as other basic reminders for Muslims that they felt were overlooked. Some responses were common to both non-Muslims and converts. Both showed an interest in understanding Quranic verses through English interpretation, or to put it simply, what the verses meant. Both groups opted for a question-and-answer session in which listeners could ask the scholars questions and receive answers live. One non-Muslim participant stated, "Other people's curiosity could be my curiosity, so if I'm able to hear the answer, I don't need to ask someone else."

Respondents with long working hours and limited transportation were more inclined toward the radio as a source of solution. They believed the radio could help save time, help them gain information, and reach out to listeners who are hesitant to come forward with their religious queries. The majority were using older model mobile phones with a built-in radio FM, so they were able to access radio without Wi-Fi. Others mentioned that they had a radio app, which they frequently used to access their favorite radio stations. For these reasons, the idea of the radio as a source of disseminating information was seen as acceptable among the majority of the respondents.

> Nowadays, people don't have time to come to centers. Instead listen to it while traveling to work, who would have thought of that. (NonM 3)

Discussion

On the basis of the aforementioned results, the qualitative analysis sought to build a detailed background of the perceptions of Islam among non-Muslims and new Muslims. Personal interviews facilitated a detailed description of the respondents' views, experiences, and behaviors when it came to the ways they searched for information about Islam and their approach in reaching out to various sources.

Results showed that the respondents had been exposed to negative media representation about Islam and Muslims in their native countries, which had affected them to some extent, and they felt that the media sought to give distorted information to their audiences. However, the respondents acknowledged that their perceptions of Islam were not dependent on what the media had to say, especially after arriving and residing within the UAE. Comments from the

qualitative study revealed that "what they had been exposed to" (in their home countries) versus "how it was in the UAE" made them eager to learn more about the local traditions, customs, language, culture, and faith. Hence, arriving in Dubai and being exposed to a Muslim society evoked an interest in them to ask questions about Islam. The interviews also revealed that, for some, "contradicting" factors (i.e., what religion said versus how it was implemented and followed) made them want to seek and learn about the Islamic faith. It was emphasized by several non-Muslims that the purpose behind seeking information about Islam was not to convert but to learn about the faith and have a better understanding of the culture and norms of UAE society.

A study showed that most blue-collar workers in Gulf Arab states came from developing countries as a means to escape poverty (Plant 2008; Menon 2013). The UAE is ranked sixth in the world and second among Muslim nations as a migrant host country (The World Bank 2021). Blue-collar expatriates in the present study indicated that the media representation of Islam in their home countries had been negative or they had had limited contact with Muslims. This limited their desire to inquire about Islam or mingle with Muslims, due to "fear" or a "taboo" in their home countries. Collectively, these factors elucidate the reasons why this group searches for spiritual information.

The interview results demonstrated that the most common visitors to Islamic centers were females from low-income groups and with low education (lower than bachelor's degree). Studies by Spoliar and van den Brandt (2020) and Van Nieuwkerk (2006) show that conversion to Islam was common among women, and it happened due to several factors, including marriage to Muslim men and working as housemaids in Muslim households. However, the present study was not intended to understand the reasons for conversion among the respondents; rather, it undertook a comparison of women and men in their levels of interest in acquiring information about the Islamic faith.

In fact, throughout the analysis, it was observed that demographics seem to play an important role in the respondents' decision to seek information about the Islamic faith. Moreover, it was noted that the respondents of certain incomes, castes, groups, education, age, and gender faced certain types of challenges. The non-Muslim and new Muslim respondents' approach to information search and sources varied, which gave the researcher the opportunity to conduct the quantitative study, on the basis of the qualitative result. However, the study of the quantitative analysis has been discussed in another series of this research study.

The results also show that non-Muslims and new Muslims shared different concerns when it came to gathering information about Islam. New Muslims stressed on accessibility, which involved their time effort, and cost to physically reach out to the information sources to get answers. Most of the new Muslims found this inconvenient, especially the women who lacked time due to long working hours, logistical issues, and limited days off from work. For non-Muslims, word of mouth and the cultural and heritage centers were the only available sources. They preferred not to visit Da'wah centers due to limited information about these centers and a misconception that they were suitable only for Muslims or for learning Arabic.

Hence, the overall results indicate that, while Islamic information is available, it is scattered and disorganized. Consequently, the respondents in general expressed a preference to receive this information through a reliable source that was convenient for them. Therefore, an English language Islamic radio proposal was seen as a possible communications solution. The researcher also suggested that radio messaging and digital access should be customized according to the informational requirements of listeners, an issue that is discussed in the next section.

Applying DoI to the Media Model for English Islamic Radio

Figure 4 represents a new media model developed from this research study. It denotes radio broadcast as an independent variable connected to three highly preferred digital mediums among the respondents (English radio website, mobile app, and Facebook). Since traditional media is associated with digitization, the application of the DoI theory as a guiding framework was deemed suitable. The model showed that the radio would be interlinked with Da'wah preachers and scholars at three key venues to achieve uniformity. This media framework was aimed to create a strong network for a flow of information that would be organized, controlled, and easily accessed and could thus help disseminate information more effectively.
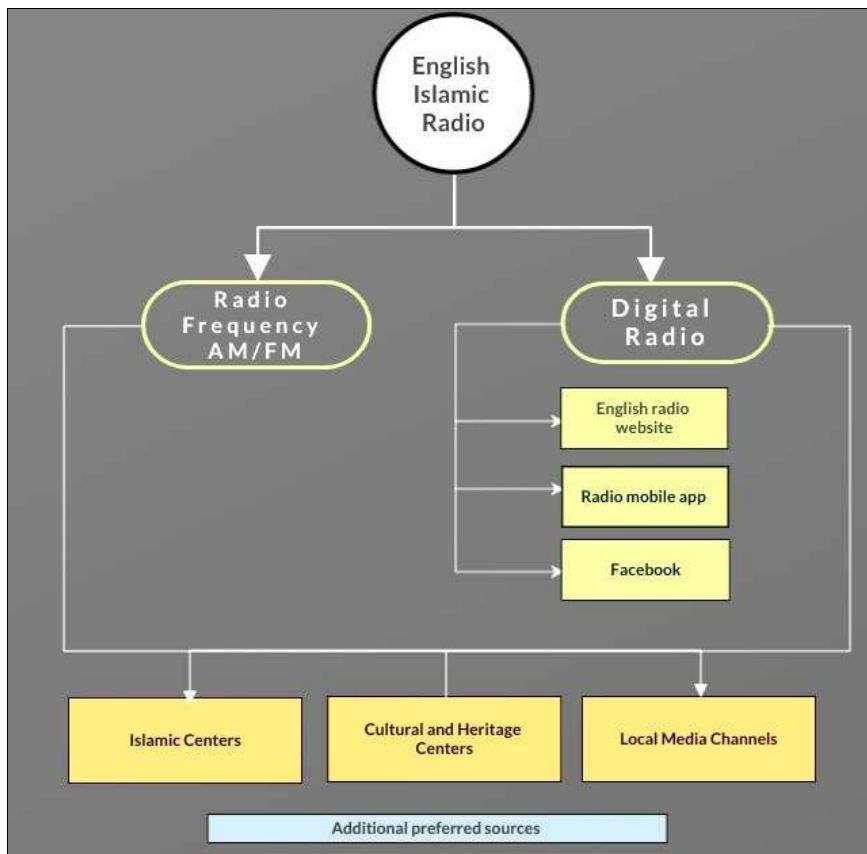
Figure 4: Media Model of English Islamic Radio in Dubai with Key Venues

The media model allows for a two-way engagement where content is created on the basis of audience demand. The digital presence of radio would also allow for information and insights that would spark reflection, awareness, and discovery to get listeners intellectually and emotionally engaged without compromising their privacy. Interactive sessions were preferred to theoretical lectures, which further supports the radio as a suitable platform. Introduction of this media model would mean Islamic scholars would need digital know-how, strong communication skills, and ability to interact well with listeners.

In terms of content, the proposal for an Islamic radio would not only cover Islam as a religion but also as a cultural and social practice and as a way of life, along with its history and

heritage, so to permit audiences (especially non-Muslims) to become familiar with Emirati social rules and norms. Additionally, it would allow Islamic organizations, local media channels, and cultural centers in Dubai to get involved in a single uniform network and utilize the platform for passing on Islamic information to non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The radio has the advantage of being able to reach out to a mass audience and contribute to the social development of society at large. The capability of the radio to reach a large population, both literate and illiterate, gives it more value than other media channels.

The radio, along with its digital presence through three highlighted sources (Figure 4), is predicted to play an important role in raising awareness and disseminating knowledge. Moreover, the Islamic centers, cultural centers, and other media outlets could play an important role in influencing the target audience (early adopters) to adopt this technology. There is a possibility that the Islamic scholars within the centers could facilitate DoI as they have an influential role in persuading followers to adopt new ideas because they are respected, have extended social connections, and are more aware of the visitors' informational needs and other issues. These scholars represent a credible source of Islamic teachings and knowledge, because of which non-Muslims and new Muslims were seen to make personal visits to Islamic centers to acquire information. However, the technology adoption considered is dynamic in the UAE, so these religious scholars need to be more open to and practical about new media technologies in order to gain access to a wider audience.

What may also be inferred from the DoI framework is that this media model is more suitable for low-income, low-education groups mostly comprising women with long working hours and inability to commute to Islamic centers on a regular basis. These people are seeking Islamic information through a reliable medium that is widely available and convenient. Hence, there is a high probability that this target audience could be early adopters within the proposed media model; they would also help promote this model through word of mouth in their social circles.

However, the traits of the early adopters in this research study diverge from the characteristics of a DoI early adopter, where the early adopters have a high social status and a high degree of opinion leadership, or are young, high-risk takers who adopt an innovation. In current study, the target audience had a markedly different demographic. The difference suggests that the DoI theory, as formulated by Rogers in a Western social setting, may not be applicable to non-Western settings. The audience in Dubai, UAE, is different from that envisaged by the DoI theory. Moreover, the media model of the radio and its digital presence is at its initial stage, but the topic is expandable; hence, there is a potential for applying a new theory through further research.

Limitations of the Media Model

The model has shortcomings as there is a possibility, due to several factors, that DoI may not manifest in real life. The current study focuses on a specific audience, new Muslims and non-Muslims, who have different kinds of interest when it comes to seeking Islamic information. Some might seek general knowledge, others might want to convert or clear up a misconception, while still others want to familiarize themselves with UAE culture, traditions, and laws related to the Islamic faith. Therefore, it is difficult to predict as to who this media model can cater to and how. Also, approvals from government institutions, how the media model would be launched, the number of listeners to whom it would be able to cater and with what content are yet to be investigated.

Although English is the most widely spoken language in the UAE after Arabic, expatriates hail from many different parts of the world and do not all speak English, especially among the low-income and low-education residents. So, there is a possibility that the English language could slow down the adoption of the radio medium. Moreover, if the UAE government and the religious institutions see the dissemination of information through the radio as a public domain,

it may lead to either censorship of content or modifications that would weaken its appeal for the audience. Additionally, there is a possibility that the Islamic radio might attract an audience from certain demographics, such as Muslims or middle-income residents with higher Internet accessibility, rather than the target audience as discussed within the research. Another challenge might be for those who have limited access to the Internet, or users might prefer not to download a radio app. Moreover, this model emphasis on recruiting Islamic scholars who possess good Da'wah skills for the radio. They would be required to understand audience needs, be trained to deliver quality content, adapt to the digital aspect of media effectively, and understand the network process for conveying information creatively.

These limitations need to be studied further. Nonetheless, an English Islamic radio with digital accessibility is proposed as an attempt to better disseminate information about Islam. Of all available mediums, the radio has the power to reach a wide audience in their own privacy and at their own convenience.

Conclusion and Further Research

This study aimed to understand the perceptions and experiences of non-Muslim and newly converted Muslim residents of Dubai, UAE, in their attempt to gather Islamic information locally. A media model was proposed for the dissemination of Islamic information in accordance with audience demand and on the basis of their perceptions, experiences, and approaches in gathering Islamic information..

The UAE is known as a land of tolerance. Certainly, Dubai, which is considered a melting pot of cultures, holds the potential to bring Muslims and Islam into a positive light, nationally and internationally. Dubai, as an emirate, has the ability to represent the Islamic faith in a positive light by undertaking some initiatives. The concept of tolerance includes the teaching of multiplicity acceptance, justice and equity, civic engagement, critical thinking, compassion for others, and protection from extremism. These could be implemented in Dubai and in doing so set a benchmark for the other emirates, and the GCC region. From a "digital religion" perspective, an Islamic radio in English may be able to not only create new trends in Islamic learning practice but also construct broader sociocultural practices and help promote tolerance.

Since it is a first exploratory research study, this study had some limitations. The number of participants was small. Also, a majority of the respondents were females with low incomes, which created a disparity in gender and income representation. The study covered two Islamic centers that were government affiliated, whereas the inclusion of private Islamic centers, the Dubai Museum, places of worship, language centers, and educational institutions would have provided a more diverse set of responses from non-Muslims and new Muslims. Moreover, the study was conducted only in Dubai, thus limiting its scope to one emirate.

Further studies could be conducted by involving other Islamic centers, both government and private. Studies might also be conducted specifically on UAE radio listeners to understand the appeal factors in terms of radio programming and content. Such a study could help examine the potential effectiveness of an Islamic radio among listeners and get an idea of how religious information could be presented in an innovative way. Likewise, further research could be done on the ways in which Muslim scholars could gain technological and communication skills to serve the ever-growing expatriate population in the UAE. Finally, a comparative study could also be conducted in other GCC/Muslim countries to evaluate and compare suitable mediums that could help disseminate Islamic information.

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