

# Online Islamic identity and community in Australia and three neighbouring countries

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## ABSTRACT

In Australia, Islam is a controversial religion practiced by a small but growing band of converts alongside migrant Muslim communities from the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia. By contrast, in Indonesia it is the professed faith of the majority of the population yet holds no place in state laws or the constitution of the Republic. In Singapore Islam is practiced within tightly monitored state-imposed boundaries by a Muslim population that comprises the Island's second biggest ethnic/cultural group. Nearby Malaysia though secular in policymaking and socio-political foundations, incorporates Islamic aspects into its governing practices and national identity. Since the early days of its existence, the internet has been the site of alternatives and challenges to the dominant popular discourse that permeates the content and values of earlier media forms such as television and print. Does the internet act to the benefit, or to the detriment, of Muslims in representing themselves and their way of life? If the internet can be used for the benefit of Muslims, in what ways can it do this?

The thesis explores how Muslim identity is constructed and mediated online in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. It provides key parameters that emerge from the overview of the countries studied, and uses these as the basis for the research topic. It then examines five key hypotheses (that national government policies on internet "freedom" will set up a first order structure of constraint that will either facilitate or inhibit free expression and exploration of identity; that government policies on religious freedom and in particular the public expression of symbolic aspects of Islamic identity will contribute to the priority accorded different internet content questions - eg political rights, questions of moral or ethical guidance, and personal relationships; that the political strength of Islam within a society will be demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the ummah; that the social class and economic position of users will affect their access to and use of the Internet, reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society; and that the use of the internet will have an effect on gender relations among adherents to Islam in the four nation-states studied, with particular reference to changing conceptions of Muslim women's roles and responsibilities in the areas of relationship building and participation in public discourse).