

Music and materialism: the emergence of alternative Muslim lifestyle cultures in Britain

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Introduction

In recent years there has been growing public and scholarly interest in British Muslim cultural production. While for the most part inadequately researched, the picture is one of an emergent middle-class generation of British Muslims who are shaping political, social and religious discourse through music, comedy, film, fashion, visual art and other forms of popular culture. While evidently comprised of many different artistic forms, networks and sub-cultures (see Morris 2016), this milieu just about hangs together as a cultural movement and helps to inform alternative Muslim lifestyle cultures for a younger generation of devout British Muslims.

Music has often played a leading role in these developments, particularly with the rise to public prominence of Muslim musicians in Britain during the mid-2000s. This music is characterised by a variety of styles – including nasheed (*a capella* religious songs) and hip hop – and remains a largely sub-cultural phenomenon. However, there are examples of Muslim musicians in Britain who have achieved mainstream and international success. The British-Azeri musician, Sami Yusuf, for example, released his polished, professional and multi-million selling album *My Ummah* in 2005 – an album and subsequent career that has led Sami Yusuf to be regularly listed among the world’s most influential Muslims¹.

In this chapter I consider the production of music by Muslim musicians in Britain, analysing the conceptual, cultural and economic assumptions that underpin the process of producing music. As David Morgan outlines in the opening chapter of this collection, materiality can be analysed through the dimensions of production, specification and circulation. This is a helpful distinction – teasing out various aspects of materiality – but it is a process that equally requires a consideration of the interrelation *between* these stages of materiality. The genitive act of production itself, for example, is informed by a comprehension in the maker of need, usage, reception and wider cultural ideology. I therefore proceed in this chapter to offer a multi-focal analysis of the materiality running through Muslim musical production in Britain. This involves considering the cultural and economic landscape that both limits and enables the production of music by Muslim musicians.

The findings presented here are based on ethnographic research carried out across the UK in 2010-12. This included semi-structured interviews with twenty two Muslim musicians,

¹ <http://themuslim500.com/> [Accessed 19.08.15]

participant observation at musical and cultural events, and an online survey completed by eighty four Muslim music fans. The chapter is organised into three parts, covering musical genre, consumer culture and frameworks of production/distribution. By analysing in turn these conceptual, cultural and economic realities, I aim to demonstrate that Muslim musicians are acutely conscious of their position within a wider Muslim lifestyle culture – one that both shapes and is shaped by a process of musical production.

Muslim Music: Defining a Genre

The act of producing music often brings with it a comprehension of placement within a wider cultural landscape. This involves the implicit or explicit categorisation of music through genre, and a resulting feedback loop that informs the process of production. In producing music, then, British Muslim musicians often debate whether or not there is a particular genre of music that might be labelled ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’. Even those who reject the term recognise that it has some practical and conceptual purchase. In handling the terms ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’ music there tends to be a recognition of three features of such music: (i) music made by Muslim musicians; (ii) music containing self-conscious Islamic or Muslim subjectivities; and (iii) music that has a primary orientation toward a Muslim audience and consumer market. These loose criteria do however conceal various other complexities. I therefore propose a two-fold typology that roughly divides Muslim musicians into one of two cultural streams: ‘Islamic music’ and ‘Islamically-conscious music’.

Islamic music is created by musicians who are more exclusively targeting communal and religious spheres of activity. These musicians produce paraliturgical music – music as a form of worship beyond core religious practice – that strengthens Muslim identity and focuses on local and communal belonging. Such music is produced as a means of connecting directly to Muslim cultural and religious networks, becoming an important cultural product in emergent Muslim markets and public spheres in the UK. The second stream of music – Islamically-conscious music – incorporates a range of musicians that are more ambivalent in terms of their engagement with Muslim networks. It seems to me that while such music might directly reference Islam – and it is certainly inspired by a Muslim worldview – it nonetheless attempts to deploy universal concepts in an effort to reach a wider audience. This music maintains a strong association with Muslim cultural and economic contexts, but it cannot be solely defined by these connections.

The first stream of Muslim music, Islamic music, is overtly immersed within Islamic discourse and attempts to reinforce the moral coherence of a distinct Muslim community. It is

partly defined by sounds and lyrical content that reference the traditions, beliefs and religious figures distinguishing Islam as a unique religion. Yet it also includes music that deals with broader concepts of Islamic morality and spirituality – ranging from love and respect for one’s mother, through to gratitude for the beauty of creation. In all instances there tends to be a clear rootedness in specific Islamic practices or beliefs. I suggest that such music can therefore be conceived as a form of paraliturgical practice. Indeed, it is perceived to exist within a spectrum of Islamic sound that is arguably reminiscent of Lois and Isma’il al-Faruqi’s typology of *handasah al sawt* (al-Faruqi and al Faruqi, 1986). According to this analysis, there is a hierarchy of performative sound directly shaped by a vocal tradition rooted in Quranic cantillation. This tradition holds Quranic cantillation as the exemplar sound, followed in order by: religious chants/poetry (*zikr*, *na’at* etc), vocal/instrumental improvisations, songs with serious themes, and, finally, entertainment music (al-Faruqi and al Faruqi, 1986: 457-459). I believe that Islamic music falls into the second category of this typology – religious chants/poetry – and it is telling that musicians often discuss such music by utilising the concept of ‘remembrance’. As with chanting, *zikr* and poetry, Islamic music is produced intentionally as a form of religious practice, celebration and reaffirmation.

In the UK, Islamic music usually manifests itself in the form of contemporary nasheeds – that is, *a capella* pop songs containing traces of an Islamic poetic tradition. Yet it is important to remember that Islamic music is not confined to any one particular style – it is the words and intent that determine whether music might or might not be considered Islamic. As Amran, from Aashiq al-Rasul explained, Islamic music covers multiple genres:

Who can say it is to do with a particular genre, or that a certain genre only constitutes Islamic music? You can’t say that, because you have today Islamic music composed and performed in many genres or styles like Country and Western, Hip Hop, Rap, R&B. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

Referencing an American Muslim ‘country and western’ musician from rural Oklahoma – Kareem Salama – Amran is suggesting that it is the intention of the musician that marks music out as Islamic, not the actual style or genre of music itself. Indeed, according to Amran and many other musicians, of central importance is the intention to remember God and the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the desire to celebrate Islam and express a Muslim worldview:

Intention is central in a Muslim’s life, in whatever we do, if your intention is sincere, your prayer is accepted... [So] if I were to give a definition of Islamic music, it would be focussing on the words and meanings of the lyrics... Vocally, there are certain words which you could say, are through and through Islamic. They remind or educate the listener about God or Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

Amran is arguing that the intention of the musician connects directly to the experience of the listener. Musicians and nasheed artists are therefore mediators of faith, transmitting religious experience and spiritual emotion through their performance and music. This requires a pureness of intent as well as a pureness of form. It emphasises communal gathering and the sharing of religious experience through the mediated form of music.

An examination of the music produced within this genre clearly demonstrates that four central themes repeatedly emerge to almost the exclusion of anything else:

- Praise to Allah and/or the Prophet Muhammad.
- Celebration of Muslim practice – most commonly Ramadan, Eid, the act of marriage and other practices relating to fasting, charity, prayer and pilgrimage.
- Reaffirmation of Islamic values – often relating to modesty, gender roles and respect for one’s parents.
- Reference to Muslim history – whether specific historical events or highly respected individuals.

The predominant purpose of Islamic music, then, is to strengthen the bonds of communal solidarity and identity through shared beliefs, practices, values and history. In Britain, Islamic music – with an emphasis on tradition and meaning – is overwhelmingly produced in the stripped-down modern nasheed style.

While the celebratory and communal role of Islamic music is perhaps most significant, it is also perceived to act as a form of religious pedagogy. Through Islamic music – in whatever form or style – Muslims are able to learn about their religion in an accessible way. It is suggested that this particularly applies to younger, British-born Muslims, who might struggle to grasp traditional forms of textual learning (which are often based on rigorous commentaries of the Qur’an and Hadith). Muslim musicians therefore often claim that Islamic music enables young Muslims to learn about their faith within a British cultural and social context. This view is shared by many practitioners of Islamic music, all of whom are seemingly happy to accept this broader definition. Yet here a conceptual dilemma is reached – for at what stage does Islamic music broaden its substantive content and simply become ‘music’? I argue that it is possible to identify forms of music that, while textured by an Islamic ethos, cannot be narrowly categorised as ‘Islamic music’. For analytical purposes, I refer to this genre as Islamically-conscious music.

Islamically-conscious music is marked by a desire to universalise the values and beliefs of Islam – to take an Islamic/Muslim worldview and produce music that will resonate with both

Muslims and non-Muslims. Such music will therefore often focus on social and political issues that are especially relevant for Muslims, as well as spirituality and religion in a broader and less specifically ‘Islamic’ sense. The musicians that produce this music are often connected to Muslim cultural networks, but also to other subcultures and genre-specific contexts. This is particularly true of Muslim hip hop musicians, who have specifically discussed their sense of belonging to an ‘underground UK hip hop scene’. In a sense, these musicians – including Poetic Pilgrimage, Mohammed Yahya, The Planets and Quest Rah – are often able to lay claim to both the cultural and religious capital associated with the field of Muslim cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), whilst simultaneously drawing on subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) in the cultural contexts of the UK, European and American hip hop scenes.

While hip hop is the musical style that might most commonly be described as Islamically-conscious music, there are other notable instances, such as the folk-rock of Silk Road, Yusuf Islam’s recent venture back into pop music, and Sami Yusuf’s attempt to create his own genre of music – so-called ‘Spiritique’. As Sami Yusuf has explained, ‘Spiritique’ draws from Muslim musical traditions and expresses Islamic spirituality, but essentially tones down the specific and exclusionary references to Islam itself (references that are characteristic of nasheeds and Sami Yusuf’s own early music):

It incorporates and utilises Middle Eastern and Western harmonics, underpinned by spirituality. It's all-encompassing, all-inclusive... It will utilise music as a facilitator for spiritual appreciation, regardless of race and religion. (Sami Yusuf, quoted in Tusing, 2010)

Sami Yusuf is reacting to the traditional characterisation of his music as ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamic’. He has accordingly altered his lyrical content, shying away from overt Islamic discourse, as well as moving toward an exploration of universal themes around human rights, the nature of worldly existence, and individual spiritual experience. These musicians will also often engage with political issues, particularly relating to geopolitics and a broadly anti-neoliberal agenda. Such themes are typical of music that would be included in this genre, right across the gamut of musical styles from hip hop through to pop music.

Despite variant musical styles, all of these musicians are largely comparable in their attempt to produce music that is inclusive beyond the traditional borders of religious belonging. They tend to reject any form of labelling that would place them squarely and exclusively into an Islamic or Muslim genre, as the hip hop musician Ayman explained:

We’re just making music and we happen to be Muslim as well, we don’t put ourselves in that bracket where we’re Islamic rappers or Muslim artists and rappers. Others may want to do otherwise, but we’ve never approached it that way, we’ve

never really approached it that way. So, if I'm speaking to, you know, if there's an interview with a Muslim radio station or Muslim magazine and they mention it, then I'll talk about it, you know, but we don't use it as a selling point.
(Ayman, 33, October 2011, London)

While Ayman joins numerous other musicians in rejecting a religiously defined label, he nonetheless stresses that his Islamic worldview naturally and visibly emerges through his music. This echoes comments made by other musicians who maintain a similarly cautious approach toward overtly expressing their Muslim identity through music. This includes the guitarist and folk rock musician, Faraz, from Silk Road, who argues that his sense of being is central to his music:

Islam just enthuses the way that we are and we live. We don't need to spell it out all the time, because it just oozes out in how you do stuff and how you see things...
(Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham)

Faraz and Ayman – whilst practicing very different styles of music – are both adamant that their Muslim background provides a rich array of personal and ethical experiences that artistically transcend any need for simplistic definition.

This stress on individuality and a unique Muslim perspective is advanced further by facets of intra-Muslim difference. Musicians regularly argue that they inherently bring their own unique backgrounds, identities and ideas to bear on their music. In doing so it is hoped that they can articulate something of their own individuality, whilst simultaneously providing a cultural point of contact for those with common experiences. Muslim musicians correspondingly raise a number of personal attributes – ranging from race and ethnicity through to gender and class – that they believe have value and should be asserted in the public sphere. The hip hop musician, Muneera, from Poetic Pilgrimage, argues that this is especially true for Muslim women, who are often excluded or misrepresented in other contexts:

It's essential for the voice of women to exist, you know, and we may not always reflect Islamic themes, but us being Muslim, it is a Muslim perspective, we're talking about love. When I'm talking about what I'm looking for in a husband, we're still reflecting that from a Muslim perspective, you know. (Muneera, 29, February 2011, Cardiff)

Islamically-conscious music, then, is not overtly marked by Islamic concepts or by issues typically framed as 'Muslim'. Such music might cover a range of themes; yet all of these musicians would argue that Islam is the central filter through which their experiences and ideas are channelled.

At root, I am arguing that the defining concepts distinguishing Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music are *community* and *individuality*. Islamic music is inseparably linked to a specific religious tradition – it attempts to reinforce Muslim practice, values and belonging through direct engagement with central Islamic discourses. In contrast, Islamically-conscious music is about self-expression and individuality – it places an emphasis on reaching out, rather than laying down the tracks of community. Both genres of music are relevant and valuable, demonstrating the ways through which music can serve different needs. Yet this musical bifurcation furthermore points toward the complex attitude that Muslims in Britain have adopted towards wider society. There is a simultaneous and not necessarily paradoxical desire to reinforce Muslim communal identity, but also to bring Islamic beliefs to play within wider social and cultural conversations.

These artistic decisions are of course not detached from wider cultural and economic factors – musicians are inevitably forced to assess how their music can be ‘placed’ within a viable market. The label they attach to their music can determine exactly who will be willing to listen to (and buy) their music. The hip hop musician Quest Rah – a young and articulate Londoner, with filial roots in Egypt – has taken advantage of the security of a Muslim fanbase but also more recently tried to build a reputation within the wider hip hop scene in London:

It’s about what experiences you’re coming from and what inspires you. If people want to label it, then that’s up to them. There was more of a "Muslim hip hop" scene at the time than there is now, so we were more comfortable with the label. But for the last couple of years, and how I feel now, it’s more of a universal thing, I’ve always had a more balanced and universal approach to music. And I feel there’s enough common principles within Islam that won’t isolate people too. (Quest Rah, 25, October 2011, London)

Quest Rah originally developed his public profile within a Muslim cultural context, billing himself as a Muslim rapper in a Muslim hip hop scene. There were opportunities provided to him here that might not have been available if he had lacked that particular mark of identity. Nonetheless, his desire now is to reach out to a wider audience – a decision that presents both challenges and possibilities. This correspondingly raises the issue of Islamic branding and the role played by an ‘Islamic’ or ‘Muslim’ label in shaping the production of music.

Consumer Culture and Music

Islamic branding is usually understood through the concept of the global halal market – valued at US\$150 billion (Fischer, 2008) – and plays an increasingly important role in providing ‘Islamic’ products and services for Muslim consumers worldwide. Music is bound up with this

developing consumer culture, but what specifically makes it ‘Islamic’? What makes *any* type of consumer or cultural product Islamic? Certain styles of fashion might be considered ‘Islamic’ – with style and religious observance integrated through specific sartorial arrangements (Tarlo, 2010) – as might hajj travel packages (McLoughlin, 2009), Muslim smart-phone apps (Bunt, 2010), or the ‘Islamic Barbie’ (Yaqin, 2007). Yet there are consumer products and forms of culture that have few, if any, implications for Muslim practice. Mecca Cola is often perceived as an anti-neoliberal Muslim consumer product, subverting the traditional dominance of Coca Cola (Aggarwal *et al*, 2011). Does Mecca Cola therefore possess any unique qualities that mark it out as ‘Islamic’ – or does it become Islamic because it targets a specifically Muslim consumer market through clever branding? In the hard-edged world of global marketing, the answer might simply be that the identity of a cultural product is reflected back by the very market that breathes life into it.

Of central importance to the argument I advance here, then, is the suggestion that the production of Muslim music – both Islamic and Islamically-conscious – is influenced by this comprehension of a Muslim consumer market. Growing beyond the simple provision of Islamic religious artefacts, halal food and other functional services, this consumer market is also increasingly about lifestyle and the reworking of mainstream Western products and practices. Little research has yet been done to examine this Islamic consumer culture, but it is worth quoting at length an insightful summary by Nabil Echchaibi:

The stunning growth of the global halal industry... has been accelerated by a wave of religious fervour among a social class of young, educated, and affluent Muslims who, according to the organizers of the World Halal Forum, wish to embrace an ‘Islamic contemporary and global lifestyle’. It is still unclear what this Islamic lifestyle is, but a new market of consumer products, advertising, and commercial media programming is increasingly labeled “Islamic” and slowly contributes to the rise of an alternative culture industry. Like all forms of consumption, such an elaborate Islamic consumer culture has deep implications for identity construction and constitutes a prime stage for the production and reproduction of what it means to be a modern Muslim in the twenty-first century. (Echchaibi, 2012: 31-32)

Taking us beyond the specific characterisation of the halal market as a source of religiously-permitted products, Echchaibi importantly brings the concept of identity to the forefront of Islamic consumerism. There are therefore two possible strands to the conceptualisation of a halal industry – that is, practical and symbolic forms of consumerism.

Practical consumption relates to specific services and products that are required by Muslims for religious observance. This includes, for instance, halal food, prayer mats, beads and books, but also financial services, Muslim marriage websites, non-alcohol-based perfume and hajj

travel packages. Such consumption is essentially about religious practice in some form – from direct religious activity and worship through to the necessary observance of religious strictures. These services and products are largely distributed through Muslim business networks that have developed in order to meet the specific religious needs of Muslims. Such networks include Islamic bookshops, health stores, supermarkets, butchers and clothes shops, but also a growing online presence where all-purpose purveyors of Islamic products can be found.

Islamic music, then, can more often be theorised as a form of *practical* consumption. As I argued earlier, Islamic music is aimed specifically at Muslims as a religious group and should be considered a form of paraliturgical worship. This is reflected in the distribution of such music. Islamic music is regularly sold through business networks that largely reject Islamically-conscious music. This is partly due to the tendency for Islamic music to restrict the use of instrumentation – a controversial issue in the Muslim mainstream – but it also represents the fact that Islamic music sits comfortably alongside recordings of Quranic cantillation and audio lectures. Islamic music essentially serves a similar purpose for many: to facilitate and enhance Muslim religious practice. Walking into most Islamic bookshops around Britain, for example, one might find a selection of nasheeds and other forms of Islamic music arrayed between recordings of Quranic cantillation and books on Muslim lifestyle and Islamic philosophy.

Access to these networks of distribution can be essential for musicians to reach an audience that might otherwise be unreachable. The nasheed artist, Amran, remarked that producing an album without any instrumentation at all – just the human voice – immediately opened up a whole distribution network that was originally closed to his group, Aashiq al-Rasul:

There are many Muslim shops or outlets that would not stock our songs, particularly those with musical accompaniment. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

This particular mode of distribution – through specific sellers of general ‘Islamic’ products and services – serves to reinforce the status and specificity of Islamic music as a form of practical Muslim consumption. These business/religious networks exercise great power in determining to stock and therefore distribute only select and ‘appropriate’ products – everything else is subtly excluded from the Muslim mainstream and correct Islamic practice.

Symbolic consumption differs from practical consumption in the sense that symbolic products and services do not provide a specific religious function, but they are nonetheless still branded as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’. Symbolic consumption is about lifestyle and identity – not necessarily about functionality. A prime example of this might be ‘Eid party plates’. There is no practical reason – based on culture or religion – why ordinary plates cannot be used for Eid

celebrations. The use of such plates instead signifies a declaration of Muslim identity and belonging through material and consumer culture. This is a benign and everyday example, but symbolic consumption is capable of additionally incorporating the socially-charged subversion of mainstream branding and consumer culture. This is often done to critique the failings of wider society, but also as a means to inject Islamic ethics and ideologies into alternative cultural forms. Thus, 'Islamic Barbie' (Yaqin, 2007) becomes the symbolic subversion of popularised sexuality, while Mecca Cola (Aggarwal *et al*, 2011) becomes the rejection of neoliberal hyper-capitalism. Through such products there is the gradual development of an alternative Islamic consumer lifestyle: a movement that advances substantive ethical and religious ideologies through symbolic and material culture. It is a cultural trend that claims to stand in contrast to the failings of mainstream consumer culture – it is in effect a form of ethical consumer culture.

While Muslim music is never purely symbolic – it always contains substantive lyrical content – it is nonetheless part of this alternative Islamic consumer lifestyle. Islamically-conscious music is a means through which Muslims utilise music to challenge the perceived failings of popular culture. Thus, hip hop becomes the ideal vehicle to critique over-consumption, aggressive sexuality, and social malaise. It can do this with particular effect through hip hop, specifically *because* mainstream hip hop so very often represents these specific failings – consider the hip hop stereotypes concerning sex, drugs and gun culture. As the British-Mozambican rapper, Mohammed Yahya, explained, hip hop moved from being a vehicle for moral and intellectual debate to becoming a commodity for corporate profit:

When hip hop started, there wasn't much money involved in it. It was a reflection of the daily experiences of the people that's why they called it the CNN of the ghetto, or the black ghetto... they didn't really have a voice or someone that could speak out for them and represent them. So hip hop became that. But the music industry started changing, more money was pumped into it, and record label requests started growing too. So yeah, it became a business and with every business there are requirements. So unfortunately TV stations like MTV always promote, or give more exposure, to commercial hip hop artists whose labels have large budgets to pay to get on TV and unfortunately whose message is critically watered down. (Mohammed, 29, February 2011, London)

Mohammed and other Muslim hip hop artists believe passionately in their contribution to the 'underground' scene in Britain – that is, a subcultural hip hop network, promoting 'conscious' lyrics and challenging the injustices of the world. This is a return to the perceived authenticity of the original and 'uncorrupted' hip hop culture of the 1980s and 1990s, but it is also a symbolic inversion of the contemporary commercialisation of hip hop. Muslim musicians – across a range of styles and genres – are scathing in their condemnation of 'sell-out' musicians

at the pinnacle of the mainstream music industry. By practising music on a foundation of spirituality and ethical integrity, Muslim musicians argue that they can play a part in gradually altering attitudes toward the excessive lifestyles that are so glorified in contemporary culture. Music therefore becomes an integral part of this alternative consumer lifestyle.

The salience of Muslim music within a broader Islamic consumer culture can be highlighted through a consideration of the burgeoning Muslim clothes industry. Islamic fashion in the UK has been well documented by Emma Tarlo (2010), but nothing has been done to analyse the sartorial arrangements of Muslim musicians in Britain. Muslim musicians adopt a range of fashions: from the smart suits or casual jeans/t-shirts of contemporary nasheed artists, through to the afro-inspired clothing of some African-Caribbean musicians, to the street wear of Muslim hip hop musicians. The deployment of fashionable but culturally varied clothing allows the reimagining of such attire to become an embedded feature within the *habitus* of the ‘global Muslim’.

The hip hop musician Ayman Raze takes this Islamic lifestyle approach further by designing his own range of clothing under the brand name Tawheed Is Unity – an organisation dedicated to Muslim development and expression through the arts. The name Tawheed Is Unity has been derived to evoke the solidarity of Muslims through the belief in one God – although the founder, Ayman, argues that this concept of unity can and should embrace non-Muslims as well. The motivations behind this clothing range are outlined on the Tawheed Is Unity website:

Tawheed Is Unity began in 2006 as the brain child of Ayman Raze as an alternative clothing line for Muslims living in the West. Being involved with Hip Hop since the mid 90's, Ayman recognised the fact that young Muslims are steadily developing their own culture distinct from that of their parents and traditions. Being aware of the fact that whether you listen to Hip Hop or not, this is the Hip Hop generation and fashion is a key emphasis of the sub-culture. Ayman set about developing designs that would both represent Islam and the society and culture we are in. (Tawheed is Unity website)²

The clothing range consists of a selection of ‘sweatshop free’ t-shirts emblazoned with particular designs, several of which have the Arabic slogan ‘*Al Maarifah Quwah*’ [trans. ‘Knowledge Is Power’] across the front. A recent addition to the clothing range involves an inversion of the famous ‘Just Do It’ slogan by the American company Nike – a company notorious for its use of cheap factory labour. This t-shirt (see Figure 1) displays the words ‘Just Dua It’, utilising the Islamic concept of supplication as a means to critique a notorious symbol of excessive Western capitalism.

² <http://tawheedisunity.com/about/> [accessed 22.08.12]



Figure 1: A t-shirt design from the Tawheed is Unity clothing range
(Source: Tawheed is Unity)

Musicians, then, are part of a wider cultural movement that is attempting to provide more than just functional Muslim products, services and cultural forms – it is an attempt to create a consumer culture that is characterised by a visible ethic. As Echchaibi points out, this cultural movement critically uses the ‘toolbox of modernity’ to subvert and reconstruct ‘a “true” modern identity’ (Echchaibi, 2012: 38). Yet this desire to break with the perceived failings of mainstream consumerism raises the question of how exactly these musicians operate within the wider economy. As I shall demonstrate, a financially-sustainable model for producing music – including ticket sales, promotional strategies and business structures – remain important and inseparable characteristics of the ‘Muslim music scene’.

Production Frameworks and Distribution

Professional and semi-professional Muslim musicians rarely operate outside of some kind of organised business framework. The decision that most Muslim musicians must make at some stage is whether or not to channel their professional career through an emerging Muslim cultural economy, or whether to utilise the independent, subcultural business networks that are already in place. It appears that most Muslim musicians choose the former option. While mainstream and smaller independent record companies are of course theoretically available as one route for Muslim musicians, they often choose instead to release their music through companies that operate in an ‘Islamically appropriate’ manner. Either that, or they simply produce and release their music themselves, selling their CDs at events and through the internet. Taking a sample of sixteen different musicians and/or groups, it is possible to examine the production company that they used to record and produce their album – in every instance

Muslim musicians in this sample either signed themselves to an Islamic production company or released their music independently (see Table 1).

<i>Production Company</i>	<i>Musicians/Groups</i>
Awakening Records	4
Meem Music	3
Mountain of Light Productions	1
Safar Media	1
Crescent Moon Media	1
Tawheed is Unity	1
None	5

Table 1: Muslim musicians/groups organised by production company.

The six production companies listed were all established to facilitate the production and distribution of Muslim music. Four of these companies can broadly be described as supporting ‘nasheed artists’, whilst the other two – Crescent Moon Media and Tawheed is Unity – have been established by musicians specifically to help provide a platform for ‘Muslim hip hop’ musicians in the UK. These companies all have an Islamic ethos of some kind and they regulate their activities accordingly. This might include a restriction concerning the use of instrumentation or the management of lyrical content to align with perceived Islamic norms. Several of these production companies furthermore release audio lectures by Muslim ‘*ulama*’ and other figures of religious note. Whether intentional or not, this can sometimes result in Muslim music becoming contained within an arc of religious pedagogy, rather than billed as a more straightforward form of ‘halal entertainment’.

Islamic production companies vary in the support that they are able to offer to musicians. Awakening Records is the most successful Islamic production company, both in Britain and worldwide. Indeed, Awakening Records has taken Muslim music to an entirely new corporate level. Boasting an unconfirmed 500 million customers, Awakening Records supports some of the most successful and lucrative Muslim musicians – including Maher Zain, Hamza Robertson and Mesut Kurtis. Sami Yusuf himself began his career with Awakening Records, releasing his first two albums with the company before an undocumented dispute drove him elsewhere. Awakening Records engages in active media promotion, the organisation of events worldwide, as well the production of both music recordings and associated videos. The individual level of

support provided to the musicians beneath the corporate shield of Awakening is unclear, though it apparently includes regular financial support for selected musicians. There is no doubt that these musicians must have extensive international appeal for such an arrangement to be financially viable – the UK Muslim market is seemingly insufficient by itself to generate the necessary returns. Perhaps for this reason Awakening Records is almost entirely focused on the contemporary pop/nasheed style of music that has so successfully penetrated Muslim markets across the world.

As well as a growth in Muslim production companies, it is also possible to note the tentative emergence of Muslim recording studios. Muslim musicians have in the past used any recording studio that can provide the technical support needed. Yet it is increasingly possible to find recording studios that overtly pitch for an ‘Islamic market’ (see Figure 2).

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Figure 2: An advertisement for a recording studio in Birmingham (Source: Audio Dawah)

It is not entirely clear how an Islamic recording studio might offer a different service to a ‘non-Islamic’ recording studio. Yet the very emergence of these studios does serve to demonstrate

two important points. First, there is clearly a growing technical and professional pool of expertise amongst Muslims in Britain, along with the business and financial resources that are required to sustain them on a commercial footing. Second, the demand for these services perhaps does something to indicate the interest in utilising audio recordings as a form of *da'wah* (religious invitation) by Muslims in Britain. Through its mission statement, the production company Crescent Moon Media vividly illustrates the desire that some Muslims have to use sound as a form of *da'wah*:

Crescent Moon Music is a company that was set up to show the beautiful side of Islam. All of the artists are talented musicians but are also Muslims. They enjoy talking about the deen and believe that the arts is probably the most powerful way to talk to the youth. The main aim of the company is to bring good music to the listener. The company also wants to give dawah to non-Muslims and to show them that not all Muslims are terrorists.³

This combination of growing expertise and interest in utilising sound recordings for *da'wah*, hints at the possibilities of a British Muslim music/audio market. While it is perhaps unlikely that the cassette culture of Egypt and other Muslim majority countries will be replicated in Britain (Hirschkind, 2006), one might speculate that Muslims in Britain could potentially be at the forefront of English-language recordings relating to Islamic teachings and beliefs – from nasheeds and hip hop through to audio lectures, Islamic adverts and audio books. The vital role that British Muslims could play within an emerging English-language Islamic audio culture on the internet is certainly within the bounds of speculation.

Ironically though, it is partly through the difficulties posed by the internet that Muslim musicians have found themselves confronted by a challenging market environment. One of the concerns raised by Muslim musicians is the difficulty that they have in supporting themselves as professional musicians – this is in spite of the potential offered by a niche Muslim consumer market. While there are exceptions, most Muslim musicians view themselves as ‘struggling artists’. Yusuf Islam and Sami Yusuf might have little difficulty in selling their music on a large scale, but for the most part Muslim musicians cannot rely on generating income as a professional musician. Internet downloading is often blamed for this difficulty. It is because of this financial context that almost every Muslim musician in Britain is engaged in employment unconnected to their role as a musician. This includes musicians who work as teachers, youth and community workers, charity fundraisers, bankers and managers. Muslim musicians are

³ <http://www.myspace.com/crescentmoonmusic> [accessed 21.11.12]

essentially a cohort of successful professionals who use the remainder of their time and energy to write, record and perform their music.

In asking why this might be the case it is necessary to consider exactly how Muslims in Britain access such music. The extent to which Muslim music fans are willing to pay for a recording, or for entry to a concert, determines the overall professional character and viability of Muslim music as a self-supporting cultural and economic venture. The online survey that I conducted with Muslim music fans provides an insight into this issue. It is of course necessary to account for the inbuilt biases of the survey itself: it is an internet survey and it specifically targets self-identified Muslim music fans. Nonetheless, it helps us in beginning to construct a picture of Muslim music consumption.

The survey was distributed to approximately 1,500 British Muslims – that is, those who have used social media to self-identify their interest in Muslim musicians. There were 83 returns – a response rate of 5.6% – representing a fairly normal return for an internet survey (Sue and Ritter, 2007). The survey consisted of 39 questions, 4 of which asked specifically about music consumption. Q.15 asked respondents to rank on a scale of 0-5 how important a particular method of listening to music is for them:

Ranking	A	B	C	D	E	<i>Key</i>
0	7	14	21	20	22	A - Through the Internet
1	3	4	9	13	5	B - Another media source (radio, television etc).
2	4	7	10	11	5	C - Through recordings bought in a shop
3	6	15	12	15	15	D - Borrowing or copying recordings
4	11	18	8	5	9	E - Live music or singing.
5	40	14	8	6	14	

Table 2: Online survey Q.15: ‘If you listen to music, please indicate how important the following methods of listening are for you.’

The most striking figure relates to the internet. Of the 71 people who responded to that particular category, 40 marked the internet as being of the highest importance as a method of listening to music. In contrast, far fewer respondents placed any great importance on recordings purchased in a shop, with 21 ranking shop-bought recordings as of the lowest importance. Alternative sources of media and live performances are a little more evenly distributed in their importance for respondents, although none equal the seeming significance of the internet.

While music can of course be purchased for a fee through the internet, these findings do suggest a weighting towards a method of consumption that increasingly holds little financial cost to the individual (e.g., illegal downloads and free streaming). This is certainly comparable with the situation facing the wider UK music industry, where there has been a notorious turn away from music retail outlets to online shopping, illegal downloading and freely distributed music on the internet. As David Kusek and Gerd Leonhard (2005) presciently argued, music has gone from largely being a purchasable physical product – such as vinyl, tapes and CDs – to cultural information that is accessed through new media technology (often at no cost). In this new and evolving environment, it has been suggested that musicians and the associated music industry must turn away from music sales as traditionally conceived, to instead focus on live performance, merchandise and sponsorship/advertisement (Kusek and Leonhard, 2005).

The survey is only one strand of data and should be viewed with caution, but it does support additional ethnographic findings that reach similar conclusions. Indeed, the internet almost certainly undermines the actual sale of music. Amran – a long-standing nasheed performer with experiences of the music market that reach back into the 1990s – has argued that it is increasingly difficult to sell music because of illegal downloading:

We headlined an event at Trafalgar Square, where there were twenty five to thirty thousand people in the audience and everyone is singing our songs. We sang five or six songs and they're familiar with all of them. They must have listened to them from somewhere... but this doesn't reflect in sales, so most probably it's illegal downloading or sharing. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

Amran is echoing a concern that many Muslim musicians have in relation to selling their music. They recognise that the internet has unavoidably taken CD sales away from them and fundamentally undermined their ability to make a full-time living out of being a musician. Yet musicians acknowledge that the internet is important as a tool to raise their profile, connect with fans, and sustain the kind of musical and cultural scene that is required to generate an interest in their music. Several musicians have remarked – particularly in relation to hip hop and other niche genres of music – that their particular music scene *only* exists on the internet. In a sense, then, while it is possible to identify the emergence of a fragile market base that can support Muslim musicians, the countervailing nature of the internet nonetheless encourages the emergence of a powerful amateur cultural movement.

The future of a distinct Muslim music market therefore looks mixed. Particular forms of music with global appeal to an Islamic market will no doubt continue to thrive, but there will often be clear boundaries concerning style and lyrical content. Islamic pop and nasheeds, for example, must necessarily be inclusive enough to appeal across different Muslim markets,

ranging from Britain and the United States through to Egypt and Indonesia. Conversely, alternative forms of music produced by Muslim musicians – including hip hop, folk rock and various syncretic styles – will most likely continue either as a semi-amateur movement in a Muslim sub-cultural context or as part of a genre-specific sub-culture (e.g., an underground hip hop scene). Despite these differences in trajectory and content, a common feature for British Muslim musicians will continue to be a high degree of self-consciousness. The societal context for Muslims in Britain – and indeed more widely – is evolving rapidly through generational, institutional and cultural change. Musicians are therefore not only grappling with these changes, but as producers of a material product they remain mindful of where their music fits within a mixed cultural landscape and global economic market.

Acknowledgements

This research was carried out at the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK, Cardiff University, with generous funding provided through the Jameel Scholarship Programme. Special thanks are due to Professor Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Dr John Morgan O’Connell for their invaluable contribution.

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