

When faith meets Facebook

They are the Futurists:

a group as ready to assert their spending power as they are to defend their religion.

From this year's Grand Prix-winning entry, a profile of the new generation of Muslim consumers, by *Nazia Du Bois (née Hussain)* with *Tanya Dernaika*.



It is tempting to draw on what we feel we know about the global Gen Y or Millennial generation to point at similarities between the Futurists and any savvy young consumer group in the world today. But what we've found is that Futurists are differentiated by how much they see themselves as champions of Islam and its steadfast followers in the modern



world. Having conducted their own research into their faith, they embrace religion wholeheartedly and as a matter of personal choice and pride. In this they feel they are driven by a purpose, and that purpose is strikingly different to other non-Muslim youth groups around the world.

As arguably the first generation of educated, discerning and globally travelled young Muslim consumers the world has known, the Futurists deserve to be seen as their own entity, fascinating in their own right.

Let's start with where they themselves are coming from. Today's Muslim consumer is both vastly different and more diverse in mindset compared to yesterday's, having come of age in a world where religious identity has assumed a completely new level of importance, as well as a world of information in which debate and discussion rather than unquestioning acceptance are the cornerstones of modern religious practice. If we start with religious identity, the first thing worth establishing is that the Futurists feel fairly misunderstood and misrepresented as



young Muslims in the world today. As a result, one of their core drivers is to seek to redress that balance.

It is worth exploring this in a bit of depth. The Futurists (due to the younger age skew of all three component segments) are the generation that really has grown up in the shadow of 9/11. Widely accepted as the day that changed the relationship of the Muslim with the non-Muslim world, the Futurists cannot help but be shaped by the enormous political and cultural consequences of those events that continue into the present day. As the Gallup research spanning 2001–2007 clearly showed, the vast majority (93%) of respondents in predominantly Muslim markets clearly ‘condemned the events of September 11, 2001’. The remaining 7% are those that are referred to as the radically politicised. But they count for a small minority in the eyes of the Futurists (all of whom, it goes without saying, belong to the majority 93%, as per our research sample screenings).

Attitudes to the West

The Futurists have had to grow up in a world in which religion is highly sensitised, politicised and polarising. As Kofi Annan put it in 2004, “When the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry, it is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with ‘Islamophobia’.” Theirs is the unfortunate world in which new words have had to be coined to address the religion-based conflict prevalent in much of society.

The authors of *Who Speaks for Islam?* argue that there are three filters through which the majority of young Muslim men and women today view Western – and, they note, particularly American – actions and words today: perceived cultural disrespect, the perception of political domination, and the reality of acute ongoing conflicts in the world today. This is important to bear in mind as a global brand when approaching the Muslim consumer.

There are ingrained sensitivities towards even the smallest of cultural slights, for example references to the ‘backwardness’ of any Muslim community. Too often marketers have fallen prey to glib segmentations of Muslim consumer groups along the lines of impoverished ‘religious conservatives’ to more affluent ‘modern liberals’ with the implicit assumption that the very devout would not be open to, or able to access, modern consumption in all its forms.





This has roots in the deeper socio-political misconception that terrorism and extremism arise out of a combination of religious fanaticism, poverty and unemployment (which has now been widely disproven, as the high levels of education of terrorists since 2001 have attested to), and by the simple fear and apprehension that many global brands feel when tasked with thinking about these consumer groups. We agree that this is a sensitive conversation to take a voice in. But we believe that the real opportunity is to move on from this conversation and take a wider view altogether, informed with a knowledge of real people, not labels.

Behaving in a Shariah-friendly manner

There is an enormous opportunity to get it right by talking to Muslim consumers empathetically on their own terms, and to consequently ensure long-term profitability with them. A refrain emerging from our own research is not to patronise Muslim consumers, either as simple-minded in not knowing what they want, or as simply wanting to follow Western ways and models wholesale, neither of which is the case.

Instead, global brands are excellently placed to succeed by demonstrating a deep empathy with exactly those cultural mores that Muslims feel are most misrepresented by the mainstream media. Global brands often count as ‘the West’ in Muslim consumers’ minds, but in reality, by occupying a relatively depoliticised ground, they are in the perfect position to counter misgivings on the part of the Muslim consumer by instead demonstrating their knowledge of and empathy with their religion. The next step, and the one we believe is likely to consolidate the place of such brands in the hearts and minds of Muslim consumers, is to actually behave in a manner that demonstrates the understanding of some of these core principles themselves, i.e. behaving in a Shariah-friendly manner.

As the new generation of Muslim consumers, the Futurists have felt misrepresented by the often simplistic tendencies of global media coverage to band young Muslims into either ‘terrorists’ or ‘liberals’, or to stereotypically represent the whole Muslim population as one homogeneous group, sharing identical lifestyles, mindsets and consumption habits, regardless of generation, background or values. They know that neither of these are fair, and want to be

seen, heard and understood for what they are and what they believe in their nuanced entirety. Above all, they want to be respected.

The new world that they’ve come of age in has also offered them opportunities unthinkable to generations before. They are globally connected like never before. They love to travel and improve themselves. They’re better educated than previous generations and they know what they want to get out of life – focus and drive are very important for them.

The ever-widening Muslim diaspora of immigrant communities and increased travel have led to an enhanced assertion of Muslim identity both as a reaction to the threat of its potential dilution, but also a spread of new and enriching cultural influences. They’re increasingly the generation with the most spending power and we believe this is set to grow. Crucially, they tend to earn it themselves, and spend it on themselves. This gives their consumption a role to play in defining who they are as individuals, in defining their sense of ‘self’.

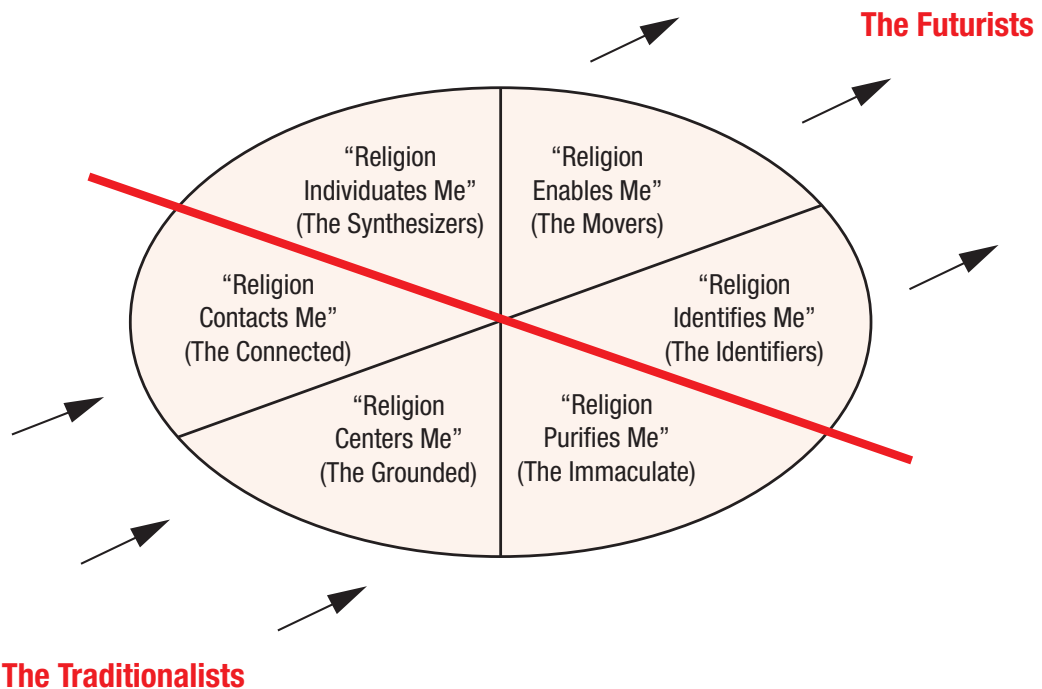
One of their key characteristics in fact, and one that places them in stark contrast to the Traditionalists, is exactly how far they have redefined the notion of the ‘individual’ within Islam. Within the context of the mores of a collectivist Muslim community, they are redefining their lifestyles to embody what some have called a new ‘soft individualism’. This means balancing individualistic tendencies that they feel they cannot get ahead without today, with traditional beliefs in the sustained power of the collective. Every day, they straddle both worlds and craft modern identities without losing touch with their roots.

Providing a sense of identity

First and foremost, they are proud to be Muslim. Their pride in being Muslim is sky-high – at 62% agreement, it is by far the highest agreement we found to any value in the course of our research. The Futurists’ strong sense of self-awareness and religious identity is manifested in all aspects of their lives, from the way they choose to express themselves through clothes and accessories, to their interest and pursuits, and their media and consumption choices. Even more than the Traditionalists at 11%, Futurists see Islam as giving them a ‘sense of identity’ (17%). Their religion is their own choice, and not due to external pressure. They see themselves as unique in this, as previous generations were brought up Muslim and there was very little questioning about it.



Segmentation of Muslim consumers: how religion affects consumption



They feel incredibly strongly that it is Islam that “gives life purpose and direction” – 38% agree, compared with 21% of the Traditionalists. And in our experience we have found that even those Futurists who would not describe themselves as ‘practising’ or ‘devout’ would still feel extremely proud of their religious values and protective of them as a result (this is often the case in a market like Turkey, for example).

They believe in the struggle. The much-misunderstood and much-misused word jihad literally means ‘to struggle’, and should be interpreted purely as the struggle to be on the true path to God. It has no inherent connotations of ‘holy war’ whatsoever. Futurists are part of a new generation of believers who share their parents’ love of religion and consider a life devoid of spirituality as empty, but they have matured in very different and challenging times. For them the daily struggle is to remain true to their faith whilst carving out success – 21% of them say they need “courage to face life’s challenges” (Traditionalists 18%). They are struggling to be successful in a world that offers much less of the political and economic stability enjoyed by previous generations, and all this at a time where they have often been stigmatised by global media, compelling them to defend their cultural and religious identity against attack.

Rather than wanting to feel “protected and cared for” by their religion (10% agreement, compared with 15% for the Traditionalists), the Futurists strongly believe instead that it is their duty to “protect Islam from Western media influences” (23% vs. 14% of Traditionalists), as they strive to bridge two worlds.

They believe in knowledge and education. Thanks to access to better standards of education, coupled with support and encouragement from parents who recognise both the importance of education and building their children’s self-esteem and confidence, Futurists are better informed and more aware of their place in the world than their parents’ generation. In recent years, many predominantly Muslim countries have achieved great success in raising their schooling and literacy standards across genders. Today’s young consumers crave being useful – they’re not content to sit back and watch, and they don’t expect to have it done for them. Young Saudi women agree strongly that women should be able to work in whatever they are qualified for. “I wish they could do anything I couldn’t do in my life, such as continue their education and have their talents fulfilled... to be a useful person for this society and to prove their presence”, a young Saudi respondent said of her hopes for her children, reflecting her own.

Knowledge: not a luxury but a right

In a world where governments cannot afford handouts to their rapidly-expanding populations and unemployment is on the rise, young people are aware that they can only depend on themselves to provide financial security. Progress and prosperity through meritocracy, values that were not prevalent in the past, are now considered aspirational to the new generation. For this reason, Futurists consider education and hard work as essential tools to help shape their own futures, and carve an edge for themselves in a more competitive marketplace.

They are also very inspired by the new generation of Islamic scholarship that has arisen in recent years as a result of the increasing levels of education. As Ibrahim Kalin at the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, Ankara, puts it: “The West is no longer the only worldview to look up to. There are other ways of sharing the world and negotiating your place in it.” The Futurists are anxious to have a say in these conversations that will shape the future.

They believe in the right to ask questions. Surrounded by a world of information, the Futurists view knowledge less as a luxury and more as a right. This is the reason that young Muslims in strictly governed countries with little press freedom are so much more frustrated than the generations before them. They are the most questioning, challenging generation of Muslims the world has seen – constantly seeking discrepancies in what they are told, and seeking self-improvement through the spirit of positive investigation. They are unafraid to probe on issues even if they are unsettling – 17% agree that it’s important for them to “not follow blindly” compared with 10% of the Traditionalists.

They source their information widely, from religious leaders (26%) to business leaders (15%), reflecting a new openness in their agenda. It’s also interesting that they tend to have more time for intellectuals (16% compared with Traditionalists’ 13%), and thought-leaders, preferring to take guidance from modern-day religious scholars (46%) over the actual Qur’an (31% compared with Traditionalists’ 40%). They feel more of a need to personalise and interpret their faith to suit their needs, so are open to credible guidance on how to do so. They also believe in their right to insist on their rules being followed.

As consumers, they are much more discerning of whether the goods and services they buy meet their personal and religious standards – according to an expert we spoke to in Malaysia, “the more educated the Muslims are today, the more awareness among themselves to follow the Shariah rules.” They probe more deeply on whether those rules are being followed through properly – while 35% agree that seeing halal certification is important to them, they are certainly not content to stop there, typically asking deeper questions around business practices and profits than the Traditionalists.

The natural consequence of improved education and exposure to wider sources of influences is a more vocal, challenging and confident generation, that is less afraid to question the intentions of governments, leaders, companies and brands and hold them accountable for their actions.

They believe in getting ahead without compromise. Despite the challenges of today’s harsher world, Futurists are born strivers, refusing to be disheartened by the status quo or to feel pressured to compromise their Muslim values in order to fit in.

The Futurists see Islam’s potential to grow, form and fit into an ever-changing world – 22% of them appreciate “flexibility within boundaries” compared with 16% of Traditionalists. Politically, environmentally and habitually, they strive to sustain an Islamic way of life that exists in harmony with their own modern lives – 25% see Islam as “adaptable to suit individual needs”. Ambitious and assertive, they think it’s more important to be ‘progressive’ (15%) than it is to be ‘harmonious’ (3%).

All this data points to a massive shift in how they see their place in the world as one that can and must be earned, not taken for granted. “Your education and your career are your weapons”, they say, and they naturally “question barriers to achievement” more than the Traditionalists (10% vs. 6%). They believe strongly in the active power of Islam, in a way that no one has voiced before.

Standing out from the crowd

They are active, not passive, in all aspects of their lives (all three component segments fall into the active upper end of the NeedScope™ spectrum). They believe in using Islam as a way of solving the problems they face in their lives – pulling out learnings and actioning them to bring about positive change. Not for them the ‘modesty’ that Traditionalists strive



to achieve (17% vs. 28%). They are comfortable being louder, standing out, voicing their opinions. But key to it all remains ‘respect’ and ‘responsibility’ – at 32% agreement each, these are the attributes that drive modern Futurists today to achieve all that they can. They believe in striving for seamless integration of a more globalised lifestyle into their own culture, but without compromising their strong religious beliefs and convictions.

In a world in which most global goods and services have not been created with their needs in mind, the Futurists are extremely resourceful in taking them up and shaping them into their lives. They are early adopters of technology and the first to know what is out there for them to use (telecommunications companies regularly use the Middle East as a test market for the launch of innovative new products). We’ve found that their creativity comes out most when they see an opportunity to blend, customise and tailor, crafting their individualities out of both the modern and the traditional in every aspect of their consumption. True to their nature as expressive synthesisers, they will pick and choose from whatever is on hand to define their style. This can be a great opportunity for brands to get involved in the process of creativity, expression and identity shaping.

They take no prisoners. Not for them the reliance on patience (17%), forgiveness (16%) and compassion (12%) that the Traditionalists demonstrate so well (26%, 23% and 22% respectively). No, for the Futurists, merit must be earned, and success is the greatest driver of them all (24% seek signs of success over 14% of Traditionalists).

Once one has genuinely transgressed in the eyes of the Futurist, it is a long, slow and painful crawl back up into their esteem, if at all. Neither Traditionalists nor Futurists have much time for the ‘atonement for one’s sins’, at 5% and 7% agreement respectively, but perhaps it is heartening that the Futurists are just a little bit more open to the thought.

They’re connected. There’s no doubt that satellite television, the internet and the advances of technology have connected the new generation to the rest of the world, opening their minds and introducing new perspectives. This has affected the Futurists in a few main ways.

Firstly, they have broader sources of guidance and influence than ever before – 12% say they regularly consult religious web media, compared with 9% of Traditionalists. Secondly,

they are connected, to a wider, flatter Ummah than ever before. Muslim youth in Lahore exchange Ramadan tips with youth in Dakar and Jakarta at the tap of a keyboard, allowing a freedom of exchange never before possible.

Blogging: anonymity breeds content

The Traditionalists used to imagine the presence of the wider Ummah spiritually; the Futurists use the internet to actively live those connections in reality. Also, they can discuss things with an immunity they’ve never had before. Whole topics of knowledge can flourish in investigation under screen-names and blogging anonymity. (Blog content cannot be easily tracked, encouraging a new honesty.) Women make up 46% of Saudi Arabia’s blogging community, a higher percentage than most other countries, according to *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent*, a 2009 study by Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

While social networking sites provide less of a forum for complete candour compared with blogs (95% of female Saudi Facebook users only post photos of their hands or their



eyes as profile pictures), they nevertheless provide a forum for genuine social connection – particularly between the sexes – that is an education in its own right.

And lastly, it has awakened in them a sense of their collective power and the responsibility that comes with that power.

The result of all this is a new generation of young Muslims who feel more knowledgeable, empowered, connected and involved than ever and less afraid to ask difficult, or previously unaskable, questions.

Perhaps most significant is their belief in Islam as a tool to bring about positive change. Despite not having created the situation they face on many fronts – political, economic and social – they still feel they have a responsibility to play a part in cleaning it up. In their unshakeable youthful optimism about the power of the future itself, they wholly live up to our term for them. They strongly believe that they have a key part to play in the future of the world.

The Futurists believe more than anyone in the power of their religion to change things for the better. Islam to them is just as much a force to hold societies together as it is a potent force in political and social change.

We've looked at the world of the new Muslim consumer in great depth and conveyed how important we feel it is for brands today to understand quite how unique they are as a consumer generation, but without losing sight of the Traditionalists.

The Futurists are creating their own cultural context on a daily basis, synthesising different worlds and opinions in the way they choose to live. Seen collectively, they really are a new kind of Muslim consumer. They are at once welcoming and challenging, and need to be approached carefully, with knowledge and flexibility. To get close to them, to be loved and trusted as part of their inner circle, will become a kind of marketer's holy grail in the years to come. We think it will be achieved by the most empathetic brands – those who genuinely understand what the world looks like through the eyes of the Futurists themselves. ■

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Brands, Islam and the New Muslim Consumer: How to Build Brands That Appeal to Muslims Today

Atticus Abstract



Home advantage

Globalization Does Not Imply Homogenization
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Millward Brown, Fairfield CT

The author of a book called *The Global Brand*, Nigel Hollis looks at the other side of the coin in this short article which argues that local cultures and local brands will have an important

part to play in the future. All other things being equal, he says, the local brand has the edge because of 'home field advantage' and will give global brands a run for their money.

Evidence for this can be seen in individual brands such as Walkers potato chips in the UK or soft drink Guarana Antarctica in Brazil. One reason for this is that global communication strategies have to be adjusted and inevitably lose something in translation, while for all the impetus behind globalization, countries like Korea and Japan have shown few signs of losing their unique culture – which may well set a precedent for others in the years

ahead. And while the internet is often perceived as ushering in globalization, it is empowering local cultures at the same time, for example through bloggers promoting local brands and consumer choices in their own languages.

Hollis asserts that global brand owners can no longer enter new markets with the assurance of superior quality or desirability, and they now have to win hearts and minds. Research, listening and appreciation of other cultures will become ever more important and the one-size-fits-all approach to branding will be overtaken by a more nuanced approach. ■

