DIGITALIZATION AND TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM: THE CASE OF THE HIZMET MOVEMENT IN FINLAND

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This article explores how digitalization shapes the religious and everyday lives of Muslims in Finland, focusing on the Hizmet Movement. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and literature, I argue that digitalization strengthens the transnational dimensions of religious life by sustaining connections, enabling religious learning, and fostering a sense of belonging across borders. In Finland, digital practices also facilitate psychosocial support and professional skill development, supporting integration. While radical actors can exploit the same technologies, the case of Hizmet Movement shows how organized civic transnational networks strategically use digital tools to rebuild community and resilience in exile.

Keywords: Digitalization, Finland, Hizmet Movement, Muslims, Transnational Islam

Introduction

This article is based on doctoral ethnographic research that I conducted on the Hizmet[1] Movement (HM) in Finland in 2021–2025. Initially founded in Türkiye in 1966 as a small Islamic community (*cemaat*), HM has today evolved into a transnational Islamic movement with a presence in more than 160 countries. Its activities primarily focus on education, dialogue, and humanitarian aid. Following the alleged coup attempt in Türkiye on July 15, 2016, the Turkish government held HM responsible, designated it as a terrorist organization, and launched a widespread crackdown on its volunteers (I refer to the members as "volunteers" in my research, reflecting the way they self-identify). As a result, tens of thousands of volunteers have been forced to flee, seeking asylum worldwide, particularly in Europe and the US (Weller 2022). Finland, though not a primary destination, became one of the countries where HM volunteers resettled. Before 2016, HM had only a limited presence in Finland, unlike countries such as Germany or Denmark, which have long-established Turkish communities. However, the post-2016 forced migration has significantly altered this dynamic: over 1,500 HM-affiliated refugees have since settled in Finland, and four officially registered HM-related associations have been established.

HM has utilized digital tools since its early years, initially through the distribution of cassette tapes and video recordings of sermons by its founder, M. Fethullah Gülen (1941–2024). Over time, the movement expanded its media outreach, effectively using various platforms, including film production, to disseminate its message (Vicini 2015). However, following the forced migration of its volunteers and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of digitalization became significantly more central in the lives of both individual volunteers and the movement itself. This article presents how digital technologies have become essential tools for religious learning and practice, supporting Islamic movements, shaping identity, maintaining transnational connections, and facilitating integration in the Finnish context.

1 In Turkish, the term hizmet literally means "service." However, the term carries a distinctly spiritual connotation, often understood as "religious service" within the context of the HM and other religious communities originating from Türkiye. Specifically, in the HM framework, hizmet refers to engaging in all forms of activity while consciously seeking God's sake.

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Transnational Islam and Digitalization

Transnational Islam refers to the varied religious, social, and political activities that connect Muslims across national borders. Both state and non-state actors shape these activities and include personal and communal ties, Islamic movements such as HM or the Tablighi Jama'at, and outreach by Muslim-majority states like Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. Also included are efforts by international Islamic institutions and the concept of the *ummah*, or the global Muslim community (Dikici 2021). Even as nation-states continue to shape migrants' legal status and social conditions, transnational networks increasingly influence the daily experiences of Muslims in the diaspora. These connections affect not only individual identities and religious practices but also reshape host societies by introducing new forms of solidarity and public discourse. In today's digital age, especially, such ties have become more prominent and accessible (Dikici 2021).

Digitalization is transforming migration and religious life worldwide, fundamentally altering how diverse communities engage with identity, belonging, gender, and ethnicity in transnational contexts. Religious and diasporic groups are increasingly utilizing online platforms to maintain networks, preserve cultural traditions, and negotiate authority across borders. In this context, digitalization has significantly changed how Muslims access religious knowledge and participate in their religious practices. The traditional reliance on local scholars and physical institutions has shifted toward online resources, including apps, online courses, digital Qur'an tools, and virtual theological programs (Wahid 2024). Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools filled the gap left by closed mosques and reduced in-person interaction. Social media influencers gained visibility, challenging traditional religious authority structures (Zaid et al. 2022). This digital shift also affects core religious practices. For example, zakat (one of Islam's five pillars, which refers to the obligatory allocation of a portion of annual income or wealth to charity), traditionally given in person, is now facilitated via digital platforms, illustrating how technology is integrated into longstanding

rituals (Akbar 2024). From the early use of cassette tapes and video recordings by movements like HM (Vicini, 2015) to modern-day social media (Zaid et al., 2022), Islamic movements have adopted digital platforms. They use these platforms not only to spread messages but also to build community, attract followers, and mobilize support across continents (Mandaville 2001; Tsagarousianou 2016). Mandaville (2001) introduced the concept of digital Muslim identities, showing how online spaces enable expressions of faith and community that transcend national borders. Similarly, Tsagarousianou (2016) has described a diverse European Muslim media space used for education, spiritual growth, and community building. These digital spaces enable the construction of translocal identities and foster a sense of belonging among geographically dispersed Muslims.

This digital connectivity has broader implications for integration and activism. Studies on the Somali diaspora indicate that new media facilitate the maintenance of cultural ties, promote local and transnational political engagement, and support identity formation (Kok & Rogers, 2017). Mihaela Nedelcu (2012) argues that digital tools have fostered a new transnational habitus, enabling individuals to maintain ties across multiple locations, participate in various societies, and shape their identity through everyday digital practices. Together, these examples highlight how digitalization enables Muslims in the diaspora to sustain transnational connections, whether for religious learning, cultural identity, or broader social and political engagement. The following section examines how the dynamics of digitalization and transnational Islam unfold specifically in the Finnish context.

Digital Practices and the Everyday Lives of Muslims in Finland

Historical and Demographic Context of Muslims

Muslim history in Finland dates to the 19th century, when Tatar and Bashkir soldiers arrived in the country. The Tatars formed the first organized Muslim community and established the first mosque in Finland. After the Tatars, there was a long gap before other Muslim communities began to settle in the country. From the 1990s onwards, Muslims began arriving mainly as refugees and through family reunification. After the arrival of these newcomer Muslims, both the public and academia began to pay more attention to Muslim communities, and research on the topic started to increase. According to data collected in 2019, there are approximately 130,000 Muslims in Finland, representing a wide range of national and cultural backgrounds (Martikainen & Kuusisto 2025). The average age within this population is relatively low, with a majority consisting of youth and children (Pauha 2017). As Muslims have grown in number and become more visible, research about them has also expanded.

Digitalization in Muslim Communities in Finland

Digitalization has wide-ranging implications for migrant populations and religious communities in Finland, extending beyond the sphere of Muslims. Existing research demonstrates its impact across multiple domains: for instance, Russian-speaking migrants are required to develop digital and administrative literacies to navigate welfare systems (Safarov 2023), while studies on asylum-related migrants show how internet use and smartphone adoption evolve across migration trajectories, with differences of gender and educational background diminishing over time (Merisalo & Jauhiainen 2019). Against this wider backdrop, the case of Muslims in Finland illustrates how digitalization specifically shapes religious learning, belonging, and identity. One recent example is the research by Maija Butters and Terhi Utriainen (2025), which explores how Muslims in Finland, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds and Finnish converts, use digital tools to learn about Islam. Their findings show that platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Islamic websites, and religious apps play a central role in learning practices ranging from prayer to Qur'an recitation. Participants reported engaging in both informal learning, such as peer-led Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and messaging apps, as well as formal learning through online Islamic courses, often combining the two approaches. The importance of these online learning and communities grew significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

In their research, Tanja Riikonen and Fred Dervin (2012) examined how Muslim religious identity is constructed through online platforms, comparing cases from Finland and the province of Quebec in Canada. They used the *Tulevaisuus* forum as their case study. Discussions in this forum reveal that the main concerns are loneliness and the desire to belong to a community. Language and cultural differences can act as barriers between Finnish Muslim converts and Muslims with migrant backgrounds. However, online environments provide both groups with opportunities to define themselves. As a result, these spaces become arenas for identity negotiation, not only for migrants but also for converts seeking to integrate into a new religion. Teemu Pauha (2017) also focuses on identity by examining the prayers shared by young Finnish Muslims in Facebook groups. He shows that these online platforms, where Muslims post prayers, provide a space for them to shape their identities through connection and communication. They also enable young Muslims to feel part of a global, transnational *ummah*. Thus, these prayers are more than simple religious expressions; they contribute to the creation of a transnational Muslim identity. Prayers for conflict zones such as Palestine help Muslims unite around shared hope and faith.

In this article, I argue that digitalization is not merely a tool but a transformative force in the lives of migrants more broadly, reshaping how they sustain transnational connections, preserve identities, and build communities across borders.

While these examples highlight mainly the positive contributions of digitalization, it is crucial to recognize that the same tools can also be used for harmful purposes. Digitalization also provides opportunities for radical groups to disseminate their messages and recruit new supporters. Leena Malkki and Matti Pohjonen's (2019) research on jihadist online communication and its relation to Finland reveals a notable increase in jihadist content on online platforms. Their findings indicate that Finnish individuals who eventually joined transnational radical organizations such as ISIS were active on online communication channels and social media platforms before their involvement. The authors also emphasize that online networks play a crucial role in initiating the process of radicalization. In sum, digitalization plays a multifaceted role in the everyday lives of Muslims in Finland.

Digital Practices of the Hizmet Movement in Finland

At the beginning of my field work on HM in Finland, digital tools were already in widespread use among the research participants. However, their primary purposes at that time were communication and the exchange of information, both locally and more prominently at the transnational level. This information was unsurprising given that the community in question lives in exile and maintains a presence in more than 160 countries. Over time, the use of digital tools expanded to encompass a broader range of activities, including activism and the creation of learning spaces, a development facilitated by the community's high level of education. Nevertheless, a marked increase in the intensity and scope of digital engagement became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. As I brief-

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ly discussed in my article on the transformation of *sohbet* (weekly spiritual gatherings) in post-migration Finland, these meetings transitioned to Zoom during the pandemic's peak, attracting more participants than their face-to-face counterparts. This shift demonstrates that digital platforms can sustain communal participation under crisis conditions. The online format also lowered participation barriers, especially for mothers, who often face greater limits on mobility and availability (Neval 2024).

Butters and Utriainen (2025) found that YouTube, Facebook, and religious apps played a central role in Muslim learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. My findings confirm this pattern among HM volunteers but also suggest that the pandemic catalyzed not only religious learning but also professional skill-building through digital platforms. This aspect has not been emphasized in earlier Finnish studies. Moreover, numerous transnational projects emerged as volunteers became more familiar with various learning and communication platforms during this period. These initiatives included the launch of a wide range of online courses, extending to bachelor's and master's degree programs, as well as information technology (IT) training. Such opportunities enabled refugee volunteers to acquire new professional skills. Some of my research participants were able to secure employment in Finland after completing courses offered through the transnational network facilitated by HM.

Studies such as Pauha (2017) and Riikonen and Dervin (2012) have shown that online religious platforms can foster a sense of belonging and spiritual connection. My findings confirm this in the case of HM, particularly through the Herkul mobile application, which compiles Gülen's sermons, prayers, radio broadcasts, and other religious content. The shared prayer section of the app allows volunteers to collectively read portions of the Qur'an, complete *hatim* (full recitation of the Qur'an), and exchange excerpts from various prayer books. These practices strengthen a sense of belonging among members dispersed across countries.

In addition, for individuals who once led ordinary lives and careers but suddenly became refugees, online seminars and meetings with long-term HM volunteers living in other countries, as well as with psychologists who are also HM volunteers, have been instrumental in helping them cope with the trauma of displacement and the challenges they face in Finland. The data collected for this study further indicate that many prefer receiving such support from fellow HM volunteers online, as they believe that Finnish institutions may not fully understand their language or lived experiences. These findings suggest that digital platforms not only provide spiritual connection but also serve as a crucial means of psychosocial support within the HM transnational network.

In summary, while previous research on Muslims in Finland has primarily focused on digital platforms as spaces for religious learning and identity formation, my findings show a broader range of uses for these platforms. They are also employed for professional development and psychosocial support, which in turn facilitates the integration process among refugee-background communities.

Conclusion

In this article, I argue that digitalization is not merely a tool but a transformative force in the lives of migrants more broadly, reshaping how they sustain transnational connections, preserve identities, and build communities across borders. Many of these practices, such as maintaining family ties, sharing knowledge, or navigating institutions are common to diverse migrant groups. In this context, existing literature on Muslims shows that digital technologies not only facilitate everyday communication but also enable access to religious knowledge, spiritual learning, and collective religious life in ways that were previously less accessible. From early media to today's social platforms, these tools have enabled Muslims to obtain religious knowledge, engage in spiritual learning, and participate in collective religious life in ways that were previously less accessible. They also illustrate how religion and identity are being actively reconstructed in digital spaces. While traditional institutions still matter, the everyday religious experience is increasingly hybrid, shaped by both online and offline realities. Research conducted in Finland has yielded similar findings. My study further contributes to the understanding of how digitalization supports refugees from Muslim backgrounds affiliated with a transnational Islamic movement, particularly by enabling psychosocial support and fostering the development of professional careers. However, further research on digitalization is vital to understanding its impact on Muslims in the diaspora and its broader implications for migration.

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