

## Chapter 7

# A Digital Ethnographic Account of a Digital Islamic Society During COVID–19: An Islamic Governance Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Every aspect of one's life, from educating oneself through YouTube to finding a suitor on dating apps, shows how intertwined one's life is with digitalisation. COVID-19 has only allowed it to proliferate further. This chapter examines how different digitalisation policy initiatives in Brunei during COVID-19 have enabled the creation of a digital Islamic society through an Islamic governance perspective. A digital ethnographic approach was employed, and data were drawn from three sources: 1) document analysis, 2) social media, and 3) observation. Analysis was carried out using the Maqāṣid collaborative framework. Results from the study show that a digital Islamic society is currently being shaped in Brunei in all aspect of the Maqāṣid of the Sharia.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The digitalisation process have changed the way people live their lives. From educating oneself through YouTube and various other online learning platforms to tracking one's step counts on exercise apps, from finding a suitor on dating apps to online shopping, many modern conveniences would not have taken place if not for the digital revolution. The Covid-19 pandemic only proliferated the digitalisation process even further, and such intertwining of one's daily life with digitalisation have led to the notion of a Digital Society. A digital society is a society that adopts and integrates information and communication technologies in every aspect of life (Foundation, 2021) and this includes religion.

The inclusion of religion in a digital society takes place when “technology has moved to the heard of religious teachings, mobilization and networking” (Bunt, 2018, p.18). In the context of the Islamic religion, religious inclusion in a digital society can be seen in many Muslim-majority countries around the world. In Brunei, Islam have gone beyond faith and rituals, but has been institutionalised to be part and parcel of the country's population (Sharbawi & Mabud, 2021). It is “an institution that covers all aspects of life and governance and serves as a significant form of socio-cultural identity that binds the society together” (Sharbawi & Mabud, 2021, p. 56). For this reason, the notion of Cyber Islamic Environment (CIE) defined by Bunt (2018), as an umbrella concept “utilised to cover a range of online activities, whether an online thesis from an Islamic scholar or a tweet from a social media activist” (p.26); do not hold true for the Bruneian society. Hence, in the case of Bruneian Muslims, it is more prudent to refer to digital society as a Digital Islamic Society.

Brunei is a small country with a population of 429, 999 in 2021 (Department of economic planning and statistics, n.d.) upon which 66% of the population are Muslim (Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, n.d.).

Brunei is a unique case to study the development of a Digital Islamic Society because of two reasons:

- A) it is a Muslim-majority country that have successfully institutionalised Islam through a national ideology of “Melayu Islam Beraja” / Malay Islamic Monarchy. In addition, Brunei have also enacted Islamic law, under the Sharia Penal Code Order 2013 and strives to become a zikir nation (Mahmud, 2021) that is considered a “Baladatun Tayyibatun Warabbun Ghafur” - a country that is under the protection of Allah (Tema Hari Kebangsaan, 2021).
- B) It has the highest internet penetration within Southeast Asia, with 95% in 2020 (CIA, n.d.)

This chapter has two objectives:

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