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# 'Taqwacore is Dead. Long Live Taqwacore' or punk's not dead?: Studying the online evolution of the Islamic punk scene

Meghan Dougherty

## Introduction

In 2003 a much-photocopied but unpublished novel by Michael Muhammad Knight was passed around young Muslims across the USA. The novel, called *The Taqwacores*, told the story of a group of young people living in a shared house in Buffalo, New York. Each character embodies some different combination of religious and political subcultures including a burqa-wearing riot grrl, a straight-edge and tattooed Sunni Muslim, a Sufi punk, and the main character – a straight-laced Islamic engineering student – who questions his own identity as he is introduced to the alternative views of his housemates. The novel spoke to young Muslims who saw the stories of their own lives echoed in its pages. The fiction gave shape and coherence to a growing movement that ties punk, straight-edge hardcore, feminism, rebellion, and Islamic faith in a vibrant subculture called Taqwacore – a combination of the Arabic word *taqwa* for piety, and *core* for varying versions of hardcore punk.

Since the novel was published by Soft Skull Press in 2004, inspiring a documentary in 2009, and a full-length feature film in 2010, the subculture took form. Taqwacore, a subcultural collection of young Muslims who are politically active, rebellious, devout and who identify with a punk ethos, gained popularity. New bands, zines, a cross-country music tour and other cultural markers began to solidify into a legitimate sub-cultural scene. It drew much media attention in its early days, and media

attention persisted, but many blogs, online forums, band websites and other online spaces where the subculture had begun to take form slowed or were abandoned shortly after they were started. Traces of the scene can be found woven into the larger cultural landscape. Conversations around Taqwacore take place on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms; Taqwacore bands maintain MySpace pages dedicated to their music and blogs discussing their views on events in the Middle East and global politics; fans post videos of basement concerts and missives on their punk stance towards Islam and politics in the Middle East.

Taqwacore is a small but complex subculture of loosely knit Muslim anti-ideals and political fervour stemming from a punk ethos.

Punk rock means deliberately bad music, deliberately bad clothing, deliberately bad language and deliberately bad behavior. [It] means shooting yourself in the foot when it comes to every expectation society will ever have for you but still standing tall about it, loving who you are and somehow forging a shared community with all the other fuck-ups. Taqwacore is the application of this virtue to Islam. I was surrounded by deliberately bad Muslims but they loved Allah with a gonzo kind of passion that escaped sleepy brainless ritualism and the dumb fantasy-camp Islam claiming that our deen had some inherent moral superiority making the world rightfully ours. I think its a good thing. [...] Be Muslim on your own terms. (Knight, 2004: 212)

There are numerous areas for possible exploration with regard to Taqwacore using punk as a lynchpin in youth subculture to structure politics, mobilization and resistance, cyberpolitics, diaspora and globalization, DIY as applied to cultural hybridity, anomie and marginalization of hybrid identities, authenticity and various themes in race, class and gender. The social history of Taqwacore is complex and includes controversies stirred up within the community when alternate readings challenge commonly held norms. As yet, it has not been presented as a social history that can lead to insights about larger youth subcultural social structures for action.

This is a youth subculture with an idolized, reluctant leader, amorphously defined borders around which much debate has been sparked within the community, and among outsiders looking in. Taqwacore had its heyday in the early 2000s into the 2010s, but has since faded. The subculture came together online, leveraging technology to draw together dislocated plural worlds into a robust web sphere, or 'a unit of analysis

[that] is boundable by time and object-orientation, and is sensitive to developmental changes, within which social, political and cultural relations can be analyzed in a variety of ways' (Foot, 2006). This web sphere reflects the quickly changing digital landscape of the 2000s and 2010s.

As popular discourse repeatedly rehashed the surprise of this seemingly contradictory hybrid subculture, academics turned their attention to exploring Taqwacore in more depth. Scholarly attention was paid specifically to the analysis of Taqwacore as a subset of punk subculture and gained some momentum with a few dissertations (Davidson, 2011; Stewart, 2011), theses and other student projects (Abdou, 2009; Hosman, 2009; Andersen et al., 2011; Yulianto, 2011), and a small handful of peer-reviewed articles (Luhr, 2010; Murthy, 2010) published between 2009 and 2012 – the high point of the scene's momentum. This chapter offers a synthesis of that scholarly literature on Taqwacore in the context of literature on punk and youth subculture movements constructing identity within religious and political movements. It adds to that literature an analysis of traces the scene left behind in web archives, as much of the scene no longer maintains an active presence on the live web. This chapter covers definitions and a framing of Taqwacore that lead to dominant narratives. Much of the extant narratives of Taqwacore do not consider the scene's online presence. This chapter offers an analysis of Taqwacore's presence on the web, and commentary on methodological obstacles in studying small, short-lived cultural phenomena using web archives.

## **Framing Taqwacore, youth subculture and punk**

Scholarly attention on Taqwacore focuses on defining the subculture to resolve the perceived conflict between its two primary driving forces of punk and Islam. Much attention is paid to determining the approach to Taqwacore as a subculture, post-subculture, imagined community or youth movement, and locating it with immigrant populations in the USA or in other diasporic Muslim communities. Conceptual frames focus on identity construction, and findings discuss a somewhat reluctant leader, self-representation and media representations, and their role in forming a definition for the subculture. Research methods used in these few studies are limited to variations on discourse analysis and ethnography. Studies focused specifically on Taqwacore frame the movement as developing in and as a result of a post-9/11, postcolonial, diasporic, international or postmodern worldview.

## Defining Taqwacore and punk

What happens when seemingly incompatible subcultures are appropriated and merged? This question drives much of the discourse around music cultures and Islam. There is an overwhelming attempt to define Taqwacore as an unlikely mashup of subcultures. This perspective defines Taqwacore as an instance of the Other borrowing or appropriating Western cultural markers to integrate with his/her own (e.g. a picture of a Muslim girl wearing an Iron Maiden t-shirt with a hijab or shayla). Many of these studies begin with an autoethnographic account of the author first learning about punk Islam or heavy metal Islam and being surprised that such a self-contradictory thing existed (Levine, 2004). It is as if Islamic youth didn't rebel, feel frustration in the face of rules and social forces, have political opinions or want to explore alternate definitions of social norms. With the implication that they necessarily had to borrow models from the West in the form of punk or metal applied to Islam in order to express what could be seen as predictable rites of passage.

This analysis is where Michael Muhammed Knight, the author of *The Taqwacores*, loses interest in Taqwacore as a cultural phenomenon. In his book *Blue-Eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey Through Islamic America* (2006) he explains that, with *The Taqwacores* and his other writing, he aims to describe a kind of indigenous American Islam, and explains that curiosity inspired by a seemingly unlikely cultural combination is more patronizing than anything else. This patronizing view from outside is restrictive. The notion that punk ideology is appropriated and applied to Islam is an oversimplification that does not allow for what Taqwacores went looking for in the first place: a frame to understand disillusion, a filter for anger, a creative outlet for discovering alternative shared meaning, etc. (Knight, 2004).

Few approach the idea from a perspective of diasporic Islam merging in different localities with other subcultures. In this oversimplified perspective, studies begin with a review of studies on punk in order to set a framework for understanding it so we may then understand how punk diffused elsewhere. This is a problematic notion of punk. It is reductionist, and limiting in terms of global possibilities for punk. It is important to revisit this foundational concept in the Taqwacore literature because the stories we tell about punk matter; they are not only about punk.

Punk, as a cultural phenomenon and not simply a music genre, emerges in different localities interwoven with global dimensions.

Rubin Ortiz-Torres's (2012) autoethnographic narrative essay, *Mexipunk*, approaches the topic from this global perspective aiming to tell a more indigenous story of punk rather than tracing the diffusion of punk to Mexican culture. Using a similar critique that seeks to unsettle the notion that punk necessarily moves from the West to the rest of the world, Mimi Thi Nguyen points out in her Afterword in *Punkademics*, 'Too often, punk studies replicate a historical consciousness, through which punk unfolds from an imperial center alongside modernity and capitalism – such that anthropological accounts, or news reportage, describe punks in the so-called Third World through a sense of their belated arrival, their distance from “our” here and now' (Nguyen, 2012: 221).

Because punk is often narrated as a white and frequently male-dominated phenomenon (Duncome and Tremblay, 2011), it can be surprising to see it evolve in other multisubcultural arenas. However, Nguyen explains that punk, no matter what multisubcultural version of it you consider is 'a product of a particular historical moment in the global city, a moment that is rife with tensions not only between colony and metropole, but also town and country' (Nguyen, 2012: 222). Nguyen explains that it is important to take from this multisubcultural view on punk that 'punks themselves are already theorizing these questions – more empirical and nuanced inquiries about multiple racial, global projects that crisscross each other in webs of connectivity and exchange' (Nguyen, 2012: 222). And so she explains, for that reason, the stories we tell about punk matter in many different ways. The multisubcultural view that rejects the West to the rest perspective is a valuable avenue for studies in Taqwacore. And if it is indeed a product of a particular cultural moment, then Taqwacore's online presence must be considered in any robust analysis as a primary influence on the shape of the scene.

### Framing subcultures

Much of the scholarly writing about Taqwacore is found in dissertations and theses written between 2009 and 2011 in sociology, religion and philosophy departments. These explorations begin by describing what Taqwacore is, attempting to draw boundaries by identifying key actors, events and themes for debating what Taqwacore means to those who identify with it (Abdou, 2009; Hosman, 2009; Murthy, 2010; Andersen et al., 2011). Indeed this academic treatment of Taqwacore echoes the discussion happening among those who claim the label, those who deny it and those who live on the periphery struggling with the notion

of 'belonging' on a more fundamental level. These writings are largely social histories of Taqwacore between 2004 at the publication of the novel and some time shortly before or after the release of the Taqwacore documentary in 2009.

This line of inquiry – determining the ontological nature of Taqwacore: is it a youth culture, youth subculture, postmodern tribe, philosophy, ideology or post-subculture among numerous other labels – follows directly from academic thought on punk. Choosing one of these labels certainly gives the researcher a conceptual framework to deconstruct the thing, but ultimately clouds the literature and forces the scholarly discussion to be about how to categorize the thing rather than discussing the thing itself. In his edited volume, *Punkademics*, Zach Furness (2012) collects chapters that use lived experience of punk as a more grounded examination of the topic. Furness explains 'what gets missed [in the scholarly literature on punk], for instance in the habitual focus on punk's origins, its shining stars, its hottest locations, and its most obvious but nonetheless vital contributions, such as punk's amplification (with all that term implies) of independent music and art – are the everyday practices, processes, struggles, ruptures and people that make it so interesting in the first place' (2012: 18). And Michael Muhammed Knight explained the implications of this kind of approach in an interview with MTV:

I'm going to have to say this quick and then retreat, so here goes: Taqwacore is my friends, a growing circle of friends. That's it. Some of us happen to be artists: writers, musicians, photographers, filmmakers. You could say that we've built our own culture, but every circle of friends builds its own culture. Because the idea of brown kids having mohawks remains provocative to the media, Taqwacore has received a significant amount of coverage—Rolling Stone, Newsweek, The Guardian, NBC, BBC, The New York Times, Globe & Mail, Mother Jones, and so on. Reporting that we've seduced all the confused American Muslim kids, journalists have made us into the movement that they wanted to see, and Taqwacore is apparently real now. I just hope that it never gets real enough for Mountain Dew to throw money at us. (Andersen et al., 2011: 41–2)

The focus in academic study of Taqwacore is on the individual and ultimately group or community formation. The literature has started with conceptual framing as an attempt to determine what the subculture is

as evidenced by the cultural artefacts, discourse, interactions and social behaviours of those who name themselves as part of the group. This sub-culture was given a name and a few fictional examples as a foundation. Discussion among those who feel affinity for this foundational definition, and possibly more importantly those who do not feel affinity for the movement, but have been labelled as part of it, test the boundaries set by these foundational definitions.

## Dominant narratives about Taqwacore

Self-representations (interviews with scholars, documentaries, fictions, music, Facebook posts, Twitter activity, etc.), media representations (articles reporting on Taqwacore) and a search for clear definitions of Taqwacore are common threads of discussion. Other dominant narratives explore the search for community and belonging, the role of computer mediated communication in enabling the diasporic character of Taqwacore (Murthy, 2010), and debates about authenticity, leadership and origin stories (Hosman, 2009; Andersen et al., 2011).

On representations, community, authenticity and leadership

One dominant narrative explains that self-representations of Taqwacore are made in reaction to American stereotypes of Arab and Muslim cultures after 9/11. Self-representations include definitions offered by many who identify as Taqwacore but may or may not be Arab or Muslim, and may or may not practise Islam to different degrees. Self-representations describe an effort to create a space for an alternative view of Arabs and Muslims in the USA – one that is defiant, individually motivated, and politically and culturally engaged. Media representations tell a tale of angry youth rebelling against authority, rebelling against Muslim stereotypes, and yet inexplicably, according to the tone of most academic study of Taqwacore, also devout. The media highlight the seemingly contradictory nature of blending a punk rock identity with a devout Muslim identity. It seems that this contradiction is felt within the scene, but it is far more complicated to those who feel that Taqwacore is a cultural space for belonging.

While not all of the characters in the [novel] are punks and not all of them are devout Muslims, they all question Islam, what it means to be Muslim, what it means to be 'punk', and how these



two identities and lifestyles are compatible. The novel's main character, Yusef, is not a punk rocker but, in living in the house [that he shares with other characters], he discovers an authentic interpretation of Islam in those around him. (Hosman, 2009)

Youth movements that centre on music/lifestyle genres can bring individuals together and bring relief from the estrangement felt by global youth living hybrid identities in plural worlds. Sometimes, such movements can create common cause to resist hegemonic forces. Taqwacores carve out a bit of autonomy within which they can authentically imagine, share and validate their alternatives to the status quo. This is a sincere attitude that is often recast and dismissed as anger, aggression and even violence by turning readers' attention to the most shocking examples of cultural product – the frequent use of this quote from *The Taqwacores*, 'In this so-called clash of civilizations, Taqwacore is about sticking the middle finger in both directions' (Knight, 2004) or citing *Rage Against the Machine's* lyrics, 'Fuck you I won't do what you tell me!' (Levine, 2004).

Rather than simple, boorish resistance, part of the drive for these subcultures is a reaction against the thoughtlessness of peers (Darrell, 1999). A set of rules would enable thoughtlessness on a different level. These subcultures strike a fine balance between codifying cultural markers and conformity for the sake of inclusion. Members of these subcultures want to belong, but they want belonging to be meaningful, thoughtful, and individually owned, not simply a set of rules. They look to a kind of leader for examples they may choose to build their own identity.

The evidence of online action within this youth movement tells a more complex story of leveraging technology that moves beyond the stories of self-representation that other studies explore. This exploration of inclusion and exclusion, of finding belonging in online spaces that bridge the multiple localities that play into the multisubcultural space of Taqwacore, is an under-represented theme in the Taqwacore literature (Murthy, 2010).

### On finding definitions

Definitions run the gamut from identifying punk as a surrogate for religion (Stewart, 2011) to lending it political purchase by locating it at the centre of a political resistance movement (Abdou, 2009). Murthy

(2010) locates it as an emerging Muslim youth subculture in South East Asia. Others, including Michael Muhammed Knight himself, describe Taqwacore as inherently American, claiming that the dislocation and diasporic nature of Taqwacore make it what it is – unlocatable except as a tenuous common thread that holds together multiple alternate interpretations of multiple subcultures. Few studies discuss anything about social inclusion as a measure of success (Murthy, 2010). The concept of shared meaning as a marker for cultural identity is well-covered in the literature, but is quickly followed by a discussion of exclusion and authenticity (Hosman, 2009; Attolino, 2010; Luhr, 2010; Andersen et al., 2011).

Taqwacore is often defined using a frame of rejection (Attolino, 2010). Definitions of Taqwacore tend toward the negative. Short definitions tend to highlight the pairing of a rejection of Islamic hegemony with rejections of American hegemony to form some sort of curious super-rejection model that is Taqwacore. This is an oversimplification, and directs exploration toward highlighting the more negative aspects of the subculture. Attolino (2010) introduced Taqwacore as ‘an emerging subculture of young American Muslims which, in the post 9/11 climate, rejects parts of both American and Islamic culture under the flag of punk music’. This reduces the subculture to its more base elements without appreciating the complexity of third culture kids (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009), hybrid or plural identities, and the rich evolution of rebellion in punk sensibilities. Descriptions of Taqwacore frame it as rebellious, angry and rejecting, whilst deriving this reading from evidence that claims the opposite. The immediate expression of Taqwacore is anger, but the deeper meaning is hopeful. Punk is described in Knight’s novel as somehow similar to Islam, in that it is a ‘flag, an open symbol representing not things, but ideas. You cannot hold Punk or Islam in your hands. So what could they mean besides what you want them to?’ (2004: 7).

## The complications of studying Taqwacore

Common approaches in studies of Taqwacore include some form of discourse analysis to examine structure, meaning, interaction, and social behaviour. Sites of mediated subcultural activity are identified in and across different online media including blogs and twitter feeds, band sites and blogs, and other offline cultural texts. More often than not, studies in the literature provide a contrast between outsiders’ definitions

of the subculture represented by news and insiders' definitions represented by fictional and documentary accounts. The few that seek out individual voices in blogs, twitter feeds, interviews and other online venues have little evidence to draw from, especially in online spaces. Many of the sites dedicated to individual level interaction and social behaviour have expired and few archives of online Taqwacore content exist. Those that do are small (see The South Asian American Archive web archive of the online Tawqacore Magazine, [saadigitalarchive.org/item/20120627-713](http://saadigitalarchive.org/item/20120627-713)), or are personal ad hoc archives stored on personal drives. A number are inaccessible to the public due to Institutional Review Board and other institutional research restrictions.

Murthy (2010) writes an exploration of participant observation in online cultural spaces during a particularly active time in Taqwacore's online cultural spaces, but relies heavily on interview data, and not on an exploration of web materials. Interview questions, when found in the literature, aggressively asked respondents to justify the subculture or resolve the conflict between punk and Muslim identities. This approach to interviewing belies researchers' assumptions about Taqwacore, punk and Muslim culture. All interview questions found in the literature explore definitions and meta-discussion about Taqwacore. None explore everyday practices, processes or people. None explore what people do in this subculture, as Furness (2012) suggests, only what they think the larger labels mean in light of assumed conflict. None describe web artefacts from the culture, content of web materials or presence on different web platforms.

Little effort has been made in digging through collections of archived websites to retrace the development of the scene in digital media. There is good reason to review Taqwacore-centred sites preserved in web archives. The scene was largely a diasporic collection imagined initially by music and literature, and solidified by belief and politics. Connections were most often made online over long distances. This kind of transmedia study, where a subculture has largely played out in digital media and virtual spaces, requires exploration into web archives to find past traces of the subculture online as it was when it was more active. This can lead to significant problems for the researcher.

The analysis to follow is based on the contents of a private collection. Objects in the private collection were captured between 2012 and 2015 by the author and a team of research assistants. Objects for inclusion were identified by strategic searches for web content using Google as a search engine. Research assistants began with basic

searches for Taqwacore materials using simple search terms (e.g. news about Taqwacore, names of bands, names of prominent figures in the scene, etc.). The results from those basic searches were used to identify additional search terms. Links on sites found also provided avenues for identifying additional materials. Websites identified as having content regarding Taqwacore were categorized according to type of content (e.g. scholarly, press, blog, first person vlog, etc.). Extensive field notes were written about objects, and about objects in relation to each other, as they were captured. Objects and field notes were captured and saved in a private group account on Diigo and on personal drives using Wget. The collection is not archival. It is inaccessible to the public, and not safeguarded for long-term preservation. The following analysis presents commentary on the rise and fall of Taqwacore as seen through the content ebbs and flows on the most prominent types of sites represented in what was collected.

## The rise and fall of Taqwacore online

Taqwacore did not have a central space online until the feature film appeared on the scene in 2010, arguably popularizing the scene to the point at which it was driven into decline, or people began to feel it had 'sold out'. There are multiple layers of online public discourse regarding Taqwacore specifically, and Muslim punk in general. Mentions of Taqwacore, and discussions of Muslim punk appear on all kinds of site types around the web, including press, blogs, forums, YouTube and its comments, portals and academic sites. Each contains elements of the popular discourse around Muslim punk and Taqwacore. The most revealing discourse, the discourse that tells the richest evolution story of Taqwacore takes place in blogs, press sites and online discussion forums dedicated to the topic.

In the evolution of blogs that discuss matters related to Muslim punk, there are discussions about political leanings, world events and beliefs that are tied to the scene. There is also an attempt to find a way to describe the coherence punk can bring to the politics, events and beliefs discussed. Press sites offer a less raw representation often defining the 'movement' and passing judgement on its credibility. In Forums, there are discussions about shared experience and also personal experience, with generalities and representations seeking to make sense of personal experience in the face of larger social contexts and how they weave together.

## Blogs

Much of the rich discussion of Taqwacore takes place in blogs maintained by the bands that make up the heart of the scene. Take, for example, Al-Thawra's band blog (<http://althawrapunk.com/>). Al-Thawra is a Chicago-based band that got its start in 2006. They maintained a blog discussing everything from political revolution in the Middle East and the role of music in revolution, to band merchandise, bootlegs and the latest gig. However, this much-linked blog, which returns at the top of search results with numerous inlinks, has only six posts, and was only active during 2011.

The Kominas, a Boston-based band started in 2005, in contrast, have a more recent and active presence on the web. Their first appearance on the web was a release of two songs on MySpace. They readily adopted the Taqwacore label, and referred specifically to the sensibilities contained in *The Taqwacores*. The Kominas are the most active band in the live Taqwacore web, maintaining an active Facebook and Twitter presence featuring updates about politics, current events and the scene. Looking archivally, The Kominas have consistently maintained a presence in the Taqwacore web sphere over time, with their own presence as a band, in the blogosphere, in reviews and in the Press since 2010.

Beyond the blogs written by the bands themselves, most blog posts are one-off reviews of a single show, a record release or a review of the documentary film. These posts routinely dig no deeper than the surface, describing and attempting to define the Taqwacore scene, briefly mentioning the complexity of life for third culture kids (Pollock and van Reken, 2001). The authors of these posts are less careful and their reviews end with the tired witticisms of punk rock reviewers sarcastically questioning, and ultimately denigrating, a scene that has gotten too much popular attention to be legitimately punk. The posts tend to vacillate between exoticizing a seemingly conflicting combination of subcultures, or accusing it of being not 'punk' enough. Now, one question always comes up: What came first – forming the band, or reading Mike Knight's book, *The Taqwacores* (published in 2003), which gave the name to this movement?<sup>1</sup> The band blogs demonstrate a richer background of cultural elements that motivate the scene, and in some ways chronicle their presence in the scene. The highest levels of blogging activity can be dated to the most active moments of the Arab Spring, which garnered much attention from the Press.

## Press

Despite the contention that mainstream recognition means the end of a subculture, there are articles from the commercial press trying to find a scoop on the existence of a subculture, to define and legitimize it. Their aim seems to be to make sense of, or find an angle with which to approach the events of the Arab Spring uprisings.

While many of the articles in the popular press highlight this scene as something interesting, and to be taken seriously, the coverage was generic and unoriginal. The pieces that added the most to the popular press discourse were those contributed by band members themselves, and appeared in the wake of the Arab Spring protests in Tahrir Square.

News articles regarding Taqwacore began in earnest with the screenings of the documentary at SXSW in late 2010, then gained momentum during the Arab Spring Egyptian Revolution centring on Tahrir Square in early 2011. Still, the press has kept Taqwacore present on the web more consistently than any other site producer within the scene itself. Coverage of specific bands, like The Kominas, and coverage of shows and festivals featuring Taqwacore bands have been covered consistently through 2015. As the Middle East continues to be a centre of attention for the global press, small alternative subcultures, like Taqwacore, maintain a presence as a way for the medium to place a human interest angle on their coverage.

## Forums

The most robust discussion of Taqwacore, its roots, its direction and influence, and what holds it together, took place and still takes place in a variety of public forums. Wikipedia, YouTube, and Reddit are public spaces where the most robust public discussion of Taqwacore can be found.

A single Wikipedia editor contributed nearly all the updates to the Taqwacore article in 2011, adding nearly 26,000 bytes of information to an existing 30,000 byte article. The article is still being updated and maintained by a variety of Wikipedia editors during the writing of this chapter in 2015. Much of the backchannel chatter in the Wikipedia editing page revolves around the origins of Taqwacore, making the point that Muslim punk has been around as long as punk; it was simply given a name by Michael Muhammad Knight in his novel. The scene's origin story is an undercurrent of most discourse regarding Taqwacore.

One first-person vlogger, who posted a video on YouTube in 2010, captured in 2012, reacts to learning about Taqwacore. In the video, she is excited to learn that there are other people out there who merge

seemingly conflicting ideologies. The vlogger describes *The Taqwacores* novel, and her affinity for the subculture – how it matches her interpretation of Islam and ideologies of punk (and other subcultural music scenes), and how it can help one come to a new understanding of faith.

The comments in response to this vlog post are interesting. In one of the more rich and deep online discussions of Taqwacore, many YouTube commenters warn the vlogger not to reinvent Islam. Comments discuss hypocrisy and rules and indicate a right/wrong attitude towards rules rather than a continuum along a spectrum from right to wrong. This response shows Taqwacore to be something far more complex than is evidenced in other places online. Some time between personal archival capture in 2012 and the time of this writing in 2015, the video was made private, making it and its comments unavailable on the live web, and so inaccessible for archiving in public archives.

The most consistently ongoing and intellectual discussion of Taqwacore takes place on Reddit. Taqwacore appears frequently in other subreddits (subs) including [/r/progressiveIslam](#), [/r/lgbt](#), [/r/debatereligion](#), [/r/Islam](#), and others. Many of these mentions are instigated by a single user – [/u/Taqwacore](#) – who participates frequently in multiple subs of varying topics. The [/r/Taqwacore](#) sub, first captured by this study in 2012, contained a much more robust conversation regarding Taqwacore's larger cultural meaning than any other discourse online. The sub, however, was made private since being captured by this study and has not been captured by the Internet Archive. It therefore cannot be read unless the moderator approves private membership. Mentions in other publicly available subs address progressive Islam, weighing the benefits and drawbacks, debating the need for reform, and the efficacy of reform coming from a pairing with punk sensibilities.

Discussion of the scene in public forums is robust and recurrent. Threads of conversation retrace recurring lines of inquiry as new people join the conversation, but each cycle moves the discourse forward, and does so in spaces that are not necessarily dedicated to Taqwacore, but rather are interested in larger cultural spaces that may overlap with a small but active, alternative music scene. In online public forums, Taqwacore is settling in, and traces of it can be found woven into a broader cultural landscape.

### Taqwacore's lost hype

Taqwacore, in its short-lived existence so far, has shifted and changed in many ways, both in response to the evolutionary trajectory of those in the

scene, but also in response to social and cultural shifts that have taken place globally since its early days in the early 2000s. So while Taqwacore as a scene has lost some of its initial popular hype, it has not fallen completely by the wayside. Rather, it has taken up residence as a niche element in a culturally diverse punk scene. Most recently it made an appearance in the form of one band's show – The Kominas – during Chicago's 2015 Black, Brown, and Punk Show Collective Annual Music Festival.

### Methodological limitations on studying Taqwacore

Finding evidence of the Taqwacore scene online, especially evidence of its early development, is difficult. Discourse found on blogs reveals something of the early days of the scene, but do little to reveal much of how it has evolved. Discourse in the press is ongoing, but tends to retrace the same surface-level, outsider perspective of the scene. Public forums show a slightly more intimate engagement with the scene. But all of these sites are difficult to access. Over time, they have disappeared from the live web, been made private due to the potentially inflammatory nature of the discussion, and evaded capture in archives due to the relative insignificance or technical depth of the relevant content. Generally, online activity regarding Taqwacore in these public web spaces has waned as discussions moved to increasingly popular and closed spaces like Facebook and Twitter.

One of the more interesting findings in this study was methodological. Midway through the collection period, research assistants began to notice a stalling of new material to capture. Repeating basic searches resulted in material already captured in the collection. Few new avenues for new material presented themselves. By the end of the collection period, all results, regardless of creative search efforts, were redundant.

The materials collected in this study have much to tell us about this particular subculture. But it cannot tell us why it waned, or why what remains of it moved into more private spaces online. Traces left behind in captured cultural materials can hint at internal strife, or aggression from outsiders, but ultimately can only provide minimal insight. They cannot tell us if a blog was abandoned out of boredom on the part of the site producer, because of external pressures, or simply because an account expired, wiping the site from a platform.

Throughout the collection period, sites found via searches of the live web were cross-checked with the Internet Archive. None of the sites collected in this study were found when searched by URL in



the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. Because the Internet Archive has the most broadly sweeping collection strategy of all the web archives, this absence indicates that there is little evidence of Taqwacore's cultural artefacts, possibly none at all, in publicly accessible, safeguarded archives meant to preserve cultural heritage long term.

There is much that is lost about a cultural moment such as this when its web presence is not captured and preserved in a web archive. If it is indeed the case, as this author found, that traces of Taqwacore have not been preserved in large publicly accessible archives, the findings of this study should be regarded as questionable, as they cannot be verified or replicated with an independent study using alternative means.

## Conclusions

There is only so much we can come to learn using web archives to find evidence of small subcultures such as Taqwacore. As a small subculture shifts its values and moves its activities to more private spaces online, less and less of that subculture remains visible to those who may study it, whether through searches of the live web, or through objects included in archives.

In this study, researchers found that over the course of the data collection period, the web itself became the archival record. Absence of relevant material in official archives led the researchers to recursively search the live web for material. The longer they searched, the more they found that relevant materials had been created in the past and were simply lingering, by chance, on the live web. Some materials that had been found early in the collection period were found to have vanished when searched for later with no trace other than the site previously captured for this study. This left the researchers with little material upon which to base a study, and concern that the material that *did* remain of this once-active subculture was ageing and might easily be lost for good, and with little evidence to explain why.

Taqwacore is a particular hybrid youth subculture that has not been well-explored, for good reason. The failure to explore the subculture's presence online is partly due to it not being represented in web archives and partly to the diasporic nature of the community. Taqwacore's presence online is just as diverse, mobile, contingent and unlocatable as it is offline. The author is left to worry that perhaps it is also unarchivable, and so too easily forgotten.