

Drew Binsky's Journey Through the Muslim World: Transforming Global Perceptions of Islam Through People-To-People Diplomacy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18196/afkaruna.v20i1.19608>

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 29 September 2023, Revised: 27 February 2024, Accepted: 12 May 2024, Published: 30 June 2024

ABSTRACT

This study explores Drew Binsky's journey in the Muslim world and how it has the potential to influence global perceptions of Islam positively. Drew Binsky is a renowned travel vlogger who has explored various countries, delving into their cultures, traditions, and daily lives. Drew Binsky has engaged with Muslim communities in different countries throughout his journeys, sharing these experiences through vlogs and social media platforms. Despite being Jewish and born in the United States, his perception of Islam and Muslims has transformed after visiting and interacting with Muslim communities. Uploaded and shared on social media platforms, particularly YouTube, these experiences contribute to offering an alternative perspective on Islam to the global audience, challenging long-standing misconceptions perpetuated by mainstream global media, scholars, and Islamophobic politicians. The study employed the People-to-People Diplomacy approach to discuss Binsky's efforts through the videos uploaded on his YouTube channel. Research findings indicate that despite being an American Jew, Binsky holds a positive view of Islam and has shared his perspective through videos watched by millions, appreciated not only by Muslim viewers but also by non-Muslim audiences.

Keywords: Drew Binsky, Global Muslim Image, People to People Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the current number of Muslims exceeds 1.7 billion people, dispersed across various countries, both Muslim-majority and others. Furthermore, Islam is the second-largest religion in terms of followers worldwide, following Christianity. However, this substantial Muslim population does not

necessarily align with a positive global image of Islam. Particularly in the early 21st century, Islam has often been associated with issues of terrorism, intolerance, and violence, especially following the events of 9/11 in 2001. The negative perception of Islam is not solely due to Muslims being the primary perpetrators of global violence; instead, it is a result of framing carried out by global media, including politicians, intellectuals, and anti-Islam groups.¹

As a response to the Muslim global image, many Muslim groups and figures have tried to share the alternative or the true picture of Islam either through online or offline activities, such as Mufti Menk, Zakir Naik, Nouman Ali Khan, Bilal Philips, Omar Sulaiman, Yasir Qadhi, and others. These figures are famous as their videos are uploaded to social media platforms and watched by millions of people. Thanks to the development of the digital technology era has provided Muslim activists and groups a significant opportunity to present alternative narratives about Islam and the Islamic world in a very simple but impactful way.²

Therefore, this article delves into Drew Binsky's role or contribution through his YouTube videos in portraying a positive image of Islam and Muslims on a global scale. Drew Binsky is an interesting figure to discuss in the context of alternative narratives about Islam and the global Muslim community. Drew Binsky is a vlogger and content creator who has visited every country in the world, capturing his interactions with various locals and sharing his impressions of each visit. Muslims and the Islamic world have left a lasting impact on Binsky through several of his videos dedicated to discussing why he is interested in and fond of Muslims and their cultures.

In this study, Drew Binsky is depicted within the framework of People-to-People Diplomacy (P2P) or Citizen Diplomacy. P2P Diplomacy, Grassroots Diplomacy, or Non-Governmental Public Diplomacy are all parts of public diplomacy that focus on the interaction process among non-state actors, including both individuals and groups. These interactions do not involve the state as a sponsor or supporter of these activities. Nevertheless, the interests of P2P Diplomacy align with those of the originating government or state of the NGOs or individuals involved. The advantage of P2P Diplomacy over government-led public diplomacy lies in its independence from the government, which enhances the credibility of its diplomatic activities. If government involvement were present, the program could be perceived as a political tool of the state.

Due to its independent nature, various open dialogues can be carried out by the involved parties without concerns about government intervention. Moreover, P2P Diplomacy tends to be less publicized by mainstream media, which reduces the potential for certain countries to block its activities. Typically, P2P initiatives receive more coverage through alternative media outlets, such as social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) and online articles, which are less susceptible to government censorship.⁴ Nevertheless, the challenge with P2P Diplomacy lies in financial issues, relying on funding from sponsors or self-funding, which limits the scope and duration of activities. Administrative matters related to travel also present challenges. Frequently, certain actors face obstacles in obtaining visas or entry permits to a particular country.⁵

Studies on Islam and diplomacy are currently being conducted by numerous researchers, exploring various state and non-state actors through diverse case studies. In the context of public diplomacy, J. Hoesterey (2020) writes about the role of the Muslim community of Indonesia in the United States in introducing Islam through various activities, such as dialogues and commemorations of Muslim holidays involving followers from different religions.⁶

In the context of public diplomacy conducted by nations, Panos Kourgiotis (2020) explores the efforts of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in promoting the concept of moderate Islam through three variables in public diplomacy: news management, strategic communication, and establishing long-term relationships with individuals and communities. The dissemination of moderate Islam also aims to counter the spread of political Islamic ideas in the Middle East.⁷

Public diplomacy using Islam and the Muslim community has also been conducted by China, especially towards Indonesia, in recent years during the emergence of issues related to Xinjiang Muslims. China has approached Muslim communities such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah through visits, joint activities, exchanges of figures, and assistance in education and healthcare.⁸

Method

This research used a qualitative method approach by trying to interpret an actor's activities in international relations and then explaining them in descriptive form to conclude the object under study. In the context of this research, Drew Binsky's role in providing an alternative depiction of Islam through his content on YouTube was the object of research to see how he describes Islam to his audience from across countries, religions, and cultures. To analyze this research, the People-to-People Diplomacy approach is a relevant framework, as Drew Binsky is an actor in international relations, and the messages he conveys are part of the spread of soft power, which indirectly benefits Islam and Muslims worldwide.

In the process of collecting data in this research, several of Drew Binsky's videos about Islam and Muslims were selected to be employed as material for analysis by looking at the content and responses from the viewers of the videos. Several of Drew Binsky's videos, specifically about Islam, were published between 2018 and 2022. From the videos, Binsky's enthusiasm for Islam and Muslims could be seen. From the videos Binsky has published, among all the religions and beliefs in the world, Islam is the religion that Binsky has made special videos for several times.

Discussion

Drew Binsky as a Travel Vlogger

Drew Binsky is a renowned travel vlogger from the United States. Drew was born on May 24, 1991, in Texas, USA, and comes from a Jewish family background. He grew up in Sunny Scottsdale, Arizona, and pursued higher education at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He obtained a bachelor's degree in economics and entrepreneurship simultaneously.⁹

Drew is known for his travel content on YouTube, which not only presents travel documentation of a particular country but also introduces cultural richness, reveals facts, discusses social conditions, and even shares inspirational stories from various parts of the world. Drew began his career journey as a YouTuber in 2012. His first video was uploaded on July 26, 2012, titled "Learn to Speak Czech." Drew felt the impulse to embark on journeys exploring countries around the world for the first time when he had the opportunity to participate in a student exchange in Prague, Czech Republic. At the same time, he was still a junior at the University of Wisconsin.¹⁰

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Drew began creating a blog about his travel stories for the first time, naming it "The Hungry Partier." This blog marked the beginning of Drew's career as a content creator. The name "The Hungry Partier" was later changed to "Drew Binsky," a name recognized today, providing better branding to the public.¹¹

Not only consistently creating content on the YouTube social media platform, Drew is a social media personality who is also active on other social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and LinkedIn. Drew has garnered over five billion viewers across all his uploaded videos and has over ten million followers on his various social media platforms. He has amassed 3.83 million subscribers on YouTube, 901 thousand followers on Instagram, 5.1 million followers on Facebook, 687.3 thousand followers on TikTok, 573 thousand followers on Snapchat, 70.1 thousand on Twitter, and 15 thousand on LinkedIn.¹²

The substantial number of followers across various social media channels undoubtedly brings significant advantages to Drew. His success in building a large community on social media has attracted numerous well-known companies and brands eager to collaborate with him. Drew reaps substantial financial benefits from these collaborations. Through his YouTube channel, Drew earns a substantial income from advertising. For every ad viewed by his YouTube followers, he receives commissions from the companies or brands being advertised. Drew also recounts that his financial foundation was established while teaching English in South Korea. He earned a monthly wage of USD 2000. He received accommodation, health insurance, free lunches, flight ticket reimbursements, and a 4-week holiday bonus. Another benefit he highlights is the absence of any tax payments, including sales tax, and his expenses are limited to mobile phone bills.¹³

As a public figure, Drew wields significant influence over his viewers worldwide. Through the videos he uploads, Drew has the power to reshape global perspectives on various countries. He successfully rectifies misconceptions among the public by presenting many facts that contradict what is often reported by the media. It is not uncommon for viewers to show appreciation and leave positive comments on his YouTube videos, expressing how their minds have become more open after watching or even thanking Drew for showcasing the positive aspects of a country and its people.¹⁴

Throughout his ten years of travel experience, Drew has documented visiting a total of 197 countries since the beginning of his career as a traveler until 2021. This means Drew has successfully traveled to every country worldwide.¹⁵ He completed his list of country visits on October 29, 2021, by visiting Saudi Arabia as the last country on his target list.¹⁶

After completing his mission to explore every country worldwide, Drew gained eight valuable lessons, which he shared through his YouTube videos. First, wherever we go, the people we encounter are generally good. Second, cities are ceaseless centers of human activity, where many people perform acts of kindness and perform various forms of wrongdoing. Third, the world is safer than we think, with 99.9% of people being inherently good. Fourth, countless hidden gems in this world are waiting to be discovered. Fifth, wildlife is a precious treasure we possess on this planet. Sixth, poverty does not always define unhappiness. Seventh, food is vital in creating connections, as everyone needs to eat. Eighth, despite our physical differences, all human beings are the same. We all laugh, we all cry, and we all love.¹⁷

For Drew, every country holds its impressions and uniqueness. Throughout his journeys to each country, Drew encountered many inspirational stories from others, and he firmly believed that all human beings on Earth are good. Interestingly, even though Drew is Jewish, he is deeply intrigued by countries with Muslim-majority populations. Drew states that Muslims are the warmest and most pleasant community. According to him, Muslims greatly value each other, respect their elders, warmly welcome guests, are disciplined, and highly prioritize family values.¹⁸

Furthermore, after traveling to all nations, 11 out of Drew's top 20 favorite countries are Muslim countries. As someone hailing from the American Jewish ethnic environment, Drew acknowledges the existence of Islamophobia and admits that anti-Islamic ideas once influenced him. However, upon

embarking on his global journey to various countries, Drew's eyes were opened to diverse cultures, beliefs, and differing perspectives in each nation. This shift altered Drew's perception of Islam, leading him to believe that Muslim nations are nations of peace. Drew laments the tendency of people to judge Islam based solely on the actions of a small minority. Therefore, Drew urges all of us to reconsider the stigma that "Muslims and Jews cannot unite and coexist." His call to action has garnered numerous positive responses from diverse audiences who watch his videos, thereby transforming their viewpoints on the world of Islam.¹⁹

Drew Binsky's Perspective on Islam

After visiting several Islamic countries, such as Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, the Emirates, Tanzania, and Mauritania, Drew Binsky underwent a shift in his perspective regarding Islamophobia worldwide. As a devout Jew, he initially believed that Islam was an extremist religion. However, Binsky now views Islam as a far cry from negativity, as he realized that many people are unaware of what Islam truly represents.

In this regard, Binsky observes that Islam is a religion that strongly emphasizes mutual respect among individuals. Muslims do not differentiate between people based on the dissimilarities that exist among them and regard every human being as a sibling, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or religion. Drew Binsky states, "Muslims greet and bid farewell to others with handshakes and smiles," seeing this as a sign that Muslims are genuine and value others.²⁰ Second, Muslims are known for their friendliness, hospitality, humility, and genuine delight in welcoming others. Drew mentioned, "While in Mauritania, I stayed with a friend's family, and I was treated like family by them." With this, Binsky sees Islam as the most welcoming religion in the world.²¹ Third, Islam is a religion that highly esteems, prioritizes, respects, and cares for parents and elders. Drew observed that in Islamic households, many older people continue to live with their children or relatives, even though there are nursing homes available for them. He believes that Muslims are warm-hearted individuals as they always find time to engage in light-hearted conversations and jokes with one another. Binsky considers this aspect to be something special. He also admires Muslims' understanding of the usefulness and benefits of things, such as their practice of abstaining from alcoholic beverages due to their perceived unnecessary nature.²²

Fourthly, Binsky views Islam as a highly disciplined religion due to the requirement for every Muslim to engage in worship five times a day and to fast during the thirty days of Ramadan. He sees these practices as proof of devotion. He stated, "Most of the worship takes place in mosques, and I am obsessed with visiting them around the world." Through this, he perceives that the unique worship places of Muslims hold their beauty and evoke distinct feelings when visited. He also mentioned, "This is mind-blowing," particularly when he visited significant mosques like the Blue Mosque in Mazari Sharif, Afghanistan, and the new mosque in Dakar, the largest mosque in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Furthermore, Binsky notes the discipline observed among Muslims, such as their habit of washing hands and feet, purifying themselves before worship, and removing sandals upon entering a place of worship. He remarked, "Muslims are some of the cleanest people I have ever met." According to Binsky, Islamic countries are extraordinary and highly recommended for people to visit. He believes interacting and being surrounded by Muslims is an incredible experience.²³

During his travels to Islamic countries, Binsky was deeply moved by the warmth and affection shown by Muslims, which made him appreciate Islam as a beautiful cultural trait. He found Islamic history fascinating and observed that majority-Muslim countries warmly embrace minority individuals. Binsky also viewed Islam as a rational, flexible, and adaptable religion, one that comprehends humanity

profoundly, as Muslims base their lives on their closeness to God.²⁴

In Yemen, a country known for its challenging tourist entry and the presence of Al Qaeda, Binsky felt safe and impressed by the friendly Yemeni people. Despite the presence of weapons and the intimidating sight of locals carrying firearms and knives, he was struck by their communal eating traditions and warm hospitality. He was welcomed warmly by locals who expressed happiness at having tourists. This experience led Binsky to conclude that Yemen, often portrayed as extremely unsafe, has normal community life and friendly locals, much like anywhere else in the world.²⁵

Similarly, in Afghanistan, despite encountering Taliban checkpoints, Binsky found vibrant markets and ordinary, prosperous cities. The hospitality of Afghans towards him, a Jew, was remarkable. He was often invited into homes for tea and felt that the fears instilled by global perceptions were unfounded. Binsky noted the curiosity and openness of Afghan people towards learning about Judaism. Even in places like Kandahar, known for gunfights and strict security, his initial fear was replaced by a positive experience once he shared his Jewish identity. He concluded that Afghans are among the most friendly and hospitable people in the world.²⁶ Overall, Binsky's experiences in Yemen and Afghanistan challenged the negative stereotypes and highlighted the hospitality and friendliness of the people in these countries.

Drew Binsky's social media influence on people's perceptions of religion and culture, particularly through his vlogs on Islamic culture and religion, has been significant. In analyzing the comments on some of his videos, it is clear that his content has profoundly impacted how viewers around the world view Islam.

One notable video, "5 Things I Love About Muslim Culture (I am Jewish)," uploaded on November 4, 2018, has amassed over two million views, 93,000 likes, and 16,310 comments. In this video, Drew Binsky shares his journey from a Jewish upbringing where he was taught to fear Muslims to discovering the beauty of Muslim culture firsthand through his travels. He emphasizes the kindness, humility, and friendliness of Muslims, aiming to break down stereotypes and negative prejudices. Binsky argues that if Islam truly promoted violence, the global Muslim population would not be as large and thriving. He encourages his audience to share his positive message about Muslims to foster greater understanding and empathy.

Viewer comments on this video reflect its impact. For instance, @lifedetermined9533, an Indian Hindu, discusses the societal prejudices against Muslims propagated by politicians in India and emphasizes the need for unity and peace between India and Pakistan. This comment underscores the broader implications of Drew's message on fostering harmonious intercultural relations. A Jewish viewer, @libby479, appreciates the video, expressing that she finds Muslim and Arab culture beautiful and was raised to respect and love everyone, regardless of their background. Her comment, "I am Jewish, and I really enjoyed the video. Muslims and Arab people are truly nice, and their culture is beautiful. In my family, they raised me to respect and love everyone. Moreover, it does not matter what religion or country they come from. Spread love and peace," reflects the video's success in bridging cultural and religious divides.²⁷

In another video titled "4 Reasons I Love Islam and Muslim People," uploaded on September 19, 2021, Drew Binsky shares his experiences in various Muslim-majority countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Syria, and Indonesia. He challenges the misconceptions he grew up with in the United States about Muslims being bad people. Instead, he highlights the respect, hospitality, and friendship he encountered in these countries. Viewer comments on this video also reflect positive changes in perception. For example, @pastor-tom-sims, a Christian pastor, praises Drew for his respectful

approach to understanding other religions, writing, "Thank you so much, Drew. I have been a Christian pastor for over 45 years, and it grieves me how so many people judge other people and their beliefs without knowing and understanding them. We can honor one another without abandoning our deepest convictions. We can love each other without compromising our faith. In fact, unless we do, we reproach our faith. You are a breath of fresh air, Brother".²⁸

In the video "Why I Love Muslim Countries," released on January 18, 2020, Drew Binsky explores why he finds the Islamic world special and why he loves Muslim people and their culture. He points out that Islam is the most misrepresented and misunderstood religion despite being the second-largest religion in the world. He notes that eleven of his favorite countries have Muslim-majority populations. Viewer comments reflect the video's impact in altering perceptions. For example, @mrabsurdist0123, a Muslim viewer, appreciates Drew's efforts in breaking down media-driven barriers, writing, "This really puts a smile on my face. As a Muslim, I really, really, really appreciate your job breaking any barrier that the media has set us. Thank you, and May God bless you. Moreover, I am sure every single person, Muslim or non-Muslim, should say the same and appreciate your job, as you are a special YouTuber, rarely found!".²⁹

These comments demonstrate how effectively Drew Binsky's videos have influenced viewers' perceptions of Islam and Muslims. By promoting love and respect for Muslim-majority countries and fostering a better understanding of their culture and religion, Drew Binsky has successfully challenged negative stereotypes and encouraged a more positive perspective on Islam. His videos highlight the warmth, hospitality, and cultural richness of Muslim communities, opening the hearts and minds of his audience to the beauty of diversity.

The impact of Drew Binsky's videos extends beyond YouTube. A heated debate on Reddit.com about the influence of his videos on perceptions of Islam reveals the complexity of these perspectives. Some users discussed how the videos inspired them to consider converting to Islam. In contrast, others expressed fears associated with the "unknown." Despite these controversies, many Reddit users shared positive experiences of visiting Muslim countries and interacting with locals, further highlighting the effectiveness of Drew's efforts in promoting a positive image of Islam.³⁰

Overall, Drew Binsky's videos have made significant strides in embracing diversity, countering biases and introducing positive perspectives on Islam to public discourse. By sharing his personal experiences and highlighting the cultural and religious richness of Muslim-majority countries, he has helped break down negative stereotypes and foster greater understanding and empathy among people of different faiths. His work emphasizes the values of peace, tolerance, and cultural beauty, contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive world.

Efforts to present a different narrative about Islam have been undertaken by various Muslim communities in different countries, including by Islamic figures such as Zakir Naik, Nouman Ali Khan, Mufti Menk, and others. However, Drew Binsky's approach is unique because he is an American Jew who travels and interacts directly with hundreds of communities around the world, including in the Islamic world, often portrayed negatively by global mainstream media.

From a People-to-People Diplomacy perspective, Drew Binsky acted as an individual who was not bound by the interests of any specific nation. Drew Binsky is free to choose which countries to visit and which communities to meet. For instance, during his time in India and before he visited Pakistan, negative statements about Pakistan were made by Indians to Drew Binsky. However, after he had personally visited Pakistan, he experienced the warmth of the Muslim community there.

With the funds generated from content on his YouTube channel, Drew Binsky does not need to rely on mainstream media coverage that may not always be available to cover his activities. Instead, through YouTube's billions of users and his millions of followers, his messages of peace have a broad reach and impact, influencing the global perception of Islam. This also serves as a counter-narrative to mainstream media, which often focuses solely on the violent and terrorist aspects of the Muslim and Islamic world.

One of the challenges Drew Binsky faced when aiming to visit all countries was related to his visit to Saudi Arabia. Eventually, he was able to visit the country and express his appreciation for it.

Drew Binsky is one of many actors and communities striving to view the Islamic world from a different, more positive perspective.³¹ For instance, in the United States, active efforts by Muslim communities to integrate with the surrounding society and educational Islamic content on social media have contributed to a more positive image of Islam in the country. This change in attitude is also occurring in European countries where their societies are engaging more directly with Muslims.³²

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the role of Drew Binsky, a travel vlogger who has traveled to every country in the world. Drew Binsky, who shares the outcomes of his interactions with various global communities, initially held negative views about Islam. However, after engaging with Muslims from different regions, his perspective became more sympathetic towards Islam. Moreover, he has created specific videos to portray his stance on Islam and why he appreciates the Muslim community.

From the perspective of P2P Diplomacy (People-to-People Diplomacy), Drew Binsky acts as an independent diplomatic actor who is not bound by specific government agendas, including funding for his global travel activities. This allows Binsky the freedom to explore various regions and express his ideas to the global public without hesitation. His various content has received positive responses from viewers of different religions, such as Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism.

Drew Binsky serves as an example of how an individual actor, armed with their resources, can contribute to creating positive perceptions of the Muslim community. This community has often been portrayed by mainstream media in terms of violence, underdevelopment, and other negative aspects. This paper contributes to the development of research in public diplomacy, specifically focusing on interpersonal diplomacy or People-to-People Diplomacy.

ENDNOTES

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