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Online tie and content management and changing religious identity among Muslim Arab women in Israel

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the central dilemmas and changes in social media use among people whose religious identity is in flux, with an emphasis on backstage processes of decision making. Drawing on 15 in-depth interviews with Muslim women in Israel, we found five main themes reflecting the main online changes users experience and effect. We suggest two different logics that the themes show in online decision-making regarding identity and self-presentation. The first is relatively predictable, whereby users reconstruct their social environment to fit their new religious identity. The second logic concerns the management of ties and content in accordance with religious obligations in ways that may not fit the user's personal welfare, and which are related to complex inner conflicts of the user. While previous literature stresses personal welfare as a main factor behind online tie and content management, in this article we show how users are willing to sacrifice their online welfare for the sake of their new identity.

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Introduction

This study investigates dilemmas and decision-making processes around social media use among Arab Muslim women in Israel as they become more religious. Based on analysis of in-depth interviews, we explore tie management strategies during a period of religious identity change. This article thereby contributes to our understanding both of the use of features offered by social media in times of religious identity change, focusing on online tie management, and of the emotions, thoughts, and considerations guiding online behavior, especially online tie breaking. It also examines the front and backstage of online religious identity formation and presentation.

The notion of identity defines and describes one's sense of self, group affiliations, and structural position (Stets & Burke, 2003; Howard, 2000). It is flexible, develops and changes with time and events (Goffman, 1959, 1963), and results from one's internal subjective perception of the self as well as external characterizations (Stets & Burke, 2000). This study explores the ways internal features of the self are externalized through social media use and online self-presentation, and delves into online aspects of identity change,

while focusing on the user's experience and perception of their social media use as related to the identity change process they are going through, and the way features offered by these media are used in order to form and consolidate a new self and identity. Focusing on identity change among Muslim women who have become more religious, and by looking closely at both front and backstage activities on social media, we may gain a fuller picture of those components of religious identity that are related to technology use.

This study shows how online acts and decisions can be driven by religious rules and considerations, sometimes at great emotional cost to the users. This contrasts with prevalent assumptions among scholars that internet use – and indeed media consumption in general – is understandable in terms of personal preferences and taste. Our findings show a different kind of decision-making process. Focusing on users' inner thoughts and feelings during an identity change brings to the fore online dilemmas and considerations that are rarely highlighted in the context of tie formation, maintenance, and breaking. Indeed, this perspective could be partly related to the fact that the participants in (and one of the authors of) this research are non-Western, unlike the subjects and authors of the majority of social media studies.

Online ties and identity change

Social ties are part of the self-people present (Goffman, 1963). In addition, identity construction entails self-presentation and the management of verbal and visual impressions. Self-presentation is as flexible and changeable as the different aspects of identity (see Goffman, 1959, 1963). Social network sites (SNSs) allow users to present their self through the use of text, pictures, videos, friend lists, interests, etc. (for example see Donath, 2007; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2010). However, information from the past may weaken the presentation of one's current self. Accordingly, people may choose to cover up certain facts, knowing that they may cause confusion or embarrassment (Goffman, 1959). Social networks have different ways of reminding users and their connections of their past, such as Facebook Memories (Kaun & Stierstedt, 2014), and 'friendship anniversaries', which remind users of the duration of current ties, while the task of saving memories becomes much easier: users can commit their thoughts, actions, photos, etc., to SNSs' servers. While removing traces of unwanted actions is crucial in building a new self-image (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009), the digital memories of SNSs, as well as of search engines and other online services, create a web of reminders of one's past that might be inconsistent with one's new identity.

We also know that people tend to initiate and maintain social relationships with those who share interests, identities, and opinions (Bisgin et al., 2010). By the same token, they may also choose *not* to form or maintain ties with those who disagree with them for ideological (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015) or other reasons (Sibona, 2014). Lopez and Ovaska (2013) refer to the behavior of shaping our social circles by tie-breaking as unsocial behavior, defined as 'deliberate acts people do to elude another person online'. Unsocial behavior helps to delineate the boundaries of one's online sphere; it is a way of avoiding and preventing unwanted situations and content (John & Gal, 2018; Malinen, 2015). These ties and texts can be unwanted aspects of an identity that the user would rather hide, given that, as mentioned, the identity of one's online ties is part of the self being presented (Donath, 2007).

Social media and religious identity

Religion can be a crucial aspect of both collective and individual identity (Durkheim, 1995). Moreover, social relationships and a supportive community are crucial to forming and maintaining religious identity (Durkheim, 1965). As communication technologies develop and provide new ways of practicing religion, they are used to form a sense of religious belonging and participation (Lundby, 2011) and are used to form and represent religious identity (Feltmate, 2010; Teusner, 2010), and to practice religion (Becker, 2011).

Technological developments in media impact on religious identities in several ways. The emergence of computer-mediated communication has changed the way people receive religious information, enabling users to form different identities. For example, Helland (2004) notes that the opportunities offered by the internet for producing content and accessing information enable users to form different kinds of religious identities away from the authority of religious institutions.

Religious identity can be part of people's self-presentation on social media, and at times these media offer a safe platform to do so when users are part of a religious minority (Pennington, 2018). Religious identity change, by which we mean a voluntary and profound change in an individual's religious identity, involving changes of behavior (conducting religious rituals and demands) and thought (adapting religious beliefs), has been widely discussed by scholars over the last two decades in relation to media innovations (see for example Campbell & Rule, 2020, 2012; Cheong, 2016; Cheong et al., 2008, 2012). As well as traditional authorities and sources of information, religious identity change is formed and presented through private profiles and dyadic ties, especially among younger users (Pascone, 2011). This experience is related to both implicit and explicit aspects of identity which are affected by each other; in the case of Muslim women, inner identity change is accompanied by a change in their dress code.

Notably, much of the research about religious change among Muslims links religion with extreme socio-political views; when talking about Islam, religious change is usually linked to Jihadist ideology (for instance Ghajar-Khosravi et al., 2016; Varanese, 2016; King & Taylor, 2011). This negative association with religious views has been discussed by Abu-Lughod (2002), who has exposed the Eurocentric assumption that women in traditional societies need help in order to enter modernity and become civilized and called for 'cultural sensitivity' when dealing with communities perceived as weak. These communities need to be studied while putting aside both Western stereotypes and the perception of non-Western research as peripheral (Wallerstein, 2004, 2006). To meet the need to de-Westernize social sciences in general, and communication studies in particular, almost every aspect of the research should be de-Westernized, including the research population, assumptions and methods (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Given its population, method and findings, this study contributes to the de-Westernization of communication studies, in particular by showing how assumptions about the motivations behind social media practices may not apply outside the Western contexts in which most communication research is conducted.

Muslim women

A large body of research has discussed the representation of Muslims in general, and Muslim women in social media in particular, as comprising varied images and

representations of cultures, groups and races (Lewis, 2010). Both the gender and religious identities of Muslim women are related to and affected by each other, in particular through representations of the hijab. The hijab is an explicit aspect of Muslim women's identity (Macdonald, 2006) that can be expressed in social media use, especially on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018). This body of research mainly discusses the ways users experience and present their existing religious identity. However, there are several aspects of the backstage of social media use and religious identity change that are less explored, such as motivations for decision making, dilemmas related to religious laws, and tie management. Indeed, studies of the process of religious identity change as related to social media use are rare.

Muslim women use new media to express their religious views and negotiate multiple religious interpretations (Piela et al., 2011; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013), including around gender issues. For instance, the question of relations with men online has been a topic of debate among Muslim women, who use the internet to both find information and express their opinion (Piela, 2010). Features offered by new media raise the question of male-female relations and, at times, have changed this social interaction. For example, Al-Saggaf and Begg (2004) examined online discourse among Muslim women and men regarding the limits of male-female relations in internet forums.

This study takes Muslim women in Israel as its research population. Research into Islam in Israel focuses mainly on political issues and activities and presents the Islamic party as the main representative body for Muslims in Israel, while ignoring parts of this population that are not politically active (Al-Atawneh & Hatina, 2019). As for Muslim women in Israel, studies have discussed their political and social status (Meari, 2015), political activism (Abu-Baker, 2016), and their role in Islamic movements (Daoud, 2016; Jad, 2018). However, we know very little about the religiosity of Muslim women in Israel as a day-to-day practice, online and off.

In sum, social media offer various tools which enable religious identity change and presentation. The opportunity to manage online ties relatively easily can also make the experience of identity change smoother. Yet, the field of tie management in times of identity change is not fully explored since it contains the challenge of getting a view of online backstage acts and events. This study focuses on a specific period of identity change: the time when women Muslim social media users make and carry out the decision to become more religious. We ask what role online ties play in this identity change and how users utilize social media features to manage these ties.

Method

To understand how users manage their ties on social media during identity change, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Muslim women living in Israel (aged 19-37) who describe themselves as having gone through a religious identity change. All interviewees became more religious at a period of their lives when they were using one or more SNSs. Moreover, all interviewees faced some objection to their change, mostly from members of their close family. Thirteen of the interviewees have an academic degree or are college students; and two have a high school education. Most of the interviewees (13) live in Arab towns in the north of Israel. None of the interviewees was married during the period of identity change.

We used two different sampling methods. The first was snowball sampling (eight participants), The second was publishing an announcement about the study in a Facebook group for religious Muslim women in Israel (seven participants). After a short conversation about the research, the interviews were held in a place chosen by the interviewees. The inclusion criteria were simply being a Muslim woman who had experienced an increase of religiosity and who used social media during that time.

The interview schedule was built around the main research topic and included questions about the period of religious identity change, social tie management before, during and after the change, and the way they used social media. The interviews lasted an average of 75 min and were recorded.

After transcription, the data were textually analyzed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. Analysis was based in the grounded theory principle (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), whereby we relied on the interpretations given by social actors for their actions. Specifically, we adopt Wierzbicka's (1974) suggestion to present the participants' voices by quoting them directly and relying on their claims in our findings and conclusions. Moreover, Wierzbicka posits presenting the raw texts as central, true and reliable. The quotes were gathered into main themes which were consolidated into five categories through which we present the ways participants managed their social media ties as they became more religious.

Findings

We present our findings concerning tie management and social media use in the process of identity change in five categories: tie building, tie maintenance, tie breaking, relations with men, and the management of one's digital past. The latter two categories involve a kind of tie and content management motivated mainly by religious considerations, which leads us to the study's main insights.

Tie building

When asked whether they built new ties during the period of identity change, almost all interviewees said that they had added friends on Facebook, followed new Instagram users, and joined WhatsApp groups. These ties were all made with other religious users. The interviewees described these as automatic acts, carried out without serious consideration. For example, Juli¹ (aged 21) said:

I simply found myself surrounded by religious Facebook and WhatsApp friends. I don't know how this happened, but my profile started to look different, with different people. It was like I needed some support.

Their new ties gave the interviewees' social media a religious atmosphere, creating a different social environment from their offline one and that afforded by their close family, which was usually discouraging of the change. The interviewees' new ties created an alternative support network, one in which they felt appreciated and encouraged. Ashgan (27) stated:

Facebook was my sanctuary. In fact, based on my posts, a lot of people expected me to be wearing a hijab. Outside of Facebook no one could have predicted that I would become more

religious [...] After I put on the hijab I published a post about it. Of course, the reactions were amazing, a lot of people supported me, Facebook supported me. They gave me the support I never had at home.

Ashgan started using Facebook to present her process of change. On Facebook, her self-presentation was different from that presented offline. By the time she decided to take the step of wearing the hijab, she already had a supportive online environment, unlike her offline environment.

Both Juli and Ashgan were excited to find that their Facebook friends supported their religious change, and they perceived having such an alternative environment as a blessing. Participants used social media as a tool to build or join online religious communities in order to overcome a sense of loneliness and a lack of religious friends offline. Hassan (2018) found similar usage of social media among female Muslim students in the US who used social media in order to connect with people beyond their immediate social circles.

When talking about their social media use around the time they were deciding to become more religious, some interviewees mentioned other users who had inspired them, as well as Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and WhatsApp groups that were a source of information about religion. Indeed, three quarters of the interviewees said that social media had played a role in their decision to become more religious. Alongside content produced by religious leaders (mostly YouTube videos and Facebook pages, but also books), interviewees mentioned new online ties as sources of information and inspiration. An example of the former was mentioned by Layla (22):

I have known from the start that the virtual world is a fiction. I don't buy it, but somehow it helped me when the first person, when I decided to search for Sheikhs, the first Sheikh was A. I didn't know him in person but I started following his page [...] I contacted him on Facebook and he really helped me find answers.

Layla describes how she built an online tie in order to get both information and support during her identity change process. Though this particular tie was broken in a later phase, it was a crucial tie that was created consciously and with a clear aim.

Tie maintenance

Users who decided to maintain pre-existing online ties with non-religious women users (mainly on Facebook) did so for two main reasons. First, they did not feel it was necessary, or right, to break ties with less religious users. Second, they perceived themselves as role models who could bring their friends closer to religion. Regarding the first reason, Manal said:

Those who are not religious or don't wear a hijab, the way I talk to them is not different [...] They are not that different from me, see? The only difference is what we wear. Even my sister doesn't wear a hijab. I treat everyone like I treat my own sister.

Manal seems to be trying to present herself as humble, empathetic, and positive; she does not break ties with her less religious friends because she does not see herself as different from or better than them. Furthermore, some interviewees chose not to break ties in order to send a message to other users and serve as role models. For example, Layla

tells a story about a friend who decided to become less religious. She explained the reason for not breaking the tie:

I wanted to prove to her that we religious people are not a separate world who don't speak with non-religious people. I knew this [breaking ties] would have the wrong effect, a worse effect on her. I couldn't simply leave her.

Layla chose to maintain this online tie so as not to harm her friend and to present a more tolerant self-online. Tagreed expressed this more directly: 'It is important to me that what others see affects them positively. Younger girls could see me as a role model and choose to learn from my posts and become better people.' Tagreed sees herself as a potentially significant character for other users, and as having a responsibility to help them become more religious. A similar sense of responsibility felt by some social media users toward their online ties, and an understanding of the way information flows through networks, were also found in John and Gal's study (2018) regarding political unfriending.

Both reasons for maintaining ties are related, whether directly or indirectly, to the interviewees' self-presentation as tolerant and caring. These interviewees tried to emulate those users who had convinced them to become more religious. Tie maintenance thus serves their identity change as much as other actions as they strive to preserve an image of tolerance.

Tie breaking

Our findings on tie breaking are presented in two parts. First, we discuss the interviewees' relationships with other women, and then their relationships with men. In keeping with what we already know about unfriending, most interviewees did not break most of their ties (Krämer et al., 2015), but those instances when they did are of particular interest. Some ties were broken both on- and offline because of events that happened offline (cf. Sibona & Walczak, 2011), such as when old friends treated them in a way they found disrespectful. For example, Ashgan broke off her relationships (both on- and offline) with her two best friends because they joked about her religiosity and because she felt that she 'didn't fit in anymore'.

Another form of tie breaking involved unfriending all non-religious users as part of interviewees' reconfiguration of their social media profiles to fit their religiosity (four interviewees reported doing this). For instance, July answered a question about tie breaking by saying:

Depressed people, who tend to be atheists, could sin by asking why is God doing this to us. I don't need this, and they may convince you of their point of view. Having them on my profile is a risk, while deleting them helps me to get where I'm aiming at since I can't be so paradoxical [by having religious and goth friends].

July perceives breaking ties with users who publish certain thoughts as important for maintaining her faith.

Overall, online tie breaking, especially with women users, was not mentioned as much as other kinds of tie management, and interviewees tended not to bring it up on their own. This could be because of the negative memories or awkward feelings the issue causes. For instance, in keeping with their desire to appear tolerant, it seems that

interviewees did not feel comfortable saying that they had broken ties with people because they held different religious views, saying instead that they unfriended users who had published 'inappropriate content' (Shimaa) online. This finding is consistent with previous literature that shows how tie breaking is sometimes driven by a desire to have a 'clean' profile (John & Gal, 2018). It is notable that the interviewees mostly said that they did not break any ties when they were directly asked about tie breaking, yet they mentioned stories such as those mentioned here as given-off information, information that is indirect and 'leaks out' during communication (Goffman, 1963).

We turn now to the management of ties with men, which entailed quite a different set of considerations. Nine interviewees said that they had broken all of their ties with male users, sometimes all at once, in order to adhere to a religious interpretation that forbids such ties. This decision was rarely easy, as some of these men were long-standing and close friends. For example, Ayat broke ties with all of her male friends, including a childhood friend:

We were all [members of] a Facebook group, with two guys, not only girls, so I decided to reduce contact with them, starting with the group. I sent a message that I intend to leave the group, first because it contains guys, and second because of a couple of situations that made me feel uncomfortable. [...] One of them was my childhood and best friend [...] Because we were friends I expected him to be the first to understand and respect my decision. I called him in order to end the friendship in a positive way. We talked for hours.

Although Ayat is referring here to what for her was only the first step of tie breaking, breaking Facebook ties, she attributes importance to it by sending a farewell message and calling her friend to explain her current and future actions. Several interviewees said they had broken ties with men because they saw them as posing a threat to the process they were going through. Layla describes breaking a tie because she felt it had the potential to develop into a romantic relationship: 'This relationship was the most significant one I had, but I had to step back because there was a chance that I could like or love him. I had to step away, and it was the right decision.' And so does Nora (25) when she told about a romantic relationship she broke because 'it was simply *haram* [prohibited]'.

Layla decided to break a valued tie because of the chance it might develop into a romantic relationship. Having this kind of feeling is perceived as a threat to the interviewee's religiosity, and also as pointless, because it would probably not develop into marriage in any case. The majority of the interviewees showed some difficulty breaking these ties. For instance, Wafa (30) broke all ties with men after reading a *fatwa* (religious ruling) that forbade having ties with men on social network sites:

It was not that easy, I mean, they are my friends and colleagues. They have done me no harm but I can't argue with the fatwa. In the evening I decided to delete all the men on my Facebook. I asked my husband to sit near me. I needed his support because it was really hard.

Wafa, like other interviewees, describes a difficult experience where she needed her husband to stand by her, literally, in order to give her the strength to break those ties. She makes it clear that the only reason for this was a religious ruling that she had decided to obey. Shimaa describes a similar experience, though her decision was not because of a specific *fatwa*:

Some of the guys were good friends of mine, we talked all the time. When I deleted them they asked why, and it wasn't easy. This was a hard decision. I apologized [...]. Yet it was part of a process. I kept asking myself, what is the right thing to do? Is it right to be religious and have men on my Facebook? Should I talk to men? I keep asking myself these questions.

Both Shima and Wafa mentioned the importance of these relationships for them and the fact that they did not break ties for interpersonal reasons. Interviewees who broke ties with men found it important to focus on the religious reasons for doing so. These are new reasons for unfriending that have not yet been reported in the literature. They point to a conception of the very nature of a Facebook friendship that does not entirely conform with the idea of Facebook as a site for pleasure based on subjective choices by its users. Overall, these acts are indicative of a different kind of user than what Facebook encourages: a predictable, active, productive user (Docherty, 2020).

On the other hand, some interviewees chose to maintain ties with men, feeling that 'they are not a threat to [their] religiosity' (Ashwaa). For example, Riham (26) said:

I never broke any ties with men. Why would I? How do these relations harm me? I find men better than women as workmates, and sometimes they are even better friends. Since I am not doing anything against the laws of Islam I can't see a reason to remove them from my profiles.

We notice here that the question of ties with men as a threat to religious identity was discussed broadly, no matter the ultimate decision. Indeed, in keeping her male Facebook friends, Riham draws on Islamic law. It is interesting, though, that none of the interviewees mentioned pressure from other people or considerations of self-presentation as a reason for their choices. Indeed, most of them had become more religious *before* having many religious acquaintances, and hence were not subject to their influence when making decisions about their social media use. The only reasons given by the interviewees for breaking or maintaining ties with men were grounded in rules which they believe are set by God and mediated by religious authority figures who have interpreted them for the modern day. It is worth mentioning that all stories told by the interviewees about their relations with men were brought up by them, as the interview schedule did not include specific questions about gender relations.

Online past: maintenance and deletion

The question of keeping or removing parts of their digital past was raised by almost all of the interviewees. Interviewees mentioned two different ways of dealing with social media content related to their past identity, such as friends lists and WhatsApp contacts, as well as posts, photos and social media profiles in general. The first strategy, which was less popular among the interviewees, was to use digital traces as aides-memoire. This is how Aya (24) used messages sent by former friends who unfriended her after she had unfriended her male Facebook contacts, some of whom were mutual friends:

At first it was really bad. [...] I mean, they even sent me, two of them sent me messages, one sent a really long message [...] It felt like I'd committed a crime. For a long time I had these conversations, I kept a copy of them, and also the messages on Facebook. I kept them for four or five years. I took screenshots and kept them with me [...] I saved the conversations as a reminder for me to know that I don't owe anyone explanations.

Aya decided to save past messages in order to raise her confidence and reinforce her religious identity and looks at them when she fears religious weakness, to remember that she sacrificed strong friendships for the sake of her religion and to use the angry messages as proof that explaining her act was useless. Ashgan (27) found a way to keep parts of her online past without breaking religious laws. She experiences old photos of hers as a part of her past that cannot simply be abandoned. She spoke of how she keeps these precious memories by using features offered by Facebook in a way that adheres to religious requirements:

I used to publish some photos of mine, and there was a time when I asked myself why. I only posted them to satisfy my ego. I felt uncomfortable with the thought that some guy is staring at my face. Yet it was really hard, these photos are nice memories of mine and I won't just throw them away, so I made them 'only me' photos.

The second way of dealing with digital traces was simply to remove them, which is what the majority of participants did. Some interviewees said they deleted content that no longer represented their identity. For example, Nora explained why she deleted posts and photos from her Facebook and Instagram profiles: 'This is not me, not anymore, so I deleted everything that shows a different character from my current self. You know, as young students people post some foolish stuff.' While Nora deleted posts because they no longer represent her current identity, other users took the more drastic step of deleting their social media profiles altogether. Shimaa said that:

When I looked at my Instagram I found that there was too much stuff to delete, so I just shut down the profile. As for Facebook, I closed it because I needed to give up everything from my past. Things from the past looked worthless now, even the photos, I kept nothing.

The act of deleting a social media profile was part of forming a new identity, separated from past events, actions and ties. Closing social media profiles included both content deletion and the mass breaking of ties with all of their online contacts.

The decision to keep or remove digital traces appears to be as important as other actions of identity building and self-presentation such as posting and publishing religious texts and photos that show the user's new identity. Participants signal their religious identity by both showing and hiding clues of this aspect of their identity, as discussed by Esposito et al. (2018). Participants perceive themselves as role models and choose to remove and publish posts, photos and videos that help them present a religious and powerful self.

Discussion

Some of the findings presented above align quite neatly with earlier studies of identity and social media (see for example boyd, 2006 and Gabriels et al., 2012). These are mainly related to tie building as a means of constructing a supportive social environment; breaking ties with those people who have very different views; and deleting content that might contradict or undermine their new identity. These efforts at creating a new presentation of self and developing new social circles are driven by decisions that serve the user's desire to reconstruct their identity and feel comfortable while doing so. This is a pattern presented in previous literature regarding different kinds of identities

(Fox & Warber, 2015) and online social behaviors in general (Sibona, 2014). Yet, our participants spoke of a conscious process of creating a homophilic online environment; it is not that they are simply attracted to the same topics with their online acquaintances, as suggested in previous literature (McPherson et al., 2001), but that they choose to contact these users in order actively and consciously to shape their identity.

Other findings, though, are reflective of dilemmas that are not related to the users' personal wellbeing. These dilemmas mostly concern ties with men, the removal of digital traces that did not necessarily undermine the participants' new identity, and acts of mass tie breaking and closing social media profiles, a drastic step that breaks all online ties mediated by that platform. These online acts were driven by religious rules and their interpretations. Sometimes, obeying these rules was very difficult, yet the interviewees did so. Although religious Muslim women use social media to present a religious self to other users (Piela, 2013), in the case we present the use of social media, especially tie breaking and content deletion, are not conveyed to a human audience, and thus are not part of their self-presentation as defined by Goffman (1963). These findings correspond with Inge's (2017) findings about tie breaking and the reconstruction of offline social circles, though her work does not deal with online ties.

Our study shows that challenging social norms and obeying religious rules, in the case of our sample, can be complicated. This challenges Stout's (2012) claim that congregation (community) is an essential component of religious practice: our participants pass through a phase when they have no religious community as they leave their less religious community – all online. The users decided to break ties for two main reasons: religious obligation and perceiving the very existence of the tie as a threat to the process they are going through. While previous literature shows that people manage their online ties mainly for intra-psychic reasons to do with their sense of wellbeing (John & Agbarya, 2020; Kwak et al., 2011; Sibona & Walczak, 2011), here we see that they manage ties to satisfy God, even when they do not feel comfortable with such acts. This kind of justification for online behaviors is barely mentioned in the literature.

Changes to their religious identity were accompanied by changes to the interviewees' online past. Respondents said that they had deleted posts that no longer represented their identity and deleted old photos of themselves in which they were not wearing a hijab. These procedures of past abandonment sometimes involved closing social media profiles, mostly on Instagram. They deleted these images partly because they show parts of their bodies which Islamic law forbids from showing. Indeed, the removal of digital traces was as important to the interviewees as acts of identity building, such as creating a new self-presentation by publishing religious texts and photos that display their new identity. For Muslim women, visual self-presentation is a crucial component of their identity and is subordinated to religious rules. The removal of digital traces has been discussed in the literature mainly as an intra-psychic decision in service of the self (Haimson et al., 2016), justified by reference to how this or that content or tie makes the user feel. Here, however, interviewees report behaving in keeping with extra-psychic religious obligations that even cause inner conflict for users who feel that they should sacrifice meaningful ties in order to follow newly adopted rules.

Conclusion

This study examines social media use during the process of religious identity change. We show how people use social media features in order to rebuild both their identity and their social environment, including acts that are mostly invisible to other users.

Social media played a vital role in the participants' religious identity change. They used the features offered by the technology in order to overcome social and personal challenges, especially peer pressure against becoming more religious. We see here how social media ties inspire, encourage and help identity change, and how some ties are broken in order to protect this change when they are perceived as threatening it. The main finding of this study is the different logic of online decision making when it comes to dilemmas related to religious rules and faith; participants acted based on perceived religious obligations rather than decisions based on their own wellbeing. These personal sacrifices are related to the social and psychological challenges of losing good friends and facing criticism from their family and friends, and so the identity change is not an inner process related only to the user but appears to include acts of allegiance to the religion, some of which are required by God.

This study, and the fact that we found different logics of decision making used by 'different', non-Western participants, is consistent with former studies that shows different internet usage patterns based on the religiosity of users and their religious interpretation (for example, Nyland & Near, 2007; Livio & Tenenboim Weinblatt, 2007; Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2016). Yet, this body of research focus on existing crystalized identity rather than changing identity, and is based on previous literature, which does not usually present subcultures online experience (in our case, Muslim Arab women living in Israel) and study their uniqueness; this points to a problem of 'European universalism', whereby the field of social media research is hugely dominated by studies dealing with Western users and their habits, sources of authority, online behavior and decision making, and leads us to Wallerstein's (2006) argument that social studies should also include non-Western scholars in order to reach a universal universalism where all cultures are part of mainstream research. To be sure, the context of this study is complex, given that its non-Western research participants live in a Middle Eastern country that is perceived both by itself and others as Western. Given global demographic changes – in particular, migration to the West – we believe that communication scholars will be increasingly called upon to account for the media experiences of new minority populations with interesting similarities to the Palestinian population of Israel.

Our study of the experiences of Muslim women users of social media gives rise to questions for further research: for instance, do we find the dilemmas presented here in other religions and societies? Or: what dilemmas and practices would we find if we looked at the opposite process of identity change, namely, Muslim women who are becoming less religious. As Miller et al.'s (2016) research shows, studying social media use in different cultures can lead to varied findings. In this specific case, the role of religious laws leads to online decisions that do not bring users pleasure, and that is certainly not the motivation behind such decisions. The field of online identity change is widely explored, but the backstage acts and thoughts of users, especially when personal preference is not the leading motivating factor, are worth exploring further.

Note

1. All names have been changed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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