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SOCIAL MEDIA AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CHANGE AMONG MUSLIM ARAB WOMEN IN ISRAEL

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This study investigates the interface between heightened religiosity among Muslim Arab women in Israel, and their social media use. Based on this case, we ask what the main dilemmas and changes in social media use are among people whose identity is in flux, with an emphasis on backstage processes of decision making. We highlight the adoption of new kinds of rules for digitally mediated communication, and expose various turning points as the research participants became more religious.

A fair amount has been written about the use of new media for religious practice in general, and religious identity formation. New media have enabled different forms of religious practice (Campbell and Evolvi, 2019) and have changed the way religious identity is formed (Lovheim, 2013; Burroughs and Feller, 2015). Scholars have paid particular attention to the way users present their religious identity online (Bobkowski and Pearce, 2011), and also to male-female relations (for example see Al-Saggaf and Begg, 2004). These negotiations between religious roles and social media use are discernable among Muslim women. For example, their outward appearance - and in particular their wearing of the hijab - is part of how they represent their self and their religious identity (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018). Also, they may sometimes remove digital footprints that lead back to a past identity by deleting texts, photos, or ties with other users (in another context, see Haimson et al., 2016). These issues come up in this study, though our contribution derives from our focus on the way decisions are made backstage, rather than on the presentations of self themselves among Muslim women as they become more religious.

To study social media decision making during identity change, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Muslim women aged 19-26 who are, or have been, social media users, who live in Israel, and who have become significantly more religious than they had previously been. The interview included questions about their interactions -

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digitally mediated and face-to-face - with family and friends, and religious and other authorities. The main issue discussed in the interviews was the use of social media during the process of identity change, including the deployment of unsocial behaviours - referring to acts such as unfriending and unfollowing (Lopez and Ovasca, 2013) - in order to restructure their social environment.

The findings show two different logics of social media use in times of religious identity change. The first is unsurprising and familiar, whereby we see people building new and supportive ties while breaking hostile ties. This enables users to create a supportive, empathetic and empowering social circle online (for example Fox and Warber, 2015). The second logic - which we find more interesting - relates to decision making based on the religious rules newly adopted by respondents. This kind of decision making is not driven by a desire for personal satisfaction, which we might see as central to the experience of social media use, but is rather based on the need to adhere to religious edicts, as perceived by the user.

We can see this played out in relation to two sets of practices. First, the dilemma of maintaining or breaking ties with male users was raised by most of the interviewees, who said that they broke online ties with men as they became more religious. The religious requirements for breaking such ties were mentioned in the interviews in terms of the necessity to maintain boundaries between men and women. Moreover, though, some interviewees saw some of their ties with men, and their romantic potential, as a threat to their identity change. Some interviewees said that they asked for help from others in breaking ties, or felt obliged to explain at length their decision to male friends.

Second, change to religious identity was accompanied by changes to 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 involved closing social media profiles at times, mostly Instagram profiles. They deleted these images partly because they show parts of their bodies which are forbidden to be shown according to Islamic laws. 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 mentioned in the literature as an individual decision in service of the self (Haimson et al., 2016), but here it is a religious obligation that even causes inner conflict for users who feel that they should sacrifice meaningful ties in order to follow newly adopted rules.

Communication technologies are used not only to present identity, but also play a role in its formation and transformation. The women in this study refer to social and unsocial acts online as driven by religious rules, and as a part of the change they are going through. Moreover, religious identity change involves a change in logics of social media use, tie management, content creation and deletion. These online behaviors and decisions are not only motivated by personal preferences but are also dictated by religious rules. The very fact that these acts and dilemmas are visible to us is a result of paying special attention to identities in flux.

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