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7. Internet and Social Media Use and Religion among Minority Groups in Israel: A Case Study of Muslim and Druze Young Adults

Sawsan Kheir and Marcus Moberg

Introduction

Recent years have seen growing scholarly interest in Internet and social media use among religious minority groups (cf. Leurs et al. 2012). The research to date has, however, primarily focused on the online engagements of minority and diasporic religious communities in European or North American contexts. While the proliferation and expansion of the Internet and social media have provided religious minority groups with new channels for communication and interaction on a global scale, minority groups' engagements online frequently remain influenced by factors such as limited or restricted access, or the continuing impact of traditional values and mores (e.g. Abbas and Mesch 2015).

Muslims and Druze constitute notable ethnic and religious minorities in Israel. Located in a broader social and cultural environment marked by intensifying modernity, increasing cultural diffusion, and the proliferation of new media technologies, both communities are currently struggling to maintain their traditional communal values, norms, and ways of life. This chapter explores the role that the Internet and social media play in the religious lives of young adult Druze and Muslim university students in Israel, both separately and comparatively. Through focusing on the relationship between Internet and social media use and the personal religious lives of young adults in two non-Western religious minority contexts, the chapter aims to highlight some of the most important ways in which the peculiarities of social, cultural, and

religious context works to significantly shape young adults' engagements with the Internet and social media in religion-related matters.

This chapter ties into all three main themes of this volume: identity, connectedness, and authority. The chapter consists of two main sections. The first section provides a general overview of the Israeli Muslim and Druze communities, followed by a discussion of current levels of Internet-and social media use among the broader Arab community in Israel. The second section moves to account for the YARG data gathered among Muslim and Druze young adults in Israel. The section starts by exploring and analyzing select parts of the YARG survey data, followed by a more detailed exploration of young Muslim and Druze respondents' thoughts about the relationship between their Internet and social media use and own religious lives as expressed in in-depth interviews. The chapter closes with some brief concluding remarks.

The wider context: the diverse Arab population of Israel

Israeli citizens are generally divided into two culturally, religiously, and (partly) nationally distinct groups: Jews, who make up approximately 75% of the Israeli population, and Arabs, who make up approximately 21% of the Israeli population. The Arab community in Israel does not, however, constitute a homogenous segment of the population. It is divided along three distinctive religious lines: Muslims (83%), Christians (8%), and Druze (8%), all of whom are nowadays commonly referred to as the "Arab" population of Israel (CBS, 2017). There are, however, highly significant differences to be observed between these respective groups', both actual and self-perceived, positions in wider Israeli society. Muslim and Christian Arabs typically self-identify as Palestinian Arabs and often explicitly resist association with Israeli national identity, instead preferring labels such as "Palestinians in Israel" or "Palestinian

citizens of Israel” (e.g. Jamal 2017; Smooha 2017). The Druze, by contrast, display a strong sense of belonging and connection to the state of Israel, although they also tend to express a primary identification as Druze and a secondary identification as Israelis. The fact that service in the Israeli Defense Forces remains obligatory for the Druze but not for Muslim and Christian Arabs provides a clear illustration of this (Katz 2000). Notwithstanding notable internal differences, the wider Arab community in Israel generally remains characterized by collectivistic values, typically emphasizing conformity and interdependence over individual needs on matters such as family cohesion and relationships (Shahla 2012; Sliman-Dakhlalla 2013). As the family constitutes the most central and important social and cultural institution of Arab culture (Aboud-Halabi 2013; Dwairy 1997; Jamal 2017), family relations generally remain strongly governed by traditional religious values and mores that emphasize the importance of mutual support and interdependence among family members (Haj-Yahia 2003; Jamal 2017). Factors relating to religious identity and identification further contribute to accentuating the differences between these three groups. For example, in a recent survey (Smooha 2017) conducted among Arabs in Israel the largest proportion of respondents (46.5%) reported that their religious affiliation constituted the most central and important component of their identity. As will be illustrated in more detail below, the respective religious identifications of the three main groups of Arabs in Israel also has significant bearings on their respective engagements with the Internet and social media in religion-related matters.

Muslim Arabs in Israel

Muslims make up 17.5% of the Israeli population, thus constituting the largest minority religious group in Israel, with a Sunni majority, living mainly in the Galilee, Negev, and Mofeth areas (CBS 2017). In addition to the internal and external conflicts they face as

Palestinians living in Israel (Jamal 2017), they are currently also exposed to several contradicting cultural and religious influences and forces. While they have partly absorbed secular and Western trends from the wider Israeli culture, they simultaneously also retain close cultural and religious bonds to the wider Muslim-Arab world (Jamal 2017).

Due to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and wide discrimination of Arab minorities in Israel, Islamic institutions have come to provide vital social and psychological resources for the survival of the community (Gara 2015; Jamal 2017). According to a recent Pew Research Center survey (Pew 2016), the majority of Muslims in Israel are keen to preserve their religious traditions. For example, the survey found that 74% of Muslims in Israel reported praying regularly, 69% stated that religion is very important in their lives, 73% reported a sense of belonging to the wider Muslim ummah, and more than two thirds reported supporting the Islamic Movement (an Islamist movement that aims to advocate Islam in Israel). As argued by Kabha (2007) the proliferation of online communication has played an important part in facilitating further connections between the Arab population of Israel and the wider Arab world and also increasingly freed users from both the constraints of minority/majority relationships as well as from internal social and cultural relationships. However, the abovementioned 2016 Pew Research Center survey results also clearly indicate that younger Muslims are becoming less observant of religious traditions as compared to their elders. For example, Muslims between the ages of 18–49 were found to be less likely to attend Mosque on a weekly basis or to observe the Ramadan. Younger Muslims were also found to be more strongly exposed to external cultural influences, mainly due to the fact that they are more likely to leave their family homes to establish lives in mixed communities (e.g. Arar and Mustafa 2009; Azaiza 2004; Jamal 2017).

The Druze in Israel

The Druze are a Middle Eastern religious community with unique religious practices that originally deviated from Shia Islam in the 11th century. The majority of the Druze live in a geographic area that includes parts of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Northern Israel. At the end of 2016, the Druze population of Israel numbered nearly 139,000, making up approx. 1.6% of the Israeli population, and 8% of the Arab population in Israel (CBS, 2017).

Druze religious beliefs are strictly monotheistic, and include various Christian, Gnostic, Jewish, and neo-Platonic elements. The Druze religion is characterized by a strong emphasis on moral commandments (Court and Abbas 2014). Its core teachings are kept strictly secret from both outsiders and so-called “non-religious” Druze. Only those who conform to strict rules of prescribed behavior (regarded as “religious” by the Druze) are granted access to Druze sacred texts, which are otherwise never discussed in public, nor available online (Court and Abbas 2014; Falah 2000). The Druze maintain a strict distinction between those who fully commit to the religion (Uqal, “the Minded”) and those who do not (Johal, “the Ignorant”). Only fully religiously committed and observant Druze are permitted to enter Druze houses of worship (*Khelwa*) and participate in communal prayer. An individual becomes recognized as an Uqal following a long and gradual process of initiation and an expressed commitment to wholeheartedly follow established Druze behaviors and norms. This also involves a commitment to wearing only specific traditional garb and renouncing all secular pleasures (e.g. night life and driving for women). Due to these restrictions and practices, individual Druze who belong to the non-observant category (Johal) are not permitted to call themselves “religious” (Junblat 1987).

Similar to the wider Arab community in Israel, the Druze are currently struggling to maintain their traditional beliefs and practices while simultaneously attempting to adapt to modernity. Mounting pressures towards general reform and renewal within the Druze

community itself have also been further propelled by rising levels of education and standards of living in the past three decades (Abbas 2010). Moreover, the growing movement of younger people from their villages for education and work makes them increasingly exposed to new values and ideas and more open to independent thought (Court and Abbas 2015). These relatively recent changes in established communal social dynamics have also resulted in internal struggles and concerns about the long-term preservation of Druze cultural distinctiveness (Court and Abbas 2014; Mansour 2010). In recent years, this struggle has been further intensified due to a progressive weakening in the status of the traditional Druze religious leadership (Mansour 2010; Ali 2019).

Internet use among Arabs in Israel

As is explored in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume, developments in digital media and their associated technologies have had a profound and multifaceted impact on societies and cultures across the world. Yet, although there is evidence of a gradual narrowing of the worldwide digital divide, there remain significant disparities in ethnic and other minority groups' access to the Internet and digital media. In comparison to majority populations, minority groups' access to and adoption of new technologies tend to be more strongly determined by factors such as income, geographical location, and levels of education (e.g. Chen and Wellman 2004), and guided by different cultural values and motivations (Mesch 2012; Abbas and Mesch 2015). As is also explored in much greater detail in the first three chapters of this volume, the reciprocal relationship between communications technologies and religion is widely acknowledged (e.g. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005; Hoover 2006; Campbell 2010). Compared to earlier forms of media, the Internet appears to hold particularly high potential to be used for various types of religious or religion-related purposes. The proliferation of the

Internet has, however, been differently perceived and experienced depending from one religious context to another. On the one hand, religious communities have expressed concern over the ways in which the proliferation and increasing democratization of the Internet brings a range of serious challenges for the maintenance and reproduction of traditional religious authority structures (e.g. Cheong 2013). On the other hand, religious communities have also recognized how the Internet also can be used as an effective means of religious communication, interaction, engagement, and proselytization (e.g. Campbell 2010). As Dawson and Cowan (2004) have pointed out, even though religious communities' typically differ in their respective approaches to the Internet as a technology, even the most conservative and reclusive religious communities tend to use the Internet in some form or other.

The explosive increase and proliferation of various types of Islamic content online during past decades has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (e.g. Bunt 2003; 2009; 2018; El-Nawawy 2009; Piela 2012). While “digital Islam” constitutes a highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon, Islamic debates on the Internet have to a significant degree remained centered on issues relating to authority. The perceived anarchy of opinions facilitated and encouraged by the Internet has often been interpreted by Muslim scholars and leaders as posing serious challenges to the traditional inter-generational transmission of principles for scriptural interpretation through the community of Islamic scholars (the *ulama*) (Campbell 2010, 109). While several established Islamic leaders and authorities have openly embraced the Internet and managed to establish a firm and recognized presence online, Islamic discourse on the Internet nevertheless still remains marked by a certain degree of unease with the technology (e.g. Campbell 2010, 35). As we shall illustrate in light of concrete examples below, such a sense of unease was also expressed by several Muslim Israeli respondents in the YARG project.

Israel displays relatively high levels of Internet access- and use. According to recent survey results (Internet World Stats 2017) 79.7% of the Israeli population reported using the

Internet in 2017, and 68.6% had a Facebook account. According to another recent survey from 2016, 93% of Israeli Internet users between the ages of 25–34 reported accessing the Internet on a daily basis (Connected Consumer Survey 2016). Yet, these relatively high rates of Internet use do not necessarily reflect Internet diffusion among the Arab community in Israel accurately as previous statistics have reported considerable gaps between Arabs and Jews regarding access to and rates of Internet use (Israel Social Survey 2007; 2009; Rafaeli 2009; Ganayem 2010). For example, a 2010 study by Mesch and Talmud (2010) concluded that these gaps were mainly attributable to broader exclusionary barriers associated with the Arab society's disadvantaged status in Israel more generally. Very similar observations were also made by Ganayem (2010) who, drawing on several large databases, was able to identify significant gaps between Arabs and Jews regarding Internet use, purposes of use, users' age, gender, education, and income. Differences were also found between different religious groups regarding connectivity and use rates, with Muslims scoring lower than the Druze on both variables. However, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has explored Israeli minority groups' Internet use in religion-related matters specifically, nor how Internet and social media use might affect personal religiosity.

According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Israel Internet Association (RA) (2017), 91.5% of Jewish respondents and 84.8% of Arab respondents reported using the Internet. The survey also found higher frequencies of social media use among the Arab population, with 73% of Arab respondents reporting being active on social networks (as compared to 61% of Jewish respondents) and 43% of Arab respondents reporting using Facebook several times a day (as compared to 21% of Jewish respondents). A previous more elaborate survey conducted by the RA among a representative sample of 600 Arab respondents in Israel (age 18+) found that 42% of all respondents reported being active on social networks several times a day, with males being more active than females in this regard. Notably, however, as many as 50% of all female

respondents reported not using social networks at all, as compared to 33% of all males. Moreover, 50% of those who self-identified as “very religious” reported not using the Internet. While these figures were not accompanied by any commentary, this finding is somewhat curious considering the wide proliferation of social media on a global scale, including across Islamic contexts. The results also reveal considerable differences between Druze and Muslim respondents. As many as 36% of all Druze respondents reported not using the Internet at all, as compared to 24% of Muslims respondents. Furthermore, 5% of Druze respondents and 3% of Muslim respondents reported not using the Internet for religious reasons.

Not surprisingly considering the character of the sample, the results of the YARG survey (2016) yielded somewhat different results compared to the studies mentioned above. As many as 93.2% of the entire Israeli sample (including Jewish, Arab Israeli, and Druze) reported using the Internet “every day,” thereby ranking fourth highest among all thirteen national samples included in the project, and exceeded only by the figures from the United States, Finland, and Sweden. Importantly, however, since the YARG sample was gathered among university students who have daily access to the Internet, the YARG survey results do not allow us to draw any more general conclusions about a possible narrowing of previously reported gaps in Internet access and usage between the Arab Muslim and Druze populations of Israel.

The relationship between Internet use and personal religiosity among Israeli Muslim and Druze YARG respondents

As is accounted for in more detail in the Introduction to this volume, the YARG data was gathered in two main successive stages, using a mixed-method study design. The first stage was conducted in 2016 and consisted of the distribution of a survey (N=minimum 300/country) that also included the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ, Schwartz et al. 2012) in all thirteen

locations included in the project. Altogether 425 survey responses were collected among young adult Druze (N=226) and Muslim (N=199) students in Israel, mainly at the University of Haifa, Technion- Israel institute of Technology, Tel-Hai Academic College, Kinneret Academic College, and Ort-Braude Academic College. Partly based on the survey results, a smaller Arab sample consisting of 22 Muslim and 23 Druze students were chosen to participate in the second stage of the study that included the Faith-Q-Sort (FQS) and thematic in-depth interviews. Our following discussion is based on the survey results and interviews respectively. In the first stage (survey), both sub-samples were relatively balanced in terms of gender, with females making up 57 % of the Muslim sample and 58 % of the Druze sample. However, in the second stage (interviews), females made up 64 % of the Muslim sample and 46 % of the Druze sample. The age range of the respondents was 18–30 in both groups. In the following we move to briefly account for select parts of the results for the YARG survey item-blocs on religiosity and media and Internet use among Israeli Muslim and Druze respondents.

Muslims and Druze YARG respondents in Israel: Self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity and that of the parental family

The “Social Life”-bloc of the YARG survey (see chapter 3 and Appendix A for further details) contained altogether six items on religious belonging, self-assessed degrees of personal and parental family religiosity, and frequency of public and private religious practice. In the following we account for the results of the items on self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity and that of the parental home, and that of public and private religious practice respectively. Regarding self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity (reported on a 10-point degree scale), the results revealed a mean of 5.7 for the Muslim sample and a mean of 4.7 for the Druze sample. The results for self-assessed degree of religiosity of the parental home revealed a mean

of 6.4 for the Muslim sample and a mean of 5.9 for the Druze sample. In light of the total results from these two items, Muslim and Druze respondents differed with regard to both their self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity [$t(422.63)=4.06$, $P<0.01$] and assessment of the religiosity of their parental home [$t(423)=2.46$, $P<0.05$], while no significant differences between the groups were found regarding the discrepancy between degrees of self-assessed personal and family religiosity [$t(423)=1.6$, $P>0.05$]. Both groups, however, clearly assessed the religiosity of their parental family as higher than their own.

Regarding frequency of public religious practice (reported on a 7-point frequency scale), 39.7% of Muslim respondents reported that they participated in public religious ceremonies or services “only on special days or celebrations”, compared to 52.7% among the Druze, followed by 19.6% who did so “less often” among Muslims and 15.9% among the Druze. Levels of public religious practice were thus low in both samples. Regarding private religious practice, however, a portion as high as 51.8% of Muslim respondents reported engaging in private religious practice “every day,” compared to only 8.0% among the Druze. Based on the total results for these two items, the two groups differed significantly regarding their levels of self-reported involvement in private religious practice [$t(400)=-10.94$, $P<0.01$], while no significant differences could be found in their respective involvement in religious practices in public [$t(412)=1.80$, $P>0.05$]. Figure 1 presents the Mean score differences of the different variables for both groups.

Insert Figure 4 here

Figure 1: Muslim and Druze YARG respondents in Israel: Differences in religiosity determinants (2016)

As noted earlier, the broader Arab community in Israel (including both Muslims and Druze) is currently facing many, both external and internal, social and cultural challenges. While they are by no means representative of young adult Muslims and Druze in Israel more generally, the above-discussed results of the YARG survey are nevertheless in line with the results of several previous studies that have identified a gradual but progressive decline in religious engagement among younger segments of the Muslim and Druze communities in Israel. The secret nature of the Druze religion and its strict requirements for inclusion in the community might certainly at least partly explain the lower levels of self-assessed religiosity reported by Druze respondents. Yet, even though the majority of the Druze respondents included in the study were not able to attend the worship houses of the Druze (which would most likely be considered participating in public religious practice) and had no access to Druze sacred texts, the results clearly suggest that some young adult Druze nonetheless engage in different forms of private religious practice. While Muslim respondents, by contrast, had the opportunity to participate in public prayers, they also clearly preferred private over public religious practice.

Muslims and Druze YARG respondents in Israel: Media and Internet use

The “Sources of news and information” item bloc of the YARG survey consisted of altogether four items on various types, forms, and frequency of media use, one of which focused on internet-use specifically. Participants were asked to rate the frequency by which they used different media during the last month (0 = Never, to 4 = “Every day”). Frequency of Internet use was high in both samples [$t(423)=.43$, $P>0.05$], clearly exceeding use of other types of media such as newspapers/magazines [$t(423)=-.73$, $P>0.05$], radio [$t(423)=.91$, $P>0.05$], or television [$t(423)=.35$, $P>0.05$]. Figure 2 presents the Mean scores of frequencies of use of the different media sources for both groups.

Insert Figure 5 here

Figure 2: Muslim and Druze YARG respondents in Israel: Mean scores for media use during the last month (2016)

As the results show, the Internet thus emerged as the clearly most preferred medium among both Muslim and Druze respondents.

Among altogether ten options provided for the multi-option question “If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?” (employing the same 5-point scale, see chapter 3 and Appendix A for further details), significant differences between Muslim and Druze respondents were found only with regard to Internet use for “Health or well-being related services” [$t(423)=3.17, P<0.01$], “Religious or spiritual services and issues” [$t(376.31)=6.18, P<0.01$], and “Political issues” [$t(392.77)=2.53, P<0.01$]. As Figure 3 illustrates, Muslim respondents reported using the Internet more frequently for all of these three activities as compared to Druze respondents.

Insert Figure 6 here

Figure 3: Mean scores of Internet use for different activities among Muslim and Druze YARG respondents in Israel

As the figures reveal, Muslim respondents report notably higher frequencies of Internet use for political, wellbeing, and religion-related matters as compared to Druze respondents. However,

the clearly most significant difference between the two groups can be found in their respective reported frequencies of Internet use for “Religious or spiritual services and issues.” Figure 4 presents a closer look at the reported frequencies of Internet use for “religious or spiritual services and issues.”

Insert Figure 7 here

Figure 4: Frequency (%age) of Internet use for "religious or spiritual services and issues" among Muslim and Druze YARG respondents in Israel

As these figures clearly show, Muslim respondents report much higher overall frequencies of Internet use for religion-related matters as compared to Druze respondents, and especially when it comes to usage on a weekly basis or more often. While the YARG data does not provide us with ready explanations for these differences, it might nevertheless be surmised that Muslim respondents’ Internet use in religion related matters is likely to more closely intersect with broader minority-related social and political issues of particular relevance to the Muslim community in Israel, and indeed the Arab world more generally. The low levels reported by Druze respondents might, at least partly, be attributable to the fact that access to Druze religious teachings and sacred texts remains strongly restricted, including on the Internet.

Muslim and Druze YARG respondents’ views on the relationship between their Internet and social media use and personal religious lives

In this section we move to discuss the individual accounts provided by young adult Muslim and Druze respondents about the relationship between their personal religious lives and Internet and

social media use in religion-related matters. As noted above, the YARG survey data revealed considerable differences between Muslim and Druze respondents when it comes to using the Internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues,” with Muslim respondents reporting much higher frequencies of usage as compared to the Druze. While the survey results only take us so far, the interview data allows us to delve much deeper into individual respondents’ thoughts and motivations for using the Internet and social media in ways that connect with their personal religious lives. Although some similar themes emerged in the interviews among respondents in both groups, they differed notably with regard to how directly or explicitly they related their Internet and social media use to their personal everyday religious lives and practices. While Muslim respondents typically talked about their Internet and social media use as having a more concrete and direct relation to and impact on their everyday religious lives, Druze respondents instead primarily talked about the impact of the proliferation of the Internet and social media on the Druze community, the Druze religious establishment, and Druze religious values more broadly. Indeed, even though a significant portion of all surveyed Druze respondents reported “occasionally” using the Internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues,” every single Druze respondent among the 23 interviewed who talked about the topic claimed *not* to use the Internet or social media for any religion-related purposes, instead expressly rejecting such kinds of use due to the secrecy of the Druze religion. Among Muslim respondents, we can thus identify a more *direct* and expressed impact of the Internet and social media on their everyday religious lives. Among Druze respondents, by contrast, the impact is more adequately characterized as *indirect* and indeterminate.

Direct impacts of Internet and social media use on the religious lives of Muslim respondents

Several both Muslim and Druze respondents talked about using the Internet to seek out information about religions other than their own. For example, one Muslim respondents talked about using the Internet to learn about his friends' religions in order to be better able to "behave correctly" around them:

Sometimes, for example, I happen to be at some place, and someone asks me, so I immediately log in in order to -- know. /.../ if there is a Christian person or somebody who told me a sentence, I love to take it, like -- to read it, and find interest in it a little bit. /.../ I collect information about everyone, so that I will not behave wrongly to anyone. (YILSK143P)

While the above quote provides an example of using the Internet to seek out information on different types of religions in order to maintain good personal relations, Muslim respondents most frequently mentioned using the Internet to seek out various types of Islamic content online. At the same time, however, many Muslim respondents also expressed some degree of concern about the trustworthiness of religion-related content online. As one Muslim respondent related:

Yes, the Internet I watch on it the lessons, of course of Sheikhs who are not anybody, I don't consider anybody's talk. I regard the Sheikhs whom are like scientists, let us say, scientists in religion, let us say. But to return to the Internet and I have a question or something, no, I prefer not, because anybody can write on the Internet. So, because of that I only watch lessons on the YouTube, videos through which I see the Sheikh who is in front of me, and enter to know about his biography. (YILSK027)

While this respondent does use the Internet for personal religion-related purposes, he simultaneously also articulates clear suspicion towards the reliability of religious, including Islamic, content online. This cautious approach towards religious content online was widely shared among Muslim respondents. In another related example, when asked if she ever turns to the Internet for information and instruction in religion-related matters, one Muslim respondent said:

Honestly, no. Because I am not ready -- for instance, a question, for example, especially in the topic of religion or even in something personal, not ready to put it on {Facebook} or on -- you know /.../ in general, no /.../ I go to, for instance, I have a question that is hurting me I do not -- I go to a doctor and ask him. [I: Um-hm.] I want to know about religion I go to a sheikh and ask him, like I do not go or like /.../ Meaning, for instance, someone comes, comes to tell me something, okay maybe it is wrong maybe true -- meaning I cannot guarantee (YILSK072PT).

This respondent views the religious content found on the Internet and social media as inherently unreliable. In order to “guarantee” that the information she receives is “correct” and “true,” she chooses to rely on established traditional “offline” religious authorities like Sheikhs in religion-related matters. Both previously quoted accounts provide apt illustrations of the extension of offline religious authority online and the enduring importance of “third-party seals” certifying the background, education, and credibility of the religious “professionals” whose lessons they watch online (cf. Wan-Chik 2015). Talking about social media specifically, another Muslim respondents voiced the following concerns:

R: I prefer for example to enter the Internet, for example, and search, there is anything you want to search for, you'll find it, like, and find like, whether it's *Haram* [religiously forbidden].

I: /.../ Facebook, for example if you have a question, something in religion, would you write it on Facebook or --?

R: No, never, I don't even think about it. (YILSK012)

This respondent strongly differentiates between independently seeking out information on Islamic teachings and instruction (e.g. via search engines such as Google and file sharing sites such as YouTube) as opposed to asking peers via social media. In stating that he would never even think about posting religion-related questions on social media, he clearly appears to prefer independent information seeking over the suggestions and views of people on social media. However, even though many Muslim respondents reported rarely using social media to seek out information about religion, many also talked about how it nevertheless provides them with a platform that can aid everyday religious practice and observance. As one respondent said:

Sometimes there are lots of good things to remind you, like for example, not to forget /.../ or maybe life's pressures might distract you, so they keep you from distraction; or remind you that at least today, /.../ from religious perspective you should do that thing today. At least one, that has to do with religion. (YILSK004P)

For other respondents, social media provide important platforms for the expression of religious identity. For example, as one Muslim respondent said:

If you log in to my Facebook, it is all about religious things /.../ Majorly. Like, I put Quranic verses, which occur a lot to me; things like, that calm you down, why? Because I feel that whenever they press -- whenever someone reads it, I get a good deed. (YILSK040P)

For this respondent, Facebook provides a platform for fulfilling her duty as a “good Muslim.” These practices also indicate a good degree of personal agency in religion-related matters on the part of this respondent. For other respondents, social media provided a platform for the expression of religious identity and for publicly displaying abidance by religious rules. As one female Muslim respondent said about her current Facebook profile:

First of all, there are no male friends, not a half one! Even my cousins are not, because it is religiously forbidden. At the beginning, it was normal /.../ “They are my cousins, what could possibly happen?” So, when I found out that it was *Haram* [Religiously forbidden], I cancelled. Like, currently, if you enter my Face they are all girls, and my girlfriends, I don’t add just anyone.” (YILSK263)

The account of this respondent illustrates how personal religiosity can come to determine how social media is used (i.e. in accordance with religious commandments), thus in turn serving to further strengthen and support the performance of personal religious identity.

Indirect impacts of Internet and social media use on the religious lives of Druze respondents

As noted above, Druze respondents unanimously reported refraining from using the Internet and social media for religion-related purposes in order to respect the secrecy of the Druze

religion. Even so, their Internet and social media use nevertheless appeared to have an indirect impact on their personal religious outlooks. As was also noted above, the Druze community is currently undergoing a process of “modernization,” involving a gradual erosion of community traditions, the adoption of Western values and cultural influences, and declining levels of traditional religious commitment. Indeed, the mere fact that Internet and social media use has become commonplace within the Druze community in and of itself provides a clear example of these modernizing tendencies. For example, when Facebook was initially established, it was viewed with great caution in the Druze community. At that time, it was common for males in Druze families (i.e. fathers and brothers) not to allow their female family members to open their own Facebook accounts. Nowadays, however, having a personal Facebook account has become the norm for both male and female Druze. This is vividly illustrated by the account of one female Druze respondent who did not yet have a Facebook account at the time of the interview:

Everyone, every time someone sees me they even call me “primitive” only because of this thing, like, all my brothers have [Facebook accounts] and I don’t have a problem -- they don't have a problem that I have one, for example -- the environment that surrounds us is regular to it, like, the thing is very regular but I am like that, they even say to me sometimes for example “Why are you primitive?” for example “Open an account.” (YILSK057P)

As is reflected in the words of this respondent, the Druze community has experienced a general liberalization of attitudes and become increasingly accepting of social media. This also appears to have entailed a general lessening of concerns about the potential negative impact of social media on traditional cultural expectations of modesty among Druze women. Another female Druze respondent further explains changes in attitudes towards social media over time with

particular reference to a previous prohibition against uploading personal photographs on Facebook (due to traditional requirements on modesty):

Little by little, like, you are exposed to something in Facebook and such, but no, I mean, I observe the values. For example, in the past it used to be that it is not okay to put your picture on Facebook, today that thing is normal. (YILSK111P)

As is clearly indicated in the accounts of both respondents quoted above, the changing position of women provides an additional example of a currently ongoing modernization process in Druze society. Furthermore, recent years have also witnessed dramatic increases in the numbers of Druze women who choose to enroll in higher education, who work in occupations not previously considered appropriate for women, and who enter the sphere of politics – something not deemed acceptable only two decades ago. Reflecting a more general shift in outlooks and communal identities, these changes have also been further propelled by the more recent proliferation in Internet and social media use, which has exposed Druze women to feminist thought and alternative perceptions on gender roles.

Several Druze respondents highlighted how the Internet and social media aids them in abiding by the central Druze religious commandment to “keep brothers,” i.e. to establish and maintain close and supportive relations between Druze worldwide. As one Druze respondent explained:

Connecting /.../ I like more to see what happens in the other world, to Druze in other places. Or nowadays there are a lot of groups of Druze, so also I follow these groups. (YILSK302P)

This respondent talked about how Facebook helped him to keep an eye on what was going on with his Druze “brothers and sisters” abroad. Social media pages focused on the Druze therefore work to strengthen the bonds between Druze communities worldwide and to foster a sense of shared collective Druze identity. However, while social media allows geographically dispersed Druze to connect, it simultaneously also provides a platform for expressing criticism that may accentuate internal divisions within Druze communities. Such divisions have become increasingly observable in the Druze community in Israel in recent years, and particularly in relation to the functioning of the official Druze religious leadership. The online world has come to provide an increasingly central environment for the public articulation of dissatisfaction with traditional religious mores and authority structures. The increasingly common practice of voicing criticism of the Druze religious establishment online was not, however, unanimously appreciated by our Druze respondents. As one respondent who had previously voiced criticism of the Druze religious establishment online commented:

For a certain while, yes, I used to express myself. But lately I started feeling it was a really silly thing /... / merely writing things [on Facebook] just because the religious people said so, and start making fun of them. I found this to be really unpleasant thing, so that is why I stopped. (YILSK303)

While this respondent expresses some dissatisfaction with the functioning and practices of the Druze religious establishment, she simultaneously cautions against criticism of religious authorities ending up taking the form of mockery. Social media therefore appears to have a somewhat contradictory effect on the cohesion of the Druze community. While social media functions to strengthen Druze identity and sense of religious belonging, it has also opened up new avenues for internal criticism that threatens to undermine that communal cohesion. In

addition to this, the Internet and social media have also exposed the Druze to information about other religions and worldviews. Yet, learning about other religions does not seem to affect the personal religious outlooks of Druze respondents to any notable extent. But as already noted, Druze respondents generally refrain from using the Internet and social media for explicitly religious purposes. This approach is clearly articulated by one Druze respondent who stated the following when asked if she ever turns to the Internet for information on religion-related issues:

No, you will not get the information as you want, like, the Internet which is open to the whole world, not only the community or the village for example, for the whole world, /.../ and we our religion is secret like, if you want to go [and ask about something], you go to a Sheikh in my opinion. It [the Internet] will not give me like, the thing that I have to get. (YILSK057P)

Similar to the Muslim respondents quoted above, this respondent emphasizes the inherent unreliability of online content, preferring instead to consult a traditional “offline” religious authorities in religious matters. The respondent also went on to clarify that respecting the secrecy of the Druze religion and obeying religious commandments not only works to discourage young adult Druze from seeking out information on religion online (including their own), but also to deter them from uploading any religion-related content themselves.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored the particular ways in which Muslim and Druze young adult university students in Israel use the Internet and social media in ways that relate to their own

personal religious lives and engagements. Several highly notable differences could be observed between the two groups. While the Internet and social media could be shown to exert a more “direct” influence on the religious lives of Muslim respondents, in the case of the Druze, their influence is better characterized as “indirect.” Indeed, while Muslim respondents actively used the Internet and social media for religion-related purposes, Druze respondents instead explicitly rejected such uses due to reasons that are peculiar to the Druze religious context.

On a more general level, our exploration in this chapter has highlighted the distinct ways in which Internet and social media use affects processes of identity construction among young adults in two conservative minority religious communities in Israel. In terms of connections and connectivity, the Internet and social media provide especially Druze respondents with important tools to connect with their wider respective communities abroad in ways that work to strengthen their sense of religious belonging while simultaneously also exposing them to other communities and traditions. In terms of authority, the above discussion clearly points to the enduring importance of offline religious authorities, particularly among Muslim respondents who routinely reported turning to traditional religious authorities such as Sheiks and older family members in order to validate and supplement religion-related information encountered online. Our comparison between respondents belonging to two distinct religious minorities in Israel has illustrated the main contextual factors that play a central role in shaping their respective engagements with the Internet and social media as it relates to their personal religious lives. For our part, we therefore hope to have contributed to highlighting the importance that future research on the online engagements of religious minorities remain attentive to contextual factors and the broader societal and cultural positions of the minority groups under consideration.