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Religiosity, Religious Practice, and Internet Use among Young Adult Muslims in Israel and Turkey

Marcus Moberg, Sawsan Kheir, and Habibe Erdis Gökce

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between religiosity, frequency of religious practice, and internet use for religion-related purposes among young adults in Turkey and Israel. The article is based on data gathered in the project *Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective* (YARG 2015–2019) that explored the values and religious subjectivities of young adult university students in thirteen different countries around the world. Drawing on both survey data and in-depth interviews, the article highlights two central themes that emerged in relation to Turkish and Israeli Muslim respondents' self-reported engagements with the internet in religion related matters: a general concern about the trustworthiness of religious content online, and the continuing importance attached to traditional offline sources of religious authority. The article thus explores the relationship between online and offline religious practice in light of a new and extensive body of data and highlights the particular main forms that it takes in a contemporary Muslim context.

Key words: internet use and religion, Islam and the internet, religious authority, young adults, YARG project, Turkey, Israel

Introduction

Digital information and communication technology is widely acknowledged to have developed into an increasingly integrated part of peoples' everyday lives. Conversely, the ways in which our online lives and behaviors have become "situated in our offline lived experiences" has also become increasingly recognized (Tagg and Sargeant, 2017, p. 213). People are, as Floridi (2014, p. 43) has aptly put it, increasingly "living onlife." The present-day media environment has also been shown to have a clearly observable impact on contemporary modes of religion, religious life, and practice (e.g. Campbell 2013). This is not least with regard to the religiosities of young adults, who are often described in terms of "digital natives." While this label remains somewhat problematic (e.g. Gunkel, 2014) it nevertheless serves the heuristic function of highlighting the general techno-cultural circumstances that the present-day young adult generation has grown up in, been socialized into, and consequently always been accustomed to (e.g. Vittadini et al., 2013). As has also been highlighted in previous research, considering that the present young adult generation is the first to have grown up in a social and cultural environment marked by the ubiquitous presence of digital media, they provide a unique case for the exploration of the present-day intersection between religion, religious engagement and practice, and digital media use (Lövheim, 2012).

This article reports on select parts of the results for the international research project *Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective* (YARG 2015–2019); a mixed-method research venture that explored the values and religious subjectivities of young adult university students (aged 18–30) in thirteen different countries around the world: Canada, China, Finland, Ghana, India, Israel (three separate cases), Japan, Peru, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. The research aims of the YARG-project centered on four main thematic areas, one of which was the role and impact of the present-day media environment on the worldviews and religious/spiritual outlooks of the present young adult generation. The project generated an extensive body of new, both quantitative and qualitative, data on the subject.

In this article we focus on what the data and results reveal about the relationship between religious self-identification, self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity and frequency of religious practice, and internet use for relation-related purposes among Muslim young adults in Israel and Turkey – the only two national samples with sizeable portions of self-identified Muslim young adults included in the YARG project. The article draws on both survey results and individual accounts as expressed in thematic in-depth interviews and identifies a set of key ways in which Turkish and Israeli Muslim young adults view and engage with the internet in religion-related matters.

The article is divided into four main sections. The first section provides a discussion of the contemporary presence of Islam online and previous research in the area, focusing in particular on issues relating to the perceived untrustworthiness of online content and the continuing importance attached to the proper certification of religious authorities online among Muslim internet users. The second section provides a general overview of select parts of the total YARG sample results on indicators of religiosity and media use for religion-related purposes. The third section then moves to account for the survey results for self-reported degrees of religiosity, frequency of religious practice, and internet use for religion-related purposes in the Turkish and Israeli Muslim samples. The fourth and final section then moves to explore these issues in light of the interview data. Here, in connection to previous research on the topic, particular attention is devoted to the ways in which respondents typically expressed clear concern over the 1) trustworthiness of religious content online and 2) the continuing importance that they tended to attach to offline religious authorities, particularly for the purposes of validating and supplementing religion-related content encountered online.

Islam and the internet: the problem of authority and trustworthiness

The past couple of decades have witnessed the emergence of a rapidly growing and fast-expanding scholarship on religion, the internet, and digital culture. While this scholarship has come to encompass a wider range of themes and particular areas of interest, in what pertains directly to our focus in this article, several studies have explored the correlations between people's offline and online religious commitments (e.g. Dawson and Cowan, 2004: 6; Noomen et al., 2011) and the impact of the Internet on traditional religious authority structures (e.g. Siapera, 2009; Campbell, 2010; Cheong, 2013). While studies focusing on the impact of the internet and digital technologies in various Islamic settings have thus far been comparatively fewer when compared to those focusing on various types of Christian contexts (e.g. Hutchings, 2017), the topic has nevertheless attracted a substantial amount of scholarly attention (e.g. Bunt, 2003; 2009; 2018; El-Nawawy, 2009; Piela, 2012).

Islamic content online started to proliferate already in the second half of the 1990s and has since developed in many different forms, including, among many others, Islamic web communities and discussion forums; personal websites of known Islamic scholars and leaders; online information resources on Qur'an and Hadith interpretations; websites offering information on *halal* products and services; online resources to aid everyday religious practice and prayer; and portals offering opportunities for conducting *zakat* (alms-giving) online (e.g. Bunt, 2003; Rahman et al., 2015, p. 62). The proliferation of various types of Islamic content and websites online has served to propel the development of what has become commonly referred to as the "digital *ummah*," or "an electronic, networked Islamic community with a global reach enabling Muslims [and especially diasporic Muslim communities] to connect with and impact both believers and non-believers" (Campbell, 2010, p. 31; cf. Bunt, 2003; 2009).

In spite of the rapid proliferation of Islamic content online, the internet remains a frequently contested issue in Islamic settings (e.g. Bunt, 2009; 2018). The perhaps most intensely debated topic of all has centered on the many challenges that the spread and increasing democratization of the internet and social media are often perceived to pose for the maintenance and reproduction of traditional and received Islamic authority structures (e.g. Bunt, 2018; Cheong, 2013). Such concerns surfaced already following the early emergence and proliferation of online *mujtahid*, i.e. persons who claim or are vested with the authority to engage in the interpretation of the Qur'an or Hadith (*ijtihad*) or issue online *fatwas* (a ruling on some issue based on Islamic law) (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Bunt, 2003). The perceived anarchy of opinions facilitated and encouraged by the internet has therefore often been seen by many Muslim leaders and laypeople alike to undermine the traditional inter-generational transmission of principles for scriptural interpretation through the community of Islamic scholars (the *ulama*) (Campbell, 2010, p. 109). Indeed, as pointed out by Siapera (2009, p. 99), drawing on the earlier work of Bowen (2004), since “transnational Islam revolves around the idea that regardless of where they are Muslims must listen to the most learned,” transnational Islam online might, arguably, have become increasingly oriented “towards a more specific source of authority.”

In addition, as explored in several previous studies, concerns about the confusion caused by sheer information overload, the untrustworthiness of online content (especially regarding religion-related issues), and the spread of “misleading information” about Islam have developed into central tropes of Islamic discourse on the internet (e.g. Campbell, 2010; El-Nawawy, 2009; Wan-Chik, 2015). For example, a previous large-scale sample (N=605) study (Ibrahim et al. 2009) on trust in online sources among Muslim students in Southeast Asia and the Middle East revealed low overall levels of trust in online content among respondents. The “uncertain nature of the web” and the prevalence of “unreliable or inauthentic websites” emerged as the two most commonly cited reasons among respondents for *not* trusting online information (Ibrahim et al., 2009, p. 539). Along with “overall site presentation,” respondents regarded “proper site authentication from reputable or well recognised Islamic bodies or institutions” as the most important feature of Islamic web-based sharing sites (Ibrahim et al. 2009, p. 540; cf. Wan-Chik, 2015). Another counter-radicalization-focused large-scale quantitative study (Corman and Hitchcock 2013) on media use and source trust among Muslims in three West African, three Western European, and one Southeast Asian country generally arrived at some largely similar results. The study found that respondents exhibited much higher levels of trust in *personal* contacts such as clerics and family members than impersonal media sources when it came to religion-related issues (Corman and Hitchcock 2013, p. 41). As will be illustrated in the following sections, these types of concerns were also frequently expressed by the young adult Muslim students that participated in the YARG project.

Religiosity indicators and internet use for religion-related purposes in the total YARG sample

The data for the YARG project was gathered in thirteen different locations throughout the world using a systematic combination of four, both quantitative and qualitative, research instruments: (1) a general survey (minimum N= 300/country, total sample N=4964); (2) the Schwartz Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ, minimum N=300/country); (3) the Faith Q-Sort (FQS, minimum N=45/country) – a novel instrument specifically developed for the study of contemporary religious subjectivities – ; and (4) semi-structured thematic interviews (minimum N=45/country). The survey was distributed among university students in all thirteen locations in 2016. The data gathering process consisted of two main phases: 1) the survey and PVQ, and 2) FQS and thematic interviews. With the exception of Japan which

was only included in the survey and PVQ parts of the study, in all other locations the survey results for those respondents who had agreed to be contacted for further participation were used to select an as heterogeneous as possible smaller sample of respondents to participate in the FQS and thematic interview part of the study. Among all country samples, the Israeli sample was the most extensive (N=761) in scale and included three separate categories of respondents: Jewish (39 percent), Druze (30 percent), and Israeli Muslim (26 percent) (plus an additional 5 percent who cited some other religious belonging). While restrictions on space do not allow us to go into the YARG survey results in any greater detail, in the following we provide a brief general overview of select portions of the total sample data that are of particular relevance for our focus of this article.

The YARG survey contained one item bloc on “Social life” that included altogether six items on religious belonging, self-assessed degrees of both personal and family religiosity, and frequency of public and private religious practice. Regarding religious belonging, only 34.5 percent of all respondents considered themselves “as belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions.” As reported on a 11-point degree scale (ranging from “0: not at all religious” to “10: very religious”), the total sample results revealed a mean of 3.9 for self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity, and a mean of 4.9 for self-assessed degree of religiosity of the parental family. As reported on a 7-point frequency scale, 27.9 percent of respondents reported “never” engaging in public religious practice (e.g. participating in religious services and/or ceremonies), followed by 19.4 percent who reported doing so “less often.” Regarding private religious practice (e.g. prayer and/or meditation), 32.1 percent reported “never” engaging in such practices, followed by 17.4 percent who reported doing so “less often.” The total sample results thus revealed quite low overall levels of self-reported religious belonging, personal religiosity, and frequency of religious practice.

The survey also included an item-bloc on “Sources of news and information” consisting of altogether four items on various types, forms, and frequency of media use. One of these focused on internet use specifically. The results revealed high levels and frequencies of internet use across the entire sample as 85.1 percent of all respondents reported using the internet “every day.” While the country-specific results partly reflect broader disparities in internet distribution and access across the digital divide, the internet nonetheless clearly emerged as the preferred form of media in terms of everyday use across the entire sample as compared to other types of media such as television (32.4 percent), newspapers/magazines (12.5 percent), and radio (11 percent). The item bloc also included the multi-option question “If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?” The question was answered on a five-point frequency scale and included altogether ten options, one of which was “religious or spiritual services and issues.” This option, however, emerged as the second *least* commonly reported option (after the option “selling things or services”) for daily use across the entire sample. While only 2.4 percent of respondents reported using the internet for such purposes “every day,” as many as 54.3 percent reported “never” using the internet for any such purposes, followed by 31.4 percent who reported doing so only “occasionally.” These figures do, however, need to be understood in their proper context. While respondents generally reported high frequencies of daily use for more broadly defined purposes such as “Communication,” (72.1 percent), “Finding information” (62.9 percent), and “Entertainment” (53.2 percent), much lower frequencies were reported for all more clearly specified purposes, such as “Buying things or services” (3.8 percent), “Uploading self-created content” (3.8 percent), or “Health or wellbeing related services” (4.1 percent).

The Turkish and Israeli Muslim YARG samples: Survey results for religiosity indicators and internet use for religion-related purposes

In this section we move to consider the Turkish and Israeli Muslim samples in more detail. We start by briefly accounting for the broader social, cultural, and religious contexts in which the respective samples were gathered. This is followed by an overview and general discussion of the survey results from both samples. Lastly, we proceed to explore individual respondents' accounts of the relationship between their personal religious lives and internet use in religion-related matters.

As the sample was gathered among young adult university students the results of the survey should by no means be regarded as representative of the attitudes of the young adult Turkish and Israeli Muslim population in general. The life-phase of young adulthood tends to be marked by identity exploration, self-focus, and general uncertainty about the future (e.g. Arnett, 2007). The period of time spent taking part in higher education has also been shown to be marked by increasing critical reflection on one's own religious upbringing and received religious beliefs, practices, and behaviors (e.g. Voas and Crockett, 2005; Uecker et al., 2007). It is important, therefore, to recognize the university context as a particular type of (arguably more secular) social and cultural environment where independent critical thought is both highly valued and emphasized. Regardless of national context, it is thus fair to assume that university students generally inhabit a social and cultural world that in many respects differs substantially from that of their non-university student peers.

Given the connections between higher levels of affluence and access to higher education throughout many parts of the world, the socioeconomic status of respondents also needs to be taken into account. The YARG survey provides some indications with regard to this aspect. When asked to assess their family's monthly income relative to the perceived country average, the large majority of all Turkish respondents assessed their income as either "somewhat higher than the average" (49.6 percent) or "about the average" (31.4 percent). The corresponding figures for the Israeli Muslim sample were somewhat different, with the majority of respondents assessing their monthly income as "about the average" (42.7 percent), followed by those who assessed it as "somewhat lower than average" (18.6 percent) and "somewhat higher than average" (18.1 percent). While the greater part of Turkish respondents thus placed themselves in the mid- to upper-mid income segments of society, Israeli Muslim respondents, on average, instead placed themselves more firmly in the middle.

The two samples also differed significantly with regard to respondents' general positions in their respective broader societal contexts. While the majority of the young adults who participated in the project in Turkey belonged to the religious majority of the country, the situation with regards to Israeli Muslim respondents was notable different. Muslims in Israel occupy a delicate position with regard to the composition of their identity. They 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). Although the YARG data did not reveal any major differences in internet use among different categories of respondents in Israel, it is important to recognize that young adult Muslims in Israel belong to a disadvantaged both religious and ethnic minority that is subject to several different types of social-exclusionary barriers.

The Turkish sample

Turkey is a secular democratic state with predominantly Muslim population (TDHA, 2014). While the vast majority of the population belong to the Sunni-Hanifi branch of Islam, the country also has larger Alevi, Greek-, Armenian-, and Assyrian Christian, and Jewish religious minorities. The media landscape of Turkey is both extensive and diverse. Internet access and use has been steadily increasing over a longer period of time, particularly among the younger and more educated portions of the population (e.g. Pew Research Center 2018).

The Turkish sample was gathered among university students in the Cukurova region of Turkey. The sample was more strongly skewed towards females, who made up 70 percent of the sample. Corresponding closely to the total sample results, 35.6 percent (N=130) of all Turkish respondents (N=320) considered themselves “as belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions.” Among these, 39 provided no further specifications while 57 identified as Muslim and 9 as Alevi. The remaining 25 each cited different belongings, ranging from Paganism and Shamanism to Catholicism and Kemalism. The sample revealed a mean of 4.3 on self-assessed degree of personal religiosity and a mean of 5.6 on self-assessed degree of religiosity of the parental family, both slightly above the total sample means. Regarding public religious practice, 25.3 percent of respondents reporting engaging in such practices “Only on special days or celebrations,” followed by 25 percent who cited “Never,” and a further 22.8 who reported that they did so “Less often.” By contrast, as many as 24.7 percent of Turkish respondents reported engaging in private religious practice “Every day,” followed by 18.1 percent who reported doing so “More than once a week.” Compared to the total sample results, Turkish respondents thus reported much higher frequencies of private religious practice.

When it comes to frequency of internet use, 89.7 percent of Turkish respondents reported using the Internet “Every day.” However, regarding Internet use for “religious or spiritual services and issues,” only 3.1 percent of respondents reported using the internet for such purposes “Every day,” followed by 5.3 percent who reported using it “Almost daily,” and a further 12.5 percent who reported using it “Every week.” 52.5 percent reported “Occasionally” using the internet for such purposes, while 26.6 percent reported “Never” doing it. Although the portion of Turkish respondents who reported daily use for such purposes was almost as low as in the total sample, the combined figures of reported use on a weekly basis at 20.9 percent not only clearly exceeded the total sample average but also emerged as the third-highest figure of all samples included. Out of a total of 45 respondents interviewed, 18 explicitly talked about the relationship between their internet use and personal religious lives.

The Israeli Muslim sample

Muslims make up 17.5 percent of the Israeli population, making them the largest minority group in Israel, with a Sunni majority, living mainly in the Galilee, Negev, and Mothalath areas (CBS, 2017). While the Arab community in Israel has partly absorbed secular and Western trends from the wider Israeli culture, it also retains close cultural and religious bonds to the broader 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 Muslim community (Jamal, 2017). The proliferation of online communications has also 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 some of the constraints posed by their minority position (cf. Ibrahim et al. 2009, p. 526; Siapera, 2009, p. 99).

As already noted, the Israeli Muslim sample (N=199) made up 26 percent of a larger Israeli sample that also included larger Jewish and Druze sub-samples. The Muslim portion of the Israeli sample was gathered in the following locations: The University of Haifa, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Tel-Hai Academic College, Kinneret Academic College, and Ort-Braude Academic College. The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender, with females making up 57 percent of the sample. 50.3 percent (N=100) of all respondents (N=199) considered themselves as “belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions?” Among these, 77 respondents cited “Islam”, 3 cited “The Islamic Movement,” and the remaining either reported “belief in God” or “following the

religion of their families.” These figures clearly exceed the total sample average. Again, it is important to note in this context that identifying as Muslim in Israel equals identifying with not only a religious, but also a social and political minority position. The sample revealed mean of 5.7 on self-assessed degree of personal religiosity and a mean of 6.4 for that of the parental family, both also well above the total sample means. The results for public religious participation were relatively modest, as 39.7 percent of respondents reported that they participated in religious ceremonies or services “only on special days or celebrations,” followed by 19.6 percent who reported doing so “less often,” and 18.1 percent who reported participating “At least once a month.” Regarding private religious practice, however, a portion as high as 51.8 percent reported engaging in private religious practice “every day,” followed by 10.6 percent who reported doing so “only on special days or celebrations,” and 8.5 percent who chose the option “More than once a week.” The Israeli Muslim sample thus revealed quite modest frequencies of public religious practice coupled with exceptionally high frequencies of private religious practice.

Regarding frequency of internet use 93.7 percent of all respondents reported using the internet “Every Day.” When it comes to internet use for “religious or spiritual services and issues,” only 7 percent of reported using the internet for such purposes “Every day,” followed by 13 percent who reported using it “Almost daily,” 23.1 percent who reported using it “Every week,” 33.2 percent who reported doing so “Occasionally,” and 23.6 percent who reported “Never” using the internet for such purposes. Tying with the option “Buying things or services”, “Religious or spiritual services and issues” emerged as the second least commonly chosen option for everyday internet usage. However, with a total of 43.1 percent of respondents reporting using the internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues” on at least a weekly basis, the Israeli Muslim sample displays the highest percentage among all national samples included in the project in this regard. In the interviews, 21 out of a total of 22 respondents brought up the relationship between their internet use and personal religious lives in some way or other.

The relationship between personal religiosity and internet use for religion-related purposes as expressed in in-depth interviews

In this final section we move to discuss individual Turkish and Israeli Muslim young adults’ accounts of their own personal engagements with religious, and primarily Islamic, content online. As illustrated by the survey results for both samples, both Turkish and Israeli Muslim respondents were avid internet users. As noted, when compared to the results for all other national samples included in the YARG-project (with the exception of the Ghanaian sample), the Turkish and Israeli Muslim samples both revealed particularly high figures for self-reported degrees of personal religiosity, frequency of private religious practice, and internet use for “religious or spiritual services and issues.” These results were thus generally in line with previous research on the positive correlation between people’s offline and online religious lives. While the survey results thus suggest a clear relationship between many Turkish and Israeli Muslim respondents’ internet use and personal religious lives, the interview data allows us to delve deeper into individual respondents’ own understandings of the character of this relationship. Notably, respondents commonly raised the same types of concerns about issues relating to religious authority and the trustworthiness of religion-related online content that has also been identified in previous research as discussed above. Our following discussion will therefore be structured on the basis of these two closely interrelated and partly overlapping themes: 1) concern about the untrustworthiness of religion-related content online, and 2) issues relating to religious authority online and the continued importance attached to offline sources of religious authority.

Concern about the trustworthiness of online religious content

Generally, both Israeli Muslim and Turkish respondents commonly regarded the internet as a valuable information source and depository of knowledge on religion-related matters. For example, respondents frequently mentioned engaging with and seeking out Islamic content online in order to satisfy a more general curiosity about religion-related issues. At the same time, however, nearly every respondent who talked about the relation between their personal religious lives and internet use also expressed at least some degree of concern about the trustworthiness of religion-related content online. For example, as one Turkish respondent related:

... if there is a subject that lingers in my mind, I research on a trustworthy website. Because, see, they say that to learn something about religion on certain special days is a greater good deed than to perform the {namaz} [the prayer rituals]. As they say this in terms of “Check it out, read a couple of things, let your, well - -, improve, let your religious culture improve!”, then, I refer to the internet and read the Qur’an al Karim there. (YTRHE135P)

This respondent expresses a rather unreserved attitude towards the internet and Islamic content online, viewing it mostly as a useful general source of information. Indeed, as this respondent says, through reading the Qur’an online, the internet can be used as a means to engage in religious practice and for “improving” one’s religious learning and “culture.” At the same time, however, the respondents also clearly highlights the importance of “trustworthy websites.” An Israeli Muslim respondent provided a somewhat similar account:

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)

In what provides an illustration of a more widely shared attitude among respondents in both samples, this respondent explicitly avoids engaging in religion-related discussions on social media. While these examples reflect a rather unreserved attitude towards the internet as a useful resource for information about religion-related issues, the issue of trust nevertheless clearly emerges in both of them. To take a more specific and detailed example, as one Turkish respondent recounted when asked about whether his/her information seeking online ever included searching out any content related to religion:

R: For instance, there are religious sites; I follow them, too. Atheists; I mean, I follow the sites of people who call themselves as Atheist, too /.../ I question the validity of it; I check to see if it is really true or not. I mean, I unconditionally, without any conditions /.../ For instance, the Qur’an, having four wives, the man may have four wives; I do not agree with this. For instance, yes, I belong to that religion, to that sect, but, I cannot accept this, you see. Consequently, I am a questioning person. I research, I check it out. Does it really say so? /.../

I: Where? How do you research? Where do you consult?

R: On the internet, yes, I check out the websites. I trust, well, if there are any {hodjas} [Islamic preacher in a mosque] that I follow, or people I trust, for instance; Nihat Hatipoğlu [a well-known Turkish Islamic theologian with a strong online presence] or

so on and so forth; that kind of {hodjas}. I mean, I do. I check through several sources. I do not stick to one place. Because some tells the truth, others distort it. (YTRHE146P)

The account of this respondent provides an example of a type of online information searching that centers on acquiring more information about and scrutinizing both religious and non-religious truth claims and outlooks alike. This includes finding information about and interrogating certain Islamic practices as well, in this case polygamy. But even though this respondent talked about “unconditionally” consulting multiple online sources when “researching” religious claims, he/she still explicitly mentioned turning to more trustworthy already familiar and authenticated sources of traditional Islamic authority online such as Islamic preachers or the sites of reputed Islamic theologians like Nihat Hatipoğlu. The account of this respondent thus also illustrates the extension of traditional offline Islamic religious authority into the digital realm.

The quotes above each illustrate different ways in which respondents reported engaging with religion-related content online. The issue of trust was highlighted in each of the above cases as all three respondents expressed some form of concern about the trustworthiness of online content or the uncertain nature of the internet more generally. In what provides a somewhat peculiar type of further illustration of a generally felt unease with the trustworthiness of online environments more generally, another common way for respondents to negotiate the relation between their personal religious lives and internet use was to, at least reportedly, altogether refrain from engaging with the internet in religion-related matters. For example, as one Israeli Muslim respondent said when asked if he/she ever turns to the internet for information and instruction in religion-related matters:

Honestly, no /.../ 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 /.../ 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 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).

The reluctance expressed by this respondent for turning to the internet in religion-related matters is pretty straightforward. Indeed, in order to “guarantee” that the information he/she receives is correct, this respondent chooses to rely exclusively on certified traditional offline religious authorities in religion-related matters. Similarly, a Turkish respondent related:

The internet, if it is a subject relating to religion, I do not turn to the internet and read there. In such delicate matters, I do not involve the internet at all. Um, in my close surrounding, I know people who have really gotten education on this. These are people that I am sure that they have knowledge on religion. I call them on the phone and ask /.../ I ask, for instance, “What is the relevant {ayat} [verse of the Qur’an] on this?” I want to check it and read it. Um, we have the {meal} [a term used for the translation of the verses of the Qur’an, usually in a more simplified language and with no attempt for a complete translation] of Qur’an, for instance, in our home. (YTRHE099P)

Like the previously quoted respondent, this respondent also expresses clear suspicion towards the accuracy and validity of online content, choosing instead to turn to traditional and properly educated and certified offline sources of religious authority. In some cases, however, respondents also reported avoiding engaging with the internet in religion-related matters in order to preserve already held beliefs. As one Turkish respondent said:

You see, I am always afraid of this thing. You see, if I research and find something, I wonder, well, if I would contradict with myself. I mean, I guess I am afraid of -- if I find something different than what they [religious leaders] say -- If it proves that they are lying -- I would stop believing them in my mind. /.../ I mean, honestly, I am afraid that my faith would be shaken. (YTRHE143).

As illustrated by the excerpts quoted above, while being keenly aware of the proliferation of various types of religion-related content online, both Turkish and Israeli Muslim respondents commonly expressed a, sometimes more, sometimes less, acute concern about its trustworthiness. Indeed, as also exemplified above, even though a notable portion of particularly Israeli Muslim respondents reported high frequencies of internet use for religion-related purposes in the survey, when asked about the issue during the interviews, many nevertheless said that they consciously avoided turning to the internet in religion-related matters. This too needs to be understood as a particular way among some respondents to safeguard the traditional validity of their own religious learning.

The continuing importance attached to offline religious authorities

While concern and suspicion towards the trustworthiness of religious content online emerged as a recurring theme among both Turkish and Israeli Muslim respondents, as already illustrated to some extent above, many also talked about their online engagements by making direct references to the continuing importance of various types of offline sources of religious authority such as family members, teachers, and religious leaders. Typically, respondents reported turning to offline religious authorities for the purposes of validating and supplementing the religion-related content found online. For example, as one Israeli Muslim respondent who received a traditional religious upbringing related:

... I follow, I watch Sheikhs in the YouTube and like that /.../ if I have a certain religious question /.../ then, no, I ask a professional, I ask someone who studied the Sharia, who understands like, who memorized the whole Quran, who understands the whole Quran and is educated, has a certificate from Islamic University, this is my religious reference. But my father I said he is my reference in all the matters of my life /.../ 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. If I see that he is a person who is suitable, like, most of them as doctors, and has studied at University in Makkah or at Al-Azhar or something, so maybe then I will watch him on video, yes /.../ and consider it. (YILSK027P)

Like the previously quoted respondents above, this respondent likewise expresses a clear suspicion towards the reliability of online religion-related content in general. While this respondent generally avoids turning to the internet in religion-related matters, this is with the exception of content produced by trusted and certified traditional religious authorities such as sheiks whose "specialist" knowledge ensures the validity of their messages. Through highlighting the importance of Islamic universities, the account of this respondent thus provides a clear illustration of the importance of "third-party seals" from Islamic institutions along with personal background and education when determining the credibility religious

messages, both online and offline (cf. Wan-Chik, 2015). Notably, at the same time, the respondent also mentions his/her father being his/her primary reference in all life matters. Another Israeli Muslim respondent similarly recounted when asked if he/she ever turns to the internet in religious matters:

R: First thing, first thing I go to my grandfather.

I: Your grandfather is religious?

R: Yes.

I: Hajj? [a person who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca]

R: Hajj, yes.

I: Yes.

R: If he did not know or I did not -- I felt that I want to know more about the thing I enter the YouTube and listen to a specific Sheikh, or enter and read in the you-+YouTube too, in {Google}***, but I enter the -- the sources that are more trusted. (YILSK264T)

The account of this respondent illustrates the importance of close family members when determining the validity of religious messages. However, in case family members (in this case the grandfather) are unable to help, or if he/she feels that he/she needs more information on a particular topic, only then does this respondent turn to online resources provided by specific trusted sheikhs.

The account of this respondent therefore not only illustrates the importance of adequate certification and authentication in assessing religious authority online, but also the ways in which traditional both online and offline sources of religious authority are used to supplement and complement one another.

Several respondents also highlighted the importance of offline sources of religious authority in relation to the proliferation of different translations of the Qur'an online. As one Turkish respondent related:

... for instance, there are certain websites on the internet. For instance, a sentence or a {Surah} [chapter in Qur'an] has different translations. I have seen thirty-nine translations for one existing all simultaneously. One cannot pull it off. In that case, a support -- in fact, if there was someone around who knew. My older sister is somewhat good on this subject. I mean, her religious belief and especially her research. Not in that way, well... as in "I am a Muslim. I believe." Through research, by getting to its meaning. My sister puts effort in researching and learning everything with its meaning. Consequently, I thought that she may be a guide for me. (YTRHE140P)

This respondent highlights the confusion often engendered by the availability of some many different Qur'an translations online. In what provides another example of the importance of close family members, this respondent reports turning to his/her sister as a trusted guide in religion-related matters.

As illustrated above, when talking about the relationship between their own personal religious lives and internet use in religion-related matters, issues relating to the trustworthiness of online content were brought up in one way or the other by the majority of respondents. Often in close conjunction to this, respondents also typically highlighted the importance that religious authority online is properly authenticated and validated in much the same way as it should be offline. Lastly, many respondents also explicitly highlighted the

importance of offline sources of authority in religion-related matters, most frequently mentioning Islamic preachers, sheiks, and close family members.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored the relationship between self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity, frequency of personal religious practice, and internet use for religion-related purposes among Muslim Turkish and Israeli young adults in light of select portions of the YARG project data. The survey results for both samples clearly exceeded the total sample average both with regard to self-reported degrees of personal religiosity and frequency of private religious practice. The Israeli Muslim sample also displayed the highest frequency of internet use for “religious or spiritual services and issues” across the entire YARG sample. The Turkish sample displayed the third highest frequency of all national samples included in this regard, although the figures were clearly below those of the Israeli Muslim sample. In line with the findings of several previous studies as noted above, the survey results revealed a clear general association between higher levels of self-assessed degrees of personal religiosity and private religious practice and frequency of internet use for religion-related purposes. The fact that this association (along with only the Ghanaian sample) emerged so clearly in relation to the only predominantly Muslim samples included in the YARG project points to the enduring vitality and influence of religious and traditional values and mores among young adults in these two particular contexts.

When further explored in light of individual accounts as expressed in interviews, reflecting broader prevalent discourses on Islam and the internet, Turkish and Israeli Muslim respondents’ engagements with the internet in religion-related matters were found to be characterized by active usage and deliberate information-seeking on the one hand, and an often expressed concern about the trustworthiness of online content, on the other hand. Indeed, even though respondents in both samples reported comparatively high frequencies of internet use for “Religious or spiritual services and issues,” when asked about it during the interviews, many nevertheless said that they consciously avoided turning to the internet, and particularly social media, in religion-related matters. In close relation to this, respondents also typically highlighted the need for adequate certification and validation of religious authority online. This was often coupled with an emphasis on the importance of offline sources of religious authority such as religious leaders and family members.

In large part, the findings presented in this article corroborate the results of several previous studies in the area, both with regard to the widespread perceived untrustworthiness of online content among Muslim users and the continued importance attached to the proper validation and authentication of religious authority online. But beyond this, through examining survey results alongside personal accounts as expressed in in-depth interviews, our findings also highlight the continued importance of offline sources of religious authority and their influence on the online engagements of our respondents. While the survey results alone might suggest widespread autonomous engagement with the internet in religion-related matters on the part the Turkish and Israeli Muslim young adults who participated in the study, the interviews reveal that their engagements actually often tend to be characterized by much higher degrees of uncertainty and a continued expressed reliance on traditional offline religious authorities in particular.

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