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The Religion of Social Media: When Islam Meets the Web

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The Religion of Social Media: When Islam Meets the Web

Zaina Salem

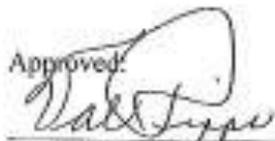
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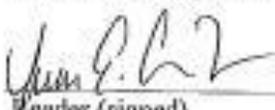
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Abstract

The purpose of this feature article is to identify the reasons why some social media users disclose their religious beliefs through sites such as Facebook and Twitter. According to the Pew Research Center, 20 percent of Americans share their faith online. After a series of in-depth interviews, I discovered that for some, religious-related posts serve as personal religious reminders. Others share their religious views on social media to feel a sense of community, or to eliminate stereotypes and ignorance surrounding their religion.

Introduction

Social media is a tool that can be used for many different reasons, by many different types of people. With a touch of a button, users can share anything from the latest breaking news to their favorite cat video. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are a hub for exchanging the thoughts and ideas of everyday life.

As a regular user of social media, one theme that seems reoccurring is the willingness of users to share their religious beliefs through these sites. Religion is often seen a very personal and touchy subject, but more and more people are choosing to publically express their spiritual thoughts on a daily basis. To soothe my curiosity, I researched why this is. Upon browsing different articles and research papers, my curiosity was left unfulfilled.

I set out to find the answer myself. Being the journalist that I am, I wanted to get insight from the people themselves, rather than relying on numbers and figures to explain the questions I had. For uniformity, I interviewed social media users who followed the religion of Islam, asking questions that produced thoughtful answers.

As technology continues to change, humans have to adapt accordingly. Understanding these changes ultimately helps us to understand ourselves and each other, which in turn helps us live harmoniously, despite our many differences.

Literature Review

As defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (p. 61). Social media provides a source for a variety of online information. Examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and others. Most social media sites are free of charge, which explains why hundreds of millions of people use them.

Whiting and Williams (2013) sought to better understand why people use social media by applying the uses and gratifications theory. By demonstrating the importance of this theory to social media, ten uses and gratifications for social media were found: social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others.

While extensive research has been done to explain why people use social media, there is little information on the motives of sharing personal religious beliefs on social media websites. McKenna and West studied and found that those who engage in “online religious forums” benefit in that they feel more social support and feel more connected to others who share their faith. Just as with those who join religious places of worship frequently, these online users experience “a greater sense of purpose in their own lives and they have greater trust and faith in others.” (McKenna and West, 2007)

The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in May and June of 2014, asking 3,217 adults if they had engaged in different kinds of religious activity during the previous week.

According to the results, in an average week, 20% of Americans share their religious faith online. About the same percentage listen to religious talk radio, watch religious TV programs, or listen to Christian rock music. Nearly half of U.S. adults see someone else share their faith online in a typical week (“Religion and Electronic Media,” 2014).

With a large amount of Americans sharing their faith online, it has become easy to find others with the same personal views. While this could be seen as a positive aspect to religious social media, it could be harmful. Kessler wrote, “...a consequence of the huge array of online communities and the ease of finding those with specific interests is a tendency to self-select into like-minded groups, lessening the opportunity to encounter and learn from those with different perspectives and opinions, and be exposed to other voices” (p. 6). Interfaith dialogue is important in order to eliminate stigmas and stereotypes that result from ignorance of other religions. Discussions between people of different faiths provide an opportunity to learn from each other. Kessler questions, “...in reality does it happen very often? When virtual communities are formed, how often do we include those who we disagree with?” (p. 9).

Miller, Mudev, and Hill (2013) highlighted the differences between social and private behavior on social networking site (SNS) involvement among adults. “Social behavior, such as being in school and participating in more non-religious organizations, is positively linked to becoming a SNS member. By contrast, more private behaviors –such as Bible reading, donating money, and helping the needy –are related to less SNS participation.” (p. 247)

By comparison, according to the study from the Pew Research Center, “Americans who said they frequently attend religious services were more likely to engage in these electronic

religious activities than those who said they attend religious services less often.” From the adults who said they attend religious services at least once a week, 31% said they shared their faith online the previous week. For those who seldom or never attend religious services, 8% reported sharing their faith online (“Religion and Electronic Media,” 2014).

According to Cheong (2011), social media practices can deepen spirituality. However, “there are concerns about the role of social media in fraying religious ties as individuals choose to consume online religious experiences and withdraw from houses of worship.” Although there are concerns from religious leaders that religious activity on social media will replace traditional in-person attendance at places of worship, little research has been done to prove it.

Another concern religious leaders have is the difficulty of keeping up with the ever-changing technology of social media. Religious leaders now have the pressure of being available and contactable to their followers almost 24/7. Cheong writes, “Religious leaders also face increasing pressures to learn new skills in order to keep abreast of the latest technological developments and appear credible to young and wired populations” (p. 3).

I am seeking the answers to why people choose to share their religious views on social media, as well as how religious followers use social media to satisfy their spiritual needs. I will do this primarily by conducting qualitative research with social media users who follow the religion of Islam. According to the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (2015), “qualitative research is designed to reveal a target audience’s range of behavior and the perceptions that drive it with reference to specific topics or issues.” On method of qualitative research is conducting in-depth interviews, which is the strategy I am using.

Any journalist will tell you that interviewing is the backbone of the trade, and having the skills to do so are a must. An interview gives a journalist the opportunity to pull personalized and comprehensive information from those who are directly involved with whatever the matter may be. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), different forms of interviews serve different purposes –for example, a journalistic interview is meant to record and report important events. However, “qualitative research interviews sometimes come close to journalistic interviews and vice versa” (p. 12).

Some stories are OK with just numbers and statistics –but others, like this one, need more than just figures to explain why something is the way it is. As Kvale and Brinkmann say, “If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them?” Humans are dynamic, complex beings who deserve to have their stories told through words.

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The religion of social media: when Islam meets the web

The bare tree branches above Noha Elsayed make the sky look like shattered glass, and a quiet but strong stream of water flows behind her.

Inspired, Noha Elsayed decides to share a thought with her friends online.

She opens the Facebook app on her phone. The cursor blinks as “What’s on your mind?” stares back at her.

Elsayed’s thumbs flutter across the keyboard. Thirty seconds later, her post is sent.

“And if all the trees on earth were pens, and all the oceans were ink, the words of God would not be exhausted,” it reads.

This line is a verse from the Quran, the Holy book for Muslims. In today’s world, it is not uncommon for individuals to use social media to express their religious identity like Elsayed does.

The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 2014 asking 3,217 adults if they had engaged in different kinds of religious activity during the previous week. The study found that 20 percent of Americans share their religious faith on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The study also found that nearly half of Americans had seen someone else in the past week share something about their religious faith online.

Little research, however, has been done to figure out why Americans self-disclose their religious views on social media. Self-disclosure on social media can mean much more than filling out the “religious views” section on Facebook. For many, this means posting quotes from scriptures, retweeting a scholar, or sharing an inspirational video.

To get a better understanding of reasons to self-disclose religious views on social media, various followers of one religion, Islam, were given the opportunity to express their views on the subject.

Jwayyed Jwayyed, 22-year-old law student, chooses to share his religious views online as a way of making social media valuable for himself and others.

“Social media is used to express ideas. I post about current events, social occurrences, politics, sports, my day-to-day life and various other topics. Religion is no different,” Jwayyed said. “But for me, life is about understanding your purpose and religion plays a major role in that. I want to utilize social media as part of the way I fulfill my purpose.”

20-year-old Saeed Khoncarly, an advanced molecular biology student at Cleveland State University, regularly shares his religious views on social media as well.

“Social media is my way of expressing myself,” Khoncarly said. “My religion is a part of my identity, and I am proud of my religion. “

According to the Pew Research study, Americans who attend religious services often are more likely to engage in electronic forms of religious activity than those who attend services less often. The study also says that young adults ages 18 to 29 are about twice as likely as Americans ages 50 and older to see people sharing religious views online.

51-year-old Laila Eddeb, a teacher from Cleveland, avoids religious posts on social media. Although Eddeb is a spiritual person who attends religious gatherings often, she prefers to draw a line between social media and her religious views.

“I believe social media is for communicating and religion is different than that,” Eddeb said. “I follow people who are wise and smart, whether they are religious scholars or not.”

In contrast, Sanaa Ziadeh, 50, says she interacts with religious posts as often as she can.

“I post about Islam as much as possible,” Ziadeh said. “I feel a sense of community with other Muslims when sharing posts because it’s a way of reminding each other the importance of being a good believer and obtaining a close relation with God.”

Ziadeh does not believe, however, that social media deepens her spirituality because “my faith is a religion of practice and therefore is not dependent on social media.”

A spiritual boost?

We know that social media is changing the way we communicate, but there is little evidence to prove that it makes someone more or less religious.

In an article titled “Religion and social media: got web?” author Pauline Cheong explains that her research on religion and new media have revealed ways in which blogging and microblogging –for example, tweeting in 140 characters or less –can function as religious practices. Cheong says that for some, social media is a platform to teach and inform about their faith, and to engage people in meaningful dialogue. It’s also used, she said, as a form of social and prayer support.

There are plenty of social media accounts made for the purpose of informing, reminding, and engaging with followers of various religions. For example, @IslamicThinking has over one million followers on Twitter. The account tweets inspirational quotes, friendly reminders such as “speak kindly of others,” verses from the Quran, and short prayers.

Sabrean Quraan, a 24-year-old speech pathology student at Cleveland State University, said although these accounts are good reminders, social media doesn't make her a more religious person.

"I would feel the same with or without social media," Quraan said.

21-year-old Summer Matar, a biochemistry student at The University of Akron, feels somewhat different. Matar said she might be a little less religious without social media.

"Seeing religious posts regularly will cause you to think more about your spirituality, therefore strengthening it when you are reminded of something you forgot or when you learn something new," Matar said. "On social media I am friends with family members all over the world and each one will post something religious that I may have never seen before. Each time I learn something new, I feel like I get a little more religious."

Cheong also says that even if social media can enrich and supplement an individual's religious devotion, there are concerns that these online religious experiences are inclining people to withdraw from houses of worship.

Raeed Tayeh, a Muslim-American activist, said that social media has changed how humans socialize in general, but believes we still need to socialize in person sometimes. For this reason, he said, planners of religious activities must be more creative to attract people to their events.

"At the same time, for those who seem content to be intellectually lazy and surf until they find religious teachings that mesh with their pre-existing beliefs or desires, social media can provide a comfortable, albeit lonely perch, where they can nest their hearts and minds without feeling the need to personally interact with co-religionists," Tayeh said.

Quraan said that although social media is an outlet for religious expression, it shouldn't take away from a person's desire to partake in religious events, such as lectures, youth groups, Friday prayers, and community gatherings. Matar agrees with this as well.

"In no way do social media replace traditional religious behaviors. I think that a large part of your religion is gathering and remembering your faith together," Matar said. "Actually, I feel more of a need to attend those events because I have a social media. I realize that social media doesn't replace those events so I find myself really wanting to go to events."

As social media becomes more predominant with religious followers, Islamic scholars are learning the language of social media as well.

Suhaib Webb, a popular Muslim scholar in America based in Washington D.C., is among many imams using social media as an educational tool. Currently, he has over 87,000 followers on Twitter and over 210,000 on Facebook.

Webb reaches out to people through various social media outlets. His most notable appearance, however, is Snapchat.

Webb uses 10-second videos to address a wide range of topics from drugs to marriage advice, dropping pop-culture references along the way. In an interview with Quartz, Webb says he uses Snapchat for two reasons: to reach a demographic of young Muslims age 13-23, and to learn the language of the youth.

What attracts so many young Muslims to his message? Accessibility is key.

“You have to be accessible to people,” Webb said in the interview. “And that’s why I encourage imams, thought leaders, and activists, to get on Snapchat.”

Feeling at home, online

Tayeh recognizes that there are some positives that come out of using social media to express religious views. According to Tayeh, social media gives people an outlet to express themselves and feel equal in a society where they are a minority, as well as encourage others to be more comfortable with their religiosity.

Yosra Nadhimi, an 18-year-old psychology student from Chicago, says she feels a sense of community with other Muslims when she engages with religious posts.

“I feel a sense of community on positive posts where I feel safe and welcomed around people who are like me and can agree and relate to my feelings about different situations,” Nadhimi said.

A study called “Give me that online-time religion: The role of the internet in spiritual life” found that those who engage in “online religious forum” benefit in that they feel more social support and feel more connected to others who share their faith. Just as with those who join religious places of worship frequently, these online users experience “a greater sense of purpose in their own lives and they have greater trust and faith in others.”

To support this statement, in 2014 [Pew Research found](#) that 45 percent of Facebook users say they use the social network to receive support from people in their network.

21-year-old Mohammed Abuaun from Cleveland said his Muslim friends interact more with religious posts than other kinds of posts.

“It makes sense. Not every Muslim likes sports, movies, et cetera; but all Muslims have one thing in common: that they are Muslims and their beliefs as far as religion are the same,” Abuaun said. “I would say it definitely strengthens your faith....when you see other people who have the same beliefs as you, it makes you feel like you are never alone.”

Khoncarly says he also feels a sense of community on social media, especially when Muslims come together to promote peace and condemn violence.

“This shows me that we are all striving toward the same goal: promoting the peace of Islam,” he said.

The power of a hashtag

In February 2016, the Pew Research Center found that nearly 50 percent of Americans believe “at least some” Muslims in the U.S. are anti-American. Another question in the study asked if Muslims face a lot of discrimination in the U.S. today, in which most Americans (59 percent) said they do.

After the recent ISIS attacks in Belgium, the Twitter hashtag #StopIslam trended worldwide.

#ikwilhelpen

18,269 Tweets

Hoofddorp

Populair geworden in het afgelopen uur

#PrayForBelgium

180,198 Tweets

#brusselsattack

144,141 Tweets

#StopIslam

105,821 Tweets

#LuanSantanaCacauShowDia22

34,177 Tweets



David Jones

@DavidJo52951945

 Follow

#StopIslam is trending worldwide, there will never be peace in the Western world until Islam is gone

9:58 AM - 22 Mar 2016

  272  367

**Liars Never Win**

@liars_never_win

Follow

The best way to #StopIslam is a good guy/gal with a gun.

12:00 PM - 22 Mar 2016

3 4

**Cristina Laila**

@cristinalaila1

Follow

#StopIslam now !! They all read the same Quran! They are instructed to kill the non believer over and over again !!

12:25 PM - 22 Mar 2016

677 676

The result of its trend, however, could be because so many people were criticizing it.

**cal**

@femnoodle

Follow

how is #stopislam trending, I've read some of the tweets and they're sickening. terrorism has no religion.

12:05 PM - 22 Mar 2016

456 597

**Feminism Matters™**

@WeNeedFeminism

Follow

Why is #StopIslam trending?

It should be #StopISIS

12:00 PM - 22 Mar 2016

2,309 2,862



Jeffrey Wright ✓
@jfreewright

Follow

#StopIslam, eh? If you can't find Brussels on a map, the distinction between Islam & terrorism will pass you by, too.
#StopIgnorance

12:12 PM - 22 Mar 2016

623 720



Faiza Khattak
@faiza_amin1990

Follow

One 3rd of the world is Muslim. This is more than 2 billion people. If Islam was a religion of violence, they'd be no one left on earth. #StopIslam

12:25 PM - 22 Mar 2016

62 83

In a time when Islamophobia – a hatred or prejudice against Islam or Muslims – is on the rise, many use social media to dispel stereotypes and misunderstandings about their religion.

Another campaign, #NotInMyName, challenges the misconceptions of Islam with messages explaining that all Muslims cannot be blamed for the actions of a few. The campaign originated in 2014 by [The Active Change Foundation](#) to show solidarity against ISIS and their actions. The campaign soon trended worldwide and the hashtag has been used over 94,000 times.



Dania
@danasalt

Follow

I am Muslim, and I stand against any crime/terrorist attack committed by extremists claiming to be Muslim #PrayforParis
#notinmyname

10:52 PM - 13 Nov 2015

390 626



Dawood Masood
@dawoodmasood786



#ISIS does not represent me, nor does it represent my religion, hence #NotInMyName.

Please R/T this message. 😊

7:45 AM - 5 Nov 2015

Tayeh believes that social media can be a good tool to tackle Islamophobia, especially for those people whose main source of information is the internet.

“Islamophobia grows through propagated ideas based on ignorance and fear. These ideas can be countered with other ideas that educate people about Islam, help them overcome their fears, and promote tolerance,” Tayeh said. “And because these ideas can be expressed with a photo, cartoon, word or phrase posted and re-posted on social media, there is a real potency there to combat Islamophobia through social media.”

On September 10, 2015, just a day before the anniversary of 9/11, 22-year-old Fatima Shendy uploaded a video on Facebook titled “The Twin Towers: A Muslim Perspective.” The video showed Shendy performing a spoken word around a small group of people at Kent State University, where she attends college.

Shendy’s poetry began with an anecdote about a time when her mother’s headscarf was ripped off her head, then continued to explain what it’s like growing up in America when terrorists hijacked your religion.

“Fingers pointed to my chest, tearing through tender cartilage,” the poem read. “I’m trapped inside your vision, my religion made me hostage.”

The video went viral overnight. Shendy’s five-minute video attracted 962,000 views, and was shared over 16,000 times.

“It was extremely shocking,” Shendy said. “I didn’t know my words could impact such a large mass of people. This has nothing to do with popularity or being famous –but the idea that, when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and talk about the truth, it touches everyone. Nothing is fabricated nor masked, just raw truth.”

Shendy said she wasn’t planning to put her video on social media, and she was nervous to hear what people were going to say to her.

“But I realized how many similarities there are between people across oceans that have never seen me but understood my words” she said. “I realized this journey really had nothing to do with me, but more so had to do with opening people’s hearts.”

Social media is a plug for reaching thousands in a unique way, Shendy said, and hopes to continue using it to share her message.

“It's the way our generation connects with one another rather than generalized news that doesn't really touch the substance of those around us. It gives us dimensions,” Shendy said. “I don’t think we realize how important our voices are. We tend to think being one person isn’t enough, but often times it is the prerequisite.”

Discussion and Conclusion

By analyzing the interviews I conducted, inferences and conclusions were made that ultimately shaped my story. An overwhelming number of responses were condensed to smaller, more manageable bits of information. I organized similar responses and it became clear what themes I wanted to discuss in my story.

Originally I had set out to find out why people choose to share their religious views on social media, but I soon discovered that it is more complex than just one simple reason. I found that for some people, the number one reason to share their beliefs is because their religion is such a large part of their lives, and they are comfortable sharing that part of themselves with their friends and family. Others said that social media is a safe haven in a society where they might feel out of place as a minority. Connecting with people who share similar beliefs, values, and obstacles gives them a sense of community.

I also found that many Muslims use social media to communicate with others who have skewed perceptions of Islam due to stereotypes, misinformation, and plain ignorance. Social media is used as a tool to reach a large number of people and to dispel these stereotypes that often arise from lack of education. Some messages are combined with creativity to produce a work of art, as seen with the spoken word performer.

As much as I learned about my interviewees, I think they learned something about themselves as well. My questions sparked a discussion that most have never had before. I was told countless times “that is a good question, I’ve never thought of it before” or, “this is a great

topic.” It was a challenge for people to understand themselves, but I believe the outcome was positive. The more we understand each other, the better we can live together.

Appendices



Noha Elsayed, 25, is inspired by the nature surrounding her and decides to post a relevant quote, pulled from the holy Quran.



Shendy works on writing her next spoken word, which she says will be posted on social media to share her message to a large audience.