

Audience Perception and Religious Identity Among Social Media Users: The Case of Muslim Arab Women in Israel

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Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews with Muslim Arab women in Israel who underwent a change in their religious identity while using social media, this article explores the role played by actual and imagined audiences in the formation and maintenance of religious identity on social media. The findings show how differing circumstances produce different perspectives on audiences. In times of identity crisis and change, interviewees would not engage with audiences whose behavior could not be predicted. The imagined audience was present in the participants' social media use, even when threats to their religious identities were absent. Additionally, interviewees use their future selves as audiences. These perceptions are based on past experiences and predicted future scenarios, mainly the oppression the participants experience both as individuals and as members of an oppressed religious group. The article points to the importance of social media audiences not only as groups targeted with online content but also as crucial parts of identity formation and, at times, of identity itself.

Keywords: social media, audience, imagined audience, digital identity, Muslim women

People present themselves and shape their identities using feedback from people they interact with their audience, actual or imagined. This is a regular occurrence on social media (Oeldorf-Hirsch, Birnholtz, & Hancock, 2017). Social media, as platforms that provide users with large, diverse, and frequently invisible audiences (Kim, Lewis, & Watson, 2018; Litt, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2011), provide unrivaled opportunities for studying the importance of audiences in the formation, maintenance, and presentation of identity. The same can be said about the way social media use corresponds with the religious identity of its users, where features and audiences help to express and strengthen people's religious identities. The affordances of social media enable religious identity formation by offering access to different sorts of religious identities (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Cheong, 2012; Helland, 2016). Women in general, and Muslim women in particular, leverage social media features to form their self-presentation in order to fit their targeted, mostly imagined, audience; others express themselves as female leaders who present somewhat complicated forms of identity (Gray, 2019).

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Religious strengthening, by which I refer to a profound change in one's religious identity occurring in a relatively short period and involving changes in behavior (conducting religious rituals and obligations) and thought (adopting religious beliefs), has been widely discussed by Internet and social media scholars over the last couple of decades (Cheong, 2012; Cohen-Malayev, Schachter, & Rich, 2014; Dawson & Cowan, 2004). New media, combined with traditional offline religious institutions, are vital for building religious identity (Dawson & Cowan, 2004). Given that social media is, *inter alia*, a place of religious identity formation and actor-audience interaction, this paper questions how Muslim Arab women living in Israel relate to their social media audiences regarding their religious identity. The term "audience" is used because this study focuses on the research population's perception of their online ties as a collective and how they choose to address them, rather than the dyadic relations that exist on social media. The study participants managed to strengthen their religiosity while facing rejection from their close environments, such as family and friends. Most of the participants were members of nonreligious families and, at times, had no religious acquaintances. Predictably, such social media users perceive their online audiences as important to building and maintaining their religious identities. This article delves into their attitudes toward their audiences by analyzing in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Drawing on reports and stories from interviews held with the participants regarding their perceptions and their management of the audiences they target with their posts and texts, the paper offers unique insights into the role of actual and imagined audiences in identity formation, showing that users who experience religious identity change believe that the process can be replicated in other social media users who perceive them as role models and as representatives of Islam, and monitor their online behaviors. It appears that the participants' perception of social media audiences mirrors their sociopolitical position, especially as they perceive social media as a hostile, mostly non-Muslim sphere where nonreligious people and non-Muslims view their profiles, even when their profiles are private, and their contacts are exclusively religious Muslims. Moreover, it is shown that in times of identity change, social media users can actively and consciously gather an encouraging audience as part of their preparations for anticipated identity crises. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that some participants target their future selves with online texts, on the assumption that they will one day need the kind of encouragement that no one but themselves can provide.

Previous literature has presented the ways religious Muslim women in non-Muslim countries form and present their religious identities to their social media audiences (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018; Peterson, 2020; Piela, 2021b). The current article explores the perception of social media and its audience; findings show how these women's sociopolitical position is reflected in their social media perception.

Audience

Goffman (1959), using the metaphor of theater, introduces our daily life interactions as a contentious self-presentation aiming to provide a desirable act to the audience, those with whom we communicate. This is a useful metaphor in the context of media use, since content creators aim to present their content, as well as their selves, to their audience (see Baumann & Flegel, 2015).

It is likely that when using mediated communication (journalism, the Internet, mobile, social media, etc.), people have less information about their audiences and their reactions. This uncertainty puts them in a face-threatening position, where the content presented to the audience may be inappropriate and cause

embarrassment (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2017). Accordingly, monitoring audience reactions is vital to constructing suitable messages. For instance, Wang et al. (2011) show that when Facebook users have a specific idea of who the audience for their shared content is, they become careful when creating posts, and are more likely to edit their posts before submitting them. However, given the platform's features, the social media audience in general, and in particular Facebook, is more likely to be imagined than witnessed. The imagined audience "is the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating" (Litt, 2012, p. 331) and is an important element of human behavior and interaction. People know they are being watched and judged by others and act accordingly (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Moreover, imagining someone's presence and behavior influences us as if we could actually see them. To quote Cooley (1983), "There is no separation between real and imaginary persons; indeed, to be imagined is to become real, in a social sense [...]" (p. 49). Users of social media imagine their online audience and tailor their posts accordingly (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) using signals they perceive from the online environment (Boyd, 2007).

Despite their importance, social media users rarely imagine their audiences accurately. For example, Twitter users exclude weak ties, or people they do not feel very close to, from their imagined audience (Wang et al., 2013). On the other hand, Facebook users at times include those who do not and cannot see their social media profiles (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This difference in the ways users imagine their audiences on different platforms could be due to the different affordances and visibility of their profiles. Daniel Miller (2011) discussed Facebook as a suitable platform for conducting anthropological research with regard to its features. Its users, Miller (2011) argues, are expected to be aware of the different genres and codes in the platform. In other words, they need to meet the audience's expectations based mainly on imagined ties and partial feedback. In the current study, understanding Facebook is essential to the process of religious identity change, as it is the main platform the interviewees used during their identity change. This relates to the evidence from earlier studies that showed the centrality of other social media users as a source of social support for those people undergoing a change in their religious identity (see Evolvi, 2019; John & Agbarya, 2021; Tsoria & Campbell, 2021).

Previous literature shows that Muslim women address their social media audiences to present and form their religious identities (Peterson, 2020; Piela, 2021a). Despite the hostile discourse on social media (Awan, 2014), they navigate within these platforms to form their religious identity and represent their religious group (Eckert, Metzger-Riftkin, Kolhoff, & O'Shay-Wallace, 2021; Kesvani, 2019). The audiences of these media can be the encouraging factor that social media users seek to ease their religious, identity-changing process, especially in non-Muslim countries (Inge, 2017).

An imagined audience is not based on facts or information about those who watch one's content but is considered when creating it, leaving users onstage but blind to one of the most important elements of their performance: the audience's expressions. This challenge can be even more intense when changing an aspect of the user's identity, where the actor transforms in some way and needs to anticipate their audience's reaction to their transformation, as will be developed below.

Religious Identity and Social Media

Religious identity develops through direct contact with people and authority (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014), but it also relies on imagined aspects where people perceive themselves as members of a collective

(King, 2015). Such a sense of belonging is vital to religious identity. This implies that one's audience and its reactions are normal aspects of forming or changing a religious identity.

Scholars have focused on how users present their religious identity online (Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011; Dawson & Cowan, 2004). Together with the development of new media, the ways people explore, form, and present their religious identities have changed (Lovheim & Lundmark, 2021). As Evolvi (2019) suggests, new media help minority religious groups, such as Muslims and atheists in Catholic countries, articulate their religious identities and engage in discourses about religion. These affordances allow people to address wide audiences not only to form their own identity but also to convince others—audiences—to adopt the same religious identity and ideologies by showing their lifestyle online (Piela, 2021a). Muslims in Western countries see social media as a tool with which to negotiate their own religious identities using ties and sources of media that are not available in their country of residence (Bahfen, 2018). Moreover, they introduce their religion and lifestyle in an attempt to negate the negative image of Muslims in both traditional and new media (Eckert, Metzger-Riftkin, Kolhoff, & O'Shay-Wallace, 2019). Studies of Muslim social media users also show that they address other users, creating an actor-audience dynamic, both as influencers and as regular users. This leads us to ask how this dynamic is created and how Muslim social media users perceive it.

(Religious) Muslim Arab Women and Social Media

Muslims in non-Muslim countries navigate between different, at times apparently contradictory, components of identity, as their religious identities are formed within the Western socio-cultural context (Duderija, 2008). As Fletcher (2008) argued, the emergence of different historical changes is associated with changes in religious identity formation processes. In the current historical context, Muslims in the West might find themselves in hostile cultural contexts, where religious identity is a crucial element of their identification (Peek, 2005). Social media users form and present their identity within this context, and they use social media to provide a positive view of Islam and Muslims that is less common in mainstream media (Varisco, 2010) and to build their own religious identity (Premazzi & Ricucci, 2015). The current study refers to religious identity as emerging within historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Religious Muslim women navigate their social media use through social and religious boundaries, which impacts their online identity presentation (Alsaggaf, 2019). Muslim women—frequently seen in Western mainstream media as victims and supporters of patriarchal and religious violence—can use social media to present their narratives and reveal different aspects of their lives by becoming content creators and providing information about Muslim women, which has been overlooked or ignored by traditional media outlets (Pennington, 2018a; Peterson, 2020; Rozehnal, 2022). The emergence of social media opened a new window of opportunity for Muslim women, who could now become authorities on themselves (Beta, 2019), and presented a new, more complex, and less binary identity of the Muslim woman who could, for instance, be both liberal and orthodox. Moreover, female Muslim religious authorities have been found to be aware of their audiences and to use social media to target them (Liberatore, 2019; Peterson, 2020). Muslims in non-Muslim countries perceive social media as a hostile environment in which they are negatively presented (see Kesvani, 2019; Nolf, d'Haenens, & Joris, 2022; Rozehnal, 2022). This leads some Muslim women, especially religious women, to consider their audiences when using social media (Hirji, 2021).

The current article focuses on aspects of social media use among Muslim Arab women in Israel, a unique community whose complex identity has citizenship, national, ethnic, and religious components (Shehadeh, 2021), on their gender. Muslims in Israel are indigenous people struggling to maintain their identity (Champagne & Abu-Saad, 2006; Sa'di, 2005). While this article aims to better understand the role of audiences in times of identity change, it is appropriate to consider the uniqueness of the population and the intersectionality between their social media use, gender, and sociopolitical status. Online audiences are important to social media users' identity formation, presentation, and maintenance. Moreover, some communities attribute more importance to this audience than others and consider their reactions when deciding the content they post (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021).

The Current Study

This article focuses on the role of online audiences in forming and presenting identities. The study sample is a group of Muslim Arab women living in Israel who were social media users during times of increasing religiosity between the years 2015–2018 and whose religious identity change was largely rejected by their offline (and at times online) acquaintances. People facing offline social rejection due to their changing identity can use social media and its features to build an alternative, encouraging online environment by managing their online ties and content (Agbarya & John, 2023). The importance of social media to identity and the centrality of the audience in both social media and identity led us to examine the study participants' perceived user-audience relations as related to their religious identity.

Existing literature shows that religious Muslim women use social media for addressing their audiences to form, present, and maintain their religious identity (see Evolvi, 2017; Goehring, 2019; Peterson, 2020; Piela, 2011). This religious identity is related to wider contexts (see Fletcher, 2008; Peek, 2005) that position these users within online spheres as an alienated minority (Awan, 2014; Khamis, 2021). However, it is important to understand both the deep, private experiences and perceptions of these online spheres that drive this usage and contribute to religious identity formation. Scholars such as Anna Piela and Julia Evolvi show how, for religious Muslim women, online performing is central to their religious identity. This raises the question of the role that social media perception, particularly audience perception, plays in forming and maintaining religious identity—if any at all. This study refers to one's sense of self as an important component of identity and examines its change.

This study focuses on social media to capture an important aspect of religious identity formation that is understudied in digital religion studies. The imagined audience is a crucial aspect of users' self-position within social media and can reflect their perception of social media as a social sphere. Moreover, the current study explores imagined audiences as reflecting sociopolitical position, which in turn plays a role in forming one's religious identity.

Method

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Muslim women aged 19–37 living in Israel who had reported becoming more religious in the previous five years and were social media users. They experienced changes in faith, in some cases from atheism to strong belief in Islamic Sharia, and in practice, mostly wearing the hijab and breaking social ties with men and nonreligious people. All interviewees faced

objections to their increasing religiosity from some of their main offline acquaintances, mainly close friends and family members. All interviewees reported using social media as an alternative, encouraging environment, and information source. For ethical reasons, and because the study focuses on the interviewees' perceptions of their (mostly imagined) audiences, rather than the actual interactions between them and the audience, their social media profiles were not examined.

Two different sampling methods were used. The first was snowball sampling (eight participants). This helped to gain interviewees' trust when discussing a sensitive and crucial period in their lives. The second involved publishing an announcement about the study in a Facebook group for religious Muslim women in Israel (seven participants). This entailed challenges in gaining interviewees' trust: For example, five potential participants refused to be interviewed since they perceived the study to be politically oriented. In each case, a pre-interview conversation was conducted to present the study and the tools used to protect interviewees' privacy. The interviews were conducted at the locations and times chosen by the interviewees. Most of the interviews took place at the interviewees' homes. Eleven of the interviewees had an academic degree or were students in the Israeli tertiary education system; two interviewees were students at Islamic studies colleges, which are not acknowledged by the Israeli Council for Higher Education; and two had a high school education. Most of the interviewees (13) lived in Arab towns in northern Israel.

The interview schedule included questions about the period of religious identity change, the interviewees' online behavior before, during, and after the change, and how they used social media. The interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes and were recorded. After transcription, the texts were analyzed using quantitative thematic analysis, where the data were categorized into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. The texts were all read, and key sentences and stories were detected. Next, they were split into parts based on the main issues raised and reread to categorize the quotes into themes. The main themes raised in the interviews regarding the research topic were grouped into four categories, through which I presented how participants managed their social media ties as they became more religious. These themes were grouped using the grounded theory principle, where findings that were noticed in the field, rather than based on a profound theoretical framework, were used and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Some of the interviewees had closed their social media accounts at some point before joining the study, while others had private profiles such that examining dynamics with their audience would have required permission to collect data that they were not willing to give.

Findings

Four themes were presented. These themes will be presented in chronological order, starting with the tendency to select an audience shortly before and during religious identity changes. The second and third themes present the interviewees' perceptions of themselves before their audiences: as representatives of Islam and as role models. The final theme shows how the future self is treated as an audience, where worries about a future identity crisis motivate content creation.

Building the Audience

When discussing their increase in spirituality and religiosity, interviewees reported acting online to prevent future discomfort and to guarantee encouragement as an alternative to their rejecting offline

environment. They referred to their need for a sense of sisterhood to overcome the expected negative experience related to how they followed their religion, since they were both in a non-Muslim country and using a Western media platform. This important role of push and pull factors was noted by Inge (2017). Some constructed their online ties by deleting, maintaining, and building them to have an audience with a certain identity and anticipated online behaviors. Here, the interviewees built their audience based on predicted reactions to the content they planned to publish and their need for support and, at times, applause for their increasing religiosity. Here, those users added by the interviewees to their social media profiles were not perceived as individuals nor predicted to act as such; rather, the interviewees perceived the act of gathering users to their profile as building a mass that would act as a supporting collective. The interviewees attempted to create an audience with beliefs and ideologies that were consistent with theirs. They expected encouraging responses to their acts of religiosity that had not been accepted or encouraged by the interviewee's offline environment. Ashgan describes gathering encouraging users to her profile, whose mission is to make her feel that a lot of people support her decision. For this, she reconstructed her audience to be more religious before the act for which she needed encouragement.

I knew there would be a need to have someone by my side when the big decision is made. Wearing the hijab is big, and you need to feel like the world loves you for it. When I published that I was wearing a hijab, Facebook was like an alternative world, I got a lot of likes and comments—it was like having fans that I had gathered intentionally. (Ashgan, 27)

This act of creating an audience was mentioned mainly in relation to Facebook, probably due to Facebook's tie management mechanism, where one can initiate a relationship through the "add friend" feature, and due to the platform's nature as a self-presentation sphere (van Dijck, 2013). These interviewees did not speak of having one-on-one or personal contact with their Facebook friends or initiating such contact with them, but rather about gathering the largest number of friends they could to get the likes and comments they needed. Only two interviewees created WhatsApp groups to strengthen their religiosity through exposure to other members' messages.

Once I understood that the more religious people around me the closer I get to God, I created the [WhatsApp] group and added some religious girls there. It was like a virtual community that compensated for the lack of support I have in the real world. (Manal, 19)

Manal, like Ashgan, constructed a WhatsApp group to fit her goal of becoming more religious. In this second example, building a particular audience for a particular goal shows a different approach to the audience. While the first three categories present the interviewees' intention to satisfy their audience and maintain a positive impression for themselves, here the interviewee is the one to satisfy and gratify their own needs via the audience. Interviewees took no risks with their online environment and put together a very real audience (as far as possible online) while positioning themselves in the center and perceiving themselves as the most important person on their online profiles, as seen in the other three categories.

"Me, the Role Model"

The interviewees used social media as an accessible platform to contact others who held different ideologies directly and to send indirect messages by posting general items about what they considered the

right lifestyles, behaviors, and identities. The main audience for these items were old Muslim friends and family members who were not religious. Interviewees explained that they were maintaining ties with nonreligious friends to persuade those friends to become more religious and to encourage them to go through the same changes that they had experienced. They believed that exposing others to religious lifestyles through social media was an indirect method of religious persuasion. Granting themselves the role of religious influencers, the interviewees practiced passive *da'wa* (Islamic persuasion) by maintaining ties with nonreligious users.

It is important that they [non-religious friends] stay on my wall even if we don't have the same faith anymore. I want them to see what a religious lifestyle looks like and understand they can have a good life even if they are religious. (Nora, 23)

Nora perceives her very presence in her nonreligious friends' profiles as effective. She goes from calling her audience "friends" to those who "don't have the same faith" and, as such, who need guidance on the right path. She regards her profile as a potential source of information about a religious lifestyle for nonreligious people, hoping that her self-presentation may convince them to adopt her lifestyle. Here, the concept of a "target imagined audience" by Litt and Hargittai (2016) can be seen; that is, users have a nuanced image of their audience in mind. The interviewees identified specific qualities and opinions in their imagined audience and even predicted their reactions, thoughts, and life circumstances based on this perception. One main driver of this attitude was the role played by social media in the interviewee's own identity change. Some of them were affected by being in the audience of other social media users or opinion leaders, and they believed others could experience the same process.

Why have I kept them on my Facebook and Instagram? Because I was once like them... no, I was one of them and changed after reading someone else's posts. So, they will read what I post, sure, and be affected as well. (Layla, 22)

Generalizing her own experience to her audience, Layla uses the same persuasion method and believes that every member of the audience can be affected in the same way. She and other interviewees monitored their content to meet their imagined audience's tastes and to produce desired reactions, believing themselves to be as influential as those who influenced them. When asked, "Do you think about the way others will react when you publish a post?" some participants said they would not publish items that could hinder increasing the religiosity other people might be experiencing. For instance, Tasbeeh said:

I know my wall is a *da'wa*[1] place. When I post something, I think about every friend I have and how they would understand it. Imagine that some of them, after starting to strengthen their faith, withdraw because of a mistake I made—that would be awful. My mission is to guide them to religion. (Tasbeeh, 19)

Tasbeeh refers to her imagined audience as individuals to whom she dedicates her thoughts despite the little knowledge she has about them. She acts upon her own assumptions regarding their characteristics and opinions, using these assumptions as proven knowledge. During the interview, she said she did not know most of her Facebook friends in person, yet she takes a personal attitude toward each of them while

also treating them as a homogenous group of people who are potentially strengthening their religiosity, a process in which she believes she can play a key role.

It was observed that interviewees had a sense of obligation toward their audiences, mainly nonreligious friends and followers. They perceived themselves as religious authorities on whom their audience relied, as seen in this and in the following subsections. This is possible because of the role social media plays in their own process of change, which they see as so important.

"Me, the Representative"

Echoing the ways Muslim social media users work to change the stereotypical presentation of Islam in the online sphere (Eckert, Metzger-Riftkin, Kolhoff, & O'Shay-Wallace, 2021; Khamis, 2021), interviewees used the terms "represent" and "representative" frequently to justify some of their online decisions and behaviors, mainly in relation to tie-breaking and item deletion. In the previous theme, interviewees perceived the audience's presence as a booster toward publishing religious items and maintained ties to be a worthwhile role model for people who might become more religious. Here, the audience motivates censorship, and the interviewees delete or choose not to publish some content, and break ties to maintain their suitable self-presentation as religious Muslims. As Manal (19) said, "Facebook is like a street. Now people who see me walking with a bad person would think, 'look how religious girls behave.' Having friends who behave badly tarnishes you."

Manal fears that online relationships with others who use social media inappropriately can harm the image of Muslim women in general, and for this reason, she avoids such relationships. Manal, like other interviewees, describes not only her sense of the public scrutiny on her profile but also actively asserts what she thinks other social media users understand from her relationships. While in the previous theme, interviewees spoke of their impact as individuals, here they speak of their impact on society as symbols, and of themselves being affected by this sense of social surveillance. Interviewees perceive themselves as entities that are inseparable from the global image of Islam and as representatives of Islam and religiosity and think they are scrutinized by a critical audience that notices improper behaviors and attributes them to religion instead of to the person conducting them. For instance, Reem (19) stated, "I keep myself from publishing a lot of things. People could see that I write silly things and tell each other, 'Look how religious women act'; they will use my posts as an excuse to stay away from religion." Reem not only refers to the impression her behavior may have on her audience, but she also describes social interactions revolving around her online behavior, where people refer to it as representative of Islam. It is significant that Reem revealed that her social media profiles were restricted to her friends and followers and that she had broken online ties with nonreligious and non-Muslim users. The audience Reem is referring to in this answer had no access to her profile, yet she still discussed their surveillance and possible reactions. Furthermore, almost half of the participants mentioned that they refrained from publishing certain items to maintain an ideal image of themselves, as they saw this image as representing Islam and religious Muslims.

I can't just post whatever I want. There are a lot of things I really like but I never post because people are looking at me. Sometimes I don't even dare to open some links or watch a video because people are watching me. I am a representative of Islam and young women watch and learn from me, so why ruin it? (Shaimaa, 22)

Shaimaa, like Reem, refers to her imagined audience. She mentioned that she did not know most of her online friends and that she had fewer than 300 Facebook friends at the time of the interview. However, Shaimaa is convinced that "a young woman is looking at my wall and learning about religion."

Some interviewees perceived their social media profiles as a platform to contact people from other religions and media outlets led by anti-Muslim ideologies. It is interesting that this sense of the foreign gaze was barely strengthened by actual events or direct communication. In Aya's (24) case, she posts content in English for "foreigners out there," even though she has never directly contacted a non-Arab person online, as can be understood from her other answers. Almost all interviewees had private profiles where only friends and followers had access to their posts, yet some reported posting various items for populations outside their friends and followers lists. Only Ashwaa (27) received feedback from a nonreligious body on her posts:

I posted my story with the hijab, and it went viral [...] someone from the Israeli radio called, and then I understood that I was being treated as a representative. I know now that every word I write is being read not as Ashwaa's opinion but as a little exposure to Islam. People don't read what Ashwaa writes, they read what the Muslim girl writes: It's like a filter in their brain.

Ashwaa described a case of receiving signals about her social media audience, where one of her followers worked in an Israeli news outlet or had acquaintances who did. She uses this sign to generalize about her audience and refers to them as nonreligious or non-Muslims who monitor her social media profiles. This led her to adopt an approach to writing for a critical audience that perceives her as a representative of Islam.

In sum, interviewees perceived themselves as representatives of Islam and religiosity, even if they had no signals or feedback to indicate such a role. Here, their religious identity took over their social media profile, and they made decisions about publishing or withdrawing items based on their predicted reactions from an imagined audience that saw them as representing Islam. This theme and the previous one can be linked to Palestinian Muslim women's experience of political and social gaze (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). These women perceive social media as a place where they are being watched by members of their society (Muslims), and by their other (in the current case, non-Muslims).

"Me, the Audience"

Although SNSs are a relatively public platform, they can also be used as a private online chamber and a place of escape when participants experience discouragement of their religiosity, both from their offline environment and inner uncertainty. Posting for oneself has been explored in previous literature, where users reported posting for their own welfare and satisfaction (Cook & Teasley, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Some participants deployed their social media profiles as platforms for addressing others but used privacy features to create a fenced-off personal area accessible only to themselves, where they could post items addressing their future self. These participants used these areas as personal archives to maintain their religious identities. Some participants perceived themselves as their own, at times most important, audience. For instance, Juli (21) uses her Facebook profile as a dynamic memory container, adjusting it to her needs and identity. She "post for myself. I delete stuff that is not a good memory for me and instead I

fill my wall with things I want to see. [...] whatever I would go back to and think oh, this is smart." Similarly, Aya chose to save discouraging comments and conversations to remember surviving tough times and peer pressure: "The angry [WhatsApp] messages of my friends are important. I think one should save such messages to remember how strong they were."

In such cases, access is restricted to the interviewee, and their future self is the only audience targeted. Some interviewees actively changed the privacy settings of old texts to allow only themselves to see them instead of simply deleting them for similar reasons. The interviewees spoke of different kinds of texts, archived differently (as public or restricted to themselves), for different purposes, likely according to the needs they predicted they would have. This attitude to the future self was accompanied by some mental distance between the two selves and was based on the fear that one's past and current social rejection would be experienced in the future (Oyserman, Destin, & Novin, 2015).

Although interviewees perceived other people as an important audience who could indeed affect their identity and be affected by them, they referred to themselves as an audience that must be kept in the lane of religiosity, treating themselves as an audience who can be changed and may need some help, which only they can offer. This attitude toward SNSs exemplifies the tension between personal and public texts on social media platforms and the sense of control they offer users over the messages they receive.

Discussion

The findings show that audiences are important for forming and maintaining religious identity, especially when they lack an encouraging environment and community. This article shows that the interviewees' imagined audiences were large and diverse. Even when the interviewees had no such social media contacts, they referred parts of their identity to an imagined (and inaccurate) audience.

The theme of building the audience shows an attempt to ensure that the interviewees know their audiences as much as possible. Their social media ties were selected, one by one, as homogeneous groups based on specific information and for a particular reason. This audience has the clear purpose of supporting a person who is declaring an identity change. Selecting social media users to be present when needed shows a conscious use of social support and an awareness of the importance of an online audience in times of identity change or crisis. This audience perception draws on the logic of seeking support from an audience while reducing, to a minimum, the need to predict their identity when needed, leaving no risk of a surprising reaction. This need to gather the audience, instead of relying on one's perception of it, could be explained by the feeling within the study population of being a minority in a hostile online environment (Beta, 2019; Pennington, 2018a): They compile their online contact list to prevent confrontations and increase their sense of security and confidence (see John & Agbarya, 2021).

The second and third themes reveal a perception of the dynamics between the user and the imagined audience. The interviewees cast their own identity-change experiences on their audiences and acted accordingly. According to these mental concepts, they made decisions about self-censorship and online tie management. The interviewees both maintained and broke ties in relation to the self-presentation they were attempting and their perceptions of themselves.

As for the user's future self, this is a unique audience where the person targeted is known, maybe better than anyone else, yet is simultaneously a future version of whom there is no information—about their life events, social status, or thoughts—in the present moment. Social media users are aware of the archival aspect of social media (Schoenebeck, Ellison, Blackwell, Bayer, & Falk, 2016), and build personal archives (Good, 2013; Zhao et al., 2013). These online archives include the content users post for themselves (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The interviewees took this awareness one step forward and limited future crises by turning these archived items into identity maintenance tools. They expect themselves to face obstacles in maintaining a high level of religiosity and to need further support because the context in which the identity is formed and the messages posted are discouraging (Oyserman et al., 2015). Accordingly, the findings showed that messages to one's future self relied on the negative offline social context rather than the positive online one and aimed at distant, unknown, future scenarios. The interviewees relied on their offline presence to predict their future, although they used online platforms to form and strengthen their identities. The impossibility of meeting themselves or receiving their feedback, accompanied by the fact that the audience is one's own self, locates this kind of audience in the unclear space of an imagined yet actual audience. Moreover, interviewees treated social media not only as an archive to look at nostalgically but as a planned (future) present experience. The use of social media as a sphere of support and leadership was also reported in Anna Piela's work. Her analysis of the content published by Muslim women who wear the niqab (a kind of hijab) points to similar uses of social media and users' dynamics with their audiences (see Piela, 2021a, 2021b).

In sum, interviewees used social media to compensate for the lack of social support and community offline, where they could feel belonging and power. They attributed these significant effects to social media and imagined their audience based on their experience of granting themselves the position of influencers, yet perceiving that their Muslim identity needed to be properly presented and protected online.

Conclusion

This article explores strategies of social media use in forming and maintaining religious identities with the help of online audiences. Focusing on Muslim Arab women who became more religious in the face of objections from their surroundings, the categories presented above show that the audience—whether imagined or actual—played a critical role in helping the interviewees execute their decision to adopt a religious lifestyle. They attributed social powers to their audiences, which influenced their online decision-making. Imagining such audiences transformed the identity change from an individual and private decision into an important, public, inspiring, and influential one with material (visual and textual) aspects.

Perceiving oneself as a role model and a representative of one's religion shows that an imagined audience is not only a factor in identity change and maintenance but is also a part of the identity itself, given that being a representative and a role model entails having an audience. The user's identity contains these imagined audiences not only as cheering supporters but also as observers and critics who police their online behavior. However, the most familiar and effective audience appears to be oneself. This relationship between an influencer user and an influenced audience is reversed when users need emotional support and gather an audience for the sake of encouragement and public approval for their decisions.

It is noted that the users targeted actual audiences (by building the audience and posting messages to their future selves) when they perceived a need for support at various crossroads in their religious identity and in anticipation of future crises. Leaning on previous literature, the need for encouraging feedback and predicting negative future scenarios for oneself points to an ongoing crisis that interviewees experience (Oyserman et al., 2015; Scissors, Burke, & Wengrovitz, 2016), while they referred to imagined audiences, of which they have almost no information and from which they get almost no feedback, when perceiving themselves as powerful and effective. This could indicate a pattern of risk management whereby users reduce the risk of negative experiences during a crisis and risk embarrassment when feeling relatively secure.

The findings of this study are all directly and indirectly related to the fact that the research population is part of an oppressed community offline and online. Following literature that shows how Muslims in non-Muslim countries perceive social media and its uses (Kesvani, 2019; Nolf et al., 2022) and the way Muslim women act online to claim their place and present their identity (Goehring, 2019; Hirji, 2021; Khamis, 2021), I argue that the actor-audience dynamics presented here reflect the sociopolitical context of the research population. The women I interviewed attempted to use social media to present a positive image of Muslims in general, stressing their gender to negate stereotypes that frame them as weak, passive, and incapable women precisely because of their religious commitment. Moreover, their behavior regarding online audiences when predicting an identity crisis—building their own audience and caring for themselves as an audience—is a translation of the multilayered oppression they experience. This sense of responsibility toward one's self-presentation to others is by itself one aspect of one's identity. Their perception of social media as an open, liberating space of self-expression, a third place (Pennington, 2018b), is noticeable. This perception is paralleled with a different perception of social media as a hostile place where users from minorities and oppressed communities need to mind their audience and act as representatives, as shown in the findings. This study shows how Muslims use the same media they perceive as hostile to improve their image; it also presents their perception of an online gaze watching their online behavior both to learn about Islam and to criticize it, which is a translation of the imagined audience.

Adding to previous literature, this article deals with online actor-audience dynamics among members of oppressed communities as reflective of their sociopolitical status. Users can build an actual audience in social and psychological situations where they cannot afford the risk of unexpected feedback. Having an imagined or actual audience is related to the stability and confidence one feels regarding one's identity. The interviewees used the support of actual audiences when changing their identity because they felt that other people's reactions would affect their decision-making and acted for their imagined audience when they felt their identity was stable enough to pass on their experience to others. Further research can help to better understand the role of sociopolitical aspects in actor-audience dynamics creation and perception.

People think of their online audience as a support for their identity and as a basis for their self-perception and presentation. When creating content, publishing items, planning a major life change, or even thinking of the future, the audience—imagined and actual—is present to support, cheer, criticize, or watch—or even just to wait and act as a reminder or support in the future. Together with the need for communities and social ties, private social media profiles are a sphere where audiences can be gathered to help form a religious identity and imagined to maintain it.

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