RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA: THE SEARCH FOR HALAL FOOD IN MUSLIM MINORITY REGIONS

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Today we have seen communities of the world unite! This is a result of a great synergy between communities and digital technology in the marketplace, where, due to social media tools, people share information about their purchases and use of products more than ever before. The adoption of social media by the world’s population is growing rapidly, with active user accounts equating to roughly 29% of the world’s population. Meanwhile, research conducted by GlobalWebIndex (2013) suggests that the average social media user spends 2 hours and 25 minutes per day using social networks and microblogs. Facebook continues to dominate the global social media landscape, claiming 1.366 billion active users in January 2015. These numbers suggest that this increase is due to more valuable, accurate and timely information shared among the online communities. Members of an online community will normally have common interests, belief and/or values; they consult with each other to obtain information related to the product search, product quality, authenticity, prices, brands and promotions. One of the most visible types of transnational online communities is religious communities.

As globalization increases, and the nation-state loses its influence on markets in comparison to other institutions, the relationship between religion and the market is an important area of investigation (Kale 2004; Mittelstaedt 2002). In particular, a need exists to increase understanding of how religion-based markets are interacted and negotiated via the Internet. Social media sites allow spiritual seekers to obtain niche-oriented information, share opinions, seek community, and find and evaluate products and services—in short all the functions that the Internet provides for many communities (Bunt 2009; Mishra and Semaan 2010). This study aims to investigate the role of digital media in building religious communities, focusing on online Muslim communities. While a number of studies have examined the use of social media websites by Muslims (Al-Mutawa 2013; Mishra and Seeman 2010), scant research has investigated the influence of social media tools on halal food markets. This research examines the use of social media tools by Muslims in their search for halal food when travelling to Muslim minority
regions. Halal food, defined as food that is permissible under Islamic Sharia, not only has religious associations, but is often perceived to be healthier, tastier, and more hygienic by Muslims (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). The growth of the Muslim tourist market (Jafari and Scott 2014) has led to an increasing demand for halal food, with Muslims seeking not only improved access but better quality options.

This qualitative study examined 2000 consumer reviews from three main social media websites: Yelp.com, Tripadvisor.com and Zabihah.com. The reviews were analyzed using netnographic analysis (Kozinets 2002, 2010), combined with Bartholomew’s (2012) model of communication in social media. Bartholomew’s model identifies four categorizes of web-based activities: exposure (degree of exposure to content and message), engagement (degree of interactions with the content), influence (level of influence of the target), and actions (types of actions target taken) (Bartholomew 2010; Drula 2012).

Our findings uncovered three major themes related to Muslim community dynamics in the context of the halal food search: uniting communities, fragmenting communities, and defending communities. First, social media websites serve to unite Muslim communities, which, while geographically dispersed, share common problems and interests in the pursuit of high quality halal food. Zabihah, Yelp, Tripadvisor and other community-brand web sites provides a platform that promotes communication among diverse pan-Muslim communities. To site one example, The Halal Guys, a well-known halal cart in New York City, has attracted close to six thousand reviews on Yelp and 36,149 likes on Facebook. This process has, in turn, linked Muslim tourists visiting New York. The rating and review systems on social media sites (i.e. number of “likes” and reviews) foster cooperation, with the amount of participation varying depending on the community characteristics (Zhang, et. al. 2014). Second, our research revealed that while social media serves to unite individuals, the same technology can simultaneously serve to fragment communities into sub-groups. In this study, the discussions on social media websites highlighted the divergent characteristics and practices of Muslims across the world in defining halal standards. For instance, halal restaurants in Middle Eastern countries do not serve alcohol, while in the U.S. alcohol is served at some Halal restaurants. This tension creates distinct segments of online Muslim communities, based on disparate primary motivations and standards in selecting halal food (e.g. for spiritual reasons, for health, for taste, or for hygiene (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). Third, the findings, show that social media serves as a means to defend the community against misconceptions related to halal food. Community members safeguard one other on issues related to the confirmation of halal status and promote the standardization of practices. These practices enable the community to (re)stabilize, reproduce, and reform halal standards over time (Thomas et al. 2013).

Community engagement increases the strength of the relationships between consumers and brands, and has a moderating effect in translating the effects of such relationships on brand trust (Habibi et al. 2014). As the case of seeking halal food in non-Islam majority regions via the Internet demonstrates, understanding online community behaviour can be important for marketers who seek to remain abreast of new opportunities and challenges to their businesses. In the absence of physical or relational proximity, online communities can produce socially dynamic and economically useful knowledge that can transcend the information that might be obtained in face-to-face contexts (Grabher & Ibert, 2014).
References


Grabher, Gernot, and Oliver Ibert (2014), "Virtual Hybrid Communities Show That You Don’t Have To Meet Face-To-Face To Advance Great Ideas." *LSE American Politics and Policy*


