Religion, Markets, and Digital Media: Seeking Halal Food in the U.S.

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Abstract
This study explores the role that social media serves in mediating and connecting religious communities and markets through a netnographic study of the search for halal food in the U.S. We find that social media websites can serve as important tools for overcoming obstacles to finding and verifying halal food sources, including barriers of physical access, authenticity, and quality. At a macro level, social media platforms have the potential to moderate the relationship between religion, the market, and consumption in a number of important ways, such as providing a venue for dialogues related to standards of commitment and faithfulness, serving as a community-based arbiter of standards, supporting identity constructions, and helping to overcome the marginalization associated with minority populations.

Keywords
food marketing, food systems, religion, social media, halal food, globalization, transnationalism, religious communities, communities, food deserts

Introduction
In a globalized, highly connected world, institutions other than the nation state are having a profound influence on markets and market behavior (Kale 2004; Mittelstaedt 2002). In particular, transnational religion-based practices and ideologies can exert a strong effect on the evolution of the market and vice-versa (Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Focused websites have been developed to advance a number of faith-based pursuits, including recruiting members, fund raising, matchmaking, buying and selling religious products and services, and remote worshiping (Bunt 2009; Mishra and Semaan 2010). With spiritual lifestyles increasingly supported, promoted, and debated via digital media, we need an improved understanding of how social media platforms intercede in the relationship between religion and markets.

This study investigates the role of social media tools in connecting and mediating transnational religious communities and markets, using the search for halal food as a focal point. Halal, a central concept of Islam, refers to any object or action which is permissible to use or engage in according to Islamic principles and practices. A Muslim who strictly adheres to the faith is expected to do what is deemed halal and avoid what is "haram" or forbidden. This categorization plays a significant role in defining the food consumption norms of Muslims. Pork, for example, is considered haram and most Muslims, whether practicing or not, avoid any foods that contain any pork ingredients or its derivatives, such as lard.

Over one-fifth of the world’s population is Muslim and that proportion is projected to rise from 1.7 billion in 2014 to 2.7 billion by 2030 (Pew Research Center 2015). Globally, Muslim spending on food and beverages was estimated at $1.292 billion in 2013, or 17.76% of the global food and beverages expenditures, and is projected to grow to $2,537 billion by 2019, or 21.2% of global expenditures (Thomson Reuters 2014). Despite the clearly rising Muslim demand, the market for halal products is undeveloped in many non-Muslim majority regions, including the U.S., where the disposable income of the Muslim population was estimated at $98 billion in 2013 (DinarStandard 2014). Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S. and is projected to become the largest non-Christian religion by 2050 (Pew Research Center 2015). Many companies worldwide, including in the U.S., continue to ignore the importance of offering halal foods, significantly losing out on the opportunity to cater to the substantial and growing numbers of Muslims (Thomson Reuters 2014). The immature market for halal products, particularly halal meat, in the U.S. means that social media websites can play an important mediating role in the religion-market nexus.

This research uses netnographic analysis to examine the mechanisms through which social media affects the relationship...
between markets and religion. We seek to answer the following research questions: How do transnational religious adherents use social media sites to identify and evaluate markets that support their religious practices, and what are the consequences of these actions for religion-based markets? In our explorations of these questions, we demonstrate how Internet-based interactions not only directly affect the marketing systems for religious products and services, but also have broader influences on religious identity, religious commitment, community construction, and, ultimately, quality of life.

**Religion, Food, and Community**

Food and eating serve a vital role in virtually all religious traditions and practices, through both formal and informal means, including feasting, fasting, sharing, taboos, offering sacrifices, consumption of symbolic foods, and dietetic regimens (Anderson 2005; Finch 2010). Some religions, including Hinduism (Khare 1976), Orthodox Judaism (Kraemer 2010), Seventh Day Adventism (Numbers 2008), and Islam (Riaz and Chaudry 2003) have particularly distinct and complex food cultures. As a vestige from the past, or as a modern moral mandate, gastro-religious rules operate for a variety of reasons, including to prevent cruelty to animals, to protect the environment, to improve the economy, to prevent food contamination and poisoning, to promote self-discipline, to improve physical health, and to seek purity of mind, body, and soul (Anderson 2005; Finch 2010). Above all, food codes serve to bind groups together across time and space (Durkheim 1915/1965). Food practices, like other religious behaviors and symbols, provide a “hard-to-fake signal of commitment” (Irons 2001, p. 292), with acceptance of the food practices signaling affirmation of the broader moral codes of a community (Rappaport 1971). According to Sosis and Alcorta (2003), religion-based behaviors and restrictions can be especially effective for internalizing commitment to a community (quite literally in the case of food), since religious behaviors are physically, publicly, and unambiguously performed. Food codes are practiced on a seasonal basis (e.g. during Lent and Ramadan) or continuously, serving as a constant reminder of loyalty and obligation. At the same time, gastro-religious habits demark boundaries that distinguish loyal members of a group from those who are not in their community, that is, serving to “construct Otherness” (Freidenreich 2011). Distinct food practices may also offer a barrier to intermarriage, preventing potential dilution of a faith-based population.

Religiously-defined food patterns are seldom static, interacting with place and time to inspire adoptions, compromises, and innovations (Anderson 2005; Finch 2010). When traveling, migrants and tourists are often exposed to unfamiliar interpretations of religious values and codes in congregations that are likely to be more ethnically diverse than those of their region of origin (Chafetz and Ebaugh 2002). Assimilating to alien geographic areas for mobile people almost always eventually requires the modification of practices for social, political, and environmental reasons. Consequently, within single religious traditions interpretations of eating rules are often diverse and even conflicting. As a result, variations in food practices can operate as an important means to distinguish sects within religions, such as Judaism and Hinduism (Khare 1976; Kraemer 2010).

**Transnationalism, Markets, and Social Media**

As Mittelstaedt (2002) and Kale (2004) explain, religion and markets have been intertwined since communities first began trading, with the coevolution of religions and markets affecting what is traded; where, when, and how it is traded; and by whom it is traded. Moreover, religion itself is a marketplace of ideas, with the call to spread or to seek greater understanding of religion stimulating, and being stimulated by, advances in transportation and communication throughout history (Kale 2004; Mittelstaedt 2002). In recent years, the ongoing globalization of economic and labor markets, combined with time-space compression, has accelerated the spread of transnational religious practices and attachments. Religious markets are increasingly connected globally through transnational religious organizations and supply chains (Levitt 2007).

With many regions of the world becoming increasingly diverse and multiethnic, consumption practices serve as an important means for members of a minority group, including practitioners of a non-dominant religion, to express identity and allegiance (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004). The costs of belonging to a religion—time, money, effort, and sometimes stigma—can escalate when a practitioner is physically located in a place where the religion is not practiced by a sizeable proportion of the population. As a result, living in a community as a religious minority might lead to the practice of more moderate or, alternatively, more strict interpretations of faith, according to complex patterns relating to identity, community, and the marketplace. Consonantly, increased or decreased use of products or services associated with the religion may occur (Grinstein and Nisan 2009; Hirschman, Ruvio, and Touzani 2011).

The most influential and game-changing technological advance in recent years for global communication is undoubtedly the Internet (Chaffey and White 2010). As with many sub-communities (Kozinets 1999), the religious diaspora is increasingly using digital tools to maintain their practices and identities. For seeking, offering, and sharing spiritual information, social media tools provide a means to provide or receive a more democratic form of religious guidance. The anonymous cover provided by the web allows people to ask sensitive or controversial questions about practices and ideology and to test unpopular views (Bunt 2009; McAleander et al. 2014). Religion-based social media sites, such as hisholyspace.com for Christianity, theshmooze.org for Judaism, and www.muslimsocial.com for Islam, allow the spiritually curious to explore meanings of their faiths (Bunt 2009; Mishra and Semaan 2010). In addition, and as with other types of consumption, products, and services, digital media exposes religion-based offerings to scrutiny on the Internet by insiders and outsiders.
The Global Business of Halal Food

The growth of Muslim residents in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2011), combined with a growing number of Muslim tourists (J. Jafari and Scott 2014), has led to an increasing demand in the U.S. for halal food. Halal food – food permissible under Islamic law – not only has religious associations, but is perceived by many Muslims to be healthier, tastier, and more hygienic (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). In large U.S. cities, such as New York City and Chicago, and areas with large concentrations of Muslims, such as Dearborn, Michigan, halal food is relatively accessible, but in other places, obtaining halal food can be onerous. Even in places in the U.S. where halal food can be easily purchased, regulation related to halal standards is not uniform. Halal is a credence product attribute (Bonne and Verbeke 2008; Grunert 2002), since no visibly discernible qualities can be used to identify genuineness, which means assurance of halal standards can be shrouded in uncertainty. Producers and retailers are trusted to accurately represent the food, yet increasingly long and complex logistic chains make it difficult to ascertain the “purity” of the food (Thomas et al. 2015; Tieman, Ghazali, and Van Der Vorst 2013). This has led to widespread concern that much of the meat and poultry sold as halal has not been prepared properly, violating people’s trust and religious beliefs (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). In a case study of a U.K. slaughterhouse that prepares both halal and non-halal food, Thomas et al. (2015) found that even when animals are slaughtered appropriately to meet halal standards, significant risks related to the cross-contamination of meat products can occur.

In recent years, a series of scandals have tarred sellers of halal food in Muslim communities. Products designated as halal, including some sold by the major producers Cadbury (Nangoy and Hamzah 2014) and Ajinomoto (Arnold 2001), were allegedly misrepresented. In 2013, accused of fraud, a McDonald’s in Dearborn, Michigan ceased offering halal chicken sandwiches (Warikoo 2013). Markets for halal food are further complicated because the standards of what makes meat “halal” can differ widely according to interpretation and has undergone change over time (S. E. Robinson 2014; Wilson 2014). Wilson and Liu (2010, 2011) note a risk aversive trend in which the concept of “halal” has shifted from products being permissible unless “haram” to products being “haram” unless explicitly labeled as “halal.” In addition, an increasing number of Muslims believe that following proper rituals to slaughter animals is not sufficient for meat to be characterized as “halal.” For these consumers, the “halal” designation should mean that proper responsibility and care has been undertaken to assure the welfare of the animals, employees, and land involved at every stage of the process from farm to market (S. E. Robinson 2014). Differing standards of halal create the need for an acceptable level of product information associated with a potential purchase for individuals to evaluate the acceptability of the product.

The growth of demand for halal food worldwide (N. Robinson 2013) has led to a number of studies investigating the consumption of halal food in non-Islam nations. Studies in the U.K. (Ahmed 2008) and Belgium (Bonne and Verbeke 2008) show that Muslims prefer buying halal meat from a Muslim vendor to buying from a supermarket for assurance of halal status. Ahmed (2008) confirms that the most important qualities in evaluating halal meat are authenticity and trust. A study in France emphasizes the diversity of attitudes of Muslim consumers toward halal meat consumption, labeling the four types of consumers as “indifferent,” “concerned,” “confident,” and “Islam idealist” (Bonne et al. 2007). As a whole, these studies point to difficulties for markets in ensuring halal sources and standards in non-Muslim majority regions and a need to explore how systems of beliefs and practices are realized by Muslims (Wilson et al. 2013).

Methodology

While other studies have examined the use of social media websites by Muslims (Al-Mutawa 2013; Mishra and Semaan 2010), our investigation focuses on the use of social media tools to share information on halal food in the U.S. We explored numerous websites from both organization-generated content websites and user-generated content social media websites that are accessible to the public for free to use as a reference point for halal food acquisition, including IFANCC.org, Yelp.com, Dine-halal.com, Zabihah.com, and Halalapalooza.com. An important advantage of using social media websites to collect data is that, in comparison to direct questioning, the information offered is generally anonymous, spontaneous, candid, and unsolicited (Veeck 2013). Still, it should be cautioned that review sites can be subject to bias and falsehood (Mayzlin, Dover, and Chevalier 2014). Using registered and moderated websites, such as represented in this study, can temper these risks. For this study, social media data analysis offered valuable insights into how religious communities connect and interact in the marketplace.

This study analyzes the content from three well-known and well-monitored websites – www.tripadvisor.com, www.yelp.com, and www.zabihah.com – that offer sub-sites specifically devoted to halal food and that are widely used by both local residents and travelers who are seeking Muslim food. These websites were chosen due to their popularity, because they offer basic, self-identified characteristics of reviewers, and because they allow interactions among the members. To narrow the study, we examined a census of all postings on these three websites reviewing restaurants that serve halal food in the state of Michigan. The U.S. has a growing and diverse Muslim immigrant population, projected to increase from 2.6 million in 2010 to 6.2 million in 2030 (Pew Research Center 2011), and is also a popular work, study, and tourist destination. The state of Michigan was chosen because it has a relatively large population of Muslims (estimated at about 200,000), with the city of Dearborn hosting the largest concentration of Muslims in the U.S. at about 35% of the population (American Values Atlas 2014). The city of Dearborn has many Muslim-targeted businesses, including a number of halal restaurants and food...
retailers. Outside of Dearborn, the state of Michigan has a mixture of areas with scant access to halal foods (i.e. small cities, suburbs, and rural areas) and areas with relatively more access (i.e. major university towns and the large city of Detroit). A total of 55 Michigan cities and suburbs generated at least one restaurant review on the social media websites. The location that produced the largest number of restaurant reviews was, not surprisingly, Dearborn with 671 reviews (32.5%). Detroit and its suburbs (minus Dearborn) were second with a total of 389 reviews (18.8%).

Altogether, a total of 2,064 reviews were collected and analyzed from the three selected social media sites, including 1,115 reviews from www.tripadvisor.com, 665 reviews from www.zabihah.com and 284 from www.yelp.com. The websites’ contents are user-generated, consumer-to-consumer (C2C), interactive chats, covering a wide range of issues related to faith-based consumption practices (i.e. halal food) that influence Muslim consumers. The reviewers are anonymous, but can be identified by user ID or nickname, gender (when a profile photo is posted), and their location of origin (as self-provided). Just as Muslims are a diverse group (Ahmed 2008; A. Jafari and Sterdem 2012), halal food seekers use the Internet for diverse reasons. At least five distinct groups of users interacted with the websites, each with different levels of experience and rationale guiding their searches. These are: 1) Muslim Americans (i.e. citizens or permanent residents), 2) transient Muslim visitors in the U.S. for an extended period of time (e.g. students and academic scholars), 3) Muslim tourists on short visits, 4) relatively recent converts to Islam, and 5) non-Muslim hosts who need tips on providing halal food for Muslim guests. Table 1 displays the area of origin for the reviewers. The mixture of about half U.S. citizens/permanent residents (52%) and half tourists and temporary guests (48%) reflects the growth and mobility of the Muslim diaspora.

Analysis of the netnographic data involved a two-stage process (Kozinets 2010). First, data were imported into NVivo 7, a software program for qualitative analysis, to aid in the organization of the comments (Bazeley and Jackson 2007). The reviews were read and re-read until the researchers became familiar with the recurring issues related to how the online communities interact, engage, and influence each other on the broad topic of halal food consumption. A hybrid approach was adopted in creating codes from the online review data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). At the beginning of the data collection, a list of “a priori codes” was derived from the literature review, research framework, and research problems, as well as from the researchers’ personal experiences, community interactions, and knowledge of the subject matter. The pre-set codes, with the number of results found in the text search, are displayed in Table 2. As Table 2 shows, the reviews contain a diverse range of content related to the motives and concerns of consumers when eating in restaurants that serve halal food. As would be expected with restaurant reviews, quality of food and taste is the number one most prevalent topic mentioned, with quality of customer service, store ambience, and price and value also ranking high. More surprising, mention of restaurants including non-halal food on the menu was the second most noted topic, suggesting concerns related to authenticity of halal status.

In the second stage, “emergent codes” were developed, through the iterative reading and analysis of the data. The procedure involved adding, collapsing, expanding and revising the coding categories until a smaller number of broader, higher order categories were developed (Flick 1998). This process allows a greater scrutiny of individual similarities and differences, as opposed to a focus on common themes across all transcripts, with the overall aim being to ensure that the codes fit the data, rather than the data fitting the codes.

These findings are presented in the next section. All of the quotes are postings of reviews of restaurants. To retain their integrity, the quotes are presented exactly as posted on the website (including spelling, grammar, capitalization), but any identifying information is removed, including restaurant and manufacturers’ names and locations.

### Table 1. Region of Origin of Reviewers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Location</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US Residents</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-east</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Pre-Set Codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Total no. of Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Taste</td>
<td>1766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-halal Menu</td>
<td>1754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td>929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store Ambience</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable Price</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility to Restaurants</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value for Money &amp; Serving Portion</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction/Regular Visitor</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant Ownership</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store Cleanliness</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halal Status Confirmation</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction/Revisit</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of Ingredients</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixture of Non-Halal Ingredients</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Menu</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Friendly &amp; Parking Spaces</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Label/ Signage</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers Alcohol</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaughtering Process</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source/ Origin of Meat</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Variety</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The findings of the analysis of the social media content confirm the vital role that social media websites can serve in connecting religious communities and markets. Serving as “citizen consumers” (Chaudhury and Albinsson 2015) for the Muslim community, members of the young and growing Muslim population (Pew Research Center 2011) provide an active leadership position in directing community members toward business that they believe promote proper values. The reviews' content highlights the challenges that Muslims in non-Muslim minority regions often face in navigating the line between purism and pragmatism in their quest to live in a way that honors their religious values (Fischer 2008). Clearly, many Muslim tourists and travelers rely on social media tools to support their religious practices. The content of the online reviews are rich, containing references to personal traits and preferences, beliefs and perceptions, attitudes and motivations, and the influence of the surrounding environment. Ultimately, four mechanisms were identified by which social media websites influence religion-market intercessions: identifying sources, evaluating tradeoffs, verifying authenticity, and protecting standards. Each of these religion-market intercessions will be detailed in subsequent sections, with substantiating quotes.

Identifying Sources

A common lament by halal seekers on the social media websites relates to a lack of halal sources, as well as the ambiguity of information related to halal status, where they are currently living, or when traveling to certain tourism destinations. For example, in the following unfavorable review of a restaurant, the commenter reported on the lack of options in a medium-sized city:

The food is terrible. The meat wasn’t well done, quantity wasn’t much and a bit pricey. Their smoothie was filled with ice. Would never go there again. People living in Flint like it because there isn’t much halal place around . . .

Because of the dearth of retailers that offer halal food in the U.S., particularly in rural and small cities, Muslim web users provide an important service to other members of the Muslim community simply by posting an evolving directory of restaurants that offer halal options. By nature, this reference list is perpetually a work-in-progress, since restaurants tend to have a short life cycle, and halal offerings frequently come and go according to the ethnicity and proclivities of the management team. Still, the vitality of social media assures that the postings of restaurants remain current, if not necessarily comprehensive.

In the face of the challenge of finding proper food, many halal seekers take responsibility for helping others in identifying good sources. For example, the following review that was posted by a university student first discusses the difficulty of finding halal food, even near a university campus in a large city, and then reviews a restaurant that the student deems as satisfactory:

Go to school in Detroit. Did not find a trust worthy place to eat near Wayne State. Friend told me about this place, went there took the same amount of time to go any where maybe 10 mins total from campus to door. Had pizza, shawarma sandwiches, philly cheese steak and it was really good. The pizza was ok but worth it. Its really good price for zabihah halal food. I’d rather pay for zabihah and drive there then to trust any place in [city] where they serve other meat and pork as well. This place is the bomb and all my friends all agree that its worth it . . .

Like this reviewer, many halal seekers are willing to travel longer distances to find trustworthy halal food of good quality and variety. The web-based reviews often provide potential patrons of restaurants with enough information to decide whether an identified source of halal food is worth the extra travel time it might take to reach it:

We ate here and Loved It! We had such a hard time finding actual halal restaurants in Grand Rapids. This restaurant was very far from our hotel, but well worth the drive . . .

While consumer reviews are the foundation of social media websites that were analyzed, the sites also provide helpful complementary information. For example, the mobile application of all three websites has real-time software, with map and navigation features to guide users to restaurants in the directory. Restaurant reviews are also often linked to the restaurant’s official website, along with contact number, menu options, opening hours, pictures, reviews, and ratings by visitors. Through the user reviews and accompanying content provided by the website social media sites serve to introduce and interpret consumption choices in the religious market.

Evaluating Tradeoffs

Because of the scarcity of options, halal food seekers often make compromises to procure halal food in unfamiliar areas. Collectively, the reviews that were analyzed listed a large number of criteria that were negotiated in the pursuit of halal food, including assurance of halal status, quality of customer service, quality and diversity of food; and the pleasantness of the environment. As shown in the following two reviews, the most common sacrifice made for access to halal food is price:

My only complaint is that its just a little bit expensive but definitely worth it since you don’t find places like this every day. . . .

The food was very good and a great atmosphere in the restaurant. Regular Arabic dishes with steak dishes. A bit on the expensive side . .

Another common complaint is the lack of good service that some consumers endure to obtain halal food, such as seen the following reviews:

food was pretty good not worth the price, service poor to awful. Our waitress seemed OK, several were rude when asking them a
question. Took forever to get food - even the complimentary bread (store bought pita, not the fresh bread at many places) and garlic dip took 15 minutes.

As these examples show, labeling food offerings in restaurant as “halal” is not sufficient to gain Muslim patrons. Active and sophisticated Muslim web users often publish derisive reviews of restaurants that serve over-priced or poor quality halal food, such as this example: “Worst pizza I’ve ever had. I’ve never wasted food. This pizza however, I had to throw away after taking first bite.” The public posting of reviews on websites afford halal food seekers increased power and legitimacy. The web content not only can affect, both negatively and positively, the sales of a business, it also can affect the operations of a business. Public reviews are read by consumers and increasingly are monitored by management, with the consumer feedback often leading to changes and additions in products and services (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Consequently, social media websites directly influence the ways that markets and market practices support religious activities and experiences.

Verifying Authenticity

A notable feature of reviews of halal restaurants is the protector and educator roles that some social media participants assume in evaluating the authenticity of halal products and experiences. Many halal seekers adopt and take very seriously a responsibility to verify the halal status of food when they eat out, not only for themselves, but as a service to the Muslim social media community and the wider community at large. Some patrons ask the restaurant owner or staff direct questions about the origin of the meat products and then provide the results on the public forums. Others are more reticent about directly questioning the authenticity of halal products and will seek out other evidence. Cues and signals related to halal (or non-halal) status that are frequently reported in reviews include confirmation by the owner or the staff members, labeling on the restaurant exterior or on the menu, physical evidence of halal status (e.g. receipt or certification for meat), the source of the meat, a Muslim owner or Muslim staff, and the presence (or lack) of alcohol, pork, and other haram products. As the following two reviews show, the commenters often provide very specific details related to the verification (or not) of authenticity:

Best pizzas you can taste! So much variety with decent prices. I love their specialty pizzas! Extremely friendly staff. All food is Zabihah halal, assured by the owner and the Halal sign in the front door! . . .

Very yummy, food delicious and waiter was great and I am glad to see the waitresses in some form of uniform clothing, not hijabis but modest dress. No alcohol here . . .

Demonstration of halal status in reviews often extends beyond text to include visual evidence, with photos and videos posted of the food, the restaurants, the staff, and halal-related signage.

Since halal offerings at restaurants can be a moving target due to frequent management changes in restaurants, a number of postings on the websites are not full reviews of restaurants but quick announcements of new halal restaurants, or updates related to the halal status of restaurants, such as the following examples:

CAUTION: I just called Sterling Heights branch and they said the food is NOT zabihah halal. Not going to go there, period.

This restaurant is currently out of halal products according to the person taking orders over the phone.

Other postings are queries for information from the community in ascertaining halal status, such as the following post (the caps are the author’s, presumably indicating urgency):

CAN ANYONE VERIFY WHERE THESE GUYS GET THERE MEAT FROM? I CALLED THEM AND ASKED WHERE THEY GOT THERE MEAT FROM AND THEY DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO ANSWER. SO I WILL NOT EAT THERE FOR NOW UNTIL I CAN VERIFY IF THESE GUYS ARE REALLY SERVING HALAL MEAT. IF SOMEONE VERIFIES PLEASE LEAVE THE PLACE IN THE REVIEWS OF WHERE THEY GET THERE MEAT FROM. THANKS.

Knowing that differing standards exist among halal seekers, reviewers often provide as many details related to halal status as possible, while conceding that it may not be sufficient for some members of the social media community. For example, the following reviewer was satisfied that a restaurant’s meat was halal, based on the word of the “auntie behind the counter,” but noted that some readers might want further proof:

I visited this place. It is in a strip mall with several other “halal” restaurants. The ones in this area have received mixed reviews questioning their “halalness”. I went in to this one, asked specifically if the meat is zabihah. The auntie behind the counter said yes it was. The food was okay. The place is self serve, you get your own plate, cup, water. Price was good. It’s up to you if you would like to do more research on this place to verify the supply chain by asking for certificates . . .

Some of these reviewers might be called consumer activists in the sense that they are asserting their rights to have access to authentic, honestly-labeled halal products. However, most reviewers appear to have little interest in evangelizing their cause to outsiders or altering consumer culture (Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Their interest is in protecting the Muslim community. Still, as will be discussed in the next section, some reviewers take a more active role in promoting their own interpretations of halal.

Protecting Standards

The following section demonstrates that halal seekers often show skepticism about the trustworthiness of halal products.
Social media sites provide an arena for users to openly debate halal authenticity according to individual criteria. Often reviewers respond to previous reviews via contradictory reports that express disagreement with the preceding review’s conclusions. For example, the following two comments were posted to dispute the authenticity of the status of restaurants that had been previously been described as serving halal meat.

I have eaten at (restaurant name) twice, there are idols all over the restaurant. The place is obviously run by people of the Hindu faith. Seriously doubtful if their food is zabihah halal which is why I will not go back. (Review of Flint restaurant)

Not only is the halal status of this restaurant very questionable (NOT a Muslim owned restaurant) but they have a full bar now . . . . (Review of Flint restaurant)

The non-monolithic standards of halal for Muslims can divide commenters in these debates into camps. For example, some halal seekers avoid restaurants altogether that serve alcohol, while other reviewers indicate a level of comfort with restaurants with bars. Some community members seek out restaurants that serve only halal food, while others, such as the following commenter, are satisfied to just have halal alternatives on menus

I disagree with others who say they won’t buy from places that have non-halal food as well. I am of the opinion that if people of the Book, are willing to cater to our needs, we should be supporting that kind of mentality.

The doubts expressed in these debates related to halal status often receive both positive and negatively responses from subsequent reviews. In addition, when reviewers express dissatisfaction with restaurants, other community members often provide alternative suggestions. Some reviewers also use the sites to mobilize other Muslims to unite to support restaurants that maintain what they consider the best standards for handling meat. For example, a number of reviews, such as the following example, call for other community members to support Zabihah meat (produced from animals slaughtered under Islamic rites).

Very good people and very nice food and loved their hot sauce and I am from Chicago but if I am around Ann Arbor I always stop by and have some [restaurant name]. Zabihah is the only way Brother. “ALWAYS ASK FOR ZABIHAH HALAL”

Other reviewers urge Muslims to unite to prevent fraud and mislabeling, as seen in the following review:

ONLY SOME ITEMS ARE ZABIHAH!!! Be Warned!! I called them today. They said that the only meat toppings that they have that are Zabihah currently are Chicken and Ground Beef. The rest of the meat toppings that they refer to as “halal” on their menu (i.e. pepperoni, bacon, ham, sausage, etc.) are NOT ZABIHAH. They are not pork based either according to them. Probably turkey or beef. If you go there, please ask them NOT to refer to the non-Zabihah items as being “halal”.

In the process of deliberating the meanings of halal, the debates also offers forums for individuals to clarify their own understandings related to halal-haram status. In that sense, the very process of interacting—either actively or passively—in disputes about proper religious standards on a social media site serves to shape the religious practices, habits, and ideologies of community members in ways that are likely to alter the marketplace.

Discussion

This study highlights a number of ways that social media websites can both serve as a link between religion and markets and also influence market dynamics. As the findings reveal, locating good sources for halal food in non-Muslim majority regions can be challenging, and social media sources provide valuable information related to the location, quality, and authenticity of halal food sources. Table 3 summarizes these findings, with a display of the functions performed by social media sites and the corresponding roles of web community members, illustrated with sample quotes.

As the results show, digital media not only provides a valuable tool for Muslims searching for products and services that conform to their religious expectations, but also has the potential to transform the relationship between religion and the market in a number of important ways. In particular, social media tools can aid newly arrived immigrants and travelers in the construction of an alternate, or even complementary identity to the cosmopolitan persona often associated with mobility (Hannerz 1990; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Spiritual lifestyles are integral to a “sense of home” for many religious “global nomads” (Bardi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012), and this phenomenon can lead to some transnational communities identifying with, and being identified with their religion as much or more than by their regions of origin, affecting the rate and tenure of acculturation.

In this study the discussions on social media websites highlights the divergent characteristics and practices of U.S. Muslims in defining Halal standards. These perspectives create distinct segments of online Muslim communities based on disparate primary motivations and standards in selecting halal food, for example, for spiritual reasons, for health, for taste, or for hygiene (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). As such, the information shared by social media participants addresses not only “what can I buy?” but “what SHOULD I buy?.” Thus, this research highlights that, along with faith-based differences, religion communities, not unlike other consumer groups, have different needs according to many other dimensions, such as country of origin, income, age, stage of the family life cycle, and other common bases of segmentation.

Many Muslims, at least in this study, seem reluctant to directly query employees as to the authenticity of halal products at the place of purchase, and instead rely on secondary
Table 3. Religion-Market Intercessions of Social Media Communities (Halal Food Review Websites).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intercessions</th>
<th>Community Member Responsibilities</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Identifying Sources | • Identifying sources of halal food  
• Informing community members of options                                                                | • I have been going to [restaurant name] for almost 10 years. And i can honestly say, the quality and the quantity of the food remains the same. It is probably the best halal restaurant you’ll find around Michigan . . .  
• I have eaten here multiple times, the food is good quality and the staff is attentive. Good to see hijab’d Muslimah proudly obeying Allah.  
• Yummy, yummy, yummy! You would have thought their was a team of Indian auntsies back in the kitchen cooking up all of the delicious food. I just saw the muslim brother though, they can obviously cook just as good. The brothers were very hospitable, and helpful. It’s a small cozy restaurant, with comforting homemade Indian food. My favorite was the Paneer! I also enjoyed the Butter Chicken, and chicken egg rolls. I nice bonus too there is a Masjid right next door so if it’s prayer time you can easily go for prayer. Alhumdulillah |
| Evaluating tradeoffs | • Sharing purchase experiences and problems  
• Evaluating strengths and weaknesses  
• Assuming responsibility to assist others                                                                 | • I love the food here, it is really good and authentic. plus the atmosphere and service is great as well. you really feel very nice eating here. it is worth the drive every time.  
• After seeing the reviews of [restaurant name] online (and realizing my only restaurant options were contained within the strip mall next to [hotel name]), I decided to try it out. I had an eggplant dish, which came with naan that was suspiciously wrapped up in a plastic baggie. . I would say that [restaurant name] gives you more for your money and is a bit tastier.  
• What a wonderful place! Great service, excellent prices, and really tasty halal food! While shopping in the area, we buy our pita bread there (and balakava!) and they have a very nice eat-in dinner too! Well worth the drive (We go three hours each way)! |
| Verifying Authenticity | • Verifying authenticity of halal status  
• Posting evidence of halal status  
• Urging community members to ask for verification of halal status                                          | • I was somewhat discomforted by them serving pork and alcohol however, especially since the buffet bar doesn’t have any special signs telling what’s halal and what’s not. We spoke with the manager who told us the Chicken & Beef were halal, so that’s why we had . . .  
• This place is 100% zabiha halal, the owners are well known muslims in the community, and they slaughter thier own chicken daily, they are also experts with fresh and fried fish which they import from all over the world . . .  
• They do not serve alcohol and that makes the experience more enjoyable. I have felt proud as a muslim whenever I have eaten at [restaurant name] May Allah bless them . . .  
• ONLY SOME ITEMS ARE ZABIHAh!!!! Be Warned!! I called them today. They said that the only meat toppings that they have that are Zabihah currently are Chicken and Ground Beef. The rest of the meat toppings that they refer to as “halal” on their menu (i.e. pepperoni, bacon, ham, sausage, etc.) are NOT ZABIHAh. They are not pork based either according to them. Probably turkey or beef. If you go there, please ask them NOT to refer to the non-Zabihah items as being “halal”.  
• NOT A ZABIIHA EATRY. Just a halal (non-pig) Five STARS for the food No Star for people who want to eat Zabihah only, Islamically kill and the name of Allah while cutting . . . I have stopped eating food from this place. I wish they consider as a Muslim what they should feed their customers and tell the truth about their meat. The food tastes great though. Choice is yours.  
• The owner says it is both Halal and Kosher. When asked which is which- he says Kosher is Halal so we can eat it. So kind of fishy. Be careful  
• This review intends to relay some info for anybody who is going to this fried chicken place for “Halal” food. I called the restaurant and they told me that their meat comes from [meat corporation]. I called [company name] (corporate office person name (phone number), spoke to him and he said that their main distributor for “Corporation” in MI is another person name (phone number). I called that person and here what he told me... Their slaughter unit has a machine that cuts the throat of chicken and as they start their unit, they start a “Tape Recorder” that recites the Takbeer throughout . . . . I asked him this Q, 3 times in different ways, but this is what they call “Halal corporation name”. The owner is a non-muslim . . .  
| Protecting Standards | • Asking community members to request certain products or services  
• Voicing suspicion of fraud or dishonesty  
• Proposing protests or boycotts  
• Requesting patronage of retailers that uphold standards                                                      |  

signals and cues to evaluate purity. This creates an important role for social media as a community-based arbitrator of standards associated with religious practices in the absence of government-based regulation and certification in secular nations in North America. As has been observed in other loosely-regulated businesses, such as the organic food and herbal remedy markets, when standards are ambiguous and not legally enforced, unethical conduct, including fraudulent practices, are difficult to prevent. Just as other web communities have served to regulate corporations and act as whistle blowers (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008), social media websites are serving to monitor businesses that offer halal products.

Conclusions

The increasing influence of social media affects the religion-market link in a number of fundamental ways. By providing a venue for newly arrived immigrants and travelers to search for and evaluate religious products and services, digital media functions as a conduit between businesses and religious segments with unmet needs, providing market-based solutions to Muslims in the diaspora. As a by-product of this process, digital tools link sub-communities with a diversity of allegiances to religious practices, potentially altering consumers’ standards as to what is acceptable to buy and eat in a religious context, and concordantly, what it means to be faithful (Mittelstaedt 2002). In turn, linking physically separated sub-communities through social media can serve to overcome the marginalization that can be associated with being a member of a minority religion (El-Bassiouny 2014) and serve a vital role in identity construction (Sandikci and Ger 2010). Altogether, digital media provides support for the symbolic and functional activities and values of Muslim individuals and collectives (Wilson and Grant 2013).

In the process of providing a means to link and unite communities, social media platforms can also stimulate dialogues that expose and deepen factions in the community. The divergent perspectives on Halal standards within online Muslim communities, driven by different primary motivations of community members, reinforce the idea that Muslims cannot be treated as a monolithic segment. The history of marketing to the Islamic community has evolved from seeing the community as a niche market to seeing it as a mass transnational market. Further development of the market requires seeing Muslims as members of multi-layered communities with disparate and changing needs for products and information (A. Jafari and Süderem 2012; Wilson 2014).

Through its role as a community-based arbitrator of standards associated with religious practices, publicized assessment of the authenticity of halal food on social media could lead retailers to maintain acceptable standards, or alternatively, to cease offering halal food altogether, such as occurred in the incident involving a Michigan McDonald’s that was cited earlier. Thus, social media serves as a signaling mechanism by which information relating to halal food market imperfections is transmitted from consumers to suppliers.

The debates related to the authenticity of halal food that can be found on social media point to a clear need for manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers to provide more information about halal foods, mirroring a current global-based appeal for increased information about the food supply (Bech-Larsen and Aschemann-Witzel 2012; Charlebois and Labrecque 2009; Thomas et al. 2015; Veeck, Yu, and Burns 2010). As some of the reviews demonstrate, lacking reliable information, consumers are prone to disseminate conjectures about the authenticity of a product, potentially attracting a large audience for information of questionable veracity. This represents both a threat and an opportunity for businesses that wish to directly target Muslim consumers. Misinformation on the Internet can be combated by businesses providing more information at the point of purchase, as well as having their own presence on the Internet to protect their brand and shape their own promotions (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Social media can also play a vital role in businesses attempts to convey their efforts at correcting halal food market imperfections to consumers. Accordingly, through its market signaling mechanism, social media has the potential to contribute to streamlining imperfections in halal food markets in non-Muslim majority regions, leading to improved efficiencies in those market systems.

In summary, as the case of seeking halal food in the U.S. via the Internet demonstrates, social media tools have begun to profoundly alter the synchronic relationship between religion, and the transnational market. As globalization trends continue, social media platforms are serving to breakdown geographic barriers that physically separate transnational communities. The process can both serve to unite a physically disparate community and create sub-factions within the community. Altogether, social media platforms are increasingly playing a prominent role in mediating the market and religion to interpret and alter consumption patterns, and for some, support an identity-affirming life. Increased consumption options provided by online markets allow greater freedom of choice but can also lead to more insular religious communities, with political and social consequences. In short, having access to social media tools can alter what it means to be a member of a global community.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations related to this study should be acknowledged, beginning with the inherent weaknesses of collecting data from online review sites. While the study involved the analysis of over 2,000 reviews, the restriction to three review sites could lead to a self-selection bias related to the characteristics of the reviewers who are attracted to these websites. In addition, despite measures taken to prevent fraudulence by established websites such as those used in this study, online review systems can be subject to manipulation, leading to the potential that some reviews may be posted by an individual with ulterior motives (Hu et al. 2012; Mayzlin, Dover, and Chevalier 2014).

The research is restricted to one state in one nation. Future research might explore how the intercession of social media...
between religious communities and markets varies according to regions. Further, this study focuses on just one religion. Future research should also determine if the mechanisms identified in this study by which social media moderates the link between religion and markets also occur with other religious groups and transnational communities. In addition, research is needed to explore how a number of other types of religion-oriented Internet sources, such as blogs, forums, community-building websites, news sites, and religious organization websites, have the potential to change the relationship between markets and consumers. Future research might combine text analysis of social media data with interviews of the authors of the digital commentaries (Dolbec and Fischer 2015) or with offline contextual data (Orgad 2009; Murthy 2008) to gain more direct access to the attitudes and intentions of community members. Another extension of this research is to explore how digital media influences how religious practices intersect with class, race, region of origin, and gender. Finally, future research might examine the role of digital media in facilitating adherence to religious practices in general. At the core, these questions all address the effect of digital media on religion and markets, and the social, political, and economic consequences of digital intercussions.

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