Transnational Religious Connections through Digital Media: Seeking Halal Food in Non-Muslim Majority Regions

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This study investigates the role of social media platforms in connecting and mediating transnational religious communities and markets, using the search for halal food as a focal point. Results show that digital media not only provides market-based solutions to geographically dispersed individuals but influences religious identity and community construction.
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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 consumer practices and ideologies can exert a strong effect on the evolution of the market and vice-versa (Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Web-based communities play an increasingly important role in shaping transnational consumer practices (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008), including religion-related consumption patterns. With spiritual lifestyles being increasingly supported 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. The Muslim population is reported to have reached approximately 21.01% of the world population, for a total of 1.43 billion adherents (CIA 2009). Halal products and services are estimated to constitute a US$2.7 trillion market today and forecasted to grow to a $30 trillion market by 2050 (JWT 2007). Despite the buying power of Muslims, the market for halal products is undeveloped in many non-Muslim majority regions, such as the U.S. The immature market for halal meat products in the U.S. means that social media websites play an important mediating role in the religion-market nexus.

This research uses netnographic analysis to seek answers to the following research questions: How do transnational religious adherents use social media sites to identify and evaluate products and services that support their religious practices? By what mechanisms do social media interactions mediate religion and markets to enable faith-based consumption experiences? In our exploration of these questions, we find that Internet-based interactions do not only directly affect the market for religious products and services, but also have broader influences on religious identity, community construction, religious commitment, and, ultimately, quality of life.

RELIGION, FOOD, AND COMMUNITY
Food and eating serves a vital role in virtually all religious traditions and practices, through both formal and informal means, including feasting, fasting, sharing, taboos, offerings, sacrifices, consumption of symbolic foods, and dietetic regimens (Anderson 2005). Some religions, including Hinduism, Orthodox Judaism, Seventh Day Adventism, and Islam have particularly distinct and complex food cultures. As a vestige from the past, or as a modern moral mandate, gastro-religious rules can operate for various reasons, including to prevent cruelty to animals, to protect the environment, to improve the economy, to prevent food poisoning, to promote self-discipline, and to improve physical or spiritual health (Finch 2010). Above all, food codes serve to bind groups 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), with acceptance of food practices signaling affirmation of the broader moral codes of a particular community. At the same time, gastro-religious habits demarcate boundaries that distinguish loyal members of a group from those who are not in their community—i.e. serving to “construct Otherness” (Freidenreich 2011).
Religiously-defined food patterns are seldom static, interacting with place and time to inspire adoptions, compromises, and innovations in food practices (Anderson 2005; Finch 2010). When traveling, migrants 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). Consequently, within religious traditions, there are often diverse, and even conflicting, interpretations of eating rules (Kraemer 2010).

**TRANSNATIONALISM, MARKETS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

In recent years, the globalization of economic and labor markets, combined with time-space compression, has accelerated the spread of transnational religious practices and attachments (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008). 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 majority of the population. As a result, living in a community as a religious minority might lead to the practice of more moderate or more conservative 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 (arguably) the Internet, which allows considerable options for the religious diaspora to maintain their chosen identities. As it the case for many sub-communities (Kozinets 1999), the Internet is used as an important source of communication among many faith-based communities. Social media sites, such as, hisholyspace.com for Christianity, theschmooze.org for Judaism and muslimsocial.com for Islam, allow the spiritually curious to explore meanings of their faiths (Bunt 2009; Mishra and Semaan 2010). In addition, as with other types of consumption products and services, religious-based offerings are increasingly subject to scrutiny via the Internet by both insiders and outsiders.

**THE GLOBAL BUSINESS OF HALAL FOOD**

The growth of Muslim residents in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2011), combined with growing numbers of Muslim tourists (Jafari and Scott 2014), has led to an increasing demand in the U.S. for halal food. Halal food—i.e. food that is permissible under Islamic law—not only is mandated by religion, 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 are not uniform. Halal is a credence product attribute (Bonne and Verbeke 2008; Grunert 2002), with no visibly discernible qualities to identify genuineness, and, as such, 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 (Tieman et al. 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 recent years, a number of scandals have tarred sellers of halal food in Muslim communities. Products designated as halal were allegedly misrepresented by major providers such as Cadbury (Nangoy and Hamzah 2014) and Ajinomoto (Arnold 2001). In 2013, accused of misrepresentation, a MacDonald’s in Dearborn, Michigan ceased offering halal chicken sandwiches (Warikoo 2013). A consumer’s search for halal food is further complicated because
the standards of what makes meat “halal” can differ widely according to interpretation (Robinson 2014; Wilson 2014). For example, an increasing number of Muslim shoppers believe that for meat to be characterized as “halal,” proper responsibility and care should be taken for the welfare of the animals, employees, and land involved at every stage of the process from farm to market (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. In short, a number of factors can make procuring halal food a challenge in ensuring sources and standards in geographic regions that are not majority Muslim.

**METHODODOLOGY**

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. The U.S. has a growing and diverse Muslim 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. This study analyzes the content from three well-known websites—www.tripadvisor.com, www.yelp.com, and www.zabihah.com—that offer sub-sites specifically devoted to halal food and are widely used by both local residents and tourists or travelers. 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. This state of Michigan was chosen because it includes a mixture of areas with scant access to halal foods (i.e. small cities and rural areas) and areas with relatively more access (university towns and the large city of Detroit). In addition, the city of Dearborn is home to a large concentration of Muslim Americans.

Altogether, a total of 2,064 reviews were collected and analyzed from the three selected social media sites. The websites’ contents are user-generated, consumer to consumer (C2C) interactive chats, covering a wide range of issues related to faith-based consumption practices (e.g. halal food) that influence Muslim consumers. Just as Muslims are a diverse group (Ahmed 2008; Jafari and Süerdem 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. The mixture of about half 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, with pre-codes initially identified to categorize the data, followed by collapsing, expanding, and revising the coding categories until a smaller number of broader, higher order themes were revealed.

**FINDINGS**

The analysis of the reviews confirms the vital role that social media websites serve in connecting religious communities and markets. The reviews’ content highlights the challenges that Muslims in non-Muslim minority regions often face in locating reliable sources of halal food and the benefits that social media tools can provide in overcoming these obstacles. Three major types of community dynamics were identified: *linking, protecting, and defending communities* (see Table 1). The following sections details the findings, with substantiating quotes. All of the quotes are postings of reviews of restaurants, with any identifying information removed, including
Linking Communities
A common lament by halal seekers on the social media websites relates to a lack of reliable sources where they are currently living, or when traveling to certain tourism destinations. In the face of the challenge of finding proper food, many halal seekers take responsibility for helping others in identifying good sources through postings on social media websites. The communities that develop provide a vital service in informing members of their options as they navigate the line between “purism” and “pragmatism” (Fischer 2008) in the market for halal food. As the following review shows, traveling longer distances is a sacrifice that halal food seekers often make:

We ate here and LOVED IT! We had such a hard time finding actual halal restaurants in [city name]. This restaurant was very far from our hotel, but well worth the drive. The soft bread, grilled vegetables, and service are wonderful…Our only complaint was the waitress hovered a bit and kept checking in on us (we were the only customers) which made it hard to fully enjoy our meal. Otherwise definitely above average! No alcohol served and the cook looked very Muslim!

The reviews show that offering halal food is not sufficient to gain Muslim patrons, with information provided by community members allowing halal seekers to determine if a restaurant is worth the extra distance or price. In this way, and, as with other specialized and connected communities, social media postings can greatly influence market offerings and revenues.

Protecting Communities
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. Some halal seekers adopt and take very seriously a responsibility to verify 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 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 non-halal products. Like the following review, many reviews provide 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. ! . . .

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. For most reviewers, the motive to provide details related to halal status appears to be to allow others to make decisions based on their own interpretation of halal codes. However, and as will be described in the next section, other reviewers take a more active role in promoting their own interpretations of halal.
Leading Communities
The non-uniform standards of halal for Muslims can divide commenters into camps. For example, some halal seekers avoid restaurants 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.

While not the majority, an active minority of community members assume a leadership role in calling upon others to unite to alter marketplace dynamics. For example, some commenters who believe a restaurant is misleading the community or perpetuating fraud may call on fellow community members to join in protesting or boycotting the restaurant, such as in the following review:

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….

Other community members post comments that attempt to activize the community to request certain products or services (e.g. Zabihah halal), or simply consistently ask for proof of halal status. Perceptions of the halal standards of individual restaurants can lead to debates among reviewers. In the process, the conflicts seem to offer 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—on a social media site serves to shape the religious practices and ideologies of community members in ways that are likely to alter the marketplace.

DISCUSSION
As our results show, digital media not only provides a valuable tool for religious practitioners who are searching for and evaluating religious product and services, but has the potential to transform the relationship between religion and the market in a number of important ways. At the most basic level, digital media can function as a conduit between businesses and religious segments with unmet needs, providing market-based solutions to geographically dispersed individuals. As the findings show, locating good sources for halal food in non-Muslim majority regions can be a challenge at times and social media sources provide valuable information related to the location, quality, and authenticity of halal food sources. As a by-product of this process, digital tools link sub-communities with a diversity of allegiances to religious practices, potentially altering standards for consumers of what is acceptable to buy and eat, and, concordantly, what it means to be faithful (Mittelstaedt 2002).

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). In the process of providing a means to unite communities, social media platforms can...
also stimulate dialogues that expose and deepen factions in the community. In this study, the discussions on social media websites highlighted the differing characteristics and practices of Muslims in defining halal standards. As such, the information shared by social media participants address not only “what can I buy?” but “what SHOULD I buy?”

This research also 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 family life cycle, and other common bases of segmentation. As such, Muslims cannot be treated as a monolithic segment. The history of marketing to the Islamic community has evolved from viewing the community as a niche market to a mass transnational market. Further development of the market requires seeing Muslims as members of multi-layered communities with disparate and changing needs (Jafari and Süerdem 2012; Wilson 2014).

The findings also suggest 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, such as in North America and Europe. As seen with other unregulated businesses, such as the organic food and herbal remedies markets, when standards are ambiguous and not legally enforced, fraud and corruption are difficult to prevent. Just as other web communities have sometimes served to act as whistle blowers (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008), social media websites can and do monitor business that offer halal products. Publicized assessments of the authenticity of halal food could lead retailers and manufacturers to maintain acceptable standards, or, alternatively, to cease offering halal food altogether. Certainly, the debates that can be found on social media point to a clear need for businesses to provide more information about halal foods, mirroring a contemporary global-based appeal for increased information about the food we consume and the supply chain that produces and delivers it.

This study also shows that social media tools can aid 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” (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012). 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. 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. Social media tools can redefine what it means to be a member of a global community.

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, the transnational market, and consumption. 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 and to 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 consumptions patterns and, for some, support an identity-affirming life.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Community Dynamics on Halal Food Review Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Dynamics</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linking Communities</strong></td>
<td>• Identifying sources of halal food</td>
<td>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 [medium-sized city] like it because there isn't much halal place around…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Informing community members of options</td>
<td>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…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sharing purchase experiences &amp; problems</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Evaluating tradeoffs</td>
<td>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 &amp; Beef were halal, so that's why we had…</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Protecting Communities</strong></td>
<td>• Verifying authenticity of halal status</td>
<td>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…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Posting evidence of halal status</td>
<td>NOT A ZABIHA EATRY. Just a halal (non-pig) Five STARS for the food No Star for people who want to eat Zabiha 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.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Voicing suspicion of fraud or dishonesty</td>
<td>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</td>
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<td>• Showing concern/empathy to others</td>
<td>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…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Feeling responsible to help or assist</td>
<td>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 &quot;halal&quot; 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 &quot;halal&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leading communities</strong></td>
<td>• Urging community members to ask for verification of halal status</td>
<td>Very good people and very nice food and loved their hot sauce and I am from [large city] but if I am around [medium-sized city] I always stop by and have some [restaurant name]. Zabihah is the only way Brother. &quot;ALWAYS ASK FOR ZABIHAH HALAL</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Asking community members to request certain products or services</td>
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<td>• Proposing protests or boycotts</td>
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<td>• Requesting patronage of retailers that uphold standards</td>
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<td>• Serving as an expert</td>
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