Investigating the Seeking Behavior for Religious Information in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Reading and learning about religious information is a habit that Saudis practice to increase their understanding of Islamic rules. It is common now for people to learn about religion from social media. Therefore, the study reports on a survey that was distributed to people in Saudi Arabia to investigate the use of social media technologies for religious information seeking. The objective is to determine if Saudis utilize social media to search for religious information and to understand their information-seeking behaviors when using such a resource. In addition, the study is an attempt to investigate how religious information on social media changes and influences people, and what obstacles and difficulties Saudis encounter when they use social media to obtain religious information.

KEYWORDS

Information Behavior, Internet Resources, Religious Information, Saudi Society, Social Media, Social Network

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a popular tool used to search for information during the past few years. Currently, a growing number of people use social media in all activities related to their lives. People can now use social network to promote events or causes they care about (Melton, Miller, & Salmona, 2012)

Social media tools can also be excellent for searching out, learning, and publishing religious information. As people become more adept in their use of social media in religious learning and practice, questions begin to emerge about the implications of new media platforms and practices for faith formation, leadership, and religious practice across traditions (Anderson, 2013). By answering these questions, we can come to understand why social media is commonly used to change religious views and deliver beliefs to different types of people.

As social media increasingly becomes part of our daily lives, people will find new ways to interact with religion and spirituality. In the digital age, a group of virtual religionists will emerge, comprising individuals who do not affiliate with religious institutions, but are nevertheless engaged in many aspects of a faith community through social networking (Miller, 2011).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Reading and learning about religious information is a habit that Saudis practice to increase their understanding of Islamic rules. In the past, most people learned about religion from traditional resources, such as attending religious events, reading books and journals, and watching television programs. But with the advent of social media, religious information and resources have become

accessible through this new channel. However, we do not know how religion and new forms of social media interact or what impact they have on each other.

Indeed, no study has thus far investigated the use of social media or its content on the subject of religion. Therefore, this study explores the extent to which Saudis utilize social media to find religious information and examines how this affects their knowledge and learning style. Specifically, this exploratory study employs a quantitative approach through the distribution of a questionnaire to collect data related to the population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media plays a clear role in changing the way people talk about faith and share religious information and perspectives, so religious leaders find it a great way to involve younger generations who may not be growing up with religion in their households (Cyprian, 2015). Recent years have seen a concern with the publishing of new information to help religious scholars understand digital media—especially social media. Religious leaders can now find texts to guide them through the construction of websites, blogs, and social media (Hutchings, 2012). However, the use of social media is not limited to religious leaders, but is also used by laypeople. It has increasingly become an important source of religious information for many people in the world (Harvey, 2014). In an average week, one in five Americans shares their religious faith online (Pew Research Center, 2014). In addition to sharing their religious faith, people use social media to share information about their favorite religious organizations, activities, preachers, religious resources, Web sites, educational materials, new issues, and much more (Groenpj, 2011). Some experts believe social networks are more successful than traditional, offline forms of communication in spreading new viewpoints including religious believe (Balint & Gustafson, 2015).

Preston (2011) reported that although it is too early to say that social media has transformed the way in which people practice religion, the number of people discussing faith on Facebook has significantly increased in the past year. This trend is supported by the findings of Tallant (2013), who declared that over 43 million Facebook users are fans of at least one religious page, and 31% of users in the United States list a religion in their profile. At this very basic level, it is possible to see that members of religious groups are using Facebook and are incorporating their religious beliefs into their online activities. As the use of social media evolves into an essential part of people's daily lives, religious organizations are also using social media tools in increasingly inspired ways to spread their influence and build communities (Newberg, 2013). For example, a recent study in China showed that digital and social media have allowed one of the largest international religious and benevolent organizations to keep in touch with its more than 10 million followers worldwide, helping it in its mission to provide humanitarian relief (Cheong, Hwang, & Brummans, 2014).

Religious information in the Islamic world is also in the category of favored information. Baddawy (2014) surveyed 250 Muslim Facebook users and found that the highest percent of them are attracted by religious information. Mustafa et al. (2013) states that the attraction of information may contribute to religious understanding; however, this is reliant on how people perceive the Islamic information shared on social media. Religious information may lead to improper behavior due to various reasons, such as ignorance of a religion, ease of online publishing, and spread of fringe groups (Hammad & Faraj Allah, 2011).

In Saudi Arabia, over the past few years, social media usage has been one of the most rapidly adopted activities, with more and more users accessing the Internet via their smartphones and tablets (AlJabre, 2013). Research conducted by Global Web Index suggested that almost 25% of the population in Saudi Arabia is active on social media (Zarovsky, 2013). Moreover, a social media agency report showed that there are 3 million Twitter users (around 12% of the population), growing by 3000%, with an average 50 million tweets per month, 840,000 LinkedIn users (4% of the population), and 6 million Facebook users (23% of the population) (Social Clinic, 2014).

The adoption of social media has had a great effect on Saudis' behaviors and beliefs (Alsharkh, 2012). Religion, for example, is an essential part of society, and so information related to religious issues has a crucial influence upon the cultures and thinking styles of individuals. Almaghthaway (2011) states that these issues used to be delivered by preachers and through traditional resources such as newspapers and audio materials, but in the 20th century, this all began to change. The advent of greater literacy, the deterioration of religious establishments, and new forms of communication such as radio and television all contributed to breaking down the pre-modern modes of religious authority (Almaghthaway, 2011). The late 20th century brought forth a new phenomenon: the creation of Google. It is now common for Muslims to search for answers to religious questions by accessing the Internet. Social media, especially mobile computing devices such as smartphones and tables, contributes to the importance of the Internet as a source of religious information, which fosters discussion of contemporary religious issues. Increasingly, Saudis are posing questions to people they identify as religious authorities through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media apparatuses (Hellyer, 2013).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although some research has been conducted on the effects of social media on people's lives, previous studies have not focused on specific areas of Saudi society. More specifically, no studies have examined the effect of social media on religious information seeking. Therefore, the current study serves to examine this issue by using a descriptive method to investigate how religious information on social media changes and influences people.

The study was designed to address four questions central to understanding Saudis' information-seeking behavior on social media regarding religious information:

1. To what extent do Saudis use social media for religious purposes?
2. What are the purposes and strategies of searching for religious information via social media?
3. To what extent do Saudis trust social media to obtain religious information?
4. What obstacles and difficulties do Saudis encounter when they use social media to obtain religious information?

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a quantitative research design involving a questionnaire distributed by e-mail to a group of participants in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The participants represent various segments of society. The questionnaire contained 14 items in five categories in order to collect data related to participants' use of searches via social media for religious information. The five question categories were (a) the demographics of participants; (b) usage level of social media; (c) purposes of and strategies for use; (d) behavioral trust in social media; and (e) obstacles to social media use. A total of 492 participants completed the questionnaire. Due to the nature of the research, descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyze and report the data. In the following sections, the findings are presented in relevant tables immediately after their corresponding interpretations.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Descriptive statistics on each variable of the study are used to investigate peoples' use of social media related to religious information. The percentage for each survey item question is reported in the tables that follow. The results are divided into categories that address the previously mentioned five issues, namely the demographic characteristics of participants, social media use, purposes and strategies of use, trust in social media, and difficulties of use.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

As shown in Table 1, participants were relatively equally split by gender, with 54% men and 46% women. As for age groups, 40% were aged 20–30 years, 28% were 31–40 years, 17% were 41–50 years, 9% were less than 20 years, and 5% were in the 51–60 year age group. As for marital status, the majority of participants (62%) were married, 34% were single, 3% were divorced, and only 1% were widowed. As for level of education, half of the participants (50%) had a bachelor's degree, 18% had completed high school, 13% held an associate degree, 10% had a master's degree, 6% had a doctorate, and the rest of participants (3%) had not completed high school. In terms of occupation, 45% reported being government employees, 23% were students, 15% were unemployed, 13% were private-sector employees, and 4% were self-employed.

Social Media Usage for Searching for Religious Information

Table 2 shows the percentage of participants who strongly agree, agree, sometimes agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, respectively, with the use of social media to obtain religious information. Almost half of the participants (47%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media is their preferred source for obtaining religious information. This phenomenon could be a result of the widespread use of social media by Saudi religious scholars. Of the top 10 most-followed users of social media in Saudi Arabia, 5 are religious scholars (Tweepar, 2014). Therefore, a large amount of information related to religion will be available to those who look for it on social media.

Traditional Resources for Religious Information

Participants were allowed to choose more than one option to specify the resources they used to search for religious information before the advent of social media. Table 3 shows that among the different pre–social media resources, Internet Websites were reported by 64% of participants as their primary resource, followed by books (55%). A much smaller percentage of participants (3%) indicated that they used newspapers to obtain religious information.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Variable	Item	Percentage
Gender	Male	54%
	Female	46%
Marital status	Single	34%
	Married	62%
	Divorced	3%
	Widowed	1%
Age (years old)	<20	9%
	20–30	40%
	31–40	28%
	41–50	17%
	51–60	5%
	>60	0
Level of education	Less than high school	3%
	High school	18%
	Associate degree	13%
	Bachelor's	50%
	Master's	10%
	Doctorate	6%
Occupation	Student	23%
	Government employee	45%
	Private-sector employee	13%
	Self-employed	4%
	Unemployed	15%

Table 2. Use of social media to obtain religious information

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	82	17%
Agree	148	30%
Sometimes agree	189	38%
Disagree	48	10%
Strongly disagree	25	5%

Table 3. Resources used to search for religious information before the advent of social media

Resources	Frequency	Percentage
Books	271	55%
Journals	19	4%
Newspapers	16	3%
Audiovisual materials	260	53%
Websites	315	64%
Other	29	6%

Most-Consulted Social Media

When seeking religious information, the majority of participants (71%) consulted Twitter, followed by Google+ (42%). Surprisingly, Facebook was consulted for religious information by only 11% of participants (Table 4). This finding differs from the general state of social media in Saudi Arabia, as Facebook is favored in that country (Social Clinic, 2014).

Purposes of Using Social Media Related to Religion

Alzoman (2012) stated that Saudi youths mostly use social media to understand and learn about new events. This study is consistent with those previous results. As Table 5 shows, learning about religion was the biggest reason (43%) for using social media to obtain information about religion, followed closely by the desire to read posts written by religious scholars (40%) who have a good reputation and are highly popular and by the desire to find answers related to religious issues in society (34%), and by the wish to communicate with religious scholars (12%).

Religious Information Sources

Although most people use electronic databases and formal Websites rather than personal Websites to locate new information and keep pace with scientific developments in their fields of specialty (Alsharhan, 2002), the search for religious information seems to operate differently. Almost half of the participants (45%) reported that they turn to the personal accounts of religious specialists to find information about religion. This finding may be unsurprising for Saudi Arabia due to the good reputation religious scholars hold within that society. Institutional accounts, by contrast, did not have the same popularity with participants, only 21% of whom reported using institutional accounts (government and nongovernment) for this kind of search (Table 6).

Table 4. Most-used social media for seeking religious information

Media	Frequency	Percentage
Twitter	348	71%
Facebook	54	11%
LinkedIn	10	2%
Google+	207	42%
H5	2	1%
Other	65	13%

Table 5. Purpose for using social media

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
Finding answers to religious issues	166	34%
Communicating with religious scholars	61	12%
Learning about religion	213	43%
Reading posts written by religious scholars	198	40%
Other	63	13%

Table 6. Sources for searching for religious information via social media

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Government agencies' accounts	110	16%
Nongovernment agencies' accounts	46	7%
Personal accounts of religious specialists	308	45%
Subject headings and hashtags	201	29%
Other	21	3%

Handling Information

Participants were asked what actions they usually take after finding the information for which they were searching. The majority (68%) declared that they search for other sources to verify the credibility of the information. Because any one can publish information on social media, participants might understandably not trust information the first time they see it. Social media is full of both no credible users and no credible information. Therefore, some users prefer to make some kind of evaluation before accepting information as credible.

The behavior of the remaining 32% was as follows: 12% accept the information and use it for their original purpose, 12% discuss the information and comment on it, and 6% publish it in their social media accounts (Table 7).

Credibility

Participants were asked to report their opinions regarding the credibility of religious information on social media and whether or not it can be trusted. A five-point Likert scale was given to measure this

Table 7. Action taken after obtaining information

Action	Frequency	Percentage
Accept it and use it for my original purpose	60	12%
Search for other sources to verify the credibility	335	68%
Publish it in my social media accounts	30	6%
Discuss and comment on it	58	12%
Other	9	2%

Table 8. Religious information on social media is credible and can be trusted

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	20	4%
Agree	96	20%
Sometimes agree	220	45%
Disagree	128	26%
Strongly disagree	28	6%

item, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The highest percentage of participants (45%) indicated that they sometimes trusted religious information on social media, whereas 32% of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the credibility of social media. This matches the previous result indicating that users will search for other resources to verify the credibility of information they find on social media. The rest of the participants (24%) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that social media is credible and trustworthy (Table 8).

Social Media Sufficiency

Table 9 shows the percentage of participants who strongly agree, agree, sometimes agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement that religious information on social media is sufficient and meets their needs. A plurality of participants (38%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, whereas the next highest percentage (33%) thought that it is sometimes sufficient. This is not surprising, because many people feel strongly about their religion and therefore may care about the credibility of religious information more than some other types of information. The information found on social media may be posted by users who are nonspecialists in religion. This leads many

Table 9. Social media sufficiency

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	16	3%
Agree	128	26%
Sometimes agree	163	33%
Disagree	148	30%
Strongly disagree	37	8%

people to search for more credible and trusted resources. The rest (29%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that religious information on social media is sufficient and meets their needs.

Influence on People's Thoughts

Table 10 reports participants' opinions regarding the statement that social media affects religious thoughts on society. The majority of participants (82%) reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This result is compatible with a referendum conducted by a local newspaper that indicated that social media sites influence the personality of users and change their intellectual and cultural attitudes (Okaz newspaper, 2013). Only a small percentage of participants (3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This finding shows the strength of social media in Saudi society, further confirming its role in societal and cultural transformation.

Presentation and Dissemination of Religious Issues

A recent study revealed that social media is very effective at improving the dissemination of information (Allen, Stanton, Di Pietro, & Moseley, 2013). The present study reached the same result. Table 11 shows that most participants (76%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that social media is useful in presenting and disseminating religious issues. By contrast, only a small number of participants (8%) reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement regarding the positive role of social media in publishing religious opinions and issues.

Social Media Censorship

Saudi Arabia's Internet censorship is considered one of the most extensive in the world, and restricted and blocked Websites include those that are incompatible with Islam (Almobarraz, 2007). Therefore, participants were asked if they believed that the religious content of social media risked censorship. Table 12 shows that the highest percentage (44%) sometimes agreed that religious information on social media was blocked, whereas the next highest percentage (34%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The rest of participants (22%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 10. Social media affects religious thoughts on society

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	148	30%
Agree	258	52%
Sometimes agree	71	14%
Disagree	12	2%
Strongly disagree	3	1%

Table 11. Social media is useful for presenting and disseminating religious issues

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	154	31%
Agree	223	45%
Sometimes agree	76	15%
Disagree	31	6%
Strongly disagree	8	2%

Table 12. Some accounts specializing in religious information are blocked

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	51	10%
Agree	118	24%
Sometimes agree	216	44%
Disagree	84	17%
Strongly disagree	23	5%

Awareness of Religious Accounts

Participants were asked if they were aware of specialized religious accounts. As shown in Table 13, combining the positive responses of agree and strongly agree indicates that a plurality of participants (45%) were aware of specialized religious accounts on social media. The combination of negative responses of disagree and strongly disagree indicates that 25% were unaware of such accounts. The rest of participants (30%) were neutral.

Presence of Religious Resources on Social Media

Participants were asked about the resources they trust to find religious information presented on social media. These resources included religious leaders, religious organizations, and religious foundations. Table 14 shows that the majority (75%) either agreed or strongly agreed, reporting the presence of trusted resources in religion on social media. The rate of disagreement (disagree or strongly disagree) was small (5%), suggesting that religious leaders and organizations are aware of the importance of social media for spreading their knowledge and thoughts.

Fake Accounts and Profiles

One of the most common methods of deception on social media is the use of fake profiles, where malicious users create profiles to impersonate fictitious or real persons, such as celebrities or other people in the public interest (Krombholz, Merkl, & Weippl, 2012). This situation may influence the use of social media by users who are looking for trusted and reliable information. Therefore, participants were asked if the spread of fake accounts and profiles that imitate religious resources would reduce their use of social media.

As shown in Table 15, combining the positive responses of agree and strongly agree indicates that the presence of fake accounts imitating religious resources would reduce the use of social media for more than half of participants (59%). By contrast, only 19% of participants reported that fake accounts had no influence on their use of social media.

Table 13. Knowledge and awareness of accounts specializing in religious information

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	39	8%
Agree	182	37%
Sometimes agree	147	30%
Disagree	109	22%
Strongly disagree	15	3%

Table 14. The presence of trusted religious resources on social media

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	112	23%
Agree	255	52%
Sometimes agree	100	20%
Disagree	22	4%
Strongly disagree	3	1%

Table 15. Fake accounts imitating some religious sources reduce the use of social media

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	130	26%
Agree	164	33%
Sometimes agree	103	21%
Disagree	71	14%
Strongly disagree	24	5%

DISCUSSION

Social media represents a hope for benefiting people, allowing access to religious knowledge, communication and collaboration, and thus promoting the process of constitution of a fairer society (Neris, Almeida, Miranda, Hayashi, & Baranauskas, 2011). This is supported by the findings of this study which reveal that social media has become a major part of Saudi society. Many Saudis frequently check religious social media accounts, specifically Twitter, in order to learn and to ask how to act according to Islamic guides and instructions. Traditional resources, such as newspapers and books, are no longer the main references for Saudis. Therefore, the government should take account of these changes in society's concerns by paying attention to social media and the provision of adequate and reliable religious information that meets the needs of the members of the community.

Other findings suggest that social media is a preferable resource for religious information. However, users may evaluate the credibility of this information before using it because well-known religious accounts are owned by individuals, that is, by religious scholars. This situation is not good, because these individual accounts may be subject to the personal views and fancies of the individuals in question, and the accounts might thus provide misleading or incorrect information. In addition, it is common on social media to create fake profiles to impersonate fictitious or real persons, such as celebrities or other people in the public interest. Government and formal organizations, such as the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, which are the source of accurate and refereed information, do not have accounts on social media. Therefore, it is important that government organizations take part in social media, establishing a channel to connect with people in order to educate them about religion and provide authorized information.

Censorship and control over the information available on the Internet, including on social media, is one of the biggest problems in Saudi Arabia. Participants have stated that this poses the greatest difficulty and barrier, because the blocking of accounts and information probably prevents people from accessing a lot of information that they need. Sometimes, filtering can block the wrong accounts or information based on ever-present rules. For instance, safe accounts might be blocked just because they contain one unsuitable keyword, even though the majority of their content is beneficial. The

government should be careful with this practice, because social media has become an important resource for educating citizens and providing them with new information and knowledge. Censorship is not a solution in cyberspace, where people and the community learn from one another.

CONCLUSION

Social media is increasingly used to search for religious information in Saudi Arabia. Although Islam is a way of life, most people prefer the personal accounts of religious specialists and scholars when seeking information. However, there is still some doubt about the content of social media, and users might search for other resources to verify the credibility of what they find. The study also shows that social media influences individuals' thoughts. Therefore, it is preferred as a channel to publish and discuss religious issues.

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