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LIVING WITH THE SMARTPHONE: RELIGIOUS MUSLIM FAMILIES IN ISRAEL PRACTICE MOBILITY AND PIETY

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In this paper, we explore some practices and meanings involved in the adoption of the smartphone among religious Muslim families in Israel. As part of a larger project on the cultural practices underlying media adoption and resistance, we analyze in-depth interviews conducted with 25 families (50 parents, 41 children aged 12-17 and 4 older ones, between August 2016-May 2017) that belong to an ethnic and national minority in Israel. Our analysis suggests that the adoption of this seemingly transparent medium involves a multilayered, ongoing cultural and religious interpretive work. The intergenerational perspective on this ideological group suggests, at the same time, that the deliberations they experience and the negotiations they perform may be shared among smartphone users in other cultural contexts.

The study draws on three theoretical strands: (1) work on the mobile online telephone that explores the socio-technical construction of this medium by its users – the meanings and the affordances they assign to it and the ways in which their cultural positioning shapes and colors how they use and discuss it (Schrock, 2015; Smahel et al., 2020); (2) work that develops concepts of mediation to ask how communication media “domesticate” family members and at the same time, how they appropriate, objectify, incorporate and convert media within the moral economies of their households and communities (Hoover, Clark & Alters, 2004; Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992); and (3) work on media and religion that explores ways in which new media are

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implicated in expanding, broadening and deepening religious practices or in challenging and undermining them (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2013).

We discuss our findings from two complementary perspectives:

The family: Studies of mediation and domestication have often defined the family as their unit of analysis, taking for granted the household as the social and physical context in which adoption and consumption take place (Nathanson, 2015; Zaman et al., 2016). Our investigation similarly regards the family as its unit of analysis, particularly since the families we interviewed are traditional both in that they have two parents and at least two children living under the same roof; and in that they are literally conservative. It is ironic, then, that these traditional characteristics construct the families we interviewed as the Other of the quintessential family presumed in the literature. Our analysis highlights how Muslim family members negotiate a medium that undermines traditional parental and religious authorities, while at the same time providing them with intense and renewed ways of practicing their familial ties and religious commitments.

As against the backdrop of several mostly quantitative studies of Palestinian Arabs in Israel (Abu-Asbah, 2018), we analyze the relationships between mothers and fathers (e.g. how mothers are tasked with enforcing family rules whereas fathers are the ones who punish for breaking them); between older and younger siblings (e.g. how older brothers monitor their younger sisters' use of the technology and their verbal and visual social networking); between parents and their children, and the children's imagined peer group (e.g. how parents and children negotiate purchase and use of the phone, and how they introduce the community to justify their practices); between parents and uncles, children and their cousins (e.g. how family members practice religion, while their less devout relatives delegate practicing to others). The challenges that members of this relatively invisible group face with the adoption of the smartphone are to some extent "theirs" – challenges of an ethnic and national minority group whose voice, if heard at all, would be typically through others. At the same time, we propose that their challenges bespeak of the challenges faced by users in other social contexts and moral economies, specifically, when and how to use the smartphone in ways that enhance (or do not interfere with) their practices and beliefs.

Religion: The main characteristic of Muslim religious practices is their independence from space, suggesting "ontological connection between mobility and Islam" (Bağlı, 2015, p. 309). This constructs the mobile phone as particularly suitable for Muslim religious practice. Thus, we describe a range of smartphone apps that allow our interviewees to practice their religion: a compass that points in the direction of prayer, a clock that signals the times of prayer, a string of beads counting the names of god, and last but not least, an electronic version of the Quran. These apps are embedded in Muslims' particular religious practice.

At the same time, we describe religious practices that rely on widely used apps which are not essentially religious – mostly WhatsApp groups that afford virtual gatherings for promoting charity, pilgrimage and Quran reading (Khatma groups). Members of other religions use the online mobile for similar purposes – the documentation of pilgrimages allows Jews to re-experience them in other times and places and with different people

(Schwarz, 2010), and they too organize Psalms reading groups using WhatsApp. However, the analysis highlights the particular tensions that are woven into our interviewees' uses: they are concerned whether participation in Khatma groups amounts to showing off – namely, the sin or Riya – or whether it expresses devotion; whether the electronic texts are authentic or fake and whether they are Sunni or Shia; and whether authority lies with the familiar local Sheikh or with trans-national world-renowned preachers. These questions are implicated in Muslim doctrines and in the predicament of Palestinian Arab families in Israel – and in the affordances of social media and online mobile phones.

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