

Facebook as Embodiment of Social Relations and Piety among American Muslim Women

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Abstract

Based on a three-year-long ethnographic research on a group of young Turkish-American Muslim women, affiliated with a faith-based social movement, I explored why these young women turned to Facebook to maintain their religious sisterhood after their graduation from high school and how their media choice and use of Facebook contribute to their Muslim subject formation. Drawing from literature on ethics and morality and employing a discourse-centered approach to language and culture provide me with frameworks and tools that help to move beyond the homogenizing and prescriptive concepts like “media niche” and “networked ore digital religion” in this study. Through these frameworks, I demonstrated that their media choice and use is more about their ethical becoming as Muslim subjects rather than solely being about medium itself or performing religious identities. Besides, their moral project, that is becoming better Muslims, rely not only on religious codes and norms but also on everyday social norms and values. This study particularly demonstrates how new practices of mediation become part of existing and old ethical debates and therefore is important in shedding light on the media choices of individuals.

Keywords

Media choice, Facebook, friendship, ethics, morality, Muslim subjectivities

The social network sites (SNS), like Facebook, has become embedded in the everyday lives of a wide range of individuals, both in the United States where it originated and throughout the world. Facebook opens up a new social space for both new and already-existing forms of sociability, networking, self-expression, and self-display, allowing communication across time and distance (Jones, Schieffelin, and Smith 2011; Miller 2011). Several scholars across disciplines studied the use of Facebook by focusing on user practices and motivations. These studies generally argued that even though Facebook has the potential to connect with a vast number of new and existing contacts, many use it to stay in touch with existing friends (Ellison et al. 2014; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield 2007). They emphasized the way Facebook is used to generate and maintain social capital through the ease of connection with heterogeneous social ties.

Another trend of research explored the media selection in relation to users' interpersonal networks (Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011; Liu and Yang 2016). Facebook in these works is seen as a choice among many others that is primarily used in the early stages of friendship (Yang, Brown, and Braun 2014) and for less intimate contacts (Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011) whereas synchronous media rich in social contextual cues are argued to be used with more intimate contacts as they promote emotion and affection expression (Dimmick et al. 2007; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011). Most of this type of scholarship employed quantitative-based approaches and quantifiable variables in exploring media choice and motivations. On the other hand, some scholars examined media choices at the intersection of media and religion by using qualitative methods and demonstrated how religious motivations, values, and norms shape religious communities' use of media (Bellar 2017; Campbell 2012) and how media actually transforms religion (Campbell 2007; Lundby 2013). In these studies, scholars mainly employ the concept "networked religion" to demonstrate the ways "online practices are often clearly embedded in the values or systems of offline culture," (Campbell 2012, 68) and how "the relationship between online and offline religious practice is continuously blurring" (Bellar 2017, 114).

In this study, employing frameworks from philosophy and anthropology, I explore media choice and motivations and their link to moral worlds and ethical subject formation among a group of young Turkish-American Muslim women to move beyond the essentialist “media niche” studies and the studies that primarily focused on “networked religion” and “storied identity.” These studies do reveal important aspects of media design and affordances and how religion shapes media and how media transforms religion. However, the literature on “media niche” lacks the user perspective whereas the literature on “networked religion” and “storied identity” primarily employ traditionally recognized categories such as religion, religious, and identity.

To better understand the complexity of media choice among this group and its link to their moral worlds, following Jarret Zigon (2013, 202), I employ the concept “moral assemblages,” that could be defined as “unique conglomerations of diverse and often contradictory discourses as well as diverse and sometimes incompatible embodied moral dispositions.” This framework allows me to understand how religion is part of their moral projects and not only interact but also interanimate other value systems that they are part of. Furthermore, I employ “subjectivity” and “subject formation” in this study following Foucault (1997) and several anthropologists (Mahmood 2005; Rabinow 1994; Zigon 2013) instead of solely examining identity performances as subjectivity encompasses “multidimensional relationship” that one has “to others, to things, and to ourselves” whereas “identity” can be seen as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Bettie 2003, 32).

This study is based on a three-year-long multisited ethnography among a group of young Muslim women that are affiliated with a faith-based transnational movement, known as the *Gülen* movement. During my multisited fieldwork, I participated and observed their online and offline social and religious circles in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews with them. To examine the complexity of their media choice and motivations and their link to their moral worlds and ethical

becoming, I utilize approaches from a discourse-centered approach to language and culture, primarily conducted discourse and genre analysis from a semiotic perspective (Urban 1991).

Media Choice and Relational Distance

The current landscape of digital communication technologies provides individuals with a variety of possibilities to select and adopt to cultivate and maintain different levels of interpersonal relations. To map the current landscape of digital technology use in relation to user's interpersonal networks, some scholars employed the theory of niche (Dimmick et al. 2007; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011; Ramirez et al. 2008). According to Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian (2010, 27), a *niche* "is that area within the resource space where one media form outcompetes or is superior to other media forms." More specifically, if a medium has superiority over others in fulfilling certain needs of its users in a given situation, it is argued that this medium has a niche. Scholars, who employed the niche theory to study the media selection in interpersonal relations, mainly with one's friends, argued that people turned to different communication channels based on relational distances (Yang, Brown, and Braun 2014; Kim, Sohn, and Choi 2011). Primarily, they maintained that the level of intimacy among the communicators influences individual's media choices and, therefore, the interactive media that are synchronous and rich in social-contextual cues (e.g., phone calls) are chosen over others since they are argued to be promoting the expression of emotions and affect. On the contrary, the media that are asynchronous and has less social-contextual cues (i.e., instant messages [IM] and email) are used in communicating with less intimate contacts (Dimmick et al. 2007; Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian 2010; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011).

Yang, Brown, and Braun (2014) including SNSs in their study examined the use of different communication channels based on the developmental level of a relationship among college students through taking the perceived salient media features' contribution to the observed patterns

into consideration. They found that college students' media choice follows a sequence that is tied to the stages of relationship development in addition to individual (gender) and contextual factors (geographic distance). More specifically some media channels are seen as more intimate and used with closer acquaintances. Facebook, seen as less intimate, is primarily used in the early stages whereas instant messaging and cell phone, seen as more intimate, are used as the relationship progresses. In their study, Liu and Yang (2016) further investigated the strength of the association between media niche and friendship closeness. Their findings revealed that mobile phone calls and texting positively correlated with friendship closeness compared to IM, SNSs, and online gaming. In collectivist cultures, however, they found a stronger association between friendship closeness and use of SNSs and online gaming. They suggested that this could be due to the social norms of these cultural groups that influence the media niche. In general, they argued that media and channel niches are not fixed; they would vary, to some extent, by the social influences experienced by the users.

Other scholars have also reported similar findings on the influence of culture on SNSs use. For instance, in their study, Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013) showed that the same SNSs users showed different behavioral patterns when using one American-based and one Asian-based SNSs that are seen as technically equivalent due to the perception of the Asian-based one as having more collectivist norms. Another study, conducted by Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2011) in which media users from different nations compared, similarly found that SNSs are primarily used by US users with more individualistic focus to reach and maintain a larger network of causal relationships whereas Korean users being from a collectivist culture leaned towards maintaining a smaller network with intimate acquaintances.

In these studies, the focus is primarily given to medium and how each medium has a niche that makes it superior over others in the current media landscape in a given situation. When talking about niche, they included several dimensions, mainly when, where, and whom used

a certain media. In the whom dimension, Yang, Brown, and Braun (2014) talked about the intimacy of medium and how it matches the intimacy of relations among users whereas Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2011) showed the cultural dimension of the whom and how it affected individual's media use. All of these scholarships see what a medium is and does as intrinsic to the medium itself to a certain extent. Even though these studies consider user differences both culturally and socially, these dimensions have been considered in an essential and prescriptive way.

Religion, Media, and Identity

Heidi Campbell (2012), going beyond the essentialist and prescriptive approaches to media and the internet, highlighted the social and religious dimensions of media use and argued that more emphasis should be given to user's religious practices both online and offline and their interconnectedness to everyday practices. In this vein, Rashi and McCombs (2015) examining the employment of the internet by *Chabad*, an ultraorthodox Jewish movement, for their community outreach programs from an agenda-setting theory standpoint found that their media motivation and use came from the communities' core religious beliefs and teachings, hence the religious texts in this case. Similarly, Bellar (2017) studying the app choice among a group of Evangelical Christians found that they shifted their core religious practices from offline platforms to the mobile contexts. Another study by Johns (2015), on the other hand, surveying the religious Facebook users showed that they find Facebook as a vital platform to support their religious communities and organizations' offline programs.

These studies, however, either looked at the use of the internet among religious communities and—or individuals or examined media choice for explicit religious purposes. Some scholars challenged the perception and employment of “media” in media studies and “religion” in religious studies (Lundby 2013; Meyer 2013). Meyer (2013), for instance, argues that it is important to study religion as mediated that is to understand it through material mediations. In this vein, Eisenlohr (2010) by seeing

media use as part of an everyday mediation argued that the choice and reliance on cassette sermons among Mauritian Muslims as mediators of immediacy could not be solely understood through technologies themselves. Instead, this capacity is rooted in broader notions and practices of Mauritians that lead them to attach such capacities to these media. In addition, Hoover (2013) calls for explorations of “Third Spaces of Digital Religion” that is beyond the traditionally recognized categories, such as private and public, formal and informal media contexts and to put the emphasis on practitioners as actors. In this study, following these goals and drawing from anthropology of ethics and anthropology of media (Madianou and Miller 2012) and employing semiotic approaches, I examine how this group of young Muslim women see their media choice and use as part of their larger moral project and how this, in turn, helps them contribute to their ethical becoming as better Muslims.

Moral Worlds, Media Choice, and Ethical Subject Formation

As argued by Michael Lambek (2010, 1), ethnographers “commonly find that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good.” Similarly, in this ethnographic account, I find this group of Muslim women repeatedly asking the ethical questions, like how to be a good Muslim and how to be a good sister, more importantly how to keep in touch and emulate prophets *vefa* (religious loyalty) in contemporary world. With the ethical turn in social sciences, ethics is now seen as an inseparable aspect of the human condition (Lambek 2010). The terms morality and ethics both refer to a sense of right or wrong, what constitutes the human good and practical judgment and agreement on proper behavior. Some distinguish between morality and ethics (Foucault 1997) whereas others use them interchangeably (Deeb 2006; Lambek 2010). In this study, I use them interchangeably.

Individuals make several ethical choices throughout their everyday lives by drawing from several different moral rubrics. These ethical

choices are not merely decisions made based on judgments but also about norms and values in action that are tied to ethical subject formation. In understanding ethical choices and action among this group of young Muslim women, I draw from Jarret Zigon's (2013, 202) concept of "moral assemblages," that could be defined as "unique conglomerations of diverse and often contradictory discourses as well as diverse and sometimes incompatible embodied moral dispositions." The use of the moral assemblage approach allows me to take into consideration not only their media ideologies, and media affordances but also the social and cultural worlds that they are part of. In fact, this moral assemblage approach comes to embody their media choices as inseparable from their everyday lives and hence their moral worlds and subject formation as Muslims.

I primarily employ the term "subjectivity" and "subject formation" in this study following Foucault (1997) and several anthropologists (Mahmood 2005; Rabinow 1994; Zigon 2013) instead of solely examining identity performances as subjectivity encompasses "multidimensional relationship" that one has "to others, to things, and to ourselves" whereas "identity" can be seen as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Bettie 2003, 32). Furthermore, I see that being a subject is an ongoing process of becoming a subject (Butler 2004). Thus, a person needs to repeatedly practice oneself and form oneself through drawing from codes, norms, and values, and hence bringing them into action, and at times reappropriating them.

Methods and Participants

This study is based on over a three-year-long multisited ethnography that has been conducted both online and offline from 2009 to spring of 2012. Research participants are a group of young Turkish-American women who are affiliated with a faith-based social movement, known as *Gülen* or *Hizmet* Movement. Between 2006–10 they attended a private high school that follows a secular curriculum in East Coast US affiliated with

the movement. Their active participation in the movement's social and religious events (e.g., interfaith dialogue events, Turkish cultural center, weekly religious social gatherings, and retreats) brought these women together. There are twelve women in the group. During the first year of my participant observation, they were all high school students except the mentor of the group, Hulya, who helped their socialization process both academically and spiritually.

I first met Hulya through email when she was referred to me by a friend to answer her questions about a graduate program at my university in 2006. During my email communications with her, I added her as a friend on Facebook and continued to follow her through Facebook. Her interaction with several other young Turkish-American women attracted my attention, and in autumn of 2008, I started conducting online ethnographic research on their group interactions and identity on Facebook with their informal consent and initially followed them through Hulya's Facebook page. Once I get my formal consent, I became Facebook friends with all of them and began to conduct online and face-to-face interviews with the group members in addition to start participating in some of their local events. During my participant observation, I discovered that all of the group members are affiliated with the *Hizmet* Movement. Upon this, I began to conduct participant observation in social and religious events of the *Hizmet* Movement in the US *Hizmet* ("voluntary service" in Turkish) refers to the principal focus of the movement.

In this ethnographic endeavor, through focusing on connection and mobility rather than static location, multisited fieldwork emerged (Amit 1999) in addition to emphasizing "the system of relations" of my research participants instead of viewing them as "situated subjects of ethnography" (Marcus 2012, 19). I initially began to observe and participate in their interactions on Facebook on a daily basis where I was visible at times and invisible at other times. As pointed out by Hine (2015, 57), "mutual visibility for ethnographic purposes" may not have to happen solely through the primary online medium,

Facebook in this account. My online participant observation directed me to participate in and observe several local social and religious events of these women and the movement (i.e., Thanksgiving reunion, religious gatherings, and retreats). Participant observation was employed as the core method of data collection, accompanied by face-to-face and online discussions and interviews (recorded and transcribed with their consent). I employed a discourse-centered approach to language and culture (Urban 1991) and semiotic approaches in mapping and analyzing online and face-to-face discourse events, instances, and genres to understand the meaning that they attach to Facebook, their media choice and use of Facebook vis-à-vis their larger moral projects, that is becoming better people and Muslims.

I argue that language and more specifically the semiotic circulation of discourse, be it a discourse event, an instance, or a genre, is an important means in understanding not only the ideologies, moral worlds, and subject formation of individuals but also the meaning of social media for its users and the ways new media technologies have been embedded in everyday social and ethical lives of individuals (Peterson 2006). As argued by Urban (1991, 1), to understand individuals' and cultures' values, norms, and ideologies, it is not necessary to get into their heads. Instead, there are easily available "publicly accessible signs, the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse." I not only examined the circulation of keywords, like "Facebook," "friends," "sisters," and "Muslim," et cetera, among this group of Muslim women, but also different genre forms that they used in their online and offline interactions. Mapping genres and approaching them dialogically provide me with a better understanding of the ways they use Facebook and incorporate it into their everyday lives (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

Background

During my participant observation, I found that their participation in *Hizmet* circles brought them together and helped them cultivate

their religious sisterhood. In addition, their perception of “friendship” and their use of media have been greatly influenced and shaped by the teachings of the movement. The *Hizmet* movement that they are affiliated with is a revivalist movement that emphasizes a socio-spiritual approach to renewal and progress which links traditional individual moral persona and embodied practices with communal and social values of everyday life. The movement, inspired mainly by the work and philosophy of Fethullah Gülen, who is a controversial Muslim cleric that lives in the US. Gülen shifted the primary focus of his adherents from the cultivation of one’s self through self-discipline towards attracting God’s mercy through serving humanity in the everyday as ethically-responsible moral subjects.

In his sermons and writings, Gülen (1996) portrayed a pious person as one who not only focuses on conventional embodied forms of piety, such as praying and veiling, but who also cares for and serves others regardless of their faith. In this vein, Gülen encouraged *Hizmet* volunteers to contribute to society through education, in particular by founding secular private K-12 schools, first in Turkey and then throughout the world (Walton 2014). One such private school brought these young women in this study together, in addition to their participation in other *Hizmet* circles on the East Coast of the United States. I participated in different *Hizmet* circles, specifically in their social and religious gatherings and events, both online and offline. Even though the movement is very large, most volunteers only interact locally with their sisterhood—brotherhood circles. Typically, there is an appointed *abla* (elder sister) for a sisterhood circle, who should not only be knowledgeable in religious texts but also a sincere movement volunteer. This group of young women formed one such circle with twelve members, including their elder sister Hulya. Their *abla* acts as their friend and spiritual mentor by organizing weekly *sohbets* (religious gatherings) and other social events. In these *sohbets*, they benefit mainly from two sources, Nursi’s commentary on Qur’an and Gülen’s books and sermons. It is usually the *abla* who chooses a topic and reads from one of these texts and explains them by giving examples.

Sohbets are informal. And the *abla* acts as the discussion leader and facilitates learning through engaging these young women in the topics discussed.

In my participation in their circles, I understand that the key principle of the movement is the belief that serving humanity is serving God. However, serving humanity in different ways requires one to act sincerely. The cultivation and maintenance of sincerity start with, first, cultivating the sincere relations with one's sisters and brothers in the *Hizmet* as could be seen in a quote from the exegesis of Qur'an read by these women in one of the religious gatherings I attended:

To imagine your brothers' virtues and merits in your own selves, and to thankfully take pride at their glory. The Sufis have terms they use among themselves, "annihilation (passing away from our individual conscious being) in the shaykh," "annihilation in the Prophet;" I am not a Sufi, but these principles of theirs make a good rule in our way, in the form of "annihilation in the brothers." Among brothers this is called "tefânî;" that is, "annihilation in one another." That is to say, to forget the feelings of one's own carnal soul¹, and live in one's mind with one's brothers' virtues and feelings. In any event, the basis of our way is brotherhood; it is not the relationship between father and son, or shaykh (a spiritual guide) and follower; it is that of true brotherhood... Our way is the closest friendship... The essence of such friendship is true sincerity. The person who spoils this true sincerity falls from the high pinnacle of this friendship, possibly to the bottom of a deep depression. There is nothing onto which he may cling in between. (Nursi 1996, 21st Flash)

Tefânî is the notion through which one can cultivate a pious persona and get closer to God through successful cultivation and maintenance of religious companionship. To practice tefani, they believe in emulating

¹ In Islamic theology, the *nefs-i emmare* (carnal soul) is the primitive stage of the soul that is open to evil inclinations.

Prophet's *vefa* (religious loyalty) towards one's sisters and brothers in the religion. To better understand their Facebook use, it is important to understand their perception of friendship in their close-knit circle. In the following sections, I will first discuss how their perception of friendship has been shaped by different social and religious registers and then move to the discussion of their choice and use of Facebook vis-à-vis their morality, sociality, and piety.

Sociality, Morality, and Piety

This group of young Turkish-American Muslim women sees sociality as a necessary aspect of one's piety. In this vein, they aimed to cultivate and maintain strong social ties with their sisters in their group. In our discussion on what brought them together and how they see their relational ties, they referenced *Hizmet* in particular and Islam in general. For instance, one day when discussing their group and friendship, Ayse commented "it is the *Hizmet* that brought us together," similarly Hulya mentioned, "our most important common ground is the *Hizmet* indeed"². She further added, "if you ask any of us about our group, they'll tell you at the beginning we were isolated people but the *Hizmet* and the teachings of the *Hizmet* connect us and allow us to create our sisterhood." They all then referred to the teachings of the *Hizmet* and Islam directly and indirectly in our discussions on their friendship. As we were talking in their group, for instance, Merve commented, "we are not just connected to each other only with past memories here or there. We are sharing so many unique things that cannot be touched by hands, cannot be seen with eyes, and cannot be heard with ears." She then summarized her comment by stating, "what holds us [our group] together very tightly really comes from the teaching of religion that we love each other for the sake of God and we together try to walk to him hand by hand." All of the group members like Merve either

² Most interviews were conducted in Turkish and I transcribed and translated them into English. All names are pseudonyms. During my participant observation from 2009–12, I conducted over one hundred semi-structured and informal individual interviews in addition to conducting over forty group interviews and discussions.

directly or indirectly use quotes from the chapter on *ikhlas* (sincerity) and *uhuvvet* (religious friendship—sisterhood) from the *the Risale-i Nur* (exegesis of Qur'an).

In these instances, by circulating several intertexts—decontextualized and recontextualized discursive elements (Silverstein 2005)—generated from different discourse forms and genres of the *Hizmet* movement (i.e., “loving each other for the sake of God,” “seeking God’s pleasure,” “do not want any favor for our love,” “loving each other without any other reason but for God;” Nursi 1996[1936]; 1998[1934]), these Muslim women indexed their alignment with the *Hizmet* movement in particular and Islam in general. Furthermore, through an ontological lens which appreciates that there are different ways of inhabiting the world, in addition to different perceptions and constructions of it, I observe that they see their friendship with their sisters in their group as an extension of their relationship with God since being pious requires them to cultivate and maintain intimate and sincere relations with one’s sisters in the *Hizmet*. One day in our discussion with Serra, she told me:

I heard from Hocaefendi (referring to *Gülen*) that our sisters in the *Hizmet* is like stars, whomever we cling onto can bring us closer to God. Seeing my sisters and interacting with them reminds me God and brings me closer to God.

Similarly, Ayse told me that:

My sisters is like my compass. Whenever I felt lost or sad, interacting with them makes me happy and reminds me God... reminds me that I am not alone, and I am not here only for myself.

In my participation in their face-to-face gatherings and Facebook interactions, I observed that even though they draw from the teachings of the *Hizmet* in seeing their sisters as a way to be with God and get closer to God, they draw from everyday social rubrics in maintaining and furthering their social ties with their sisters (Vicini 2013). Similarly, Vicini (2013), studying

a group of young men affiliated with the *Hizmet* movement in Turkey, found that “it is by relating to each other” that his interlocutors “lived and understood their own place in the world as Muslims.” Vicini, finding everyday sociability as an important aspect of how his interlocutors become better Muslims, argued that if the focus was only given to those actions that are geared toward ethical self-discipline, like prayer, he would not be able to understand and analyze everyday sociability as an important aspect of his interlocutors’ lived religious experiences and their ethical becoming. Correspondingly, this group of young Muslim women in the *Hizmet*, created an understanding of piety and moral selfhood that requires them to cultivate and maintain intimate social relations, primarily with their religious sisters, in their everyday life. However, their group’s dispersal to different geographical locations throughout the United States and Turkey after their graduation from high school created a moral puzzlement, as voiced by Sera, on how to emulate the Prophet’s *vefa*:

We have been dispersed to different parts of the world now and we cannot see each other as often as needed to fulfill our religious duty of *vefa* (loyalty) anymore. And thus, I am not sure how we should understand and show our *vefa* now... I judge myself by asking the question, “Do I need to be more engaged with technology now?” Well obviously I do, but I don’t know how much engagement would be appropriate. And big sisters and big brothers are not saying anything about it. They go, like, “yeah, *vefa* is important,” but now there are long distances among us and how should I now need to show my *vefa* in the age of technology?

As could be seen from Sera’s comment, at first, they were puzzled and tried to find ways to maintain their relational ties with their sisters as their big sisters and brothers in the *Hizmet*, that are their mentors, were not saying anything specifically about the use of technology and only keep reminding them practicing *vefa* is crucial. Consequently, their understanding of piety and moral selfhood collides with an understanding and use of a social media platform, turning them to Facebook. Some of the group members were already active users of Facebook, while others joined Facebook after

their dispersal. Through mapping discourse genres and forms before and after dispersal, I observed a significant routine change that also showed a shift in their media ideologies, that can be defined as “a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning” (Gershon 2010, 3), surrounding Facebook. More specifically, between 2009–10 it was more about having fun whereas from 2010 to 2012 Facebook became a crucial tool to practice a culturally valorized form of sociality (religious sisterhood, *uhuvvet*) and pious personhood (*ikhlas* and *tefâni*). Before discussing the changing meaning of Facebook for these women by focusing on discourse genres and forms used on Facebook, I will first discuss their perception of Facebook and why they chose Facebook among many other tools to keep in touch after their dispersal. In our discussion on and off Facebook, these young Muslim women constructed Facebook as their group’s locality and hence as a social space to enact religious principles of piety after their dispersal. When talking about what Facebook is and what kind of tool it is for them, they changed the topic to their group, and vice versa. For instance, in our discussion with Emine, she commented:

Facebook is a way to be with my sisters. How should I say? For instance, I tried to deactivate my Facebook account twice. But I feel that something is missing from my life. The only reason for me to come back to Facebook is to keep up with my group and their conversations.

When talking about their group, Merve changed the topic to Facebook:

Our group! This is why we keep our Facebook accounts open. In our group, we have Beyza, Kubra, Rana, Emine, for instance, she did not have a cell phone for some time and Hulya, she is in Turkey right now, and we are seeing them on Facebook, keeping up with them. Otherwise we cannot keep in contact.

By 2010, even though they all turned to Facebook to maintain their sisterhood, they also began to see the negative sides of Facebook for

their religiosity due to its connection to voyeurism and gossip. They believe that everyone has *nefs* (carnal soul) and learning much about others' private lives on Facebook might lead them to gossip about others, that is to talk behind their back in their absence. Thus, there were cases where they deactivated their accounts. However, they all came back to Facebook after seeing that they cannot show their *vefa* to each other through other means. In addition to constructing Facebook as a crucial way to be with their sisters in their group, they also referred to their youth identities and sociality in their choice of Facebook. For instance, in one of our discussions, Burcu emphasized how religious sisterhood requires one to show *vefa* (religious loyalty) and how Facebook helps them to enact this religious loyalty as a new generation:

We try to be *vefali* (being religiously loyal) to each other. We're a new generation and we cannot always find enough time to ask how our sisters are. But via Facebook we can follow our sisters. Then messages like "where have you been?," "Are you ok?" started to be circulated within our group.

Not only in interviews but also in their Facebook interactions among themselves, they underline the importance of Facebook in practicing *vefa* in multiple instances. For instance, when Hulya posted on Facebook to let their sisters' know that she might deactivate her Facebook account, Burcu commented as follow:

Burcu evet cok buyuk bir slusturacak. bnm icin olacak! tel desen bs. this is all we have [it would negatively affect me! cell phone is also bs. this is all we have].

As it could be seen from their narrations above, these Muslim women not only draw from the discourses of *Hizmet* and religious sociality in choosing Facebook to enact religious principles of piety, their youth identities and hence sociality also influence their choice of Facebook in interacting with their sisters after their dispersal. More specifically, as they began college, they had less time to navigate and use some other communicative channels.

However, it was not just about time but also about the device availability and money. Not all of them at the time had smartphones and—or free wireless plans to interact freely with their sisters. In addition to ease of communication, Facebook was a very popular site among high school and college students during those years and could be accessed from a phone, tablet, PC and—or a laptop. Throughout my ethnography from 2009–12, I observed that this popularity also contributed to their use of Facebook. In the absence of the availability of other mediated forms, they see Facebook differently from other media tools due to the fact that it allows them to share more as they could post pictures, and share media, update their statuses, write on each other’s walls, use private messaging tool, like and comment each other’s posts and pictures, and use the chat tool. As a result of this intense sharing via Facebook, which is argued to be much more than that through other communication means, Facebook makes them feel that they are together as a group. The following quote from Merve during our group discussion summarizes what kind of a space Facebook is for them:

It [Facebook] is a means that we could be together in the same place and at the same time when we are dispersed physically. We cannot always be at the same place [at the same time]. For instance, I can talk with Emine on the phone. But there we cannot be together as a group at the same time. But this could happen on Facebook.

Merve then continued her discussion on Facebook and differentiated it from other communication tools used among group members:

Since we are dispersed now, we use social media more. Facebook like is for me just means that, I mean there is msn, skype, other programs but we can post pictures, be together as a group.

Similarly, Ayse emphasized that Facebook allows them to share which she argues is better in practicing *vefa*:

With Facebook, we can share more and do more with our hacilar [“pilgrims” to refer to her sisters]. We also sometimes use Skype,

Msn, WhatsApp... But it is not enough. In Facebook, we can visit each other's walls, we can tag each other in a photo or in a post, we can send quick messages to each other... how should I say... I really need Facebook to keep up with my sisters.

They also talked about how Facebook is just fun for them from 2009–10 and how then it became a vital tool to be with their sisters in their group. Burcu, for instance, emphasized the change from enjoyment to piously-motivated social use of Facebook in one of our discussions:

It [using Facebook] was a desire and an ambition for us at first. I guess just to have a Facebook page. We were using it just to use it. But now it became like a necessity. We need it to keep our group together.

Furthermore, in our discussion with Rana, she also drew attention to the shift of focus in their use of Facebook:

Now we're dispersed. In 2009, we were together and Facebook was just fun for us and... to entertain us. We were using it for fun. But now it connects us and allows us to keep up with [each other].

After their dispersal, these young Muslim women in a transnational movement began to see Facebook as their group's locality and hence as a social space to enact religious piety in their everyday lives through participating in a community and its broader movement. In one of our online group discussions, Ayse responded to a comment made by Sera, as follows:

I know Facebook is not enough to show my vefa toward you [referring to her sisters in the Hizmet] and to do uhuvvet. But we do not have any other means now to keep in touch. Some of you deactivated your Facebook accounts to try to find other tools to keep in touch... but you all came back to Facebook at the end. I told you this [referring to Facebook] is all we have and all we can use right now to keep in touch.

However, enacting religious principles of piety does not require these young women to turn to Facebook but to cultivate and maintain a culturally valorized form of sociality (*uhuvvet* and *tefâni*). Their everyday sociality and morality as Turkish-American youths, instead, turned them to Facebook after their navigation and use of other communication tools. In the absence of other means to keep in touch with their sisters, they primarily looked for a tool that would resemble their everyday conversations and give them that group feeling. The ethical question of how to properly keep in touch and maintain their relational ties as youths turned them to Facebook and its affordances.

Facebook is (for) Fun; Facebook is (for) *Vefa*

When I began to work with this group of young Turkish-American Muslim women on Facebook, not all of them had a Facebook account, and in general, Facebook was used as a space to continue talking more about what they had done in their face-to-face interactions in addition to teasing each other to initiate fun talk. Thus, most of the discourse forms and genres used on Facebook during these early years both generated and contributed to the symbolic capital that is being humorous on Facebook (Bucholtz 1999). In fact, cartoons were very commonly used. In these cartoons, funny tagging practices were important in making fun of each other, and I argue that they serve as the “generic framing device” that marks the beginning of a genre of fun talk (Briggs and Bauman 1992). The following excerpt is a common example of their use of cartoons and funny tagging practices in their community of practice. Hulya posted a cartoon to Facebook in 2009 and tagged Burcu, Emine, and Kubra on it.

Excerpt-1:



www.penguen.com

Kid: We began to study the multiplication table today

Father: Gosh I cannot endure this kid's talking. :))))))

Tagged: Kubra, Emine, Burcu

Posted on October 22 · Comment · Like

Burcu

my dear husband, our son is like you :D

Thursday, 09:42pm

Emine

haha :D idk y but I was always assigned to a male character in cartoons. Burcu seems to be a better fit for a male character.

Thursday, 09:45pm

Sumeyye

haha I love it :D My dear Emine you're becoming more charismatic as you grow. What's going on man :))

Thursday, 09:45pm

Hulya

you look great with a moustache my dear Emine :)))) jk ♥

Thursday, 09:48pm

Emine

haha yes my dear friends I'll grow moustache then :p since sister Hulya wants it :p btw, thank you my dear Sumeyye you're the only one who finds me charismatic :p

Thursday, 09:55pm

Kubra

multiplication table sister Hulya. its been way too long since i passed the multiplication table Sister Hulya, and last time i checked i was still a girl :) but gotta admit, loooooove the parents...D

Thursday, 10:06pm

Hulya

love you :)

Thursday, 10:19pm

Omitted posts

In addition to cartoon use, these women also used group pictures where funny effects were created via using Photoshop and actual funny photos of their group members. During 2009–10, they were spending most of their time interacting face-to-face with their sisters at school in addition to the movement's local religious and social gatherings and events. Although they saw Facebook as a medium where they further their group relations via humorous conversational and media exchanges in 2009–10, it was not considered vital in that period by the group members. After their dispersal in 2010, however, they began to see Facebook not as a communicative medium to use for the sake of play only but a medium for communicative practice that is vital in keeping contact with their group members in their particular localities. Those who were not on Facebook were forced to open a Facebook account. Some group members opened an account for those who were not on Facebook at the time of their dispersal. Facebook by 2010 became a locality for their group where they got together, interacted with each other via sharing posts, media, links to media, and pictures, and enjoyed their shared time and resources.

After their group's dispersal, most of the conversations that took place among these women on Facebook served as phatic communication since all the communicative practices helped them to mark alignment with each other and maintain their group relations in the absence of other means. More specifically, two types of genre were employed very frequently in their interactions on Facebook, "greeting" genres and "emotional" genres. Especially "greeting" genres were almost absent in the data prior to their dispersal. This type of genre is usually initiated by a common greeting phrase either in English or in Turkish. In addition, by 2010, I observed a significant increase in "emotional" genre use that has been accomplished through Facebook posts, comments, photos, and sharing media and—or links to media. In the following section, I discuss the use of new discourse forms and genres by these women on Facebook. I will support my points via providing examples for each form from my online ethnography and will discuss their link to offline genres and genre forms and their contribution to constructing an emotional discourse on Facebook.

From Genres of Fun to Genres of *Vefa*

The changing media ideology surrounding Facebook and its use among these young Turkish-American Muslim women became apparent through the examination of discourse genres and forms used on Facebook. As Briggs and Bauman (1992, 147) suggested "when genre is viewed in intertextual terms, its complex and contradictory relationship to discourse becomes evident." In this vein, I examined these new genre types in intertextual terms to better understand their link to face-to-face interactions. More specifically, looking at the phrases that mark the generic frame of "greeting" genres, I understand that these women in the absence of face-to-face and phone interactions transmitted their daily discourse routines to Facebook to fulfill the notion of *vefa* (loyalty) to their sisters. After their dispersal, I observed frequent use of "greeting" genres either between two or all group members. Sometimes they just greeted each other as a way to check if they were there and reachable when needed. For instance, one day Hulya posted the following post on Burcu's wall and then Burcu greeted her back.

Excerpt-2:

Hulya

Hey!!

Like · Friday at 1:46pm near Ankara, Turkey ·

Burcu

hey!! :)

Saturday at 12:15am · Like

Similarly, Esra greeted Emine and Emine greeted back.

Excerpt-3:

Esra to Emine

hi my dear Emine ♥

Like · See Friendship · October 1 at 3:42pm · Privacy:

Emine likes this.

Emine

hii my dear Esra :) how are you?

October 1 at 9:43pm · Like

Sometimes, they just greeted each other as seen in the excerpts above. However, mostly they not only greeted each other but also sought information and learned about their sisters' whereabouts in their diverse localities. They either began with a "how are you?"—or "where are you?"—type phrases or pretended that they are knocking on someone else's door or ask someone if they are there. For instance, in the following excerpt, they greet each other and ask about their whereabouts.

Excerpt-4:

Ayse to Emel

what is up?

Like · See Friendship · 16 hours ago · Privacy:

Emel

I'm in a steamboat right now. What's up with you my sister?

16 hours ago · Like

Ayse

I'm helping my little brother and sister with their homework till morning. They're giving too much homework sighh.... these people are crazy. What's up where are you going with a steamboat?

16 hours ago · Like · 1 person

In these “greeting” exchanges, they frequently used the notion of “voice” (“ses” in Turkish) pretending that they would like to hear each other’s voices as in face-to-face encounters.

Excerpt-5: Burcu’s post to Hulya’s wall

Burcu

whereeeeeeeeeee are you??? Let me hear your voice :(

November 30 at 5:17pm · Like · Comment

Hulya

here I come here I come I'm here now, did you miss me? ♥

Excerpt-6:

Merve

Heyyy Emel pleaseee let me hear your voiceee

Like · 6 hours ago ·

Emel

voice check 123 :))

ohh honey! I really missed you guys give me a call sometime :))

what's up? Did you meet with Burcu's?

Saturday at 11:38am · Like

Omitted posts

During my ethnography, I found that these young women see their Facebook wall as an extension of their physical embodiment and visits to each other's walls as an extension of physical social relations. One day Emine posted to Burcu's wall:

Excerpt-7:

Emine

my dear Burcu what's up?

Like · See Friendship · Sunday at 8:41pm · Privacy:

Burcu

my wall said it was very glad to see you :)) I'm fine my darling how about you?

Monday at 4:01pm · Like

Emine

I also missed your wall :) I'm somewhat fine how about you? I heard that you finished reciting the whole Qur'an in Arabic May Allah accept it / *Monday at 8:16pm · Like*

Omitted posts

As mentioned, Facebook wall is seen as similar to their physical locality, like a home. Consequently, they pretended to knock on each other's walls during their visits on Facebook. In the excerpt below, Emine visited Hulya's wall by pretending to knock on a physical door.

Excerpt-8:

Emel

knock knock knockkk :) here I comeeeeeeee ♥

Hulya

where were you sister, it seems you weren't here for a century :)

Friday at 11:45am · Like

Omitted posts

In addition to “greeting” genres, they began to use “emotional” genres frequently on Facebook. Prior to their dispersal in 2010, they were using fun talk as a way to mark their emotional states indirectly. However, after their dispersal, they began to use more affective and emotional displays on Facebook to express an affective stance and hence affective alignment with their sisters in their group. In their affective performances, they employ an affective register (Irvine 1990), and this register is multimodal (i.e., images, cartoons, etc.) and intertextual, weaving in diverse genres, such as “greeting” genres, “emotional” genres, fun talk, song lyrics, and poetry. Displays of emotion were also performed through tagging practices. They tagged some of the group members, who were not present on the photos posted, just to give the message to those that they had been thought of (Excerpt-9).

Excerpt-9: Merves's photo album

Group picture posted here

Like · Share

Hulya, Emine and Burcu like this.

Omitted posts

Merve

I tagged you in that empty space under me :)

May 6 at 9:05pm · Like

Omitted posts

When I talked to Merve about this tagging practice, she told me they want to show their sisters that they are thinking about them and they miss them. Almost everyday, either one or more group members explicitly or implicitly shared their emotions with each other on Facebook. Sometimes it takes the form of a brief explicit statement of affect, like Hulya's post to all group members (Excerpt-10) and Burcu's post to Merve's wall (Excerpt-11).

Excerpt-10:

Hulya

awwww :(i really miss seeing you every friday [referring to their Friday socioreligious gatherings] :(

November 3 at 6:06am · Like

Excerpt-11: Burcu posted the following on Merve's wall

Burcu

January 11 near XXXX

I would like to hold your skinny belly very tightly and do not want to leave you anymore! ♥

Merve

don't leave me ♥

January 11 at 10:15pm · Like

The excerpts presented above demonstrate how this group of women employed an affective register and perform affective displays through Facebook use. They marked their affective alignment and hence social intimacy through affective performances in and through Facebook (Irvine 1990). In addition to explicit enunciations of affect, they used songs, song lyrics, poems, and photos as enactments of affect. Sometimes they just share it with one of the group members by posting it directly to her wall (See Excerpt-12 below). At other times, one group member shared her feelings with all by posting them to public space and tagging all (See Excerpt-12 below).

Excerpt-12: Ayse to Merve

[Line 1 was taken from the lyrics of the “Move Along” song by “The All-American Rejects”]

Ayse

February 11

I just thought of you. Here's how: my hands were cold so
I thought hands are shaking cold, then I said these hands are meant
to hoooooollddd, speak to me.

Like · Comment

Merve

Ayseeeee!!!! this was so nice thoughh :) you got my favorite part!
:)

February 11 at 2:04pm · Like

Ayse

:) ♥ :D something like that so

February 11 at 2:14pm · Like · 1

Merve ♥ :)

February 11 at 6:48pm · Like

Excerpt-13:

Emine

One should have companions; mature, wise, that could read the life
from its memory

Who makes you think what you did not

Who could hold you safely on acrobat's rope

Who could eat fire for you if needed

[poem shortened]

I'M GLAD YOU ARE IN MY LIFE.... ♥

5 people like this · Like · · Share ·

Emel

:) thanks

April 13 at 7:37pm · Like

Sumeyye

I'm glad that you're in my life Emine too .. I'm glad you all are in my
life

April 15 at 3:52pm · Like

Emine

:) ♥

April 15 at 6:48pm · Like

Burcu

you're being loved ♥

April 16 at 10:32pm · Like

Emine

you too you too :)

April 17 at 6:44pm · Like

The employment of affective performances and “greeting” and “emotional”
genres on Facebook commonly after their dispersion to different

geographical locations indexed the ways in which this group of young women show their *vefa* to each other. As argued by Briggs and Bauman (1992), when we look at these emergent genre forms in intertextual terms we can better understand their relationship to previous discourses. Before their dispersal, when I was participating in their face-to-face social and religious gatherings, I observed them using greeting genres when they see each other. However, these greeting genres were not at all present in the Facebook data before their dispersal. Similarly, the emotional genres were not present in the data before 2010. After being dispersed, in aiming to find ways to be together, and to maintain their social interaction with each other, they turned to Facebook and this is also evident in the employment of different forms of genres on Facebook. Consequently, they employed Facebook as a vital medium of communication to show their *vefa* to their sisters in their group in the absence of the availability of other mediated forms.

Conclusion

My initial aim was to study codeswitching practices of this group of young Turkish-American women. However, as argued by Lambek (2010), I find them frequently asking ethical questions and striving to become better Muslims. Drawing from Islam in general and the *Hizmet* movement's teachings in particular, they see their sisterhood as a necessary aspect of being Muslims and becoming better Muslims. They were feeling well and secure in their faith when they were around their sisters during high school. However, after their graduation from high school, as they began attending college in different cities throughout the United States, they faced with a moral dilemma, that is how to keep in touch with their sisters as their sisters remind them of God and help them maintain and further their relations with God. After trying several other tools, like the Messenger app, text messaging, WhatsApp, they all turned to Facebook and began seeing it as a vital way to keep in touch with their sisters and enable continuous sharing.

Their media choice cannot be solely understood by looking at medium itself (Madianou and Miller 2012). The literature on “media niche” and

scholarship that examines media choice vis-à-vis relational distance is still heavily quantitative, medium-based, and work with traditional and homogenized concepts. This study by working with these young Muslim women demonstrates that their notion of “friendship” has been influenced and shaped by their religious teachings and hence cannot be examined by only using the homogenizing terms such as “friend” and “relational distance.” Furthermore, their choice of Facebook is not only about its niche and affordances. It is more about how these Muslim women imagine and use it through the perspective of their moral rubrics and hence their moral worlds.

This study by employing frameworks and methods from anthropology of ethics and anthropology of media contributes to literature on media choice through linking the media choice to the moral worlds and ethical becoming of these Muslim women. They negotiate their media choice and Facebook use through their ethical frameworks. It is part of their moral projects and, hence becoming better Muslims. There have been studies that approach media choice and use from a user-based perspective standpoint. However, there is too much religion in the current literature on digital religion that mainly prioritizes the religious and their religious use of media. Even though this group of Muslim women sees *vefa* as a necessary aspect of their religious piety, they draw from everyday social rubrics when deciding how to show *vefa* in the contemporary world. Thus, although *vefa* is a religious duty, how one’s show *vefa* can be better decided socially and turning into everyday. Employing the concept of moral assemblage helps me move beyond the traditional and homogenizing concepts like “religion” and “religious” and allow me to study mundane everyday practices and use of media as part of religious and moral projects of these women. As argued by Hoover (2013), I explored the “Third Spaces of Digital Religion” that is beyond the traditionally recognized categories, mainly sacred and secular in this case, and put the emphasis on practitioners as actors that are tailoring their relationship to other and to things, like media.

Furthermore, their choice and use of Facebook is also about their subject formation as Muslims. As they evaluate how to be a good sister after

their dispersal to different geographical locations through their moral rubrics, this then helps them to contribute to their ethical becoming as not only becoming better sisters but also becoming better Muslims. Subjectivity is a continuous process (Butler 2004) that requires one to act based on moral norms and codes, and hence draw from one's moral world. As they negotiate how to practice *vefa* and began using Facebook in this vein, their choice and use of Facebook helps them to become better sisters and Muslims in the everyday.

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