

The Role of the Internet in the Formation of Muslim Subjectivity Among Polish Female Converts to Islam

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss the main arguments related to female Muslim converts' formation of a religious subjectivity in the context of studying Islam in online spaces. In distinguishing between Western and Eastern Europe, it is our purpose to highlight the significance of online sources for converts who inhabit geographic "peripheries" of Islam. After giving an overview of the literature that discusses Muslim subject formation among converts, we analyse 35 in-depth, qualitative interviews with Polish female converts to Islam in reference to a theoretical framework that integrates Belenky et al.'s model of epistemological categories of knowledge and the concept of Muslim subjectivity formation. We argue that for the Polish female converts we interviewed, the process of acquiring and revising their knowledge about Islam, through online engagement with individuals, groups, texts, and multimedia content, is vital for developing an ontologically secure Muslim subjectivity.

Keywords

Muslim subjectivity, conversion to Islam, Poland

Introduction

This article focuses on how female converts to Islam form their Muslim subjectivities through the study of Islam online: through accessing formalized knowledge (literature by scholars and established authorities), informal interpretations of Islam (for example, by reading blogs or watching YouTube videos), and communicating with other Muslims online. We approach the complex activity of studying Islam in its multiple modalities as a component of a broader process of Muslim subjectivation—that is, “becoming Muslim,” a process in which the symbolic act of embracing Islam—declaring the shahada—is a brief, if supremely important, moment¹.

Our understanding of subjectivation draws upon a Foucauldian concept of subjectivity. Foucault’s attention to power illuminates the power relations inherent in Muslim and non-Muslim discourses about Islam shape the converts’ new religious subjectivity. Illustrating the aim of his work, Foucault wrote, “I have tried to discover how the human subject entered ‘games of truth’ [...] like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control” (Lotringer 1996, 432). We aim, therefore, to critically examine the positioning of Polish converts and the dilemmas they experience as they negotiate what we characterise as the “game of truth” of becoming, or being, a “real Muslim” that pervades various religious and non-religious online spaces. This perception and orientation of converts to “idealized Muslim subjectivities” (Tourage 2012, 211) changes over time as the use of internet-based Islamic sources becomes more selective and sophisticated.

We find Hall’s (2004, 3–4) conceptual differentiation of subjectivity from identity useful insofar as it highlights the broader, more social and contextual character of subjectivity: “Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises,

¹ We discuss reasons for our respondents’ conversion and how it affected their relationships with significant others in our other work: Krotofil et al. (2021), Krotofil et al. (forthcoming), and Abdallah-Krzepkowska et al. (forthcoming).

to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control.” The need to understand and actively shape one’s identity (according to Hall (2004, 3), “a set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that [...] gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being”) in a dynamic context is embedded in the subjectivity that we focus on in this article.

Working from the premise that the Muslim subjectivity of female converts to Islam is inescapably entwined with the process of learning about Islam and interacting with other Muslims, we put these concepts in conversation with Belenky et al.’s (1986) categorization of “women’s ways of knowing” what is right or true, their reliance on expert advice or knowledge (or lack of thereof), and if experts disagree, how the women decide what is right. Based on their work, Belenky et al. (1986, 15) identified five coherent “epistemological perspectives from which women know and view the world.” These perspectives are the foundations for the developmental model of different epistemological categories of knowledge that are situated on a continuum. The categories reflect increasing confidence, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, mastery of the subject, and the need to contribute to knowledge among women.

1. Silence. Women at this stage described feeling “deaf and dumb,” disconnected, obedient toward authorities. They were comfortable with extreme sex-role stereotyping. They tended to describe themselves by the actions they performed, for example, “I am a person who likes to stay home” (1986, 31).
2. Received knowledge. Many women at this stage reported that childbirth was a major turning point in their lives. Words were central to the knowing process, as listening was the vehicle. Their moral judgments reflected those expected in their society. They looked to others for knowledge of self or for social or occupational roles. This often saw the need to live up to others’ views of them.

3. Subjective knowledge. At this stage, “walking away from the past” (1986, 76) was a common theme. Women reported that they had severed relationships, rejected obligations and moved out to live independently. Stubbornness was a common trait of most of these women; they often knew they would face loneliness and material and emotional difficulties but were steadfast in their ambitions. Importantly, they became more aware of their own internal resources for knowing and valuing.
4. Procedural knowledge. Most of the women in this category regularly practiced reasoned reflection. These women were aware that knowing requires careful observation and analysis. Women at this stage believed that everyone views the world through a different lens and construes the world differently.
5. Constructed knowledge. Belenky et al. described women at this stage as engaged in “weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought” (1986, 134). Common to these women was a high tolerance for ambiguity or internal contradiction. They saw the knower as an intimate part of the known. In addition, they were able to see the contextual nature of knowledge and envisioned knowledge as a constructive process.

Our analysis of the data aims to increase the knowledge about the evolving Muslim subjectivity of the Polish converts by identifying Belenky et al.’s five stages connected to different epistemic categories of knowledge and their context—the internet. However, to understand this process, it is necessary to situate it in the existing literature on Muslim subjectivation and conversion.

Muslim subjectivation in literature

Becoming Muslim, as described by the growing body of literature on converts, involves complex transformations of beliefs, self, behaviours, attitudes, and social relationships (Moosavi 2012, van Nieuwkerk 2006,

Özyürek 2015, Rao 2015, Roald 2004, Zebiri 2008). Muslim subjectivation is experienced not just by converts, as Mahmood demonstrated in her landmark study of Egyptian Muslim women's mosque study groups (2005). Lifelong Muslims, just as converts, may experience challenges and doubts related to maintaining the Muslim subjectivity, especially of the "idealized," pious type (Jeldtoft 2011, Schielke 2009). The relationship between practice, belief, and identity, as Mahmood demonstrated, is multilayered and multidirectional. Acquiring Islamic knowledge, however, is of paramount importance to converts who cannot rely on heritage to be recognized as "authentic Muslims" in diverse Muslim settings. It is one of the strategies of coping with being "racialized out of Islam" by those who may not perceive them as authentic (Amer 2020, Galonnier 2015, Garner and Selod 2015, Moosavi 2012, Özyürek 2015) which is a function of being a convert and, in the Polish case, being a white convert. In performing Muslimness (Goffman 1963), the ability to support one's religious claims and decisions by referring to Islamic texts reflects the seriousness of religious commitment that also involves the (sometimes gradual) adoption of Islamic clothing or food practices described as "embodied practices." (Delaney 1991, Rao 2015, Winchester 2008).

Therefore, for converts, the study of Islam—in its scriptural and experiential forms—gains significance that transcends the idea of being more knowledgeable, and, therefore, pious. Using Goffman's symbolic interactionist terminology, it is central to identity management, the ability to perform Muslimness (a particular religious habitus, a symbolic set of affordances: knowledges, behaviours, languages, styles, and tastes) and, therefore, "pass" among lifelong Muslims as authentic and, therefore, acceptable (Moosavi 2012).

In this article, we address the process of acquiring Islamic knowledge as located at the intersection of bodily practice, belief, and identity in the process of "becoming Muslim."

Our point of departure is that converts' learning of Islam is socially situated in multiple contexts. The relevant contexts for studying Islam by Polish

converts include (1) Poland as a local setting shaping the process, defined by its historical, cultural, religious, and racial collective identities (Balogun 2020), and (2) online spaces, including social media, videoconferences, emails, and websites. The women we studied are located at the intersection of these contexts, each of them structured by dynamic relationships, affordances, and limitations. In the following section, we address each context and its particularities as related to the study of Islam on the internet.

Learning about Islam in Poland

Experiences of converts to Islam in Central and Eastern Europe were not addressed for a long time (Račius 2018). Several studies, almost all in English, emerged as an area of academic inquiry only in the last decade. Embracing Islam as an alternative basis for one's identity following the collapse of the geopolitical order and the overwhelmingly secular post-Soviet region is a common theme in the studies of conversion by Račius (2013) in Lithuania, Stoica (2011; 2013) in Romania, Pirický (2018) in the Czech Republic, and Shestopalets (2019; 2021) in Ukraine and Russia, respectively. However, Poland does not easily fit into this theme; it is a comparatively devout country (Topidi 2019), and Catholicism provides a meaningful social and religious context for Muslim conversion.

Muslims constitute less than 0.1 percent of the population of Poland (Pew Research Center 2017) although this number is growing. Along with immigration, conversion to Islam is one of the factors that account for this growth (Górska 2021). The indigenous Polish Muslims, the Tatars, are a small subgroup of Polish Muslims and their presence is concentrated in rural north-eastern Poland. Today, their number is estimated at approximately four thousand (Łyszczarz 2011). The first Tatar settlements in Poland can be dated back to the late 14th century. The type of Sunni Islam that they practise has been enriched by Turkic and pre-Islamic traditions. The Turkic elements are visible in the names of the prayers, while the pre-Islamic ones are mostly visible in magical and healing practices (Łyszczarz 2011). Tatars have also incorporated some Christian elements into their traditions, such as celebrating Christmas (as the birth of Prophet

Isa), or the All-Saints' Day (Kamocki 2000). There are two historic Polish Tatar mosques: in Kruszyniany and Bohoniki in the east of Poland. Today, many Tatars are organized in the Muslim Religious Union, the only Polish Muslim organization formally recognized by the Polish state. There are other ones, notably the Muslim League, whose members are mostly immigrant Muslims and converts. There are mosques in most large cities in Poland; in Warsaw, the two most prominent ones are the Muslim Cultural Centre and the Wiertnicza Street Mosque. There are also Muslim places of worship in Kraków, Katowice, Wrocław, Poznań, and a purpose-built mosque in Gdańsk.² Muslims organized through these institutions work to engage Polish citizens by organizing open days, conferences, and workshops about Islam. For Poles, especially the young people, these opportunities are the only ones, other than the internet, to learn about Islam, as there is no religious education (other than Roman Catholic instruction) available in Polish schools.

In elementary and secondary level education, as well as in the mainstream media, Islam is represented in mostly negative ways as a religion and civilization antithetical to Christianity and Europe (Górak-Sosnowska 2006, Piela 2020). Roman Catholic instruction is the norm in Polish schools, and while technically it is an elective, there is immense social pressure on families and children to attend, even if they are not religious (Balsamska et al. 2016). The ontological fusing of Polishness with Catholicism and whiteness, described by Balogun (2020) as "Polish-centrism," the lack of education about religions other than Roman Catholicism combined with hostile political discourse about Muslims and refugees contribute to high levels of Islamophobia in Poland (Górak-Sosnowska 2016). The few print titles in Polish relevant to the study of Islam are criticized as too academic, although Polish translations of English texts about Islam are becoming more common, such as Karol Wilczyński's translation from English of Al-Faruqi's *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture and World Order* ([2012] 2021). The most common Polish translation of the Qur'an by Józef Bielawski (and the only one that

² Most Polish women converts do not attend mosque regularly; some mentioned that mosque participation was not required of Muslim women. Many of our respondents do participate in Muslim women's meetups at mosques or cultural centres, but not necessarily in Friday prayers.

had been translated directly from Arabic) was often described as archaic and inaccessible by the women we interviewed.

Therefore, for converts, the internet is often the preferred medium that offers ease of access and a wealth of information about Islam. For many converts, it is the first source of information about Islam that reflects on it as a lived faith tradition. For those living in rural Poland, it is also the only opportunity to interact with other Muslims.

Learning about Islam on the internet

The internet has been at the centre of attention of researchers interested in converts' religious socialization for the last two decades (Račius 2013, Górak-Sosnowska 2015, van Nieuwkerk 2006, Piela 2015, 2021, Sakellariou 2015). The multiplicity of Muslim perspectives available online led many scholars to conclude that authority in Islam had become atomized or pluralized (Anderson 2003). Be that as it may, the very same multiplicity of interpretations and claims have created a situation where it is difficult to assess who speaks with authority for a new convert. Many converts, having few other reference frameworks, turned to Salafi teachings, the proponents of which perform Islamic authority very well (Pall and de Koning 2017). This is also a well-documented phenomenon in Eastern European and Balkan contexts (Clayer 2022, Norvilaitė and Račius 2014). Górak-Sosnowska (2015) noted that Polish Muslim online spaces were ideologically polarized between Salafi-oriented versus non-Salafi-oriented groups. Račius (2013) observed that the preoccupation with "halal" (permitted) and "haram" (forbidden) actions was the focal point of a prominent Lithuanian online forum for converts, illustrating the limited capacity of converts in earlier stages to accept the ambiguity of knowledge and truth. Abdallah-Krzepkowska (forthcoming), based on her ethnography of Polish online convert spaces, argues that for most converts, the "Salafi phase" is often superseded by a "mature Islam" phase that accommodates the complexities of Muslim life better.

All these considerations notwithstanding, for many Polish Muslims, including converts, internet forums and social media spaces provide a platform for cyber-community building (Górak-Sosnowska 2015) and a knowledge marketplace. Especially for those living in small towns and the countryside, the internet provides access to Islamic texts in Polish and English, scholars' interpretations and guidance, for example in the form of fatwas. Additionally, the network-building capacity enabled by the internet—interaction with other converts, as well as lifelong Muslims—in spaces oriented to Islam in general, and Polish Islam in particular, is invaluable.

Polish Islam-oriented online spaces have evolved technologically in parallel with online communication in general. In the 1990s, Poles' Islam-oriented internet use involved mIRC (a chatroom platform), ICQ (a one-to-one text communication platform), and email discussion groups. Especially mIRC enabled international text-based communication with people from all over the globe, and many first encounters with Muslims occurred there. Early, static websites provided access to Islamic content in English. In the 2000s, the first Polish Muslim blogs by women and for women emerged; for example, muzulmanki.blogspot.com (“muzulmanki” means “Muslim women” in Polish) or alejkumki.blogspot.com (alejkumki is a wordplay on the word *Allaikum*, in loose translation meaning “women who say Salaam Allaikum”). Both these blogs are now inactive, but still accessible; the latter one has resurfaced as a Facebook group. At first, Facebook's rise in Poland was slow, as in the 2000s, a Polish social networking platform Nasza Klasa (“Our Class”) that brought together people on the basis of their past elementary and secondary school assignments was the most popular. Some respondents mentioned that platform (now defunct) in interviews as a place where they found other Muslims and discussed Islam. Polish converts have always been enthusiastic about responding to threads on forums (Górak-Sosnowska 2015). Currently, Facebook is by far the most popular platform used by Polish converts to communicate via public or private groups (Homoncik 2018), but our respondents often mentioned YouTube. Instagram is popular mainly among Polish converts living outside of Poland.

Methodology

Polish converts to Islam are difficult to recruit for research participation. It is, therefore, difficult to gather reliable statistical data and ensure the representativeness of the research sample. A small group of converts serve as “Muslims on duty” in Poland; they frequently participate in research or give interviews (Rogowska 2017). Similarly, Harris and Hussein (2018, 1) commented on the existence of “everyday explainers” of Islam in Australia. However, in the case of Poland and other Eastern European countries, the reason behind the difficulties with recruitment is the very small size of the local Muslim community (with disproportionately intense interest in Islam and the resultant demand on Muslim research subjects). This kind of sampling bias might produce an illusion of group cohesion, a prevalence of a particular approach to Islam and uniformity of convert experiences. It should be, therefore, acknowledged that we might be unable to reach the less visible, “silent majority” of converts who locate their experiences in the private domain and do not want to participate in research (Amiraux 2006, 40). We made every effort to recruit women who represented diverse backgrounds (socioeconomic class, rural–urban location, Islamic affiliation) through personal networks, social media, public events, and snowballing. It is impossible to generalise from these findings to all Polish converts, however, we argue that they do provide a useful window into experiences of Muslim subjectivation. The main sources of our data are 35 qualitative interviews with Polish female converts conducted as a part of our research project between June 2018 and September 2019.

Literature dealing with Muslim converts and the internet often employs a form of a virtual ethnography, for example, van Nieuwkerk (2006) analysed 50 online conversion narratives to identify common scripts; Rhazzali (2015) analysed multiple websites that functioned like “conversion rooms,” assisting new Muslims-to-be throughout the conversion process;

² See (including the video): @farooi, *Twitter* post, February 18, 2019, 1:57 p.m., <https://twitter.com/farooi/status/1097480161715458053>.

Akou (2015) explored the role of online spaces devoted to Islamic fashion, such as online boutiques, review sites, YouTube channels, message boards. Piela (2015) analysed online Islamic forums populated by both lifelong Muslims and converts as sites of informal Islamic learning using the communities of practice framework. In contrast, this article uses narratives of internet use produced by the Polish female converts we interviewed, exploring the epistemological meaning-making frameworks that they deployed as religious internet users and subsequently reflected on in the interviews.

Participants were aged 24–60 (the mean age was 35) and included both recent converts as well as women who embraced Islam in the early 1990s. They lived in different regions of Poland (18 participants) and the UK³ (17 participants); two self-identified as Silesians (members of an ethnic minority in Poland) rather than Poles. Most women converted in Poland (23), while others converted in the UK (12). The UK-based Polish converts were first-generation migrants; they were permanently settled in the UK. Some participants were very active in Muslim organizations; others were active in informal convert groups. Although we attempted to achieve diversity in terms of education, class background, age, marital–parental status, and Islamic affiliation, we recognize that some groups, for example, rural women, are less represented in our sample.

The women we interviewed represented a broad range of Islamic affiliations. The majority did not identify with any school or branch of Islam, but some participants acknowledged that they gravitated towards a traditional, pietist interpretation of their faith framed by literalist readings of Qur’anic texts and the Sunnah (sometimes, but not always, describing themselves as Salafi). Others adopted a dynamic, context-based mode of engagement with the Islamic texts and traditions, commonly referred to as a progressive and–or liberal approach. Some of them explicitly self-identified as feminist, and–or leftist. Finally, a noticeable group embraced a form of Sufism, emphasizing the spiritual aspects of Islam.

³ The UK is home to the largest and best organised diaspora of Polish Muslims outside of Poland (estimates range from 2,000 to 4,000). For this reason, the UK, with a large population of lifelong Muslims and ethnic and cultural diversity provides a slightly different context for the Muslim subjectivation.

The interviews were carried out in locations chosen by our respondents—usually in their homes, or in public spaces, such as cafes, or parks. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a topic guide focused on participants' experiences of converting to Islam. We translated the interview transcripts into English. The participants signed an informed consent form, and they were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity; the pseudonyms reflect the Polish or Arabic first names used by participants. We provide only sparse background information about participants with the quotations in order to preserve their anonymity within their small Muslim communities.

Findings

In the following section of the article, we use a framework for understanding the trajectory of individuals through different epistemological categories of knowledge developed by Belenky et al. (1986). Belenky and colleagues' reflection that epistemological assumptions of the women who participated in their research were intimately linked to their perceptions of themselves and their relationship to their world speaks to the narratives produced by the converts we interviewed.

From silence to received knowledge: Encountering Islam

Several respondents reminisced that they first encountered Islam in a variety of digital spaces. Angelika (UK) first heard about Islam from non-Muslim Poles:

I got interested in Islam in the 1990s. The internet was still a novelty in Poland, and I came across people who were discussing religions on a random online forum. I can't remember what it was called. That was my first encounter with Islam and Qur'an.

Czesława (UK) met a Muslim man on an online forum and in the course of the conversation, she slowly realized that her preconceptions about Islam

were largely inaccurate. Responding to the man's challenge to present him with three intellectual arguments against Islam, she immersed herself in online spaces where knowledge about Islam was accessible to beginners:

I was learning English and someone in a chat room directed me to Islam. They wanted to talk with me about religion, and I stated that religion was rubbish. I believe in God, not in religion, I didn't want to talk to them, and suddenly I heard "Islam." They asked what I believed in. And suddenly someone said: "It's a shame you don't want to listen about Islam, because you'd be a great Muslim." Me, a Muslim? I was offended, Muslims, Arabs, burkas, wars, terrorism, what's he on about? I didn't want to listen, but this man pestered me, sorry, he said he'd leave me alone if I could give him three solid arguments, why I thought Islam was evil. So, in order to find these arguments, I had to learn what Islam was. I started reading English-language websites and I realized, wow, that's what I believe in, that's what I've been looking for. And I pronounced my shahada three days later.

Amalia (UK), a religious studies graduate, was impressed by the trajectories of Polish Muslims she observed on an online forum before and after saying the shahada:

I joined an online group for Polish Muslims, and started exchanging thoughts with the women contributing there. That was five, six years ago, and that's how I began to get to know the sisters, I began to look at Islam in a way different to the schematic way they taught Islam at university, without those differences between different religions, definitions, schemas. I started learning about lived Islam, and that's how my friendship with Islam began [...] Even before I said the shahada I watched a lot of videos, I was inspired by [name of an activist]. She was so active in [online group for female Muslim converts]. She was my celebrity, my inspiration.

These three extracts stories illustrate individual embracement of the positions of received knower and subjective knower; they all identify

the period “before,” marked by a lack of awareness of Islam, one’s own prejudiced attitudes to Islam, or, notably, “schematic” academic knowledge of Islam. These could all be understood as a particular version of the silence position (Belenky et al. 1986) in the broadly understood religious and spiritual architecture of their lives. Czesława’s encounter with the man who challenged her on the online forum resulted not only in her identifying bodies of knowledge that allowed her to question her preconceptions about Islam; she immediately recognized that those beliefs were hers. In that sense, in the interview she constructed her identity as a Muslim even prior to saying the Shahada; the encounter merely enabled her to label her pre-existing beliefs.

Amalia’s story illustrates power struggles between what she saw as external knowledge about Islam and the lived truth of it (Danaher et al. 2000) which paved the path to her production of subjective knowledge about Islam, framed by her “friendship” with Islam itself and the emotional and intellectual impact of the activist from the local religious circles. As we see here, accessing different types of online religious content symbolically denotes transitions between different types of knower positions. For many, it is the saying of the shahada symbolically takes the individual out of the silence position into that of a received knower. For others, this is achieved through an encounter with one or more Muslims who can provide a connection between the doctrine and lived experiences of Islam. Many respondents were relying on “external authorities” to make sense of the origin and meaning of the new knowledge; at this stage, any ambiguity or internal conflict is intolerable as it is easier to accept absolute truths (Belenky et al. 1986).

The internet was mentioned as the main source of information on Islam at different stages of conversion, but particularly in the beginning. Daria (PL) said: “internet was my main source of information.” Websites such as the one mentioned below by Jadwiga (PL) are particularly useful at the received knower stage, as they provide simple, straightforward guidance for a convert. Other participants often echoed this biographical element.

Interviewer: At the time, in the beginning, when you were alone, where did you get the knowledge about everyday practices, what was the source?

Jadwiga (PL): Unfortunately, the internet. I found this website, www.newmuslims.com and it's not the worst website, everything is explained, the rules, and so on.

Interviewer: Where did you acquire deeper knowledge about Islam?

Bogumiła (UK): At the time, only off of the internet. Only the internet.

Interviewer: Was anything of help in acquiring knowledge and growing in the religion at that time or later?

Angelika (UK): Later, I found internet forums very helpful. All of the [Islam-oriented] internet. The internet helped a lot, and other Muslim women, of course.

At this point, most converts had a limited ability to recognize authoritative, reliable sources of knowledge. Marlena (PL) commented how very often new converts stumbled upon a particular mode of Islamic belief and practice, and accepted it wholesale, without an ability to recognize it as only one of many modes; she cited the sometimes-subtle differences between different schools of thought in Islam (*madhab*) as causing consternation for those unaware of interpretive and practical variations in Islam. Several women mentioned that the internet was a fount of information about Islam after their initial encounter which often happened by chance, during a stay abroad. Matylda (PL), a history of art student converted to Islam in Turkey, ten years prior to the interview, while visiting a friend who was in Istanbul on a student exchange. She reflected that online resources, mostly YouTube videos, helped her continue on her journey to Islam after her return to Poland, once the strong emotions triggered by saying the shahada subsided.

Matylda: I felt like I was the first Muslim woman in Poland. I had a sense of [...] illumination, but when I returned to Poland, I had to face the hard reality. I knew some stuff about Islam, but I couldn't pray. They showed me how to do it [in Turkey], but I had to learn from YouTube.

Embodied religious experiences are much harder to come by in absence of a Muslim community with its institutions and collective practices. Amalia said: "How did I learn to pray? The internet was my treasure trove. I was looking for videos, and I learnt to pray from YouTube." This quotation illustrates a dilemma encountered by Polish converts early on: some practices can only be properly learnt by doing (Speelman 2018), which makes the production of a religious subjectivity problematic in absence of a teacher or guide. YouTube was often mentioned by respondents as an entryway to comprehending and internalising the mechanics of the embodied prayer, salat, and eventually gaining mastery of it. The internet was often framed as a less desirable source of knowledge than personal interaction with an authoritative individual; however, limited access to Muslim communities left this as the only possible option, especially in the beginning of one's spiritual journey as a committed Muslim. Once more experienced, and with more connections to the community, the women became more selective about the answers to their questions, sometimes abandoning the internet as a knowledge source altogether, as the next sections show.

Developing subjective knowledge of Islam

However, becoming a Muslim encompasses more than adopting Islamic beliefs and practices. Redefining one's own identity, in a particular context where one is meshed into multiple social relationships, requires a great deal of work. The formation of a Muslim subjectivity means that they take on a more significant share of responsibility for their moral formation; in other words, they gradually begin to see themselves as an authority. For Stanisława (PL), Grono, a local social media network that is now defunct, inhabited some years ago by Polish converts provided a proof of sorts that "a Polish Muslim" was a feasible subject position:

When I was already quite into Islam, I felt the need to research how that could work in Poland. I wasn't even sure that it was possible to be a Pole and a Muslim. It was just so abstract. So I started looking [...] at the time there was a popular social network in Poland, Grono. There were groups there, Polish converts' groups, and that's where I read stuff. The first Muslim woman I met I originally came into contact with through Grono.

By reading people's online conversations, she was able to observe the lived reality of converts before accepting Islam herself. Even though she technically wasn't a Muslim yet, she was already carving out a path to a Polish Muslim selfhood. Once she was secure in the knowledge that it was a socially legitimate subject position, she was ready to embrace it. This quotation echoes Nai'ma Robert's autobiographical account (2005) of having to first overcome doubts about the compatibility of Islam with her Black identity; she only converted after discovering that Islam had a long and rich history in Africa, where her mother was from.

While websites offering Islamic content, such as www.newmuslims.com, were often mentioned as the beginning of the conversion journey, with time, the respondents usually managed to establish wider Muslim networks, which led to more targeted information exchanges. Some, like Matylda, mentioned meeting a more advanced "guide"—a peer convert who assisted them online throughout various challenges of conversion: "I knew her only virtually, I knew most people virtually. I really owe her this, she helped me find my way in Islam."

Internet was a great source for me. Later I met online a convert from France who was married to an Algerian. Thanks to her, I could understand Islam better. We had some differences, I'm more inclined toward Sufism, and she's more of a Salafi. (Danuta, UK)

While Matylda's and Danuta's statements indicate that they appreciated the virtual guidance of a fellow Muslim, they suggest that they eventually recognized the diversity of Islamic expressions and began to develop a more individualistic approach ("my way in Islam," "we had some differences").

Regular and comprehensive online interactions with other Muslims enable converts to position themselves in the broader Islamic milieu; as they encounter a robust variety of practices and interpretations, they are faced with making choices rooted in their own fledgling understandings, and, at least in part, personal preferences. These choices become sedimented into what Rogozen-Soltar (2020, 150) calls “religious feelings” that converts sense are correct *before* fully comprehending the logic of beliefs, practices, and injunctions. This observation dovetails with Belenky et al.’s (1986) characterization of the subjective stage of knowing as dependent on the development of an “inner voice” that allows women to make their own claims to truth and knowledge.

Procedural knowledge—critical approaches to the internet as a source of knowledge about Islam

With time, many converts who initially relied on the internet for Islamic education, gained enough knowledge and diverse perspectives to be able to recognize that not every website or scholar was suitable for them. In Belenky et al.’s model, the following extracts illustrate the procedural knowledge stage, whereby knowers acquire the mastery of procedures for evaluating the quality of knowledge. Methods and techniques for assessing the accuracy and authority are a central consideration. Maria talked about the differences between (presumably) Salafi-oriented content and content tailored to what she saw as European Islam. The ability to approach online religious content critically, rather than at face value, is an important step in the process of developing a contextualised, dynamic religious identity.

[...] yes, [I used] mostly the internet, and unfortunately, [I first came across] the very strict websites. Unfortunately, there are many websites that are directed at people who live in Arab countries, they do not take the European situation into account. These sites made me feel bad, because I read there that I shouldn’t do this or that, and that I was a bad Muslim. These days, I try to avoid it. (Maria)

Alicja (PL) explained about the procedures she employed to evaluate the accuracy of different sources, including checking the origins of claims and cross-checking between different sources:

I don't use the internet a lot because I don't believe in the internet a lot. There are a lot of distortions related to Islam online. I prefer to use reputable textual sources than read some strange online publications, from some unknown sources [...] [In the past] I was active on Islam-oriented forums, I asked questions and got answers. I met hundreds of people online, some of them I met in person. These connections are active to this day, they helped me understand things I couldn't figure out on my own. They helped me a lot, but I trusted only those I met face to face. I spoke to people on forums, but I took what they said with a pinch of salt, and I preferred to cross-check if different sources confirm their views. If they did, I knew it was true.

Each of these extracts represents a different variety of procedural knowledge, according to Belenky et al. (1986): Alicja's stance is characteristic of a connected procedural knower who emphasises the importance of context and personal experience in selecting and applying procedures. Procedural knowledge, although rarely leading to absolute truths, provides its bearers with intellectual tools that help them orient themselves to "objective truth." This, in turn, provides them with sufficient authority to communicate it to others, as it can be seen in the case of Barbara (UK):

Whenever I can, I try to share my knowledge, and sources that I know are good. That's possible mostly on internet forums, all I do is online, supporting and sharing resources with other Muslim women or potential Muslim women, who are interested in Islam.

Sharing resources with those interested in Islam constitutes *dawah*, or proselytization. The internet has long been a platform for Islamic *dawah*,

often utilised by Salafis (Olsson 2014) and minoritised groups such as queer or disabled Muslims (Piela and Krotofil 2021) who claim their belonging in the ummah and gain a voice in this way.

Negotiating global discourses: Moving between the margins and the centre

Digital spaces provide evidence that conceptual boundaries between “Polish” and “global” Islams are tenuous and porous. Participants create their individualized bricolages of knowledge based on the interrelated contexts which they inhabit. Allievi (1998, 220–221) calls this a “do-it-yourself-culture,” as the stage of conversion is followed by the phase of re-culturation, constituting a process of fusion occurring between various aspects of the local and the “Muslim” culture.

These days [in Poland] you can get halal products, order clothes online, meet people from the global ummah via social networks [...] it used to be harder, but now the world is our oyster. (Helena, PL)

Polish converts seek out fatwas published in English as the Polish fatwa bank is small, although it is useful as it situates rulings in the Polish context (Górak-Sosnowska 2015). English fluency is important, as English provides access to Anglophone Islamic discourse, and enables Polish converts to learn about Islam and communicate online with Muslims from other countries.

There used to be fewer Polish-language sources about Islam, and that motivated me to work on my English skills. I really improved, because I had a goal, I wanted to read specific stuff, rather than learn English for abstract reasons. And so I started using Anglophone internet sources. (Marlena)

Bogumiła felt that Polish-language online sources referencing Islam were more biased than Anglophone ones, which similarly motivated her to learn English:

I became interested in Islam and its tenets. And if you google “Polish Islam,” you’ll find only criticism and expletives. So, Alhamdulillah, I learnt English. When I started using English-language queries, I received entirely different results.

Marlena and Bogumiła recognized the limited usefulness of Polish-language online content about Islam, and remedied this problem by learning a new language, which, notably, was English, not Arabic (venerated in Islam as the original language of the Qur’an). Piela argues elsewhere (2012) that English is the online *lingua franca* for Muslims wishing to communicate beyond the boundaries of their linguistic communities. For Polish converts, English is still necessary to transcend both the constraints of Polish online content about Islam, as well as Polish Islam itself, which we described elsewhere as highly specific in terms of sociopolitical context and history (Krotofil et al. 2021, Krotofil et al. forthcoming).

Discussion and conclusions

This article contributes to the scholarly debates about the role of the internet in facilitating the creation and embracement of new religious subjectivities. It discusses this question in the contexts of relatively under-researched Polish and Eastern European Islam. In a sociopolitical sense, it complicates the stereotypical views of Poland as an exclusively Catholic country by addressing a small, yet growing population of Poles who abandon Catholicism in favour of another religion. We argue that, given the small size and dispersion of the Polish Muslim population, the internet plays a central role in the lives of converts to Islam.

The material presented in this article illustrates some key notions and logics that organize the Muslim subjectivation of Polish female converts to Islam. While their epistemic narratives are embedded in various networks of relationships with other Muslims and online Islamic content, individuality and autonomy are central in the process of becoming Muslim. The process of subjectivation is often mediated by the relationship to what our participants referred to as “Salafism,” “restrictive Islam,” or jokingly

borrowing from the Anglophone Muslim discourse, “haram police” (Karam 2019, 404). Abdallah-Krzepkowska (forthcoming) described new converts as “unconscious Salafis” who rely on literalist interpretations of Islam due to their need for clear instructions on how to be a Muslim and live a Muslim life. This is the stage of silence and received knowledge identified by Belenky et al. (1986); converts may experience a cognitive dissonance between Islamic prescriptions formulated in a rigid manner and their lived realities when, for example, there is no availability of *halal* meat in their area, or they experience harassment for wearing Muslim traditional clothing. Despite the central role the internet, and in particular, the Polish virtual *ummah*, plays in the life of the Muslim community, the internet is sometimes perceived as a hostile space rife with power play and judgment. Many participants described being shamed online by fellow converts for asking clarifying questions regarding Muslim bodily practices such as bodily hair management or the exact amount of coverage.

After the initial period, a small minority of converts evolve into “mature Salafis” (Abdallah-Krzepkowska, forthcoming) and move to a more welcoming environment, for example, a larger European or a Muslim-majority country. Most of those who remain in their local environment, develop a more localised Islamic perspective that relies on constant negotiations between flexible interpretations of Islam and their sociocultural location. In Belenky et al.’s model, this is the subjective model phase. A smaller subset of converts reaches the final phase: procedural knowledge. This involves a certain mastery of Islamic concepts and substantial experience of their lived applications. They often become educators (not necessarily formal): in face-to-face settings, they may lead study groups and give public talks about Islam; in online settings, they produce their own Islamic content in the form of blog posts, Instagram posts, and YouTube or TikTok videos. These converts are active producers of Islam-oriented online content in the Polish language, which reaches those who are not fluent in English or Arabic, thus democratising access to Islam in a context where having foreign language skills or the ability to read academic-level texts is a sign of class privilege.

Each of these stages of learning how to be Muslim corresponds to a different phase of forming a Muslim subjectivity that may be externalised through visible practices, but equally importantly, ultimately enables the convert to make confident decisions regarding how they interpret Islam in their everyday life. Subjective and procedural knowledges provide the ability to be selective in judging which interpretive approaches to Islam are most realistic to them as socially situated Muslims. In other words, with increased knowledge and experience such as narrated by the participants, comes the agency to form and articulate a Muslim subjectivity aligned with individual predispositions and structural affordances and limitations.

Converts engage with “different internal and external voices, giving prominence to some and silencing others” (Krotofil 2011, 166). This study suggests an important difference between the Polish and Western European converts. The former do not necessarily seek authenticity in order to align themselves with lifelong Muslims (Moosavi 2012); it appears that it was more important for our respondents to align with other, more experienced, Polish converts on issues of beliefs and their day-to-day application. Elsewhere (Piela and Krotofil forthcoming) we argue that this all-Polish clustering, which in some context could be described as self-segregation, is only partially explained by the small number of Muslims of minority (ethnic, immigrant, non-white) backgrounds in Poland or the preference of Polish converts to collectively create a “Polish Islam” (Krotofil et al., forthcoming). Exclusively Polish convert communities are likely to be white spaces in which “white culture of solidarity” (Bonilla-Silva (2010, 104) thrives. White culture of solidarity relies on drawing (often unspoken) boundaries between the white self and the racial Other. Thus, for example, Polish converts, especially those living in the UK and/or married to non-white Muslims often reject “culturally-tainted” Islam which they see as “too South Asian” or “North African,” creating a racial hierarchy within the *ummah* (Piela and Krotofil forthcoming).

The internet simultaneously reinforces mainstream regulatory Islamic discourses produced by scholars, thus strengthening their authority, and opens new discursive spaces within which Muslim women from varied

backgrounds study Islamic and discuss sources (Piela 2012). It is a space where knowledges can be absorbed, tested, reproduced, and questioned. This article, and its central argument that Muslim subjectivity is intimately related to these stages, complicates religious conversion debates that hinge on investigating reasons for conversion and, in the case of women, on patriarchal narratives suggesting that marriage is the main reason and interpretative frame for the experience of female conversion.

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland under grant 2017/25/B/HS1/00286.

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