Introduction: Digital Youth and Religion

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1. Introduction

Public and academic discourse on the online activities of youth have been stormy and ambivalent at times (Lynn Schofield Clark 2013). Nevertheless, a significant body of work has been devoted to the grassroots workings of youth on new media platforms, albeit in adolescents’ autonomous settings, such as social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube), online gaming, and interpersonal communication (e.g., instant messaging, WhatsApp, Telegram). While past scholarship has yielded a rich offering of insights into these activities, there is a clear dearth of research on the online social worlds of religious youth.

Delving into the cultural worlds of contemporary believers and religious youth, today, there is a strengthening of modernist claims in which researchers identify an age gap connected to religious commitment (Pew Research Center 2018). This is to say that younger generations manifest less commitment to religious practice. Accordingly, scholars refer to the usual suspects that challenge religion: secularization, migration, the expansive religious market, and modernity at large. All of which are said to lead the youth to reduce identification and abandon churches (Stolz 2020; Ertit 2018; Eyal 2009). Conversely, in many countries, the youth continue to demonstrate religious affiliation. Nevertheless, their ways of practicing, symbolizing faith identity, and connecting to peer believers have changed, particularly with the advent of the internet and social media. Hence, the youth are afforded multiple venues of religious creeds, interpretations, and forms of expressing their religious affinity in unprecedented formats and channels. These channels enable access to youth outreach, foster communal participation, and shape youths’ identities, belief systems, and affiliation to (or from) religious institutions.

Given these developments, it is surprising that digital youth and religion have yet to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. Accordingly, the primary objective of this unprecedented Special Issue is to draw together concepts, theories, and empirical data related to the study of three legacies: youth cultures, digital culture, and religious studies. As each field’s legacy is multidisciplinary, this Special Issue involves scholars and research groups of different scholarly backgrounds who explore rich expressions from a comparative perspective of Indigenous cultures on what can be seen as a youthful online landscape.

2. Youth, Youthfulness, and Religiosity

Beyond its definitions as an age group or in terms of the leanings of biological essentialism, the emergence of youth as a social category can be seen as a product of modernity (Eisenstadt 2017; Kahane 2015; Coleman 1961). This is to say, since the 19th century, youth are defined by themselves and by others as a distinct group in society due to cultural factors, as well as socio-economic changes (i.e., the division of labor, industrialization), and have gained increasing measures of autonomy and developed distinct subcultures. These subcultures have been investigated to uncover the style, resistance, space, societal reaction, identity, and authenticity (Williams 2007) of the youth, while their image has fluctuated between marginality, moral panic, and at times vilification (Rao and Lingam 2021; Cohen 2011). Nevertheless, the youth have become charismatic influencers in society, primarily in times of deep change and turmoil (e.g., social revolutions in Eastern Europe or...
the mass student protests in the 1960s in France and the US). Moreover, with the rise of the internet and new media, the youth have gained further prominence as spearheads of the digital revolution, as they have proved themselves to be highly responsive to digital advances (Smahel et al. 2020; Collins and Halverson 2018; Tapscott 2008). While some scholars challenge the idea of a digital generation (Buckingham 2013; Vaidhyanathan 2008), it would be difficult to dismiss claims of the social construction of youthfulness under the prism of contemporary technologies.

While the socio-historic parameters of the sociology of youth have gained scholarly attention, the study of religious youth can be seen as more eclectic. This fractured gaze may be attributed to an overemphasis on modern (secular) youth, aligned with modernization theory’s reification of the decline of the traditional family (Turner 1993). Overall, a widespread premise is that religion is an a priori set of beliefs and practices and that religious youth are predominantly socialized in their families and through formal (e.g., schools, seminaries) and informal institutions (e.g., youth movements, Sunday school activities). Given this premise, it would be easy to overlook the current developments that would suggest that religious youth are also active in devout practice and its instruction (Campbell et al. 2009) and, moreover, religious digital outlets and social media sites are becoming increasingly popular. Platforms that give voice for the youth to express their religious affinities as well as forge meaningful connections and develop a subcultural symbolic culture which adheres to their religious identities.

3. Digital Religious Youth

As religious youth endure tensions and paradoxes in their everyday encounters with modernity, this encounter has been intensified and gained new spheres of social action in the digital age. Enticing games, websites, and apps all allow new forms of engagement with both the interfaces and epistemologies that are involved in digital worlds. Thus, modernity’s individualization has been accelerated in the digital age with ‘networked individualism’ (Rainie and Wellman 2012) to include values such as self-fulfillment and primary commitment toward the self, versus religious, fundamentalist, or enclaved societies that are seen as giving precedence to collective interests over individual ones (Darwish and Huber 2003; Moore and Kimmerling 1995).

Within these conflicting trends and given the growing inclination of religious youths to conform with youth subcultures and expressive freedoms, questions emerge regarding how the grassroots youth of religious communities negotiate and perform their hybrid (youth/modern/traditional) identity via online social media. How are youth embracing a religious lifestyle in the western urban spaces compared to their parents? How do they articulate their religious (or youthful) identities on social media’s visual platforms? Additionally, do they expand their intra-religious social capital to introduce religious change or do they instead reinforce their boundaries via internet usage? These questions and more are explored in this Special Issue.

In their paper, ‘Religious “Bubbles” in a Superdiverse Digital Landscape? Research with Religious Youth on Instagram’ Novak, Haselbacher, Mattes, and Limacher question the formation of the social boundaries of religious youth as is articulated in their social networking activities. This question is at the heart of the project they lead at the University of Vienna (namely YouBeOn, https://www.youbeon.eu/en/about-the-project, accessed on 21 May 2023), which focuses on youths’ religious life in online and offline spaces, with special attention given to the online diverse profile of Vienna.

While the internet affords seemingly boundless exposure and access, the research team’s qualitative study uncovers the religious clustering of various adolescent groups on Instagram’s image-based platform in Vienna. This alludes to a reorganizing of religious-communal boundaries by lumping distinct denominations (Christian sub-groups, for example). Within these lumped groups, they identified increased communicative and social interaction, which can be viewed as an imagined community in itself. In contrast, the study indicated a reinforcement of social boundaries, which can be seen as a digital
form of segregation to others (e.g., Christians/Sikhs). Thus, social media praxis may reflect changes in interfaith relations in the EU, which are grounded in its youth.

In her paper, ‘Muslim YouTubers in Turkey and the Authoritarian Male Gaze on YouTube’, Esma Çelebioğlu examines the social representation that is narrated by popular YouTubers whose content is geared toward adolescent and young adult demographics. Through her exploration of this microcelebrity culture, she identifies the significance of male YouTubers. Accordingly, these video creators are viewed as social influencers and religious agents that demonstrate a creed for disseminating Muslim ideals. Her study further examines the actions of female YouTubers, as they socialize young women to embrace a hybrid identity—an identity that is based on globalized notions of womanhood and key aspects of traditional Muslim identity. Exploring these voices, Çelebioğlu reveals the gender differences and outreach activities of these increasingly prominent informal youth leaders.

Additionally, focusing on social influencers as youth leaders, Zaid, Fedtke, Donghee Shin, El Kadoussi, and Ibahrine focus on content produced by social influencers in the Gulf region. The role of social influencers in the cultural landscape of Muslim youths is viewed as a popular feature of today’s zeitgeist. Exploring Instagram and YouTube feeds from popular media influencers, the authors uncovered their agency as shaping new images of Muslim identity. A represented identity that balances religious proclivities with modern and global images of lifestyles that can inspire Muslim youths’ imagination. They discuss the backgrounds of these social influencers and address key issues, which are relevant to the youths they cater to and their regional milieu, ranging from personal problems of obesity to street interviews on Sunni and Shiite relations in Karbula, the holy city in Iraq. Reflecting on their work, it is worth considering the ways that these social influencers have risen to become informal leaders who offer pathways for youthful expression and social representation that incorporates religious themes and traditional symbolism. A social representation that challenges and innovates the traditional notions of how Muslims of the Gulf physically embody their cultural capital, and reform their portrayed habits and dispositions to fit global images that are in congruence with the Gulf’s hybrid notions of modernity and traditionalism.

In their paper, ‘Legitimation of New Media for Religious Youth: Orthodox Elites’ Approach to Adolescent Youths’ Engagement with Digital Worlds’, Golan and Don refrain from analyzing online productions (e.g., Instagram posts, video uploads on TikTok or YouTube) or creators (e.g., web social influencers, webmasters). Instead, they focus on the religious elite and clerical educators of a Jewish subgroup, namely that of the Religious Zionists in Israel. For this religious elite, new media comes as a challenge to their authority, offering alternative interpretations to religion, as well as a new source for information and entertainment. The researchers find that these religious elites, whose work focuses on youth and young adults, have developed ways of legitimizing the use of new media by highlighting its educational, religious, and social benefits. Rather than shunning new media and resisting its use, these religious educators developed an approach to accepting new media, which was also embraced by other religious and fundamentalist groups. More specifically, the paper highlights the ways that religious clergy make new media acceptable not only for everyday life but for educational praxis and advancing piety, thus creating new avenues for developing a hybrid modern–traditional way of life that involves duality in its contradictory orientations.

Pivoting to the user-end of religious content, in his study on Turkish prosumers, Abanoz investigates Muslim identity production by scouring user comments on ‘street interview videos’. Through a systematic investigation of these comments and the employment of a social-psychological framing, the study unveils the ways that young Muslims are continuously (re)constructing their religious sense of belonging via social media, which introduce a form of religious identity socialization, albeit in a country that is predominantly Muslim.

Additionally, investigating a Muslim society, Taherifard focuses on the religious mediascape in Iran, with special attention paid to visual content that is aimed at the youth. Given
state attempts to deepen religious socialization, the study uncovers the ways that prominent and charismatic objects (i.e., holy sites, martyrs, revolutionary clerics) are highlighted and reified through online visual language that is utilized on social media (primarily Instagram). Moreover, the study reveals youths’ grassroots efforts to appropriate these ‘grand’ religious spaces into their everyday lives and social representation, most notably through the practice of taking selfies. Thus, through this study, Taherifard identifies state and clerical efforts in approaching today’s youths in their own field of literacy (i.e., image consumption on social networks), as well as its gaps. Gaps that are apparent through the interpretive agency of users to negotiate meanings. Accordingly, Taherifard uncovers user practices that function in a contradictory semiotic structure that juxtapose visual meanings, which are often identified with young users’ humor, “coolness”, fun, and self-expression as well as with collective religious ideals of martyrdom, holy shrines, and disaster relief (cf. Golan and Martini 2018). Thus, the Iranian case illustrates that for youths, Instagram images offer meanings which are more open for interpretation beyond state and clerical design.

Similarly concerned with online visual culture, in her paper, Farah Hasan investigates Muslims’ visual landscape by examining key hashtags on Instagram (i.e., #muslim and #islam). In the past, the literature underscored the growth of a Muslim landscape on the internet (most noteworthy is Gary Bunt’s discussion of Islamic cyber environments, 2018). In these discussions, the outreach of religious content (e.g., fatwas, scripture), the emergence of new figures of authority and the internet’s utility for fundamentalist movements have been explored. In contrast, Hasan identifies a cultural change that is manifest over the visual language of Instagram. More specifically, she identifies the growth of a youthful imagery that is incrementally infused into Muslims’ mediascape. Thus, Hasan addresses key questions in the sociology of youth regarding the expansion of youthfulness into society, and in the sociology of religion, as she identifies changes in believers’ religious context as they traverse to visual Instagram spaces of practice and identity articulation to manifest their adaptations to modern lifestyles.

Finally, Kasstan highlights the ways online platforms bring forth the voice of the youth, under the constraints of highly supervised religious lifestyles and educational institutions. Overall, religious educational institutions are most often premised on shaping social and moral boundaries (Fader 2009), sometimes at the expense of the liberties bestowed on children and adolescents by state legislation and policy (Dwyer and Parutis 2013). Against this backdrop, Kasstan demonstrates how the anonymity of the internet allows for pupils attending religious schools to express their right to sex education and to be protected from sexual abuse and harassment. Through a focus on digital and public reporting of peer abuse in religious Jewish schools in the UK, Kasstan not only brings forth questions of public accountability, but offers an outlook on the power of the medium to deliver social and educational change in enclave societies that resist modern intervention and incrementally impact the status of youth in these societies.

To conclude, this Special Issue points to contemporary sources of informal leadership and authority for youth, current outlets for youth(ful) expression and the ambivalent (or dual) responses of key socialization brokers (e.g., schools, clerics) to these changes. While modernization theories, as well as subcultural theory relating to youth, may view a turn to tradition and religiosity as a reactionary return to past (or adult) culture, the studies assembled in this volume highlight a sense of identity and freedom embedded in youths’ playful online engagement and representation of religiosity. Thus, it can be deemed that online religiosity is ‘cool’ so long as it is framed within youth’s cultural mediascape. This in turn can point to youths leading grassroots changes in religiosity that are authentic, yet underexplored.

While there are certainly many more questions that need to be investigated in the convergence between the study of youth culture, digital culture, and the sociology of religion, this nascent Special Issue can be seen as a clarion call that invites scholars to
uncover not only contemporary expressions of youthfulness but the understanding of today’s agents of religious change and the social platforms that facilitate its transformation.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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