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Swiping for God: Islamizing Dating or Secularizing Islam?

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NOOR SUWWAN, AUG 25 2023

The introduction of information communication technologies (ICTs) exponentially digitalized most social interactions, including the more peculiar ones such as dating. Indeed, the launch of niche ICTs designed for the exclusive purpose of dating, such as Tinder in 2012, not only produced a paradigm shift on the sociological front (Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg 2017), but also added algorithmic diversity to those studying ICTs. As identity construction has effectively expanded into cyberspace, simulating a social lab for identities (Abubakar, Noorani and Rashidi 2020), it has produced transnational repercussions. Here, the majority of International Relations (IR) research focuses on networked ICTs, for their role in disrupting hierarchical communication. Nonetheless, a space should exist for non-networked ICTs, such as dating apps, to be discussed in the literature, specifically for their role in capturing identity evolutions. Nowhere is this more evident than in relation to Muslim dating ICTs.

The main architecture of an overwhelming majority of dating ICTs all follow the same basic format of Tinder, the most popular by far (Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg 2017). For instance, all dating apps are geo-social in their ability to generate possible partners within a preferred location. This not only covers the users' radius, but can extend beyond their states, allowing the initiation of romantic communication without social, physical and spatial constraints (Couch and Liamputtong 2008; Subrahmanyam, Smahel and Greenfield 2006). In other words, digitalization has enabled the transnationalisation of modern dating. Similarly, all dating apps import basic social and network data from other ICTs such as Facebook, Google and Twitter. Only a handful of dating apps do verify the imported data by face recognition or phone confirmations. Finally, all dating ICTs are designed to privilege the visual profile of a user, above all other personal dimensions, allowing users to either like by swiping right or pass by swiping left. In the case of two users mutually liking each other's profiles, a match is generated.

The basic premise of dating apps is presenting users with possible partners, exhausting them with choice. Nonetheless, most apps place a limit on daily swipes, refilling swipe capacity after a time constraint or pushing premium subscriptions on them. It is this combination of paying users alongside advertisement space upon which the business model of most dating ICTs rests. At the onset of a search, a filtering feature is provided, allowing users to exclude all possible partners outside their sphere of the ideal. It is this three-way combination of swipe culture, daily refills and filtering that results in what has been called 'the gamification of dating' (Hakala 2013). Consequently, the plethora of accessible possible partners within the desired geo-range signals a post-scarcity relationship market, incentivizing match hopping. Fueled with perceptions of an infinite supply, match hopping is the abrupt pursuit of possible partners, characterized with a short attention span.

Differentiations, however, do exist within dating ICTs. For instance, 'Bumble' positions itself as a women empowering dating ICT. That, it does by allowing women to initiate contact first. It attracts a more educated user-base and provides more filters compared to Tinder, such as fitness habits, dating expectations, smoking, political views and religious identity. It also supports voice and photo texting, to matches. Meanwhile, 'Happn' scans the 250-meter radius of users, often in public, alerting them of the presence of other users, looking to date. 'Hinge', on the other hand, expands the range of free features, beyond Tinder's and places a limit of 8 swipes per day, as opposed to Tinder's 100 swipes every 12 hours. Other dating apps' differentiation are faith-based.

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Consider, for instance, the case of the Muslim dating apps which incorporate religion to a secular process long rejected by Islamic tradition – dating. Seemingly, one of the ways of religious incorporation to the digitized dating process is the quantification of religion itself, through different parameters. For instance, on ‘Muzz’, an Islamic faith-based dating app, users can quantify their religiosity by self-identifying as very practicing, moderately practicing, fairly practicing and interestingly non-practicing at all (Abubakar, Noorani and Rashidi 2020). The motivations of those who identify as non-practicing to use a Muslim dating app are a puzzling case, worthy of further investigation. It suggests the use of Islam as an identity marker, exclusively, devoid of the religion itself. On the opposite hand, it also suggests a disinterest in inter-faith relationships specifically, by an insistence to seek out members of the same faith, despite not practicing.

Similarly, users can also self-parametrize religious rituals such as praying from a spectrum ranging from always praying, usually praying, sometimes praying and never praying (Abubakar, Noorani and Rashidi 2020). This is presented alongside static personality features such as height, age and ethnicity. Another religious parameter is the completion of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, that includes both categories of what Muslims constitute a pilgrimage; Umrah and Hajj, signaling different levels of religious commitment. As for women, a gendered parameter also exists, one that communicates modesty levels that includes the following options, niqab, jilbab/abaya, hijab and a generic modest. This reclaiming of Muslim religious parameters as celebratory self-identifiers after a long tradition of their socio-institutional use as stigmatized boundary markers (Gorman 2019), signals a post-anxiety existence of the Muslim identity in global society.

Muzz also enables users to zero in on their Islamic sect as well, with options ranging from Sunni, Shia, Ahmadi, Ibadi and Ismaili. This enables precise filtering, increasing the odds of finding an ideal match. Other attempts of capturing religiosity include drinking habits, smoking habits, conversion or reversion to Islam and commitment to the consumption of halal food (Abubakar, Noorani and Rashidi 2020). Furthermore, Muzz attempts to parameterize intentions as well, in a rhetorical alignment with the faith. For instance, the ICT enables the self-disclosure of relationship intentions, with all options strictly leading to marriage. The only variations of which are time-based, with possibilities constrained within marriage as soon as possible, marriage within one to two years, marriage within three to four years, or marriage beyond four years. Arguably, these options are nothing but dating intentions, ranging from casual to somewhat serious to religiously serious, all disguised by an Islamic veneer. The ICT also parametrizes future family plans, such as the want for children. This binarization of faith by capturing both practices and intentions and presenting them as screenshotted parameters undermines the faith itself, which by definition is unquantifiable.

Beyond the quantification of religion, users engage in identity construction, a process common to all ICTs. Online self-presentation generally aims at creating a favorable impression based on a person’s ideal self (Herring and Kapidzic 2015). The tools to this self-presentation on dating ICTs usually include the user’s physical features, general interests and a short bio. The bio allows the verbal construction of an identity, in a competitive landscape. Abubakar et. al (2020) found that while bios on Tinder tend to be very brief, those on Muzz are generally longer and more revelatory (Abubakar, Noorani and Rashidi 2020). However, premature self-disclosure does not conform to social penetration theory, which maintains that people prefer to receive personal revelations parallel to intimacy development (Saltes 2012). In other words, people prefer to peel their own onions. This excessive self-disclosure on Muzz warrants a success rate comparative study between general ICTs and Muzz, to test for correlation or causality.

While controlling the self-image is half the motivation for engaging in online identity construction, it increases the probability of inaccurate self-perceptions including exaggerations, embellishments and outright falsification (Fullwood, James and Chen-Wilson 2016). Indeed, digitization enables experimentation with the possible selves (Fullwood, James and Chen-Wilson 2016). This puts profiles on Muslim dating apps at a particular risk of communicating an ideal spiritual self, in which religious ideals are by definition unattainable. A comparison between the levels of deception in self-presentations on Muslim dating ICTs as opposed to generic ones is a topic begging further research.

Yet another important question to consider answering through the study of Muslim dating ICTs is whether the evolution of the Muslim identity is homogenous across countries. In other words, are there any state-specific patterns in both self-presentation and behavior on Muslim dating apps? This is particularly relevant when considering

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renowned scholar, Shadi Hamid's, thesis that outlines the presence of both forced secularization and forced Islamization attempts in the Middle East, past and present (Hamid 2017). The hypothesis, within this context, is that citizen-users in states with active institutional secularization programs are more likely to project their Islam as an identity, as opposed to a faith. Put differently, they would constitute the majority of users who self-identify as non-practicing. This said, would democratic states ironically emerge as defenders for the organic evolution of Islam, in a counter-Huntingtonian twist?

As for security implications, all ICTs suffer from the onset of data-based commercialization. The commercialization of personal data exposes all ICTs to the threat of breaches, usually for the purpose of trade to the highest bidder. While we've seen examples of the utility of personal data in political advertising, the trade of quantified religion would constitute a dragon of a different kind. For instance, it can serve as stigma markers, depending on the state's mood for either secularization or Islamization, by feeding into a social credit-score system, modeled after the great Chinese experiment in this field. Access to such parameters simply enables conformity tracking by the corpus of state-institutions. Meanwhile, less drastic measures still enable the quantification of minority religious sects, a challenging number to come by in the Middle East, for instance, for a lack of perceived protection. Surely, the stationing of faith and its parameters at the altar of advertisers cultivates sociopolitical consequences of a magnitude that extend beyond our current perceptions?

To conclude, interactions on the social lab of the Muslim dating apps signals an ongoing negotiation process of what it means to be Muslim, what it means to be secular and what it means to be a secular Muslim. It also suggests a renegotiation of faith in what it means to practice Islam, by binarizing it. It is this binarization that enables the cataloguing of Muslims, defined by their religious levels, and enables their filtering. This, in principle, Islamizes dating wholesale. In return, capitalism commodifies the new, binarized Islam. The resultant is a paradox between the limiting ring of sexual expression in Islam and their infinite supply on dating apps. This swiping through faith for the purpose of exclusion has been rejected by the majority of mainstream Muslim scholars, for its binarization of both faith and people. They also reject the Islamic veneer on Muslim dating ICTs on grounds of the commodification of human beings, as well, for its dehumanizing capacity. Meanwhile, the insistence of using them by millions of Muslims around the world might be, in a close reading, an early signal for the possible secularization of Islam itself.

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