Islam and Social Media: Attitudes and Views

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Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of our daily life encapsulating time and place, creating new relations and fostering old ones not only on an individual level but also on social and global ones. This revolution in human interaction was led by the introduction of Facebook in 2004 that was followed by other social media platforms such as Twitter and Instegram. This electronic revolution swept over to reach mobile phones and to introduce new platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber. The present study investigated attitudes and views towards the use of social media in promoting Islam. A random sample of Facebook users was asked to fill in a questionnaire that tackled questions related to their attitudes towards the role of social media in promoting Islam, the linguistic influence of the social media on their English language skills when talking about Islam and the most preferred social media platform. . Respondents were then classified according to education and gender. The study revealed that the social media have affected the way the other is addressed when discussing Islamic topics. Despite some negative stands, the positive attitudes towards social media in promoting Islam prevailed. The views were influenced by the respondents' age, gender and education. The linguistic influence of the social media on developing English skills was viewed positively. The Facebook was the most preferred social media platform. Further research is recommended on the interrelationships between social factors and views of social media. Code-switching among social media users and the effect on Arabic might be also investigated.

Keywords: Islam, social media, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Viber

1. Introduction

Not only has the spread of the internet marked a new phase of technological development, but it has also inaugurated a new era of cultural mobilization that has transcended all limitations of time and place. Religions as an integral part of human culture have been affected considerably. The classical 'halo' of religious male scholars has drastically been affected and traditional control over the production and interpretation of religious discourse has been challenged by the spread of social media. According to a report by the Governance and Innovation Program (Dubai School of Government, 2013), more than 125 million people use the internet in the Arab region, and more than 53 million actively use social networking technologies. 44% of users are aged 15-29, while 23% are aged 30-39.

Islamic web sites have played important roles recently and their popularity among Muslim minorities has been rapidly growing thus forming social, cultural and epistemological bridges between Islamic minorities on the one hand and Islamic countries on the other.

Since the 1999, the greatest manifestation of the internet could be traced in all walks of life. The internet has turned the whole world into a global village, creating new types of discourse and new communicative practices. This new form of media is praised by Campbell et al who state that

'With its ability to transport both personal conversations and mass communication, the Internet has begun to break down conventional distinctions among various media and between private and public modes of communication' (2007, p. 42).

Social network sites provide the perfect setting for creating interpersonal relations where people can express themselves freely and gain more friends. In 2008 about half of UK citizens did not have any Muslims among their "closest friends," (Dispatches, 2008), recently, there is evidence that social network sites change interpersonal relationships in some ways.

Social capital is broadly defined as the resources gathered through relationships among people (Coleman, 1988). Internet is considered as a source of social capital (Boase, et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2007). This view of the internet as a social capital is closely related to digital social media. The term 'social media' might be difficult to define as it encompasses people's views and varied practices. For some, any material posted online is social media, while for others; social media is what is shared through the social sites. For the present study, the term social media is used to refer to internet sites that ask readers to interact such as Facebook and Twitter on one hand, and WhatsApp and Viber, on the other.

The present study examines attitudes towards social media in the Arab countries and their effect on the language used for religious purposes addressing the following questions:

1. How do Muslims view the role of social media?

2. Are these views affected by respondents' age, education and gender?

3. Do these views and attitudes tackle the linguistic influence of social media, particularly with regard to English?

4. Which is the most preferred social media platform and what factors affect this preference?

2. Review of Related Literature

Human to human interaction through the shared use of Inter-supported technologies is known as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Computer mediated social communication is a recent field of investigation.

A lot of theories have been proposed to account for the   influence of the internet on our communication process., e.g., social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), reduced-context cues theory (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), and social information processing(SIP) theory (Walther, 1992). Social presence theory postulates that human interactions are influenced by the medium chosen for communication. Placing different communication media along a one-dimensional continuum, the degree of social presence was equated to the degree of awareness of the other person in an interaction.

The face-to-face medium was preferred to text-based communication for being more effective (Short et al., 1976). With regard to the attitude of the participants, it was found out that anonymous CMC interaction was favored for encouraging depersonalization among participants (Kiesler et al., 2006).

Assimilation theory is widely used in studies that tackle the issue of adaptation. It argues that migrants' convergence into the dominant culture leads to, 'decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic/racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it' (Alba & Nee, 1997, p. 863).

Interest in the relationship between the internet and religion can be traced to the in 1990s with Lorne Dawson (2000, p. 8) raising the following questions:

First, we need to know what is on the Internet, who has put it there, and for what purpose. Second, we need to know how many people are using these resources. How often are they using them? In what ways are they using them? We need to develop a social profile of those who use the Internet for religious purposes ... Third, we need to know what influence these activities are having on religions and practices of users.

Helland (2000) tried to establish a distinction between two concepts, 'online religion' and 'religion online' concluding that both are common nowadays where online sites provide information and a chance for interaction. Campbell (2005) tackled the concept of "lived religion" and the Internet in her article *'Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage.* The basic objective of her work is to investigate how the internet has affected religious worldview through identification of narratives used to shape religious or spiritual Internet usage.

Larsson (2005) investigated the online linguistic behavior of an Islamic Swedish group calling for combining online research with traditional fieldwork (in particular interviews) in order to be able to use data taken from the Internet. Larsson stressed the need to recognize global Muslim community in different languages and on many "global" topics. Krüger (2005) investigated methodological aspects involved in research of religion on the Internet.

The role of Social network sites has been stressed by several scholars. For (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) they are viewed as

'a cultural arena which gives rise to the processes of self-presentation, impression management and friendship performance.'

"Cyber Islamic Environments represent one barometer of diversity within the Islamic spectrum" (Bunt, 2000, p. 37).

Castells (2004, p. 56) postulates that the use of the internet led to the emergence of a new social order where the local fights against the power of globalization stating that

'In a world submitted to cultural homogenization by the ideology of modernization and the power of global media, language, as the direct expression of culture, becomes the trench of cultural resistance, the last bastion of self-control, the refuge of identifiable meaning'

'People resist the process of individualization and social atomization, and tend to cluster in community organizations that, over time, generate a feeling of belonging, and ultimately, in many cases, a communal, cultural identity' (Castells, 2004, p. 64).

Research on religion and the internet is relatively recent. Prominent studies were conducted by Dawson & Cowan (2004) and Højsgaard & Warburg (2005). The linguistic aspect of the internet communication is highlighted by Crystal who maintains that the internet is a social fact which has textual language use at its very heart (2001, p. 237).

Studies on Islam and social media are very scarce and have been basically conducted by either sociologist or computer specialist. Ibahrine (2014) investigated the role of social media in spreading Islam among social media users focusing on the influence of social media on religious practices. Presenting many examples of Islamic social media, Ibahrine came to the conclusion that the use of social media has created an open sphere for a young Muslim generation that started to assume an authority that was usually assigned to Muslim scholars thus 'the religious authority has become a contested domain, rather than an accepted reality by the uneducated masses'. Allievi (2002) coined the term 'neo-communities' to refer to the emerging Muslim community in Europe that has started to assume an underlying authority manifested in the political views towards the foreign policy regarding Muslim countries. His work is an attempt to investigate the role of the internet and the mass media in constructing transnational and non ethnic Muslim communities focusing on the processes involved in the way they establish their borders as well as transborders. Allievi provided examples of Islamic networks that contributed to the building of Muslim neo-communities in Europe and fostering a new image of Islam.

Nassar, Hayajneh and Almsafir (2012) conducted a survey to study the use of social media among students of different educational levels in Jordan. The study focused on social network usage, purposes and Islamic effects. The study revealed that the use of social media increased information promoting Islam to 78% calling for more utilization of social media by religious scholars.

3. Research Methodology

A questionnaire covering points related to the attitudes towards the role of the social media in promoting Islam, the way they have influenced discourse and the most preferred social platform was distributed to a random sample of Facebook users during the year 2014. Respondents were asked to comment on the effect of using the social media on their English language skills. Respondents were then classified according to age, education and gender. The age groups ranged between 18-60 with various educational levels ranging from high school to doctorate.

4. Discussion

Though use of social media has become a daily routine for many people, attitudes towards its contribution to our life vary. 91 % of the female respondents strongly agreed that the social media has positive effects on promoting Islam and creating a positive image while 9% females strongly disagreed. It is worth to mention here that all females in this random sample were undergraduate university students. Results for male respondent, on the other hand, were different. The difference could be attributed to the different educational backgrounds. Three educational levels could be identified as far as male respondents were concerned. These included high school, undergraduate and postgraduate. Half of the high school respondents agreed that social media plays a significant role in promoting Islam. Male university respondents showed more belief in the positive role of social media where the percentage for those who agreed was 76%. Results obtained for postgraduates presented a strong support for the positive role of social media with 88% supporting and only 12% disagreeing .Those who had a negative attitude towards the role of social media postulated that social media created more enemies for Islam rather than more friends. Some respondents believed that the social media had affected Arabic negatively while those who had positive views maintained that social media helped in creating a positive image of Islam and decreasing Islamophopia.

As far as the linguistic influence of the social media is concerned, about 91% of the female respondents agreed

that the social media has created a new discourse while 70 % of male university students agreed. Though high school respondents were less aware of the effect of the social media on discourse,60% agreed that the social media had created new discourse.36% of the postgraduates agreed. Different attitudes according to age can be attributed to the frequency of using social media and the exposure to various discourse genres. Young users might spend more time on social platforms but might not have the ability to engage in demanding linguistic situations. Postgraduates, on the other hand, tend to be more equipped with linguistic as well social communicative skills that enable them to get exposed to various discourse genres and consequently have stronger ability to judge.

Respondents had various views towards the effect of the social media on their linguistic skills when talking about Islam in English. Females' responses indicated that the social media improved their listening and reading skills most while male high school students and male university students said that social media improved their reading and writing skills most. Postgraduates' responses emphasized the positive effect of the use of social media on their listening and speaking skills. Most respondents agreed that the social media increased their English vocabulary.64% of Male undergraduates and postgraduates praised the social media for improving their English vocabulary while the figures for the females and high school students were 57% and 62% respectively.

The last question investigated the most preferred social media platform for discussing Islamic issues. Facebook was the most favored social platform for all respondents. WhatsApp came next for all respondents except postgraduates who preferred Twitter to it. The reasons for favoring Facebook might be related to the vast numbers of users since it began earlier than other social media platforms in addition to the features provided by the Facebook that facilitate international communication.

5. Conclusion

Analysis of the responses elicited by the questionnaire in the present study revealed that the social media have affected the way the other is addressed when discussing Islamic topics. Despite some negative stands, the positive attitude towards social media in promoting Islam prevailed. These views were influenced by the respondents' age, gender and education. The linguistic influence of the social media on developing English skills was viewed positively. The Facebook was the most preferred social media platform. Further research is recommended on the interrelationships between social factors and views of social media .Code-switching among social media users and the effect on Arabic might be also investigated.

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