

# Altered Rhythms of Ramadan: Temporalities of Social Media Non/Use during COVID-19

Cansu Ekmekcioglu<sup>1</sup>, Nadia Caidi, Priyank Chandra & Rojin Jamali

Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

## Background

The literature that investigates the interface between religion and social media has demonstrated how religious individuals, communities, and institutions engage with social media (Åhman & Thorén, 2021; Caidi et al., 2018; Campbell & Golan, 2011) and detailed a multitude of religious and spiritual conditions that shape aspects of this engagement (Rosenberg & Blondheim, 2021; Tsuria, 2016). These accounts reveal a range of modalities and motivations of engagement, including asceticism, skepticism, and pragmatism, regarding social media's role in mediating religious expressions, identities, and ideologies (Jonveaux, 2021; Rifat et al., 2017). COVID-19 pandemic has heightened this interaction by pushing religious individuals and events online, and Ramadan –the holy month of fasting in Islam– was no exception (Jones-Ahmed, 2022).

Time and temporality (e.g. the experiential aspect of time) are deeply rooted in our experience of the world, including religious commitments and practices. As Dalsgård and Thorsen (2020) remind us, Ramadan restructures time in the lives of Muslims “through an exercising of the body, evoking certain emotions and concomitant micro-temporalities throughout the day and month” (p.193) as it reorganizes everyday practices around suhur (the last meal before fasting) and iftar (the end of the fast) as well as the change in praying times. Ramadan also restructures public time as people alter their schedules around when they work, eat, sleep, and socialize - at the mosques, at home, and in designated public spaces.

## Objectives

This article explores how the relational context of religious rituals and practices and pandemic-induced stay-at-home orders shape the socio-temporal organization of young Muslims' everyday social media engagement during Ramadan under COVID-19. This examination requires attending to different aspects of time as we experience it: temporal rhythms (i.e., recurring patterns in and across practices) as theorized by Lefebvre (2004), Zerubavel (1985), Reddy and Dourish (2002) and Southerton (2006) as well as Adam's concepts of time as “rhythm with variation, a dynamic structure of framing, timing, synchronization, duration, sequence, tempo and intensity” (Adam,

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Cansu Ekmekcioglu, [cansu.ekmekcioglu@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:cansu.ekmekcioglu@mail.utoronto.ca)

1995). We utilise these to explore socio-temporal rhythms of Ramadan and how they shape (and are shaped by) everyday practices during pandemic.

## **Method**

We collected semi-structured interviews with 22 self-identified Muslims who observed Ramadan during the pandemic (in 2020 and 2021). Participants were recruited through the researchers' personal and social networks as well as through a call to various established organizations such as student associations, community networks and digital spaces. Our participants' ages ranged from 18-35 and included 9 women and 13 men. Together, they represented a diverse sample of respondents in terms of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, representing the varied Islamic traditions and practices (Peterson, 2020). They were asked about their Ramadan routines and experiences, as well as their social media usage over those periods of time. The data analysis was undertaken through an iterative process of thematic coding.

## **Results**

Our findings point to the impacts of COVID-19 and related public health measures in the formation of the participants' psyche about their observance of Ramadan in 2020 and 2021. They also indicate that the disruption caused by the pandemic resulted in social media weaving itself into specific rhythmic patterns of activities in the lives of young Muslims, while supporting their unique needs, both religious and otherwise. The participants used Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Snapchat, and Zoom to adjust their circumstances. Each of these platforms served a distinct function based on their affordances and user needs.

Drawing on the concept of socio-temporal rhythms in everyday life practices (Lefebvre, 2004; Southerton, 2006, 2020; Zerubavel, 1985), we analyzed our findings looking for examples of socio-temporal rhythms and enabling factors in our informants' accounts. Rhythms are regular recurrences that are characterized by either a cycle of events and movement suggested by numerous repeated processes of event durations or a linear recurrence (Wunderlich, 2008, p.94). Taken together, this circularity and linearity map the temporal patterning of their everyday religious rituals and practices onto their social media (dis)engagement, as enabled or constrained by pandemic restrictions. Below, we present our analysis of these socio-temporal rhythms, how they shape (and are shaped by) our participants' religious lived experiences and engagement with social media.

Circular rhythms are governed by the timing of recurring activities, such as prayer schedules or religious mealtimes, that have a distinct beginning and end. In our study, these are primarily shaped by Ramadan's cycles of time which regulate individual and communal lives. Examples of social media practices rhythmically shaped by cyclical patterns, include: checking social media each day for prayer schedules and iftar and suhur times, video-calling families and friends, watching live-streaming of virtual prayers

on YouTube, along with distractions such as “killing time scrolling social media while waiting for the break of the fast” (i.e., when the body is too exhausted to do anything more demanding due to lengthy hunger and thirst). We found that circular rhythms in social media usage motivated participants by acting as a source of support and connection to fellow Muslims at a time when congregational religious activities were halted due to social distancing. These circular rhythms created a routine that enabled participants to remain both resilient and motivated.

Linear rhythms, allude to sequential patterns of everyday practices that are mostly motivated by individual needs, concerns, and desires. Linearity is formed and reproduced through patterning of activities that are informational, such as browsing religious websites, directed search on forums, monitoring certain information, scrolling on social media apps. As one participant stated: “I’ve been learning about an app to teach myself more about the Quran [the holy book] and Hadith [the sayings of the Prophet].” Our participants engage with these activities to meet religious and health-related needs, such as looking for information about whether being vaccinated would break their fast or how to cook more nutritious meals to keep their bodies healthy during long hours of fasting. Other practices are motivated by the need to fulfill emotional and communal needs (e.g., a participant describes how following various Muslims' fasting rituals through their public Instagram profiles connected her to the global Muslim community). Our data revealed that linear rhythms relating to social media engagement support users informationally, spiritually, and emotionally.

While these rhythms overlap and produce temporal organisation of social media activities, we also found examples of non-use and social media avoidance in our participants’ accounts in an attempt to revive the spirit of Ramadan. Practices range from: changing the frequency and duration of the time spent on social media, or allocating more time on religious platforms, or a complete disconnection from social media for the entire month. Indeed, several participants reported decreasing their social media usage because, as one participant recounted aptly, “Fasting is also about the fasting of eyes and ears.” Others expressed their desire for slowness and intentionality as they immersed themselves in the spiritual and corporeal cleansing often associated with observing Ramadan. We found both medium-specific (avoiding music and video during Ramadan) and platform-specific ways of disengagements during Ramadan: “YouTube and Netflix decreased for me during Ramadan” and “At least in my family, using the Instagram app has decreased and instead we were using religious apps”; while others chose to disconnect entirely: “I deleted Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok to keep self-calm and keep up the spirit of Ramadan.” Our data suggest that disconnection occurs partially due to the algorithmically-mediated nature of social media (ads or autocomplete predictions), which our participants deemed more likely to bring up haram (e.g. Islamically non-permissible) content online on their feed thus putting their fast at risk of being void. To mitigate this risk, our participants use the likes

of Halal Googling, a search engine that allows people to use filters for specific topics, words, or phrases in queries. Collectively, these instances highlight the numerous socio-cultural and psychological factors that impact social media use and non-use practices.

## Future Work

Our examination of rhythmic patterns of practices enables us to better understand socio-temporal organization of everyday life in the lives of young Muslims during Ramadan. Specifically, it captures their perceptions, emotions, and challenges as they attempt to reconcile their social media engagement with their fasting during a pandemic. Admittedly, Ramadan is an event that matters a great deal for Muslims (and fasting is not specific to them, as many traditions have a version of the fast). A future research direction might look at how religious routines and rituals shape and are shaped by everyday social media practices, which includes the sentiment of religiosity and belonging afforded by a broader community of co-religionists. It would also be complemented by an exploration into how design of religious/spiritual social media platforms shape users' aspirations and actions regarding how their time is spent and allocated.

Moreover, digital disconnection, which has been attracting scholarly attention (Baumer et al., 2013, 2015; Chia et al., 2021; Kaun, 2021; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Wyatt, 2003), needs a more thorough (re)conceptualization in the context of religious/spirituality realms. In writing this article, our aim was to move beyond secular (or this-worldly) theories of digital disconnection, and think about non-secular non-use experience. Our study showed how the ascetic desire for slowness and immersion in spirituality, as well as avoidance of algorithmically-curated haram content temporally have been shaping young Muslims' social media non-use during pandemic. Future work should broaden the empirical scope and conceptual framework to elicit culturally-relevant practices from other religious communities in relation to social media engagement, and how they seek greater control over apps, sites, and the devices that surround us.

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