Introduction

This chapter examines the use of social media and online communities by religious women. It is grounded in a study of blogging by 13 Muslim and Mormon women in the United States conducted during 2019. The chapter begins with an overview of key themes in the literature on religion, gender, and online communities more broadly before examining scholarship on Muslim and Mormon women online more particularly. After a description of the methods used in my study, I turn to analysis of the findings of my research. I examine the construction of community on Muslim and Mormon blogs, the negotiation and representation of gender norms and religious agency, and religious authority on the blogs.

The study demonstrates that contextual factors in the offline world of religious communities—such as local histories and structures of religious authority—play a part in shaping the online community. In the context of this study, it is the history of correlation in the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints (LDS) and its continued, formalised religious hierarchy and the contemporary fragmentation of religious authority in Islamic communities that shape the nature of Mormon and Muslim women’s blogs respectively. This study also speaks to the fierce debates on the possibilities for women’s agency within religious communities—which has particularly focused on Islam. Where much of this debate has focused on the nature of agency itself—whether it must be found within resistance to oppression or can operate ‘embedded’ (Korteweg 2008, 437) within a conservative religious community—this study shows that, in the case of Islam at least, both forms of agency can exist within the same religious community simultaneously.

Religion and online community

Scholarship on the internet has often emphasised that its decentralised, non-hierarchical nature holds immense emancipatory potential (Daniels 2009; Loewenstein 2008, 9), especially for religious women. Gina Messina-Dysert (2014, 10) is so enthusiastic about the emancipatory potential of the internet for religious women that she argues, ‘social media embodies feminist values’, specifically naming the elimination of hierarchy, foundation on personal experience,
and networking capacity that transcends geography as ‘feminist’ characteristics of social media. However, the monetisation of social media and concomitant rise of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2015) relying on user-generated data and data-breach scandals at Facebook have all dampened enthusiasm about an internet utopia and undermined trust in social media platforms (Lapowsky 2019). Whilst the internet has no hierarchy, the lack of transparency around algorithms and their immense power in determining what internet users access legitimately raises concerns about the ‘silo-isation’ of the internet, where users only access content that confirms their existing preferences and biases (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 185). Further, scholars have rightly pointed out that offline power hierarchies are often reproduced online (Hoover 2014, 123–124; Ott 2018, 96): this includes a ‘digital divide’ of unequal access to the internet, insufficient training to use the internet, and the dominance of conservative religious voices online (Coleman 2015, 146).

Whether the internet still holds some emancipatory potential for religious women is an open question: in the context of gender and women’s leadership within the Mormon community, for example, the ‘most vibrant discussions’ are occurring on Mormon blogs (Feller 2016, 156). Scholars of Christian, Mormon, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist women have all noted that internet communities have revitalised or transformed women’s religious community in a variety of ways (Coleman and Augustine 2014; Finnigan and Ross 2013; Kavakci and Kraeplin 2017; Tomalin, Starkey, and Halafoff 2015; Yael 2014). Indeed, as our understanding has grown both of the internet itself and the ways in which religious women use it, the simple framing of the internet as either emancipatory or not is unhelpful. Internet spaces are full of ambivalence, ‘contradiction and complication’, whilst still allowing religious women ‘the freedom to experiment and simply be’ (Pennington 2018, 632).

Blogging and social media have certainly opened up avenues to circumvent or subvert traditional religious authority, particularly for those women who are members of religious communities with centralised and/or well-defined religious hierarchy. The decentralised and non-hierarchical structure of the internet means ‘authority is rendered diffuse and official statements no longer speak for the whole’ (Haglund 2016, 253), which allows women to establish informal authority or expertise within their online communities. In the communities of feminist religious women who have found a home online, a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ is adopted towards traditional religious authority (Coleman and Augustine 2014, 22), and some scholars argue that even more orthodox women engage in ‘theological innovation, doctrinal interpretation, and cultural resistance’ in online groups (Haglund 2016, 255). Certainly, amongst some conservative religious groups, such as in ultra-orthodox Judaism or more conservative forms of Islam, there is evidence that orthodox gender norms and religious authority are contested online (Fader 2017; Piela 2012). Even though many blogs are little more than personal diaries, Lovheim (2011, 338–339) argues that ‘personal blogs might also become an arena for collective reflections on changing values and norms for self-expression and social relations’. The formation of online communities of women writing about their daily lives, in and of itself, may create an autonomous space for women to reflect with others about the ‘values and norms’ of their religious communities.

The internet also allows for gendered norms regarding strict boundaries between the public and private to be blurred. Andrea Lieber writes of a ‘new kind of “public” private’ that is articulated through such uses of the internet, ‘one that facilitates an extraordinary opportunity for self-expression, but one that is not viewed consciously by the women who write them as compromising social or religious boundaries’ (Lieber 2010, 622). In their study of veiled Muslim social media ‘celebrities’, Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) document how the female celebrities frequently post images of their family members and provide commentary on the intimate
moments of their daily lives (such as getting an ultrasound or a piercing) that challenge orthodox norms regarding what women should reveal in public. Muslim and Jewish women from more conservative communities also embrace anonymous virtual communities or ‘closed’ groups on platforms like Facebook to freely express themselves within a safe, closed community (Guta and Karolak 2015; Lieber 2010).

The relationship between online religious communities and their offline counterparts is a common area of focus for scholarship on religion and the internet. Online communities are portrayed as ‘addenda’ (Hoover 2014, 112) or as supplementary to offline communities (Finnigan and Ross 2013) and as a way for offline religious communities to extend their access and outreach (Yael 2014). For example, Yael (2014) documents the use of online streaming services from a synagogue in the US to make it possible for people unable to attend worship due to illness or distance to watch online; whilst Finnigan and Ross (2013) document the construction of a Mormon feminist community online that allowed Mormon feminists to find and support each other across geographical distance. Women have also used the tools of the internet to organise for change within their religious community (for example, Echchaibi 2013; Tomalin, Starkey, and Halafoff 2015). Mormon feminists have been particularly adept at this: forcing the church to clarify their position on menstruating women participating in baptismal rites, organising women to wear pants to church to symbolically challenge gender norms (Finnigan and Ross 2013), and coordinating the contemporary women’s ordination movement (Toscano 2014).

This study is unique in its comparison of Mormon and Muslim bloggers. Whilst some, limited, literature has compared Muslim and Christian use of the internet (el- Nawawy 2011; Romanowski 2005), the vast majority of studies in this field examine a single religious community. As discussed later, both the Mormon and Muslim communities in the United States are perceived as conservative regarding gender and have histories of being ‘othered’ within American society, providing a foundation of contextual similarity for comparison regarding gender and online religion. Comparing the use of social media by women from two different religious communities allows us to begin to unpack what trends in the existing literature regarding online community, gender, and religious authority are grounded in specific religious communities and their particular features, and which may be instead grounded in broader social trends regarding the impact of internet technologies upon society more broadly.

**Mormon and Muslim women bloggers**

Mormon and Muslim women are members of two religious communities that are—both at present and historically—‘othered’ within the United States in surprisingly connected ways (Heise 2013). Popular discourse on women in both communities often focuses upon their apparent submission to patriarchal religious and cultural norms. Muslim women in particular who add their voices to this popular discourse struggle to be heard unless they conform to two narrow stereotypes: ‘victim’ or ‘escapee’ (Hammer 2012, 90). This article analyses 13 blogs where Mormon and Muslim women speak for themselves and about themselves and are neither ‘victims’ nor ‘escapees’ of their religious communities. Given that both groups of women are frequently ‘spoken about’ in academic and popular media, I assess the extent to which the blogosphere is an autonomous space for religious women, guided by Jasmine Zine’s (2004, 168) assessment that ‘attempting to construct an alternative space where [religious] women can articulate a new understanding of their subjectivities through discourses they themselves have authorized is a contemporary challenge’.

This chapter is, however, unavoidably part of academic discourse ‘about’ Muslim and Mormon women. I am a white New Zealand–born woman living in Australia from a Christian
background. The intent of this article is not to determine the ‘right’ way for Mormon or Muslim women to live autonomously, nor the ‘right’ way for Mormon or Muslim women to present themselves in online spaces, nor to put forward an argument for a particular understanding of gender in either religion. I do not believe I have a place in those debates, which must occur and be determined amongst Muslim and Mormon women themselves. Rather, I wish to analyse how Mormon and Muslim women form communities online and present agency and to assess whether the blogosphere is a space in which religious women can have those debates in an autonomous and productive way. In the process, I hope to demonstrate how religious women are, already, actively engaged in and writing on questions of agency, gender, and religious interpretation in both the LDS Church and Islam by bringing a handful of their voices into an academic publication—fully realising the (subjective) role I play as researcher in ‘selecting’ these voices as somehow representative.

Both Mormon and Muslim women have a history of creating community through writing: Margot Badran (1996, 7) documents the rise of women’s printing presses in Egypt in the early twentieth century, spurred on by rising literacy rates and the arrival of affordable technology—these presses were central to the women’s movement of the time, and female writers wrote for a specifically female reading public. Since the early 1990s, Muslim women have engaged in ‘feminist’ (or ‘female’—for those who shirk the feminist label) theology of Islam, reading Islamic texts and traditions through a gendered lens (see Barlas 2002; Mernissi 1991; Wadud 1995). There is a similarly significant history of women’s publications in Mormon communities in the United States, with both orthodox and more feminist publications enjoying stable readerships until the mid-twentieth century, when the LDS church leadership took steps to control Mormon publishing in a process known as ‘correlation’ (Haglund 2016, 236) that eventually saw most of these women’s publications fold.

Some scholars have hypothesised that online communities are filling the gap left by the collapse of religious women’s publishing, particularly in Mormon communities (Feller 2016, 164). The internet offers a space for people within both religious communities who occupy a marginal or oppressed identity to freely express themselves and find each other: women and LGBTQ people in particular make use of the anonymity of the internet to express unorthodox and possibly controversial accounts of their lives (Finnigan and Ross 2013; Pepe 2011; Segall 2013). Other studies note how some Muslim and Mormon women harness the reach of the internet to counter dominant narratives about their supposed oppression. For example, a site such as Muslimah Media Watch documents and critiques the way Muslim women are portrayed in media across the world, and contributors to the site ‘perform a double function of complicating both the western modernist view of the Muslim woman and that of the Muslim traditionalist’ (Echchaibi 2013, 861).

Whilst Muslim and Mormon women make use of social media and internet technologies to build religious communities, the internet is also a platform where religious women negotiate and enact religious agency. Recent decades have seen an unfolding debate about the possibilities and nature of agency amongst religious women (Ben Shitrit 2013; Rinaldo 2014; Singh 2015; Zion-Waldoks 2015), particularly in relation to women belonging to ‘conservative’ religions such as Islam or the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints which have formal and/or informal patriarchal structures of power. For Muslim and Mormon women, both secular feminists and orthodox figures within their own religions have claimed their religious identity is incompatible with feminism (Badran 1996; Finnigan and Ross 2013). On the one hand, Western modernist and feminist discourses tend to see in the patriarchal structures of Islam and Mormonism gender-based oppression and describe women’s participation in religious practices like veiling as tantamount to submission to patriarchal control. On the other hand, traditionalist
religious discourses proclaim that both Islam and Mormonism honours women as mothers and wives (Haglund 2016), and in the case of Islam, decry Western feminisms as neocolonialist and oppressive of ‘authentic’ Islamic culture (Badran 1996, 24). Whatever choices a Muslim or Mormon woman makes—to veil or not to veil, to participate in paid employment or to remain at home, to believe in and advocate for gender equality or not—the legitimacy of those choices and the extent to which she makes them ‘freely’ will be questioned by one or other of those camps.

Yet a number of scholars do theorise about women’s agency within these so-called conservative religions. For example, Saba Mahmood locates subjectivity and the capacity for action within already-existing power structures, and thus allows for religious women to be both pious adherents of orthodox religions and have agency within that community (Mahmood 2005). Piela (2011, 250) studied Muslim women’s use of internet platforms to form study circles where women ‘actively explore the Qur’an and Hadith’ and ‘hear their own voices’ in their reading of scripture. The majority of women in these discussions held orthodox views on gender, and Piela (2011, 263) called all three categories of women identified in the study (traditionalist, egalitarian, and holistic) ‘pious’ for their reliance on Islamic scripture as the ‘main frame of reference’ in their discussion. Their active engagement with scripture and formation of autonomous communities online demonstrate their agency—which is still located within the bounds of orthodox Islamic norms.

Differing slightly from Mahmood’s work, Rinaldo argues for what she calls ‘pious critical agency’, where women ‘engage critically and publicly with religious texts’ in a way that involves both ‘reflection on religious texts and [also] critical reinterpretations that [are used] in political activism’ (Rinaldo 2014, 825). Some of the debate and discussion conducted on Mormon feminist blogs, particularly when women pressured Church leaders to clarify whether menstruating women could participate in baptismal rites, is a good example of this ‘pious critical agency’. The bloggers engaged critically with scripture and religious tradition publicly on their blogs, which fed into activism: remaining within the bounds of their community by pressuring established religious authority.

**Method**

This chapter is based on the analysis of 13 blogs—six written by Mormon women and seven written by Muslim women, all of whom are based in the United States. A major methodological challenge to research on blogs is that there is no ‘population list’ from which to obtain a representative sample of blogs, and the nature of blogs is such that many available online may be inactive (Li and Walejko 2008). However, Earl argues that one can create a list of sites that an average internet user would be likely to find by using ‘repetitive and overlapping’ searches using search engines such as Google (Earl 2013).

In creating a population list of blogs from which to sample, I used the search engines Google and Bing to conduct overlapping searches using paired keywords: ‘Mormon’ ‘LDS’, ‘Women’ ‘Blog’, and ‘Muslim’ ‘Islam’ ‘Women’ ‘Blog’, and recorded the blogs that appeared on the first 10 pages of the searches that matched the selection criteria. The selection criteria I used in this project include the following: (1) the blog is written by a self-identified Muslim or Mormon woman; (2) the blog is sole-authored; (3) the authors are located in the United States; and (4) the blog is active (defined as a minimum of six posts in the last year, and a minimum of one post since 1 January 2019). I limited the study to the United States as, even though online communities transcend geographical location, ‘human beings do not create or use new media apart from the networks and communities to which they belong. They come from somewhere, and
that somewhere matters’ (Hoover 2014, 113). As one of the aims of this study is to compare the use of the internet by Mormon and Muslim women to determine the extent to which trends identified in the literature, such as the formation of religious community online and the representation of religious agency, are shaped by religious community specifically or by internet technologies more broadly, I wanted to control for other factors—such as geography—that may also influence the use of social media.

Each of the 13 blogs that met the selection criteria had entries from the period 1 January 2019 to 31 March 2019 archived and saved in NVivo qualitative research software. Each entry was assigned codes based on the subject matter and type of the entry. In addition, one entry from each blog was randomly selected for close content analysis, including the text of the entry, any visual data (Hookway 2008), and any comments. Quantitative data about the 13 blogs was also captured, including the number of posts during the research period and the number of comments per post.

**Findings**

**Online community**

Scholars of online religion have argued that the use of the internet by religious women has emphasised the creation of geography-spanning communities of support that have renewed or transformed women’s connection to their religious tradition (Feller 2016, 164; Finnigan and Ross 2013, 3). However, it is relatively difficult to assess the extent to which any individual blogger in this study is engaged in extensive and significant online communities: it is up to the blog owner to determine whether to publicly list the number of unique visitors to their site (and most in this study do not). There are other mechanisms to ascertain the formation of online community: the comment section found in most blogs is often thought to be a central aspect of the engaged and interactive online community that can form around blogs (Wilson 2005, 51).

Most bloggers in this study had a low rate of engagement by readers, with a mean of 2.8 comments and a median of 1.3 across all blogs during the research period (see Appendix I). Four of the bloggers received no comments at all during the research period (n. 3 Muslim; n. 1 Mormon)—although one of these bloggers did not have a comment function enabled on her blog. However, receiving no comments is not necessarily an indication that the blogger is not part of an engaged online community: readers may also converse with bloggers using email or through other social media channels (where bloggers will cross-post their writing) and in the case of dissent may make posts on their own blog rather than engaging in direct debate (Haglund 2016, 245). For example, one blogger who received no comments on her posts during the research period stated in a post, ‘I’ve gotten requests over the years to give you guys some modest professional dress inspo’ (Blog K, 1 February 2019), indicating that she has an engaged audience despite the lack of comments on the blog itself.

A common critique of the limitations of the internet—and social media in particular—is that way algorithms show readers only what they already like, preventing genuine debate across difference and forming ‘silos’ of sameness (Wellman and Gulia 1999). Whilst other studies demonstrate that debate across difference can happen on blogs (el-Nawawy and Khamis 2011), this was not evident on the blogs in this study. Most of the comments found on any post were simple words of agreement or encouragement, and it was very rare to find any significant disagreement or debate in comments during the research period (n. 2). For example, on a long post suggesting ways for stay-at-home mothers to make friends with other mothers, a reader commented, ‘I love this! What great, realistic ideas’ (Blog C, 1 March 2019).
I found evidence of only two comments disagreeing with the content of a post during the research period: one on a post about the benefits of studying religions other than your own (Blog L, 25 February 2019), and a second on a post discussing Muslim women who choose to stop wearing the veil (Blog H, 11 January 2019). In the latter example, a commenter stated, ‘There are many issues I’ve come upon when reading this article’ before briefly asserting that there is ‘no . . . excuse’ for Muslim women not veiling. Another reader came to the defence of the blogger, stating, ‘You are a man, right? So you don’t know anything about this’. This policing of dissent and the dismissal of a male perspective by the reader suggest that the blogger and their readers have formed a ‘women’s space’ (Lieber 2010, 632) online: a community of like-minded women whose function is to provide support and a space to express themselves freely—rather than a space to debate religious norms and theology.

Whilst evidence of debate and extensive interaction were relatively rare on the blogs in this sample, it is evident that the blogs were ‘pitched’ towards an external audience. Three common modes of writing were evident across both the Mormon and Muslim blogs: resourcing, advice giving, and modelling. Those who adopt a ‘resourcing’ mode of blog writing use their posts to provide—literally—resources to their readers: recipes and stitching patterns (Blog A) or practical information (including links to external websites) about healthy eating (Blog H). Those who utilise an ‘advice-giving’ mode of blogging use their blog to give readers advice: how useful it is to have a ‘Mommy’ mentor—including listing tips for how to identify and approach a prospective mentor (Blog C, 5 February 2019) or a list of tips for more effective prayer (Blog B, 16 January 2019). Modelling was the most common mode of blog writing. In general, the blogs were used to ‘model’ an ideal of pious religious womanhood. Some bloggers modelled how to raise children deeply grounded in their religious tradition and practice (Blog A), others modelled how to be a loving and committed wife and mother (Blog F), yet others modelled public modesty (Blog K). Many of these posts take the form of journal-like entries, where the blogger simply records their activities and (sometimes) a little reflection on their day. Diary-format blogs often present an idealised version of the author—who they would like to be—and ‘blogging . . . becomes a way of life-constructing, a performing act of self-identity’ (Pepe 2011, 78).

Although it is difficult to assess the number of readers a blogger has and the extent of engagement between a blogger and her audience, it was clear that there was a consistent effort to build supportive religious community online through the tone and mode of writing on the blogs. Overall, the Mormon bloggers were nearly three times as likely to have readers engage with their posts through the comments section as the Muslim bloggers and posted more than four times as much on average (see Appendix I). The higher level of activity by Mormon bloggers may be due to the prominence of blogging within the LDS Church. Literature on Mormon bloggers has consistently emphasised the reach and influence of the ‘bloggernacle’ in Mormon communities (Feller 2016; Finnigan and Ross 2013; Haglund 2016), whereas no one internet platform appears to have similar dominance in Muslim communities.

**Gender online**

The bloggers in this study do not all neatly fall into ‘orthodox’ or ‘feminist’ categories. Whilst some bloggers write predominantly about what I call the ‘three Ms’ of orthodox religious gender norms—modesty, marriage, and motherhood—others simply do not engage with these norms on their blogs, preferring to write about nutrition, pop culture, or mental health. There were only two self-identified ‘feminists’ in the sample of blogs, which is consistent with other
research indicating that orthodox or conservative religious voices outnumber feminist religious voices online (Haglund 2016, 239).

Of the ‘three Ms’ of orthodox religious gender norms, motherhood was the most common theme in the sample of blogs. However, this theme was not evenly distributed across both Muslim and Mormon blogs, as only the Mormon bloggers wrote about motherhood. Four of the six Mormon blogs in this study centred on description and reflections—with varying degrees of intimacy—of family life, whilst a fifth touched on family life in an oblique manner. Motherhood on these blogs was represented as fulfilling and meaningful. In a post about reading aloud to her children, a blogger described how when she took her children for a walk in the snow, they copied characters in a book by using their bodies to make shapes in the snowfall: ‘My heart nearly burst as I watched my five year old experience such joy, the impetus for which came from a book we read together. It was perfect’ (Blog A, 18 January 2019).

Whilst some of the bloggers share their experiences of raising their children in their faith—describing daily scripture reading, trips to the temple, or youth groups—others barely make mention of their religious faith and focus instead simply on daily family life. However, even these bloggers may be doing ‘religious work’ through their blogging: Kristine Haglund (2016, 240) has argued that, for the popular Mormon ‘Mommy’ bloggers, ‘making their lives and their families lives visible and public was an expression of their belief in the doctrine of a patriarchal church’. On Blog F, where the blogger posts almost daily about the routine experiences of her life as a (mostly) stay-at-home mother to five children, she explicitly articulates that her blog is ‘focused on storytelling and testimony building’ and quotes directly from a LDS Elder who instructs pious Mormons to ‘share your testimony’ (22 March 2019).

Marriage and married life were significantly less popular themes than motherhood across all the blogs in this study; however, they did feature on a handful of the more orthodox blogs. Most of the (few) posts on this theme can be described as ‘appreciation’ posts that either praise the husband or appreciate the marriage of the blogger—often still within the context of motherhood and family life. For example, just before Valentine’s Day a blogger posted a video of her and her husband to her blog with a short paragraph saying,

I’ve learn [sic] the best way to celebrate Valentine’s Day (and any special occasion, really) . . . [is] prioritizing time together. . . . However we can get it! . . . Just reaching across the sticky dinner table filled with children and a lot of mashed up peas underneath to hold each other’s hands in a sort of ‘I see you over there and I love you’ way. *(Blog E, 12 February 2019)*

Whilst other studies have shown marriage and gendered relationship dynamics to be a feature of religious women’s online community (Kavakci and Kraeplin 2017; Piela 2011), explicit discussion of marriage was not a strong feature of the blogs in this sample. However, I argue that the focused attention on motherhood and family life from the more orthodox bloggers, while not directly talking about marriage, is nonetheless an oblique engagement with marriage and gendered relationship dynamics.

Modesty is the final ‘M’ of orthodox religious gender norms. Where only Mormon women discussed motherhood in this sample, only Muslim women discussed modesty. Although modest dressing is a feature of both religious communities, this finding is consistent with other research in the field. Where there are a number of studies that highlight debates around ‘modesty’ by Muslim women online (for example, Guta 2015; Kavakci and Kraeplin 2017; Piela 2011, 2012), this debate has not been a feature in other studies of Mormon bloggers. This difference may be due to the politicisation of Muslim women’s dress: the very public discourse and contention
about Muslim women veiling in Western countries such as the US may prompt Muslim women to speak openly about ‘modest’ dressing—whether to justify it or challenge it—in a way that Mormon women are not forced to do. Blog K, a Muslim fashion blogger, was particularly focused on modesty. In a study of Muslim women’s online communities, Piela found that more orthodox women presented adherence to traditional religious norms like modesty to be ‘enjoyable, satisfying, and glamourous’ (Piela 2011, 255). Blog K similarly represented modesty as easy and fashionable. Two of her four posts during the research period had the words ‘modest’ in the title: ‘Affordable and Modest Pieces for Spring’ (7 March 2019) and ‘5 Modest Spring Outfit Ideas’ (30 March 2019). In another post about work wear, she writes of a recent shopping trip, saying she ‘found so many gorgeous, classic, and feminine pieces! A lot of the pieces I found were really modest and would be perfect to wear to work’ (1 February 2019). As with both ‘motherhood’ and ‘marriage’ themes on other blogs, Blog K did not explicitly engage with theological justifications for female modesty: her tone was breezy and conversational, closely resembling that found in any secular fashion publication.

Three of the seven Muslim blogs and one of the six Mormon blogs took what I term an ‘unengaged’ approach to religious gender norms in their writing. These bloggers did not explicitly engage with a discussion of religious gender norms and did not ‘model’ either orthodoxy or feminism on their blog. For some, piety was still a concern. For example, on Blog I, the single post during the research period was a comic-strip account of keeping up a running habit during Ramadhan, including a very brief reflection on the spiritual benefit of fasting (28 March 2019). Whilst reference to motherhood, marriage, or modesty may be made on these ‘unengaged’ blogs, these norms are often not discussed in explicitly religious terms. For example, one blogger discussed fan responses to a movie about a teenage girl, expressing frustration at the impulse of some fans to want the character more ‘sexualised’:

God forbid a teenage character is played by an actual teenage girl and not an over-sexualised adult woman. . . . You, a grown adult, are not seriously telling me you’d like to see a 16 year old girl run around in a crop top, much less are demanding to see it, right?

(Blog M, 16 February 2019, emphasis original)

Whilst this comment could be an expression of a religious belief in modesty, it could be a feminist critique of hyper-sexualisation; and it could also be both at the same time.

Only two bloggers in this sample explicitly identify as feminist, and both are Muslim. Whilst the label ‘Muslim feminist’ is debated amongst some women who argue for egalitarianism and against patriarchy in Islam but are uncomfortable with the feminist label (Echchaibi 2013, 862), both of these bloggers prominently feature the word ‘feminist’ on their blogs. Blog L has headings on her blog including ‘Qur’anic Exegeses’ and ‘Notable Women’—demonstrating an engagement with scripture and religious tradition on the blog. However, during the research period only one post explicitly dealt with gender—a post which critiques gendered languages (English, Arabic, and French) for having the masculine ‘he’ pronoun stand as universal, particularly in reference to God. The blogger writes,

when you come around here, talking about how ‘he’ is neutral for the God/dess, that I should never use ‘She’ because ‘HE IS NEUTRAL’—you scream in enraged tantrums—what you sound like to me is nothing short of what you actually are: uncultured swine.

(Blog L, 8 January 2019)
The second feminist blogger engaged more deeply with religious gender norms in her blog during the research period—particularly critiquing practices of gender segregation and the policing of women’s dress in places of worship. The header on her blog reads, ‘All things gender and Islam. No bigotry is allowed in this feminist territory. #Deathtopatriarchy’ (Blog J). In a post about her trip to Egypt, the blogger discussed at length the restrictions placed on women accessing mosques and shrines, including the (inconsistently applied) requirement to veil and gender-segregated spaces. Explaining her decision not to enter al-Azhar, she wrote, ‘My philosophy is, I will not honor ANY mosque or any other place of worship with my presence if it views women (or any group of people) as sexual objects’ (Blog J, 12 January 2019).

Monetisation

Whilst some bloggers seem to ‘model’ family life as an act of piety in and of itself, others monetise their blogging—turning their idealised family life into a ‘personal brand’ (Haglund 2016, 241). Two bloggers in particular—one Mormon and one Muslim—engaged in consistent sponsored blogging during the research period: Blog E and Blog K. Both these bloggers engage in the kind of ‘modelling’ behaviour typical of Instagram influencers—showing a glamorous life that is designed to appear desirable to readers (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).

Blog E is written by a Mormon woman living in a major North American city with her husband and five children. She is a full-time mother, and both she and her husband earn their living through the business that has grown out of her blog. The blog ‘models’ motherhood as glamorous and desirable: it is photo-heavy and features the blogger wearing designer clothing, living in a desirable apartment, taking regular holidays with her family, and always wearing an on-trend shade of lipstick. Religion and religious practice barely feature on the blog—during the research period, there was one passing comment about ‘spiritual scripture study’ (5 March 2019), and the blogger briefly discussed visiting a Mormon temple while the familyholidayed (14 March 2019). There is, however, a link on the right side of the website simply titled ‘What We Believe’ that, when clicked, takes the reader to an official website of the LDS Church. This blog is an example of the kind of Mormon ‘mommy blog’ described in Haglund’s (2016) study, where presenting an idealised picture of traditional family life—rather than explicitly discussing religion—is an expression of faith. Blog E has clearly struck a chord with readers—it is by far the most popular blog amongst the sample in this study—receiving an average of 17 comments per post during the research period (Appendix I). These comments typically enquire where a particular item of clothing or product feature in the photographs on each post are from or make supportive, positive comments about her children and family. She did three sponsored posts during the research period, which were sponsored by brands congruent for her image as a cool stay-at-home mother and which target readership.

Blog K had much lower engagement than Blog E, receiving zero comments during the research period (Appendix I). However, the tiled images of recent Instagram posts and links to a YouTube channel suggests that the blogger’s audience is primarily located on other social media channels. Blog K is a modest-fashion blog—and each post has a fashion theme: for example, dressing for work (1 February 2019), or modest spring fashion (7 March 2019). Where ‘motherhood’ was the dominant theme on Blog E, modesty is the dominant theme on Blog K. But, similar to Blog E’s ‘modelling’ of motherhood, Blog K’s ‘modelling’ of modesty through her blog rather than openly discussing it (although there is a prominent link to a post about the blogger’s ‘Hijab Story’ on the ‘About’ page). Her posts feature images of her posing in fashionable clothing in a trendy neighbourhood, wearing neutral headscarves and makeup. The clothing is similar to any found in a fashion magazine—jeans, wide-legged pants, silky shirts and blazers. In a study of...
Muslim social media celebrities, Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017, 865) found their subjects revealed on their blogs ‘both an Islamic religio-cultural identity and fashionable Western identity’ and—similar to Haglund’s (2016) findings of Mormon mommy bloggers—that ‘their motivations may often be market driven, even when bound closely with the mediated Islamic cultural and religious imagery and semiotics’ (Kavakci and Kraeplin 2017, 866). This negotiation between religious norms and the cultural expectations of Western culture is a feature of many blogs written by women from conservative religious traditions, and both Blog E and Blog K celebrate orthodox norms of motherhood, marriage, and modesty alongside American consumer and beauty norms.

Blog E and Blog K represent their lives as glamorous and desirable through their content, their reliance on posed high-resolution photographs (in the case of Blog K, including the use of subtle peachy or rose filters), and their use of minimal blog templates. Whilst both ‘model’ orthodox norms of womanhood for their respective religious communities, it would be a mistake to reduce their blogs to simply ‘selling’ orthodoxy. Although the blogger behind Blog E represents an orthodox—if glamorous—life as a mother and homemaker, the website and brand is highly successful, and she is clearly a skilled entrepreneur. Her husband left his successful career to help her run the business—invert[ing the stereotype that women sacrifice their careers to support their husbands. The blogger behind Blog K is a healthcare professional and writes in her ‘About’ page that she set up the blog in the hopes of ‘empowering Muslim women’. Both bloggers have—to differing degrees—successfully monetised their blogs, marrying religious orthodoxy with Western consumerism and capitalist entrepreneurship—a phenomenon decried by the Muslim feminist Nawal el-Saadawi for blinding religious women to multiple ‘forms of oppression, such as global capitalist imperialism’ (Zine 2004, 173).

**Religious authority**

The subversion or circumvention of religious authority by religious women in online communities is a consistent trend in research on religion and the internet (Haglund 2016; Finnigan and Ross 2013; Fader 2017; Piela 2011). Women are supposed to have the freedom, away from the centralised, hierarchical, and patriarchal authority structures of ‘offline’ religious communities, to interpret religious texts for themselves and debate religious traditions and norms. However, of the 13 blogs in my sample, only three bloggers (all Muslim) explicitly engaged in critical thinking about religious texts, traditions, and norms on their blog. Haglund (2016, 237–238) argues that a lasting impact of ‘correlation’ on the Mormon community is ‘to powerfully inculcate among orthodox Mormons the notion that information and ideas ought to flow from a single, officially approved source’. When the Mormon bloggers in this sample mentioned religious teachings or scripture, they typically posted links to official LDS sites or direct quotations with a little personal reflection on the particular quote’s applicability to their life or experience in the moment. They largely did not attempt to interpret (or reinterpret) scripture for themselves or critique any religious traditions or practices.

However, although most of the bloggers do not explicitly challenge orthodox religious authority on their blogs, through ‘modelling’ pious religious practice and womanhood many establish themselves as figures of informal religious authority amongst their readers. For example, Blog B received the following comments on a post titled ‘12 Simple Things to Make Prayer More Meaningful’: ‘You are right up there with a seminary teacher who changed my life’ and ‘My daughters adore you and you’ve been a big example to them’ (Blog B, 16 January 2019). The diffusion or fragmentation of religious authority online (Anderson 1999; Campbell 2007, 2012) that allows these bloggers to be recognised as sources of informal religious leadership and
authority does not, in the case of the Mormon blogs in this study, extend to breaking down boundaries of ‘offline’ religious authority but rather ultimately affirms them (Lieber 2010, 632).

The one blogger who consistently engaged in critical discussion during the research period about religious scripture, practices, and gender norms within her community is a self-identified Muslim feminist, one of only two self-identified feminists in the sample, and a scholar of Islam. Her writing demonstrates what Riley (2016, 97) calls ‘tafsir through blogging’—religious interpretation drawing on experience and taking form in the stories and interactions on blogs. In a post about whether women can lead mixed-gender prayer, the blogger critiques patriarchal theological and legal interpretations that deny women leadership: ‘the whole “consensus/ijmaa” issue needs to be challenged repeatedly, and it gets exhausting. Patriarchy, having a “dialogue” with you about this, but just a reminder: stop pretending there’s a clear “consensus” on anything’ (Blog J, 27 March 2019). Her conversational tone is light, but her argument cuts to the heart of how religious norms and law are enacted under traditional forms of religious authority in Islam. As a scholar of Islam working in the academy, the blogger behind Blog J has formal expertise and the qualifications to prove it. But, like blogs by other religious feminists, she includes hyperlinks within the text to other posts she has written and to Islamic feminist literature as a demonstration of her ‘expertise. . . [and] authority’ to speak on this topic (Feller 2016, 164).

A second Muslim blogger did not identify herself as feminist but wrote a long post about respecting women’s decisions to take off the hijab (mentioned earlier as the only post in the sample with dissent in the comment section), arguing ‘just because something is religiously obligatory, doesn’t mean it’s up to the “community” (which is subjective) to enforce personal decisions’ (Blog H, 11 January 2019). Whilst she doesn’t challenge the orthodox norm that wearing hijab is ‘religiously obligatory’ for women, she does challenge the policing of Muslim women’s dress within her community. This blogger demonstrates what Rinaldo (2014, 825) calls ‘pious critical agency’—where piety is ‘a source of agency’ and where ‘religion and feminism can intersect in surprising and unexpected ways’. The blogger maintains the right of women to make up their own minds about their religious practice, without intervention or policing from their religious community, while simultaneously remaining committed to her belief that Muslim women are obliged to veil.

This blogger reflects a trend found in other studies on Muslim women online, in particular, where the right of an individual to undertake personal research and come to their own determinations about religious interpretation and law is evident. In research on the website Muslimah Media Watch, Nabil Echchaibi (2013, 864) found the contributors there refused to speak ‘on behalf of an unchanging religious essence shared by a Muslim collective’ and rather emphasised that they simply spoke for themselves. Some scholars see the influence of Western individualism and liberalism in an approach that emphasises personal research and interpretation over traditional religious authority (Mishra and Shirazi 2010). However, I note Islamic precedents to this approach. Since the death of the Prophet, Islam has not had a central religious authority or formal religious hierarchy, and personal interpretation [ijtihad] has long been an (albeit contentious) accepted feature of Islamic jurisprudence.

Whether they explicitly challenge traditional religious authority or not, one can argue that in blogging about religion and their personal lives, the bloggers in this study are ‘doing theology’ (Romanowski 2005, 131) for themselves and are claiming a space for the layperson in religious discourse. Mormon bloggers did not use their blogs to explicitly challenge traditional religious authority, whilst (at least some) Muslim bloggers did. This may be explained, I contend, by the formal structures of both religions: where the LDS Church has a single, centralised hierarchy, the Islamic community does not, which makes challenges to established religious authority more possible within the extant community frameworks.
Conclusion

Whilst the hype of the late 1990s and early 2000s about the immense emancipatory potential of the internet for religious women has not delivered an internet utopia, internet technologies and social media have created new avenues for religious women to create communities across geographical distance and to find like-minded women within (and beyond) their religious community. This chapter has examined the formation of online community, representation of gender, monetisation of content, and religious authority in the blogs of Mormon and Muslim women in the United States of America. All four of these themes have been a feature, to greater and lesser degrees, in literature on the use of social media from women in both these communities. However, there has been no effort to compare the use of social media across the two religious communities. As this chapter shows, whilst there are important differences between the two groups of women that reflect differences between the Mormon and Muslim communities in the United States, there are also consistent similarities that reflect broader trends of internet use by religious women.

One such trend is that religious women online by and large seek ‘a community of peers’ (Lieber 2010, 629) for connection and support rather than seeking out debate and difference, something evident with the bloggers in this study. However, the use of the particular medium of blogging to build community differs between the two religious groups. The ‘bloggernacle’ has been identified as a significant feature of contemporary Mormon communities and the higher frequency of both posting and interaction with readers on the Mormon blogs in this study demonstrates the continued importance of blogs in the online world of the LDS church. By contrast, literature on the use of the internet and social media within the Muslim community has not identified a single, dominant platform, which may explain the lower activity on the Muslim blogs in this study.

The context of the ‘offline’ religious community is a significant influence on the ‘online’ community for the bloggers in this chapter. Where previous studies examine the extent to which online communities support or replace offline religious community, for those that access them (Finnigan and Ross 2013; Hoover 2014; Yael 2014), this study instead shows that regardless of their role, an online community tends to reflect the offline context of authority and hierarchy. That the only two explicitly feminist blogs are written by Muslims and none of the Mormon bloggers directly challenged the LDS Church or its teachings in their blog is indicative of the more centralised and hierarchical structures of religious authority in the LDS Church, including the move towards correlation in the mid-twentieth century. By contrast, scholars since the 1990s have documented the ‘fragmentation’ of religious authority in Islam, in no small part due to the rise of the internet (Anderson 1999, see also Campbell 2007, 2012). However, whether or not the bloggers challenged religious authority on their blogs, all those (both Muslim and Mormon) who explicitly or implicitly engaged with religious teachings and practices through reflections on their daily lives were ‘doing theology’ (Romanowski 2005, 131) by claiming a space for the layperson in theological discourse.

The complexity of the debates on women’s agency within religion is evident in the blogs in this study. Whilst a few have agency located in resistance to oppression and domination, others have a kind of ‘embedded agency’ (Korteweg 2008, 437), where they are consciously in control of their own lives yet are not directly engaged in broader resistance or activism. Indeed, all the bloggers represent themselves as in charge of their own lives and making active decisions regarding their religious practice (where it is discussed). Whilst a few do this by debating religious norms, others promote particular (religiously informed) ideals of womanhood, and still others barely engage with religion and gender at all. Further, most of the women in this
study demonstrated in their blogs a complex negotiation between the demands of their reli-
gious communities and traditions and the expectations of North American consumer society.
Where internet spaces are full of ambivalence, ‘contradiction and complication’ (Pennington
2018, 632), so too are the religious communities to which the bloggers in this study belong.
However, the continued centrality of religious identity, scripture, and practice on the blogs
demonstrate that religion ‘is not an obstacle’ to the constitution of modern religious women
(Echchaibi 2013, 863).

Appendix I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mormon Blogs</th>
<th># of Posts</th>
<th># Comments</th>
<th>Av. Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog A</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog D</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog E</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog F</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muslim Blogs</th>
<th># of Posts</th>
<th># Comments</th>
<th>Av. Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog G</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog H</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog I</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog J</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog K</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog L</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Mormon Totals                  | 123 | 426 | 3.5   |
| Muslim Totals                  | 29  | 34  | 1.2   |
| Totals                         | 152 | 460 | 3     |

Notes

1 In this article I use the term ‘orthodox’ to mean conforming to generally accepted or traditional rules
and beliefs in either Islam or the LDS Church, rather than meaning any particular sect in either reli-
gion. In this article I have characterised as orthodox women who, in the context of the LDS Church,
accept the authority of Church Elders regarding women’s roles and rights within the Church and,
in Islam, who accept that women are religiously obliged to veil and other traditional (and gener-
ally accepted) interpretations of Islamic law as it relates to women. In contrast, I have characterised
as feminist women in both religious communities those who challenge either the traditional or the
generally accepted norms applying to women within their religious traditions or who challenge the
traditional interpretation of those norms and scripture as it relates to the role of women in favour of
more gender-egalitarian norms and interpretations. I acknowledge that the labels ‘orthodox’ and ‘femi-
nist’ are imperfect and contested within both the LDS Church and Muslim communities, and indeed
as I demonstrate in the chapter many women hold both ‘orthodox’ and ‘feminist’ beliefs at once.

2 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the debate regarding the use of the label ‘feminist’ by reli-
gious women, except to note that it is contentious within both Islamic communities and the LDS Church.
3 This project was approved by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 019070S). Active consent was sought from all bloggers on the population list where a contact email address or contact form was available. A waiver of consent was granted for blogs where no contact information was available or for blogs where the author did not respond to four attempts at contact over a one-month period.

4 Other bloggers may write sponsored posts on their blogs but did not write any during the research period. For example, Blog C has sponsored posts on her blog and a section on sponsored posts and advertising in her ‘About’ page.

Bibliography


Daniels, Jessie. 2009. ‘Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment’. Women’s Studies Quarterly 37 (1/2): 101–124.


