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Confidential Publics: Digital Reconciliation and Queer Muslim Identities

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CONFIDENTIAL PUBLICS: DIGITAL RECONCILIATION
AND QUEER MUSLIM IDENTITIES

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
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for the degree of Master of Arts
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Western Michigan University, 2018

In this paper, I trouble constructions of community through exploring temporal spatial configurations of support for queer-identified Muslims living in America. I assert that when community is not something one can physically access, use of the internet to create temporary spaces of community is critical in assessing identity reconciliation between intersectional conflicting identity. As it relates to queer Muslims, where there is a distinct lack of public community, the level of crisis some individuals face is explored through their use of online vehicles to establish social support systems that would otherwise not be available. My paper provides a framework in which to discuss queer Muslim challenges to traditional narratives among American LGBTQ existence and resilience. Based on ethnographic research among several online communities, I analyze how queer Muslims negotiate the authority of dominant narratives concerning identity conflict, activism, community, and space through digital forums. Based on virtual participant observation within queer Muslim online communities and interviews with those who use them, this paper advances ethnographic work on the intersecting projects of identity reconciliation and community formation through digital means.

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INTRODUCTION

“There’s even a normal way to be queer;” State of the Field and Methodology

On a posting dated April 7, 2014, Lamy H. described how the concept of normalized queer identity centered on “coming out” constituted a source of exclusion for her as she tentatively began participating in queer culture (2014). She published an article on BlackGirlDangerous, an online platform¹ devoted to highlighting the experiences of queer and trans people of color.² Lamy writes, derisively: “There’s even a normal way to be queer.” As a Muslim-American, she finds that her religious and cultural identities are subjected to what she terms “exoticization” in both white and minority non-Muslim queer spaces. She notes:

I am markedly different in these spaces and unable to hide the difference that I wear on my body: my brownness, my hijab, my not drinking are lightbeams signaling my otherness. I find myself embarrassed at how much this makes me crave invisibility, makes me want to be normal in my participation in counter-culture.

Here, Lamy emphasizes a desire to be treated like anyone else, even while holding identities that would contradict mainstream conceptions of normalcy. Notably, she chose BlackGirlDangerous as the vehicle for conveying her thoughts, a platform that is widely used by queer communities, though not necessarily by the heterosexual mainstream.

Three years later I found another posting by Lamy that took a more positive tone. On March 22, 2017, Lamy published on Vice, a somewhat mainstream article platform that offers a variety of categories, such as “politics” or “lgbtq” for authors to publish under. Here, Lamy writes of having “[her] queer Muslim siblings, [her] friend family” to visit with in person. But, she notes that this is not always enough to protect her from daily hostile exchanges of being

¹ An online platform refers to an online space or webpage in which users are interacting with each other; either through transactional or social means.

² From the website, “BGD seeks to, in as many ways as possible, amplify the voices, experiences and expressions of queer and trans people of color.”

called “terrorist” or “dyke.” She explains how the otherness of her identities presents a site of resistance, fear, but perhaps most importantly, survival. Lamya states:

Not that I could, if I wanted to, be less different. They're a means of survival, my identities. I cut my hair and wear men's clothes to be comfortable, to not hate myself. I wear hijab and pray so that I can get out of bed in the morning, so that this world with its injustices and inequalities is a little more bearable. I wear my identities to live.

Reflecting Lamya’s experiences, queer Muslims can sometimes find themselves isolated from both their faith communities and local queer communities. In her comment on microaggressions, Lamya notes that the hostilities driving this isolation can be felt from the glances of others even just walking down the street. In the 2017 post Lamya talks about belonging to a queer Muslim community, the strength in that community; but she still indicates a pressing desire to see the world change in ways that would lessen her exposure to microaggressions.

In such a context, the internet can be critical for queer Muslims like Lamya for the potential it offers to form different kinds of communities and to engage in self-development processes that take place in interaction with like-minded others. Indeed, the internet provides a platform for queer Muslims to begin forming friendships, exploring the intersection of their religious and sexual identities, and accessing a space in which their identities are not sensationalized or compromised. Internet-based relationships can be critical for identity reconciliation, or the bridging of identity categories assumed to be disparate, such as “Muslim” and “queer.”

Confidential Publics: Digital Reconciliation and Queer Muslim Identities examines how online engagement helps queer Muslims accomplish identity reconciliation by developing places of expression, building friendships, sharing information, and establishing connections in a way that helps them meet their unique needs for confidentiality. *Confidential Publics* provides information on questions of how and why queer Muslims participate in online communities; how

these communities form; how queer Muslims gain access to community spaces; their trajectory of internet usage over time; and what these communities afford individuals in terms of identity reconciliation³ and community formation. To the best of my knowledge, there are no published works that ethnographically study queer Muslims through digital means: scholarship on queer Muslims has remained offline. Therefore, Confidential Publics might be the first exploration of this kind.

My concept of “confidential publics” builds upon queer theorist Jose Munoz’s expansion of the term “counterpublics” (1999). In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Munoz defines counterpublics as “communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere” (1999).⁴ In this vein, I assert that queer Muslims make use of counterpublics through the establishment of publics in which they express resistance to the “dominant public sphere” while simultaneously creating space within it. The space in which these communities are formed is the internet, through various online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr; all theoretically public spheres. Confidential is a term I use to expand upon the notion of counterpublics, as queer Muslims are seeking out social platforms that are both alternative and inaccessible to dominant social spaces. The internet as a foundation for confidential counterpublic formation is critical, given that online spaces are more accessible than physical spaces. Online spaces tend to be more accessible because they provide expanded possibilities for anonymity when searching for specific communities, such as queer Muslims.

³ Identity reconciliation refers to the process of individually accepting identity categories that may be in conflict or are assumed to be disparate. Reconciliation for queer Muslims would include holding onto both queer and Muslim identities.

⁴ The term “counterpublics” was first found in Rita Felski’s *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989). Other authors that discuss counterpublics further include Nancy Fraser (1997), Michael Warner (2002), and Charles Hirschkind (2006). In particular, Hirschkind addresses the formation of counterpublics within the Muslim world as it relates to sermon distribution and conflicting interpretations of religious doctrine.

Within confidential publics, I assert that queer Muslims make use of public spheres such as the internet in order to play along the lines of visibility, while continuing to remain anonymous. Through internet usage, queer Muslims create confidential public spaces in which they are able to imagine their identity performance outside of community restraints. These spaces, as they exist online, are held on public, accessible platforms. However, access to queer Muslim spaces on these public platforms are limited; thus giving users a sense of confidentiality and safety in their participation within these types of spaces.

My fieldwork spanned the course of five months, from August 2017 to December 2017, and was based mainly on participant observation and interviewing. My participant observation was virtual, in that it took place through social media observation; primarily focused on Facebook. Participant observation included belonging to private Facebook groups of queer Muslims, researching related “hashtags”⁵ through Twitter, and analyzing the comment section of Youtube videos whose subjects were queer Muslims.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted a series of formal and informal interviews with three individuals who were actively engaged in my virtual field site. Formal interviews included a series of pre-determined questions as outlined in my HS-IRB protocol (see Appendix), while informal interviews consisted of off-the-cuff conversations. In my analysis of these interviews, I discuss each interlocutor’s understanding of their identity development as queer Muslims; their use of social media and digital platforms over time; and their conceptions of queer Muslim community following their digital engagement.

⁵ Hashtags are ways of organizing tweets on Twitter under searchable categories. Hashtags also function as ways, within these categories, to determine what the most popular topics of discussion are at any given time.

Literature Review

A growing body of literature addresses queerness or same-sex desire among Muslim populations in the United States and globally. This includes ethnographic work on contemporary Muslims in North America such as Scott Kugle's *Living Out Islam Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (2014) and Ahmed Afzal's *Lone Star Muslims* (2014); and those situated in Muslim majority countries (Merabet 2014; Jama 2013; Gaudio 2009). It also includes historical analysis (El-Rouayheb 2005), and activist representations such as photo blog The Queer Ummah Project (2017). Literature situated in the United States also seeks to address how queer Muslims negotiate their identities in a range of overlapping forms of oppression, through their status as religious minorities, racial minorities, and minorities within minorities given that dominant Muslim discourse is not usually accepting of LGBTQ members. Women may also face a fourth level of oppression in the United States.⁶

Within this body of work, recent scholarship such as Afdhere Jama's 2013 work *Queer Jihad: LGBT Muslims on Coming Out, Activism, and the Faith* and Pepe Hendricks' 2009 publication *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* provides narratives covering various experiences of queer Muslims throughout the world. However, these works are anthologies that are composed of a disjointed collection of narratives without a unified analysis. These works do not systematically theorize questions such as how queer Muslims come to understand their identities, nor how they access community, nor offer comparisons of the similarities and differences that queer Muslims face across various contexts.

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins terms multi-layered oppression the "matrix of oppression" or "matrix of domination." The matrix of oppression states that there are overlapping identities in which one may be discriminated against. Though her work is primarily situated in Black Feminist thought, the concepts can be applied to an oppressed group such as Muslims in the United States, given increased persecution in a post-9/11 era (2000; Naber 2005).

In the past few years, some scholars have begun ethnographic research on queer Muslims' lives to theorize about how they negotiate visibility, sociability, and activism. In the U.S., Ahmed Afzal was one of the first to take on this topic ethnographically, through one chapter in his work *Lone Star Muslims* (2014). In chapter four of *Lone Star Muslims*, Afzal traces how Pakistani Muslim American gay men conceive of their sexuality and Islam in terms of creating alternative publics. Afzal produced an analysis of the day-to-day life of this population; theorizing on the constructions of transnational faith, South Asian epistemologies of sexuality, and the appropriation of Western gay identity. As I discuss in the following chapter, my interlocutors also are engaged in creating alternative publics in Afzal's sense of the term; spaces created by queer Muslims that are alternative to both Muslim communities and LGBTQ communities. However, I focus on how this space is created virtually by using social media. Afzal also fashions his use of the term "publics" after Munoz; stating that his Pakistani Muslim American gay interlocutors develop their communities as sites of existence counter to dominant public spheres.

Ethnographic research on interactions between the LGBTQ community and Muslim community (or the lack of these interactions) has been undertaken in Europe (Bracke 2012; Fernando 2014: 221-260) and in the U.S. (Maira 2016; Perkins 2010, 2016, 2017). In terms of Muslim majority countries, ethnographer Sofian Merabet produced an ethnography of queer Muslim lives in *Queer Beirut*. Other ethnographies dealing with queer Muslim lives include Rudolf Pell Gaudio's study of sexual minority populations in Nigeria (2009), Afdhere Jama's anthology of queer Muslim experience in *Queer Jihad: LGBT Muslims on Coming out, Activism, and the Faith* (2013), and Scott Alan Kugel's ethnographic study of queer Muslims in *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (2014).

Online news mediums such as Huffington Post, Salon, and Teen Vogue provide queer Muslims, scholars, and allies with the ability to circulate opinion articles. This includes Economics scholar Junaid Jahangir's widely read series of articles on Huffington Post regarding queer Muslims that he began posting in 2012. These online platforms for narrative are useful to generate dialogue that is available to those who may not have access to academic databases. Representation through sharing narratives can be critical to queer Muslim interactions online and thus, article-based platforms, though not peer-reviewed, can serve as an important resource in scholarship on this population.

As noted by Gender and Sexuality scholar and novelist Samar Habib, there is a tendency within some scholarly and popular literature to create representations that misconstrue the queer Muslim community as continually depressed or relatively nonexistent (2015). Likewise, in his 2016 study, Junaid Jahangir associates queer identity amongst Muslims mainly with conflict or tragedy. Other scholars assert that the experience and existence of queer Muslims are marked by inherent difficulty over and above the challenges faced by most other minority groups given the particular complexity of their identity and community formation (El Kaka and Kursun 2002; Bochow and Rainer 2003). Conflict is a critical lens in which to analyze queer Muslim experience, however, I believe that it is not the only lens, or necessarily the dominant one through which this community may be studied. Indeed, the assumed conflict inherent within queer Muslim identity is often related to the idea that an individual cannot necessarily hold both their faith and sexual orientation as non-conflicting identity categories. However, I argue that the perception of incompatibility from outside influences may be a factor exacerbating identity conflict among some queer Muslims. This is foundational to understanding the queer Muslim experiences I present; queer Muslims are not in conflict with themselves, but rather, the

perceptions of themselves. While some queer Muslims do not view their faith and sexuality as conflicting, communities outside, such as the LGBT community or Muslim community may view these identities as such. Representations of queer Muslims feed into the perception of queer Muslims that is not always accurate to their experience. The daily lives of queer Muslims are not always centered in irreconcilable conflicts, despite dominant narratives through media and scholarship assuming that to be the case.

While I am not trivializing the trauma queer Muslims often face on multiple levels, I suggest that another level of analysis be added to scholarship on queer Muslims which challenges some of the tropes assigned to this community. Previous research has been restricted, based on limited access to queer Muslim communities (Merabet 2009; Siraj 2012). But, in recent years, social media usage among queer Muslims has introduced novel forms of visibility allowing expanded possibilities for research.

Online mediums have provided increased visibility for queer Muslims. However, the process of navigating intersectional identity does not necessarily lead to public identity reconciliation for queer Muslim Americans, even if private identity reconciliation is achieved. I argue that the emphasis on public visibility of sexual orientation for this population can be related to homonationalist biases.⁷ As discussed in chapter one, two of my interlocutors addressed the impact assimilation to normative coming out scripts had on their conceptions of self throughout their initial coming out process. Thus, the push for visibility as the main goal for LGBTQ identity reconciliation may lead to Muslim-American individuals upholding liberal secular aspirations of queer identity, which includes disavowing connections to religious, racial,

⁷ Homonationalism refers to the effort of LGBTQ communities attempting to integrate into heteronormative structures while still maintaining their 'gay' identity as a means of assimilation into the systems that disadvantage them in the first place (Puar 2007). Relatedly, homonationalism also refers to state attempts and popular efforts to legitimate some versions of homosexual identity as appropriate within nationalist contexts.

and ethnic communities in order to reprioritize a normative, homogenous queer community (Puar 2007).

My approach to creating an ethnography of queer Muslim lives is influenced by Sofian Merabet's work on queer masculinities in *Queer Beirut*, in which he uses vignettes to demonstrate queer masculine life and community formation throughout Beirut city spaces in the early 2000s. Innovating on Merabet's form, my interlocutors are introduced by way of vignettes so that their identity and experiences are contextualized in an accessible manner. I include my participants' coming out experiences, their access to the online queer Muslim community, and the impact of that online community in their day-to-day lives and constructions of the self.

Merabet's work is concerned with the experiences of LGBTQ Muslim men in the city of Beirut (2014). He acknowledges the limited scope of experience his research portrays; however, it is difficult for him as a man to enter some of the women-only spaces that would have led to research on queer Muslim women⁸. Through the use of the internet as a gender-neutral space, I have been able to focus on queer Muslims claiming a range of different sexuality and gender categories. Thus, the present study highlights the experience of three queer Muslims; two femme-identified queer Muslims, along with one cisgender⁹ male-identified individual.

Within the field of Muslim and Arab-American studies, attention to queerness is still at its beginning stages (Mahomed & Esack 2017). Anthropologist Nadine Naber points out that the current climate of Islamophobia has created a context in which some American Muslims are under a great deal of pressure simply to defend Islam as an identity, and that this leaves little room for them to grapple with the public presentation of their other co-occurring identity

⁸ The lack of scholarship on queer Muslim women or femme-identified individuals is also addressed by Ahmed Afzal (2015:127).

⁹ Cisgender refers to the gender identity of an individual that matches the gender identity they were assigned at birth. (Serano 2016).

categories and experiences (2005). Prioritizing a singular Muslim identity category in order to maintain community resilience can lead queer Muslims to feel as though they cannot participate in more than one identity-based communities at any given time. Indeed, this emotion of simultaneous belonging and not-belonging is replicated in media outlets and earlier academic discourse, thus reinforcing for queer Muslims that their identities are either wholly invisible or wholly tragic (Habib 2015). As a response to reconciling this identity conflict, queer Muslims seek out spaces in which to validate their experiences within a shared community; social media and other digital spaces provide a platform for queer Muslims to carry out these efforts.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim sexual minority youth rely on social media as a critical factor in developing resilience. Shelley Craig, Lauren McInroy, and their colleagues understand resilience as how well an individual can mitigate oppressive experiences by building community (2015). Lack of viable friendships and other means of social support hinders resilience development for some LGBTQ youth. Through online usage, queer youth tap into structures that aid their resistance to oppression (Craig et. al 2015).

The internet plays a crucial role in youth identity formation and community interaction for youth and adults. There is emerging literature on queer digital engagement which suggests the internet as a potential site for transformative experiences to occur (McGlotten 2005). It provides a social landscape for religious dialogue that not only mimics real-life exchanges but opens potential new possibilities for religious identity to transform (Cowan and Dawson 2004). I found, through my interlocutors, that online usage indeed contributes to frequency and quality of significant interactions among individuals with others concerning their sexual orientation and faith (Mehra and Braquet 2011).

The field of ethnographic research online has developed a clear and relatively consistent methodology within recent years. Early research conducted online focused primarily on the effects of virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and made clear distinctions between the dichotomy of physical and virtual space (Hine 2000). However, with the growth of social media, the dichotomy between what exists online and what exists in ‘real life’ is less concrete. The internet impacts and affects physical interactions among individuals and communities; it has indeed contributed to the rise of globalization, instant communication, and creation of spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible or unknown. What happens online thus has very real impacts on the physical world. The language has shifted rapidly between virtual, digital, or cyber ethnographies, and netnography; each specializing in specific forms of digital media so that the nuances of each digital sphere is accounted for and addressed in a cohesive manner.¹⁰ The use of digital ethnography has also been incorporated into religious studies, as demonstrated by Velma Love’s suggested assignments for students in religious studies programs (2011). She asserts the validity of digital ethnography, or netnography, as being critical for assessing the experiences of vulnerable populations within religious subgroups.

My method builds upon ideas established by Kozinets’ *Netnography: Redefined* (2015) and the work of ethnographers such as Merabet (2014) who deal with populations that are often difficult to access in physical spaces. I have been particularly inspired by the way that legal scholar Chris Ashford troubled the dichotomy that exists between traditional ethnographic methods and digital ethnographic method (2009). Ashford makes use of queer theory to disrupt previous understandings of the virtual and physical as separate experiences that do not influence each other. Rather, Ashford influences my work particularly in their assertion that what happens

¹⁰ Ashford 2009; Barrat and Maddox 2016; Beneito-Montagut 2011; Farquahr 2012; Hallet and Barber 2014; Hine 2000; Kozinets 2015; McGlotten 2005; Underberg and Zorn 2013; Ward 1999; Webster and Marques da Silva 2013.

or occurs in digital spaces can directly impact experiences that take place in the physical or ‘real’ world (2009).¹¹ Digital ethnography is of critical importance when studying vulnerable populations, as the opportunity to conduct ethnography through ‘traditional’ (meaning non-digital) methods is not always available nor as effective. Indeed, it is critical to incorporate online research into the study of some vulnerable populations, as it was found in various studies demonstrated by Kozinets that “the online social experience [is] liberating to the expression of the fully authentic self” (2015: 60). The methodological and logistical netnographic approaches I used in this study will be discussed further in following section.

Method

My project builds upon netnography frameworks, which rely on using non-digital ethnographic frameworks to understand and translate the ways in which communities interact on online forums (Kozinets 2015:246). Kozinets’ work is situated in the interdisciplinary project of social media studies, which calls for additions to be made to the methodological process of ethnography so that technological communications are pertinent to data collection and analysis. Kozinets argues that netnography is critical to ethnographic practice because it “requires interpretation of human communications under realistic contexts [...] in native conditions of interaction, when those human communications are shaped by new technologies” (2015: 5). Relatedly, my project is rooted in exploring patterns of social relations among queer Muslims and their implication for future forms of identity, community, and visibility.

Netnographic method primarily draws on ethnographic research methods, with careful attention to how entering digital space can differ from entering a physical one. Like Kozinets, my research relied primarily on participant observation and interviews with participants recruited

¹¹ I make use of gender-neutral pronouns in covering Ashford’s theory, as their gender identity was inaccessible through the background research I conducted.

according to HS-IRB protocols (See Appendix). Digital research of vulnerable populations that are otherwise inaccessible through traditional anthropological methods have been rising in number since the 1990s. Following Kozinets' comprehensive text on best practices, I find that theory and method concerning these specific research projects ultimately relies on digital adaptations of current ethnographic foundations and frameworks. The studies below demonstrate their use of digital ethnography to access and understand otherwise vulnerable populations and their interactions online.

I drew partly from researchers who study the "dark web" (anonymous website servers) in crafting my approach to digital space. Dark web researchers study those who use servers to purchase illegal and illicit drugs and provide best practices for digital ethnography throughout the process of accessing an otherwise inaccessible population. Certainly, they make a strong case for the value of digital ethnography concerning stigmatized populations and provide a framework with future directions for those looking to take their ethnographic work online (Barratt and Maddox 2016). The authors assert that digital realms provide a platform for stigmatized communities that are difficult to engage with on the ground, and thus, digital ethnography in these cases can provide a rich understanding of these populations.

Dark web researchers structured their project in three stages: preparation, field entry/engagement/exit, and knowledge production/dissemination. Knowledge of technical practices used by the group being studied, community consultation, developing credible identities as researchers were critical to the formation of this particular ethnography (2016). Reflecting this structure, my research includes careful consideration of the methods above specifically in terms of field entry, engagement, and exit. Often, queer Muslim groups online involve being invited to join a Facebook group, communicating through Twitter accounts that are

almost entirely de-identified, or participating in post-based dialogue via Tumblr or Youtube, where, similar to Twitter, users are able to de-identify themselves to their comfort level.

Netnographies similar to my project have been conducted, including, for example, a 2007 study focused on the usage of social media by Filipina lesbians to forge community and explore sexual orientation (Mariano 2010). This digital forum provides a space that exists outside of curfews or other cultural constraints that would otherwise render this specific population unable to access each other socially. Moreover, the researcher's process is parallel to my own in that the primary focus is on interviews and observation of interaction through social media networking sites. One interesting facet of this study is the challenging of norms within LGBTQ community in terms of presentation. Often, presentation through appearance signals that one belongs to the LGBTQ community and is willing to take on predetermined roles in a relationship as influenced by dominant gender roles. This makes sense when engaging socially in spaces that are specifically queer spaces as gender presentation implies a social cue as to who an individual can potentially be romantically interested in (Mariano 2010). However, presentation is both more fluid online; thus women have the opportunity online to challenge normative butch/femme dynamics by redefining the dynamics in which they hope to present and interact. The queering of presentation online also challenges conceptions of gender, performance, and associated gender roles which is revolutionary and taking space in a community that would not have had access to redefinition outside of heteronormative structures that are often replicated in queer communities through the butch/femme dichotomy. As detailed in the following chapter, each of my informants experienced a similar replication of and resistance to structures, though on a cultural and religious level more so than presentation-based.

Even in the beginnings of the social media era, counter-cultural communities have made use of digital platforms to build resilience through community and activist efforts (Van De Donk et al. 2004).¹² In particular, the resilience of queer women in Hong Kong who participated in social media platforms has a direct impact on queer activist organizing for the community of queer Chinese women (Nip 2004). Where Nip asserts the capacity of identity-building on the internet for queer women in Hong Kong, I do so as well for queer Muslims in America, tracing how the internet often functions as ground zero for the formation of resilience building, in addition to the formation of a collective identity. Queer Muslim Americans must sometimes access digital spaces before building offline social communities and indeed, digital space is critical in similar ways to queer Muslim futures in terms of resilience, sociability, and potential activism.

In addition, the increased visibility among LGBTQ Muslim populations through social media has led to new opportunities for understanding the formation of this community and the role of social media in its development.

Research Design

Reflecting netnographic research trends, I base my methodology on participant observation and interviewing, in accordance with HS-IRB protocol approved by Western Michigan University in April 2016 (Kozinets 2015; See Appendix). Participant observation consisted of surveying posts, comments, and dialogue that takes place in Facebook groups that are centered on queer Muslims. I conducted formal and informal interviews with three interlocutors, while protecting their confidentiality.¹³ I gathered data for this study between

¹² Social media has its beginnings in the late nineties, with blog platforms and rudimentary social connectivity sites (Malloy 2016; Van Dijck 2013).

¹³ Incorporating confidentiality into my method was crucial, as confidentiality is key to the success of queer Muslim spaces online. I establish myself as a researcher held to the HS-IRB approval of my project, which includes

August 2017 and December 2017. During this time, I followed a regular schedule of participant observation and interviewing.

Participant observation is crucial, as it is a form of enculturation in which the researcher gains familiarity with the way participants engage with each other, assessing meaning, and interpret the world through daily interaction (Dewalt et al. 2000). In this project, my active observation is limited strictly to ‘liking’ various posts so that participants are aware of my presence. However, I refrained from contributing dialogue. This is a direct equivalent to the ways in which some ethnographers engage in meetings, public events, and day-to-day life within their field through limited involvement (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 272).

In regards to participant observation, I followed queer Muslim goings-on in my daily internet usage. To estimate, this included checking Facebook at least twice a day, while archiving articles to digest at different times. My reasoning behind this scheduling was to reflect the use of social media in ways that would be authentic or similar to the experience of my interlocutors. Having found groups through Facebook centered on queer and Muslim identities, my interlocutors all indicated that beyond finding these groups their internet experience did not seem to differ from their non-Muslim queer counterparts. Keeping this in mind, I wanted to view and experience social media in the ways similar to other queer Muslims.

My field site is a virtual field site consisting primarily of the social media platform, Facebook.¹⁴ Access to queer Muslim groups on Facebook is entirely based on the choices of current members or moderators using that platform. For example, my study includes attention to a Facebook group of which new users must be invited to by a current member. Once invited to

protecting the identity of my interlocutors. Through credible establishment of my identity, I found my access into connected networks of queer Muslims more easily granted and that informants were more willing to participate knowing that they are completely protected from concerns of revealed identity.

¹⁴ Social media platforms are websites intended for user interaction via personal accounts on that specific platform.

that group, individuals are asked to introduce themselves so that the moderator can decide whether or not they may join based on why they are interested in joining the group and what they can contribute. Accessing these groups can be difficult, as most private groups require an invitation to join or previous knowledge of the group's existence in order to locate it on social media.

Facebook is a social media platform centered around creating a profile that reflects the individual user's identity and connects them with family, friends, and other individuals with similar interests. There are groups, both public and private, built around shared interests in which users can choose to opt in or opt out. In addition, privacy settings can be customized by the user entirely, so that certain posts, photos, or group participation is blocked from being seen by other users. I belong to two Facebook groups that were created with the intention of getting queer Muslims in touch with each other to develop friendships, share resources, and spread news. Both Facebook groups are closed,¹⁵ and individuals must introduce themselves upon acceptance to these groups. I have introduced myself to these groups upon entering, and then recently re-introduced myself again as someone conducting research on the groups, as specified by my HS-IRB protocol.

I recruited three interlocutors to participate in this study. Each interlocutor was recruited through a convenience sample; two interlocutors I have known socially and met originally through Facebook groups; one interlocutor was recruited through word of mouth. The three interlocutors each participated in a series of formal and informal interviews throughout four months. Formal interviews consisted of structured questions, primarily establishing context,

¹⁵ A closed group on Facebook is a group in which you must request access to join that group. Posts within the group are visible only to members.

while informal interviews consisted of casual conversations with my participants about their internet usage and social communities.

Criteria for inclusion as a participant in this study included that each informant identified as LGBTQ, Muslim, American, and used social media on a regular basis of two to three times a week. Age was not a determining factor in assessing criteria for inclusion in this study. However, the ages of the three interlocutors for this study all fell between 20-24 years old. The closeness in age among my interlocutors enabled me to experience an in-depth view of one specific generation and the resulting similarities and differences between each participant.

I did not limit the study to any specific race or ethnicity, as the primary identity categories that I am analyzing are sexuality, gender identity, faith, and American identity. As Muslim identity can often be used as a cultural identifier, I asked that my informants clarify what self-identifying as a Muslim means to them (Walid 2017). I intentionally sought out women or femme-identified participants for the study, as femme voices are not always as represented in the available literature (Afzal 2014; Habib 2015).

My interlocutors identify as two cisgender-identified queer women and one cisgender-identified gay man. Sampling remained a convenience sample mixed with snowball sampling. I posted in two Facebook groups centered on queer Muslims and received interest in the project, but less so in participating. Interviews took place between September through December of 2017.

As each of my informants had prolonged experiences with social media and were familiar with the ways that digital platforms granted them access to queer Muslim communities, I was able to track a general sense of internet usage over a period of time by analyzing data they shared in interviews. As I describe in the following chapter, fluctuations in internet usage over time is

influenced by a number of factors and can reflect changes in both online and offline life experiences. Each of the study participants reported that, over time, they tended to use social media less frequently than they did when they were first coming into an understanding of their identity. The possible reasons for the decrease in usage is discussed further in chapter one. Each interlocutor used the internet for the reasons expressed in this particular project at a minimum of two to three times a week, but their usage was primarily in liking posts, “scrolling” and absorbing information without always contributing to dialogue. Scrolling in this sense refers solely to looking through various social media sites, including Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter.

One characteristic of strong ethnographic work is the coupling of participant observation and interviews. Peter Just and John Monaghan discuss the coupling of method as crucial to ethnographic study, citing an example concerning a trial taking place among the Dou Donggo population (2000).¹⁶

Ethnography encapsulates a long tradition of scholarship that has found participant observation and interviewing to be crucial cruxes of method in determining what constitutes a strong ethnographic project, in contrast to a similar project carried out through other disciplines, and with other methods. As discussed more in the conclusion of the study, my project makes use of observation and interviews to ensure a full portrait of queer Muslim-American lives online so that theories of sociability, identity formation, and internet usage can be explored in conversation with each other.

¹⁶ In this example, what an individual was convicted of was entirely separate for the reasoning behind his conviction, which would have virtually been unknown without the researcher interviewing other citizens immediately following the trial. In the presented case they show without interviews, the participant observation of the trial would have left the researcher with a one-sided understanding of what had happened. On the other side, interviews alone would have blurred or perhaps negated larger understandings about the process of justice among the Dou Donggo (Just and Monaghan 2000).

Positionality

I position myself as fully invested in this project not only as a project of academic pursuit, but one of self-discovery as well. I am a queer Muslim, who has found the only place in which I am fully comfortable in my faith was online. I met other individuals online and some of these relationships quickly moved to in-person interactions. As a result of this, I now have a strong support system and the beginnings of group formation. How are other queer Muslims imagining their online usage? Are they becoming stronger in their faith? Are they redefining what it means to be Muslim, to be American?

I focus on a few narratives because this type of identity formation and group participation can be intensely personal. It not my intention to prove a generalizable group dynamic or provide quantitative data on queer Muslim-Americans. I am trying to show the potential for profound impact the internet can have on sexuality, sociability, and existence of queer Muslims in America. I argue that friendship and community building is the ultimate form of resistance for LGBTQ Muslim-Americans, given that they sometimes exist in locations that do not offer participation in LGBTQ spaces or Muslim spaces without censorship of one identity in favor of the other.

In the following chapter, I explore my each of my interlocutors' experiences, drawing similarities and differences between each story. I include my own narrative among my participants; as a queer Muslim I too have benefitted from internet usage in ways that have aided my own social community formations and identity reconciliation projects.

CHAPTER ONE

“It Normalizes My Existence:” The Impact of Social Media on Identity Reconciliation and Community Formation of Queer Muslims

The day I learned about online queer Muslim groups was also the last day of Ramadan.¹⁷ Although I live in Michigan, I happened to be in Nashville, Tennessee for a LGBTQ leadership retreat with two other queer Muslims. The three of us got together for our last suhur, the breakfast before sunrise. Since it was four in the morning, the conversation was relatively subdued. But before we left the table, my friend who had been out of the closet for the longest asked us if we would like be part of a Facebook group for queer Muslims. This way, we could stay in touch with each other, but also reach out to other queer Muslims transnationally. I was floored. It had taken me upwards of ten years to come out to myself, let alone to any of my Muslim friends. Knowing that other queer Muslims throughout the world were taking their identities online was surprising and very welcome information.

When I joined, I was invited to introduce myself to the Facebook group, and to give a sense of my background so that current members would know my intentions in belonging to the group.¹⁸ I introduced myself as a queer Muslim who was resentful about how her faith was taught to her. During the three years I have belonged to this Facebook group, I have used the space to ask for resources concerning identity reconciliation and to connect with other queer

¹⁷ Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is a holiday that takes place over the course of month, calling for fasting from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. Suhur is the time before sunrise, when some Muslims will eat breakfast with their families.

¹⁸ A few months after I had joined the Facebook group that my friend mentioned, the group’s moderators instituted a policy of requiring new members to answer a more specific set of questions before allowing them to join the group. Whether this is because of an update in Facebook’s capabilities, or a policy decision on behalf of the group’s moderators is unclear. When I went back to these posts to find out more about the reason behind this policy change, I discovered that the moderators have changed multiple times since 2014. Asking around, I found that no one seems to remember who the moderators were that year, or if they even still belong to the group. Leaving no trace behind, even in a private Facebook group, is indicative of the extreme confidentiality some queer Muslims practice.

Muslims in the Michigan area where I lived. Indeed, this group routinely provides support to those who ask for it; people who are coming out, struggling with their faith, or trying to reconnect with family.

Joining one of these Facebook groups is not always accessible for queer Muslims. Users often do not know any other individuals who belong to these groups, either through digital usage or offline. Facebook groups can often be hard to locate or access and may not always be active in terms of posts and dialogue. However, once invited to become a part of a Facebook group, the process of establishing ones' self is relatively simple. When I joined a Facebook group for queer Muslims in 2014 there was a rule that new users must be added by someone who is already a member. Although it was slightly smaller in 2014, there are currently over one thousand members in this group. When I was invited to join by the individual mentioned above, the process looked like this:

Admin: New Members, please introduce yourselves! Anyone who has not introduced themselves through a post or comment on this thread will be removed from the group.

Mariam: Hi! I'm Mariam, from Michigan, a lesbian, and Muslim culturally if not spiritually.

Members of the group could then comment on my post, like my post, or add to the larger thread with their own introductions. My post received three "likes" and was part of a thread where one hundred and thirty-two people commented introducing themselves. Other examples include:

Heba: I am 25 years old and I am Turkish. I was raised Muslim by both my parents but struggled to unify my sexual orientation and religion in a post 9-11 society. I identify as gay and became radical when even though I am now legally allowed to get married, I still feel like many times I'm still trapped inside this closet. [2016]

Omiid: Omiid. them/they, racially and ethnically mixed (I like the word for myself, back off) born muslim, live in DC. Long time member. I can whistle and touch my toes at the same time. [2016]

Aminah: Hello I'm Aminah. I'm a 19 year old cis queer woman and I've been trying to figure out where I stand with Islam and this page has helped me a lot. [2014]

Ameera: One of my friends invited me to this group a year or so ago when I was still trying to come to terms with my gender/sexual identity and how it interacted with my religion. I'm thankfully past that point in my life now and am quite comfortable being myself after a long life of denial and self-doubt. This group always helps remind me that I'm not alone in my struggle, and that being an open-minded and tolerant Muslim isn't a novel concept. Love the community here and will try to interact more whenever I can! [2014]

Individuals in this group introduce themselves in ways that are reflective of their personalities, elaborating on what they value and why they feel they belong in this group. They also talk about themselves beyond their queer Muslim identity, acknowledging their age, where they live, what they study, or what they enjoy doing. The posts themselves provide glimpses into each commenters' life, allowing the possibilities of connections on many different levels to take place.

I have belonged to this particular Facebook group for almost four years. In that time, I have observed an ebb and flow of dialogue taking place on a wide variety of issues that were not limited to only queer Muslim experiences. However, during my observation period for this study, I found that some queer Muslims were posting similar experiences to posts from previous years. One user, Ozhan, posted in August 2017 of his experience in coming out to his mother, not unlike a post I had made in August 2016. My post and Ozhan's post are as follows:

Mariam: Hi all. So I'm coming out to my dad Saturday night. Could really use some support/good vibes. If anyone has come out to their parents and are willing to share their story I'd be so grateful.

Mariam: Update: came out to my dad. He took it surprisingly well. Said he doesn't accept or support it by he still loves me.

My first post, on August 4th, received forty-six likes, and twelve comments from users providing their experience and words of affirmation as I prepared to come out to my father. My follow up post, which updates the group on the result of my coming out, received one hundred likes and

fifteen comments, again with affirmations and support from other users in the group. In contrast, Ozhan's post from August 11th, 2017, received seven likes and two comments. His post is as follows:

Ozhan: Hi everybody... Now that my mother knows about me being Gay.. Everyday is just a fail attempt of making me straight.. There's so much I can endure.. but I'm only human and I have limits.. This time I took a final decision that I'll leave my country for good.. I'm trying to go to Canada [...].

I put these two posts here to demonstrate the ebb and flow of participation in Facebook groups, as well as the similarities in experiences that cause some queer Muslims to seek out a community that understands their nuanced perspectives and identity conflicts. Whereas only a year prior to this post, my experience received a strong reaction from the group, this post received only seven likes and two comments. The comments themselves provide Ozhan with suggestions for relocation, resources to access, and words of affirmation. The response to both of our experiences, which are similar in nature, demonstrates that some queer Muslims access online spaces in order to participate in a shared community with shared experiences, regardless of how many users react or respond to them. It is the act of sharing one's narrative in and of itself, that can provide the user with some sense of relief or increased resilience, as they know there is a space in which they can verbalize their experiences.

One other post from this particular Facebook group I want to highlight is that of Afiz. Afiz is a trans-identified Muslim, attending college in Missouri. They belong to their university's Muslim Student Association (MSA), a club with chapters across universities nationally, centered on gathering Muslim students together to build community. Afiz's experience with this community in the wake of their coming out is as follows:

Afiz: [...] They [MSA] literally just kicked me out of the group chat for a day, probably to discuss what to do when one of their MSA "brothers" comes out as trans, instead of asking me directly how they can support me, and re-added me after a whole discussion

citing Quran and stuff, based on what I know. Y'all know you could just ask, and I would gladly do your emotional labor for you. Like I do for like most men and whites anyway. [...]

This post received seventeen reactions from Facebook users and three comments, all of whom, were commiserating with Afiz's experience with their general Muslim student community. Afiz's posts, however, demonstrates a few layers of some queer Muslim experiences. The first is that of intolerance from their religious community. Afiz was left out of a conversation on their own gender identity following their public claiming of that identity. This demonstrates the identity conflict of publicly performing one's sexuality or gender identity in their faith community. Another layer revealed by Afiz is the desire to commiserate with those who would understand this unique experience from both a queer and Muslim perspective; they chose to post this in a queer Muslim Facebook group. And finally, Afiz's post in particular calls out the inability of others outside queer Muslim spaces to reconcile the two identities, which ultimately disadvantages Afiz in their participation of a faith community on campus. Isolation and the perception that trans identity or homosexuality is in conflict with religion causes some queer Muslims to seek community online, whereas in-person communities may result in hostility or one editing their performance in order to belong, thus compromising their conception of authenticity. This Facebook group, as shown by posts I observed over a four month period, suggest that this group has been particularly useful for queer Muslims in community formation through sharing narrative experience and making connections.

The two Facebook groups I observed served different purposes. The second Facebook group I belong to, "Queer Muslim Updates," provides a space in which members primarily share news articles on updates in queer Muslim experiences, legislation, and goings-on with, by, and about the community. Comments on these posts were relatively limited, suggesting that for some

queer Muslims, belonging to this particular group may be focused less on dialogue, and more on gathering information, or visibility of other queer Muslims in one's daily feed. Most of these posts were shared articles, without any comment from the user who posted it beyond re-stating the title of the article, and little to no dialogue on these posts. One such post, made on October 21st, shares an article from NBC news titled "Photojournalist documents lives of LGBTQ asylum seekers in Mideast." The user who posted this article did not add any information or commentary on this article, and the post itself received only two likes. In a group where there are over one thousand members, this is the norm.¹⁹ Given the group's name, which establishes it as a news sharing platform, users do not feel inclined to engage with each other or contribute dialogue to the posts. However, as the high membership number indicates, some queer Muslims are still interested in the visibility aspect: in this group, they are able to see what is happening nationally and transnationally for queer Muslim communities, or read articles where they may see their own experiences represented through other queer Muslims, thus building up their resilience to in-person hostilities. Observing the posts over a four-month period demonstrated a potential foundation for my interlocutor's experiences. Where I observed a desire for community, access to resources, and normalized representations of queer Muslims in these Facebook groups, I also saw replicated through each of my interlocutors.

I provide a narrative for each interlocutor, covering their patterns of online usage, how and why they accessed online platforms, and their structure of identity and community. Laila, Khaled, and Tahani, are similar in age, ranging from 20-24. Each had been accessing queer

¹⁹ Perhaps for some queer Muslims, joining a group whose identity is focused on news signals to members that this is not a space to actively participate in, beyond passing along different resources. The post that received the most likes (twelve) during my observation was an article about homosexuality as mentioned (or not mentioned) in the Qur'an. Again, this signals a desire for visibility; to know there are other queer Muslims, and the type of work that is being done for queer Muslim rights.

Muslim communities online for at least four years. Laila, Khlaled, and Tahani each provide a unique outlook on the experiences of queer Muslims in their daily lives. Through these glimpses, we see the possibility for different ways of queer resilience among this population that is developed in part through their interactions with social media.

Laila

I walk in to see Laila already seated a corner table. We are the only two people in this coffee shop, most likely because it was mid-afternoon on a weekday. Laila seems relaxed and confident. She is wearing a necklace with a crescent moon, a hand of Fatima, and a few other charms.²⁰ The Hand of Fatima is named after the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, and is traditionally worn as a guard against evil. Laila wears it as a reminder to take care of herself. We hug like old friends, though this is our first meeting. After being introduced through a mutual friend, Laila and I had a sporadic email conversation, trying to sync our schedules enough to meet in person. Laila identifies as a queer woman, a Muslim, an immigrant, and an American. Her family moved to the United States from Bosnia when she was a child. She is twenty-four years old, and currently working in the non-profit sector.

We spend the next hour or so getting right into it; she had just attended the annual LGBT Muslim Retreat²¹ and was eager to hold onto that feeling of shared community with someone who holds similar identity groups; a feeling I inherently understood. She found the LGBT Muslim Retreat through happenstance; a colleague had involvement in this retreat listed on their resume and when Laila saw this, she felt compelled to follow up on attending to see for herself.

²⁰ The hand of Fatima is an object believed to provide the wearer with protection. The hand is typically worn face down and is depicted as having an eye in the center of the palm, though depictions vary across cultures.

²¹ The LGBT Muslim Retreat is a weekend retreat focused on centering the experiences of LGBT Muslims in religious activities and dialogue. The Retreat, organized under the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity, has taken place every year since 2011.

Laila recounted that she had recently gone through a major shift in how she conceives her identity as a queer Muslim. Our conversation gave her an opportunity to reflect on this shift:

It's interesting the narratives we construct in hindsight. For a very long time I just identified as straight. I looked up at one point and all my friends were queer ... It made a lot of theoretical sense, if the gender binary is bullshit how is my entire attraction based on this hypothetical thing? I started dating a woman a few months after I determined I was queer.

Laila had chosen her words carefully. She elaborated: "I use the word determine because of the agency it gives me. I am in control of my identity and what I choose to share." She finds that having a feeling of agency is critical to the construction of her identities, including her sexuality and her faith identity. Of both, she specified: "Queerness and Islam are both ways of life to me, more than sets of rules or prescriptions."²² Though her circle of friends in college were overwhelmingly queer-identified, Laila did not find support among them in reconciling her queerness and her faith. Her non-Muslim queer friends empathized with her struggle in coming to terms with her sexuality and were supportive of this. However, they were more hesitant to support her in her desire to hold onto her faith in Islam.

This crux of identity formation between sexuality and faith is where Laila made use of the internet. She cites Twitter in particular as being integral to her "intellectual development," as well as giving her a space to learn about opportunities that had previously been unavailable or unknown to her. Laila reports that she prefers to interact more passively online, by scrolling and "liking," only occasionally posts content.²³

²² As in the case of the two other informants discussed below, faith is integral to Laila. This is similar to the experiences of Afzal's interlocutors: "Islam is central to their lives as gay men, rupturing scholarly interpretations of Islam and Muslim communities as monolithic and incapable of non-heteronormative accommodation" (2014: 142).

²³ Scrolling is an action that involves a user moving down their news feed on Facebook, or timeline on Twitter. The ability to "like" a post is present on multiple social media sites. Liking involves reacting to a post in a positive light, either with a heart (Twitter and Instagram) or a thumbs up (Facebook).

My observations of Laila's activities online during the four-month period matched her self-reports. I noticed that she posts between once and twice a week, on Facebook and Twitter; promoting local events or articles she finds interesting and marking some postings that she has read by "liking." According to her interviews, the greatest part of her online activity, scrolling through each platform, looking at dialogue and resources related to her interests, leaves hardly any visible trail.

For Laila, the act of viewing normalized experiences of other queer Muslims is the profound aspect of the experience, perhaps more so than using social media to find and form active relationships with other queer Muslims. Laila states:

When I'm just chilling and scrolling and they're [other queer Muslims] posting pictures of them and their partners, coming across that more regularly, and through social media, it does *something*. Social media is how we interact with the world. It becomes so much more normalized... it does something for me, normalizes my existence. I find a sense of comfort in it.

Laila describes what it feels like for her to see posts online from queer Muslim friends with whom she has face-to-face encounters. When she is "scrolling on Instagram and sees their photos of them living their lives; eating good food, seeing friends, it normalizes the existence of queer Muslims." Thus, the online visibility of her offline community gives her a sense of comfort and a vicarious experience of everyday queer Muslim life progressing in a normal way. The idea she conveys here is that it is radical enough to just exist; to take up space while embracing identities that may not be legible to outsiders of this particular group.

By attending a retreat for LGBT Muslims that she had found through her colleague, Laila established a social community critical to her development as a queer Muslim. Up until she attended the retreat, she had been "so focused on survival" that the opportunity for identity exploration or community building was just not there. Laila indicates that her internet usage

supplements the face-to face community contact that she has with queer Muslims. Her internet usage has increased over time, after identifying a queer Muslim community that she routinely connects with online. Through this online community, she has been able to identify other queer Muslims in close proximity to her; thus, creating physical spaces of interaction with other queer Muslims.

I asked Laila: “Why wasn’t it enough for you to have queer friends who were not Muslims? Couldn’t they have aided you in understandings of your sexuality?” For Laila, the answer is complicated. As a result of having a queer social circle, Laila was able to understand her sexuality with less conflict than had she not had an established support system. However, reconciling her sexuality with her cultural and religious identity proved complicated, as her support system of friends did not share her faith or cultural identity. Laila notes the distinction of having queer Muslim friends as such:

I think something that was really important, now that I have these friends I can actually unearth things that I did not feel comfortable before and it’s not because I don’t trust my non-queer non-Muslim friends, but there’s certain stereotypes I don’t want to be enforcing for WASPS [White Anglo-Saxon Protestants]. And I don’t want to have to sit through conversations with them anxious about what they’re thinking and their problematic narratives. Coming from an “Eastern Third World” country that’s stereotyped as aggressive violent dudes, like, I don’t wanna... I know that just because some of my experiences line up with that doesn’t validate those stereotypes, but I just don’t want to have to worry about it when I talk about my shit. I think that’s the real treasure in actually being able to talk about this stuff with these new-found friends who are at the intersection of both identities. I have had like, queer friends since college, but now I have queer Muslim friends and *that means something different*.

Laila indicates that coming into a social circle of other queer Muslims has been the strongest form of support she has received throughout her various experiences trying to achieve

reconciliation among her various identity.²⁴ For Laila, online interactions facilitate the establishment and maintenance of offline friendships, rather than being an end to themselves.

Use of social media, then, for some queer Muslims, may not always in and of itself provide a radical moment of identity conception and community transformation. Sometimes, the shift is quieter, as in Laila's case, when the access to normalcy and agency in self-construction is what has the power to transform.

Khaled

In the story above Laila described an increase over time in her online engagement with other queer Muslims. She first met a group of queer Muslims in face-to face encounters with them during the LGBTQ Muslim Retreat. For Laila, the individuals in this group transformed into a queer Muslim social circle as they continued building connections online. In contrast, Khaled, my second interlocutor, describes an opposite process in which his online engagement with queer Muslims has decreased over time as he builds offline communities. At first, he went through a period of very frequent usage when he was first establishing a social circle, and then, he began to take some of those online connections with people offline.

I have known Khaled socially for almost two years.²⁵ Our friendship began through an online interaction in on one of the Facebook groups analyzed in this study. We both accessed this

²⁴ Laila implied at this point of the interview that her strongest relationships are with other queer Muslims; that she hasn't had relationships, platonic or romantic, as strong with non-Muslim non-queer individuals. This recalls ethnographer Ahmed Afzal's observation: "In seeking relationships, my Pakistani gay male interlocutors search for men who share their religious and ethnic background. Although these Pakistani men venture regularly into predominantly gay spaces [...] they often experience these places with other Muslim gay men" (2014: 130). Although his interlocutors engaged with other queer individuals who did not share the same background, they acknowledged that those relationships were temporary and not as satisfying.

²⁵ Similar to Afzal's chapter on Pakistani gay Muslim men, I made use of my aligned identity and social relationships to carry out this research. The communities, even in large cities, can be relegated to such small social groups, that this is sometimes unavoidable.

group to discuss a Mashrou Leila concert in downtown Detroit.²⁶ Khaled posted about going to this concert, and I commented that I would be going as well. In response, he sent me a private message suggesting we attend together, to which I agreed. The concert we attended ended up not working out due to technical issues that the venue was unable to fix. But, our friendship was cemented as we bonded over our upbringings, the band we both liked, and other things like our shared perception of the current gentrification taking place in Detroit.

Khaled was the third queer Muslim I had met in person since coming out. He identifies as Pakistani but is almost always read as being from the Middle East. He was raised in a devoutly religious household, and though he still finds comfort in his faith, he has stopped engaging in his mosque community as actively as he once did. This is for several reasons, including his desire to be relatively public about his sexuality, his lack of interest in communal worship, and the demands of a full-time job. In the two years since knowing Khaled, his internet usage has waned from when we first met. This is directly correlated with his growing engagement in face-to-face interactions with a social community of other queer Muslims.

Khaled is a cisgender Muslim gay man living in southeast Michigan. For the majority of his life, he has been an active member in his religious community. He has attended leadership camps for Muslim youth, worked with other Muslim activists, and involved himself in the goings-on of his mosque community. Since his youth, he has understood Islam primarily as a vehicle in which to advocate for “bringing justice to the oppressed.” His upbringing has been

²⁶ Mashrou Leila is a Lebanese alternative rock band, where the lead singer, Hamed Sinno, is openly gay. The band’s name is a loose translation of “overnight project,” referring to the band’s original formation.

infused with religion as the priority identifier, or “identity anchor” and Islam has been integral to his understandings of self from a very young age.²⁷

Khaled also has been relatively public about his sexuality since 2015. Though he does not actively hide his sexual orientation, Khaled admits that in certain spaces, he is careful to edit his performance, knowing that many Muslims in his community have altered their behavior towards him since his coming out. Of his faith and sexuality, Khaled states:

Islam really impacted how I viewed my sexual orientation. If I wasn't raised a Muslim, I don't think I would have had the same crisis of sexual orientation clashing with faith that I experienced. But I think it was very important that I went through that. I was fortunate to experience life being marginalized within an already marginalized community. It helped me form my views about humanity and compassion that I don't think I would have developed if I had just been born a straight Muslim man. Islam taught me to explore and I did. I found views and ideas I never would have even considered if I was not gay.

Khaled took a self-assured tone when relaying his personal journey of reconciling his sexuality and faith. His narrative reinforces that for some, the conflict between both identity groups can result in a crisis; but one that can be reconciled. Prior to his public coming out, Khaled cites the internet as critical to his ability to form and structure a queer Muslim community, thus allowing the possibility of faith and sexual orientation reconciliation to be realized.

Khaled's use of Tumblr, a blogging site, was the first context in which he found other LGBTQ-identified Muslims. Khaled states that without this online community, he would not have been able to find the friendships that he now carries out offline. He also states that without Tumblr, he would he have felt comfortable in coming out in any public manner. Of Tumblr, Khaled indicates:

Tumblr was very instrumental in helping me find a community for queer identifying Muslims when I didn't think it was possible that we even existed. And through that I found groups of people on Facebook as well.

²⁷ Several scholars have written about the emergence of a “Muslim first” identity among Muslim youth in the United States. (Naber 2005, el Amin Naeem 2009). Additionally, Zarinah el Amin Naeem used the term “identity anchor” to describe the primacy of Muslim identity for youth navigating many complex identities (2009: 23).

Thus, in the beginning of his coming out, Khaled made use of the internet on a regular basis to connect and reach out to other queer Muslims. He was actively involved on Tumblr and in various private Facebook groups that are centered around this community. For Khaled, the desire to connect online signaled a lack of community in his direct physical space. Khaled also cites his internet usage offering him a context in which to authentically express his identity as a gay Muslim. He asserts that finding other gay Muslims online validated his queer Muslim identity as an authentic construction of self.

During my fieldwork period, I primarily observed Khaled's online usage via his visible Facebook profile.²⁸ His use of Facebook involves occasionally posting articles typically concerned with a social justice issue. He also posts frequently about his achievements in the gym. Though his public profile presents an individual concerned with social justice, nothing is mentioned of his sexuality. It may be implied through some of the photos he posts, but it is never overtly addressed. However, Khaled has indicated that the public presentation was not, and indeed continues not to be necessary to how he reconciles his identity. During the four months of observation, I found that he uses social media primarily to connect with friends he has made through queer Muslims closed Facebook groups, or to scroll on Tumblr, "mindlessly," he says. Thus, as in the case of Laila, his usage could not have been observed in full without the addition of interviews.

His friend group of queer Muslims developed through first establishing online connections with two individuals. After taking those connections offline, and building stronger friendships with these individuals, Khaled was introduced to other queer Muslims who were

²⁸ Facebook includes the option to decide what posts are visible to any Facebook user, only Facebook friends, or only certain Facebook friends. By "visible profile" I refer to Khaled's posts that were visible to all his Facebook friends.

friends of friends. Of the times in which Khaled was going to bars, cafes, and museums with the two queer Muslim individuals he had first connected with, he was also developing a strong group of friends that included these two individuals, as well as others who happened to connect either online or in person. In contrast to Laila, whose online connections with other Muslims increased the more she got to know them in person, Khaled's internet usage waned over time with the construction of an in-person queer Muslim social group. As he continued to make connections with other queer Muslims and develop friendships with individuals he could see in person, Khaled's use of the internet became more and more casual; posting a Facebook status here, checking Tumblr there. Rather than a lifeline, his internet use was an everyday or banal experience. But the internet most certainly functioned as a starting point for Khaled to flourish socially, thus impacting his views on himself, his feelings of authenticity, and his agency in determining what communities to participate in. To conclude, Khaled recently stated that he "instantly feels closer to a queer Muslim person. There is just a lot they understand without me having to say anything. And after a lifetime of hiding your feelings, it is the greatest weight being lifted off your shoulders to be able to experience this."

Tahani

Tahani is a prominent activist in queer Muslim circles, having established at least one highly visible platform in which queer Muslims can submit their stories. Her work as an activist has been featured through various platforms across the country. Tahani identifies as a cisgender, queer, black femme. As for her religion, she categorizes herself as both a Muslim and a conjurer.²⁹ We have known each other socially for almost two years; having met originally through mutual friends at a social gathering I organized with a few friends. I am often in awe of

²⁹ During our interviews, she pointed me to some resources about the kind of conjuring she practices which categorize the faith as a part of traditional folk magic by African-American communities.

all that Tahani has accomplished in such a short period of time. Tahani and I have spoken about her experiences in the past, but we recently went back and forth online to discuss more about her experience with queerness, religion, and the internet.

When we first met, Tahani was just starting her first year in college, having already successfully launched a platform in which queer Muslims could share their narratives online. At the time of our most recent interview, she had been featured on multiple news outlets for her activist work for religious tolerance and was in the beginning stages of creating a community-based organization for queer Muslims in her area. Her first coming out experience as a youth was aided by social media. Interestingly enough, she came out to her godfather via Facebook Messenger. The online affirmation Tahani received from her godfather helped her develop the confidence to attend an LGBTQ event as a youth. It also enabled her to come out to her mother. However, her mother was not as receptive as her godfather had been. Indeed, Tahani's relationship with her mother was strained in her youth in part because of her sexuality, and also in part because of her religion. Tahani converted to Islam around the time she was coming out; and thus, her experience of Islam has always been influenced by her queer identity. Her relationship with her mother is now much stronger, as Tahani's work and activism has become more integral to her sense of self and her desires to teach and work with those who are still grappling with social justice concepts.³⁰

In reference to using social media, Tahani uses Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr multiple times a day. Her online presence is strong, with a large following of almost seven thousand people on Facebook alone. Tahani's use of the internet as a social justice-based

³⁰ The identities of "Muslim" and "conjurer" would also seem to most Muslims as contradictory. Although an analysis of these religious identities is beyond the scope of the current project, it is interesting to note that Tahani is engaged in multiple processes of identity reconciliation at the same time.

platform has enabled her to provide digital space for queer Muslims to connect and engage with each other. Indeed, she is one of the pioneers of this digital community building within the millennial generation of queer Muslims. In my direct observations of Tahani's social media usage over the past four months, I have observed her updating some of the social media platforms she runs for queer Muslims, in addition to her almost daily posts of events, articles, and thoughts on social justice concerning faith, sexuality, and race. The friendships that have resulted from her online interactions range from "acquaintances to good friends to strong close friends." In addition, Tahani's increased social media presence has had a profound impact on her conceptualization of faith and sexuality. Of both she states:

[Religion] plays an important factor in my life. I identify as both spiritual and Muslim and I'm always trying to work on my relationship with Allah/the Universe's Divine Presence, and practice manifestation in my life in order to live my life most efficiently and in a way that will serve both my community and I good in the long term. Being religious and spiritual helps me to practice spreading love, being love, and being liberated.

Queerness and her faith are not in conflict for Tahani. In her perception, the conflict that is assumed or created for many queer Muslims is a result of "white colonialist influences on communities of color." This is critical both to her work and to the ways in which she engages in certain spaces online. Her use of the internet has almost solely provided a space for other queer Muslims to reconcile the conflicts that have been foisted on them. When asked about the conflict between sexuality and faith, Tahani indicates:

It [faith] doesn't have a big role in understanding my sexuality too much actually. Not like it once did. And even when it did have a slightly larger role in understanding my sexuality, it wasn't as heavy of an influence compared to other queer folks I know. I already know that nothing is wrong with my queerness and that my queerness is not actually queer. The main role it plays is just me simply acknowledging and educating other people about how pre-colonialism, historically queer and trans folks of color all over the world held sacred healer and spiritual roles in their communities.³¹

³¹ Tahani's ideas about pre-colonial queerness in Muslim and Arab communities reflect the findings of recent scholars such as El Rouayheb (2005), Babayan (2008), and Joseph Massad (2007).

Tahani's education and experience, cultivated primarily through digital means, demonstrates her commitment to providing other queer Muslims and queer people of color with spaces that do not beget conflict in identity formation or presentation. Her narrative presents us with a contrast point to Laila and Khaled's findings about how internet usage within queer Muslim communities varies over time. The importance attributed to online connections with other queer Muslims for the purposes of identity reconciliation for Laila increased over time and decreased for Khaled. But Tahani has remained steady over time in the way she has appraised the internet as the main landing point in which to enact change, educate herself and her community, and provide forums that are uniquely tailored to the needs of the queer Muslim community. As she has solidified her place in organizations devoted to activist work, Tahani finds her internet usage geared more towards raising awareness of what can be done offline for vulnerable communities, yet this expansion of focus does not change the value she continues to attribute to her online experiences.

My direct observations of Tahani's internet use over the four months suggests that for her, the internet is a powerful tool in which to spread and access information. Many of her posts during this time have been focused on a new, local community organization she is starting in her area which is geared towards queer Muslims, Muslims of color, and any other self-identified Muslims who may feel marginalized in larger Muslim communities. Indeed, what fills up her public page beyond her posts about this organization are others' comments on all that she is achieving.

Tahani's narrative contrasts to those of Laila and Khaled in other ways. Unlike the others, her online engagements are mainly driven by the desire to provide others with a means for authentic identity expression; this seems to eclipse or serve as another way for her to work on her own identity reconciliation. The internet has expanded her sense of agency in terms of sustaining

activist work. Her ability to continually communicate with various communities both nationally and transnationally enable Tahani to advocate for these communities in the highly public platforms she identifies or creates for herself. Tahani's experience affirms how internet usage can be critical to the varying forms of success queer Muslims have in terms of identity performance, activist efforts, or community formations.

Analysis of Research Findings

This section addresses similarities and differences across Laila, Khaled, and Tahani's online engagements. I also elaborate upon three findings that I make in relation to the study. These findings concern trajectories of online usage over time; access to normalcy through digital means; and agency in identity and community formation through confidential publics and reconciliation.

Online Usage Over Time

Online usage over time for all three informants changed as a result of multiple factors. What their narratives may suggest is that the internet may function as a starting place, a sustaining place, or a place to imagine future places for queer Muslims.

Laila's internet usage for the explicit purpose of engaging with a queer Muslim community was minimal in terms of observable actions. Rather, the moments when social media was particularly powerful in Laila's experience was the normalized observations of the social groups that she had access to. Indeed, Laila's narrative would have been incomplete without her interviews, as her online usage on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram involved her consumption of what was showing up on those respective feeds; something that one does not have access to unless it is their own profile. For Laila, her actions of scrolling through the various online platforms, occasionally liking a post or reading an article shared by another queer Muslim de-

sensationalized her identity both as a queer person, but even more so as a queer person of faith. In the online communities Laila had access to as a result of attending the LGBT Muslim Retreat, her participation online did not include seeking out a queer Muslim community; the internet was a space in which to recreate the physical community to which she already had access.

As with Laila, Khaled's internet usage is somewhat observable, but direct observation over the four months was not my primary way in which to create a picture of his narrative or experience with identity reconciliation online. Khaled communicated that his primary use of social media originally stemmed from a desire to both reconcile his identity as a queer Muslim, and to form a queer Muslim social community. As his involvement in establishing a physical social community grew, his internet usage decreased, as he was able to spend more time congregating with other queer Muslims. However, prior to the formation of a social community, Khaled made use of Tumblr and Facebook to form connections with other queer Muslims as he was reconciling his sexual orientation with his faith identity. Thus, Khaled's internet usage over time indicates that as he had access to an in-person space in which his identity was de-sensationalized, he had less of a need to access digital spaces in which to experience the benefits of social ties across shared identities. In terms of assessing what access to social media can do for queer Muslims, Khaled's narrative presents a relatively clear picture: for some queer Muslims, the first step to community formation begins online, and as those communities are able to be taken offline, the need for online interaction with that explicit purpose is lessened.

Tahani's internet usage over time has remained relatively steady both in terms of observable information as well as the self-perception she provided through our interview process. As the internet is one of the main sources in which she carries out initiatives to support the queer Muslim community, Tahani's participation online has taken on a consistent and public

nature. For Tahani, her desire to contribute to community formation and resilience guides her online usage in both general and day-to-day terms. Some platforms, such as the Tumblr blog Tahani created to share queer Muslim narratives, depends on the rate of submissions she receives to that specific blog. Thus, her actions or time spent on that platform vary. However, on other platforms, such as Facebook, where her actions can and often do extend beyond only queer Muslim sociabilities, Tahani participates in active posting; commenting on others' posts; and communicating regularly with other queer Muslims about non-identity related conversations. Tahani's insistent, consistent, and active online presence suggests that digital space is a platform that fuels her social interactions and is an effective platform for her in which to best enact social change as it relates to queer Muslims or other minority groups.

Critical to this section is the understanding that the full scope of each interlocutor's internet usage is enhanced through the interview process. What this suggests is that public space, such as the internet, can also function as a highly confidential space; thus, lacking in observed nuance of queer Muslim experience without that opportunity to engage directly with users. Ultimately, the changes in online usage over time demonstrated by Laila, Khaled, and Tahani suggest that for some queer Muslims, the internet is again, a starting place in which to situate their thoughts on and experiences of their queer Muslim identity. Community formation is inherently intertwined into this process as well, given that access to a queer Muslim community tended to dictate the ways in which Khaled, Laila, and Tahani consumed content through various social media platforms. Access to content also signals a desire, as shown particularly through Laila's narrative, for a de-sensationalized, authentic, or otherwise normal experience of queer Muslim identity.

Access to Normalcy

One facet critical to the success of queer Muslim identity reconciliation and community formation includes a normalizing of the two identity categories. De-sensationalizing the assumed conflict between sexual orientation and faith identity includes increased access to normalized online experiences that may or may not be impacted by those identities. I am speaking here of online experiences such as scrolling, which shows the user what people in their social groups are posting. A normalized experience of scrolling would include seeing one's social connections participating in activities such as posting photos of locations those individuals have visited, making announcements about new jobs or life events, and/or sharing information on their pets, family, or relationships. In this case, access to normalcy through digital means is a case of representation, of seeing others similar to one's self existing in ways that resist dominant narratives.

Laila indicated that what was so profound about having a queer Muslim community was the ability to scroll through Instagram and see her queer Muslim friends enjoying themselves similar to anyone else on her friends list. Seeing her queer Muslim community in normalized settings added to the de-sensationalizing of her identity and her view on the existence of queer Muslims; "It's a totally normal thing now, and that is just so cool." Her ideas of normalcy are tied into authenticity: to be able to authentically exist as queer and Muslim; to publicly perform those identities; form social groups from those shared identities; all comes back to some idea of having access to authenticity. In the discussion below, I use authenticity and normalcy interchangeably, reflecting the intense degree that these concepts are tied together for my interlocutors.

Concerning authenticity online, perhaps the simple question can be asked: if a profile has no identifying information about the user, are their actions through that profile still authentic? Does authenticity require not just vulnerability, but some form of public exposure in order to be deemed valid? Authenticity, I find, is a somewhat false concept within the confines of this study. It assumes an unchanging nature among individuals to be the main indicator that what they are sharing is somehow more trustworthy than another source that may have experienced change or growth in their identity and community. Often, as represented through Khaled, the perceived need for authenticity from others imposes the conflict between identity categories, sometimes more so than internal conceptions. And though their interactions online have been less shrouded than other users, the concept of authenticity is still pertinent, especially when we consider the users through Twitter and Youtube whose accounts reveal little to no identifying information. Are their contributions to discourse less valid because we cannot verify their intentions? Perhaps not, given the very real impact those contributions have on the user, again, as we see in Khaled's case.

Khaled, through confidential means, was able to access the most authentic conceptions and performances of his identity through online activity. In those performances of identity, he was validated through representation from other queer Muslims participating in those digital spaces: through commenting on posts in the queer Muslim Facebook groups, or re-posting affirmations through Tumblr. Khaled's feelings of authenticity increased in direct relation to his access to various representations of other queer Muslim experiences, varying from experiences of joy to trauma.

Talking about authenticity online in contrast to in-person perpetuates a dichotomy that somehow there is one objective measure of authenticity. Assuming that authenticity requires

rigidity of performance, the following issue concerns authenticity online, where one can construct the self in a way different than how they are perceived in the day-to-day. Are we our truest selves online? How does it differ from who we are in person, how we act or want to act? In answer to this, I argue that internet is simply another space in which a person can perform their identity and connect with their communities. If someone joins a Facebook group of people one could never be friends with in real life using a pseudonym; that action may signal that there is not a physical group of people like that in an accessible physical space, or that a less confidential public would be unsafe, rather than implying anything about an individuals' lack of authenticity in joining the group (Dubrofsky and Wood 2014; Hall 2015; Somdahl-Sands and Finn 2015; Næss 2017).

Tahani's feelings concerning authenticity are reflected in her social justice work online. She has stated multiple times to me that her commitment to sharing queer Muslim narratives from a variety of sources is intended to provide queer Muslims with the implied message that existence in and of itself is authentic. Her actions online are intended to challenge conceptions of authenticity for other queer Muslims who have access to her social media pages. In terms of Tahani herself, she has indicated that her feelings of authenticity are rooted in intellectual and activist projects centered on de-constructing the binaries developed around sexual identities in Muslim societies that took place after European colonization. As previously mentioned, Tahani experiences her queer faith identity as something that is "not-queer" in a pre-colonialist sense, and thus not in conflict. In providing platforms to other queer Muslims who are in search of reaffirmation and validation, Tahani finds her identity validated through this work and her own research on the impact of colonialism on her various communities.

Indeed, authenticity seems to be a concept in which some queer Muslims require various outlets in which to come to terms with their own ideas of authenticity in regards to themselves.³² Whereas Tahani found her authenticity through access to knowledge coupled with providing spaces for her community to experience and access authenticity, Laila found that representation in her social media experience was a powerful tool in accessing her own authenticity. Khaled as well, found representation and social connection to be key in his own constructions of authenticity. The variety of experiences among these three individuals suggests that authenticity is a highly personalized construct. Authenticity was woven into other forms of identity formation, such as the process of reconciliation through the creation of digital space for sexual orientation and faith identities.

Confidential Publics and Imagination Work

Creating confidential publics, meaning alternative spaces in which there are elements of public performance, yet regulated access to such spaces; are critical for identity development among queer youth (Craig et al. 2014; Afzal 2014). As for queer Muslims, I argue that confidential publics are critical for the development of identity reconciliation and community development. This section addresses how each informant created their own confidential public; the reasons behind a need for such a space; and how the internet has functioned in various ways for each informant as a confidential public site. Establishing a confidential public is an action that functions as a direct result of queer Muslim imagination. To imagine a space in which there is no need for compromise in terms of identity performance requires queer Muslims to seek out

³² Doubt or desire-based feelings concerning authenticity may be linked to a variety of factors, including but not limited to, the idea of a Muslim/Arab diaspora. Afzal references the diaspora among his interlocutors as an explanation for their inclusion of South Asian cultural concepts into their constructions of queer identity and community (2014).

spaces where it is indeed possible; thus the use of internet spaces as foundational to queer Muslim identity development.

In previous research, I conducted a study entitled “Resisting Reconciliation: Middle Eastern and Queer Identities,” which traced the coming out experiences of four queer-identified Arab-Americans and the impact coming out had on their participation in their families, religious and cultural communities, and the LGBTQ community. My aim in conducting that study was to understand how queer Muslims reconciled their faith and sexuality in public and private spheres. What I found was that though individual private reconciliation was possible, and even assumed among my participants; each participant acknowledged that they either distanced themselves publicly from their religious and cultural communities, or they were delicately balancing their public performance of each identity so that they would never publicly perform both their queer and Muslim identities. However, as stated in the introductory chapter, identity reconciliation between counter-cultural identities can be influenced by the pressure of homonationalist ideologies which seek to regulate and homogenize queer Muslim identities.

Both nationally and internationally, representations of LGBTQ issues and Islam are filtered through a homonationalist lens which presumed that the “assumed violent fundamentalism of Islam” is incompatible with queer identity, with the implication that a more ‘Western’ religion or culture would in comparison, be more accepting, progressive, or forgiving (Bracke 2012: 245). Accordingly, Laila reports that being fed images of Islamophobia while coming out has caused her and others she knows to question their religious involvement at various points in time, despite knowing of the scare tactics involved in the creation of hegemonic narratives associating violence and tragedy associated with Islam. Through digital and physical

means, Tahani actively works to combat imperialist representational agendas, such as homonationalism, that disadvantage multiple minority populations, including queer Muslims.

Laila's experience with homonationalism is in part a result of having friends who identified as queer, but were not Muslim, nor raised in a culture influenced by Islam. Thus, as she states, she is cautious to share some of her familial experiences, or confusion surrounding her queerness and faith among this group of friends. Laila is careful to not perpetuate stereotypes that would assume Muslims are fundamentally violent or oppressive. The editing of one's self to avoid perpetuating further state violence is, for Laila, what ultimately caused the initial conflict between faith and sexuality. Thus, her identity formations were compromised by this innate understanding that they would have to continually edit their performances, so as not to upset cultural or community balances. This balance prevented her from accessing in-person communities, because of the effects of homonationalism on non-Muslim queer populations, or the perceived/imagined/real homophobia present in their religious communities. The internet, where anything can exist, gave Laila a chance to find a shared community, one where she did not have to go through that identity conflict alone.

Khaled, for instance, asserts that his most powerful assessment of his own identity conflict comes from realizing that his presentation online was more censored than his behavior in public, and that on certain spaces where he was anonymous he could participate as a queer Muslim more freely than on other platforms. His experience is similar to Laila's, in that growing up with two cultures led him to experience conflict around his sexuality and faith identity. While internalizing messages that his faith community would not be accepting and thus denying Khaled access to faith itself, he also indicated experiencing hostility from queer communities. Non-Muslim queer communities expected him to confirm their suspicions that Islam was a

particularly toxic faith community in its responses to sexual orientation. While Khaled's perception of his faith community indicates some resistance to his open performance of sexuality, he also is hesitant to perpetuate a stereotype that justifies state violence against Muslims in America.

Through access to queer Muslim spaces online, Laila, Khaled, and Tahani were able to imagine new ways in which their identity could be presented, and the communities to which they could have access. The work developed online impacted the way they imagined community. Imagination is a practice in which the everyday life is constructed (Appadurai 1996). Rather than imaging new worlds, art pieces, or other creative avenues solely, imagination and creativity are used to imagine and realize the self in terms of conception, performance, and presentation. This suggests the potential to exploit difference in favor of imagined collectivities, and definitions of the self. Imagined realities inform individuals' assumptions of values, morals, and everyday actions; imagining or constructing an online personality can influence the behavior of an individual in their physical daily interactions.

In fact, new media, or the digital world, has lent itself to the project of self-imagination in the way of Facebook profiles, blogs, or even the share option on Spotify that shows others what music one is listening to at any given time. However, imagined realities through digital media also have the potential to perpetuate cultural difference and limit or monitor what kind of global cultural flow is taking place (Appadurai 1996). Queer Muslims make use of digital media to collectively imagine fully realized performances of the self, community, and participation in religion that could otherwise be denied to them offline. However, collective imagining reinforces validation of the self and builds up the community based on its unique cultural influences; an absolutely critical process to queer youth development (Craig et al. 2015).

Appadurai's theory ultimately stems into three main points; imagination is critical to the construction of ordinary life, rather than being purely reserved for creative or abstract endeavors; the results of cultural interaction and traffic based on imagined realities can be explained through various forms and are infinite in nature; and finally, that there is an individual and collective sense of imagination that often operates on transnational levels (1996).

In terms of imagined constructions of the self, it is also critical to note the construction of the self in relation to the place of being and the communities that exist there: "the homeland is partly invented, existing only in the imagination of the deterritorialized groups, and it can sometimes become so fantastic and one-sided that it provides the fuel for new ethnic conflicts" (Appadurai 1996: 49). This type of conflict at stake in my analysis functions internally, as an imagined boundary of who an individual feels they belong to culturally; as we see in Laila's case where she is caught between cultural communities and boundaries when processing her identity. The imagined homeland of a first-generation American child's parents factors heavily into their conceptions of self, where they come from, and how to properly honor the homeland in a space that, though in theory they belong to, are told that they do not. This inner conflict, I argue, has a strong influence on sexuality and desire as well, as the desire to uphold and adhere to the homeland implies not participating in some of the current cultural practices, whether they are based in sexuality or not.

Tahani's imagination of queer Muslim space is rooted in providing a confidential public for those queer Muslims who are first beginning to seek these spaces in relation to their identity and community formations. Her actions in creating a narrative-sharing space for queer Muslims to submit their experiences with a non-identifying photo of themselves play along the lines of imagining new, safe, and visible spaces for queer Muslims. Tahani, who asserts her identity and

development is not in conflict, engages directly in carrying out the type of imagination work she believes other queer Muslims may be going through. By providing a confidential public in which she is able to let other queer Muslims safely engage in visible identity presentation; Tahani takes the imagination work of queer Muslims and puts it into sustainable action.

Ultimately, queer Muslim Americans have multiple layers of imagined realities that they are contending with in their conceptions of self as it relates to desire; many of those imagined realities stemming from the creation of their parents or communities at large. Making use of social media or digital platforms as a means in which to explore these imagined realities construct a new sort of reality in which intersecting identities can be realized into full communities, rather than the outskirts. Each interlocutor engages in this new reality through digital platforms, where they are able to carry out imagined possibilities of their identity performances in spaces that are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Imagination of identity reconciliation online increased my interlocutor's experiences with identity reconciliation offline; the internet lent itself to the project of practice for these queer Muslims, so that they could engage in shared community and identity work offline as well.

CONCLUSION

“It is Such a Gift to Be Yourself Publicly:” Future Directions and Significance

Ethnography is a method used by researchers when trying to assess or analyze a specific population. This method includes observation, interviews, or assimilating into lifestyles similar to those being studied. However, the ultimate core of ethnography is story-telling. How can we tell the story of individuals collaboratively, in a way that captures the meanings that they bring to the different parts of their own narratives? How can we tell these stories in a way that takes into account the changes wrought on this telling by the ethnographer’s interpretation?

These questions have guided my preparation for researching this community, particularly in terms of authenticity. Are we more “authentic” online because we have less to lose? Or are we less authentic online, given our ability to construct a projection of the self that can be edited in real time? What is the meaning of authenticity when it comes to self-representation, especially in light of the many theorists who trouble identity as a stable category? (Butler 1990; Hall 1992).

Further, if ethnography is telling stories about a population, then that population must be met where they are at. How does the internet as a research site impact ethnography? In many ways, this study was a reflection an expansion of classical ethnographic methodologies and practice, but not a deviation from their main tenets. My field site was digital because I wanted to study how queer Muslims congregated online. I argue that contemporary anthropologists must consider digital space as a legitimate field site. Populations such as queer Muslims are making use of the internet as a site in which to replicate community structures to the best of their abilities. In this sense, if the internet is to be a site of community formation, then ethnographers must respond accordingly; allowing for creativity within traditional methodological frameworks to fit the needs of the community being studied.

As in most ethnographic projects, I found that participant observation was not enough to fully understand the dynamics of my field site. By conducting interviews with people in my field site, I was able to gain critical information about the meaning of what I observed, as well as to get a sense of non-observable online actions, such as scrolling. Thus, interviews functioned as a means in which to humanize the experience of both the ethnographer and the population being studied. Having an opportunity to connect with interlocutors provided expanded context and nuance to observable content, thus allowing for a fuller analysis of material.

As described in the previous chapter, my study yielded three findings: that queer Muslim online community formation relates strongly to offline experiences; that access to normalcy is a strong motivating factor in queer Muslims make use of digital spaces; and that the creation of confidential publics through internet spaces is a direct result of queer Muslim imagination work. Together, these findings suggest that for some queer Muslims, online experiences profoundly affect processes of identities reconciliation. Confidential public space, or, a space that allows for public identity performance while simultaneously navigating this community's unique need for privacy, and in some cases, anonymity, gives access to some queer Muslims so that they are not placed in continual community-based conflict of having to prioritize one identity over the other.

Future Research

The present study made use of participation observation and interviews with participants over the course of four months. Future studies to further expand upon the impacts of internet usage for queer Muslims should allow for longer time frames if possible. Given that internet usage is determinant upon a series of factors, including access to internet, time in which to participate online, and the spaces that are able to be located, may also be influenced by the factor of time. Thus, a longer study may benefit from the ability to track prolonged usage over time in

line with information provided by participants, opportunities to engage with larger participant groups, and allows for reactions to other factors such as news items or community responses.

My methodology, a combination of netnography and traditional ethnographic methods, was both a practical and effective method for the purposes of this study. While the length of the study may have impacted access to different facets within the queer Muslim community, this methodology is suggested for future research in terms of accessing populations that would otherwise be difficult to reach, either through in-person or online platforms. In addition, increased length of time could also impact the location of such a study. While most of the work can and should be done online when assessing queer Muslim internet usage, in-person initiatives such as the LGBT Muslim Retreat or the Toronto Unity Mosque could increase the scope and possibilities for analysis of this particular population.

Significance and Contribution

Recently, Huffington Post reviewed a new PEW study that indicates Arab-Americans are more tolerant of homosexuality than evangelical Protestants in American (Kuruville 2017). This post was shared over a thousand times across various social media platforms, with scholars both celebrating and questioning this study. In his article for the Guardian, literary scholar Moustafa Bayoumi observes this new statistic as proof that the “homophobic Muslim” is nothing but a “bogeyman” used by populist leaders to create more hostility towards Muslims (2017). While I appreciate some aspects of Bayoumi’s comment, I want to read his reaction against activist Dawud Walid’s critique of PEW and of this new statistic concerning tolerance of homosexuality by American Muslims.³³

³³ Dawud Walid is the current Executive Director of the Michigan chapter of CAIR. CAIR refers to the organization, Council on American-Islamic Relations. This organization serves as an advocacy organization for American Muslims.

Walid recorded himself through Facebook to discuss his critiques of the recent PEW study that asserts American Muslims are more tolerant of homosexuality than evangelical Protestants. His critique stems from the fact that categorizing an American Muslim can be difficult, if not near impossible work, given that Muslim is used as a cultural identifier as well as a statement of faith (2017). Those who are identifying as Muslim may not be representative of all Muslims, and indeed, those who are tolerant of homosexuality, according to PEW, tended to be millennials, who often do not yet hold power in mosque structures or within their communities. Even if this tolerance has jumped as such a remarkable amount (thirty-nine percent to fifty-two percent in a six-year gap), there has not been an active stride made towards including queer Muslims specifically into public cultural and religious representation efforts (Kuruvilla 2017). Thus, if tolerance has risen among American Muslims, direct action is still lagging specifically for those who identify as queer within the Muslim community. Queer Muslim American communities are still finding their voice alongside straight Muslim Americans on the national stage, and even at home, are finding plenty of opposition in their families, mosques, and social communities.

My work addresses the spaces queer Muslims make use of when they are not granted access to mosque structures or community participation, despite the potential for future collaboration among non-queer Muslim communities and queer Muslims themselves. In lacking public, physical space where both identity groups are warmly received either in faith communities or non-Muslim queer communities, queer Muslims are forging forward with their own communities, online. In building a foundational space online, queer Muslims are able to form social ties that can then be taken offline. The internet provides agency to queer Muslims, who then can look at data presented by PEW and feel stronger in enacting change within their

physical communities. Queer Muslims are taking the imagined possibilities of their existence putting them into practice through these confidential public spaces, which set the tone for future action in terms of community integration into dominant Muslim spaces, or alongside non-Muslim queer spaces.

Further, as Blair Imani, a public Black queer Muslim activist stated at the Midwest Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, and Ally College Conference in 2018, “It is such a gift to be yourself publicly.” Blair Imani, who rose to prominence following her public coming out on Fox News’ program with Tucker Carlson, acknowledges the difficulty in navigating community spaces both as a queer person and as a queer person of faith. Her work in the Twitter hashtag, #QueerConfessions, where she publishes queer Muslim confessions sent to her personal Twitter account, further advances the critical nature of the internet as a platform in which to connect, share, and build resilience among identities that are often divided through dominant discourses. Blair also asserts the importance of online space for the queer Muslim community, often working through these digital platforms to further advocate for this particular community in the ways she has access to as an executive director for the organization, Equality for HER.

In reaffirming my findings through Blair Imani, I assert that the internet is a fluid space; a space for possibility, expansion, imagination, and transformation. It is a platform in which sociability, community formation, identity development and reconciliation can take place. Its usage can transform the ways in which queer Muslims are finding communities and spaces in person. I further assert that community formation and confidence in identity performance are the ultimate acts of resistance and resilience for a community such as queer Muslims, who are often excluded from dominant discourse in practice, if not in theory. As queer Muslims are forging connections online, they are advancing the idea that imagination work is critical to the project of

identity development, and the ways in which it can take place are not subject to only one geographical location. The creation of a confidential public through digital means is not simply a feature of boredom, or of random internet usage. Rather, it is a systematic involvement in one's personal and communal resistance, resilience, and success in spite of whether or not access exists.


APPENDIX

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: April 20, 2017

To: Alisa Perkins, Principal Investigator
Mariam Mustafa, Student Investigator for thesisFrom: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number 17-02-35

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Digital Resilience: Queer Muslim Community through Social Media" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study."*** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 19, 2018

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