



Desecularization of Instagram Users; Providing a Grounded Theory

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Received: Dec. 8, 2021; Accepted: Mar. 17, 2022

ABSTRACT

The main view of thinkers, with respect to the impact of cyberspace on religion, is that its continuous use would help lead to “secularization” of individuals and society. However, it seems that this process, under the influence of some interfering factors, has overturned and, in some cases, even strengthened the religious outlook of some users of the virtual space, a process which we call “desecularization”. In this article, the attempt is being made to examine what are the most critical factors that enhance desecularization in social networks, and how desecularized users resist those secularizing effects? This research has been done using a qualitative approach and based on grounded theory as well as the theoretical sampling method. The statistical population was undergraduate students from universities of Tehran who were religious and each of them having about a thousand followers on Instagram. Finally, 27 of them were interviewed through structured questionnaire. MAXQDA20 software was used to encode and analyze the data which were deduced in three stages of sub-and-main concepts. The 10 categories that were selected include: pre-network context of the individual; scientific protective armor; transnational knowledge; activism power of users; religious lifestyle; reminding and meditating about life's priorities for users; maturity in interactions; internal and external care; intellectual patience and to build a social network with indigenous characteristics. All these aforementioned characteristics are gathered under one title called “conscious struggle”.

Keywords: desecularization, Instagram, religiosity, social networks, secularization

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INTRODUCTION

Regarding the impact of cyberspace on religion, as said the main view of thinkers is that the continuous use of virtual space will lead to “secularization” of individuals and society. However, it seems this process has not only encountered snag due to some interfering factors but in some cases has encouraged users toward religion. We choose the term “desecularization” to describe this process. There are some proofs that the use of cyberspace does not necessarily lead to secularization of users, including an extensive activity of religious users in social domains. Among them, some have principle-based and even Salafist approaches to religiosity, extensive use of cyberspace by religious sources are aimed at imitation and missionaries and encouraging their followers to take maximum advantage of the space, and the existence of numerous channels and pages with religious themes, which often run spontaneously and sometimes have hundreds of thousands of visitors and followers.

PURPOSE

In this article, we do not intend to prove whether social networks cause secularization or desecularization of users, which we have discussed elsewhere (Sayyah Taheri, Entezaari & Zokaei, 2020). Instead, we want to examine what are the most critical factors that enhance desecularization in social network domains, and more precisely, in what ways and techniques do desecularized users resist those effects of social networks?

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research based on the grounded theory approach and the theoretical sampling method. The statistical population was undergraduate students from universities of Tehran who were religious and had about a thousand followers on Instagram. At the end of interview, each of them was asked to introduce active people with an appropriate number of followers and with characteristics that are preferably different from the interviewee (in terms of gender, the field of study, political orientation, and how to appear on Instagram).

MAXQDA20, the qualitative data analysis software, was used to encode and analyze the data. All interviews were transcribed and entered into the software. The evaluation unit was considered as a paragraph, and one or two free (open) codes were assigned to each paragraph. The number of codes obtained in this step (based on software count) is equal to 1741 codes, which are classified into 271 concepts. After the theoretical saturation, interviews were stopped (Zokaei, 2002, 51).

FINDINGS

Data were deduced in two stages of sub-concept and main concept. Eventually, these items were placed in a more abstract form, and among them, ten categories

were selected. These ten categories, drawn in the form of a model and represent the influential factors in desecularization, are:

First, desecularization does not necessarily start from a moment or place, and one cannot be indifferent to the background of users. Thus, only a period cannot be considered as a basis and hence, it is essential to pay attention to the pre-network context of the individual.

Second, despite the existence of positive and appropriate content, it seems the dominant content in foreign social networks and Instagram, which is the subject of our research, is harmful (in various forms of secular content, religious doubts, and immoral images). Most of the interviewees in our study had a negative evaluation of Instagram content overall. Since it is not possible to form beliefs in the context and within the network, this should preferably be done before entering social networks. People should join the environment of Instagram and other social networks with a scientific protective armor.

Third, having accurate knowledge of the environment, in which, actors' engaging in internet activity is essential. That is, who does produce and manage this environment and media-communication software product? Having transnational knowledge and information on the goals of network operators and developers is necessary.

Fourth, despite the possibility of management, many still believe in the activism power of users in these networks. At the lowest level, because of their religious-revolutionary conscientiousness, the users see their presence in this environment as a duty to save the people, or at least to dominate their narrative of political events. Some achieve small victories in this environment, convince people, have successful civic and charitable activities, and create an emotional and spiritual atmosphere. These successes motivate them to be more active in the network.

Fifth, the need to choose a religious lifestyle: In general, adherence to non-Western fashion and lifestyle requires self-consciousness and its effects on religion. This self-consciousness, of course, does not exist in many people and must be transmitted to them through education or informal learning methods. If this is done collectively and in the form of organizations in the network, its impact would be much more significant.

Sixth, due to their timelessness and attractive features, social networks create intense dependency and engagement for individuals. This dependence, known as "addiction" in psychology, causes the management of a person's life and spiritual plans to get out of control and not to be able to create a balance between them. As a result, the importance of religion in a person's life would be gradually diminished. To prevent immersion in the social network, the user must continuously warn



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himself and even punish himself if necessary. The purpose of all this is to remind and meditate about the priorities in life, both outside and inside the network (through reminding the reason for presence).

Seventh, interactivity is an integral part of social networks. One aspect of being interactive is that each person who shares a post or content is exposed to others who either approve or disapprove of him based on own liking, commenting, and resharing. That is, the social network regulates the behavior of people through likes and instructs them on where to go and how to be present. Liking creates emotional attachment, making it difficult for a person to share topics and content that receive fewer likes. Nevertheless, in the case of self-consciousness, the person gradually grows and “matures in the interaction”, which reduces the importance of external approval, and the user passes the stage of asking for like.

Eighth, Instagram dramatically facilitates communication between the opposite sexes. It is a point made by almost all of our interviewees. In terms of finding new people, different methods of communication, and excuses for communication in the form of stories and posts, and in terms of hiding the answer to stories in the private environment, Instagram is all a better platform for communication with the opposite sex compared to Telegram and Twitter. Therefore, desecularized users provide internal and external care in this environment.

Ninth, one of the characteristics of social networks is the rapid, continuous, and widespread dissemination of news and content. It is called “information overload.” The amount of information that is produced and reshared on the networks is so large that the user does not have the opportunity to read all of them accurately. Since understanding many religious concepts requires reflection, this feature of the network has a religious impact. For this reason, the most crucial strategy in dealing with the constant bombardment of information is contemplation and “intellectual patience,” whether in resharing content or acknowledging them.

Tenth, the vital point that some respondents point out is that many of the problems of current social networks are related to the design, and unless there is a change in the basics and design of the social network, some problems remain to exist. Therefore, the last strategy is to build a social network with indigenous characteristics that is in maximum harmony with religion.

CONCLUSION

All these characteristics are gathered in “conscious struggle.” It is a being and living of a person who first of all considers himself involved in a broad and continuous struggle (both in moral and military senses), and he has to do much work (some of the topics of which appeared in research categories) to succeed. Secondly, consciousness means an incisive understanding of oneself, phenomenon (especially cyberspace), purpose, and the way to achieve it.

NOVELTY

There are discussions about the role of social networks in religiosity and users' behavior toward religion in the society, and the question is whether online social networks make their users secular or not? So far, no study has focused on this subject independently, although being mentioned within some researches but without providing any reasons against or behalf of that. This article tries to provide at least 10 new arguments for the desecularization in Instagram.



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