

Online Ultra-Orthodox Religious Communities as a Third Space: A Netnographic Study

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This research applies a netnographic approach to explore the extent to which online communities function as a third space that supports a networked religion. Five months of observation at a leading online ultra-Orthodox Jewish forum revealed four chief characteristics: religious–secular discussion—the forum served as a platform for religious discourse as well as a sphere for discussing a wide range of subjects unrelated to religion; identity game—members constantly played two types of identity games: personal and group; intense activity—the forum was characterized by rather intense activity patterns; and a unique religious expressiveness—this was reflected in textual and visual representations and exhibited in online debates. Findings indicate that the forum offers its members a third space of digital religion that is hybrid in any possible sense and reinforces a lively networked religion. While it aims at enabling serious discussion of religious matters, it also serves members as a social sphere in which they can communicate about extrareligious issues; express their personalities, skills and opinions; and even play with their anonymous peers.

Keywords: Judaism, netnography, networked religion, online communities, spirituality, third space

Internet use by religious and spiritual communities has increased over the past few years (Campbell, 2011, 2015). Studies examining this phenomenon explore a broad range of issues, such as social changes following the transition to computer-mediated communication, impact on theological thought and religious–spiritual views of online spaces (Bunt, 2000; Campbell, 2010, 2011, 2015; Cheong & Poon, 2009; Cowan, 2005; Helland, 2007; Howard, 2000; Taylor, 2003). Such studies suggest that the Internet offers a new religious and spiritual environment, providing a valuable prism for observation of numerous processes occurring in the networked society. Nevertheless, whereas several online religious communities have been the focus of in-depth examinations (Cheong, 2013; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014; Larsen, 2001; Roof, 2007), online communities of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish sector were hardly explored in research.

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Ultra-Orthodox Judaism is a unique religious sector characterized by strict patterns of behavior, both off-line and online. Although attitudes toward the Internet in this extremely conservative society range from ambivalence to resistance, the percentage of Internet users within this sector is growing rapidly (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Israel Internet Association, 2017; Rotem, 2014). Exploring the online activity of the ultra-Orthodox audience may thus enhance our understanding of online religious communities and yield new insights about changes in a society constituting an enclave culture (Caplan, 2007).

Relying on the theoretical construct of third space of digital religion (Echchaibi, 2014; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014), this case study aimed at exploring the extent to which online communities function as a third space that supports a networked ultra-Orthodox Jewish religion by addressing three distinct yet interrelated questions. The first explores the topics community members discuss, the second concerns the manner in which they present themselves in the community, and the third relates to their online participation patterns. Addressing these questions provided more knowledge of the roles online communities play in members' lives as well as their in-between quality as a social space.

Literature Review

The concept of the digital religion stands at the heart of many studies dealing with the relationship between culture, society, and new technologies. The pioneering researcher in the field, Stephen O'Leary, argued 20 years ago that the Internet would serve as a sacred space for religious people and lead to far-reaching changes in religious belief, faith, and spiritual life (O'Leary, 1996). Since then, a corpus of research has supported his argument by pointing out significant changes in religious power, community, identity, and ceremonies (Brasher, 2001; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Hall, 1997). The Internet allows users to undergo new spiritual and religious experiences that they perceive as enabling expression and identity formation as well as spiritual and social support (Cobb, 1998; Ess, Kawabata, & Kurosaki, 2007).

The inquiry into online religious communities started at the beginning of the millennium with the publication of findings about communities operating within religious contexts. For example, Bunt (2000) found that religious Muslims use their online communities for public and private religious practice, Taylor (2003) described spiritual activity in an online Buddhist community, and Larsen (2001) reported that online Christian communities strengthen faith and a sense of belonging to the church. Research also showed that online religious communities dispel the naïveté and the lack of criticism characterizing religious cultures (Brasher, 2001), leading to greater flexibility in the construction of religious identity (Lövheim, 2004), yet constituting a supplement rather than a substitute for traditional communities (Fuchs, 2008; Young, 2004).

Summarizing insights from her own research and that of others, Campbell (2010, 2011, 2012) suggested the concept of networked religion as a means of encapsulating how religions function online. This theoretical framework complements the networked society discourse, according to which social relations are increasingly decentralized yet interconnected and often supported by a social-technical infrastructure (Castells, 2000). Central to the idea of networked religion is the emergence of religious practice within a distinctive social sphere, comprising both online and off-line networked interactions. Instead

of living in a single, static religious community, "people in contemporary society live in religious social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized" (Campbell, 2012, p. 71).

The networked religion framework portrays five key traits characterizing online religions (Campbell, 2010, 2012). First, members of networked religions are part of networked communities that operate within online contexts as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. Second, they create and perform storied identities through interactions and texts online and off-line alike. Third, such religions are characterized by shifting authority, as they create a new class of online experts and offer believers the opportunity to present views that differ from the norm, sometimes to the extent of challenging traditional sources of authority. The fourth feature is convergent practice, as networked religions combine traditional and new sources, and the fifth is multisite reality, as the online communities are strongly associated with members' off-line lifestyles by supporting, expanding, and becoming an integral part of their ceremonial narrative.

Campbell's notions were further developed by Hoover and Echchaibi (2014), who suggested that when lived religious practice and digital culture meet, a third space emerges. Relying on the concept of third space (i.e., social surroundings separate from both home and work environments), they described the third space as a nonphysical location that is alternative, abstract, and common and a conceptual expanse. For them, digital religion is closely linked to the emergence of hybrid, in-between digital spaces of religious practice, defined as "complex text of social practice, a site of negotiated religious praxis, which resists totalizing and monologic frames of reference and produces its own spiritual repertoire, its own discursive logic, and its own aesthetics of persuasion" (Echchaibi, 2014, para. 4). They also described the quality of "in-between-ness" (e.g., between private and public, authority and autonomy, local and global) as fundamental to third spaces of digital religion.

According to Hoover and Echchaibi (2014), the third spaces of digital religion produce new religious and spiritual places and thus may serve as an interpretive tool to highlight the thickening of religious experiences. Providing in-depth understanding of digital religious and spiritual practices as part of everyday life, they may also point at the outcomes of having potentially contesting sites and assist in visualizing the mobility of the contemporary religion. Accordingly, using the concept in a series of case studies may help explaining how religions are practiced and religious meanings are generated in the new media environment (Echchaibi, 2014).

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and the New Media

Online activity has been observed in different religions around the globe (Cheong, 2013), including ultra-Orthodox Jewish society. This society is characterized by rejection of modern secular¹ culture and includes a range of factions differing in religious ideologies, practice and lifestyles as well as the extent of isolation from the surrounding culture in which they live. Accordingly, they vary considerably in terms of new media use because of the differential instructions expressed by their spiritual leaders.

¹ The term *secular* is used in this article to describe behaviors, knowledge, and sensibilities that are not connected with religious or spiritual matters.

While some ultra-Orthodox rabbis strictly forbid Internet use, others allow it only under rigorously controlled conditions (e.g., solely for work purposes). Exposure to pornography, blasphemy, gossip, and mingling of the sexes—all prohibited by religious codex—promote this reluctance (Lev-On & Neria Ben-Shahar, 2011). Despite these concerns and restrictions, Internet use is becoming increasingly common in ultra-Orthodox Jewish society, with almost 50% of this sector reporting at least some involvement in the digital world (Israel Internet Association, 2017; Mann & Lev-On, 2014; Rotem, 2014).

Online activity among ultra-Orthodox Jewish individuals was explored in several studies. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) noted manifestations of religious fundamentalism as a form of ultra-Orthodox interaction with the Internet. Livio and Tannenboim-Weinblatt (2007) reported tensions experienced by ultra-Orthodox women between online activity and rabbinic prohibitions. Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (2009) examined attitudes toward the Internet by observing online communities for ultra-Orthodox Jewish women. And Lev-On and Neria Ben-Shahar (2011) conducted similar research through an online survey of community female members.

Some of the abovementioned studies (e.g., Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, 2009) indicated that the most popular activity among ultra-Orthodox Jewish Internet users is participation in forums that target their community. Campbell and Golan (2011) found that the webmasters of these unique ultra-Orthodox forums are motivated by negotiation of the core beliefs and constraints of their off-line communities. These researchers also reported that control, layering, and guiding are three unique strategies used by community administrators to manage potential tensions among members (Golan & Campbell, 2015). Moreover, Cohen (2013) showed that the use of ultra-Orthodox social networks violates religious rules of behavior, by allowing gossip and free interaction between men and women, for example.

These studies suggest that the online ultra-Orthodox Jewish forums, like other new mediated forms of communication, pose various moral challenges to their users (Campbell, 2015). It is unclear, however, how members of these forums perceive and use them and whether participation strengthens or challenges core beliefs, norms, and relations. Focusing on one of the most popular online ultra-Orthodox Jewish forums and examining the topics discussed and members' self-representations and online behavior, the this study aimed at completing some of these gaps in the body of knowledge.

Method

The study combined two complementary methodologies: case study and netnography. The latter method is based on observations of computer-mediated communication in online networks and communities (Kozinets, 2015). Adapting many traditional ethnographic research techniques, netnography is distinguishable from traditional approaches by its primary reliance on published texts and archives, its examination of a unique form of private interactions that take place in a public space, and its observation of the behavior of particular interacting people who themselves remain unobservable. Furthermore, netnographic studies may be purely observational, wherein the researcher is a specialized type of lurker who witnesses online communication without participating therein (Kozinets, 2010). While this method prevents researchers from probing or conducting member checks, it provides very rich and authentic data

that remains unaffected by the presence of researchers (Beaulieu, 2004), allowing them to update their perceptions in accordance with new information obtained during the study (Hine, 2008).

Data Collection

Every month there are approximately 7 million entries to websites that specifically target ultra-Orthodox Jewish individuals (Israel Internet Association, 2017). Leading websites for this audience are Shturem.nt, JDN, Kooker, COL, Haredim10, Kol-Chai, Kol-Barama, Stybel, Kol-Hazman, and especially the two most visited forums, Behadrei Haredim and Kikar HaShabbat (Katz, 2012; Paz, Almog, & Almog, 2008).

The case study chosen for this study was the popular forum Behadrei Haredim (a Hebrew play on words, transposing letters in the expression *behadrei hadarim* [in the privacy of one's room] so that it reads "in the rooms of the ultra-Orthodox"). This forum was selected according to the overlapping criteria of relevance to the research questions, activity and interactivity (frequent and constant communication), substance and critical mass of participants, heterogeneity, data richness, and experiential nature (Kozinets, 2015). Many community members consider this forum their virtual home (Paz et al., 2008). Each visit lasts an average of 16.5 minutes, and many of the visits are conducted via a friendly mobile application (Israel Internet Association, 2017).

Founded in 2002, Behadrei Haredim was built, structured, and organized specifically for the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Although the forum's contents can be read by anyone, users who wish to become full members with posting privileges are required to fill out an online registration form that is subject to approval by the forum administrators. This filtering process ensures increased safety and privacy of the online discussions (Golan & Campbell, 2015). Currently, Behadrei Haredim has thousands of members, men and women of all ages, ethnic groups, occupations, and places of residence and belonging to all streams of the orthodox society (Israel Internet Association, 2017). Therefore, the forum well represents the ultra-Orthodox audience.

Data were gathered over a five-month period, with three observations of online discourse per week and repeated retrieval of data via the forum's archive. Each observation explored the 50 most recent threads (discussions), for a weekly total of 150 threads, eventually forming a corpus of 3,000 (about 15,000 posts). The observations were recorded according to a daily protocol including information about each discussion's content and participants, their nicknames and personal information (e.g., age, residence, occupation, personal signature), date and time of posting, and number of comments and views. Recording was accompanied by generation of extensive memos regarding the dynamics and interactions among participants.

Data Analysis

This study followed the Action Implicative Discourse Analysis (AIDA) method (Tracy, 2002), which is particularly suitable for netnographic studies exploring discourse cultures and proved useful in previous studies of online religious communities (e.g., Neuman & Levi, 2003). This method is based on a three-level encoding process: Identifying a given communication situation, clarifying discourse strategies

used by writers, and evaluating the ideals and principles shaping their reactions. Accordingly, analysis included diagnosing how forum members presented themselves, their arguments, and the discourse means they used; linking among verbal texts and visual representations; the discussions' context; and the participants' characteristics. Data were collected and analyzed simultaneously during the observation period. This process ended when saturation was detected (i.e., when new data did not appear to add new insights or knowledge; Tracy, 2002).

Ethical Issues

The authors' institutional ethics committee discussed and approved the study. As Behadrei Haredim is a public forum and its contents are accessible to all, and because the community members use anonymous usernames (nicknames), this study does not violate participants' privacy. Nonetheless, efforts were made to conceal any possible identifying information in this report. For example, when relating to discussions that included greetings or prayers for the health of real individuals, all names were replaced with pseudonyms.

The fact that forum members mainly used the Hebrew language whereas this article was written in English created numerous dilemmas related to translating members' nicknames and quoted posts. To solve this, the authors hired an experienced professional translator who was highly familiar with the ultra-Orthodox culture. His work was done in full collaboration with the authors by discussing and negotiating the translation precision and adherence to origin. In addition, numerous explanations were added in the text to clarify the meaning of various terms to readers who are not familiar with the ultra-Orthodox society. Still, one must approach the translations presented in the findings section with caution, as it cannot fully convey the messages and meanings transmitted through the originals expressions.

Findings

Analysis led to identification of four principal characteristics of the online ultra-Orthodox Jewish community: religious–secular discussion, identity games, intense activity, and unique religious expressiveness.

Religious–Secular Discussion

The forum served as a platform for religious discourse and a sphere for discussion of a wide range of topics unrelated to religion. Overall, nine principal topics were identified: Religious discussions included religious law and ultra-Orthodox identity; secular discussions included current affairs, politics, leisure, health, and technical matters. Between these two extremes, hybrid discussions related to cycle of life and struggles between Jewish *courtyards* (communities) incorporated secular and religious matters. Regardless of the discussion topic, all threads were highly relevant to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle.

Most religious discussions dealt with religious law, including clarification of Jewish philosophy and rules, biblical studies, rabbinic wisdom, and timely information on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. An example request for clarification is, "Why do worshippers point their little finger at the Torah scroll when it is held aloft [during synagogue services]?" In this case, the poster asked to understand the spiritual

symbolism of a common habit. Other deliberations related to the ultra-Orthodox identity. For example, a lively discussion was initiated by the question, "What are the criteria for being ultra-Orthodox? What makes one an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man?" One community member replied,

A Haredi [ultra-Orthodox] is a man who listens to his rabbi, whose children are studying religious subjects without secular studies, who adheres to a strict dress code, and, most importantly, who does not raise provocative questions that challenge the ultra-Orthodox way of life!!!!

The secular discussions included updates, reviews and criticism of events, and people and places related to politics and current affairs. Some discussions were highly relevant to the ultra-Orthodox audience, such as those concerning possible recruitment of young ultra-Orthodox men to the Israel Defense Forces, whereas others were of a general nature, including a debate on tensions between political parties and government ministers. Many real-time reports were observed as well, such as, "It was just announced that Tnuva [a leading Israeli dairy products company] was sold to a Chinese-owned firm," and "An accident on Route 1 near Latrun [a central junction near Jerusalem]."

Other secular discussions referred to leisure in general and online leisure in particular. This topic included conversations about off-line leisure activities (e.g., tourism, music, shows, shopping, cooking) as well as information sharing of online movies and games, YouTube clips, digital images, and Photoshop tips. Both discussions were adapted to the limitations and characteristics of the ultra-Orthodox sector. For example, when one member recommended family recreation at the beach, he emphasized the "gender-separated beaches." Similarly, when someone asked about a cooking course, he stressed, "Completely separate, of course."

Discussions on physical and mental health consisted of information and advice about diseases, physicians, treatments, health maintenance organizations, and prayers for healing; for example, "Urgent! Have mercy and pray for the couple seriously injured in a car accident, Yosef ben Malka and his daughter Rachel [pseudonyms]: God bless you." Even the discussions of technical matters reflected ultra-Orthodox context. For example, when one member wrote, "Help!!! Ants have settled in our house!! Does anyone have a solution?" the immediate reactions were, "Is it permissible to kill ants [according to Jewish law]?" and "What does one do when it happens on the Sabbath or holidays [on which activity of this kind is forbidden]?"

The hybrid religious–secular discussions on struggles between Jewish courtyards reflected extreme tension and rifts between ultra-Orthodox factions and leaders. For example, "Beatings and arrests at the funeral of Rebbe [a Hasidic religious leader] Yitzhak Cohen [pseudonym] God rest his pious soul." Circle of life discussions, by contrast, include elements of closeness and solidarity among community, such as, "Congratulations to Moshe Levi [a known ultra-Orthodox politician, pseudonym] on the birth of his daughter. May he and his wife be blessed to raise her for Torah [religious study], marriage, and good deeds [conventional blessing expressed to parents of newborns]."

The variety of discussion topics presented indicates that although forum members live in a closed ultra-Orthodox community, they are well aware of the secular world around them. Furthermore, they suggest that the forum is used for two purposes: On the one hand, it serves as a religious community in every respect, where one may discuss Jewish observance, clarify spiritual issues, and reinforce elements of solidarity and mutual support. On the other hand, it constitutes a platform for the exchange of information and opinions on overtly extrareligious matters.

Identity Games

Community members constantly played two types of identity games: personal and group. The personal identity games included selection of nicknames, display of information in personal profiles, and formulation of mottos (personal signatures) using various textual and visual forms, some revealing details of members' real identities and others concealing them. Some members used neutral online nicknames, such as Neurologist, asi_414, rrafi, Ytzhak57, and Tammy99, but the majority were derived from ultra-Orthodox jargon Yiddish (the historical language of the Jewish diaspora in Central and Eastern Europe), or both. Example of the latter include *Gornisht* (Yiddish: Nothing), *Vas_hartzic?* (Yiddish: What's up?), *Ach-tov-vachessed* (Hebrew: Surely goodness and mercy [Psalms 23:6]), and *Ira_shmaim* (Hebrew: God-fearing).

In the registration process, community members were asked to fill out personal profiles detailing date of birth, occupation, place of residence, and so on. Most authentic particulars remained confidential, as members tended to provide responses that were limited ("???", "0," "—," "not telling," "A.R." [abbreviations], or simply "confidential"), fictitious (made-up or impossible information, e.g., "I am 99," "114," and "born in 1900"), or quintessential (often provided with respect to place of residence, such as "Jerusalem," "Or Haganuz [locality in northern Israel]," and "Brooklyn," all of which have large ultra-Orthodox communities). Certain members did supply apparently true responses regarding their occupations, such as teacher, computer specialist, consultant, *avrekh* (Talmudic scholar), and housewife.

More detailed answers were observed in member mottos, as reflected in *signature* and *just about me*—two categories in which participants augment their personal profiles with worldviews or meaningful statements, thereby incidentally revealing more information about themselves. These statements included quotes from the Bible, expressions common in the ultra-Orthodox sector, or messages to the community, such as "Do not tell God how big your troubles are; tell your troubles how big God is."

Many group identity games were observed as well, in which members attempted to reveal the identity of other participants, to some extent, by speculating about "Who's behind that nick?" These discussions tended to be vibrant and extensive, and the participants appeared genuinely curious about each other's true identities. For example, one cracking game started with the following post:

It may be very interesting to know who's hiding behind each and every nickname. Obviously we will never know, but we can imagine!!! How about trying to visualize each one, guessing the sector to which he/she belongs, with all due caution and without exaggeration, of course.

In response, one participant wrote:

Well, for starters, I would like to describe the nick *Juke*. One who writes about the weather has to be around 50 years old; he already has married children, lives in Betar, is about 1.75 m. tall and weighs 90 kg., bearded, with black plastic glasses. I'm guessing he is married with five, educated, and a hiking enthusiast.

Another community member joined the game and wrote, "I imagine she is a housewife, neither thin nor fat, a little short, temperamental and playful." Another responded "I think she is 25–30, modern Orthodox, who has a flex time job requiring computer access and wears a brown shoulder-length wig [all ultra-Orthodox women cover their hair; most wear wigs]."

Some group cracking games focused on guessing profession, place of residence, or age. Another type of game concentrated on multiple identities, in which participants tried to detect members who used more than one nickname. In one such game, a suspect responded,

There are some "Sherlock Holmes" specializing in identifying my multiple nicknames. . . . So far, my suspected nicknames are *Balkol*, *Simcha_rif*, *Organist*, *Zuzovsky*, *Bilti_kari* [Unreadable], *Liad_hsndak* [Near the Godfather], *Lebchiratchem* [For Your Selection], *Hchoter laemet* [Striving for Truth], and *Devrei_shalom* [Words of Peace]. If you are able to find a few more, bless you! *Menhashora* [Rank and File] will give you *Maser_galt* [Yiddish: tithe money].

Still another type of game attempted to expose men who presented themselves as women and vice versa; for example,

I can prove that *Aznaiim_lacotel* [Listeners Are Everywhere] and *Neurologist* are *Aotha_achat* [The Same (another nickname)], and refer to a distinctly masculine figure who constantly struggles to prove he is a woman and but keeps failing. Whoever thinks I'm delirious is welcome to raise his hand.

While one might expect an online ultra-Orthodox community to focus on serious discussions, these identity games show that participants demonstrate a high level of playfulness that may sometimes compromise the complete and essential anonymity offered by cyberspace. Some relative anonymity was retained, however, along with the exchange of specific messages concerning members' personalities, beliefs, and lifestyles.

Intense Activity

Online activity patterns reveal that the community is characterized by rather intense activity in terms of quantity, timing, speed, and duration, primarily reflected in the quantity of discussions, comments and views. More than 50 active discussions and thousands of views per day were observed during the study period. For example, 6,076 participants viewed the discussion "Funeral of Rebbe

Rabinovitz [pseudonym], of blessed memory," and 3,921 participants viewed "Malaysian plane crash." Community members appeared impressed when discussions attracted thousands of views, as evident in a comment regarding a discussion on WhatsApp (a mobile phone application): "We set a new record at the forum—2,000 comments and 5,367,000 views."

Another major finding related to activity timing. Community members were active 24 hours a day, and extensive activity was observed even during the night. In addition, although it was a religious community, active only six days a week (computer use is forbidden on the Sabbath—just before sunset on Friday to just after sunset on Saturday), a significant volume of interactions took place during the moments immediately before and after the Sabbath. Sometimes members even posted after the official time for inception of the Sabbath (candle-lighting time) or before it was officially over (*havdala* [separation] ceremony time).

Activity also varied in terms of duration and speed. There was a rather prolonged asynchronous communication, reflected in laidback discussions extending over several days, months, and even years. For example, the "Cartoons and political jokes" discussion lasted for more than six months and accounted for 1,183 comments and 1,288,909 views by the end of the study, and "Free online programs" lasted nine years, yielding 3,088 responses and 2,354,455 views by the end of the study.

Yet there were also almost synchronous discussions, indicating the simultaneous online presence of the forum members. One example is a thread on a search for an ultra-Orthodox family lost during a trip to southern Israel. The discussion was almost synchronous, as comments were posted nearly every minute. At 6 p.m., *Mitnadned* (Swinging) wrote, "Forces searching the river. The search is being carried out with the assistance of drones." Two minutes later, *Mabat_milmalh* (View From Above) asked, "Rescued or not?" Updates, speculations, and advice lasted until 12:15 a.m., when *Ytzhak57* announced, "Good news. We were just informed that the family was found safely, thank God."

All of these examples indicate that Behadrei Haredim is a highly active online community, whose members find interest not only in writing and reading posts but also in creating human interaction through screen activity. The active nighttime discussions and the high level of activity just before and after the Sabbath and holidays suggest that these ultra-Orthodox individuals long for open, accessible, and updated communication outside their immediate social environment—an option that only became possible nowadays thanks to the digital space.

Unique Ultra-Orthodox Expressiveness

Another major finding demonstrated unique expressiveness among the ultra-Orthodox, reflected in textual and visual representations and exhibited in both neutral and emotionally loaded online debates. Participants used a unique colloquial dialect, immersed in discourse, grammar, semantics, acronyms, and jargon phrases from the ultra-Orthodox world. For example, *Hanavii_bashaar* (The Prophet at the Gate) used the forum to find a person who lost a jacket and a hat at a ski resort in northern Israel. It was not only the poster's nickname that pointed to his religiosity. The post content included many ultra-Orthodox phrases, such as, "Returning a lost object" (phraseology taken verbatim from compendia of Jewish

religious law), "Found a black jacket and a hat" (typically ultra-Orthodox garments), and "It can be retrieved according to identifying signs" (as mandated by Jewish religious law).

The community's unique style was also reflected in various visual cues—photos, videos, cartoons, and Photoshopped images—that included many ultra-Orthodox elements (e.g., women's wigs and headgear; men's black hats, jackets, and other garments; synagogues; religious gatherings; and ritual objects). Visual representations of people consisted primarily of photographs of men; when women were included, a proper warning was attached: "Caution, Women!!!" Photos presented images such as an ultra-Orthodox bride and groom on their wedding day, Hasidim (an ultra-Orthodox Jewish faction) praying in Jerusalem, and religious celebrations such as the *hilula* of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (an annual celebration near the tomb of a noted Talmudic sage).

Unique ultra-Orthodox expressiveness was maintained even in emotionally loaded online debates. Many messages included mutual criticism, that sometimes deteriorated to blatant, slanderous discourse, such as, "He is totally crazy and completely freaked out," "I protest such revulsion," "Swindlers, crooks, help!" "You are mindless and opinionless," and "You're a small and miserable liar." It was noticeable, however, that members were seeking solidarity and social acceptance in accordance with biblical commandments concerning human behavior. Such solidarity was reflected in positive verbal cues, such as, "Thank you so much. It is illuminating and enlightening," and "Again you proved that the community companions are the best. There's always someone with good advice and guidance."

It should be noted, however, that besides using unique ultra-Orthodox jargon, participants also expressed themselves extensively in the Internet paralanguage, including icons and emoticons (smileys and the like), as well as common textual style, such as favoring abbreviations, integrating foreign text, highlighting final letters, and using multiple punctuation marks (especially exclamation points), as in "Big like," "Sssshit, I wasted the whole morning," "Wow! Huge!!!! Where can I buy it???" and "Magnificentttttt!! Thank God."

These findings indicate that the ultra-Orthodox community is characterized by a unique and rather diverse expressiveness that is manifested not only on an emotional level, with positive and negative messages, but also stylistically, through textual and visual representations. Like the discussion topics themselves, this expressiveness combined the religious and the secular and reflected a high degree of awareness of the Western world in general and the cyber world in particular.

Discussion

The research method applied in this study and the extensive quantity of data gathered enabled a thorough description of the qualities of a leading ultra-Orthodox online community and provided an initial understanding of the roles such communities play in their members' lives. The findings indicated that the community indeed facilitated serious discussions of religious topics, conflicts, and quandaries, thus offering members a safe space to enhance their understanding of Jewish law, challenge and strengthen their religious identity, and enjoy spiritual enrichment. Simultaneously, however, the community played a rather different, secular role. It provided members with a social sphere in which they could chat about

nonreligious issues; express their personalities, skills, and opinions; and even play games with their anonymous online peers.

Which Topics Do Community Members Discuss?

The study revealed a religious–secular discussion that comprised nine major topics: Some purely religious, some entirely secular, and the remainder combinations thereof. This finding clearly complies with the definition of convergent practice in networked religions (Campbell, 2010, 2011, 2012). On the one hand, the online ultrareligious community constitutes a study group for people interested in expanding their understanding of Jewish law and tradition and seek to discuss essential matters related to their religious identity. On the other hand, it is also a public platform for discussions of current affairs, politics, recreational endeavors, health concerns, and technical matters. This convergence reinforces previous arguments regarding the flexibility of online religious communities and their conversational community role (Lövheim, 2004). Apparently, community members are receptive to this dual function and appear to welcome the opportunity to carry on their religion-oriented lives in a custom-made midspace tailored to their spiritual and social interests and needs.

How Do Members Present Themselves?

Gender was among the most noticeable aspects of the games. Many members presented themselves as men, but it became clear that the reported gender was not necessarily true, and that participation in online discussions was somewhat liminal in terms of religious prohibitions regarding communication with the opposite sex. To some extent, the online community allowed its members to challenge established tenets in Jewish law and rebel against traditional gender norms—an observation consistent with previous arguments regarding the role of online religious communities in processes of negotiation with core beliefs and constraints (Campbell, 2015; Campbell & Golan, 2011; Cohen, 2013). Moreover, the opportunity for ultra-Orthodox men and women to converse without barriers also appeared to add some magic and excitement to the overall participation experience.

What Characterizes Members' Online Participation Patterns?

The findings indicated intense activity and unique participation patterns. The combination of scale of activity, discussion length, reaction timing, and speed proved that community members were highly interested in and motivated toward involvement in online religious social life and extended discussion of various matters under the cloak of anonymity. The lively nature of this activity parallels two properties of online recreation defined by Nimrod and Adoni (2012)—selective timing and assimilation. The animated discussions and the often unconventional times at which they took place reflected a leisure experience, allowing participants to cut themselves off from the off-line social milieu surrounding them. Their prior common religious background and external context, however, probably had some influence on the varying timing patterns.

Another important finding underscored a unique ultra-Orthodox expressiveness, exhibited through highly articulated textual and visual forms that combined traditional and modern expressions and

that was reflected in statements of solidarity and criticism as well as in somewhat aggressive discussions. This expressiveness, as well as the topics discussed, may be a result of the multisite reality of networked religions (Campbell, 2010, 2011, 2012). As members were active in various off-line and online environments, they created a hybrid community language with unique content and style, including a multitude of linguistic and visual references and numerous quotations from canonic Jewish sources. This pattern was similar to the one noted by Caplan (2007) in his study of printed ultra-Orthodox Jewish media and may be considered a "defense mechanism" (Sivan, 1991, p. 45) preventing any outsider who reads members' comments from fully understanding what is actually happening in the community.

In conclusion, all four characteristics revealed in this study indicate that the online ultra-Orthodox Jewish forum provide members with a third space of digital religion (Echchaibi, 2014; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014) that is hybrid, or in-between, in any possible sense. The topics discussed and the language used are in between the religious and the secular, the manners in which members present themselves are in between the anonymized and the disclosed, and community dynamics range between the serious and the playful. Overall, this third space highly supports a networked ultra-Orthodox Jewish religion by offering members an experiential environment that engenders community spirit and unity while allowing members to live according to their personal religious and spiritual choices.

Similar to other third spaces of digital religion (e.g., Echchaibi, 2014), the Behadrei Haredim community informs us of new language, meanings, identities, and religious practices. A comparison between the various case studies shows that the online religious and ethnic groups, including the Jewish ultra-Orthodox society, produce their own spiritual repertoires, religious experiences, and social behavior within the online sphere.

This community manifests all key traits characterizing networked religions (Campbell, 2010, 2011, 2012). Its members are part of a networked community with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment, they create and perform storied identities through identity games, and they even somewhat challenge authority (e.g., by interacting with the opposite gender). In addition, the topics members discuss clearly reflect convergent practice combining traditional and new sources, and, overall, their online activity suggests a multisite reality that is strongly associated with their off-line lifestyles.

In contrast to other online religious communities, Behadrei Haredim does not constitute the focus for an online spiritual pilgrimage (Helland, 2008). Furthermore, it contains no online religious ceremonies, and a discussion of online synagogues or digital fulfillment of commandments would be entirely irrelevant. Nevertheless, the online ultra-Orthodox Jewish community provides meaningful public discussion of Jewish law, tradition, religion, faith, identity, and lifestyle. Like other online religious communities (Fuchs, 2008; Young, 2004), it does not appear to constitute an alternative to its off-line counterpart, but serves chiefly as a supplemental religious social sphere that enriches members' lives.

Limitations and Guidelines for Future Research

This case study was innovative in two respects. Theoretically, it identified four core characteristics suggesting a dual role (both religious and recreational) and expanded the corpus of knowledge available

regarding networked religions. Empirically, it was the first to use netnography to explore the online activity of a highly conservative Jewish sector, a society constituting an enclave culture (Caplan, 2007). Notwithstanding its advantages, netnography has certain inherent limitations because it focuses on specific communities. Whereas it is reasonable to claim that Behadrei Haredim constitutes a sound representative example of online ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, generalization is inevitably limited. Furthermore, as the study was purely observational, it cannot assess community members' perceptions and experiences.

To present a broader and more comprehensive ethnographic picture, future research should use netnography to explore the characteristics of other online ultra-Orthodox communities—both Jewish (e.g., Kikar HaShabbat) and of other religions—to clarify whether the dual role revealed here is a common feature of such communities. Additional research should include in-depth interviews with community members to explore how they perceive and experience the third space provided by the communities and the effects participation has on their belief, relations, and well-being. Online surveys with community members may complete such interviews by enabling some generalizations as well comparisons between different types of users, including active posters and passive followers (lurkers), frequent and occasional visitors, men and women, members who use computers versus users of the mobile application, and so on. Last, comparing online religious communities based on online forums with communities that apply different platforms (e.g., Facebook or WhatsApp) may shed light on the effects the technology itself has on community characteristics and members' experiences.

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