IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

MASTER THESIS

DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE RELIGIOUS LITERACY PROCESS: NARRATIVES OF MUSLIM AMERICAN FEMALE YOUTH

NESMA AHMED B ELSAYED

THESIS SUPERVISOR
PROF. RAMAZAN ARAS

ISTANBUL, 2024

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by
NESMA AHMED B ELSAYED

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

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APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

Thesis Jury Members

Title - Name Surname	Opinion	Signature
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This is to confirm that this thesis complies with all the standards set by the School of Graduate Studies of Ibn Haldun University.

Date of Submission Seal/Signature

ACADEMIC HONESTY ATTESTATION

I hereby declare that all the information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conducts, I have fully cited and referenced all materials and results that are not original to this work.

Name Surname:

Signature:

ÖZ

SOSYAL MEDYA VE DİNİ OKURYAZARLIK SÜRECİ: MÜSLÜMAN AMERİKALI KADIN GENÇLERİN ANLATILARI

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İçinde bulunduğumuz dijital çağda, kullandığımız çoğu şey teknolojiyle ilişkilidir. Bu anlamda, teknolojinin hayatımızın her alanındaki olumlu ve olumsuz etkileri üzerine çok sayıda araştırma yapılmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, sosyal medyanın toplumun farklı kesimleriyle kesişim noktalarını değerlendirmek kaçınılmaz bir hale gelmiştir. Bunun bir örneği de bilgisayar tabanlı bir teknoloji olarak sosyal medyanın; toplumun belirli üyeleri -zamanlarının çoğunu telefonlarında ve internette geçiren gençler- için nasıl bir eğitim alanı olarak davrandığını anlamakta bulunabilir. Bu sosyolojik ve antropolojik çalışma, elbette Müslüman Amerikan genç kadınların söz konusu sosyal medya alanları aracılığıyla edindiği dini bilgi türünü tam olarak ortaya çıkarmayacaktır. Bu tez çalışması, bu gençlerin dini anlayışlarına dayalı olarak ibadetlerini nasıl yaptıklarına ışık tutarak, bu bilgiyi Müslüman Amerikalı kadın kimliğinin inşasıyla ilişkilendirecektir. Başka bir ifadeyle, Müslüman Amerikalı genç kadınların hayat hikâyeleri ve anlatılarının analizine dayanan bu çalışma, sosyal medyayının dini algılar üzerinden şekillendirilmesinde nasıl önemli bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dini Okuryazarlık, Genç Kadınlar, Müslüman Amerikalılar, Sosyal Medya.

ABSTRACT

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In the digital age that we currently live in, everything we use is associated with technology. This comes with an overwhelming number of research on the negative and positive outcomes of technology in every aspect of our lives. It has become mandatory for researchers to evaluate the intersection of digital media with different sectors of society. For example, being able to assess how digital media, as a computer-mediated technology, behaves as an educational space for youth who are vital members of society and spend the majority of their time on their phones and the Internet is a great starting point. This sociological and anthropological work will uncover the type of religious knowledge that Muslim American female youth acquire via these digital media spaces. In addition, it will tie this knowledge into the construction of the Muslim American female identity by shedding light on how these youth engage in worship practices based on their religious understandings. Overall, this research aims to document how digital media plays an important role in shaping a group's identity through their developed religious perceptions.

Keywords: Female Youth, Muslim Americans, Religious Literacy, Social Media.

DEDICATION

To my father, the best companion on this journey of knowledge. To my mother, who instilled in me love for knowledge and to always seek God wherever I may be. To my siblings for their tremendous support. And last but not least, to my husband for his encouragement which I will remember forever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the participants in this study. This research would be nothing without their participation. Their precious time and conversations will always be cherished, not only to me as a researcher but to all who come across this research, because in it they will find that these narratives are shared by many Muslim American female youth today.

I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Ramazan Aras. Since the first day I stepped foot on Ibn Haldun University's campus and attended my first course which he happened to be teaching, I have gained so much knowledge in the field. Throughout the curriculum, Professor Aras was always generous with sharing his wisdom. As I continued on with the program and my research interests, I found his encouragement and feedback a valuable means in pushing me to pursue this research to its completion.

During my experience studying abroad in this program, I met well respected professors of great caliber that demonstrated the true definition of mu'alim or teacher. In their own unique way, they exposed me to subjects and discussions that allowed me to think critically. Each interaction with these professors, whether it was in a classroom learning under them or during assistantships working alongside them, taught me valuable lessons that I will carry with me throughout my journey in academia. For all of this and more, I am forever thankful to God for putting them in my path.

Nesma Elsayed

ISTANBUL, 2024

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

app	Application (i.e. Phone Application)
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
FIS	Florida Islamic School
ICD	Islamic Center of Detroit
ISPU	Institute for Social Policy and Understanding
LDHI	Lowcountry Digital History Initiative
MSA	Muslim Students Association
MUC	Muslim Unity Center
NOI	Nation of Islam
ODOJ	One Day One Juz Movement
TC	Tawheed Center.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The subject of the Muslim American identity is very broad and can sometimes be misleading as there is no one single identity. The population of Muslim American youth is a diverse group that consists of immigrants, native-born Americans, and converts. This population consists of more than one hundred different countries, either from the African, South Asian, or Middle Eastern regions. In addition, this population belongs to an array of religious sects which infers that not only do their ethnicities differ, but their religious practices differ as well. These Muslims belong to one of the four Sunni sects: Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali, and Hanafi (Sirin, 2008: 34). A much smaller sect known as Shia Islam focuses on following specific Imams or religious scholars that interpret the Quran depending on the current situation of the community (Sirin, 2008: 34). Based on this, it is important to distinguish the population that I am focusing on which consists of second-generation Muslim Americans as well as converts that mainly adhere to the Sunni sect. Most recent statistical data shows that this focus group along with first generation immigrants as constituting more than two thirds of Muslims in the United States (Sirin, 2008: 4). The lives of these Muslim youth are completely different compared to the other Muslim American groups. For one, they are distinct from other immigrants in that they live comfortably in working upper, middle, or upper middle-class families (Sirin, 2008: 4). They are also different from the native born, African Americans because they appear to be more "white". This means that they are more likely to enjoy the privileges that come with this racial category. The different policies of integration and less obvious forms of discrimination during the United States' selective migration period presented an advantage for the "white" Muslim Americans to blend in mainstream U.S. society compared to their other counterparts (Sirin, 2008: 43).

One reason why researchers find themselves captivated by the subject of Muslim American youth is for the purpose of seeking to provide insight to families on how to

navigate difficult climates (i.e. Islamophobia) and being a means to facilitate and nurture youth from a religious standpoint. The period of adolescence is known to be such a vulnerable age that there is a likelihood that youth in general can either turn toward religion or turn away altogether and join gangs or become anti-social (Dollahite et al. 2019, 1). The researchers that are dedicated to the subject use this data collection to provide insight on ways to improve the wellbeing of these youth and contribute to the betterment of the society. Furthermore, the sample population of this thesis focuses on female Muslim American youth. Muslim American females are viewed by non-Muslims as visible markers of the Muslim religious identity. At the same time, research reveals that Muslim women struggle to define what it means to be Muslim enough within their own communities in relation to the overt markers of their own identities (Karasu, 2024). The pressures arising in both communities they are members of cause them to want to seek religious knowledge to act as true representatives of the faith, to demonstrate to others that they are practicing, and to fight back against stereotypes (Sirin, 2011: 1540). Although I dedicate a complete chapter, specifically the second chapter, to discuss the aspects of the methodology and research design, I believe it is worth addressing that the majority of the female interlocutors in this study either grew up in religious environments or were not Muslim originally and later embraced the faith. Nonetheless, the common similarity between all of them were the life events they experienced starting from their childhood and then as they got older which pushed them to seek a deeper (re)connection with their Islamic faith. This is important to keep in mind as it discloses a critical period of spiritual development from personal accounts with the help of digital media and social media. There is a growing scholarship interest in the area of religious and spiritual development of female youth and this study adds to this valuable list. It is also worth pointing out that the interlocutors were living during an uncertain time of the Covid-19 pandemic. In ambiguous times such as this, it made it difficult for them to seek face-to-face religious gatherings to discuss and navigate their experiences due to the spread of this newly discovered disease. Physical gatherings were once the spaces that provided a connection among members, a source of spiritual rejuvenation, and support for their emotional ailments. With the circumstances they found themselves in, these interlocutors innovated an available space, the digital space, with its accessible features to assist them in their journey toward seeking religious knowledge.

As I examined the literature on patterns of pursuit towards religious knowledge or *ilm*[1] among Muslim American youth, I noticed that it has mainly been studied in light of religion and culture. Most researchers find that these youth are in a state of tug of war between keeping their religious identity while living within the American mainstream culture. These same researchers view this as a catalyst for the interest of these youth in seeking religious knowledge to stay informed and counteract this crackdown on their religious identity. I argue that studying this phenomenon starts way before youth begin their teenage years and experience the struggles of that age group, such as meeting the demands of modern American culture and the demands of Islam. Just like any other faith-practicing youth group, the answer that leads to the religiosity of Muslim American youth requires a closer look at how well it has been established in the earlier years. It may be that in the earlier years it is not a quest for *ilm*, but rather an exposure and, thus, an implantation of the foundational elements of their faith. This is what researchers should build off of as it manifests into the journey of actively seeking of deeper religious meaning for these individuals in their later years. In this introductory chapter, I will start by presenting an outline of the journey an average Muslim American youth takes toward faith or religiosity. I will quickly review research that highlights the foundational elements of faith education throughout the early years and ongoing. Some of this research has demonstrated that children develop a cognitive conceptualization of their religious identity within early stages of their lives. It then takes an upward trajectory as they get older depending on the environment (Elkind, 1964: 40). As Elkind illustrates in his study, this progression was discovered in the fieldwork conducted among children from Jewish, Catholic, and Congregational Protestant sample groups which found that they attached spontaneous meanings to their religious denomination (Elkind, 1964: 40). Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist known for his theory on intellectual development among children, coined the term spontaneous meaning to describe how children interpret religious terms and practices that are beyond their comprehension. Out of the three stages of religious development, pre-operational intuitive religious thought[2], concrete operational thought[3], and formal operational thought[4], Piaget categorizes spontaneous meaning in the pre-operational

[1] Ilm is an Arabic word meaning knowledge that points to the direction of God.
[2] This first stage of religious development concerns children 2-7 years old.
[3] This second stage of religious development concerns children 7-11 years old.
[4] This third stage of religious development concerns children 11 years and older.

intuitive religious thought phase[5]. This information on Piaget's theory is the foundation that advances an individual's religious development over time consisting of spontaneous religion and acquired religion. As a result, this information is meant to lead to one point surrounding the role that religious interpretations have; the fact that children come up with these interpretations are critical markers in helping researchers follow the pathway to any person's current religiosity. Literature overall has shown that these religious interpretations during younger years develops to an abstract form and predicts the future wellbeing of the individual. This means that this crucial stage of childhood is very telling of the general religious development of the individual, where wellbeing here describes the low probability of the individual to engage in dangers of adolescence such as drugs and depression. Instead, they have a higher chance of participating in community work, have a higher sense of purpose, and stay connected to their faith's teachings (Institute for Family Studies 2018).[6] As we reviewed together, the establishment of one's spirituality begins during childhood, but as one gets older other factors emerge. Narratives of Muslim youth living in New York and Colorado portray this kind of spirituality as a transformation and a choice of a preferred religious identity over time. Some of the interviewees in the study by Lori Peek believed the cause of this transformation was a new phase in life as they moved from high school to college (Peek 2005, 226). This change in environment and responsibilities triggered the participants to a reflective approach to the world leading to their religious identity. This is important to remember when attempting to uncover the reasons for a spark in religious and spiritual interest among youth as we will find in this study as well.

As was mentioned earlier, the timeline of one's spiritual journey is an excellent start to understanding the subject matter of this research. However, learning more about the religiosity of the Muslim American youth entails exploring their usage of the apparatuses that assist the seeker in this journey of religious conceptualization. In the third chapter, I give a brief overview of the traditional religious schooling style that has traces in different Muslim American communities, apparatuses that we are familiar

[5] My intention in referencing Piaget's theory very briefly is to get an overall view of how religiosity is established over time for youth and Muslim American youth are no different. In the earlier stages of childhood Piaget, specifically between ages 2-7 years old the religious concepts that are acquired and thought by the child become the foundation of their religious thought in the future.
[6] https://ifstudies.org/blog/religious-upbringing-and-adolescence

with. These styles of religious learning were adopted in the Muslim American community since its establishment in masjids or Islamic schools modeled after implementations in Muslim majority countries around the world. As I was becoming familiar with the history of the traditional Islamic schooling method in the United States, I noticed that for most of the Muslim American female youth, the Islamic schooling system had a role in developing what Piaget describes as the pre-operational intuitive religious thought phase for most of my interlocutors. An even more interesting fact was discovering that the interlocutors that did not experience this kind of Islamic schooling (i.e. converts) still received faith-based schooling in their childhood years demonstrating support to Piaget's understanding.

In the fourth chapter, I will briefly set the stage for a later discussion of a new type of "Islamic schooling" infused with a technological touch that my interlocutors have found more fitting with their lifestyle and sometimes even more rewarding. There is no doubt that technology impacts us in more ways than we can imagine, however, the focus of this thesis is to showcase technology, specifically, digital media and social media, as more than a tool we use to make life easier for us. It has a role in shaping the way we operate and think as well. As for the youth, their usage of technology and the phone specifically is noticeably more apparent, thus presenting itself as a valid subject for review. The Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 95 percent of young people between ages twelve to seventeen are online, of which 80 percent use social media network sites, and that 77 percent of American teens also have a cell phone (2011)[7]. Muslim American youth are not exempt from this finding. The question begs, to what extent does technology and specifically digital media, which is the focus of this study, assist in the religious literacy process of Muslim American female youth? It also helps us arrive at the meanings and discourses that these spaces present to its seekers of knowledge.

In the fifth and final chapter, I will attempt to showcase the enriching and unique spiritual journeys of my interlocutors. I argue in this chapter that my interlocutors were prompted in seeking digital spaces to further develop themselves and arrive to their religious literacy goals, all as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The journey of these

[7] https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/05/21/part-1-teens-and-social-media-use/

pious women to God transformed into something so much more profound. A journey that one may assume, where these women acquire religious knowledge stored in memory. It is a journey of reawakening of these pious women which begins with the emergence of pious values that they adopt and the formulation of different layers of piety. Moreover, I address the learned practice of pious values and the connection these morals have with becoming a hafitha (i.e. woman of the Holy Quran) and a mindful Muslimah (i.e. woman who has God-consciousness).

Overall, this work does not desire to produce representative findings on the role digital media has in being a force for Muslim American female youth towards religious literacy. Instead, this work gives credit where its due, that digital media does formulate meanings and discourses that lead to this movement. I argue that digital media affects the religious literacy process to the level that it shapes the awareness of the interlocutors on their being, thus redirecting their behavior back to piety.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

2.1. Introduction

In regard to research in the fields of humanities and social sciences, fieldwork is an essential component due to its potential to maximize the researcher's perceptions of the social setting at hand. In the case of the social sciences, it is held in high regard because it allows the researcher to become informed on human existence through observing their participants. Generally speaking, researchers should always strive to understand the way their participants live, but simultaneously observe and interact with the intended environment encompassing these people, materials, and thoughts to gain a deeper perspective (Blackstone, 2014: 6). More importantly, our responsibility as researchers is to be observing participants with the aim of learning these various behaviors so that we can share them as they are, in a state of transparency, with the world (Bernard, 2011: 260). Keeping this in mind as I embarked on my journey of conducting my research, I intended to integrate myself within the specified communities and became a part of them. I sat with them during their religious gatherings, attended events at the masjids, familiarized myself with their discussions and activities on social media spaces, and analyzed the Qariah[8] phone application in hopes that my efforts will allow me a peek into their world. It is important to distinguish this research from others because of its implementation of a new ethnographical approach known as netnography (Kozinets, 2010: 4). In the upcoming pages, I will outline these research techniques that facilitated my fieldwork operations during the years 2019-2020 in three specific, suburban, Muslim American, masjid communities in the city of Detroit, Michigan. The choice to conduct my research in these three masjids was not intentional but came coincidentally as I explored religious gatherings to attend regularly. Since I had visited these masjids before, it was not an

[8] The Qariah app is a phone application that makes Quran recitations easily accessible to women. It features women reciters of the Quran from all over the world. All of them have ijazas or certifications.

arduous process. The first masjid is called the Islamic Center of Detroit, the second is called Tawheed Center located in Farmington Hills, and the third is called the Muslim Unity Center. Since virtual participant presence is equally essential as the physical component in regard to the fieldwork for this study, I will focus on the usage of digital media spaces by Muslim American female youth, specifically the Qariah phone application and Instagram. The selection of digital media was unintentional in the beginning as well. During the early stages of the interviews, most of these female youth referenced Instagram multiple times while explaining their conventional habits and preference over other social media sites. However, after careful examination it became evident that Instagram's features had a tremendous role in their religious literacy process resulting in being their top choice. One feature some participants appreciated which was linked to Instagram was the snippets of reels or posts that educated about a specific topic without having to waste too much time delving into the rigorous religious texts they may not understand in most scenarios.

2.2. Ethnography and Research Methods

In this study, I have decided to implement a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and digital ethnography. As I reflect on the entirety of my fieldwork approach, the achievements and the minor setbacks, I was fortunate enough not to stumble upon significant recruitment issues. Living in the city of Detroit (within the suburbs) and frequently showing up to halaqas and events hosted by the masjids, I embraced my dual role as an observer and participant to expand the trust and ties that I initially possessed. To embrace my role completely, I had to put in more effort while attending masjid events when an Islamic speaker was invited in comparison to attending a small religious gathering. There were times where I did build rapport with a new attendee that I had not previously known, but all in all, it was not necessary for me to rely on solid network connections to encourage participation in my study. Furthermore, and as can be seen from Table 2.1, one of the reasons I worked hard in building a rapport with the newcomers of these religious gatherings was to get access to information on their social media accounts, especially the Muslim convert interlocutors whom I had never met before. The majority of the listed participants were female youth that I knew and considered friends in the community. The two female youth who were converts were still new community members who had recently joined

the events at the masjids. Finally, the three elders from the masjid communities were valuable sources in shedding light on the history of the masjid communities and guiding me to the new events I was unaware of.

Table 2.1. Interlocutor Demographics

Name	**Age**	**Education**	**Ethnicity**
Asem	An elder from the TC community	----------	Pakistani background
Sami	An elder from the ICD community	----------	Palestinian background
Aliaa	An elder from the MUC community	----------	Syrian background
Malak	25-year-old from TC	Bachelor's in Early Childhood Education (Online)	Indian background
Razanne	24-year-old from MUC	Bachelor's in Chemistry	Yemeni background
Sarah	27-year-old from TC	Bachelor's in Nutrition	Pakistani Background
Raghad	18-year-old from TC	Pursuing Bachelor's in Biology	Egyptian background
Hoda	21-year-old from ICD	----------	Egyptian background
Yusra	27-year-old from ICD	Bachelor's in Graphic Design	Polish/convert
*Intissar	17-year-old from ICD	Pursuing Bachelor's in Psychology	Yemeni background
*Sana	24-year-old from TC	Bachelor's in Mathematics	Pakistani background
*Dania	24-year-old from MUC	----------	Irish/Convert
*Lila	25-year-old from MUC	----------	Convert

2.2.1. Research Design

In this study, I decided to conduct my research using the field research design, otherwise known as ethnographic research. This research design involves researchers fully immersing themselves within a particular group or setting to gain a deeper understanding of a people's beliefs and practices. My aim in this research was to live the learning experiences of my interlocutors and immerse myself in the religious learning process that they have created for themselves. This was an opportunity for me to experience the religious growth that they describe as their spiritual journey. Although I did immerse myself physically in the religious gatherings and events, this was only one phase of my research design. The other phase I adopted in my research involved immersing myself in their digital media practices and social media world. This introduced a new world of data to uncover and compare to the observed realistic data. Curran and Perecman, authors of *A Handbook for Social Science Field Research: Essays and Bibliographic Sources on Research Design and Methods,* believe that aside from verbal or conversational techniques there are other techniques that offer leverage to gain insight into social life (2006: 57). The social media world of my interlocutors was a space that served this purpose as it provided a variety of images linked to social media posts. I analyzed these social media posts that my interlocutors referenced in our interviews and compared their reflections to their behaviors. These meanings reflected the kind of religious knowledge my interlocutors acquired and internalized.

Although many researchers encourage the application of visuality in their research design, others claim that the visuality linked with using images will dominate and cause neglect of the other bodily senses (Curran et al., 2006: 57). In my study, I did not find this to be an issue due to the learned pious behaviors that were manifested on multiple occasions by my interlocutors after their exposure to the religious content. The religious literacy process I describe is one where the visuality and comprehension of the interlocutors lead to engaging other bodily senses. For example, one interlocutor describes her technique of memorizing the Quran as using the phone application to memorize. This involves repeating the recording of the verses of the Quran. As we will discover in chapter 5, the process does not stop here but inevitably involves her heart to connect with the words of Allah during one of her prayers.

In terms of data analysis, I have adopted the discourse analysis framework to address the paradigm of pious behavior and the religious literacy process. Because I emphasize specific themes, my data selection is informed by theoretical considerations outlined in the literature. As the discourse analysis framework intends to operate, it can be applied in an analysis of different social domains, including organizations and institutions, and for the focus of this study, in the exploration of the role of language use in broad societal and cultural developments and mass-mediated communication (Jorgensen et al., 2002: 2).

2.2.2. Participant Observation

Participant observation is well-known for its ability to effectively allow the ethnographer to gather as much data as they can throughout the research. James Spradley saw the cultural aspect of an ethnography from three dimensions: what people do, what people know, and the things people make and use (1980: 5). The practice of being involved in the environment guarantees that the ethnographer fully immersed themself in the cultural practices at hand. The ethnographer's responsibility is not solely to see the act or items but to learn why they are there and why this act is being done from the participant's point of view. The distinctive feature of this fieldwork portion of the study is that the ethnographer doesn't have to be an insider or a member of the group to gain access to the community. Fortunately, the ethnographer is also allowed to stay as an outsider with the advantage of participating in the environment they are studying (Bernard, 2011: 260). This method allows for all kinds of data to be collected thus, contributing significantly to the research outcome. It is a type of craftmanship that is not to be performed haphazardly but with precision when it comes to selecting the object of study leading to a more significant phenomenon. The artist who is often referred to as the painter sits down and moves their brush in different motions on the easel to eventually create a piece of work that has meaning, a meaning that was never there to begin with (Wolcott, 2004: 42). Similarly, the ethnographer works with what they have at a given moment to make it significant, whether it may be indoors or outdoors or a person or a group. For example, using participant observation methodology the ethnographer can document the participants' behavior during a religious ceremony, but simultaneously they can also make note of the details in the natural setting, something which may have been hidden or deemed

insignificant (Bernard, 2011: 257). This example and many others demonstrate the attainment of valuable data that leads us to learn more about the participants, the focal point of an ethnographer's endeavors.

In the context of this study, the entirety of this research was conducted using a qualitative framework emphasizing participant observation and both in-depth and online interviews. The sample population consisted of ten female youth between the ages of 16-24 years old. The selection process of these participants was dependent on the kind of engagement they presented during the events organized at the masjid. In this study, gender is a factor that needs to be considered when addressing the chosen method of participant selection by the ethnographer because each masjid performs with particular gender cultures. In other words, during the ethnography, there were noticeable gender-cultural patterns within all three masjids. During the events when a speaker was invited to speak on a topic, the seating arrangement was standard with the women sitting on one side of the room and the men on the other side. This seating arrangement made it easy for me as the ethnographer to see all the attendees and approach any female I felt inclined to for recruitment purposes. In addition, this seating arrangement proved to be friendly to the attendees when it came to meeting with the speaker for questions at the end of the event. From the very beginning, there was a tremendous gap in male recruitment which prompted the course of the study to focus its efforts in recruiting female participants only. After further research, some studies across the United States found that the subject of women and the masjid has been a contentious issue. Insufficient congregational areas and programs were the leading causes of Muslim women to stay away from the masjid (Ahmed et al, 2015: 9). Many were vocal about these issues where they felt they were not receiving the religious knowledge they need. They all seemed to comprehend the source of these problems stemming from cultural perspectives that are not necessarily true in religion. These same individuals were the ones who seemed inclined to participate in this research and organized religious gatherings to discuss topics that uplifted the Muslim female. In other words, some attendees were very vocal about their thoughts during these religious gatherings, while others were not. Those who were actively interacting presented a willingness to be involved in the study. Most of the time, those who did not speak up during these events were more likely unwilling to participate in the study. This was my cue when approaching the participants in these event spaces. Fortunately,

because of the age range I did not need parental consent when undergoing the participant selection process.

2.2.3. In-Depth Interviews

There is no doubt that in-depth interviews are a crucial means to successful fieldwork in research. As Holy and Stuchlik describe, interviews are a reality of fieldwork that helps us find out what we do not and cannot know otherwise; it is a means to locate the knowledge people carry in their heads, their "notions," the beliefs and values driving their actions (1983:). With this being my mantra, I went to visit female youth in masjids they frequented and to be in their presence during religious gatherings such as halaqas or interactive seminars where a well-known scholar was invited to address a specific topic with the aim of educating the crowd from an Islamic perspective. My selection of in-depth interviews was an essential step in my fieldwork because of its flexibility when interacting with my interviewees. At the start of my fieldwork, I would speak to one interviewee. This proved not to be efficient in gathering quality data, so I developed a second plan. On more than one occasion, I noticed that it was more effective to speak to multiple interviewees together at specific times, especially since they were attending the gatherings as a group of friends. I asked them about the topics that were discussed during the religious gatherings or seminars and was able to formulate open-ended interview questions to use in my research to learn more about the interviewees' religious literacy journey. I believe this was an advantage to in-depth interviews as I witnessed firsthand their engagement in these congregations specifically through their questions related to religious matters. This methodology, a combination of participant observation and interviews, gave me direction on how my interlocuters view themselves as Muslim American female youth. It demonstrated the topics that they were most passionate about and the topics that they struggled to comprehend thus, seeking guidance from the resources available in these spaces.

Furthermore, through this technique I established an environment for my participants to speak their minds freely without limiting them. In-depth interviews allowed the interviewees to share their life experiences with me and connect them to the religious topics in the lectures. This was the most effective way to motivate my participants to share their thoughts with me and enabled me to enter the interviewee's human

conscious and revealed to me recurring themes that aided in deep discussions with the participants. Since my attention was primarily on the thoughts and actions of the participants versus the speech/lecture, I did not prepare questions in advance or record the lecture and let the course of the interviews flow naturally. The lectures from the seminars I attended were essential references. As agreed with the participants, if I needed more clarification from them I would just reach out to them. Also, if I needed to resort to a specific point in any lecture the interviewee referenced, I could always find them online or refer back to my notes. Nonetheless, being present during these lectures was vital because it is a rarity that each lecture be repeated once more in a similar format with the same scenarios including the topic, speaker and attendees, so it was important to me to use this research technique. The recurring themes that were the concentration of our discussions focused on connecting with the Quran topics on emotional distresses which were mentioned during the religious gatherings and had an online presence. All in all, my participants each voiced different learning experiences while congregating to disseminate and accumulate various religious knowledge that poses relevance to their current lives. The most important aspect of this research focuses on the internalization of this entire process of acquiring religious knowledge and what it will tell us on how it molds these female youth as religiously conscious members of the Muslim society.

2.2.4. Field Notes

One of the many purposes of writing field notes during qualitative research is to ensure and convince others that the data a researcher collected is of sufficient quality and credibility (Bailey, 2018: 167). Another unseen attribute of field notes serves the purpose of guiding the researcher to the right questions to ask, which may have been overlooked at the beginning of the fieldwork (Neimark, 2012: 76). As I started my fieldwork, I aimed to learn more about the interlocutors' experience of the knowledge that they acquired through social media accounts only. It soon came to my understanding that I had to fine-tune my questions and instead focus my attention on asking questions about other forms of digital media, specifically phone applications that my interlocutors used. I realized that most of my interlocutors voluntarily pulled out their phones in their unique shapes and forms, and presented them to me as proof of another form of media. It was so much more than these mediums paving the way to

the interlocutors' connection with the Quran and other spiritual knowledge. The conversations revealed another element of the religious knowledge present in this space and resulted in an alteration of the title and overall topic of my thesis.

Furthermore, the themes that I was focusing on completely shifted as well. Carol Bailey advises the most effective way to notetaking is to organize the notes as soon as the researcher leaves the field site (Bailey, 2018: 172). As I learned, Bailey's approach was constructive in laying out all my participant experiences and locating the repetition of themes. In the beginning, I had the intention to organize my field notes to help me remember the details during the workshops or events that I attended at the masjids, as Lofland describes it "the raw behavior" (1971: 175). In these events my goal was to capture and store a record of the people I met, a summary of the lecture topics, the behaviors, and interactions I had with my interviewees. This led me to a single-minded path of viewing these gatherings as the only source of religious knowledge for these interlocutors. I soon realized that this process was much more complex and deserved more effort from my end. I proceeded to take down notes of all details of the environments that I would have never paid attention to before. I wrote the date of the event and the location, the speaker that was invited, and my observations of the interviewees while attending the workshop or event. Although all this information may seem not related, it was helpful in leading me to the unique techniques and usuage of digital media that the interlocutors practiced. Through this, I arrived at themes that pointed me towards a kind of religious literacy process where exposure to this kind of religious knowledge resulted in the learned pious behavior of my interlocutors.

2.2.5. Digital Ethnography

Although many find online interview methodology complementary to other methods in the field, especially during certain circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, others believe it carries a more profound role in redefining what fieldwork means (Howlett 2022: 387). The gold standard of in-person interviews that was used to measure efficiency in research methodology is no longer pertinent (Howlett 2022: 390). Questions such as "what is the field?" hints towards new epistemological and methodological concerns around understandings of presence, field relations, and observation (Hannerz, 2003: 202). This means that the absence of a field within a more

extensive field strips the participant of their associated behavior found within the field (Howlett, 2022: 387). During the time of COVID-19 uncertainty, in-depth interviews came to a halt for all researchers in the field as the government restricted gatherings in places of worship and many other locations through the mandatory lockdown orders. As an ethnographer willing to do anything in my power to complete my research, I resorted to online interviews with little to no experience just as many ethnographers like me.

Before I share my experience with online interviews and the process, I want to discuss an opinion on online interview methodology; those who vote in favor of this methodology see that the real-time interviews performed through Zoom, Skype, or Facebook offer the same trustworthiness that the face-to-face interviews carry (Howlett, 2022: 390). The "human feeling" usually experienced in a face-to-face interview is still present in an online interview because researchers can still see and hear their participants talk which is a prerequisite to research in general (Salmons, 2014: 214). On the other hand, there are some who disagree with the practices of this methodology because it does not fully grasp essential details that add to the research in comparison to being out in the physical space near the participants. For example, online interviews through Zoom or other computer-mediated technologies generate an image of the participant that is not holistic in the sense that we can't observe some body gestures that can be hidden from the screen, such as the movement of legs and hands due to nervousness (Howlett, 2022: 390). One of the challenges I faced was related to the internet connection which resulted in times where I would hear the participant speak but did not see clearly how the participant was behaving (i.e., a frozen image). This hindered my ability to decipher the participant's response and proceed accordingly.

The success of an online interview relies on set-up preparations. Before scheduling a day and time for the online interview, I would send my pre-interview questions that consisted of general questions to gauge whether the participants meet the requirements to be involved in the study. Questions such as "Do you have an Instagram account?" or "Have you heard or participated in the Foremother's movement?"? When it came time for the actual interview, I made sure I was sitting in an area with my laptop positioned on a table and the webcam is visible. Since I was keen on giving eye contact

during the interview, I made sure to memorize the questions I was going to ask the participants so to avoid looking down on my notebook. When I admit the participant into the Zoom meeting, I notify them of my request to record and begin recording per their approval. Afterward, I introduce myself and explain the purpose of this study. As I start my questions, I ask broad questions to establish comfort with the participant and keep the dialogue going. Once all the questions have been asked and the session has ended (I tried my best to stick to the time frame I gave) I ask the participant if there are any questions, concerns, or feedback for me. I also let them know that if there are any follow ups from either side to connect. There were times where I needed to get in touch with the participants with a follow up question and all responded to my inquiries.

Karen O'Reilly's definition of ethnography is considered a standard "open" definition of the relationship between ethnography and theory. Her exact definition of ethnography states that it is iterative-inductive research that is known to evolve in design throughout the study (O'Reilly 2008: 3). The outcome of such an accumulation of methods in analysis, coding, field notes, grounded theory, and induction is an account of a particular human experience that cannot be broken down into simplicity (). In addition, this definition allows for flexibility in pairing ethnography and any theoretical discipline. However, once ethnography becomes digital this definition begins to change. First, digital ethnography can be labeled as netnography, virtual ethnography, online ethnography, or even cyber-ethnography[9]. Second, the definition itself sees a shift in the connection between the participants and the ethnographer (Pink et al., 2016: 21). The connection is no longer a direct physical one and evolves into a mediated version where the ethnographer watches what happens after being invited into social media practices or listens to what is being said by reading comments and communicating through other ways (Pink et al., 2016: 21). Another definition proposed by Natalie Underberg and Elayne Zorn characterizes digital ethnography as a method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story. As we see, the objective is still to convey the experience of learning and living in a culture through a digital approach. Underberg, Zorn, and Pink's definitions when merged point to another way to learn of cultures known as digital ethnographic storytelling. This fusion of the two

[9] https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/percs/digital-ethnography/

methodologies presents us with a unique methodology that shares similarities to the origin of ethnography. Any research studies that are digitally focused undergo six phases: developing a research plan, establishing entree, collecting and triangulating data, analyzing and interpreting data, ensuring ethical standards, and reporting on research findings. Each specific type of digital ethnography, as we will see down below, follows these six standard phases.

Netnography, a term that was coined in 1995 by Robert Kozinets, a Professor of Journalism at the University of Southern California, is the name of a digital ethnography that uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010: 60). The history behind this methodology is rooted in Kozinets' involvement in anthropological observation of a group of coffee fanatics on the Internet. Through his participants' usage of different terminologies and online discussions on descriptive taste experiences he learned the importance of this methodology. He found that it spreads through to other fields like fashion, sports, etc. (Robert Kozinets, 2021). The procedure for conducting a successful netnography lies in planning, entrée, gathering data, interpretation, and adhering to ethical standards (Kozinets, 2010: 58). The planning that occurs during a netnography constitutes work done by the ethnographer to ensure they targeted the social sites or topics to investigate and formulated a definition of the research question. Following these steps of the planning phase, the netnographer selects and identifies a community. In the data collection phase, the ethnographer engages in community participant observation while ensuring ethical procedures. After all the data has been gathered it should be analyzed and interpreted for findings. The last stage is to present the research findings of this netnography. In the following few pages following examples of digital ethnography, I will explain the path of digitalizing humanity that our society is pursuing.

One study that implemented digital ethnography is demonstrated in Elisabetta Costa's work in the city of Mardin, located in Southeast Turkey. The aim of her work titled *Social Media in Southeast Turkey* was to uncover how social media leaves an imprint on the societal ties between the members within this city. Through this digital ethnography, Costa analyzed the ways in which the Mardinites' consumption of the

Facebook platform led to a presentation of an over-exaggerated conservative representation of their "self" (Costa, 2016: 79). Costa discovered that in the offline spaces the Mardinites had to conform to the social norms placed by the society to achieve their membership status. Subsequently, she found that these social norms were upheld by the people of Mardin even more rigorously within the online spaces, primarily on Facebook. The explanation for this pattern was attributed to the Facebook wall, a public, online space where the self is constantly being monitored by others, especially relatives. In turn, the Facebook user is forced to present themselves to those observing under the social norms of the environment they live in. To arrive at such a conclusion, Costa tactically met with her participants face to face before becoming friends with them online through Facebook and initiating the digital ethnography process. Costa compared the various conventional offline spaces where the construction of the self predominantly happens, namely weddings, restaurants, and cafes. In these traditional spaces taking part in activities such as smoking or drinking alcohol is frowned upon, yet people still engage in them. Nevertheless, these same individuals would never think to share notorious activities on the Facebook wall. Unlike the traditional spaces where the development of the self is exhibited through social interactions, Costa examines pictures that display specific social activities and whether they were publicly posted on Facebook. For example, many of the images that were shared focused on the individual partaking in a socially acceptable activity with no acquaintances tagged near them. Costa's explanation for this phenomenon is that users learn to protect the other's privacy and reputation. In other words, the reputation of the people in this society is off limits. If a Facebook user from the community were to post a picture of another person, they would need to make sure to get a consensual agreement before tagging them (Costa, 2016: 88).

The Mardin experience also presents the social media space as sharing an equal role in society with the physical space through its preservation of kinship. Costa came to this conclusion based on the interviews with Kurdish and Arab teenagers and young adults. Rationally speaking, being near a group of individuals furthers the strong bond present within that setting. In a similar sense, social media acts as a medium that shortens the distance between individuals whether they are friends or family. In this community of Arabs and Kurds, the root problem of weak social networks started with the onset of urbanization and individualization. For example, data showed that the

Arabs who moved to various cities in Turkey had fewer relatives in their networks yet displayed more friends instead. Those who resided in the tribal communities where Elisabetta Costa conducted her digital ethnography showed higher numbers of relatives on their Facebook friends list. Some participants in Costa's research even described the discovery of connecting with distant family members that they had never met before (Costa, 2016: 88). In the case of Kurdish culture, familial blood is sacred even if there is nothing else in common between these two individuals that just met. One of the participants in Costa's research named Cihan mentioned how by connecting with 40 relatives through Facebook he could recollect the forgotten blood that many people from the young generation are losing (Costa, 2016: 88).

The act of viewing digital media sites as analogous to physical sites may have been an approach that was uncommon and difficult to comprehend a few years ago. However, in our recent times societal events caused social scientists to shift their attention to virtual spaces in understanding the role these spaces carry in the changing landscape of a given society. The research studies mentioned above show a glimpse of the reflection of cultural practices upheld in physical communities now in the digital world. It is the digital ethnographer's responsibility to extract such phenomenon and make an understanding of it. This led to the birth of a process called digitalizing humanity. The human race is known for compassion, freedom, morality, and more importantly contemplation. The humanistic quality of contemplation holds significance because it is in tune with the phenomenon I am focusing on in my study- the usage of digital media as a religious educational space similar to what a madrasa[10] is in the Islamic world. According to my female participants, physical institutions such as Islamic schools or masjid religious gatherings are not the only ones accessible to them these days. Another educational space that is gaining popularity among female youth striving to obtain religious knowledge is digital media (i.e., social media and phone applications). These contemporary spaces of various digital media platforms that allow for religious contemplation where many well-known Muslim scholars are heading towards to fill in the gap in religious expertise these youth so desperately need. To gain a comprehensive image of the religious literacy process these young women undergo, I will begin by briefly examining the function of the physical space known

[10] An Arabic term meaning a type of school for religious instruction predominantly found in the Islamic world.

as the madrasa where Muslims seek to learn about Islam. With this evidence we can build on our knowledge to discover the function of the now virtual spaces.

2.2.6. Being the Native Insider

It is believed that ethnographers impact the fieldwork, but more importantly is the impact and transformation that the fieldwork leaves on the ethnographer. Ethnographers such as Amanda Coffey believe that the objective of anthropological research tends to be labor on a personal, emotional, and identity level (1999: 1). This laboring process takes place at the inception of the study until after the completion of the fieldwork, ending at the writing phase. Throughout this process, sometimes consciously or even unconsciously, we are involved in our own self -presentation and identity construction. Our ability to experience the field in any capacity results in these ontological changes of the researcher manifested in parts of emotional and physical ways (). Examples of these emotional and physical transformations are becoming emotionally attached to the field site or coping with situations of like and dislike (Coffey 1999: 6). Other researchers, Lofland and Lofland, affirm this viewpoint from a sociological standpoint by referring to the most remarkable works ever performed by social scientists that connected between the self and the study, leaving out the outside observer (1971:175).

This research contributes to the ontological perspective of the researcher, myself, from an ethnographical and digital ethnographical standpoint. As a Muslim American who grew up alongside her peers of the global generation or those who experienced life during the introduction of the Internet age, I envision this research as an essential dedication to society. Although I cannot confidently say that the experience of the youth nowadays is the same as what my generation experienced, as a Muslim American female who has lived some of what the youth are going through now it is pretty apparent that there are instances in limitation in religious education. Fortunately, accessibility to knowledgeable mentors helped me and others of the same situation navigate our way during that critical period of adolescence. This information takes into consideration the idea that the needs of female youth are sometimes overlooked, explicitly focusing on their religious educational needs. Through my research, I hope to the voices of some of these female youth in answering the question, “What are your

religious educational needs to help you navigate your way in your society as a Muslim American?". Once they can answer this question and get a sufficient answer, I believe they will have a solid understanding of their identities. After all, Socrates once said, "to know thyself is the beginning of wisdom".

The nativity of an anthropologist about the group investigated is always in question. Some believe that a researcher can never really achieve the level of an insider of the group that is being studied. In support of this opinion, the only way to describe the relationship of a researcher should be through shifting identifications (Narayan, 1993: 672). Kirin Narayan, an Indian American anthropologist who also comes from a mixed ancestry, shared these exact sentiments and the specific ways in which she was able to navigate them. She firmly believed that there are many identities, other than a particular cultural identity, that need to be considered during an observation. With the multiple identities she carries, Narayan became flexible in presenting herself in an appropriate manner that fit the environment she was observing. In one specific instance while she was doing fieldwork in Nasik, a city located in India, most of the people living there knew her because of her father's reputation. Through her familial ties she was given special treatment in comparison to those who have been living there far more than she has because of her class ranking. Yet, in this same space she was also known as the outsider who took Swamiji's words with the ill intention of making a profit. In the city of Kangra, Narayan faced similar identity shifts, but the difference was that the people within this city classified Narayan according to their subjective thoughts. The concept of nativity is manifested in different ways in my research as well. In the first masjid that I observed, the Islamic Center of Detroit, I knew the community beforehand and the cultural presence. Most of the community knew all my family members and the roles they have in this community. They ultimately had a sense of trust when speaking to me. In the second masjid, the Tawheed Center, I was not very well known through familial ties, but instead through my presence at the events as an individual from my undergraduate years. This meant that there were some female youth that did not fully know who I was and therefore started categorizing me into different identities. For example, in the third masjid called the Unity Center, a young woman inquired what city I lived in and once she found out she labelled me as the girl from that specific city. This categorization of myself, the ethnographer, spread among the other female members. At that specific moment, although I felt that I had

been a member of this masjid since my teenage years, it was made clear to me that since I didn't live in the city where the masjid was located I was not an actual member of that community.

To many it may seem intuitive that there is nothing ethically unjust about analyzing my participants' online discussions about a specific religious topic because they were all posted publicly willingly. After all, the netnography process consists of public information at the fingertips of a researcher to examine at any given time. However, this understanding is completely false and in need of some clarification. A study that was conducted in the year 2004 revealed the opposition researchers faced from members of a chat room when they attempted to connect with them by joining the group (Bruckman et al. 2004: 127). If researchers were lucky enough to be given access to online spaces, then it only makes sense that there would be some demands by the participants. For my research, I was asked to create pseudonyms to replace the real names of my female participants. The stigmatization associated with not being educated enough about one's faith is likely the culprit for why most of the participants did not want their community members to know their real names. Interestingly, these same female participants willingly interacted with other attendees at events and even asked their questions to attending scholar. Another reason why some of my participants requested pseudonyms was due to some sensitive data that described traumatic life events that re-oriented their path in life and motivated them to search for religious guidance to heal.

2.2.7. The Question of Class and Ethnicity

The female youth who attended the three masjid I visited for my ethnography came from different backgrounds. Class and ethnicity were factors that distinguished participant responses from others. The race factor did not create barriers for me during my ethnographical work since the majority were South Asian and Arab Muslim participants. The element of class among the Muslim Unity Center participants was a factor that proved to be a barrier when trying to recruit some participants. The attendees of this masjid all knew each other and were the type that functioned in cliques. Most of the female participants attended the same halaqas and lived in the same neighborhoods so as a result, when they saw me at their gatherings, they knew I

wasn't from their circle. This created some hesitation in proceeding with the research in the beginning and I was looking for other masjids to observe. It is relatively common for researchers to handle such a common problem through the process of reflexivity where an ethnographer employs a mechanism of introspection to the situation at hand through considerations of race, gender, nationality, etc. (Callaway, 1992: 33). Though this technique took a lot of effort, I gained an excellent rapport with these interlocutors. In addition, the masjid board knew that I was already a member of the greater Muslim community before embarking on this research excursion which smoothed my introduction to this circle. Finally, I have seen most of these individuals at times, although my relationships with some are on a deeper level than others. My age and gender were indeed tremendous contributors in allowing me to maneuver easily within these environments because I looked similar to my participants. I was a visibly practicing Muslim female in her late 20s donning the hijab and modest attire.

2.2.8. Doing Research During the Covid-19 Pandemic

On December 2019 the SARS-CoV-2 virus was discovered and later spread across the world (Center for Disease Control, 2022). The United States and specifically the state of Michigan, the focus of where my research took place, was heavily hit and many lives were lost. This was the peak of when I started my fieldwork. Shortly after, the Center for Disease and Control created guidelines to protect the population which every state was required to abide by. The administrations of the masjids were ordered to change their hours of operation or close their doors temporarily, as were all houses or worship. Only after a few months did the masjids open up at specific hours of the day and with lenient requirements. Doing what any researcher would do in this case, I had to improvise and take precautions to protect myself and my participants while upholding these guidelines in mind. One way I accomplished this was by wearing a mask in the religious gatherings and keeping a 6 feet distance from other attendees during my observation sessions. During these gatherings, the masjids were diligent in placing markers on the floor to represent a 6 feet distance marker as well as make sure attendees were wearing masks at all times. In addition, I substituted the face-to-face interviews with online interviews. The utilization of Skype was particularly helpful in this case because I was able to see the reaction of the participants as they responded to my questions. Of course, if there was ever a need to reconvene with participants to

gather more data and hear additional narratives, I would be able to do so through this medium.

Despite the public health crisis the world experienced and still is, the work of anthropologists still has to go on. There have been many research studies conducted worldwide during this pandemic and every one of these studies found a way to adapt to the circumstances. One study conducted in Sydney, Australia focused on the technological evolution of the home environment during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lupton et. al 2022: 2). The significant aspect of this study was how the researchers took advantage of the different options of remote fieldwork to transgress the limitations imposed by the pandemic and ultimately obtain their results. In other words, the introduction of various remote fieldwork such as video call software surfaced in response to government stay at home orders and physical distancing rules. Each participant was asked to consent to the phases in the study where they provide a video-recorded tour of their homes and digital technologies, their attributes, and take part in creative activities using a pen and paper and discussion of their digital data (Lupton et al. 2022: 3). The researchers visited the participant's home for the tour and interviewed the participant without interrupting any of the other household members, if any were around. Also, participant anonymity was applied during instances where it was needed. During the home tour and interview phase, a semi-structured approach was performed where one researcher was assigned to record the interactions with a video recorder during the entire ethnography. In contrast, another was assigned the task of jotting down notes while asking the interview questions. The idea behind a home tour is to highlight the various ways the devices in the home are used. Also, since the participants are leading the researchers in their own home during the tour, the researchers used this to their benefit. They observed their senses and feelings associated with each technological structure within the home. The researchers were aware that some participants were more expressive when writing versus verbally, so they created an activity using a pen and paper to allow the participant to discuss their digital technology within the home. This particular study illustrates a similar adaptation process to my research. Documentation was a crucial technique throughout the entire study, and especially in this study it deserves its recognition. Like in any ethnography I devoted my time to writing down field notes every time I went out to any of the three masjids. As the art of notetaking indicates, it is imperative to not just

document the participants' behavior and statements, but also take notes on anything and everything during the event. This entails examples such as the surrounding space and its associated features like the smell or sounds or the seating arrangement. Each time I attended an event that a masjid hosted to become acquainted with my participants I left acquiring a more profound meaningful experience. For example, one instance when I went out to the Muslim Unity Center masjid where Sister Yasmin Mogahed was invited to give a talk on "Why Does Evil Exist?", my notes for that session documented the date and time of the workshop, the apparent similar physical appearance of the speaker and the attendees when it comes to their dress code, the seating arrangement, and the personability of the speaker in the beginning and end of the lecture, to name a few. The most exciting activity similar to the home tour study explained above was when I asked the participants to explain the content on social media that they find most religiously educational. The purpose of this activity was to allow them space to speak and describe through visual presentation.

CHAPTER III

SOCIOLOGY OF DIGITAL MEDIA: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1. Introduction

In the early 2000s social media made a presence with full force and started restructuring every facet of society. This digital media, ranging from social media, phone applications, blogs and others, has performed exceptionally alongside other traditional institutions in education, religion, economics, and government sectors. When we think of the religious social institution, we may think of a place of worship such as a masjid. In this space, Muslims are known to gather together to perform rituals or congregate as a devotion to God. Attending obligatory daily prayers five times or the Friday sermons every week are specific examples. When the COVID-19 pandemic spread across regions, many masjids temporarily closed their doors to attendees due to the possible spread of the virus. This abrupt separation of the Friday sermon from its original masjid space and showcasing it in a virtual space illustrates a temporary transformation our social institutions undergo in times of urgency. During this time, we observed the conjunction of social media with that of a religious institution. This adjustment to worship practices became a trend within different religious institutions like churches and synagogues where many computer-assisted platforms were hosting sermons, and dedicated attendees shifted their attention to this reconstructed space to stay in touch with their respective communities. In this chapter I will initiate the discussion by presenting a conceptual analysis of digital media and social media. Since they are used interchangeably in this research, where digital media encompasses social media and phone applications - both will become integral to this study. Finally, I will provide a critical review of current literature on digital media usages among Muslim American female youth. This information in this chronological order will allow readers to make out this virtual space as a small reflection of the reality of the seekers of religious knowledge and their physical environments.

3.2. A Brief Conceptual Analysis of Digital Media and Social Media

Everyone can agree that digital media has a significant role in our lives. As Katherine Hayles puts it in her book titled *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis, "*When my computer goes down or my Internet connection fails, I feel lost, disoriented, unable to work- in fact, I feel as if my hands have been amputated" (Hayles, 2012: 18). As we learn from Hayles's statement and some may even relate to this feeling, our dependence on digital media has transformed into an inseparable connection with our senses and body. Before we elaborate on this statement near the end of this chapter, I would like to take a moment to explain what digital media is and its relationship to social media. This is a necessary step as this study examines the role of digital media, both social media and phone applications, on the religious literacy process of Muslim American female youth. Simon Lindgren's perspective on digital media involves splitting the terms digital and media. He views *digital* as a term that refers to the nascent computing machines that developed into smart devices which enabled large scale networked connections, coordination, and communication in both automated and human driven ways. On the other hand, the term *media* refers to the collection of structures that dictate the ease or limits for how we act and interact with people (Lindgren, 2017: 14). Media is not restricted to televisions or smartphones but can also include other mediums where people can think, create, and do stuff such as the usage of language (Lindgren, 2017: 14). After all, we do not use our cognitive abilities only while watching television or using our smartphones. Lindgren proposes language as media types because we think as we speak to others using the language. Moreso, the rules and cultural context surrounding the language creates a limitation for people in their articulations which is one function of media. This means that through language people interact with others in a specific manner to make up for this limitation. In a similar sense, social media which is a type of digital media that became prevalent in the early 21st century allows specific human behavior to flourish while subjugating other behaviors. This study will reveal valuable information about this digital media structure (i.e., social media accounts and phone applications) and its impact on how we think, interact, and act in the times we live in.

The question, "What is social about social media?" was tackled by author Christian Fuchs in his book titled *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (2014). He defines social

media as a complex term with multi-layered meanings. He presents his readers with arguments that lead to four reasons of sociality of social media: (1) communication, (2) cognition and information, (3) community, and (4) collaboration and co-operative work. The first argument describes the discernable social aspect of social media owed to the communication between two users. Moreover, this communication transpires into a deeper bond known as a community. This feature is an outcome of repeated communication shared among the users which develops into feelings of belonging and friendship (Fuchs 2014, 5). Fuchs takes it a step further and argues that all social media carries a sociality from the aspects of society present in the technological objects. For example, the scenario of a university student typing a commentary on his computer reflects sociality because the thoughts embedded in his post are ideas probably shared by different people and even the laptop was designed by other people. This broad understanding of social media is the feature of cognition and information. The last characteristic of sociality found in media is known as collaboration and co-operative work which is described as the support of humans to each other. Fuchs illustrates a scenario of a team of individuals working on editing articles on Wikipedia (2014: 5). Throughout my thesis project I will be using the category of digital media that embraces sociality found in both Instagram social media accounts and one phone application named *Qariah*. As we will discover, this sociality is manifested in the formation of a virtual social group that became involved in the Foremother's Movement[11] and later enthusiastic users of the Qariah application.

3.3. Digital Media and Muslim American Female Youth

The Muslim female has been under the spotlight in America since the tragedy of 9/11 and afterwards with the rise of Islamophobia and it is still being discussed today. Amid this hostile climate, Muslim American women are actively working to take back the narrative of their identity through digital media participation. The majority of the

[11] The word, *foremothers*, denotes a succession of women collectively extending Quranic knowledge to one another so that the dedication of the tradition lives on. In this section of the chapter, I will attempt to portray the role storytelling within the Foremother's Movement and the Foremother's Movement itself had in producing pious values that led my interlocutors ascending towards a spiritual transformation. This Foremothers Movement was the tool that participants used to nurture their selves for preparation towards the journey of piety.

literature surrounding this topic revolves around hijab[12] representation within these spaces despite the different ways this female population practices holding onto their faith. That is not to say that there is a gap in literature focusing on other aspects of the Muslim-American identity such as activism or resisting stereotypes. However, this is not my focus. I aim to present an ethnographic study of the digital media practices of Muslim American female youth, in this section I will conduct a critical review of the literature available on the digital media practices concerning this population, especially the literature that tend to reference only hijab and the Muslim woman's outer appearance. Although hijab is mandatory for Muslim women, it is not the only worship that Muslim women observe according to my participants. Using this angle of understanding, I will pave the way for a new research perspective on more realistic digital media habits that consolidates all kinds of practices and later become internalized and ultimately shape the Muslim-American female identity.

In the outset, I would like to start discussing some literature available that frame donning the hijab as an act of resistance. Subsequently, I will focus attention on specific literature that explores the relationship between the Muslim female identity and the hijab. I aim to lay out vast amounts of literature for the reader's knowledge. Finally, I will compare the topics lined up in this layout of literature and its analyses with how it is denoted within digital media. This will allow the reader to visualize the subjective realities of members of the general Muslim female population, thus, allowing a preview into the subjective realities of my interlocutors that use digital media as described in the next chapter (chapter 5). Understandably, through wearing the hijab, Muslim females are placed on the front lines when compared to their male peers as they visibly represent their faith. In some situations, religious adherence is the only motive and then there are other reasons, some like political resistance as we will learn. The merging of these two reasons is demonstrated in research examining Palestinian women living under the Israeli occupation in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. This research discovered that veiling was a political statement and an act of anti-colonial resistance (Alayan, 2021: 1051). It was symbolism for a complex assortment of visibility, identity, and empowerment instead of merely a religious act (Alayan, 2021: 1051). Fanon's work, which is what this more contemporary study is based off

[12] The head covering Muslim women wear. It is worn as a command from Allah. It covers the hair, neck, ears as well as with modest clothing. Referenced in the Quran in Surah An-Noor verse 31.

of, indicates that the act of veiling disrupts the Western man's agenda of colonizing the land including the removal of the veil from customary dress code of the colonized woman (Fanon, 1959: 1051). For example, some of the 143 Palestinian female participants describe the voluntary act of wrapping oneself in the hijab is a form of agency which has the potential to undermine power in a non-dramatic way like riots do for instance (Alayan, 2021: 1056). Out of the 143-sample population, 26 West Bankers said they began wearing the hijab after the Second Intifada and the construction of the separation wall, a time when destruction and loss of life prompted these Palestinian women to use their bodies in fighting back against oppression (Alayan, 2021: 1056). In addition, they see this kind of everyday resistance as a source of power to them because it is enacted by them without any formal leadership (Alayan, 2021: 1056). Disputing the oppressed Muslim female narrative through fashion influencing, digital creation, food blogging, makeup artists, lifestyle blogging, or the music industry are all creative ways Muslim females integrate hijab expression and resistance. Awa Sanno takes her research in that direction where she focuses on the area of fashion influencing as she attempts to identify if Muslim female fashion influencers are conforming to the Western notion of modesty or if they are using the power of social media to portray a new realistic definition of modesty (Sanno, 2022: 3). Examining six well-known Muslim American fashion influencers and the way they chose to package and present themselves to their followers on Instagram and the messages they are putting out there about modesty, Sanno found that these influencers used and still use their platforms to contribute to the changing perception of modesty through their visual representations of it (Sanno, 2022: 6). During the period of conducting her research, Sanno observed that modesty was not a trend in the Western fashion industry, nonetheless, that changed through the subjects' resilience as they pushed back to keep their modest attire through malleable behavior (2022: 6). This was possible through the manner that the subjects shaped Western clothes to match their faith's guidelines. To achieve modesty they used the available style of clothing and constructed a fashion style to fit the Islamic standard style that they accept. The choice of selecting the existing clothing or cultural attires present in the United States versus the dominant Middle Eastern way of modesty, the abaya, illustrates an act of repurposing where agency, creativity, and empowerment create a more significant movement of change within the fashion industry market (Sanno, 2022: 12). As I conclude, this section that provides an overview of literature geared towards

representing hijab expression as a form of resistance in different contexts, I would like to pave the way for other literature on Muslim women that use hijab to develop and showcase their identity.

One study that analyzed the way Muslim American females were more aware of their Islamic religiousness is by virtually connecting with like-minded individuals to combat Islamophobic rhetoric through the IIIMuslims[13] organization, which has social media accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (Zakarison, 2016: 20). One of the group's projects was titled *Somewhere in America* by Mipsterz, a name that combines all the qualities of a perceived Muslim American woman such as one who is fashion-forward, adheres to the Islamic and Divine scripture and knowledge, is creative and has imagination. (Zakarison 2016, 20). After launching the video which served the purpose of sharing a glimpse of the Muslim American female life with the world, many voiced their concerns about the video's message. There was much criticism of the kind of representation it was echoing to non-Muslims about Muslim American women overall (Zakarison 2016, 28). Those that refused to support the IllMuslims organization and their project Mipsterz argued that it was a hijack of hijab representation to fit a specific trend that not many adhere to in the first place (Zakarison, 2016: 28). They believed that there is a whole other population that dress completely different than these women and that they deserve equal representation. One of the characteristics of this trend is the emphasis on the superficial culture of fashion and consumerism that is always critiqued which unfortunately is what is becoming hijab and that to them is worrisome (Zakarison, 2016: 28). Furthermore, this Mipsterz video shows Muslim women donning different fashion styles and essentially objectifies them and that is not what hijab should be. The true nature of this fashion is a trendier hijab style that is not in compliance with the spirit and intent of Islamic modesty. Another case where digital media literature essentially reduces the Muslim American female experience into one narrative highlighting the outward hijab symbol more than any other religious practice is found in Raihanah Mydin's work titled *World Hijab Day: Positioning Hijabi in Cyberspace*. Referring to a Facebook page created by Nazma Khan, *World Hijab Day* started after a traumatic personal experience of

[13] The Ill Muslims group is a social and creative outlet for Muslim millennials. They host events that focus on building community all while promoting creativity as stated on their website and social media accounts. https://www.instagram.com/illmuslims/?hl=en

religious discrimination and abuse that happened to Khan, a veiled Bangladeshi migrant who attended school and university in New York. Her purpose in creating this page was to promote greater awareness and empathy for the dignity of being a hijabi[14] (Mydin, 2018: 98). This page with its 700,000 followers evolved into a space for hijabis to exercise their self-agency in the act of veiling as seen from the testimonies and selfies (Mydin, 2018, 98). The scope of the participants encompassed those that belonged to other religious factions such as Christianity, Judaism, and some were even Atheists; all insisted on joining the campaign of wearing the hijab in solidarity with their Muslim sisters in humanity (Mydin, 2018, 106). Nevertheless, this example and many others that were not mentioned should not be defining the overall digital media practices of these Muslim American female youth. This literature as we have seen is all very telling of the experiences of this population, but literature conducted with the objective of analyzing other parts of the Muslim American female identity is often neglected and should be brought to life. One study took it a step further and steered in this direction as it discovered the role of social media in shaping the Muslim American female identity. It found that using this space allowed for the majority of the participants an opportunity to learn and connect with other Muslims around the globe, especially religious leaders or imams thus, improving their spirituality and religious identity (Hassan, 2018: 45). This study does a great job giving an all-encompassing view into the various and unique social media interactions that the participants are involved in. These interactions include networking with Muslim activists and hijabi content creators among other examples that were cited in this study, trends which we have seen in other literature as well. In addition, this study disclosed the kind of unity that the participants found and the expansion of their local group to grow beyond the socially constructed boundaries (Hassan 2018: 45). As I attempt to reveal through my study and similar to Hassan's approach, I will delve into the details on the manner that these interlocutors learn from the accounts on this space through a religious literacy process and the kind of identity that it transpires into.

[14] Hijabi is a term that describes a Muslim woman who wears the hijab or head covering and dresses modestly.

3.3.1. An Alternative Approach: Discourse Analysis Framework

As I have addressed earlier, there is a specific discourse or reality linked to Muslim women around the world whether it is presented in digital media or physical spaces. I believe that this literature on Muslim American female youth in both physical and virtual spaces is not far-reaching to the integrity that is present. Thus, there is still much work that needs to be done to dig into and reveal a comprehensive nature of the truth that is created discursively. We may be able to see superficially how these statements transpired in the first place. Still, it is just as important to look beyond these constructed statements of the subjects within the respective periods. Michel Foucault, who held a crucial role in developing this framework, conceptualizes discourses as relatively rule-bound sets of statements (also known as the language) that impose limits on what gives meaning (Foucault, 2002: 13). He continues to describe discourse as a fragment of history posing its limits, its divisions, its transformations, and the specific modes of temporality (Foucault, 2002: 12). He accredits this discussion to a perceived power that can modify and impact what we believe to be confirmed through modes of discourses. In his understanding, discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart' (Foucault 1998: 100-1). Foucault adheres to the general social constructionist premise that knowledge or power is not just a reflection of reality and that for one to understand truth one must trace it back to regimes of knowledge that determine what is true and false (Foucault, 2002: 13). In this section, I aim to use Foucault's theory to pick at the discourses that are meshed within the narratives of my interlocutors. Their narratives are essential not just because they are very descriptive and informative of their own lived experiences, but because of the dispersed and pervasive power manifested that leads to the discourses and, thus, their experiences. In addition, this power is accepted forms of knowledge that has a productive and positive effect on the behavior of my participants and not one that is coercive or oppressive as one may imagine. I do not intend to concentrate on the features of power only, but the discourses produced as well. It serves to note that this means that I will follow a path of not focusing on a specific regime of knowledge that controls my interlocutors in a negative way as it is not a structure or institution. In its place I will focus on where it all began, a worldwide incident (i.e., pandemic) that pushed for power relations in a virtual world and a production of discourse which overlaid a path for the experiences of my

interlocutors. The world is never ready for a pandemic at any given time. Yet, it is imperative to make known that a pandemic can malleably communicate and change social behavior in a specific direction. One way is through social media and other digital media which are known as examples of communications that feed the public meanings within different sectors. It can be the cause of spreading communication that directs social behavior towards faith as we see in my research.

We reviewed some examples of literature illustrating the creative participant utilization of spaces (i.e. social media posts and other digital media) to hack what became normalized discourse of submissive and other adverse rhetoric of Muslim women. Instead of intaking the anti-Islamic communications on this space, participants follow a different direction of rejecting these communications and countering the already present discourse as my study will show. What we will soon examine is the effect that the virtual religious world that my interlocutors are living in will have on their minds. Through focusing on their minds, digital media, presents a role in creating obedient and pious users. This is not achieved through coercion but through voluntary action. In other words, the interlocutors in my study reacted by getting more closer in their faith. They indulged in two types of Islamic worship, God-consciousness and connection with the Quran, as a way to take back their narrative and ground themselves in their reason for existence. In the next couple of pages, I would like to bring to light any ethnographic study that exposes the lives of interlocutors who opposed a specific discourse and used their faith to accomplish it. This study follows a different conduit from my study in the sense that the discourses that were produced were bi-products of regimes or political institutions, a phenomenon that is not applied in my study. This does not disaffirm the fact that the reasons for participant engagement in Islamic worship is similar to the interlocutors in my study. These discourses that they lived through were the reason for pushing them to this religious engagement and connection. The first study gives the spotlight to Quranic memorization methodologies in Turkey. Although it is not the United States- the country of focus in my research- this study does a great job of providing a historical account of the role of politics and the development of this type of worship historically (Coşkun, 2022:). In other words, this study focuses on Turkey's secular movement

known as the Kemalist National Project[15]. In addition, it focuses on the impact this movement had on the interlocutors to push for Quran memorization and preservation in their networks (Coşkun 2022, 72). During the first period of Turkish Republic rule, the closure of *dar al qurras* issued under the Unification of Education law on March 3, 1924 caused stagnation and stigma in the education of Quran memorization (72-73). There were no documented attempts to try and substitute them with other specialized madrasas and the only action that was taken was the transfer of all education and training institutions to the Ministry of Education (Koç, 2014: 375-405). This period of twenty four years of banning the Quran in Turkey, resulted in a complete crackdown on all institutions that facilitated Quran memorization transpired into one of the making of hidden Quran memorization spaces in locations such as barns, homes, and trains (Coşkun, 2022: 127). The appearance of the society presented hints of this crackdown in the prohibition of books written in Arabic and the Arabic call to prayer also known as the *athan* was banned (Coşkun, 2022: 30). In situations where the presence of Islamic clergy is needed such as funeral burials, these dismal times found no one qualified to take on the responsibility (Coşkun, 2022: 30). Leaving the readers with this brief history of Turkey, I want to use this opportunity to highlight the experiences of these interlocutors living during this time so that we can attain a complete picture of the discourses present. As one may assume, this compilation of the Quran was a very diligent and necessary process and has been imprinted on different religious communities of upholding these efforts. The interlocutors in Coskun's study saw this Quran memorization process as their duty to stop the opposing Kemalist government from further stripping the people of their religious identity.

3.4. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has come to an end, as I target the appropriate definition for digital media, and social media, and discover the relationship the two media types have with each other. This conceptual analysis of the media types was intentionally momentary as my only aim was to provide the readers with a lens to view the significance of each media type. Moreso, the purpose of this chapter was to explain

[15] The Republic People's Party (CHP) was established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk on September 9, 1923, not long before the declaration of the Republic of Turkey on October 29.

the current discourse production emerging from these sources. Most literature available on digital media and social media concerning Muslim American female youth tends to reference only hijab and the Muslim woman's outer appearance as the sole discourse production. As I argue, this is only a fraction of the meanings that my interlocutors acquire. I will bring to light meanings that are primarily associated with the inner qualities of a pious woman.

In the following chapter, I will uncover a more comprehensive meaning to the discourses produced from these media types. I will lay out the techniques my interlocutors develop as they indulge themselves in the religious literacy process through these mediums.

CHAPTER IV

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I give a brief overview of the subject matter, the history of Islam in the United States, and connect its progression to the Islamic schooling system that is found across the United States albeit being in different stages of development. Without these institutions, a bleak future is expected where generations will have difficulty staying connected to their faith and its teachings. As it will be impossible for me to go over all the Islamic school systems in each state, and since it is not the purpose of this chapter, I decided to proceed, in the second section, with summarizing the history of Islamic schooling in the United States beginning with the style of religiosity that early enslaved Muslims practiced and then its development in the later Muslim communities. In sections three and four I focus on two of these educational systems, specifically in Michigan and Florida. With Michigan being the pivot of this research, I attempt to provide all the necessary background information such as the masjid communities and topographies for the readers in hopes that they see the impact of these institutions. This is so that when the question presents itself: what does one expect to happen if these institutions were to decline or the members of these institutions were to be separated from these spaces? They will have an answer. As the readers will soon find, I argue that religious literacy is dependent on the presence of religious educational systems that Muslim American youth receive. At times these systems can take different shapes and forms (i.e. physical or virtual).

4.2. An Overview of Islamic Schooling in The U.S.

The presence of Islam in the United States has contributed to its richness culturally, politically, artistically, among many other ways. The American Muslim story begins

with the first Muslims that were forced to arrive to a land and work tirelessly just to survive, those being the slave workers. To connect with and learn the ways of the early people requires us to understand the instruments and mechanisms they constructed to preserve their faith. This will be the foundation that the subsequent generations of Muslims will embrace and build on. Following this category of Muslims, another group, namely the immigrant Muslims made America home. With the resources that they had at the time and, in certain situations, the remains of Islam that were left by the Muslim African slaves, immigrant Muslims worked to build on this foundation. After the establishment of masjids that included schools teaching Arabic[16] and Quran, the Muslims quickly realized that this was not enough to sustain the youth. This led to initiatives to complement the already present tools that educated the people on their faith.

Before trying to understand the commitment of Muslim female American youth in learning more about their faith through various social digitalized mediums, it is initially essential to know the histories of their grandparents- not a biological kinship but through a kinship of faith- that shaped the foundation of Islam in their spaces and daily lives until this day. Where did they come from? How did these people settle in these areas and what do these populations look like today? What problems did they face? What institutions did they find essential to reduce or eliminate these issues? What were the impacts of these institutions on each other, the people, and the future generations to come? The answers to these questions will be readily available to us after careful consideration of chronological and geographical factors of Islam in America. The Lowcountry Digital History Initiative (LDHI), a digital public history project, presented by the College of Charleston in South Carolina revealed the connection American slaves had with Islam through examination of documents such as the runaway slave advertisements dispersed during the period of 1730-1790[17]. These public documents were plastered everywhere displaying slave names that had Islamic origin like Fatima and Moosa. Some of these public documents were written in terminology describing Muslims such as Moorish and Fula. They were mainly found in advertisements displayed in Southern states, thus implying that the enslaved Muslims resided primarily in the South. Historian Muhammad Fraser-Rahim describes

[16] The Arabic language is an important language to Muslims because it is the language of the Quran.
[17] Lowcountry Digital History Initiative 2022

how this historical record continued its efforts even after emancipation. The LDHI documents another project known as the Federal Writer's Project conducted in the 1930s in Georgia (specifically in Saint Simons and Sapelo Island). The main objective of this project was to disclose the Islamic practices of the enslaved people through memories of their relatives. This was accomplished through federal employees interviewing former enslaved people and their descendants while referencing plantation journals and enslaved Muslim manuscripts (Lowcountry Digital History Initiative 2022). The discovery lies in the merging of cultural practices that erased the source of the religious practice in the long run. A more contemporary research study which was authored by Khaled Beydoun, a law professor at Wayne State University, uncovers the neglected inclusion of Muslim slaves in legal scholarship and how this was accomplished (Beydoun, 2014: 163). According to Beydoun, two factors resulted in this intentional exclusion: the law characterized Africans as Black slaves with no rights, thus stripping them of their religious identity and the utilization of immigration laws in propagating a restricted racial identity of Arabs and Turks that is void of any genuine religious aspect (Beydoun, 2014: 163). In 1790 the Naturalization Act was passed which listed the rules that allowed someone to be eligible for citizenship through the naturalization process. This historic moment spearheaded the political direction in American society where Muslim presence connotated Arab presence with an embodied barbaric nature (Beydoun, 2014: 167). The result of this move was the segregation of Blacks from the Muslim diaspora and the "outcast" of Muslim Arabs from the United States as a country.

As we have come to learn from project initiatives such as the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, there is a consensus among scholars such as Muhammad Fraser-Rahim and Khaled Beydoun that the narrative of Muslims in America stems from the traditions the enslaved people carried with them from their homelands originating from various parts of Africa. Most of these slaves were a combination of noble Africans or had some level of education. They became enslaved all while desperately trying to hang onto their religious traditions and culture. Some could not practice these traditions in the harsh and strictly monitored environments they lived in. One historical figure from Senegal named Ayuba Suleiman Diallo was enslaved and sold in Annapolis, Maryland to a tobacco farmer in 1731. This educated and well-off man turned slave was fluent in the Fulla and Arabic languages; he wrote letters- which are

preserved until today- to his father about his dire situation in hopes that he would ransom him (Curtis, 2009: 2). Mamout Yarrow was another example that lived to share his story after being enslaved for 44 years in Maryland working in the brick construction industry. After he was given his freedom, he became a successful entrepreneur and a well-respected Muslim within the community (Dirks, 2022: 138). He was known for his exceptional character and being a devout Muslim who regularly sang praises to Allah or prayed one of his daily prayers in the streets. The last example that will be shared to give a glimpse of how the lineage of an enslaved person living in America transpires is that of Kunta Kinte. He was a 20-year-old who was jumped by four men while cutting and gathering wood in the jungle. After being sold as a slave he ran away three times. The last time he was captured, he was given the choice between castration or amputating one of his legs and he chose the latter. Now living an unfortunate fate, he was then sold to another owner who gave him light tasks to complete due to his disability. There he got married and had a daughter named Kizzy who was taught the Mandinka language and the basic tenets of Islam. She was later raped by her owner and gave birth to George who proudly donned the typical Muslim dress in a historical picture found in the Collections and Stories of American Muslims. This was proof that the Islam of Kinte was passed down to at least his second generation of descendants. Fortunately, leaving behind pictures or personal narratives just as Ayuba and the others did, these inscriptions and documents, despite how rare in quantity they were, proved their value as they described the enslaved people's lifestyles in detail for future generations to remember significant contributors to the country's history. The story of Ayuba, Yarrow, and Kinte as well as many other enslaved people reveal the difficult journey Islam took from different countries to exist within the United States.

After the enslaved people were emancipated, a second wave of Muslims arrived in the United States around 1878-1924. These migrants, although few, were mainly from Arab countries such as Lebanon and Syria searching for a better quality of life (Haddad, 2004: 3). The climate during this time favored Anglo orthodoxy which resulted in the assimilation of these migrant workers. For example, many changed their Muslim names to sound more Caucasian like Mohamed to Mo or Ali to Al (Haddad, 2004: 4). Another trace of Islam in America was the influx of another group of migrants during the 1950s. This new wave of Muslims was from the countries of

Palestine (especially after the illegal establishment of Israel in 1948), Iraq, and Egypt (Haddad, 2004: 4). This segment of migrants had a huge role in restoring the Islamic faith into the hearts of some African Americans. As the African Americans began settling North to bypass Jim Crow laws in the South, these migrants were settling in the North also in states like Ohio, Michigan, Iowa, and the Dakotas. Afterward, especially in the 1960s, immigrants from South Asia started making their way to America. This diverse group of Muslims came to the United States to attend university or to see employment opportunities. They were predominantly educated and spoke English as well as other languages such as German and British English because of their exposure to their educational systems back home (Haddad, 2004: 5). These distinct biographies illustrate the trajectory of the religion of Islam, moving from one region of the United States to the other. Today, the Muslim American population has increased in comparison to previous years with the majority of Muslims in Michigan (4.7%), Florida (6.3%), California (10.5%), Illinois (13.8%), New York (15.1%), and Texas (16.2%) (Harrell 2010). As a way to comprehend the complete picture, these movements must be analyzed in light of the projects these communities initiated to keep its members connected to Islam. These projects were the groundwork to the indoctrination process of the Muslim American communities in their faith's teachings and led to visions of progress that we see today.

The sections of this chapter will concentrate on analyzing the evolution of Islamic schooling through different projects in the state of Florida and then will zoom in on the operating projects in Detroit, Michigan where this study was conducted. Florida and Michigan were the top two states that I was invested in because I had access to the communities and the timeline to their Islamic schooling projects. Through this analysis we will learn the ways that Islamic schooling projects act as a means for communities to preserve and thus, promote the process of learning faith. These projects were the building blocks that helped the early Muslims and those that came after to confront their hardships in America. More specifically, the kind of hardship that will be emphasized in this paper is the hardship of seeking and preserving religious knowledge. Without this preservation of knowledge, the future generation of slaves were left with nothing to connect them to their faith. This same population of slaves that were forced to live a life against their will in every aspect of their life. Islam is known to be a complete way of life, one that calls for every believer to obey Allah's

commands with all of their being. In the harsh conditions the slaves lived in, the more apparent hardships that were often unique to Muslim slaves were adhering to the five pillars of Islam. As an example, through the strict labor schedule that the enslaved people were placed under, they were not given time to complete their ablutions, let alone the five daily prayers which held deep significance of spiritual connection to God or the right to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. At this point, enslaved people realized the need to come up with creative measures to learn about their faith without their masters discovering their ways. Those seeking to connect with the Quran searched for the enslaved people who memorized the entire Quran and had them write it out from their recollections (Dirks, 2022: 101). It was challenging to get a copy of the Quran due to the financial restraint the enslaved people were placed under, so writing from memory was the only method to remain connected to the Quranic teachings. Sections of the writings, if not all of them were passed down to the next generation either physically or through oral tradition.

4.3. Islamic Schooling as an Instrument of Religious Literacy in Michigan

The histories of the diverse factions of Muslims that lived within the city of Detroit have the potential to configure the level of religious knowledge the youth have. There lies a connection between the method of how these youth acquire faith-based knowledge and the histories or concurrent lifestyles of the various groups of Muslims within a region. Detroit city's Muslim identity is often conflated with the Arab American identity. This misconception perpetuates overlooking the historical parties that left their marks on the religious makeup of the city and state composition overall. Inevitably, along the way of establishing themselves and taking ownership of their Muslim American narrative, Muslims in Detroit as well as other American cities learned to recognize what they lacked to prosper even if it meant making mistakes along the way. Coexistence between different Muslim factions further assisted in this realization of prioritizing the needs and intervention of the general Muslim community. This response was the drive that pushed the Muslim-American communities in the United States. For example, in the state of Pennsylvania, the Moorish, Ahmadi, and Orthodox Muslims learned to exist among each other despite their differences (Bowen, 2018:). United under the banner of religious intellectualism and advancement, these communities joined forces to organize the Uniting Islamic

Society of America Convention and the mother organization African Moslem Welfare Society of America. Similar movements were seen in cities such as Detroit (MI). For example, a commencement of the opening ceremony of the Highland Park masjid in Michigan occurred in the year 1921 where an Ahmadiyya scholar from India named Muhammad Sadiq was welcomed into the community. At the time, the community believed that Sadiq was the most suitable spokesperson to address the American public, so they welcomed him to their community to be an Imam of the masjid. According to some narratives, Sadiq's presence within the community caused mischief as he tried to instill Ahmaddiya focused agenda on constituents that favored an Islamic orthodox lifestyle. Sadiq was left with the only option of parting ways with the community in such a short period (Howell, 2014: 52). Sadiq's image was once held in high regard within this community of early immigrant Muslims, but this didn't stop his influence in other communities especially the black communities present at the time. This experience was a warning to the early Muslim American communities that their children would be guided in a direction that blends religious teachings with other non-Muslim cultures that were not their own. Following this alarming realization, the parents in the community took matters into their own hands and started schools in their basements that focused on teaching the Islamic curriculum. For example, in the 1920s one of these parents was Hussein Karoub who held Arabic reading and writing classes as well as rote memorization of the Quran (Howell, 2014: 52). Needless to say, these early Muslim American communities were not the only presence to leave a mark on society.

Another organization that started to gain momentum and attracted many followers was the Nation of Islam. The popularity of the Nation of Islam is tied to Sadiq in an indirect way through its members that were taught Islamic teachings under him. It has been reported that Sadiq's very first converts were several Garveyites[18] that were dedicated to his missionary attempts that provided a means for them to learn anything about the religion of their ancestors (Bayoumi, 2001: 41). These members adopted earlier teachings of Marcus Garvey, a Black Nationalist, and then Sadiq's Ahmadiyya Islam

[18] These are a group of people living during the 20th century were influenced by Black Nationalism. The leader of this movement was Marcus Garvey. He aimed to unite all Africans who were facing discrimination and marginalization in the United States and other countries under the banner of their collective African descent.

and then the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam's deep roots can be found in Detroit city since the 1930s as it made its way to other states through emissary work. The impact the Nation of Islam had in the city of Detroit was profound because of its emphasis on uplifting the African diaspora in the United States through building a new religious identity, lifestyle, education, and commerce (Tsoukalas, 2021: 46). After the Great Depression in 1929, African Americans were discriminated against even more and suffered a great deal economically. The founder of this movement, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, initially intended for it to be a way of reintroducing the Black Man's religion, Islam, to empower the black man. While Fard's objective from the movement was achieved, the movement simultaneously took a detour and paved the way for orthodox Islam to flourish in Detroit (Howell, 2014: 222). Unpredictably, even though there was a difference in the theological mindset, some of the Nation of Islam members slowly began to side with Sunni Islam teachings (Howell, 2014: 222). One well-known example was Malcolm X who supported principles of the Nation of Islam and held a spokesperson position representing the organization. He was known to advocate for black superiority. However, after his pilgrimage to Mecca he began to practice orthodox Islam. He began connecting with others of different perspectives such as Martin Luther King among other leaders from different networks.

Table 4.1. Masjids of Interest

Masjid Name	***Location***	***Date of Establishment***	***Founding Figure***
Highland Park	Highland Park	1920	Mohammad and Hussein Karoub
American Moslem Society	Dearborn	1930	Hussein El-Haje
Masjid Wali Muhammad/Temple No. 1	Detroit	1940	Wallace D. Fard Muhammad

The movement of the Nation of Islam throughout the United States was accompanied with a syncretic influx of Muslims. Today, the city of Detroit is known as home to Arabs that immigrated seeking job opportunities promised in the Ford factories. By unraveling this Detroit narrative, we arrive to the conclusion that it is not very distinct from the other states. Similar to the other states mentioned previously, this city

consisted of Muslim immigrants. The majority were Arab, their background origin linked to the Middle East. Some were Muslims and some adhered to other faiths such as Christianity. Those who called themselves Muslims believed that institution building was a necessary step to settling in this city. The immigrants that built the first mosque in the area were Syrian brothers named Mohammed and Hussein Karoub ("Michigan Radio", 2021).[19] They envisioned Detroit to be the center of Islam where all kinds of Muslims practiced freely ("Michigan Radio" 2021). Their vision partly came true in the sense that masjids were established everywhere within the city, yet the usage for each space varied in its purpose. This meant that the functions in the masjids still standing today are on a much larger scale and encompass everything from Friday prayers to holiday celebrations to Islamic schools. This was not the case back in the day for most masjids in Detroit or masjids across America where masjids mainly served the purpose of social gatherings.

The first masjid that represented Muslim presence in Michigan was located in the city of Highland Park during the 1920s. This place of worship did not stand for long and closed shortly after due to different ideological beliefs (Howell 2014, 55). In addition, some link this shut down with the automobile industry work schedules which pulled people away from Friday congregations and other types of worship. The hours of employment posed an issue; however, there was another problem where many of these employees relocated to be closer to their new employment location ("Michigan Radio", 2021). The abandonment of this masjid by the community members did not deter them from the idea of another masjid in the city. In the 1930s the American Moslem Society was established by a group of Syrian and Lebanese individuals, one of whom is named Hussein El Haje. El Haje was honored at a banquet event in recent years for his role in launching this masjid (Howell, 2014: 4). He was remembered as the founder who dug out the basement of the masjid and a dedicated father who sent his children to the Sunday Islamic school (Howell, 2014: 7).

Regardless of the intentions of the founders of the American Moslem Society, there is no doubt that the formation of this religious institution was a catalyst in bringing together generations of people through faith and, more importantly, later became a

[19] https://www.michiganradio.org/arts-culture/2021-08-16/was-highland-park-the-home-of-americas-first-mosque-its-complicated

model to replicate throughout the city of Detroit. As the population of Muslims increased in diversity, more masjids were established to accommodate the community's religious needs. In 1940 another masjid was built called Masjid Wali Muhammad formerly known as Temple No. 1 under Nation of Islam leadership. This temple assisted with many services for the people such as community centers and schools, and was the headquarters for the movement ("Historical Marker", 2021). After the leader of the movement passed away, his son Imam Warith Deen Mohammed took over and reoriented the teachings toward orthodox Islam. Along with the many changes, the temple would be renamed a masjid. At this point, there were different Muslim circles present within the community. Ultimately, this led the masjids within the city to strive towards better networking and coordinating events together.

Islam's history in the city of Detroit, Michigan is an account shared by immigrant Muslims and African American Muslims. What started as separate accounts of their Muslim experience ended up being one collective account of how both groups transmitted Islam to the city. We learn that both viewed religion as a form of self-empowerment. The immigrant Muslims were determined to build masjid spaces to protect their interests as a community by being comfortable in expressing themselves religiously. In the same way, African American Muslims strived to reignite their affinity to Islam to elevate themselves from society's limitations.

Although our focus was the history of Islam in the state of Michigan, it is necessary never to forget the similarity that exists between Muslims living across most states: the seeds of Islamic faith that the enslaved African Muslims carried and planted in the region. Despite the majority of slaves losing touch with their Islamic heritage, Islam still found a way back to them regardless of the states they resided in or moved to after their freedom. As narrations of the stories of the Muslim slaves are shared it is essential to point out the unique methods of acquiring religious information just as much as the brutality and violence forced on them. This is the start of a new study of the tools that the later Muslim Americans adopted and worked with. Taking the example of South Florida, research shows that the Nation of Islam was the first obvious indicator of a community that declared their adherence to Islam. Adding to the masjids of the followers of the NOI, South Asian immigrant Muslims actively striving towards their education pursuits built masjids to have a space of their own for worship. The Floridian

experience portrays a diverse Muslim community that succeeded in their mission of establishing a space, like all Muslim American communities, but noticeably did not spare any effort to connect until later on. As soon as frequent associations between the different communities of Muslims in the area took place, the community discovered that the current atmosphere was not sufficient enough to give the youth a solid understanding of their positions in society as Muslim Americans. This resulted in promoting a framework based on the Quran and Sunnah to teach the faith; many school systems adopted the "Islam is a way of life" approach. The Detroit experience was also a prime example of a community that attempted to unify the different Muslim sects from its inception. Initially, the objective of constructing the masjid space was to bring all Muslim communities, be it immigrant or sectarian centered, together. To their dismay, as the mission of this establishment steered away from its origin, the Muslim American community found that Islamic schooling was a necessary investment for the guidance of their children and future leaders. It helped reaffirm the need to refine religious education in their spaces. In cities like Detroit, the construction of a masjid was not seen as solely being a space that fulfills the purpose of dialogue between different religious entities but instead was seen as an appeal to safeguard the collective identity of its members. In addition, there was a persistent realization that Islamic education needed to be promoted as a responsibility to its members if the community wanted qualified and knowledgeable religious leaders from within to speak on behalf of their community and own their role in society. The evolution of traditional Islamic education to meet the needs of the community was so critical at the time because it was the only tool that the communities saw as the path that paved the way to positive change.

4.4. Michigan Masjids and the Communities of Interest

In *The Art of Fieldwork* Harry Wolcott, who was once a leading author in anthropology and research methods, described the role of a fieldworker as very similar to the role of an artist who reveals something already present but hidden (Wolcott, 2004: 40). Wolcott utilizes the example illustrated by anthropologist Edmund Carpenter during one of his studies on the art of carving when he states, "The carver rarely sets out, at least consciously, to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find its hidden form and, if that is not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it,

humming or chanting as he works. Then he brings it out: Seal, hidden, emerges. It was always there: he didn't create it; he released it; he helped it step forth" (Wolcott 2004, 40). As we understand from Carpenter's study, the location of interest for an ethnographer ties into this form of art because the skill of selecting the location of the fieldwork leads to the object of attention. In the context of this study, as was previously stated, the selected three masjid communities, Islamic Center of Detroit, Tawheed Center located in Farmington Hills, and the Muslim Unity Center are all located within the city of Detroit, Michigan. According to Arab America's statistics, a national media organization, Detroit is known to harbor many Arab ethnic groups since the 1890s due to the influence of the automotive industry. Among this enormous Arab population living in this city, 42% identify as Muslim (Baker et. al., 2003:). Another more recent study conducted on Muslims residing in Michigan found three major racial and ethnic groups: African Americans, South Asians, and Arabs (Alrawi et al. 2011: 489). Although the objective of the study was from a healthcare approach, it still gives us an overall picture of the diversity of the Muslim population located in Southeast Michigan. Although these specific statistical numbers are significant of this study, it is still important to note that there are other cities outside of Michigan that are as diverse as Detroit, possibly even more diverse, yet having easy access to the participants encouraged me to continue fieldwork in Detroit. The idea of a researcher using their networks during their ethnography has been done countless times by other researchers. One study that followed such an example is an ethnography that was conducted in a French factory with high security protocol which is known as SEVESO 2 (Becker et al, 2002: 114). The ethnographer utilized network connections to get into the heart of the factory, to observe the working subjects (Becker et al., 2002: 114). Based on the researcher's point of view, without these networks there would be no reliable results. In the case of my ethnography, I am a member of many masjids located in various suburbs across Michigan, but the three masjids which are the focus of this study were ones that I had frequented since my younger years. These masjids are complex in that they each offer more than just a space for prayer. In addition to a prayer space, most act as a community center for playing sports in the gym area or a place to gather members through events such as weddings and other occasions.

The topography of each masjid, a valuable feature originating from Detroit city diversity, demonstrates the different backgrounds the female youth originate from.

This was important because the aim was not to explore any three masjids. Instead, the purpose was to analyze three masjids that have different environments than the other which will eventually be an accurate reflection of the attendees or female youth that reside within the city. The first masjid that I was able to learn more about is the Islamic Center of Detroit. My interview with one of the founders who will be identified as Sami gave me a historical timeline of the masjid's developments. Sami described this masjid as home to Arab attendees; in its earlier years the members were mainly from Palestinian, Syrian, and Egyptian origin. As the years went by, the Yemeni population from the neighboring masjids known as Dix and Masjid Mu'ath Bin Jabal began shifting their attendance to the ICD because of its attractive programs that called for community engagement. After being purchased originally as a warehouse, the founders continued its expansion until they opened it to the public in the year 2000 on Eid AlFitr[20]. This masjid has undergone multiple expansions to accommodate the community it serves, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The building acts a community center encompassing a gym area, Islamic School, banquet hall, mental wellness space, and two prayer areas for men and women. Those who attend the masjid functions, specifically the female attendees, appear more conservative in their style as they enter the doors wearing the black abaya or other forms of long dress (i.e., maxi dress or maxi skirt and a cardigan on top).

The Muslim Unity Center is another masjid that was built in 1993 by two main families, the Salman and Baig family.[21] This masjid was built in multiple phases and many families donated until it was fully constructed[22]. Originally, the masjid attracted a majority Pakistani community that lived within the local neighborhood of West Bloomfield Hills. Slowly this demographic shifted and now the population of attendees are 90% Syrian[23]. The facilities located within this building are a banquet hall, Children's Academy, Islamic Sunday school, men and women prayer areas, and cafeteria. As far as the typography of the female attendees of this masjid, the most noticeable feature was the turban hijab style. These same females also pair the turban

[20] Interview with "Sami" on December 2022 Michigan.
[21] Interview with "Aliaa" on December 2022 Michigan.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

with jeans and shirts. Other dominant appearances include white two-piece hijabs and mid-length shirts or no hijab at all.

Finally, the last masjid that I did my observations and interviews in was the Tawheed Center located in the suburban city of Farmington Hills. This masjid was established in 1993 by the founder, Imtiaz Rahmet and others that supported this project.[24] It was initially a tiny home with a large piece of land surrounding it. According to my interview with Asem, the attendees of the masjid tend to rally around the Imam[25] and this is the case in this masjid with 80% from the Desi culture[26]. In 2006 the masjid expanded to include an Islamic School, hifz[27] school, gym, banquet hall, and additional parking. The female youth population of this masjid was mainly of Asian background, specifically from countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Their culture was manifested in their style of clothing as they walked in wearing the shalwar kameez and vibrant jewelry. Some wore the traditional hijab wrapped around their head and covered their necks. In this same space, some young women entered the masjid wearing a piece of cloth wrapped loosely around their heads with their hair visibly showing from underneath. Similar to the Muslim Unity Center attendees, some did not wear the hijab at all.

4.5. Islamic Schooling as an Instrument of Religious Literacy in Florida

Seeking and preserving religious knowledge took a different route within the newer communities, the followers of the Nation of Islam and the Muslim immigrants. In the state of Florida, slave presence was first observed in the city of St. Augustine where African slaves that ran away from the English plantations in the Carolinas sought refuge in Fort Musa. This fort stood tall from 1738 to 1812 after being officially established by Spain (Rashid, 2001: 209. The Africans integrated within this Spanish community and even began participating in their expeditions. In other regions of Florida, newer communities like the immigrants and members of the Nation of Islam arrived. These communities had rights and were able to access resources to construct

[24] Interview with "Asem" on December 2022 Michigan.
[25] Imam is a term used to describe the person who leads prayers in a masjid.
[26] Interview with "Asem" on December 2022 Michigan.
[27] Hifz is a term used to describe a Quran memorization school.

the desired environments they wished to live in that reflected an alignment with their religious guidelines. South Florida is currently home to the largest Hispanic population. However, Hispanic Muslims comprised a small percentage during the 1900s (Krijestorac, 2015: 276). Florida's Muslim population is a mixture mainly of Caribbean, South Asian, African American, and Hispanic groups. The African American population was the first to establish a masjid in South Florida in the year 1958 which they called Masjid Al-Ansar (Krijestorac, 2015: 277). This masjid was known as a hub for the activities of the Nation of Islam and was under the leadership of Imam Najiy originally, and then was led by Imam Nasir Ahmed afterwards in 1977-1987. Although there were different ethnicities present at the time, the diverse Muslim community showed no interest in interaction. Instead, history shows us a polarization of different ethnicities separating into their own masjid community. The explanation behind these societal patterns was due to some Muslims not recognizing the Temple 29, which was associated with the Nation of Islam, as a masjid or a house of worship for Muslims (Krijestorac, 2015: 278). The flow of immigrants into the state also attributed to a predominantly South Asian influence. These immigrants settled in Miami for their educational endeavors at nearby universities. Within these universities, chapters of a non-profit organization known as the Muslim Student Association[28] (MSA) were established by a student body devoted to the religion of Islam in 1972 (Krijestorac, 2015: 283). Some students even utilized a home as a masjid and met regularly for the five daily prayers and the weekly Friday congregations. Similar to the experience of many Muslim immigrants across America, they continued this lifestyle until they had the means to purchase property that provided them with a larger dedicated space to exercise their worship and simultaneously accommodate the growing congregant population. This experience was discovered in another study conducted that resulted in the development of an Islamic school in Florida. This Islamic school fosters the preservation of religious knowledge and untangles for us the kind of knowledge and values internalized by the students and relayed in their narratives.

The first study that we will discover remains within a qualitative framework. This study examines the personal experiences of female youth involved in a local project,

[28] Muslim Students Association is a religious organization that is dedicated to establishing and maintaining Islamic societies on college campuses in Canada and the United States.

namely an Islamic school, which is called the Florida Islamic School (Martinez, 2012: 41). This research presents valuable information on the type of faith-based knowledge taught to the younger generation at one of the many Islamic schools in the area. These narratives reveal to us the method of schooling as an instrument that this community started and built upon to immerse their young adults in an Islamic environment for the purpose of staying connected to their faith's teachings. It is generally understood that schools act as institutions that disseminate specific rules and cultures (Little et al., 2014: 553). While that may be true in some situations, it is not in this context. With the Muslim population not being the majority, the purpose for establishing schools in this community is quite different from what it usually is: grooming the students to widen the capitalist society. Instead, Muslim American communities support and build Islamic schools to teach the next generations to uphold their religious identity as FIS did (Martinez, 2012: 110). Martinez's research gives a glimpse of the topics that are an integral part of the curriculum at FIS: the significance of the month of Ramadan and fasting, prayer, modesty, etc. Nonetheless, all these topics hold more value when combined as they contribute to "a way of life" as Diana, one of the participants, describes as being the most crucial aspect of FIS's mission (Martinez, 2012: 91). There is an agreement within the Muslim American community that Islam is best described as a religion that is "a way of life". Through Prophet Muhammed's example, teachings of the faith mandate that being Muslim is not only to be reflected outwardly in one's appearance but should manifest in every single manner related to a believer's life just as Prophet Muhammed demonstrated. Although it would have been very fascinating to learn more of an elaboration of this participant's comment, Martinez does not provide any more information. The takeaway from this study is that the school environment was a means for the participant to acquire and develop their own framework on religious teachings that they remember and use throughout life. The emphasis is on this specific teaching approach in this school that led to such a positive outcome in one student while keeping in mind that not all school teaching methods result in this outcome.

In another study conducted in Florida, a school-like structure was built within a masjid space to safeguard the Muslim identity of the youth or children of immigrants. Motiwala is a 60-year-old immigrant woman from India who was one of the founding

members of the International Islamic Center (Mahmood 2011, 26). In one of her discussions, she stated that:

"I was very young, but I still remember. It was so exciting for everybody! (…). It was a big achievement to have your identity."[29]

In Motiwala's opinion, the establishment of the masjid was directly related to protecting her identity during her younger years through religious education. The purpose of establishing a masjid space is not only to perform prayers, but to Mrs. Motiwala it served as a space for her young self and other youth like her to be in an environment that fosters proper religious knowledge (Mahmood 2011, 28). This place of worship was groundwork developing the curriculum that was used in teaching the upcoming generation about their faith, especially the youth. Since many of these youth attend secular public schools, the private school functioning under the umbrella of the masjid was a way to instill an Islamic curriculum to supplement the other curriculum they were already taking. At the time, the Islamic curriculum at its nascent stage was provided for the students to preserve their faith. The school administration focused on establishing an Islamic curriculum with a Quran hifdh program where students were encouraged to memorize and more importantly understand the Quran (Mahmood 2011, 28). Since this school was a Quran hifdh school that meant that the Quran was the compass guiding the curriculum that facilitated identity formation, it also meant that the students in this school used the Quran to construct their identity from an approach of how they viewed themselves as a Muslim in comparison to the other Muslims in the community and also, the greater non-Muslim community. An example of this approach was that any commandments in the Quran represented a rubric that conveys expectations required of them as followers of the faith regardless of the environment they are in.

The forms of knowledge in educational systems such as the examples of Islamic schooling present themselves different from the knowledge presented in other sectors of society. We learned earlier that Islamic schooling systems were established to preserve and promote the process of learning faith for the early Muslim communities.

[29] This interview was conducted in Florida by researcher Azka Mahmood in 2011.

This was a brief introduction of the kind of power that Foucault mentions which is circulated within these spaces based on factual evidence mentioned earlier. This power is observed to originate from participant perceptions of their Muslimness and the actions that are associated with this identity with respect to the new community they joined in the case of immigrants. It was not a reactionary method to a higher establishment inflicting a rule on this new community. As we will learn in the following chapters, digital media spaces include a form of power that is no different from the Islamic schooling systems in that it fosters Quran study and memorization and learning the Arabic language. This configuration leads to a language that affects the minds of my interlocutors and results in disciplined and desired religious behavior.

CHAPTER V

THE REAWAKENING OF PIOUS WOMEN

5.1. Introduction

The journey to God materializes in unique ways for pious women. But why do women embark on such a journey in the first place? Many of the times it becomes a reason of gaining agency from people and environments that hinder their religious transformation, a journey they have found to be a source of peace for them. Narratives elaborating on becoming pious for the first time refocus the lens to concentrate on the outcome most of the time. Others focus on an a more critical period, the middle ground and all that happens within the becoming process. One way to look at it is that the process of becoming constitutes the involvement and evolution of the subject within the landscape to result in involution (Deleuze et al. 1988: 262). It is a process that is centered in the middle with no beginning or end and has no natural connections (Deleuze et al. 1988: 262). For example, the landscape attributes to the becoming process by registering or presenting a range of large scale religious and political formations into which the city has been drawn over the years (Biehl et al. 2017: 147). Biehl describes these environments as an accumulation of layered histories (i.e. large scale) within a city that disrupt the present of its dwellers (i.e. small scale). Hence, through the narratives of his interlocutors he attempts to draw a line connecting the question of historical change to the question of phenomenological experience (Biehl et al. 2017:). Zehra one of the subjects in Biehl's study recalls a city in Turkey named Urfa, the city she lives in, as being a sedimentary or layered city that presently carries traces of popular religiosity such as talismanic objects, drinking of curative water, or maledictions that sway her own religiosity. As she moves within it, she notices these historical deposits affecting her movement as she continues to alter her dimensions by getting bigger or smaller to fit the ritual landscape (Biehl et al. 2017: 144). As for my study, the virtual landscape did attribute to a unique remaking of a pious female. At a time where lockdowns were enforced around the world, the virtual landscape and what

it has to offer was the missing component that these interlocutors needed to move up the piety ladder. Unlike Deleuze's thought, the process of becoming in this study is associated with a linear trajectory where an individual remakes themselves following a realization or event. However, the focus is not the start of the becoming process since the women already associate themselves with piety since their young years, but instead embark on a higher degree of piety than before. The interlocutors in this study view the journey of piety as a ladder with each step leading to a higher form of piety. Some women may temporarily lose momentum or fall back a step, but they will eventually regain momentum.

A specific political event can also be another factor that guides and influences one's spiritual journey as it is carried throughout one's lifetime. The women in this situation experience Muslim piety as a source of agency and a resource for personal and social transformation. A visual representation of this journey is illustrated in a study conducted during the Post-Soviet Muslim revival period where Tatar women share piety stories as a window into justifying their own social and personal transformation (Karimova, 2013:). These Tatar women were an older generation of women (sixty years old and up) that strived to live a coherent and moral character that the younger generation of women (under thirty years old) found easier in the times they live in. The older generation of Tatar women fall under those who have embraced a newfound religiosity during the middle of their adult lives built on their past Muslimness through narratives of their childhood memories of grandparents' and parents' Quran and prayer recitations and even their attempts to secretly observe some Muslim rituals despite the Soviet state's atheist policy (Karmiova, 2013:). This newfound religiosity was described as not a becoming process but as entering a higher level of religiosity of seeking religious knowledge since the foundation was always there, "the religion was always in their hearts." During this study, the Tatar women positioned themselves as ethical and pure even while living in the corrupt times of eating prohibited foods, alcoholism, and other social problems. This separation of the moral individual from the forbidden act is a collective state that indicates the Tatar women's Islamic pious nature as always present from birth (Karimova, 2013:). The climax of one participant's journey was her decision to send her children to a Tatar school to help undo the Russified lifestyle they lived. The journey then takes her to the only Kazan mosque at the time to act on the beliefs that she has always carried with her and discovering her

way (Karimova, 2013:). This example shows us the piety operations of these women as they continue living in the political society that suppresses their faith practices and identity in general. But what about environments that don't directly subdue these Muslim women, but instead work to reproduce and instill misconceptions about them to the public? What kind of journey to piety do these individuals take? A study fixated in Cologne, Germany found that the majority of Muslim women advocated for a deep acquisition of religious knowledge that leads to inner dispositions which help in re-establishing their pious self (Jouili, 2008: 479). They did not find this environment and the issues of their unacceptance as one that could be remedied with identity politics or an acknowledgment from the other communities. In the German context, Islam is not the cause of the Muslim community's issues. These issues they face stem from the understanding of fundamental practices in other countries that are not representative of the Islamic faith (Jouili, 2008: 35). The participants in this study found that the only antidote was from within, by reestablishing the Muslim female self in a way that its objective is to be confident in the faith, respond strongly to the criticisms, and resist any temptations (Jouili, 2008: 479). The interlocutors in this study described inner dispositions as love for God and faith-based self-assurance as stages of spiritual growth. Both examples of inner dispositions were the byproducts of hate campaigns launched on the Muslims within the German community. I believe that this research is an excellent introduction to the many works that inform us of the phenomenon of Muslim females returning to a state of piety. In this chapter I will provide an analysis of the key participants in my study and the layers to their spiritual journey. This will include the various environments they were immersed in that allowed them entryway into the Foremothers Movement. Following their involvement in the Foremothers Movement, my interlocutors share the virtues they discovered within themselves at the start of this journey and as they used the phone application called the Qariah App. Similarly, another group of interlocutors in this study utilized Instagram as a space to acquire religious knowledge that ultimately paved the way for their pious selves to stand confidently under the spotlight.

5.2. The Emergence of Pious Values: Foremother's Movement and Sisterhood Stories

It would not be justified to start writing about the discourses present in the Foremothers Movement without mentioning the advocator of the movement itself. Maryam Amir[30], a female religious scholar who studied a bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, has committed her time to empowering Muslim communities in the West through lectures and talks about spiritual connections, identity actualization, social justice, and women's studies (Yaqeen Institute 2021)[31]. Another contribution of Amir's is the Foremothers Movement which started as a space that connected women from around the world in pursuit of faithfulness. This movement led to the creation of the Qariah phone application that was released to the public in 2022.[32] It all began on her personal Instagram page where she started the Foremothers Movement, campaign which encouraged female Quran engagement through recitation and sporadically, comprehension of the meanings. In the year 2020 this campaign began; each day a recitation of a specific surah from the Quran was posted on her Instagram stories and all interested females would record themselves reciting and tag Maryam Amir. These submitted video recordings were shared publicly on her page based on their consent. When asked about the issue of a woman's voice being *awra*[33] and whether there was a specific fatwa that Amir follows, she mentioned Sheikh Ibn Baz's fatwa which permits broadcasting these Quranic recitations by these women[34]. Some of the women participating were beginners in learning the Arabic language so they substituted reading in the Arabic language with the English translation aloud. Some mentioned that they had memorized parts of the Quran years

[30] Before travelling overseas to study Islam, Maryam Amir's education was in Child and Adolescent Development from San Jose State University. After returning home, she completed a master's degree in Education from University of California Los Angeles. Amir describes the transitional period between these two degrees where her life changed completely. During one of her talks with Yaqeen Institute, she explained that there was a particular stage in her life where she questioned her Islamic faith. Amir comes from a family that was not Muslim originally which meant that she had experienced a unique journey of finding out what Islam meant to her. Her parents found Islam later in their lives during their time spent in university. She became more connected with her faith during her last year of high school after doing *Umrah* with her family. As she entered college, she became active in halaqas and other Islamic work.

[31] https://yaqeeninstitute.org/team/maryam-amir

[32] https://www.qariah.app/

[33] This is an Arabic word meaning an intimate part of the body that should not be seen or objectified by anyone. For this context, the awra here is referring to the woman's voice.

[34] https://www.kalamullah.com/misc1.html

ago but had slowly lost that bond with the Quran due to the lack of encouragement from those around them to pursue recitation. Others were experienced reciters which was evident in their submissions. The completion of the memorization of the Quran is often followed by some sort of small gathering to congratulate the *hafitha* on her achievement. Although it is not a requirement to host such a gathering, some prefer this as a form of encouragement and motivation for others. At this event, a crown made of faux pearls and diamonds is usually placed on the *hafitha's* head to resemble the crown that will be placed on her parents' heads on the Day of Judgement for their lifelong efforts in instilling in her a sense of longing towards the Quran[35]. While none of the participants in this study completed memorization of the entire Quran, the primary focus in this case is the journey to achieving that goal. All in all, this campaign was a means to unite all passionate women under the shade of the Quran. These physical features of the Foremothers Movement are essential, but to examine the abstract values of this campaign is of equal importance.

The Foremothers Movement presents a new meaning to womanhood in Islam. The journey of womanhood is often conflated with a firm understanding of the self and the identity. According to Maryam Amir's observations, most of the time when women question their equalness to men they do so because of a lack of feeling seen or heard.[36] Women are frequently put in particular boxes and forced to carry certain titles within society when women have the potential to be so much more. Due to unexpected circumstances some women may not fit within the category of the "ideal Muslim woman" and are left out of place within the community. This is part of the reason why generations of women tend to ask this question of gender equality. These women overlook the tremendous impact women had in Islam's history from the very beginning. There are many biographies of female companions during Prophet Muhammad's time that are interpreted by scholars. Each female companion was known for a specific role(s) she was involved in throughout Islam's history. Maryam Amir's Foremothers Movement is a response to the oftentimes one-sided

[35] The source of this is a hadith where the Messenger of Allah PBUH said, "Whoever recites the Quran and acts according to what is in it, his parents will be crowned on the Day of Resurrection with a light brighter than the light of the sun in your worldly houses, were it among you. What do you think of one who acts upon this. Source Sunan Abi Dawud 1453

[36] Referenced in her public statements (found on her personal social media accounts). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpiM73bS0-k

interpretations of these biographies. Amir's solution suggests focusing on the context of these narratives to provide women today with a preview of the many titles these female companions embodied. In other words, Amir argues that the female companions' biographies should be understood from multiple lenses, not just one lens. For example, when we examine the story of Khadijah, we mainly know that she was the wife of the Prophet and supported his *dawah* work financially. Other dimensions of this narrative that are not always emphasized was her role as a mother to her children despite her business responsibilities. As a businesswoman she did not succumb to the material success that comes with owning a business but found a balance between all her duties while keeping in mind that her primary role was her family and the upbringing of the future generation. Another female companion that shares a prime role in Islamic history is Asmaa bint Abu Bakr. In many narrations she is mostly famous for her bravery in transporting food and drink to the Prophet and her father during their shelter in the cave as they made their way to Medina. The nickname attributed to her, Dhat Al-nitaqayn[37], depicts her innovative skills in tying the provisions she was taking to the Prophet and her father in two pieces of cloth. The political act of supporting the followers of a small movement when it was forbidden by the ruling party at the time demonstrates her strong dedication to Islam and her courageousness in the face of oppression all the while being pregnant. Similar to the other biographies of female companions within Islam, Asmaa's story can be understood from more than one outlook. In addition to her involvement in this political movement, she was known to voice her concerns whenever the situation arose. She did exactly that when Umar, one of the male companions, stated that his companions deserved to be near the Prophet more than any other group. She spoke on behalf of the group that she was a part of and made it clear in a firm speech that her group of companions deserve to be with the Prophet more than any other group because they suffered more tribulations than they underwent during the two migrations.[38]

The Muslim female identity and the Muslim pious self are constructions that precipitated during the religious literacy process predisposed by the Foremothers Movement. The progression did not end here, but sparked pious values adopted by my interlocutors as they enlighten us through their journey back to God. The best approach

[37] https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095428901
[38] ALIM 03/18/2024 https://www.alim.org/history/prophet-companions/15/

to understanding how Muslim women view themselves and present themselves through different identities is best achieved through unraveling ontological perspectives in the form of a relationship between God and woman. We already scratched the surface by examining models from Islamic history. These biographies of female companions are almost always archetypal of the image of an ideal Muslim woman. We must consider contemporary contexts to help us understand and compare this ideal Muslim woman's perspective. In the Indian context, Hem Borker's work titled *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood* attempted to understand the everyday life of the madrasa[39] student, first generation learners, ranging from her relationships, transitions, successes, failures, and aspirations (Borker, 2018: 59). The author's goal was to learn of the journey and experiences of these madrasa students once they leave their home villages to the madrasa life and beyond the madrasa life to trace their changing aspirations that shape and reshape their understanding and embodiment about what it means to be an ideal Muslim woman (Borker, 2018: 77). This was all accomplished by finding a connection between the dynamics within the madrasa space and the broader socio-economic and religious landscape. One of the ethnographic portraits of his interlocutor Zainab portrays a madrasa student that was reluctant to live the madrasa life and later grew to appreciate what it has to offer. Zainab's breakthrough was in her determined realization that throughout her life she was guided by God to this destiny or as she calls it *kismet*[40], that she was a chosen one in this, and that she must accept it. Everything that happened to her in the madrasa was essential to her success in the *akhirah*[41]; it was the knowledge that surpasses all other worldly knowledge. Although Zainab intends to finish madrasa and then con tinue with her goal of becoming a doctor, she realized that she was always able to carry two identities if she aspired to: a madrasa student and a doctor all while being connected to God and accepting what He has decreed for her. Fatima's ethnographic portrait brings to life a pious self shaped by the madrasa's mission towards righteousness. It stems from the conviction of the *akhira* taught in madrasa (Borker, 2018: 77). Borker does correlate the madrasa with pious selves but does not push to learn the self-cultivation process of a righteous Fatima or any one of his interlocutors for that matter.

[39] A madrasa is a center of learning, mainly teaching Islamic law and theology, usually affiliated with a mosque, and funded by an early charitable trust known as waqf.
[40] In Islam, kismet means divinely ordained fate.
[41] Akhirah is an Arabic word referring to the Afterlife and Judgment Day.

Moreso, the author found the learned performances of the interlocutors and the behavior of their pious selves in other non-madrasa spaces captivating and deserving of attention. As demonstrated in other ethnographic portraits, Fatima viewed herself and other madrasa students different from the schoolgirls that attended secular education systems. The madrasa she attends provides the students with a pathway to ethical attitudes especially in environments where males and females coexist in the same space as they seek knowledge. Fatima compares the schoolgirls as more competent socially and technologically, yet lacking a moral consciousness that helps them navigate situations (Borker, 2018: 77). The main distinction between the two student narratives- madrasa and secular student- lies in the fact that she is the first daughter in the family to be permitted to study in university after the madrasa phase was over. With this privilege given to an erudite student of knowledge comes a responsibility to make sure she is holding on to the values of an ideal Muslim woman. In the case of Fatima, the moral obligations that have been adopted by her depicts a madrasa-based enforced ethical behavior that is used by her in any co-educational and academically competitive setting (Borker, 2018: 77).

In another research on the subject matter conducted by anthropologist Saba Mahmood in Egyptian mosques based in the city of Cairo has brought to the surface a wave of Muslim women participating in religious movements and thus, bodily practices with the aim of self-fashioning and obtaining agency (Mahmood, 2005: 156). Mahmood vividly states that bodily practices do not serve as manipulable masks in a game of public presentation detachable from the self (Mahmood, 2005: 156). She appoints these various bodily practices as avenues used for a type of training program for the Muslim female self or self-cultivation program (Mahmood, 2005: 156). Moreover, this self-cultivation program is a multi-layered approach that builds off the other layer of the self. For example, one critical symbol of Muslim female piety is donning the veil but to the one with a keen eye for detail it is so much more. As a woman first begins to wear the veil, she is using it as a means to reach the attribute of shyness or *al-haya'*. When she finally arrives to shyness, she learns that now she must continue wearing it because it has become a mandatory element of that new level of piety (i.e. shyness or *al-haya'*) and will build off of it. Mahmood retells the grouping of bodily practices as described by her interlocutors in examples like wearing the religious veil for the first time despite feeling embarrassed by how one looks. As she pushes through those

abrasive feelings and continues wearing it, her inside starts to accept this outward practice. It feels uncomfortable and even embarrassed with the thought of taking it off (Mahmood, 2005: 157). This example is just one of many that portrays acceptance and growth of a pious covered woman which happens gradually upon submitting to God's command and taking the first step in wearing it. Going off of the interlocutors' understanding, Mahmood finds that it resonates with Butlerian theory in the sense that both groups perceive the performative actions as contributing to the shaping of a person's will, body, desire, and intellect (Mahmood, 2005: 157). While Mahmood highlights this similarity, she joins forces with Butler in believing that this same theory isn't enough to arrive at such a conclusion, one where the performative actions lead to the formation of the subject. The reason behind this theoretical caveat aligned with its inability to travel across cultural and historical specificities (Butler et al., 2000: 35). Mahmood proposes an anchor to this bent structure with three critical dimensions to consider when discussing performativity in regards to the formation of the self: the sequencing of the performatives and their interrelationship, the place of language in the analysis of performativity, and the different articulations of the notions of "subversion", "change", or "destabilization" across various models of performativity (Mahmood, 2005: 163). While all three dimensions are essential, the first dimension is of utmost importance because this model of ethical formation applies to my interlocutors in this research. As Mahmood found in her study, the mosque participants emphasized the sedimented and cumulative character of reiterated performatives where each performance builds on prior ones and a carefully calibrated system exists by which differences between reiterations are judged in terms of how successfully (or not) the performance has taken root in the body and mind (Mahmood, 2005: 164). I want to move away from the strict body-mind analysis suggested by Mahmood and recreate it to one that resembles a heart-body-mind analysis as I discover in the narratives of my interlocutors. As we will see, the interlocutors in my study used this system to gauge how well (or poorly) their performances had taken root in their character and tendencies.

Putting in practice the heart-body-mind analysis implicates that, work internally, on the heart, contributes to the repeated performances instead of the repeated performances resulting in a pious self. The tranquil heart has arrived at a state of patience after exhausting all efforts towards a specific goal, in the case of the

interlocutors it is improving their relationship with the Quran. It means that one is constantly working on their belief by reigniting it and learning who Allah, the only one true God, is as if it's for the first time. Pious values were the intermediary element of this system that appeared due to the heart's work. Through the recounted sisterhood stories of the Foremothers Movement[42], the interlocutors extracted these pious values from each other and that is what helped them measure their dispositions and whether they were on the correct path of performance in religious literacy and Quranic knowledge. These pious values, precisely sincerity, were unlocked leading to the actions of a people and are founded on the awareness of the self and identity. Throughout the conversations with my interlocutors, they describe these values that aided in passing the torch of performance (Quranic knowledge) on to the next generation of Muslim females just as their ancestors did, thus contouring the pious Muslim self and maintaining its outline.

[42] The word, *foremothers,* denotes a succession of women collectively extending Quranic knowledge to one another so that the dedication of the tradition lives on. In this section of the chapter, I will attempt to portray the role storytelling within the Foremother's Movement and the Foremother's Movement itself had in producing pious values that led my interlocutors ascending towards a spiritual transformation. This Foremothers Movement was the tool that participants used to nurture their selves for preparation towards the journey of piety.

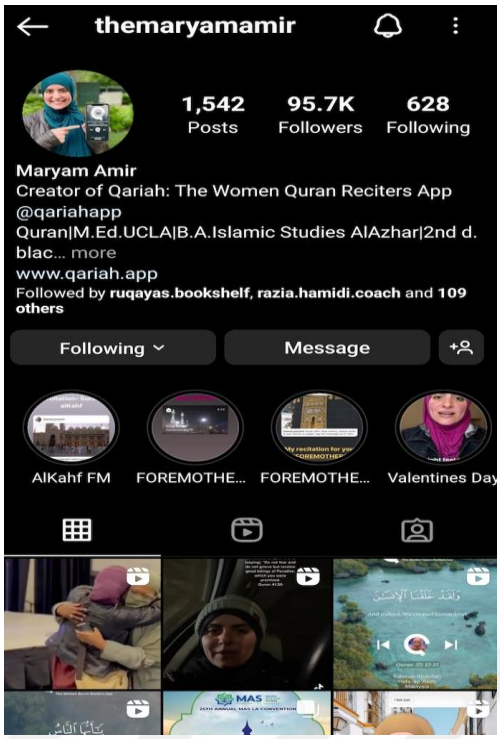

Figure 5.1. Foremother's Movement Stories Archived on Sheikha Maryam Amir's Instagram

(accessed on 3/18/2019.)

As I addressed earlier, the Foremother's movement had a significant function in producing pious values that guided the interlocutors towards religious literacy and Islamic pious behavior. As the researcher, I learned of another influence on the output of pious values which my interlocutors described as sisterhood stories. Storytelling within digital media holds to its nature in the virtual space just as much as the physical space. It remains in its original form, the practice of using one's voice and gestures to convey a story, and has been an ancient practice since the beginning of humanity. Moreover, it exists to enlighten, entertain, and spread cultural traditions and moral values of a given community. It is not merely a practice to pass time by passively listening as some believe. It is more than just words strewn together that describe people, places, and events told for entertainment. It is a tradition that if implemented properly can engage the listener and moves the listener by shaping one's religious identity and how one view's themselves within a given religious community. The people of Indonesia understood the profound impact storytelling has on instilling moral values in their children just as much as it did in adults, thus contributing to a

strong foundation in their identity development. They ranked the highest in the practice of storytelling in early education to promote Pancasila[43] among other agendas that were morally based. The results found that children were likelier to show moral values when the education programs they were involved in applied the storytelling method that engages the child through physical activity and other means of activity. In this current study, the circle of women that we are describing gift one another an heirloom in the form of sisterhood stories to hold onto something valuable to them. Through these sisterhood stories they can lean on each other for emotional support as they work towards constructing their hafitha identity by memorizing the Quran. The emotional support they receive differs from the kind of emotional support that people get from group settings for example. This type of emotional support is not founded on these women meeting each other routinely. It entails a special kind of dynamic where women embarking on their Quran memorization journey, these same women who are from different generations and regions, are using these sisterhood stories as a way to help them persevere and show that they are not alone. Regardless of the circumstance they find themselves in, there is a sisterhood story that speaks to them and this is all accomplished indirectly. Many view a hafitha or a woman who memorized the Quran from a one-dimensional standpoint. Usually, what comes to mind aside from knowing the entire Quran by heart is the image of a hafitha that appears conservative in her appearance, oftentimes wearing a long jilbab[44] which is mainly black and a long khimar covering her upper torso. This presumption as well as many others is evident in the misinformation that is passed down through generations. This conservative image is not the problem, because it is the reality in some situations. The problem lies in the acceptance of these reproduced presumptions among generations as religiously backed information that is not inclusive contributing to a diminishing population of women who aspire to *be hafithat (i.e., plural of hafitha).* This understanding leads women to see this Quranic journey as one size fits all and that if they don't look or act the part then they are not qualified to take this path. Religion is not only about appearance, but the main focus should be belief first and foremost and the rest will fall into place. The best way to reach this correct belief is to surround yourself with those

[43] Pancasila is an Indonesian principle founded by leader Sukarno after the country's independence from the Japanese. It is based on five principles: the belief in one God, just and civilized humanity, Indonesian unity, democracy under. The wise guidance. Of representative consultations, and social justice or all.
[44] A jilbab is an Arabic term describing a long and loose-fit garment adorned by women.

that have the ability to teach you and in this case, digital media and all that it entails from various sisterhood stories performs that role for the participants.

The sisterhood stories narrated by the participants of this study were learned by word of mouth from their fellow sisters while partaking in the Foremothers Movement. Most of the participants indicated that they were introduced to these real-life stories through this virtual movement and that they became a source of inspiration for them. One participant shared how she frequently remembers the celebration story of a new hafitha, whom she has never met in her life. Given the pseudonym Sarah, this participant described a unique story of sisterhood that is not founded on close proximity or blood ties, but on a community of women that can lean on each other when they need to without ever meeting each other physically or even knowing each other personally. This occurs as the listeners, my interlocutors, learn of developing these pious values that they perceived were necessary for an ethical formation. This maturity in pious values consists of a cycle of reinforcement of these learned pious values within the heart which led to different bodily practices. This story begins with a gathering hosted by a local Islamic school for one of the graduating classes that completed the memorization of the Quran and the new hafitha was being honored at this ceremony. Sarah describes her sentiments as the story was relayed to her for the first time. She envisioned this new hafitha, her sister in Islam, walk down the stage to accept the crown on her head on that special day. The knowledgeable woman relaying the story made a point that the reason for sharing this story was not centered on the action or the reward but the transformation that the audience saw and the way they viewed this new hafitha's journey in comparison to their own journey. Sarah mindfully turned her attention on the audience as they watched the main character in this story receive this award and how they must see a totally different side of her. Many probably admired her devotion to memorizing the Quran at such a young age and how she finally accomplished just that. From the outside, this new hafitha must have fit the criteria for a religious woman or more specifically, a hafitha that excelled in worship. In Sarah's words she states,

"The knowledgeable woman revealed to me that this new hafitha appeared to be the perfect age and had a good number of responsibilities that were not too overwhelming

which allowed her to dedicate most of her time to memorize. However, in reality many didn't know that this new hafitha was the complete opposite of the image she portrays. She carried many responsibilities, but still made it work. You're probably wondering how she made all that work? asked the knowledgeable woman. Unfortunately, it is not often that hafithat share their journey with the public, let alone other women within their circles, and that's part of the reason why not many women see themselves as one day reaching this admirable and noble status in today's age."[45]

This statement made by Sarah highlights an issue that many sisters beginning this journey notice. Sarah's realization pertains to the seemingly nonexistent representations of a hafitha in the Muslim communities. According to Sarah's observations, many women who are *hufath*[46] are present in Muslim communities but don't own up to their narrative. I was a little perplexed with this statement, as I could count a number of women *hufath* off the top of my hand, so I asked her to elaborate. She narrated that, "There is a gap between those that are already hufath and those aspiring to be *hufath*". All around us there are women that are doctors and teachers and engineers, but what about hufath? You may hear of one elderly auntie who finally finished memorization, but what about the other women? You don't really hear of them."[47] Sarah lightly touched up on the possibility that it was connected to humbling themselves and avoiding public attention. She said, "I believe it's because they prefer it to be hidden between them and Allah." Preserving one's intention which is part and parcel to achieving sincerity or *ikhlas*[48] in action was the motive of these dedicated women. Sarah believes that women who memorized the Quran avoid public attention and work hard to genuinely participate in an act for Allah and other peoples' knowledge of this matter has no importance in their lives. As the knowledgeable woman continued sharing the story of this new hafitha, she brightened the light on this hafitha's lifestyle. This hafitha was twenty-seven years old and of Pakistani descent. Interestingly, she had no knowledge of the Arabic language which is the language of the scripture. The knowledgeable woman also said that this new hafitha had a full-time job where she worked as a research assistant and was a mother to four children. This

[45] Interview with "Sarah", September 2019 Michigan
[46] This word means plural of hafitha/the woman who memorized the Quran.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ikhlas is an Arabic word meaning any action both internal or external with the goal of desiring only the pleasure of God.

life that this hafitha was living was already bustling with responsibilities, but somehow her loyalty to her dream of being a hafitha superseded all. In addition, it was told that she did not have a formal teacher to guide her through the memorization process as people usually do, but instead she was a participant in an active group that helped a small group of women stay on track with their memorization. The method of memorization within this group was not really explained or any other details, but the teacher said that the participants in this group were assigned a new surah every month and they had to memorize a specific number of verses and submit a recording as their homework every week or at their own pace. This twenty-seven-year-old women had memorized half of the Quran, a culmination of some chapters when she was younger, before joining this group and completing the other half of the Quran. I interrupted the story Sarah was telling me and said, "What were the practical ways that you established your intention before memorization?" Sarah looked at me and said,

"Before opening my mushaf and reading, I look at it and prepare myself. I search within my feelings and find the feelings I have towards the Quran and what this book means to me at that moment in time. Sometimes my feelings seem distant and that's when I know I need some work. I force myself to still read and connect as much as I can. But it is a process that needs revisiting most of the time. Most of the time it ends up with me reminding myself that without this sacred scripture we wouldn't know how to live within this life. It is so easy to exist in this life, but to live in it is something very different".[49]

I found this comment very interesting and wanted to understand her perspective more, so I asked her to explain that last part. She stated,

"Living in this life with the Quran helps us soften our hearts which translates into being aware of everything around us including our priorities. The hafitha in that story I just mentioned is someone I think of often when I begin reading the Quran because she had so many responsibilities and even difficulties that may have stalled her journey a little, but she was cognizant of her priorities and persisting with the Quran was what made her manage and see that so well."[50]

[49] Interview with Sarah on September 2019 Michigan.
[50] Ibid.

Sarah's response is enlightening for several reasons. Note that Sarah does not ground her relationship with the Quran in just interacting with it through reading, reciting, memorizing, or contemplating it. Instead, she grounds that relationship first and foremost with a steady heart that engages in inner exercises that ultimately lead to feeling incomplete when she does not engage in these exercises. Sarah highlights the Quran's effect on salving the heart in a way that the believer is concentrated on the life she is living and making the most of it for Allah. Without grounding the relationship with exercises that soften the heart there will be difficulty in living life. As we see in Sarah's statements, women that encounter nuisances in even preliminary skills to engage with the Quran such as not being familiar with the language itself can still connect with the Quran through this approach. As Sarah describes another aspect of the heart and its exercises is the consistency of working through them when compulsory. The grounding of one's bond with the Quran is only made possible through the recurring reinforcement of the intention-building that leads to sincerity. This translates into a desired state of the heart that one must arrive to multiple times, found in the intention of the person, that edicts success in that particular relationship. It is what Mahmood would call a type of agency where intention-building and all the heart's exercises describe a malleability required of someone in order to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge (Mahmood, 2005: 29). This journey was one of labor, efforts, and achievements and my conversations with Sarah were meaningful and gave me a peek into another kind of life that a hafitha lives. Through the sisterhood story that she shared, she made near what women saw far- an alliance between the heart, body, and mind- and saw in sight the true nature of the heart and its connection in building a sincere relationship with the Quran that is reproduced in women performances. Those that reach this state of sincerity, a precious pious value, are distracted by re-forming and re-solidifying this relationship that they forget to share their eminence with those that carry the same ambitions.

The sisterhood story that resonated with Raghad, another participant that was involved in the Foremother's Movement, describes a hafitha that was born with down syndrome. During one of the sessions about the Foremother's Movement, this hafitha was interviewed as a way to introduce her story to the crowd. This hafitha is known by the name Rawan Dwaik from Jordan and was twenty-six years old. As I learned from my participant Raghad, the reason this story was so much more special than all the other

stories is that the participant saw this hafitha in actual form and heard her present her story virtually during an interview with the founder of the Qariah App, Maryam Amir. Dwaik's mother who was also present during the interview was sharing details that Dwaik may have missed allowing the listeners to attain a deeper insight into her journey with the Quran. In Raghad's words, seeing the hafitha in real form was so meaningful because she could wrap herself in this sister's story to move forward with her disability. Throughout my meetings with Raghad, she did not disclose what kind of disability she had, but she made me aware that it was a test for her in many areas of her life and that it also deepened her relationship with Allah. Similar to my previous interlocutor Sarah, never having personally met Dwaik, Raghad saw her as a sister who constantly reminded her of the beauty of striving for her goal. Whenever she felt like giving up; she remembered Dwaik's story with the Quran and a new inspiration gave way. Before ever connecting with Dwaik in such a way, Raghad described the first time she installed the Qariah App and started scrolling through the different female reciters, she noticed Dwaik listed as one of the qualified reciters and others that also shared some form of disability. There was a split second where she tried to imagine each unique yet arduous journey of these reciters. While watching the video that Raghad shared with me of the interview, I listened to the story as it begins with Dwaik's mother sitting next to her daughter. Dwaik's mother was a huge advocate for her daughter to study the Quran despite her disability. Dwaik's mother saw talent in her and skills that would allow her to learn and continue in education. Her mother had intentionally placed her in a regular school where students did not have disabilities and saw that her daughter was thriving in that environment. Before enrolling in school, Dwaik had memorized twenty pages of Chapter Al-Baqarah just by listening to her mother's recitation and no one knew that she had memorized them. This discovery was made after Dwaik's acceptance into a Quran school to get placed into a course level. Her mother picked up on her memorization skills and was the leading factor in putting her in an educational environment that nourished her love for the Quran. After entering this Quran school, she finished the rest of Chapter Al-Baqarah which she memorized in approximately one year. As Raghad was describing what she learned about Dwaik she said,

"Subhanallah, you know…. hufath like Dwaik really show all of us that there is no set of exclusive skills one must own to become a hafitha. If you have no extraordinary

skills, you can still be a hafitha of the Quran, if you set the right intentions. Dwaik is a beautiful example of a young woman that had the innate inclination to grow with the Quran. That's all I need to remind myself every day and Allah swt will help me do the rest.[51]

This statement made by Raghad traces the innate structure of Dwaik that facilitated the memorization of the Quran. Even though Dwaik has no control over her faculties, Raghad described her as a hafitha that does not need to engage the heart in exercises to attain sincerity since her heart is already at that state and will always be at that state. This meant that there was no benefit in having her repeatedly search within herself to find her intentions toward memorizing the Quran. Raghad did not assume that Dwaik engaged in bodily practices frequently until it became a part of her pious self. Nor did she dismiss the role that the heart plays in these kinds of religious performances. What she did was paint Dwaik as an exception to this requirement with the reasoning that individuals in Dwaik's situation will always have a pure innate structure that accepts the Quran. As Raghad learns from this sisterhood story, she too with her limiting yet undisclosed health condition must view herself as striving towards piety but what differs is that she was allowed by Allah to work in the state of her heart and Dwaik was not.

All in all, the Foremother's Movement was a channel that transported many stories of sisterhood and sincere intentions that energized these women to rush towards the book of Allah, the Quran. In both instances, we learn of the value of storytelling in the interlocutors' narratives. This discourse, just by analyzing their experience without even glossing over the major role digital media has in proliferating this movement can already give us a sense of the kind of world these aspiring hafithas live in. Their world is consumed with the treasures of the Quran and its ultimate gift of nearness to Allah through their metacognition efforts they developed using digital media. The hafitha story Raghad shared with me was a way for her to measure where she stands regarding pleasing God through her intentions. In Raghad's experience, this digital media provided a collection of these sisterhood stories that helped to strengthen her religious character by learning the meaning of intention. She comprehended this as one who

[51] Interview with Raghad on September 2019 Michigan.

never relies on herself or her talents. Quite opposite, all the skills that she has under her belt attribute to nothing if she does not have the pure intention to perform it for Allah. In a similar fashion, the hafitha story Sarah shared with me a sisterhood story that inspires women from all backgrounds to strengthen their relationship with Allah by bonding with the Quran. These are just two participant experiences that uncover the main propellers of this Quranic journey related to ethical formation. Still there is more to this journey according to other participants. In the next section we will examine a component that bridges the human faculties to the worship and that is the kind of digital media, namely the Qariah app. We will see their techniques in this space and the effect it has in production of discourse that leads them to accomplish their worship.

5.3. The First Layer of Piety Examined: Becoming a Hafitha

As noted earlier, the Qariah App is a continuation of the Foremother's Movement spearheaded by Maryam Amir and was launched in 2022. This application a one-of-a-kind software program that is easily accessible from any platform whether it is a phone, laptop, or any other smart device. The description found under the application states the following:

"Qariah" translates to a woman Quran reciter. While there are many public Qariahs around the globe in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Morocco, Algeria, Nigeria and Yemen, it is not a well-known term in many Muslim communities in the West. Thus, the Qariah app aims to mainstream the term Qariah for women and ease accessing recitations of Qariahs….so that when little girls ask their mothers or aunts or sisters or homegirls, "Why are there no women Quran reciters?" The answer will be a resounding, "There are an uncountable number of them- and God willing, you and I can be them too!"

At its launch, the App featured sixty *qariahs* or women reciters from around the globe. The app's creator, Maryam Amir expects to showcase many more reciters in the future. Its significance lies in the ability of any Muslim woman to retrieve any one of these valuable recitations stored in one place to fulfill her Quran goals, and thus, her relationship with God. In a recent interview with Amir, she drew attention to the request of her audience to gather all these female reciters into one space for easy

access. Some of her followers voiced their concerns on the tedious process of searching for these reciters in various platforms such as YouTube, Google, etc. Some reciters were challenging to come across or not accessible at all. Although the Foremother's Movement was a very successful campaign, when it came to an end, all that was left was the many video recordings of the women recitations. Amir preserved them on her Instagram highlights but felt obligated to devote more time to this area. She saw there was a vast population of women that yearned to rekindle their relationship with the Quran daily and it was not sufficient to make the Foremother's Movement a continuous campaign on her Instagram. With all this in mind, the Qariah app came to life with the purpose of assisting these women to recite more and ultimately connect on a deeper level with the Quran through this app. The focus in this section will be a detailed rundown of how this application brought about agency through a stream of learned religious behavior. This voluntary and determined action ensued to a pious transformation of my interlocutors as we will discover in the following sections.

Hoda, a young woman in her twenties whom I met at a halaqa at the Islamic Center of Detroit, was familiar with the Qariah app and used it alongside other apps to memorize. She pointed out the need to use other complementary apps because the "Qariah app is in the most basic shape right now."[52] Despite this, she does not see the likelihood that she will ever stop using the app. She foresees this as not posing an issue in the future when the app goes through advancements and updates. Hoda discloses elaborate details on how she used the Qariah app to assist her in her spiritual transformation. When I sat down with Hoda to live vicariously through her experience, she explained the importance of finding a qariah that she connects with first. She showed me her phone as she opened the Qariah app and pointed to the list of new recitations and reciters constantly updated. The process she set for herself begins with routinely and quickly checking the app to listen and examine the new recitations that are added daily. Once she has found recitation(s) that she believes she will benefit from, she clicks the favorite button to save these recitation(s) for later reference. To be able to find a match for the recitation of a surah and the qariah recitation style she prefers was stressed more than once during the conversation we had together. In her journey, this is a critical step followed by repetition, where she listens to the selected recording daily.

[52] Interview with Hoda on February 2019 Michigan.

Interested in learning more about this, I asked her to give me more details on this daily engagement she encounters almost daily. Daily engagement with the Quran can be performed on different technological platforms and one collective form of engagement that Hoda described is *tilawah.*[53] This form of engagement has been studied by researchers in Indonesia to understand the practice of *tilawah* among the participants of a WhatsApp movement called ODOJ (One Day One Juz). The ODOJ movement which initially started in Facebook and later migrated to WhatsApp was created by Nurkholifa who reported to her religious mentor her daily recitation of one complete section of the Quran and any other religious activities assigned (Nisa 2018, 25). This study found that the peak time that the members would submit their daily recitations would be midnight when members were also actively participating in the recommended night prayer called *tahajjud*. Not surprisingly, I soon find out that Hoda dedicates half of the week to perform the *tahajjud* prayer. Before the *tahajjud* prayer she works on her memorization using the Qariah app. Unlike the members of the ODOJ movement that finish reciting one section of the Quran daily, Hoda's goal is to memorize one chapter every month. Her process of memorization was different from the ODOJ members because she actively listens and repeats the recitations that she saved in the Qariah app multiple times. Afterward, she tests herself by reciting or doing *tilawah* again during the *tahajjud* prayer. Throughout this process, she does not report to anyone. It is only her and the Qariah app in the middle of the night. Hoda said in one of our discussions:

"During tahajjud, my worship is different. I work towards connecting with the Quran by reminding myself that it is Allah speaking to me, especially when I am not feeling that great. I mean...that goes for every prayer of course. Reading the Quran at midnight is a special type of worship and allows you to search within your heart without any of the noise and distractions. It is the best way to dig within yourself to really feel what you are feeling… hopelessness, laziness, jealousy or when we feel angry or despair. These are feelings that should not be what a Muslim feels, and this is the solution for when we fall into that cycle."[54]

[53] Tilawah is the Arabic word meaning the recitation of the successive verses of the Quran in a standardized and proven manner according to the rules of recitations.
[54] Interview with Hoda on February 2019 Michigan.

When I questioned Hoda further about what she meant by "this is the solution when we fall into that cycle", she narrated:

"Just recently I was using that app to listen and read Surah Al-Muzammil. When I got up to pray tahajjud, in the start of my prayer…. the second verse[55] *really struck me at the time. I realized that what I was doing, tahajjud, was an important worship for me. It protects me from these unpleasant feelings that every human encounters every once in a while and the following day I am given the chance to start on a clean slate by communicating to Allah after hearing His communication to me…you know, the Quran.*[56]

Hoda explains that using the Qariah app pre-tahajjud prayer prepares her for the opportunity to receive communication from Allah. She explained to me that she was memorizing Chapter Al-Muzzamil[57] by listening to the Qariah reciter named Meriem Ahmed for the month. Afterward she performs tahajjud prayer with the intention to improve her memorization. From her standpoint, pre-tahajjud prayer times were not allotted for memorization purposes only. Still, instead they were essential periods of special communication in the form of a divine reminder customized to her. Then she was given a channel that allowed her to engage in communication with Allah by practicing her obedience to Him in the actual prayer itself. Through the Quranic recitations that she listens to pre-tahajjud prayer and mimics while in tahajjud prayer, she is reminded of and able to get to a state of proper moral conduct of the Muslim by accepting Allah's communication as well as communicating to Him in this same prayer. Noticeably in Hoda's technique memorization was achieved, but what this quote points to is something even broader than that. Within the narratives of the other interlocutors, the power of a specific verse is the source of their drive toward pious behavior. In Hoda's experience it is the power of tahajjud prayer which was inspired by the app, as an inseparable tool of the believer, in reviving the heart's righteousness to receive the Quran. Foucault describes this ethical approach critical for the subject's transformation to a desired state of being and this is the state Hoda is aspiring towards. It is an internal state of shaping herself to interlace the revelation within herself.

[55] Verse 2 in Chapter Al-Muzammil says, "Arise O Muhammed to pray the night, except for a little."
[56] Interview with Hoda on February 2019 Michigan.
[57] Chapter Al-Muzzamil translates into "The Enshrouded One".

Tahajjud paved the way to a condition through which a Muslim comes to train herself in the virtues of internal tranquility and peace which is her ultimate aspiration. As Hoda came to realize, it was this ethical approach that allowed her to continue her memorization of the Quran the following day and the day after that. It was a source of fuel that pushed her in tahajjud consistency by erasing any negative feelings, thoughts, or actions that she may have come in contact with throughout her day.

One of my interlocutors, Yusra, a young woman of Polish background, believes that a relationship with the Holy Quran is primarily to contemplate its meanings. She stated that,

"If I want to know whether or not I have the correct relationship with Allah, then I need to look at all my actions. If they are reflective of a believer, then I should personify a walking Quran like the Prophet was. The best way to achieve this is through contemplation of the chapters."[58]

As a new Muslim, she has been on a journey to find a study group to connect with the Quran and to build her faith through this modus. With no success, she has learned other ways to accomplish this goal. The agency that she aims to construct for herself is dependent on the skills and capabilities found within contemplation of the Quran that leads to the moral action of a strong bond with the Quran. If we examine this in reverse order, it means that no contemplation of the Quran means no bond with the Quran, thus no bond with Allah. As someone who is peeking into Yusra's life with a limited background on the convert experience, I along with the readers should know that Muslims that fall under this category are an already understudied group in pre-covid and post-covid times. Not only are their mental health needs not met, but their needs for religious knowledge are also not met. Yusra was the first convert that I met during the duration of this study. When I discovered that she used the Qariah app, I was eager to hear her perspective in how the app stimulated her agency towards pious behavior. In accordance with reality, the way this interlocutor uses the app is not like the other interlocutors. As we saw previously, Hoda used the app to actively participate in Tahajjud prayer to work on the purification of her heart to facilitate connection with

[58] Interview with Yusra in February 2019 in Michigan.

the Quran (through memorization). Yusra also uses the app to engage her heart involving the mind and other bodily senses. As we will soon find out, she verbalizes the need to engage the believer's ears, mind, and heart. The first time I sat down to interview her, she made an apparent statement about how she did not know the Arabic language as most of the interlocutors in this study do. As she compared the advantage her fellow sisters in faith have over her, she also made it clear that her persistence in contemplating the Quran's meanings is still particularly important to her because it supports her in knowing her God, especially as a new Muslim. The method of contemplation that she formulated for herself consisted of a copy of the English translation of the *mushaf*[59] on hand that also has *tafsir*[60] written on the margins of the pages while playing the recitation from the Qariah app. Yusra associates the repetitive manner of using the Qariah app and holding the *mushaf* (English translation) in her hand with increased contemplation. The effect it has on Yusra's body as she engages in this contemplation of the Quran emphasizes its purpose through which the embodied subject is formed. Through this tool, a contemplation of the Quran is attained by acting on the body through captivating the ears, mind, and even the heart. During one of our encounters she said,

"Allah swt is so kind that He gives human beings the ability to think and understand His words, the Quran. Even if it is in a different language than the one I know, it truly is a blessing to be able to recite His words with my mouth…even if I struggle saying some of it (chuckling a little)… I still need to be patient. I need to use my mind to think about what He is communicating to me. That makes me develop a strong love for Allah swt because He could have created me in a way that I be able to hear the verses only, but instead I am able to speak and think about them.[61] *"*

Yusra's statement here describes the kind of disciplinary power that she and the other interlocutors become conscious of and work towards. Michel Foucault once stated that disciplinary individuals are regulated by the environments they reside in, and this is what we see Yusra undergoing (Foucault, 1998:). Yusra describes a process that partially involves her bodily senses, described as hearing the recitation from the Qariah

[59] The written form of the Quran revelation.
[60] The exegesis or the explanation of the Quran.
[61] Interview with Yusra on February 2019 in Michigan.

app and following along with the translated tafsir (i.e., using the mind faculty) helps her learn the overall context of the chapter and the crucial lessons to grasp and employ in her own present life. Chapter Al-alaq[62] was the chapter that she said she was reciting. I asked her why she started with this chapter, knowing fully well that this chapter was the first revelation sent down to Prophet Muhammed. She mentioned that this surah was the first chapter she was introduced to during the first year of being Muslim. In that year, she remembered the hardships she went through when she announced her Islam. Without going into details, Yusra described the feeling of being crippled by the thought of never understanding the Quran because of the language barrier. During one of the gatherings she used to attend, one woman was reviewing Chapter Al-alaq with her. This chapter changed her outlook on the relationship a Muslim should have with the Quran. She told me,

"If Allah directed us to "read" in the first verse of this chapter then it must mean something and needs to be of value in our lives. As I view this Holy Book, it is where we find the ideals and values that we must live by and that means that all of you, not you specifically but any person, needs to participate in the Quran to get to this stage."[63]

This quote emphasizes how Yusra's practice of using her mind faculty outweighs the ability to contemplate the chapter. It is where all the brewing of contemplative thoughts materializes and Yusra sees this as only possible through the presence of the English translation *mushaf* she carries with her at all times. This is not to say that Yusra believes the other two human faculties associated with the heart and ears are not necessary for this contemplation process. Still, she believes that her situation mandates that she work on the mind thoroughly via reflection and application of the divine commands in the Quran. The Qariah app still carries a vital role of repetition and pronunciation of the verses for the non-Arabic speaking individual. Still, the translation of the chapters is the most helpful in understanding like a true hafitha and thus, achieving piety. In addition, Yusra holds the same thought as the predecessors of Islam that believe it is more virtuous to look at the *mushaf* and recite from the Quran instead of reciting from memory primarily if one is reflecting on the meanings more

[62] Chapter Al-alaq translates into "The Clot".
[63] Interview with Yusra on February 2019 in Michigan.

in one method compared to the other. In her depiction of the process contemplation, she stated that she highlights and writes notes near certain verses that feature the reason of revelation or *asbab al-nuzul*[64]. In other instances, Yusra uses the YouTube app alongside the Qariah app to listen to tafsir in English or the interpretation of the surah she is studying instead of reading it. One of the famous interpretation scholars she learned from is Nouman Ali Khan[65]. Another stage of the contemplation process described as the most eye-opening part of this process to Yusra is the foundational step in communicating with Allah. I understood Yusra's conviction primarily centered on the first step towards the Quran, a journey that is granted to all who strive to connect with it regardless of the barrier, whether it be language or not, and will lead to a special understanding of the Divine communication. She explained that she is not communicating to Allah about a specific need she has for example. In a way, her participation in the command of "read" stated in the Quran, is a way for her to focus on Allah's communication to her about who He is, through reading His words. She describes Allah as wanting to help make the journey with the Quran easy for those seeking guidance, even if one feels like she is never going to arrive at the goal.

Malak is another participant that I met coincidently as I was getting ready to leave the masjid one day. She was alone and not surrounded by any of the other girls walking or sitting in groups. For whatever reason, I never saw her again at that masjid during the other times I went. I asked the other attendees about her, and they told me that she was not a frequent attendee. Nonetheless, our interaction was very brief but the exchange we had was valuable. At the time, I remember her rushing to pick up her child from daycare, repeatedly checking her phone throughout our conversation. As I learned, she was a mother and a graduate student studying Early Childhood Education at an online university. Like Yusra, Malak has her personal copy of the Quran that she references with the *tafsir* written on the margins, although not an English translation. Most of the time, while holding her Quran in her hand and listening to a recording of a surah from the Qariah app, she explains how she comes across verses with a specific command for the believer which she labels as "God speaking His command to His

[64] A*sbab al-nuzul* of the verses which Al-Zurqani defines as the revelation of one verse or several verses of the Quran that mention an issue or explain its law on the day of an event in Islam's history (1918).
[65] Nouman Ali Khan is a Pakistani American is an Islamic speaker who founded Bayyinah Institute that serves to teach Arabic and Quranic Studies

believers". The statement that grabbed my attention during our initial conversation was when she said,

"This app showed me a different outlook on the Quran. It is not just any book to me. More than once when I was sitting alone with the Quran, I came to this epiphany. That the Quran is instructions or divine communication, yes, but also that it intends to keep us engaged every time we read it. Malak pauses for a brief second. It gives me blessings for my heart, and I try my best to reciprocate in action. That's the kind of engagement I am talking about".[66]

Replaying that conversation and thinking about it often, I told myself that I needed to hear more from my interlocutor. I successfully got in touch with her one day and followed up through virtual interviews and messages which helped me gain some insight into this understanding of hers. In one of our exchanges through messages, I discovered the importance of two categories of divine commands from Allah which Malak emphasized. She saw them as physical commands and spiritual commands for the hafitha; Malak stressed the importance of distinguishing between the two and explained that the latter contributed to the overall well-being of the hafitha. The Qariah app enhanced Malak's communication with Allah by pointing her toward fulfilling her duty of spiritual commands. First, I would like to briefly shift our attention to the likelihood that hafithas could have arrived to this same realization without the Qariah app in their lives. But in Malak's situation, this app came at the perfect timing in guiding her to this realization. Unlike the other halaqa attendees, the pandemic disrupted Malak's religious lifestyle. She did not have the opportunity to attend any religious gatherings because of her busy schedule. The app, a quiet space away from the busy lifestyle, and the physical form of the Quran were the only things she needed to connect with Allah and the Quran in such a way. My curiosity got the best of me, so I asked her why she didn't find any online religious gatherings and her response was so matter of fact. She claimed:

"I am searching for something specific. I am looking for a deep connection that will help me reach Allah. Not a gathering that memorizes Quran only. I attended enough

[66] Interview with Malak on February 2019 in Michigan.

of those. She looked at me to gauge my reaction to her statements and then continued when I didn't say anything. I want something that will help me think of Him day and night through the Quran. I want to have a hal[67] with Allah".[68]

Moving back to the form of communication that Malak underlines, a *hal* with Allah, she describes this form of communication with Allah as an attachment that is built from improving and increasing the spiritual commands the hafitha owes to Allah. In Malak's understanding, any hafitha who seeks this relationship knows that it is a necessary first step. This communication is far from any interpersonal relationship or linking two individuals, but one that "is between Allah and His servant" as she describes it. More importantly, it is a hafitha's vade mecum and an accessory to be always worn. The exploration of her conceptualization of communication is in order before delving into this form of communication that Malak brings to my attention. s as holding importance in Islam as it commences with Allah's communication to humanity through a progression of prophets from Adam to the last Prophet, Muhammed, all of whom share the same message of belief in One true God. Malak states,

"Ever since the last Prophet's death, all Muslims are obligated to carry the responsibility of preaching or communication to those around them. These commands are understood to be physical aspects of the commands. This is all true, but I want to leave that aside for a little and focus on the spiritual commands that a believer is duty-bound to".[69]

Throughout her conversation with me, she is repeatedly accentuating the spiritual commands that a hafitha is duty-bound to. These spiritual commands can be categorized into any action that stems from the heart, for example *dhikr*[70]. She remembers very vividly a moment in her life when she was in solitude with the app and the Quran and came across Chapter Nuh and started reading it. She took out her phone to allow me a chance to relive this moment with her. She played a recitation of

[67] This is an Arabic word meaning an intense or deep connection with Allah.
[68] Interview with Malak on February 2019 in Michigan.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Dhikr is a form of Islamic prayer in which phrases are repeatedly chanted for the human consciousness to remember God.

Chapter Nuh by a reciter named Saima Yaqoob listed in the app. When we finished listening to verses 1-10 from Chapter Nuh, she paused the recitation and translated the verse in English saying, "And said, Ask forgiveness of your Lord. Indeed, He is ever a Perpetual Forgiver." This verse encompassed one example of a spiritual command that stood out to Malak. In it she finds a special opportunity, an invitation, for her to communicate with God which is presented in the form of participating in the command of doing *istighfar*[71]. Malak defines this communication in the form of doing *istighfar* as a part of one's life, similar to one taking their breath. As Malak stated:

"If you don't communicate with Allah through your istighfar every hour, then you are not doing it right. You will never feel open and happy striving towards the Quran as a hafitha without fulfilling your spiritual commands."

In this specific statement by Malak, the state of piety that she is trying to arrive to is founded on the repetition of *istighfar*. Malak explains that this process does not end at *istighfar* for example, because there are other spiritual commands mentioned in the Quran that she has encountered. However, the example of *istighfar* here suffices in acting as a modality of power that Foucault terms where the hafitha performs a certain number of operations on their own bodies, starting with the heart, and spreading to their entire being (Foucault, 1998:). The hafitha actively participates in this process to gain nearness to Allah and develop a better relationship with His words or communication. Jumping into the next section, we will hear Razanne's hafitha journey of arriving to a similar direction towards piety.

The emphasis on using the Qariah app as a means to discover ways to build a stronger relationship with Allah is a theme that was repeated by another interlocutor named Razanne. I asked her, as I was interested to learn more, about what a relationship with Allah means to her and if there was a similarity with Malak's understanding. As I expected, her response was to focus on communicating with Allah. This interlocutor, Razanne, who was a 24-year-old Yemeni American from the Muslim Unity Center describes a similar appreciation to that of Malak's when it comes to using the Qariah app. Razanne uses the Qariah app with the intention to review the chapters she has

[71] An Arabic term meaning seeking forgiveness from Allah.

memorized a long time ago. She has taken on a new goal understanding and reflecting on what God is conveying to her within the Quran. We both took a seat together by the doors of the women *musalah*[72] and she continued,

"I am at a stage in my life which mandates that I focus on application versus memorization. I don't want you to misinterpret my words…memorization is necessary and important. But the world we live in right now requires us to be aware of the message in the Quran and how to apply it to our current situation. The world is changing and the only book that can help us navigate these confusing times is the Quran. The only way for us to get to this level of locating the commands of Allah is if we purify our hearts and use the Quran to build our communication with Allah."[73]

I realized the choice of words that Razanne selected and asked her to clarify what she meant by "communication with Allah". She became flustered by me disrupting her trail of thoughts once again and answered in one word, "prayer". In comparison to Malak's understanding that the communication is to be in the form of dhikr, Razanne saw her communication with Allah in the form of prayer or *salah*[74]. She picked up her phone and showed me the name Ramla Hasan who was a qariah listed on the app. Razanne was telling me that yesterday she had opened this qariah's recitation of Chapter Al-Baqarah and verse 43 specifically. It wasn't her first time reading this chapter. She had memorized the chapter already and just reviews it daily through recitation and reflection. She goes into detail on how she was reciting alongside the Qariah app while holding the copy of the Quran and felt that Allah was sending her a message. She follows that by pulling out her own copy of the Quran showing it off proudly. It was a small sized Quran that was missing the binding spine. She let me know that her familiarity with this chapter has earned her a great deal of lessons that she reminds herself of frequently. During one of our conversations she stated,

"There are times where I have to muster the strength to find that connection in making sure that I am communicating with Allah properly. I noticed that during the times that I use the app and read this chapter specifically, the more I am reminded of the

[72] This is an Arabic word for a small prayer room in the masjid designated for women.
[73] Interview with Razanne in February 2019 in Michigan.
[74] This is an Arabic term for prayer.

importance of my communication with Allah and that He does understand me in my prayer. I don't know what it is…maybe it's the different qariah and the recitation. You hear the command differently as you are reciting with it."[75]

After I examined this verse and its translation, her explanation was clear. It consisted of warnings to the Children of Israel[76], to not transgress against Allah by following in the path of destruction or having an intermediary role in furthering any kind of evil on Earth. This specific verse that she was referring to translates into, "And establish your prayers, give charity, and bow with those who bow (in worship and obedience).[77] It is a warning from God to the Children of Israel that transgressed against the people by causing chaos and destruction in the society, thus, disobeying Allah. Every time Razanne uses the app to review Chapter Al-Baqarah she is reminded of the power of establishing prayer and its influence on a people. The Children of Israel did not see it this way and led themselves to their doom. Using them as an example that she does not want to follow, she subjugates her heart into prayer as a way to keep her communication with Allah alive, thus achieving pious self. She sees the fate of the Children of Israel as a warning and a message to herself from God and a way for her to keep herself in check.

This section ends here as we come to a closing in understanding the methodology each interlocutor put in place to walk in the footsteps of a hafitha. Although the narratives of each interlocutor offered versions of the interlocutors' experiences and their own unique journeys, it more importantly depicted the Qariah app's role in easing their connections with the Quran and contributing to their reawakening or spiritual revival. This was illustrated through the prioritization of each interlocutor's need either, focusing mainly on contemplation or memorization. The function of this same app pronounced discourse that created a disciplinary power that produced obedient and pious subjects that adhered to the Quran through the relearning of the meaning of their hafitha identity.

[75] Interview with Razanne in February 2019 in Michigan.
[76] In Arabic this is translated into Bani Israel. They were descendants of Prophet Jacob.
[77] Chapter Al-Baqarah verse 43.

5.4. The Second Layer of Piety Examined: Becoming a Mindful Muslimah

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, an organization with efforts to provide objective research and education about American Muslims to support well-informed dialogue and decision-making, has found that little research has been conducted on Muslim American youth and their mental health attitudes (ISPU 2020).[78] To make up for the lack of statistical data, ISPU examined the mental health behaviors of 184 American-born Muslim college students through a quantitative methodology in 2011 (Herzig 2011, 17). The results revealed how participants expressed a multifaceted coping approach to mental health disorders (Herzig 2011, 40). Some coping methods include religious-backed approaches, proactive cognitive strategies, and using other individuals for support (Herzig 2011, 40). In addition, there were high level concerns over the accessibility of trained providers with multicultural competence (Herzig 2011, 17). This much needed research paved the way for this ethnography which presents social media spaces as an environment equipped with information, regardless of the level of impact, to assist Muslim American women in navigating mental health issues as well. Most of the discussions within this space revolve around the intersections of mental health, stigma, and religious socialization with God in mind. By analyzing the discussions I had with the female participants in this study, I explore the value of this space and the extent it has in facilitating a framework of introductory Islamic understanding of Allah that sparked a design of managing emotional distresses these Muslim American female youth confront. In this study, I have found that the best way to truly understand the lived experiences of these female interlocutors is by viewing their narratives from the lens of discourse analysis. In other words, I aim to use discourse analysis methodology of their narratives, reflections on posts and its integration in their lives, through analyzation of keywords, metaphors, and phrases used in these spaces will reveal a framework that coincides with the pious behaviors of these individuals and how this framework is used by them to attain agency not from an institution but from a previous discourse.

At the outset of this section, I would like to take the time to briefly summarize the results of studies conducted in the United States and Canada that explored the way

[78] https://www.ispu.org/social-policy/youth/

Muslims- both women and men- used their faith in relation to their mental health. Karisse Callender along researchers Lee Ong and Enaya H. Othman conducted a study titled *Prayers and Mindfulness in Relation to Mental Health among First Generation Immigrant and Refugee Muslim Women in the United States: An Exploratory Study.* Another study based in Canada titled *Prayer and Wellbeing in Muslim Canadians: Exploring the Mediating Role of Spirituality, Mindfulness, Optimism, and Social Support* directs our attention to the similar faith-based coping mechanisms that positively impacted the mental health of the participants and their overall lives. In one study, a sample of Muslim women that lived in an urban city in the Midwestern region of the United States found that *salah* or prayer had a strong influence on the mental health of the women participants. The results displayed a reoccurring theme of prayer which was classified into four sub-themes: prayer helps build community, prayer promotes wellbeing, prayer increases faith, and prayer increases intentional awareness (Callender et al. 2022, 8). To expand on this, researchers found that one way to promote wellbeing was through prayer which was based on the way the women used it as a method to manage and overcome their emotional distresses. Another study focusing on 174 Muslim participants (62% males and 38% females) discovered that two components of prayer categorized as mindfulness and offering prayer regularly contributed to better mental health (Al-batnuni et al. 2021, 912). Within this Canadian-Muslim population a study demonstrated that four potential mediators of the relationship between prayer and wellbeing were examined: mindfulness, optimism, spirituality, and social support (Al-batnuni et al. 2021, 912). The main element that was repeatedly mentioned in these studies was mindfulness during prayer and here is where I would like to begin our discussion. Most of my interlocutors that I sat down with during this study believed that mindfulness was the key to affirmative feelings of safety during their episodes of emotional distress. Each participant-Intissar, Sana, Dania, and Lila-all agreed that mindfulness is a state that they continuously strive towards and not a one-stop destination and certainly not a state that they will always be in engaging in *salah*. Invoking the ninety-nine names of Allah was the common ground to establishing and extending this state of mindfulness for all the participants. For each participant, the name or attribute of Allah that was mentioned was reflective of their situation at the time of the interview. This means that they found other names of Allah to be meaningful in their journey, but for the purpose of this study I will focus on the main attribute that they mentioned most frequently. This common method

among the participants begins with two Instagram pages that act as a form of instruction as well as consecutively used to suppress or reduce their negative thoughts with the mindfulness in *salah* approach. Note, there were other Islamic Instagram pages that the participants used as a part of their routine but will not be mentioned in this paper because they did not focus on the ninety-nine names of Allah.

The first participant that we will introduce in this chapter is Intissar. She described attaining mindfulness in prayer as "a blessing from Allah and sometimes Allah takes it away, so you need to work harder for it again because you miss and yearn for it".[79] Intissar, a participant in her early twenties who recently graduated from Wayne State University with a bachelor's degree in psychology, follows an Instagram page titled *Youth_Awakening*. This page was created on November 6, 2020 and has over 1K followers. The description associated with this page reads:

> AN AWAKENING TO HELP YOU LIVE PURPOSEFULLY, STAY BALANCED, DEVELOP YOUR MINDSET, AND REACH YOUR POTENTIAL. OUR AIM IS CULTIVATING A SOCIETY UPON IHSAN BASED ON THE QURAN AND SUNNAH.[80]

She became a follower of this page after searching on Instagram for accounts that help cope with her anxiety. One of the topics that she seemed keen on discussing was related to the mental health issues primarily impacting Muslim American women in her community. In her opinion, despite this eminent problem, there does not seem to be enough faith-based intervention efforts. Intissar is aware that her faith is the solution to this problem but blames culture for aiding in the growing numbers. When she stumbled upon this page, she found enlightenment and solace in the page's posts and stories[81] produced daily. In one of our lengthy conversations together, Intissar stated that despite following other religious scholars and religious pages on Instagram, this page was one of those that produced posts that resonated with her the most because it was a quick guide to practical ways that she can use faith to lighten the difficult moments in her life.[82] Difficult times lead to different coping mechanisms depending on the person and in this case the type of coping mechanism that is being referred to

[79] Interview with Intissar on August 14, 2022 Michigan.
[80] Ihsan is the Arabic word that means to do something in the most beautiful and perfect of ways for Allah.
[81] Instagram stories are vertical full-screen photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours.
[82] Interview with Intissar on August 14, 2022 Michigan.

is stemming from religious literacy. This translates into the way religion is interwoven with culture and specifically cultural health, where it is reflected in how Intissar sought relief from her anxiety through prayer and a change of mindset.

Religion and cultural health are two important subjects to define in this study because there are ways a person of faith seeks lifestyle changes and treatments for a specific mental or physical health condition. Some obvious examples are therapy or medicines, and one not so obvious example is digital media habits. In this study, digital media based coping mechanisms aligned "in prayer and a change of mindset" as Intissar describes it is a great place to begin examining her scheme of managing her anxiety. Intissar begins by stressing that both are grounded in the Islamic creed. As I learned she associated this with a change in mindset that is Islamically based and her awareness of her emotions and inner state in relation to Allah. As all humans experience, she describes that there are times when she notices changes in her emotions that lead to a high level of anxious behavior. In these vulnerable times, she retraces her own thoughts and assesses what needs to be adjusted by asking herself important questions. These include assessing her emotional state and its reflectiveness of a pure inner state that is connected to Allah or not. In her experience, this approach of introspection and mindfulness is connected to prayer. The turning point in her life which was the very first time she applied this was after seeing a post shared on the Youth Awakening Instagram page (Figure 2). For Intissar, this post consisting of three images was a significant force in allowing her to realize her shortcoming that is contributing to her anxiety, forgetting who Allah is and what He means to her. Intissar elaborates that all her life she has prioritized social relationships, and this pattern in her life has done more harm to her than good. She describes these relationships as weak from the start, an unfortunate position where no one intended to keep the other's well-being in mind. This introduced an onset of worry and anxiety that she experienced and struggled to overcome. Through this post she learned that the primary relationship she should have made her priority and worked hard to perfect was the one with Allah and the foundation of this relationship is knowing Allah's ninety-nine names. In this relationship there is no hardship or suffering to you or those you love because there is a sense of calmness in knowing you are all watched over by Him simultaneously. Her words depicting this realization were as follows:

"As Muslims we know our rights that Allah gave us. He always knows what we need. Because our unbalanced connection with people we disregard all that and look to them for what we need. She pulls out her phone and opens the Quran app and says, "In Surah Al-Nur Allah says, Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession to authority upon the earth just as He therein their religion which He has preferred for them and that He will surely substitute for them, after their fear, security, for they worship Me, not associating anything but Me. But whoever disbelieves after that then those are the defiantly disobedient."[83]

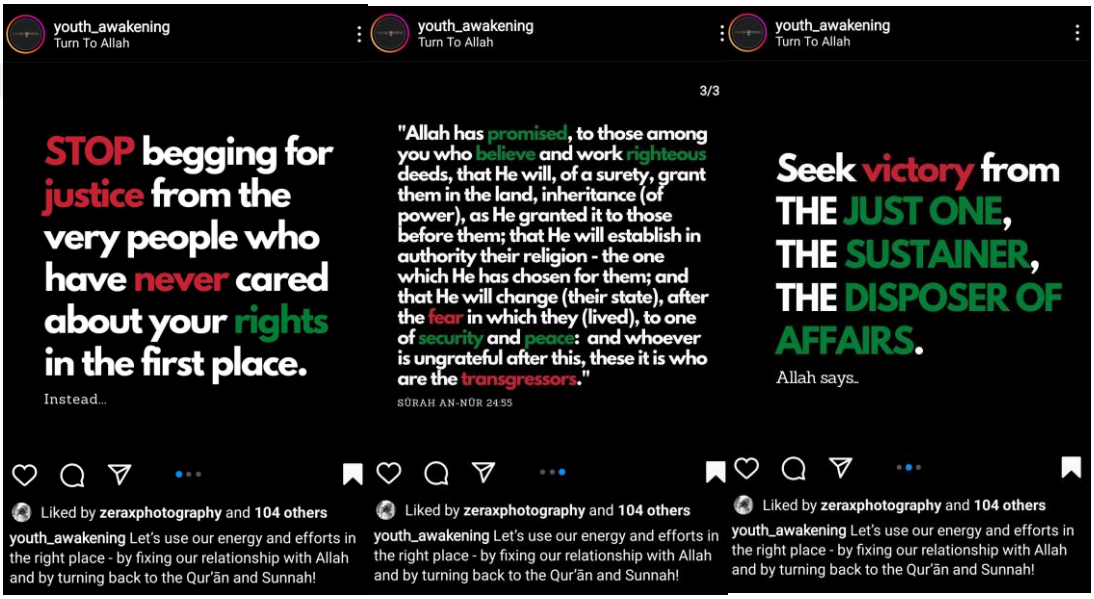

Figure 6.1. Intissar and the Youth Awakening Instagram Post

This quote is important because it represents the revival of the meaning of some of Allah's ninety-nine names to Intissar. In realizing the basis of the missing link to her emotional troubles, Intissar enters the first stage of mindfulness, but she also describes another stage which was in prayer as she was actively engaging with Allah's names that were portrayed in the post (Figure 2). When asked about the different approaches to meditation in response to mental health disorders or emotional distress she stressed breathing exercises, stretches, and *salah*[84]. Without dismissing the value of the two previous coping techniques, *salah* is the most emphasized in Islam because it's a

[83] Interview with Intissar on August 14, 2022 Michigan
[84] Salah is one of the five pillars of Islam which is mandatory upon every Muslim.

recurring practice that facilitates a bond between the believer and Allah. Furthermore, *salah* is an indispensable element in the building of a believer's character (through shaping feelings and behavior) and in linking her directly with God. More importantly, *salah* includes diverse forms of *duaa* while partaking in prescribed movements. As we will learn from Intissar, during *salah* Muslims verbally make *duaa* using the ninety-nine names of Allah as a form of etiquette when calling to Allah[85]. The names of Allah that Intissar viewed as interdependent centered on four names*: Al-Razzak* (The Provider), *Al-Aziz* (The Victorious), *Al-Muhyi* (The Restorer), and *Al-Muqit* (The Sustainer or All-Nourisher). She explained that the Instagram post piqued her interest to search the name *Al-Muqit* first which guided her to the meanings expanding further to embrace the other three names of Allah. She states, Allah *Al-Muqit* has the all-encompassing power which extends to the protection, nourishment, facilitation, and maintenance of all creation. In Intissar's words she states:

"Allah being The Sustainer, to me it means He is the one that gave us life, the one that keeps us in existence and maintains our existence. He maintains our provisions and everything pertaining to both losses and gains."[86]

Al-Muqit as "The Sustainer" was a name that resonated with Intissar because it gave her relief from the plights she witnessed in her community, specifically to her fellow sisters who were stripped of their Islamic rights. In her moments of anxiety thinking about this susceptible group who she calls "her sisters" yet having no familial ties to them, she feels an obligation and connection to them by remembering them in her *salah.* She describes her accountability; her part to uplift these women isn't linked to only informing them of their Islamic rights that Allah has promised will surely come back to them, but that she needs to practice mindfulness of Allah for them.[87] When I inquired more about what she meant she explained that her mindfulness of Allah is of course for her to make sense of all that is happening around her. I remember she said, "It's obvious how this helps me as I get emotional for them, but how is that going to help those women who are suffering? These are abandoned women and they are going

[86] Interview with "Intissar," August 14, 2022 Michigan
[87] Ibid.

through serious adversities and are advised to persevere." She explained to me that her mindfulness of Allah pushes her to make duaa for her sisters that are suffering and that is the gift she gives to them along with any other help, either in verbal or physical form. Intissar arrives to this state while in *sujood* as she performs her salah. During our conversation, she turns on her phone and looks up a Prophetic saying that describes *sujood* or the prostration of a believer during *salah* as the best position since she is closest to her Lord during that time.[88] When she makes her duaa for them during *sujood* she feels a sense of peace and less worry about them. She feels this is the most effective way to fix a problem after doing whatever is in her capacity and then making duaa and leaving it in the care of Allah to handle all matters. She said that if all Muslims sincerely do this and believe that Allah has their welfare in mind and will make them victorious and protect them from their oppressor no matter the situation, this world would be a completely different world.

The practice of mindfulness in salah was stressed in more than one occasion as I was speaking with another participant named Sana. Sana was a friend of Intissar's and also introduced herself as a Wayne State University undergraduate. As I gathered later on, she resided in New York, before coming to Michigan to complete her bachelor's degree in mathematics. One of the topics she was vocal about was the topic of loneliness which she grapples with, mainly after starting her university program and moving away from her family and community. Loneliness is a problem that is not reserved for a certain age or religion. Statistics show that loneliness expands throughout the world with data revealing highest scores of loneliness among youth ages 18-22 in the year 2018 (CIGNA[89]). The cause of this problem is often blamed on the modern world we live today which is filled with so many *-isms* that are constructing a new dimension to life. To cope with these unwanted feelings, people avoid the problem and insist, knowingly or unknowingly, to live their life with its many issues on their own without any help. As a result, this feeling of being lonely is on the rise among different age groups within many populations and is a known social factor that contributes to mental illness. A study conducted on undergraduate Muslim female

[88] Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him said, "The servant is. Closest to his Lord during prostration, so increase your supplications therein." Source Sahih Muslim 482

[89]https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combatting-loneliness/loneliness-survey-2018-full-report.pdf

students confirms that students that fall under this category and specifically minority students who are more likely to experience marginalization and thus, experience loneliness compared to their white peers (Mir 2014, 74). Although not enough research has been conducted on the Muslim American population specifically, researchers anticipate a high probability that the same outcome presents itself within this population as they participate in different sectors of society. In addition, the Muslim American story is a special case because of being at the forefront of bigotry and discriminatory backlash since the September 11 attacks. For example, aggressive behavior projected on some Muslim Americans is a known contributor to psychological problems whether in an educational, employment, or other social setting.

During one of my interactions with Sana, I probed for the role of social media in her life. She made it clear that she is an avid user of social media for various reasons. In addition to keeping in contact with her loved ones, social media keeps her updated on local and world news. Moreover, she stated that social media was a way for her to stay connected to her faith by reminding her about religious topics. She explained that when she lived in New York she was very active in her local *masajid* and would attend events weekly. That all changed when she moved to Michigan. She struggled a lot with attending religious events at her local masjid and hadn't developed close friendships yet.[90] The situation became even more difficult with her busy schedule consisting of work and school. Social media in the given moment was the best alternative to listen to presentations and lectures organized at the masjid and recorded online. At one point during our conversation, she asked me if I knew of an Instagram page called Thinkbites[91]. This page was one that she frequently visited to read the articles associated with the posts. The profile of the page and website states:

A new media (online publication and content platform) non-profit promoting personal, spiritual, and community development. Our goal is to articulate an understanding of Islamic values that helps Muslim students and professionals engage more thoughtfully with God, their selves, and their communities. We publish articles, short reflections,

[90] Interview with Sana on August 14, 2022 in Michigan.
[91] https://www.instagram.com/thinkbites/

and curated recommendations to spark God-consciousness introspection-- bite-sized content to get you thinking.[92]

This Instagram page, a fairly new account that launched in 2020 with an estimated 2K followers, had posts and articles written by community members, scholars, and academicians such as Tarek Younis[93], Omar Usman[94], and Justin Elias[95] to name a few. Sana pulled out her phone and searched through the page and then pointed her phone towards me which was dated March 9, 2021. It was a post on meditation and redirecting one's thoughts throughout the day (Figure 3). In Sana's words, this post was a gateway to improving her *salah* and being dedicated to her worship. She said:

"I think everyone experiences this and then they start taking their faith seriously. I mean when you pray you are not really fully present, you are distracted by so many thoughts in your head. That was me many times and when I saw this post and read the article, it gave me a sense of urgency to rebuild my relationship with Allah and feel His presence in a different way, like my companion and friend. And because of this new thinking I did not want to mess up my meetings with Him. In doing that, I felt more at peace with myself and not always so lonely."[96]

Like the other participants in this study, Sana expressed a point of realization that prayer was not a standard set of movements and verbal statements that she completes and then goes about her day. Her thoughts matured to be more mindful of Allah during her prayers. She compares these prayers she patiently waits for as her therapy sessions with God. In her prayers she can release her worries, parting way with them through expressions she speaks to Allah. Moreover, Sana believes that seeing this post and reading the associated article guided her to embracing one of Allah's ninety-nine names in her prayer daily. She describes that in her prayer she remembers and thinks of Allah as Al-Wali or The Ally and that He is the friend that she does not have in the new environment that she lives in.

[92] https://www.instagram.com/thinkbites/
[93] https://www.tarekyounis.org/about.html
[94] https://www.ibnabeeomar.com/about
[95] https://www.instagram.com/abuaminaelias/?hl=en
[96] Interview with Sana on August 14, 2022 Michigan

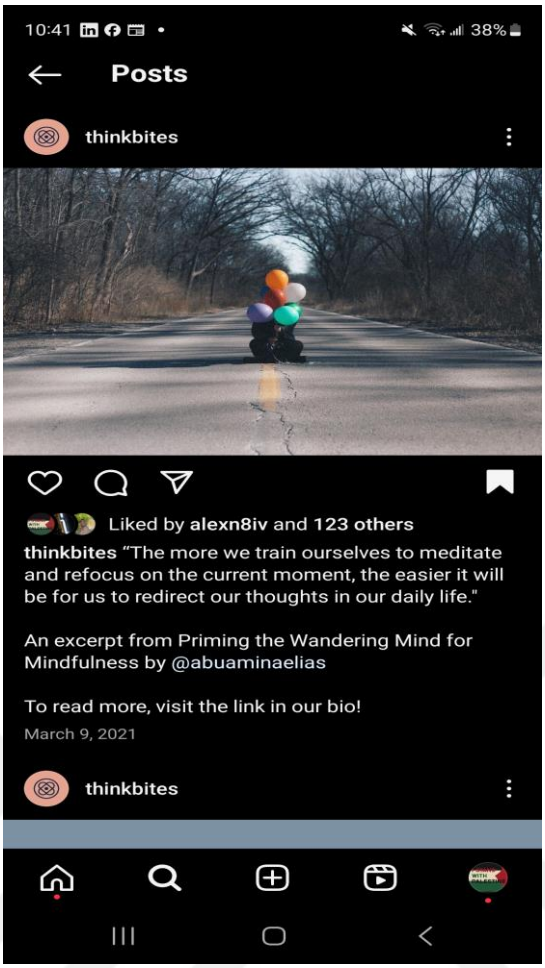

Figure 6.2. Sana and the Thinkbites Instagram Post

This section explores the type of loneliness that female converts endure in comparison to the participants mentioned above, who were born into Muslim families. Dania and Lila were both new converts to Islam who described a type of loneliness before their conversion that slowly decreased over time, especially after becoming Muslim. The more they grew with their worship, the lesser of a presence loneliness had in their lives. Studies demonstrate that most converts admire a common trait of Islam that lies in its parading of strong community bonds and kinship. Pre-conversion to Islam most women from this group reminisce on their feelings of not fitting in with members of their old communities and were always aware of the perceptions they had towards them based on their appearance or lifestyle choices they made (Nieuwkerk 2006, 33). One woman stated, “I was looking for peace. I was not very happy, I felt lost, I was drifting. I didn’t feel like I belonged in my society” (Nieuwkerk 2006, 33). In addition to these feelings of being out of place before Islam, women who embrace Islam

struggle with problems in this phase of their lives as well. A common problem is the weakening of familial relationships in response to the conversion. Some of these women who convert to Islam are adolescents who live with their parents and are financially dependent on them. Once they declare their adherence to the Islamic faith, they may experience limitations in their religious observances and opt to conceal or retract their conversion to reduce tensions in the family (Ahmed et al. 2012, 238). Eventually these feelings and unwelcoming behavior result in attacks, adverse reactions, and a strained relationship to the extent that the relationship is cut off. An accumulation of all of this sometimes contributes to dark episodes of depression for these women. In the case of this study, Dania and Lila had each other when they announced their conversion. They met at one of the sisters only events organized by the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills. They expressed that they did experience feelings of loneliness as they were discovering the faith before their conversion and a little bit afterward. They also stated that during this critical phase in their lives they were fortunate enough not to experience depression. It was also during this phase that they utilized the available resources at their disposal to learn more and achieve a higher level of faith. With the acquaintance of some Muslim sisters, they met at the local masjid to read and discuss the Quran together. These women also mentioned the value of social media in teaching them about their faith. As women who still need to master the Arabic language to truly understand the Quran and Sunnah, they found some social media accounts to be a constructive source for this quest for knowledge. One way this was accomplished was through how the posts made accessible the comprehension of the ninety-nine names of Allah to them.

Dania was the first convert that I spoke to during my time in the field. I found that the name of Al-Fattah or The Opener paired in *salah* helped her see her journey of converting to Islam from a different lens, a lens free of loneliness because of Allah's power. Learning the name of Allah, Al-Fattah, provided her with a receptive mind and heart, especially during the difficult moments of family abandonment upon learning of her conversion. Dania explains that the Instagram post associated with the Youth_Awakening account depicts a five-image post (Figure 4). The third image from the post activated this new realization of hers. In her own words Dania says:

"I think the turning point was accepting these feelings. The beautiful memories that I had with my family will always be my favorite memories, but that doesn't mean that I can't have anything like that anymore in my life. Just as Allah gave me my family and even if they don't want to be a part of my life anymore, that doesn't mean that the next phase in my life will not be better. I am learning to believe in Allah and His plans that He has for me. I am learning to believe that the next door that will open will be just as beautiful."[97]

As we see from this quote, Dania's firm belief in the name of Allah, Al-Fattah, helped her survive the new changes in her life after her conversion. This Instagram post bridged the gap between relief from loneliness and seeing Allah's power of Al-Fattah present in her life. Through this post she was aware of Allah's power to unfold her life to different doors awaiting her fate. Dania believes that the state of a Muslim's mind and heart combined is the compass that when situated ideally will lead to a fruitful prayer. Similarly, when Muslims align themselves towards the Kaaba in the city of Mecca for prayer, they are declaring their devotion to Allah. In this act of prayer, Dania explains how this reflection on the name Al-Fattah repositions her heart and mind by allowing her to continue through her day no matter the hopelessness and difficulties.

[97] Interview with Dania on August 14, 2022 Michigan.

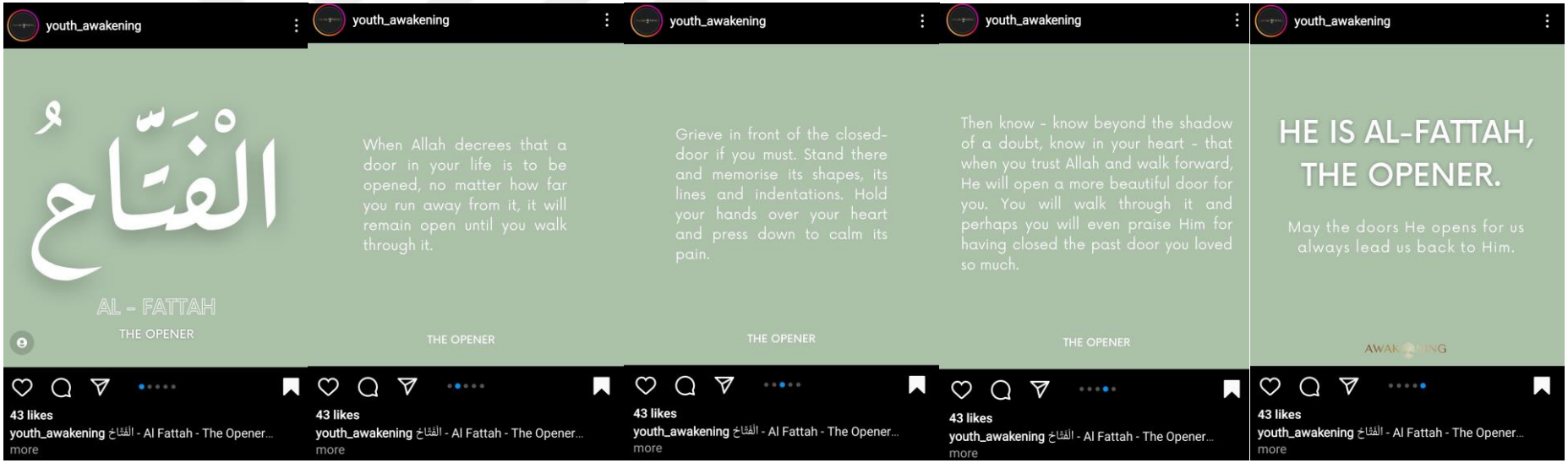

Figure 6.3. Dania and the Youth Awakening Instagram Post

Lila was another participant that I was introduced to while speaking to Dania. She introduced herself as a "revert" to Islam. Intrigued by her choice of words, I spoke with her individually during one of our meetings and she explained that her preference in using the word "revert" versus convert to describe herself was rooted in her firm belief that everyone, regardless of the religion they follow, was born a believer in one God since birth.[98] This may have changed within their lifetime as they embraced other religions or even no religion, but the starting point is the Oneness of God. Her interest in Islam began in high school where she was exposed to the faith through close Muslim friends and was invited to attend events at the masjid during Ramadan. She describes that while attending these events, she would often observe and find fascinating the ritual of prayer or *salah* as Muslims call it.[99] Now that she has embraced the Islamic faith, she points to *salah* as the most intriguing ritual that pulled her towards the faith. Understandably, religious conversion consists of changes in the lifestyle and identity of the individual. Lewis R. Rambo[100] confirms this fact as applicable in all religious, but when he zoomed in on the Islamic faith he describes the rituals as one that penetrates all areas of life. Furthermore, in the Islamic and Christian framework Rambo specifically describes the prayer ritual as a central link between its adherents and deity in the form of communication (1993, 118). We can see that in Western conversion studies, the impact of *salah* on one's life is powerful. For example, in the British context a woman named Huda Al-Khattab who is an English convert equates prayer as a tool that keeps you conscious of God all the time and continually touching base (Zebiri 2008, 88). These definitions of prayer are tied into Lila's perspective on prayer. She stated that:

"Prayer is a believer's source of peace. It is a sanctuary that gives you a break from the flaws of this world and allows you to nurture and restore your body, mind, and soul. Then you can confront this world again as you continue serving Allah."[101]

[98] In Islam, fitrah is an Arabic word that describes the innate human nature that recognizes the Oneness of God which is the message of Islam.
[99] Interview with Lila on August 14, 2022 Michigan.
[100] A research professor of Psychology and Religion at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and Graduate Theological Union, Berkley. He is the author of *Understanding Religious Conversion*.
[101] Interview with Lila on August 14, 2022 Michigan.

Arriving to this explanation, that prayer is the peace of a believer, is founded on one of the names of Allah, As-Salam or the Source of Peace. As she explained the name of Allah As-Salam, she described the Thinkbites post that led her to this understanding (Figure 5). This post inspired her to learn more about the name of Allah, As-Salam during her quest to find inner peace. Often, Muslim converts state inner peace as the goal they search for pre-Islam. They first realize that material things and people may help them temporarily feel that inner peace. However, they soon discover that it is not sufficient and start searching for something else. They only discover this inner peace after finding the true meaning of Islam. Even after they find Islam, they still experience problems in their lives, but they are given divine resources to work through these problems compared to their lives pre-Islam. A study conducted in Denmark reveals a similar situation of a young woman named Aisha who was on a similar path to finding inner peace. After her conversion, she makes an effort to share with other Muslim converts or those interested in the faith that Islam is divided into three parts: faith, rituals, and spirituality. The way to be a good Muslim is to possess all three (Rasmussen 2020, 430). Using this example, Lila sees the ritual of prayer as a spiritual practice of purifying one's soul and mind and ultimately reaching that inner peace. This perspective of hers is the essence of one's faith and relationship with Allah.

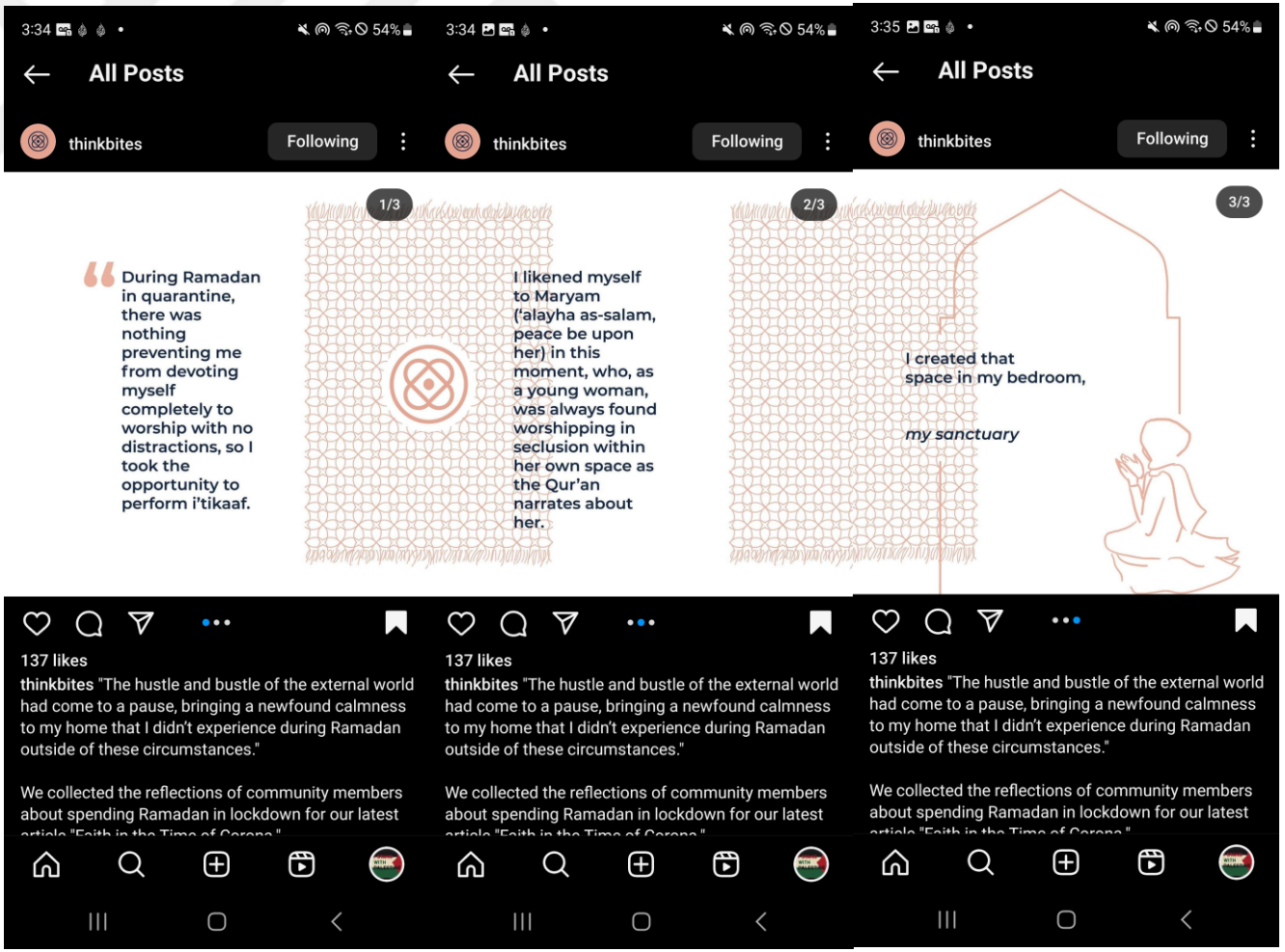

Figure 6.4. Lila and the Thinkbites Instagram Post

5.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the religious meanings that Intissar, Sana, Dania, and Lila arrived at within the medium they are involved in. The reader learns of a specific discourse that gives insight into religious practices that are unrelated to the visual elements of religion such as wearing the veil or the movements of prayer. It is not a discourse that is a reaction to Islamophobic rhetoric. We see an exhibition of the interlocutors, all on a shared journey of seeking their Creator through the difficult emotional trials they were experiencing. In these specific experiences, we examine the manner social media performs itself as an effective tool in supporting the participants' mental health coping mechanisms. The direct relationship between social media and a craving heart and mind that yearns to find relief in Allah's names while performing prayers can be an appropriate mechanism to combat mental health. Also, as we learn from the experiences of Intissar, Sana, Dania, and Lila, social media content and specifically the Youth_Awakening and Thinkbites Instagram pages, promote faith-based techniques such as mindfulness of Allah during prayer which was their tried and tested methodology. These Instagram pages fostering an informative commitment to the Divine names transpired into the piece of the puzzle that each woman was searching for to practice awareness of her emotions in response to the challenging situations and the experiences of her community members that peaked their emotional distresses. In this space they each discovered a practice akin to keeping Allah with you at all times.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Attempting to discover and analyze a phenomenon such as the religious literacy process of a community requires that one does not avoid the technological role that led to this development. Religious literacy in various communities may have manifested itself by taking a direction in which members learned the faith's teachings in an established and fixed manner. But as the world changes so does this traditional religious literacy methodology. Some worldwide incidents are distinguishably given the title of pushing a community towards significant change; one example is being technologically forward. This is what the pandemic served for religious communities in America; within the Muslim American context it became an event that unearthed an added tool (i.e. digital media) that served to strengthen their faith and it simultaneously reshaped how its members behave. As we saw, it displayed the way members of this community acquired religious knowledge that incorporated understanding, behavior, and action. Although religious affiliation remained largely unchanged throughout the pandemic in the United States, the understandings, practices, and habits of the members changed (Survey Center on American Life). According to the 2022 American Religious Benchmark Survey, the pandemic took a toll on religious attendance where more Americans affiliated with White Mainline Christian, White Evangelical, White Catholic, Black Protestant, Hispanic Catholic, Latter-day Saints, and Jewish communities reported they never attend religious services or attend less frequently than the years they did before. This was no different for the Muslim community during the pandemic period, yet they utilized new platforms to seek a connection with their faith. As I have shown in this study, the power of discourse production within these unique spaces such as the virtual ones that were discussed, is one method to excavate the reality of the members of this faith and the overall religious temperaments and characteristics of a society. I am sure that there may be other ways to discover the reality of the religious literacy practices of Muslim American female youth. However, one must also think of the state of the world if we were not to experience the pandemic,

maybe people's quest for religious knowledge may not have expanded to other spaces? Nonetheless, events do occur that create a shift in the direction that adherents of a particular faith practice worship. This direction can lead to a methodology where the power and knowledge present in this path develop into what dictates the behavior of the people.

As with most studies, those that focus on the Muslim American female construct a picture resonating with the Western imagination of stereotypes inflicted on the Islamic faith. The view of Islam today is most of the times sensed and learned through assumptions and narratives dissociated from the reality of its members. This leads to an understanding of Islam that is not entirely clear to many and associated with many prejudices. Western-based stereotypes imposed on Islam are many; some include patriarchal and misogynistic qualities. Speaking on terrorism, another one of the stereotypes linked to Islam, John Esposito once said, "Critical to the fight against global terrorism is an ability to move beyond presuppositions and stereotypes in our attitudes and policies and to form partnerships that transcend an "us" and "them" view of the world" (Esposito et al., 2008). In this statement one can extract the problem and its remedy; the issue lies in intentionally mislabeling a group of people to fit one's agenda. The solution to this problem is to refrain from labelling others using such a limited scope. Each one of these stereotypes fall under the Western discourse which has spread and even engrained itself in all societies. My aim in mentioning the tenacity of such views is to present an evaluative stance on this Western image and point out another outlook to understand and connect with this population. As we learn, this targeted population, especially those who are visibly Muslim such as female youth, are on a mission to explore other avenues of taking back their narratives and reconnecting with their faith's teachings.

This ethnographic research contributes to an insufficient amount of literature on Muslim American female youth and their inventive ways and skills in using technology to acquire religious knowledge. This research unveils the production of knowledge, despite its incomprehensive nature, where the discourse styles become the language that these interlocutors use to develop or build on their pious behavior. This study looks at the critical role of digital media technology in promoting this female religious pious movement presented in the form of prayer to lighten emotional

distresses and examining Quran memorization practices which shapes the Muslim American female identity. These participants present broad perspectives on using digital media like Instagram and phone applications to attain some level of religious literacy and be better Muslims. Whether they were Muslim American converts or second generation Muslim American females, these women emerging from various backgrounds and different stages in life, showed determination in developing their spirituality and bettering their relationship with Allah.

As this chapter comes to an end, I would like to discuss future work that would shed more light on this topic, the first being that interested researchers should seek to study a more significant sample to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. Also, examining other social media platforms and the effect they have on the religious literacy of the female Muslim American youth population is recommended. In addition to Facebook and the others, I believe Whatsapp would be particularly interesting to look into. As I referenced earlier in this thesis, Whatsapp has been used all over the Muslim world to connect Muslim women and seekers of religious knowledge, especially those improving their Quranic knowledge. As I was conducting this research, I have met interviewees that described their usage styles of this platform. Although they benefited greatly from this platform compared to the others studied in this thesis, unfortunately because the interlocutors were not as many as I anticipated, I did not have a solid sample to work with. Also, I propose that future work can broaden efforts to learn about the kind of platforms that Muslim American male youth use in their quest for knowledge. I believe there is a lack of adequate research examining the religious literacy goals of this sample population.

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Teaching Experience

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