

The Role of Religion in Young Muslims' and Christians' Self-presentation on Social Media

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Abstract

This article examines how young Muslims and Christians with ethnic minority backgrounds in Oslo reflect on their use of social media as a way to present themselves and their religiosity. The study draws upon Arlie Hochschild's concepts of feeling rules and emotional labour and Erving Goffman's typology of frontstage and backstage behaviour to analyse how young Muslims and Christian informants present themselves on social media. For minority groups, these strategies can be used to negotiate religion and create a different image. This study shows that both Christian and Muslim youth with minority backgrounds use different strategies to present their religiosity. Even though all the informants want to portray themselves as religious, they carefully consider what type of religious content they share to avoid social exclusion, conflict and religious discussions.

Keywords

Youth, minorities, self-presentation, feeling rules, social media, Christian, Muslim, emotional labour, frontstage, backstage

Introduction

Social media plays an important role in young people's everyday lives. In particular, social media constitutes a central communication channel for what happens in youth cultures. This can be anything from keeping in touch with friends to arranging parties, concerts, and religious or political celebrations (Bakken, 2018, p. 58).

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The current article examines how a sample of 25 young Muslims and Christians, aged 16–35 years with ethnic minority backgrounds, who live in Oslo, reflect on their use of social media to present themselves and their religiosity. Further, we investigate how these young people negotiate religion and how gender contributes to processes of inclusion and exclusion in the presentations of their religious selves on social media. The study covers young people who were born or raised in Norway but who have at least one parent who immigrated to Norway as an adult. Both male and female informants are included, all of whom are active in a congregation.

Several studies have suggested that young people with minority backgrounds use social media frequently, and that it represents a significant arena for learning and discussion (Kayıkcı & D’Haenens, 2017; Mainsah, 2011; Panagakos, 2003; Synnes, 2019). Youth with minority backgrounds do not differ from other youth in their use of social media. At the same time, studies show that hate speech in the Norwegian public and on social media can lead to social limitations being placed on freedom of expression, and that this limitation is often stronger among minority populations (Midtbøen et al., 2017, p. 16).

Social media is well suited when it comes to promoting religious attitudes and messages because it provides an opportunity for discussions, the exchange of views and ability to communicate with like-minded people in more closed forums. In this article, we draw on Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman’s theories regarding self-presentation, frontstage and backstage behaviour (Goffman, 1959), and stigmatization (Goffman, 1974) to interpret how Muslims and Christians with minority backgrounds use different strategies to present their religious identities on social media.

We use the categories ‘Christian’ and ‘Muslim’ to differentiate the youth from two religious traditions. We emphasize that these categories do not represent homogeneous groups but are diverse in terms of belonging to different cultural, linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic groups. However, we argue that these categories are useful in the current study because they show that both the Christian and Muslim youth participants are considered different minorities (Synnes, 2019) and because Muslim and Christian youth face different reactions from society when presenting their religiosity.

The Research Context

In 1970, the number of Norwegians born to immigrant parents accounted for only 2,000 persons, or 0.06%, of the entire population. As of July 2019, the same category accounted for almost 180,000 persons, or 3.4%, of the Norwegian population. As many as 70% are under 18 years of age, while only 14% are 25 years or older (Kirkeberg et al., 2019).

In Norway, Oslo has the largest proportion of people with minority backgrounds. In 2018, every third inhabitant of the capital belonged to an ethnic minority. In addition, Oslo also has the largest religious diversity: 20.9% of the population are members of a religion or faith community outside the Church of Norway.¹ Norway has about 175,000 members from various Muslim congregations, and Oslo has the largest number of Muslims, totalling about 65,000 (Statistics Norway, 2018). Norway is considered a secular society; however, in recent years, immigration has contributed towards religion becoming more visible in the public sphere (Furseth, 2020).

Most migrants to Norway have a Christian background, and less than a quarter have a Muslim background (Statistics Norway, 2020). In a previous study (Synnes, 2018), Christian and Muslim youth with minority backgrounds were found to have different perceptions of the relationship between their religious identity and affiliation with Norwegian society. Because Christianity is the dominant religion in Norway, the Christian youth regarded their connection to Norwegian society as less tense than the Muslim youth. Many young Muslims described a situation in which they constantly had to defend and explain their religion, and that their religiosity was often perceived as contrasting with Christianity and the Church of Norway that the majority of the population belong to (Synnes, 2018).

Research on Youth, Religion and Social Media

Studies on social media suggest that in recent decades, a digital revolution has taken place in Norway, much like in many other parts of the world. A national survey reveals that over 50% of the Norwegian youth spend between 2 hours and 4 hours daily on social media, while 27% spend more than 4 hours (Bakken, 2018).

The focus of many previous studies on religion, media and youth has been on the idea that social media is a resource contributing to new forms of religious self-presentation (Bailey & Redden, 2011; Campbell, 2013). Research focusing on the relationship between religious life and the media finds that the media plays an increasingly important role in people's lives, which has helped change and shape religious life (Bailey & Redden, 2011; Hjarvard & Reintoft, 2012; Lundby, 2018). Some studies show that young people use social media to counter negative images or opinions of their religion (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Engebretsen, 2015; Herbert & Hansen, 2018; Mainsah, 2011; Nielsen & Allievi, 2003).

Mainsah (2011, pp. 189–190) has conducted a study of how a sample of Norwegian immigrant youth use social network sites, claiming that social media gives these young people the opportunity to present a more balanced picture of their religion than what is presented in the Norwegian public sphere. In their social network profiles, race, ethnicity, gender and religion emerged as integral parts of these individuals' identities. Despite this, Mainsah claims that 'the macro-societal context of Norwegian society largely defines the boundaries within which minority youth negotiate their identities both online and offline' (Mainsah, 2011, p. 190). He argues that the youth reproduced Norwegian society's discourse on ethnicity, in which identity is defined as 'where you're from' in place of 'where you're at' (Mainsah, 2011, p. 190).

Previous decades have entailed many studies on how Muslim youth use social media. Swedish sociologist Mia Lövheim has studied young female Muslim bloggers in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, showing that social media has opened up a space for new alternative voices in the public discourse, and that the female bloggers in their material confront stereotypical images of Muslims (Lövheim, 2012, p. 140). A similar qualitative study conducted by Midden and Ponzanesi (2013, pp. 200–202) shows that social media plays a central role in the daily religious practices of young Muslim girls in the Netherlands. In a study of a popular Muslim blog (Muslimah Media Watch), Echchaibi (2013, p. 857) shows that the young Muslim women challenge stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes without using confrontational language.

Other European qualitative studies (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Engebretsen, 2015) indicate that young Muslims engage in social media to counteract what they experience as negative images of Islam in the public sphere in Norway and Germany, respectively. Through social media, the youth can display a different image of religious minority groups while also encouraging dialogue.

However, few studies deal with both young Muslims and Christians with minority backgrounds and their use of social media in relation to religious topics (Synnes, 2018). Moreover, the studies that deal with gender are often solely about Muslim women (Echchaibi, 2013; Lövheim, 2012; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013; Piela, 2011). While many of the studies mentioned earlier conduct media analyses, the current article uses qualitative interviews with young people, how they use social media and how they wish to present themselves as religious, and compares the perspectives from Christian and Muslim youth. While previous research studies have often studied Muslim girls, the present article focuses on both boys and girls by analysing the role of gender and religion in their self-presentations.

Theoretical Framework

Self-presentation, Frontstage and Backstage Behaviour on Social Media

Social media has provided opportunities for new forms of self-presentation, roles and situations for interaction. Goffman is known for using a wealth of metaphors to describe social life, and some of them are well suited for analysing self-presentation in social media. For example, Goffman compares social interactions to a theatre in which individuals play roles and appear as performers in a ritual game. Goffman (1959, pp. 107–112) further divides role performances into backstage behaviour and frontstage behaviour. Frontstage behaviour is a façade performance where one shows off one's best side; this can be seen as a public or professional performance. Goffman's frontstage term is a useful analytical concept to describe how one tries to show oneself from their most favourable side and gain position and prestige through posts, likes, friends and followers. Backstage behaviour is used to describe information that young people hesitate to share about themselves and how they may avoid sharing content that might be considered controversial. Frontstage and backstage behaviour will further be used to understand how the young people in the current study try to control and manage their self-presentations on social media.

Goffman also uses the term 'stigma' to describe bodily signals or expressions that deviate from what is 'normal' (Goffman, 1974). The term may denote '(...) various character errors that manifest themselves as wilful weakness, dominant or unnatural passions, treacherous and uncompromising beliefs, or dishonesty (...)' (Goffman, 1974, p. 17). Goffman's stigma concept can be used to explore how young people with minority backgrounds socially manoeuvre and present themselves in social media, trying to avoid stigma, like 'religious fanatic' or 'religious terrorist'.

Social Media, Emotional Labour and Feeling Rules

Young people's self-presentations on social media are also gendered presentations. Goffman (1979) points out how social interaction is governed by frameworks and

how ritualized practices are linked to gender. As mentioned earlier, people are keen to show off their best side and avoid losing face. This also applies to the relationship between the genders. It is important to appear in line with the expectations of being a man or woman. Goffman looks at gender as a social structure, where gendered codes must be learnt to participate in social interactions with others. For Goffman, gender acts as a framework that helps in structuring and laying down guidelines for human interaction.

Hochschild (2003, p. 54), who was also Goffman's student, developed the terms 'feeling rules' and 'emotional labour' to describe how institutions govern and regulate emotions. Hochschild argues that women have more training in performing emotional labour than men. At the same time, women have stricter 'acting manuals' because '(...) subordinates having less control over their lives, must orient themselves to those in control' (Hochschild, 1990b, p. 291). It is easier for those who hold positions of power to choose new roles, juggle roles and distance themselves from roles than for those with less power. Hochschild's concepts of feeling rules and emotional labour will be used as interpretative resources in the analysis of how the youth present themselves on social media.

Methods

The current article is based on empirical material from a study of young Muslims and Christians who are active in two Muslim and two Christian minority congregations in Oslo. The congregations are an Eritrean church, a Chinese church and two Muslim mosques—the *Islamic Cultural Centre* (ICC), which is theologically associated with Deobandi, a school in Sunni Islam (Metcalf, 2003, p. 137), and the *Islamic Association, Rabita*, which is theologically associated with the *wasaṭī* approach. The latter's orientation is less restrictive and more theologically liberal than the former (Shavit, 2015, p. 418). Christian and Muslim youth were selected because these religious traditions had the highest representation among ethnic minorities in Norway. Regardless of congregational background, all informants had friends from both minority and majority backgrounds.

These congregations have been selected because they have existed for 30–40 years and, thus, are well established. While they vary in size, membership and ethnic composition, they all have established youth groups with high levels of participation of both genders.

The current study, which follows ethical guidelines for research and has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), is based on fieldwork in the form of participatory observation that took place between September 2016 and March 2017. The study also includes 25 qualitative semi-structured interviews that sought an in-depth understanding of the role of religion in minority youths' self-presentation in social media. Out of the informants, 22 were participants in the congregations' youth groups, aged 16–35 years. Most informants were under 20 years of age. In addition, three adult leaders—one imam, one mosque leader and one priest—were interviewed. Among the informants, there were 13 women and 12 men. The informants' backgrounds varied. Most of them were born in Norway but had 'minority visibilities'. A total of 22 of the informants had phenotypical Asian and African

appearances. Half of the girls, both Christian and Muslim, wore religious clothes, like a hijab or headscarf.

The informants were asked whether they were active on social media and, if so, what types of social media they used. They were further asked whether they used social media related to activities in their congregations or religious issues and, if so, what information they shared on which platforms and for what reasons. All the informants were active users of social media, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp. None of them expressed any reservations about using new technology. The most common social media used included Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook; they used these social media groups not only to communicate within the religious congregation but also to communicate with friends outside it. The youth seemed to have different forms of social networks connected to school, work, family, the congregation to which they belonged and transnational networks.

The interviews were conducted on the congregations' premises, via Skype, in meeting rooms on the university campus or at a café. The names used in the current study were pseudonymized. We also did not mention the roles and duties of the informants of the smaller congregations to ensure that the informants could not be identified based on their responses. The present article focused mostly on the interview material, while the observations functioned as supplementary material.

During the interviews, it became clear that the Muslim informants, in particular, related to a discourse of being marginalized and to experiences of Islamophobia (Bangstad, 2014, 2015; Bruckner, 2018; Morgan & Poynting, 2016); they seemed well prepared and adept at engaging in discussions of, for instance, critical views of Islam, the oppression of women and the portrait of Muslims as terrorists.

Findings

The Role of Religion in the Self-presentations of Minority Youth

In this section, we look more closely at how the informants reflect upon the role of religion in their self-presentations in social media. Based on our interviews, we find three different strategies that the informants used to present themselves as religious on social media.

The youth used social media frequently, and they were all members of groups related to their congregations on social media, mostly on Facebook. These were 'closed' groups for members, where they could exchange information about activities and discuss religious matters. Generally, the youth used social media in these groups to communicate with each other and receive information about events. They were careful about what they shared with different audiences, especially regarding how they presented religious content both within religious groups and among friends and acquaintances.

Inspired by Goffman's frontstage and backstage theory, we have organized the analysis into three categories of self-presentation on social media—secular frontstage, double frontstage and religious frontstage. We emphasize that these are analytical strategies that partly overlap and also depend on the situation.

Secular Frontstage

The first category, secular frontstage, refers to how some informants' self-presentation on social media entailed an avoidance to share or publish anything on social media. This strategy was about avoiding sharing or publishing anything on social media related to their own religion. According to the informants employing this strategy, self-presentation on social media in the Norwegian context should appear as religiously neutral as possible and one should not preach. Those who employed this strategy were mostly male, and they had different reasons for refraining from doing so.

The informants differentiated between religion in the public sphere and private sphere. The public sphere was considered to be 'non-religious'. This related to Casanova's understanding of how various spheres have their different ways of interpreting the world, where each is accorded its specified tasks and a separate space to fill in the community (Casanova, 1994). Based on some of the informants' descriptions, it makes sense to say that social media can be perceived as a public arena and as part of the secular sphere. Even though all the informants were religiously active in a congregation, some did not want to show their religiosity in public. The secular frontstage was about avoiding to appear religious on social media or omitting or toning down one's own religiosity in self-presentation.

Secular frontstage due to career reasons: One of the reasons why the male Muslim informants held back from publishing posts with religious content was because of the fear of limiting their career opportunities. One of these youth was Ahmed. When he was asked whether he posted religious content on social media, he reflected as follows:

I would like to spread the message [the informant is referring to communicating his religious faith], but then there's the topic of what people would think, that I only publish that stuff 24/7 and don't publish anything else. I have many Norwegian friends on Facebook. I want them to read and understand something about that time with Islam and such, but the problem today is that if you, for example, are going to apply for a job, then they go into your profile and see who you are, what kind of person you are. And so, it's very difficult to get a job if you are like that. For example, if you want to become a pilot, there are very bad conditions today. They don't hire Muslim pilots these days. The brother of a friend of mine still struggles to get a job. He works as an instructor because of his Muslim name. You know they are looking at the profile; they see everything, absolutely everything, what you have shared and where you are active. That's why I am careful with what I share.

Ahmed was a practising Muslim, but he deliberately chose to avoid religious messages in his self-presentation on social media. He justified this by his career—he was afraid that he would be considered extreme. Recent studies (Marzouki et al., 2016; Sandberg et al., 2019) point out that young Muslims experience being associated with extremists and an expectation from society that they have to denounce the violence carried out by extremist groups in the name of Islam or other forms of political violence that have affected Western countries since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 (Bangstad, 2014, 2015; Morgan & Poynting, 2016). This may have consequences for young people's self-presentation on social media. Vassenden and Andersson (2011) analyse youth in the Grønland area in Oslo, pointing out that religion is perceived as a stigma in many contexts, and that White Christians often

try to hide their religious identity, while minority youth are often stigmatized as Muslims before their religious background is known. To avoid the stigma related to Islam, which, among other things, can lead to difficulties in getting a job, Ahmed chose not to publish religious content on social media. To Ahmed, a public presentation of being a Muslim on social media may lead to exclusion, hence creating further stigma (Goffman, 1974).

In relation to a question about whether they share religious content on social media, a Muslim youth leader said the following:

Eh, no, no longer. Very little, I've deliberately limited it because it's ... you have to be careful about what you post. It can have consequences for your future and career. And I personally do not feel that it is useful to discuss on Facebook.

Another youth leader replied with the following:

I have done so, but to a much lesser extent now. But it's simply because of my professional situation. I work in a financial environment that is very small in Norway, and it is in some way career suicide.

These informants took a deliberately secular frontstage position in social media because they excluded their religious beliefs in their self-presentation on social media. Based on the interviews, it seems as if they had wanted to present themselves in other ways but did not dare do so out of fear for their careers. The interviews revealed that some youth previously tried to share posts with religious content but experienced negative comments from friends. These informants acted in accordance with a Western secular ideal in which religion was considered to be a private matter (Casanova, 1994). It seems that fear of one's career was particularly strong for the male Muslim informants, while the Muslim female informants did not discuss their self-presentation on social media as being connected to their career.

Secular frontstage due to fear of negative reactions from friends: Another reason for presenting oneself on social media in a purely secular manner related to a fear of negative reactions from friends. Based on the interviews, the Muslim female informants were less reluctant to include religion in their self-presentation on social media than the Muslim male informants. We will return to this in the analysis of the religious frontstage. The Christian informants also acted on a secular frontstage but had other reasons for doing so.

All the informants had Norwegian friends with both majority and minority backgrounds. However, when informants talked about their fear of negative reactions, they mainly referred to their Norwegian friends with a majority background. The Christian informants focused on the risk that it would lead to a negative discussion or criticism from friends who were not religious or who belonged to another religion. When Esther, who came from the Eritrean church, was asked if she used social media to post religious content, she said the following:

I was that kind of person before. But that is not how the media is. There is a lot of criticism, and I can't stand that. My mobile, when you open it, has a picture of God there.

So, my friends, those who are Muslims, they get a bit like that: 'Is she crazy or something? Delete the picture!' But I say, 'No, that's what I believe in, so I'll have a picture'. But social media is something else; I can't stand criticism. I have friends with different opinions and different cultures. (...) Now they've stopped criticising because they know I have a strong faith. All I hear is just criticism: 'Christians are so and so, and Christians are like this and that'. Not on Insta and such, but on Facebook and such. (...) I'm just getting so freaking fed up. It hurts you.

When Christine, who came from a Chinese congregation, was asked if she uses social media to post religious content, she pointed out that her Norwegian friends were far less open to and tolerant of this type of content than, for example, people in the USA:

(...) Not as much as before. My American friends and such are much more active on Facebook than I am. I don't know if it's a cultural thing, but they do a lot more. And they are much more open about their religion on social media. I feel it is a little bit more accepted over there than it might be in Norway. That people feel a little offended, or that... I don't want to feel that I somehow push the religion on others when they don't want it in a way.

For these Christian informants, their secular frontstage performance related to their fear of appearing *too* religious. This also correlates with Vassenden and Andersson's (2011) findings that people are stigmatized based on their religious identity, so they try to hide it. This applied to both male and female informants in the current study. These Muslim informants also mentioned a fear of appearing too religious among their non-religious friends; however, it seemed as though the stigma was experienced as the most problematic for the male Muslim informants. We argue that the 'acting manuals' related to religious self-presentation might be stricter for the Muslim boys than for the Muslim girls (Hochschild, 1990a, p. 291). For these boys, their secular frontstage performance on social media are related to Islamophobia, the fear of losing friends and about being put out of work and becoming marginalized.

Double Frontstage

The second category refers to a strategy we named double frontstage, where one maintains a clear distinction between how one presents oneself in the various groups one participates in on social media. Of these informants, Adam and Esther, who came from the Eritrean church, distinguished between participation in social media, in general, and their own forums in the congregation. They did not want to show their public profile on social media to other members of the congregation because they were afraid of their profile being 'monitored' by adults and faith leaders. Within the religious group, they could share religious content, but there was no information about their social life outside the congregation. On social media, in general, these informants did not share religious content with their friends, and they deleted all friend requests from adult members of the congregation. Their medial self-presentations appear to be clearly separated, with friends sorted into different groups.

Esther replied as follows when asked whether her congregation was active on social media:

I see that there are different Eritreans who 'add' me or say: 'We've seen her; we have to have her' [as a friend on Facebook]. It scares me a little. I don't want them to see

another version of me. Maybe I'm another version of myself when I'm with friends and am enjoying myself and so on. I don't do anything wrong, but the pictures may be presented as something wrong for them. So, I choose not to 'add' them, unless they are the girls here [within the congregation], they are my friends. I can 'add' them. But I don't dare adding other people. I get a little afraid that they will say: 'I didn't know you were like that'.

Esther did not want to be 'added'—being followed by or added as a friend—on her personal profile by other members of the congregation. Adam said something similar; he used Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram daily but did not write about topics related to the church or religion: 'No, I don't want to share everything. And social media is for everyone, so everyone can look at me'.

Adam and Esther did not want their conduct in the church and on social media to come into conflict. Therefore, they distinguished between different groups and friends on social media. During the interviews, they both expressed that they feared negative reactions, especially from the older members of their congregation, if they should find out that they gathered with the youth with a different religious affiliation on a daily basis. In our study, only Adam and Esther made this differentiation. This strategy could also be seen as a way of handling social control in the environments they represent. Esther felt, for example, that she might be judged by the pictures she has published on social media, and that members of the congregation would want to control who she is seen with.

Religious Frontstage

The religious frontstage strategy refers to how both some of the Christians and Muslim informants chose to share religious content on social media. Some studies claim that young Muslims engage in social media to counter negative representations of their religion (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Engebretsen, 2015). This is partly confirmed by the findings of our study, and, here, it also seems that gender played an important role regarding whether the informants chose to publish religious content or not. As pointed out previously, most youth in our study will present themselves with a secular frontstage for fear of stigmatization.

Religion and 'Careful' Self-presentation

The informants who chose to share religious content were cautious about what they chose to share. In our study, the Muslim girls were less reluctant to share religious content on social media than the Muslim boys, who expressed that they also would like to share religious content but were afraid of sanctions. Some did but were very careful about what they shared. Unlike those who used a double frontstage on social media, the informants who used a religious frontstage regarded it important to present themselves as religious. Their religious self-presentation could also be viewed as a strategy to contribute to a more positive image or to a positive reputation of Muslims. They shared different types of religious content on all the social media they participated in, but they were aware about what was being presented to various audiences. Here, we also see some differences between what kind of religious content the Christian and Muslim male informants shared and why. Some Muslim informants referred to how they wanted to convey content that countered prejudice.

When Ali was asked if he used social media to post religious content, he stated the following:

Yes, I use it very often. Almost every day, I have some kind of notification from my own Facebook or something related to religion. Why? Because I know social media has a lot of power. You can spread it pretty fast, and that's how I want people to know... Both in terms of Muslims and non-Muslims, what Islam says. (...) But it is very rare that I take up controversial topics, such as ISIS, etc. I usually don't write an opinion, but I could, for example, share a picture with quotes. I usually share other people's opinions. For example, opinions that great imams from the West have written, who are actually experts and professors in universities. And they have both Western and Muslim cultures. (...) And I don't want to express my feelings on Facebook because then some nasty words come, but I personally try to hold an academic and professional attitude to what I write on social media.

Ali was the only male informant who chose to share religious content. However, he was cautious about what he shared and adhered to academic discussions in which emotions were kept in the backstage.

Religion in Everyday Self-presentation

A second way to share religious content was to post content relating to everyday religious experiences. One of the Muslim women pointed out to the importance of bringing more voices into the debate about Islam. Myriam replied with the following when asked if she used social media to post religious content:

As a Muslim ... It is important because then you get a more nuanced picture of Muslims, I think. Muslims can speak for themselves what they believe in and even what they think, and not that we just get it through the media. Today you can see how the media might portray Muslims, and that it may not always be the whole truth. And that people accept it very easily, even if it doesn't come from Muslims themselves. And that there are often people who are not so fond of Islam, or perhaps have been Muslims, or come from countries where they are forced to be Muslim. Also, they gladly voice their opinions. They are not interested in listening to us. And I think this is a little sad. But I think it's very nice that social media is a place where people can say what they think themselves. Also, people can read about it if they want to. And it's not something people can hide because Facebook is public to everyone.

Myriam wanted to change the 'religion in the media' picture, pointing out to the importance of bringing more voices into the debate about Islam. For the participants in the current study, media presentations of Muslims and Islam were perceived as unnuanced and negative in character. Myriam argued that social media helps bring out the other voices in the public sphere, which corresponds well with the findings from Lövheim's (2012) study. Myriam's self-presentation on social media was closely linked to the purpose of creating a positive image of Muslims. She wanted to appear as an active Muslim and agent of change. Myriam distinguished between her image of Islam and a media-created image that she experienced to be negative in character.

The other female Muslim informants also used a religious frontstage in order to share their own religious experiences, but they did so in order to counter prejudice and share their own experiences of how to be a Muslim. For these girls, it was about

sharing their everyday religious experiences. A Muslim girl named Noor focused on the ‘small’ things in everyday life that she shared—‘cards, pictures and religious quotes’—but she did not go too far into theological discussions. This ties to religious ‘feeling rules’ and the dissemination of good experiences (Hochschild, 2003). Another reason for Noor’s reluctance to engage in heated religious discussions was that she was afraid ‘to have the Norwegian Police Security Service at her doorstep’. Noor was afraid to be stigmatized as having ‘uncompromising beliefs’ and as a ‘Muslim extremist’, so she wanted to avoid these kinds of debates (Goffman, 1974, p. 17).

It is also interesting that the girls in the current study who were most clearly in favour of sharing religious content on social media were those who wore a hijab. The hijab is a hypervisible symbol that may signal that the person wearing it is an active female Muslim (Furseth, 2011). Therefore, these Muslim girls may have had little to lose by publishing religious content on social media because they already wore hijabs on a daily basis. In this sense, the hijab can make the religious self-presentation ‘easier’ for Muslim girls than for the boys we interviewed. In Nyhagen and Halsaa’s comparative study of Muslim and Christian women in Europe, Muslim women had a greater need to explain their faith to clarify public misunderstandings about Islam (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016, p. 181).

Religion and Harmless Self-presentation

The third way to employ a religious frontstage was to share ‘harmless’ and positive content with a religious undertone. This applied to both the Christian and Muslim informants. Semira was asked what kind of religious content she posted on social media, and she replied as follows:

I might add a picture with a quote from the Bible on Instagram. But mostly I use social media just to talk to friends. I feel that there are not so many people who are religious in Norway, and then I feel that they are a little embarrassed. I feel there are many who criticise me. I don’t feel that many have respect for it. Although they are respectful in some way, it is not the same when they ask, ‘Do you really believe in God when this happens?’ Then I find it difficult to talk to them. I find it hard and embarrassing. Yes, I believe that. That you are afraid of criticism from others.

Semira strived to find a fitting form to mediate religious messages on social media. She experienced it as embarrassing and emotionally difficult, and she tried to balance the content she shared so that it became tolerable for non-religious friends on social media. The examples of content that these young people would post often related to religious celebrations, holidays or popular religious beliefs and symbols that allowed for different interpretations.

Eloy said, ‘I still show that I am a Christian. I very rarely post, but I’ve done it before. There are pictures of me from the summer camp and Christian contexts’. Eloy further said that he found it difficult to ‘post the right things’ when it came to presenting religious content. Other informants described how they previously tried to share different types of religious content on social media, but negative reactions from friends made them quit or largely refrain from such activities. It appeared that religious content from the minority informants was often criticized by non-religious Norwegian friends, and that the informants adapted to this.

A Muslim girl named Nora replied as follows to the question of what kind of religious content she posted on social media:

No, I'm not usually someone who participates in that proper Islamic stuff [referring to Islamic debates on social media] because I don't feel that my level of knowledge is so high that in a way I can argue or discuss such things. Then in a way, I won't write anything that is wrong or contrary. So, I usually stay away from writing such Islamic things [that may be misinterpreted] or discussing on a forum or something. Usually keep my distance. If I were to do that [referring to if she would publish anything as such], I think I might give an image of myself in a way that would make people misunderstand it... I hate for people to misinterpret my words and take it for something other than what I meant then.

Nora was afraid of being misunderstood and ending up in situations where she could not answer for herself. She only shared religious content that appeared positive and harmless. The quotes showed that the informants handled negative emotions backstage instead of protesting against critical comments from non-religious friends. They adapted to the secular frameworks of social media and scaled back the role of religion. This way of using a religious frontstage could also be linked to emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003).

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the role of religion in young Muslims' and Christians' self-presentations on social media. We argue that the informants used three different strategies to handle their religious identity on social media: secular frontstage, double frontstage and religious frontstage. In the analysis, we argue that the secular frontstage was used by the Christian and Muslim informants to downplay the role of religion in their lives because of fear of stigmatization. The double frontstage strategy was used by two of the Christian informants to avoid internal social control from members of their congregation. The religious frontstage was used by both Christians and Muslims to participate in debates and change negative views of being religious.

We also argue that there are gender differences concerning religious self-presentation. This is particularly evident among the Muslim youth in our sample. The Muslim girls we interviewed who wore a hijab were the most active in presenting religious content on social media and appeared to be the most zealous defenders of their religious values. Contrary to Hochschild's (1990a, p. 291) description of frames for gender, these findings suggest that the Muslim male informants have stricter 'acting manuals' than the girls when it comes to the role of religion in their self-presentation on social media. These boys experienced a double stigma and, as a result, were afraid to share social content. This fear was connected to how their friends would perceive such self-presentations but—most of all—to the fear of how posting religious content would affect their careers.

We also argue that the Christian and Muslim informants had different motivations for sharing religious content on social media. For the Christians, it was mostly about wanting to show their religious identity to their friends, but for the Muslims, it was more about confronting and changing a negative image of Islam in Norwegian society. Furthermore, the Muslim and Christian informants presented different reasons for choosing *not to* publish religious content on social media. The Christian informants

referred to the risk of feeling excluded by their non-religious friends. They seemed to perceive there would be little tolerance from non-believers. A study of young people in Oslo also confirms that non-religious youth are more negative towards religion in the public space (Botvar & Mortensen, 2017, pp. 39–40). Most of the informants appeared to be restrained and refrained from publishing religious content to avoid social exclusion, conflict and religious discussions. This can be related to other studies of how Muslim informants have experienced Islamophobia (Bangstad, 2014, 2015; Bruckner, 2018; Morgan & Poynting, 2016; Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016; Synnes, 2019).

The use of Goffman's ideas in the current study has contributed towards highlighting how the informants used different strategies to present and sometimes downplay their religiosity on social media. However, places other than social media—such as home, work, school, church and the mosque—may be important when it comes to the role of religion in the informant's self-presentation. We are also aware that there may be multiple reasons why the informants refrained from sharing religious content. Goffman's notion of frontstage and backstage behaviour has been fruitful in structuring the role of religion in self-presentations and in capturing the negotiations in terms of what religious content is considered acceptable to present. However, the question of the structural frames and power relations that influences how youth with minority backgrounds present themselves as religious on social media needs to be further investigated.

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Note

1. The Church of Norway is a Protestant Lutheran denomination and functioned as a state church until 2017. About 70% of the population are members of the church (Statistics Norway, 2019).

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