

Socially-distant fasting: information practices of young Muslims during pandemic

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Abstract

Introduction. *The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to reimagine how they engage in spiritual and religious activities. This paper presents an analysis of the information practices of young Muslims during Ramadan, with a focus on their social, spiritual and COVID-related needs and strategies.*

Methods. *Our qualitative approach entailed semi-structured interviews with 22 self-identified Muslims from across the Muslim spectrum. They were asked about their experiences with completing Ramadan under pandemic, including the nature of information accessed and shared as part of the fasting rituals.*

Analysis. *Interviews were transcribed, and open coding was used to categorize the data into themes. The thematic analysis was conducted through an iterative process.*

Results. *Our findings pointed to the differing affective states of the young Muslims who observed the fast under COVID. Participants also hinted at the loss of communal practices and rituals and the emergence of new habits and coping strategies (many informational in nature). Social and emotional support were particularly critical to overcoming the challenges.*

Conclusions. *This study contributes to a better understanding of the intersection between information activities and spiritual/religious practices. The findings also have theoretical and practical implications for the role of information and technology in times of crisis.*

Keywords: *religious and spiritual rituals, information practices, Islam, technology use*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the lives of people everywhere, with studies of the effects in the general population showing elevated levels of anxiety and depression resulting from the repeat outbreaks and ensuing stress (Fassett-Carman, et al., 2020; Lebel, et al., 2020; Taylor, et al., 2020). Several studies in Information Science have paid attention to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on various populations (e.g., patients (Stvilia, et al., 2021); students (Chang, et al., 2020; Thompson and Copeland, 2020); information professionals (Mi, et al., 2020); academics (Dali, et al., 2021; El Masri and Sabzalieva, 2020; Katz, et al., 2021)), along with related issues of misinformation (Hernandez et al., 2021; MacDonald et al., 2020); inequalities (Alon, et al., 2020; Fox, et al., 2021); or media consumption (Choi and Fox, 2021; Soroya, et al., 2021; Xu, et al., 2021).

In this study, we examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected an emerging area of everyday life information practices: the spiritual and religious sphere (Caidi, 2020, 2019; Gorichanaz, 2015; Guzik, 2018; Johnstone, 2015; Kari, 2007). Specifically, we focus on the information experiences of young Muslims during the religious month of Ramadan. Ramadan is one of the holiest months in the Muslim calendar, during which Muslims worldwide observe a fast from sunrise to sunset. Fasting during the month of Ramadan constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam, and Muslims believe the Quran (the Muslims' holy book) was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad during the Ramadan. Fasting is mandatory for all physically capable Muslims, except for minors, the elderly, pregnant or menstruating women, travellers, and anyone too vulnerable to undertake this arduous fast (no food or drink is allowed). It is also seen by many as a spiritual exercise in disciplining desires (Schielke, 2009), engaging in charity (Mittermaier, 2014), and attaining empathy with the poor (Yocum, 1992) by experiencing hunger and thirst, thus providing observant Muslims with a greater sense of social, moral, and religious commitment (Schielke, 2009; Sandikci and Omeraki, 2007; Alghafli, et al., 2019). Ramadan is also a month of celebration and community, with sharing of food, almsgiving and family gatherings. In many instances, the mosque plays a key role during the evenings of Ramadan as the ritual prayers of tarawih (evening prayers usually at the mosque after the break of the fast) bring together families and communities in prayers and communal sharing of food.

This study is part of a broader project that examines young Muslims' information practices, and this article examines specifically their experiences of completing Ramadan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our approach adheres to theories of information practice that privilege the socially embedded nature of information practices (McKenzie, 2003; Savolainen, 2008). We also privilege individuals' affective and cognitive processes and how these processes are embedded in specific socio-cultural spaces, network structures and tied to particular moments in time (in this case, the global COVID-19 pandemic). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the observance of the fasting months of Ramadan: the first Ramadan took place April 23-May 23, 2020, while the second Ramadan took place April 13-May 12, 2021 (the date changes based on the Muslim lunar calendar). Muslims were faced with the situation of completing their religious obligation in a context of fear and uncertainty about one's health (and that of one's family), as well as spending Ramadan alone or far from family and without access to the local community places and spaces.

The following research questions guided our inquiry:

1. What were the lived experiences of young Muslims attempting to complete Ramadan during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What kind of information practices have young Muslims engaged in while observing Ramadan under pandemic?

We were interested in understanding better how participants negotiated the tensions between the communal spirit and practice of Ramadan and the public health restrictions on gathering (confinement, social distancing, social bubbles, etc.) and the implications of doing so. Our study thus contributes to the literature by shedding light on a novel spiritual and religious information context (the observance of Ramadan) and a better understanding of information practices under crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic).

Method

To address our research questions, we opted for a qualitative study, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with Muslim youth (defined as 18-35 years of age). The criteria were that the participants self-identify as Muslims and be familiar with Ramadan. They were asked about their experiences of Ramadan during the pandemic, including the nature of information in their practice of the Ramadan rituals and in their socialization (or lack thereof).

22 young Muslims participated in the interviews. Participants were recruited through the researchers' personal and social networks. Since this was an exploratory study aiming to understand the phenomenon of completing a religious ritual under unusual circumstances, our goal was not to offer a comprehensive picture of Muslims' experiences for any specific geographies but rather to document shared experiences. Our purposive sampling aimed to capture a diversity of lived experiences of Ramadan under COVID while highlighting key themes that emerged. The interviews were conducted virtually over a period of 10 months and were not bounded by any one geographical area (although the majority of our participants stemmed from North America). While our study captured the experiences of participants across Ramadan 2020 and 2021, it was not designed to be a longitudinal study. Our focus was less on comparing across time periods; rather, it was on documenting how individuals coped in the face of a pandemic, with those interviewed later increasing the diversity of collected data. Data collection was carried out primarily in English, with some supplementary data collected in French, Moroccan Arabic, Turkish, and Persian (three of the authors were fluent in one or more of these languages). The translation back to English was conducted before data analysis. Interviews were conducted through a virtual platform (Zoom and Skype video conferencing tools or other applications such as FB Live or WhatsApp video).

The semi-structured interview guide included four categories of data: demographic information, memories of Ramadan and fasting (meaning of the rituals and affective dimension), everyday life information practices including media and technology use, and coping strategies during the pandemic.

The data analysis was undertaken through an iterative process of thematic coding. The focus of the analysis was on the descriptions and constructions of the participants' accounts of completing (or not) Ramadan while locating their stories in specific times, places and contexts. This participant-centred focus provides space for the 22 participants to articulate the meanings and activities associated with Ramadan and fasting (both during and outside the pandemic) along with their motivations, emotions, needs, and strategies. After the initial coding was completed, the coding scheme was discussed and revised before an agreement was reached. Through constant comparison, we built up from basic, open codes to develop selective, thematic codes related to the characteristics, situations, and experiences of our 22 participants. The codebooks were iteratively expanded upon and validated by co-authors, with any differences among coders resolved via discussion. Whenever appropriate, we include selected quotes from the data (in English or in their English translation if applicable).

It must be noted that there were some challenges with completing this study. Firstly, most participants preferred to be interviewed after Ramadan ended. This was due to the fact that fasting is a physically exhaustive and demanding experience, as well as a spiritual, reflective period in the lives of Muslims. While this may affect their recall of specific events, we provided ample time and probes to facilitate recall. The other challenge was participant recruitment: religious and spiritual contexts are very personal and sensitive areas of research in general. In the case of young Muslims, the stigma attached to speaking about their Muslim identities and practices (in a post/9-11 world, in the West) means that they are an even harder population to reach. We, therefore, spent considerable time and energy recruiting through personal networks and wider trusted social networks.

Findings

Our participants included nine women and 13 men (Table 1) and represented a diverse sample in terms of cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds as well as Islamic traditions. They stemmed from Turkey, Morocco, India, Iran, Bangladesh, Iraq, Pakistan and UAE, as well as non-Muslim majority societies such as France, Canada, and the United States.

Table 1: Participants By Age, Gender, Ethnic Background and Country of Residence

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnic Background</i>	<i>Country of Residence</i>
P1	30-35	Male	Middle Eastern/Arab	Canada
P2	30-35	Female	West Asian	Canada
P3	18-24	Female	Middle Eastern/Arab	France
P4	18-24	Female	Middle Eastern/Arab	Morocco
P5	25-29	Female	South Asian	Canada
P6	25-29	Female	South Asian	Canada
P7	18-24	Female	Middle Eastern	Canada
P8	25-29	Female	Middle Eastern	Canada
P9	30-35	Male	South Asian	Canada
P10	25-29	Female	Middle Eastern/Arab	Canada
P11	30-35	Male	West Asian	Turkey
P12	25-29	Female	South Asian	United States
P13	25-29	Male	South Asian	Canada
P14	18-24	Male	Middle Eastern/Arab	Canada
P15	30-35	Male	Middle Eastern/Arab	Iran
P16	30-35	Male	Middle Eastern/Arab	Iran
P17	25-29	Male	South Asian	Canada
P18	30-35	Male	South Asian	Canada
P19	18-24	Male	Middle Eastern/Arab	Canada
P20	18-24	Male	South Asian	Canada
P21	25-29	Male	South Asian	Canada
P22	30-35	Male	South Asian	Canada

The focus on the experiences, feelings, and coping strategies of the 22 participants as it related to their Ramadan experience in times of pandemic allowed for rich and detailed narratives. Our findings pointed to the shifting affective states of young Muslims who observed the fast under COVID. Participants hinted at the loss of communal practices and rituals and the emergence of new habits and coping strategies (many informational in nature). Social and emotional support were particularly critical to overcoming the challenges of fasting during COVID. Below, we have organized our findings around the two RQs.

Ramadan under COVID

RQ#1: What were the lived experiences of young Muslims attempting to complete Ramadan during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We asked the participants about their experiences and any challenges they faced in completing their religious obligation in the shadow of COVID-19 with its attending stressors. Participants were asked about how they felt about fasting (or not) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the kind of activities they engaged in as part of the Ramadan months. The perspectives varied, but one participant's account summarized well the situation for most of our participants:

'It was very different to do Ramadan during Covid. It made me realize how much of my practice of Ramadan and of Islam is so much rooted in the community and collective practice. It was a big loss'. (P22)

Social isolation and coping strategies

The sense of loss and isolation inflicted by the pandemic restrictions and waves of confinement were recurring themes. All 22 participants expressed in vivid terms their frustration, sadness, and desperation at the idea of spending Ramadan alone (or with fewer family members). Ramadan is a time for spiritual replenishing and sustaining one's community. The scenarios that participants shared ranged from the international student unable to travel back home to be with family to those who avoided meeting their vulnerable or ageing family members for fear of putting them at risk. There were also those who braved the regulations and tried to gather anyway, and lastly, those who coped with the distance by taking time to reflect and adapt to the situation with the help of established routines and a range of technology uses.

'Being away from friends; not being able to share food; then Covid... and being a newcomer: it is very isolating. If I had a community, I am sure it would have been different. Only one night were we invited to a friend's house. And this is better than last year [2020], when gathering was impossible. The community motivates you. It makes you feel more natural. Last year was a bit better. Covid had just hit; we were trying to understand and make sense of it. So Ramadan helped us feel more connected. This year, my Ramadan was meaningless. I was bored and it was flat for me.' (P2)

'Gathering with friends every single day was not possible during Covid. The first Ramadan [under COVID], we met up a few times; for the 2nd Ramadan, there were strict curfews, there were no gatherings. We never got together virtually because it didn't have the same feeling.' (P14)

'Even though it was not advised, what we did is we organized prayers in our neighbourhood for three households, because our village did not have Covid cases at the time. We were cautious but we still held organized prayers. We met during the prayers and that gave a feeling of togetherness in one of our homes since we couldn't go to mosques.' (P17)

When asked about their feelings toward fasting during COVID, participants used a range of affective terms such as anxiety, sadness, and loss of meaning, while others opted to focus on growth and harnessed creativity, hope and courage as a means of coping with the situation. While some found the second Ramadan under COVID a bit easier, others found the experience "mentally exhausting" (P21) and generally frustratingly lonely.

'For us, these two years were far different from previous years. It seems that all people were on the 'pause' mode, waiting for some incidents to finish this situation. I don't think these two years were different from each other; both of them were very quiet, lonely and dead.' (P16)

P2, an international student from Turkey, talked about her COVID fatigue and how it tainted her Ramadan. She also shared how she coped with the situation by engaging in nostalgic and comforting media practices:

'After iftar [break of the fast], I feel less connected, I have no bandwidth for socializing, so I am becoming less social. I also listened to more Turkish sounds this year. On Spotify, I would put Turkish instrumental music and rewatch some childhood programs on YouTube. I

don't like Spotify for religious chants and prayers. I really don't like to hear them digitally. It sounds too perfect on Spotify, while I like to hear the imam's own sounds and grunts and emotions.' (P2)

Some, however, took the opportunity to reflect and reconcile with the circumstances and approached the situation as a learning opportunity and a respite from the usual routine:

'We did less tarawih (prayers) at the mosque, but we compensated in other ways with decorations, iftar meals, gatherings and learning as a family.' (P3)

'Because I did not see many people, it made me more spiritual. I read more and researched a lot more because I was alone. Me and my family connected more to God because we were scared and connected to a greater power.' (P14)

'During COVID-programming, we had more of an international audience. A lady from Chicago who had a disability was really connected this past year thanks to our programming. Also, my South African connections were able to attend online. It was more intimate and global. Initially, the local was viewed as being better in terms of value, but the global creates more intimacy, I find. There were also those who worried about holding everything online: the fundraising in Canada's mosques, for example, is most dynamic during Ramadan. This is not the same when things are online.' (P18)

Role of the mosque

As per P18's account above, the role of the mosque in the lived experiences of many participants came up often. Several participants pointed to the glaring absence of the mosque in their lived experience of Ramadan during the pandemic and how they had to develop coping strategies. Some followed their local imams through social media, attended virtual prayers in the evenings and on Fridays, as well as attended various educational or social programs online offered by their local mosque.

'With Covid, everyone was checking out videos. The mosque in [french city] had been streaming a 20-min sermon since last year. Another association was doing live khutbas [sermons] for about one hour, both in French and in Arabic. So the night was going fast. On IG [Instagram], a young imam was also doing some live khutbas that I would watch; it was a Q/A format. So lots going on, but with my studying schedule, it was difficult to keep up.' (P3)

'I tried a variety of things (digital iftars, virtual talks, reminders, etc.). The problem was not the design of the platform, it was that it did not work for me. The connection cannot be replicated. I feel comfortable having grown up here to engage with the mosque base and engage with them. I feel that it is a space where I belong. I can understand that some may prefer virtual spaces to belong to. But not me. Avatars do not work for me.' (P22)

Others turned to other sources to help them with their spiritual and religious needs: books such as the Quran or the Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) were a staple in many participants' accounts, along with online content from a range of sources and in a variety of languages. The void left by the mosque and the socialization it enabled led a few participants to realize that not going to the mosque gave them more time and space to read, learn, and find their bearings. Several mentioned carving their own spaces at home for prayer and reflection and around their schedule.

'I missed not being able to hug fellow Muslims after Eid prayers. Not getting together with people was hard.' (P20)

'I make time to finish the Quran every year, but it is always a struggle because of tarawih. By not having to go to the mosque, I found it easier. I even learnt 6-7 new sourates because of that.' (P21)

'It was hard not visiting mosques and not being able to go out and help people, and I really missed helping poor relatives and acquaintances. We used to provide supplies [for those in

need], and not being able to do that was difficult.’ (P17)

Embodied forms of engagement

Our findings also pointed to the importance of the body in how our participants experienced and made sense of fasting during Ramadan. Fasting, in and of itself, puts a huge demand on the body as one refrains from eating and drinking for the better part of the day, but fasting is also about connecting body and mind in ways that are transformative. P2 refers to that alignment when speaking about their family’s decision to “recharge spiritually” by disconnecting from media sources and prioritizing spending time together instead.

‘Last year was more stressful; there was way too much information, so we were trying to disconnect from all this information and media. It was all overwhelming, so we disconnected from the media as a family. We were able to recharge spiritually, and we were also together.’ (P2)

There is a growing literature in Information Science that connects embodied experiences with various aspects of human life and views the body as central to information activities (Cox, et al., 2017; Gorichanaz, 2018; Guzik, 2018; Lloyd and Olsson, 2019; Lueg, 2015). Our participants spoke about the role of prayers in rhythming their days (especially when spent alone or in confinement), of the practice of journaling or engaging in physical activity (such as walking around the block) as coping strategies. Some, like P19, resorted to avoidance as a means of coping with the absence, and the suffering that comes with seeing (yet missing) loved ones:

‘I haven’t been able to video call my parents because it’s difficult to see their faces. So I just call quickly to check on them.’ (P19)

Information activities associated with the fasting of Ramadan include the sharing of information in the form of community-maintenance rituals, with such activities as ‘exchange (or social exchange), interaction, dialogue and conversation’ (Savolainen 2017, p.48). Our data suggest that different modes of engagement are activated, most notably through the participants’ bodies, as well as through their information brokering role. Within the social world of Ramadan observers, participants exchange social information through various means, including their manner of physical presentation (dressing more modestly), and engaging in certain practices (such as creating a shrine or dedicated space; being more introspective, or engaging more with sacred texts). P18 states:

‘I made a nice place to pray and contemplate. I created a little corner at my place for this month of Ramadan.’ (P18)

Other participants, by contrast, consciously refrain from certain practices (or “fasting of the ears and eyes” as one participant put it). Some participants mentioned refraining from eating non-halal foods or accessing content deemed inappropriate -such as certain music or reality TV deemed frivolous. P20 stated: ‘*Watching random videos or reality shows on TV decreased for me. They’re not useful*’. In so doing, these types of activities discipline the mind as well as the body, and hint at subtle social markers that demarcate status (Kane and Zink, 2004) within the social world of Ramadan observers.

Pandemic Information Practices during Ramadan

RQ#2: What kind of information practices have young Muslims engaged in while observing Ramadan under pandemic?

Our participants seek information to make sense of their environments, to fill information gaps, and to satisfy their emotional, spiritual, and communal needs. When asked about the resources that helped them get through their Ramadan observance during the pandemic, the participants pointed to an array of sources including organizations, human sources, social media, and faith-specific sources (Table 2).

Table 2: Information sources accessed by participants for their Ramadan-under-pandemic needs.

Type	Sources of Information
Digital Sources (includes organizations, community, faith based, and recommended resources)	Messaging Platforms: FB Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram, Facetime, Signal,
	Social Media Platforms: Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube
	Digital Media: Spotify, Podcasts
	Live streaming: (e.g., Mecca's holy sites live streaming, Friday/Tarawih prayers)
	Islamic apps: (e.g., call for prayer reminder, Quran app, MuslimPro, Mufti-me)
	Teleconferencing: (e.g., Zoom (work and social), Skype, etc.)
	Internet Radio Stations (in a range of languages)
	Religious educational digital platforms (for kids, for learning the Quran, etc.)
	Web Browsing: (browsing, directed search, scrolling)
Traditional Media Sources	TV, satellite: local and international channels, in language
Human Sources	Faith leaders: Local imam, Muslim influencers and/or scholars (local or worldwide)
	Family members & relatives
	Friends, social media influencers (inspiration, discovery, humor, spirituality)

As Table 2 points out, the participants in this study were closely monitoring the media and trusted organizational sources for health information. These included the World Health Organization (WHO), government agencies' websites (i.e., public health ministries and religious directorates - nationally and internationally), media sources (both mainstream and community-specific news) as well as resources sent to them by trusted individuals through their social networks. Faith-based organizations (i.e., mosques, online communities of co-religionists), as well as digital media (i.e., YouTube channels by Muslim influencers, TikTok videos, podcasts, etc.) and of course, human sources (i.e., friends, families, relatives, and community leaders) rounded up their information environment.

The participants' information needs revolved around monitoring and making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic, and checking public health measures relevant to their local contexts. The sources tended to be in English as well as in a range of other languages. This was particularly true when participants were trying to monitor the healthcare situation in places (and countries) where their relatives and friends resided.

'I listened to the Canadian government press conferences, the briefings by Dr Tam, I think her name is, the head of the COVID committee. I also follow different doctors on YouTube, they are in the US often. I also listen to news back home in Jordan, although even they followed the US news because we do not have our own scientists so we rely on the US,

Canada, or UK research. Also, I look at YouTube for different Islamic scholars from the Arab world and what they had to say about covid and fasting [in Arabic]. There are several famous Muslim scholars that I follow. Also some famous scholars and some folks that my parents follow in Jordan. I do not rely on only one source.’ (P14)

‘I subscribed to some Morocco TV channels such as 2M, especially for Ramadan, because I enjoy the programs and shows proposed; also Internet radio stations in Moroccan Arabic and French news because my family lives there.’ (P1)

Participants also sought information to fill informational gaps about a safe experience of fasting during pandemic. Examples included how to prepare healthy and nutritious foods for suhur (pre-sunrise meal) and iftars and keep themselves healthy. For example, P2 stated that taking care of one’s body while fasting becomes more important during COVID-19 because *‘any health concern that would necessitate visiting hospitals that are already overburdened due to COVID-19 would put my family and me at risk’*. Several interviewees reported, taking naps during the day, ensuring they get enough sleep and taking proper breaks during work hours, exercising after iftar meals. P7 also actively sought information about a healthy and safe fast: *‘I spent time reading journals online on Ramadan coinciding with Covid-19, fasting and safe practices. I also looked for cookbooks because I wanted to ensure I was getting enough nutrition to maintain a healthy immune system’*. Another participant, P11, sought information through a directed search to inquire about the effects of vaccines on one’s fast.

‘I consulted Turkey’s Diyanet [the state institute on religious affairs] website to understand whether the vaccines are breaking the fast or not. I checked the fatwa over the website. They say that it’s not harming the fast.’

Our participants also seek information to fulfil emotional needs and as a means to create connections and break social isolation. P3 spoke about her social media practices as a means of feeling connected to the broader Muslim community. She explains:

‘I learn so much about how other Muslims spend their Ramadan and what they do. One sister posts about “The Date of the Day” it is just 10 minutes, but every day, she finds new ways to stuff her dates, and her family members vote on her latest creations. There is also a Texas family that I follow, where they show reunited families in all these places. Same for the Instagram page of this Palestinian girl. So you learn how people celebrate Ramadan elsewhere, and I just keep finding new accounts and stories to follow.’ (P3)

‘After work, I would connect up with family a lot. Not only my parents but also uncles/aunts. Surprisingly I called aunts and uncles a lot more than I used to. I would also walk around my neighbourhood after iftar and think about the situation as a means of mitigating for isolation. On weekends, I would go shopping, for food mostly.’ (P14)

We found several factors that are impacting the source preference, such as perceived relevance of the information, and the credibility of the source. P8, for instance, shared why she avoids using Facebook: *‘Everything is so random and not categorized on Facebook. I think my eyes kind of got used to the relevance [of information that she needs]. And I get that on Telegram’*. P21 stated:

‘I would go to speak to elders in our community or masjid, like the imam, about why we do this [Ramadan] as Muslims. It is a requirement to do it. But it is also about connections with the mosque and the family that is the most critical. I would do my own research and go online; then I make up a list of questions and then research them and then only check with knowledgeable people (uncles, religious figures or other elders in the community) for a different perspective and for different information sources.’ (P21)

As can be seen from the quote above, faith-based sources and organizations also play an important role in the life of some of our participants. The mosque is a very important place during the Ramadan nights when individuals and families would gather there for prayers and for a range of events. Barring attendance at the mosque for the ritual prayers, participants and their families had to turn to alternative means of connecting with their co-religionists and/or fulfilling their spiritual and religious needs.

'I listened to conference talks; we got the satellite dish: not as much for the Arab channels but mostly for the live streaming from Mecca. For my two younger brothers, we really amped up the religious education during the Ramadan. There is this digital platform where they teach them one hadith per day, the meaning of these hadith, and teach them some sourates from the Quran. The local imam recommended this platform to us. There is also "Les Musulmans.fr" where there are lots of educational resources, for example, to learn the 99 names of Allah or to create a miniature model of a famous mosque. People now are more used to digital content.' (P3)

Among the sources that participants seem to rely on for this type of information were those of the intimate kind. These refer to strong ties (families and friends), members of the local community and/or mosque, and others (some of whom they do not know personally) whom they follow and trust for opinion and content. *'I prefer local, in-person sources: these are irreplaceable because they provide contextual, specific, relatable content'*. (P22)

'We listen to this [Paris-based] source: it has useful information and is something to listen to as a family and learn; it makes for a peaceful time for us to gather around it; we also often put on the live streaming from Mecca [the Muslim holy sites, in Saudi Arabia]. I value the routine that puts us all in the Ramadan mood, such as reading the Quran as much as we can; listening together to podcasts or YT conference talks on historical stuff, and IG posts like that of Omar Soulayman talking about the Firsts (converts) or Amaliah, who would share her perspective about being a young British Muslim.' (P3)

Discussion

This article considers the information practices of young Muslims as they navigate their Ramadan practices under pandemic. It takes as a premise the idea that their Ramadan-related activities represent a form of information work through which they seek and make meaning about the contexts in which their Ramadan experiences and information practices occur. Ramadan and the COVID-19 pandemic exist as both contexts and narratives formulated by the participants based on their experiences and negotiated through their information practices. We focus below on three areas of discussion that arise from the findings: affect and identity; the Ramadan social imaginary; and the reconciling of tensions between the communal spirit of Ramadan and the individual enactment of Ramadan under pandemic.

Affect and Identity Work

The significant upheaval experienced by the study participants as part of their overall Ramadan experience under pandemic is emotionally charged. As researchers of the role of affect in information behaviour have noted, emotions shape decision making as individuals engage in information work to make sense of a situation (Savolainen, 2015). The centrality – and validity – of these emotions calls for a closer look at how emotions and affect are at play as our participants engage in meeting their religious/spiritual obligation. The extent to which their identity as Muslims (engaged in the rituals of Ramadan) shapes their activities is significant and explains why community building during a worldwide pandemic is central in their accounts. The information activities required to address feelings of confusion, frustration, and anxiety seems to revolve around the identity work and reframing that the situation requires: who am I if not this mosque-attending Muslim? What is Ramadan without the support of my family and my faith community?

The need to continually adapt to the information received in an evolving information environment (i.e., constantly revised public health measures; uncertainty around how to connect with other Muslim and local community members) prompts an affective response. For some, the pressure to respond to these external pressures is enraging. For others, making accommodations can be empowering; this active information work is a process that is both labour-intensive and emotionally taxing. Each participant must determine which aspects of their identity can be adapted, what can be accommodated, and what cannot.

A Shared Ramadan Imaginary?

The study has revealed the significant role that religion and a Muslim-informed outlook have on the participants' information practices and their approaches to coping with their fasting obligations. Indeed, Ramadan is a formidable anchor in their lives. The imaginaries that impact the expectations of these young Muslims are about more than fasting and meeting a key religious obligation; the participants also contend with a shared imaginary. Some of the prevailing associations and values of what Ramadan means inform this imaginary, including the nostalgic and memory-laden images (often of anticipation, family gatherings and food), as well as values of trust in the divine and the ability to forge ahead and be resilient. Social imaginaries, as conceived by Appadurai (2010), shift and are refigured as experience is accumulated. Communities have long leveraged technologies organically to strengthen existing religious practices (Caidi, et al., 2018; Caidi and Karim, 2022; Gorman, 2007; Woodruff, et al., 2007). Values associated with Ramadan generally include community cohesion, charity, empathy and collaboration. These values are ubiquitous across participants' lived experiences of Muslimness, thus informing a shared social dimension. This imaginary is also propped up by narratives of unity, strength, and transcendence of borders. Digital media platforms are spaces where young Muslims can express their religious identities (i.e., performing or 'doing' religion) rather than relying on others to speak on their behalf about what it means to be a Muslim (Caidi, et al., 2018). This connectedness (through a range of 'mediascapes' (as per Appadurai)) results in a shared understanding of the observance of Ramadan under COVID, along with what it means to be a young Muslim in a global networked environment.

Communal Spirit of Ramadan vs Individual Enactment of Ramadan under Pandemic

Throughout the study, the young Muslim participants have expressed a key tension that they faced between reconciling the communal spirit of Ramadan and the circumstances that led them to become isolated. They also came up with workarounds and strategies to enact their Ramadan under pandemic often without their families, friends, co-religionists, and community members. Several have missed being a part of the broader Ummah (Muslim community).

'One of the most spiritual, and also delicious, activities in Ramadan is "Nazri", which means distributing home-made foods to poor people. I used to be a delivery boy and sometimes treat myself to one of those! This year, due to the pandemic, the Nazri has been suspended, and people help the poor more through charity foundations now.' (P16)

While this quote illustrates the loss of proximity and local ties within communities, it is also true that the rapid expansion and modification of digital spaces are changing the way that religion is perceived or practiced. The new forms of religiosity facilitated by the digital environment are bringing people together through the promotion of spiritual experiences online (Dawson and Cowan, 2004), and several participants reported how technology has enabled feelings of belonging over the past two Ramadans; how it connected them, and helped give meaning to their fast. Indeed, translocal networks can empower community resilience. This study is evidence that building resilience capacity is a key agenda for communities during a crisis or disaster (McClean, et al., 2014; Saja, et al., 2018). Our findings have provided examples of information practices that help young Muslims cope, adapt, and transform when faced with distress. While the experience of Ramadan under COVID taught some participants how to find alternative means to congregate, it taught others about the value of reflection and contemplation and taking time to make space for their religious/spiritual engagement. P21 illustrates this newfound balance as a result of their experience fasting during COVID:

'We didn't go to the masjid for jummah and tarawih. We were doing jummah at home with my brothers. I always found it difficult to do tarawih at the mosque because you needed to concentrate for over 2 hours and follow what was said, and the number of rakaats were sometimes long. By doing it at home, I found it was not detrimental to my spiritual needs.' (P21)

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the role of information activities and media practices in individual and community-maintenance rituals during Ramadan. Throughout the process, they engaged with

information gleaned from various sources, assessed the credibility of said information (e.g., whether vaccinations break the fast; or whether fasting is harmful during Covid), and partook in documenting and sharing narratives of their own (Ramadan without the gatherings at the mosque, without family or charity work). The meaning-making that participants engage in both validates their own notion of what Ramadan ought to be (e.g., doing it the right way) as well as leads to new practices online (sharing pictures of meals, connecting with family through social media before sunrise; attending virtual sermons and digital iftars) and offline (such as avoiding information, focusing inward, journaling). These, in turn, shape the collective Ramadan imaginary and contribute to aspirations and representations about completing the holy month of Ramadan under Covid.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an exogenous shock that altered the status quo and reshaped our collective experiences and practices. In examining young Muslims' experiences of Ramadan during the COVID pandemic, this study contributes to the literature on information practices during times of crisis, as well as to the nature of information in the spiritual and religious lives of individuals (an understudied area in Information Science). Our findings point to social limitations and restrictions that force individuals to rely on virtual and technological platforms to connect with others. Ramadan coinciding with COVID stimulated the evolution of new online mediated practices. To remediate the (mental) stressors and social isolation challenges, individuals came up with creative approaches or substitutions. The study also points to the importance of transnational networks and practices specific to Ramadan. These new practices had an immense impact on strengthening the collective feeling of Ramadan. Various online platforms became a source of support, motivation, and encouragement for many. It also became a method of sustaining ties and checking in on others while confined. The importance of spiritual and religious values; the ability of faith-based institutions in shaping information flows; and the religious logics shaping everyday decisions are all important areas for future studies.

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