Religious communities and the marketplace: Learning and performing consumption in an Islamic network

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Abstract

Sociopolitical analyses of religion evidence the increasing prominence of religious communities across the world. However, existing work on religion–consumption interaction focuses mostly on the personal effects of religion and examines how religion and religious ideologies influence individual decision making, choice, and purchase and shopping behaviors. In this study, we focus on the collective experiences of religion and unpack the multiple ways consumption shapes and is shaped by a communal religious ethos. Through an ethnographic study of a Turkish-based Islamic community, we show that consumption plays important roles in attracting individuals to the community, socializing them to the communal ethos, and drawing symbolic boundaries between the community members and outsiders. We also discuss how the communal religious ethos shapes consumption practices and brand relationships of members and influences the marketplace dynamics.

Sociopolitical analyses of religion evidence the increasing prominence of religious communities across the world (Emerson and Hartman, 2006; Wuthnow, 2004). These studies show that membership in a religious community provide many benefits, including satisfaction of spiritual needs as

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well as access to social networks, educational resources, and economic opportunities (Chen, 2002; Peek, 2005). Scholars also highlight many ways religious communities shape behaviors of their members, such as friendship and voting preferences, and discuss the embeddedness of communal religious narratives, practices, and institutions within the global economic, social, and political dynamics (Vasquez, 2008). However, despite their significance, religious communities are absent within the marketing literature. Existing work on religion–consumption interaction focuses mostly on the personal effects of religion and examines how religion and religious ideologies influence individual decision making, choice, and purchase and shopping behaviors (e.g., Hirschman, 1982, 1983; Delener, 1994; Essoo and Dibb, 2004; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010; Moschis and Ong, 2011; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Jafari and Goulding, 2013). As a result, the relationship between communal experiences of religion and consumption remains overlooked.

This is a rather surprising gap. Membership in a particular group is one of many signals that are communicated through consumption objects and practices (Mackay, 1997). In addition to distinguishing one individual from another, consumption can distinguish people belonging to different groups. As O'Guinn and Muniz (2005: 253) note, the relationship between community and consumption constitutes a starting point for understanding "how we live and why we consume as we do." Given the significance of community–consumption linkage, there exists considerable research on the topic (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Scholars investigate various communities and show that pursuit of common consumption interests fosters a sense of solidarity and collective identity and enables consumers differentiate themselves from others (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Unlike consumption collectivities that form and revolve around a particular brand or activity, a shared scripture-based value system underlies religious communities. This normative ethos shapes all aspects of members' lives and in a rather permanent manner. However, as any other collectivity, religious communities are also about drawing boundaries between different groups of people. Indeed, sociological analyses show that religious communities survive and thrive in contemporary world because they forge strong subcultural identities that enable their members to distinguish themselves from other religious groups and nonreligious people (e.g., Smith et al., 1998; Starks and Robinson, 2009). The subcultural identity equips members with a particular worldview, attitudes, and behavioral preferences through which distinctions from other groups are (re)produced and (re)articulated. In this study, we are interested in understanding how consumption contributes to the formation and adoption of religious subcultural identity and marking of in- and out-group boundaries.

The empirical context of our study is a Turkish-based Islamic network. Islamic communities have become particularly visible in the aftermath of 9/11, and more recently the Arab Spring, and play an increasingly prominent role in Muslim nations from Africa to Middle East to South Asia (Demiralp, 2010). Earlier Islamist groups were characterized more by their resistance to Western-style modernization and secularization and the desire to establish *Sharia'*-based regimes (Esposito, 1998). New Islamic communities, however, take daily life as the major unit of action (Wiktorowicz, 2004) and attract individuals with the aim of transforming their everyday lives in a manner congruent with the Islamic principles. Many young people participate in these groups, learn communal ethos, and develop a religious subcultural identity. However, little is known about how consumption is implicated in these processes: What roles do consumption play in attracting people to an Islamic community? How do new members learn and negotiate what constitutes religiously appropriate consumption within the community? And, how does consumption help members draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and other groups? Before we examine these questions in detail, we first offer a brief review of the literatures on religion, community, and consumption.

Religious communities and consumption

Despite the centrality of religion in human behavior, religion remains underresearched and undertheorized within the marketing field. Much of the existing literature treats religion as a segmentation variable and investigates how it influences consumer decision making, choice, and purchase behavior. Two commonly used exploratory variables are religious affiliation and religiosity. The former refers to the adherence of people to particular religious groups (e.g., Hirschman, 1982, 1983; Bailey and Sood, 1993; Essoo and Dibb, 2004); the latter refers to the degree to which an individual is committed to the norms and expectations of the religious group he or she is a member of (e.g., Wilkes et al., 1986; Delener, 1994; Moschis and Ong, 2011). Scholars conceptualize religious affiliation as a "cognitive system" (Hirschman, 1983)—a set of beliefs, values, and behaviors shared by members of a group—and examine how such common cognitive systems shape marketplace behaviors of consumers of different religions. Similarly, scholars compare and contrast consumers with varying levels of religiosity and identify the differences in their attitudes and behaviors. Overall, these studies provide some empirical evidence suggesting that religious affiliation and religiosity influence individuals' consumption practices.

Another group of studies focus on religion as a component of identity and examine the role of objects and consumption practices in constructing and communicating religious identities (e.g., Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1990; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Wattanasuwan and Elliott, 1999). For example, Hirschman and LaBarbera (1990) found that religious objects were among the most favorite possessions of Evangelical consumers and constituted a central source of their sense of identity. Wattanasuwan and Elliott (1999) showed that Buddhist teenagers in Thailand utilized symbolic consumption to create a sense of "Buddhist self." And, research on Muslim consumers examined how consumers' veiling practices (Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010) and attitudes toward global brands (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012) were shaped by ideologies and marketplace forces and, in turn, shaped their identities. Overall, these studies draw attention to the role of religion in the pursuit of identity projects and discuss how consumers use market resources to build their religious identities. However, similar to the work on religious affiliation and religiosity, this stream of research also focuses on the individual experiences and expressions of religion.

The communal aspects of religion are central focus of sociological analyses. Prompted by the continuing significance of religious communities across the world, scholars explore why religious communities survive and continue to attract members. A widely accepted explanation is offered by the "subcultural identity theory of religious strength" developed by Smith and his colleagues (Smith et al., 1998). Smith argues that humans have a drive to belong and only through belonging to social groups people can develop their identities. These social groups seek to differentiate themselves from other groups by creating distinctions between themselves and others. As a result, individuals belonging to a particular group come to define themselves in opposition to other groups. Conflicts among these different groups only serve to strengthen in-group solidarity. According to Smith et al. (1998), religion survives in modern times because religious subcultures enable their members to draw "symbolic boundaries" between themselves and other groups. Through these symbolic boundaries, religious groups develop a distinctive and strong subcultural identity and provide "meaning and belonging" to their members.

Overall, religious subcultures allow people to construct "identity spaces associated with their own vocabulary, expectations, and leaders, where like-minded people can engage in meaning construction for the subcommunity" (Starks and Robinson, 2009: 652). By emphasizing the positive aspects of one's own group and the negative aspects of the other, people come to value their

group more and strengthen their collective identity. Scholars show that in drawing boundaries groups draw upon religious teachings as well as ideological positions on issues such as gender equality, divorce, and homosexuality. By advocating particular forms of behavior and ideological perspectives, a group sets its distinction from the rest of society. We believe that consumption practices also play a role in drawing boundaries and contribute to the formation and maintenance of religious subcultural identity. To explore such potential of consumption, we focus on an Islamic network.

Research context

Our research context is a Turkish-based Gülen community—a Sufi-based globally connected Islamic network—founded and led by a Turkish preacher named Fettullah Gülen. The network comprises educational institutions, financial and manufacturing enterprises, media companies, real-estate trusts, charities, and think tank organizations dispersed across over hundred countries (Özdalga, 2005; Yavuz, 2003). Although no one knows the exact number of followers, estimates range from 6 to 10 million members worldwide (Turam, 2007). The network is Turkey's largest and most influential Islamic movement (Hendrick, 2009) and differentiates itself from other Islamic communities by its emphasis on the free market and modern education. Members are from the economically and socially influential middle class conservatives and include educators, journalists, businessmen, and professionals (Hendrick, 2009; Yavuz, 2003).

Gülen himself, however, is from a modest background. He was born in a community of farmers in the eastern Anatolian province of Erzurum in 1938. He received religious training from a local sheikh and was deeply influenced by the teachings of Sufi Islam. In 1966, he became the state-appointed *imam* of Kestanepazari Qur'an School located in the western coastal city of Izmir. There he began tutoring a small but devout group of students (Gulay, 2007). From early on, Gülen emphasized the role of education in building religious consciousness and firmly believed that "serving God means raising 'perfect youth' who combine spirituality with intellectual training, reason with revelation, and mind with hearth" (Yavuz, 2003: 20). To this end, he expanded his activities and began to organize summer camps for the youth. In these male-only camps, Gülen trained high school and university students on the principles of Islam as well as ethics, history, and science (Gulay, 2007; Yavuz, 2003). Gülen's ideas appealed to a growing number of people and a dedicated group of followers congregated around him.

In the 1970s, community building activities intensified and new spaces of gathering, such as *ışık evleri* (houses of light) emerged. The *ışık evleri* are houses where followers in a particular locality meet, pray, discuss social and political issues, and raise funds. Moreover, the *ışık evleri* play a very important role in attracting young people to the movement. These houses also function as dormitories where bright and promising university students from lower economic status stay free of charge throughout their education. Typically, four to six same-sex students reside in each house. Students regularly participate in collective praying and reading sessions, learn and discuss Islamic principles and practices, and develop a powerful sense of Muslim identity and religious brotherhood/sisterhood while studying in a secular university environment (Agai, 2002). These living spaces help formation of a religious consciousness that informs followers' everyday activities. Moreover, they provide members with social capital useful for finding employment upon graduation and succeeding in the competitive business life.

The Gülen community expanded significantly in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, Turkish economy went through structural transformation and adopted liberal policies. Community

members took advantage of the changes and began establishing businesses in the newly privatized fields of media, finance, health, and education. Community-affiliated TV and radio stations, newspapers and periodicals, banks and financial companies, and hospitals developed rapidly. The community has been particularly active in the education sector; the first Gülen-affiliated primary and high schools, and *dershanes* (private institutions that provide training for secondary school/ university entrance examinations) were established in the early 1980s. The educational network soon expanded beyond Turkey, first to Central Asia and Balkans, then to Russia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Australia, the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America (Hendrick, 2009). According to the estimates, there are now more than 1000 Gülen-affiliated schools worldwide (Hudson, 2008).

Two key principles underlie the workings of Gülen community: *himmet* (voluntary religious donation) and *hizmet* (rendering service). All followers of the community donate some portion of their income to the movement-related causes. This helps redistribution of wealth among different sections of the community and generates a pool of capital that is used in setting up and supporting new businesses, establishing new *ışık evleri*, and helping those in need (Hendrick, 2009). The *hizmet* principle is related to the mission of the community, which emphasizes serving humans, the country, the world, and ultimately the God. Gülen believes that a Muslim cannot passively submit to God but should actively serve him (Gulay, 2007). Those directly involved in the activities of the movement are considered as doing *hizmet*.

Overall, the Gülen movement aptly utilizes "the power of market-based forces" (Mandaville, 2011: 17). Businessmen associated with the community form an informal network and gain competitive advantage in the marketplace. The wealth they generate is channeled to the funding of community initiatives including dormitory houses, which function as spaces of teaching and disseminating a lifestyle based on Islamic principles. Given its pro-liberal economic stance, strong position in the marketplace, and emphasis on education, some analysts refer to the Gülen community as "Islamic Calvinists," or "Muslim Mormonism" (Mandaville, 2011; Yavuz, 2004). Those who are critical, however, see the community as a threat to the secular state and lifestyle. They regard *ışık evleri* as an attempt to create a uniform, traditional, and sex-segregated community. Indeed, gender relations remain highly problematic in the community. While there are dormitory houses for female students and women work as teachers in community-affiliated schools, as Yavuz observes, "the Gülen community itself practices rigid segregation of the sexes and does not permit women to work in high positions" (1999: 124). Nevertheless, the community continues to expand its reach and power in Turkey and beyond.

Methodology

As discussed above, student houses play an important role within the Gülen community: they function as venues where young individuals develop their affiliation with the community, meet and interact with other members, and learn communal norms, values, and behavior. Given the focus of our study, we decided to concentrate on these houses and collect data from students residing there. However, identification and recruitment of informants proved to be very difficult. In general, access to closed groups such as the Gülen community is limited and requires establishment of trust between the researcher and informants. As two researchers were not affiliated with the community, we faced many access problems. We began our search by holding informal discussions with our acquaintances who we thought might have some connection with the community. After rounds of conversations with different people, we managed to find two individuals who were members living

Table 1. Profile of informants.

Pseudonym	Age	Major	Year	Position in the house hierarchy
Abdullah	20	Education	Freshman	Mentor
Abdurrahman	21	Mathematics	Sophomore	House imam
Aydın	25	Management	Junior	House imam
Barış	20	Molecular biology and genetics	Junior	Mentor
Fatih	19	Medicine	Freshman	Mentor
Hüseyin	26	Management	Sophomore	Resident
Serdar	19	Mathematics	Sophomore	Mentor

Note: Information reflects informants' positions at the time of interview.

in community-run houses at the time of data collection. These students became our key informants and introduced us to their friends. However, many of these potential informants refused to participate in the study. Eventually, after contacting several community members, we succeeded to recruit five more students.

All seven students comprising our sample are male. The reason for such a skewed sample composition is related to the highly gender-segregated nature of the Gülen community. Both of our two key informants are male and they felt more comfortable introducing us to their male friends. Although we are aware of the possible limitations of a male-only sample, given access difficulties, we decided to utilize the available informant pool. We hope to investigate female members' experiences and practices in the future studies and compare them to those of male members. Overall, our informants belong to lower-middle-class households and are originally from small towns of Anatolia. They all state that they voluntarily decided to participate to the community. Informants major in different disciplines and assume various positions in the house hierarchy. For details of informants' profiles, see Table 1.

Data were collected between October 2010 and May 2011 through observation in three community-run houses and interviews conducted with seven students living in these houses. The first author spent several days with different informants in their houses. He socialized with them, participated in various activities, and engaged in informal chats. He also conducted semistructured in-depth interviews with the informants. The interviews lasted between two to three hours and covered three main topics: their encounter with the community; their decision to move to a community house; and their experiences as a member of the community. We especially inquired about their consumption choices and practices and probed about any changes they observed in their behavior after they have become affiliated with the community.

Field notes and interview transcripts constitute the data set. We analyzed the data using the grounded-theory approach (Glaser, 1998). We independently and closely read the interview transcripts and observational notes several times, identifying different analytic themes. Next, we organized common themes into categories. Any disagreements were resolved through numerous iterative readings of and comparing between interviews and notes. Once consensus was reached, the identified categories were related to the existing theoretical conceptualizations. To maintain confidentiality of our informants, we use pseudonyms in our reporting of the findings.

Findings

We organize our findings in the following manner. First, we briefly discuss informants' encounter with the community and their decision to join. Then, we examine how new members learn religiously

appropriate behaviors and adopt community-based roles. We show that consumption practices shape interactions among existing and prospective members and contribute to the formation and adoption of subcultural identity. We also find that consumption practices and brand preferences of members change with their tenure in the community, and a new institutionally imposed, communally shared consumption schema develops over time.

Encounter and entry

Our informants' first interactions with the community took place during their high schools years. In many small cities, community-run *dershanes* are the only available educational support facilities. Even when there are alternatives, these institutions have a reputation for providing the best preparation for the university entrance exam. Hence, they attract a broad spectrum of students, both religiously oriented and not. Our informants claim that, although they were aware of the community connection, their decision to attend a community-run *dershane* was driven primarily by academic rather than religious reasons: they wanted to get the best exam tutorial. At the *dershane*, students meet members of the community, such as instructors or elder brothers, and form some initial relationships. Occasionally, an instructor or an elder brother may invite students to watch a movie or have dinner together. However, as students' spend most of their time on preparing for the exam, community–student interface remains at a low level. Contact with the community intensifies once the student gets accepted to a university. In Turkey, higher ranking universities tend to cluster in bigger cities. Hence, it is very common for a successful high school graduate to attend a university in a city far from his hometown. Typically, after the university entrance exam results are announced, the community representatives get in touch with successful students and offer help for accommodation.

Indeed, all our informants recall that shortly after the university entrance exam results were announced, *dershane* instructors informed them about dormitory houses and introduced them to community representatives in the cities they would study. The informants acknowledge that they initially felt some ''anxieties'' over moving to a community-run house. The stereotypical representations of community members as "Islamists" in the secular media cause some discomfort. Serdar, for example, recounts ''fears'' he initially had:

> I felt some fear about the community. I thought of them as people who always pray, who are disconnected from the world, who want to establish a religious government.

Similar to Star Trek fans or Apple Newton consumers (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005), our informants feel that if they stay in a community house they might be stigmatized. However, for a fresh high school graduate with limited financial resources and little exposure to big city life, the community offers important benefits: a cheap yet comfortable accommodation in an unfamiliar city and a social network that provides support in adjusting to a new life as a university student. Barış explains:

> It is a different feeling to come to another city, to a different place. I was always afraid of living in Istanbul. I was like "what am I going to do?" Getting to know as many people as I could would make me feel comfortable. Of course, I didn't want to meet just anyone. I became friends with a few who got in touch with me through my *dershane* teachers.

As Barış's case indicates, the advantages that the community offers prove to be attractive and lessen anxieties that potential members might feel. Some of our informants settled in a community

house at the beginning of their university education; others moved to one after staying elsewhere for a while. Those who moved later, like Barış, told us that community-affiliated people constituted most of their social circle during the early days of their university life. Socializing with members of the community and occasionally visiting community-run houses further ease any remaining anxieties. Moving into a community-run house solidifies entry to the community. The student is now expected to fulfill his educational obligations (i.e., attending classes, studying, and taking exams) as well as his duties as a member of the community. There is a variety of communal duties and roles that a newcomer should learn and perform.

Adopting community-based identities

Previous research on the Gülen community suggests that the network has a strict, responsibility-based hierarchy and members' responsibilities are defined according to their relative position (Gulay, 2007; Yavuz, 2003). We find that a similar task-based hierarchy characterizes the organization of student houses. Each house has a house imam (also called "*abi*" [elder brother]) who is responsible for its governance. Houses in the same neighborhood constitute a "region"; regions in the same area make up a "province." Each region has a regional imam and each province has a provincial imam. House imams of each region and regional imams of each province meet regularly and discuss various issues related to the governance and organization of student houses. They also evaluate house residents' performances and identify those that fulfill their obligations and those that fail to do so. Based on the evaluations, imams decide who should be given new responsibilities and move to a higher position in the hierarchy.

In line with the overall guiding principle of *hizmet*, living in a house entails fulfilling various religious and nonreligious duties. Some responsibilities are performed by all residents; others are carried out only by certain members. A common service that all members, irrespective of their position in the hierarchy, are expected to render is *ilgilenme*. Literally, *ilgilenme* means taking care of or showing concern for others. In the context of the community, *ilgilenme* refers to the Islamic principle of *tabligh*—that is, propagating Islam to others. Every member of the community is responsible for attracting outsiders to Islam in general, and to the community in particular. To be able to do this, one needs to develop his religious knowledge and find ways through which he can communicate this knowledge to prospective members. As we discuss later, leisure activities become productive avenues to fulfill *ilgilenme* duty.

In addition, there are "minor" and "major" responsibilities. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy fulfill only minor duties. These typically involve household chores, such as shopping for supplies, preparing meals, washing dishes, and cleaning the house. Major responsibilities entail mentoring high school students and running the house. When a member gains some experience in the community, he can become a "mentor." As a mentor, he is given responsibility of a few high schools students. He periodically meets with them at home and outside, helps them in their school work, and carries out religious and leisure activities with them. The highest ranking member of a house is the imam and he is responsible for governing the house and ensuring that residents comply with communal norms and expectations. In particular, he monitors the behaviors of house residents and leads them in religious activities. Each week, the imam holds a meeting with residents. He listens to their problems, reminds them of their duties, gives feedback on their performances, and gets a report on the responsibilities they fulfilled during the week. These weekly meetings are instrumental in creating an environment conducive to learning religious values, norms, and ways of behaving. But more importantly, they help build a sense of community. As Fatih's account indicates, the imam's

emphasis on both religious activities, such as daily prayers, and social activities, such as having breakfast together, reminds new members of the importance of communal spirit and "togetherness."

> We have breakfast together. It is extremely important to attend breakfast. It is something that the house imam reminds on every meeting. In these meetings, we ordinarily talk about our spiritual deeds such as how many pages of [religious] book we read, if we have missed any prayer. And, we tell the number of breakfasts we attended in the house. It is very interesting, isn't it? He asks: how many breakfasts did you have together last week? Why? One could have breakfast elsewhere. But, having breakfast together shows the extent to which people in the house are united. That you are a community. It [breakfast] is very important because it is about togetherness.

Similar to consumption subcultures where a strict hierarchy exists (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), a newcomer is typically positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy and assumes only minor responsibilities. His performance in fulfilling these responsibilities and overall "spirituality" determines the speed of his movement in the hierarchy. However, the process of status referral differs from that observed in consumption-oriented communities. For example, in skydiving community (Celsi et al., 1993), status is a social perception based on technical mastery and competence of a certain member in managing a high-risk context. Similarly, in Harley Davidson subculture (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or among modern Mountain Men (Belk and Costa, 1998), status is a social judgment based on participation in activities, display of visible indicators of commitment through appropriate clothing, costume, and appearance. In the religious Gülen community, however, status is conferred by the high-rank members to the low-rank ones. The status is institutionalized through the conferral of a "title," such as mentor or house imam, and is realized through a multilevel decision-making process that involves members at higher positions.

In evaluating a student's potential to assume a higher ranking role, his degree of "spirituality" plays an important role. The number of pages of religious books a student reads each week and the extent to which he performs religious prayers are seen as a reflection of his commitment to Islam and the community ethos. Those who are assessed as satisfactorily performing these duties are considered to be better suited to become a mentor or house imam. However, our informants' accounts indicate that besides spirituality, there are other factors that affect conferral of status. Consider, for example, Barış's case:

> At the beginning of the last summer, new houses were set up. There was a need for one or two house imams. I have been told that this [issue] has been discussed in a weekly meeting of house imams. Two of imams believed that I could become imam of one of these new houses, but others didn't agree. They said there was a long discussion. Then, they gave the house imamate responsibility to someone who even does not pray properly.... I got angry with this. Because the only reason they didn't appoint me was that I did not fit [the type] in their minds in terms of my clothing.... And they even didn't try to get to know me better, my spirituality. He is someone who fits that typical community appearance, his shirt, pants, socks, facial appearance ... He shaves every day. If you see him, you say 'He is a community member!' But he always criticizes the community, he even does not pray properly.... These kinds of people are given responsibility just because of their appearance.

Barış's account highlights the importance of overall appearance and the existence of a particular member profile that the community promotes and rewards. Barış believes that he does not fit to the profile because he does not wear plain shirts and dress pants but prefer more colorful

and casual clothing, such as jeans and t-shirts. He feels frustrated that his clothing choices rather than spirituality shape his position in the community.

The importance of appearance is well known to our informants. They are fully aware that, in order to assume a higher level duty in the community, they need to exhibit sufficient spirituality but also project an outlook that distinguishes them as members of the Gülen community within the broader social spectrum. The narratives of the informants indicate consensus regarding the looks of a typical member of the community: he wears plain colored shirts and dress pants and does not have a beard. Our informants regard such style of clothing and physical appearance to be authentic, distinct, and unique to the community. They observe that all higher ranking members project a similar look. This particular look creates a sense of ''seriousness'' and ''distinctiveness,'' plays an instrumental role in reinforcing the hierarchy, and helps construct and communicate a Muslim identity that values ''modesty'':

> A Muslim differentiates himself from others through his seriousness. He has to be serious. . . . A Muslim should be modest and should refrain from extreme [behaviors]. He should live simpler. That's why [community members] wear trousers instead of jeans. Or, a plain shirt. (Serdar)

> Seriousness . . . Does a member in the lower levels of the hierarchy take a person with jeans and colorful t-shirts seriously? No. That's why they [higher ranking members] wear trousers, white shirts, or dark-colored sweaters. To make sure that lower ranking members take them seriously. (Fatih)

The physical appearance in general and clothing style in particular help draw boundaries between the community and the outsiders: they differentiate community member university students from nonmember students; Gülen community members from other extremist Muslim groups; and community members located at different hierarchical positions. As we elaborate next, beyond clothing, a multitude of consumption practices and objects play an instrumental role in new members' learning of religious and communal values and norms and contribute to formation, adoption, and dissemination of subcultural identity.

Learning communally appropriate forms of consumption

Studies on consumer socialization report that family, friends, mass media, and retailers act as socialization agents (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988). Our findings indicate that in the religious Gülen community elder brothers—imams and mentors—are the key socialization agents. House imams and mentors interact with new and potential members through collectively performed leisure activities, such as having breakfast together, playing computer games, or watching films. Through these practices higher ranking members teach new and potential members religiously proper ways of behavior and help them develop a working knowledge of *halal* (religiously permissible) and *haram* (religiously impermissible).

Consider for example the case of watching movies, a leisure activity frequently performed in student houses. House imams organize movie nights for current and prospective residents. Or, a mentor, as part of his *ilgilenme* duty, invites a few high schools students to watch a movie together. Typically, house imams and mentors have a library of ''appropriate'' movies stored in their computers and pick one for group viewing. The library includes both Turkish and Hollywood productions. As Barış and Fatih explain below, such archives develop over time, through personal experience and consultation of higher ranking brothers:

Elder brothers learn appropriate movies by experience. They are members who have a long history in the community. They either had asked their house imams [which movies were appropriate] while they themselves mentored [high school students]. Or they watched [appropriate] movies while they were new residents in a house. As a result of all these experiences, they know about the appropriateness of a large number of movies.

He [house imam] knows [which movies are appropriate] because he watched them previously. He has hundreds of DVDs, an archive. All of them are appropriate, all could be watched with students mentored in the community.

A closer analysis of what makes a movie appropriate or inappropriate illustrates the socialization process at work. In general, movies that feature scenes of nudity and sexual contact are thought to be *haram*. However, as our informants believe, if a very strict interpretation of *halal–haram* classification is to be followed, there will be very few appropriate movies that students could watch. Fatih explains:

[We watch] movies which do not involve sexuality . . . By sexuality, I mean, for example, the kissing scenes. If there is, we don't let students watch them. We skip that scene. . . . Or, a scene where people party and women wear miniskirts is skipped. Because such scenes are sexually arousing for men. Such a movie or scene is not acceptable. A woman without revealing clothes, miniskirts or make-up can also be sexually arousing, but if we evaluate that strictly, then we cannot watch any movie. Every movie includes such scenes . . . So, we choose the most appropriate ones among available movies.

The informants' accounts indicate that choosing "appropriate" movies entails an intricate process of negotiation. For instance, scenes that involve a female character are regarded as religiously appropriate if the woman "does not appear with her femininity." What define "femininity" are sexually arousing acts, dresses, and appearances. However, while there is a shared understanding of "femininity," practice suggests that it is interpreted in multiple ways. Consider Abdullah's approach. While he subscribes to the general principle that watching women in revealing clothes is an inappropriate behavior, he reinterprets this norm with respect to the movie genre:

If a scene involves a woman, whose head is not covered but her dress is not revealing either, is normal. The movie *Eyvah Eyvah*, for example. It can be watched within the community. In that movie, there is also a woman who wears dresses showing her décolleté and miniskirts . . . But it can be watched because it is a comedy. Romantic movies are not watched. It is okay to watch scary movies, comedies, but not romantic movies. Because there is definitely a love affair in those kinds of movies and there are kissing scenes.

For Abdullah, while sexual innuendo is permissible within one context (i.e., a comedy film), it is unacceptable within another context (i.e., romantic movies). Aydın and Barış, on the other hand, emphasize technical features of the scene and suggest that appropriateness depends on how the female character is shot and shown in the movie:

While choosing movies to watch with students [I mentor], the most important criterion for me is the lack of indecent scenes. For example, a scene of kissing. Or, the appearance of a woman character naked. Or, she should not appear with underwear. I think the skirt is not a problem. A mini skirt is still improper but there is a degree [of indecency] . . . I watch the scenes with mini skirt if the camera does not zoom to the legs of the female character.

If a woman character and a male character talk to each other, then it is not a problem; but if they kiss each other or if they are in bed, then it is problem. In the scenes where they talk, the legs or the breast of the woman character should not be zoomed. Then, it can be watched I think. I mean, it is being watched [in the community].

When collectively watching a film, it is the house imam or student mentor who has the final word on whether the group should watch the movie or not. For example, it is a common practice for house imam or mentor to fast-forward scenes that they regard as inappropriate. If there are too many indecent scenes, then the group might stop watching it altogether. By choosing the movies to be viewed and explaining why a scene might be considered appropriate or inappropriate, house imams and mentors perform their roles as socialization agents. Newcomers observe behaviors of elder brothers and consult them if in doubt. Overtime and through the experience of watching together, new and potential members develop a shared understanding of the community's view of *halal* and *haram* as it applies to movies. When members become mentors themselves they use this knowledge to choose the films they would watch together with students they are responsible for.

Our analysis indicates that the influence of house imams and mentors extends beyond communal leisure activities to almost every domain of consumption. Indeed, a significant aspect of the socialization process is the transformation of the brand preferences of students. Elder brothers play an instrumental role in disseminating knowledge about the legitimacy of different market offerings and guiding new members away from or toward certain brands. Kates (2004) argues that in communities where brands are not the central focus (i.e., ethnic or sexually-oriented subcultures), a brand's legitimacy, the fit between a brand's meanings and a community's shared norms, is not given but needs to be established. He outlines various framing processes through which brands gain legitimacy within a community and shows that both cognitive and moral legitimacy are instrumental in cultivating communally acceptable brand meanings. We find a similar emphasis on brand legitimacy in our context. However, in the religious Gülen community, the process through which brands gain and lose legitimacy is far more autocratic and top-down.

As we discussed, Gülen movement has a strong presence in the economic realm and there are many community-affiliated businesses. These businesses operate in diverse fields, such as food, clothing, retail, and media, and market many products and services. Community affiliation renders legitimacy to a brand; that is, members regard brands owned by community-affiliated businesses as suitable for purchase. Typically, a new member knows little about which brands belong to community-affiliated businesses and which do not. Information regarding affiliated businesses flows from the higher to the lower levels of the hierarchy. A student learns about legitimate and illegitimate brands through his interactions with elder brothers and observing their consumption behaviors. Aydın and Barış explain respectively:

We learn through word of mouth . . . higher rank members give information about brands when needed. Like "Let's not use such and such brands". . . . I learnt from someone that owners of Aba and Hosta [fast-food restaurants] are also community members. That's why I often go there.

Nt bookstore is owned by a community member. Just like Samanyolu TV, Zaman newspaper, Bank Asya, Fatih University Hospital. I mean, everybody says so. Elder brothers say so. They have long been telling us to buy from [Nt]. They are directing but it is not enforcement. I mean I often ask which one we should buy. Or, if I am going to a café, I ask which one belongs to businessman brother.

As new members learn about brands' status, they begin to modify their consumption choices. With tenure in the community, a new consumption schema, which classifies brands into the categories of legitimate and illegitimate, develops. While shopping in a particular product category, a student first searches if there is a brand owned (or, believed to be owned) by a community-affiliated businessman. If there is, he purchases that brand, even though the product might be of lower quality and/or higher price relative to other offerings. If, however, there is no community-affiliated brand in a product category, then the student looks for a "proved" (*müspet*) brand—a brand whose owner, although not a member of the community, is someone "close to Islam." He also pays attention to brands that are discouraged by house imams or mentors and avoids purchasing them. Aydın's narrative below illustrates such a decision-making process:

> [A typical member] buys from Nt. Since Nt is a community enterprise, he wants the community to earn the money he spends. He buys from Nt even if it is more expensive in Nt. He first goes to Nt, and he does not look at the price or the quality of the same product in other bookstores if he can find in Nt. . . . For example, [he chooses] Ülker while buying beverages or biscuits even though Ülker is not owned by the community. Because its owner is religious. In other words, it is not owned by the community but it is owned by people who are close to Islam, or not enemy of Islam. For example, Eti [another biscuit and confectionary brand] is not bought; it is avoided. I don't know if its owner is an enemy of Islam but I know that the owner of Ülker is a religious man. Therefore, Ülker [is chosen] instead of others. But, if a businessman from the community enters into that sector, then Ülker will not be preferred as well. For example, the owner of Çetinkaya [a department store] is also a religious person. Once upon a time, there was Yimpaş shopping mall as well, which was owned by a person from the community. Yimpaş then went bankruptcy. My teachers from *dershane* used to shop at Çetinkaya. After Yimpaş opened, they switched to it. When Yimpaş went bankrupt, they went back to Çetinkaya.

As Aydın's account reveals some brands can be regarded as "enemies of Islam" and elder brothers instruct new members to stay away from them. Similar to previous research (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandıkcı and Ekici, 2009), we find that brands that are perceived to be associated with Israel are sanctioned in the community:

> Some time ago, there was this list of Jewish products. They [elder brother] told we'd rather not use these products. There were some shampoo brands in that list. There was Ariel, Milka . . . (Abdurrahman)
>
> *I*: Are there any brands that you are told not to purchase?
>
> Yes, for example, we are not supposed to buy Coca-Cola. Or, Nutella. Products that are Israeli based. (Aydın)

While the above quotes suggest consumer animosity (Klein et al., 1998) toward brands associated with Israel, there is no indication in our data of a general ethnocentric tendency (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). Except a few brands believed to be connected to Israel, our informants show no antagonism toward foreign brands. The focus of socialization appears to be promoting patronage of community-affiliated and "proven" brands rather than advancing a "consumer jihad" (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012) against global brands. As Aydın explains, what matters most while shopping is whether there is a legitimate brand or not in that particular product category:

For example, nobody says do not buy Levi's. There is nothing said for Levi's. And when they say do not buy Coca Cola they also always say buy Cola Turka. If there is an alternative. And only if the alternative is a proven one. I mean nobody says don't buy Levi's and buy Mavi [a Turkish jeans brand not affiliated with the community]. But they say don't buy Coca Cola because there is Cola Turka. There is no distinction between domestic and foreign products. Only something against Israeli products. For others, if there is a proven brand, buy that. Otherwise it does not make any difference whether you buy a foreign brand or a Turkish brand.

Indeed, our analysis indicates that foreignness or localness does not automatically render a brand illegitimate. Any brand, whether Turkish or foreign, can be rejected by the community if it comes to be seen as preventing believers from performing their religious duties. A vivid example of a recently blacklisted Turkish brand is Pamukkale, an intercity bus service provider. Several informants told us that they were advised not to use Pamukkale while traveling. Allegedly, a high-ranking member of the community riding on a Pamukkale bus requested the driver to stop for a prayer break. However, the bus driver refused to stop and continued his destination. According to the informants, the community interpreted this incidence as an indication of the company's insensitivity to the needs of religiously oriented people and, hence, recommended members to refrain from patronizing its services.

Overall, as one socializes into the community and moves up in the hierarchy, he starts to adopt a communally shaped pattern of consumption. He buys the brands of the companies associated with the community. If no such brand is available in a certain product category, he then chooses a brand known to be "proven." This closed system of exchange contributes to the strength and sustainability of the community. Members actively support community-affiliated businesses against competitors, and community-affiliated businessmen provide the resources that fuel the growth of the community.

Discussion

Recent studies report the influential role religion and religious ideologies such as Islamism play in shaping individual's consumption choices and practices (e.g., Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Jafari and Goulding, 2013). Our study extends this research by focusing on the collective experiences of religion and unpacks various ways consumption shapes and is shaped by a communal religious ethos. In the context of the Gülen community, consumption plays important roles in attracting individuals to the community, socializing them to the communal ethos, and drawing symbolic boundaries between the community members and outsiders. During the early stages of interaction, leisure activities engaged with elder brothers help ease anxieties that potential members may feel and bring them closer to the community. At later stages, consumption practices serve as means through which communal and religious norms, values, and behaviors are learned and reproduced. Next, we discuss theoretical implications of our findings.

Socialization and communally embedded consumption

Existing literature on consumer socialization focuses mostly on how children learn to be consumers and discuss friends, family, schools, and the media as the main socialization agents (for a review, see Ekstrom, 2006). We contribute to this body work by first unpacking the role of consumption in socializing young people to a religious community, and second, identifying new socialization agents, such as student mentors and house imams. We observe that these socialization agents assume formally and hierarchically defined responsibilities and perform their roles as part of their religious

duties and services. Through various control mechanisms, such as weekly meetings, they closely monitor behaviors of new members and ensure that students acquire religious knowledge and build their identities as members of the Gülen community. The hierarchical and responsibility-driven structure of the community is also instrumental in disseminating communal values and norms. As a member moves up in the hierarchy, he assumes new responsibilities that entail different consumption activities, such as watching films or playing computer games with new and prospective members. Learning and engaging in religiously appropriate forms of consumption contributes to the development and dissemination of communal identity. With increasing commitment to the community and movement up in the hierarchy, a shared understanding of religiously appropriate consumption practices emerges. This shared understanding of consumption practices, which covers all domains of everyday life, helps draw in- and out-group boundaries.

Sociological analyses stress boundary work as central to the processes of religious subcultural identity formation and group strength (Dillon, 1999; Smith et al., 1998). We find that consumption performs an instrumental function in boundary work and contributes to the formation and maintenance of a distinct religious subcultural identity. Particular forms of consumption, such as wearing dress pants instead of jeans or plain colored shirts instead of colorful t-shirts, provide members with a sense of "distinctiveness." Communally developed consumption preferences allow a Gülen community member to distinguish himself from members of other Islamic groups and nonreligiously oriented people.

However, as much as consumption practices help differentiate community members from others they create in-group uniformity. In contrast to previous studies that discuss how Muslim consumers negotiate various religious and ideological tensions and critically evaluate meanings of different alternatives in order to make informed personal choices (e.g., Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010; Wong, 2007), we find that our informants' consumption choices are communally structured and tend to converge into a limited set of alternatives. Although students might appear as if making individual choices while deciding on which movie to watch or which fast-food restaurant to patronize, they actually follow elder brothers' instructions and align their consumption practices with the shared norms and practices of the community.

As past research shows, despite the rhetoric of free choice, various institutional and structural forces constrain consumption (e.g., Murray, 2002; Jafari and Goulding, 2013; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). For example, in their study of Iran, Jafari and Goulding show how the state media and the conservative strata of the society seek to oversee people's consumption practices and impose traditional values and styles. The authors report that the tension between institutional forces and subjective experiences fosters a reflexive process of intercultural learning process through which young middle-class Iranians create their localized modern identities. In a similar fashion, our study illustrates the constraining impact of a particular institutional force, a religious network, on consumption. However, unlike young Iranians, our informants' experiences suggest submission rather than reflexivity. For those who choose to be part of the community, life in the student house is characterized by communal order, discipline, and conformity. The community imposes restrictions on everyday life including consumption choices; yet, as long as one wants to stay as a member, he voluntarily abides by these limitations. The sense of moral satisfaction that derives from doing *hizmet* and serving Islam appears to ease any feeling of deprivation that might stem from giving up some choices (see also Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010). Whether such restrictions cause frustration and eventually lead to an exit decision remains unknown. As Turam (2007) observes, exit from the student houses is possible and those who feel overburdened by communal demands may choose to leave. We believe that further research can illuminate whether and how

consumption is implicated in exit decision and contributes to the eventual dissolution of communal identity.

Marketplace legitimacy and halalness in the life of a brand

With increasing attention given to Islamic markets, *halal* and *haram* have emerged as key constructs to evaluate religious appropriateness of products and practices targeted at Muslim consumers. While Muslims are to refrain from *haram* and engage in *halal*, these concepts are neither entirely predetermined nor universally set. As many scholars point out not only there are different interpretations of religious texts and rules but these interpretations are sociotemporally situated (e.g., Asad, 1993; Ismail, 2003). Moreover, intentions play an important role in assessing religious appropriateness and inappropriateness. Islamic theology acknowledges that all actions are judged by their underlying motive or the intention behind them (Saeed et al., 2001). Hence, any action that is motivated by pure intentions can be regarded as good deeds that aim to please *Allah* and warrant His satisfaction (Alserhan, 2010). Under these conditions, adopting a strict normative definition of *halal* and *haram* is likely to produce a limited understanding of Muslim consumers' marketplace behaviors. Indeed, recent studies point out that, rather than categorizing things a priori as permissible and not, research focus should be on understanding how *halal* and *haram* are constructed in particular sociotemporal contexts and unfold in everyday lives of consumers (e.g., Fischer, 2005; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Jafari and Suerdem, 2012; Sandıkcı, 2011; Wilson and Lui, 2010).

In line with this call, we develop a situated conceptualization of *halal* and *haram* consumption. In the context of Gülen community, certain consumption practices and objects can gain or lose religiously appropriate status not only because they follow or fail to do so certain normative principles but also because they help or hinder community objectives. The potential of these practices and objects for reproducing and perpetuating communal values and goals plays an equally important role in assigning *halalness* and *haramness*. As such, a movie with sexual innuendo or a computer game with violent acts can be reframed as appropriate if deemed as useful for attracting new members or keeping existing ones in the community. Similarly, any brand can gain religiously appropriate (inappropriate) status when it is contextualized within (outside) the community as contributing to (restraining) the communal goals and helping (hindering) perpetuation of religious ideals and aspirations of members. Community members are well aware of the competitive aspects of the marketplace and seek to support community-affiliated businesses by preferring their brands over others. Choosing legitimate and proven brands does not only support the community but serve as "good deeds" that help students develop proper Muslim identities.

However, our informants' accounts also illustrate the instability of the *halalness* of a brand. A brand's status can abruptly shift from acceptable to unacceptable (e.g., Pamukkale) or its degree of religious appropriateness may change (e.g., perceptions of Yimpas and Cetinkaya brands). Such fluctuations imply a complex, multilayered, and dynamic process of meaning construction. Hence, we suggest that rather than essentializing *halal/haram* distinction and fixing the status of brands as either *halal* or *haram*, a more productive approach is to conceptualize *halalness* (or *haramness*) as a moment in the life of a brand and investigate how *halalness* (or *haramness*) is constructed in a particular sociomaterial context and temporality. In his seminal work on the social life of things, Appadurai conceptualizes commodities as "things in motion," acquiring and losing value, changing signification, becoming nonexchangeable, and then maybe sinking back into mere commodity status. Adopting Appadurai's view, Gökarıksel and Secor examine the veiling industry and argue that

Islamic-ness is best understood to be "fleetingly present and absent throughout different stages of the commodity's life" (2010: 16). Similarly, we argue that that *halalness* (or *haramness*) of a brand is not fixed but transient and transpires in relation to its position within a particular sociohistorical network. As religion and market intersect with each other, new legitimate (illegitimate) practices and products emerge, complicating and transforming the meaning of proper Islamic behavior. Such instability, in turn, calls for a critical approach attentive to understanding how *halal* and *haram* are constructed and operate in different sociotemporal contexts and under what circumstances an object moves from one state to another.

Conclusion

Religion continues to be an important force shaping contemporary world. Our study shows the importance of religious communities for understanding consumption and marketplace dynamics. On the one hand, consumption significantly contributes to the formation and dissemination of a religious subcultural identity and acts as a medium through which religious norms and values are learned. On the other hand, religious subcultural identity also shapes consumption practices and brand relationships of members, and ultimately impact market structure. More research is needed to unpack different aspects and implications of this symbiotic relationship. While researching religious communities has its particular difficulties and problems, we hope that our research motivates new studies that examine the interconnections between religion, communal identity, and consumption in different contexts.

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