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An Islamic Revivalist Group's Unsuccessful Attempt to Find Meaning on WhatsApp: A Case Study of Understanding Unsustainable Asymmetrical Logics between Traditional Religion and the Digital Realm

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Abstract: The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted society in myriad ways, but how the pandemic has changed traditional forms of religion has been relatively understudied. Addressing this caveat, in this paper, I try to understand how adherents of an Islamic revivalist movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, turn to WhatsApp for meaning-making at the onset of the pandemic in Pakistan. The adherents are unable to sustain the use of the digital space due to incompatibility between the logic of the movement and the online platform. Without structural authority and organization, communication is chaotic and, at times, combative. The mixing of pure and impure ideas is also detrimental to communal cohesiveness. This study provides a counterexample to previous claims of symbiosis between online and offline religion and their inevitable merger.

Keywords: Tablighi Jamaat; COVID-19; WhatsApp; traditional; Islamic revivalist movement; digital religion; Pakistan; netnography; logics; authority



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1. Introduction

“(It’s the) time of (a) big test . . . what we think and what we say . . . what we do and why we do,” reads the WhatsApp message of one of the informants of my study. It captures the heart of the situation I am trying to understand. Pakistani society is in a state of chaos as the COVID-19 pandemic punctures the spirits of many. Additionally, while the traditional Islamic revivalist movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, is typically calm in Pakistan’s inherently volatile socio-cultural and political environment, this time I realize a noticeable rise in the temperature of the discussion. As the group is typically offline for most of its events, the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed much of this group’s discourse to the digital format. The WhatsApp platform had previously been mainly used for the coordination of events and meetings but has now suddenly turned into a hotbed of discussion and debate as a result of unreliable and obfuscating information. In times past, such conversations, if they ever occurred, were left for one-on-one or small group physical interactions. However, with new norms being set by the pandemic—of which arguably the prickliest for this group had been social distancing—there seemed little choice but to turn towards social media for sensemaking of religious belief and conduct in the face of conflicting scientific information.

Modernity is imagined as the improvement of physical, political, and social life through a number of changes in society, e.g., the rise of free-market capitalism, urbanization, technological advancement, especially in communication and financial exchange, and scientific explanations (Ali and Sahib 2022). Among the myriad forces that comprise our understanding of modernity, one such force is that of digitalization, or the “[i]ntegration of digital technologies into everyday life by the digitization of everything that can be digitized” (Ochs and Riemann 2018, p. 506). The move toward digitalization across fields of social life

has increasingly been witnessed over time and in particular during the dramatic onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for social distancing (or at least physical distancing) has introduced alternate modes of behavior, e.g., increased online shopping (as opposed to in-store shopping), increased use of digital communication in workplaces as employees work from home, and physical distancing in queues and on public transport (Bapuji et al. 2020; Scott and Martin 2020; Viswanathan et al. 2021). One of the more profound effects of the pandemic has been its impact on social relations. In fact, it is perhaps in social contexts where physical proximity is constitutive to social existence that the impact of the pandemic has been most severely felt (Sheth 2020).

With the advent of social distancing, people in the modern world have increased their digital modes of communication in order to make sense of the disorder. In a quest to find meaning, people indiscriminately share with the best intentions (Islam et al. 2020). Others spread information to please others so that they can establish and strengthen social connections (Aditya and Darke 2019). However, the reality is that such information is doubtful or untrue even when sourced from ostensibly credible sources (Chaxel and Laporte 2021; Goldsmith and Lee 2020; Jun and Johar 2022). As a result, rumors and false news spread rapidly under such circumstances of risk and low trust (Fine et al. 2005; Rosnow 1980; Shahsavari et al. 2020). Fake news, unconfirmed reporting, and biases in the presentation of data are all challenges that information consumers face. Hence, along with the health crisis, COVID-19 also brought with it an ‘infodemic’ (Alam et al. 2021; Depoux et al. 2020; Patwa et al. 2020).

While previous research has argued that reckless dissemination of information occurs pervasively, particularly in a digital world, we are yet to realize the full social implications of such acts, particularly at a time of heightened risk such as the pandemic. For instance, as shown above, while we know why digital citizens may share such information and when such news may be deemed credible, we are yet to understand what implications spreading unverified information has on social understanding, practice, and relating. This is of particular importance to certain groups, such as those based on Islamic tradition, where communal harmony is central to meaning-making and progression. In this vein, I ask how do members of a movement which is based on reviving Islamic tradition respond to the effects of digitalization?

In this paper, I consider the site of an Islamic revivalist movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, whose everyday social and consumption behavior relies on physical proximity and is disrupted due to the social restrictions of the pandemic. As a result, the community is forced to converse digitally given the extraordinary situation of the pandemic. I draw my data mainly from a netnographic study of a WhatsApp group comprising participants who are members of Tablighi Jamaat. I observe that the onset of the pandemic fundamentally upsets the social principles of the movement, creating discord online. More specifically, I find that the digitalization of the traditional movement’s activities upends hierarchy, creates a cacophony of verified and unverified information sources, and fundamentally alters the norms of communication. This creates mistrust in the movement’s own authority and members.

This article unfolds in the following manner. First, I revisit the literature on digital religion. I then review the work conducted on Islamic revivalist movements and the Tablighi Jamaat. These literature streams form the basis of the theory that this study aims to contribute to. I then share the methods used for this study and the research context. This is followed by the findings section, where I draw on some major conclusions. I follow this with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Religion: An Overview

Helland (2000, 2005) put forth the idea of *religion online* and *online religion*. The former encompassed the idea of religious authorities moving to the online space but maintaining the one-to-many paradigm in which religious experts could speak to adherents but not

vice versa. On the other hand, online religion envisaged religion coming to the digital space but also using the potential of the internet to allow for cross-communication between religious leadership and laypersons and laypersons with one another. In addition, it permitted followers to be creative in praxis e.g., perform virtual prayer and meditation (Helland 2016).

Campbell (2012, p. xx) presented a more formal explanation of digital religion; she conceived it as “the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated”. The author extended the view that digital religion incorporates influences from both online culture and traditional religion. The former implies dynamics such as interaction and convergence, while the latter points to belief systems informed historically. The online religious culture, nevertheless, is shaped by both the developments in new media as well as the religious system in the offline world. Hence, offline and online are not bifurcated. Moreover, digital religion addresses issues of modernity that underscore the uneasy relationship between religion and secularization, shifts in authority, and freedom of religious choice and practice.

Grieve (2013) argued that three features comprise digital religion. One component is the variety of technological tools in which religion is embedded digitally. These include audio, video, websites, games, etc. These media characterize the interactivity, hypertextuality, and communicability of digital content. The second characteristic of digital religion links the economics, politics, and culture of new media to establish a new religious vision and set of novel practices that liberate adherents from dogma and tradition (Grieve 2013, p. 109). The third facet is a means to negotiate liquid modernity. This idea elucidates that digital religion is not simply a repackaging of traditional religion; instead, it speaks to apprehensions of the liquid modern world by combining new media with religious narratives (Grieve 2013, p. 110).

Examples that support the ideas of Campbell and Grieve are rich. For instance, Kim (2005) explored online Korean Buddhist communities and found that online religion serves interpretative, relation-building, and instrumental functions. Golan and Stadler (2016) noted that even in ultra-orthodox Jewish communities, authorities worked with webmasters to foster solidarity, preach Judaism, and negotiate the apparent divide between modernity and religion. Islamic examples also exist. Becker (2009) found Salafi Muslims use digital media to debate authentic religious sources. In other work, researchers have documented how religious authorities such as *shaykhs* (religious leaders) and *imams* (prayer leaders) and religious practices such as Sufism transit to the digital sphere (Rozehnal 2019, 2022). Fakhruroji (2021) unveils how Indonesian consumers use new forms of media, such as apps by celebrity preachers, to engage with Islamic rulings.

In these interventions, researchers have taken an approach that points to the inevitability of the merger between religion and the digital (Siuda 2021). Helland (2016, p. 179), for instance, posits that researchers need to ask “how *has* digital religion become part of my lived religious experience?” rather than whether or not it has. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) declare that the pervasiveness of digital media makes it progressively onerous for religious authorities to retain solitary interpretations of religious teachings. More significantly, these arguments allude to an almost laudatory and compatibility between the two realms, indicating seamlessness in integration.

However, one domain that requires empirical attention in the aforementioned discussion is that of traditional religious movements, i.e., those that are intrinsically anti-secular modern. To explore this facet, I now move to discuss Islamic revivalist movements and the Tablighi Jamaat in particular.

2.2. Islamic Revivalist Movements

Almost as a response to the secular modernity that had begun to pervade globally in the 1800s, Islamic movements of various kinds responded to the changing social landscape (Robinson 2008). Mainly, the responses varied from adapting religion according to modern-day requirements to being resistive and strongly holding on to belief structures and identity-

forming values. Traditional Muslims were forced to either resist secular modernity or succumb to the pervasive new lifestyle. In a sense, the advanced onset of modernity catalyzed Islamic revival. This is buttressed by the fact that in about the last two centuries, a number of revivalist movements (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Nahda in Tunisia, Tablighi Jamaat, and Jamaat-e-Islami in the Indian subcontinent) sprung up at the same time modernity spread its proverbial wings globally (Ali 2003; Lapidus 1997).

The rethinking of Islam in the Indian subcontinent included new ways of interpreting religious texts such as the Qur'an and *Hadith* (Prophetic sayings) by Islamists and modernists to align with modernity (e.g., Ahl-e-Hadith and Ahl-e-Qur'an); selection of and working with portions of traditional knowledge to suit modern needs (e.g., Deobandi school disbanding Persian streams to focus on Qur'an and *Hadith*); institutionalization and spread of networks of knowledge using schools and publications (particularly in the Deobandi stream of thinking); focusing on transforming the spiritual self (Tariqat movements) (Robinson 2008). These changes helped bring rationality to traditional Islam and reify its roots. Based on the latter line of thinking, one of the movements that aimed to revert Muslims to orthodoxy, the Tablighi Jamaat, is the subject of this investigation. To bring the Tablighi Jamaat into a socio-historical perspective, I will now present a review of the major events that transpired before and after the founding of the Tablighi Jamaat.

2.3. Tablighi Jamaat from Its Advent to Today

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944), a religious scholar trained in the traditional Deobandi Islamic way, was concerned about the lamentable spiritual state of Muslims in late colonial India (Ali 2003). Maulana witnessed the lives of the Muslim Meos of Mewat on the outskirts of Delhi. Living side by side over centuries, there was little difference in the lifestyles of Muslims and Hindus (Nadwi 1983). This observation was recorded in the Alwar Gazetteer of 1878 by Major Powlett (1878, p. 38) as follows:

All the Meos are, now, Muslims, but only in name. Their village deities are the same as those of the Hindu landlords, and they celebrate several Hindu festivals. Holi is a season of special rejoicing among the Mewatis and they observe it like their own festivals, such as Moharram, Id and Shab-i-Barat. The same is the case with Janam Ashtami, Dusschra and Diwali...Very few of them know the *Kalima* (basic testament to oneness of God and Messenger of God Muhammad [peace be upon him]) and fewer still observe *namaz* (prayer) regularly. About the hours and rules of *namaz*; their ignorance is complete. This is the state of the Meos of Alwar.

Maulana aimed to help Muslims revert to traditional Islam by re-enacting preaching behavior from early Islam as shown by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Instrumental was Maulana's two-pronged approach that not only revived the teachings and practices of Islam but also in the manner of reviving the very work and ambience that were used in seventh-century Arabia. He believed that lay preaching under the supervision of *aalims* (religious clerics) was the route to establishing pious lives.

Maulana's mission included uniting every person of the *ummah* (Muslim nation), scholars and laypeople, the pious and impious, and the rich and poor classes of society. He thought of sending out *jamaats* (group missions) consisting of varied individuals from one area to another, as was the norm at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The first *jamaat* set out in 1927–1928. By 1941, the annual 25,000 people took part in the annual Tablighi Jamaat *ijtema* (congregation). In 1947, at the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the Pakistan Chapter was set up in Raiwind, a town near Lahore.

Tablighi Jamaat, literally meaning preaching group, is an Islamic revivalist movement that has today mushroomed into a global presence (Rauf et al. 2019). Estimates claim that Tablighi Jamaat today has more than 80 million adherents (Taylor 2009). Pakistan, with its headquarters in Raiwind, is one of the largest bases for Tablighi Jamaat and the epicenter for guidance for many countries. Many international Tablighi Jamaat participants travel to Raiwind annually to learn and practice *dawat* (preaching).

In recreating the practices and atmosphere of early Islam, Tablighi Jamaat uses a number of methods. These include participative communication both oral and written (Metcalf 1993, 2004); seclusion from everyday environments (Gaborieau 2006; Rauf 2022), social community and participation (Ali 2003), mythologizing (Metcalf 1993), egalitarianism (Rauf and Prasad 2020), and inculcating etiquettes and values (Reetz 2004; Rauf et al. 2018). Many activities are carried out in participants' local *masjids* (mosques) on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.

Other aspects that are integral to moral development include rituals and (physical) social community (Masud 2000; Metcalf 1993). Tablighi Jamaat activities reinforce social belonging through traveling as a group, congregational programs, and meetings at Tablighi centers and at local mosques. The movement advocates community by encouraging Muslim congregations for prayer, religious education circles, sleeping, and eating. Social decorum is sustained through peer pressure and group discussion. Social activities by themselves also foster acceptable norms. A council of elders guides community life by publicly meeting to discuss and decide on matters of administration and importance (Reetz 2004).

2.4. Summary of the Tablighi Jamaat Program

One of the conspicuousities about the Tablighi Jamaat is the repetitive, cyclical nature of the different discourses and practice routines that adherents perform. One of the main excursions is the *khuruj* (preaching tour outside one's locality). The *khuruj* takes place as a collective or *jamaat*, with usually 8 to 12 persons comprising the sojourn. The duration of *khuruj* may range from 3 to 360 days, but the format for every day in each version is the same. All activities, whether in *khuruj* or the local mosque, try to gear toward the six principles of Tablighi Jamaat (for a detailed explanation of the daily activities and six points, please see Ali (2021)). The atmosphere in the *jamaat* maintains a congenial, brotherly atmosphere.

Another key instrument in this moral development through physical proximity is that the participants of Tablighi Jamaat understand preaching to be an act that requires submitting to the authority of pious elders or other participants in a hierarchical fashion (Khan 2016). One of the key vehicles to achieve this is *mashwara* (group consultation), whereby a designated leader guides other participants on matters pertaining to social and religious life. It is the very physical, social, and masjid-based nature of this movement that makes it an appropriate site for the present investigation. Tablighi Jamaat participants are discouraged from using digital technology for their activities.

Tablighi Jamaat activities, including congregational prayers, take place in the environment of the mosque. Hence, when the Pakistani government announced that masjids would not allow more than five persons for prayer at the height of the pandemic, it dealt a severe blow to Tablighi Jamaat activities.

Given the above backdrop of digital religion and the traditional revivalist mode of the Tablighi Jamaat, the following question arises: how do members of a movement that is based on reviving Islamic tradition respond to the modern force of digitalization? This is a question that arose upon my reading of the literature and understanding of the site of fieldwork, which I describe next.

3. Research Context: COVID-19 in Pakistan

Pakistan is a country with a population of more than 220 million, making it the second largest Muslim nation in the world (Population Reference Bureau 2020). Born in 1947, Pakistan was a post-colonial state conceived as a homeland for Muslims (Dhulipala 2014). It has had a fraught relationship with religion and has experienced historical tensions between its identity as a Muslim state and its effort to become a progressive socio-economic player in line with Western standards (Zaman 2018).

The 2020 World Population Data Sheet noted Pakistan's "population density in urban areas, household size, and population aging contribute to . . . vulnerability to pandemics" (Population Reference Bureau 2020). The first coronavirus case in Pakistan was officially

detected on 26 February 2020 ([Worldometers 2021](#)). I conducted this investigation from the start of the pandemic to when its first wave began to recede. That effect was also noticeable in the social media data collected. Hence, the end date for this study is 30 June 2020, when the number of deaths in the country dramatically fell and stayed below 100 per day for the next several months ([Worldometers 2021](#)). At this time, the total number of cases in Pakistan had swelled to 209,337, out of which 2825 were daily new cases. The peak number of daily new cases recorded in Pakistan was 6825 on 14 June 2020.

Shortly after a month into the pandemic, the government of Pakistan announced a national lockdown from 1 April 2020 that would extend to 9 May 2020. Before this, two individual provinces had declared a local lockdown. While some commercial activity, industrial activity, and necessary consumer shopping continued with precautions, the government encouraged the general public to stay at home and observe social distancing ([GardaWorld 2020](#)). The administration shut down restaurants, malls, public transport, local, and (eventually) international flights. For a few weeks, only congregational prayers in masjids (mosques) were permitted while observing protocols. In a few cases, mosques were shut down completely.

4. Research Method: Netnography

To understand how the use of a social media platform influences the behavior of members of a traditional religious group, I used netnography. Netnography is the online version of ethnography. It is defined as “a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media” ([Kozinets 2019](#), p. 14). Borrowing from the lineage of anthropology and sociology, netnography has been used in a number of research areas, including marketing, consumer research, and communications, to access naturalistic online data ([Kozinets 2019](#)). It is particularly useful for answering our research question since we would like to comprehend how online consumers of religious knowledge make sense of the various sources of information presented to them. In addition, this research is particularly interested in the social interaction transpiring through social media platforms, for which netnography is again particularly well suited.

5. Data Site and Analysis of a Private WhatsApp Group

I conducted a netnographic study on the social media platform WhatsApp. WhatsApp enables online relationships to play out through frequent communication. The platform is ideal for sharing news and stories, commenting, and entertaining. In a large group such as the one for this study, a few participants are observed to be more active than the rest. While occasionally the conversations can be personal, generally they are meaningful to the entire community. Relationships are developed and constructed over time; the threads can be joined or suspended at any time, creating an atmosphere of informality ([O'Hara et al. 2014](#)). The participants' discussions are often related to their real relationships with the community at large or with specific members. The collective, public display of threads also tempers the conversation. There is a degree of intimacy with relatable humor being shared, but also a degree of formality as senior and as some unknown members may be present. In this investigation, I noted that text messages, photos, audio, and videos were shared, creating opportunities for debate, critique, analysis, teasing, and sarcasm. In addition, other emotions were either texted or shown through emoticons. These exchanges developed the narrative over days, weeks, and months ([O'Hara et al. 2014](#)). Hence, the ongoing social construction of member relations on the platform was of key interest in this study.

At the same time, belonging to a traditional religious community also means that members are supposed to live up to the ideals of the community, observe propriety in communication and espouse the values and beliefs of the Tablighi Jamaat in their perspectives. Interestingly, as I note later, the platform-based communication exposes how the participants are tussling to live by the ideals of the Tablighi Jamaat with the plethora of other information sources, which may be held incompatible with traditional Islam.

I used netnography to study the group for four months at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan. The WhatsApp group comprised 70 faculty members and alumni of a university in Pakistan who were affiliated with Tablighi Jamaat activities and had spent considerable time on Tablighi Jamaat sojourns (see Table 1 for selected member profiles).

Table 1. Selected Profiles of WhatsApp Group Members.

Serial No.	Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation	Years Since Graduation From Relevant University	Years since 4 Months in Tablighi Jamaat Sojourns	WhatsApp Group Role	Number of WhatsApp Posts in Research Period
1	Haris	40	Postgraduate	Professor	10	18	Admin	135
2	SeniorGrad	27	Postgraduate	Phd Student	0	5	Admin	369
3	Ismail	25	Postgraduate	School Administrator	2	3	Admin	61
4	Ehsan	25	Graduate	Business Owner	9	8	Admin	25
5	Professor	55	Postgraduate	Professor	NA—faculty (only taught)	29	Member	22
6	Ibrahim	44	Postgraduate	Government Employee	19	22	Member	27
7	Furqan	42	Postgraduate	Professor	19	19	Member	47
8	Nauman	34	Postgraduate	Phd Student	11	11	Member	18
9	Adnan	31	Postgraduate	Business Owner	8	8	Member	10
10	Talha	30	Postgraduate	Phd Student	8	8	Member	18
11	Usman	25	Graduate	Business Owner	3	3	Member	27

The description of the group stated that it was a group for old Tablighi Jamaat participants affiliated with the university. The members were spread apart globally. Two of these members left and rejoined the group within four months (one of them accidentally exited the group and rejoined immediately, while the other exited when they left on a Tablighi Jamaat sojourn and was added back when he returned). Three other members were added during the four months and three other members left during the four months. It is also important to note that some adherents who were eligible to join the group opted not to join the group for fear of the dangers of the Internet in polluting their beliefs and values (Rosenberg et al. 2019).

After experiencing the discussions live during the netnography, I then downloaded the posts from the group and analyzed them qualitatively. I determined the start time for the data as the time when the first Coronavirus-related post was reported in the group and the end time as the time when the Coronavirus cases had dropped significantly from their peak such that there was little discussion in the group on them. The timespan for the data is from 27 February to 30 June 2020. The data comprised a total of 1543 posts, which included 59 voice messages and 189 images and videos. Immersion notes were kept where I tried to interpret the feelings, events, and conversations in light of the overall context at the time. The textual data amounted to 25,864 words. The multimedia audio and video messages ranged from 3 s to roughly 45 min.

Since the data used for this study has been gleaned from a private online platform, research ethics was instrumental to the integrity of the investigation. I obtained Institutional Review Board approval for the project. Institutional Review Board is a university panel that checks for the ethical soundness of any project. No objections were raised by the Institutional Review Board with regard to the use of the project's methodology. I have been a member of the WhatsApp group since April 2019, while the group itself started in 2015. I was well-known in the community as an academic. Nevertheless, I also mentioned this on my profile in the group. In addition, the profile picture clearly mentioned "Researcher"

and was visible not only on the group member page but also in any messages that I posted on the group. Moreover, I sent a message to the group stating that I was conducting a research project on the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities and would be using the posts made on the group as data for the project. I also clarified that the data would be anonymized, and I could be contacted if there were any issues.

6. Findings

6.1. Online Activity during the Pandemic: From Indifference to Excitement to Dysfunction

The findings indicate that members of the WhatsApp group initially exhibited an indifferent attitude towards the pandemic, then experienced anxiety and conflict, and finally normalized and consolidated their views and accepted the reality of the pandemic. At the end of the study period, it was realized by the group at large that the online mode of Tablighi Jamaat operations was not materializing sustainably. Hence, the group returned to a sedate state, such as in pre-COVID times, with no meaningful Tablighi Jamaat activity being carried out. In the findings that follow, I explain why digitalization is not conducive in the case of the Tablighi Jamaat due to certain logics that are asymmetric to the inherently physical nature of the Tablighi Jamaat orthopraxy. Before that, I unravel the dynamics that change when the transition from physical to digital is made.

6.2. How Do Community Dynamics Change When Transitioning from Physical to Digital?

Interaction between members is an important part of religious communal relations. In physical communities, interaction between all members at most times may not be possible. However, digital communities eliminate restrictions of time and space so that information is accessible to communities and interaction is open. Moreover, in tightly knit, homogenous communities, communication in the digital space may be more facile and frequent. In addressing the structural dimensions of communities, [Thomas et al. \(2013\)](#) offered a classification of the dynamics undergirding consumption communities. They delineated communities according to nine characteristics: focus, duration, appeal, access, dispersion, marketplace orientation, the structure of resource dependency, collective belonging, and heterogeneity. In this particular study, I extend the dimensions presented by [Thomas et al. \(2013\)](#). In addition to the nine original characteristics of the authors, I find that the Tablighi Jamaat community varies in its physical and digital form as per the following eight additional attributes:

Purpose of Interactions: This refers to the motivations members have when joining and participating in community activities;

Attention during Interactions: This tells us how concentrated the interactions of the community members are. It also shows how much attention members are paying to community activities as they transpire;

Pace of Interactions: This identifies how quickly the group, as a whole, responds to or can respond to any situation;

Frequency of Interactions: This identifies how much the group interacts or can interact with each other during a given situation;

Mode of Interactions: This tells us how sensory the interactions are (visual, auditory, etc.);

Rules of Conduct: This indicates whether or not there are rules governing community interactions and behavior, how specific these are, and how they are implemented;

Effects on Identity: This implies how the community proceedings shape consumer identity and behavior;

Relations between Members: This indicates how clear members are on their own goals and roles and cohesive the community is.

How these attributes play out for the physical and digital versions of Tablighi Jamaat activities are depicted in Table 2 (attributes 1–9 are adapted from [Thomas et al. 2013](#)). These characteristics are inter-related and come together to influence community dynamics.

Table 2. Dimensions of Community.

Sr. No.	Communal Dimensions (Adapted/Extended from Thomas et al. 2013)	Tablighi Jamaat Physical Community Attributes	Tablighi Jamaat Digital Platformized (WhatsApp) Attributes
1	Focus	Ideology	Activity tending towards Ideology
2	Duration	Enduring at the mosque level; temporary at the sojourn level	Enduring
3	Appeal	Limited	Limited
4	Access	High barriers to entry and high welcoming	High barriers to entry and high welcoming
5	Dispersion	Local: Geographic proximity	Dispersed: Globally spread
6	Marketplace (of ideas) Orientation	Oppositional: Less access to external information/ideas	Synergistic: Full access to external information/ideas
7	Structure of Resource Dependency	Simple: Unidirectional flow of ideas from top to bottom	Chaotic: Any member contributes ideas at any time
		Clear chain of authority; hierarchical	No chain of authority; democratic, flat
8	Collective Belonging	Prominent	Limited to Prominent: Some members are active; others join but hardly participate
9	Heterogeneity	Homogeneous	Homogeneous
10	Purpose of Interactions	Gathering for performance of religious rituals and consumption	Gathering for discussion of external events and how they impact the community
		Ritual participation is the main activity	Posting messages is the main activity
11	Attention During Interactions	Devoted, focused interaction	Distracted, chaotic interaction; too many extraneous issues to deal with
		Physical presence/no dropping out	Easy to drop in/drop out
		Usually no multi-tasking	Can multitask
12	Pace of Interactions	Decelerated	Accelerated
13	Frequency of Interactions	Temporal	All the time
14	Mode of Interactions	Everyone sees and hears each other	No seeing, not necessarily listening to others
15	Rules of Conduct	Prescribed rules to follow	No rules
16	Effects on Identity	A particular identity enacted	Open to all sorts of identities
		Singular interpretation	Each person to interpret information personally
17	Relations Between Members	Clarity on roles and prescribed beliefs, behavior	Myriad news sources give little direction
		Members physically meet	Members may never have met
		Harmony and brotherhood between members	Incites acrimony and difference of opinion; demotes intracommunity respect

For the Tablighi Jamaat community's transition from physical to digital, I now underscore some of the more important characteristics that disorient Islamic revivalist movement members.

6.2.1. From Hierarchy to a Flat Structure

While generally viewed to be a boon for mainstream marketplace communities, a democratic flat structure in which every community member has a voice is detrimental to

the functioning of a traditional community. This is because traditional religion operates in a hierarchical structure that allows for a unidirectional flow of information and ideas. Tablighi Jamaat operations require a clear understanding of who is in control and whose command to follow.

When news broke out of the COVID-19 pandemic and messages from UNICEF on the characteristics of the virus and that the government had shut down important institutions were shared, the group administrator asked, “Any letter from Raiwind (i.e., Tablighi Jamaat Pakistani headquarters)?” As physical access to religious authorities was severed, official messages from the headquarters were traditionally slow and infrequent when compared to other media since they were usually handwritten letters from the *Ameer* (leader) of Tablighi Jamaat. Hence, despite the outbreak and chaos, instructions from Raiwind were eagerly anticipated. When no instructions were quickly forthcoming, one of the group administrators gave the following advice to reach out to regional headquarters or local senior Tablighi Jamaat members: “We cannot formulate our opinions here. Please find out from your local *markaz* (regional center) and its responsible brothers on how to do the work during these times”. This post also retorted the tendency for members to formulate their own opinions as time elapsed and the lack of information continued. Time and again, especially at the apex of the pandemic, members challenged each other’s opinions. In the physical world, an *Ameer* of a group would have been looked up to and obeyed. However, in the WhatsApp forum, there was no ostensible leader.

Further panic ensued when Raiwind *markaz* was shut down by authorities to prevent the spread of infection. Without *markaz* instructions and the ability to travel and reside in the *markaz* (since Tablighi Jamaat sojourns originate and end at the *markaz* many times), many *jamaats* (groups) were stranded without directions on how to proceed and where to go. This desperation is depicted in the following post by Ismail:

Latest news:

A [name of university] junior who is currently in Multan doing 4 months [sojourn time] [name of student] called. They have sealed Raiwind and now he is stuck there. @SeniorGrad *bhai* . . . *aap ki dili khawahish tou puri hui* [brother your wish is fulfilled].

While the tone is one of panic, the post above ends with an accusatory note on SeniorGrad, who started the debate on whether sojourns should be halted. Several members expressed divergent opinions on whether travelers should continue with their sojourns or not, and how big the travel groups should be. Different members shared information from various sources. No conclusion was drawn, despite some posters thinking they had the authoritative solution captured in an audio or message from someone in authority. A blame game and this-vs-that solution argument ensued, leading to friction. One person dropped out of the group altogether as a result of being disappointed with the seemingly unending debate.

Relatedly, another issue was that each member’s decision-making was shaped by the consumption of what they viewed as authoritative information. Hence, there appeared to be some customization of behavior depending on how information was interpreted, with each member thinking for themselves what was the truest way forward in their own circumstance. When these conflicting interpretations were discussed, they created bitterness. Hence, the medical advice taken, the religious practices performed, and day-to-day consumption varied and created acrimony.

6.2.2. From Pure to Impure

The authority of the WhatsApp Group Administrators was apparently symbolic, and despite their requests to refrain from sharing news and updates and keep the group restricted to Tablighi Jamaat-related matters, the other members diverged from the core purpose of the group. One of the group administrator’s posts refers to this issue as follows:

We are in different regions and countries and the situations are different. Our elders have given us *targheeb* (motivation) and encouraged us to keep doing the work of *Dawa* (preaching) but keeping the guidelines from the government and

local authorities in front. The effort of *Dawa* will continue but the *tarteeb* (order) will change from time to time and region to region. . . .

(also on a sidenote we are already receiving enough posts on other groups and social media about the ww (worldwide) situation, fear factor and recommendations, please avoid posting here, and lets stick to the original purpose of this group).

The above excerpt from the data shows how transitioning online has been problematic on several fronts. One issue was that members from globally diverse areas had been brought together through WhatsApp in what was traditionally a geography-specific movement. Hence, with different leaderships in different areas and different instructions for each area, the sharing of area-specific information on WhatsApp puzzled those who inhabited different areas.

The second issue identified in the post is that there was a tendency to bring in unrelated (impure) posts to the group (Douglas 1966). This attended to a lack of focus by the posters on the core purpose of the group. A number of posts on scientific facts, possible fake news, rumors, the spread of the disease, number of deaths, closure of institutions, etc., found their way into the group, adding to the confusion. Rumors spread because they were not to be considered facts or because they needed to be verified (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007).

As opposed to the singularity of thought in the physical space, the digital introduces a multiplicity of thoughts as follows: diverse sources of ideas and expertise create confusion, arguments, and mistrust. The irony was that people were turning to WhatsApp to find clarity. The administrators were keen to maintain purity by reminding the members of the purpose of the group—discussion of Tablighi Jamaat-related matters. Extraneous ideas created a debate on what expertise should be viewed as sound, as follows: scientific/medical advice versus religious advice versus government orders. One faction understood this event as a conspiracy, another took the side of science, while another was in the middle or toggled between. Each faction tried to sway others toward its argument by presenting evidence, often with proof of authenticity, so that it might not be rejected as fake news. At the pandemic outbreak, the disease was dealt with non-seriousness by the majority. However, this later turned into anxiety as the community became divided, and there was some semblance of reality sinking in as most members came to believe that the pandemic was not a hoax, especially when close family members died or the disease’s devastation was experienced firsthand.

This virtual impurity leads to debates that are detrimental to group cohesion and individual spirituality. The ease of posting or trigger-happiness was problematic as people said stuff that they later regretted. One member seemed to joke that he had lost his faith because of the things he said. In another incident, poster Ismail revealed upsetting details of a senior university professor’s grievances in the hospital when he took his father for treatment. After the post, some community members started calling the professor to obtain more details. Ismail notes the aftermath as follows:

Ismail: Already being very sensitive, he [university professor] became further upset. It has been requested not to further share this and make a similar request on forums it has already been shared on. (As it is not possible to recall or delete on WhatsApp).

One of the reasons for discord was a seemingly lack of trust in ideas being shared. Some participants provided proof for whatever they posted. For instance, poster Farhan quickly asked the following when an edict emanating from a cleric was posted: “This is *Mufti* (cleric) Sahab’s official account? Just wanted to confirm the authenticity”. There was an air of skepticism as different kinds of ideas were bandied about. There was no way to determine the trustworthiness of such ideas unless they came from Raiwind *markaz* itself. This skepticism came with a lack of clarity generally (both in the physical and digital space) and the chaos that occurred via other social media, which I discuss next.

6.2.3. From Organized to Chaotic Space

I saw the transition from physical to digital as a transfer from a structured space to an unstructured space. Since the Tablighi Jamaat participants were used to physical interaction, members generally desired physical interchange. The purpose of interacting in the digital space seemed to be to obtain clarity and stay up-to-date. For some, it seemed that the WhatsApp conversations were a spectacle to see how things unfolded. This contrasted with the physical space where participants connected to perform spiritual activities together. One of the elders' messages read that "we are being closed down, but the work is not being closed down". Members argued that the Tablighi Jamaat effort should continue despite the hindrances and perhaps take alternate forms, such as abiding by restrictions, forming smaller preaching groups, and preaching individually rather than in large groups. However, this diluted the experience for many. For instance, when the issue of offering congregational prayer (normally performed with shoulders touching side by side inside a mosque) with social distancing came up (standing three feet apart), some members were irritated. Moreover, when some mosques were closed for prayer altogether, including the alma mater mosque, members expressed sadness and dissent as follows:

5:45 PM—Professor: [Name of university] masjid [mosque] closed for Namaz as from yesterday

6:25 PM—Usman: That is Sad :(

10:34 PM—Ismail: No staff is there. Faculty comes but they have closed masjid [mosque] as if corona ne namaz mein hi sirf 'katna' hai. [as if corona only attacks during prayer].

This news also angered some participants since in the physical space many public areas (such as the checkout lines of shopping centers) did not follow social distancing rules. As Ismail's comment suggests, it seemed to some that some administrators deliberately target religion.

WhatsApp also brought chaos due to casual user behavior. Sometimes, a lack of attention was being paid by participants. For example, Adnan posted a message in French intended for another WhatsApp group. He was quick to apologize as follows: "Sorry message sent in the wrong group". A little while later though he repeated the following error:

10:13 PM—Adnan: Something similar was also being discussed on the [X] Brothers group

10:30 PM—SeniorGrad: isn't this the [X] Brothers group? 🤔

10:31 PM—Adnan: Sorry same error again :).

Such mistakes would not occur in the physical world as the attention of members would be focused.

The general lack of order was complemented by the capacity to make disrespectful interruptions in an informal (as opposed to a formal physical) environment. Respect for elders and authority are important facets of physical Tablighi Jamaat work. In the aforementioned post where a senior professor noted that the university mosque is closed down, his message was soon commented on by Usman who was a recent fresh graduate. In normal, physical spaces, such comments would not be made just out of sheer respect for elders; such posts would be met with silence.

A final issue is one of time. With the rapidity of events and changing situations, members felt a need to respond quickly. Some were quick to respond than others and at odd hours. Some members were active, others less so. Some members followed the group conversations closely, others less so. At times, there was a repetition of points made earlier as members did not follow what was said before. The speed of information access, both credible and unreliable, made the transfer of information from a YouTube clip or from one WhatsApp group to another just a few taps away. Moreover, as activity on social media increased, the chaos was also exacerbated with the lockdown, giving participants more time to interact on social media.

7. Discussion

This case study explored how an Islamic revivalist movement responds to digitalization. A group of physically active Tablighi Jamaat members became disoriented when they shifted to the digital space. To this end, we have been able to gather that the Islamic revivalist movement community disintegrates due to multiple dynamics that are transposed on the online format, notably change in a hierarchical structure, speed of relating, and the merging of impure, unreliable, off-topic and pure, reliable, on-topic information.

While previous studies have looked at other forms of religion, this investigation is a relatively novel look at an Islamic revivalist movement experiencing a foray into the digital. In line with [Campbell and Vitullo's \(2016\)](#) stance that online communities need to be understood in relation to their offline versions, we see that an Islamic revivalist movement's resistance to transformation occurring in modernity figures heavily in its lack of success in the digital space. This exposition also goes counter to the relative ease of transition that other types of religious groups have experienced with the digital realm (e.g., [Kim 2005](#); [Golan and Stadler 2016](#); [Fakhrurroji 2021](#)). [Fakhrurroji \(2021\)](#), for instance, presents the claim that digital Islamic learning is a form of religious engagement as it extends knowledge seeking in a new format, is an expression of Islamic identity, and is an effort to maintain global religious connections. However, in this study, we see these points refuted. The digital could not be conceived as a true extension of Islamic practice nor a presentation of identity, as for the Islamic revivalist movement did not abide by the way of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Previous scholars have portrayed a rather symbiotic relationship and a blended approach to the physical and the digital ([Campbell 2012](#); [Siuda 2021](#)). However, here we see that by virtue of its very foundation, the Tablighi Jamaat conversion to the digital platform is unsustainable due to its resistance to some uses of modern technology. Traditionalists value the past ([Graham 1993](#)), and Islamic revivalist movements specifically try to recreate it and reconnect to it.

This study also concurs with [Neumaier's \(2016\)](#) conclusion that people turn to the digital realm when they are dissatisfied with offline proceedings. The extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic resulted in Tablighi Jamaat adherents' transition to the digital. However, additionally, this study finds that the digital itself may not be a panacea to offline problems.

Foundational to the mismatch of logic is the case of authority ([Whyte 2022](#)). Traditional Islamic revivalist movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat are dependent on religious leadership for guidance on commonplace and macro issues. [Bunt \(2018\)](#) claims that cyber spaces provide access to myriad leaders and their guidance through forums, *fatwa* (edict) sites, celebrity cleric sermons, blogs, and the like, but he also recognizes the difficulty for lay adherents in picking authentic and credible authorities. This problem was also witnessed in this study as the Tablighi Jamaat moved online and incidentally derailed one of the value propositions of Tablighi Jamaat's offline dynamics—reliable, structured, and trustworthy authority without the strife of using self-judgment ([Timol 2019](#); [Whyte 2022](#)).

The Tablighi Jamaat, as an Islamic revivalist movement, prides itself on trying to replicate a life that is close to the Golden era of Islam. However, the use of technology in itself goes counter to the purpose of the movement. It may be noted that technology is actually discouraged in physical Tablighi Jamaat events. Using the case of digitalization, this study reinforces [Ali and Sahib's \(2022\)](#) thesis that modernity's apparent benefits remain unrealized. It is through following the rulings of religion in its pristine form that Islamic revivalist movement adherents find solace and meaning. Secular modernity, as digitalization shows, can be a new *jahiliyah* (ignorance) and chaotic. The digital space is bereft of the ritual and ordered performances that sustain community. The sacred also entails respect for others and dealing with ideas in a patient and silent manner; these very attributes are overridden in the online world. It is these very issues that Islamic revivalist movements such as Tablighi Jamaat resist.

Social connection is a fundamental need that can be replaced by a virtual format if not a physical one. However, the dynamics of the online world create new conditions that disturb

the nature of relationships. With the forced conversion of the Tablighi Jamaat community to an exclusively online format, the WhatsApp community members had instantaneous access to multiple sources of information and corresponding data, which could be transmitted unfiltered into the community for consumption. This unique context in which a traditional religious community transits to an online community brings with it challenges that are counter-intuitively brought to the fore by the ease of access to information, a democratic and flat structure of operations, and an anytime, all-the-time mode of (possibly distracted) communication.

Fader (2020) discusses a digital space where Jews gather to discuss their doubts about religion. She finds other people telling them they are not alone in their hereticism. In my netnography, I see adherents wanting to reify their faith, increase their affiliation with a religious institution, and find ways to become more pious and more obedient in the face of adverse conditions. Their taking up of the digital is under conditions of extreme stress, unlike Fader's subjects, who basically take refuge on the Internet. Hence, it is not surprising that as soon as COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed, my informants cut down on their socialization on WhatsApp.

Finally, Douglas (1966, p. 37) notes, "shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table, . . . our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications". With the adjacency of pure and impure ideas on the platform space, I found pollution corrupting pure ideas. Here I see the case of virtual impurity—the impurity of ideas and thoughts. While Durkheim's notion of sacred contagion—the belief that spiritual properties pass on by contact or physical proximity—has been commented on by other scholars, I note the effect of virtual profane contagion. While social media corporations have been blamed elsewhere for inciting vices through their platforms in exchange for profiteering (Rauf 2021), this study brings to light another example of harm inflicted by online community facilitation.

This in-depth case study compromises the breadth of the variety of Islamic revivalist movements that abound with presumably differing logic. Future research may wish to investigate how the digital realm is negotiated by movements such as the Jamaat-e-Islami or the Muslim Brotherhood (Ali and Orofino 2018). Since many, if not all, of Tablighi Jamaat's activities are dependent on physical proximity and interaction (such as *mashwara*), digitalization seems to have limited promise for this group. However, this may not be applicable to other Islamic revivalist movements due to differences (Ali and Amin 2020).

Moreover, the onset of the pandemic created an extraordinary situation where an immediate lack of satisfactory solutions to the disease and conflicting messaging created an environment of chaos both online and offline. Future research may wish to examine how the digitalization effect plays out in more sedate environments post-pandemic.

8. Conclusions

Traditional Islamic revivalist movements are premised on the grounds of resisting the forces of secularization that are antithetical to the traditional foundations of Islam. One noteworthy aspect of secular modernity is the digitalization of physical aspects of social life. The digital space offers speed of access, instantaneous global communication, a space for democratic participation, a platform for airing multiple viewpoints, and other affordances. While it may seem plausible to many that traditional Islamic revivalist movements should follow suit in digitalizing the norms and protocols of their operations, the present case study rebuts this stance. It appears that, at least in the case of traditional religion, the sacred is undergirded by an array of facets that are necessary to uphold its prestige, some of which cannot be transposed from the physical onto the digital realm.

In this case study, I examined how the move towards making sense of an exigent situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic in a traditional Islamic revivalist movement context floundered as a result of the asymmetrical logics of the digital platform and the Islamic revivalist movement in question. In particular, the very foundations of the movement—authority, trust, and communal harmony—were upset in the digital realm. A change in

hierarchical structure upended sensemaking for participants in the WhatsApp context. Moreover, it created discord by not having the leadership to look up to for direction, through which participants attained the capacity to debate with more or less equal others. The asynchronous logic problem was exacerbated by the speed of information collection and its dissemination that social media platforms afford. With more viewpoints at faster speeds from unverified or irreligious sources, chaos and mistrust increased. Finally, a casual, unfocused rather than a serious, rule-abiding approach by group members also added to the strife. It was only by curtailing digital activity that a semblance of normality was achieved.

Such a case study presents further evidence that Islamic revivalist movements, due to their resistance to secular modernity, cannot easily accommodate particular modern forces as they present a salient conflict with a movement's ideals and operations. This study brings to the fore the importance of carrying out further research on religion's place and operationalization in modernity, especially as conceived by Islamic revivalist movements.

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