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Cyber-Jihad: Islamic Consumer Activism on the Web
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ABSTRACT
This study explores Islamic cyber-activism and finds that activists pursue a virtual jihad against transnational brands as an economic and non-violent means of asserting Islamic values and identity in the marketplace. The study contributes to consumer activism literature by highlighting the role of religious discourse and authorities as market-structuring forces.

INTRODUCTION
While there is considerable research on religion and ideology in social sciences, consumer researchers have given little attention to how the interplay of these influential forces informs brand attitudes. Notably lacking are examinations of consumer activism fueled by religious ideology. This is concerning given that brand avoidance driven by fundamentalist beliefs is not always substantiated, unlike typical boycotting behavior (e.g., Nike protests following media exposés of labor abuse). Yet research shows that consumer activism, particularly in the form of boycotts, can have adverse effects on profits (Klein et al. 2004), tarnish brand image (Thompson et al. 2006), and may result in violent acts.

Compounding the dynamics of contemporary consumer activism is new media. Internet has changed the way individuals pursue social change, rendering activism convenient and, largely, anonymous. Further, viral activism has dramatically reduced the time in which boycott messages proliferate and reach mass audiences (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009).

While the literature on consumer activism - also known as consumer resistance, anti-consumption, brand avoidance, political consumerism, and boycotting - is vast (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Lee et al. 2009; Micheletti et al. 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004; see special issues of Consumption Markets and Culture and Journal of Business Research), there is little theorizing on the interplays among religious ideology, activism, and new media. Considering that Internet is instrumental in social mobilization (e.g., Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street) and dissemination of ideologies (Kahn and Kellner 2004), it is critical that consumer researchers explore the roles of religious ideology and new media on brand attitudes and consumer identity.

This study seeks to advance our theoretical understanding of these issues. Through a netnography of cyber-activism, this research investigates how Islamism informs consumption discourses. The data includes textual, visual, and audio material collected over two years on Islamic boycott websites, forums, and blogs in English. The study identifies two themes that underlie and distinguish Islamic consumer activism from other examinations of critical consumerism (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Lee et al. 2009; Micheletti et al. 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004): 1) tyrannization of the other – the discursive construction of non-Muslims as tyrants, and 2) formation of a cyber-imama (community of Muslims). The study also highlights religious authorities’ role in mobilizing Islamic boycotts as unique to consumer activism driven by religious ideology.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Consumer Activism
Recent research has identified a broad spectrum of contemporary forms of consumer activism. Consistent with a postmodern consumer culture, these newer forms of activism represent individualized quests for social change and range from consumer resistance (Holt 2002; Penaloza and Price 1993), culture jamming (Handelman 1999), anti-branding (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2010), brand avoidance (Lee 2007), anti-consumption (Lee et al. 2009) to political consumerism (Micheletti, Follesdal, and Stolle 2004).

Among various forms of consumer activism, boycotting stands out as the oldest (Friedman 1999), the most prominent, and the most effective form of consumer expression of discontent (Pruitt and Friedman 1986). Friedman (1985, 87) defines a boycott as “an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace.” Often viewed as a ‘vote in the marketplace,’ or more dramatically as a ‘weapon of resistance’ in socio-political conflicts, boycotting commands powerless groups with authority to pursue social change. For example, consumer boycotts have played a fundamental role in labor unionization and the mobilization of the civil rights movements in America (Cohen 2003; Klein, Smith, and John 2004), while the Indian boycott of British salt and cloth propelled the British to withdraw from India.

While boycotting is a powerful tool consumers use to realize sociopolitical goals, recent research suggests that today’s boycotts are less focused on political causes and civic objectives. For example, Klein, Smith, and John (2004, 93) state that contemporary boycotts “are more typically focused on corporate practices and marketing policy issues rather than on broader sociopolitical goals such as civil rights.” Confirming this comment, a series of studies have identified brands’ unethical business practices (Friedman 1985), ‘hard-sell’ tactics or overt commercialism (Micheletti et al. 2004), negative country of origin effects (Klein, Ettenison, and Morris 1998), and representation of undesired self-image (Hogg, Banister, and Stephenson 2009) as significant motivations underlying contemporary boycotts. While these studies highlight some of the important drivers of boycotting behavior, they inadvertently imply that contemporary consumer activism is divorced from ideology.

However, a close reading of the studies, particularly those emerging in the Consumer Culture Theory domain, suggests that consumers’ anti-consumption (and consumption) practices are imbued with various ideological and moralistic narratives. For example, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007, 150) find that a strong desire to redress “the ecological and socioeconomic problems fostered by economic globalization,” while contesting the asymmetrical power relationships among transnational corporations, nations, and labor motivates some consumers to opt out of mainstream grocers and to participate in community supported agriculture (CSA) practices. In addition to these environmentalist, anti-industrialization, anti-globalization, and anti-corporate ideologies, Press and Arnold (2011) find that American pastoralist ideology is a prominent theme underlying CSA practices and discourses. Similar political and moral motives can also be found among the proponents of the fair-trade and green consumption movements (Connolly and Prothero 2008), culture jamming (Handelman 2002), and the anti-corporate movement (Lee 2007), anti-branding (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2010), brand avoidance (Lee 2007), anti-consumption (Lee et al. 2009) to political consumerism (Micheletti, Follesdal, and Stolle 2004).
al. (2004, 93) suggest. Rather, these studies suggest that such acts of consumer activism remain deeply infused with personal and shared ideologies.

**Consumer activism and religious ideology**

While the latest literature has addressed the role of political, nationalist, and competing marketplace ideologies in structuring consumer choice and identity works (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Thompson 2003; Thompson 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Varman and Belk 2009), there is little theorizing on how religious ideology might foster consumer activism (see Friedman 1999 for boycotts organized by religious groups on moral concerns). This is concerning given that religious beliefs, when coupled with socio-political tensions and economic conflicts, may become significant ideological resources with which activist consumers contest the marketplace. One good example is Islamic consumer activism. Recent boycotts of Danish goods (and of global retailers like Carrefour or Tesco that carry Danish goods) by Muslims in response to the ill-perceived cartoon depictions of Prophet Mohammed powerfully demonstrate how religious sentiments may mobilize consumer resistance and result in financial damage to the targeted businesses (Jensen 2008; Knudsen, Praveen Aggarwal, and Maamoun 2008). Far from a reflexive response to what is perceived as an offense to one’s faith, the Danish boycott is a reflection of Muslim ideological views about Western powers that are deeply rooted in the colonial history and the recent Western involvement in Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine.

Islamic activism has been extensively examined as a new social movement with a political and militant agenda (Ayoob 2008; Roy 1994), yet little research has explored marketplace articulations of Islamic ideology (Izberk-Bilgin 2012a; Rudnyckyj 2009; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Wong 2007). Particularly missing is an understanding of how Islamic beliefs, coupled with consumers’ political ideology and the socio-historical structures, shape brand attitudes and consumer activism in light of consumers’ identity projects. Considering that consumers increasingly pursue social change and perform identity goals through the marketplace and that new forms of media has propelled this trend, an interesting area of research lies at the intersection of new media, consumer activism, and religious ideology.

**Islamic activism and new media**

Evolving new media environment has led to a profound restructuring of societies by enabling an unprecedented degree of interconnectivity among various social groups, cultures, and nations. New media has provided an alternative platform for ‘other’ voices, which has fostered new interpretations of taken for granted ideas and practices. This, in turn, has gradually led to the fragmentation of political and religious authorities in not only the democratic societies of North America or Europe, but also countries under totalitarian regimes. These profound changes are perhaps nowhere more visible than in the Islamic world. The proliferation of media has played a crucial role in amplifying the exchange of ideas, discourses, and practices among the Islamic communities in diaspora, homeland-Islam, and converts, which led to a wide range of emerging discourses about Islam from fundamentalist to reformist (Iwickel and Anderson 2003; Oncu 1995). Dialoguing with Islamic communities in other cultures allowed Muslims to not only discover alternative articulations of belief and practice, but more importantly, question the authority of the religious scholars, who have traditionally served as the spokespersons for Islam. Accordingly, new media has transformed the public space into “a marketplace of ideas, identities, and discourses” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003, xii). Indeed, the expansion of Islamic public sphere and identity politics fueled by the Internet is quite visible in the global rise of the halal industry (Izberk-Bilgin 2012b) and the formation of Islamic consumption-scapes (Pink 2009). Paralleling the growth of Islamic consumerism, interestingly, is a proliferation of discourses and practices of Islamic consumer activism. Particularly, in the aftermath of 9/11, there has been a wave of Islamic cyber-activism protesting anti-Muslim discourses as well as American and Israeli foreign policies involving Muslim-majority countries. This cyber-activism is most evident in the increasing number of websites, Islamic forum threads, blogs, Facebook boycott pages, and tweets that target transnational brands. This paper examines why multinational companies become key targets of Islamic cyber-activism as well as how religious discourse and authorities, combined with socio-historical factors, influence Muslim consumers’ motivation to boycott.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study draws from a netnographic analysis of online Islamic forums (e.g., ummah, shiachat, islamawakening, turntoislam, muslimvillage, and islamicity) as well as websites (e.g., islamicinsights, muslimmatters.org, almuslim, radionislam, missionislam, inminds, alqudsday.org) and Facebook pages that address issues relevant to Muslim audiences. Islamic forums were initially chosen among those awarded the “Top 40 Muslim Forums Award,” which ranks Muslim forums based on “the page rank of the Forum, the number of visitors, the number of post threads, the number of viewers, the quality of the topics debated,...” (http://topmuslimforums.wordpress.com/). A smaller sample was then identified for closer analysis based on the number of forum members; for example, the analysed sites ummah.com and turntoislam.com have more than 58,000 and 93,000 members, respectively, with close to 5 million posts combined. The forums were also carefully chosen to reflect the diversity of sectarian views; shiachat.com and shiasisters.net were included in the analysis despite having fewer members than predominantly Sunni forums in order to incorporate Shia perspectives. A similar approach was taken with the identification of Islamic websites. For example, islamicsights, which started out as a print magazine and later added a web portal that features news and various Muslim lifestyle topics, has garnered more than 8,000 likes on Facebook and 5,000 followers on Twitter.

Most of the Islamic forums are structured in a similar way. The main categories of discussion include religious topics, political news concerning Muslims, Islamic marriage, events, and boycott campaigns. The narratives chosen for analysis were identified from links that contained key words such as ‘boycott’, ‘campaign’, ‘protest’ and ‘activism’. A total of 120 posts were analysed. Data was interpreted by moving back and forth individual postings and the entire discussion threads as suggested by Kozinets (2010). The findings are presented below.

**FINDINGS**

**Tyrannization of the other**

The Islamic activist rhetoric found online parallels that of the many anti-corporate, anti-globalization movements’. Corporate commitment to fair-trade wages, use of non-genetically modified organisms, and environmental sustainability are of concern to Islamic cyber-activists. However, one critical discourse, namely, ‘tyrannization of the other’ stands out as unique. Islamic boycott materials con-
strue many multinational companies (MNCs) as tyrants and oppressors of Islamic faith and identity.

At the core of this criticism is the long standing Palestine-Israel conflict. A number of provocative images that mix corporate logos with rhetoric infused with religious ideology can be found on forums and blogs that appeal to a Muslim audience. One of these images (Figure 1) shows a Coca Cola bottle shaped like a missile with the texts “Where does our money go?” and “Don’t buy your brother’s blood”.

The provocative image of the Coca-Cola missile along with the religious rhetoric has attracted several reader comments, which echo the views that MNCs are oppressors of Muslim faith and boycotting these companies is a religious duty. For example Ahmad, dismissing skeptical remarks about boycott effectiveness, comments that: “...participating in a boycott of companies that support slaughter and oppression is for our own benefit...you read up on the guilty companies. You then print out a list of the guilty companies and post it on the fridge. Now every time you walk by the fridge, you’ve got a small reminder of what our brothers and sisters are going through. Every time we go to the grocery store or to a restaurant, we remember that there are certain products or chains to avoid. We have a DAILY and INTIMATE (in your own kitchen) REMINDER about what our brothers and sisters are going through.” Next, Ahmad posts a link to a boycott list (Figure 2), which conveniently narrows down the number of targeted companies to three: Starbucks, McDonald’s, and Coca-Cola. The list displays these three logos next to a picture of a group of people, including children, running for their lives as a tank chases them. Ahmad ends his remarks by emphasizing that standing up to oppressors is a religious duty for Muslims: “we should remember that a consumer boycott is just one small aspect of fulfilling our obligation to support the oppressed and reject the oppressor.” Likewise, HiddenSoldier angrily responds to another forum member, who suggests political participation as an alternative to boycotting, by reminding this religious duty: “Just because those strategies may be considered “easier” than boycotting the companies which support Zionism, it doesn’t mean it’s not WAJIB [religious duty] to boycott. In other words it is still haram [religiouly unlawful] if we do not boycott! There’s no point in taking party of a political rally in front of government offices if we purchase Fanta or Sprite when we get thirsty...”

Similar sentiments can be found on Islamic forums such as ummah.com, turtoislam.com, and shiachat.com. For example, on ummah.com’s forum, a user nicknamed lonerider evokes what seems to be a common analogy within the Muslim community (Figure 3) by likening the consumption of McDonald’s and Coke products to drinking the blood of Palestinians as s/he sends a call for boycott through this provocative post: “Do you go to Marks and Spencer’s cos their salad is just too good? Do you do McD’s fish fillet? Do you drink Coca-Cola? Have you tried the blood of a Palestinian? All of these days … murdering entire families and directing perfectly-targeted bullets in the chests of innocent babies in Gaza is habitually supported by Muslims… we continue to support those nations which take pride in the unwarranted death of the people of Palestine by purchasing and selling their products…”

The author goes on to cite several fatwas (religious decree) that have been issued by Muslim scholars such as Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani and Khameni that deem the consumption of “any item which helps strengthen Zionism” impermissible. Based on these fatwas and other canonical evidence, the author then concludes that continuing to buy Coca Cola or other global brands would be “committing a great sin”: “For those of us who resent the boycott, news flash! We are not only committing a great sin, we are also helping the oppressors! In regards to the helpers of oppressors, the Messenger of Allah has said “On the Night of Ascension, I saw the following inscription on the doors of Hell: Do not be a helper of the oppressors.” [emphasis original] ... what would be wiser is for us to actually act upon this narration of the Holy Prophet...Who would have thought buying a Nestle chocolate bar would be committing a major sin, and the negative du’as [prayers] of the oppressed ones would be directed towards us, as aids of oppressors?”

Figure 1

Source: Islamicawakening.com

The image appears on one of a series of articles that Islamic Insights ran from January 2009 to November 2010 urging “god-conscious consumers” to boycott MNCs for allegedly providing financial support to Israel. The author of the article ‘Boycotting for Justice’ urges readers to reflect on the war in Gaza by evoking a verse from the Qur’an:

Remember the time when joining hands in murdering innocent people seemed atrocious? The time when “To kill one soul is as though you have killed the whole of humanity” of the Holy Qur’an actually meant something to most of us?... Because
these products have one thing in common: Israel. So the question is do you?" It is noteworthy how these cyber-activists collaborate in strategically combining graphic pictures of baby corpses, culture-jammed images of brand logos, and religious rhetoric to link MNCs to the Palestine-Israel conflict and portray these companies as “child killers” or “murderers” draining “the blood of Palestinians.” Activist consumers use many tactics to sustain this discourse and the boycott efforts. For example, cyber-activists routinely share greeting cards and boycott pamphlets with images reportedly of suffering Palestinians (Figure 4), use subverted logos as avatars or signatures (Figure 5), circulate boycott lists, share links to youtube clips about the Palestinian resistance movement and boycott organizations, as well as sharing fatwas and Israel’s barcode information to discourage buying Israeli products.

Notably, the Islamic scholars’ fatwas (and e-fatwas) play a key role in motivating the activists, but more importantly, presenting boycotting as a religious duty, thus equating the consumption of global brands with committing sin. Also, organizations such as Innovative Minds (the prominent face of the Boycott Israel Campaign online), the BIG Campaign (Boycott Israeli Goods Campaign), Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement, and Friends of Al-Aqsa (a UK based NGO) are instrumental in providing discursive material and paraphernalia such as books, clothing, badges, pins, key chains, boycott lists, and greeting cards to consumer activists, who then share these materials to create a global consciousness about the boycott and construe global brands as tyrants.

The conflict between Palestine and Israel and the concomitant Arab League’s boycott of Israeli goods date back to 1948; both have been well documented in the media and literature (Jevtic 2009). Rather interesting is how quintessentially American or Western brands that clearly do not have Israeli origins are enwrapped in this conflict to be construed as tyrants and become key targets of consumer protest. From a socio-historical perspective this is partly due to the transformation of the Israel boycott from a state-led policy with a secular, Pan-Arab rhetoric to a consumer-driven campaign infused with religious ideology. The Arab League boycott of 1948 primarily targeted products with Israeli origin and secondarily sought to discourage foreign countries to invest in Israel. The boycott was largely carried out at a diplomatic level through limited trade relations, however, participation gradually dropped after Egypt withdrew its support in 1979 as a result of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty and other states followed suit to seek membership in WTO.

In the late 1990s, as the state support for the boycott was dwindling, a grassroots campaign was in the making. Interestingly, this consumer driven phase of the boycott targeted American and Western MNCs more aggressively than the earlier phase which focused on non-branded Israeli produce like dates. This strategic shift can be attributed to the growing involvement of American and Western nations in the Middle East following the 1991 Gulf War. While Muslim majority nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia participated in the Western coalition against Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, for the masses,
the presence of foreign military forces on Arab lands was reminiscent of the colonial years. From the perspective of the consumer activists, adding to this bitter colonial past is a collective memory of perceived Western indifferences to Muslim suffering in Bosnia and Chechnya, not to mention the stigmatization of Muslim identity following the tragic events of 9/11 in the US and Europe (e.g., the minaret ban in Switzerland), the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Danish cartoon crisis.

Collectively, these developments are perceived as threats to Muslim identity and faith. From the cultural lenses of the cyber-activists examined in this study, MNCs with their ubiquity, immense financial power, and close ties to Western states, are viewed as the hallmarks of these threats to Islamic identity.

**Cyber-ummah: forming a transnational Muslim community**

Sharing the boycott discourse and paraphernalia is undoubtedly crucial for campaign success. To ensure that the boycott messages deeply resonate with the Muslim community, cyber-activists frequently borrow from the Quran and Sunnah (Prophet’s practice) to urge fellow Muslims to demonstrate solidarity with the oppressed. Consider the religious referents used by the activists in the following quotes:

Our Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was reported to have said, “The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, fellow feeling is that of one body; when any limb of it aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever.” In light of the above, I call you, all dear brothers and sisters to join hands with us in order to achieve our aims and to defend our main issues and primarily that of wronged and oppressed Palestine. It seems ironic and illogical that while Zionists in Israel and their supporters in the West are killing the innocent in Gaza we keep consuming the products of those aggressors and give them the price of the bullets they cold-bloodly use to kill our children in Palestine. Have our hearts turned into stone?! Have we stopped thinking?! (nosrat-sunna on Islamic-life.com)

…the Qur’an says, on the subject of trading/dealing with non-Muslims “you are not forbidden from trading fairly with those who do not seek to kill you or drive you from your lands”…well you can’t say that for companies that support the occupation of Palestine, can you? So I’d question whether it’s even halal [permissible] to buy from companies that support the state terrorism of Israel.” (dhakilya on ummah.com)

Interestingly, activists’ highly emotional and religiously-laden language serve a more important purpose than merely summoning solidarity for the oppressed; such rhetoric latenly allows consumer activists to pursue ummah, a global community of Muslims united around common causes. While the concept of ummah has been in-
terpreted as merely a community of believers by Western scholars, Saunders (2008, 303-307) argues that ummah has political connotations as “the nation of Islamic creed” and suggests that ummahism is “a new form of postnational, political identity which is as profound as any extent nationalism.” Indeed, this utopia of an imagined community (Anderson 1991) of Islam is reflected in the works of Islamist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb and engrained in the leading Islamist movements’ agenda (Ayoob 2008). While the Islamist organizations like Muslim Brotherhood and Jemaah Islamiah pursue ummah through political platforms and armed struggle, at the micro-level, ordinary Muslims, who want to seek this ideal and demonstrate solidarity around Muslim causes in a non-violent way, do so through boycotts and other forms of activism against transnational companies. The internet undeniably has facilitated the everyday Muslim consumers’ pursuit of ummah by offering a transnational space that is relatively free of sectarian divisions and confining local power dynamics. Consider how two users utilize this space to create and sustain this utopian Muslim community through referents of power dynamics. Consider how two users utilize this space to create and sustain this utopian Muslim community through referents of "community of believers".

In the absence of the possibility of Jihad, boycott has become in the opinions of many prestigious Muslim scholars, an obligation and not only a desirable action...boycott ...helps us to prioritize and give more importance to the issues of our ummah [emphasis original] and forget our selfish desires. Let us always remember the pictures of the innocent being bombed brutally by the Zionists...Let us always remember that ... every Muslim has an obligation to support the Palestinian issue in every possible way until we free al-Majdjid al-Aqsa [a Muslim holy site in Jerusalem] from the hands of the children-killing Zionists. (nosrat-sunna on Islamic-life.com)

Dear brothers and sisters - ...We urge the entire Ummah to desist from buying these “HARAM PRODUCTS” immediately. . most of the profits from these large organizations are FUNDING The ISRAEL Military to MURDER & KILL the innocent Palestinians and ALSO to create chaos in this world. JUST Like you all made the DUTCH economy suffer by BOYCOTTING products from HOLLAND, NOW dear brothers and sisters be steadfast and committed and BOYCOTT ALL ISRAELI PRODUCTS. Dear Arab brothers, The Arab world is one of the BIGGEST MARKETS FOR THE FOLLOWING PRODUCTS: COKE, PEPSI, MCDONALDS, STAR BUCKS, TOMMY HILFIGER, GIORGIO ARMANI, PERRIER WATER, JOHNSON & JOHNSON, MARKS & SPENCER, RALPH LAUREN, ARAMIS, CALVIN KLEIN, SPRITE...For the sake of your brother/sister/son/daughter/father/mother who are been [sic] SLAUGHTERED by the BLOOD THIRSTY KILLERS, PLEASE BOYCOTT NOW. !!! Please circulate this message all your contacts. (Murshid on Google Groups).

Noteworthy in the creation and performance of a virtual ummah is the role that Islamic scholars play. Among the prominent Muslim scholars is Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi; his fatwas are widely circulated on Islamic forums, websites of Islamic organizations such as innminds.com, and even youtube. One of his fatwas that presents boycotting as an economic warfare encourages Muslims to unite in activism against transnational corporations by evoking the concept of ummah 18 times:

We must all be united against the aggressors. We are united in Islam, ...and also united in pain and hope. As Allah Almighty says: “Verily this Ummah of yours is one Ummah.” (Qur’an, 21:92)...Now we see our brothers and children in Al-Aqsa and the blessed land of Palestine generously sacrificing their blood, giving their souls willingly in the way of Allah...If people ask in the name of religion we must help them. The vehicle of this support is a complete boycott...The time has come for the Islamic Ummah to say “NO” to America, “NO” to its companies, and “NO” to its goods, which swamp our markets...The boycott is a demonstration of Muslim brotherhood and unity of the Ummah. It is our duty to say we are not going to betray our brothers...Our sisters and daughters, who control the houses, have a role to play in this matter, which may be more important than the role of the man, because women supervise the needs of the house, and buy what must go inside the house. She is on hand to guide the boys and girls. She...educates them in what they must do for their Ummah and its causes, ...especially in the area of boycott.

While many cyber-activists simply copy and paste the fatwa on discussion forums with no further input, it is also easy to find the fatwa’s discursive motifs woven in users’ personally crafted comments. For example, users allude to the notions of economic warfare and ummah as well as the role of ‘sisters’ or the ‘fairer gender’ in forging this economic crusade frequently: “The economy is one of the major lifelines for this oppressive entity [referring to Israel]. Remember the Jahil [ignorant/nonbeliever] Quraisy, with their trade routes to the north & south. The early Muslims cut the jugular of the northern markets, because the trade caravans had to pass Medina. It was this series of raids that led to the Jahil Quraisy being bled white, thus curtailing their growing threat. As much as we are reasonably able, let us boycott the apartheid state & her major supporters. Even if it stops just one bullet being fired into the skull of a defenceless babe in arms on her way to school. Let’s hit them where it hurts i.e. in the pocket! ... I know that the majority of the day to day household supplies are purchased by the female gender. It is important that the fairer gender is educated & made aware of how the damage the Ummah is in their hands as well...I feel it is incumbent on the more educated & aware of the fairer gender to gently proffer the pro-Ummah advice to their less aware peers.” (Ashfaq Bahman on hansot.com). Bibi’s comments on onislam.net also resounds the discursive motifs of Sheikh’s fatwa: “Mothers, as you lovingly bathe your babies with Johnson & Johnson products, think of the Palestinian babies who died from Israeli bullets — courtesy of J & J, who support Israel. Next time we pop a Nestle’s candy in our mouth, let us savor the taste of the pain of those who are oppressed by Israel, of those whose land was taken from them, of those who will never taste the olives they so lovingly grew.....It’s important we don’t ever forget. It’s easy to become complacent and be seduced by the consumerist culture. Let this be our jihad. Let us strive in our efforts to speak out against oppression. Let us not fail in our duty toward our brothers and sisters. Let us boycott Israel.”

As these examples demonstrate, cyber-activism is a means through which Muslims seek the imagined community of ummah. This quest for ummah can be more comprehensively understood as an exercise to reconfigure Islamic identity in light of modernization in the post-colonial era. In the years following independence, the modernization movements in Muslim majority countries like Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, led by a small, authoritarian, and pro-Western elite class left the Islamic identity sidelined to a great extent in the nation formation process. Most notably, the abolishment of the Caliphate (religious and political leader of all Muslims) institution marked the dissolution of the ummah, which had traditionally represented a unit-
ed Islamic society under the former Ottoman Empire. Losing their ‘righteous’ leader, seeing the erosion of ummah, falling behind Western powers in science and technology, and witnessing the incapacity of local regimes in finding a dignifying solution to the Palestinian conflict left the pious believing that they have fallen from grace for swaying away from Islam’s path. Islamist movements’ rhetoric of justice that promised to end Muslim suffering in the hands of ‘infidel’ powers, to reclaim Muslim dignity, and to revive the ummah fueled the perception that Islam was on assault, particularly among the economically disadvantaged and those discontent with the local regimes. Such sentiments were even more intense among the European Muslims who had difficulties assimilating to the host country and yearned for connecting with the ummah (Saunders 2008). This quest gained urgency as a crisis for unity among Muslims erupted post 9/11.

It is in this socio-historical context that many Muslims seek the ummah through the new platforms made possible by information and communication technologies. For many Muslims who do not want to associate with political or militant Islamist movements, waging a cyber-jihad against multinational brands through a rhetoric laden with religious ideology is the ideal means to forge an Islamic identity and connect with fellow Muslims on a global scale. Boycott websites and forums do not only provide a common cause around which a community of believers can be formed, but also offer a nonviolent and convenient form of ideological resistance, allowing users to create a space for Islamic identity and politics.

**DISCUSSION**

This study examines Islamic consumer activism at the nexus of religious ideology and new media. The findings suggest that the quest for a transnational community, coupled with the discursive construction of MNCs as icons of economic and social injustice, propels a cyber-jihad against transnational brands. Jihad, while generally associated with Islamist fanaticism, also means spiritual rejuvenation and self-defense (Ayoob 2008). In this sense, the cyber-jihad is an economic and non-violent means of asserting Islamic values and identity in the marketplace. These findings offer several interesting theoretical implications.

First of all, the study highlights the important role that religious discourse and authorities play as market-structuring forces. While prior studies have addressed how various ideologies motivate consumer activism (Varman and Belk 2009), the role of religious ideology in shaping consumption goals and brand attitudes has not been examined before. The findings indicate that transnational brands, which are perhaps the most conspicuous symbols of the secular, easily can get tangled in global webs of ideological conflicts and can be enwrapped in religious rhetoric to be construed as tyrants by consumer activists. The role of religious authorities such as Islamic scholars in this ideological construction of global brands is also noteworthy; sheikhs and the fatwas they disseminate through the internet are instrumental in framing MNCs and Islamic activism as tyrants and a religious duty to defend sacrosanct values, respectively. In this sense, religious authorities represent a unique type of authority and market structuring force that previous consumer research literature has not sufficiently explored.

Secondly, this study contributes to our understanding of brands as symbolic devices by demonstrating the role that shared brand meanings inadvertently play in the formation of consumer identity projects and communities (Askegaard 2006; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Holt 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz Jr. and Schau 2005). The cyber-jihad Muslim consumers discursively wage against tyrant brands facilitates virtual activists’ assertion of a pan-Islamic identity on a global scale. Moreover, cyber-activism allows these consumers to seek and perform a transnational community of Muslims. While this pursuit of ummah is similar to the postmodern quest for communal affiliation that has been addressed in detail in previous studies (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz Jr. and Schau 2005), it is important to note a few nuances. The ummah forged through cyber-activism against global brands, unlike other brand or anti-brand communities, is founded on a shared religious identity and ideological aspirations of Islam. As such, unlike the postmodern brand communities or evanescent hypercommunities, membership in the cyber-ummah cannot be established in an ad hoc fashion (Kozinets 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), purchased (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), or easily terminated. Future research should explore whether these types of market-mediated communities, in which religious identity is a sine qua non, are more effective in transforming the policies and practices of MNCs than other brand (anti-brand) communities.

The limitations of this study offer opportunities for future research. First, the study focuses on cyber-discourses of Islamic activism, however, to what extent, if any, these consumers practice the boycott remains unexplored. Also, non-boycotters views may not be equally represented in the forums since counter-boycott comments are effectively rebuffed and such commentators are stigmatized as “sinners” or “traitors” by fervent cyber-activists.

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