



Article

I Am Niqabi: From Existential Unease to Cyber-Fundamentalism

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Abstract: Currently, niqabi women are more and more visible, even in traditionally non-Muslim societies. However, there is a deep ignorance with regard to their worldview in general and about them in particular. The aim of this paper, which is based on a research carried out using the Grounded Theory, is to give answer to three fundamental questions: did niqabi women belonging to the Telegram channel Orgullo niqabi choose to become niqabis after experiencing some kind of crisis or existential unease? Has the grouping of these women in said channel contributed to the polarization of their posture on the niqab in some way? Additionally, if that is the case, has said polarization fueled or given rise to some ideology in particular? One of our conclusions, after conducting 27 in-depth interviews, is that most of these women opted for being niqabi and Muslim in response to the existential unease they experienced, which somehow kept them searching for some meaning in their lives. Another interesting aspect we have observed is that these women have reinforced their posture on the niqab, polarizing their perception in a fundamentalist way. Additionally, our third conclusion is that these women are cyber-fundamentalists, given that, besides the reactionary nature of their ideology, they construct it in a modern way.



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1. Introduction

Two of the main characteristics of our time are the so called “cyber-world” [1–3] and individualism [4–6]. The “cyber-world”, originated by new technologies, refers to the non-space where more and more significant events, both individual and collective, take place, greatly modifying the life of individuals as well as the essence of their bonds. Individualism is linked to a change of habits, costumes and social organization, with personal values tending to be focused on introspection and self-concern, and being in a constant search of sense in a mostly secular environment [7] ruled by consumerism [8,9], market ethics [10] and disenchantment with all institutions, including religious ones [11]. In this environment, where the seeds of the slogan “God is dead” [12] (p. 147) and the end of ideologies [13] lay, has left the individual in a perpetual state of provisionality, search and existential suspension [14].

All of this leads to a scenario of great disenchantment as a result of the fall of many great meta-narratives that stood out as principles and grounding basis for us to think and name our world [15]. According to Florence Beauge [16], in this context where personal responsibility prevails, we as individuals are constantly doomed to “choose” our own values, with all the consequences, difficulties and doubts that this entails. Samuel Huntington [17] (p. 116) points to fundamentalist movements as a possible response to this context and a way to confront chaos and the loss of identity, meaning, and strong social structures. According to him, these circumstances have been originated by the scientific culture, laicism, economic development, and the hasty introduction of modern political and social models.

From this point of view, Kepel [18] says that fundamentalism has to be seen not only as a result of unreason and fanaticism, but as proof of a great social disease which our traditional categories of thinking cannot fully describe. As individuals, we feel the need to give definite answers, above anything else, to questions such as “who am I” or “where do I belong” [17] (p. 15). To this respect, Hobsbawm and Belrán [19] (p. 45) point to social changes and a constant climate of insecurity in every aspect of life, and the unease associated to them, as essential characteristics of our time. More specifically, they argue that current fear of “the tomorrow” being different to “the yesterday,” along with the urge to gain permanent values of “fundamental” characteristics, are acquiring great psychological significance not only for individuals, but also—and even more—for the community.

Moreover, in that scenario of constant changes, one of them is especially relevant: the transition from a completely analogical reality to a hybrid one. In this hybrid reality, offline and online activities coexist in some sort of symbiosis that facilitates the emergence of new communication channels which we could not imagine until now, as well as new ways of being, interacting, and interpreting the world [2]. This has brought more uncertainty and unease but, somewhat paradoxically and ambivalently, technology has also presented before us new “doors” and tools which help us find some answers to calm that existential unease and end, for some time at least, the search for meaning that some individuals undertake. An example of that would be “cyber-religions” [20] or all the new online movements linked to faith, such as those related to the “New Age” [21].

In this context, composed of the people inhabiting the “non-space”, Rheingold [22] (p. 18) points to the existence of what he calls smartmobs—collectives of people which unite, group together, create communities, deconstruct identities and even act jointly without knowing each other personally. According to him, members of this groups cooperate in ways that would be inconceivable in the past because they make use of advanced information and telecommunication systems which allow them to connect to other systems from their environment, even to phones and computers from strangers.

According to Cass Sunstein [23], these communities formed around common interests present something that the theorist calls “group polarization”: the members of a deliberative group are likely to lean towards the extreme position close to their pre-deliberative tendencies. One of the main research questions of the present paper revolves around this theory.

As one can see, we are talking about research questions, not research hypotheses, given that we have carried out our research making use of the Grounded Theory. Said theory utilizes the inductive method to discover theories, concepts, hypotheses and propositions. Although it is true that we did not start directly from previous data or assumptions, it is also true that we have made use of some theoretical assumptions which have helped us to focus our research. We have used some analytical categories as a first approach to the data we had obtained, while we were open to possible new categories that could emerge from the final analysis of said data thanks to the application of the Grounded Theory.

The questions in which we base our research are the following: First, we want to find out the reasons why the niqabi women belonging to the *Telegram* channel *Orgullo niqabi* (Spanish for “Niqabi Pride”) became niqabi and if the search for existential meaning had something to do to this respect. Second, we want to know if the grouping of these women in said channel has contributed in some way to the polarization of their posture on the niqab. Additionally, third, we want to find out if this possible polarization has motivated or given rise to some ideology in particular.

Regarding the private channel *Orgullo niqabi* on *Telegram* it is worth noting that its central theme are niqabi and Muslim subjects, the demands of their members as Muslim women in general, and as niqabi in particular.

For us, there are two requirements that must be fulfilled so that we can consider someone a niqabi woman: she defines herself as niqabi, and she covers her whole face and body, including hands and feet and excluding just the eyes. However, in order to fully understand what being niqabi means in the context of our research, we must say that

these women associate the niqab not only to the clothing, but also to the way of being and behaving in this world, tied to and coherent with their interpretation of Islam [24].

Thus, wearing a niqab does not necessarily mean being niqabi, since in theocracies such as that in Saudi Arabia women are forced to cover themselves with a niqab or a burka, no matter what they want [25]. Those women have not chosen to be niqabi Muslims. Additionally, there are plenty of cases that do not adjust to our definition, such as those of some Muslim countries where women are wearing niqab or burka because the government is promoting its use as a low-cost alternative to the masks used to fight COVID-19 [26]. Moreover, some women associate niqab with fashion, and there are even some Instagram “influencers” which wear it and promote its use as a fashion product, more than as something with religious interpretations—although in some cases both motivations are not mutually exclusive, apparently [27,28]. What we want to make clear is that niqabi woman and niqab-wearing woman are not the same, and that both categories represent very different realities [29–33]. As an example, and putting the focus only on a country, as we said before, there are women in Saudi Arabia that are forced to wear niqab, but there are also those who wear it voluntarily and make it a central element of their lifestyle [30,34,35].

It is worth noting that our research is focused on a very specific group of women—the members of the aforementioned Telegram channel—thus, our objective is not to extrapolate their reality to the rest of niqabi women or niqab-wearing women but to leave proof, through the answers the women under study gave to our questions, of the diversity that exists within the collective of covered women. Regarding Telegram, it is known for being used for a great variety of purposes (leisure, publicity, etc.). However, in the case of Orgullo niqabi, it is used as a subaltern space whose main feature is to give room to all kinds of users, without discrimination; groups which are not a majority, or which are non-normative, that is to say, subversive groups, and even groups of criminal or terrorist nature. More specifically, Telegram channels are groups where people can send all kinds of contents: messages, pictures, links, files, etc. Channels may be public or private: anyone can join a public channel, whereas private channels can only be accessed if the creator of the group adds you or sends you an invitation to join. Channels are usually built around subjects and common interests shared by all of their users. A particularity of these channels is that messages are encrypted and, in addition, they can be “destroyed” after a scheduled time without leaving a trace. It is precisely this peculiarity of Telegram which made niqabi women to choose this virtual space for creating their channel. On the one hand, it gives them the opportunity to freely express their interests and opinions and, on the other hand, whatever they say is kept private. That way, this space possess the double functionality of subaltern spaces: it functions, on the one hand, as a safe place for retreating and regrouping and, on the other hand, as the “headquarters” for planning and organizing a group’s actions [2].

As for the conclusions of our study, we could confirm that a lot of interviewees, especially the converts, arrive to Islam and to being niqabi after some time searching for existential meaning, including coming into contact with other religions and forms of spirituality, as well as having experienced strong personal crises. We could also confirm that, after grouping together, their posture on Islam in general and on the niqab in particular were polarized, reinforcing one another in their choice for the niqab and its meaning and significance. Furthermore, one of the most important conclusions of the research is no doubt that we can call these women cyber-fundamentalists.

If the prefix “cyber-” gives an excessively modern and specially contemporary nuance to the concept, we will not have erred in our conclusions. This is so because both the continent—the concept—and the content—its essence—are modern; not only these women, but their ideology and the way they construct it, are modern.

This way, cyber-fundamentalism would present itself as another variant of fundamentalism that arises as a reaction, alternative and even a tool to live the context of modernity. Regarding the concept of “fundamentalism”, we would like to point out that it has not been free of controversy since the emergence of the term in *The Fundamentals: a Testimony*

to *Truth* in United States between 1910 and 1915. This is so because it is a term that, throughout history, has been attributed to several ideologies, movements and groups of various kinds (religious, political, cultural and social groups). This term was born, as we have said, with the aforementioned work, a collection of ninety articles written by very conservative evangelical Protestant professors, writers and theologians who showed their total opposition to the predominant modernism of that time, since they thought that said modernism, along with liberalism, threatened the fundamental pillars of Christian faith [18]. Later, this term began to be used to designate other movements and collectives, being extrapolated—not without criticism—to refer, by analogy, to other religions or currents within them. Additionally, not only that: it also began to be used in other fields outside the religious sphere.

As for cyber-fundamentalism, it can be defined as an ideology that emerges as an opposition to modernity and complies with the characteristics of fundamentalism given by some authors—search for literal interpretation of texts, elimination of any type of alternative interpretation of the texts, search for religion to spread to the public domain, etc. [36]. Furthermore, it adds the peculiarity of being constructed in a specific non-space: cyberspace, non-space par excellence and particularly characteristic of our time.

These women—whose life was clearly modern and characterized by having an open purpose, changing, searching, being constructed—would not have achieved to sculpt the specificity of their identity, as well as each and every one of its enclosures, without said non-space.

Somehow, cyber-fundamentalism—dressed with Islamic clothing—has lifted from these women the weight of freedom and creative energy to present themselves to the world. In contrast, this has endowed them with a vital re-enchantment with the world, giving them an apparently harmonic existence. The social price these women pay for having found the elixir of a world full of certitude is to endure some type of social discrimination and sometimes even being repudiated by their families. In addition, the personal price is having to work to achieve a specific, given character coherent with the niqab, thus renouncing to have one of their own.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data-Analysis Method

The Grounded Theory, a general method of comparative analysis with great ability for uniting theory and empirical research [37], was used for data analysis. This method offers a series of procedures that serve to order the information and develop analytical categories that reveal the most relevant patterns present within the data. We used the software Atlas (v. Ti6) as a manager for the creation of different codes on which we applied the constant comparative method—the search for similarities and differences through the analysis of the incidents contained within the data [38]. Thus, we established three significant categories which allow us to explain and respond to our research questions.

As for the procedure, it started with the creation of a first level of codification with several substantive codes that offered us a descriptive explanation of the data we had collected so far. After that, as these codes became saturated with data from new interviews, some of those codes came to form the central categories—i.e., with greater explanatory power—of our study. Thus, substantive codes such as unease, emptiness, depression or search formed the category *anomie*; codes such as sisters, *outjīs* (sisters), together or *ummah* (community) formed the category *cohesion*; and codes such as practice, straight path, channel or online formed the category *cyber-fundamentalism*.

As for the categories, the first one, *anomie*, is based on the sense of emptiness, depression and existential crisis that the interviewees reported having experienced before becoming *niqabis*. The second category, *cohesion*, represents the strong sense of union that these women declare to have, both in terms of intra-group affective ties and in terms of consonance and agreement in their opinions, feelings and arguments. Finally, the third category is called *cyber-fundamentalism* because we consider that their decision to become

niqabis responds to this type of ideology. These categories are what in Grounded Theory is known as in vivo code, i.e., they are coded taking into account the expressions and literal language of the participants, given their relevance for the study. Later, these categories make the emergence of the theory possible.

2.2. Members of “Orgullo Niqabi” Who Participated in Our Research

About the participants, it should be noted that they declare themselves niqabis and cover their face, body, hands and feet, leaving only their eyes uncovered. These women link the niqab to a garment, but also to a way of behaving and being in the world, linked to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, in this case Sunni [39]. In the following table (Table 1), we present some of the complementary information that we have mentioned in the text or throughout the analysis. Significantly, many of these women—twelve of them, to be precise—have declared during the interviews to have “turned to Islam”, i.e., they are converts.

Table 1. Profiles of the niqabi women which were interviewed.

Name	Age	Residence	Nationality	Ties to Islam
Ahlam	25	France	Algeria	Family tradition
Amina	25	United Kingdom	Spain	Convert
Dunia	19	Spain	Morocco	Family tradition
Falak	19	United Kingdom	Spain	Convert
Farida	33	Venezuela	Turkey	Family tradition
Fatima	27	Chile	Uruguay	Convert
Fatin	35	Mexico	Tunisia	Family tradition
Hafida	33	United Kingdom	Algeria	Family tradition
Hakima	32	Romania	Romania	Convert
Hanna	35	Venezuela	Turkey	Family tradition
Ikram	41	United States	Colombia	Convert
Islam	28	Chile	Chile	Convert
Maria	35	Venezuela	Morocco	Family tradition
Melika	29	United Kingdom	Morocco	Family tradition
Mery	34	United Kingdom	Iraq	Family tradition
Meryem	31	United States	Colombia	Convert
Nour	36	United Kingdom	Morocco	Family tradition
Ratsida	26	United Kingdom	Algeria	Family tradition
Romina	27	Venezuela	Venezuela	Convert
Salima	28	France	Algeria	Family tradition
Samia	23	Germany	Turkey	Family tradition
Sara	34	Mexico	Mexico	Convert
Sofia	31	United States	Spain	Convert
Sonia	39	Mexico	Mexico	Convert
Souad	27	Mexico	Mexico	Convert
Yasmin	25	Venezuela	Syria	Family tradition
Zyneb	25	Spain	Morocco	Family tradition

2.3. Materials

This research is based on in-depth interviews. A total of 27 interviews to women belonging to the Telegram channel *Orgullo niqabi* were conducted. All of them declared to be niqabi or in the process of becoming one. The interviews were based on a semi-structured script taking into account the various objectives of the research. Those we are specifically concerned with in this article are the following: (1) To find out which are the reasons that have led the niqabi women under study to become niqabis and whether the search for existential meaning has had something to do with this issue, (2) To determine whether the grouping of these women in the *Orgullo niqabi* channel has contributed to the polarization, in some sense, of these women’s postures on the niqab, (3) To determine whether this possible polarization has given rise to a particular ideology.

As for the number of women, despite the fact that it may not seem a very significant number a priori, the strength of this research lies in having gotten these women to participate in the study. It is not easy, first, to interact with groups of niqabi women, and second, to get these women to agree to participate in any type of research. We would also like to emphasize that this study is not intended to extrapolate results to other groups of niqabi or niqab-wearing women, especially from other sociopolitical contexts, but to highlight the particularity of this group, reflecting the discourse of the participants and capturing one of the multiple realities that hide behind the niqab.

Regarding how these women were contacted, one of the researchers who sign this article has actively participated in a lot of Spanish-speaking forums, groups, channels, websites and social networks on Islamic issues for years, carrying out analyses of some of them [39,40]. She has also carried out participant observation in different Islamic communities and associations [39], paying special attention to two major topics: the discrimination suffered by Muslim women [40] and the processes of radicalization of said women [24].

In one of her many online interactions, she was offered the opportunity to be part of the Orgullo niqabi channel. Needless to say, the researcher jumped at the opportunity without a second thought. However, the easy access to the group was an achievement that had nothing to do with the women agreeing to be part of the study. It was not easy to gain their trust, necessary to conduct the interviews. In fact, the research was only possible thanks to the creator of the community, who acted as a liaison between the other women and the researcher by posting an announcement on the channel, inviting them to participate in our study.

The participants set several conditions for participating in the study: their social and political demands should be discussed in future publications—an issue addressed in another article [41]—their speeches should not be manipulated, their identity should stay secret—which is why we changed their names—and the treatment of the interviews should be above all ethical, publishing only fragments of the interviews and not disclosing personal issues that could have been addressed during the interviews, be it unconsciously or due to the atmosphere of confidence.

The software *Skype* was used to conduct the interviews; on the one hand, because the interviewees suggested it due to its ease of use; and on the other hand, because most of the participants lived outside Spain—the place from where the research was conducted. Due to these circumstances, the researchers adapted to the way in which the women wanted to be interviewed as well as to their time availability. The interviews were carried out over a period of 6 months, but the previous work of contacting the women, planning the interviews and other aspects, took approximately a year and a half.

3. Results

This section contains some of the main analytical findings of our research, based on the analysis of the interviews and linked to our object of study. These have been listed according to the three significant categories that explain and answer the questions posed in our research after applying the constant comparative method based on the search for similarities and differences through the analysis of the incidents within our data [38]. Said categories are called anomie, cohesion and cyber-fundamentalism.

Let us begin the analysis citing Beriain [42] (p. 1), who says that the concept of *persona* comes from ancient times. It originated to refer to the mask worn by the performers, and in it converge the intentions of the performer and the requirements and opinions from the environment. Thus, according to Beriain, we are persons insofar as we wear masks that “represent” us and through which we present ourselves to the world. That is the case of the women under study: on the one hand, they have “chosen” the niqab and let it represent them and, on the other hand, they represent a specific ideology—Islamic fundamentalism. Said ideology turns to the precepts of the Quran and the teachings of its prophet, applies them literally and follows them as a spiritual and behavioral guide, expecting religion to spread to public domain [24]. In the following excerpt we can see how these women feel

with respect to their choice on how to present themselves as persons and what they feel they are representing being niqabis:

I feel complete. I feel good being niqabi; it gives me a sense of dignity. The niqab is the representation of what I am, of what I believe in, of Allah's command, subhanahu wa ta'ala (may He be praised and exalted), and of our beloved Prophet Muhammad's precepts, sallallahu alayhi wa sallam (may Allah honor Him and grant Him peace). I would not feel good and at ease walking the streets without my niqab, because I am Muslim, both at home and outdoors; what's more, I think it's my right, and I would get angry if I was forced to renounce to wear what I want. It's my freedom, my choice, the niqab represents me and, when I wear it, I feel like I'm raising Islam's flag up high (Ratsida).

In this context, with respect to the interviewee's words "it's my freedom, my choice," and according to Weber [43,44], we can say that religious beliefs have become a matter of subjective choice as a result of the emergence of many and varied alternative interpretations about the purpose and meaning of life. In the same vein, Melucci [45] affirms that "to choose" is the unavoidable fate of our times, when the credibility of all institutions—even religious ones—is falling apart. On this playing field, faith and its specific manifestations are seen as an option among many other possible choices [46]. This can be seen in this quote from one of the participants:

I have embraced a lot of religions and not a single one has satisfied me. Even less the churches, the priests, it's all a sham. Islam is my place. I couldn't find myself until I found The Truth, Islam (Ikram).

3.1. Anomie

If, as pointed out by our results, "to choose" is an unshakable fate we cannot avoid, then what is behind our choices? Is it an unstoppable search of sense, maybe? This was one of the main questions we asked ourselves before conducting the interviews, and that is how we posed the question to the interviewees: "what drove you to choose to be niqabi or to the niqab as a way of life?" It was vital for us to unravel what was behind that choice. Additionally, all the answers they gave in this regard were associated to two main issues which are in turn intrinsically related.

The first, more repeated one, had to do with the constant "search for meaning in life" these women experienced "before turning to Islam." The second type of answers was associated to what some authors call "perceived marginality" [47], which has been a source of frustration, unease and disenchantment for these women. Regarding the search for meaning, we can see it in this intervention by Romina, which represents how these women feel in general:

I used to go online, and I have always liked Moroccan food very much. I got to know a Facebook channel about recipes for this type of food, and there were many Muslim women there. We started talking about Islam and then a motivation that I hadn't known for years came to me. You have asked me how I felt before Islam, and the truth is that I was depressed. Sad. I have always had many problems with depression, many ups and downs, and it was turning to Islam and ending it all. I have tried many things before Islam, everything to no avail. Now I have joie de vivre, motivations, plans. I love being an ambassador for Allah, subhanahu wa ta'ala, and for our beloved Prophet Mohammed, sallallahu alayhi wa sallam (Romina).

In this last respect, Berger [48] (p. 113) pointed out that "ideals and morality are the best means to fill the big hole that the one calls *soul*." Weber [44] talked about the "disenchantment of the world" associated to the eclipse and decline of sacred institutions, and Simmel [49] pointed out that, throughout history, the lack of "something definitive" at the center of life has driven individuals to seek momentary satisfaction in excitement, elation, new activities, etc. Additionally, indeed, in the discourse of these women we find

signs which lead us to affirm that they have suffered personally the uneasiness of this profound disenchantment and that they have found “the meaning of life,” literally, in the way in which they live Islam.

I was born into a Catholic family. It didn't make me whole. Then, I went through a time in which I felt I didn't believe in anything, I think it had to do with being a teenager and, well, I really don't know how, but I ended up becoming a Jehovah's Witness. It worked for some time, but then I felt again that some things didn't fit me. I have told you before that my brother was a pothead, but I was also a quite a junkie for some time, to say the least. Druggie, drug-addict. I was a lost cause. Totally lost, *astaghfirullah* (I seek forgiveness from Allah). Life had no meaning to me. I just wanted to party, party and party, and I consumed and consumed, naturally. I robbed my parents, I even shook and pushed my mother around because she refused to give me money. I am ashamed to tell this, but I do it for Allah, because if someone reads what you are going to publish I want them to know that they can find a way in Islam, Allah is good and merciful, He forgives everything, when you enter Islam you get clean, you begin from scratch. Isn't it wonderful? That's Allah's *rahma* (mercy), *subhanahu wa ta'ala*. Besides, our beloved *Rasul* (prophet) shows you very well the path to follow, you can't miss it. Once you enter Islam there's no turning back, the path is very clear (Dunia).

Sara is also very explicit in this regard:

I used to tell my parents “don't you see that giving me this life has been a tremendous mistake?” And they didn't understand. I didn't want to live. Now everything, everything, looks different. My life is different (Sara).

Regarding the perceived marginality, and closely linked to this feeling of disenchantment, we have observed that it can occur as a result of the feeling of being perceived as “second-class” citizens. This perception is due to the effects that society and the development of the interactions within it generate in the person. We include here the feeling of being discriminated against by not being able to acquire the desired status or being undervalued for possessing certain social, cultural, ethnic or religious characteristics. The discourses of these women consistently reflect how they perceive this feeling of marginality in the two main ways we have previously mentioned. However, some key excerpts reflect this feeling in a particularly significant way.

In Spain I was doomed to be a fucking Moor, and in France, what can I say? “Rebeu!” (verlanised form of *beur*, itself the *verlan* of *arabe*). My parents don't even live here, though, so who cares, they don't even know, but people put the label on you, just like that, that's the harsh truth. That made me feel very bad, as if I was less, I felt like a shit—pardon my French—not useful, not worth anything, until I found the path of Allah, and now I even feel important, I feel like someone. You could say that being on this path of being *niqabi* has even raised my self-esteem (laughs) (Salima).

3.2. Cohesion

Regarding cohesion, and in relation to the previous section, it should be noted that these *niqabi* women—or on their way to become *niqabi*—experience a profound ambivalence: on the one hand they experience a strong rejection outside the *niqabi* and non-fundamentalist Islamic world, that is, in offline life in general; and on the other hand they experience a strong group cohesion within the online community of Muslims in which they move—especially in the Telegram channel to which they belong. Due to the courage they show in publicly displaying themselves as *niqabis*, these women are adored and admired in the groups in which they participate. However, in non-Muslim societies or in Muslim communities that opt for a more moderate Islam, they are admonished, discriminated against and even feared.

I was recently told, by a brother in an Islamic chat room, “How brave you are! Subhanallah (glory be to Allah). But I would not let my daughter do it if she wanted to.” I know they want, many brothers and sisters would love to see the niqab and feel it in their streets, but their imaan (faith) is very weak. However, they like to see us, many are proud of us and support and encourage us (Melika).

As a result of their strong, intra-group cohesion, two phenomena stand out. The first is that one can perceive what in social sciences is described as the “echo chamber effect” [50] within this group. This effect refers to the metaphorical description of a situation in which information, ideas or beliefs are amplified by transmission and repetition in a “closed” system, where different or competing views are censored, forbidden, or minimally represented. These women, after so much constant repetition of the same views, have significantly reinforced their individual belief systems. Furthermore, this effect results in a lack of critical view and attitude towards the group, as well as a lack of censorship of behaviors or attitudes that fall within what they consider lawful. This is clearly reflected in the following excerpt from the interview with Sara:

We help each other, together we reaffirm our beliefs and support each other in not doing anything haram (unlawful). When one of the sisters doubts, or myself, we support each other by reminding us of the way. Sometimes, Saytan (Satan) whispers evil in our hearts through so many things . . . television, fashion, everything. But we must continue strong in our din, in the way of Allah. We refresh the precepts each other and, if one of us doubts, we give her extra doses of Quran and Sunnah (laughs) (Sara).

The second phenomenon stemming from the strong intra-group cohesion and intrinsically related to the other phenomenon is the strong polarization of opinions that women in the channel Orgullo niqabi share. They state that, before joining, their postures on the niqab and other Islam-related issues were more “diffuse.” However, hearing their discourses, it is clear that, after uniting, these women have converged towards a more extreme posture on Islam.

Look, before sharing this space we were doing things just moderately well . . . most of us were hesitant, especially about the niqab because, you know, we payed too much attention to society and to our families, who tell you that this is extreme or radical. However, we support each other here, we don’t feel weird and nobody makes us think we’re crazy. In the channel we understand each other, we encourage each other and we advance in the path of Allah, subhanahu wa ta’ala, which is the most important thing. We practice more and more what the Quran and the Sunnah say and we move away from the rest. There is no interference here (laughs). Without my little sisters, I don’t know if I would have had the strength to be a niqabi. I think a lot about it (Fatima).

Regarding this issue of social rejection, which the interviewees implicitly or explicitly maintain throughout their discourses, these women talk also about the labor sphere, assuming that they will not be hired because they are niqabis.

I know I’m not going to work, no matter how much I do, no matter how much I am worth, no matter how much I study. No, niqab and work: impossible. It hurts me, but this is what it is. The way of Allah is much more important. And I choose Allah (Falak).

For her part, Zyneb expresses the rejection she experiences as follows:

I have even experienced my own sisters (she refers to other Muslim women) rejecting me by calling me radical, telling me that I couldn’t go around like that. I have experienced such thing even in my own family, even my parents don’t understand or accept it. Fortunately, I have my sisters on *Telegram*, who fill me with joy and encouragement and give me strength to continue on the straight path (Zyneb).

3.3. Cyber-Fundamentalism

The women under study are Muslims, as they state, but they are Muslims with two particularities. The first is that the polarity—their extreme positions—we mentioned before has led them to integrate fundamentalist Islam into their worldview. They reject “enlightened” or moderate Islam because, as they often say, it did not “satisfy” or “suffice” them. Thus, together, they opted for what they consider “the straight path,” that is, the path they consider adequate or correct within Islam: clearly, as we said, the fundamentalist one. In this sense, Bourdieu [51] (p. 104) says that the variety of religions and of ways of living them is part of a new field of struggles for the symbolic manipulation of behavior in the private life and the orientation of the worldview, and all of them put into practice antagonistic definitions of health, healing, and the care of body and soul. This idea is reflected in the following excerpt:

There is only one Islam. I’m not going to criticize anyone, but my sisters already know well what is halal (lawful) and what is haram and we all know that showing off is haram. And Allah knows better. We know very well the rules from the Quran and the Sunnah of our beloved Rasul, sallallahu alayhi wa sallam, and our duty as Muslims is to comply with them. Moreover, when you comply you are happy; when you don’t, you cannot live with guilt and discomfort. And so, yes, niqab as Allah’s command (Yasmin).

The second particularity we mentioned is that their fundamentalist discourse and its articulation has been constructed and constituted, literally, in the online world and in a context derived from modernity. This is why, at the beginning of the article, we pointed out that these women experience the niqab in a particular way. In fact we could say that, without these tools provided by modernity—social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp or Telegram—it is likely that this group of women would not exist. Likewise, their discourse would not exist or, at least, it would not have been elaborated in the same way, so particular, so structured. Therefore, modern!

I have received great support and ease from this group of sisters; they help me a lot, they help me to be better, to practice each and every one of the teachings of the Prophet, sallallahu alayhi wa sallam, which are within my reach as a human being. I don’t know what would have become of my life without the internet (laughs). And I tell you more: the only way to feel good, at peace with yourself, is to do everything, everything, everything that Islam says, not skipping anything. Alhamdulillah (all praise is due to Allah), the internet has given us the opportunity to unite and to learn from each other, to teach each other. If Allah wants something, so will be it, and He has given us modern technologies to organize ourselves. Allah is great, my dear (Islam).

4. Discussion

We find ourselves living in a context derived from modernity in which the religious sphere has clearly become “deinstitutionalized” and, as a consequence, it has produced the emergence of new religiosities which offer diverse possibilities in terms of faith, from creeds to models of spiritual behavior. Giddens [52–55] (p. 122) argues in one of his books that we, as societies, have gone from having a “given” destiny in relation to God, nature, etc.—meta-socially speaking—to having a socially-produced destiny, as a consequence of the multiplication of the range of possibilities in the face of new uncertainties.

Within this context of non-permeability, mobility and change, faith is presented as a rational and pragmatic choice: to be Muslim and, specifically, to be Muslim and also niqabi, would be presented as an alternative within the melting pot of possibilities presented to certain human beings. However, in some cases such as those shown in this article, that choice is undoubtedly, significantly profound, given that it implies to renounce to things from the most material sphere—such as opting for a job—to the most affective one—family disruptions, in some cases. Such renunciations, which in the purest Weberian rational

sense—in which cost–benefit calculations come into play—would be compensated by the certainty and security that the fundamentalist ideology to which they decide to adhere and which they in turn represent, clearly provides.

According to what the women under study have told us during the interviews, when they decided to become niqabi they went from living in an uncertain and anomic world to a world where each and every one of the questions they ask themselves, whether on the material, spiritual and/or existential level, have closed and, above all, useful answers for them, from a functionalist point of view. Thus, our first research question—whether the existential unease has led these women to choose to be niqabi—would be substantially resolved. We can now affirm that the women under study are niqabi because, behind their worldview, there is a solid ideology that alleviates their existential unease, the constant search for meaning that results from living in an anomic society.

With regard to the second question—whether their grouping has contributed to some polarization—we find that this feeling of shared unease and, above all, having overcome said unease together by their adherence to Islam, has served as a basis for these women to connect and to create and/or participate in the channel. This participation has polarized their behavior more and more towards the extreme, leading to the adoption of a fundamentalist and homogeneous version of Islam, which has ended up in the use of the niqab or contributed to its continued use. This would also answer the third question—whether the polarization has given rise to or driven any particular ideology.

However, we have to clarify something: these women are not just fundamentalists, but cyber-fundamentalists, given that both their discourses and their lives are grounded in a context of modernity. In fact, many of these women claim to have lived a modern life and to have suffered from the challenges of modernity itself as well as from its roots, such as individualism or liquid relationships. These aspects of modern life dissatisfied them, and even led some of them to depressive states, which made them find temporary refuge in drugs, distant spiritualities or liquid religions—adapting Bauman’s [9] expression—elaborated ad hoc as a remedy to survive, existentially speaking, the moment they were living through.

Therefore, these women react to modernity from the fundamentalist precepts in which they have polarized their perceptions, while they have deconstructed said precepts in the very same modern context the react against. Thus, this version of fundamentalism that is emerging, as well as its effective expansion and diffusion, are rooted in one of the great enclaves of modernity: the non-space fruit of new technologies. This situation makes us think that cyber-fundamentalism may be one of the many mutations of fundamentalism, one that adapts itself, survives and stands as an existential possibility one can hold on to in our times.

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