Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"There are only a few things that you cannot manage without internet": Realization of capabilities through internet (non)use by ultra-Orthodox Jewish women

Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, Avi Marciano & Amit M. Schejter

Published online: 28 Jun 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

"There are only a few things that you cannot manage without internet": Realization of capabilities through internet (non)use by ultra-Orthodox Jewish women

Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar[a] (ID), Avi Marciano[b] (ID) and Amit M. Schejter[b,c] (ID)

[a]Department of Communication, Sapir Academic College, Sderot, Israel; [b]Department of Communication Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel; [c]Bellisario College of Communication, Penn State University

ABSTRACT

In this study we focus on internet nonuse among Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, members of a community that either refrains from using the internet or deploys content-filtering when it does access it in some situations. We conducted in-depth interviews to empirically answer two questions: First, how do ultra-Orthodox women perceive their internet nonuse? Second, what direct and indirect solutions do they create to realize their desired capabilities that contemporarily require internet access? We found that adhering to religious strictures means more than obedience to religious commitments and community leaders, and that while nonuse may seem like a self-imposed disenabling act, it holds valuable social advantages at the individual, family, and community levels.

The ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, a very religious one, comprises 13% of Israel's population (Malach and Cahaner 2022). Its religious and social life are bound by a stringent interpretation of *Halakha*, Jewish religious law, and unquestioning faith in rabbinic authority. The men see themselves as belonging to an intellectual "society of scholars," whose commitment to studying the *Torah* supersedes professional attainments in secular vocations (Friedman 1991, 1993). The women are responsible for the care of their relatively large families (an average of seven children per family), and many other communal needs, and have a very significant presence in the public sphere. With an average of 14 years of schooling, they work, study, and support their families, and many are the primary breadwinners (Davidman 1991; El-Or 1994; Fader 2013). The large families, the fact that often there is only one breadwinner per family, and the limitations on the type of vocations women can engage in due to religious constraints, contribute to the community's impoverishment.

A major tenet of ultra-Orthodoxy is that "what is new is forbidden" (Samet 2005). In the case of the internet, there is ambivalence on this score because it is essential for employment (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005; Livio and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2007; Rosenberg and Rashi 2015). As a result, limited internet use is permitted outside the home primarily for business needs (Campbell 2010, 2013, 2015; Malach and Cahaner 2020), and more and more among the ultra-Orthodox have started using the internet. Interestingly, Cahaner (2020) found that 68% of them used the internet for work, 24% got updates from ultra-Orthodox news websites, and 15% used it for entertainment. In 2020, 47% of the ultra-Orthodox (respondents could mark more than one option on the survey questionnaire) used the internet for information searching, 41% for banking and paying bills, 36% for government agencies' services, 29% for online shopping, and 18% for social media (Central Bureau of Statistics 2021). The users tend to legitimize internet use by providing reasons, and excuses, and most importantly, on the grounds that they employ content-filtering technologies (Rashi 2013; Rosenberg, Blondheim, and Katz 2019). Although the COVID-19 pandemic increased internet exposure among members of the community, its use is still limited, and many households refrain from using it.

Such nonuse differs from the much-studied digital divide (e.g. Hargittai 2004; Hargittai and Walejko 2008; van Deursen and van Dijk 2015; Wyatt et al. 2005). For many years, scholars have focused on motivational barriers to digital technology usage with particular attention to usage and digital skills (e.g. Büchi,

Just, and Latzer 2016; van Deursen and van Dijk 2014). However, ultra-Orthodox women's nonuse is by choice. The reasons are complex, as we will see.

In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews to empirically answer two questions: First, how do ultra-Orthodox women perceive their internet nonuse? Second, what direct and indirect solutions do they create to realize their desired capabilities that contemporarily require internet access?

Theoretical approach

Iannaccone (1992) found that there is a connection between the sacrifices members of religious communities make and their success. What may be perceived as unproductive sacrifices in fact mark the group's commitment and collective nature. The unusual norms adopted by the community increase the members' participation in its activities, as they must forsake aspects of the secular world in order to get support from other community members. In his study focusing specifically on ultra-Orthodox Jews, Berman (2000) used these insights to explain their embrace of voluntary poverty. He argued that while adopting religious prohibitions may seem like an irrational act, they provide access to a "generous mutual insurance network, based on religiously motivated charitable acts" (Berman 2000, 908). Since access to these mutual insurance networks excludes outsiders, the benefits they offer to their members are club goods[1] (Berman 2000).

The ultra-Orthodox community's approach also resonates with Amartya Sen's (1993, 2004, 2005) capabilities approach, which shifted the attention "from goods to what goods do to human beings" (Sen 1979, 219). Herein the focus is on people's ability to use the opportunities that are available to them rather than the goods they possess (Schejter and Tirosh 2016). Accordingly, Sen (1979) looked at people's actual capability to use the goods, services, and opportunities available to them, rather than the mere access to or ownership of those goods. At the same time, he rejected approaches that recognize lists of capabilities taken to be ideal or canonical, leaving the choice of capabilities to be realized to each person's choice (Sen 2005).

Our study offers a unique context to understand the development of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as "made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital" (243). In a similar vein, Putnam (1995, 67) referred to social capital as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". He pointed out that these social networks' interactions reduce opportunism, and develop the "I," the individual, into the "we," the community, for collective benefits. Communities with high social capital have two underlying factors: engagement and trust.

We draw on theories of club goods, social capital, and capabilities to understand ultra-Orthodox women's nonuse. In a nutshell, we find their nonuse increases their social capital both inside and outside their community.

Methodology

In 2017–2019 we conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in the ultra-Orthodox community. We relied on a female ultra-Orthodox research assistant to recruit the interviewees and conduct the interviews, since an external interviewer may raise suspicion and distrust.

The ultra-Orthodox women (based on self-identification) were recruited using purposeful and snowball sampling. Their ages were between 27 and 51, and they were mothers of 3 to 15 children. Most of them work as teachers (from daycare to high school), some are stay-at-home mothers, others have small businesses, or work part-time in various odd jobs. All of them speak Hebrew, and most also speak a second language (English, Yiddish, French, or German). The husbands of most women are *Torah* scholars and some work in the ultra-Orthodox education system for boys.

The ultra-Orthodox research assistant who identified herself as a smartphone nonuser had decided to have a very strictly filtered internet at her home about two years before the interviews were conducted. She found the process of finding appropriate interviewees for the study to be harder than she imagined because many of her neighbors, family, friends, and acquaintances only started to use the internet, mostly filtered, about this period.

We analyzed data in line with grounded theory principles (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Findings

While conventional scholarship and policymaking takes nonuse to be a detriment to human growth, flourishing and wellbeing, we look at nonuse from the capabilities perspective, allowing us to note the benefits of nonuse and understand why some communities do so by choice.

Nonuse as a constraint and as an enabler

The prohibition against internet use weighed heavily against the interviewees. Responses reflected how the interviewees perceived this prohibition: "Our rabbi renews every year, again and again, the prohibition against using computers. Only those who must do it for work [can use the internet]" (Blumi, kindergarten teacher, mother of nine); "In our community, this is prohibited, there is no permission. It's sweeping, it's addicting, it extends to all areas of prohibition" (Hanna, seamstress, mother of 15).

Accepting the rabbinical ruling was perceived by the interviewees as a sacrifice, which impacts different dimensions of life. Indeed, these sacrifices ranged in size and kind and involved compromising accepted patterns of family ties, making economic compromises, and avoiding government service needs.

Familial

Some of the interviewees reported missing family news and updates:

> My father-in-law has wanted us to have a computer, so we can get news from the family in the USA [… and] I said that nothing will happen if we get the news two days later. [However] I started to feel disconnected from the family in the USA. They have their [WhatsApp] group. In the past, they used to call us … when my niece got engaged; my father-in-law wanted to show my husband the groom's picture. He said: "this is your nephew!" My husband just answered: "Nicht" [in Yiddish: "no"]. (Blumi, kindergarten teacher, mother of nine).

Economic

As breadwinners in a tough job market, some of the women sacrificed meaningful job opportunities: "I heard about a newly married woman … who had a job interview in a place with non-filtered internet. She asked to turn off the internet for her, and the boss said – no way. She said that this is not a job for her and returned home … Many women sacrifice their souls for this issue, and it's clear. When women work with an open internet, it influences their home. They are exposed to … The fact that the children know that their mother works with internet […and] touches an impure device" (Lea, teacher, mother of 10). Another participant told us: "If I am a teachers' guide, I will need to know [how to use] the computer, so this prevents me from thinking about promotion … My niece is a famous graphic designer and a photographer … She has a computer in another building, but [the computer] is empty, very very filtered, but she doesn't bring it [into the home]. She is very strong, she could, but she doesn't enter it. She can lose a lot of money because at stressful times she could work in the middle of the night from home" (Blumi, kindergarten teacher, mother of nine).

Blumi's description of the "empty, very very filtered" computer in another building refers to an initiative of some entrepreneurs to establish kiosks with filtered internet. These kiosks, located in central and peripheral areas in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, can be found in a street shop or a small apartment in a residential building. The kiosks are maintained according to the community's rules. They maintain gender segregation; some places allow only men or women at all times, while others maintain different time slots for men and women. Here, on a strictly filtered internet portal, users can access government agencies, banks, health services, and sometimes popular shopping sites. Sometimes these kiosks use security cameras to make sure that the uses adhere to the rules. The users pay according to their usage.

As far as expenditures go, the women described the convenience and low prices of web-shopping which they avoid: "Sometimes I was really tempted … when I heard mothers talk in my kindergarten about their shopping. I saw the nice and cheap clothes and shoes" (Sari, kindergarten teacher, mother of six); "There is a temptation to shop using the computer, Next [a cheap British website that is very popular among ultra-Orthodox mother**s**, especially because of the modest design of its offerings], clothes, things for my grandchildren and my daughters. I see teachers sit and buy sheets, [for the] brides' dowry. There is a special kiosk for Next shopping [but I don't use it]" (Lea, teacher, mother of 10). Participants' economic situation, as members of one of the most impoverished populations in Israel, could explain the repetitions of "temptation" in their responses.

Civic

Interviewees also mentioned sacrifices when talking about government services that are designed for connected citizens: "We need five documents from the Ministry of Justice's website. We don't have [internet]. We are looking for someone to do that for us. Wouldn't I like to have internet, click some buttons and send it to my email?" (Tovi, teacher, mother of seven). While Tovi just needs the website, Blumi (kindergarten teacher, mother of nine) found herself at odds with the law: "A policeman came to check my summer-camp's safety. He asked me to sign my name on his iPhone and I replied that I could not even

touch it. He said: I'm a policeman, and I require you to sign. I asked to call the area's commanding officer. I told the officer that I could only sign my name on paper. He said that the paper might get lost. Then [after a negotiation] he asked the policeman to sign on my behalf. The policeman said [to me]: 'good for you!'"

These testimonies show how the prohibition against internet use results in significant sacrifices, ranging from time and money to social isolation. In terms of club theory (Berman 2000; Iannaccone 1992), religious strictness appears to be a coin in the social-religious-cultural capital system (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017), functioning as an individual's payoff for securing desirable behavior from other members. In terms of capabilities, we observe that the religious dogma serves as both a constraint as well as an enabler – the former in limiting the benefits of connecting to the world outside the community, the latter for maintaining ties within the community. For these community members, the price of leaving the community is much higher than the sacrifices of nonuse. In other words, by adopting a capabilities perspective we can note that nonuse is a choice that enables a capability the women desire, the group membership, which for them supersedes the benefits of internet use for everyday needs. Indeed, in policy terms, these women do not need a one-size-fits-all connection to the internet to resolve the "divide" they are experiencing, but rather connectivity that would not jeopardize the capability of belonging to the group.

Finding direct and indirect solutions

Our interviews revealed that when it comes to communicating, the need for using media technologies arises only when face-to-face communications are impossible or at least very hard to establish and conduct. Here we will illustrate how the women realize their capabilities by finding direct and indirect solutions for the new media needs. The process the women go through in order to determine whether to go the technology way is a road map of sorts. The first intersection is a sorting process, asking whether interaction with people external to the community is necessary. Once that is determined, the women first seek offline solutions such as going to the place, calling the agency they need by phone or calling family members and friends for advice. Only in cases of a real necessity, in which they cannot physically access the service themselves, or that the effort does not make sense,

they ask for help from somebody with an internet connection.

Choosing to avoid internet use and instead visit physically by walking or traveling is the standard solution: "I know that there is an option to get prescriptions and blood tests' results online. I take some minutes walking; I go to the secretary and ask for all the papers I need. What is the big deal?" (Rivki, Shopkeeper, mother of 10); "There were times that without email at home I lost hours. OK, that's fine, everything has a price" (Freida, teacher, mother of eight). Blumi's story was more challenging: "It was after a day of running around. From 8:30, I was doing errands. I came home at 13:30 … and I didn't do anything on my day off! … I bought nothing and returned with empty hands because money also has a say. I cannot pay these astronomic prices. … Then, my friend told me today that she spent the morning with the computer in my building [special kiosk with filtered internet]. I thought, ho, mom! I could save a lot … I returned so exhausted from the dissatisfaction".

The interviewees also use (simple) phones – landline or cellphone – for calling government and commercial service providers, family members and friends, for services and advice. "The bank is very annoying, very frustrating. They think that everyone has an internet connection. One day I entered the bank, I found a responsible official; I said to her: 'Listen, I don't have internet. I need someone [a person]'. She gave me her number. Now, I have her number [in another case…] I told my daughter's hospital doctor that I [can't receive] messages, I don't have internet. … She said: OK, I respect that, here is my number, you can call 24 h a day. I called her at 4 am. She always answers with a smile; she respects. … I try to work with people that … Alternatively, it's just God's help." (Rivki, shopkeeper, mother of 10).

The interviews revealed that the standard old-fashioned phone served as a viable alternative for seeking advice from trusted people. The women call their mothers, sisters, friends, and other community members. They don't just talk about experiences, but also seek help regarding information that can be found only over certain websites. "I called my friend about a weekly menu, what should I cook for the family … to ask where I can find a skirt for a three-year-old girl" (Miriam, housekeeper, mother of eight); "I initiate contact with parents, I must have the personal tone, that they will hear the tones beyond the words. We have some teachers that send emails 'your daughter behaves great in the English lesson.' … I'm old fashioned, I would call" (Lea, teacher,

mother of 10).; "I got [the hotel number] from my son … the number was disconnected […I had to invest many efforts]. Indeed, if I had internet, perhaps I would look for a minute and find … [but] I don't have internet" (Naomi, housekeeper, mother of 11); "My husband doesn't have a cellphone … I had eight births and one miscarriage. … he gave me the phone numbers of the [pay phones in the Yeshiva] and I found him, every time I needed" (Shira, therapist, mother of nine).

Liba (copy editor, mother of 11) said humorously: "I have four married children, [… I talk] with everyone several times a day because they call every second. When my daughter calls and asks, 'how are you' I answer that nothing [has changed] since the last conversation, five minutes ago."

We can also look at these phone calls from a two-step flow perspective, wherein information diffusion entails both mass media and interpersonal networks, with the speed and efficiency of the diffusion process depending on social and cultural issues, such as different degrees of social integration and social norms (Katz 1957, 1961; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). The ultra-Orthodox women by eschewing the internet deliberately choose slower and less efficient modes. For instance, even though the call to the doctor's personal phone and the many calls to family members are less convenient and more time-consuming than the hospital website or the family WhatsApp group, these nonusers prefer to use traditional phone calls to satisfy their needs. Herein they not only become informed but also simultaneously strengthen the social norms and the community's cohesion.

Granovetter (1973) examined the communications characteristics of weak and strong ties. The bank official and the hospital doctor, among others, demonstrated respect for their clients' values, changed established professional behaviors, and shared their phone numbers. They bypassed the regular system through secretaries and websites, and connected directly, using their personal phone, with the nonusers. The weak ties were replaced by strong ties when the doctor and the banker became closer to these clients and provided service as if they were VIPs, despite their inability to connect over the internet.

The young daughters that call every five minutes, the husband who is always to be found at the Yeshiva, without a cellphone, and the friends and relatives demonstrate that the absence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their lives is not a constraint for the maintenance of the strong cohesive ties in this social network. The community's support system enables the community to safeguard its values

and function within contemporary secular society at the same time. Looking at these professional and familial strong ties from Sen's capabilities perspectives (1979, 1993), these women create, maintain, and sharpen their abilities to make use of their opportunities. While they may be sacrificing some convenience, they are able to realize their capabilities and achieve the functioning they desire. They use cleverly the resources they have – the people willing to help, and the simple phone to fulfill their needs, in ways that respect their values.

Sometimes, somebody, somewhere: Using the internet via a proxy

There were certain needs, however, which the women found were impossible to address without internet use, e.g. contacting the United States' embassy. In such cases they had to use the internet *via* a proxy. Ester (teacher, mother of seven) said: "The United States embassy is the only … place that … there is nobody to talk to. You have to do that through the computer. It is really the only thing that I need to ask somebody to do for me." Blumi (kindergarten teacher, mother of nine) almost gave up: "My husband is an American citizen. He wanted our daughter to be an American citizen, too. He [was willing] to give up American citizenship, the American passport, and the social security [… in order not to be forced to use the internet]. Then, God gave us a present – a Hassid that did everything for us [on the website], we just had to sign".

When describing other issues that could only be addressed by asking other internet users, the women used terms that highlighted the rareness of these uses. Ester (teacher, mother of seven) described this in the context of health issues: "I have Arthritis, and I take medicine. There are side effects that weren't written. For these *few* events I asked somebody to check for me"; Lea (teacher, mother of 10) said: "*Sometimes* the doctor tells me something, and I want to understand what it means. I asked another teacher for help [with the internet at school]". Lea also mentioned work-related needs: "I can ask other teachers, my colleagues, to help me … one showed me Google … I said: 'wow! It's a wonderful tool!' In one moment, I was exposed to much information that I wouldn't reach in another way …" ; Freida (teacher, mother of eight) said: "I need studies for my teaching … something to enrich the classes … I approached someone, and she doesn't care if *one evening every month* I sit and look *a little bit*"; Rivki (shopkeeper, mother of 10) remembered: "I needed to see some hair covers

for my shop. They sent it to the nearest shop, a guy that works in the vegetable department has something … I saw the pictures on his phone. It's OK; I saw it only *once*."

Necessity

Indeed, necessity often served as an excuse for using the internet, even by others. Blumi (kindergarten teacher, mother of nine) described some solutions for dealing with bureaucracy: "We have somebody from the community that takes care of our arrangements"; Dvora (teacher, mother of eight) said: "For technical and bureaucratic issues, such as registration for school, I asked my neighbor … She registered her daughters, so she took my ID and, *in some minutes*… It took her *only some minutes*, but for me the time to travel there … is crazy". Sari (kindergarten teacher, mother of six) apologized when discussing shopping: "Perhaps *three or four times* I went to my sister. She has internet for her work. I found a shop that I can order clothes".

Third-person effect

We also saw our respondents ascribing responsibility for their internet use to others, a third-person effect (Davison 1983). Ester (teacher, mother of even) hesitated: "In fact, this is for her [sister-in-law]. It's for her if she finds for me a shoe or something in Next. I don't even need it … She looks for herself, so she looks for me as well". Some others may be justified in their use because they reside abroad. For example, Freida (teacher, mother of eight) approaches relatives abroad: "My mother is in the USA; she has an internet connection. If I need a forecast for the next four days, she checks for me … My brother in the USA checks for me about flights, or entrance to sites … "my sisters-in-law can help sometimes. They are not from here; they are from outside the country". Here the explanation is the need to connect with kith and kin in the US, where ultra-Orthodox communities have different norms with many of them permitting an internet connection.

The road map of capabilities

The behavior of the ultra-Orthodox mapped above could be seen paradoxically as dichotomic and straightforward at the same time: seeking enabling uses of the ICTs and overcoming the constraints created by the cultural setting. Needs that are not essential, are to be given up. Necessary needs are to be resolved first by using alternative means – walking, traveling, or calling – and only in rare cases – having another person use the internet to perform tasks for them. We noticed that when the women hesitated to talk about or sounded frustrated about situations that required reliance on a proxy for internet connection, the most meaningful stories emerged. Their justification for internet use by proxy took the form: "I know …, but …" Further, they engage in much soul-searching on this issue. They talk about their self-limitations, support each other's nonuse and criticize the other community members who take advantage of the proxies. At the same time, some (as there are different levels of religiosity) are cognizant of the fact that asking another to perform a forbidden task is also inappropriate, so they often add a disclaimer when describing the interaction with the proxy in the form of "I didn't ask her."

Sari (kindergarten teacher, mother of six) addresses the constraints she faces, even with her sister: "There are only a few things that you cannot manage without the internet. Sometimes I need an urgent appointment with the pediatrician. I think … maybe I can call my sister, she will arrange it for me [by the website]"; the women's support of nonuse includes even the community's special events, as Blumi (kindergarten teacher, mother of nine) said: "our rabbi traveled to Canada; he hasn't been there 23 years. It was a very, very moving ceremony … more than 12000 people. We are [a group of] 12 women. Six watched; they have it on the computer. They work, in the workplace, filtered … Six didn't watch. We strengthened ourselves, the women that didn't watch". This implicit criticism became explicit toward the people who use the internet by proxy: "using in the neighbors' house, taking advantage wherever they can, just for not having it in my home." (Naomi, housekeeper, mother of 11). Dvora (teacher, mother of eight) was clear: "For these things, I would never ask other people – for recipes, for things that [are] not a must – I would never ask somebody to search for me there, really, never! Because I don't want to ask other people something I don't must-have. And also, why? Why do they need to open their eyes for me? Because I want a recipe?" Sari (kindergarten teacher, mother of six) Laughs: "My sister says … that she enjoys seeing other people screaming at the internet while [I] ask her for favors all day around."

Nevertheless, the data show that even the strictest women who never touched the internet themselves used the internet by proxies, at least once. The following quotes bring out the women's hesitations, rareness, and the non-intentionality of these relationships: "I have a neighbor that has a tablet. Sometimes I

would like to see a sweater on Next or something like that. Nevertheless, I say: what is the problem? She would show it to me in one second. On the other hand, I say that I don't want to get used to this thing, to take advantage of her internet … My mother-in-law sends me pictures [to…] my neighbor, and, on her way home, she shows me the pictures. I said, 'thank you,' but I didn't ask." (Miriam, housekeeper, mother of eight); Tovi (teacher, mother of seven) said: "I break my head, trying to figure out who will get it [documents from the ministry of law]. So, I can go to the less known people – the neighbors that don't know me much [… but] I don't have such a pleasant communication with them, that I can knock [on their door] and tell them [that I need help]".

Looking at the decisions these women make as they work through whether to go past their self-imposed nonuse constraint and utilize an ICT to connect with others, we see that the social network, the constraining factor, trumps. While the better choices of using the phone and asking many questions engender contact with strong ties – from family member to the merciful doctor – the proxies, who are the enablers, are mostly their weak ties: the "other side" of the family (e.g. in-laws), neighbors, and colleagues.

Strong ties as constraints and weak ties as enablers

Granovetter (1973) characterized strong ties as heavily invested in terms of time, emotions, intimacy, and reciprocity, and the weak ties as the converse. In the case of internet access, the ultra-Orthodox women cannot get help from their strong ties. These homophilous relationships are with people who are (usually) nonusers. In order to exercise ICT-enabled capabilities, they strengthened their weak ties by asking heterophile linkages – out-of-the-country family members, in-laws, neighbors, and colleagues, or even hired strangers – for internet use by proxy.

These proxies became bridges, "a line in a network which provides the only path between two points" (Granovetter 1973, 1364) – such bridging is not limited to the internet connection, it also creates ties between different people, heterophilous linkages across the boundaries of closed communities (Liu and Duff 1972). This enables their capability to survive in contemporary society by addressing the most basic needs, which at this point in human history are mostly provided *via* networked ICTs, e.g. access to health providers, government services and processes, and online sellers. Even though there is no reciprocity in these weak ties, a high level of intimacy as well as

emotional and personal connection could be created in the process. For instance, for online purchase of gifts, the women give their helpers their ID numbers, credit card numbers, bank details, family members' body sizes, budget, etc. Such reliance creates a high level of collaboration and social capital that is characterized by trust and engagement (Putnam 1995). At the same time, this surrender of private information opens the possibility for strong control by the proxies.

The strength of the weak ties could be seen clearly in this religiously "excluded" community. The complex usage of inside and outside community networks is part of the enablement of their capabilities – which is done through creative means. The women use strong ties for everything they could – by face-to-face interaction, or usually by phone. Today's low price of phone calls enables them to overcome distance within Israel as well as call their relatives outside the country, even just to ask about the four-day weather forecast. When the strong ties cannot help and they need to see something that is online themselves, such as family pictures, or to sign a document, they operate the second system – the weak ties. Here come the neighbors, colleagues, or others, helping them to get the signed document or see the newborn. Thus, the weaker ties become more effective because they bridge physical and bureaucratical distances without reprimand from the family or community should they be identified as utilizing ICTs and internet connectivity against the community strictures.

The enablers know that without their support (even though they accept the criticism for their actions), the nonusers wouldn't stay nonusers. Their needs for services and documents from bureaucracy or from the US embassy may lead them to become users. But then, their support of the nonusers enables the provision of their needs. Furthermore, the enabler's support, from both inside and outside the community, helps the ultra-Orthodox nonusers demonstrate how strict and serious their community is about its faith, and the high cost they are willing to pay to maintain it. Indeed, this demonstration of faith in itself can also be interpreted as a capability these women realize through the procedure they created for indirect use of online services.

On the cultural and political levels, we are witnessing here a rethinking of the value of goods. The ultra-Orthodox women managed their multiple offline and online (by proxy) social networks cleverly. Their road map addressed how they differentiate between goods and "what goods do to human beings" (Sen 1979, 219). They don't choose mere ownership or access to those goods (Sen 1979). Nevertheless, they

use these weaker networks to realize "the opportunity of doing things and achieving results one has reason to value … the freedom to live the way one would like, rather than judging freedom simply by commodity holding" (Sen 1993, 532). In their communities, the rational behavior is accepting restrictions, stigma, and self-sacrifice, and relying on mutual support (Berman 2000; Iannaccone 1992). When other people use their devices to take care of their needs, the ultra-Orthodox women reflect their values with complex decision-making guided by a value-laden road map. Moreover, by calling their strong ties or using the internet connection of their weak ties, they strengthen both the strong and the weak ties. Further, they make visible the sacrifices their religious commitments entail. For instance, by calling friends for advice for something that is instantly available on a Google search, these women are essentially proclaiming: "I am a very committed member of this community."

Indeed, the nonusers declare their piousness to the outside world. Calling the government offices, the bank, and the hospital, they let the outside world know that there is a religious community that is willing to sacrifice the convenience provided by internet access for its religious values. They show the strictness, costliness, and seriousness of their religious group (Kelley 1972, 1978). And, so far, in a society that is transitioning to online services, their determination to stay offline while still realizing their survival capabilities is working, and the fact that the non-religious doctor and bank person provide them with their phone numbers, shows others' appreciation (or at minimum acceptance) of their nonuse.

Summary

We sought to understand how ultra-Orthodox women perceive their nonuse of the internet, and what direct and indirect solutions they create for realizing needs that call for internet access. We identified the capabilities they would like to realize and the constraining and enabling elements their unique communal life introduces to these efforts. We argue that "holding the fort" by adhering to religious rules despite the temptations and needs for internet usage, means more than just obedience to religious commitments. We suggest that while nonuse may seem like a self-imposed disenabling act, it enables the realization of valuable social advantages at the individual, family, and community levels.

Our findings show how nonusers sacrifice the convenience offered by contemporary ICT use, yet generate social capital inside their community by showing fidelity to the community strictures as well as outside by developing relationships with people who help them with internet use by proxy.[2] Our findings prompt rethinking of the actual power of strong and weak ties for the realization of capabilities in communities where members can access club goods (Berman 2000; Iannaccone 1992). The nonuse in itself is strengthened by both the strong and weak ties. The intensive phone calling with their strong ties and the rareness of using the internet by proxy through their weak ties strengthens the density and cohesion of their inside community ties and weakens their outside community ties. Once again, strengthening the feeling of belonging to their community can be defined as a capability emerging from the appreciation and support of the outside world members.

To conclude, among the ultra-Orthodox women internet nonuse has led to the development of creative ways to realize capabilities needed to function in today's society. The prohibitions and the attendant sacrifices contribute to the creation of a complex system of reliance on weak and strong ties, wherein the use by proxy is a public statement of sacrifice, mutual support, and control. Granovetter (1973) observed that bridges based on the weak ties create many short paths. However, this study shows how the ultra-Orthodox women's bridges – the proxies – make weak ties adopt strong ties' characteristics – emotional intensity, intimacy, and amount of time, even though there is no reciprocity built in the relationship. What these women gain goes beyond the shopping or the service they need; they are the unique relationships with the proxies that raise the individual's and the community's social capital through collaboration, engagement, and trust.

Notes

1. Cornes and Sandler (1999, 3) define a club good as an "impure public good, characterized by congestion and excluded benefits."
2. The social consequences of the nonuse are not limited only to the social capital of the nonusers (see Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017)

ORCID

Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8909-4546
Avi Marciano http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2813-6159
Amit M. Schejter http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3670-2165

References

Barzilai-Nahon, K., and G. Barzilai. 2005. Cultured technology: The internet and religious fundamentalism. *The Information Society* 21 (1):25–40. doi: 10.1080/01972240590895892.

Berman, E. 2000. Sect, subsidy and sacrifice: An economist's view of ultra-Orthodox Jews. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115 (3):905–53. doi: 10.1162/003355300554944.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital. In *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of religion*, ed. J. E. Richardson, 241–58. New York: Greenwood.

Büchi, M., N. Just, and M. Latzer. 2016. Modeling the second-level digital divide: A five-country study of social differences in internet use. *New Media & Society* 18 (11):2703–22. doi: 10.1177/1461444815604154.

Cahaner, L. 2020. The ultra-Orthodox community on the conservatism-modernism spectrum. Accessed June 13, 2023. https://en.idi.org.il/articles/26911

Campbell, H. A. 2010. *When religion meets new media*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, H. A., ed. 2013. *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, H. A., ed. 2015. *Digital Judaism: Jewish negotiations with digital media and culture*. New York: Routledge.

Central Bureau of Statistics. 2021. Israeli CBS Social Survey (in Hebrew). Accessed June 13, 2023. https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/subjects/Pages/%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%93%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%93%D7%99%D7%92%D7%99%D7%98%D7%9C%D7%99-2020.aspx

Cornes, R., and T. Sandler. 1999. *The theory of externalities, public goods, and club goods*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Davidman, L. 1991. *Tradition in a rootless world: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Davison, W. P. 1983. The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47 (1):1–15. doi: 10.1086/268763.

El-Or, T. 1994. *Educated and ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish women and their world*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Fader, A. 2013. Nonliberal Jewish women's audiocassette lectures in Brooklyn: A crisis of faith and the morality of media. *American Anthropologist* 115 (1):72–84. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1433.2012.01536.x.

Friedman, M. 1991. *Haredi society: Sources, trends and processes* (in Hebrew). Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.

Friedman, M. 1993. The market model and religious radicalism. In *Jewish fundamentalism in comparative perspective: Religion, ideology, and the crisis of modernity*, ed. L. J. Silberstein, 192–215. New York: New York University Press.

Granovetter, M. S. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6):1360–80. doi: 10.1086/225469.

Hargittai, E. 2004. Internet access and use in context. *New Media & Society* 6 (1):137–43. doi: 10.1177/1461444804042310.

Hargittai, E., and G. Walejko. 2008. The participation divide: Content creation and sharing in the digital age. *Information, Communication & Society* 11 (2):239–56. doi: 10.1080/13691180801946150.

Iannaccone, L. R. 1992. Sacrifice and stigma: Reducing free-riding in cults, communes, and other collectives. *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (2):271–91. doi: 10.1086/261818.

Katz, E. 1957. The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on a hypothesis. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1):61–78. doi: 10.1086/266687.

Katz, E. 1961. The social itinerary of technical change: Two studies on the diffusion of innovation. *Human Organization* 20 (2):70–82. doi: 10.17730/humo.20.2.322v6303331k1x37.

Katz, E., and P. Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal influence*. New York: Free Press.

Kelley, D. 1972. *Why conservative churches are growing?* New York: Harper and Row.

Kelley, D. 1978. Why conservative churches are still growing. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17 (2):165–72. doi: 10.2307/1386160.

Liu, W. T., and R. W. Duff. 1972. The strength of weak ties. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (3):361–6. doi: 10.1086/268018.

Livio, O., and K. Tenenboim-Weinblatt. 2007. Discursive legitimation of a controversial technology: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women in Israel and the internet. *The Communication Review* 10 (1):29–56. doi: 10.1080/10714420601168467.

Malach, G., and L. Cahaner. 2020. *The yearbook of ultra-Orthodox society in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.

Malach, G., and L. Cahaner. 2022. *The yearbook of ultra-Orthodox society in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.

Neriya-Ben Shahar, R. 2017. Negotiating agency: Amish and ultra-Orthodox women's responses to new media. *New Media & Society* 19 (1):81–95. doi: 10.1177/1461444816649920.

Putnam, R. D. 1995. Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1):65–78. doi: 10.1353/jod.1995.0002.

Rashi, T. 2013. The kosher cell phone in ultra-Orthodox society: A technological ghetto within the global village? In *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media Worlds*, ed. H. Campbell, 173–81. New York: Routledge.

Rosenberg, H., M. Blondheim, and E. Katz. 2019. It's the text, stupid! Mobile phones, religious communities, and the silent threat of text messages. *New Media & Society* 21 (11–12):2325–46. doi: 10.1177/1461444819846054.

Rosenberg, H., and T. Rashi. 2015. Pashkevillim in campaigns against new media: What can pashkevillim accomplish that newspapers cannot? In *Digital Judaism: Jewish negotiations with digital media and culture*, ed. H. Campbell, 161–82. London: Routledge.

Samet, M. 2005. *New if forbidden from the Torah: Chapters in the history of Orthodoxy* (in Hebrew). Jerusalem: Carmel Publishers.

Schejter, A., and N. Tirosh. 2016. *A justice-based approach for new media policy: In the paths of righteousness*. London: Palgrave-MacMillan.

Sen, A. 1979. Equality of what? In *Tanner lectures on human values*, Vol. I, ed. S. M. McMurring, 195–220. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A. 1993. Markets and freedoms: Achievements and limitations of the market mechanism in promoting individual freedoms. *Oxford Economic Papers* 45 (4):519–41. doi: 10.1093/oxfordjournals.oep.a042106.

Sen, A. 2004. Capabilities, lists, and public reason: Continuing the conversation. *Feminist Economics* 10 (3):77–80. doi: 10.1080/1354570042000315163.

Sen, A. 2005. Human rights and capabilities. *Journal of Human Development* 6 (2):151–66. doi: 10.1080/14649880500120491.

Strauss, A., and J. M. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

van Deursen, A. J. A. M., and J. A. G. M. van Dijk. 2014. The digital divide shifts to differences in usage. *New Media & Society* 16 (3):507–26. doi: 10.1177/1461444813487959.

van Deursen, A. J. A. M., and J. A. G. M. van Dijk. 2015. Toward a multifaceted model of internet access for understanding digital divides: An empirical investigation. *The Information Society* 31 (5):379–91. doi: 10.1080/01972243.2015.1069770.

Wyatt, S., F. Henwood, A. Hart, and J. Smith. 2005. Digital divide, health information and everyday life. *New Media & Society* 7 (2):199–218. doi: 10.1177/1461444805050747.