

**University of Haifa
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Preliminary Doctoral Research Proposal

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Identity Construction on Student Organizations' Social Networks:

Hillel's Social Media Activity on Jewish Campuses in the US

הבניית זהות ברשתות החברתיות בקרב ארגוני סטודנטים:

המדיה החברתית הדיגיטלית בארגון הלל בארה"ב

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Objectives and Research Question(s): This study aims to examine the ways in which student organizations construct identity by way of online social media. Specifically, its umbrella question asks: *How do student organizations construct, affirm and mediate identity through online social media?* To address this query, the proposed research case studies the social media activity of Hillel Jewish student centers in the US. Accordingly, the work seeks to document and unveil the corpus of meanings embedded in social network posts. Within social networks, special attention will be given to visual aspects, identity work enacted by social media webmasters and the interpretive gaze of Jewish students who incorporate religious and national schemes into their personal epistemology. Expanding on these themes, the study proposes the following subqueries: (1) What are the creeds (e.g. religious, professional, national) and worldviews of webmasters, and how do these ideals shape online workers' media activity in their identity work? (2) How are identity narratives constituted and transmitted through the visual discourse of Jewish student organizations' social media in the US? (3) How is Jewish identity understood and negotiated by users of student organizations' social media?

Background: In recent years, the widespread adoption of social networks has disrupted how identities are represented, particularly among minority groups in societies characterized by significant cultural diversity. Accordingly, identity representation is challenged by ongoing tensions between particularism and universalism. This tension is notably pronounced for students as they disengage from the nuclear family and primordial surroundings to pursue academic learning and campus life. Scholars underscore the American college experience as stimulating students' identity introspection and formation of identity as a liminal space where youngsters interact with peers of diverse cultures, backgrounds and beliefs (Schwartz, Côté & Arnett, 2005). Among contemporary young adults, online social networks have become a central activity (Fernández-de-Castro et. al., 2023; Levine & Dean, 2012; Mesch & Talmud, 2020; Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Tapscott, 1998). Given youngsters' avid engagement with social media, educational organizations (formal schooling and informal civil society institutions) continually work online to accentuate identities that match their primordial, ideological or religious creed (Chakim, 2022; Golan & Don, 2022), thus employing new media's growing role in free-choice or informal learning (Kross et al., 2021; Marler & Hargittai, 2023). Working within a competitive online identity

marketplace, this study focuses on the digital campus experience of Jewish American students and examines the ways that student organizations negotiate identity building via online outlets.

American Jewry is characterized by large participation rates in higher education institutions. Most Jewish high school graduates attend college and about half of the Jewish graduates continue their studies for an advanced degree (Koren et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016). However, while universities are driven by a universalist ethos that highlights academic achievements and a broad American identity, minority groups, including Jewish variants, struggle to crystallize their distinct identity. An identity that is challenged by multiple affiliations (Alper et al., 2022; Rosner, 2011; Sarna, 2004;). Accordingly, Jewish students view themselves through a fused definition of integrated religion and ethnicity (Kushner, 2009). Exploring Jewish-American identity, Cousens (2007) emphasizes the diverse religious classifications associated with students who identify themselves as Jewish. These classifications go beyond the orthodox/progressive split to include agnostic or atheist, not affiliated, as well as dual affiliations between Jewish and other faiths.

Within this multifaceted public, Jewish educational organizations strive to highlight various elements of Jewish identity (e.g. religious, social, cultural). In this context, the largest presence in US universities is that of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, which boasts over 550 centers spread out on American campuses and over 800 worldwide (Hillel International, 2023; Sales & Saxe, 2006). Hillel has become a central education agency for outreaching and engaging Jewish students. Thus, as this research aims to explore the overt and tacit identity work implemented in informal student organizations, I contend that Hillel and its online activity (webpages, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok videos) serves as an effective case study for examining identity construction on the internet.

The concept of "identity" has been employed in multiple ways and can be classified by four paradigmatic approaches: bio-psychological; role-identity theory; post-structuralist; and symbolic interactionism. The bio-psychological approach highlights an essentialist gaze that views identity as an outcome of physical growth (mostly discussed in puberty) and psychological maturation (Erikson, 1968; Kahane, 1997). Role-identity accentuates the impact of socially prescribed positions and scripts on individual behavior and self-perception (Biddle, 1979; Stryker & Statham, 1985). Post-structuralists

either deny the existence of selfhood or offer a liquid view of identity that is constantly reshaped and avoids a cohesive self-narration (Foucault, 2011; Tseëlon, 1992). Overall, the bio-psychological and role-identity paradigms highlight external and predetermined forces that shape identity and post-structuralists reify the driving forces of society (such as language) or denounce them as compatible with an inconsistent and ever-changing self. In contrast, I contend that symbolic interactionism offers an approach that is more fitting for understanding identity formation over online tracts as it negotiates human agency with social structure to identify contingent identity narratives. Symbolic interaction theory proposes that an individual's sense of "self" is made up of numerous identities that are continuously modified through the events and contingencies of social interactions. Some interpretations of this viewpoint suggest that these identities exist apart from the central self, while others characterize the self as an "encompassing identity" that incorporates various situational identities (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934).

Methodology: The research will involve a three-pronged design. To address the first subquestion, the study will draw upon 25 in-depth Zoom interviews with Hillel webmasters who manage social media accounts. To this effect, initial contacts have been made with leaders in managerial positions at Hillel and a snowball sampling process has been enacted to identify potential interviewees. Interview questions will discuss the webmasters' background (with particular attention to Jewish lifestyle, culture, and education), worldviews, creed and online activity in their capacity at Hillel and beyond.

The second undertaking will focus on visual content (photos and videos), inserted image captions, as well as user comments from the Instagram accounts of prominent Hillel centers. This online corpus will be supplemented by other Hillel online outlets such as webpages, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok videos. Through this semiotic and unobtrusive analysis, the study aims to uncover identity narratives that are embedded in these targeted social media outlets.

Addressing the third subquestion, I intend to develop a think-aloud procedure in which Hillel students will be asked to comment on select images from Hillel's Instagram feed that represent key identity narratives (identified in the previous section). In addition, the respondents will be asked to discuss their impressions and positions towards their own postings on the feed or with Hillel hashtags. Student

responses will shed light on how a Jewish identity is negotiated through the ongoing exposure to representations of Jewish life on campus, as well as the ways that social capital is established and maintained by these online images and user participation.

Background and supportive information will be gathered through ethnographic field analysis of Hillel's annual events and visits to Hillel Campus centers in the US. Visits will include meetings and informal conversations with professors and students who are active in Hillel and its online outlets. Moreover, efforts will be made to collect documents pertaining to Hillel's outreach efforts including its press, distributed pamphlets and giveaways, as well as meeting protocols (if attainable), with special attention to meeting protocols on media policy.

All three subsections will be coded and analyzed with Dedoose qualitative research software in line with the principles set forth by Glaser & Strauss (1967). Coded data will be discussed and compared to past literature on Jewish identity construction.

Research Significance: The study offers contributions to fields of digital religion, online community building, lived Judaism, visual exchange and more. However, for brevity, I would like to emphasize three aspects of cultural and educational merit:

Students' Online Cultures - Scholars have often emphasized students' activity as either expressive and occasionally hedonistic (Alon, 1986; Taub, 1997), or as professional and goal-oriented (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Nevertheless, this study seeks to shed light on the informal activity of young adults in higher education and explore contemporary venues that feed their identity socialization.

Online (visual) Activity of Voluntary Organizations - While organizational activity is often evaluated according to economic or behavioral criteria, this work will shed light on online strategies that are initiated by voluntary organizations, in their attempt to augment social mobilization, crowd participation and garner trust towards the organization and its creed, while emphasizing the visual aspects that are employed for these purposes.

American Jewry and Higher Education - The research will shed light on Jewish community leadership's actions to counter processes of secularization and assimilation that threaten Jewish identity amongst

students in higher education. Unlike studies that emphasize the contribution of the Jewish community, and its philanthropic organizations, to the development of formal studies (i.e. Jewish and Israel studies) (Koren et al., 2016), this research will elucidate informal socialization channels which the communities foster within the American academia to ensure cultural reproduction, the development of young leadership and the cultivation of community boundaries.

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