



# Facing the shaikh: Sufi authority through self-representation in Halveti Facebook communities

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## Abstract

This paper explores the self-representation of Sufi shaikhs on Facebook in establishing their authority over communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study investigates the created self-image of shaikhs as online authorities through their social media activities and content, using the example of the Halveti Order in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. As the Halvetis in Southeast Europe are not organised under an umbrella organisation, individual accounts of shaikhs and collective accounts of the local communities are analysed as means of self-representation. The produced content highlights various aspects of the shaikhs' self-understanding and mission, referring among other things to the orders' history, as well as to (religious-)political issues. The analysis of this content also reveals different roles these leaders assume in the digital space, which are categorised analytically. This paper aims to decipher what the shaikhs' social media activities and content reveal about their self-image as online authorities, thereby contributing to an understanding of the impact of digital media on religious dynamics and communities. Methodologically, the study relies on online observations of Halveti shaikhs' accounts on Facebook. Facebook is chosen as the focal point, for it is the most widely used digital platform in the examined region.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the authority of Sufi shaikhs is established through direct, interpersonal interaction. With the rise and spread of internet usage, this authority has been extended into the digital realm. This is because Sufi groups, like many other religious groups, progressively use social media, despite some initial scepticism that the increased use of internet might be destructive to the (offline) communities (Cheong et al. 2009: 292; Milani/Possamai 2013; Pietrobruno 2018; Dudoignon 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, contact restrictions gave rise to social media use for the purpose of socialising with others (Dixon 2025). The pandemic did not necessarily result in significant alterations to the activities of religious groups, but rather accelerated pre-existing trends. Some Sufi shaikhs, for instance, adopted online platforms to facilitate rituals such as the *dhikr* prayer (Othman 2022). This transition reflects a continuity of

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“pandemic responses with pre-pandemic trends, as they unfold in accordance with pre-existing cosmologies, theologies, liturgies, and social hierarchies of presence” (Lorea et al. 2022), showing how Sufi leadership has adapted to the challenges and opportunities of the digital era.

This study concentrates on discursive strategies, i.e. actions and attributions, in social media to establish shaikhs as Sufi authorities online within traditionally offline communities. I draw on the conceptual framework of authority proposed in the introduction to this special issue (Kalender/El-Wereny/Nagel 2026), focusing on the structural context and sources of authority.

While previous research on online religious authority mainly focused on Christian communities (Cheong 2016, Campbell 2020), examining those religious leaders who have become prominent and highly visible online figures, studies of Sufi communities have shown that the internet fundamentally reshapes both authority relations and communal formations (Milani/Possamai 2013; Piraino 2016; Dudoignon 2020; Hidayati 2022; Rozehnal 2023). These works demonstrate that Sufi orders simultaneously transmit and transform rituals, teachings, and hierarchies in digital spaces.

Dudoignon (2020) highlights the dual dynamic of preservation and transformation of authority structures in “Cyber-Sufism,” whereas Hidayati (2022) illustrates the re-establishment of authority in digitally active but locally embedded milieus. In contrast, the present study addresses the Halveti Order in Southeast Europe, a community marked by centuries of local continuity and patterns of emigration rather than immigration (Clayer 2011). While a few shaikhs also use platforms such as YouTube or personal blogs, the Halveti community overall maintains a conservative-traditional practice. Its digital activities mostly observable on Facebook – suggest only a limited degree of transformation so far.

This distinct regional, historical, and socio-structural profile renders the Halveti order an exemplary case for investigating the persistence and adaptation of religious authority within a locally rooted and digitally circumspect milieu. Thus, it stands apart from migration- and digitisation-centred studies that focus on transnational, globally networked orders such as the Naqshbandi, Nimatullahi, or Inayati (Milani/Possamai 2013; Piraino 2016; Rozehnal 2023). By examining how Halveti shaikhs use Facebook to articulate authority within a localised and digitally cautious context, this study expands existing discussions of “Cyber-Sufism” beyond migration and global mobility, foregrounding the continuities of authority and locality in the digital sphere.

The research gap I refer to concerns the self-representation of various Sufi shaikhs – even those less popular. This gap is tackled by the main research question: What do the shaikhs’ social media activities and content reveal about their self-image as online authorities? I will show that different shaikhs exhibit varying degrees of effort or success in establishing authority online, reflecting diverse strategies and self-perceptions in the digital space.

Due to practical research reasons, only the accounts and pages of shaikhs and their local Sufi groups are considered, as they are more meaningful than other pages. Although authority only emerges in relation to others, this study does not analyse interactions with other Facebook

users. The focus is also set on shaikhs because they can be recognised by their title or description.

This research aims to answer two subordinate questions: First, what authority strategies and sources do shaikhs utilise in their social media content? For instance, do they refer to the group's history and collective memory, or do they guide religious practices based on their personal knowledge and experience? Second, which role do shaikhs, as heads of their local groups, play on social media? Are they a focal point or do they tend to keep a low profile online?

In order to answer these questions, I first outline why shaikhs can be understood as Sufi authorities, even on the internet, before giving methodological remarks on how to research social media usage in Southeast Europe through online observations. Focusing on the Halveti order, I provide an overview of its history in the focus region and the presentation of the shaikhs on Facebook. After the overview, I analyse the shaikhs' Facebook activities. The results, which stem from the content communicated on the considered accounts, reveal the shaikhs' strategies and resources, allowing me to categorise the shaikhs' self-representation based on their communication styles. Thus, the findings of this study also give insight into the digital literacy of the examined Sufi actors.

## 2. Sufi authorities going online

Following Green's approach, I consider Sufi orders as a "tradition of powerful knowledge, practices and persons" (Green 2012: 3) to make them historically accessible and to capture their complexity, highlighting the teacher-disciple relationship as a central feature of Sufism.

However, although Sufi orders are hierarchically structured, there "is no single, universal system of institutional authority in Sufism" (Rozeňnal 2023: 156). This assertion aligns with the general observation that authorities are formed through the negotiation of various "centres of power" (Horsfield 2016: 64). In this context, according to Horsfield, media is used to establish an individual as an authority figure as well as for the construction and maintenance of a hegemonic worldview in which that authority is perceived as legitimate.

Sufi authority is negotiated between the interplay of these power centres. This definition highlights a leader-determined transmission of knowledge and practices as well as multigenerational cultural re-production. Furthermore, the synchronic teacher-disciple relationship forms a cross-generational series from a diachronic perspective, which can be traced back to Muhammad (570–632), considered the last prophet, and which is a group-forming reference to the past. Another category of authority to be considered is *text* (Hidayati 2022: 211). This refers primarily to Qur'an as the main written source in Islam. It also includes the hadith, which is the oldest canonised interpretation of the Qur'an, which contains assertions about Muhammad's deeds that have normative autonomy according to the Islamic perception. The writings of several Sufis such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) or Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273) can also be regarded as authority texts. Thus, *knowledge* may be considered

a text-related expertise in the sense of recitation and interpretation. Consequently, shaikhs as Sufi leaders are not the ultimate authorities, rather one authority for a specific group – traditionally a local community.

Shaikhs as local authorities also maintain their community by transcending time, generations and borders. To construct their authority and to foster receptive groups, the shaikhs tie countervailing features of Sufi orders to discursive strategies. Some strategies are obvious: interpreting Qur'an verses and quotes of former Sufi masters, showcasing theological knowledge and expertise, or presenting the groups' history as collective memory. Hence, it seems reasonable to include some of the sources of authority that the editors outline in this volume's introduction (Kalender/El-Wereny/Nagel 2026).

The description *community* implies an equality among the members contrary to the hierarchical structures. The terms "brotherhoods" or "fraternity" especially suggest a certain degree of equality (Geoffroy et al. 2012). But due to the hierarchy, this idea relates mainly to members that form a hierarchy below a shaikh, although even those can be differentiated by their initiation or special tasks (Trajanovski 2018: 145).

Concerning the utilisation of the internet, Rozehnal's findings provide insights into the distinction between leadership and authority. As there is no single institutionalised authority among Sufis, he posits that "each Sufi order ultimately makes its own decisions about if, when, and how to engage digital media" (Rozehnal 2023: 156). Moreover, the case of the Halveti order in Southeast Europe, which is not structured within a cross-border umbrella organisation, demonstrates that each local group operates independently, despite their historical connections. Furthermore, Rozehnal shows how Sufi shaikhs as group leaders may become online authorities by determining which content is shared:

“ In practice, the style and content of Sufi web pages and social media are typically shaped by a community's living Sufi master, often in consultation with senior disciples and technophile (usually younger) webmasters. Regardless of background and biography, it is the individual Sufi teacher who ultimately charts the course for his/her community, navigating between the boundaries of the digital and analog worlds. (Rozehnal 2023: 156–157)

The utilisation of the internet, and in particular social media, enables Sufi shaikhs to expand the reach of their work if they proactively engage with new platforms (Hidayati 2022: 231). A study about pastors on Twitter revealed five strategies of how they establish religious brandings in order to become a successful key agent in social media (Cheong 2016: 89–96):

- Turning their name into a brand by using engaging bio descriptions and/or creating an appealing, meaningful neologism for their username,
- Marketing of their own products through strategical micro-blogging, cross-posting, tagging colleagues and referencing other users by name-dropping,

- Posting to engage their community, facilitating social interactions at events such as prayers and rituals that took place locally before the pandemic,
- Posting behind the scenes reports about their physical and emotional work, their family life and travels, which signals approachability,
- Incorporating quotes from renowned religious figures and their subsequent interpretation in brief sermons to achieve pedagogical objectives.

These strategies can also be identified among proactive Halveti shaikhs on Facebook. However, it is a fallacy to assume that all Sufi leaders with a social media account become prominent online figures or try to grow their religious authority through online platforms. To begin, not all shaikhs have social media, and those that do may not actively use it for religious matters. They may use social media for private reasons or to prevent a void being created that someone without official legitimacy can fill and establish themselves as an alternative authority.

In general, it is hardly possible to prevent such a case or to stop non-legitimised others from producing unchecked content due to the democratic functionalities of these platforms: religious leaders and their groups' members have the same possibilities and rights (Pietrobruno 2018: 525). Shaikhs are not privileged in social media due to their religious role, but equal to members on these platforms. In addition, equality in social media is guaranteed as platforms allow "interpersonal religious interaction with others" (Cheong et al. 2009: 292). Thus, when members do not question the shaikhs' online authority through alternative accounts or challenging posts in the groups, they respect and maintain the transfer of the shaikhs on-site authority to social media. This can also be considered a sign of clear and strong order structures, at least on the local level (Piraino 2016: 101).

The increasing emergence of online religious authorities during the pandemic, including those not officially recognised, was a noteworthy occurrence. They emerged mainly due to the loss of face-to-face contact between religious leaders and their group members and the need for other types of social contact if the religious leaders did not fulfil members' needs in this new and challenging situation. In the literature, this development is coined as *Sufism online* and *online Sufism*. While the first phrase means centralised sharing of traditional content such as information about the order and events, the second phrase emphasises the decentralised dissemination of information about the religion by members (Dudoignon 2020: 409–410). Pre-pandemic studies showed that popular internet presences, either as *online Sufism* or *Sufism online*, are attributable to relatively young followers who are receptive to certain formats which expand the order (Piraino 2016: 100). Furthermore, *Sufism online* is fostered by fluid structures of an order (Piraino 2016: 101).

This study examines only the accounts of the local communities and their shaikhs and thus neglects *online Sufism*, namely content production by users who are not also legitimate offline authorities. The category *online Sufism* should though be considered in the analysis due to the lack of a control instance, such as a cross-border umbrella organisation. Theoretically,

independent shaikhs can randomly consume and share on social media platforms whatever content they like and think fits into their worldview. Hence, they may merge several discourses and even contradictory content (Pietrobruno 2018: 523–537). Moreover, shaikhs may distribute content to maintain and construct themselves as online authorities, utilising, for instance, the abovementioned characteristics and sources.

According to my observations, the shaikhs primarily address their local communities as target groups on social media. Especially during the pandemic, they focussed on local groups to address challenges such as the lack of face-to-face contact. This is evidenced by the use of the local language rather than a global language; the presence of shared images depicting either the shaikhs, members of the local communities, or the lodges (so-called *tekkes*) and mausoleums (so-called *türbes*); as well as the emphasis on local history, which is often framed as the culmination of the historical trajectory of Islam in general or the order in particular. As the shaikhs are free to choose and present which issues they communicate online, they might also embody several types of online authority.

Furthermore, the members of the main target group – those from the analogue pre-COVID community who also use Facebook – remember the analogue community because of their shared offline experiences, probably hoping for a reunion soon. Considering these changes during the pandemic, increased social media use could symbolise the continuation of previously in-person activities. However, through online activities, Sufi orders may attract further people, whether it be members from other local groups, previous local members settled abroad, non-Sufi Muslims, or even non-Muslims that have friendly connections to the shaikh or the group.

### 3. Considering social media in Southeast Europe as a research source

The use of social media demonstrates the increasing role of information and communication technologies as a crucial part of social life. Even Sufi agents using social media platforms have deeply connected social media with religious practices. Among them, shaikhs, dervishes, sympathisers, orders, and umbrella organisations are individual and collective actors that should be considered.

The survey of the Balkan Investigative Research Network (Jeremic/Stojanovic 2021) and the annual reports of DataReportal give an overview of the use of social media in Southeast Europe. In the region, the most used social media platform is Facebook (Jeremic/Stojanovic 2021). DataReportal also offers data about the use of Facebook Messenger, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter. In North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, the second and third most popular social media platforms were Facebook Messenger and Instagram by the end of the pandemic (Kemp 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Twitter is not used by more than 5 percent of people in these countries and thus is used even less than the business-oriented platform LinkedIn.

In this case study, I examine Facebook accounts of local Halveti communities that are collectives and those that are led by individual shaikhs from North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo. On

Facebook, such as on many other social media platforms, users can cross-post entries from other platforms such as YouTube or blogs, an action that is rarely done in the reverse. Hence, the investigation of Facebook posts is triangulated by these cross-posts. I do not consider Facebook Messenger due to the private settings that are implied in such a platform where individuals share information in private. Twitter will also not be considered due to its limited popularity in these countries. Furthermore, the few entries on Halvetis on Twitter are mainly from Turkey, i.e. outside of the chosen research area, and rarely refer to the post-socialist region.<sup>1</sup>

The collection of data on social media platforms is challenged by ethical and technical issues. Ethically, the collection is mainly determined by the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) (Schulz/Hennis-Plaesschaer 2016). This regulation differentiates between “personal data” (Art. 6) and “special categories of personal data” (Art. 9). The latter category includes information about someone’s “racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs”. This clause refers to the data that this study is investigating. Although the *GDPR* prohibits collecting and processing of this data (Art. 9, par. 1), there are three legitimate ways to do so. First, informed consent allows the processing of even sensitive data types (Art. 13 GDPR). Secondly, data can be processed by pseudonymisation (Art. 5 par. 5 GDPR). Finally, irreversible anonymisation enables data processing, for there are no longer any personal references.

The ethical issues influence the technical side of data collection directly: The anonymisation generates a technical challenge for data collection in social media due to the academic principle of intersubjective comprehensibility. For instance, screenshots can rarely be anonymised sufficiently to fit this standard.

In addition to the legal challenges, ethical research must weigh which information social media users want to share publicly and which privately. Facebook and other social media should be considered private sites due to the registration barrier. Nevertheless, according to a decision from a United States court that has “examined Facebook’s privacy policy [...] individuals have no reasonable expectation of privacy in information they post” (Moreno et al. 2013: 710). However, studies have shown that religion and religious issues discussed in online boards are considered private, especially when users register under pseudonyms (Neumaier 2016: 457–459). Thus, the use of clear names, including religious titles, or pseudonyms must be considered as a further sign of users’ awareness of sharing information in a public versus private space.

Therefore, I collected data by observing several Halveti Sufi accounts on Facebook with public settings while taking only paraphrased notes. These notes refer to the local groups and discussed issues and include general observations about the actors’ activities. Considering ethical standards regarding processing public and private data in research (Kozinets 2020: 197–198), I protect user rights and preserve a certain degree of anonymity which is generally difficult to guarantee with

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<sup>1</sup> The data from Twitter has been collected with the free Google Sheet template tool TAGS since 05 December 2020, using the search term “halveti”. The results include tweets referring to the Halveti Sufi Order, and exclude tweets from users having “halveti” in their name.

small samples. Although this documentation style is not standard in the *netnography* approach as an internet-based equivalent to ethnography (Kozinets 2020: 236–239, 290–292), this style of investigating corresponds to rather traditional field research methods such as observing and taking field notes. Moreover, by integrating insights from field research, I question the strict distinction between field research on site and digital research in social media. Hence, I adopt Klausner’s *more-than-digital-field* concept, which frames digitality as a wide range of expressive forms, techniques, and technologies that are in constant transition and entanglement with the analogue world (Klausner/Eckert 2023: 5).

The time frame of this study focuses on the first twenty months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020–October 2021). This period introduces an increased use of social media due to several of the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus in which people were forced to limit personal encounters with other community members. However, the period also covers a kind of adaptation to the new circumstances, i.e. living with the virus, but without further state restrictions. For example, although Muslims in Southeast Europe found “marking another Ramadan under COVID restrictions difficult,” in the second year of the pandemic (Buyuk/Isufi 2021), most of them gathered having taken into consideration the current conditions and warnings (Buyuk/Marusic/Bami 2021).

#### 4. Halvetis in Southeast Europe

The Halveti Sufi order is a well-researched group. However, the existing research mainly focuses on the order’s history, as illustrated by the studies of scholars from Southeast Europe. They either compare the distribution of Halvetis in the Balkans with other Sufi orders, or they offer case studies about the historical changes of the Halvetis within a specific region or state (Izeti 2008; Palikruševa 2013; Türk 2015; Dobruna 2017). Only single empirical studies exist that refer to contemporary local Halveti groups, their relations to the non-Sufi Muslim community (Endresen 2017), or groups’ internal negotiations of legitimate shaikh positions (Trajanovski 2018; Bria 2019).

The order emerged in present-day Azerbaijan with its name deriving from the Arabic term *khalva*, meaning retreat (to prayer) (Curry 2010: 37, 60). During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Halvetis became a Sunna-conformist community with close connections to Ottoman politics. At that time, the order has also spread in Southeast Europe (Clayer 1994). The Halvetis were one of the most influential Sufi orders in the Ottoman Empire and have remained so in Southeast Europe through today (Clayer 2011).

However, the Halvetis have been influenced by political changes such as all Sufi orders. During the formation of nation states and the establishment of socialist systems, religion was generally suppressed or banned, and Sufi communities, in particular, were marginalised; they almost disappeared. The reduction in their numbers, however, is no reason to consider Sufi groups as religious minorities, which as a political concept focuses on the quality of relationships rather than the quantity of members (Stausberg/van der Haven/Baffelli 2023). This is mainly because Sufi

communities have rarely been explicitly targeted for marginalisation but instead targeted as Muslims, for within predominantly Christian states, they fit even less into the image of Christian heritage that is instrumentalised in nation-building (Clayer/Bougarel 2017: 153).

In addition to religious-political decisions, which includes the infrastructures and privileges of Muslim communities, in general, and Sufi orders, in particular, emigration also contributed to the marginalisation of Muslims. Yugoslavia, for instance, made an agreement with Turkey in the 1950s that led many Muslims to emigrate to Turkey which in turn heightened the marginalisation of Muslims, including Sufi orders (Clayer/Bougarel 2017: 133). The emigrations of so-called *Gastarbeiter* since the late 1960s to Western Germany may have also fostered marginalisation.

In the post-socialist period, Sufism experienced a revitalisation as Islam did generally (Elbasani/Roy 2015). There are, nevertheless, differences between the religious revivals of Islam and Sufi orders in the region. In Yugoslavia, the revival of Sufi orders started in the 1970s with the establishment of the Community of the Sublime Islamic Dervish Orders (Serbo-Croatian: *Zajednica Islamskih Derviških Redova Alije, ZIDRA*) in 1974 (Clayer/Bougarel 2017: 153). This organisation gathered Sufi orders from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo to represent their interests against the more dominant, non-Sufi Islamic Community (Serbo-Croatian: *Islamska Vjerska Zajednica*) with its centre in Sarajevo. In 1977, the Sufi orders in Bosnia-Herzegovina left *ZIDRA* and joined the newly established Sufi Centre (Serbo-Croatian: *Tarikatski Centar*) under the control of the Islamic Community. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Sufi orders in Macedonia also left *ZIDRA* becoming part of the Islamic Community based in Macedonia. In Albania, on the other hand, the revival could only start with the collapse of the socialist system as with all other religious communities (Endresen 2015; Bria 2019).

The Halveti order is neither cross-border nor nation-wide connected under an umbrella organisation. There are two possible reasons for that: First, the Halveti order is divided into different branches depending on their founders, such as Hayati, Jerrahi, Shabani, and Karabashi. Second, the order often is locally divided according to ethnicities such as Albanians, Turks, or Roma; Slavs are a rather marginalised group in the orders or do not even exist. However, not all local Halveti communities openly reveal their ethnicity or branch, either on social media platforms or during personal interactions, such as conversations or through information displayed on their buildings. Despite these reasons for separation, some local communities maintain contact with each other, especially when they are historically connected.

Nowadays, the Halveti order still exists “almost everywhere, but established most strongly” in (North) Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Geoffroy et al. 2012). However, the status and activities of the Halvetis and other Sufi orders in Bosnia-Herzegovina are indistinct due to the civil war (1992–1995) and the ethnic-based separation. Furthermore, some important shaikhs died in the last decades, leaving a gap in their communities. One of the latest studies mentions the Halvetis as a historically meaningful order, but highlights the Naqshbandi as the

most important contemporary order (Raudvere 2019). Consequently, I only focus on Albania, Kosovo, and (North) Macedonia.

In these countries, I also conducted field research between May 2016 and January 2020, which complement the present study. During this research, I observed that Halveti communities in the region are deeply embedded in local religious and social life. Their *tekkes* function not only as places of ritual practice but also as spaces of social cohesion. Authority within these communities is largely personal and relational: it is tied to the shaikh's reputation, lineage, and presence within the neighbourhood or village rather than to formal institutional structures, although Halvetis are Sunnis and therefore formally represented within national Islamic communities. Nevertheless, specific interests and traditions of the order are not necessarily articulated through these institutions. Such a situation only arises by chance when a shaikh is also a trained imam working within the official religious organisation. More relevant to the establishment of authority and structure are the existing networks of disciples, families, and local supporters that provide a stable offline framework within which digital activities have gradually gained importance. Consequently, Facebook functions as an extension of these established contexts, reinforcing rather than replacing traditional forms of authority and community.

As there is a lack of organisation on a national and cross-border level, only local groups are present on Facebook. During the investigation period, 15 local Halveti communities could be found on that social media platform: In North Macedonia, from Ohrid, Struga, Kičevo, Tetovo, Skopje, and two in Strumica; in Albania, from Tirana, Durrës, and the villages Hormova, Çërrila, and Eçmenik; and in Kosova, from Prizren, Rahovec, and Rugova.<sup>2</sup> Of these fifteen communities, eleven are registered under a collective Facebook group named after the location of the *tekke*. One of the groups is a closed one, so it is not considered in the present study due to the aforementioned ethical reasons. Another Facebook group was founded during the pandemic in February 2021 and thus proves the increasing significance of social media at that time. The rest of the local Halveti communities are represented by the shaikh's profile which is either private or official. Only one shaikh has a private and an official account. In addition to the collective Facebook groups, a few shaikhs use their own Facebook accounts to represent their communities.

However, there are some local Halveti communities in these countries that are neither visibly present on Facebook nor on any other social media platform. Some of them I met during my field research, for instance the group in Štip (North Macedonia), and others are mentioned in Facebook posts by other groups. Furthermore, some communities might be represented by their shaikhs whom I have not met yet. For instance, one shaikh in my sample conceals his connection to the order and his role. I could only identify him due to previous contacts. Some shaikhs who represent local groups on social media have migrated to other countries and supervise the groups

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the aforementioned data protection decision, I refrain from referring to specific Facebook accounts by sharing their URLs or account names.

most of the time remotely. In these cases, the geographical location of the community is considered for the analysis.

## 5. Establishing Halveti authority on Facebook?

As leaders of Sufi orders, shaikhs are traditionally regarded as authoritative figures within their communities. This authority is often legitimised through spiritual genealogy (*silsila*), which serves to establish their legitimacy within the Sufi tradition. In light of the long Halveti tradition, the diffusion of the shaikhs' authority on the internet and in social media can be considered a rather contemporary occurrence. It can be assumed that the shaikhs view themselves as authoritative figures in their non-digital environment. This raises the question of whether they perceive themselves the same way online and how their social media activities and contents reflect their self-representation. In the following, I will analyse the Facebook content in order to prove whether and how Halveti shaikhs establish themselves as authorities. The analysis starts with an overview of the content produced on Facebook in the investigated period, relating it to strategies and sources of authority. The online authority types of the shaikhs are then analysed based on their communication styles and the content they share.

### Content revealing authority strategies and sources

The Facebook posts of the abovementioned Halveti shaikhs and their groups cover a wide range of topics relating to religious and non-religious dimensions of the local groups. Some of these topics overlap regarding the authority sources elaborated by the editors of this special issue, which can be intermingled with the five strategies of Cheong (2016).

The posts on religious issues include proofs of Muslim and especially Sufi knowledge, such as quoting relevant texts. These include mainly Qur'anic verses, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali, and writings of prominent Sufi figures that are not necessarily Halvetis, like Rumi. In addition to the quotes, on some Facebook pages, thoughts about these references are offered in the form of sermons and teachings that are sometimes cross-posted from blogs (Cheong 2016: 96). For instance, one of the blogs quoted on Facebook is a private one of a theologically trained imam and shaikh, who is also a professor for Philosophy of Arts (Izeti 2019).

Similarly, life experiences and everyday wisdoms are shared on the examined pages. These refer, for example, to the distinction between real and false friends or to good behaviour. These issues can be considered ethical. However, not all of them are connected to an Islamic source. Hence, they could also be identified as non-religious posts, although communicated by a religious account.

Further religious posts refer to fixed-termed occasions of the Muslim calendar. They include information about feasts, such as Bayram and Ramadan, and prayer times. These posts emphasise the Islamic tradition to which the Halvetis belong. This category of content relates to the authority source of *collective memory* because these events nurture the cross-generational community. In addition, short prayers and blessings are posted on such days. This may serve as a

means for the shaikh to engage the community, to provide background insights into their everyday life or to show-up as a role-model in challenging times (Cheong 2016: 94–95). Prayers are only considered a sign of expertise or reference to the collective memory if they are derived from a traditional text source. Individual prayers, however, can indicate wisdom, life experience or charisma. The same applies to festive greetings.

Likewise, reports on the shaikhs' activities and personal life can be considered under the authority sources of life experience or, even more so, charisma. For instance, evidence of the shaikhs' personal experience contributes to the attempt to become affable for followers, which is a sign of charisma. These include photos of meetings between shaikhs of different local groups or orders and between shaikhs and visitors, may they be members of the orders, sympathisers, or tourists. This kind of background information can also be combined with the authority building strategy of tagging the people which the shaikhs met (Cheong 2016: 92–93).

Further reports document gatherings of communities during a feast, a *dhikr* called group prayer, or rituals, in photos and videos. Although these posts include personal memories and thoughts, they must be interpreted as primarily aiming to signal the shaikhs' public accessibility through these group activities. At the same time, these posts refer to collective memory as an authority source because the shaikhs demonstrate that they are able to connect their own lives with the traditional religious practice. This is supported by further entries about the history of the *tekkes* and the death and funerals of past shaikhs, as well as the proclamation of new shaikhs who guarantee the future of the community. This is a way to announce their legitimacy in public.

As for the establishment of legitimacy through collective memory, historical relationships between the different local Sufi communities are sometimes described in the info boxes. These can overlap with contemporary connections. In addition to the info box, posts are used to emphasise solidarity bonds and to negotiate power positions. A group from Kosovo, for instance, showed solidarity with the group in Tirana by posting about the destruction of the wall around the *tekke* by the municipality of Tirana in 2020 (ResPublica 2020). The municipality legitimised its action by claiming the construction of the *tekke* did not receive proper permission.

Closely linked to inner Halveti network relationships, several posts explicitly point out the relation of the local Halveti group to the non-Sufi Muslims, i.e. the national Islamic Communities. The agents from two rural Halveti groups in Albania have highlighted their subordination to the Muslim Community of Albania (Albanian: *Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë*) during the negotiation process regarding the leadership of Albania's Halvetis. In North Macedonia, some groups shared information about the new leader of the Islamic Faith Community (Macedonian: *Islamska verska Zaednica*) and demonstrated their loyalty by visiting him. This case, too, is connected to a religiopolitical negotiation process after the previous leader had been dismissed for several controversial activities and statements (Marusic 2020). These posts refer to the authority source of social position either because they prove that the non-Sufi leaders

acknowledge the shaikhs who visited them or because it can be assumed that they acknowledge the shaikhs of the subordinate groups.

Furthermore, some accounts stress their ethnic or national affiliation and loyalty, which can also be seen as a strategy regarding the source of position. This applies less to North Macedonian politics, but rather to Albanian and Turkish politics, in which Roma groups also play a part. Another political topic during the investigation period was COVID-19 given the state restrictions and permissions that influenced religious life. With respect to the pandemic, some groups and shaikhs signalled their competence with photos of disinfection measures or by offering visitors masks. Others shared information about medicines to cure any disease, including COVID-19. Moreover, the pandemic has been interpreted from a religious perspective: Some have emphasised the opportunity for Sufi retreats during the lockdown, while others have asserted that praying can serve as a form of protection against the virus. These messages relate to the source of wisdom, although they are related to medicine and not originally to religion. This constitutes an additional benefit for shaikhs, particularly given their association with the capacity to heal, which can also be considered a divine gift and thus becomes part of the charisma strategy.

Additionally, some shaikhs disclose personal information regarding their background, which can be interpreted as a means for religious leaders to humanise themselves (Cheong 2016: 99). For example, they share pictures of their family members and activities. Among the family members are mainly their grown-up children and grandchildren but also their wives and other relatives. The photographic evidence demonstrates that the subjects engaged in a range of activities, including commemorating anniversaries and other significant occasions, as well as participating in informal gatherings. Additionally, the images depict instances where the subjects achieved certain milestones, such as acquiring status symbols or completing works that they found commendable. This humanising strategy can be related again to the authority sources of charisma and social position illustrating the affability of shaikhs and the high value attributed to family. Similarly, shaikhs disseminate information about various products, like footwear sold by family members, which can be interpreted as well. Additionally, some shaikhs repost entertaining content, such as video clips or intriguing material from other Facebook accounts or social media platforms. The aforementioned private entries serve to illustrate the approachability of the orders' heads, which is difficult to assign to one of the authority sources.

However, some local groups and shaikhs refrain from sharing their views, choosing to remain silent. Based on my observations in the field, there are several reasons for this reluctance to engage with Facebook or the absence of a Facebook profile. First, the local group may be characterised by a general lack of activity due to the relatively low number of members caused by emigration, mainly to Turkey during socialist times or to EU countries or the USA after the socialist regimes collapsed. The reason for a low profile can secondly be attributed to the character of the shaikh, who may be a reserved and inconspicuous person inclined to avoid publicity. Thirdly, if there is no agreement about who the legitimate shaikh is, there might be little

online activity, meaning the conflict will not be played out in public. And fourthly, the shaikhs may be reacting to past or present social pressures by avoiding visibility in public so as not to become a target for attacks. Some of my interlocutors attribute such attacks to aggressive “Salafists” who consider Sufi orders as not part of the “true” Islam and thus believe they must be destroyed. As the case of Tirana has demonstrated, administrative issues can also lead to violent actions.

Two more factors may influence the absence from social media: As chief decision-maker, the shaikh may have a certain degree of aversion or scepticism towards such platforms, possibly due to his older age. However, the inactivity or absence on Facebook may also be attributed to the lack of “technophile (usually younger) webmasters” among active members (Rozehnal 2023: 156). In conclusion, while both an active and a deliberately limited or absent social-media presence can constitute a strategy, the reasons outlined above indicate that in some cases the term is not fully appropriate, as these patterns can result from structural or personal constraints rather than intentional planning.

### Categorising shaikhs on Facebook

Based on the outlined content, the shaikhs, who are presented as the most influential Halveti actors on Facebook by the considered collective and individual accounts, can be categorised. While a few rather passive accounts neglect the shaikhs, communities that are not active on Facebook overlook all members of the community, including their shaikhs. On Facebook, other roles within the Halveti hierarchy, such as dervishes, are not visible, as the focus is primarily on the shaikh. In field research, however, these roles were either evident or could be clarified through direct inquiry. In general, there are two mechanisms for ascertaining the shaikhs’ role: first, in the case of a collective account, the shaikh may be introduced in the info box or he may sign posts with his name. Additionally, some posts may share information about him and his activities. Second, the shaikhs have a private account, sometimes in addition to the official account of the *tekke*. A few of them, however, do not explicitly disclose their positions. Without additional fieldwork to get to know about their positions, investigating these shaikhs online is difficult, especially when the *tekke* communities do not have own accounts.

Hence, the shaikhs as decision-makers determine activity and communicated content on Facebook. Regarding their activities and public visibility, it is possible to identify a spectrum between active and passive shaikhs. Although this quantitative scale is not the focus of this study, I use this general distinction to differentiate between active and passive shaikh types. Additionally, I refer to the outlined content for further distinction. I thus delineate the Halveti shaikhs into three types: there are two active types, the intellectuals and the socialisers, and a rather passive third type, the quietists. For all these types further subtypes can be identified. However, as a pure type can rarely be found, the following categorisation just serves as an analysis tool.

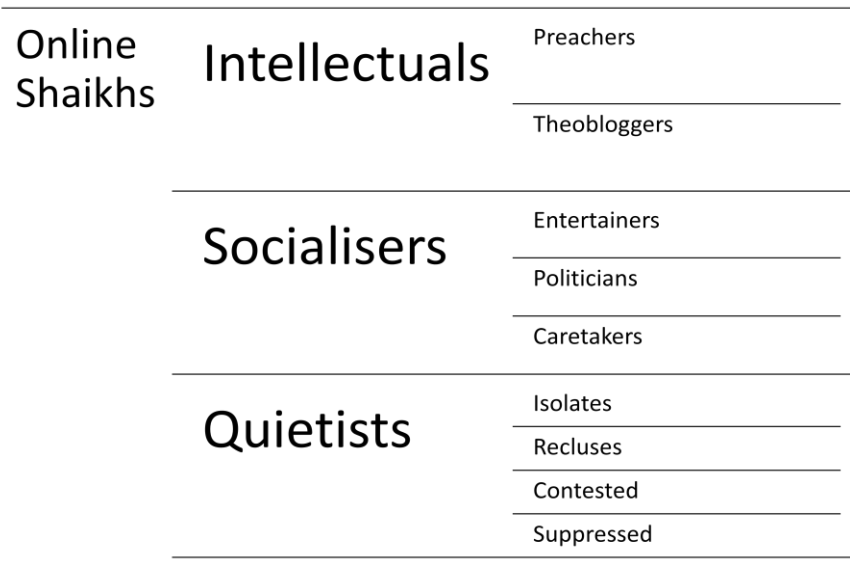


Figure 1: Overview of the types of shaikhs referring to their Facebook representation.

The *intellectuals* distinguish themselves by demonstrating their religious knowledge and wisdom in various forms. Some share their thoughts in the form of Friday sermons called *khutba* (Albanian *hytbja*); they can be characterised as the subtype *preacher*. One such shaikh in Kosovo publishes his weekly Friday sermons that he probably would give to the audience in the *tekke* if there were no COVID-19 restrictions. These posts start with the headline “The khoutba in the *tekke* of mmmmmm [...]” adding the name and place of the *tekke*, before interpreting some lines from the Qur’an. Each post ends with the date of the sermon, a complimentary close, the name of the shaikh, and the letters “BSH” meaning *bismi ’llāhi* (In the name of Allah). Others publish their thoughts about religious issues based on the Qur’an or the sayings of Sufi figures, including Muhammad and Ali. They publish more frequently and in shorter or longer posts and thus can be called *theobloggers*. This type is based on Campbell’s “theologians who blog”, referring to professional theologians using “internet to draw an audience around a particular religious topic or interpretive stance” (Campbell 2020: 137), in this case a Sufi perspective. An example for this category is a shaikh in North Macedonia, also a trained imam and professor for Philosophy of Arts, who writes, among other things, about art through the prism of Sufism and his recent publications, as well as cross-posts entries from his own blog and interviews from other channels or accounts on his Facebook accounts.

The second category *socialisers* is characterised by the sharing of content to demonstrate and maintain various relationships. Among them are *entertainers*, *politicians*, and *caretakers*. *Entertainers* share non-religious content they come across using several social media channels, i.e. the posts are not linked to Sufism but might be movie clips or some everyday wisdom. Such an entertainer is, for instance, the shaikh from a local group in North Macedonia where the Muslim population is relatively sparse. In sharing non-religious content, entertainer shaikhs maintain contact with their broader network using a humanising strategy. *Politicians* clearly communicate their political point of view with respect to conflicts within the order or within the

non-Sufi Muslim community. For instance, the shaikhs from two rural communities in Albania clearly communicated their subservience to the Muslim Community of Albania in order to gain its support within the negotiation process regarding the leadership among the Halvetis in Albania. *Caretakers* focus on the welfare of individuals and the group, especially during the pandemic, by advising or blessing with healing prayers or advice on how to stay healthy. In the investigation period, this was mainly connected to the ongoing pandemic. This subtype may merge easily with entertainers and politicians. Shaikhs that use their accounts for private and Sufi-related issues become entertaining caretakers when non-religious content is shared as a humanising strategy. For instance, sharing family pictures maintains family relations and entertains followers. In a humanising manner, they consequently engage in the formation of a relationship characterised by a low threshold, thereby indicating a flat hierarchy. Political caretakers, on the other hand, keep the groups together as their leaders show solidarity with other Halveti communities. The practice of group-thematization means posting photos of gatherings which can be engaged with by a broader collective due to several possibilities of interaction – sharing, liking, and commenting (Schreiber/Kramer 2016: 101–102). The solidarity act of sharing information about the destruction of a *tekke* wall in Tirana can be considered an act of a political caretaker.

The passive type of *quietists* is characterised by a low profile or by the absence of any Facebook account, either for the local group or for the shaikh himself. These shaikhs can be further differentiated into four subtypes: *isolates*, *recluses*, *contested* and *suppressed*. The *isolated* type's passivity is structurally influenced by emigration or demographic decline. An example for this subtype without any Facebook presence is the shaikh from Štip, who referred to the large number of members who have relocated to Turkey as a reason for the reduced level of activity. Others avoid publicity due to their modest and reserved character and can thus be described as *recluses*. For example, another Halveti leader in North Macedonia has a low private profile, not highlighting his hierarchical position. Based on my observations during field research, he is a rather reserved and inconspicuous person in general. He maintains contact within his community, but he does not promote his order or *tekke*. This applies to further shaikhs of local groups in North Macedonia and Albania that are rather passive on Facebook. Some of these do not even reveal their branches. The third subtype is the *contested*, whose limited activity reflects unresolved internal disagreements about legitimate leadership within a local community. Finally, there are the *suppressed*, who deliberately avoid public visibility in response to social pressure or out of fear of attacks from hostile groups. The shaikh of the community that has vanished from Facebook after his *tekke* was attacked is an illustration of the *suppressed*.

## 6. Résumé

This article has analysed the activities and contents of the Halveti Sufi order in Southeast Europe on Facebook focusing on the local shaikhs' self-representation as online authorities. Accordingly, I have examined individual accounts of shaikhs and collective accounts of local groups during the pandemic due to the increasing use of social media in this time. For the analysis, two aspects

were considered: the authority sources that are strategically deployed and the roles of the shaikhs as the local groups' leaders.

In conclusion, the examined accounts demonstrate the communication of both religious and non-religious content. Irrespective of whether the content can be considered religious or non-religious, the scrutinising of social media content demonstrates overlapping discourses, strategies and sources of authority which collectively contribute to the understanding of the shaikhs' self-image. However, the term *strategy* is contested due to its implication of a cautious and targeted utilisation of tools and content, a concept that some shaikhs and their groups do not appear to deliberately employ. Consequently, even successful social media accounts may not always operate strategically, but intuitively.

The five sources of authorities explicated by the editors are discernible within the posts of the shaikhs and local Sufi groups. The most obvious one is probably the source of expertise and knowledge, as the accounts quote and interpret significant theological texts. This source is linked with wisdom and life experiences as some of the knowledge distributed does not refer to religious sources. Another source of authority easy to use in social media is collective memory. These posts refer to the tradition which the group leaders keep alive and serve to legitimise the shaikhs. The socio-economic position as a source of authority is also used but mainly filled with non-religious content. Charisma is probably one of the most expected sources but is hard to identify. Indeed, all posts about shaikhs are akin to performances and self-presentations to create the picture of a well-educated, affable or wise shaikh. However, single posts are not easy to analyse as this source.

Moreover, various issues can be linked to different sources. Messages to pray for protection against COVID-19, for instance, can be read as knowledge or wisdom, but they also can be considered as charisma, if seen as a sign of the shaikh's ability to heal. Also, posts sharing personal experiences of the shaikh can be connected with life experience or collective memory, if connected with a religious event, as well as charisma. Content about family members can be part of the performed charisma in the sense of affability and sociability or as socio-economic position since family is a significant value in the states' societies.

The mix of religious and non-religious contents contribute to the shaikhs self-image. Do they want to be the distant authority that cares only about religious aspects or do they also want to share their private life, humanising themselves? As only a few of the analysed accounts belong to shaikhs that present themselves *and* the Halveti group, the shaikhs may consider themselves as both, private and professional in personal union.

Shaikhs as heads of the order stand mostly at the centre of their local Facebook groups. They are either the content producers or the ones that the posts focus on. As content producers determining the discourses, the shaikhs can be categorised as *intellectuals*, *socialisers*, or *quietists*. When they are the focus of posts, some shaikhs may have assistants for communication in the so-called virtual space (Rozehnal 2023: 156). This is due to the fact that some shaikhs may

lack the required social media competencies as a result of their older age, or they may be unable to dedicate the necessary time to transferring their input to Facebook. However, this may not apply to each shaikh or Sufi group. Nevertheless, this assistant role as part of the virtual community's hierarchy does not appear in the groups and remains speculative. But what does support this assumption is that additional hierarchical positions other than the shaikh's are also disregarded. Consequently, the process of digitalisation, or at the very least the utilisation of online communication, serves to reproduce the order's hierarchy in a more pronounced manner. This is evidenced by the fact that the shaikh is positioned as the sole authority figure, despite the potential afforded by social media for a more democratic form of participation.

The migration issue is more difficult to discover in this context. Whereas some shaikhs disclose through their account the fact that they moved abroad, it is not always obvious who of the local group members moved abroad and whether they remained with the original community or joined another Sufi group in their new homes. Independent of the migration issue, the Sufi orders can be considered as a minority in Southeast Europe. This is particularly the case in countries where Christianity is traditionally the dominant religion, as Sufi orders are an Islamic sub-group that are rarely overtly represented by official Islamic representatives. However, further field research is needed regarding the relationship between migrated shaikhs and the members of their groups in Southeast Europe, as well as between migrated members and shaikhs who remain in the region of their origins.

Similarly, more field research is required for a better understanding of groups that are invisible on social media platforms. Whether or not they aim to transfer their authority there too, can only be assumed. Clear answers would require a comparative study investigating the authority types of the shaikhs in on-site and online contexts.

Overall, considering the historical and political context maintains the analysis of the social media data. In order to interpret the observations, it is necessary to consider background information about socialist and current politics, as well as social interactions within a local community. This encompasses data gathered through field research, as on-site investigations enable researchers to gain insight into the actors involved and facilitate a more nuanced analysis by contextualising the data. Therefore, assumptions regarding social output are not mere speculation.

With respect to future investigations, this study also shows the limitations of social media research. Firstly, ethical issues complicate the collection and use of data and consequently the scientific standards of intersubjectively comprehensible transparency, as well as the verifiability of the entire research process. Second, the focus on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, ignores the use of more invisible social media, i.e. several messengers like WhatsApp, Viber, Signal, or video-call platforms like Zoom. Thirdly, as the researchers use social media, this may influence the communication, which must be reflected in the analysis. In this sense, field research complements social media research due to the researcher disclosing themselves for the purpose of transparency.

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