



Article

Utilizing information communication technologies (ICTs) during the process of disaffiliating from the ultra-Orthodox community

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Abstract

The ultra-Orthodox community is characterized by high levels of commitment to community and religion and insulation from the outside world. Leaving such a community resembles the process of migration, in which the individual encounters new cultures, norms, and behaviors. This presents challenges with integration and disaffiliated community members do indeed often lack the tools, skills, and knowledge to successfully integrate into their new societies. Through qualitative in-depth interviews, we examine the role of information communication technologies (ICTs) and media in the processes of disaffiliation from ultra-Orthodox communities. Findings reveal the enablers and constraints these individuals experience in their journey and shed light on the importance of media and ICTs in individuals' attempts to build new lives outside the ultra-Orthodox community. This study contributes to a better understanding of the role of media and ICTs in the lives of people undergoing major life changes, such as disaffiliation from the ultra-Orthodox community.

Keywords

Communication, digital media, disaffiliation, ICTs, religion, ultra-Orthodox

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Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been increasing evidence surrounding both the positive and negative effects that access to digital and social media can have on the lives of and opportunities for people who are experiencing major life stressors, e.g. the loss of a significant relationship, coming out as LGBTQ+, immigrating, adapting to a different socioeconomic class (Eden et al., 2020; Marciano et al., 2023), or disaffiliating from insular communities (Hookway and Habibis, 2015; Myers, 2017) such as the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community (Keller et al., 2024b). In particular, as most members of the ultra-Orthodox community refrain from using digital media (David and Baden, 2020; Shomron and David, 2024), many of those who grow up in the ultra-Orthodox community can be considered newcomers to the technological world and are accordingly often digitally illiterate, lacking knowledge about how to use digital media in a healthy way (Gentina and Chen, 2019).

A common practice for coping with major life stressors is to turn to social media (Alfasi, 2019; Eden et al., 2020; Wolfers and Schneider, 2021), and individuals grappling with such a significant stressor as disaffiliation from an ultra-Orthodox community are no exception. In this study, we found that many turned to social media for information and for coping with stress, with most considering social media a potentially positive form of engagement that gave them access to important coping mechanisms, such as social support, access to information, and, in some cases, even employment. Indeed, the analysis suggests that even prior to leaving their ultra-Orthodox communities, individuals used information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially digital media, to access forbidden information and learn about the everyday practices of other societies.

Literature review

Utilizing ICTs during the process of disaffiliation

ICTs can play a vital role in helping individuals learn and internalize the values and norms of a given society. The learning process often occurs by observing other people and imitating them (Akers and Jennings, 2015; Bandura, 1977). Indeed, young people often learn what should be achievable and how to achieve it by observing close environments (such as family and friends), their educational environment (including peers and teachers), culture (such as cinema and literature), and the media (both legacy and digital media). Thus, mediated communication can play a central role in shaping individuals' understanding of the world, beliefs, and behaviors.

When moving between societies with noticeably different norms, ethics, and rules, such as moving from a closed ultra-Orthodox community to an open secular society (Keller et al., 2024a), there is often a need for rapid learning, particularly among older teenagers and young adults, who are a more common group affected by disaffiliation. One possible central domain for such learning is legacy and digital media. Many of those who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community are in dire need of learning how to behave in the new society they have migrated to (Shomron and David, 2024; Keller et al., 2024a; Keller and Exline, 2025; Sender, 2024). This migration process often occurs

at the same time as being disconnected from their family and friends, and the socio-cultural knowledge they had learned and internalized from their ultra-Orthodox community tends not to be relevant to them anymore. Thus, finding themselves without social ties and community frameworks, they often turn to the only available sources of information: legacy and digital media.

Gathering information via the use of ICTs is a phenomenon with both positive and negative connotations. Among the positive aspects are easy access to information, affordability of technological devices and services, high levels of connectivity from most geographical locations, and freedom from community censorship. However, the negative components include the exposure of vulnerable individuals to fake information, misinformation, conspiracy theories, pseudo-scientific ideas, populist content, and hate (Alfasi, 2019; Keles et al., 2020; Krause et al., 2021).

Digital media and information

The past two decades have witnessed a rapid transformation in the information and communications worlds, with digital technologies becoming increasingly required for even the most basic social and societal functions. This technological transformation has also highlighted new challenges, including issues identifying how trustworthy or accurate information is. Moreover, this technological transition and its effect on information accuracy has been amplified by political and cultural movements around the world. While people who have grown up in digital societies arguably have some awareness of the challenges and risks of inaccurate information, those who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community often lack the most basic understanding of these issues (e.g. Shomron and David, 2024) and are, accordingly, highly susceptible to inaccurate and harmful information. In addition, most individuals who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community lack basic social support (e.g. family, friends, and colleagues), are not knowledgeable about the new society they are migrating to, and are digitally illiterate or unacquainted with social media platforms. Thus, they often resort to maladaptive rather than adaptive use of digital technologies (Gentina and Chen, 2019).

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish life and digital media

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism is characterized by high levels of commitment to community and religious rituals and high levels of insulation from other cultures and societies (Gull, 2022; McGraw et al., 2018; Myers, 2017). While highly observant of Jewish religious law, the ultra-Orthodox communities are distinguished from other Orthodox communities by their unique theological dogma and community practices emphasizing a distancing from the material world, gender separation, dress codes, and the matchmaking [*shidduch*] system. The majority of the ultra-Orthodox population operates as a self-contained socio-cultural microsystem that sustains the community and insulates it from secular cultural influences (Shomron and David, 2024; Friedman, 1991; Sender, 2024; Suzin, 2025). However, ultra-Orthodox communities remain highly dependent on general public funding for their financial existence (e.g. welfare, health insurance, tuition, and government subsidies).

Another integral part of this community's cultural isolation involves controlling their members' exposure to media content, often prohibiting access to any and all external media sources and technological devices that could enable such exposure (David and Baden, 2020; Sommerlad and David, 2022; Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2017). For example, half of all ultra-Orthodox women reported not using the Internet at all (Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2017), while only 31% of undergraduate ultra-Orthodox students who chose to study at a regular mixed Israeli university reported using social media (Kay and Levine, 2019). In addition, a recent survey conducted among a representative sample of the ultra-Orthodox community found that only 47.4% had Internet access at home and only 12.6% used social media (Shomron and David, 2024). By comparison, among the general Israeli population (including ultra-Orthodox), 90% had Internet access at home and 83% used social media (CBS, 2022; David and Baden, 2020; Sommerlad and David, 2022).

The case study: disaffiliating from ultra-Orthodox Judaism

The Jewish ultra-Orthodox community in Israel is an insular, devout group whose members oppose the use of most digital and social media. Despite this prohibition, however, some community members use these forbidden platforms and others even participate in other prohibited behaviors that do not align with ultra-Orthodox dogma. To date, there is no clear data on the number of people living "double lives" inside the ultra-Orthodox communities or on the number of people who have more actively declared their disaffiliation from the ultra-Orthodox community. Estimates of how many individuals take part in the more active phenomenon of disaffiliation in Israel vary, however, most studies suggest that between 6% (Mitchell, 2016) and 10% (Gordon and Regev, 2021) of all individuals born within the ultra-Orthodox community will disaffiliate each year. While there have been some studies on the disaffiliation phenomenon conducted in the United States, in Israel there is a notable lack of empirical research on the topic. Disaffiliated individuals are often characterized by significant challenges across various aspects of their lives, such as physical and mental health, employment and finances, and the loss of familial and social ties (Berger, 2015; Engelman, 2024; Levi-Belz and Yalon, 2023; Pinchas-Mizrachi and Velan, 2022). There is also a lack of empirical studies on the role of digital media and social media in the lives of people who have disaffiliated from ultra-Orthodoxy.

We concluded that the scientific literature to date is lacking in terms of studies into the role of media technologies in the lives of people who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community. Therefore, the main goal of this research is to be the first to investigate the experiences and self-perceptions of individuals who have disaffiliated from the ultra-Orthodox community in relation to their use of ICTs and particularly their utilization of digital media and social media in the process of integrating into their new societies. This investigation will contribute to a broader understanding of how digital and social media can be utilized for learning practices among people experiencing major life changes.

Research questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1). What roles do ICTs play in the process of disaffiliation from the ultra-Orthodox community?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). How do disaffiliated individuals utilize ICTs in their integration into their new society?

Methods

In order to investigate the roles ICTs play and how they are used by people who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious communities in Israel, we conducted 23 qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviewees were collected through snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981) and the nonprobability purposive sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016), in which the recruiting criteria goal was to identify individuals who grew up and lived in the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel but have since disaffiliated and are not part of these communities today. While the interviewees are originally from Israel, some of them currently reside in Europe or North America. All interviewees described themselves as disaffiliates from the three main groups of ultra-Orthodoxy (Litvak, Hasidic, and Sephardi), were raised ultra-Orthodox, and studied in the ultra-Orthodox education system (*Yeshiva/Seminar*). All participants were 18 or older and gave informed consent to be interviewed for this study.

Reflecting the complex and indefinite process of such a major life change, most of the interviewees could not point to a specific moment that they considered their “exit” from the ultra-Orthodox community. For many, it had been a long and arduous process lasting months and even years. Indeed, many of the interviewees did not feel comfortable dividing their feelings of belonging into the simple notions of inside versus outside the community. Yet, we deemed it beneficial to present the findings in this way to better represent the individuals’ experiences while feeling subjugated by community norms and regulations in comparison to their experiences when they no longer felt obligated or controlled by these norms and regulations. In the latter instances, our participants tended to report a sense of agency and autonomy that enable them to act in the world as they saw fit, though this should not be misinterpreted as a theological statement of any individual’s religious beliefs. In fact, some of the individuals who considered themselves disaffiliated from the ultra-Orthodox community still considered themselves religious to some degree, though with differing levels of devoutness.

The interviews were conducted on the Zoom video communications platform with interviews recorded (video and audio) and later transcribed. Most interviews lasted about 90 minutes, though some lasted longer, up to 3 hours. The study used the two-to-one technique (Fific and Gigerenzer, 2014) in which both authors conducted the interviews together. This method encourages a dual perspective, which often leads to better questioning and richer interviews that encompass more than one perspective on the studied phenomenon. In many cases, we also noticed that the interviewees connected emotionally better with one of the interviewers than the other, possibly due to their personality or “vibe”, which also invited a deeper engagement with the interview process. In addition,

the two-to-one technique reflected an inside-outside approach, since one interviewer was himself a former ultra-Orthodox community member who had disaffiliated from that community, while the other was not. While some interviewees found it easier to open up and share with “one of their own,” others found it more liberating to share with an “outsider” and took care to over-explain the nuances of their experiences and thoughts. The interviews were conducted predominantly in Hebrew, though when required, English and Yiddish were used as well.

We developed special semi-structured interview guidelines for this study, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed in Hebrew and later translated into English by the authors. The interviews were analyzed thematically by the authors, with the purpose of understanding the roles that ICTs play in the lives of individuals who disaffiliate from ultra-Orthodoxy and how they integrate into a new society. The manual analysis included multiple rounds of analysis and discussion related to the main themes and categories. Findings were then honed and validated through member checking (Birt et al., 2016) conducted by experts on the topics. The themes and categories were systematically identified through the grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). As this study is the first to focus on the roles of ICTs in the process of disaffiliation from ultra-Orthodoxy, we chose to use grounded theory to enable a rich and comprehensive perspective of the phenomenon. In the analysis, we also reflect on our own positionality, with one author a former member of the ultra-Orthodox community and the other not. To protect the identity of the interviewees, we use pseudonyms, and the findings are presented without identifying features (see Table 1 for full list of interviewees).

Findings

We found *three* central themes reflecting how digital and social media were used by people who disaffiliated from the ultra-Orthodox community in their integration into new societies. Indeed, the interviewees reflected in depth on how digital media in general and social media in particular played a central role in their lives after leaving ultra-Orthodoxy. They recounted learning about this new world, including how it works, its norms, its social behaviors, and much more, being left to deduce for themselves how to operate in it. This learning process took place for many interviewees primarily through digital media platforms and emphasizes the importance of ICTs in their integration into secular society. Three themes were identified regarding the utilization of digital media in the process of leaving ultra-Orthodoxy and integrating into a new society: digital media as (1) *a sneak peek into the outside*, their (2) *attraction and suspicion* toward digital media despite their lack of knowledge, and their high levels of (3) *digital (il)literacy*. These three themes are at the core of understanding how people who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community overcome the challenges of growing up in an insulated community by utilizing digital media to gather the information necessary for them to integrate into their new societies, meaning both a Western-secular-Israeli society and an individualistic culture in which each person may choose their own set of beliefs, values, and lifestyle.

Table 1. List of interviewees.

Pseudonym	No.	Gender	Marital status	Number of children	Current residence	Profession/education	Age	Sect
Deborah	1	Female	Divorced	1	Europe	Student	20s	Hasidic
David	2	Male	Married	Unknown	North America	Small business	50s	Litvak
Michal	3	Female	Divorced	2	Israel	Teacher	30s	Hasidic
Shmuel	4	Male	Single	0	Israel	Transcriber	20s	Hasidic
Moshe	5	Male	Married	2	Europe	Construction	40s	Litvak
Rachel	6	Female	Married	2	Israel	Kindergarten teacher	30s	Sephardic
Leah	7	Female	Married	0	Israel	Counsellor	20s	Sephardic
Avraham	8	Male	Married	0	Israel	Reporter	30s	Sephardic
Dina	9	Female	Single	0	Israel	Municipality worker	30s	Sephardic
Levi	10	Male	Single	0	Israel	Medic	20s	Litvak
Yehuda	11	Male	Single	0	Europe	Student	30s	Hasidic
Sarah	12	Female	Single	0	Israel	Social worker	30s	Hasidic
Shoshana	13	Female	Remarried	3	Israel	Charity worker	30s	Sephardic
Eli	14	Male	Married	2	Israel	Construction	30s	Litvak
Chava	15	Female	Divorced	1	Israel	Banking	30s	Sephardic
Dan	16	Male	Single	0	Europe	Security guard	30s	Litvak
Leah	17	Female	Single	0	Israel	Student	20s	Litvak
Moria	18	Female	Divorced	0	Israel	Hydrotherapist	30s	Sephardic
Esti	19	Female	Single	0	Israel	Musician	30s	Hasidic
Chaya	20	Female	Single	0	Israel	Artist	20s	Litvak
Rivka	21	Female	Single	0	Israel	Human resources	30s	Sephardic
Yaakov	22	Male	Married	2	Israel	Student	30s	Hasidic
Chani	23	Female	Divorced	2	Israel	Medical clerk	30s	Litvak

All the interviewees were born and raised in Israel, but some now live in other countries.

A sneak peek into the outside

The interviewees often reported feeling confined and depressed in their ultra-Orthodox communities and reactively finding solace and escapism in external mediated content from outside the community. This content, which was ordinarily censured and prohibited, included content from outside the community, such as popular books, mainstream newspapers, local radio stations, national television stations, blockbuster movies, and the all-encompassing digital sphere. These media sources served as a small window into the world outside and enabled them to overcome the boundaries of their community, pursue their desires, and experience a richer life. For example, Rachel, a mother of two in her 30s who is a kindergarten teacher today, shared that she used ICTs to celebrate and explore the world of secular music:

I started listening to music on the radio. At the time, it wasn't contemporary secular music, but I discovered a classical music station, and I played the accordion and piano, and it really spoke to me. I would just sit and listen to music.

Digital media also quenched the curiosity of the interviewees by supplying information as well as enabling them to receive emotional support from other individuals going through similar life challenges. For example, Sarah, a former Hasidic woman in her 30s who is now a social worker, explained,

I had a mental health forum [online], a forum focusing on depression – I don't remember what it was called. I really liked *Ivri Lider* [a popular Israeli musician] so I was on his forums [fan forums for discussing the singer and his songs] and I really liked *Aviv Gefen* [another popular Israeli musician]. I was terribly depressed, in short, and they gave some form of expression to my distress.

This consumption of external content often took place over many years and coexisted with the interviewees' offline lifestyle as members of the ultra-Orthodox community, despite the prohibition of such actions. The interviewees reported that this unauthorized consumption released pent-up frustration, regulated their emotions, and enabled them to continue the lifestyle of ultra-Orthodoxy for many years. ICTs allowed members of the ultra-Orthodox community to secretly cross outside the boundaries of their community without the risks associated with doing the same in "real life." As such, those considering leaving the ultra-Orthodox community were able to peek outside the community with less risk, gaining information about life outside.

However, interviewees reported that this eventually came to an end, as the consumption of external content slowly built up their expectations from life, making it harder over time to be content with ultra-Orthodoxy despite their minor deviations outside the community. With time, this manifested as a cognitive dissonance between their current life experiences as ultra-Orthodox and the experiences they saw outside their communities. For example, Michal, a divorced mother of two in her 30s from the Hasidic community, recalled:

I remember myself sitting through the chatter of explanations for brides-to-be [before her wedding], and I was daydreaming and imagining all kinds of parts from books about the sex my husband and I would have. [However], there was no connection [to the reality she actually experienced], no connection at all.

Michal's words illustrate how an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic woman began to covet the sexual experiences she was exposed to on media platforms that existed outside her community, which denied her these experiences, given Hasidic lifestyle norms. Thus, ICTs served as a window to the outside, introducing the interviewees to new information and new perspectives that were very different from those presented in the community's internal media channels. This led to a dissonance that may have later motivated these individuals to disaffiliate from the community in their pursuit of self-fulfillment.

I listened to all the radio channels, and each channel has its own interesting things . . . it was a whole world, there was news, politics, and there were opinions . . . It exposed me to a variety of things . . . I would spend hours on the radio (Sarah, social worker in her 30s)

For hours I sat in front of the computer in the forums and read, and no one had names, everyone had nicknames. I corresponded with people in chat rooms and suddenly the gates of heaven opened for me, I could write what I wanted, and no one would slap me in the mouth, no one would send me to repent (Shoshana, divorced and remarried mother of three in her 30s, from the Sephardi community)

Despite the limits on digital accessibility and heavy censorship, all of the interviewees admitted to consuming prohibited content from outside the community. This consumption was done in secrecy and fear of exposure, as the interviewees relayed that being caught would lead to severe community sanctions, such as being expelled from school (Yeshiva or Seminar), harmed in future marriage prospects, or ostracized from the community.

The use of prohibited media devices and services (such as smartphones or the Internet) and the consumption of prohibited content took place in three main ways. *One*, through ICT devices belonging to individuals from the ultra-Orthodox community who had a special approval to access external content or did not abide by ultra-Orthodox norms. These often included family members, in particular, non-ultra-Orthodox family members. For example, David, who is married, in his 50s, and a member of the Litvak community who migrated to North America, recalled: "I had an aunt, my mother's aunt, who was disabled, so she was allowed a TV in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood, and I would sneak in to watch her old TV." *Second*, the consumption of prohibited content took place through individual agency. In these cases, individuals used creative ways to access media content while remaining within the physical boundaries of the community. For example, Moshe, a married man in his 40s from the Litvak community, said: "Someone brought a radio, and we would make it work with a toothpick and a fork as the antenna. One day the head of the Yeshiva [found out and] grabbed it and broke it." Another interviewee said,

I really wanted to buy a cellphone . . . I didn't want them to know at home that I bought it . . . [My friend] registered the line in his name and I was able to buy a device, it was some Ericsson [brand of Kosher cellphone] with a very small screen (Avraham, married, in his 30s, from the Sephardi community)

The *third* form was access to prohibited media and/or content through the help of people from outside of the community. These included non-ultra-Orthodox neighbors, Internet shops, and public libraries. This usually took place outside the physical boundaries of the community. For example, Michal, a teacher, described how:

I used to run away a lot from the seminar [all female school] to the city [public] library in *Chibat Zion* [a nearby non-Orthodox neighborhood], I studied at the seminar in *Bnei Brak* [an ultra-Orthodox city], so it was [only] a fifteen-minute walk . . . I spent many hours in that library.

Another interviewee recalled,

I saw a hardware store, there was a TV there and I kind of watched it, I would come every day to shop and not buy anything of course, just watch. The owner told me, come take a chair, sit down, don't make a fuss, sit down and enjoy it, and we became quite close, and I would come every day. (Moshe, from the Litvak community)

Yehuda, a student in his 30s from the Hasidic community, highlighted a similar method of accessing digital media:

When I was in Yeshiva [all male school], I don't remember exactly when, I think I was 17-18 years old . . . there were internet shops in Jerusalem, you go and pay a few shekels [the Israeli currency] for an hour of using internet and it was the first time I was exposed to the internet.

The interviewees described feeling that their existence was limited or confined inside the ultra-Orthodox community, but that using ICTs to sneak a peek at the outside world helped them overcome their communities' boundaries. At the beginning, crossing community boundaries released pent-up frustration and helped regulate emotions, as such keeping them content with the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. However, over time, access to the outside changed their expectations of what was an acceptable or desirable cultural norm, motivating them to disaffiliate from the community.

Attraction and suspicion

The interviewees reported encountering a variety of enablers and constraints that affected their ability to utilize ICTs to answer their personal needs prior to leaving the ultra-Orthodox community. While they had *ambivalent attitudes toward the use of ICTs*, they perceived *access to technology* positively, reasoning it helped them *overcome the boundaries of the community* and *get access to content that was censored* by the community leadership. Avraham's experience reflects this positive perception of access to ICTs:

[For] years in Yeshiva, where I had no other option to connect to the outside world, so the phone was the only place of refuge for me and it was actually what saved me at that time, I would surf the internet . . . I remember the first time I opened Google, and it was a new world for me. I can search for any topic I want, and research, and I went from site to site . . . This was a refuge. (Avraham, in his 30s, from the Sephardic community)

Within this statement, however, Avraham also intimates that he did not have to abide by any guidelines or endure any censorship while online, which scholars have suggested can increase the odds of maladaptive usage of the Internet (Gentina and Chen, 2019) and, in turn, lead to harmful behaviors and consequences.

Prior to leaving ultra-Orthodoxy, some interviewees expressed attitudes that supported the use of ICTs, while others opposed their use. These attitudes were multilayered and depended on their overall experience, as well as the specific platform and content. The overall experience referred to their theological belief that they should live a devout religious life of spirituality according to their community's interpretation, which excluded exposure to things deemed secular, material, or mundane. This perception of ICTs was also directed toward inter-community content, including community newspapers and radio stations. While community content is considered permissible, many of the more conservative members of the community do not approve of it because they perceive it as a waste of time.

In addition, the interviewees reported that there were also distinctions made between different platforms, regardless of the content. Thus, while old technologies were perceived as acceptable (e.g. books, newspapers, radio), new technologies were perceived as prohibited (e.g. television, computer, Internet, smartphone), most likely because leaders in the ultra-Orthodox community recognized that media such as television and the Internet provide a much greater quantity of secular, outside content than traditional outlets such as books or newspapers. Indeed, while the community leadership controls the traditional media channels, which feature content produced by and for community members, ICTs enable easier access to content from outside the community (see David and Baden, 2020). Thus, new technologies can be seen as competing with spiritual experiences, rather than serving as low-sensual sources of information. This is in part because the ultra-Orthodox community seeks to make religion the sole source of human experience and the only means of personal and spiritual fulfillment. Accordingly, interviewees shared that, prior to leaving the community, they saw ICTs as a dangerous tool that spread dangerous content (Rosenberg and Blondheim, 2021), including a wide range of information perceived as threatening to the socio-spiritual ultra-Orthodox way of life, including violence, sexuality, materialism, and secularism. For instance, Michal (a woman in her 30s from the Hasidic community) identified external media as the source of her knowledge about feminism, recounting how she eventually internalized it as a key part of her identity: "My feminism comes from books. [For example, the book] *Pride and Prejudice*, [even] the introduction to the book promotes feminism." Similarly, Chaya, an artist in her 20s from the Litvak community, recalled utilizing external media to search for information about someone she knew who had left her ultra-Orthodox community:

I always read how the internet is prohibited and how dangerous it can be, so I really wanted to see for myself what the internet is . . . The first time I successfully accessed Google, I searched for a YouTube video on a woman I used to know who left ultra-Orthodoxy.

The interviewees perceived ICTs as a powerful tool and believed that ICTs have a substantial effect on our ability to construct reality, change society, and influence the beliefs and behaviors of the individual. These perceived strong effects of ICTs could be used for negative purposes (spreading fake news) or for positive purposes (to uphold values). This perception toward ICTs could derive from the *fear of the unknown* caused by a long and intimidating campaign against the use of ICTs in the ultra-Orthodox community (Rosenberg and Blondheim, 2021). Moreover, it could reflect the reproduction of power structures from the community in the world at large, searching for hierarchy and structure similar to the divine, rabbis, and community leaders.

After leaving the ultra-orthodox community, the interviewees reported undergoing a long process of reconceptualizing their attitudes toward ICTs, sometimes lasting for years after their initial disaffiliation from the community. This reconceptualization dialectically integrated old perceptions with new perspectives, leading, for instance, to individuals who reported feeling free from the constraints of their former community reassessing the value of different ICT platforms, content, and experiences. Often, interviewees replaced their earlier religious aspirations with aspirations of personal freedom, focusing on the benefits they would receive from access to previously-banned technologies. For example, the interviewees highlighted entertainment (e.g. movies, TV shows), accessing information (e.g. news, websites, applications), and general functions (e.g. communicating, using governmental websites).

Furthermore, the interviewees regarded ICTs as vital tools for functioning in society and wished to integrate them into their new lives, highlighting the central role that different platforms could have or already had in their lives, including mobile applications related to everyday activities such as employment, education, banking, health, fitness, and music. Moreover, some interviewees regarded ICTs as the main platform for various basic functions, such as developing and conserving interpersonal relationships, gaining important information, and learning.

Yet, the interviewees also reported trepidation about the new ICTs they encountered (e.g. computers, smartphones, Internet) that had been limited or off limits in the communities they left. This trepidation was grounded in the potential negative effects they feared they could have on themselves or their families, including maladaptive use of ICTs (Gentina and Chen, 2019) such as addiction, timewasting, and being exposed to misinformation or toxic information.

In addition, some interviewees expressed sorrow that *screens* had replaced physical paper books for them. They reported feeling as though they had been forced to transition from an analog to a digital society and, in doing so, that they had lost the ability to read for longer periods of time. This meant that they were reading fewer books, having substituted reading for television shows, movies, streaming, podcasting, audiobooks, and social media. At the same time, some expressed feelings of guilt and a sense of loss because they felt as though they had replaced a more intellectual, imaginative life with one filled with shallow, worthless media content.

Digital (il)literacy: lacking the ability to verify information

The interviewees reported that, before leaving their communities, they lacked awareness and knowledge of, as well as the ability to, verify information they encountered on different ICT platforms. This can be explained by their lack of general information about the world due to their insular living. This reported lack of digital literacy is likely due to the scarcity of advanced ICTs in the community, and interviewees' strong trust in authority due to community hierarchical structures and theological inclinations. Prior to leaving, the interviewees expressed high trust levels in the written word and reported low skepticism concerning the truthfulness of online information. This may reflect the pedagogical socio-theological structure of ultra-Orthodoxy, which teaches its members to trust blindly in authorities and the written word. As such, members had high confidence in all written content, regardless of its source and without fact-checking, especially if it was written by an individual with a title such as Dr. or Prof. The inability to verify information can hinder the utilization of ICTs to answer individuals' needs, as reliable information is necessary for conceptualizing the world and acting in it. For example, Leah, a student in her 20s from the Litvak community, said,

You just feel that everyone in the ultra-Orthodox community is a *Macher* [fixer]. . . maybe it is because [you feel that] the world is so simple, you feel that they really know what they are talking about, they are connected and have reliable sources or something like that.

After leaving ultra-Orthodoxy, the interviewees expressed high concern over the truthfulness of information and feared the use of ICTs due to their inability to verify information. This reflects their cognitive processes as they undergo a transition that entails a loss of trust in authority and exposure to content that may have motivated their disaffiliation from ultra-Orthodoxy. In addition, even among interviewees who were somewhat exposed to ICTs before leaving, their exposure frequently took place without adult (parent, older sibling) supervision and guidance; thus, after leaving, they often expressed their inability to utilize ICTs in an advanced way for information and functioning. Indeed, most interviewees reported using ICTs for basic purposes, such as chatting applications (e.g. WhatsApp), search engines (e.g. Google), social media (e.g. Facebook), general news websites, and streaming.

This inability to utilize ICTs for advanced purposes often lasted years after leaving ultra-Orthodoxy. For example, most interviewees reported challenges operating computer programs (e.g. Word and Excel), comparing and authenticating information, shopping online, managing public and commercial tasks such as requesting permits, completing forms, paying bills, and online banking. "I want to, I have plans, I want to learn how to use the Excel program, but I despair, and prepare myself [for failure]. In the end I do nothing" (David, in his 50s).

All of the interviewees reported having few technological devices when leaving the ultra-Orthodox community – often, only a *Kosher* cellphone (rather than a smartphone), which could be used only for calls and not for sending messages or connecting to the Internet. Only a few had unauthorized devices that were held in secret while still living as ultra-Orthodox individuals, such as a small radio or MP3 player. Thus, in the process

of or after leaving the community, they had to obtain access to basic devices such as a computer, smartphone, tablet, wireless Internet router, or television. While the interviewees initially gained access through a variety of external sources, such as friends, Internet shops, and school computer rooms, they all reported closing this gap quickly by purchasing the desired devices and services. Indeed, none of the interviewees reported a scarcity of ICT devices at the time of the interview.

The interviewees also experienced a newly developed motivation to verify the information they encountered in their everyday lives after leaving the community. This motivation derived from a *loss of innocence*, positing a reconceptualization of the (un)trustworthiness of online information.

The interviewees ascribed their development of this critical perspective to a variety of reasons, including previous traumatic interactions, for example, being a victim of online scamming or hacking. Their adoption of a more critical outlook was something they deemed necessary for life on the *outside* and to ensure they were able to trust the influential figures who helped them navigate their integration into the new society. For example, Shoshana, a charity worker from the Sephardic community, explained,

I did not know, and I made mistakes again and again . . . I met questionable people; I did questionable stuff. There was something in me that trusted everyone, it still lingers in me today, I always have to tell myself to put question marks [be skeptical].

The need to verify information (because of the possibility of misinformation) was true across various types of information, from health and politics to employment and general knowledge. It included not only the information they encountered outside the community in their new lives, but also information that emanated from inside the community (e.g. community news outlets). According to the interviewees, this reflected a change in approach toward the community and the religious beliefs they had regarded as trustworthy and reliable for most of their lives. Moreover, they reported that their opinions on ultra-Orthodox media outlets changed too, with many believing that these outlets were biased.

Interviewees reported using a variety of techniques to verify information. These included seeking experts in their fields (e.g. medical personnel and scientists), consuming information from mainstream online news and from known organizations' websites and applications, and using their instincts and rational thinking. However, despite these techniques, many were vulnerable to misinformation, as they reported they often had difficulties determining the truthfulness and reliability of the information they encountered. This was particularly challenging for interviewees who used social media networks, where they reported encountering alternative information that caused them to doubt what information they had already found via mainstream platforms or outlets. Indeed, the interviewees reported feeling lost and unable to determine a correct path forward, which led some to choose to remain passive and not seek out answers. Indeed, while they rarely believed the alternative information they encountered, its existence relayed to the interviewees that the topic was controversial or multilayered, leading them to deduce that the safest path was to abstain from enacting any particular choice:

I don't have a system [to verify information] . . . there is also that place of low trust in scientific research because in the end you find out it was financed and there are different interests . . . it is very unsettling. At first, I was a hysterical COVID denier, afterwards I understood there was COVID, but it had been blown out of proportion . . . It infuriates me that something is happening underneath my nose, and I don't understand what is really happening. (Chava, a divorced woman with one child from the Sephardic community)

Chava highlights the challenges of being introduced to ICTs without guidance or context, which can lead to some maladaptive form of ICT usage (Gentina and Chen, 2019). However, in her case, this led her to challenge herself to identify the differences between news and “fake news,” and between information and misinformation.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study investigates the ways in which individuals who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community utilize digital and social media in the process of leaving ultra-Orthodoxy and integrating into a new chosen path in life. The analysis points to three central themes that are at the core of understanding the use of ICTs during the disaffiliation process. Many people used ICTs as a way to gain a “sneak peek” at and start to gather information about an outside world that was, until then, hidden behind the boundaries of their community. They did it despite the fear they had been instilled in them by the ultra-Orthodox communities who object to the use of such technologies (Rosenberg and Blondheim, 2021), which often led to a mix of attraction and suspicion toward digital media. In addition, as a result of community objections to digital technologies, interviewees had to deal with their own digital (il)literacy, in addition to the many other challenges related to the process of disaffiliation from such a closed community.

Our findings show that, for people leaving ultra-Orthodoxy, ICTs play an important role both during and after disaffiliation. While still in the ultra-Orthodox community, ICTs are a major factor in helping regulate their needs by enabling them to stay physically in the community while providing access to the outside world. As technological devices and services become more affordable, mobile, and physically smaller (Dunaway and Soroka, 2021; Schejter and Tirosh, 2016), it is plausible their adoption by individuals in insular communities will grow, causing a greater erosion of the community walls (Shomron and David, 2024; CBS, 2022; Gentina and Chen, 2019; Kay and Levine, 2019). We found in this study that exposure can serve in two conflicting ways: for some people, it can help regulate their emotions and frustrations, helping them to stay in the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle; for others, it might expose them to alternative lifestyles and motivate them to leave ultra-Orthodoxy. These two functions could even be used to characterize the experiences of the same individual at different stages of their life.

In line with the findings from previous research (Berger, 2015; Engelman et al., 2020), interviewees in our study often found themselves socially isolated after leaving their ultra-Orthodox community. This social isolation often derived from situations in which their families and friends severed all contact with them due to their disaffiliation. To help overcome this isolation, many interviewees utilized ICTs to form new relationships, mostly with other individuals who were experiencing a similar situation. At the same

time, these actions put some of them at risk of being exploited emotionally, economically, physically, and sexually by predatory individuals online. These relationships, which often started in designated online forums and Facebook groups for individuals who had disaffiliated from ultra-Orthodoxy, often transitioned into personal friendships through private messaging, with some relationships even transitioning outside of the virtual sphere to the real world. However, in some cases, due to interviewees' lack of knowledge of how to behave outside of their former community, some also developed maladaptive ICT usage (Gentina and Chen, 2019), behaving inappropriately in the use of these technologies.

One of the highlights of our study is the way in which it exposes two different modes of digital technology use: active and passive. Active usage of ICTs refers to instances in which interviewees sought out specific information, mostly via the Internet and, more specifically, through online forums and Facebook groups which included other members who had left or were leaving ultra-Orthodoxy. In these instances, interviewees initiated conversations on issues they were dealing with and raised questions about problems they encountered, many of which stemmed from their experience migrating to the outside world. The scope of active usage also included a more general approach to learning more about social norms, for instance, through watching television sitcoms or listening to radio shows that would enrich their understanding of their newly adopted social paradigm. Through learning more about the norms, values, and performance of Western, Israeli, and secular society, they could adapt to a new, more individual-centered lifestyle in which they were able to choose which components they wished to have in their new lives. Other interviewees reported a more passive use of ICTs. This consisted of casual consumption of content – often for the purposes of entertainment or escapism – without the direct motivation of learning or better integrating into outside society. Even if this use of ICTs was more passive, interviewees nonetheless reported that this type of usage also enriched their understanding of the world and their new social sphere and how to function in it. Thus, both active and passive consumption of mediated content reflects the process of social learning, in which individuals learn by observing others (Akers and Jennings, 2015; Bandura, 1977).

Moreover, and in line with previous studies (Schejter et al., 2023), after the interviewees became more integrated into their new surroundings, they increasingly utilized ICTs for more typical purposes, such as online shopping, receiving services from public and commercial institutions, communicating with friends and colleagues, and pursuing hobbies and personal interests. However, interviewees still found these comparatively “normal” functions challenging, reflecting the key differentiator of being native to the digital world versus being a digital migrant (Palfrey and Gasser, 2011). In addition, we found that, despite the excitement of discovering new worlds, many individuals who disaffiliated from ultra-Orthodoxy reported high levels of naivety, leading to maladaptive usage (Gentina and Chen, 2019) and negative experiences both online and offline. In line with other studies (Pinchas-Mizrachi et al., 2024), this led them to develop a more skeptical approach to encountering new information and people.

In general, interviewees expressed a mixture of negative and positive feelings regarding ICTs. While some praised their newly acquired freedom to access information and platforms, others expressed criticism of and dissatisfaction with various elements of the

digital world. These included, for example, the shift from face-to-face communication to virtual communication (e.g. messaging platforms, online forums, video calls), which caused some difficulties in interpreting and encoding communicative meanings across virtual communications platforms. These difficulties seem to be intensified by the transition from a low-technological, community-based existence to a more individualistic, high-technological society. Indeed, these findings highlight the vital role that ICTs can play in the central intersections in people's lives, including relationships, employment, health, and consumption. Contemporary life, in the age of information and technology, has come to rely heavily on digital media for a wide range of basic functions (Schejter et al., 2023). Consequently, individuals who lack technological access, digital literacy, or are characterized by other barriers such as those related to language and culture, often feel that the world is full of hindrances to basic functioning (Schejter et al., 2023). While limited technology might serve the socio-theological ethos of ultra-Orthodoxy, our study shows that members yearn for a richer human experience and secretly utilize technology to access this experience. Moreover, after their disaffiliation, former ultra-Orthodox members find technology indispensable in the process of migrating into their new societies.

We also found that the interviewees had low levels of digital literacy and faced fundamental challenges in verifying information, a finding which is in line with previous studies (Pinchas-Mizrachi et al., 2024). It is plausible that this derives from their pedagogic upbringings, which promoted blind trust of community authority figures and the hierarchical structure of organized religion (Friedman, 1991). Thus, the interviewees lacked not only the skills to use such technologies, but also the critical perspective needed to have a healthy skepticism toward mediated content and the motives of its creators.

Leaving ultra-Orthodoxy entails changes in all aspects of life, including how individuals consume and evaluate both information and information sources, as well as the identity of the sources themselves and the type of sources they are. In line with other studies (Keller et al., 2024b), the interviewees in our study explained that information sources within the ultra-Orthodox community mostly consisted of mediators who passed on community-approved information only. This role of mediator was taken on by figures including parents, teachers, rabbis, and community news outlets. However, after leaving their communities, interviewees found that they did not want to receive information through mediators and they often opted to go directly to the source instead. These new sources were often professionals with expertise in their respective fields (e.g. medical personnel, financial advisers, lawyers, and scientists). Accessing this information directly was possible primarily because of access to ICTs, which allowed interviewees to consume expert content online (e.g. video lectures, personal websites, and social media) and utilize ICTs to verify the credentials of experts they found online and offline.

However, while the interviewees actively wanted to pursue information this way during and after disaffiliation, they also found this challenging, in large part because they now needed to actively engage with online content, researching and evaluating an expert's qualifications and credentials. This is markedly different from their experiences in the ultra-Orthodox community, where they passively received information from community-approved sources such as parents, teachers, rabbis, and media outlets. This information was often communicated in a uniform, one-sided, way and although individuals

had open access to as much information as they wanted, this information was censored by the community's authority figures.

Finally, while the environment of the ultra-Orthodox community was relatively homogeneous, the new surroundings, particularly in more advanced stages of integration, were more heterogeneous, with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances having diverse backgrounds. The interviewees reported that encountering people from different backgrounds broadened their perspectives and introduced them to new issues they had not previously encountered. While these encounters often occurred face-to-face, interviewees also reported utilizing ICTs to communicate with individuals with similar ultra-Orthodox backgrounds. This took place mostly through online forums and designated Facebook groups. These communications often involved individuals in the early stages of the disaffiliation process who were searching for information from people who had already crossed to the outside world or those who were looking for social support and companionship.

In conclusion, by looking at the experiences of newcomers to ICTs, we have revealed the challenges and advantages that both conventional and digital media offer individuals and society at large. More specifically, this study highlights the important role that ICTs play in the lives of people undergoing major life changes, such as leaving their communities, their organized religion, or their home country. Growing up in the ultra-Orthodox community makes members ill-prepared for life on the *outside* and can thus lead to major difficulties in functioning normally outside of the community's boundaries and rules (Keller and Exline, 2025; Levi-Belz and Yalon, 2023). One central way in which disaffiliated individuals bridge these societal gaps is through the active and passive usage of ICTs. For those who disaffiliate from the ultra-Orthodox community, these difficulties often stem from a shortage of information regarding basic areas of life, including employment, housing, health, education, banking, paying bills, and utilizing public services. These individuals also face challenges learning the accepted social norms surrounding issues such as dating, sexual and romantic encounters, friendship, and interactions with colleagues. Indeed, the transition from ultra-Orthodoxy should be examined as a migration process (Engelman et al., 2020; Levi-Belz and Yalon, 2023), as it includes the need to learn the rules and norms of a new societal paradigm in a newly chosen path in life.

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