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Islamic Ideals, the Concept of Love, and Processes of Individualisation: *Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī's* Writings and his Spiritual Brand

1 Introduction

This article deals with the televised religious guide Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī. His teachings, oral and written, are part of the analysis, in addition to his self-marketing as a spiritual brand. Ḥusnī is one of several Islamic guides in Egypt; however, he focuses not only on religious education, but also on education and advice in everyday life practices. While he is very present on television and has an active social media profile, he also publishes books and other written material. In his writings, he highlights the importance of balancing one's life and one's beliefs. His self-marketing is one of the keys to his success and the reason his many adherents follow him.

Since the “Egyptian Revolution” of 2011, understandings of Islam have undergone substantial changes in the country. The ousting of President Hosni Mubarak was followed by the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi, whose presidency has greatly affected the way Islam is perceived. Restrictions imposed during Morsi's rule in the name of religion, such as the closure of cinemas, disappointed many Egyptians who had been supportive of the regime's “Islamisation project.”¹ In the direct aftermath of the revolution, public debates over religiosity ensued, and an unprecedented momentum of political and religious plurality translated into a wide array of movements and political factions in the public sphere.² This in turn was reflected in a dynamic of re-positioning and questioning of political and religious authorities. For many individuals, this also included re-considering their religious identities. As Khaled Fahmy states in his reflection on the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013: “Egyptian society finds itself, confronting and raising (...) very, very deep questions (...). [W]hat to do with Islam? What is the proper position of (...) Islam (...)?”³ While this holds true for the broader political debate, in this article, I examine how these questions have specifically impacted the positioning of public religious figures like Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī. I also ask how his personal brand and the impulse for change effectively set in motion a

1 Cf. Haenni, 2016; El Esrawi, 2019; Brown, 2015.

2 Cf. Haenni, 2016.

3 Fahmy, 2013.

process of individualisation, of which many Egyptians with whom I spoke felt in need. And more generally: what mechanisms and strategies does the branding of religious influencers employ to deal with these social dynamics and requests for alternative religious guidance?

The change in leadership from Mohammed Morsi to President Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi in 2013 was characterised by the imposition of greater restrictions than before the “Revolution” in an attempt to limit the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood. In particular, public religious spaces such as mosques were regulated.⁴ Based on my research in post-revolutionary Egypt, I noticed that many people were finding new or rather different ways of doing being Muslim.⁵ Because some of these people were interested in or impacted by influencers such as Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī, my initial, heuristic questions asked explicitly about the influence of public religious figures and the power of personal brands on individual’s negotiating of their intimate religiosities: What role do public religious figures⁶ play in these processes and how do they create and design their brand accordingly? What is the specificity of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī and how can the attraction of his brand be assessed? What is the content of his spiritual message and why do many believers follow his guidance?

The turmoil of the revolution and its aftermath have been meticulously described and analysed by various scholars.⁷ Mona Abaza in particular highlighted how, since the revolution, young individuals searching for identities are torn between agency and passivity.⁸ She identifies insecurities, generational differences, and misunderstandings in terms of values and appreciation amid dystopian environments. This article relates to the existing academic scholarship and deals with searches for identity among young Egyptians, but goes a step further by adding to the analysis the dimension of the public religious figure Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī and his brand.

From 2016–2019, I lived in Alexandria to carry out ethnographic research for the ERC project “Private Pieties. Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics,” at the University of Göttingen. During this fieldwork, the appeal and phenomenon that Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī and others like him had for my interlocuters caught my attention. Thus, the following analysis and findings are based on the interviews I conducted as part of that project. This research on individual pieties, being religious, and

4 Cf. Bano and Benadi, 2018.

5 Cf. Franke, 2021b.

6 See Brown, 2015.

7 Cf. Saad, 2012; Fahmy, Boutaleb, and El Chazli, 2019; Schielke, 2015; Abaza, 2012, 2014.

8 Cf. Abaza, 2020.

doing being religious, provided me with insights into the worlds of individual believers and their sources of spirituality. The brand of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī must be especially highlighted in this respect, because many of my interlocutors referred to him and his programs as a source of spiritual inspiration and guidance. In addition to Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī and his brand, I examined those voices that hint at tendencies away from mainstream Islam and express alternative options and different versions of belief.⁹

My primary sources consist of qualitative individual interviews and group discussions, participative observation, and written, audio, and visual sources of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī in Arabic (leaflets, “grey literature,” websites, books, TV and radio programs, and social media). I also consulted the *Qur’ān* and *Ḥadīth* to follow up on the respective religious references made by Ḥusnī and my interlocutors. I conducted interviews with Muslim Egyptians who consider themselves to be “different” in terms of religiosity and social expectations. All their names have been anonymised, and personal details have been changed. I spoke with both men and women aged between 15 and 75, some of whom participated in the 25 January revolution.¹⁰ All are Alexandrians from middle-class milieus with high school or university degrees. Alexandria formed the centre for my research; having grown up in Alexandria myself, I relied on and was grateful for my social network there. In addition, Alexandria is a vibrant city with diverse and heterogeneous religious milieus, such as Sunni, Coptic, Sufi, and Salafi communities.

2 Definition of the Notion “Brand”

The notion of *brand* has undergone substantial changes in the past decades. Globalisation, modernity, and processes of individualisation visible in the wider region of the Near and Middle East have led to alternative concepts and understandings of the term, in the sense that a focus on the social dimension of the brand is becoming increasingly important. Many theoretical approaches have been developed around the idea that brands resemble an interplay between the consumer and the product. More precisely, from a perspective within the discipline of management, the brand amplifies the product’s value for the consumer to identify it as a positive and thus valuable item.¹¹ According to Kevin Lane Keller, who further develops the idea of the brand as identificatory in the “product-consumer-

⁹ Cf. Winegar, 2014.

¹⁰ Cf. Mehrez, 2012.

¹¹ See Maehle, Otnes, and Supphellen, 2011.

brand” relationship further, the brand is the purposefully developed and constructed (by interested parties) heart of an item, which can be a service or a product. Thus, the brand is the encompassing characteristic of the product that indicates its quality. The purchaser, the consumer, and ultimately the user are given an image that guarantees its value at the same time as it serves as a symbol and a narrative of the product.¹² The intention is to incorporate the product in the feelings and minds of the consumers and to give it a unique standing in worldwide competition. Recognition, association, identification, and emotional commitment are deliberate outcomes, as much as loyalty and memorability.¹³ This development that takes into account emotions and puts the consumer at centre stage has outgrown previous approaches focusing on the functional and/or ethical aspects and profits of the notion of the brand.¹⁴ With the new attention to the clients and their identities, brands aim to add to and influence these identities in order to foster an engaged consumer-brand-product relationship. From a business perspective, globalisation and international rivalry thus demand such poly-dimensional approaches that adhere to social, emotional, and spiritual, i.e. religious needs, as well as mere functional levels.¹⁵

The functional dimension reflects the perception of benefits of the product or service associated with the brand. The social dimension considers the identification role of the brand in terms of creating connections with a group and supporting consumers’ identities. The mental dimension reveals the ability to support the individual mentally, which is becoming an inspiration for achievement in consumers’ lives. Finally, the spiritual dimension reflects the perception of the social responsibility of the brand (...).¹⁶

Gad calls the perception of the multidimensional framework of branding “Brand Mind Space” to support the idea that “unless you keep on stretching your brand it will implode and eventually vanish in people’s minds.”¹⁷ The case of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī shows that the notion of the brand has transformed from the product brand to a personal brand that is designed around the public personality, the message, and the performance of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī himself. The personal brand, then, focuses on the individuals, their spiritual development, and their well-being by offering transparent and trustworthy services and religious content. At the same time, while it seems clear that the brand of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī is a personal brand, it is dif-

¹² Cf. Keller, 2003.

¹³ Cf. Paswan, Spears, and Ganesh, 2007; Darrat, 2011.

¹⁴ Cf. Ind, 2003.

¹⁵ Cf. Ind, 2003.

¹⁶ Mourad and El-Karanshawy, 2013: 151.

¹⁷ Gad, 2003: 187. Cf. also Mourad and El Karanshawy, 2013.

difficult to clearly specify what or who is being branded. The relationship between the person, namely Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī, and the religion, i.e. Islam, meanders in the public presentation and re-presentation of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī. This fluidity is typical of the personal spiritual brand in which the person himself embodies and conveys the religious message by means of his own self. Thus, the personal brand of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī necessarily consists of the religious message that he conveys, of himself as model believer, and of the products and interactions that he creates to communicate with his audience. His brand can be interpreted as serving individuals and the majority by encouraging them to stay on the religious path or to start being religious and consequently to live a religious life conforming to the Islamic principles that Ḥusnī preaches, explains, and invites his audience to include in its everyday routines. According to his writings, he aims at making Islam visible and interesting, especially to a modern, young, middle-class generation of Egyptians. The intention is to increase their spirituality and to harmonise society by focussing on concepts of love and religiosity in interpersonal relationships, with the idea of encouraging individuals, communities, and societies to engage in peaceful and appreciative social interaction.¹⁸

3 Who is Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī?

Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī was born in Egypt on 28 August 1978. He is a graduate of Ain Shams University in Cairo and obtained his BA degree in Business in 2000.¹⁹ After changing from being a businessman to becoming a preacher of Islam, he took courses at the Institute of Training Preachers to receive a certificate that enables him to legally teach the guiding of Islam to a larger public. The institute is part of the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf and an official training institution for religious content that teaches Sunni Islam.

Ḥusnī regularly holds sessions and call-in shows on various Egyptian television channels, among them the global satellite channels *Iqra'* and *On E*. He not only presents these programs as preacher, but is also their producer. His weekly program on *Iqra'* is broadcast every Friday. Apart from programs on television, Ḥusnī is also present on radio; for example, his *'Aiṣ al-laḥẓa* (Live the moment) is aired on *Nujuum FM*. During the month of Ramadan, Ḥusnī has special programs on television and on radio.

¹⁸ See Ḥusnī, 2020.

¹⁹ Cf. Wikipedia, 2021.

In addition to his media presence on more than 13 television and radio programs, Ḥusnī also preaches and lectures at different mosques in Cairo, such as the Yusuf Al-Sahabi Mosque in Hejaz Square in Heliopolis and the El-Hosary Mosque in 6th of October City. His Wednesday weekly lessons take place after *ṣalāt al-mağrib* (sunset prayer) in summer and after *ʿiṣāʾ* (evening) prayer in winter. The lectures are taught under the title *al-Ḥadīṭ al-Qudsī* and focus on conveying religious content alongside everyday life advice.²⁰ At the Bilal Mosque in Moqattam, he delivers the Friday prayer (*khutba*) twice a month.

In addition to preaching in mosques, Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī is a writer and the author of numerous books. Some of the titles, style, and content are transcribed from his lectures or broadcast programs, while others are new and independent manuscripts. A common characteristic of all his books is that the name of the author is highlighted in large letters on the cover, along with his picture. The book titles range from *Al-kanz al mafqūd* (The Hidden/Lost Treasure), *Risāla min Allāh* (A Message from God) and *Qiṣṣat ḥubb* (Love Story) to *Siḥr al-dunyā* (The Magic/Enchantment of the World). The titles hint at the content and the entanglement of religious with worldly tasks.

As has been shown, Ḥusnī is a public person, a writer, and a religious guide. However, his activities are not limited to established broadcast media and written sources; he also engages with online social media.²¹ Here, his activities are broad and encompass networks such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and SoundCloud. With almost 57 million followers on these platforms and 4.67 million on YouTube, his social media presence is noteworthy. As of early 2021, his YouTube video lectures have received more than 287 million views.²²

While his media presence is steadily growing with a rising numbers of clicks, listeners, and viewers, especially on social media, Ḥusnī has also faced problems and complaints from his opponents. In June 2020, for example, a complaint submitted by an Egyptian lawyer to the Public Prosecutor and the State Security Prosecution charged him with being a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. The legal complaint stated that Ḥusnī was opposed to the current political leadership by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. This accusation was based on a tweet in which Ḥusnī wrote in Egyptian Arabic: “In times of (mental) chaos, mingle only with your close loved ones. And do not mingle with the (mental) groups because they may lead you to wrong and prevent you from taking the right path. Don’t be influ-

²⁰ These are the sayings directly attributed to the prophet Muḥammad and thus represent a special category of *Ḥadīṭ*.

²¹ Cf. Hirschkind, 2012; Kazi, 2016.

²² See The Muslim 500, 2021.

enced by the majority.”²³ However, he did not face any charges or consequences following the complaint.

Regardless of this incident, Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī is a popular religious guide who enjoys a large audience not only in Egypt, but globally. His lectures and preaching are well-received and often cited in everyday conversations, as I noticed during my field research. In addition, Ḥusnī participates in social activities and hosts various charity events, for example as the Director of the Ammar al Ard Charity Foundation for Human Development. He also offers special services to his community, such as selling *Qur’ān* recitations as an app for smartphones. To reach his audience directly and to interact with the participants, he regularly invited individuals, both adults and children, to various competitions, ranging from preaching to *Qur’ān* recitation.²⁴ These competitions are publicly visible and encourage the active participation of his followers. Other public events such as public performances and rallies are also part of Ḥusnī’s agenda and transform his virtual character into a real one, available and visible beyond the screen.

It is striking that Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī is a religious teleguide who combines global religious trends with local social transformations. These local social transformations are closely linked to global processes of individualisation and an increasing use and consumption of social media. Throughout the past decade, “imagined communities” – to borrow the term from Benedict Anderson – have been transferred from public or private spaces to virtual spaces in the digital realm.²⁵ According to Mohamed Ismail, “Hosni’s discourse represents a glocal form of Islam that takes into consideration globalization and the reconciliation of dissonant hybrid identities by neglecting the traditional Islamic meta-narratives concentrating on the mini-narratives that achieve salvation and self-help.”²⁶ Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī has transformed himself into his own brand that displays various layers, such as religious, social, and individual dimensions. While he does not sell his private life, political opinions, or a specified religious direction, he propagates a lived religion and religious vitality to be practiced by individuals. He calls for individuals to be agents in their intimate ability to create and modify religion. Ḥusnī claims that the definition of religion is not only in the hands of the authorities – although he is not explicitly against them – and that disenchantment with public religion can be met only by making religion enchanting in the intimate space of the individual.²⁷

²³ Wikipedia, 2021. Translated from Arabic by the author.

²⁴ Cf. Ismail, 2020.

²⁵ Cf. Anderson, 2006.

²⁶ Ismail, 2020: 146.

²⁷ See Weber, 2004.

Employing the figure of himself by embodying worldliness is visible in his appearance. In public, he wears a shirt sometimes combined with a jacket, dark trousers, and a wristwatch.²⁸ His short beard is trimmed, and he usually smiles, looking directly into the camera. He looks neat, fresh, healthy, and happy. This appearance, which incorporates an idealised version of himself as an open-minded, (enchanted) modern Muslim, is a crucial element of his brand image. In line with conveying a flexible and modern religious message, he gives access to Islam through various media, thus making religion available to everyone at any time. According to Ḥusnī, accessibility is key if religion is to be part of everyone's everyday life.

However, while I listened to many supportive opinions, not everyone I talked to during my field research was fond of his programs or his public figure. Amira for example, a 49-year-old mother of two, unemployed, living in a middle-class quarter of Alexandria said:

Mustafā Ḥusnī is very popular among so many people. Everyone likes him. They like how he speaks, the topics he discusses, that he only talks about life and Islam and not about politics. I don't like him. I think he is fake. To me, what he says doesn't feel real or authentic. And this sleek appearance, always happy, and although he tries to be on the same level as us, I have the feeling that he thinks he is better than us. And I don't like that. We should listen to God and to our hearts and not some self-made sheikh who is not qualified to teach us how to be religious. This is my opinion. What I can see is the big business that he created around his figure, that he is a businessman selling his soul for his own profit. How can this be religiously accepted?²⁹

From the perspective of consumption in the context of religious information and material, Ḥusnī tries to combine selling his personal brand with selling Islam. To be precise, this selling of Islam is actually selling certain aspects of Islam. These aspects suit the multifaceted religious identities of his audience, which is heterogeneous and diverse in terms of age, profession, relation to God (i.e. Islam), experience in practicing religion, gender, marriage status, and place of residence.

²⁸ Cf. Ḥusnī, 2020.

²⁹ Interview conducted by the author, Alexandria, 23 May 2021. All quotes from interviews have been translated by the author.

4 Branding Strategies Beyond Religious Normativity

Interestingly, academics in the Global North often call Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī and other religious guides televangelists or television preachers – terms that I do not favour in the context of Islam, since they come from Christian backgrounds.³⁰ From an emic perspective, these guides are sheikhs or *ṣuyūḥ* (plural; *ṣaiḥ* singular); for pragmatic translation reasons I will use the term religious guide, religious teleguide, or religious influencer alongside the Arabic term *ṣaiḥ*.

The branding strategies of these religious teleguides go well beyond the religious content that they aim to convey. According to Yasmin Moll: “At the same time, the success of the televangelists’ own shows increasingly relies on their ability to navigate between, and capitalize on, different genres and forms of media that go beyond any conventional boundaries of the ‘religious’ or even the specifically ‘Islamic.’”³¹ Here, Moll gives the example of how popular music is employed in the trailers and opening sequences of the television shows of Ḥusnī and others, which gives the impression that they are mimicking music videos. Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī’s show *Al-kanz al mafqūd* (The Hidden/Lost Treasure) for example, features the well-known voice of popular Egyptian singer Mohamed Fouad.³² Regarding this branding strategy, it is noteworthy that the worldly song vocalised by Mohamed Fouad is not perceived as contradicting the religious teachings of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī. On the contrary, in combination, the song and the lecture are perceived as mutually affecting each other and thereby intensifying the message.³³

And this is exactly what Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī aims at, namely, to establish a brand of his own that triggers a natural emotion among his followers in the sense that religion, i.e. Islam, exists on the same level as everyday life expectations and requirements.³⁴ The brand here is not a fixed entity but oscillates between the person and the religion. It is thus not surprising that worldly music is played in the opening sequences, as part of the branding intention. During my fieldwork in Alexandria, I encountered a life-work-religion balance approach among many believing Muslims who are searching for an ecological “green” version of Islam that is compatible with their own well-being, a phenomenon that I called “*organic* Islam.”³⁵

³⁰ Cf. Moll, 2010b.

³¹ Moll, 2010a.

³² See Moll, 2010a.

³³ See Moll, 2010a.

³⁴ Cf. Kreil, 2006; Lewis, 2010.

³⁵ Cf. Franke, 2021a.

The brand of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī follows a similar path. Focusing on the spirituality and not the normative aspect of Islam, this brand is built around the voices and needs of its followers, who are, as stated above, often young and educated and who belong to middle-class milieus.³⁶ These voices can be followed on social media, where they express their needs and mostly ask for inspiration and guidance and how Islam can be maintained and practiced, as well as about the meaning of life.³⁷ Thus, innovation and being aware of trends and future developments are key aspects of the image Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī wants to convey.³⁸ Through interaction with his followers, he is able to perceive their needs and requests and to respond to them by answering with an entangled personal and religious brand that they can identify with.³⁹ The relation between him and his public has become a natural and dynamic process of mutual inspiration. The transformative power of this brand in the sense of transforming one's self by becoming more religious was noteworthy during many of the interviews I conducted in Egypt. These interlocutors for instance referred to Ḥusnī as an example of how Islam should be discussed, taught, and portrayed in public. As fellow Egyptians, they were proud of this brand from a nationalist perspective and added that more religious guides should follow his example. As Dalia, one of my interlocutors, stated, the importance lies in the combination of the content and the wrapping of the message:

Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī is not a *ṣaiḥ* like the others that we know. He is dressed normally, and he speaks our language [i.e. Egyptian Arabic], he talks about everyday life, issues that concern us as teenagers, young adults, and family members. It is a lot about relationships with others. And it is also about how we can remain spiritual in an Islamic sense in our hectic lives that are dominated by work, family, and commuting. His unique ability is to remain calm and not shout during his shows, to use examples from his own environment, to take us seriously and not treat us like little stupid children. We feel understood and valued even in our imperfections and failures. And he also conveys the message of the holy *Qurʾān* in an understandable way; it is not just about citing and referencing; he gives illustrative examples and how the times of our prophet Muḥammad, *peace be upon him*, can be understood and incorporated in our everyday lives today. It is not that I am a regular follower, but I understand how he reaches out to us and how this makes a difference for many of us who are struggling with Islam. Not because they doubt, but because our lives have become so busy, and we often do not make enough time for our belief. Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī helps us to be practicing Muslims no matter how crazy our schedules have become.⁴⁰

³⁶ Cf. Echchaibi, 2011.

³⁷ Ryder, Ian 2003: 352.

³⁸ See Wise, 2003; Winegar, 2008.

³⁹ Cf. Ryder, Ian 2003.

⁴⁰ Interview conducted by the author; Alexandria, 18 June 2021.

In her account, Dalia hinted at a request that many of my interlocutors had – a balanced life in line with Islamic norms that still leaves enough scope for personal interpretation and creativity: a life-religion balance that is similar to the work-life-balance approach mentioned above.⁴¹

5 Emotions, Love, Compassion: Spiritual and Religious Content

My analysis and assessment of the content of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī's material in his sermons, shows, social media, and books is in line with most of my interlocutors' impressions, who stated, for example, that they noticed "a focus on relationships," as Dalia put it. More generally, a focus on emotions, especially on love and compassion, can be identified. Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī takes the individual into consideration and highlights that, as a single person, one should aim at "higher" results in social relationships.⁴² He advises his followers to maintain a religious mindset by practicing religion on a daily basis – he refers here to regular praying and reading the *Qur'ān*, in particular. According to Ḥusnī, Islam and society in Egypt can flourish and grow only if social relationships are prioritised in terms of emotions, love, care, and compassion. Moreover, Ḥusnī considers it necessary for religiosity to be fostered and included in even the busiest everyday life. Ḥusnī therefore does not present Islam as a religion that is normative and punishing; rather he points to the spirituality of Islam and its compatibility with personal interests, development, and success. His main message is to see and read beyond the written word. This approach will reveal the true message and enlighten everyone's spirituality and relationship with God. By using illustrative examples from his own life, he evokes proximity with his audience. To these everyday life examples, he regularly adds examples from the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*, first by recitation and then by explanation.⁴³

Another aim of Ḥusnī is to bring the written sources (especially the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*) closer to people and to make the texts clearer for the masses. These sources need interpretation, since neither their content nor their language is self-explanatory. Thus, by repeating the message in Egyptian Arabic and fleshing it out with examples from everyday life, the audience can get closer and closer

⁴¹ See Franke, 2021a.

⁴² Cf. Ismail, 2020.

⁴³ See Moll, 2012.

to God.⁴⁴ Ḥusnī encourages his followers to engage with the written sources, even if they are not fully understood, since through repetition and recitation an enhanced religious mindset will be achieved, in the sense of being closer to God, and thus being connected more deeply to one's religious self. Rituals such as praying and fasting, as well as kind and loving behaviour towards others, are equally important.⁴⁵ The key to a successful, prosperous, and satisfying life, then, is not necessarily fully understanding Islam as religion per se, but having a strong faith and spirituality by practicing religion in terms of rituals. The improvement of the individual and intimate self is at centre stage in these programs, as in Ḥusnī's book *Fann al-ḥayāh* (The Art of Life).

Salvation and afterlife are not necessarily key concepts that he focusses on. However, some of his shows are called *Allāh* (God), *'Alā bāb al-janna* (At the Door to Paradise) and *'Alā ṭarīq Allāh* (Road to Allah) and clearly focus on how his followers can collect *ḥasanāt*⁴⁶ in order to be ready for paradise.⁴⁷

6 Concluding Remarks

As has been demonstrated, brands, especially personal brands in the realm of spirituality, are designed with a focus on enhancing the consumer's religiosity as in being religious and *doing* being religious. The mindsets and emotional desires of individuals are put at centre stage. Individual needs, comfort, and a sense of well-being are projected onto the brand. These intimate conditions are expected to bring a return on the customers' investment of time and money, with an added value at the personal level of satisfaction. In this sense, the individual becomes emotionally more satisfied by consuming the brand's product. According to many of my interlocutors, personal spiritual brands are often accused of influencing or manipulating their audience. Thus, the notion of trust comes into play as an important factor for the persistence of the brand, something that Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī focuses on by excluding political issues from his lectures. By incorporating his religious messages in everyday life processes, he also employs mechanisms and practices of transparency and integrity to give credibility, authenticity, and profoundness to his own brand. The focus of the present example, then, is on relationships in terms of social links between the brand and the consumer, i. e. the social

⁴⁴ Cf. Ismail, 2020.

⁴⁵ Cf. Franke, 2021a.

⁴⁶ *Ḥasanāt* is the Arabic term for deeds, good deeds, and points that count toward being granted permission to enter paradise.

⁴⁷ Cf. Saleh, 2012; Schulz, 2006; Mittermaier, 2019.

spirit. Consequently, for my interlocutors, trust and transparency are the most important reasons for them to “follow” the personal brand of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī and to listen to his religious guidance, while at the same time maintaining and fostering their individuality. In this sense, engaged “following” does not mean uniformity, but rather defined individuality by decidedly listening, reading, or watching certain parts or episodes of Ḥusnī’s programmes and selecting the religious content of his personal brand. Consumers judge spiritual brands based on these categories, which in turn leads to controlling strategies by the actors behind the brands to assess and continuously improve their offers, namely in terms of performance; this can then lead to the co-creation of brands by their consumers. For this, Ḥusnī’s engagement and direct interaction with his followers on social media, and his responding to their demands, serves as a strong example. His personal spiritual brand leads in the domain of religious guidance in Egypt and beyond and uses various channels in print and online media to reach its customers. As a brand, Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī focusses on the individuals as consumers of his services, thus aiming at enhancing and fostering their spiritual mindset and religious practices.

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