Calling to Prayer in 'Pandemic Times': Muslim Women's Practices and Contested (Public) Spaces in Germany

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ABSTRACT   This article explores how the regulations imposed during Germany's first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 impacted on gendered mosque spaces and the digital spheres relating to those spaces. Examining the call to prayer as a sensory form that establishes "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009), the article unpacks gender-specific Muslim perspectives on space within mosques and the contested position mosques occupy in German public space. Paying particular attention to the temporalities of the pandemic restrictions, the article reflects on women's (digital) practices and relates them to ongoing debates about the contested presence of sonic markers of Muslim religiosity in public space in Germany. It argues that the heterogeneous digital practices and discourses that emerged in 'pandemic times' should not only be viewed as extraordinary responses to an exceptional situation, but as exemplary of ongoing debates over gendered Muslim spaces and publicness in Germany.

KEYWORDS   digital practices, gendered spaces, call to prayer, COVID-19, Muslim women, Islam in Germany, anti-Muslim racism, digital ethnography

Introduction

#goosebumps. I would never have thought it possible that the Azan could be allowed in Germany. Because of Corona & the ban on assemblies, supporters of AfD or Islam haters can't even demonstrate against it. SubhanAllah (post forwarded to author in German in a shared WhatsApp group on 25 March 2020)   [1]

This brief quote was extracted from a longer post that was shared in a WhatsApp group I   [2]
had established as part of my ethnographic research on Muslim everyday life and social media
practices. Ebru,[1] the woman who forwarded the post, was a young mother of third-generation

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1   To protect privacy, all interlocutors' names in this contribution are self-chosen pseudonyms and the exact
geographic locations of fieldwork sites are not mentioned.

Turkish descent in her mid-thirties who often posted statements relating to Turkish-Muslim communities to the group of friends, which included up to five young women with very heterogeneous ethnic and language backgrounds conversing in German. The quote relates to the permit obtained by the central mosque of Duisburg, the Merkez Mosque of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), to publicly call to sunset prayer (*adhan al-maghrib*, Turkish spelling in German *azan*). This permit was granted shortly after mosques in Germany had been obliged to close temporarily as part of the restrictions imposed in March 2020 during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Muslim communities in Germany heralded the Duisburg mosque's permit as a gain that would boost solidarity within their congregations as well as in relation to other religious communities.

More widely, permission to sound the *adhan* in the city must be seen as a political devel- [3] opment within a longer history of controversies about the (sonic) presence of Islam in public places in Germany (e.g., Kuppinger 2014; Klingelschmitt 2010) and other European cities (e.g., Lundsteen 2020; Baumann 1999; see also the special issue by Cesari 2005). The forwarded statement concisely evokes the multiple entangled issues implicated: of religiosity, the contested sonic presence of Islam, anti-Muslim discrimination, and the lockdown regulations in Germany. The significance of the call to prayer and its affective potency for Muslim spirituality is emphasised by the hashtag "goosebumps". This also alludes to the role of mosques as a space for spirituality and prayer and for the communal experiences of believers in Germany. The comment "I would never have thought it possible" references the contestation of sonic presence in public space in Germany, which in turn impacts upon the degree to which Muslim populations feel a sense of inclusion and solidarity as part of Germany's urban centres. Contestations over such public presence involve anti-Muslim and racist groups in Germany that continually seek to promote 'othering' discourses and discrimination against Muslim sections of the German population (Shooman and Spielhaus 2010). Lastly, the quote sets this positive news with a light touch of irony against the negative impacts—such as restrictions on assembly, protest, and social life—of Germany's lockdown regulations.

In this article, I reflect on these issues by focusing on the media practices of Muslim women [4] in a German city and in German-language social media interactions more broadly. I examine responses that express the impact of the first lockdown regulations imposed in Germany from March to May 2020 upon these women's everyday religious lives. Considering their statements in relation to wider ongoing debates about the presence of sonic and visual markers of Muslim religiosity in German public spaces and within semi-public mosque spaces allows me to highlight how their reactions are also shaped by their pre-pandemic (digital) religious practices. To contextualise my ethnographic examples, I draw on anthropological literature that explores the significance of sound and listening in Muslim spiritual experiences and public space.

The main part of this article is divided into three sections. First, I offer an overview of [5] female Muslim religiosity in Germany, with particular attention to female mosque spaces as spaces for sociality and spirituality. Against this backdrop, I then outline how women were affected by restrictions limiting their access to the mosques during the pandemic, and the digital practices that they established in response. Finally, I return to the opening quote and the public call to prayer in order to elaborate my discussion by examining judgements expressed about contested sonic spaces during the pandemic. By bringing together the two big themes of female religiosity during the pandemic and the sonic presence of Islam in Germany,

I cannot fully address the broader political issues and implications of the public presence of Islam in Germany, but I am able to point to female perspectives on these debates.

I propose viewing religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the notion of 'epidemic times'[2]: not only as an exceptional response to an extraordinary situation with "particular temporal dynamics" (Roth 2020, 13), but also as part of longer-term ongoing debates around gendered mosque spaces and Muslim publicness in Germany. This 'bifocal' lens allows me to explore how pandemic-specific issues were enfolded into pre-pandemic practices with sometimes surprising consequences: First, during the pandemic, spaces within mosques were more contested than ever, with men often encroaching on women's prayer spaces. This did not, however, spark immediate changes in gender-related attitudes, but was attributed to men's obligation to attend Friday prayers, which women do not have. Second, pandemic restrictions shifted many religious practices to the 'online' realm and later to hybrid forms of engagement for whole communities. While younger women in particular benefited from these transformations, the temporary loss of access to the embodied communal and social experiences within female mosque spaces could only partially be compensated for by gatherings in digital environments. Thirdly, while contestations over the public call to prayer during the pandemic restrictions were usually not related to gender but to wider debates about the presence of Islam in Germany, ways of listening and responding to the call for prayer are nonetheless structured along gendered lines.

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This article is based on a digital ethnographic fieldwork that I have been conducting since September 2019 on Muslim everyday life and social media practices in Germany with heterogeneous groups of mainly German-speaking women between 18 and 40 years old. Most of the women whom I initially met in different German-Arabic-language and German-Turkish-language mosques[3] in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia had very different migratory backgrounds, with roots in countries such as Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as European or Latin-American countries.[4] In addition to participant observation in three female mosque spaces where I took part in learning circles, Friday prayers, and celebrations, like those for childbirth (*ʾAqīqah*), holding in-depth individual and focus group interviews enabled me to gain further insights into everyday media practices. After this initial focus on 'offline' fieldwork that mainly took place between September 2019 and March 2020, my participant observation shifted more to different German-speaking social media and messenger services, using Instagram profiles and WhatsApp groups of up to five participants that were set up exclusively to enable the ethnographic study to digitally continue exchanges started during the offline focus group interactions. Setting up these dedicated groups and research profiles with women whom I had first met offline enabled me to obtain informed consent from indi-

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viduals to use material shared in digital contexts on a weekly basis.[5] This digital ethnography structure proved unexpectedly fortuitous when pandemic-related restrictions on face-to-face meetings came into force in Germany on 16 March 2020. With physical meetings in mosques no longer possible, the research of WhatsApp groups and personal chat conversations and phone calls enabled me to stay in touch with selected participants and continue the fieldwork at a distance during Germany's first lockdown from mid-March until May 2020, and in the months that followed. This article is largely based upon ethnographic material gathered between January and October 2020, but I also draw selectively on later digital ethnographic work, e.g., from the WhatsApp groups and on Instagram, that became part of ongoing research.

Digital Publics, Aesthetic Formations, and the Call to Prayer in Public Spaces in Germany

A growing body of anthropological works address the sonic dimensions of religion and how sounds relate to public spaces and religious and political belonging (e.g., Jouili and Moors 2014). Among these, the Islamic call to prayer has received particular attention and has been seen as a way of sacralising space as well as of claiming religious space in heterogeneous urban settings. There have been heated societal debates over the public presence of the *adhan*, the Islamic call to prayer, in non-majority Muslim contexts, and its recordings and radio broadcasts have also been contested (Tamimi Arab 2015; Larkin 2014; Lee 1999).
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The anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2006) has identified the call to prayer as well as other quotidian sounds of religious sermons and qur'anic recitations as foundational to the self-styling and subjectivity that form the bases of a moral and political community for Muslims in Cairo. As scholars of Islam have done (e.g., Schulz 2012, 24), he notes the importance of auditive learning, recitation, and speech as modes of transmitting authoritative religious knowledge while also highlighting the affective and intersubjective dimensions of listening. According to Hirschkind, listening to audio cassettes is not merely a cognitive activity but an embodied experience that incorporates multiple affective and emotional sensations. The voice and its technical processing serve as a principal mediator between speaker and listener, and in this process of mediation what is heard and experienced depends not only on what is said and who is listening, but also on the context and the publics the listener is set in. Hirschkind (2006, 117) argues that an "Islamic counterpublic" has emerged as a domain of discourse and practice disjunctive to the public sphere and the media of the (secular) nation state.
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Hirschkind's analysis can be seen as part of a broader shift in the anthropology of religion from the study of the doctrinal content of scriptures to public (and private) practice and especially the embodied, sensual, and affective dimensions of religion (Asad 2009). It also belongs to the growing body of literature on the anthropology of religion and media (e.g., Meyer and Moors 2005; Eisenlohr 2011; Schulz 2012) that focuses on either visual or sonic dimensions of religious everyday life. In this contribution, I would like to leave behind this separation of visual and aural senses and media to expand on the aesthetic dimensions of
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5   For reflections on ethnographic research profiles and ethical challenges in digital ethnography, see Pfeifer (2021): 'How Can You Approach the Field Digitally? Reflections on Using Social Media Profiles in Ethnographic Research'. *Digital Ethnography Initiative Blog* (blog). Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://digitalethnography.at/2021/04/29/how-can-you-approach-the-field-digitally-reflections-on-using-social-media-profiles-in-ethnographic-research/; Fuhrmann and Pfeifer (2020).

multi-sensory perception as a means of knowing. To this end, Birgit Meyer's (2009) notions of "sensational forms" and "aesthetic formations" appear particularly pertinent. Meyer pays attention to the role played by things, media, and the body in processes of establishing social formations. This focus allows her to "grasp the particular modes through which the imaginations materialize through media and become manifest in public space" (Meyer 2009, 6). She describes the senses, experiences, and aesthetics as sensory forms[6] that, in combination, shape the shared subjectivities that hold religious communities together. Building on Meyer's discussion, I argue that the call to prayer—like other bodily sensations—can be approached as a sensory form that always stands in interdependent relationships with social relations, materialities, and configurations of power. Taking this into account when examining gender-specific Muslim practices and responses to the pandemic restrictions enables me to explore the link between "auditory sensory perception and our physical and social environment" (Riskedahl 2020). I thereby expand upon the idea that digital technologies encourage individualisation (Slama and Barendregt 2018).

When looking at these dynamics in relation to digital media, Hirschkind's notion of an in-   [11]
dependent "Islamic counterpublic" can be adapted to include publics established in different digital contexts. By focusing on the different (digital) spheres in which the making of publicness takes place in (female) mosque spaces, WhatsApp groups, in public places, or on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, it is possible to distinguish different "scaled socialities" (Miller et al. 2016) and imaginaries of the social. Hence, I analyse the public presence of Islam in urban centres in Germany as "contested" and "graduated publics" (Zillinger 2017), which are distinctly structured around gender and overlap in significant ways. This focus on practices and contested and graduated publics enables me to elaborate on the gendered regimes of specific religiosities and thereby offer a more nuanced perspective than that of other studies that observed the shift from 'offline' to 'online' religious activities during the pandemic (Kühle and Langholm Larsen 2021, 3; in this special issue, see also Ragozina 2022).

Public societal debates on the role of Islam and Muslims in Germany have often revolved   [12]
around issues such as the building of mosques, the height of minarets, or, as discussed in this contribution, the public call to prayer. What they all have in common is that they arise when moves are made to claim greater visibility and a greater (sonic) presence of Islam in German urban centres.

(Digital) Religious Practices and Sociality in Germany in 'Pandemic Times'

The above-mentioned restrictions imposed during Germany's first lockdown in 2020 came   [13]
into force shortly before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which lasted from 23 April until 23 May that year. The suspension of religious services in places of worship were lifted just in time for *eid al-Fitr*, the festival of breaking the fast, and thereafter Friday prayers could be held and practised in mosque spaces as long as certain regulations were adhered to. Yet, many Muslims continued to stay at home and only slowly began meeting face-to-face. Most mosques in Germany were only able to accommodate a very limited number of persons in order to uphold the stipulated 1.5 m between each person praying. This also meant that prayers could not be carried out with the usual bodily proximity, whereby worshippers

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6   To avoid misunderstandings, instead of sensational, which can also be read as amazing or shocking, I use the term sensory form to refer to sensory experience and knowing.

stand so close to one another that, depending on the religious practice, they (almost) touch, signifying the communal body of believers. Additionally, older people and others with health conditions that made them vulnerable to the virus were advised to stay at home, no youth or children were allowed in the mosque, worshippers had to bring their own prayer mats, and the use of disinfectant was obligatory. Most mosques began keeping records of visitors, with some even installing digital registration via smartphone and a barcode that had to be scanned upon entering. This served to limit the number of people but also to facilitate contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 case among attendees.

These different phases, from closing mosques completely to reopening with limited oppor-   [14]
tunities for communal prayer and none for social gatherings or learning circles sparked a diverse range of initiatives to take communal spiritual experiences online. Some mosque organisations expanded their existing social media engagements to include the use of Telegram, YouTube, and Instagram, making their Friday sermons available in written form, as audio podcasts or videos, and even offering learning circles online. Yet these efforts could only partially replace the social support networks that mosques usually offer. For certain groups of women in particular, limited access to mosque spaces starkly curtailed their opportunities to interact with other women socially and for communal religious experiences. In the next section, I will first outline how a mosque as a gendered physical space offers a setting for communal spirituality as well as for sociality. This will enable me to demonstrate how the (partial) closing of religious spaces impacted Muslims in Germany in gendered ways. In the final subsection, I will expand upon my introductory example of the permitting of the public call to prayer and relate it to responses articulated by different groups and publics associated with two different mosques.

Gendered Mosque Spaces in Germany

I regularly met for Friday prayers with a heterogeneous group of women with family links   [15]
to Turkey and different north African countries in a German-Arabic-language mosque. About thirty to forty women of different ages, some with small children, came regularly for Friday prayers. Upon arrival, each woman usually prayed two cycles of prayers (*rakʿa*) in solitude, after which she would walk around, greet everyone, and sit down with her friends to chat while waiting for the call to communal prayer. On one of those Fridays, shortly before the lockdown was imposed, a woman in her fifties came in brandishing two packets of toilet paper like a trophy and announced, laughing, in German: "Look what I managed to get today [for the mosque]—the last two in the whole supermarket!" Everyone nearby laughed in response; some even playfully tried to grab the scarce goods. Jokingly, the women commented on hoarding and panic buying; toilet paper was indeed hard to obtain in Germany at the time. Soon after, the call to prayer was announced via the loudspeakers in one corner of the ceiling. The unmistakeable form and text of the call to prayer, always recited in Arabic, usually with four repetitions of Allahu Akbar (*takbīr*) followed by the Islamic creed (*shahada*), was called out by a trained and accomplished prayer caller. Some of the women had previously praised his beautiful voice. But the loudspeaker in the women's space was often distorted by a hollow echo and sometimes, as on this day, the volume was set so low that the voice failed to catch the women's attention immediately; their conversations continued. Some of the older women in the room asked the others to be quiet and soon everyone was solemnly listening to the sermon, which lasted about twenty minutes and was delivered in Arabic; a language that some of the women did not understand. The sermon was immediately followed by the communal

prayer, for which most of the women got up from the floor to gather in the rows marked by the carpet. They carefully arranged their bodies so that the feet of those standing next to each other in a row were almost touching. Some of the more knowledgeable women regularly oversaw and instructed the others on how to perform the gestures and postures correctly (not always with consent), and made sure that no one was ever alone in a row. As soon as the praying started, all the women synchronised their bodies with the prayer leader and with each other, performing the movements of two prayer cycles: standing, bowing, prostrating. After the communal prayer, participants could stay sitting in the rows for as long as they liked. Some left straight away, but most, like the group I became best acquainted with during my fieldwork, stayed longer. They could then listen to the broadcast of the German translation of the sermon and later chat together, drinking tea and sharing food.

This ethnographic vignette captures the importance of female mosque spaces for women's [16] spiritual practice as well as for sociality and community. While it is not obligatory for women to take part in communal Friday prayer, doing so allows them to enact and experience their relationship with God, not least in its embodied and affective dimensions (Pontzen 2020, 192). The call to prayer and the communal praying in this semi-public space serve, in line with Birgit Meyer (2009), as sensory forms, mediating between the women and the realm of God while at the same time forging a particular kind of community among very different groups of women who all attend this particular mosque for Friday prayers.

It also emerges in the description above that the women (and also men) do not always agree [17] about the correct way to perform the prayer, instructing each other on how to perform and listen to the *adhan* and the sermons. The women did not necessarily carry out all the gestures of the prayer in exactly the same manner.[7] As Khadija, a young woman of Moroccan descent and part of the above-mentioned WhatsApp group, told me: "there are several ways that can be right, there are always permissible differences." Yet, nonetheless, performing their practices together within a shared space served to attune their bodies and routines to the others present. The distinctive voice, amplified by the loudspeaker, the synchronised bodily movements, and not least the scent of tea and the sharing of food are key to the multi-sensorial experiential realm within which the female community is established.

Mosques, especially in places with stringent interpretations of Islam, have often been segre- [18] gated according to gender, with women carving out their own spheres of authority, religious knowledge, and interpretations of religious sources in dedicated female spaces (Jouili 2015; see also Mahmood 2005). It is only relatively recently, however—at least in the German-speaking context—that researchers' attention has been focused upon the participation of women in regular prayers in mosques and their claiming of female prayer spaces within those mosques. Islamic scholar Ayşe Almıla Akca (2020, 198) observes that female prayer areas have only recently, in the last twenty years, become common in German mosques, and that the predominant focus on female imams or leaders of prayer in public debates (see also Spielhaus 2012) fails to recognise the significance of the non-leading women's participation in communal prayers and the daily activities of mosques.

Most mosques with female praying spaces have a separate entrance for women, which is [19] often at the side or back of the building and not clearly signposted. "I see this as a sign of appreciation and discretion for our particular needs," Khadija told me in one of our regular

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7   These forms of learning bodily comportment during and after the prayer are closely tied in with other modalities like bodily comportment and dress that are part of the "pious subject" Saba Mahmood (2005) describes in her groundbreaking work.

conversations. Sometimes, older or more knowledgeable women use the prayer space to host learning circles and offer guidance to other women on a voluntary basis. In addition, some women choose to clean up after the sharing of food. The regular cleaning and provision of necessities for the female area is usually taken care of by men, however, unlike the toilet paper mentioned in the narrative above. Often, it is the board and sometimes the imam of the mosque who decide upon the decoration of the female prayer room; women can suggest their preferences and make changes in consultation with the board.

These observations support Akca's (2020, 198) argument that the practices in these spaces are shaped not only by the capacities and resources of the built environment but also by the activism and authoritative knowledge of the women who participate in day-to-day mosque life. This also points to recent reconceptualisation of mosques in Germany as 'transtopian' spaces (Yildiz 2021) in which innovative and transcultural practices thrive, also in relation to gendered dimensions. The significance of such female participation became strikingly evident when the lockdown was imposed in Germany and women suddenly lost their access to the embodied communal and social experiences described above; a loss that could only be partially compensated for by gatherings in digital environments.   [20]

Constraining and Expanding Religious Space in 'Pandemic Times'

On 12 March 2020, at about half past eight in the evening, a post was forwarded to the above-mentioned WhatsApp research group by Sarah, a student of Tunisian descent. It was a post that had been issued via Telegram by the mosque where we regularly met: The mosque requested all parents to refrain from coming to evening prayer that day and also to the Friday prayer the next day. Men and women without children were still allowed to come. In addition, adults with cold or flu symptoms and elderly people were asked to stay home because of the virus. After a short exchange of comments within the WhatsApp research group, yet another message from the mosque was forwarded. It referred to an unnamed "committee of great scholars"—as Khadija later explained to me, this meant the senior council of the Ulema of Saudi Arabia—having made a statement regarding the coronavirus and Friday prayers. The statement forbade infected persons or those quarantining to enter mosques, and basically exempted anyone who feared infection from their obligation of regular communal prayer. Two days later, the mosque followed federal state and council regulations, announcing that there would be no communal prayers in the mosque until at least 10 April, hence everyone should pray in solitude or only with household members at home. The women in the research WhatsApp group reacted with shock and sheer disbelief. Sarah said "I'm sad and appalled, but it is good that the measures are there. And of course, we abide by the rules of the country." With this statement she anticipated and invalidated prejudices that Muslims would not abide to German law. Moreover, missing out on their regular meetings in the women's space of their local mosque would not only deprive them of their communal religious experience but also of the sociality and support of other women. During the weeks that followed, WhatsApp became an increasingly important means of connection for the women to communicate with one another, and evolved into a channel for mutual support and reflection on the effects of the pandemic on their religious community.   [21]

With the fasting month of Ramadan, the situation changed again. For many women participating in my research, Ramadan is a month of collective praying, reflection, and experiencing of religious community. Many expressed views like that of the young mother, Ebru, who told me: "I miss my family and the community, eating together and breaking the fast is some-   [22]

thing I miss so dearly, I feel so lonely at times." Most women particularly missed the shared *Iftar,* the nightly communal feast that breaks each day's fast, and is usually enjoyed in the mosque or with extended family and friends. Unable to come together for communal prayers and festivities, for most women who shared their experiences with me, this first Ramadan during the pandemic was marked by solitude and retreat to just their closest family circle. Many reported that the worst part of the lockdown was being unable to come together in the mosque as a religious community. But besides meeting with a few close family members, they did find ways to socialise via WhatsApp and other digital applications. Not only did they break the fast together via video calls, some women also called each other while preparing the evening's food. Some even listened together to the same digital recordings of a call to prayer that they had found online, evoking the familiar soundscape of their daily prayers, and sharing that experience in real time. They thus found ways to digitally synchronise their spiritual and more mundane activities, regaining a sense of sociality and community despite physical separation.

At the end of Ramadan 2020, when German federal states began to slowly ease restrictions, [23] gatherings for religious services became permissible, albeit under strict physical distancing regulations. Some of the younger women, like Sarah and Khadija, were overjoyed to be able to end Ramadan with their prayers in the mosque—despite the lack of bodily contact and the obligation to wear masks throughout the whole prayer cycle. Subsequently, they commented in our WhatsApp group that "it was still not the same" and that they "wanted to touch each other": they missed the intercorporeal experience and the communal and social activities associated with the prayers and *eid-al fitr,* the feast held at the end of Ramadan. People with small children or vulnerable to COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions were still not permitted to enter the mosque.

As restrictions were eased further over the course of summer 2020, mosques were still not [24] allowed to accommodate as many people as before. In some instances, this led to women's mosque spaces being partially opened to men. One newlywed woman reported during one of our regular calls and exchanges of voice messages: "I feel uncomfortable with men praying in the same room as women, it feels like they are encroaching (*eindringen*) on our space." Although there were curtains visually separating men from women, she still felt the presence of men as an intrusion into the female space. The visual markers of separation were insufficient: she knew and felt that men were present, and the sound of their prayers disturbed the spiritual experiences of many women. Another research participant remarked that she had decided to attend prayers in a larger mosque that still maintained gender segregation. She was a German woman with Turkish roots who had been praying regularly in a German-Arabic-language Mosque where her Arabic-speaking husband prayed; now she chose to return to one of the bigger German-Turkish-language mosques she had attended before marriage. She did not even return when the female space was once again fully dedicated to women following the easing of restrictions. Women's decisions regarding which mosques to pray in are often influenced by friends and family members as well as by the amount of space and the opportunities offered for active participation, such as learning groups. Even pre-pandemic there were many mosque communities where the women's area was mainly used by men for Friday prayers or, for example, separated only by a curtain in some Bosnian mosque communities (Rückamp 2021, 182), but under the pandemic restrictions space for women in mosques became even more contested.

Before the restrictions, especially for younger women, social media like Instagram and [25]

YouTube had already been important sources of spirituality, religious knowledge, and advice on how to live a pious life as a Muslim woman in Germany. Many women who met during Friday prayers in the female areas of mosques also joined women's groups on WhatsApp for spiritual guidance, took part in online learning circles, or just kept in touch through phone and video calls, voice messages, and texting. In accordance with the increasing digitalisation of most aspects of daily life, in recent years many mosques have been developing ways to engage with their communities online via social media. They have publicised prayer and teaching schedules on their Facebook and Instagram pages or Telegram channels, and some have reached out to the wider community by making audio recordings and videos of their Friday sermons available online. Mosques that had previously engaged in these kinds of social media activities were the quickest to adapt to the closing of communal spaces under lockdown by expanding their programmes to include livestreaming of prayer sessions on YouTube, online teaching formats like webinars, or podcast streaming on SoundCloud. Some even took measures to enable personalised responses to direct questions; answering and fostering interaction within their communities, in order to reach older people in particular. Even though women had always participated in learning sessions, the newly established offers were even more inclusive, expanding to incorporate sessions that had previously largely been only accessible to men. The chance to ask questions via different kinds of comment functions enabled women to directly engage with the imam or teachers and "follow the duty to search for knowledge," as Khadija put it to our group. In most gender-segregated mosque spaces, this had previously been much more difficult, with the preaching usually transmitted unidirectionally to the women's spaces without any possibility for interaction. The opportunities opened up by digital infrastructures enabled some of the younger women to even start participating in more formalised religious study groups, learning how to read and recite the Qur'an in weekly digital sessions and engaging more closely with the imam and teachings of their particular mosque.

The observations presented above can be seen as evidencing different moments of rupture [26] that transpired during different phases of the pandemic restrictions, reshaping the everyday religious practices of the women who took part in my research. While rupture has been defined as a "radical, sometimes violent and even brutal form of discontinuity" (Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019, 2), I do not mean to imply a necessarily negative impact. Rather, I choose the term to reflect on the lockdown restrictions as a constitutive element of the women's social realities and experiences, which intersected with their individual biographical situations, as in the example of the woman who returned to the German-Turkish-language mosque. The physical space available for communal practices, not only in order to relate to the divine but also to experience being part of the community, was severely curtailed by the restrictions, yet that impacted upon the heterogeneous group of women who took part in my research in different ways. Some synchronised their religious practices by digital means, such as by listening simultaneously to the same *adhan* or participating in shared religious learning experiences; such adaptions sustained the sensory forms by transforming them to flourish in the new context. Others felt shut out from their communal female religious spaces but were unable to find compensation in the digital realm. My interlocutors' different strategies and reported experiences suggest that it would be too simple to see the rupture of the pandemic as radical discontinuity. Although the turn towards digital or hybrid online/offline engagement or the increasing 'individualisation' of religion due to pandemic constraints are not specific

to women, it is important to note that these transformations were shaped by ongoing contestations of gendered spaces within the mosque and digitally.

Contested Sonic Public Spaces

As described above, the semi-public spaces within mosques and the digital spheres that relate to those spaces are structured in gendered ways that are not fixed but are constantly being renegotiated. Broadening the outlook, the public spaces surrounding mosques in Germany are also contested in particular ways that relate not only to the mosques' physical buildings but also to the wider sonic urban space. This brings me back to my introductory example about the call to prayer in Duisburg. The post cited was part of an exchange of other currently significant spiritual and sensorial visuals, such as dramatic videos of the deserted Kaaba in Mecca. The message referred to the permission granted for publicly sounding the *adhan* of the mosque in Duisburg as well as for the ringing of neighbouring church bells at seven o'clock each evening, in order to create a shared religious city soundscape. The women in the WhatsApp group responded to the post emotionally with a range of affirmative expressions and emoticons with red hearts; one woman was so touched that she expressed her excitement in a direct message to me: "I am totally touched, I almost started to cry when I heard that." [27]

Duisburg was one of over seventy cities in Germany where (often for the first time in their history) the call to prayer was temporarily allowed to be sounded publicly during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Germany.[8] In most cases, both the *adhan* and the Christian call to prayer, the ringing of church bells (see Weiner 2014, 2014), were permitted. Before the pandemic, municipalities had often prohibited the Muslim public call to prayer, referencing local noise regulations or arguing that unlike Christian church bells, the *adhan* proclaimed a theological message. Yet, German federal laws pertaining to freedom of religion explicitly allow public calls to prayer, as long as certain regulations are adhered to regarding, for example, the volume and frequency of the call. [28]

During the lockdown, mosques were able to obtain permission to broadcast the public call to prayer through non-bureaucratic processes at the municipal level. It was generally the larger, centrally organised Turkish mosques that did so. In their statements, most imams and spokespersons argued that the public call to prayer would raise morale within their own [29]

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8   There are no official statistics for the number of German cities that have allowed the call to prayer. Estimates from before the pandemic lie at around thirty cities Herrmann, Andreas (2020). 'Stellungnahme zum Muezzinruf'. *Zentrum Oekumene*. Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://www.zentrum-oekumene.de/filead min/redaktion/Religionen/Stellungnahme_zum_Muezzinruf-final.pdf. Whereas the call to prayer sounded temporarily in approximately seventy cities in Germany during the first pandemic restrictions in 2020: Graver, Michael (2020). 'Ja, Wo ruft er denn? Temporäre Gebetsrufe während der Covid19-Pandemie'. *Adhan Statistik* (blog). Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://freies-verlagshaus.de/adhan/#statistik. The first documented public call to prayer in Germany took place in a prisoner-of-war camp in Wünsdorf, Brandenburg, on 30 December 1916, where the call to prayer was called five times a day (Lange 2019, 221–36). It is unclear whether there was ever another public call to prayer until 1970, when documentation states that a Muslim caster worker called to prayer with a megaphone every noon and every evening at a mosque in Allendorf (Hessen). Better known is the case of the Faith Mosque in the city of Düren, where in 1983 permission for the public call to prayer was granted by the trade inspectorate. After a lawsuit that lasted until 1989, the court cited freedom of religion as grounds for allowing the call to prayer five times a day: Akdemir, Feyza (2018). 'Die Geschichte des ersten erklingenden Gebetsrufes in Deutschland'. *IslamiQ - Nachrichten- und Debattenmagazin* (blog). 7 November 2018. Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://www.islamiq.de/2018/11/07/die-geschichte-des-ersten-erklingenden-gebetsrufes-in-deutschland/. Out of consideration for the neighbourhood, however, the mosque refrains from the morning and night call. To this day, the Düren call to prayer is considered the first public call to prayer in Germany.

communities and would also serve as a sign of interfaith solidarity and dialogue.[9] It is rather paradoxical and perhaps ironic that where permission was granted and the call to prayer was publicly broadcast, the amplified voice called to prayer at a time when communal praying inside the mosque was not allowed.

Nonetheless, many mosques that broadcasted the *adhan* publicly were visited by people who gathered in front of the buildings. They listened attentively to the voice and recorded videos on their mobile phones to document the unprecedented public event and send it to family members and friends. Some of these videos were also shared with me in the research group on WhatsApp, for example, a mobile phone video showing a prayer-caller (Turkish muezzin; Arabic: *muʾaddin*) of the famous Cologne Central Mosque, run by the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB). He was calling to prayer, standing all by himself outside the mosque, with a microphone in his hands and cables leading inside the mosque. It was again Ebru, the young mother, who had forwarded this record of the exceptional event. She had not been able to attend it herself, yet she told me: "Just knowing that this is taking place nearby makes me happy, so unbelievably happy! It fills me with such a warm feeling." Even more so, as she pointed out in the same conversation, because heated disputes over the heights of the "silent minarets" had taken place during the building phase of the mosque (see Gorzweski 2015).[10]

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The technical set-up meant that the man's voice was overpowered by its amplified version emitted by the loudspeaker; the smartphone recording distorted the audio quality further before any listener could replay it in a different time and place. The original intercorporeal experience and signification of calling a community to pray together in a shared physical space had been transformed in multiple ways. This mediated call to prayer, disseminated via WhatsApp, was imbued with further significations as the group's members reacted and discussed it in relation to past and ongoing debates about religious public presence in German urban spaces. In a different digital conversation, a young woman with Muslim-Greek roots explained her feelings in more general terms: "When the call to prayer is heard in a country that is not predominantly Muslim, I think it shows that the country tolerates and accepts people of other religions. […] I think it's a great gesture and promotes multicultural coexistence." While these responses feed into more general discussions about the visibility, presence, and acceptance of Islam in Germany, and might not appear to be particularly shaped by gender, such voices tend not to be heard in male-dominated public debates.

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In some places, such as one Berlin mosque, the public call to prayer was broadcast during the day (*ṣalāt aẓ-ẓuhr*) and was intended to be heard by the local neighbourhood as well as livestreamed on Facebook. The mosque announced on its website that the public call to prayer was a sign of support and consolation to help people feel spirituality and cohesion in a time of crisis. Many people gathered on the street in front of the mosque to hear the exceptional sonic event. Some were simply curious passers-by, others had come to witness the occasion having read the online announcement—even though it had not been meant as an invitation

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9   See, for example, the statements in these international online journalistic outlets: https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20200403-039 (Imam Mehmet Taha Sabri); https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/diaspora/mosque-in-germany-joins-call-to-prayer-to-raise-morale-amid-virus-lockdown, https://www.islamiq.de/2020/03/21/erster-gebetsruf-als-zeichen-der-solidaritaet/ (Spokesperson Hülya Ceylan). Last accessed 22 August 2022.

10   As a particularly visible and prominent mosque, the Central Mosque of Cologne had made an agreement with the city council to install only silent minarets as part of the representative building. The settlement allows public call to prayer within the inner courtyard of the mosque, yet the mosque had never before made use of this right.

to congregate. Up to 300 persons came to the street in front of the mosque, according to police reports, despite lockdown regulations and physical distancing rules. People listened to the *adhan* with respect, awe, and fascination; some with curiosity and some barely able to believe that the public call to prayer had been allowed to resound in that urban space. Most who came held their mobile phones in their hands, ready to record the extraordinary event.

As Diane Riskedahl (2020, 5) has argued in relation to the Canadian context, where the call to prayer was allowed during Ramadan 2020, "there is, through listening, an alignment of self with God and self with community"; she sees this as a soundmark that "sonically remakes public space." Likewise, the people in front of the Berlin mosque participated physically in a multi-sensorial event, creating a sense of belonging to a community, and maybe also sensing an alignment with God, but not in the usual way, as no one was preparing to pray in public because communal praying was forbidden at the time. The meaning and experiences of the call to prayer therefore shifted from communal experiences of alignment with God to the emphasis of solidarity at a time of physical distancing measures that, for many, were associated with sensory deprivation and social isolation. [33]

At the same time, people were also participating in different kinds of highly contested discourses about the sonic (and audiovisual) presence of Islam in public space. The *adhan* was experienced as a particularly intense public presence in the city during the lockdown regulations. According to my interlocutors, the sound of the *adhan* was all the more prominent due to the relative quietness and emptiness of the streets. As Meyer (2009, 18) has noted, the public presence of religion always has to be analysed in relation to state and other institutions' regulation of the role of religion in society. What I must add here are the unique circumstances of the 'pandemic times.' In Berlin's particular socio-cultural and historical context (and that of Germany more generally), a "turn to Islam" has been observed in recent years, asserting the presence of Muslims in the city (Bendixsen 2013; Sounaye 2021). Most strikingly, the construction of mosques with minarets serves as a symbolic testimony to Muslim life in the city, increasing the visibility of Muslim communities. This has led to controversial debates and polarisation, provoking intervention from municipalities, city administrations, various civil society organisations, and ordinary citizens (Akca 2020; see also Spielhaus and Färber 2006). The sound of the *adhan* in Berlin and many other Germany cities in 2020 thus connected to more deeply rooted ongoing debates and reinvigorated them in the charged pandemic situation. [34]

As the crowd in front of the Berlin mosque grew ever larger on that day, with many people not heeding distancing measures or wearing masks, the mosque's security guards and police collaborated with the local imam, who ended the call to prayer early, before they intervened to disperse the gathering. Consequently, the mosque's permission to broadcast the call to prayer publicly was withdrawn by the municipality; health councillor Falko Liecke announced the decision on Twitter[11] that very day. In his tweet, as in most press coverage of the event, the "extensive violations of measures to impede the corona pandemic" were cited as justification for the reinstated prohibition. Before even reaching that statement, however, the first sentence of Liecke's tweet pointedly mentioned that the mosque was under observation by the German domestic intelligence services (*Verfassungsschutz*). This single tweet thus discursively intertwined the *adhan* and violations of pandemic regulations with federal security issues, offering fertile ground for anti-Muslim sentiments and conspiracy theories associat- [35]

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11   Translation by author. The post is accessible here: https://twitter.com/falkone1/status/12471662485776 91656. Last accessed 22 August 2022.

ing the corona pandemic with Muslims (for similar observations in the Indian context, see Rahman 2020, 135).

This relates the public call to prayer to yet another dimension that was snidely alluded to in the WhatsApp post cited in my introduction: "Because of corona & the ban on assemblies, supporters of AFD or Islam haters can't even demonstrate against it." Political parties like the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany) and other groups that spread Islamophobic messages have long been (re)signifying the call to prayer as a threat to society. Such groups portray the call to prayer as a sonic demarcation of Muslim presence in a soundscape that should supposedly be free of religious expression—or should only resonate with Christian church bells. Indeed, from their perspective, the sonic marker is an attempt to assert power over other religious groups; they reject the idea that it can foster interfaith solidarity and dialogue. Awareness of these and similar sentiments was enough to discourage many mosques from submitting requests to be allowed to publicly call to prayer during the lockdown and also at later stages of the pandemic. Some were so demoralised by hateful comments on social media that they even revoked requests that were in progress.

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These complex dynamics testify to the significance of sound and auditory spaces in orienting belief: firmly held notions of difference between self and other become explicit when people take a stance on the controversial presence of sonic forms of Muslim religiosity in public spaces in Germany. As a sensory form, the call to prayer thus becomes a viscerally experienced point of contention for these different kinds of debates. For German Muslims, listening to the call to prayer is part of their pious practices of religious community, while the sound itself controversially permeates urban places as well as digital spheres and through that takes on new social and political significance. Although public debates related to the public call to prayer are not gender-specific, they are dominated by male voices. Muslim women tend to listen to the call to prayer within female safe spaces and express their opinions with regard to the contestations in more semi-private contexts, like in our WhatsApp group. Yet, during the pandemic, young women in particular have become more vocal in different kinds of Muslim social media publics, including in debates about issues such as the public call to prayer. Communities and municipalities have also realised that they can use the public call to prayer to promote "diversity and integration", as is illustrated by the pandemic-inspired "model project" to allow the public call to prayer on Fridays under certain conditions by the city of Cologne. However, the related contestations seem to continue along the pre-pandemic lines.

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Concluding Remarks: Calling to Prayer in 'Pandemic Times'

As I have shown in this contribution, women's access to female mosque spaces and forms of community was drastically restricted not only by the regulations imposed in Germany during and after its first COVID-19 lockdown but also by men taking up space in female prayer areas. While this fed into long-term debates about gendered mosque spaces and prevented many women from experiencing important sensory forms and communal religious practices within the mosque, it did not immediately spark changes in gender-related attitudes. The different phases of the changing restrictions as the pandemic developed were felt by my interlocutors as a series of ruptures that intersected with their own biographies, varying with age and social status. The heterogeneous group of women who took part in my research was affected by the restrictions in different ways. For most, mainly young women, increasing the

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degree to which social media and messenger services were incorporated into their daily routines enabled them to maintain a sense of shared community and thereby also sustain a sense of religious self. Listening to the *adhan* and synchronising their everyday religious activities via digital infrastructures were key strategies that activated familiar sensory forms digitally. Some younger women expanded their practices to even participate in debates and learning sessions that, in physical settings, had been largely accessible only to men. Others, particularly women with small children, felt excluded from the religious practices and had difficulty finding compensatory experiences in the digital realm. In one case this even led to personal crisis and with the encroaching of men on female prayer spaces to reorientation to a different mosque. All my interlocutors' accounts implied that the ruptures of the pandemic restrictions were experienced not so much as exceptional events but rather as an intensification of ongoing contestations around gendered spaces within the mosque and in the digital realm, as the introductory example also suggests.

I proposed conceptualising the call to prayer in the semi-public and public spaces in and outside the mosque as a sensory form that not only mediates between women and the spiritual realm but is also experienced as a shared reference point among a particular kind of community that brings together very different groups of women. In addition to the technically amplified voice that performatively brings forth the call on each occasion anew, the synchronised movements of the bodies praying together can also be seen as a sensory form, exemplifying how auditive perception is always about more than just hearing: sound pervades spaces and bodies, choreographing movement and mobilising affect. This kind of sensory form can only partially be transferred to the digital realm: While some women found ways to synchronise their everyday routines and prayer practices with other women in tune with the digitalised call to prayer, such practices were generally limited to the intimate sphere of selected close relationships and could not hold together a larger community of a more heterogeneous group of women. Even before the pandemic, a trend had already been observed towards the individualisation of religious life, with more personalised practices performed in the privacy of homes augmented by smartphones (Slama and Barendregt 2018, 6). Nonetheless, this apparent withdrawal to more private spaces is accompanied by digital practices that enable people to encounter and engage with religious material and communities that might otherwise be inaccessible. This is what Miller et al. (2016) address as the "scaling of socialities" in the digital realm. In my case, it also permeates physical locations: social formations are structured and fragmented by institutions and spaces located physically, such as the mosque or public areas of a city, as well as by digitally infrastructured media like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. In the examples presented above, the publics appear predominantly structured and fragmented around gender and age, but other social hierarchies and relations intersect in significant ways.

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Once the call to prayer enters urban public space and makes Muslim religiosity sonically present, it becomes embroiled in moral debates and municipal regulation of the place of religion—or, more precisely, the presence of Islam—in German society. During the pandemic, it was argued that the Muslim sounds would contribute to solidarity and interfaith dialogue, raising the morale of believers. Others, however, saw the public broadcast of the *adhan* as a threatening sonic demarcation of Muslim space and an attempt to assert dominance. Such perspectives were put forward in statements that discursively related the *adhan* to violations of measures to reduce infection as well as to the securitisation of Islam in Germany. Many of my interlocutors welcomed the opportunity that the pandemic brought for the sonic pres-

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ence of Islam in German public spaces to be heard, cherishing the sound for its religious significance and as a symbol of solidarity, not only but especially for female communities. However, interminable wider debates indicate that the public call to prayer continues to mobilise emotionally felt principles and beliefs that shape secular and religious publics, as was also acknowledged in the post forwarded among the WhatsApp group.

Drawing upon the material presented, I argue that everyday religious practices during 'pandemic times' should not be viewed as an exceptional event or radical discontinuity, but as responses to a specific situation that bring to the fore and highlight key ongoing debates over gendered Muslim presence in mosque spaces and Muslim (sonic) publicness in German-speaking discourse.

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Acknowledgements

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