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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS USAGE OF CYBERSPACE BY INDIANS

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ABSTRACT

The Internet as a place for worship or for inter-faith exchanges has rarely been explored. Most studies in this field have focused on analyzing the experiences of specific religious groups. There has thus, been little attempt to study the prevalence of interfaith exchanges among Internet users. This is despite the versatility shown by the Internet in promoting intercultural exchanges, since its inception. The present paper, while briefly tracing previous research on the evolution of the Internet as a spiritual place, specifically aims at exploring the potential of this medium in encouraging inter-faith exchanges. Focus group discussions of Indian Internet users provided insights about the latter's quest for religion online as well as their interpretation of the interfaith text.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Internet or the new media invited a flurry of research from scholars across disciplines. The primary objective of most studies was to investigate how the new media differed from the old, mainly in terms of audience experience. Soon, the new media was to pervade all aspects of life and work, thanks to the distinct advantages it enjoyed over the old. Hypertext became the new text and emails posed a threat to post offices across the globe. Businesses were quick to realize the value of cyberspace, which in turn promised to transform them. Gradually the impact of Internet started being felt in all walks of life. It also entered the world of faith. Religions as well as online religious communities have flourished on the Internet for decades. The first online forum dedicated to the discussion of religion and morality, the Usenet group net religion, developed in 1983 – only 13 years after the birth of Internet. This was the first networked forum for discussion on the religious, moral and ethical implications of human actions. Later in the mid-1980s, during a reconfiguration of Usenet, net.religion split into smaller forums. 1990s saw the emergence of fresh religious groups and mailing lists online. Prominent among them were Ecunet – an ecumenical Christian email listserv, H-Judaic and Buddha Net (Campbell, 2006).

Time magazine, in 1996, came up with a special issue on religion online. This was the phase that also saw ancient religions such as Wicca and new religions such as techno paganism (digital version of neo-paganism) finding their place online. Internet has provided religious practitioners with new ways of exploring their religious beliefs through a growing number of websites, chat rooms and email discussion groups dedicated to a variety of faith related issues. Some of the most common types of online religious activities included (1) gathering religious information online (2) online worships and rituals (3) online recruitment and missionary activities and (4) participating in online religious communities (Campbell, 2006). Gathering religious information is, by far, the most commonly observed activity of online religious seekers. This may include listening to archived religious teachings, reading online and buying religious products and resources online. Online worship and rituals have led to the emergence of cyber churches and cyber temples. They are simply online environments where electronically linked groups aim to reproduce some aspects of conventional places of religious worship. These entities exist solely on the Internet and have no equivalent offline structure. Cyber churches and cyber temples provide emails for daily reading, offer bulletin board services where people post spiritual questions or prayer requests. By using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) software users could also participate in online prayer meetings.

Similarly, many examples of online recruitment by religious groups also exist. The Internet is changing the ways people of faith spread their beliefs and make converts. Evangelism has been officially sanctioned by the Catholic Church in the Vatican documents (Campbell, 2006). Lastly, there are several online groups that facilitate interaction with believers. While some online communities are created intentionally by religious institutions, others are formed by individuals at a grassroots level. While some websites refer to themselves as online communities, many in fact provide interaction with hypertext and images only. Online religious communities are interactive groups, facilitating two-way communication through computer technologies such as IRC and emails. Irrespective of the technology used, online religious communities revolve around common themes: experience, interaction and communication. Members select the communities they want to join on based on the type of experience they are looking for. The strength of their connection is based on the affinity an individual feels for the group or topic (Campbell, 2006). The concept of interpretative community has often been invoked by scholars to study media or new media audiences. Stanley Fish, said to have coined the term, argued that the meaning of any text derives from the authority of a critical community. Fish (1980), argued that texts or media texts are neither good or bad in themselves, nor do they represent meaning in any direct sense. Instead it is the reader who activates the meaning of a text and gives it value by deploying the appropriate strategies of interpretation. From the mid-1980s through the 1990s the interpretative community became a popular concept among researchers who used qualitative methods (such as focus group discussions) to study audience behavior. Notions of an active audience dominated the field of mass communication in the early and mid-1990s and the interpretative community was aligned with an active audience view. Of late, the concept of interpretative community has been summoned by scholars who study media in religious contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion online began to catch the attention of researchers in the mid-1990s. Initial studies (O' Leary, 1996; O' Leary & Brasher, 1996) address how religion was beginning to be influenced and manifested in online environments. Early studies looked at the general phenomenon of cyber religion (Brasher, 2001). Scholars wanted to explore how technology connects spiritually inclined people. Online adaptations of traditional religious practices, identification of new religious expressions, religious ethics and virtual reality were other areas of interest. Studies, for instance, suggested that a prayer meeting in the virtual world reproduces some of the essential features of a traditional / offline prayer meeting, although in a novel way (Schroeder, Heather & Lee, 1998). An important study (Hoover, Clark & Rainie, 2004) reveals that a significant portion of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual and religious purposes. This group of 'online faithful' is predominantly white, better educated and is relatively well to do. For instance, frequent church goers were also heavy users of religious news (pertaining to Christianity). The above study also reveals that about a quarter of these users seek information about the religious faiths of others. They do so out of curiosity, or for spiritual growth (Hoover, Clark & Rainie, 2004). This group consists of users who attended traditional religious services most regularly or those that hardly attended them. However, as the study points out, there was a clear distinction in the motifs of those who attended traditional religious services frequently and those that didn't, when it comes to online seeking of information about other religions. For instance, the frequent church goers looked for information on other traditions for their own spiritual growth, while the non-church goers looked for the same just out of curiosity. By the beginning of 21st century, research on religion and Internet had begun to be considered a serious field of inquiry. Several edited collections came up with multiple forms of religiosity that have emerged in chat rooms, websites and other computer networked technologies. In an attempt to outline this comprehensive field of inquiry Campbell (2003) suggests four categories of research existing on Internet and religion.

She categorized these studies as coming under (1) observational analysis, which includes analysis of websites pertaining to religion, interviews of webmasters and users and other methods primarily focused on the general phenomenon of cyber religion, (2) philosophical or theological examinations, which suggested how Internet may be used to reconnect people to religious ideas and beliefs, (3) theoretical development, which attempted to develop tested conceptual frameworks in order to interpret the empirical data (4) social ethnography, which investigated distinct online cultures and online religious communities. These categorizations provided an initial starting point for contextualizing the given field of study. Since then the number and diversity of studies on Internet and religion have increased exponentially. Later studies, for instance, those on ritual and authority and several other areas, didn't fit into the above mentioned categorization, hence calling for the need to come up with new categorizations. Though not in its infancy anymore, Internet and religion as a field of inquiry, is still evolving. A survey of existing literature points at a dearth of studies on religious use Internet in India and other Asian societies. Also, most studies on religious use of Internet are about users who practice their own religion online. Studies on use of Internet to seek information about others' religions are scarce. The present study aims to fill this gap. It proposes to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the Indian audience narrate their religious experience acquired online?

RQ2: How do the Indian audience members interpret an online text on interfaith practices?

The study assumes significance in light of India, as well as many Asian countries, being multi-faith societies, where respective Constitutions guarantee each citizen the freedom to practice one's own religion without state interference.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Interpretive community theory is of fairly recent origin, even though its epistemological roots go deeper. The basic idea of the interpretative community can be seen in the works of American pragmatist and semiotic an Charles Sanders Pierce, who argued that public knowledge arises out of the discursive practices of communities of inquiry. Proponents of this theory supported the view that reality is a social construction that takes variable forms and is created through the process of face-to-face interaction. Towards the end of the century the poststructuralist philosophers argued that knowledge is created through the contingencies of power and discourse. Similarly, in literary studies, the deconstructionists and reader-response groups promoted the role of the reader in bringing textual meanings to life. It was in the backdrop of the above developments that Stanley Fish coined the term interpretative community. Interpretive community theory popularized by Stanley Fish (1980) states that a text does not have meaning outside of a set of cultural assumptions regarding both what the characters mean and how they should be interpreted. The meanings ascribed to cultural texts such as television programs, novels, and web content becomes meaningful only through the interpretive strategies practiced by the members of communities. In simple terms, Fish proposed that text was meaningless without readers to engage it. Fish argued that the interpretative strategies that a reader employs in the act of reading existed long before the reader encountered the text. Moreover, these strategies are not the private property of individuals but of a social community of readers. According to Fish, what we conventionally think of as an act of reading is actually an act of writing it and the strategies that enable the same are produced by the social entity called an interpretive community. It might also be noted here that, members also learn the rules for debating the value of an interpretation. Such debates can be fruitful for indicating the core values of a community. A textual reading is judged right or wrong, worthy or unworthy, by the standards of this community. Other communities may have very different standards of judging or interpreting the same work.

The concept of interpretative community that Fish had in mind was the literary critics. Yet, it became apparent by the early 1980s that this concept can apply to a variety of settings. The concept of interpretative communities entered the realm of media studies with the publication of *Reading the Romance* by Janice Radway in the year 1984. With the help of a series of focus group interviews Radway inquired about the social background of romance reading, including women's negotiation of novels in the context of family roles and responsibilities. Latter mass communication theorists followed up on Radway's study with efforts to render bone and flesh to the then embryonic concept. Several mass communication studies, done subsequently, shared an interest in popular genres and the competencies and pleasures that characterize audience reception in genre texts. Genres served as a focus of investigation and conceptual development for several reasons. First, media content is often designed, produced and marketed to the public by means of genre classification. Thus, the genre system represents an unwritten contact between the media industries and the normative codes of readers and viewers. Second, genres always marks some variance in meanings of their signifiers. Third, from a practical standpoint, it is thought to be easier to find an interpretative community if one can make a case that a genre has a highly devoted following. Also, in media studies the concept of interpretive community has been applied to cultural identity (Lindlof, 2009).

In doing so, focus group interviews are often used for tapping into the group context of audience interpretation. In addition, qualitative interviews have also been employed to elicit discourse about the content uses, strategies and textual discriminations of an interpretative community.

METHODOLOGY

Focus group discussions were chosen for answering the above research questions. As a research technique focus group employs guided, interactional discussions with a view to generating rich details of complex life experiences (Powell and Single, 1996). FGDs, increasingly being followed by social scientists, are primarily intended to arrive at insightful findings, reveal public discourses, and understand interpretative communities (Merton, Fiske & Curtis, 1946). Simply put, FGDs can be understood as informal discussions among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic or issue. A revival of interest in FGD in media and communication studies was part of a move for more qualitative research in this area.

Participants: A total of 30 participants split into six groups were selected for the study. The participants were selected by purposive sampling on the basis of a predetermined criterion, which in our case was participation in online religious activities. The focus group discussions were held in October – November, 2022.

Religious activities performed online were classified into the following categories:

- **Category 1:** Online activities related to personal, spiritual or religious concerns. This includes sending, receiving or forwarding emails with spiritual content / sending online greeting cards for a religious holiday such as Christmas, Eid or Diwali / responding to a prayer request online / downloading or listening to online music with religious or spiritual themes.
- **Category 2:** Online activities related to traditional institutional religion. This includes searching for places to attend religious services / using email to plan a meeting for a religious group / make a donation (online) to a religious organization.
- **Category 3:** Online news seeking. This includes reading online news accounts about religious events.
- Participants of focus group discussions had the desired experience in at least two (out of three) of the above-mentioned categories. Care was taken to include participants from different religious denominations. Age, gender or educational qualifications were not set as criteria for selection.

Measures

Selection of Stimuli: Participants were briefed on interfaith and intercultural communication. They were introduced to a series of contents, downloaded from Internet, describing interfaith activities. They were exposed to the given content right before the commencement of discussions.

Procedure: Six focus group discussions were conducted by the moderator (researcher). All the groups had five participants each. Prior to the discussions participants were given a brief orientation of the topic at hand. They were asked to read content downloaded from Internet for the purpose of the study. Participants were promised complete anonymity by the researcher. They could speak in English, Hindi or Odia – languages known to the researcher. All members were encouraged to speak evenly and equally. No discussion lasted for more than an hour. Discussions were held in informal settings. Quiet settings were preferred to aid recording. All the focus group discussions were recorded. They were selectively transcribed. Translations were done, wherever necessary.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes emerged from a careful reading of the focus group discussions.

Religion Online' than 'Online Religion: When asked to "narrate their religious experience acquired online" participants could promptly identify religious activities, pertaining to their own religion that they performed online. Online information on their religion was widely available as well as consumed quite often. Participants were sometimes highly specific while describing the usefulness of the medium during the former's pursuit of religious information.

Group (G)3, Participant(P)3: *I, more or less, watch tales of Shirdi Sai Baba [Hindu mystic and saint] online. (translated from Odia)*

G3, P4: *As we are living in a city, the sound of azaan [Islamic call for worship] ... we are unable to hear. To know the perfect timing (for azaan) I follow the Internet...I just try to remember some of the dates (for religious occasions).*

G2, P2: *I have played naat [religious songs] in the month of Ramzan. YouTube provides me with lots of valuable information about my religion ... Google too helps.*

G1, P2: *I read many quotations (from Internet), many paragraphs about my religion (Islam), which I was surprised (to know for the first time).*

Sending and receiving religious information to other members of their religion, via social media, particularly during festivals, also remains a popular activity among participants.

G4, P1: *...on occasions like Diwali, Dusherra, RathYatra, I've also shared messages and greetings to various people online. I've also shared images and quotations (in social networking sites).*

Discussions with participants suggested a preponderance of 'religion online' (Helland, 2000), which involves importing traditional forms of religion to the Internet. An elaboration of religious activities performed online, mainly during festivals or in connection with daily rituals points at 'religion online' than anything else. 'Online religion' (Helland, 2000), which adapts religion to create new forms of networked spiritual interactions, as a theme, was near absent from most discussions. This answers the first research question (RQ1).

Quest for other religions: The role of Internet as a facilitator of interreligious communication also dominated the discussions. Some participants were quick to recall activities they had performed online, in order to know other religions and cultures.

G2, P1: Online is a better medium (for interreligious chats). There is an element of fear in offline chats ... arguments may escalate. What may follow next is hate speech. Through the Internet, I met a friend who was a Hindu. We chatted. We could never have met in person. We met through Facebook. (Translated from Hindi)

G3, P1: I was doing some research (online) on a place called Jerusalem ... it also led me to know a lot about Islam (my own religion being Christianity) ... the direction they face during prayers.

G3, P4: I got interested in mummies and their (Egyptian) religion ... mummies are also about preserving the dead, like burying ... somewhat (similar) to my religion (Islam).

G1, P3: ... I was going through an article, over Internet, about Punjabi people [Sikhs] ... (about) how they are so helpful ... I was reading about Guru Govind Singh (pause) online. My curiosity aroused me to read about Guru Govind Singh.

Surfing for another religion was often associated with an innate curiosity, a desire to explore similarities with one's own faith or a positive orientation towards a religious figure. An interest in art and architecture could also serve as a propellant.

G1, P2: Despite of being (sic) Muslim ... I find some of the historic places ... of Hindus (to be) very interesting ... I've read about Jagannath temple (online)

Participants could defend their search for information on other religions.

G1, P4: My parents had an inter-religious marriage. My mother is a south Indian Christian and my father is Hindu. Everyone used to say that they have not done the right thing ... but when I got to surf the Internet I read that it can be (sic) possible for persons not in the same religion ... to marry. And it is not a crime.

Contrary to previously held beliefs that knowledge of other faiths could loosen one's own, some participants spoke otherwise.

G2, P1: (after getting to know other faiths) Faith in my religion has definitely not gone down...after going through these resources some part of my faith has actually strengthened.

Participants were aware of the hate speech, which of late, has proliferated on the Internet as well as social media. They were quite vocal in their criticism of hate speech.

G5, P1: Such a thing (hate speech) shouldn't be treated as religious at all...it defeats the very purpose of religion. I have found it highly distracting.

G5, P5: I think those promoting hate speech (online) have an agenda other than religion. Its neither spiritual ...nor religious.

A change in media technologies has always produced corresponding cultural changes (McLuhan, 1964). Each new medium transcends the boundaries of experience reached by previous medium and contributes to further change. If our experience of the world is technologically mediated, then technology itself must have direct relevance. The arrival of the Internet and other communication technologies can have a tremendous impact on intercultural communication. It has the potential to lead to increased information about people and cultures and increased contact with people who are different from us. Similar trends were also observed in the discussions above. This curiosity for other religions was, however, not accompanied by a propensity to change one's own faith. In some cases, knowledge of other belief systems seems to have reinforced participants' faith in their own religion. This also answers the first research question (RQ1).

Cautious Interpretation of online interfaith text: Speaking on interfaith articles downloaded from Internet, participants' views ranged from positive to cautious optimism, to reluctance.

G1, P1: This (gives an idea) about the secularism of our nation, that joins each and every individual (irrespective of faith) ... creates a healthy link. As far as doing Aarti to Jesus ... I don't think it is against, you know, anybody's religious sentiments...Hindu monks, well versed in scriptures, develop a world view (which enables them to connect with other religions as well).

G4, P4: (initially finding it difficult to frame an opinion) ... they want to show there are no boundaries. It is great that we get such articles from the Internet ... haven't heard before ... so surprised to know!

G2, P2: This, I guess is a bit too much! Aarti and puja is a bit too much ... can go to the church and do it. This is not necessary. (Translated from Hindi)

Participants interpreted the stimuli in their own ways. Responses varied from the activity being described as a strong secular message to society, to others being slightly more reluctant or taking a more cautious view to this apparently novel way of celebrating Christmas. This attempts to answer the second research question (RQ2).

LIMITATIONS

- Findings can't be generalized to the entire population.
- Possibilities of interviewer's effect can't be entirely ruled out.
- Possibilities of guinea pig effect can't be entirely ruled out.
- All religious denominations didn't find equal representation in the discussions.
- More number of focus group discussions might have yielded more enriched data on the issue.

CONCLUSION

Internet users in India are not new to the idea of surfing for religion. Internet, as a medium, mostly supplements or reinforces the traditionally held religious beliefs of its users. Due to Internet, information on other religions and belief systems is more accessible now. The same, however, hasn't eroded faith in one's own belief system. Indian Internet users were varied in their interpretation of interfaith activities published online.

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