FAITH IN DIGITAL AGE- INFLUENCE OF NON-SECTARIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND THEIR ONLINE FAITH SUBCULTURES ON YOUTH IN INDIA

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Thesis submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Bachelor of Arts in Sociology**

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I certify that the thesis entitled **"Faith in Digital Age- Influence of non-sectarian spiritual practices and their online faith subcultures on Youth in India"** is a record of bonafide research work carried out by **Anamika Lami, Aneena K.R, Isha Nagaraj, Zeba Manesh, Nayana Roshan, Meghana Ramesh, Sarah Saju, Ashtami V and Sivapriya K S**, under my guidance and supervision. The thesis is worth submitting in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology.

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The concept of spirituality is significantly different from that of religion. A religious person is spiritual but a spiritual person is not always religious. The essence of spirituality echoes in identifying and finding oneself as well as understanding the universe. The study sheds light on digital platforms being a major propagator of non sectarian spiritual practices.

The non sectarian spirituality centers around nature and its artifacts,with a revival of the ancient practices of worshipping nature and identifying oneself with their environment. A key concept of non sectarian spirituality is SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious) encompassing of various practices and beliefs such as-

Meditation, yoga, divination, astrology, reiki, crystals, manifestation, sound healing, energy healing. These practices have gained prominence through various online platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Discord.

The study can be viewed through the framework of hyperreality, a situation where one is unable to distinguish between reality and simulation, i.e. this distinction becomes increasingly blurred for them. The simulations are more compelling than the actual experiences, which is propagated by the increasing exposure to various online platforms, which host communities focused on spirituality.

The youth, especially the urban youth, are the harbingers of the SBNR practices. Many turn to non sectarian spirituality as a means of coping with various mental health challenges. And in turn, the content creators cater to their needs by addressing topics like mindfulness, personal development and meditation practices. The youth are also able to find a "like minded community" and are thus able to cultivate a sense of belongingness while being anonymous, further boosting the popularity of online platforms focusing on non-sectarian spiritual practices.

In India , the rise of SBNR practices can be mainly attributed to urbanization, globalization, rising stress and other mental health challenges as well as commercialization of such practices.

Methodology

The study, a descriptive research, analyzes online interactions and community dynamics within digital platforms, focusing on youth engagement.

General Objective:

To analyse the influence of online non-sectarian spiritual practices on the youth.

Specific Objectives:

1. To understand the socio-demographic factors of youth involved in faith-based online communities.

2. To identify digital platforms and communities for spiritual guidance and mentorship.

3. To find the motivating factors behind the involvement of youth in online faith subcultures & practices.

4. To investigate the impact of online practices on youth.

The data was collected with help of netnography and case studies.

- **Netnography:** For three months, netnographic data was gathered through active participation in group discussions and observation of community activities and emerging trends across Reddit, Discord, and YouTube platforms frequented by SBNR individuals.

- **Case studies:** The methodology includes four case studies based on online interviews, representing a range of participants with diverse spiritual practices.

Major Findings

1. **Objective 1: Understanding the Socio-Demographic Factors of Youth Involved in Faith-Based Online Communities**

- Participants primarily hailed from urban areas, with Indian city subreddits showing strong engagement in SBNR practices.
- The majority of participants were aged 18-24, reflecting high youth involvement in alternative spiritual practices.
- More than half of the respondents identified as female, with women playing a prominent role in non-sectarian spiritual practices.
- Many participants were students, indicating that educational institutions are significant spaces for spiritual exploration.
- Respondents displayed diverse religious affiliations, with many retaining ties to Hinduism while engaging in SBNR practices.

2. **Objective 2: Identifying Digital Platforms and Communities for Spiritual Guidance and Mentorship**

- Majority of the respondents discovered SBNR communities through social media, highlighting its role in spiritual exploration.
- Reddit hosts diverse subreddits like r/divination, fostering open dialogue on spirituality. Discord offers real-time interaction and community building through servers like "Spellbound" (mystical practices) and "Somewhat Conscious" (structured discussions). YouTube features channels on subliminals, reiki, astrology, and Shaktism, creating large global communities.
- Non-Indians prefer crafting unique spiritual journeys (e.g., spell jars, chaos magic), while Indian practitioners often integrate SBNR practices with Hindu traditions or Western ideologies.
- Popular apps include meditation tools (Headspace, Sadhguru Yoga) and fortune-telling apps (AstroTalk, Labyrinthos Tarot), catering to youth seeking accessible spiritual resources.
- Subreddits like r/manifestation are inclusive and beginner-friendly, while others like r/occult remain guarded, emphasizing exclusivity.
- Unique practices discovered include Shaktism, Hellenism, eclectic witchcraft, angel jars, sacred sex work, and the Law of Assumption (LOA), which is notably popular among Indian urban youth.
- Platforms like WICCA India and Udemy offer courses on witchcraft, tantra, and divination, expanding spiritual education digitally.

3. **Objective 3: Motivating Factors Behind the Involvement of Youth in Online Faith Subcultures and Practices**

- Urban youth are motivated by the desire for self-realization and reconnection with nature, facilitated by SBNR practices like meditation, manifestation, and eco-spirituality. Practices such as urban gardening, forest bathing, and yoga retreats integrate nature into city life.

- Digital platforms like Discord foster a sense of belonging and emotional support. Communities provide safe spaces for sharing personal struggles, offering encouragement, and creating strong emotional bonds.

- Many youth seek spiritual growth, connection with like-minded individuals, and mentorship opportunities. Accessibility of digital platforms and apps enhances convenience in exploring spirituality.

- Emotional support is a key motivator, with online communities offering therapeutic outlets for youth to navigate personal challenges. The anonymity of digital spaces encourages vulnerability and openness.

- Childhood curiosity and personal triggers often initiate interest in SBNR practices. Shared experiences in forums help members explore self-discovery and spiritual identities.

- A significant rejection of organized religion drives youth toward personalized spirituality. Many express disillusionment with hierarchical structures while embracing practices like divination, energy work, and rituals.

- The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of SBNR practices as a coping mechanism for isolation and uncertainty. Digital platforms became vital for exploring spirituality during this period.

- Academic exposure to alternative spiritual practices influences youth to adopt eclectic approaches to spirituality, integrating various traditions into personalized belief systems.

- Aestheticized representations of spirituality on platforms like YouTube and TikTok attract youth by aligning with self-care culture. Tools like crystals and tarot cards serve as accessible entry points.

- Participation in online faith subcultures enhances overall life satisfaction by providing non-judgmental environments that encourage exploration and self-expression.

4. **Objective 4: To investigate the impact of online practices on youth.**
- The rise of materialistic spirituality is evident in the commodification of practices, with platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram promoting products such as tarot decks, crystals, and manifestation journals. Practices like the Law of Assumption (LOA) have turned spirituality into a consumer-driven trend, emphasizing financial investment over

introspection. Corporate adoption of mindfulness and yoga often prioritizes productivity over genuine employee well-being, using these practices as tools for stress management rather than addressing systemic workplace issues.

- Many online communities advocate for non-commercial, self-driven spiritual exploration, emphasizing inner work over consumerism. Critiques of exploitative trends and corporate appropriation highlight the importance of maintaining authenticity in spiritual practices.

- Digital SBNR spaces offer emotional support, anonymity for open expression, and opportunities for global spiritual experimentation. However, over-reliance on digital spirituality can lead to disillusionment, addiction to content cycles, and passivity in real-world actions.

- Online SBNR communities provide youth with socialization opportunities, new spiritual identities, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing. Concerns include the over-commercialization of spirituality, addiction to digital practices, and the erosion of traditional religious institutions in favor of individualistic belief systems.

- The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to SBNR as a coping mechanism for isolation and uncertainty, blurring lines between secular and religious spirituality.

- Academic exposure and childhood curiosity drive many young people toward eclectic spiritual practices. Aestheticized representations on digital platforms make spirituality appealing but risk reducing it to a lifestyle trend.

Conclusion

This research explores the significant influence of digital platforms on the spiritual lives of young people, revealing a shift towards more personalized and decentralized expressions of faith. Unlike earlier generations that were often influenced by traditional religious institutions, today's youth actively shape their spiritual identities through online communities and social media trends. While these digital spaces provide emotional support and empower individuals through practices like mindfulness and manifestation, they also present challenges such as the spread of misinformation and the potential for superficial engagement with spirituality. The dynamics of these online environments contribute to identity formation and personal interpretations of

spirituality, though they may also lead to fragmented understandings. Additionally, globalization allows for a blend of diverse spiritual practices, raising ethical questions about cultural appropriation. Despite the risks associated with commodification and hyperreality, digital spirituality fosters community connections that can alleviate feelings of isolation in contemporary life. Ultimately, this evolving spiritual landscape invites critical reflection on its advantages and drawbacks, leaving open the question of whether it represents a true spiritual awakening or a transient trend.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 RELIGION

Émile Durkheim one of the founding fathers of Sociology considers religion as *"a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden— beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them"* (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1912).

Simply said, Durkheim viewed religion as a rigid social institution that unified a community, providing a sense of collective belonging through norms and roles. Through common symbols and rituals, religion creates a moral community, providing individuals a psychological comfort through the 'we feeling' and answers to various existential queries. This way of thinking wherein religion promotes social cohesion and social control is the major topic of interest in Durkheim's work 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life'. This ultimately forms the basis of the field, 'Sociology of Religion'.

1.1.1. FORMAL RELIGION

In today's world, religion is a diverse and complex aspect of human life, with numerous belief systems practiced across the globe. Among these, formal religion is one that is characterized by established rituals, doctrines, and a clear set of beliefs that are widely recognized and followed. It typically includes official sacred texts, moral codes, and ordained

practices that guide its adherents. These religions have codified and standardized beliefs and practices, often maintained through recognized institutions like churches, temples and synagogues. They may also include an organized clergy or religious leaders who oversee the religious community. The focus of a formal religion is on adherence to doctrines and prescribed rituals, ensuring a uniform approach to faith. Examples of formal religions include Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism.

Characteristics of a religion-

- Codified Beliefs - Has a set doctrine or creed that defines core beliefs.

- Institutional Authority - Often governed by religious leaders, councils or institutions (e.g., The Vatican in Catholicism).

- Sacred Texts - Central religious writings guide faith and practice (e.g., the Bible, Quran).

- Rituals and Ceremonies - Emphasizes traditional religious rites like sacraments, prayers, or pilgrimages.

- Moral and Ethical Guidelines - Provides rules for behaviour, often seen in religious law (e.g., Sharia, Canon Law).

1.1.2. STRUCTURED RELIGION

Throughout history, certain religions have played fundamental roles in shaping societal values, legal systems and cultural traditions across civilizations. This very form of religion emphasises the organisational aspect of faith. Structured Religion is organised with a clear system or framework for governance, rituals and community life. This consists of a well-defined organisational hierarchy and includes roles such as religious leaders, clergy and governing bodies. Having a robust infrastructure to manage aspects of religion, resources and doctrinal matters, Structured religions tend to have formal rules for membership, roles and conduct activities within the community. Institutionalised groups such as the Catholic and the Baptist Church tend to establish formal doctrines for this very purpose. Certain Hindu organisations such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) have highly organised structure with spiritual leaders, temples and governing Councils.

- **Hierarchical Organization** - Clearly defined leadership and roles (e.g., priests, bishops, monks).

- **Institutional Framework** - Organized systems for religious governance, education,and outreach(e.g., seminaries, synods).

- **Standardized Worship Practices** - Uniform rituals across locations (e.g., standardized liturgy in Catholic Mass).

- **Community Engagement** - Involves group participation in religious services, Charities and events.

- **Regulated Membership** - includes formal initiation processes like baptism, confirmation or conversion requirements.

1.1.3. DEVIANCE

Over the years, new age movements have come up. These moments are often considered a form of religious deviance.

Religious deviance is becoming more prevalent as people are increasingly moving away from traditional religious norms and practices. It refers to beliefs, actions, or rituals that are different from the existing structures of an organised religion. Religious deviance, in the context of non-sectarian spirituality, involves adopting personalized spiritual beliefs that take elements from various religions or focus on individual experiences, rather than fulfilling expectations set by a traditional religion. While it challenges traditional beliefs, it doesn't always involve harmful behaviour, as opposed to popular beliefs , it focuses on reinterpreting or changing the religious framework.

With the passage of time and the increasing interconnectedness of societies, the rigidity of religion slowly started to wane. This transition resulted in spirituality gaining prominence with individuality being more sought after than collectivity.

The concepts of spirituality and religion, while often intertwined, represent distinct approaches to understanding the self and the universe. Religion is generally characterized as a structured system of beliefs, practices, and rituals centred around specific deities or spiritual figures. It typically involves organized institutions, sacred texts, and communal worship, providing adherents with a clear framework for navigating their existence. Through rituals and ceremonies, religion aims to connect followers with the divine and foster a sense of community (Smith, 1991).

In contrast, spirituality is more fluid and personal. It emphasizes an individual's inner journey toward self-discovery, meaning, and connection with something greater than oneself. Spirituality encourages introspection, mindfulness, and personal growth without the constraints of rigid doctrines or organized structures (Tacey, 2004). It is often viewed as an inclusive path that allows for diverse interpretations of the divine, focusing on direct personal experiences rather than prescribed beliefs.

While religion offers a defined set of practices and moral guidelines, spirituality prioritizes personal exploration and individual understanding. This distinction highlights how individuals may seek solace and meaning either through structured religious practices or through a more personalized spiritual approach. Ultimately, both spirituality and religion serve as avenues for individuals to explore their beliefs and connect with the world around them, yet they do so in fundamentally different ways.

1.2 RISE OF NON- SECTARIAN SPIRITUALITY

The 1960s marked a transformative period in mainstream religion and cultural practices,with the rise of hippie culture (Roszak, 1970). The Hippie culture or movement aimed to challenge the existing and established social norms by promoting the ideals of peace, love and spiritual exploration.

The hippie culture emerged in the United States as a response to the violence of the Vietnam war, which stretched for almost two decades. The movement searched for alternative lifestyles that emphasised communal living and personal freedom. Its roots can be traced to the earlier cultural shifts, especially the Beat Generation of the 1950s, which rejected materialism and conformity of the time (Hoffman & Womack, 1999). Hippies embraced an alternative lifestyle characterised by the use of psychedelic music and drugs like LSD as a means to to expand consciousness. They expressed their individuality through colourful clothing, music and art.

Indian spirituality, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism were a beacon of attraction for many hippies who sought enlightenment through the practices of yoga and meditation. Indian Gurus like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi played a huge role in the spread of these practices to the western audience and he gained fame when the notable English Rock Band visited India in 1968 to study meditation with him (Kumar & Sharma, 2015). Many hippies also adopted various elements of Indian culture, such as vegetarianism and meditation practices with the desire to escape Western societal pressures.

Many hippies travelled from Western Europe through Turkey and Iran to arrive in India in search of a spiritual awakening giving rise to the "Hippie Trail". The young travellers were able to find vibrant communities that embraced their ideals in the cities of Delhi, Varanasi and Goa.

In the 1970s, the hippie culture thrived in Goa, with the region's relaxed atmosphere and beaches attracting many free spirits. The region became a centre for trance parties and lively celebrations that embodied the hippie ethos of love and unity Ghosh & Ghosh, 2020). There is a distinctive subculture in Goa created by the hippie movement which continues to influence the region even now. This can be observed in today's music festivals, yoga retreats and spiritual expeditions.

1.2.1. <u>Non-Sectarian Spiritual Practices</u>:

Non-sectarian spiritual practices are considered as a framework of spirituality or an approach to spirituality, independent of organised religion (Fowler & Kenney, 2016). This approach encourages connections with oneself emphasising personal growth and inner peace. The search for meaning here is through individual experiences rather than the adherence to specific religious doctrines. It adopts practices like meditation, mindfulness and yoga to cultivate a sense of well being without resilience to structured religious beliefs. Non-sectarian spiritual practices coexist with or acknowledge the traditional religion.

1.2.2. <u>Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR)</u>:

SBNR reflects the shift from institutionalised religions to more personalised spiritual expressions (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Here individuals focus on individual freedom and autonomy and rejects communal worship. They value and explore various spiritual practices without adhering to any traditional doctrines or rituals.

1.2.3. <u>Alternative healing practices</u>:

Alternative healing practices exist outside of the conventional methods of treatment and can be understood through both non-sectarian spiritual practice and SBNR practice (Snyder & Snyder, 2018). Non-sectarian spiritual practices incorporate alternative healing practices like crystal healing and herbal supplements in their wellbeing routine. Practices like energy therapies (Reiki) , body based techniques (massage, yoga) and mind-body techniques (meditation) foster personal connection and wellbeing and are practiced by SBNR individuals.

1.3. MOST COMMON SBNR PRACTICES

"Spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) encompasses a variety of spiritual practices that individuals engage in outside the confines of organized religion (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). These practices often emphasize personal growth, self-discovery, and a connection to the universe or a higher power. Meditation, yoga, astrology, divination, reiki, crystals, manifestation, energy healing, and sound healing are some of the common SBNR practices.

i) <u>Meditation</u>

Meditation is a practice that involves focusing the mind to achieve mental clarity, emotional calmness, and heightened awareness. Various forms include:

- Mindfulness Meditation: Concentrating on the present moment and one's breath.

- Transcendental Meditation: Using specific mantras for deep relaxation.

- Guided Visualization: Following verbal prompts to visualize desired outcomes or peaceful settings.

ii) <u>Yoga</u>

Yoga is a physical, mental, and spiritual discipline originating from ancient India. It combines postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama), and meditation to enhance overall well-being. Different styles include Hatha, Vinyasa, and Kundalini yoga, each offering unique benefits for body and mind.

iii) <u>Astrology</u>

Astrology is the study of celestial bodies' positions and movements to gain insights into human affairs and natural phenomena. Practitioners believe that astrological charts can reveal personality traits, life challenges, and potential future events based on one's birth date and time.

iv) Divination

Divination involves seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown through various methods. Common forms include:

- Tarot Cards: Using a deck of cards to gain insights into personal situations or future possibilities.

- Runes: Ancient symbols cast or drawn to interpret messages.

- I Ching: An ancient Chinese text used for guidance through a system of hexagrams.

v) Reiki

Reiki is a form of energy healing that originated in Japan. Practitioners use hands-on techniques or distance healing to channel energy into the client, promoting relaxation and healing by balancing the body's energy fields.

vi) Crystals

Crystal healing involves using gemstones and crystals for their purported energetic properties. Each type of crystal is believed to have specific benefits, such as promoting calmness, enhancing focus, or fostering emotional healing.

vii) Manifestation

Manifestation refers to the practice of turning desires into reality through focused intention and belief. It includes:

- Affirmations: Positive statements repeated to influence subconscious beliefs (e.g., "I attract wealth").

- Subliminals: Techniques that use subtle audio messages believed to influence thoughts at a subconscious level

viii) Energy Healing

Beyond Reiki, energy healing encompasses various modalities that aim to balance the body's energy systems. Techniques may include acupuncture, chakra balancing, or other holistic therapies that focus on restoring harmony within the body.

ix) Sound Healing

Sound healing utilizes music, singing bowls, gongs, or other instruments to promote relaxation and healing. The vibrations from sound are believed to help clear blockages in energy flow and induce meditative states.

1.4. NEW GENERATION IN INDIA

The rise of non-sectarian spiritual practices among urban youth in India reflects broader societal changes influenced by urbanization, globalization, and evolving cultural attitudes towards spirituality.

[A survey in Delhi indicated that 40% of respondents consulted astrology regularly, viewing it as a legitimate form of insight into their lives (Verma & Singh, 2022)] [A qualitative study in Pune revealed that many young people find a sense of belonging in SBNR communities, which provide support and encouragement for their spiritual journeys (Patel & Joshi, 2021)].

Factors Contributing to the Rise of SBNR Practices:

- **Urbanization**: The rapid urbanization in cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi has led to a breakdown of traditional community structures, prompting individuals to seek new forms of connection through spirituality.As traditional religious practices are increasingly viewed as rigid or outdated, many young people are turning to SBNR practices that allow for personal exploration of spirituality without the constraints of organized religion.

- **Globalization**: Exposure to global spiritual practices through the internet has made diverse spiritual traditions accessible to urban youth. Urban youth can easily explore meditation, yoga, astrology, subliminal music and other SBNR practices through online communities and social media. Research indicates that films significantly influence the attitudes and expectations of young people- The portrayal of modern lifestyles in films encourages youth

to adopt new values that align with SBNR practices, such as individualism and personal exploration of spirituality.

- **Mental Health Awareness**: Many urban youths are turning to non-sectarian spiritual practices as a means of coping with mental health challenges. The National Mental Health Survey (2015–2016) reported a 7% prevalence of psychiatric disorders among adolescents aged 13–17 years, highlighting a significant need for mental health interventions tailored to this demographic. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and depression among young people due to disruptions in daily life and social isolation. Practices like meditation, yoga, manifestations and mindfulness are increasingly recognized for their benefits in reducing stress and promoting emotional well-being.

- **Commercialization of Spirituality**

  - Profit-Driven Practices: The commercialization of SBNR practices can lead to exploitation. Wellness retreats, workshops, and products may prioritize profit over genuine spiritual growth, potentially diluting the essence of these practices.

  - Consumerism: The focus on acquiring spiritual products (like crystals or wellness apps) can shift the emphasis from personal growth to consumerism, undermining the original intentions behind these practices.

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Around 100,000 years ago , the need for faith in early human societies arose from several factors like -

1. Understanding the unknown (to explain natural phenomena like storms and earthquakes)

2. Social cohesion (for uniting unrelated individuals)

3. Moral framework.

Sociologist Edward Burnett Tylor in his seminal work *Primitive Culture,* defined "Animism" as the belief in spiritual beings. It was likely the earliest form of religion.

As societies evolved, particularly during the rise of agriculture, around 3000 BCE, polytheism emerged as the worship of multiple God's representing various aspects of life (eg. Fertility, War, etc).

Later, around 1000 BCE, monotheist religions introduced the concept of a single , all powerful deity.

Traditionally, spirituality has been associated with structured religious institutions. But with the passage of time these institutions have slowly begun to lose their hold particularly among the younger generations. With the rapid development of technology, kicking off the digital age, many facets of human life have been transformed, especially spirituality and religious practices. Almost every single individual prefers to face and experience the digital world(s) rather than the real world.

In '*Simulacra and Simulation' (1981)* Jean Baudrillard defines the concept of 'hyperreality' as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality". Hyperreality thereby is a condition where one is unable to distinguish between reality and simulation, i.e. this distinction becomes increasingly blurred for them. According to Baudrillard, these simulations present in modern society are more compelling than the actual experiences, a phenomenon largely propagated by digital technology and online platforms.

Considering the realm of online spirituality, hyperreality manifests in the digital platforms which create immersive and compelling environments that simulate the traditional religious experiences, often incorporating various dimensions of pop culture. In our study, hyperreality can be utilised as a critical lens to understand the ways in which these simulations become more prominent, allowing individuals to engage with SBNR practices in a way that feels more authentic than the structured religious experiences.

The idea of a 'network spirituality, can be bought in here, where online interaction creates spiritual connections that transcends the traditional boundaries. When the users interact with each other in a hyper-real platform, their interactions consist of signs and symbols which can be reinterpreted within digital contexts, such as using games to promote collecting crystals or 'good healing energy'; this ultimately fosters a strong collective identity among the participants.

Often the simulacra or representations are derived from fictional stories or media figures. Tales from C.S Lewis's 'Chronicles of Narnia' and texts like James Redfield's 'The Celestine Prophecy' are referred for their allegorical connections to spiritual reflections and interpreted as a metaphor for their personal growth. The flexibility offered by the non-sectarian spiritual practices, enables individuals to develop their own belief systems that prioritise emotional connections over adherence to conventional doctrines. In such hyperreal settings individuals are able to find emotional satisfaction through the simulated experiences.

As mentioned earlier, hyperreality manifests in online platforms. With the internet as the medium, individuals develop new forms of digital spirituality, a blend of traditional and modern elements, which resonate with the contemporary audiences. Online platforms like 'Tik Tok', 'Reddit', 'Facebook', 'Instagram' as well as 'Discord' host communities focused on spirituality. There is a digital congregation which allows users to share beliefs and practices, cultivating a sense of belongingness among like-minded persons. 'YouTube' and podcasts are also another vital area used for exploring spirituality. Usually content creators address topics like 'mindfulness', 'personal development' and 'meditation' practices which resonate with the younger generations. The rise of mobile applications specifically designed for mindfulness, spirituality and meditation, has also contributed to the spread and growth of SBNR practices.

However, the main reason for this engagement with and the easy acceptance of the simulation would be anonymity. Online forums and communities offer anonymity, which encourage open

discussions about spirituality without any fear of judgement or stigma. Reddit and other specialised spiritual forums aim to promote inclusivity which allows individuals to share their experiences and perspectives freely. The anonymity is thus a major factor that encourages individuals to explore beliefs outside traditional religious structures.

It is evident that hyperreality plays a significant role in transforming contemporary spirituality by merging authentic experiences with digital representations. As people interact with online platforms, they frequently discover that these simulated spiritual practices resonate more profoundly than traditional religious rituals. This dynamic creates a distinctive sense of community and identity, as users engage with symbols and narratives drawn from popular culture. Ultimately, hyperreality reconfigures conventional understandings of spirituality, enabling individuals to explore their beliefs in a more flexible and inclusive manner within the digital landscape.

1.6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Researching the rise of non-sectarian spiritual practices among youth and the role of online faith-based subcultures is significant for several reasons. It provides insights into contemporary shifts in spirituality, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly disillusioned with traditional religious institutions.

Digital platforms play a critical role in shaping spiritual beliefs and practices, democratizing access to resources that allow individuals to explore various spiritual paths without geographical barriers. This accessibility fosters a sense of belonging and support, which is particularly important for mental well-being.

Many SBNR practices, such as meditation and mindfulness, are linked to mental health benefits. Understanding these practices can contribute to discussions on holistic approaches to mental health among youth, especially in urban areas where stress and anxiety are prevalent. However, it is also essential to study the negatives associated with non-sectarian spiritual communities. Critics argue that these groups can lead to superficial engagement with spirituality and reliance on pseudoscience. Additionally, the allure of occult practices within some online circles raises concerns about exploitation and potential psychological harm.

The rise of non-sectarian spiritual practices challenges established social norms and promotes inclusivity and diversity. This research can illuminate how these communities advocate for egalitarian values.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of identity formation and social change in an increasingly interconnected world, offering valuable perspectives on the evolving landscape of belief systems among urban youth in our country.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF

LITERATURE

CHAPTER - 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Religion originated in the early human societies as a response to the various existential inquiries and mysteries of the natural world. It also established various norms, rituals and communal practices, i.e. religion created a structure that fostered social unity and provided moral guidance. Slowly the societies became less rigid and more integrated, interconnected and diverse, reducing the rigidity of religion as well. The organized religion gradually transformed emphasizing the spiritual aspects of it. This also depicts the transition from shared or group focused norms to a more personalized approach. Spirituality emphasizes personal exploration and inner growth, where individuals seek meaning, connection and purpose in their lives (William B. Parsons et al., Being Spiritual but Not Religious). Unlike the traditional religions that adhere to traditional doctrines, spirituality focuses on subjective experiences and personal transformation. In contemporary society where there are no distinct geographical demarcations with the advent of the internet, the shift from religion to spirituality has given rise to the 'Spiritual But Not Religious' (SBNR) movement. SBNR practices priorities individual experiences over communal worship, reflecting a growing desire for spiritual fulfillment, outside of conventional religious institutions. These practices largely incorporate elements from various spiritual traditions, consisting of meditation, yoga, mindfulness, and nature-based rituals (Courtney Bender, The New Metaphysicals).

2.1. Spirituality and Adolescent Wellbeing

- Recent research conducted within the Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) network emphasizes the significant role of spirituality as a determinant of adolescent wellbeing. Led by Valerie Michaelson from HBSC Canada, the study redefines spirituality not as a religious construct but as an intrinsic and relational sense of meaning, connection, and self-awareness. This aligns with broader sociological perspectives that explore well-being through multidimensional, non-material determinants, moving beyond traditional economic and social health indicators. Traditionally, adolescent well-being has been analyzed through factors like family structure, socio-economic status, and access to education and healthcare. However, the HBSC study positions spirituality as an

intermediary determinant, highlighting the importance of internal resources such as a sense of purpose in mental well-being. This finding echo Durkheim's work on social integration and individual meaning as protective factors against psychological distress. The study also explores cross-cultural dimensions, noting that in Western countries, spiritual health mediates the relationship between socioeconomic status and mental well-being, a dynamic not observed in Eastern Europe. This discrepancy may relate to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, where spiritual well-being is more effectively leveraged within specific socio-economic and cultural contexts. The research challenges traditional health paradigms by advocating for an inclusive approach that incorporates non-material determinants like spirituality, aligning with holistic health models. As posited by Giddens, modern identity formation is increasingly reflexive, with individuals drawing on various sources, including spirituality, to construct meaningful self-narratives. Overall, the HBSC study contributes to sociological discourse by advocating for policies that support environments fostering spiritual health, emphasizing the complex interplay between material conditions and personal, cultural dimensions of well-being

- The resurgence of spirituality among young people, particularly their fascination with crystals, tarot, and holistic practices, mirrors broader sociological trends related to secularization, individualism, and coping mechanisms in a fast-paced society. McKie (2022) situates this phenomenon within the decline of organized religion and the growing emphasis on personal spiritual exploration, aligning with theories on the transformation of belief systems in modern societies. The decline of religious identity among younger generations, as highlighted by the 2016 European Social Survey, underscores the appeal of spirituality, aligning with Bryan Wilson's (1982) secularization theory, which posits the diminishing influence of traditional religious institutions. Instead of fully disengaging from spiritual beliefs, young people are embracing alternative forms such as crystal healing and tarot readings, an interpretation supported by Grace Davie's (1994) concept of "believing without belonging." McKie suggests that the competitive, fast-paced nature of modern life drives young people towards self-centric spiritual practices to cope with stress, resonating with Émile Durkheim's (1912) view of religion as a source of social cohesion and individual stability. In the absence of traditional guidance, individuals seek alternative methods for inner peace and stability, using crystals, meditation, and tarot as tools for self-

reflection and reassurance. This trend aligns with Anthony Giddens' (1991) concept of the "reflexive self," as individuals craft their identities in response to societal pressures. The rise of spirituality on social media, especially platforms like TikTok, reinforces Giddens' argument, as people share and curate their spiritual identities in aesthetically pleasing ways. Unlike organized religion, contemporary spirituality is highly individualized, reflecting Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) "liquid modernity," were rigid structures dissolve into fluid identities. The crystal craze exemplifies this shift, allowing individuals to select elements that resonate without adhering to a singular framework. The consumerist aspect of modern spirituality also plays a role, with the commercialization of spiritual items like crystals and tarot decks suggesting an intertwining with capitalist consumption patterns. This observation aligns with Karl Marx's (1844) theory of commodity fetishism, where objects are imbued with symbolic meanings beyond their material worth, becoming desirable commodities in a market-driven society. In conclusion, the resurgence of spiritual practices among young people signifies a broader sociological transformation in belief systems. As traditional religious affiliations wane, alternative spirituality offers a means of self-exploration, stress relief, and identity formation, reflecting trends of secularization, individualism, and consumerism, and positioning modern spirituality as both a personal coping mechanism and a cultural phenomenon shaped by digital media and capitalism.

2.2 Digitalization of Spirituality

- The digital era has profoundly reshaped religious practices, belief systems, and spiritual communities, reflecting broader sociological trends of globalization, individualization, and technological integration. Scholars have explored how digital media influences faith, examining both its potential to democratize religious knowledge and its challenges to traditional structures of authority (Campbell, 2010). The transition from hierarchical religious institutions to decentralized, digital faith networks illustrate the impact of modernity and secularization on spirituality (Giddens, 1991).

- The emergence of virtual religious communities highlights the evolving nature of social cohesion in faith groups. Digital platforms foster religious engagement across geographical boundaries, supporting marginalized believers and enabling new forms of collective worship (Hutchings, 2017). This phenomenon aligns with Durkheim's (1912) concept of

collective effervescence, though scholars debate whether virtual interactions can replicate the emotional intensity of physical congregations (Helland, 2005). While online faith communities provide inclusivity and accessibility, they also risk fostering superficial engagement and weakening institutional religious bonds (Lövheim, 2011).

2.3. Contemporary Spiritual Trends

- In her 2019 article, ' The Rising Popularity of Crystals', Hannah Musick explores the rising popularity of crystals, attributing this trend to a variety of factors that have transitioned crystals from niche interests to mainstream commodities. This shift has broadened their appeal across diverse demographics, including Millennials, Gen Z, and older generations who are in search of spiritual connections. Many individuals report experiencing positive effects from using crystals, often linked to the placebo effect, where a belief in their purported properties can lead to enhanced personal well-being and provide emotional support. Additionally, the visual beauty of crystals significantly drives consumer interest, with a considerable number of people collecting them primarily for decorative purposes rather than solely for their metaphysical attributes. The increased visibility of crystals through social media platforms has further popularized crystal culture, making it more accessible and relatable, particularly to younger audiences. This digital exposure has allowed the crystal phenomenon to permeate various aspects of contemporary life, establishing a newfound cultural relevance that bridges traditional spiritual practices with modern wellness trends.

- The growing popularity of crystals reflects broader sociological trends related to consumerism, spirituality, secularization, and belief systems in contemporary society. Despite the lack of scientific validation and the categorization of crystal healing as pseudoscience, its appeal persists due to psychological, cultural, and economic factors. Sociological theories such as individualism, alternative spirituality, and commodification help explain this trend. A significant factor is the decline of organized religion, particularly among younger generations, with many individuals shifting towards personalized spirituality. This aligns with Grace Davie's concept of "believing without belonging," where spiritual beliefs are maintained without institutional affiliation, allowing crystals to serve as a means of engaging with spirituality free from religious dogma. The placebo

effect and the ritual of using crystals provide psychological comfort, echoing Durkheim's theory that rituals, regardless of empirical validity, offer stability and meaning. This belief functions as a coping mechanism, aiding in managing uncertainty and stress similarly to traditional religious rituals. Additionally, the booming crystal industry exemplifies the intersection of spirituality and consumerism, as Marx's theory of commodity fetishism illustrates how crystals are transformed into desirable products imbued with mystical significance. Social media and mass marketing have commercialized spirituality, making crystals both a spiritual tool and a fashion accessory, reflecting Giddens' concept of the reflexive self where spiritual beliefs are curated through consumer choices. However, the industry also raises ethical concerns regarding consumption and labor exploitation, as production often involves environmentally harmful mining practices and worker exploitation. This mirrors broader patterns of ethical consumerism, where individuals selectively engage with global supply chains while overlooking ethical issues. In conclusion, the crystal craze exemplifies themes of secularization, belief systems, commodification, and ethical concerns, highlighting the complexities of belief and materiality in contemporary society.

- The resurgence of witchcraft in contemporary society, as examined by Bianca Bosker, reflects broader sociological trends involving identity, power, and resistance to dominant cultural narratives. Historically linked to superstition and marginalized communities, witchcraft has become a mainstream phenomenon, drawing diverse participants. Sociologically, this rise can be analyzed through theories of social change, identity politics, commodification, and cultural resistance. During periods of social instability and declining trust in traditional institutions, interest in witchcraft grows as individuals seek alternative belief systems. This aligns with Durkheim's and Weber's theories on religion and disenchantment, respectively. Witchcraft's resurgence is also tied to feminist movements and identity politics, reclaiming the witch as a symbol of empowerment. The commercialization of witchcraft, as discussed by Bosker, raises issues of authenticity and consumerism, echoing Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. Additionally, cultural appropriation concerns arise as dominant cultures adopt marginalized traditions, resonating with Said's Orientalism. Ultimately, Bosker's analysis positions witchcraft as a dynamic

social phenomenon shaped by historical, economic, and political forces, highlighting its role in navigating uncertainty and challenging power structures.

- In their insightful article "Creating Harmony in the Reiki Community," authors Laurelle Gaia and William Lee Rand explore the significant evolution of Reiki and underscore the pressing need for unity among its practitioners. They articulate how competition and negativity within the Reiki community can severely undermine its inherent healing potential. The authors argue passionately for the adoption of collaboration, sharing, and mutual support as foundational elements in fostering a positive and nurturing environment. Through recounting personal experiences, they vividly illustrate the critical importance of communication and understanding among Reiki practitioners. These experiences have led to the development of initiatives such as "United in Healing," which aim to bridge gaps and foster a spirit of unity. Gaia and Rand firmly emphasize that harmony within the Reiki community is not merely beneficial but essential, as it significantly enhances the effectiveness and outreach of Reiki practices. By promoting a collaborative and supportive atmosphere, Reiki practitioners can collectively amplify their healing abilities, ultimately benefiting both the community and the individuals they serve.

2.4 Impact of Digitalization of Spirituality

- The New Age Movement (NAM) presents a fascinating subject for sociological exploration due to its lack k of centralized authority, unifying doctrine, or institutional framework, as noted by Margrethe Løøv. The movement's rise aligns with secularization trends, where individuals turn to alternative spiritual paths outside traditional religious institutions, as highlighted by Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce. This shift supports Emile Durkheim's idea that religion evolves with societal needs. The NAM also exemplifies individualization in belief systems, where personal spiritual experiences replace structured doctrines, a notion supported by theorists like Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. Practices such as meditation and astrology embody Ulrich Beck's "religion à la carte," suiting postmodern identity formation. Furthermore, the NAM's decentralized nature and reliance on online networks echo Manuel Castells' theory of network societies, differing from Weberian religious authority models. The movement's cultural hybridization, drawing from various spiritual traditions, reflects Arjun Appadurai's global cultural flows, though it raises

cultural appropriation concerns. Ultimately, the NAM signifies a societal shift towards individualized, decentralized spirituality, embodying trends like secularization, self-spirituality, networked organization, and cultural blending. •Technological advancements have transformed religious practice through mobile apps, livestreamed services, and virtual reality experiences. While these tools enhance accessibility, they also contribute to the commodification of spirituality, aligning with Baudrillard's (1981) critique of consumer culture. The 'pick-and-choose' approach to faith, where individuals engage with fragmented aspects of different traditions, reflects postmodern religious pluralism but raises concerns about commitment and theological depth (Roof, 1999). •Sociologists have examined the impact of digital culture on deep contemplation, a key element of religious practice. The constant flow of digital stimuli challenges the traditional emphasis on meditation, silence, and prayer (Turkle, 2015). Some religious communities counter this trend through digital fasting and mindfulness practices, reflecting broader societal efforts to reclaim attention in an era of information overload (Carr, 2010).

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER – 3

RESEACH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Spirituality, vital for youth development, is understudied, especially in India. While youth have distanced themselves from traditional religion since the 1960s, online forums have accelerated this trend. The study sheds light on digital platforms being a major propagator of non-sectarian spiritual practices. A key concept of non-sectarian spirituality is SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious) encompassing various practices and beliefs. This is mainly practiced by the youth, as a means to cope with various mental health challenges.

3.2 Statement of the Problem

Even though there is an increase in online spiritual engagement by the youth, objective studies on Spiritual but Not Religious practices remain scarce, especially when the youth are transitioning from the traditional religious aspects to such practices.

The purpose of this research is thus to analyze and understand the influence of online spiritual engagement among the youth as well as to identify how the dynamics of these online subcultures impact the youth.

3.3 General Objective

To analyze the influence of online non-sectarian spiritual practices on the youth.

3.4 Specific Objectives

1. To understand the socio-demographic factors of youth involved in faith-based online communities.
2. To identify digital platforms and communities for spiritual guidance and mentorship.
3. To find the motivating factors behind the involvement of youth in online faith subcultures & practices
4. To investigate the impact of online practices on youth.

3.5 Theoretical Definition

3.5.1. Faith:

Faith is conceptualized as a profound trust or belief in a person, concept, or doctrine, often intertwined with religious convictions and the divine.

3.5.2. Digital Age:

It denotes the present era characterized by the pervasive influence of digital technology on communication, information dissemination, and social interactions.

3.5.3. Non-Sectarian Spiritual Practices:

Non-sectarian spiritual practices are considered as a framework of spirituality or an approach to spirituality, independent of organized religion.

In the present study, non-sectarian spiritual practices are spiritual activities that embrace inclusivity and are not restricted to specific religious sects, encouraging personal exploration of spirituality.

3.5.4. Online Community

A community is defined as a group of individuals who share certain common characteristics. An online community is a virtual collective where members primarily connect with one another via the Internet. To join such an online community, individuals typically need to register on a specific website, which requires Internet access. Within these online communities, members can exchange information, create posts, comment on content, engage in discussions, seek advice, or collaborate with one another.

3.5.5. Online Faith Subcultures:

Online Faith Subcultures refer to communities that emerge around shared beliefs and practices primarily within digital environments, facilitating diverse expressions of faith and spirituality in a connected world.

3.6. Research Design

The research design is descriptive in nature.

3.7. Methods of data collection

To analyze online interactions and community dynamics within digital platforms, focusing on youth engagement with spiritual content netnography was used.

Netnography, also known as digital ethnography, was termed by Robert Kozinets in 1995. As the term suggests, it adopts the conventional ethnographic methods to the online sphere, i.e. the online interactions and dynamics of the digital platform are analyzed by the researcher as a participant of it. In this research, digital platforms- Reddit and Discord- were chosen.

Reddit is a social media platform which is further divided into various subreddits. These niche communities serve as forums facilitating open discussions. **Discord** is another social media platform centered around niche communities called servers. Servers can be customized to an individual's preference and consist of various channels focusing on specific activities and topics

Basically, these two platforms consist of various types of communities, including those that are based on faith. **YouTube** is yet another global platform where a wide range of both long and short-form video content is shared by creators through different individual hubs called channels. There is a diverse range of community interaction through comments, descriptions, and subscriptions with media engagement that strengthens viewer- creator connections. Various faith-based creators and channels contribute spiritual content to this space.

These online platforms thus promote community building and networking. From these forums, data was primarily collected through observation and online interviews- both group and individual.

The researchers became a part of the online faith-based communities for a duration of three months to understand the dynamics of these communities. 'Threads', i.e. conversation starters were initiated with most of it receiving good responses and were further discussed. Here, the researchers began by generally observing the online behaviors of the community members, which required a thorough immersion. Later on, through particular discussions and conversations, specific data was collected.

To explore more about the influence of online non-sectarian spiritual practices on the youth, four case studies were based on the online interviews and discussions.

CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER – 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1. NETNOGRAPHY

Netnography, in simple terms , is the digital version of ethnography. It was chosen for this study to analyze online spiritual engagement within diverse SBNR communities.

Unlike traditional ethnography, netnography allows for real-time observation of social behaviors in digital spaces such as social media, forums, and chat servers, making it perfect for studying Non-sectarian spiritual practices.

This research used participant observation to engage with online communities actively. By upvoting, liking, and sharing SBNR-related content, digital algorithms were influenced to present more niche discussions to us. Reddit and Discord were very valuable, as they offered interactive and dynamic spaces where spirituality was explored through discussions, shared rituals, and communal activities. Casual surveys helped with informal interactions with practitioners, providing their insights on motivational factors and experiences.

Additionally, conversations in Indian city-based online forums helped understanding the urban perspectives on digital spiritual.Discord communities, with their interactive games and tasks, revealed how spirituality is integrated into entertainment and socialization.

By using netnography, we could understand the nuances of online spiritual exploration, and how digital platforms shape identity, belief systems, and community belonging. "Manuel Castells' concept of the 'network society' describes how digital connectivity has restructured human interactions, including spiritual engagement.

Unlike traditional religious institutions, which relied on hierarchical structures, contemporary spirituality is shaped by decentralized, digital networks that allow individuals to construct personalized belief systems.

In the contemporary digital landscape, the exploration of spirituality has transcended traditional boundaries, leading to the emergence of diverse online communities that cater to various spiritual practices. This analysis focuses on the phenomenon of non-sectarian spiritual practices, particularly the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) movement, and its influence on youth spirituality.

Figure 4.1 – a word cloud showcasing the most frequently used words in the netnography

(We observed and made a list of the 20 most frequently appeared words while doing netnography. We used an online word cloud generator to make this image)

To investigate this topic, three prominent platforms—Reddit, Discord and YouTube—were utilized as primary sources for observing and engaging with these online faith subcultures.

Reddit is a social media platform known for its unique structure of niche communities, referred to as subreddits. Each subreddit serves as a forum where users can post content, share opinions, and engage in discussions on specific topics. The platform operates on a voting system that promotes community-driven content curation, allowing users to discover and connect with others who share similar interests. With thousands of subreddits covering a wide array of subjects, Reddit has become a vital space for individuals seeking to explore and engage with diverse ideas and perspectives. It has been aptly termed "the front page of the internet" due to its role in facilitating real-time discussions and community engagement across various topics.

YouTube, on the other hand, is a video-sharing platform that has evolved into a significant social hub for content creators and viewers alike. Beyond merely hosting videos, YouTube fosters community interaction through comment sections, live chats, and features like YouTube Communities, which enable deeper connections between creators and their audiences. This platform allows users to engage with spiritual content through videos related to various practices such as subliminals, divination, chakra healing, and reiki. The active participation of users in comment sections creates a dynamic environment for sharing experiences and opinions on spiritual practices.

Discord is also another versatile platform that facilitates voice, video, and text communication, enabling users to connect with their communities and friends. It serves as a space for discussions on a wide range of topics, including art projects, family outings, and mental health. The majority of servers on Discord are private and invite-only, allowing groups of friends and communities to maintain close connections. Additionally, there are larger open communities available for users to join. The platform empowers users by giving them control over their interactions and overall experience. Discord effectively functions as a virtual home for various communities and interest-based groups, fostering an environment where individuals can freely engage with like-minded people on topics of their choosing.

Through this multi-platform approach ,this analysis seeks to uncover the multifaceted influences of non-sectarian spiritual practices on youth spirituality in the digital age.
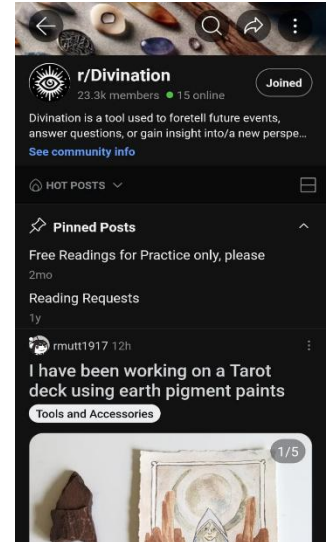
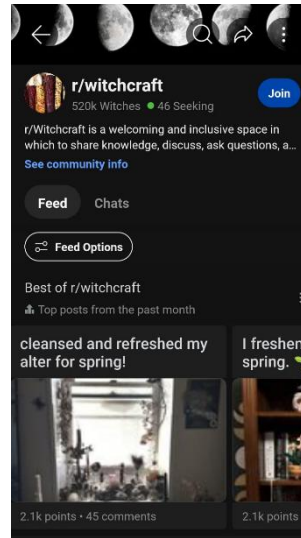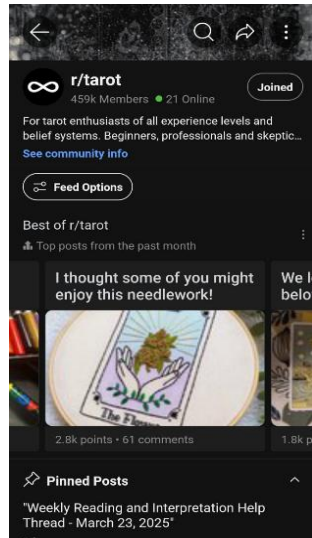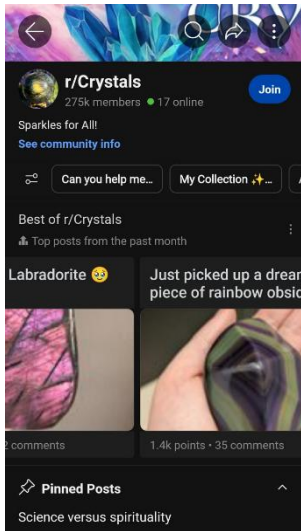**figure 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5** showcase the four major subreddits used for netnography

figure 4.6- reiki class in Malayalam in youtube

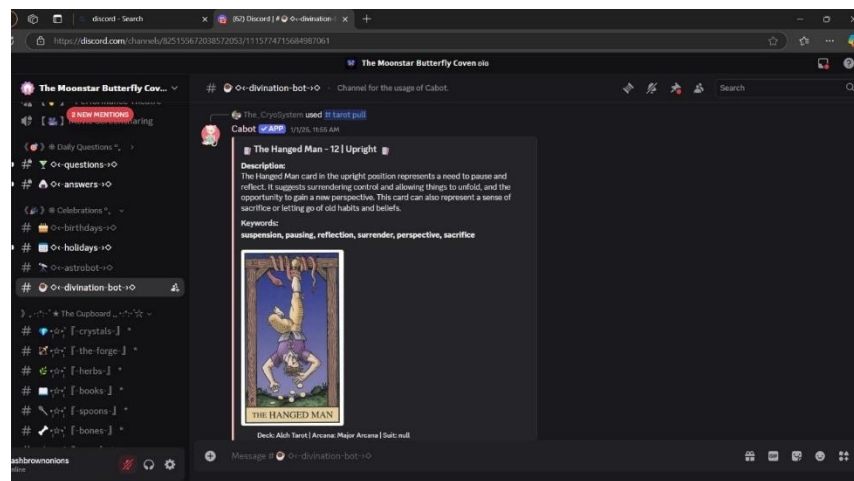**figure 4.7**- beauty subliminal in youtube

figure 4.8- discord server on divination (tarot card discussion)

Objective 1: Understanding the Socio-Demographic Factors of Youth Involved in Faith-Based Online Communities

The exploration of socio-demographic factors among youth engaged in faith-based online communities reveals a diverse and multifaceted landscape. Through a combination of surveys and observations within various online platforms, several key findings emerged that highlight the age, gender, geographical distribution, educational status, and religious affiliations of participants involved in non-sectarian spiritual practices.

<u>Geographical Distribution</u>

The majority of respondents hailed from urban areas, particularly within Indian city subreddits focused on SBNR practices. The netnographic approach allowed for engagement with a global audience; however, it was noted that many practices discussed—excluding yoga, astrology and meditation—were perceived as Western concepts more prevalent among urban youth. Participants from Indian subreddits highlighted that these non-sectarian practices were less common in rural settings, contrasting with observations from Western subreddits where individuals reported that such practices were often embraced by those distancing themselves from organized religions, particularly Christianity. Cultural Adoption: Many SBNR practices have Western origins. A digital media trend suggests that "Western people have no culture," leading them to adopt practices like yoga to feel part of a culture.This discrepancy suggests that while Western youth may have access to these spiritual concepts even in rural areas due to internet penetration, Indian youth in metropolitans seem to be more influenced by urban trends when it comes to adopting non-sectarian spiritual practices.

<u>Age Distribution</u>

During our participant observation in these communities, we found that a little more than half of the respondents belong to the age group of 18-24 years. This demographic is particularly significant as it represents the youth who are actively seeking alternative spiritual practices beyond traditional religious frameworks. The next largest group consists of individuals over 30 years old,

followed by those in the 25-30 age range. Interestingly, very few respondents were under 18, indicating that engagement in these online communities is primarily a phenomenon among young adults.

Gender Representation

In terms of gender representation, our research indicated that slightly more than half of the participants identified as female, with a smaller proportion identifying as male and an almost equal number identifying as non-binary. This aligns with observations from various discussions, where practitioners involved in practices such as witchcraft, subliminal music listening, and divination are predominantly women. India vs. Western Countries: In India, non-sectarian spiritual practices (SBNR) are predominantly embraced by teenage girls aged 13-24. While older practitioners like astrologers and gurus exist, the youth, especially young women, form the majority. In contrast, Western countries see higher participation among middle-aged women, possibly due to greater freedom and work-life balance.

The active participation of young girls in high schools and colleges highlights a growing interest among females in exploring spiritual practices outside conventional religious structures. While men and individuals from queer identities also contributed to these discussions, the strong presence of women underscores a notable trend in the landscape of spiritual engagement.

Educational and Professional Status

A significant number of respondents identified as students, suggesting that educational institutions may serve as fertile ground for exploring alternative spiritual practices. Additionally, many participants were working professionals, while others fell into categories such as unemployed or other statuses. This demographic insight emphasizes the role of both academic environments and professional spaces in shaping spiritual exploration among youth.

Religious Affiliations

Our findings showcased a diverse range of religious affiliations among respondents. Many identified as Hindu, while others expressed atheistic beliefs or belonged to unspecified religions. Observations indicated that numerous individuals engaging in Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) practices—such as meditation, subliminal music listening, chakra healing, reiki healing, and

astrology—often maintained an affiliation with Hinduism or their familial religion. In contrast, participants from Western backgrounds frequently reported a complete disconnection from organized religions like Christianity, expressing skepticism or opposition toward them.

Cultural Imperialism Theory argues that globalization often results in the dominance of powerful cultures over weaker ones, leading to the widespread adoption of foreign beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. In the context of our research, the increasing popularity of Western-originated non-sectarian spiritual practices—such as manifestation, tarot, and energy healing—among Indian youth, especially teenage girls can be seen as an outcome of the dominance of Western media, influencers, and digital platforms. During our research, we noticed how many teenage girls in India were chasing western beauty standards by depending on practices like subliminal listening. This reflects a broader hegemonic process where digital spaces are becoming conductors of cultural homogenization, reinforcing the global influence of Western spirituality, shaping the indigenous culture.

Objective 2: Identifying Digital Platforms and Communities for Spiritual Guidance and Mentorship

The digital age has facilitated the emergence of various platforms and communities that serve as important resources for spiritual guidance and mentorship, particularly among youth engaged in non-sectarian spiritual practices. When asked in an online survey , 61.5% of the people agreed to have discovered SBNR Communities through social media. This analysis focuses on the role of Reddit, Discord, and YouTube as key platforms for exploring spirituality, as well as the rise of specialized apps and online courses that cater to diverse spiritual interests. Durkheim's Theory of Anomie explains how rapid urbanization and social fragmentation may leave youth feeling isolated, prompting them to seek alternative forms of belonging in digital spiritual communities.

Key Digital Platforms

1. **Reddit**: As a prominent social media platform, Reddit hosts numerous subreddits dedicated to spiritual practices. Communities such as r/divination provide a global forum where individuals share their personal experiences and methods of connecting with the universe. The platform encourages open dialogue and exchange of ideas, allowing users to explore various forms of spirituality without the constraints of organized religion.

2. **Discord**: This communication platform has become increasingly popular among youth seeking spiritual mentorship. Discord servers often serve as safe spaces for individuals to connect, share resources, and participate in discussions about spirituality. Many users prefer this platform for its real-time interaction capabilities and the sense of community it fosters, while still allowing for personalized spiritual exploration.

3. **YouTube**: The video-sharing platform has become a significant source of information and guidance for those practicing SBNR methods. Numerous channels are dedicated to topics such as subliminal messaging, reiki healing, and other alternative practices. Popular YouTubers in these niches have cultivated large followings, creating vibrant communities that extend beyond YouTube into Reddit and Discord.

Personalized Spirituality vs. Organized Communities

A notable trend observed among non-Indians engaging in SBNR practices is a preference for personalized spirituality rather than adherence to cultish organizations or traditional religious structures. Many individuals express a desire to craft their own spiritual experiences through activities such as creating spell jars, establishing altars, or utilizing esoteric tools like oracle decks or chaos magic sigils. While they appreciate the support of community, they prioritize personal autonomy in their spiritual journeys.

In contrast, Indian practitioners often find their SBNR practices intertwined with traditional Hindu beliefs, leading them to participate in online Hindu communities or follow established gurus. However, those who gravitate towards Western SBNR practices tend to actively distance themselves from conventional Indian traditions, often engaging with platforms like Discord and Reddit that align more closely with Western ideologies.

Emerging Spiritual Apps

The rise of mobile applications has further transformed how youth engage with spirituality. Notable applications include:

- Meditation Apps:

    o Headspace

    o Sadhguru Yoga & Meditation

    o Art of Living App

- Fortune-Telling Apps:

    o AstroTalk

    o AstroSage

    o AI Tarot Card Reading

    o Zodiac Palm Reading

    o Inura AI Fortune Teller

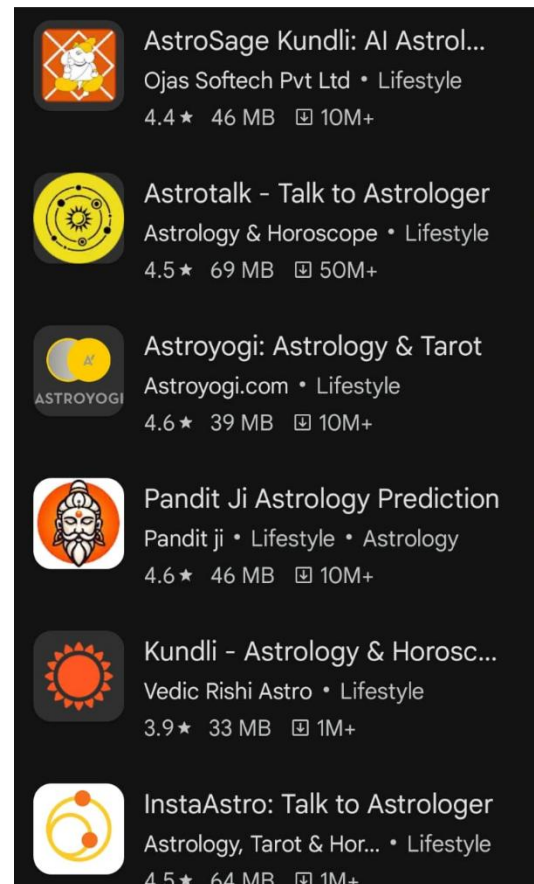   o Labyrinthos Tarot Cards

    o Kismet

figure 4.9-popular astrology apps in playstore.

These apps provide accessible resources for meditation, astrology, tarot reading, and other spiritual practices, catering specifically to the needs of young users seeking guidance.

Discord

Discord fosters community building through voice, video, and text communication, with its servers offering youth spiritual communities a platform for interaction, support, and diverse discussions on spirituality. For our study, we examined two prominent Discord servers: "Spellbound" and "Somewhat Conscious."

Spellbound – An Eclectic Server

- Diverse Spiritual Practices: Offers a range of practices like witchcraft, tarot, astrology, and more, allowing members to explore and refine their spiritual identities.

- Beginner-Friendly & Inclusive: Designed for newcomers, welcoming youth from different cultural, religious, and spiritual backgrounds.

- Unique Spiritual Identities: Users adopt various spiritual personas (e.g., witches, wizards, mages) and engage in role-playing, adding a playful yet meaningful twist to spiritual exploration.

- Immersive Spirituality: Members treat rituals, symbols, and practices with deep personal significance, creating a "parallel world" or a "living game" for spiritual engagement.

Somewhat Conscious – A structured Server

- Multidimensional Practices: Includes meditation, astrology, yoga, and divination.

- Inclusive Atmosphere: Welcomed people from various backgrounds, including religious, agnostic, and atheistic.

- Interactive Features: Fun elements like a "spiritual lottery" game to engage users.

- Casual & Serious Engagement: Balances light-hearted and deep spiritual discussions.

- Youth-Focused Introspection: Focus on emotional experiences, mental health, and mindfulness.

- Spiritual Experimentation: Virtual rituals and collective meditations for diverse practices.

While Spellbound encouraged diverse mystical practices in a welcoming environment, Somewhat Conscious integrated structured discussion with casual engagement.

<u>YouTube Channels and Online Courses</u>

In recent years, digital platforms have played a pivotal role in disseminating faith-based subcultures, making spiritual practices more accessible to a global audience. Among these platforms, YouTube stands out as a significant medium, introducing diverse spiritual traditions to individuals across various age groups. YouTube serves as a vast repository of spiritual content, allowing practitioners and enthusiasts to share teachings, rituals, and personal experiences. This democratization of information has led to the proliferation of various faith-based subcultures online.

- **Subliminal Channels**:

    o Baejin Café

    o Enchanted Workshop

    o Moza Morph

    o Kapelsu

    o Solar Subs

These channels not only offer subliminal music but also provide tips on manifestation techniques through their associated communities on Reddit and Discord.

Subliminals and Youth: Young women are influenced by beauty influencers promoting subliminal music targeting insecurities like weight loss and body image. These subliminals often feature catchy titles, unique designs, trendy music, and convincing comments, appealing to younger audiences a.k.a. Gen Z , thus having millions of viewers.

- **Reiki Channels:**

    o Dr. Randolph Shipon

    o Ryan Cropper

    o International School of Free Reiki Learning

      o   Dhairyawan Healing Science

      o   BSmile Academy

These YouTubers focus on alternative healing methods such as reiki and feng shui, providing valuable insights into holistic wellness.

- Astrology Channels: Astrology has seen a resurgence in popularity, with numerous channels dedicated to both Western and Vedic astrology. Notable examples include:

  o **CHANI:** This channel aims to make astrology accessible and practical, blending ancient astrological wisdom with mindfulness practices.

  o **Patrick Arundell Astrology**: With a substantial following, this channel offers yearly horoscopes and special astrology features, catering to a diverse audience.

  o **AstralAstrologer:** Guided by Vedic traditions, this channel delves into the mystical realm of Vedic astrology, fostering a deep connection with its audience.

- Shaktism Channels: Devotees and scholars of Shaktism utilize YouTube to share teachings, rituals, and devotional content. For instance, The Shaktism channel provides a sacred space to honor divine energy through explorations of spirituality, devotion, and meditation.

Reddit as a Research Tool

During our netnographic research, Reddit emerged as a crucial platform for observing and engaging with a vast range of faith-based subcultures. The platform hosts numerous subreddits where individuals share their experiences, seek guidance, and teach each other various spiritual practices. These subreddits include included r/Kochi, r/agnostic, r/divination, r/horoscope, r/subliminals, r/Bangalore, r/Hyderabad, r/Chennai, r/Mumbai, r/tarot and r/chakras.

Subreddits like r/manifestation and r/subliminals were notably welcoming and encouraged newcomers to try simple practices like listening to subliminal music or following basic manifestation techniques. These communities were built around general and widely accessible practices, making them more inclusive to curious individuals.

In contrast, subreddits dedicated to occult and esoteric traditions—such as r/occult, r/witchcraft, and r/divinity—were significantly more guarded. When we asked questions for our research, we

were met with hostility rather than openness. This could be due to a preference for maintaining exclusivity or skepticism towards outsiders questioning their beliefs.

Despite this, Reddit provided an invaluable discovery space for non-sectarian spiritual practices we were previously unaware of. Some of the most intriguing traditions we encountered included:

- Shaktism (a Hindu tradition focused on goddess worship)
- Hellenism (revival of ancient Greek religious practices)
- Eclectic Witchcraft (a personalized blend of magical traditions)
- Chathanseva (folk rituals from Kerala)
- Scottish Rites & Middle Eastern Occults
- Use of Trans Music with Weed for Meditation
- Making of Angel Jars (aestheticized manifestation tools)
- Sacred Sex Work (spiritual practices involving sexuality)
- Law of Assumption (LOA) – Surprisingly, LOA turned out to be far more popular in India than we anticipated. Many Indian students, particularly girls in urban areas, practiced gratitude-based LOA techniques as part of their daily routines.
- Dravidian Culture & Kaali Principle (regional spiritual frameworks in South India)
- Folk Catholicism (blending local traditions with Catholic beliefs)
- Numerology & Animism

Additionally, websites like WICCA India and Magic & Witchcraft Academy offer courses on witchcraft, paganism, tantra, druidism, and other esoteric practices. General educational platforms like Udemy also feature courses related to witchcraft and divination.

In conclusion, the digital landscape offers a plethora of platforms and communities that facilitate spiritual exploration among youth engaged in non-sectarian practices. By leveraging these resources—ranging from social media forums to specialized apps—young individuals can find guidance and mentorship tailored to their unique spiritual journeys while fostering connections within supportive online communities.

Objective 3: Motivating Factors Behind the Involvement of Youth in Online Faith Subcultures and Practices

The involvement of youth in online faith subcultures and non-sectarian spiritual practices is driven by a variety of motivating factors. Through survey data and observations made within online communities, several key themes emerge, highlighting the complex interplay of social, psychological, and technological influences that shape young people's spiritual journeys.

Urban Areas: Self-Realization, and Reconnection with Nature

In urban environments, the fast-paced lifestyle, individualism, and growing digital engagement have led many individuals to seek non-sectarian spiritual practices (SBNR) as a means of self-realization and reconnecting with nature. Unlike structured religious practices, urban spirituality often focuses on personalized and fluid belief systems that allow individuals to explore their inner selves while adapting to the constraints of city life.

Self-Realization Through SBNR Practices: Urban dwellers increasingly turn to SBNR techniques to cultivate mindfulness, self-awareness, and emotional well-being. These practices are often influenced by modern psychology, Eastern traditions, and New Age philosophies. Popular SBNR methods include:

- Meditation and Breathwork .
- Manifestation and Affirmations
- Sound Healing and Subliminals
- Alternative Healing Therapies .

The appeal of these SBNR practices lies in their individualized nature—allowing practitioners to engage with spirituality on their own terms without adhering to rigid doctrines.

Reconnecting with Nature in the Urban Landscape: While traditional spirituality often involves temple visits and religious pilgrimages, urban SBNR practitioners look for ways to integrate nature-based spirituality into city life. This includes:

- <u>Urban Gardening and Plant-Based Spirituality</u> – Many city residents have turned to indoor gardening, herbalism, and green altars as ways to reconnect with natural elements in small apartments. Some incorporate moon gardening and plant blessings, blending nature with mystical traditions.

- <u>Forest Bathing and Outdoor Meditation</u> – Inspired by Eastern Zen practices, Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing) has become popular among urban SBNR practitioners who seek relaxation in public parks or nature retreats.

- <u>Eco-Spirituality and Conscious Living</u> – Many individuals involved in urban SBNR communities focus on sustainable living, zero-waste practices, and mindful consumption as an extension of their spiritual beliefs. This reflects a broader movement of environmental awareness intertwined with spirituality.

- Yoga and Mindfulness Retreats – In cities, corporate wellness programs and weekend spiritual retreats often incorporate yoga, meditation, and ecological healing as an escape from urban stress.

In discord, under a certain spiritual server named spellbound, which had diverse and specific spiritual channels, one the most active channels was the "grounding channel"The Grounding channel emphasized stability and mindfulness, with members exchanging personal techniques like tree hugging, mindful breathing, and nature connection. While less chat-based and more forum-driven, the discussions provided mutual support, members linked grounding practices to emotional regulation and stress relief through nature connectivity.

<u>Sense of Belonging</u>

The rapidly declining mental health in urban environments is a significant factor in why many individuals turn to these SBNR practices. As social bonds weaken in cities, digital faith-based subcultures have filled the gap, offering spiritual guidance, emotional support, and a sense of community to those navigating the isolating nature of urban life.

A significant finding from our research indicated that more than 50% of respondents felt a sense of belonging within online faith-based communities. This sense of community is crucial for individuals seeking connection and understanding in their spiritual journeys. The ability to share experiences and beliefs with like-minded individuals fosters an environment where youth can

explore their spirituality without fear of judgment. In a world marked by uncertainty, particularly during events like the COVID-19 pandemic, this sense of belonging becomes even more vital.

Identity was a recurring theme in most digital platform discussions. Users engaged in self-disclosure and reflected personal experiences, emotions and concerns.

In the SBNR Discord servers, One user expressed their struggles with past trauma and reinvention of self. Many users responded with positive affirmations and reassured the user of the on-goings in life. With responses such as "we're here to guide you" and others such as "you are a fighter".

When one user expressed having expressed a feeling of loneliness and interest for a specific spiritual practice. The responses were positive and many of the responses were promising and inspiring. Certain responses stated "I've been there too, we can talk about it" or statements such as "Don't worry, you have us"

The discord community supported the users through individual insights and educated on broad perspectives. Overall, the gesture demonstrated the community's willingness to provide support to its members. This underscored the server's inclusivity and friendliness. The openness illuminated the reasons for the server's appeal and revealed a community that balanced individual exploration and readily available support.

Such interactions not only restored hope in members but convey a strong emotional bond across digital spaces. Users respond with each other with encouragement and shared experiences, creating a sense of belonging. Ir reveals the role of online communities as therapeutic outlets.

From the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, the process of identity formation in digital spaces shows how personal and collective meanings are negotiated through everyday interactions, enabling youth to construct personalized spiritual narratives.

<u>Key Motivating Factors</u>

Several reasons emerged as motivating factors for youth involvement in these communities:

1. <u>Seeking Spiritual Growth:</u> Many individuals are drawn to non-sectarian practices as a means to enhance their spiritual development and personal growth. The desire for self-improvement is a powerful motivator, particularly among young people navigating the complexities of modern life.

2. <u>Connecting with Like-Minded People</u>: The desire to find others who share similar beliefs or interests is a powerful motivator, allowing youth to engage in meaningful discussions and relationships. Online platforms such as Reddit and Discord provide spaces where youth can connect with others who have similar spiritual interests.

3. <u>Accessibility and Convenience</u>: Digital platforms provide easy access to spiritual resources, making it more convenient for individuals to explore various practices at their own pace. The rise of mobile applications dedicated to meditation, astrology, and other spiritual practices further enhances this accessibility.

4. <u>Mentorship and Opportunities:</u> Online communities often offer mentorship opportunities, where experienced practitioners guide newcomers in their spiritual journeys. This support system helps youth navigate their exploration of spirituality more effectively.

5. <u>Emotional Support:</u> Many youth seek emotional support during challenging times, finding solace in the shared experiences of others within these communities. The anonymity offered by online platforms allows individuals to express their vulnerabilities without fear of judgment.

6. <u>Escapism:</u> For some, engaging with spirituality serves as a distraction from the stresses of everyday life, providing an avenue for escapism. This desire for distraction can be particularly pronounced during periods of personal or societal upheaval.

7. <u>Validation:</u> Individuals may seek validation for their beliefs or choices that are not widely accepted in mainstream society, finding reassurance in the acceptance of their peers. This need for validation is especially relevant in the context of non-traditional spiritual practices that may be viewed skeptically by others.

<u>Childhood Curiosity and Personal Triggers</u>

Observations from Reddit indicated that many individuals who engage in SBNR practices often trace their interest back to childhood curiosity about the universe and existential questions. Personal events or triggers may prompt them to pursue these practices further, integrating

spirituality into their daily lives. This natural inclination towards exploration can lead to a lifelong journey of spiritual discovery.

Similarly, within discord, one user posted about their personal experience with negative "Lucid Dreaming". In a broad conversation in chat-based format, many users responded sharing similar experiences offering tips on techniques for controlling dreams.

In certain forums, members experienced doubts or feelings of disconnection from their faith. In one instance, a user shared their spiritual struggle from childhood. The responses they received were focused on empathy and shared experience. Comments such as "you're not alone in this" or "I've felt the same way before" reflected the supportive and non-judgemental environment.

On further observation, many users in detail stated their journey of self-discovery, including their autism diagnosis and exploration of meditation. Another user expressed a feeling of Isolation and uncertainty, one relatively new user expressed her goal of wanting to connect with a community, while another mentioned on a spiritual journey in discovering astrology. Such experiences emphasised the individual paths members are taking to find themselves through the aid of spiritual identities. The moderators and experienced members provided support by welcoming and assuring members while they were encouraged to remember that they are not alone

Rejection of Organized Religion

A significant trend observed in the rise of non-sectarian spiritual practices (SBNR) is the shift of individuals away from institutionalized religion, particularly among young people engaged in academic studies. This rejection is often not a move toward strict atheism but rather an exploration of spirituality outside rigid religious structures.

One Reddit respondent from r/Divination shared a perspective that encapsulates this trend. They grew up as a devout and conservative Christian but began deconstructing their faith at 18, largely due to the moral and ideological conflicts they had with the church as an institution. While they rejected the hierarchical and dogmatic aspects of organized religion, they still retained a belief in a higher power, albeit one that aligns more with personal intuition and direct spiritual experience rather than prescribed doctrines. This mirrors the experiences of many individuals in India and globally who distance themselves from traditional religious frameworks yet continue to seek

spiritual meaning through practices like manifestation, divination, energy work, and personal rituals.

A common sentiment among respondents is the perception that organized religions, such as Christianity, are often mistranslated or colonial in nature. Negative associations with organized religions—due to historical injustices or experiences with fake gurus (as in the case of Hinduism , Buddhism and Jainism)—can drive individuals towards smaller-scale personal belief systems that feel more fulfilling. This shift reflects a desire for authenticity in their spiritual practices.

In discord one such channel focused on fostering a space for diverse, self-directed spiritual practices. In channels like the Spellbound Server, members engage with a variety of metaphysical tools and techniques—such as crystals, spiritual baths, and simmer pots—tailored to individual experiences rather than prescribed religious rituals or doctrines. One Such active channel was the "protection Channel". Members were deeply focused on warding off negative energy, actively sharing experiences and advice. When one user expressed concern over their broken black tourmaline necklace, an experienced member reassured them, saying the crystal had "served its purpose." Another user seeking help after an unsettling spiritual encounter was advised to take a "spiritual bath and use a simmer pot." Others responded by sharing similar experiences and offering affirmations of protection. These discussions reflected deeply held beliefs and a strong sense of community, blending serious conversations with moments of humour.

Research indicates that today's youth are less likely to accept strict affiliations with specific institutions compared to previous generations. This trend may lead them to explore alternative spiritual practices online, as they seek meaning beyond traditional religious frameworks.

Postmodernism suggests that in highly modernized, urban societies, traditional structures such as organized religion , lose their authority, leading individuals to construct their own fluid and highly individualized belief systems

Impact of COVID-19

 The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped spiritual engagement, accelerating the shift towards non-sectarian spiritual practices (SBNR), particularly in India. Interestingly, it wasn't

traditionally religious individuals who turned to SBNR during this period, but rather a significant number of atheist and agnostic individuals who began exploring spirituality in new ways. The psychological impact of isolation, uncertainty, and existential reflection led many who previously distanced themselves from organized religion to seek personalized spiritual coping mechanisms like mindfulness, meditation, manifestation, and energy healing. Digital platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, and virtual workshops became essential spaces where individuals could discover, experiment with, and discuss various SBNR traditions, from affirmation-based manifestation techniques to astrology and chakra healing. Online faith-based subcultures not only provided access to spiritual knowledge but also fostered support systems where individuals could share experiences and build a sense of belonging despite physical isolation. The increasing adoption of SBNR by non-religious individuals also indicates a broader cultural shift—where spirituality is becoming less about institutionalized faith and more about personal meaning, self-exploration, and emotional resilience. The pandemic, in many ways, blurred the lines between religious and secular spirituality, reinforcing that spirituality in the modern era is increasingly fluid, inclusive, and individually driven.

Academic Perspectives on Spirituality

A particularly interesting case was of a respondent in reddit who discovered witchcraft and magic through an anthropology class at university. Studying religion from an academic perspective—viewing belief systems as methods of social organization—led them to realize that rituals and symbolic practices exist across all spiritual traditions, including in everyday life. This analytical approach to spirituality allowed them to explore magic as a means of engaging with the world without the constraints of formal religious structures.This observation aligns with broader academic perspectives on spirituality. Many young, educated individuals, particularly in fields like anthropology, psychology, sociology and philosophy, recognize that all religions share common structures, myths, and rituals, leading them to question traditional exclusivist religious claims. Rather than rejecting spirituality outright, they often adopt a fluid, eclectic approach, integrating various spiritual and philosophical traditions to create a personalized system of meaning. Notably, many young people are exposed to alternative spiritual practices at an early age, which can shape their beliefs as they grow older.
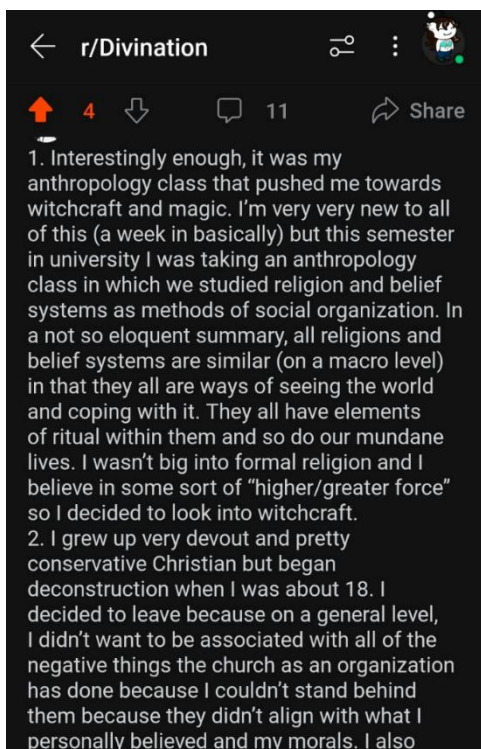
figure 4.10- a beginner in the divination community in reddit answered our question on why they got into SBNR practices

Subjectivity and Mind Power

A recurring theme among participants is the realization that reality is subjective. Many subliminal music listeners believe they can alter their reality through focused intention and manifestation techniques. The rise of the subliminal community during the pandemic introduced new methods for manifestation, attracting individuals seeking empowerment over their circumstances.

Aestheticization of Spirituality as a Motivating Factor

A major reason youth are drawn to non-sectarian spiritual practices (SBNR) is their highly aestheticized presence on digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Visually appealing videos with soft lighting, pastel visuals, and trendy music make spirituality feel modern, accessible, and aspirational. This aesthetic extends beyond digital content to the promotion of crystals, tarot cards, and manifestation journals, which provide a tangible, low-barrier entry point into spirituality. Influencers and online stores market these tools as essential for self-discovery and personal transformation, making spiritual engagement feel effortless. Unlike traditional religion,

which may seem rigid, SBNR is visually packaged as a lifestyle aligned with self-care culture, attracting young audiences seeking both meaning and personal expression. While for some, this serves as a gateway to deeper exploration, for others, spirituality remains more of an aesthetic trend than a belief system.

<u>Overall Life Satisfaction</u>

Participation in online faith subcultures provides individuals with a sense of divine or universal support, enhancing overall life satisfaction. These communities foster non-judgmental environments that allow members to explore their curiosities freely while receiving encouragement from peers.

In conclusion, the motivating factors behind youth involvement in online faith subcultures are diverse and interconnected. From seeking belonging and emotional support to rejecting organized religion and exploring personalized spirituality, these factors reflect the complex landscape of modern spirituality among young people today. As they navigate this landscape, digital platforms play a crucial role in facilitating connections and guiding individual journeys toward spiritual fulfilment while providing safe spaces for exploration and growth amidst societal challenges.

Objective 4- To investigate the impact of online practices on youth and society

The rise of non-sectarian spiritual practices (SBNR) in digital spaces has transformed how young people engage with spirituality. Online communities provide a sense of belonging, alternative belief systems, and a modern approach to self-discovery, yet they also raise concerns about commercialization, psychological influence, and the growing detachment from traditional religious structures. The impact of these online spiritual practices on youth and society is complex, shaped by both materialism and authentic spiritual exploration, as well as the increasing corporate adoption of mindfulness-based practices in professional environments.

Materialism vs. Authentic Spirituality: The Influence of Digital Trends and Corporate Adoption

One of the biggest debates within SBNR communities is the distinction between authentic spiritual exploration and the commercialization of spirituality as a trend. Traditionally, spirituality has been seen as a deeply personal journey centered around self-growth and transcendence. However, in the digital age, many practices have become commodified, aestheticized, and tied to consumer culture, blurring the line between genuine engagement and profit-driven influence.

The Rise of Materialistic Spirituality

The monetization of spirituality has led to the increasing association of faith-based practices with products rather than introspection. Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have played a major role in shaping the modern spiritual aesthetic, where engagement with SBNR is often reduced to purchasing tarot decks, crystals, manifestation journals, and spell kits rather than practicing deep personal transformation.

Manifestation & Consumerism – Practices like Law of Assumption (LOA) and affirmation-based manifestation techniques have turned spirituality into a consumer product. Influencers promote expensive custom manifestation guides, subliminal music subscriptions, and paid manifestation coaching sessions, reinforcing the belief that one must invest financially in spirituality to achieve their desires. This shifts spiritual focus from internal growth to external material gains, making it less about self-awareness and more about transactional success.

YouTube's Role in Commercialized Spirituality – The YouTube spiritual ecosystem has transformed into a highly monetized space where creators promote paid astrology readings, energy healing courses, and digital spirituality guides. While some content is genuinely educational, many channels exploit audience insecurities, selling hope rather than encouraging actual spiritual practice. Additionally, aestheticized spirituality—videos with trendy music, soft visuals, and mystical imagery—draws younger audiences into these practices not necessarily for spiritual enlightenment, but for their "lifestyle appeal."

Corporate Adoption of Spiritual Practices

The corporate world has also begun incorporating SBNR practices into workplace culture, but often in a way that prioritizes productivity over genuine employee well-being. Many multinational corporations (MNCs) now promote mindfulness, meditation, and yoga, but rather than fostering personal growth, these initiatives are often strategic tools for improving efficiency, focus, and employee retention.

Workplace Spirituality as a Productivity Tool – Meditation breaks, corporate yoga retreats, and mindfulness programs have been introduced as "self-care initiatives" in workplaces. However, instead of addressing core issues like burnout, excessive workload, or toxic work environments, these practices shift responsibility onto employees, encouraging them to "manage stress" through mindfulness rather than demanding structural changes within their workplaces.

HR Strategies & Affirmations – Many corporate wellness programs now promote daily affirmations, motivational speakers, and manifestation techniques to improve workplace morale. While this may provide temporary motivation, these strategies often serve as marketing tools rather than genuine efforts to address employees' emotional and spiritual needs.

Authentic Spirituality: Resisting Materialism and Corporate Influence

Despite the commercialization of SBNR, many serious practitioners actively resist materialistic engagement in digital spiritual spaces. On Reddit, Discord, and niche online communities, individuals often critique the consumerist aspects of modern spirituality, advocating for non-commercial, self-driven spiritual exploration.

Key elements of authentic SBNR spirituality include:

Spirituality without excessive consumption – Many experienced practitioners emphasize inner work, meditation, and self-reflection over the purchase of trendy spiritual tools.

Avoiding exploitative trends – Some communities warn against manifestation-based content that preys on young people's hopes and insecurities, pushing them to spend money rather than cultivate patience, discipline, and self-awareness.

Critiquing corporate spiritual appropriation – Many spiritual communities recognize that corporate mindfulness programs are often a facade for increasing productivity rather than addressing employee well-being, reinforcing the importance of personal, non-commodified spiritual journeys.

The Psychological Impact of Online Spirituality

The increasing accessibility of digital spiritual spaces has both positive and negative psychological effects on youth. These digital environments allowed for spiritual experimentation and exploration of practices that may have not easily accessible offline. For instance, some youth participated in virtual rituals or collective meditations with people from different parts of the world. These experiences were often discussed within the community where members shared advice and encouragement based on their own journeys

Anonymity is an important factor in open discussions. In many cases, the youth felt more comfortable expressing personal spiritual experiences or uncertainties without the fear of judgement.

While SBNR communities can offer emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, there is also a darker side to the over-reliance on spiritual practices as a coping mechanism.

One tragic example is an individual, we interviewed who experienced the loss of a friend due to overdependence on online manifestation and subliminal practices. The person, struggling with personal issues, turned to manifestation techniques, believing that spiritual visualization alone would solve their problems. However, when tangible results failed to appear, the sense of disillusionment and disappointment led to a worsening mental state. Eventually, they lost hope, highlighting the dangers of blindly trusting digital spirituality without taking real-world action.

Additionally, many individuals in these online spiritual spaces experience addiction to digital faith-based subcultures. The constant cycle of seeking affirmations, waiting for "signs," and consuming endless spiritual content can create paralysis, where individuals become passive dreamers rather than active participants in their lives. This demonstrates that while SBNR can be empowering, excessive dependence on digital spirituality without critical thinking can have severe emotional consequences.

<u>The Broader Impact on Youth and Society</u>

The rise of online SBNR communities is reshaping how young people understand and engage with spirituality. These digital spaces provide:

Opportunities for socialization and belonging – Many young individuals feel disconnected from traditional religion but find community, mentorship, and guidance in online spiritual spaces.

A new form of spiritual identity – Spirituality is no longer rigid or institutional; instead, it is becoming fluid, inclusive, and customizable, leading to the formation of new spiritual identities and belief systems.

Intergenerational knowledge-sharing – Many traditional spiritual families, such as astrologers, energy healers, and reiki practitioners, are now using YouTube and social media to pass down their wisdom in digital spaces, ensuring that these practices evolve with the modern world.

However, there are also critical concerns:

- <u>Over-commercialization of spirituality</u> – The increasing aestheticization of spiritual practices has led many young people to engage with SBNR as a "lifestyle trend" rather than a meaningful journey.
- <u>Addiction to digital spirituality</u> – The ease of access to endless spiritual content, manifestation rituals, and online divination tools can create dependency, where individuals become trapped in passive belief rather than active self-growth.
- <u>Erosion of traditional religious institutions</u> – As youth move away from organized religion, faith is becoming less community-driven and more individualistic, shifting the concept of spirituality from collective worship to personal belief systems.

4.2. <u>CASE STUDIES</u>

Case studies were also chosen for this study . Case studies are a detailed examination of a specific person group or situation. Case studies used here helped with an in-depth analysis how online SBNR individuals and groups engage and interact and practice spirituality. It also gives concrete examples of experiences of practitioners including their beliefs, rituals and engagement styles further capturing different perspectives and giving a deeper understanding.

Online spaces enable more easier access to communities. For this study, multiple online and offline interviews were taken. The 4 most detailed and relevant to the project of the cases were taken for an intensive study.

Case Study 1-

This case study examines the experience of a 19-year-old female student, who identifies as an atheist and has been involved in online faith-based communities for four years. She is particularly engaged in "subliminal communities," which focus on practices related to subliminal music listening and manifesting.

She discovered these groups through YouTube, which recommended them to her. She engages in online discussions and feels very comfortable using technology for spiritual practices. Despite her atheism, she finds value in the practices and engages in them regularly. "Subliminal music listening motivates me to achieve my daily goals as it brings my focus back to what I want to achieve," she shared. "My day ends with meditating to such music."

She feels a sense of belonging in these online communities. "Spiritual activities and the peer groups made through them provide a sense of support beyond the materialistic sense," she explained. When asked about factors that attract individuals to these communities, she highlighted emotional support, escapism, and validation. "It also gives us a medium of hope and something to look forward to in times of distress." She strongly agrees that participating in her community enhances her overall life satisfaction.

"The anonymity makes it hard to trust them," she admitted. "On top of that, many subliminal communities encourage objectively wrong things like eating disorders or the evil eye on enemies, which could monger hate or even result in occult practices."

Despite these challenges, she believes that online faith communities can influence societal norms and youth behavior positively but cautiously added: "They help vulnerable youth by providing direction and a sense of belonging," she explained. "Although sometimes they could influence youth overwhelmingly."

When asked about improvements for these communities, she expressed concern "The whole point of non-religious communities like these is to avoid the authoritative and marketing-based system of traditional religion," she said. "But many end up being authoritative as unity increases. This adds stress, and members start losing faith." She also suggested improvements such as better technology for creating subliminal music: "Maybe we'll have better technology to create subliminal music—like 8D sound effects or apps to create them easily."

When asked if she would recommend these communities to others, she firmly replied: "I don't recommend communities to people. I got into this community through a natural instinct; people should choose their spiritual journey themselves and not through influence. Rationality is recommended." She also highlighted potential risks for youth relying heavily on online faith-based communities: "It might blind them to the real world, making them delusional or having impractical hopes," she cautioned.

Her experience reflects both the opportunities and challenges present within online spiritual communities as individuals navigate their own paths toward understanding and connection amidst a complex landscape.

Case Study 2

This case study examines the experience of a 20-year-old female student. She identifies as agnostic and has been involved in online faith-based communities for about a year. Her spiritual affiliation is with the occult, which refers to non-traditional spiritual practices involving esoteric knowledge and mystical beliefs, often including divination and mysticism. Her practices include strengthening intuition and reading mythology. She discovered these communities through social media and participates in them regularly, using both her smartphone and laptop to access faith-based content.

She primarily uses YouTube and Reddit for spiritual guidance and feels very comfortable using technology for these purposes. Despite being agnostic, she finds a sense of belonging in these online communities. When asked about what attracts individuals to these communities, she highlighted factors such as connecting with like-minded people, accessibility, mentorship opportunities, emotional support, and escapism from real-life challenges. "People have a plethora of reasons," she noted. "Most times it's people going through a hard time that get into occult."

She strongly agrees that participating in her community enhances her overall life satisfaction and believes that support from her community helps reduce feelings of anxiety or stress. "I feel a sense of contentment reading and relating my experiences with those online," she shared.

However, she faces challenges such as trust issues with content authenticity and feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information available. She believes that online faith communities can influence societal norms to some extent and impact youth behavior, particularly if a community becomes widespread. "Well, I think if a community becomes very widespread, it will influence a large section of people (not entirely society in general)," she explained. "There could be clashes if the views these communities spread are contradictory to general societal beliefs."

She has witnessed activism and community outreach organized through these platforms and acknowledges the significant role social media plays in shaping youth spirituality. "Social media plays a very important role in shaping youth spirituality," she emphasized.

Despite experiencing negative aspects like scammers and faith-based shaming, she feels safe discussing personal faith issues online and plans to continue participating in online spiritual activities. However, she is hesitant to recommend these communities to others, feeling that it's not her place to influence others' beliefs. "Nope, it's not really up to me to make people believe in occult. They'll think I'm crazy," she said.

She also noted potential risks in youth depending heavily on online faith-based communities, such as using occult practices destructively or for frivolous purposes. "Using occult in destructive ways. Or using it to answer useless questions," she cautioned.

Her experience highlights the complex dynamics of online spiritual communities, where individuals seek connection, support, and personal growth amidst challenges and risks.

Case study 3-

This case study examines the experience of a non-binary individual , who is involved in online faith-based communities centered around ancient spirituality, particularly the worship of Inanna. Inanna is an ancient Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, fertility, and war, and her worship involves practices that honor these themes.

The individual practices "the making and maintenance of altars, offerings, dedicated practices like yoga & prayer & art, learning, service to those less fortunate, & sacred sex work." They have been involved in these online communities for over two years and participate in traditional offline religious practices daily. Online, they engage in activities such as watching sermons or lectures and reading religious articles. "I primarily use Facebook, Reddit, and YouTube for spiritual guidance," they shared.

When discussing what attracts individuals to these communities, they noted several factors: "Connecting with like-minded people, accessibility and convenience, emotional support, escapism for distraction from real-life challenges, and validation for beliefs or choices that others may not agree with." They elaborated on this point by saying, "Any form of escapism & uniqueness is in high demand. I believe superficial interest or obsession with spirituality muddies its overall integrity & purpose."

They acknowledge that their involvement in online communities has significantly deepened their faith. "Having a sense of not being entirely alone and having somewhat accessible, legitimate resources for historical learning is essential to my well-being," they explained. "Much of our original history & teachings were destroyed and/or hidden and continue to be oppressed."

However, they face challenges such as trust issues with content authenticity. "I think the shiny objects, beautiful stories, and easy answers are attractive to anyone," they said when discussing how these communities impact youth behavior. "Overall, the movement is a step forward in the right direction, but there's still so much work to do to bring us back to true center."

"Social media plays a very important role in shaping youth spirituality." They believe these practices promote interfaith tolerance but have experienced negative aspects "Disingenuousness is rampant & toxic," they cautioned. "The monetization & objectification of spirituality is inherently unhealthy. We run the risk of becoming the next 'corporate zen.'"

To improve these communities, they suggested more stringent requirements for joining and active positions intended to dispel misinformation with actual history and science. "We need open resources in exclusive communities intended to improve the everyday lives of their participants," they recommended.

Despite the challenges, they feel safe discussing personal faith issues online and plan to continue participating in online spiritual activities. When asked if they would recommend these communities to others, they replied emphatically: "Yes! It's as much historical as it is spiritual; our people, land, and culture deserve the truth and deserve to be healed and returned to our natural state of being after the rape of the world.""There's a risk of delusion and the spread of misinformation—overall a new way to obscure the truth." Their experience highlights both the opportunities and challenges present within online spiritual communities as individuals seek connection and understanding amidst a complex landscape.

Case Study 4

This case study examines the experience of a 25-year-old non-binary individual. Dissatisfied with traditional religious institutions, they turned to the digital world for spiritual exploration. When asked about their religious or spiritual affiliation, they stated, "I don't consider myself an agnostic, nor a Christian. I think one could call me a Hellenist."

Their journey began online, leading them to engage in religious discussions and access educational content. They actively participate in virtual prayer groups and connect with others sharing similar interests. Their online exploration has led them to Reconstructionist Hellenism, a modern revival of ancient Greek religious practices, focusing on ethical living and honoring the gods of Olympus. They also shared that they are part of "several Discord servers where the discussions are all non-traditional" as well as "Hellenion, which is more traditional."

Regarding their involvement in online communities, they stated, "I think it's almost been 5 years since I joined Hellenion." As for the frequency of their practice, they explained, "I participate in my religious practices daily. I do not participate much in live spiritual sessions or events though."

They reflected on what attracts individuals to these online spaces: "I think everyone has their own reasons for joining any religious community, regardless of whether it's online or not. I think the most important parts are ease of use, struggling to find community in rural areas, and wanting to find community and connection when practicing a faith practice when one's living situation is opposed to such (be it parents against their child's religion or atheism, etc.)"

They also found themselves drawn to Eclectic Witchcraft, a personalized approach to witchcraft that blends different traditions and beliefs. They also explore Folk Catholicism, a blend of traditional Catholic beliefs with local customs and folk practices. "It's the way the faith is actually lived by the people," they explained. "Not always what the church dictates."

Through platforms like Reddit , Discord and dedicated religious apps , they built a spiritual life online. When asked about how their involvement in online communities influenced their daily life, they responded, "The things I learn I involve in my daily practices and mindset."

They stated that "Youth can access online spaces more easily than physical spaces. They can learn more (good and bad) through these communities. social media plays a very important role in shaping youth spirituality."

Regarding improvements for such communities, they stated "Prideful practitioners or other bad actors can and have created online cults. Less "improvements" and more information and prevention - teach others of red flags and what to look out for. Without the guidance of trusted adults, youth can easily be influenced by bad actors. Just as we teach Internet safety basics, we should also be teaching ways to spot a cult (and knowledge of the BITE model)."

Despite these challenges, they believe that online religious communities offer vital spaces for spiritual exploration, particularly where access to traditional religious communities is limited. When asked if they would recommend these communities to others, they responded "I've found them to be important and instrumental to my practice, living in a rural area. I'd suggest them to anyone in a similar situation."

Case Study Analysis

The kind of people behind these practices

The case studies indicate that digital spiritual communities are predominantly accessed by urban youth, with a noticeable concentration of young women and non-binary individuals. Many respondents in our study reported that the flexibility and anonymity of online communities allowed them to explore spirituality on their own terms, without the geographical limitations. For example, one participant said "… I think the most important parts are ease of use, struggling to find community in rural areas…" highlighting how these communities foster emotional resilience, especially to those who feel left out in their traditional community. Overall, factors such as age, gender, and urban residency play a crucial role in shaping participation. The digital environment enables these individuals to bypass the constraints of traditional religious institutions, which are more commonly adhered to by older generations (often patriarchal) and rural populations.

Mediums of Spiritual Pathways

Digital platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, Discord, and Facebook serve as vital spaces for spiritual guidance and mentorship. Respondents emphasize that these platforms offer immediate access to diverse spiritual content and real-time interactions that facilitate community building. The ease of use and interactivity of these digital tools make them indispensable for youth seeking personalized spiritual pathways. This multi-platform engagement allows participants to benefit from both curated educational content and peer-led support systems, fostering a decentralized model of mentorship that transcends geographical boundaries. One respondent said "Maybe we'll have better technology to create subliminal music—like 8D sound effects or apps to create them easily." Highlighting the high demand for such online communities.

Driving forces

Youth involvement in online spiritual communities is driven by needs for emotional support, validation, and a sense of belonging. Many respondents indicate that these communities offer an escape from real-life challenges and a space to share personal experiences. One participant noted

that these digital spaces provide "a medium of hope in times of distress," reflecting how aestheticized content and tangible spiritual tools—like crystals and tarot cards—serve as accessible entry points into SBNR practices. This combination of emotional relief, easy accessibility, and engaging content meets the modern challenges faced by youth, prompting them to seek alternative spiritual networks. Sociological theory- Symbolic Interactionism explains how digital symbols—such as aesthetic visuals and specific hashtags, help users co-create a collective spiritual culture that transcends physical boundaries.

Importance of "balance"

The impact of digital spirituality is twofold. On one hand, online communities offer vital support, foster identity formation, and enhance overall life satisfaction through accessible spiritual guidance. On the other hand, challenges such as misinformation, trust issues, and potential overdependence are evident. Some respondents warn that an excessive reliance on digital spirituality can "blind [youth] to the real world," underscoring risks like commodification and emotional dependency. False consciousness, as explained by conflict theory, reveals how the commodification of spiritual practices may mislead youth into believing that purchasing tangible spiritual products is essential for personal growth, while deeper social inequalities remain unaddressed. Overall, while these platforms empower youth by offering new avenues for self-expression and community, they also call for a balanced approach to avoid transforming spirituality into a superficial trend.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

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This research has shed light on the significant influence of digital platforms on the spiritual engagement of young people, revealing a transition towards a more fluid, personalized, and decentralized understanding of faith. Unlike earlier generations, whose religious beliefs were often shaped by familial and institutional frameworks, today's youth are actively curating their spiritual identities through online communities, social media trends, and an evolving global landscape of spiritual thought. This transformation mirrors broader societal shifts that emphasize autonomy, self-expression, and mental well-being over rigid religious doctrines.

The findings indicate that young individuals are increasingly seeking out digital spiritual spaces not only for faith but also as sources of emotional refuge and self-empowerment. In a time characterized by considerable social pressures—arising from family expectations, peer dynamics, and existential uncertainties—online SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious) communities offer supportive environments where individuals can explore their beliefs without fear of judgment. This research highlights the crucial link between digital spirituality and mental well-being, as many young people adopt practices such as manifestation and mindfulness to navigate anxiety and personal challenges.

However, while these digital communities provide emotional support and foster a sense of belonging, they also pose significant challenges. The prevalence of misinformation and the rise of digital authority figures prompt critical questions regarding the authenticity of spiritual engagement in these spaces. Unlike traditional religious institutions that have historically relied on scholarly study and doctrinal continuity, digital spirituality is increasingly influenced by social media algorithms and influencer culture. This phenomenon raises inquiries about whether we are witnessing a liberated approach to faith or merely a new form of ideological control shaped by digital forces.

A deeper sociological analysis reveals several critical dimensions that further contextualize these findings. The decline of traditional religious authority has created a vacuum filled by digital influencers who may lack the rigorous training or ethical frameworks associated with established

religious leaders. This shift raises concerns about credibility and the potential for exploitation within online spiritual communities. Youth are not merely consumers of spiritual content; they actively shape their identities through interactions within these communities. Shared symbols, language, and practices become integral to their self-concept, allowing for diverse expressions of spirituality that may diverge from traditional norms. George Herbert Mead in his theory of Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes that shared symbols and interactions create meaning within communities. By participating in communal activities, individuals build identities and reduce feelings of isolation, The practices, rituals, and even digital spaces that youth engage with are not just passive forms of consumption—they are active sites of identity formation. Though unconventional compared to traditional religious settings, there is a dynamic and evolving nature of spirituality in the digital age. However, It is inevitable that this engagement may lead to challenges, such as the lack of deep interpersonal connections and the potential for superficial engagement with spiritual practices.

Additionally, further observations demonstrate that phenomenology provides a robust framework for understanding the lived experience of spirituality in this context. young individuals experience spirituality subjectively. They interpret and understand it in their own unique ways, with practices like meditation, breathwork, energy work, or mindfulness being deeply felt, embodied experiences. Spiritual practices performed by youth become a personal journey of perception, where the focus is on how these practices are experienced in the moment. But this subjective experience with a lack of structure or guidance, can potentially lead to fragmented or inconsistent understanding of spirituality. While this individual perception of spirituality is readily shared online, enabling individuals to connect, inspire one another, and form relationships based on shared experiences or curiosity to explore further, it can also result in superficial engagement or a lack of meaningful connection. The discovery of diverse perspectives may also contribute to information overload and the difficulty of discerning credible or grounded spiritual practices, which can hinder the development of a deeper sense of community and connection.

Modern bureaucratic life can lead to feelings of isolation, as emphasized by Durkheim's Theory of Anomie. Digital spirituality offers a counterbalance by fostering community bonds that transcend geographical barriers. These online spaces facilitate intergenerational knowledge-sharing and collective healing—essential elements for addressing contemporary mental health

challenges. The concept of hyperreality is vital in understanding how digital spirituality often blurs the lines between genuine belief systems and curated lifestyles. As spirituality becomes commodified—evident in trends like aestheticized rituals or wellness products—there is a risk that authentic spiritual experiences may be eclipsed by superficial engagements driven by consumer culture.

Globalization allows youth to access diverse spiritual traditions from around the world, leading to eclectic practices that blend various cultural elements. This phenomenon raises important questions about cultural appropriation versus appreciation and the ethical implications of adopting spiritual practices outside their original contexts.

In conclusion, this research underscores the complex nature of online spirituality among youth. Digital platforms provide unprecedented access to diverse spiritual traditions, empowering young individuals to explore and construct their belief systems. Nonetheless, the growing commercialization of spirituality raises concerns about authenticity and depth in practice. As we navigate this digital age, it is essential to approach these spiritual landscapes with mindfulness and critical thinking, acknowledging both their advantages and potential pitfalls.

Ultimately, whether this shift signifies a genuine spiritual awakening or merely a fleeting trend remains an open question; however, it is clear that faith in the modern world transcends traditional boundaries—it is being reshaped, redefined, and experienced within the expansive realm of the digital frontier. This comprehensive sociological analysis serves as a foundation for future research into the evolving dynamics of spirituality in our increasingly interconnected world, emphasizing the need for ongoing dialogue about the implications of digital engagement on individual well-being and societal cohesion.

CHAPTER 6

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