User Engagement on Social Media:
A Case Study of Online Buddhist Community Engagement Behaviour during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

Lim Soo Jin[1], Cheah Shu Xu[2]
Email of author correspondence : sjlim@utar.edu.my,cheahsx@utar.edu.my

[1,2]Faculty of Creative Industries, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kajang, Malaysia

Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many countries, impacting almost every aspect of people's lives. Religious organizations had to adapt by connecting with worshippers online. Social media platforms, in particular, were crucial in delivering religious teachings, practices, and activities to its online community. This study examines the motivational factors that drive young adults' engagement in online Buddhist communities, adopting the social identity theory as a framework to understand why individuals portray individual or group-based behaviors in an online religious community. This study uses qualitative Internet-based in-depth interviews to investigate the online behavior of 21 members from the Buddha's Light International Association Young Adults Division (BLIA YAD) Malaysia Facebook community during the pandemic. The participants comprise of 20 to 39-year-old adults who use social media as their primary source to obtain information on Buddhism and to communicate with other believers during this period. The findings revealed that the users perform specific engagement behaviors (like, share, and comment) based on varied reasons. The factors that drive users to "like" and "share" posts within the Buddhist online community include offline relationship, sense of belonging, sense of moral obligation, emotional connection, social support, trust, and personal identity. The implications of this study explores and reveals the motivations and behavior of faithful users with religious content. While most studies deal with the way users interact with commercial or public content this study explores the way the user interacts with religious content within the virtual space of a religious organization.

Keywords: Online behavior, Online engagement, Buddhism online community, Social media, Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2020. This severely disrupted almost all aspects of daily lives and routines for everyone. The pandemic not only presented unprecedented challenges to individuals and commercial organisations, but also to religions organisations (Kowalczyk et al., 2020).

Malaysia being a culturally and religiously diverse country, banned religious mass gatherings as it was pinpointed as a public health concern amidst the fast spreading pandemic. The movement control order (MCO) was implemented with strict standard operating procedures that severely limited religious mass gatherings. The MCO procedures for non-Muslim houses of worship limited the number of worshippers to not exceed 50 persons for premises with the capacity to accommodate more than 1000 people and premises with a capacity of less than 1000 worshippers were only allowed 20 people (Bernama, May 12, 2021).

This severe restrictions posed a massive challenge for religious organizations whose main objectives were to promote and encourage group worship, prayer, meditation, teaching, healing, and spiritual wellbeing. Religious organisations adopted the growing strength of social media and the available Internet technologies, shifting to social media platforms especially Facebook in an attempt to reach out to its community members (Kgatle, 2018; Baker et al., 2020).

The research objective of this study was to examine the interactions of the users with religious content during the pandemic and the benefits derived from their interaction with the content during a time where physical was severely curtailed. This study aimed at examining how the members of the Buddhist community have adapted to the change from a most physical engagements to virtual engagements of the Buddhist content. This study also aimed at examining the motivations of the participants in engaging with the messages and encouragement from their faith thru postings, online religious activities such as talks, sermons and group prayers.

Literature Review

An online community is a group of people with shared common interests or goals who interact through electronic communication technologies (Dennis, Pootheri and Natarajan, 1998) it is a place where its members feel like they are part of a larger social group. COVID-19 pandemic had affected not only religious organisations but also in doing so affected the religious life of some believers (Tseng, 2022), however the availability and easy access to their religious association's online community has led to the maintenance of an ounce of normalcy albeit one that is solely online. However a successful online community is vastly different from that of a physical community; successful online community relies on frequent number of online engagement and participation of its community members to ensure that communication is kept active (Chan et al., 2004; Kim, Lee and Hiemstra, 2004). Thus it is crucial that the behaviour of its members engage other members which is typically done through liking and commenting on post, sharing the post, sending messages amongst member, and otherwise performing online engagement activities that are considered as active social media behaviour (Verduyn et al., 2017).

In line with that thought, studies have also found that members actively engage in a community due to their sense of belonging to an online community, meaning that

they will be willing to spend their time creating content (Haythornthwaite et al. 2000) and sharing their experiences if they can connect with other community members (Malik et al. 2016). Additionally, an individual's social identity has a significant impact on his or her behaviour in a community. Based on the social identity theory, an individual's social identity in a community is developed through three stages/elements: cognition, emotion, and evaluation.

Cognitive social categorisation is the first stage where individuals will classify themselves and others into specific communities or social groups, meaning that thru classification of themselves as part of the community the individuals will proceed to engage with the online community. Members will then proceed to invest their emotions and a change of behaviour towards the community will occur; part of their membership within the social group would inevitably dictate this change in their behaviour (Chi, 2015). Organisations would recognize this as an intrinsic part of the development of a user to inculcate a sense belonging to them to incorporate them into the online community, part of this would require all members to frequently participate in their online community through online acts such as liking, sharing or commenting. Members who have gained a sense of belonging would gain enjoyment from their interaction and participation with their fellow community members through the sharing of their experiences and expressing their thoughts and ideas (Malik et al., 2016). An individual's online identity would be gradually formed from their online interactions (Feng et al., 2018) and cognitive connection to the community (Paxton and Moody, 2003). Willingness of the individual members to spend time to assist other members strengthen their sense of belonging to the community and in turn drives the success of the online community through their engagement and participation with fellow members (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005). Coleman (1990), describes this behaviour as a sense of obligation, where members especially long standing members of the community feel an obligation to assist members with their issues and to further enhance the status of the community, It should also be noted that through their interactions that they too are increasing their individual status within that community. Wasko and Faraj (2005) also notes that members behave in this manner because they believe that it is part of their responsibility to share their knowledge or experience with others in a community. This is especially true in religious organizations where senior member or heads of the order are seen as those who are best able to pass on the teachings of their religion.

However despite the realization for the need of active engagement and participation from their members researchers such as Gummerus et al. (2012) report that only a minority of members in online communities actively engage in the activity of content creation, meaning that the majority of members are likely to be lurkers (members who are unlikely to create content or add to the content/conversation and instead merely consume the content generated by others). Additionally, lack of engagement among members is shown to be a main factor that leads to the failure of any online communities. Therefore, member engagement behaviours – such as liking, sharing, and commenting on posts – are key to ensuring the success of online communities (Arnone et al., 2010; Gummerus, et al. 2012; Huang, 2013). Correspondingly, it is necessary to understand members' engagement behaviours in

religious online communities, especially in the current pandemic situation. As people are faced with significant health, economic and social challenges (Chakraborty and

Maity, 2020) due to COVID-19 and the prolonged MCO, there is also an increase in depression and anxiety (Abdullah, 2020; Dorall, 2020; Togoh, 2020; Shahmugam et al., 2020; Yusof, 2021; cited by Ting et al., 2021). Consequently, society attempted to seek reasons in response to their vulnerability, and religion – unsurprisingly – shouldered a major role in shaping communal cognition and response (Ting et al., 2021). After all, religion plays an important role in providing an individual sense of security and peace-making.

In the unprecedented crisis, people turned to faith and their religious communities for comfort, hope, fellowship, meaning, and worship (Dimsdale, 2020). However, it is not easy to sustain a successful online community; it requires members' engagement in the community to keep the community active.

Methodology

As such, this study aims to examine the factors that drive members to perform engagement behaviours, including liking, sharing and commenting on the administrative content of religious online communities. The findings of the study will be significant to religious organisations as it will help them figure out how to manage online communities effectively, especially during the pandemic. To better understand members' engagement behaviour in religious online communities, this study has adopted a qualitative research approach using in-depth online interviews with Malaysian Buddhist young adults, aged between 20 to 39 years old. This target group was selected primarily because Internet users are mainly comprised of young adults in their 20s and 30s, accounting for 46.0% and 21.2%, respectively (Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020). Young adults are the future of a particular religion, as they will be responsible for carrying out religious activities and imparting religious knowledge and information to the public in the future. This study focuses on Malaysian Buddhist young adults, investigating the motivations that drive participant's engagement in online Buddhist communities.

This study utilized a qualitative online interview research method the purpose was to gain a more thorough understanding of the factors that drive engagement amongst the young members of the BLIA-YAD organisation. Semi-structured interview questions focusing on engagement behaviours such as queries on the use of "liking", "sharing", and "commenting" on BLIA-YAD's Facebook page were asked to respondents of this study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather data from the participants; this form of interview enables the researchers to pursue specific areas of interest brought up by the participants during the interview process. This allows for a more extensive examination of certain key topics that were not anticipated by the researcher. Interviews were conducted online through ZOOM. As this study was conducted during the pandemic it was the best option for both the researchers and the respondents that online interviews were used as it removed potential risks for all involved.

Respondents for this study were obtained from the Facebook group of one of the largest Buddhist organisations in Malaysia – Fo Guang Shan Malaysia and its religious online community – BLIA YAD Malaysia. The members of the community were obtained thru convenience sampling from BLIA YAD Malaysia Facebook group.

The participants were invited to participate in the study via private messages (PMs). Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) Malaysian citizen residing

in Malaysia; (2) aged 20 years to 39 years; (3) a Buddhist; and (4) a member of the Buddhist organisation Facebook online community. Before the members agreed to participate in this study, they were provided with adequate information about the research and were informed that their participation was fully voluntary. During the interview, participants were allowed to stop at any time, and they could choose not to answer any questions if it made them feel uncomfortable.

A total of 21 participants participated in this study. All the participants are Malaysian Buddhist young adults aged between 20 to 39 years old; eight participants were university students, and 13 participants were working adults. These participants are members from BLIA YAD Malaysia community, and have participated in activities for at least four years. The participants also disclosed that they became members of the online community since the day they began participating in physical activities that were held by BLIA YAD Malaysia. Therefore, the researchers deduced that all the research participants have at least four years of membership in BLIA YAD Malaysia.

Results and Discussions
Offline Relationship
Offline relationships impact how users engage online; researchers (Sessions, 2011; Boyd and Ellison, 2008) have noted that online social engagement typically arises between old friends and acquaintances, these relationships are based on existing relationships and is further developed through online engagements. Social media and other Internet communication technologies are used to enhance relationships. Participants of this study note that they will automatically engage with postings from members that they have existing offline relationships with either through liking or commenting on the post.

> *Joseph, 20: "When we know the person we will 'like' the post to show support. Friend must support."*

> *Seong, 25: "Seeing your friend in the post and liking the post is like saying hey! I saw your picture or I saw what you did. Keep in contact with them online even if just clicking a 'like'"*

Prior to the pandemic the organisations activities were predominantly conducted at physical locations, face to face which allowed for bonds to be formed by members of the community, offline interaction between individuals would inevitably be translated to online camaraderie between those individuals (Koh and Kim, 2004).

> *JC, 28: "I've spoken to the Venerable a number of times… although we are not friend-friend but I know him and can talk to him."*

> *WQ, 22: "The time we normally meet new people is when we get together for those huge celebrations like the lantern festival. That is normally the time where you see a lot of new and old faces."*

Overall, a majority of the community members know each other in the physical environment, thus it is unsurprising that their offline relationship is a motivating factor that drives their engagement behaviour as a sign of acceptance and support.

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging in a community can be understood as a sense of attachment, identification and membership in a community. It is an individual's emotional attachment to a specific online community that makes him or her feel as if he or she is part of the community (Caskurlu et al. 2021). Users who feel a belonging to a community would develop a psychological ownership of the community. Participants in this study often describe the online Buddhist community as "our" community during the interview sessions, demonstrating the participants' sense of belonging within the community.

> JC, 28: "We should always show support to the events or activities that organised by our "family" members."

> QW, 27: "I share the post on my own Facebook wall, I hope it able to change publics' perception towards the religion, accept the religion, and be part of us."

A sense of belonging to the community is shown to be a driving factor in the motivation of the participant to engage with the content as they sense that they are part of the community.

Sense of Moral Obligation

A sense of moral obligation refers to a person's inner perception of responsibility (Xu, Yao and Teo 2020). Members perceive that it is their obligation to support others on the basis of being social media friends, coupled with their attachment to the community has led to a sense of moral obligation in engaging with the content. However while participants have noted their willingness to assist other members but they did not feel comfortable doing so as there was no dedicated space within the online page to contribute their actual assistance, instead they opted to supporting the community through "likes" for community posts that were generated by the admin instead.

> WQ, 22: "We are part of the association already so when we see the post then we "Like" lor. It is easy and it is a way for us to show our support. If no one click "like" then sometimes feel like no support."

Participants also noted that they often support the community with the intention to improve the community, such as increasing non-members' awareness of the organisation and activities held in the community, attracting more individuals to attend the activities, and increasing the number of community members.

Joseph, 20: "Spreading the word to friends and family is important. At least they know got some interesting things happening or maybe they just need some comforting. … let them know about the association."

Emotional Connection

Schreiner and Reidl (2019) notes that emotional content could attract people's attention and evoke their engagement. Emotional content would increase their feeling of connection to the posted content and motivate them to engage with the community. Participants in this study have expressed that they would engage with posts that they emotionally connect to. These include content that makes them feel better or calmer, and content that are related to their current situation.

QW, 27: "I will "like" and "share" the content when I find the content is meaningful and significant to me."

Besides "liking" a post to show their agreement with the content, participants also "share" meaningful content on their personal Facebook accounts. This is because they hope that their friends and family will experience a similar pleasure as well after reading the content.

James: 23 "I am more likely to "share" it to my friends if the content is related to my current situation or feeling, I hope my friends can see it and also feel better after read the post."

They would then share the content on their personal Facebook account with the purpose of disseminating the message out and benefiting their friends and family.

Social Support

Social support is the provision of real and perceived support as received from the community. From the discourses of the participants social support is seen through the participant's awareness of the lack of engagement on the organisations content. The lack of engagement is acutely felt by participants as an indicator of the lack of support for the community which spurs them to engage in post by their friends as a sign of social support.

Mei, 24: " The community sometimes very quiet. … a like will make the poster feel like their post got people see. Will definitely do this for my friends. So the association also same."

Joseph, 20: " Need to support your friends (in the association). If not they feel like you're not interested or support them. Especially when they are involved or organizing the event."

Participants believe that their engagement in the content posted by their friends would be appreciated and noticed by their friends and be perceived as a form of support especially during a time where they were physically isolated.

Trust

Trust is defined as the basic belief of honesty, benevolence and integrity in party exchanges and the characteristics of merit in online environment and it is significantly important to the success of an online community, as it will affect the

behaviour of its members. (Karami, Bozbay and Arghashi 2018; Mezgar, 2009). Organisational reputation plays an important role in affecting members' behaviour in an online community where user-generated in crucial in content adoption because the source of information will influence the participation of the community (Hsieh, Lee and Tseng, 2022; Ukpabi and Karjaluoto, 2018). Participant's decision to "share" their online community's post on their personal Facebook is in part due to the trust they feel towards the organisation.

> *SY, 28: "The source of information is important, if the source is reliable then I do not have to concern about the accuracy of the information. Some of the religion communities their content might inaccurate or misleading. So, I will only "follow" the religion organisation that have high credibility and share the content they posted on my Facebook."*

Participants trust towards the content generated by the organization leaves them with little doubt that it is content that is credible and relevant to Buddhist. Content generated by the organization is perceived as not only accurate and safe but also one that is "true" from the perspective of a Buddhist.

Personal Identity

Social media, enables its users to build their identity by creating and posting their personal content and photos, sharing content from relevant sites, and joining any community pages. A member may also build his or her identity by contributing to the community, such as sharing knowledge or helping other members. By participating in social interaction, knowledge sharing, and helping others in the community, a community member is able to increase other members' recognition of himself or herself, as well as establish his or her identity within the community (Feng et al., 2018). Findings of this study differ slightly from the existing bodies of literature as participants revealed that although they do intend to develop personal identity as Buddhists it is mainly for the members outside the religious community.

> *Joseph, 20: "People surrounding me always wondering what I am doing, why I am so busy… My friends and family are able to understand better on BLIA, what I am doing currently after I "share" the content on my Facebook."*

Participants sharing Buddhist content from the organisation is done both for the development of their identity with in the online community as well as for the purpose of indicating to their other online friends of their religious affiliations.

Users' Engagement Behaviour of "Commenting" in the Online Buddhist Community

Participants have expressed that their primary method of engagement is through the use of "liking" and "sharing" post by the organization rather than commenting. Participants have noted that they would consciously avoid commenting

unless it is absolutely necessary. Previous studies have suggested that community members were more likely to interact and share knowledge in an online community if they perceived the community to be trustworthy; felt a sense of belonging and a sense

of moral responsibility to help others within the community; emotional connected to the content; developed of their personal identity in the community; and shared offline relationships with the other members (Chuang 2020; Karami, Bozbay and Arghashi 2018; Sukhu, Zhang and Bilgihan 2015; Xu, Yao and Teo 2020). The participants of this research, meanwhile, specified that they tended to avoid commenting unnecessarily on the social media posts made by the organisation, and this can be attributed to the nature of the community. Participants express that a religious online community is inherently different from other online communities; it is sacred and therefore, should be treated with respect, with comments being kept to a minimum.

> *WR, 25: "In the association we don't talk loudly and don't shout. Same in FB commenting non-stop is like shouting. …a lot of noise. I think abit disrespectful."*

> *Andrew, 26: "Normally I won't comment at the community… because this group is managed by the religion organisation, by shifu (Venerables); and the information also quite formal. So, it is not a place for us to simply make any comments… we need to respect to the community…"*

Despite this preference for minimal participation via "comments", it should not be mistaken that the research participants feel less involved in the community. They continue to demonstrate strong trust in the Buddhist organisation and its online community; feel like they belong in the community; possess a sense duty and responsibility to support and improve the community; and show their support for activities conducted by their friends in the community.

Conclusion

This research's findings also show that a majority of the study participants prefer to comment less in the community. This is mainly because they perceive a religious online community to be sacred, and that they have to show respect. Excessive commenting is perceived as inappropriate or disrespectful. However, participant's feelings towards the community are not lessened.

Offline relationships and a sense of belonging is an important motivating factor to engage in their community. Emotional engagement to the community increases participation and engagement. Members will actively "like" and "share" their community's contents to increase out-group members' awareness of the organisation, its online community, and the activities conducted by the organisation. Content that is relevant and have an emotional impact to the user are more actively engaged with. Users also show their support for other community members as a sign of love and acceptance of the community and organization. Trust between the members and the organisation are equally important; the organisation's credibility, in particular, has a significant influence on their behaviour in the community

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The current study is focused on a single Buddhist association albeit a large organisation. However it would be interesting to examine other religious associations

and its social media groups and pages to compare and contrast the engagement activities of its members, behaviours within different communities might vary from one to the other and it would be add greatly to the body of knowledge to examine the virtual spaces of the other faiths.

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