

4. Remediating the Sacred: Building of Collective Spiritual Memory in the Digital World

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Abstract:

The growth in media consumption in the twenty-first century has been rapid and substantial. The advent of social media has led to a significant shift in both the production and consumption of content over a shorter period of time. The growing field of artificial intelligence enables creators to produce visuals that go beyond imagination. On the other hand, there is a significant increase in the consumption of Infotainment content. From lifestyle categories to the most advanced technology, users have the information at their fingertips. This paper examines an Instagram page that posts content related to spirituality within Hinduism and the audience's reception of it. Instagram, as a platform, has created a space where ancient philosophies are reinterpreted through digital media aesthetics. The collective memories that social media, as a medium, is trying to build around, including representation, affect, and influence on the users' side, are some of the areas this paper will explore. These contents that are being circulated are engaging a larger user base and act as micro-narratives of memory, reviving and transforming the collective memory of the young Indian audience. While digital platforms aim to modernise the spiritual experience, there is a gap in understanding how these platforms could mediate collective spiritual memory and what impact they could have on digital natives, whose first-hand knowledge about various topics comes from digital sources. The paper examines the experiences from a specific Instagram page (@sacred_narratives) and analyses them using qualitative methods to determine if they actually have a greater impact on people's lives.

Keywords: Indian heritage, Indian culture, Spiritual, Social media, digital aesthetics

The rise of Instagram spirituality has been observed significantly in recent years, not just among adult users but also among younger users. Digital natives, also known as Generation Z, primarily acquire their firsthand knowledge about religion and spirituality through digital means, with social media platforms like Instagram playing a significant role. Unlike any other offbeat and entertaining content, this particular genre has a considerable influence on shaping the collective memory of Indian spiritual traditions among the young audience. Visually appealing representations, artificial intelligence-influenced content scripting, a lack of authentic information and verifiability, and a lack of interest in researching and verifying social media narratives appear to be just another form of entertainment. Still, in reality, they are the micro-narratives that contribute to the collective consciousness of viewers, encompassing rituals, symbols, myths, oral traditions, and Vedic traditions, among others. These are indeed contributing to the cultural identity, and the content repository will further contribute to the collective and cultural memory.

As Memory theorists largely agree, ‘memory’ is a dynamic entity that is shaped and reshaped, imagined and reimagined by the time and communities that own it. The researcher has selected an Instagram channel, a handle named @sacred_narratives, a public page that has been consistently posting spiritual information related to Hinduism for three years. The audience's reception, engagement metrics, personal conversations, and sharing of their experiences, as well as trends among today's youngsters, are all qualitatively studied to understand how digital spiritualism is shaping the collective memory of today's generation. Needless to say, the bottom-top approach is being used here (from the reception to the creation of the content) to understand how the social media aesthetics or the audience's interest and reception is teaching the creator himself; it is not just contributing to the shaping of the page itself, but also to understand how IKS elements such as rituals, symbols, language, and philosophy are being adapted for digital dissemination.

In the relatively short history of digital content consumption, short videos, also known as reels, gained popularity as companies like ByteDance introduced mobile applications like TikTok and Helo, which later inspired major platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Although it started as entertainment, with the growing volume of infotainment content, the platform saw a significant rise in spiritual content consumers, who later developed interesting and rapidly emerging traits. To discuss the background of the aforementioned Instagram page, it was started during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world came to a halt. This is the time when people not only moved inward physically but also metaphorically and spiritually to find answers to many existential questions. “Spirituality refers to one's relationship with God or whatever one perceives to be Ultimate Transcendence” (Hodge 48). This page started exploring every possible dimension within Hinduism. The competitor analysis revealed that social media users are largely interested in seeing deity darshan photography, temple travelogues, highly edited content featuring devotional songs, guided meditations, yoga, and, more recently, AI-generated videos within the spiritual genre. To establish a distinct USP, the admins of the aforementioned page experimented with text-based and voiceover reels that focused on providing spiritual information, which proved beneficial in the algorithm. This gave a unique and reliable content format for the audience to learn something beyond what was mundane and repetitive within the category. The interest grew, the audience started engaging, with mixed opinions in the comments section, and the algorithm helped reach the right audience who are greatly interested in engaging with spiritual discussions. Interestingly, the age group of the page's followers is predominantly young adults from tier-1 metropolitan cities. Upon analysing the content, it is largely related to lesser-known facts about Indian traditions, the relationships between various Gods and Goddesses, interesting belief systems, temples, and rituals, as well as the architectural marvels of our ancestors. The USP was to bring Indian Knowledge and tradition into the spotlight and bring the young generation into the realm of spiritual discussions. Many agreed and equally many disagreed, showed hatred towards some of the unbelievable facts, and there was also hatred spreading between various sects and philosophical believers within Hinduism. Along with these, there were many instances where these reels have affected and influenced the lives and decisions of many youngsters. In terms of data, the maximum reach of thirty days that this page has witnessed is ten million. Considering that at least ten per cent of people are engaged and one per cent are serious about spirituality, it is still a huge number.

There was a traveller from the state of Kerala whose long-time wish was to go on a long bike ride and had made his itinerary ready. After witnessing ‘The Temples of Tamilnadu’ series from the aforementioned page, he has totally changed his mind and went on a bike ride to the temples that were

captured in the series. Many such instances from the youngsters' lives have been witnessed through this page. The researcher has keenly observed many such decisions, behavioural and engagements amongst the followers. Followers perform a kind of “digital devotion” through engagement, and the reinterpretation of IKS in digital form through these platforms and engagement creates hybrid identities.

These experiences are not just reflections of individual lives; with the advent of technology and the availability of measurable data, researching and understanding their contribution to the collective consciousness or collective memory plays a crucial role. The historical legacy has been widely read and discussed on digital platforms, and when it has been felt and affected individuals at the deepest spiritual level, contributing to thought processing, then the contribution to society is immense. Researchers such as David R. Hodge and Melissa Kleinz, and many other modern spiritual enthusiasts, are studying the digital environment for its spiritual contributions, as they recognise both sociocognitive and economic aspects of the digitalisation of spirituality.

A recent study among Generation Z, which uses Instagram for self-verification, reveals insights into how users seek alignment between their self-perceptions and others' perceptions, highlighting their validation and identity expression as they perceive it in an online environment. Gen-Z users who spend more time scrolling and engaging with spiritual content show that authenticity, self-presentation, social comparison, and intrinsic spirituality are interconnected variables for analysing their levels of validation. Interestingly, this study from the American University shows that the intrinsic spirituality positively correlates with authentic self-expression and decreases reliance on social comparison. Not to exclude the inappropriateness of the authenticity of the selected user base from the dataset, the author acknowledges and categorises the dual identities of users on the Instagram platform as Rinsta and Finsta, referring to real and fake profiles, respectively (Kleinz 4). The study may exhibit varying geographical patterns, but it reveals the same trend: the content category and the generation that the researcher observes and compares with the selected spiritual page, called '@sacred_narratives.'

“Individuals want to be viewed by others in alignment with self-views, seeking out self-verifying feedback to predict and control their social worlds” (Kleinz 66). As the algorithm operates, the initial engagement by the follower community will increase the content's reach to non-followers who have a liking for similar content, converting them into followers and encouraging them to regularly consume spiritual content. In the last four years, there has been a significant conversion in people's engagement with the spiritual content, which later gets reflected in their intrinsic spirituality. Intrinsic spirituality is a kind of spiritual beliefs and practices that are deeply integrated into their core identity of individuals, serving as their "master motive" for life, rather than being driven by external pressures or social factors (Hodge 41). This qualitative nature of the individuals grounds the idea that spirituality is truly turning intrinsic in today's young audience. The admin of the page had been receiving hundreds of messages, expressing their happiness and witnessing their progressive mindset, after starting to scroll through spiritual content. Their eagerness to learn more about Indian Knowledge, historic heritage, and rich, heterogeneous traditions, especially the quest to learn the authentic version of various religious texts and engage in debates around them, has increased significantly in energy. This

interest in the knowledge of Bharat, at a time when the modern world prioritises anything technical and tangible, must be seen as a significant progression among young adults.

There will always be limitations, as “It is not known to what extent self-verification processes occur in Generation Z’s use of Instagram” (Kleinz 67), but that cannot prevent measuring the growth and progressive nature that already exists. Studying the select Instagram page has dual benefits. Firstly, it helps in understanding that the follower base or audience largely possesses a self-verification quality, and just like any spiritual niche user in America, one could assume that the Indian user base also has this trait (as these are not geographically bound). Secondly, it is not just the individual user’s experience and validation for one’s own self-understanding and growth, but it also largely shapes the micro-narratives of the collective memory. These mnemonic communities, which engage with social platforms, constantly acquire narratives that are being socially constructed and reconstructed continuously. As Maurice Halbwachs, a memory theorist, states that individual memory gains meaning only within a collective framework (Halbwachs 7), and for this reason, Instagram serves as a digital collective memory site, where users recall and reframe inherited spiritual narratives. Users also distinguish between communicative memory and cultural memory when engaging with content on Instagram. The page posts spiritual information that is cited from institutionalised cultural memory, and the receiving end largely does not have institutionalised memory, yet interacts with the communicative, or rather, everyday memory. This engagement or the interaction becomes mnemonic rituals, with the content eventually contributing to the original idea, and as dialogues get built with the audience, these digital spaces start serving as new cultural archives where the information gets reinterpreted, as Assmann calls it (Assmann 111). The Followers participate in a shared act of spiritual remembrance, rearticulating old wisdom in digital dialogue. The new collective spiritual memory is constantly being constructed, interpreted and reinterpreted. Although this engagement may influence the authenticity of the information, the focus here is on understanding how it affects the audience and shapes the collective memory. The study cannot be conclusive in terms of memory because memory processing is a continuous process, and the digital environment provides everyone with an opportunity to engage with. The minor mnemonic communities would keep building various narratives, and each would strengthen its respective identity, and it is here that the importance of studying them should be understood.

The algorithm helps in reaching the spiritual content, and this process becomes memetically transmitted memory in the digital environment. Gone are the days when knowledge was only ratified academically, but with the advent of technological usage in the age of information, knowledge is ratified on these platforms. There is constant negotiation between the authenticity and the aestheticism of the posts, and the one that is highly relatable for the audience gets ratified. There is little botheration about the authenticity, which should not be the concern of the memory. Memory cares not for what is true, but rather for how something is being remembered and reproduced. While such digital re-enchantment democratises the Indian knowledge, one must also reflect on the depth, authenticity and philosophical nuance surviving in the digital environment. The paper thus concludes that digital spirituality is not a loss of tradition, but it is the need of the era to focus on the transformation of memory practices in the digital environment. This memory ecology in digital space is very rapid, intense, and extremely influential at the large scale, and this posits a greater urge to study the Indian knowledge that is being discussed in this space. The limitation of this study is that one cannot come to any solid conclusions from the engagement that happens in the digital space, but

in a collective context, larger conclusions can be drawn, which have direct implications on the collective consciousness and the collective identity of the mnemonic community.

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