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## **Ethical Considerations in Social Media Utilization by Religious Organizations: An In-depth Investigation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the contemporary landscape, social media platforms have evolved into highly effective instruments facilitating participatory communication across diverse aspects of human life. The advent of the digital revolution has introduced a novel dimension to the application of social media, extending its reach into various realms of communication, management, and development initiatives. Particularly noteworthy is the role that social media platforms play in the domain of religious communication, mobilization, and organization. Among the myriad social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook stand out as extensively utilized tools by religious organizations and leaders. Leveraging these platforms, religious entities seek to establish direct communication channels with their target groups, fostering active engagement and participation in the organizational and managerial aspects of religious institutions. This paradigm shift in communication strategies has become increasingly relevant and influential. To explore the dynamics of this*

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*intersection between social media and religious engagement, the present investigation was undertaken in Delhi, focusing on the National Capital Region (NCR) – a geographical area encompassing all major religions in the country. The study delves into the multifaceted ways in which social media platforms are employed for religious outreach, examining their impact on communication strategies, organizational dynamics, and the active involvement of the faithful within the diverse religious landscape of the NCR. Through a comprehensive analysis of the use of social media in this specific context, the research aims to contribute valuable insights into the evolving nature of religious communication in the digital age.*

**Keywords:** *social media platforms, religious communication, digital revolution, national capital region, participatory engagement*

## **1. Introduction**

In the contemporary landscape, the pervasive influence of social media platforms has undergone a transformative evolution, emerging as powerful tools that facilitate participatory communication across diverse facets of human life. The digital revolution has added a distinctive dimension to the application of social media, extending its influence into various spheres of communication, management, and developmental endeavors. Of particular significance is the integral role played by social media in the domain of religious communication, mobilization, and organization. Notably, platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook have become indispensable tools extensively harnessed by religious organizations and leaders. Through these channels, religious entities endeavor to establish direct lines of communication with their target audiences, fostering active engagement and participation in the organizational and managerial aspects of religious institutions. This paradigm shift in communication strategies holds increasing relevance and influence. To unravel the

intricate dynamics at the intersection of social media and religious engagement, the present investigation focuses on Delhi, specifically within the National Capital Region (NCR), a geographic area encapsulating the major religions prevalent in the country. The study aims to explore the multifaceted ways in which social media platforms are employed for religious outreach, delving into their impact on communication strategies, organizational dynamics, and the active involvement of the faithful across the diverse religious landscape of the NCR. Through a comprehensive analysis of social media usage in this specific context, the research seeks to provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of religious communication in the digital age.

The present study was conducted in the National Capital Region, Delhi on the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by the religious organizations. Prominent studies concerning the present topic of investigation include – Judd (2012), Judd and Johnston (2012), Tappendorf and Glink (2013), Moreno et al. (2013), Turculet (2014), Galbraith (2014), Denecke et al. (2015), Hazelton and Terhorst (2015), Villegas and Alvarez (2016), Ann (2017), Hammer (2017), Baier (2018), Berman et al. (2018), Sormanen and Lauk (2018), Swenson-Lepper and Kerby (2019), Kumar (2019), Bhargava and Velasquez (2020), Ariff et al. (2021), Kia et al. (2022), Bicher and Fathy (2022), Heinrichs (2022), Marx and Mirbabaie (2022) and Brindus et al. (2022). The synthesis of the available literature confirms that adequate scientific investigations were not conducted in National Capital Region, Delhi on the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by the religious organizations.

### **1.1. Significance of the Study**

The literature review clearly indicates that sufficient scientific investigations have not been conducted on the ethical issues related to the application of social media, particularly concerning religious organizations. The study aims to address various questions in the area of social media centric ethical issues. A need was seen to investigate religious communication as a part of culture and not independent of it. Thus, the present study on the ‘A Study of the Ethical Issues Involved in the Use of Social Media by Religious Organizations’ is justified

from the viewpoint of research dealing with social media, ethical issues, and religious communication.

This study explores the idea of both benefits and ethical issues involved in the use of social media with respect to religious organizations with specific reference to NCR Delhi. This research clearly demonstrates that the research would shed light on the use and utility of social media with specific reference to religious organizations. This research will also assist the religious organizations in understanding the effective use of social media to reach their goals. Moreover, this will be highly beneficial for religious organizations in exploring the necessity of adopting social media in their organizations.

In addition, this research will also develop a new model regarding the use of social media within the context of religious organizations. At the same time, it will determine the ethical issues faced by different religious organizations with respect to NCR Delhi. Additionally, this study aims to offer various strategies and suggestions in order to enhance the use of social media with respect to religious organizations with specific reference to NCR Delhi. This research will be beneficial to adopters of social media in their organization to identify both benefits and ethical issues involved in adopting social media. Further, this research will be eye opener for religious organizations since it provides valuable insights to the future investigators and researchers.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

Social media has emerged as a prominent tool of participatory communication in various fields, including religion. It has created virtual social spaces encouraging interaction among various stakeholders in religious communication. Social media interfaces through the Internet and other sources and devices have become widespread in modern society. It is necessary to understand whether social media platforms have upheld professional ethics in the present times. The present study was conducted to examine whether social media platforms can be a substitute for other modes of religious communication.

The present study was conducted by the researcher based on the following considerations:

1. India has achieved commendable progress in the development and application of social media for various purposes.
2. The National Capital Region, Delhi, has gained prominence as the political capital, media centers, and religious organizations.
3. Social media has become an alternative medium for participatory religious communication since mainstream media has serious limitations.
4. The application of social media in the processes of good governance and participatory communication has changed the profile of the stakeholders in religious communication.
5. The application of social media for religious communication has gained contemporary relevance from an ethical issues point of view.

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To analyze the utilization of social media by religious organizations;
2. To assess stakeholders' access to social media within the realm of religion;
3. To examine ethical issues related to the use of social media by religious organizations;
4. To explore the role of social media in endeavors of religious communication;
5. To study ethical threats posed by social media within religious organizations; and
6. To develop a new model for the effective utilization of social media by religious organizations.

### **1.4. Conceptual Framework of the Study**

Mukhopadhyay (2017) investigated the ethical issues in social media application. The study found that social media had served many purposes including social networking for progressive movements. The

study highlighted that social media users were required to create new ethical standards in the new dynamic social milieu. The scholar suggested that social media should be judiciously used as alternative media for religious communication in modern society. The present study was conducted on the conceptual framework offered by Mukhopadhyay (2017).

### **1.5. Hypotheses of the Study**

The present study was conducted on the basis of the following hypotheses in National Capital Region, Delhi.

H1. The religious organizations in the National Capital Region actively use social media for religious purposes.

H2. Social media has served multiple purposes in the religious organizations.

H3. Social media application has absolute ethical impact on religious organizations.

### **1.6. Research Methodology**

The major objectives of the present investigation were to analyze the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by religious organizations with special reference to National Capital Region, Delhi, India. In particular, access to social media, uses of social media, ethical issues in social media, role of social media in religious communication, and prevention of ethical threats with reference to religious organizations were scientifically analyzed by the researcher.

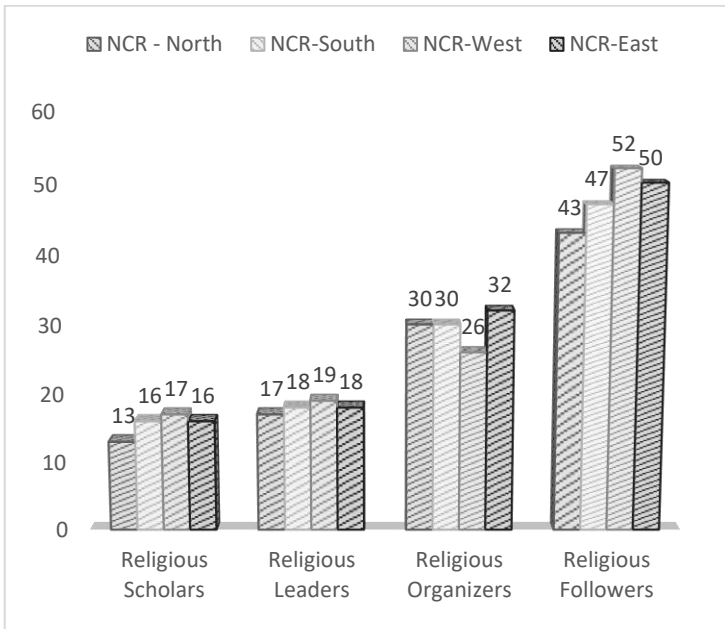
In the first stage, a pilot study was conducted to examine the appropriateness of the instrument of the study. In the second stage, questionnaire was developed and perfected to collect appropriate primary data from the stakeholders of religious communication. In the third stage, suitable statistical tests were conducted for systematic data analysis and interpretation. The present investigation was carried out on the basis of a systematic survey method.

## 2. Data Collection

### 2.1. Primary Data Collection - Field of Study and Sample

Name of the NCR zones	Religious Scholars	Religious Leaders	Religious Organizers	Religious Followers	Total
NCR - North	13	17	30	43	103
NCR-South	16	18	30	47	111
NCR-West	17	19	26	52	114
NCR-East	16	18	32	50	116
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>444</b>

**NCR: National Capital Region, Delhi, India, N=444**



### Field of Study and Sample

Primary data was collected through standardized questionnaire which was administered to various stakeholders of religion in National Capital Region, Delhi. The respondents include religious scholars (62), religious leaders (72), religious organizers (118), and religious followers (192), respectively. About 500 individuals were approached

for primary data collection. But the researcher chose to retain 444 questionnaires, which were complete in all respects. Appropriate statistical tests were followed for the purpose of scientific statistical analysis.

## **2.2. Secondary Data Collection**

The present study was conducted on the basis of relevant secondary data available in different forms. They include scholarly writings available in professional journals, theses, dissertations, reference books, proceedings of national and inter-national seminars and conferences, media analyses, and other sources related to the research topic.

## **2.3. Computation of Data**

The primary data gathered from the survey on the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by religious organizations located in five zones of National Capital Region. The primary data was consolidated and computed by using descriptive analysis and parametric tests, frequency counts, p-value, chi-square, and percentage distribution. These methods revealed the relationship between the social media platforms and ethical issues.

## **2.4. Statistical Analysis**

The researcher used certain parametric statistical tests since it was a descriptive study by nature. The interpretation of the chi-square and contingency table analysis justify the assumption of independence which was primarily carried out at the 0.05% level of significance.

### *2.4.1. Frequencies and Percentages*

The Frequencies procedure provides statistics which are useful for describing many types of variables. The primary data collected on the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by the religious organizations were analyzed by the researcher. The researcher found that the application of the frequencies procedure is an appropriate statistical test.



#### 2.4.2. *P-Value*

In statistics, the  $p$ -value is a function of the observed sample results (a statistic) that is used for testing a statistical hypothesis. The  $p$ -test statistics typically follows a standard normal distribution when large sample sizes are used. The researchers use  $Z$ -tests to determine whether a hypothesis passes based on a specific significance level will be rejected. The larger the  $p$ -value in the  $p$ -test, the more likely the hypothesis is true. In statistics, the  $p$ -value is a function of the observed sample results that is used for *testing* a statistical hypothesis.

#### 2.4.3. *Contingency Table Analysis*

The Cross tabs procedure forms two-way and multi-way tables and provides a variety of tests and measures of association for two-way tables. The structure of the table determines the nature of statistical tests. In the present study contingency table analysis was applied to find out the association between social media platforms and political communication / participation.

#### 2.4.5. *Chi-Square*

The chi-square is a statistical method assessing the goodness of fit between a set of observed values and those expected theoretically. The primary data was analyzed by using chi-square method to test the hypotheses of the present study.

### **3. Findings of the Study**

#### **3.1. Demographic Features of the Sample**

A majority of the study sample represents male respondents (58.11%), young and middle age groups (79.69%), higher educational category (70.27%), religious scholars, religious leaders, and religious organizers (56.76%), and Hindu religion (74.77%), respectively.

### **3.2. Use of Social Media by the Religious Organizations**

The distribution of responses on the use of social media by the respondents in the religious organizations includes Facebook (100%), WhatsApp (80.18%), YouTube (77.93%), Instagram (54.05%), LinkedIn (54.95%), Telegram (57.66%), and Twitter (59.91%), respectively.

The unused social media by the respondents in the religious organizations include Viber (69.37%), WeChat (65.32%), Piscart (62.16%), Skype (61.26%), Qzone (60.36%), Microsoft teams (58.56%), Tumblr (55.86%), Facebook Messenger (55.86%), Quora (55.41%), Pinterest (54.95%), Reddit (53.60%), Snapchat (53.60%), and TikTok (52.25%), respectively.

### **3.3. Utility of Social Media Application by Religious Organizations**

The findings from the study indicate a widespread acceptance of social media among *religious* leaders and organizations, with a unanimous 100 percent agreement on this point. These platforms have proven instrumental in shaping and advancing religious agendas, with 76.13 percent of respondents acknowledging their efficacy in persuading people to accept these agendas and promoting religious activities. Moreover, social media offers participatory communication and management opportunities to religious leaders, garnering a substantial agreement rate of 79.73 percent. They have become integral to religious institutions that rely on public relations and persuasive communication, evidenced by a concurrence of 78.38 percent.

The effectiveness of social media as online platforms for participatory religious communication is affirmed by 79.28 percent of respondents. Interestingly, 51.80 percent believe that these platforms provide better insights and strengthen religious practices in a networked society. Social media has played a role in enhancing social interaction between religious institutions and their followers, supported by a significant 71.62 percent agreement. Furthermore, they have changed the patterns of religious communication in online social networks, with a notable agreement rate of 74.77 percent.

The proliferation of social media within the religious sector has facilitated interaction between organizations and civil society, receiving a concurrence of 74.77 percent. While 54.50 percent recognize the promotion of religion-centric pro-social orientation and civic engagement, 68.47 percent believe that social media has provided new spaces of communication and impacted religious institutions, beliefs, and practices. Additionally, these platforms have connected international funding agencies, missionary firms, and outdoor ministries for the promotion of religious activities, as agreed upon by 68.92 percent of respondents. Social media has proven effective in crisis management for religious organizations (56.31 percent) and have contributed to the evolving nature of religious authority and forms of religious organizations (69.82 percent).

However, concerns are raised, with 62.16 percent indicating that social media has radicalized the young generation of religious followers. Nevertheless, they have emboldened adults to question unhealthy practices and gain a critical understanding of religion and spirituality, with a unanimous agreement of 100 percent. Social media has widened the horizon of religion, enlisting active participation from religious followers in the programs of religious organizations (50.90 percent). However, challenges persist, with 55.86 percent expressing that these platforms have not enhanced religion-centric pro-social orientation, civic engagement, and involvement of religious organizations. Additionally, 74.32 percent believe that social media has not strengthened religious communication and promoted religious interest.

Furthermore, 67.57 percent feel that these platforms have not promoted religious procedures through the extension and conception of religious organizations, and 65.77 percent are skeptical about their role in providing the benefit of mediated communication and disseminating spiritual realities and collectivities.

#### **4. Ethical Impact of Social Media on Religious Organizations**

The ethical impact of social media on religious organizations is a complex landscape marked by various concerns and challenges, as

revealed by the study's findings. A significant portion of respondents, amounting to 80.63 percent, suggests that the application of social media has influenced the trust and moral behavior of religious followers. Furthermore, ethical concerns such as information relevancy, accuracy, and privacy issues in the religious sector are acknowledged by a substantial 77.93 percent of participants. The invasion of privacy is a notable issue, with 73.42 percent expressing concerns in this regard. Privacy and confidentiality of users are deemed adversely affected by social media application, as indicated by an overwhelming 81.98 percent agreement.

The distraction caused by social media to young religious leaders from their religious duties and responsibilities is a pervasive issue, with an alarming 87.39 percent consensus. While 72.52 percent believe that ethical threats to privacy settings and data confidentiality are not posed by social media, concerns arise regarding the dissemination of inappropriate pictures and harmful contents (77.25 percent) and spamming affecting healthy communication (69.37 percent) in the religious sector. The study underscores the ethical threats associated with social media application, including trolling, harassment, and the spread of fake news, acknowledged by 72.07 percent of respondents.

An overarching concern is the unanimous agreement (100 percent) that social media application has led to social media addiction, a problem insufficiently addressed by policymakers and other stakeholders in the religious sector. Public bashing in the religious sector is acknowledged by 54.50 percent of participants, and concerns are raised about incorrect information, inappropriate comments, and integrity risks resulting from social media application (73.87 percent). Negative religious propaganda that injures the interests of followers is recognized by 68.92 percent of respondents.

The misuse of personal information, misinformation, and deep fakes in the religious sector is identified as a significant ethical challenge by 76.58 percent of participants. Additional concerns include information relevancy and accuracy (77.48 percent), dishonesty, and distortion of communication (80.18 percent). Distraction of young religious leaders, organizers, and followers from

their religious duties and responsibilities is a prevalent issue, with 82.88 percent agreement. Ethical challenges related to evidence generation in the religious sector are unanimously recognized (100 percent).

Misuse of technologies, manipulation of tools, and mismanagement of contents in the religious sector are unanimously acknowledged as increased due to social media application (100 percent). Improper anonymity in communication and transactions is flagged by 72.07 percent of respondents, and concerns are raised about the misuse of free expertise and contests in the religious sector (59.01 percent). Negative comments affecting the interest of religious organizations are acknowledged by 74.77 percent of participants. However, identity theft, creating law and order problems, and privacy constraints resulting in vulnerability are reported as not directly linked to social media application, with agreement rates of 68.47 percent and 56.31 percent, respectively.

Additionally, social media application is not perceived to lead to religious manipulation and vilification by the majority of respondents.

## **5. Testing of Hypotheses**

*H1. The religious organizations in the National Capital Region actively use social media for religious purpose.*

The data which are presented in the thesis clearly reveal that the social media were used by the religious organizations in the National Capital Region. Hence, the above hypothesis stands disproved according to the data analysis.

*H2. Social media has served multi-purposes in the religious organizations.*

The data which are presented in the thesis clearly reveal that social media has served multi-purposes in the religious organizations.

Hence, the above hypothesis stands proved according to the data analysis.

*H3. Social media application has absolute ethical impact on the religious organizations.*

The data which are presented in the thesis clearly reveal that social media had limited ethical impact on religious organizations in the National Capital Region, Delhi. Hence, the above hypothesis stands disproved according to the data analysis.

## **6. Implications of the Study**

The implications of the findings of the study with reference to the study of the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by religious organisations in specific terms are given below.

- Social media organizers should respect the freedom of religion as a fundamental right of paramount importance.
- Social media organizers should judiciously use the social media to guarantee the safety of the faithful to worship in peace.
- Social media organizers should pay attention to privacy settings and disseminate religious contents on the basis of mutual respect and concern.
- Social media organizers should promote the freedom of religion on the basis of active participation of the followers in other walks of life.
- Social media organizers should facilitate the reasonable accommodations for religious observance and practice in the workplace and civil society.
- Social media organizers should gather the most authentic information and disseminate the contents with passionate concern and responsibility.
- Social media organizers should make ethical choices in accordance with professional obligations and promote religious harmony at various levels.

- Social media organizers should disseminate religious contents which reflect on the ethical issues.
- Social media organizers should play a responsible role in dissemination of religious contents on the basis of commitment to truth.
- Social media organizers should understand the societal diversity and ethics which are the foundations of religious communication. They should deliver goods in accordance with ethical norms and social responsibility.
- Social media organizers should understand the complex ethical and human rights issues and deliver religious communication to increase the ethical competence.
- Social media organizers should develop an ethical and professional mindset to deliver constructive religious communication services to prevent ethical threats of social media application.
- Social media organizers should understand both cognitive and emotive elements of religious communication and deliver goods on the basis of professionalized approaches.
- Social media organizers should not use the media as a tool of antisemitism and religious hatred.
- Social media organizers should not target religious individuals or entities for special disabilities based on religion.

## **7. Suggestions for Future Research**

The researcher examined the ethical issues involved in the use of social media by religious organizations based in National Capital Region, New Delhi. It was realized by the researcher that there are many areas which demand comprehensive and constant scientific investigation in this important branch of mass communication in India. The role of social media in the modernization of religion is also another vital area of research in the future. Scientific studies have focused on various aspects of ethical impact of social media application by the religious organizations in India and abroad. There is a need for establishment of linkage between social media application and integrated development of religious institutions in India. Future

studies should clearly establish how social media application affects the sustainable development in the new millennium. Further scientific research is necessary on the role of religious communication in the cultivation of human values and cultural ethos. The future researchers should carry out the formative research on the right kind of management approaches to religious communication. The process evaluation is also necessary to understand the impact of social media application on religious sector. The summative evaluation is also necessary to improve the status of social media application for the protection of religious and ethical factors in the country. Experimental research studies could also be conducted on the improvement of the contributions of social media in the process of religious communication. Authentic data based religious communication management approaches and religious communication strategies and initiatives are essential in modern times. Hence, a combination of quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, content analysis, case study, and experimental research is strongly advocated for understanding the application of social media for the promotion of ethical foundations of religious communication in India.

## **8. Conclusion**

Social media has contributed to the development of digital platforms for the promotion of peace, tranquility, equality, and justice despite certain limitations. Ethical aspects of the application of social media by the religious organizations have attracted the attention of philosophers, communicators, and other stakeholders of religious organizations. Certain ethical concerns of social media application have created new awareness such as information is not knowledge, transparency is not credibility, convergence is not integrity, processing is not an enlightened action, and information storage is not ultimate communication. Scholars have explored corrective strategies to address the structural, ideological, and practical issues of social media application by religious organizations in the world. It is imperative for the social media organizers and users to prevent ethical threats to religious organizations vis-à-vis social media application in the new millennium.



Social media facilitates interactive communication between the service providers and users in modern society. Social media platforms Facebook, YouTube, X, WhatsApp, and so on have become inevitable tools of communication, management, development, spirituality and other spheres of human life. They have become a determining factor in shaping the religious, social, educational, economic, political and cultural life of the people. India accepted secularism as the way of life in the post-independence era. Pluralism integrates and promotes all religious groups on the basis of constitutional norms and guidelines. Secularism in India means respect for all religions and equality of opportunities to all citizens regardless of their religious background. Social media are used as a tool to propagate various religious ideologies and promote religious tolerance in India. Therefore, the ethical challenges of social media were examined in the present investigation with special reference to National Capital Region, Delhi. The study envisages that social media should not be abused as tools of antisemitism and religious hatred in a pluralistic society like India. Besides this, social media should be judiciously used to guarantee the safety of the religious organizers and followers without violating ethical norms and guidelines.

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