

Encountering “the Other” in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines how social media platforms shape encounters with religious “others” across diverse cultural contexts, focusing on Muslim users in Pakistan and Buddhist/Christian users in Hong Kong. Through qualitative interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, we identify key patterns in how these platforms both facilitate and constrain meaningful interreligious dialogue. We find that while religious social media can expand exposure to diverse perspectives, it often reinforces in-group boundaries and amplifies polarization through echo chamber effects. Our findings further reveal that users engage in selective exposure, primarily interacting with like-minded believers, while also developing new competencies as “religious bridge-builders” in some cases who cultivate new competencies for interreligious communication. We develop a theoretical framework of “digital othering” to explain how believers navigate religious identity, knowledge, and community in online spaces. By adopting a cross-cultural comparative approach, the study contributes to our understanding of religion in the digital age, offering insights into the culturally specific manifestations of digital othering while also identifying broader patterns that transcend particular contexts. This research advances the field of digital religion studies, providing a nuanced understanding of how social media reshapes religious expression, authority, and interreligious relations in an increasingly digitized global society.

Keywords

religious social media, mediatization, mediation, social shaping of technology, interreligious dialogue, echo chambers, cross-cultural analysis

Introduction

The more I scroll through my Instagram feed, the more I feel like I’m looking through a window at strange, alien worlds. At first, I was fascinated by these glimpses into other religions. But now, I find myself focusing on the differences, the things that make “them” not “us.” It’s like each post, each comment, is another brick in an invisible wall. I’m more aware of other religions than ever before, yet I’ve never felt so distant from them.

By truly listening to one another, we can shatter stereotypes and build bridges—I call them bridges of compassion. When we focus on our shared hopes for peace and justice, our differences fade, and we go back to our common humanity—our roots.

These poignant reflections from our interviewees encapsulate the complex and often paradoxical nature of religious engagement in the digital age, offering a compelling entry point into our exploration of how social media has reshaped religious communication and perception (Åhman & Thorén, 2021). As illustrated by the opening quotes, social media not only provides digital spaces for staying informed and

connected but also actively shapes how we perceive religious “others” (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). The user’s experience of becoming more aware of, yet more distant from, other religions highlight the dual nature of what is termed as “religious social media”—online platforms and digital spaces dedicated primarily to religious content, discussions, and communities. These include religion-focused groups on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok (Åhman & Thorén, 2021), as well as niche platforms specifically designed for religious users. The “window” metaphor in the opening quote aptly conveys how these digital spaces offer glimpses into diverse religious worlds while simultaneously reinforcing perceptions of otherness.

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With nearly 5 billion people globally using social media, understanding the impact of religious social media is increasingly crucial, especially given the renewed focus on religion's public role (Haynes, 2023). The metaphor of the "invisible wall" constructed through digital interactions underscores the importance of examining how these platforms shape interreligious encounters and perceptions. However, as the second interviewee suggests, digital spaces also hold the potential to "shatter stereotypes and build bridges of compassion." By focusing on shared aspirations like peace and justice, these platforms can foster connections that transcend religious differences. As we delve into this phenomenon, we will explore how religious social media both expands exposure to religious diversity and reinforces boundaries, reflecting the nuanced dynamics described in our opening quotes.

Scholars argue that social media holds the potential to cultivate "a more thoughtful society" (Rheingold, 2012, p. 2) by promoting "a rational-critical discourse" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 1) in the public sphere. However, these same platforms can also amplify misinformation, conspiracy theories, and other harmful content (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021). In addition, they often create "echo chambers" or "information cocoons" (Sunstein, 2017) that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints. This article engages with these debates by examining how social media has influenced online religious discourse in a cross-cultural setting. It pays particular attention to the consequences of this discourse for users, especially in terms of their encounters with religious "others." By exploring these issues, we aim to contribute to the growing literature on social media's impact on religious engagement. Specifically, we address the following research question: *How do religious social media platforms shape encounters with religious "others" in different cultural contexts?*

This question is theoretically significant as it helps us understand the complex interplay between technology, religion, and intercultural communication in an increasingly connected yet polarized world. It also has practical implications for religious leaders, policymakers, and platform designers seeking to foster meaningful interreligious dialogue and reduce online religious polarization. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of how digital spaces both reflect and shape the dynamics of religious othering.

In the next section of the article, we will provide a review of the literature at the intersection of social media and religious studies. This will be followed by a detailed description of our methodology. Subsequently, we will present our data analysis and explain the emerging themes. Finally, we will discuss our findings and conclude with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and so on are often conceptualized as complex hybrid assemblages of machines, data, and people that altogether store and

distribute information (van Dijck, 2013). However, for this article, we conceptualize these platforms as socio-cultural artifacts (Vicari & Kirby, 2023), focusing on the discursive spaces and cultural circuits of meaning within which these hybrid assemblages are embedded (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020). The global reach and social legitimation of these platforms have transformed how ideas and thoughts are shared. Scholars have identified various societal benefits of social media, including social inclusion of diverse participants (Notley, 2009), mass collaboration and open innovation (Mount & Martinez, 2014), political democratization (Lüders et al., 2014), truth exposure (Miranda et al., 2016), and public engagement (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

Previous research has also examined how social media platforms facilitate religious expression, community-building, and information-sharing (Cheong, 2017). For instance, Facebook's technological affordances, including editability, persistence, searchability, and visibility, allow believers to communicate in ways not always possible with face-to-face interaction, enabling the crafting of strategic messages, archiving of information, on-demand retrieval, and enhanced visibility of content (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). Scholars have also explored the potential for social media to expand interreligious dialogue and exposure to religious diversity (Tsuria, 2020). As Neumaier (2020) argues, media platforms have become crucial spaces for discourse about and between different religious traditions, shaping not only communication processes but also how individuals understand themselves and construct their world. In fact, social media has the capacity to transform religious logics, symbols, practices, and debates into new digital formats. Through these platforms, users can create, share, and comment on religious content, which can either reinforce or challenge existing views (Tsuria, 2020). However, this dynamic also raises concerns about the potential for online echo chambers to intensify religious polarization (Sunstein, 2017).

Højsgaard (2006) distinguishes between organized and habitual types of religious interactions. Following this, Neumaier (2020) defines *interreligious dialogue* as intentional and institutionalized, involving predefined roles and objectives, while *interreligious encounter* refers to casual, informal exchanges without specific roles or religious goals. This distinction is important when analyzing online interactions, as different social media platforms may encourage different forms of interreligious communication. Consequently, the online public sphere offers a space for both formal and informal engagement with religious and sociocultural diversity, promoting social listening and fostering understanding across different belief systems (Burgess & Green, 2009). In this context, believers are able to encounter and interact with religious "others." However, this exposure can also contribute to a process known as "othering"—the social and psychological mechanisms through which individuals or groups are perceived and treated as fundamentally different or alien. This often results in marginalization or discrimination,

highlighting the dual nature of online religious interactions (Dimitrova, 2013). The process of othering is a crucial concept to consider when examining interreligious encounters on religious social media platforms. Othering implicitly creates a dichotomy where the “self” is seen as superior, and the “other” as inferior. This polarity is particularly relevant in online spaces, where interactions often reinforce these distinctions through selective exposure to content that affirms pre-existing biases.

The online dynamics of othering are complex and multifaceted, influenced by social psychological processes related to ingroup-outgroup formation. Social psychology informs us that cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms interact to define certain groups as “outgroups,” which are perceived as fundamentally different. This perception often leads to ingroup favoritism and the derogation of outgroups (Rathje et al., 2021). On religious social media, these processes can influence how users interpret and engage with content, potentially amplifying divisions between religious communities rather than bridging them (Oboler, 2016). Factors such as platform affordances, cultural contexts, and individual user strategies all influence how religious diversity is navigated online (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017; Campbell, 2010; Rauf, 2021). The categorization of others into essentialized religious groups and the application of different cognitive frameworks to ingroup and outgroup members can also lead to dehumanization (Wahlström et al., 2021). While social media algorithms can exacerbate echo chamber effects (Aydin et al., 2022), religious social media also has the potential to challenge othering by facilitating direct interactions across religious boundaries (Chaudhry & Gruzd, 2020). Understanding these complex dynamics is crucial for analyzing how religious social media shapes interreligious relations and for developing strategies to foster more inclusive online religious environments.

Despite this growing body of research, there remains a need for more cross-cultural analyses that examine how religious social media functions in different religious and cultural contexts, especially in non-Western settings. In addition, the specific dynamics of encountering religious “others” in these digital spaces warrant further investigation. This study aims to address this gap by drawing from theories of mediatisation (Hjarvard, 2013, 2016; Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019), mediation (Hoover, 2006), and the social shaping of technology (Campbell, 2010). Mediatisation provides a macro-level context, highlighting how media logics increasingly shape religious institutions and practices. As Hjarvard argues, the growing prevalence of digital media is fundamentally altering how religion functions in society (Hjarvard, 2013). Religious authorities must adapt to the affordances and constraints of social media platforms, potentially transforming traditional hierarchies and modes of communication. On the other hand, mediation (Hoover, 2006; Mitchell & Marriage, 2003)



Figure 1. Mutual relationship at the macro-, meso-, and micro-level.

focuses on the meso-level, examining how media technologies act as conduits for religious meaning-making. Hoover’s work emphasizes how individuals use media to construct and express religious identity, often in highly personalized ways. In the context of social media, mediation draws attention to how users actively curate their religious self-presentation and engage with religious content. Our framework incorporates mediation to analyze the communicative practices through which users negotiate religion in digital environments. Finally, the social influence of technology perspective (Campbell, 2010) provides a micro-level lens, highlighting how users are influenced by their social environment and interactions, which are amplified in online settings. Campbell’s research demonstrates that religious groups are not passive recipients of technological change, but rather engage in processes of negotiation and change. In our framework, this approach informs our analysis of how users and communities develop specific strategies for engaging with online religious diversity and might change their beliefs or behaviors. Figure 1 below shows the embeddedness and interconnected nature of our theoretical framework.

This theoretical integration provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between religious practices, digital technologies, and social contexts. It allows us to examine religious social media use at multiple levels—from broad societal shifts to individual practices—while acknowledging both the transformative potential of digital technologies and the agency of religious actors in shaping their engagement with these platforms. To explore these dynamics, this study employs a qualitative research design, which we turn to next.

Methodology

This study employs an international comparative cross-cultural methodology, which involves measuring and studying the same phenomena in different countries with diverse cultures (Hantrais, 2009; Peterson, 2009). It aims to investigate how religious social media influences interactions with religious “others” in distinct cultural contexts. Conducting international comparative research is important for advancing and refining our understanding of social phenomena (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2023). The geographical distinctiveness of social dynamics, embedded in a specific historical, temporal, and cultural setting, require careful consideration of their comparability (Fachelli & López-Roldán, 2021). To construct theoretical models of social behavior that go beyond the uniqueness of specific territorial realities, we must develop rigorous methodological approaches that enable broader generalizations (Mangen, 2007).

Collecting data at the micro-level through individual interviews while building a model at the macro level is a well-established approach in social science research, particularly in studies examining complex social phenomena like religious engagement on social media. This multi-level approach, often referred to as micro-macro linkage, allows researchers to understand how individual experiences and behaviors aggregate to form larger social patterns and structures (Coleman, 1990; Raub et al., 2011). By conducting in-depth interviews, researchers can capture the nuanced, lived experiences of individuals, providing rich, contextual data that illuminate the processes of digital othering at the personal level (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Seidman, 2006). These micro-level insights are crucial for understanding the motivations, perceptions, and strategies that individuals employ when navigating religious content and interactions online.

Simultaneously, building a macro-level model based on these micro-level data allows researchers to identify broader patterns and trends in how religious social media shapes interreligious encounters across different cultural contexts (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Jepperson & Meyer, 2011). This approach aligns with the principles of inductive theory building, where theoretical insights emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori (Patton, 2015). By synthesizing individual experiences into a broader theoretical framework, researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social processes at play, while still maintaining a connection to the lived realities of social media users (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Tracy, 2013). This micro-macro integration is particularly valuable in studies of digital religion, where individual practices and experiences on social media platforms contribute to larger shifts in religious expression, authority, and interactions in the digital age (Cheong, 2017; Lövheim, 2013; Tsuria & Campbell, 2022). To effectively explore the nuances of othering in diverse religious and cultural contexts, we employed a comparative case study approach focusing on two distinct settings.

Case Selection

We focus on two case studies: Muslim social media users in Pakistan and Buddhist/Christian users in Hong Kong. This comparative approach allows us to identify both common patterns and context-specific dynamics in online interreligious encounters (van de Vijver & Leung, 2021). Pakistan and Hong Kong were selected as research sites due to their contrasting religious landscapes and levels of digital penetration. In Pakistan, the Muslim majority has long held political, cultural, and religious dominance, while religious minorities like Christians have faced marginalization and, at times, persecution (Ahmed, 2016). The precarious position of minorities in Pakistan creates an asymmetrical power dynamic that likely extends into online spaces. In contrast, Hong Kong presents a more pluralistic religious landscape, with Buddhists and Christians comprising a significant majority (Chan, 2021). However, this majority exists within the broader context of Hong Kong’s relationship with mainland China, adding layers of complexity to religious identity and expression online. The varying degrees of religious freedom between Pakistan and Hong Kong likely impact how majority and minority groups engage in interreligious dialogue on social media platforms.

The comparative lens allows for an examination of how these offline power dynamics translate into digital spaces. As Phan and Tan (2013) argue, genuine interreligious dialogue requires awareness of power imbalances and vulnerability. In the online realm, this may manifest in different ways—for instance, through the amplification of majority voices or self-censorship by minorities. At the same time, social media potentially offers new avenues for minority groups to assert their identities and challenge dominant narratives. By analyzing these contrasting contexts, the study can illuminate both common patterns in online majority-minority dynamics as well as context-specific factors that shape interreligious encounters. This approach aligns with calls for more globally-aware and culturally-sensitive research on digital religion (Campbell, 2013). It allows for a nuanced exploration of how religious identity, cultural norms, and technological affordances intersect to create unique conditions for online interreligious engagement in different majority-minority contexts.

Both regions have seen rapid growth in social media use, but with different patterns of adoption and regulation (Zhang & Song, 2018). In Pakistan, cultural norms around religious expression tend to be more conservative, with public religious displays, particularly Islam, being common and expected (Shaikh, 2018). Social media use in Pakistan is characterized by a high degree of religious content, often reflecting and reinforcing these cultural norms (Masood & Skoric, 2023). In contrast, Hong Kong’s more pluralistic environment fosters a diversity of religious expression, with Christianity and Buddhism having a significant presence in both public and digital spheres (Guo, 2023). Social media use in Hong Kong is generally more secularized, although

religious content remains a notable presence (Lim & Sng, 2020).

This diversity in cultural norms and social media practices enables us to explore how majority-minority dynamics and varying degrees of religious freedom impact online interreligious engagement. We believe that conducting a comparative analysis that goes beyond ethnocentric approaches (Stymne & Löwstedt, 2006) is not only an appropriate but also an essential step in increasing awareness of this diversity and elucidating our complex, globally networked, and interdependent environment (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015). By examining these contrasting contexts, we can gain insights into how local cultural norms and global digital trends intersect to shape online religious expression and interreligious dialogue.

Data Collection

We conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews in each location (40 total), with participants ranging in age from 18 to 65 years. Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Emmel, 2013), to ensure diversity in age, gender, educational background, and level of religious engagement. The interview protocol was developed based on a comprehensive literature review and pilot tested in both contexts to ensure cultural appropriateness and comparability (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Kallio et al., 2016). Ethical considerations were a top priority throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and provided with informed consent prior to participation. Special attention was paid to safeguarding participants' identities and sensitive personal data, particularly given the religious and cultural nuances of the study. Researchers also remained mindful of the potential emotional and psychological impact of discussing religious beliefs and interreligious interactions, offering participants the option to withdraw at any point. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language (Urdu, English, or Cantonese) by researchers fluent in these languages and later transcribed and translated as necessary (Cortazzi et al., 2011). Interview questions focused on participants' motivations for using religious social media, experiences encountering other religions online, perceived impacts of these digital interactions on their religious beliefs and practices, and strategies for navigating interreligious interactions in digital spaces.

To ensure the validity and comparability of our cross-cultural research, we carefully established construct, measurement, and data-collection equivalence across our Pakistani and Hong Kong contexts (Hult et al., 2008). For construct equivalence, we conducted an extensive literature review and consulted with local experts in both settings to ensure that our conceptualization of "religious social media use" and "interreligious encounters" held similar meanings across cultures (van de Vijver, 2015). We then employed

cognitive interviewing techniques with pilot participants in both locations to verify that these constructs were understood similarly (Willis & Miller, 2011). To achieve measurement equivalence, we developed our interview protocol through a collaborative, iterative process. This involved the active participation of researchers from both cultural backgrounds, as the first author hails from Pakistan, and the second author from Hong Kong (Boer et al., 2018). The protocol was initially drafted in English, then translated into Urdu and Cantonese using a rigorous back-translation method. We also conducted pilot interviews in both contexts to refine question wording and ensure comparable interpretations. For data-collection equivalence, we standardized our interview procedures across sites. Both authors of this research are well-versed in consistent probing techniques and data-recording methods (Hult et al., 2008). Interviews were conducted in similar settings (e.g., quiet, private spaces) in both countries, and we maintained consistent criteria for participant recruitment (Robinson, 2014). In addition, we employed a centralized data management system to ensure uniform data organization and initial coding across both research sites (McLellan-Lemal, 2008). Through these meticulous processes, we strived to maximize the comparability of our data while remaining sensitive to cultural nuances, thereby enhancing the validity of our cross-cultural analysis (Hantrais, 2009).

Data Analysis

We employed a rigorous and iterative data analytic approach, drawing on established qualitative methodologies while remaining sensitive to the unique cultural and religious contexts of our study. We commenced with a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2020), which allowed for a deep engagement with the data and the emergence of nuanced themes reflective of participants' lived experiences. Our analytical journey began with an immersive reading of all interviews, allowing us to gain a holistic understanding of the data landscape. This initial step was crucial in familiarizing ourselves with the breadth and depth of participants' narratives, particularly as they related to the intersection of social media use and religious practice in Pakistani Muslim and Hong Kong Buddhist/Christian contexts. As we traversed the data, we meticulously documented our first impressions, emergent ideas, and pertinent questions, laying the groundwork for subsequent analytical stages.

The coding process unfolded through multiple iterations, beginning with open coding to capture the granular aspects of participants' experiences. As we progressed, we developed higher-order themes that encapsulated broader patterns and conceptual relationships within the data. This process was inherently inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' accounts rather than imposing preconceived categories. However, we remained cognizant of

relevant theoretical frameworks, which informed our analytical lens without constraining our interpretations. In line with the constant comparative method (Terry et al., 2017), we continually returned to the raw data, refining and recalibrating our coding schema as new insights emerged. This cyclical process of coding, comparison, and refinement continued until we reached a point of theoretical saturation, where additional interview quotes no longer significantly altered our established categories. Throughout this process, we paid particular attention to the nuances distinguishing the Pakistani Muslim and Hong Kong Buddhist/Christian contexts, seeking to develop a rich, contextually grounded understanding of the phenomena under study.

A critical aspect of our analytical approach was the adoption of a team-based strategy, leveraging the diverse cultural backgrounds of the research team (Giesen & Roeser, 2020). This collaborative approach to coding and interpretation allowed us to bring multiple cultural perspectives to bear on the data, enhancing the cross-cultural validity of our findings and mitigating potential biases that might arise from a single cultural viewpoint (Cornish et al., 2013). Regular team meetings facilitated robust discussions about emerging themes, ensuring that our interpretations were grounded in a nuanced understanding of both cultural contexts. To further enhance the credibility of our findings, we engaged in member-checking, sharing preliminary results with a subset of participants (Madill & Sullivan, 2018). This step allowed us to validate our interpretations and ensure that they resonated with participants' lived experiences. The feedback received during this process was invaluable in refining our analytical framework and deepening our understanding of the complex interplay between social media use and religious practice in these diverse cultural settings.

Throughout the analysis, we remained acutely aware of our positionality as researchers and its potential influence on the research process. We engaged in ongoing reflexivity, critically examining our assumptions, biases, and interpretive lenses (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). This reflexive stance was particularly crucial given the sensitive nature of religious topics and the cross-cultural dimensions of our study. Ethical considerations were paramount in our analytical approach. We implemented robust measures to ensure participant confidentiality, offering the option of pseudonyms and meticulously removing all identifying information from transcripts prior to analysis (Klykken, 2022; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). These steps were crucial in creating a safe space for participants to share their experiences openly, particularly when discussing sensitive aspects of their religious practices and social media engagement.

As we moved toward higher levels of abstraction in our analysis, we began to explore the interconnections between themes, seeking to construct a coherent narrative that captured the complexity of participants' experiences. This process involved "reading between the lines," moving beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover deeper meanings and

implicit assumptions embedded within participants' accounts. The result was a rich, multifaceted understanding of how individuals navigate the intersection of social media and religious practice while constructing and interacting with the "other."

Findings

Our analysis revealed several key themes that illuminate how religious social media shapes encounters with religious "others" across cultural contexts. Figure 2 presents the frequencies of these themes, offering a quantitative overview of their prevalence in our data. This visualization not only reveals the relative prominence of each theme but also lays the foundation for the detailed analysis that follows. In the subsequent discussion, we explore each theme in depth, highlighting both the commonalities and differences observed between the two settings.

Digital Enclaves

While some participants reported that religious social media expanded their exposure to diverse religious perspectives, many described primarily engaging with like-minded believers. This created digital enclaves (Campbell & Golan, 2011) that reinforced existing beliefs and limited meaningful encounters with religious "others." Two participants from Pakistan explained:

I mostly follow Islamic scholars and groups that align with my understanding of Islam. It's comforting to be surrounded by people who share your values.

Seeing how other religions present themselves online makes me appreciate Islam even more. I share more Islamic content now to show the beauty of our religion.

This selective exposure reinforced the echo chamber effect. Two participants from Hong Kong expressed a similar sentiment:

I realize I'm quick to share posts that support my views on Christian morality, but I tend to scroll past things that might challenge my beliefs.

I mainly discuss Mahayana [a Buddhist school of thought] in private groups on Reddit where everyone thinks alike. It is safer and more comfortable than debating with people who have opposing views.

This theme illustrates how encounters with religious "others" online mostly reinforce rather than blur religious boundaries. While digital enclaves were evident in both contexts, Pakistani participants tended to emphasize religious identity reinforcement, whereas Hong Kong participants more often described seeking comfort and safety in like-minded online communities.

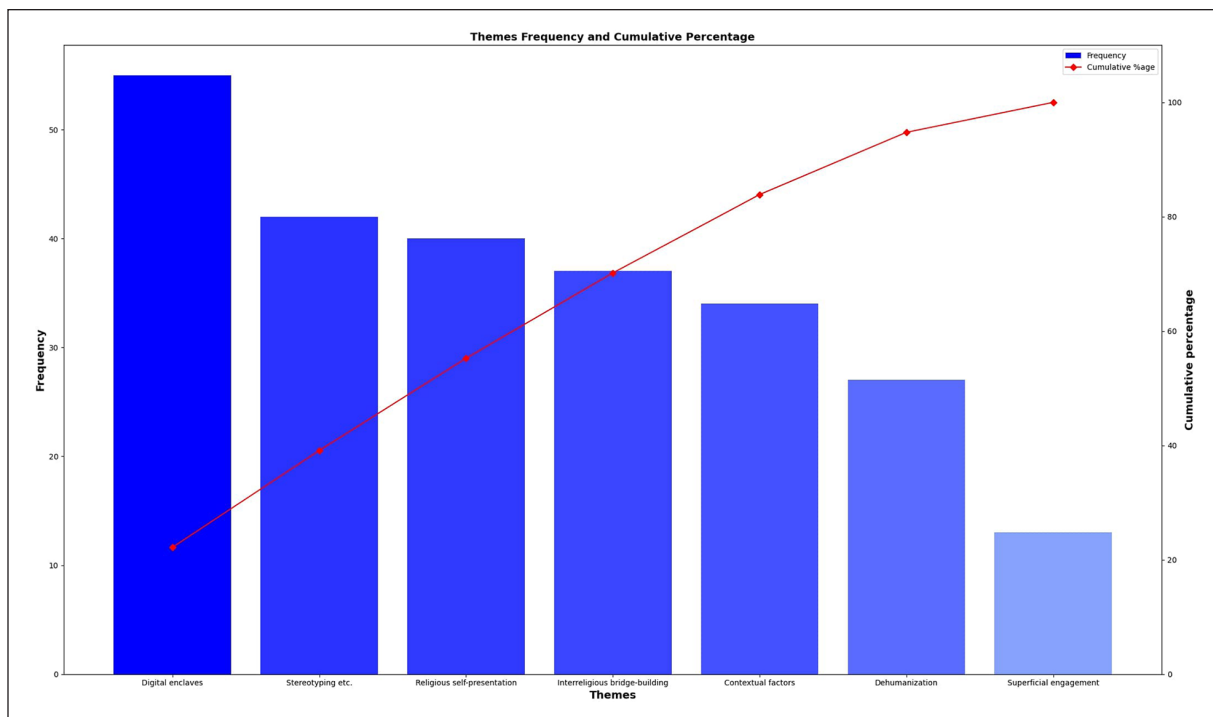


Figure 2. Frequencies of key themes.

Superficial Engagement

While religious social media increased overall exposure to other religions, many participants described these encounters as superficial. Genuine, in-depth interreligious dialogue was rare. Two Pakistani participants shared:

Before Facebook, I rarely thought about other religions. Now I see posts about Diwali or Christmas, and it makes me curious. But it's mostly just pictures or greetings—I don't really learn much about what they believe.

I saw a viral post about Christians celebrating Christmas. It is just about decorating trees and giving gifts, right? Seems more like a cultural festival than actual worship.

Similarly, two participants from Hong Kong noted:

I follow some Buddhist pages because the quotes are calming. But I couldn't tell you much about Buddhist teachings. It's more like . . . spiritual window shopping.

I see posts about other religions, but it's usually just basic facts or stereotypes. There's not much real conversation happening.

This theme highlights how social media can broaden religious horizons, but often in a cursory manner. The easily digestible nature of social media content seems to encourage broad but shallow engagement with religious diversity. While participants from both Pakistan and Hong Kong reported superficial

encounters with religious “others” online, Pakistani users tended to focus more on visual aspects of unfamiliar religious festivals, whereas Hong Kong users often engaged with decontextualized spiritual content from various traditions.

Stereotyping, Labeling, and Polarization

This theme shows how complex religious identities can be reduced to simplistic labels or stereotypes in online interactions. This includes reductive religious categorizations and hashtag-based religious profiling. Two Pakistani participants said:

Aha . . . I need to tell you that #CowWorshippers is trending again on Twitter. It is hard to take a religion seriously when they pray to animals.

I saw a meme about Buddhists being non-violent. Well, this does not fit news from 2017 in Myanmar, where Rohingya Muslims faced mass killings, rape, and destruction of entire villages.

Similarly, two participants from Hong Kong expressed their sentiments:

Muslims are so strict. Five prayers a day, no pork, no beer? This is extremism.

#Jesuslovesyou. Christians always trying to convert others, even Buddhists. I am tired of this attitude.

Participants also described how online discussions could quickly escalate into heated debates or attacks on other religious groups. A Pakistani participant noted:

Sometimes I see posts mocking other religions or calling them false. It makes me uncomfortable, but these posts often get a lot of likes and shares.

Moreover, historical interreligious tensions and conflicts were often reproduced and sometimes amplified in digital spaces leading to increased polarization. Participants described seeing centuries-old theological disputes play out in comment sections and viral posts. A Pakistani participant observed:

The same arguments about Jesus that Muslims and Christians have had for centuries are all over social media, but now with memes and insulting emoji reactions.

Similarly, a participant from Hong Kong reported:

Old theological debates blow up in comment sections. It's like the Reformation never ended on Facebook.

This theme highlights how social media can amplify existing religious fault lines, with the anonymity and distance of online interaction sometimes exacerbating conflicts. Although stereotyping and polarization were evident in both contexts, Pakistani participants more frequently referenced historical religious conflicts, while Hong Kong participants tended to emphasize perceived lifestyle differences between religious groups.

Dehumanization

This theme shows how religious “others” are portrayed as less than human in online interactions, potentially exacerbating interreligious tensions. It includes key aspects of dehumanization including religious group objectification and a mechanistic view of religious practices. Two Pakistani users commented:

These Ahmadis are like programmed robots, blindly following their so-called prophet. They're not real Muslims, just empty shells mimicking Islam.

I was watching a video on YouTube about Hinduism where strange creatures are flying in the air and people were worshipping these creatures as if they have lost their ability to think rationally about the divine.

Similarly, two users from Hong Kong said:

A while ago you were talking about cogs in the machine. Do you want to see real-life cogs in the machine? See Falun Gong believers. They have given up their humanity.

Let me not talk about evangelical Christians. I am telling you; we don't need to quarantine ourselves from a virus. We need to quarantine ourselves from backward beliefs.

Dehumanizing rhetoric appeared in both settings, but Pakistani users more often employed religious doctrinal arguments to delegitimize other groups, whereas Hong Kong users tended to frame their dehumanizing comments in terms of perceived irrationality or backwardness.

Religious Self-Presentation

This theme demonstrates how people construct and express their religious or cultural identities online, carefully curating their digital presence to reflect their beliefs and affiliations. Two Pakistani social media users said:

Just updated my profile pic with the *Kaaba* background. The next month will be *Ramadan*, and I want everyone to know that I am a proud Muslim.

#DailyQuran. I make sure to share at least one Quranic verse every day on my Facebook and Instagram accounts. It is my way of spreading the beauty of Islam to my followers.

Similarly, two social media users from Hong Kong expressed their sentiments:

I always post pictures of myself at the temple during festivals. It shows I am keeping our traditional Chinese values alive in modern Hong Kong.

You will see that some of my posts on Instagram has a tiny cross like an emoji. I know that other Christians will notice. I need to be smart about expressing my religious belief here.

While users from both Pakistan and Hong Kong engaged in careful curation of their religious identities online, Pakistani participants displayed a greater tendency toward overt religious symbolism, whereas Hong Kong users often adopted more subtle signifiers of their faith traditions.

Interreligious Bridge-Building

Some users, however, developed new competencies as “religious bridge-builders” online. A Pakistani Muslim who actively participates in religious Facebook groups, shared:

I've learned to explain Islamic concepts using Christian terminology. It's about finding common ground, even if we ultimately disagree. You should search for #ReligiousHarmony on Twitter.

I occasionally attend live religious dialogue events on Facebook, and I believe they are valuable in a world filled with so much hatred. When we take the time to explore both the Bible and the Quran, we can find many similarities that can bring us closer together.

Similarly, a participant from Hong Kong described her approach:

In religious discussions, I try to ask questions rather than make statements. It's opened up some really meaningful dialogues, especially with my Buddhist colleagues.

Let me tell you something interesting. I have actually visited a mosque with my Muslim friends. The *Imam's* Islamic call to prayer [*adhan*] was fascinating. There is so much we can learn from each other.

This theme illustrates the potential for social media to foster new forms of interreligious engagement, as some users develop skills in digital diplomacy and cross-cultural communication. Interreligious bridge-building efforts were present in both contexts, but Pakistani users more frequently emphasized finding doctrinal common ground, while Hong Kong participants tended to focus on shared cultural experiences as a basis for dialogue.

Contextual Factors

This theme demonstrates how users adapt their religious self-presentation and engagement based on contextual factors such as social media platform affordances, cultural norms (such as the mix of traditional and Western influences in Hong Kong), and religious majority-minority dynamics. A Pakistani social media user stated:

I love using . . . “feeling blessed” status with the prayer hands emoji when sharing Quranic verses. It's a great way to express my ideas without being too obvious about it.

As a Christian in Pakistan, I am careful about what I post. Even a simple “Merry Christmas” status can attract unwanted attention. I mostly share in closed Christian groups on Facebook.

Similarly, Hong Kong social media users said:

WeChat is convenient, but I don't discuss Falun Gong there. I use another platform for sensitive religious conversation.

Being a practicing Buddhist in Hong Kong means you have to think about both traditional Chinese practices and Western influences. My Instagram reflects this mix—posts about meditation centers alongside mooncake festival celebrations.

The influence of contextual factors on religious engagement online differed markedly between the two settings, with Pakistani users navigating more explicit religious majority-minority dynamics, while Hong Kong users grappled with the intersection of traditional Chinese and Western cultural influences.

Overall, these findings collectively illustrate the complex and often contradictory ways in which social media shapes encounters with religious “others,” simultaneously facilitating exposure to diversity while often reinforcing existing boundaries and stereotypes.

Discussion

Our findings illustrate the complex ways religious social media shapes interreligious encounters. While these platforms expand exposure to religious diversity, they also risk reinforcing boundaries and polarization. The specific manifestations of these dynamics vary between the Pakistani and Hong Kong contexts, reflecting differences in religious majority-minority relations, cultural norms around religious expression, and patterns of social media use. Our analysis suggests that the affordances of social media platforms interact with existing religious and cultural dynamics to shape how users encounter and engage with religious “others” online. To conceptualize these complex dynamics of online religious interaction, we propose a theoretical framework of “digital othering.”

Digital Othering

We define digital othering in the interreligious context as the complex process through which religious individuals and communities use social media platforms to construct, maintain, and negotiate religious identities in relation to perceived religious “others.” To theoretically explain our findings, we draw on theories of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2016), mediation (Hoover, 2006), and the social influence of technology (Campbell, 2010). This theoretical integration helps us to understand how believers navigate religious identity, knowledge, and community in online spaces, particularly interacting with believers of other religions. These others are linked to the self as a subordinate relation and are characterized by what the self perceives of them. The difference is maintained through language and representation. In the digital realm, these dynamics are shaped by the specific affordances of social media platforms, including algorithmic curation, viral sharing, and the collapse of traditional spatial and temporal boundaries. The digital othering framework consists of four key processes: identity performance, epistemic enclosure, amplification of othering, and belonging as shown in Figure 3 below.

Identity Performance. Religious social media becomes a stage for performing and affirming religious identity, sometimes in opposition to perceived “others” (Lövheim, 2013). This process of identity performance reflects the mediatization of religious identity construction. As Hjarvard (2016) argues, religious authority and identity formation are increasingly influenced by media logics as communities engage with digital platforms. Religious users must navigate how to present their identities online in ways that align with community values while adapting to the affordances and norms of social media. It examines the interplay between personal religious expression and adherence to community norms. The findings suggest that interreligious encounters on social media are often emotionally charged, with users asserting their religious identity in ways that can reinforce prejudices and negative

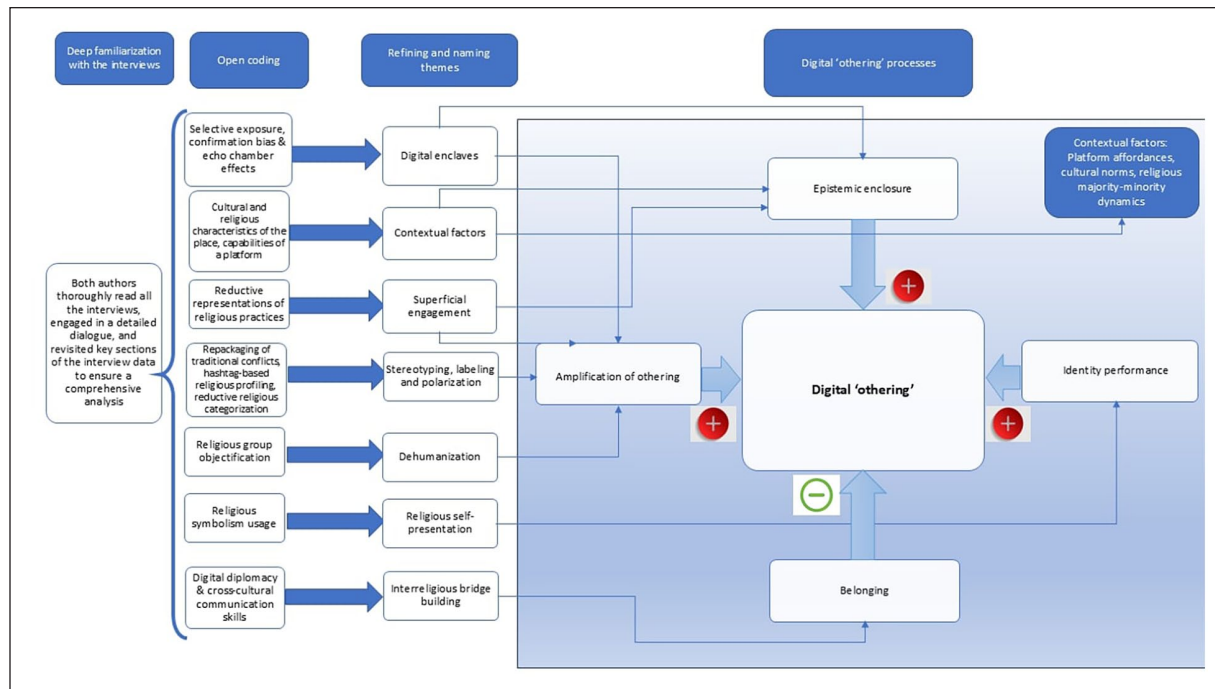


Figure 3. Processes of digital othering in interreligious social media interactions.

stereotypes about other religious groups (Piela, 2017). This involves distorting others, seeing them through stereotypes, and not acknowledging or respecting their differences.

Epistemic Enclosure. The concept of “epistemic enclosure” encompasses how religious users on social media platforms simultaneously reinforce the boundaries of their religious communities and curate their religious information ecosystem. This process involves both inclusion (strengthening in-group ties) and exclusion (distancing from out-groups), as well as the filtering, interpretation, and sharing of religious information. Drawing on mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2016; Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020), this process examines how religious groups establish and reinforce doctrinal and community boundaries in digital spaces. It considers how social media affordances may both challenge and strengthen existing religious demarcations. Our findings reveal that exposure to other religions on social media often strengthened users’ identification with their own religious tradition, reinforcing in-group boundaries rather than fostering open dialogue across religious divides (Tsuria, 2020). We observed a tendency to impose categories and norms to groups classified as “others” and to see the difference through modes of perception specific to one’s own religion. This trend echoes Campbell and Golan’s (2011) concept of “digital enclaves”: bounded online platforms that act as “spaces of safety for members” (p. 709) while reinforcing community norms. They allow religious communities to engage with digital technologies while maintaining a degree of control over content and interactions, mirroring offline strategies of enclosing and maintaining boundaries.

Moreover, participants actively curated their religious information ecosystem, often prioritizing familiar sources and perspectives while filtering out challenging or diverse viewpoints. Informed by mediation theory (Hoover, 2006), this knowledge-gatekeeping process explores how users filter, interpret, and share religious information online. It analyzes the strategies employed to curate religious knowledge in an environment of information abundance (Åhman & Thorén, 2021). The study found that users engage in selective exposure, primarily interacting with like-minded believers, creating echo chamber effects that limit genuine interreligious encounters (Boutyline & Willer, 2017).

Interestingly, some social media consumers are not challenged by new ideas. Instead, challenging ideas get consumed with an attitude of sarcasm and irony. Our research shows that while social media increases exposure to other religions, this exposure is often superficial, lacking the depth required for meaningful deliberation on complex religious issues (Evolvi, 2018) which might result in a reconceptualization of the other. Overall, the various elements of this process serve to reinforce existing ideological structures whether in dominant or marginalized groups.

Amplification of Othering. Social media platforms, through their algorithmic curation and viral sharing capabilities, can intensify the process of othering in religious contexts. This amplification occurs through several mechanisms. First, the echo chamber effect, where users are predominantly exposed to like-minded perspectives, can reinforce and exaggerate existing biases against religious outgroups (Sunstein, 2017). Second, the rapid spread of information,

including misinformation and inflammatory content, can escalate interreligious tensions more quickly and widely than traditional media (Evolvi, 2019). Third, the anonymity and distance provided by digital platforms can lower inhibitions, leading to more extreme expressions of religious intolerance or prejudice (Piela, 2017). Finally, the gamification of social media interactions, through likes, shares, and comments, can incentivize provocative or divisive religious content, further amplifying the othering process (Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020). This amplification can create a feedback loop where online othering spills over into offline contexts, potentially exacerbating real-world interreligious tensions. This process reflects broader processes of mediatization, as religious discourse and conflict increasingly play out through media channels (Hjarvard, 2016). However, the specific ways othering is amplified are shaped by how religious users appropriate and give meaning to technologies, as emphasized in mediation theory (Hoover, 2006).

Belonging. Online spaces can either exacerbate existing religious tensions or, less commonly, serve as venues for constructive interreligious dialogue, conflict resolution, and generating a sense of belonging. This duality points out that the digital space often reinforces boundaries but can also provide opportunities for challenging and subverting these same boundaries (Neumaier, 2020). Digital media's role in fostering belonging demonstrates how religious communities engage in the "social shaping" of technology (Campbell, 2010) to create spaces that align with their values and practices. At the same time, the ways belonging is constructed online reflect broader processes of mediatization, as religious community-building adapts to digital media logics.

By viewing digital othering through these theoretical lenses, we can better understand how these processes reflect broader patterns in the relationship between religion and media in the digital age. Religious communities are not simply subjected to technological effects but actively shape their engagements with digital media. At the same time, religious authority, identity, and community are being transformed as they increasingly operate through mediatized environments. Our research shows that historical interreligious tensions are often reproduced and sometimes intensified in online spaces, rather than being resolved through rational discourse (Bramadat & Seljak, 2013). However, we also identified positive developments, such as the emergence of "religious bridge-builders" who develop skills in digital diplomacy and cross-cultural communication, fostering new forms of interreligious engagement and understanding in some cases (Spadaro, 2014).

The digital othering framework helps explain the seemingly paradoxical nature of religious social media: while it has the potential to broaden exposure to diverse religious perspectives, it often reinforces existing boundaries and beliefs. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the

processes of digital othering are not universal or deterministic. Critics of technological determinism argue that users possess an agency in shaping their online experiences and that the impact of social media on religious identity and interreligious relations is mediated by various social, cultural, and individual factors (Campbell, 2010). The outcome depends on how users navigate the tension between the echo chamber effects of social media and its capacity to broaden religious horizons.

Interconnections Between Digital Othering Processes

In addition, these four processes are not discrete, but rather interconnected and mutually reinforcing. They provide a framework for analyzing the complex ways in which religious users negotiate religion, identity, and community in digital environments. Identity performance on social media often leads to epistemic enclosure, as users seek out content and communities that affirm their religious identity. This enclosure, in turn, can amplify othering by limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and reinforcing in-group/out-group dynamics. The amplification process feeds back into identity performance, as users may feel compelled to assert their religious identity more strongly in response to perceived threats or misrepresentations. However, the process of belonging offers a potential counterbalance, as some users navigate these dynamics to foster interreligious understanding. This interplay creates a complex ecosystem where religious identity, knowledge, and community are constantly negotiated in relation to religious "others" in the digital space. This integrated theoretical approach allows us to examine religious social media use at multiple levels—from broad societal shifts to individual practices. It acknowledges both the transformative potential of digital technologies and the agency of religious actors in shaping their engagement with these platforms. By applying this framework to our empirical data, we developed a nuanced understanding of how religious social media shapes interreligious encounters across different cultural contexts.

Cultural Dynamics of Digital Othering

The processes of digital othering manifest differently depending on the specific cultural and religious contexts, highlighting the importance of considering local nuances when analyzing interreligious interactions online. Our comparative analysis of Muslim users in Pakistan and Christian users in Hong Kong revealed both commonalities and distinctions in how digital othering unfolds across these diverse settings. In the Pakistani context, digital othering often centered around reinforcing Islamic identity in opposition to perceived threats from other religious traditions. Many Pakistani participants emphasized using social media to assert and defend their Muslim identity, particularly in

relation to Hindu and Christian outgroups. This aligns with Ahmed's (2016) observations on the complex interreligious dynamics in Pakistan, where religious identity is often politicized. The digital space became an extension of existing sectarian tensions, with users employing religious symbolism and Quranic references to demarcate boundaries between the Muslim ingroup and religious others.

It is pertinent to note that the religious majority-minority relations in Pakistan are characterized by a complex historical and sociopolitical context. The predominantly Muslim majority often wields considerable influence over public discourse and policy, leading to heightened sensitivity around religious expression by minority groups. This power dynamic is frequently reflected in online interactions, where majority users may feel emboldened to engage in more overt forms of othering toward religious minorities. Conversely, in Hong Kong, digital othering frequently manifested through more subtle cultural signifiers rather than overt religious symbolism. Christian users in Hong Kong navigated a pluralistic religious landscape, often framing their digital interactions in terms of traditional Chinese values versus Western influences. This reflects the unique religio-cultural dynamics of Hong Kong, where Christianity intersects with Confucian heritage and secular modernity (Chan, 2021). Digital othering in this context involved negotiating multiple layers of cultural identity, with religious differences sometimes subsumed under broader East-West dichotomies.

The cultural norms around religious expression in Hong Kong are markedly different from those in Pakistan. Hong Kong's historical legacy as a British colony and its status as a global financial hub have fostered a more cosmopolitan environment, where overt religious expression is often tempered by secular norms and multicultural sensibilities. This cultural context informs the more nuanced and indirect forms of digital othering observed among Hong Kong users. The intensity and explicitness of digital othering also varied between the two contexts. Pakistani users tended to engage in more direct and confrontational forms of othering, often invoking historical conflicts and doctrinal disputes in their online interactions. This mirrors Yilmaz's (2016) observations on the intensification of religious boundaries in Pakistani society. Hong Kong users, by contrast, often employed more indirect forms of othering, using cultural references and subtle linguistic cues to differentiate themselves from religious outgroups. This aligns with Zhang and Song's (2018) analysis of the nuanced ways religious identity is negotiated in Hong Kong's digital spaces.

It is crucial to consider the patterns of social media use that underpin these differing expressions of digital othering. In Pakistan, social media platforms have become significant arenas for religious discourse and identity formation, with users frequently sharing religious content and engaging in faith-based discussions. The pervasiveness of religious themes in Pakistani social media usage creates an environment conducive to more explicit forms of religious othering. In contrast,

social media use in Hong Kong tends to be more diverse in content, reflecting the city's multifaceted cultural landscape. Religious themes, while present, are often interwoven with broader cultural and social issues, leading to more subtle and contextually embedded forms of digital othering.

This cross-cultural comparison revealed that while the specific content and theological disputes differed between Muslim users in Pakistan and Buddhist/Christian users in Hong Kong, the underlying patterns of digital othering were remarkably similar. This suggests that the dynamics of religious social media may transcend particular cultural and religious contexts, pointing to broader trends in how religion is practiced and experienced in increasingly digitized societies. These findings underscore the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to studying digital religion. As Tsuria and Campbell (2022) argue, researchers must attend to both the global dynamics of digital platforms and the local particularities of religious practice. Our analysis demonstrates that digital othering is neither a uniform global phenomenon nor entirely determined by local factors but rather emerges through the complex interplay of technological affordances, cultural norms, and religious traditions.

Practical Implications

These findings have significant implications for religious leaders, policymakers, and platform designers. To promote meaningful interreligious dialogue and reduce polarization on religious social media, it is essential to address both individual behaviors and the structural features of online platforms. This could involve implementing digital literacy programs that encourage engagement with diverse religious perspectives, creating dedicated spaces for constructive interreligious encounters, and rethinking recommendation algorithms that often reinforce echo chambers. Moreover, understanding the cultural dynamics of online interactions is crucial for developing effective strategies to foster interreligious dialogue and mitigate the negative effects of digital othering. It is important to recognize that interventions that are effective in one cultural context may not be directly transferable to another, necessitating tailored approaches that consider local religious landscapes and digital practices.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this comparative approach offers valuable insights, we acknowledge limitations in generalizability. Our sample is not statistically representative of all religious social media users in Pakistan or Hong Kong, a common challenge in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). In addition, the focus on these two specific contexts means findings may not be directly applicable to other cultural settings, highlighting the need for caution in cross-cultural generalization (Tsang & Kwan, 1999).

Despite these limitations, this rigorous cross-cultural methodology allows us to develop a nuanced understanding of how religious social media shapes interreligious encounters across diverse settings (Boehnke et al., 2011). By systematically comparing user experiences and platform dynamics in Pakistan and Hong Kong, we can identify both universal trends and context-specific factors influencing digital othering, contributing to the growing body of comparative digital religion research (Cheong et al., 2012).

Future research should explore these dynamics in other religious and cultural settings, expanding the scope of cross-cultural digital religion studies (Lövheim & Campbell, 2017). Examining how different types of social media platforms shape interreligious engagement could provide insights into the role of platform affordances in religious interaction (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). It will also be worthwhile to examine the factors that lead to constructive exchange rather than the repetition of prejudices and stereotypes, and to what extent specific user groups are decisive in shaping these interactions. In addition, longitudinal studies could provide insight into how digital othering processes evolve over time, addressing the need for temporal perspectives in digital religion research (Hutchings, 2017). Future studies might also consider employing mixed-methods approaches to combine the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), potentially enhancing the generalizability of findings while maintaining rich contextual understanding.

Conclusion

This research contributes to our understanding of how digital spaces both reflect and shape the dynamics of othering in the context of interreligious encounters. While our findings highlight how religious social media can reinforce boundaries and amplify polarization, they also reveal opportunities for fostering meaningful interreligious dialogue. Some users develop competencies as “religious bridge-builders,” learning to find common ground and engage in meaningful dialogue across religious boundaries. These practices suggest the potential for digital spaces to contribute to peace-building efforts by facilitating encounters that value difference and recognize our shared humanity.

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