Personalizing Religion: A Qualitative Analysis of New Age Spiritual Identity Online

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Atheism is on the rise around the world, so does that mean spirituality will soon be a thing of the past? Rachel Nuwer discovers that the answer is far from simple.

DECEMBER 29, 2016

The Long, Slow Death of Religion
by JAMES A HAUGHT

Is religion dying? A look at shifting demographics.

Studies show which religions are growing fast and which ones may be dying out.

PAUL RATNER  27 April, 2018
Inspired & Informed By

• New conversation on transcendent meaning
  • Besecke (2005)

• “Tinkering” with technology and identity
  • McClure (2017)

• Choice and “lifestyle” focus
  • Giddens (1991)
HOW ARE INTERNET USERS CONSTRUCTING AUTHENTIC SPIRITUAL IDENTITY ONLINE?
Studies of Religion Online

• Largely quantitative
  • McClure (2017)
  • Lundmark & LeDrew (2019)

• Comparative to traditional physical religious practice
  • Mayer (2000)
  • Jacobs (2007)
  • Campbell (2012)
Qualitative Analysis

• Necessarily qualitative
  • Emphasis on categorical and unique data for multiple investigations
    • Altheide (1996)

• Online content analysis
  • Compilation of text and coding through Nvivo
  • Categorized themes, illustrated relationships, facilitated a story

• Reddit
Cultural Context of Reddit

- Reddit: social media site made up of individualized communities

- Subreddit: a community on Reddit
  - Examples: /r/worldpolitics, /r/publicfreakout, /r/gameofthrones

- Thread:

  This is a post title
  u/thisisauser

  This is the text of a post. Usually longer than this.

  ^This is a comment
  This is a response comment
  This is a separate response comment
  This is responding to initial response comment
New Age Spiritual Communities

r/pagan

r/witchcraft

r/spirituality

“Individualistic approach to an identity.” –reddit.com/r/pagan

“Witchcraft is a complex concept that varies culturally and societally; therefore, it is difficult to define with precision.” –reddit.com/r/witchcraft

“Open to everyone, religious and non-religious alike.” –reddit.com/r/spirituality
The Journey to Spirituality

**r/pagan & r/witchcraft**
- Practice oriented
- Media heavy in comparison
- The external processes

**r/spirituality**
- Belief-oriented
- Text heavy
- The internal processes
Constructing Authentic Spiritual Identity

Practice & Belief

Material Culture & Transcendence

The Unveiling & The Spiritually Powerful Self

AUTHENTICITY
“I’m moving within a year! This jar is for finding a home, building savings, and finding another roommate. I prayed to Hermes for luck in travel and money and to Hestia for warming a new hearth.”

r/spirituality:

“As the most genuine intention, I send prosperity to anyone who reads this… Let’s each meditate on this feeling together and send it out to our little community. That way we will multiply its effects.”
“So, my question is, what else do you need? The less you require, the more you eventually get. And the return on your investment feels so good, such that, all trappings [of] this world and their hold on you melt away. Behind them, freedom my friends.”
“I found [my goddess’] name in a book. As soon as [I] came to the part about her, I experienced an intense sensation of heat and pressure that I had never felt before. I knew then that she was the one I was truly intended to work with. <3”

“You are, the leader, the creator, the judge and the jury of your own universe. Your mind is a powerful tool, more powerful than you know. We as humans trick ourselves into believing we’re all individuals […] but we are all ONE. One consciousness. Experiencing the same thing at the same time.”

“I've tried to rationalize how witchcraft and magick must work based on psychological frameworks, but I really feel that I've witnessed its power now firsthand.”
Three Conclusive Themes

Practice Vs. Belief

Material Culture vs. Transcendence

The Unveiling & The Spiritually Powerful Self

AUTHENTICITY
Broader Implications & Limitations

• New strategies to construction of identity, spiritual or otherwise
  • Internet as an influential medium
  • Continue personalization
  • Strive for authenticity in virtual social spaces

• Further Research
  • Mainstream subculture
  • Commodification & appropriation
  • Finding transcendence through the virtual
References

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- The 2019 Winthrop McNair cohort
- The Winthrop University Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology Department

Thank you!
QUESTIONS?

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## Frequency Table

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<th>r/spirituality</th>
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*11 cases missing from center that ultimately did not fit any of the presented categories*