

Spirituality and Social Media: Connecting the Dots

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Abstract—Spirituality has gained the interest of all generations in the past few years. The concept of spirituality is very old but its popularity in the last few decades is worth noticing. Today spirituality is making inroads in different sectors like health sector, education, working culture etc. Social media on the other hand is a relatively new phenomenon which has changed the world forever. The impact and reach of social media is the maximum among all media tools. With the increased use of smart phone and other interactive technologies social media usage has grown with huge leaps and bounds. The paper tries to find a link to connect the old with new in search of a principled life as advocated by spirituality. The paper explores the journey of Spirituality and its usefulness in current context. The paper then traces the rise and impact of social media. The paper concludes by proposing a conceptual model that depicts use of social media to educate about spirituality. The integrative approach identifies the positive aspects of social media to reach out to people.

Keywords—Spirituality, Social Media, Conceptual Model

1 Introduction

Spirituality is an old term, in vogue now. Till a few decades back spirituality was only related with serious and deep thinkers who were beyond the worldly pleasures. The times have changed and so have the perceptions of people. Spirituality, though still an enigma, is a topic of interest. Over the years, researchers have offered different definitions of spirituality. The definitions encourage to explore and question beyond the normal routine life. Spirituality encourages people to do some introspection and find the true meaning of one's existence. They discuss the importance of ethical dimension and are in search of peace and harmony. Researchers have offered realistic definitions with a practical approach. They have tried to describe and discuss some parameters that can help identify and reach the respective goals of the individuals. Spirituality has been related to search for life and some tools to reach spirituality have been identified as truth, justice, courage, imagination and high energy.

In contrast to spirituality which is thousands of years old, there is social media a relatively new phenomenon. Social media has changed the landscape of the world in a period between two to three decades. It is difficult for people to imagine life without social media. One important reason for such tremendous growth of social media is the

popularity and use of smart phones and interactive technologies by the consumers. Social media is part of not just personal lives but has huge budgets allocated by corporate sector also. Social media is a powerful tool—a tool that has its benefits and can be equally dangerous. It has a reach which is not possible by any other medium. Can there be a way to use this current medium to spread a philosophy which is ages old and yet is contemporary. Can there be a way to blend the new tool called social media with the philosophies of spirituality and reach out to the masses?

The paper aims at providing a comprehensive view of interpretations of spirituality and social media by researchers. Further the paper will also highlight the impact of Spirituality on different aspects of life. The paper also presents the far-reaching effects of social media and thereby combining the definitions, interpretations and implementation to make a conceptual model for “Use of the contemporary social media tool to spread the age old philosophy of spirituality”.

2 Spirituality: The Journey

Spirituality is as old as human species but it started making headlines only a few decades back. Scientific minded people did not think it as an area worth their interest but that changed in 1980s and 1990s when researchers started conducting focused research in spirituality. Some believe that this gave rise to Neuro ethology and Theo biology [1]. Moral abnormalities, twisted social values, greed and all kinds of crimes have caused an imbalance in material and spiritual life of an individual and spirituality fills this gap by giving meaning to lives and makes sense out of things [2]. Over the years researchers have offered different definitions of spirituality. The definitions are diverse and yet they have a common thread. All definitions highlight that spirituality is the process to find the purpose of one’s journey; it is the quest to discover oneself; it is the route to define one’s goals and hence be in peace and sync with reality [3]. Spirituality has also evoked a lot of debate with religion. Phipps (2012) [4] describes religion to policy, practices and creeds of a particular faith while spirituality is seen as a common condition. Almost in a similar manner, Wilkinson (2012) [5] has identified religion with organized set of rules, worshipping a God and a community of followers. Spirituality is linked to morals, an individual experience and belief in higher power. Religion has been given an image of being formal and exclusive, in contrast to spirituality which is not burdened with this formal and ideological baggage [6]. Some papers have also used religion and spirituality interchangeable [7]. Maybe one of the prime reasons of growing spirituality is that it offers room for innovation of thoughts, beliefs and processes. It allows itself to be molded with changing times and hence lead to acceptance of the idea that a person can be spiritual and not religious [3].

2.1 Use and importance of spirituality

Popularity and acceptance of spirituality can be judged from the fact that it has made inroads in various areas like medical sector, organizational setup, education sector and others. Research has indicated that spirituality offers maximum health

benefits in chronic and incurable diseases [8]. Addressing issues of spirituality has shown encouraging results in people suffering from persistent pain [9], mental disorders [10], eating disorders [11], or for patients to cope with death [12]. The range of spirituality is vast. On one hand researchers feel that it can help the chronic patients who have given up on life and on the other hand they advocate it for youth who is full of life. Researchers have encouraged connecting youth to spirituality to help in the ethical and self-awareness aspect of their development [13].

What has made spirituality so popular and attractive is a difficult question to answer.

- As mentioned in the paper earlier, maybe it is the ability of spirituality to give and respect freedom of thought.
- Maybe the secret of acceptance and popularity of spirituality is in its beauty and ability to connect with people in diverse spectra's of life. In that way it is truly global.
- The world has witnessed changes at an exponential rate and maybe spirituality provides that stability amidst those changes.

The reasons may be many or any, what is certain is that spirituality is an attitude that leads to principled way of life. Overall the vast research done in trying to connect spirituality to different areas leads us to believe that spirituality can help in leading a principled life and can result in peace, harmony and answer to quest for life but then the next important question is how do you connect spirituality with the common man?

3 What Is Social Media?

Social media has become one of the most intriguing topics of modern times. It has not only become an integral part of consumer life but also it has altered the way people communicate, socialize, learn, entertain themselves and interact with each other's. It provides firms with an opportunity to understand the consumer needs wants in a better fashion with help of the content provided or shared by and the consumers in Web 2.0 channels [14].

As defined by Constantinides and Fountain (2008) [15],

“Web 2.0 is a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online application expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informational content”.

The term Web 2.0 is often used as a synonym to social media however some spectator associate Web 2.0 mainly with online application while the term social media with the social aspects of Web 2.0 application for example interaction, connectedness, openness and so on [14]. Web 2.0 also promises better collaboration and communication within and outside the companies [16].

Social Media has been defined and explained in a multiple manner by different authors and researchers. However, researchers and practitioners consensus on one definition for the same is difficult. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) [17], defined social media as –

“Social Media is a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”.

Few other definitions and explanations which are proposed by different researchers are as follows:

- Social media is a hybrid element of promotion mix because in a traditional sense it enables companies to talk to their customers while in a nontraditional sense it enables customers to talk directly to one another [18].
- Social media are a cluster of modern internet related technologies that encourages participation, collaboration, user-content generation, sharing of information and connectivity among its users. These includes social networking sites (SNSs), wikis, blogs, podcasts, videocasts (or vlogs), mashups, folksonomies and online virtual worlds [19].
- Can be summarized by dividing the compound term “social media” into its two components, “social” and “media.” The “social” part refers to the activities carried out among people, whereas “media” refers to the internet-enabled tools and technologies used to carry out such activities [20].
- Social media are the online platforms that allow people to exchange ideas and opinions, discuss, make contacts or participate in social networking [21].
- A collection of online services that communicate and shares content with various stakeholders groups [22].

Dye (2007) [23] has very rightly referred the users of social media as “Generation C” where C stands content, creativity, consumption and connectivity. All these Cs has drastically increased in past decade and is expected to skyrocket in the coming new future. The users of social media are a new breed of consumer which cannot be grouped on the basis of age or gender but can be categorized on the basis of their behavior and the usage pattern they follow. In other words, how they create, share, manage and collaborate the content becomes more important. The entire social media is all about content-centric communication.

An interesting report put key statistics for digital, social, and mobile media in 2016 as [24]:

- 3.42 billion Internet users, equaling 46% global penetration.
- 2.31 billion Social media users, delivering 31% global penetration.
- 3.79 billion Unique mobile users, representing 51% global penetration.
- 1.97 billion Mobile social media users, equating to 27% global penetration.

Comparing the data for last three years (Jan 2014 – Jan 2017) for the sources of internet traffic globally gives a better insight of the entire picture. Comparison of Internet traffic data for Mobile (including Tablet) vs. Desktop, placed Desktop at 43.41%

and Mobile (including Tablet) at 56.59%. The analysis clearly signifies that customers using internet are largely on Mobile phones and the trend is continuously increasing as reflected in figure 1 and figure 2 [25].

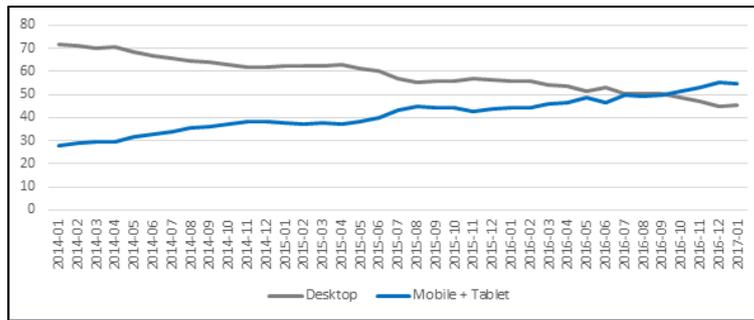


Fig. 1. Comparison of Internet traffic data for Desktop and Mobile (including tablet) for last three years (Jan 2014 - Jan 2017) [25]

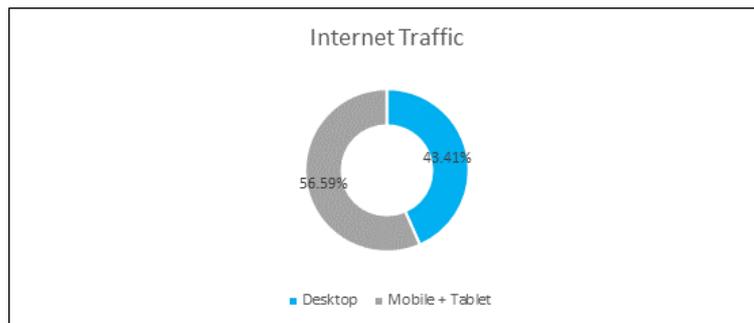


Fig. 2. Internet traffic data for Desktop and Mobile (including tablet) for Jan 2017[25]

Surprisingly, the forecasted annual run-rate of 366.8 Exabytes of mobile data traffic for the year 2020 is equivalent to 120 times more than all global mobile traffic generated just 10 years ago in 2010 [26].

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) [17] have classified social media into six more specific categories on the basis of social presence/ media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure. These categories are – collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds (Table 3).

Table 1. Classification of Social Media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure (Kaplan and Heinlein, 2010)

| | | Social Presence/ Media Richness | | |
|---------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Low | Medium | High |
| Self-Presentation/ Self-Disclosure | HIGH | Blogs | Social Networking Sites | Virtual social worlds |
| | LOW | Collaborative Projects | Content communities | Virtual game worlds |

Among the mentioned categories (Table 1) of social media social networking sites (SNSs) are the most commonly used platforms and has grown at a tremendous rate [27]. The tranche of the population which can be attributed as heavy users of social media are youngsters [28] [29] [30]. Numerous studies have been done in order to explore the effect various aspects of social networking sites on youngsters [31] - [37].

3.1 Social media: History, growth and importance

Social media has become part and parcel of one's life today. There are number of social networking platforms which cater to the different needs of the people. For example- Facebook is social networking platform, LinkedIn serves as a professional platform, Instagram is a virtual platform to share photograph, Tinder for romantic relationship, MySpace for music and others ,YouTube for screening videos and this list goes on and on. Some sites cater to diverse group of people with various interest while few attract people with common religion, geography, language, hobby and interest [38].

The first popular social networking site was Friendster [39]. However, the first recognizable social networking site was SixDegrees.com which was launched in 1997. SixDegrees.com allowed the users to create profile, list their friends and later they can also locate their friends. Figure 3 shows timeline of the launch dates of many major SNSs and dates when community sites re-launched with SNS features [38].

As can be noticed from the Figure 3 that SNSs started hitting the mainstream from 2003 onwards. Many new SNSs were launched during and after this year which tried to cater to different needs of multiple user groups. Also, few SNSs were launched in order to support niche demographics before expanding to the broader user base [38]. For example – Facebook which was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg along with his fellow college students and was initially limited to Harvard College students only. Later on Facebook was expanded to education institutions in Boston area, professionals in corporate networks and eventually to everyone.

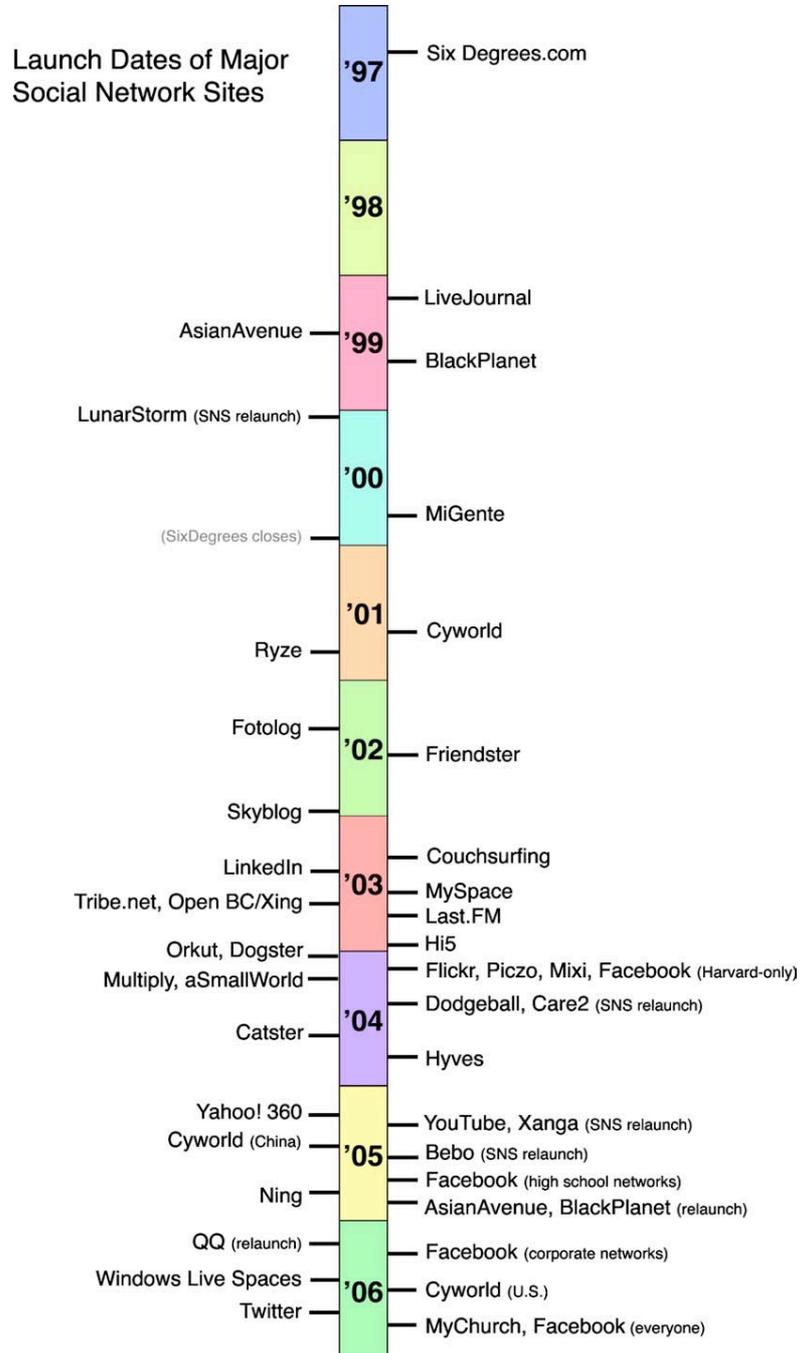
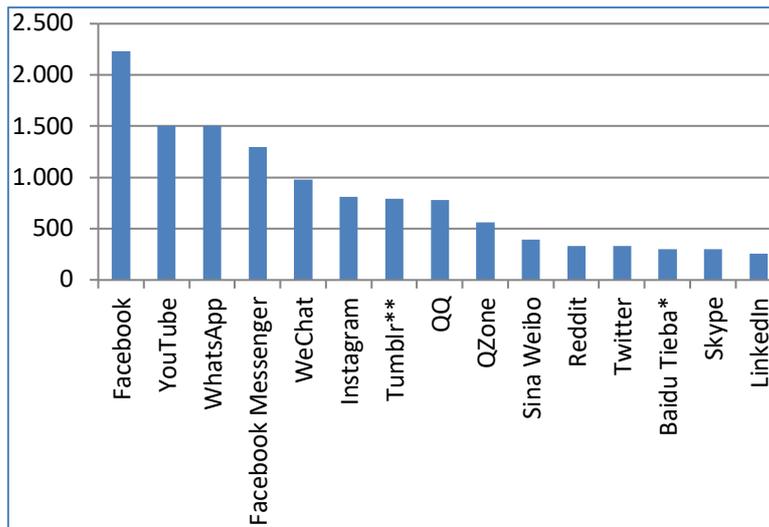


Fig. 3. Timeline of the launch dates of many major SNSs and dates when community sites re-launched with SNS features (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

As reported by the online website Statista 2018[40], Facebook is the most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2018 ranked by the number of active users. It has 2.2 billion monthly active users. Also, Figure 4 shows the most famous social network sites worldwide as of April 2018, ranked by number of active users (in millions).



*Platforms have not published updated user figures in the past 12 months; figures may be out of date and less reliable.

**These platforms do not publish MAU data, user figures from third-party reports.

Fig. 4. Most famous social network sites worldwide as of April 2018, ranked by number of active users (in millions) [40]

Social media has had its fair share of appreciation and criticism and will continue to have. After all it is a tool and usage of the tool depends on its user. A study conducted in 2017 indicated that positive effects of social media outweigh its negative points [41]. To bring closeness among family members, social media was perceived as a good tool of communication [42]. Positive connection was found between higher self-determination and use of social media by employees for work purposes. It helped in increasing their job satisfaction [43]. Social media has been appreciated as a tool to enhance clinical teaching and to stimulate learners. At the same time need for reinforcing professional standards is emphasized [44]. Utilitarian and hedonic motivations are shown to have a positive impact on intention of the user to browse products on social media [45]. Social networks have emerged as the most popular platform for users and companies [46]. Broader social contents and its struggles are dominating the data structures and more and more information is now available [47].

Social media allows the users to create, share, like (or dislike) content unlike the traditional website where organizations and firms act as the gatekeeper for any information disseminated to consumers [19]. The firms can act only as an observer in most

of the cases as they do not have the power or chance to change, alter or delete the content, information or review communicated by the consumers [17]. SNSs on one hand aid in maintenance of existing social relationship while on the other assist the user to create new social ties [31]. This contributes towards the fulfillment of the social need of the individual. Few studies [48] [49] [50] have also highlighted the use of social media for developing new products and services. Researchers are also of view that social media is an excellent tool of co-creation and customer engagement [51] - [53].

The picture would not be complete without sharing the negative effects of social media also. Social media has been in news for its deceptive attacks and what makes these attacks dangerous is the viral effect that takes place when the perpetrator takes advantage of the connections among people to deceive them [54]. Also negative comments lead to negative responses regardless of source credibility [55]. Social networks are influencing the lives of the individuals and communities and specially youth whose academic performance was found to decrease significantly due to hours of social site visits [56]. Social media is dictating a lot in lives of young people starting from goal of their relationships to how they want others to perceive them [57]. Interactions of a few form the perceptions of many [58].

Ability to participate in discussions from anywhere, making more friends than in real life were some positive effects while decrease in concentration in class, promotion of short handwriting were some negative effects that were highlighted [41]. Thus, any social media effort should be considered in the bigger picture of strategic communications and public education [58].

Though the users of social media can control the access to their personal information (by using privacy setting) a survey by Dwyer et al. (2007) [39] indicates that users do not use right to privacy in most of the cases. Thus, for the organization which needs consumer information SNSs can be a boon but raises questions about the security and privacy aspect of users. Also, there is always a cost associated with using social media as a communication medium for the firm. But the return (benefits) often offset the costs associated with this investment [22].

The users of SNSs voluntarily provide personal information to the service providers in return of free online services provided to them. These free services are usually covered by terms and conditions. The online behaviors of the customers are also traced using cookies. Making personal information available to the wide audience can pose high risk to the users [59]. Nissenbaum (2009) [60] considered information technology as major threat to privacy because “it enables pervasive surveillance, massive databases and lightning-speed distribution of information across the globe.”

It is difficult to imagine life without social media today. Just like no one could have predicted the growth of social media two decades back, it is difficult to imagine what would be the shape, reach and impact of social media in coming years specially with new, exciting and unpredictable technologies round the corner. All one can say with confidence is that with all its positives and negatives, social media is here to stay.

4 Social Media and Spirituality: Can the Dots be Connected?

Researchers across the world have tried to understand how to use social media to reach out to right target audience. Social media provides a platform to firms to cultivate meaningful relationship with users [61][62]. Also, conversation drives everything in social media platform i.e. how people using the same social media platform communicate and participate in various areas of their interest [63]. However, while using social media one should remember that the motives of both marketer and consumers can differ and may not go along each other [64]. For example the users may use social media to connect socially with other users while marketer go to sell things which are completely different motives. Thus, content can be termed as ‘foundation stone’ that drives traffic or participation of users in social media platforms.

Participation of people is seen to increase when a social media site witnesses higher activity [62]. Higher activity is witnessed when informative, interesting and engaging content is shared with audience rather than persuasive or promotional content [65]. Also one should remember that in social media the number of followers is used to determine a person’s influence on social media. An interaction with people of influence increases the reach of the site [58]. A study was done focusing on exploring the role of four social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram) in creation of knowledge or forming opinion leaders. As per the results, use of social media for basic information serves as an opportunity to promote interactivity and dialogue [66]. Similarly focus on social identity helps in promoting varied use and focus on relational identity helped in enhancing reinforced use [67]. Also, social media browsing intention was linked in a positive manner with word of mouth [45]. Internal core functions, need for data privacy and need for social self- portrayal were directly linked to high usage intensity [46]. Digital opinion leaders play an important role as they can change the attitude of followers and make them accept the information provided [68].

Spirituality has been widely studied in the field of medical sciences and organization workplace. In most of the studies it has been proved that spirituality contributes to the well-being of mental as well as physical health. This also promotes the use of spiritual well-being for the youngsters as they are the future of any society and country. It becomes vital to educate them on spirituality. Concerning how to teach spirituality researchers and academicians are of the notion that non-conventional methods such as social media can be used [69]. The authors believes that social media provides an excellent media to distribute and express spiritual information in this highly connected world.

4.1 Spirituality in the age of social media: Distribution and expression of spiritual information on social media

There are no social, racial or geographical boundaries of social media and thus it can be used as an efficient tool to spread spirituality across the world. Social Media can be used to solve a problem collectively, for collective well-being or be collectively innovative [70]. In today’s world there exist examples where social media platforms are used in order to spread spirituality among people. Most of these platform try

to connect and appeal to the users of entire world as these platforms can be access anywhere, anytime and by anyone. For example speakingtree.in is a spiritual network intended to create a link between spiritual seekers with spiritual practitioners. The users of this platform can follow the spiritual masters or gurus, can ask questions and can also write or create blogs. Users can also write answers to questions of other users. The discussion forums in such type of platform engages the users and helps the users in expressing their own thought process related to the topic. Thus, these platform on one hand foster the distribution of spirituality while on the other aids users to express their feeling related to spirituality.

These platforms try to relate spirituality with the day to day life of users and create positive impact in their life and well-being of oneself. For example, a user of social media can make others happy or feel good by expressing his or her liking, affection or appreciation about other user. This creates a ripple effect of happiness where users pass this happiness to another and in few hours this happiness creates “pandemic of happiness across the planet” [70]. In other words, this happiness or positivity has a multiplier effect and is able to create a self-organized and dynamic network of happiness, inspiration, positivity, creativity and so on.

The present study tries to create and present a model in order to connect the dots between social media and spirituality. In other words, as evident from different facts and figures the penetration rate and use of social media platforms are increasing at a great pace and there lies a great opportunity to use this platform to enhance spirituality in people.

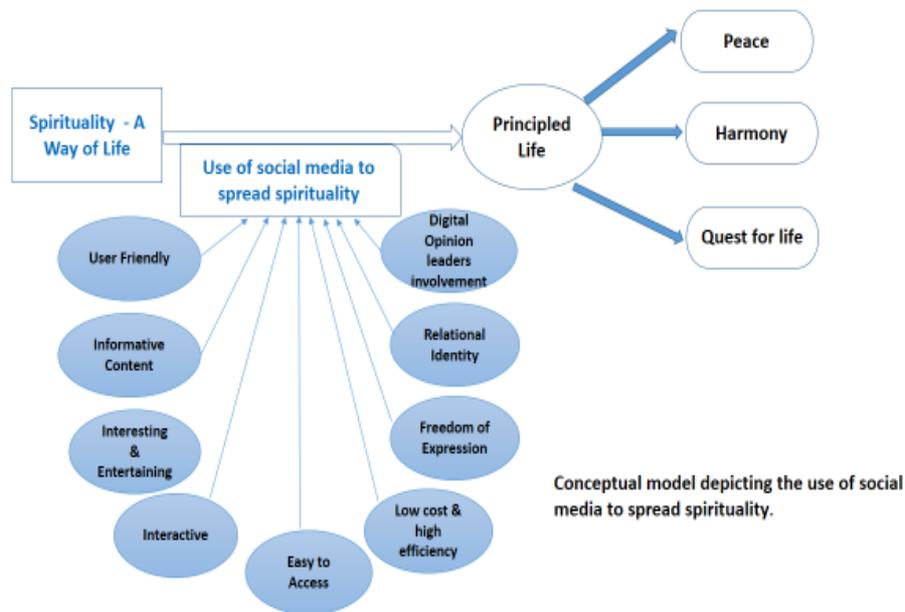


Fig. 5. Conceptual model depicting the use of social media to disseminate spirituality

4.2 Analysis and discussion

Spirituality as well as social media has received lot of attention in the past few decades. Spirituality in most of the cases is considered as a way of life while social media have already created turmoil in the world of communication. Many researchers have studied the effect of usage of social media in students and associated use of social media with being less social [71] or having negative effects on academic performance [72] Social Media is often blamed as an enhancer to superficial connection and an obstacle to the mindful life but the fact that it is growing and is becoming popular can't be change. However the changes in technology cannot be stopped but can be harnessed to create a better world.

The conceptual model presented in figure 5 aims at combining spirituality and social media where social media can be used as a medium to enhance and spread spirituality in day to day life of an individual. A study done by Whiting's and Williams (2013) [73] explored ten important reasons of using and liking social media. The important reasons highlighted were - "social interactions, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, and expression of opinions, convenience utility, information sharing and surveillance and watching of others".

The model presented summarizes the characteristics of a virtuous social media platform. The presence (or absence) of all these characteristics decides the success (or failure) of a particular social media platform. For example an engaging and interesting content drives the success of any social media platform [74] [75]. With all these characteristics and using an integrated approach (for using different platforms), spirituality can be spread for wellbeing and in interest of humanity. Social media can be used to share information about spirituality. The information can be shared in an interesting manner that encourages participation from the users. Also, the easy accessibility of social media will ensure that we get high efficiency at comparatively low cost. Use of digital opinion leaders can encourage people to identify with an image. The strong points of social media can be used to help people discover the journey of peace, harmony in their quest for life. Social Media is a powerful medium to inspire and cultivate spirituality in the everyday life of people. For example –A person's day may start with reading inspirational and motivational quotes in some social networking platform like WhatsApp or Facebook. Beautiful imagery and breathtaking images can be posted in some platforms to remind people that they are surrounded with a beautiful world. In other words, directly or indirectly it will remind people to be awesome and live a healthy, peaceful and happy life. This will also enhance harmony and quest for life in people. These are all the outcome of a principled life which is ultimately the motive of spirituality.

Thus, social media can positively contribute towards the spiritual growth of mankind. It will interconnect the people as living-being, enhance well-being within our self and will contribute towards making a world a better place to live and enjoy.

5 Conclusion and Recommendation

Spirituality and social media are two distinct, different concepts. Spirituality exists for thousands of years and social media was born a few years ago. Spirituality is about finding inner peace and harmony while these words are not used for social media in any way. On one hand the reach and impact of social media is enormous and on the other hand need for spirituality is felt by people of all age groups. The paper was an attempt to use the impact of social media to spread the philosophy of spirituality. The paper was an attempt to use the dynamic nature of spirituality to bring peace and harmony in lives of many. The conceptual model proposed highlights the positive aspects of social media that can be used to spread spirituality. Spirituality has been found to be very useful in different sectors. Different sectors may use the relevant characteristics of social media to spread spirituality. Few online platform such as soulspeak.com, speaking tree.in, Isha foundation are already using online platform to spread spirituality however the intense need demands more such players to come into the picture and use social media for the same. Also, more research needs to be done to find out the psychology, behavioral pattern, use and adoption of social media and spread of information by the users in online media environment. We hope researchers will test this model empirically to contribute and strengthen it further.

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