Always Connected: WhatsApp Use in Two Middle-class Pentecostal Churches in India

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Abstract

This article explores the activity in the WhatsApp-groups of two Indian Pentecostal churches using Christine Hine's E3-model. It shows how the activities in the groups, in various ways, are *embedded*, *embodied*, and *everyday*. A central finding is that what takes place in these chat-groups is closely related to both offline congregational life and the church members' everyday lives. The WhatsApp-groups extended what the church was, and what it meant for the members into an online space. Further, the article highlights that through these WhatsApp-groups, the church members expressed a greater level of connection to each other and their immediate, personal spaces. Having the church in their back pocket through their smartphones, resulted in a blurring of boundaries between congregational life and the everyday lives of members. The study is based on six months of fieldwork in two churches in the North Indian city Gurugram, including participation in the churches' WhatsApp groups.

Introduction

The developments in digital technologies in recent decades have had a profound impact on societies and cultures, and is also transforming contemporary religion.[1] Many religious communities are going through a digital transformation in that they are embedding digital technology and platforms into how they operate and communicate.[2] For example, to have a web or Facebook-page (or both) is the new normal, and more and more religious communities are using digital platforms, such as, Instagram and YouTube, to reach out to and strengthen relationships within their own group, as well as to connect to potential new members.

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[1] Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, eds., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022).

[2] Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010); Miranda Klaver, *Hillsong Church: Expansive Pentecostalism, Media and the Global City* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021); Jeffrey H Mahan, "Congregation(s) in Digital Culture," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9, no. 2 (2020): 247–64; Oren Golan, "Dual Production for Dual Publics: Community: Chabad's Inward and Outward Online Presence," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 175–85; Maria Frahm-Arp, "Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity and Social Media in South Africa: Mitigating Marginality, Prosperity Teachings, and the Emergence of a Black Middle Class," in *Religion, Media, and Marginality in Modern Africa*, ed. Felicitas Becker, Joel Cabrita, and Marie Rodet (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), 256–80.

Moreover, as argued by Jeffrey H. Mahan the digital space is providing new conditions for individuals to be religious and think about their religious self. These include, among others, the vast availability of religious content that can be accessed through the internet, the ease with how a person can connect beyond their own religious community, and the increased possibility for lay-participation.[3]

While research on religion and the digital is rapidly growing, the field of global Pentecostalism has been slow in catching up in what manner the internet is changing how Pentecostal communities operate and is also influencing the lived religion of adherents. Even though there is a broad consensus that Pentecostals are particularly skillful in adapting to new forms of media technology,[4] studies that specifically focus on online-offline complexities are rare. The increasing recognition that online and offline religion are overlapping and intimately connected[5] demands for further studies on how the digital has become embedded within Pentecostal communities and in the lived religion of Pentecostals. This article is a small contribution to this area of research and explores, using Christine Hine's E3-model,[6] the activity in two Indian Pentecostal churches' WhatsApp groups.

WhatsApp is a communication app that allows users to send messages, images, audio files, and videos, as well as make audio and video calls. All communication is free so long as the person has an internet connection. Users can have one-to-one conversations, as well as form groups of up to 512 participants. India is WhatsApp's largest market and is widely used for both personal and professional communication.[7]

Before turning to the two churches' WhatsApp groups, I first briefly sketch what previously has been studied in relation to Pentecostalism, media, and the digital. Secondly, I explain Hine's E3-model and discuss some methodological issues. Using Hine's categories embedded, embodied, and everyday, I thirdly explore the activities in the two churches' WhatsApp groups and end the article with a short conclusion.

1. Pentecostalism and the digital

The birth of digital religious studies can be traced to the mid-1990's when scholars first began to investigate how religion manifested through the internet.[8] The term "cyberspace" was used to describe this new arena and it tended to be understood as a place fundamentally different from "real life." The emphasis was on a type of religious engagement that was novel and disconnected from traditional religion. At that stage, the internet had not yet become a

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[3] Mahan, "Congregation(s) in Digital Culture."

[4] Birgit Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. Allan Anderson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 113—130.

[5] Mia Lövheim and Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction, Rethinking the Online–Offline Connection in the Study of Religion Online," *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 8 (2011): 1083-1096.

[6] Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

[7] Jessica Maddox and Shaheen Kanthawala, "The Revolution Will Be Forwarded: Interrogating India's WhatsApp Imaginary," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2022): 1–19.

[8] Mia Lövheim and Heidi A. Campbell, "INTRODUCTION"

topic of investigation among scholars of Pentecostalism, rather, those in the field tended to be interested in the intersection between media and religion and so had turned their attention to how Pentecostal communities were appropriating mass-media.[9] In the years to come, these scholars explored, among other things, how Pentecostalism was contributing to a new Christian public visibility and culture,[10] how new religious formats were evolving around charismatic media personalities,[11] and how various media technologies were used to mediate the transcendental.[12]

While these studies seldom discussed the internet, they provided important insight for understanding Pentecostalism's general position towards media and new technology. We learnt that for most Pentecostal communities and groups, there was no conflict between religion and technology, rather, Pentecostals tended to be early adopters of new media, thrived along with the new information technology, and used it skilfully and efficiently. Another central finding in research on Pentecostalism and mass-media was that the justification given for appropriating mass-media was often to "reach out to the world," in other words, the enthusiasm for using mass-media tended to be missionary driven.

As the field of digital religious studies matured scholars saw a need to develop a more balanced approach to religion found online. A distinction came to be made between "religion online" and "online religion," the latter being religious activity online, while the former designated sites that mainly provided information about religion, without any or with limited possibility for interaction.[13] This model was, among other things, applied to explore how religious communities and groups made use of the internet.[14] These questions slowly began

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[9] Early publications of Pentecostalism and mass-media include Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 258–77; Birgit Meyer, "Popular Ghanaian Cinema and 'African Heritage,'" *Africa Today* 46, no. 2 (1999): 93–114; Patricia Birman and David Lehmann, "Religion and the Media in a Battle for Ideological Hegemony: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and TV Globo in Brazil," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18, no. 2 (1999): 145–64; Marleen De Witte, "Altar Media's Living Word: Televised Charismatic Christianity in Ghana.," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2003): 172–202; Asonzeh Ukah, "Advertising God: Nigerian Christian Video-Films and the Power of Consumer Culture," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2003): 203–31; Birgit Meyer, "Visions of Blood, Sex and Money: Fantasy Spaces in Popular Ghanaian Cinema," *Visual Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2003): 15–41.

[10] Birgit Meyer, "Going and Making Public Pentecostalism as Public Religion in Ghana," in *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*, ed. Harri Englund (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 149–66; Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Mediated Religion in South Africa: Balancing Air-Time and Rights Claims.," in *Media, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 166–87.

[11] Tamar Gordon and Mary Hancock, "'The Crusade Is the Vision': Branding Charisma in a Global Pentecostal Ministry," *Material Religion* 1, no. 3 (2005): 386–404; Patricia Birman, "Future in the Mirror: Media, Evangelicals, and Politics in Rio de Janeiro," in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 52–72.

[12] William K. Kay, "Pentecostalism and Religious Broadcasting," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 30, no. 3 (2009): 245–54; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Anointing Through the Screen: Neo-Pentecostalism and Televised Christianity in Ghana," *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 1 (2005): 9–28.

[13] Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–15.

[14] Lövheim and Campbell, "Introduction"

to draw the attention of scholars of Pentecostalism,[15] but tellingly, as Rosalind J. Hackett complains in the article "The New Virtual (Inter)Face of African Pentecostalism" (published in 2009), that while scholars of Pentecostalism often acknowledged the impact of the internet, there is an absence of studies that treat the subject seriously.[16] In the article, Hackett examined the websites of eight African Pentecostal ministries, focusing particularly on leadership and the constitution of authority. She showed how these websites were used to convey the picture of Pentecostal leaders as "big men" with a big god, but also allowed leaders to authenticate their authority through testimonies, historical accounts, and biblical texts.

In the early 2010s, the sharp distinction between online and offline religion began to be questioned within the field of digital religious studies. As the internet became more integrated in people's everyday lives there was an increasing recognition that these two spheres were interconnected and overlapped.[17] Moreover, one saw that, what has been called the "Web 2.0" allowed for a different internet culture, more focused on interaction, participation, openness, sharing, and play.[18]

However, while scholars of Pentecostalism observed that the presence of Pentecostal ministries and communities on the internet rapidly increased, the studies conducted during the following decade were mostly concerned with online religion and seldom explored online/offline connections. Nevertheless, the internet seemed to have caught the attention of some scholars of Pentecostalism as new issues and areas began to be explored. For example, Innocent Chiluwa, examined the use of the internet for Christian worship in Nigeria and found that spiritual experiences and miracles were regularly reported by people who took part in online worship.[19] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu argued that the internet is regarded by Pentecostals in Africa as "a 'technological miracle' for the evangelization of the world" which Pentecostal ministries use to reach out to local, as well as, diasporic communities.[20] Additionally, Maria Frahm-Arp observed how Pentecostal churches and pastors used

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[15] Asamoah-Gyadu, "''Get on the Internet!' Says the LORD' Religion, Cyberspace and Christianity in Contemporary Africa," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007): 225–42; Kirsteen Kim, "Ethereal Christianity: Reading Korean Mega-Church Websites," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007).

[16] Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "The New Virtual (Inter)Face of African Pentecostalism," *Society* 46, no. 6 (2009): 496–503.

[17] Lövheim and Campbell, "Introduction"

[18] Grant Blank and Bianca C. Reisdorf, "The Participatory Web: A User Perspective on Web 2.0," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 4 (2012): 537–54; Gunther Eysenbach, "Medicine 2.0: Social Networking, Collaboration, Participation, Apomediation, and Openness," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 10, no. 3 (2008): 1–13.

[19] Innocent Chiluwa, "Online Religion in Nigeria: The Internet Church and Cyber Miracles," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 6 (2012): 734–49.

[20] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'We Are on the Internet': Contemporary Pentecostalism in Africa and the New Culture of Online Religion," in *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, ed. Rosalind I. J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 165.

websites, Facebook, and Twitter to shape the religious experience of believers, provide a space for testimonies, and offer channels for political engagement.[21]

While there still is much to be explored in terms of Pentecostal activity online—especially on the digital platforms Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok—a key area of research development is to better understand offline/online dynamics, especially among ordinary members. In other words, how is the new digital condition changing how Pentecostals are experiencing and practicing their faith? There are, for example, indications that internet-connected smartphones are changing dynamics among church members, as well as members' relationship to their church.[22] Further, a study that will arguably become increasingly influential as we continue to investigate Pentecostalism and the digital space is Miranda Klaver's recent book *Hillsong Church: Expansive Pentecostalism, Media and the Global City* in which she explores the impact of mediatization in the context of Hillsong.[23]

With this article I aim to contribute to the discussion on Pentecostalism and the digital by further exploring online/offline dynamics and the embeddedness of the digital in two church communities. As a corollary, this study will also contribute to research on Indian Pentecostalism and is, to my knowledge, the first study on how Pentecostals in India are making use of new digital technology.

2. Christine Hine's E3-model: Embedded, Embodied, Everyday

Sociologist Christine Hine provides in her book *Ethnography for the Internet* a model for approaching and studying the internet in a time when the online and offline have become interwoven in our daily lives.[24] She argues that as the internet has become an infrastructure that underpins a variety of activities and a taken-for-granted means of being and doing we need a strategy to investigate what the internet might mean for specific groups or individuals. Hine emphasizes that while the internet might have become a mass phenomenon, access to internet and knowledge about how to use it varies greatly not only between different national contexts, but also within countries, an issue to which I will come back later in the article.[25]

In her E3-model, Hine emphasises three aspects of the internet that can help us understand internet-usage today, including the online/offline dynamics. First, there is a need to consider

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[21] Frahm-Arp, "Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity and Social Media in South Africa: Mitigating Marginality, Prosperity Teachings, and the Emergence of a Black Middle Class." In *Religion, Media, and Marginality in Modern Africa,* edited by Felicitas Becker, Joel Cabrita, and Marie Rodet, 256-80. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018.
[22] G.A.A. Cavalcanti de Arruda et al., "The Production of Knowledge through Religious and Social Media Infrastructure: World Making Practices among Brazilian Pentecostals," *Popular Communication* 20, no. 3 (2022): 208–21; 'Rotimi Taiwo, "Religious Discourse in the New Media: A Case Study of Pentecostal Discourse Communities of SMS Users in Southwestern Nigeria," in *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, ed. Rosalind I. J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 190–204.
[23] Klaver, *Hillsong Church: Expansive Pentecostalism, Media and the Global City*.
[24] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*
[25] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet, 7*

how the internet is *embedded* within the group studied.[26] There are many aspects of embeddedness, including what devices that are used to access the internet, in what situations and contexts people use these devices, and how personal and circumstantial elements are brought into online spaces. In examining how the internet is embedded within a community, we can get clues as to what the internet might mean for that particular group.

A second aspect to consider is the notion of the internet as *embodied*.[27] In the early phase of digital studies, the internet was often thought of as a space where users could potentially become someone else, where they could develop an alternative identity. However, Hine argues, most of us today do not have a virtual identity that radically differ from how we understand ourselves in offline settings. Rather, online activity is more of an extension of our embodied way to be and act in the world. While online and offline spheres are not related in some predictable fashion as regards to embodiment, the bodies that use the internet are socially situated bodies and therefore our class, gender, age, sexuality, occupation, and interests do often matter when we interact online. Moreover, a motivation to go online often has a bodily motivation, whether it be finding emotional support, sexual gratification, health related information, or to have a good laugh.

Third, much of internet usage today has become commonplace, that is, something *everyday*.[28] However, just because it often is experienced as something mundane, it does not mean that it is not important but instead does deserve critical attention. The everydayness of the internet can be difficult to grasp as it is about making visible that which is unremarkable, such as, unspoken norms and rules in how people interact on a platform or usage of language. Another aspect of the everyday internet is that it is integrated in our everyday goings-on from how we conduct our relationships with friends and family, find a recipe, listen to music, to reading the latest news. Therefore in this analysis, I will look at these three aspects, of embedded, embodied and everyday, in relation to the activities and dynamics of the churches' WhatsApp groups.

3. Method

This study is based on fieldwork in two middle-class Pentecostal churches in the North Indian city and business centre of Gurugram, conducted between September 2016 and March 2017. The data was collected for my dissertation and consisted of online and offline participant observations, interviews, and diaries.[29] The focus of this article is on the data collected from the WhatsApp groups, however, the offline participate observations, interviews, and diaries

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[26] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet,* 32–40.

[27] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet,* 41–46.

[28] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet,* 46–53.

[29]29 Julia Kuhlin, "Lived Pentecostalism in India: Middle Class Women and Their Everyday Religion" (PhD Thesis, Uppsala, Uppsala University, 2022). The time spent in the field was equally divided between the two churches: I spent three months with each church participating in whatever goings-on took place and spending time with the members. During the fieldwork, I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews (including five with regular churchgoers from Nigeria and Kenya). Eleven of the Indian women I interviewed wrote weeklong diaries. In the dissertation one will find a detailed discussion on method and methodology.

provide a crucial backdrop for understanding the context of what took place in these chat-groups. To be noted as well, that while the dissertation had a particular focus on the female adherents in the two churches, this article has a broader agenda as it aims to discuss WhatsApp-activities among both women and men. However, since the interviews were conducted with women and the diaries written by the same, the material is somewhat biased towards the female members. However, online and offline participant observations were made of the church at large, and the fieldwork, as such, included many conversations with men.

As for the churches, one church was part of the Pentecostal denomination Assemblies of God while the other is best described as an independent Pentecostal church. The pastor of the latter, that is, 'Church of All Nations,'[30] had previously worked in an established Pentecostal church in Delhi but decided to start his own church in the city of Gurugram in 2009. The pastor couple, Sunil and Aditi,[31] came from North Indian Hindu families and had become believers in their early twenties. The Assemblies of God church, called 'Loving Assemblies of God,' was led by a South Indian pastor couple, John and Dharmila, both from Tamil Nadu and of Pentecostal background. There were no official records of members in the churches, but the church service in Loving Assemblies of God had around 80-100 attendees on an average Sunday morning and Church of All Nations between 50-70 attendees. While this may be considered a low number in South India or North-East India where the percentage of Christians are considerably higher, in the North Indian context these two churches may be considered mid-size churches.

Most members of the two churches were internal professional migrants who had relocated to Gurugram due to the availability of career opportunities and higher paid jobs. Most of the male attendees were generally trying to pursue a career within the IT or finance sectors, while there were greater differences among the women in terms of their main occupations. Some women were pursuing professional careers (for example, as doctors or lawyers) while others had, after becoming mothers, settled for less time-consuming jobs (for example, as teachers) while some were homemakers. In terms of age, most members of the two churches were between 25-40 years old and around two-thirds were married with children. The churches were multiethnic and multilingual; thus, English was used as the common language.

Both churches had an online presence in the form of websites and Facebook-groups. Loving Assemblies of God's website consisted mostly of information about the church and upcoming events. There was more activity in the Facebook group, but only a limited number of members were active in the group for reasons that will be discussed below. Church of All Nations' website was more dynamic. It was updated quite frequently and had, in addition to the usual information provided about the church and upcoming events, a blog and a testimony page. Moreover, the Sunday sermons were normally uploaded. The activity in Church of All Nations'

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[30] The name of the churches are pseudonyms to protect the identity of members.
[31] All names in the article are pseudonyms.

Facebook group was low and consisted mostly of information about upcoming events in the church.

However, in contrast to the two websites there was another platform used by groups in both churches in which there was much activity, namely on WhatsApp. Loving Assemblies of God and Church of All Nations both had several WhatsApp groups. Apart from their main WhatsApp's group, they had special groups for women, men, youths, and cell groups. In this article, I will focus on the activities in the main WhatsApp-groups, in which almost all regular churchgoers were part. The activity in these groups was high and varied. In Loving Assemblies of God around 20-40 messages were posted every day, and in Church of All Nations the number was between 5-20 messages a day. As such, through the churches main WhatsApp group, churchgoers were in daily contact. I became part of Loving Assemblies of God's main WhatsApp group a couple of weeks into my fieldwork and was a member until I left India, as such, I was a member of the group for about five and a half months. As I joined Church of All Nations later in my fieldwork, my participation in the group was shorter and lasted around two and a half months.

This article is based on my observations in both these WhatsApp groups, as well as material from my fieldwork at large related to online/offline dynamics.

4.   WhatsApp and the Churches

As mentioned above, Loving Assemblies of God and Church of All Nations were middle-class churches located in the city of Gurugram, which is one of the main international business hubs in India. The city draws professionals from all over the country, as well as abroad.[32] As increasingly more middle-class Christians have settled in Gurugram, churches of all the major Christian traditions that can be characterised as middle-class, have emerged in the city in the last two decades.[33] Loving Assemblies of God and Church of All Nations were typical examples of this trend and were churches that mainly attracted internal professional migrants.

As internal migrants, most of the members of the two churches lived far from their family and kin, as well as most of their friends from their hometowns. Like so many other Indians, they used WhatsApp to keep in contact with their loved ones, but also used the platform to communicate with, among others, their colleagues, clients, fellow students, neighbours, and their children's' teachers. As a matter of fact, WhatsApp has become an immensely popular app in India and is widely used in all sorts of contexts, including education, business, and health care.[34] Moreover, Benson Rajan and Sahana Sarkar found in an interview study among Catholic and Protestant Christians in Delhi that churches commonly use WhatsApp as a

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[32] Shoshana R. Goldstein, "Planning the Millennium City: The Politics of Place-Making in Gurgaon, India," *International Area Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2016): 12–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865916628798.
[33] Julia Kuhlin, "Lived Pentecostalism in India"
[34] Maddox and Kanthawala, "The Revolution Will Be Forwarded: Interrogating India's WhatsApp Imaginary."

platform to communicate with members.[35] According to Rajan and Sarkar, WhatsApp has become an efficient tool for churches to reach out to members and co-ordinate events since almost everybody has an account and the app allows for the creation of large chat-groups. The same experience was echoed among the pastor couples in Loving Assemblies of God and Church of All Nations.

It is worth noting that while most adult middle-class Indians might have a smartphone and a WhatsApp-profile, the same cannot be said of the working class and poor. Even though smartphones are currently comparatively cheap in India and therefore not an exclusive gadget of the middle-class, access to the internet and the general usage skill is much lower among the working class and poor, though of course this varies according to gender and age.[36] Hence, the assumption that WhatsApp is an efficient tool to reach out to "all members" would not necessarily apply in the same way in churches with members from the lower economic strata.

Yet, WhatsApp was considered a very practical tool by the pastor couples in the two churches. In addition, they also reported a preference for WhatsApp as a platform over, for example, Facebook because the app allowed them to communicate more freely and without fear with the church members. Due to widespread anti-Christian attitudes and increasing persecution of Christians in India, the pastor couples were careful with what they posted on open channels and forums like Facebook and their website. Over the last decades, the situation for Christians (and Muslims) in India has become gradually more difficult and every year hundreds of incidents of violence are reported.[37] Further, the government systematically represses critical voices of those trying to report and advocate for religious minorities. Similarly, there is arguably an obstruction of the work of religious and charitable nongovernmental organizations, as well as a continuing enforcement of anti-conversion laws against non-Hindus. While violent attacks mostly take place in rural areas, the overall situation requires all Christian leaders in India to be cautious in what they say and do in public contexts. Hence, in order to be able to communicate without restriction with their congregations, the pastor couples in both Loving Assemblies of God and Church of All Nations preferred the closed groups of WhatsApp over other public platforms.

However, the churches' WhatsApp groups were much more than forums for the pastor couples to disseminate information about church activities or to organise church events. As noted in Section 3 (Method), there was a lot of activity in the churches' WhatsApp groups with various ongoing conversations every day. People posted, among other things, prayer requests, jokes, worship songs, birthday wishes, religious memes, shared their personal

[35] Benson Rajan and Sahana Sarkar, "Emerging Digital Churches in India: A Study of WhatsApp Communication in Churches," in *Religion and Society*, ed. Samit Kar (Delhi: Monoshakti, 2017), 125–39.

[36] Jerry Watkinsa, Kathi R. Kitnerb, and Dina Mehtac, "Mobile and Smartphone Use in Urban and Rural India," *Continuum* 26, no. 5 (2012): 685–97; Rishikesan Parthiban et al., "Digital Access through Smartphones and Well-Being of BoP Women: Insights from a Field Study in India," *Information Technology & People* 35, no. 1 (2022): 1–26.

[37] Chad M. Bauman, *Anti-Christian Violence in India* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

struggles, and discussed current events. The WhatsApp groups were vibrant forums; they were spaces for bonding, showing love and care, and a space where members could support each other in spiritual growth.

To give an example of how the three aspects of Hine's E3-model (that is, embedded, embodied and everyday) were evident in the use of internet and online/offline connections, I will share the transcript of a conversation that took place in Church of All Nations' WhatsApp group. I will thereafter discuss each aspect separately. The conversation starts with a prayer request from a young woman who has travelled back to her hometown in North-East India. She was the daughter of a pastor and had been asked to preach the coming Sunday. The prayer request is followed by several responses, including one short teaching story.

10:18 Varuna: Praise God... Church. I have reached safely to my hometown. Please keep me in your prayers especially for tomorrow as I have been asked to give the Sunday message in our church.
11:03 Sushil: Sure sister
11:07 Sushil: Once a man asked God. Why you don't fulfill my wishes if you are everywhere? GOD replied: I am like WIFI my Child. I am available everywhere but you need to connect with me with a Correct Password. And the password is *BELIEVE IN ME & HAVE FAITH*. 🙏
11:37 Bjay: Will pray
12:01 Arjun: Varuna, praise & thanks to our triune Lord God almighty. Praying. Amen
12:36 Varuna: Thankyou... I really want the prayer support...
12:46 Pastor: Will do
12:46 Pastor: Praise God.
16:57 Ravi: 👍
16:58 Ravi: Will do
17:04 Usen: 👍
20:30 Mercy: Praying for you Varuna.
21:48 Varuna: Thankyou 😃

Looking closely at this conversation, it is obvious that Varuna's way of acting in the chat group is related to what the church means for her in her offline religious life, namely, a supporting and loving spiritual community. Her offline and online life is, at this juncture, overlapping and intertwined. She has access to the church, as a community, through her smartphone and uses this possibility to connect when she now finds herself in need of prayer support. The fact that she is 2,300 kilometres away does not inhibit her interaction; the church has become an embedded part in her life, no matter where she finds herself physically. It is also likely that the people who participated in this conversation and responded to Varuna's request, did actually take a moment to pray for her and so their online activity facilitated religious activity offline. In fact, several of the women I interviewed told me that they often read through the latest posts in the WhatsApp group when taking a moment for prayer to see if somebody in the church needed prayer for something specific.

Further, in the conversation, Varuna shows up as an embodied person. While not expressing her feelings explicitly, she gives the impression that she is in an emotional state where she needs love and support. The people who respond show care, which turns the conversation into a bonding, emotional event. Varuna's social position in her hometown also becomes apparent in this conversation. While she (in Church of All Nations) was regarded as a "youth" (because she was unmarried) and would not have been given the opportunity to teach on a Sunday service, in her hometown, she once again becomes the pastor's daughter and is asked to give the Sunday message.

Lastly, this form of conversation, starting with somebody asking for prayer support was common and everyday in both churches' WhatsApp groups. While there are several persons that respond to Varuna's request, the majority do not: this sort of appeal did just not draw a lot of attention to itself since similar requests were posted several times a week. The everydayness of the conversation is also visible through the informal language, ignorance of grammatical errors, and the usage of emojis.

An interesting aspect of this conversation worth noting is that it is a fellow member and not the pastor who provides religious guidance to Varuna. The pastors did, in fact, have a more withdrawn role in these groups than they did in offline settings. While they almost always responded to prayer requests and concerns put forward by members, they were seldom the ones who wrote the most elaborate responses. An opportunity was thus opened for lay members to provide spiritual guidance and encouragement. While not everybody took this opportunity, some did, both men and women.

5. Embedded

As pointed out at the beginning of the article, scholars previously approached religious activity online as a form of action taking place in a domain separate from "real life" settings. That is, approached it as a type of religious engagement that was different and disconnected from how religion traditionally was caried out. However, as we saw in the above example, what took place in Church of All Nation's WhatsApp group reflected what the church was for Varuna in her offline life. In this section, I will give some further examples of how the offline and online lives of the members were connected in regard to the activities in the churches' WhatsApp groups.

On a general level, current affairs and events that affected the lives of members were commonly raised in the group chat. This could be anything from checking in if everybody was okay after the last earthquake, to discussing possible outcomes of the presidential election in the USA. An event that created an extraordinary amount of activity was when the Indian government, on November 8 in 2016, decided to demonetize all RS500 and RS1000 banknotes, making them invalid effective from midnight the same day.[38] The action was

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[38] "India Scraps 500 and 1,000 Rupee Bank Notes Overnight," BBC, November 9, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-37906742.

claimed to be done to curtail the shadow economy and increase cashless transactions, but it fast became a much-criticized action as millions of households were thrown into personal economic crises. While the demonetization hit the poor and working class the hardest, those who are often totally dependent on cash, the cash shortage also created a lot of problems for the middle class and there were lengthy queues everywhere as people tried to exchange their banknotes.

During this time, Loving Assemblies of God's WhatsApp group became an important forum for the church members to get information about the latest updates from officials and where one could find a cashier with money. There were also many discussions taking place about the action and related jokes were frequently posted. While members of the church, in general, were cautious of expressing critique of the prime minister Narendra Modi, the following months after the demonetization he was both openly critiqued and ridiculed. Even when I joined Church of All Nations' WhatsApp group in January, around two months after the event, the issue was still from time to time raised in the chat.

Another way in which offline and online activities were intertwined were in the organization of various happenings in the church; everything from weekly prayer drives to particular events, such as, the yearly Christmas program or outreach meetings. While information about upcoming events and goings-on was normally given at the Sunday service, one needed to be part of the churches' WhatsApp group to be fully informed about details and changes. The WhatsApp group was used by the pastor couples and church leaders to organise arrangements but was also used by members to ask questions or make changes from previous commitments. For example, every Sunday the following message would appear in Loving Assemblies of God's WhatsApp group from the assistant pastor:

> *Dear Brothers / Sisters, 1st call for changing the Chain prayer timing. You can whatsup the timing. If u r not informing and pray on a different time, it will break the chain. Kindly co-operate with us. Thank you in advance. With Love, Loving AG Church.*

This message was normally followed by messages, such as: "Hi brother. Can you please change our time from 1-2am to 1-2pm in afternoon" and "Dear bro, please change my timing to 9-10pm... Thanks." As such, the WhatsApp groups were not only practical for those arranging events, but also for those participating as it provided possibility for fast communication. After being part of the groups for some time, it was clear for me that to be fully informed about what happened in the churches it was necessary to be part of the group and follow the conversations.

There were, however, also incidents when a particular discussion or episode taking place online had consequences for offline dynamics and congregational life. A striking example involved one of the church leaders in Church of All Nations. This person, who I will call Chacko, had a tendency to sometimes overshare personal issues and his theological standpoints on various themes in the WhatsApp group. Over the course of a few days, he wrote a long post about his daughter (who was also an active member in the church but not part of the group

due to her age) and another long post about the second coming of Christ. Shortly thereafter, the pastor wrote that it had been decided, after talking with Chacko, with other church leaders, and the WhatsApp-group administrator, that Chacko would be removed from the WhatsApp group and, for a time being, he would be removed of his leadership responsibilities in the church. The pastor further explained that all members in the group needed to think about what they shared about others and that WhatsApp was not a forum for expressing one's theological position on difficult themes. The following Sunday, Chacko, who otherwise was running around greeting everybody and usually had responsibilities during the Sunday service, sat quietly in his chair. The incident was not mentioned during the church service and people were very reluctant to talk about it. My fieldwork ended just a week after the incident, so I did not get to follow what happened during the coming weeks but was later updated by a participant that Chacko had again been added to the group and taken up his responsibilities in church.

6. Embodied

In this section, I will highlight some of the ways in which the activity in the WhatsApp groups were integrated with other embodied experiences. As pointed out by Hine, in most cases when we go online by, for example, entering a particular app or browsing on the web, we do so as an extension of our embodied way of being and acting in the world.[39] Even though our bodies are not physically on the internet, we bring them online in various ways. As for the activity in the churches WhatsApp groups, one could observe that members who had formal positions or high status in the churches were also the ones who were the most active and visible in the chat-groups. Formal and informal leaders were the ones whom, most of the time, initiated conversations and wrote the most elaborated posts (though, as noted above, the pastors were less active than one might expect in the groups, but did nonetheless regularly respond to messages and queries). In other words, the member's social positions in the church offline extended to this online forum.

There were, however, certain exceptions to this general rule of visibility. First, there were cases when individuals had been given special responsibilities or tasks in the WhatsApp-groups which pushed them to be more active in this forum than in offline settings. For example, Tamara, who was a very reserved woman, had been given the responsibility to keep track of everybody's birthdays and congratulate them in the chat-group. As a result, she was a regular initiator of conversations in the chat-group despite being a person that seldom drew attention to herself in offline church settings. Another example is Radha, who was the group administrator of Church of All Nations' WhatsApp-group. As an unmarried woman, a "youth," she had a rather low profile in offline settings and did not come across as a woman in power. However, the fact that she was the administrator of the chat-group said something different. This became especially apparent in the incident mentioned above when Chacko was removed from the group and his leadership responsibilities. Radha was one of the persons that the

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[39] Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet,* 41.

pastor consulted with before taking his decision to remove Chacko from his leadership responsibilities and Radha did also, after the incident, state openly her support for the pastor.

Another exception to the general rule of visibility in the WhatsApp groups, was that there were certain members with particular expertise who, despite having a low profile in the churches, were rather visible in the WhatsApp groups. These individuals were most often doctors or lawyers and would give advice or provide information when there were issues related to their area of expertise. Hence, the social dynamics in the group was somewhat different from what was evident in offline settings.

The activity in the WhatsApp-groups were also embodied-spaces in the sense that they were emotionally charged forums. Members would bring their worries, joy, grief, and sometimes anger to the groups. Worries and grief were most often expressed in the form of asking for prayer support for particular issues, and joy was typically expressed in connection to various forms of celebrations or when somebody had been successful in performing a specific task. For example, a few hours after Varuna, who we met in the above conversation, had given her Sunday message in her hometown, she posted the following message:

> *Praise God...!!! The Sunday message was good… I didn't struggle rather it was really smooth. The congregation was really attentive and came to meet me personally after the service stating that the message was really good. Thanks for all the prayer support without which it won't be possible.* 😄

Commonly, as Varuna did in this message, emojis were used to express and/or amplify emotions. The use of emojis enhanced emotion in the communication of the chat-groups and provided helpful hints for how to interpret messages. As pointed out by Isabelle Boutet et. al., the lack of non-verbal clues, such as facial expressions and gestures, in digital text-based interaction can obstruct communication.[40] However, this can partly be compensated by using emojis which can act as powerful symbols for an emotional state. As such, emojis should not be understood as superfluous additions to text-based interaction, but symbols that that help us more efficiently communicate and understand tone and intentional meaning.

Another way, according to Hine, in which the body plays an important role in how we use the internet is that quite often, our activity online has a bodily motivation. In Loving Assemblies of God and Church of All Nations' WhatsApp-groups, the need for emotional support was undoubtedly one of the most common reasons as to why members reached out to the church. However, health problems were also a motivational factor for posting messages. A notable example of such an incident took place in Loving Assemblies of God's WhatsApp group. On a Sunday morning, the following message was posted by a member named Joy:

> *Urgent help needed. This is Joy. My father-in-law just had an open-heart surgery at a hospital in Delhi. Initially yesterday we were told that max 5 units of blood are needed*

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[40] Isabelle Boutet et al., "Emojis Influence Emotional Communication, Social Attributions, and Information Processing," *Computers in Human Behavior* 119 (2021): 1–13.

> *but after the surgery today doctors informed us that they need 20 units of blood… So If you are a healthy person with normal blood pressure and non-diabetic, please volunteer. Men should be above 60kg and women above 55 kg. Thanks for the help. I would be extremely grateful if you could help for the same. Please call my husband. Any blood group is ok.*

In order to understand this appeal, one needs to know that there is a lack of blood at most hospitals in India. As a consequence, patients' families are commonly requested to organize for the donation of as many units of blood needed for the particular intervention. Joy and her husband had been told that five units would be enough to perform the surgery, but after the surgery, the doctors asked for 15 additional units. In this emergency, Joy turned to the church and the first persons to volunteer were the pastor couple. Soon thereafter member after member wrote that they were ready to help. Thanks to the members in the church, the situation could be solved. Worth mentioning is that Joy and her husband had only been part of the congregation for a few months and the father-in-law, who had the surgery, wasn't even part of the congregation, in fact, he was not even a Christian. Still, the members in Loving Assemblies of God literally gave their blood for him so that he could survive and recover.

7. Everyday

While these incidents that drew special attention took place occasionally in the WhatsApp groups, most of the messages and interaction were rather unremarkable in the sense that they were recurrent and typical. The flow of messages coming in daily made it difficult to keep track of all conversations. In fact, some of the women I interviewed mentioned that it was difficult to find time to read all the messages and that on busy days they would just quickly scroll through the conversations in the evening. Because WhatsApp, as a platform, was used to communicate with all sorts of people (e.g., family, friends, classmates, colleagues, clients, and neighbours) the churches' WhatsApp groups became one of many groups that church members kept up with daily.

The everydayness of the activity of the groups was also noticeable in how people wrote messages and responded to messages. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors were common and ignored, making conversations come across as informal. The response time was often short, and responses often included only a few words or an emoji. Moreover, the threshold to share something was low, it needed not be something extraordinary but could be a joke one had just come across on Facebook or a favourite worship song.

One of the most common types of posts, which appeared almost daily, were religious memes. A meme is a piece of media, commonly an expressive picture with a humorous block text that is widely shared on social media platforms.[41] While humorous religious memes are common, even more numerous are those with the intention to provide spiritual guidance or

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[41] Wendi Bellar et al., "Reading Religion in Internet Memes," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 2, no. 2 (2013): 1–39.

encouragement. Both types occurred in the churches' WhatsApp groups even though the latter type was posted more frequently. In a study on the usage of memes on two Indian churches' Facebook pages, Benson Rajan found that the Catholic church he studied tended to post religious memes to remind people of the glory and love of God and encouraged them to pray, while the Protestant church under investigation mainly posted memes with quotations from the Bible.[42] Moreover, at this Facebook page, Rajan found the memes were almost exclusively posted by people in leadership positions. In Loving Assemblies of God's and Church of All Nation's WhatsApp group the type of religious memes posted were much more varied and were normally posted by ordinary members. It is likely that this difference is related to Facebook being more of a public platform and WhatsApp being a more closed forum.

8. Conclusion

In this article I have explored the activities in two Indian Pentecostal churches' WhatsApp groups using Christine Hine's E3-model. I have tried to understand the ways in which the activities are embedded, embodied, and everyday. The analysis has shown that what took place in these chat-groups were closely related to both church members' everyday lives and offline congregational life. Rather than being a space very different from "real" life, the WhatsApp-groups extended what the church was and meant for the members into an online space. The social offline dynamics was to a high degree reflected in the activity online even though there were exceptions to this rule. Most notably, the pastors played a less visible and active role than in offline settings which allowed for ordinary members to step in as spiritual guides and counsellors for each other.

Another important finding is that by means of these WhatsApp groups the churches had become an integrated part of congregants' everyday lives and come closer into their immediate personal spaces. Through these chat-groups, the church had moved into one of the congregants' most used items, that is, their smartphones, resulting in a blurring of boundaries between congregational life and the everyday lives of members. The WhatsApp groups added a new dimension to their everyday religion in that they now basically walked around with the church in their back pockets.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize that the integration of digital technologies into the life of Pentecostal communities (which results in new arenas for communication, participation and bonding) needs to be further addressed within studies of global Pentecostalism. These online forums, especially the closed ones like WhatsApp groups, also provide methodological challenges that need to be tackled as they extend the field beyond offline settings that are not always easy to access.

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[42] Benson Rajan, "Faith Memes: An Analysis of Authority as Reflected in the Social Media of Churches in New Delhi," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 11, no. 1 (2015): 1–23.

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