

## RELIGIOUS AMBIENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE STUDY IN A PANDEMIC SITUATION

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### ABSTRACT

*Social media has been crucially important today in the pandemic situation. This work is rooted in key questions: whether social media consumption increases during a pandemic and does the communicative action of social media target religious ambience? The findings show that the flow of messages has increased on social media platforms during pandemic. However, the communicative action of social media is not targeted toward religious ambience. This work is based on data collected through a qualitative survey in the context of Assam, a state of India. The study concludes the communicative action of social media depends on its users' profiles. Users' profile is perhaps the determining factor regarding religious ambience on social media.*

**Keywords:** Religious Ambience, Social Media, Pandemic, Covid-19.

### INTRODUCTION

India has witnessed a unique environment during the initial phase of the Covid-19 emergency. The government of India has to deal not only with the medical threat of Covid-19, but also with intense religious tensions as most of the initial cases were linked to a religious organization. The initial cases were from the participants of a gathering held at the Tablighi Jamaat of New Delhi (capital of India), a conservative Islamic missionary group. The gathering was organized in the third week of March 2020 where Muslim participants came from countries including Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Apart from foreign participants, several thousand Indian nationals also came from different states of the country to attend the function. The situation worsened when infected participants spread out through the country and abroad. More than 30% of the few hundred initial cases of the country were members of the Tablighi Jamaat. The scenario was more threatening in some Indian states such as Assam where around 90% of the initial Covid-19 cases were Jamaat participants.

The tension intensified when the head of the Tablighi Jamaat, along with its

members, could not respond to the Government's call. In April 2020, they did not cooperate with the Indian administration, and hid at religious institutions with the infection instead while behaving rudely towards doctors and health staff. This situation was not only in the capital New Delhi, but also in Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam. The behaviour of the Jamaatis fuelled many radical Hindu organizations to mobilize communal tension in the country by spreading anti-Muslims messages. The CNN (Cable News Network) news channel on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 aired a report indicating the intensity of the scenario by using the headline: "India's Muslims feel targeted by rumors they are spreading Covid-19" ("India's Muslims," 2020).

When the rumors on religious sentiment began, the traditional medium of mass communication, the Indian Newspaper Industry, was negatively affected due to the spread of rumors related to Covid-19. The rumors spread through social media, especially WhatsApp, that newspapers are Covid-19 carriers. Henceforth, the newspaper vendors did not agree to distribute newspapers to its readers. As circulation of newspapers, one of the major mass communication channels, was negatively affected, readers were deprived of receiving crucial information during the pandemic. The lack of print media also created an opportunity for social media to emerge as an alternative channel of information.

The newspaper industry in Assam was badly affected along with many other Indian states. Nava Thakuria, an eminent media activist of North East India, commented that newspapers published from the Northeast region would not be able to sustain their publication for extended periods (Thakuria, 2020). In many Indian states, newspaper vendor associations came forward towards the safety of their members. The situation became such that the Government of India issued a circular and scientist of the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) Nivedita Gupta who came to reassure people that "Covid-19 is a respiratory infection and there is no risk of catching it through newspapers and packages" (Thacker, 2020). Gupta indicated that the WhatsApp messages and forwards regarding this information was not based on facts (Thacker, 2020). However, the damage had already been done and advertising revenues of newspapers fell drastically. Few Assamese vernacular newspapers and news magazines like Sadhin, Satori, and Prantik suspended their ongoing issues. The scenario worsened within a month as the demand from the Indian Newspaper Society led to the removal of a 5% customs duty on newsprint and a two-year tax holiday for newspaper establishments to face the situation (Roy, 2020).

The discussions highlighted the following consequences, especially in the

context of India which occurred during the Covid-19 initial phase. Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic posed an immense medical as well as a religious threat in India. Secondly, the newspaper circulation was badly affected, which created a vacuum in respect to the channel of mass communication in the country. People feared receiving the oldest and most reasonably reliable medium of information during the initial phase of Covid-19. Thirdly, the absence of newspapers provided an opportunity for social media to gain prominence in the mass media space. These consequences indeed prepare an interesting topic to study religious ambience on social media during the pandemic. Understanding communicative action on social media in an environment of suspicion and religious hatred is the core theme of this study. It is also important to highlight that the nationwide lockdown started on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 and the mobility of the citizens was significantly restricted when people had to stay at home. Perhaps, this gave people more time to connect with social media.

The study selected Assam for the context where 90% of initial Covid-19 cases were linked to the conservative Muslim group. Second, the mass media industry of Assam was affected to a considerable extent due to readers' lack of access to newspapers. The demographic profile of the state also makes it an evident choice since it is a land of diverse ethnic and religious communities. The central thesis of the research is based on the following questions; Does social media consumption increase during pandemics? And is the communicative action of social media targeted towards religious ambience?

The timeline of the research was the first two months of the Covid-19 lockdown in April and May 2020. Before moving into analysis, the concept of communicative action of social media needs to be explained. Communicative action means social interaction through the notion of mutual understanding. Habermas, the chief academic on communicative action, states that it can happen among subjects for interpersonal relations through verbal or by extra-verbal means who are capable of speech and actions (Nah & Chung, 2016). This study examines whether the communicative action, especially the exchange of messages in social media, is religious or not. The communicative action provides a larger social context and indicates that the media functions as democratic communications in a civil society. Social media is a relatively new member of democratic communications and is examined if it is targeted towards religious ambience. According to Habermas, the communicative action is expanded by the use of mass media in the public sphere, and obtains dual status as a sphere both in physical and mediated realms (Nah & Chung, 2016). Introduction of the internet and social media like other mass media

channels receive important status as public spheres in which public opinion forms through open and rational discussions. More importantly, the internet created multiple public spheres by being interrelated and interconnected through the networked public (Nah & Chung, 2016). It would be an immense task to examine all social media tools; henceforth on the basis of popularity and accessibility in India, WhatsApp has been selected.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA IN MASS MEDIA SPHERE**

Social media focuses on social interaction and provides a platform to share information and express feelings, views, and opinions. The sender and receiver of communication are direct in social media where messages are created and shared by users. This is indeed a distinctive feature of social media in comparison to traditional mass communication channels. The responsibility of content within social media lies solely on its users, along with distribution and filtration. The gatekeeper's role is not omnipresent in social media, which is indeed an essential element for print and electronic media. The prudent outcome of the feature gives those whose voices are underrepresented a platform to create materials and be heard. Thus, a group of mass communication researchers views social media as a means of dissemination of marginalized voices even in the most authoritarian states.

Another important element of social media is the potential to depolarize people's opinions through the exchange of messages for mutual understanding and tolerance toward the other side (Lu, et al., 2020). The communicative action on social media enhances an opportunity to transform viewpoints to be more moderate on a given topic after conversing on social media. Madden and Zickuhr's study concluded that 83% of internet users within the ages of 18-29 years adopted social media for interaction with colleagues (Ansari & Khan, 2020). On the other hand, Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin found that social media infuses a constructive attitude while also having an educative value too (Ansari & Khan, 2020). The utility of social media in the social sphere received a new limelight during the Egypt Arab Spring (2010) revolution that started from the Facebook page of Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim. This social movement was an enlightening case of social media's unique role to facilitate real change. There have been many episodes where individuals and groups coming together through social networking sites are able to create social protests in countries, and India is not an exception.

On the other side, there were many instances of dark episodes caused by social media. For example, in Assam, on the 9th of July 2012, a girl was assaulted by a group of men in the middle of Guwahati City. It was telecast live by a private

television channel and later the entire footage of the episode was uploaded on popular video social media 'YouTube'. The web availability of the incident allowed national and international media agencies to carry the news of the incident as the 'GS Road Episode of Assam'. The incident itself portrays the growing popularity of social media and its negative consequences for society.

Another aspect that is important to understand is media consumption is not determined ethnically but, rather, socially (Madianou, 2005). The use of mass media and integration in people's daily lives is a complex process and technologies are enabling, offering choice, and allowing people to switch to different languages and broadcasting systems including the use of various social media tools (Madianou, 2005). Although media does not determine identities, it does contribute to the creation of symbolic communicative spaces that either include or exclude, thereby affecting audiences' lives and discourses about their identities (Madianou, 2005). Social media has been blamed for being an incubator of extreme opinions and like-minded echo chambers in this digital age (Lu, et al., 2020). The ease of posting immediate responses on social media can facilitate the expression of extreme opinion. In addition, some evidence suggests that social media algorithms favour pro-attitude news stories over other types of media content (Lu, et al., 2020). Hence, it is conceivable that social media use is likely to polarize people's opinions and like-minded information about the issue. This is an interesting finding to study the religious ambience on social media in an environment when religious tensions are intense in the Indian society.

Since its emergence in the larger media scene, social media has played different roles from informer to the catalyst during health emergencies like Ebola and Covid-19. Tara Kirk Sell, Divya Hosangadi, and Marc Trotochaudin their study on the Ebola crisis informed that social media may increase its effects, serving as both a source of misinformation and a catalyst for its dissemination during health emergencies (Sell, et al., 2020). They indicated that during crisis situations, fear, uncertainty, lack of knowledge, and information-seeking behaviour among the public may increase opportunities for the propagation of misinformation (Sell et al., 2020). However, the result of their study highlighted that misinformation was not a dominant feature but still notably present, and there was evidence regarding the presence of provocative, discord-inducing messages in response to public health measures. On the other hand, David E. Alexander's article on Social Media in Disaster Risk Reduction and Crisis Management points out that social media has provided a remarkably democratic form of participation in public debate and during emergencies (Alexander, 2013). However, its tendency to coalesce opinions (or stimulate

monetary donations) shows the capacity of revealing some aspects of the mental and emotional state of a nation (Alexander, 2013). He added that during a pandemic, social media can also be used to monitor a situation to improve responses.

It is important to mention that in the Japan disaster, 49% of Twitter messages were either positive or somewhat positive in their attitude to emergency preparedness and only 7% were negative (Alexander, 2013). US audiences found that 80% of its general people have shown confidence that it would be beneficial for national emergency response organizers to monitor social networking sites regularly (Alexander, 2013). Researchers note that people caught up in the disaster reported feeling more supported and more optimistic about the future when social media was extensively involved. An American Red Cross survey of social media indicated that 24% of the US population and 31% of the online population would use social media to inform family and friends they are safe (Alexander, 2013). Perhaps the greatest challenge of using social media is that the messages can go viral immediately and reach millions. The future of social media depends on new methodologies to judge the public mood and the utility of information supplied by the public. The theory of social responsibility places stress on the fact that the media needs to keep society's interest a top priority. The sensational and provocative words should be avoided while communicating information. This parameter of needs will be useful to analyse social media in the Covid-19 context.

### **WHY WHATSAPP?**

Among social media tools, WhatsApp has had a unique role in India. In the last few years, the mobile market in India has revolutionized as the numbers of mobile internet users has increased. The use of social media tools has increased and impacted society even in the small and medium level states of India (which is the category Assam falls under). The substantial growth has been witnessed across nearly all social media platforms, with WhatsApp the most popular. Users of this platform have crossed 400 million in the country since 2017.

This popular messaging service has been used to communicate different types of text and multimedia messages between users or groups easily. The 2017 study Kumar & Sharma shows the popularity of WhatsApp has also impacted its users significantly as 66% of adopters believe this platform has improved their relationship with friends (Kumar & Sharma, 2017). The study in a pandemic context shows that informal WhatsApp chats seem to be highly valued and trusted during pandemic situations ("THE ROLE OF A WHATSAPP", 2020).



Even medical information is shared actively daily through WhatsApp. The open and rapid dissemination of relevant findings through WhatsApp groups provide benefits during public-health crises. The study in Pakistan indicates that the participants in the study mentioned using WhatsApp groups as a learning tool. A majority (94.40%) of the 72 members participants in the survey found the discussion in WhatsApp group related to Covid-19 as extremely helpful (“THE ROLE OF A WHATSAPP”, 2020). 94.40% members in the survey found their knowledge related to Covid-19 increased through the group communication (“THE ROLE OF A WHATSAPP”, 2020).

Understanding its vast reach and impact, WhatsApp has teamed up with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Government of India to disprove myths and share authentic information during the Covid-19 emergency. Significant numbers of fake news, rumors, and hate speech went viral through WhatsApp as highlighted by the Police Department (Minhas, 2020). For example, the police of Maharashtra (one of the largest Indian states) emerged with an advisory for WhatsApp users during the lockdown with the objective to tighten its message forwarding restrictions. The advisory instructs the group administrator to inform all group members about the rules of posting in the groups; warn all members and prevent them from sharing objectionable content, and regularly monitor the content shared in the group. As the company’s blog, the messaging service provides the opportunity for its users to chat one-on-one, chat with a group, send attachments, record voice notes, and make voice calls across Android, iPhone, Windows Phone, Nokia S40, Nokia S60, Blackberry, and BB10 (Greene, 2020). Social media is one of the main channels updating COVID-19 information (Gao, et al., 2020). WhatsApp developed a WHO chatbox and MyGov Corona Helpdesk. It also unveiled a \$1 million grant to curb misinformation. Media Scanner, a fact-checking platform, compiled a list of at least 69 fake videos against Muslims and listed at least 28 attacks prompted by online abuse (Jain, 2020). The information or misinformation, keeping this on track, the study produces the following findings.

### **THE RESULTS:**

A survey was conducted among 100 WhatsApp users of the state across different geographical and demographic profiles. A questionnaire was sent to these 100 participants through WhatsApp. For the efficacy of the survey response, participants were asked for consent and requested not to forward it to others outside of the survey (Ameen & Praharaj, 2020). Out of 100 users who were sent the questionnaire, 64 filled out responses and 56 were analyzed.

The researcher admits that as like other online and WhatsApp surveys, there is no way to assess the magnitude of selection bias. However, sufficient attention has been given to the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The response rate of our study was 64%, proving statistical validity.

The Demographic and Education Profile of the Participants:

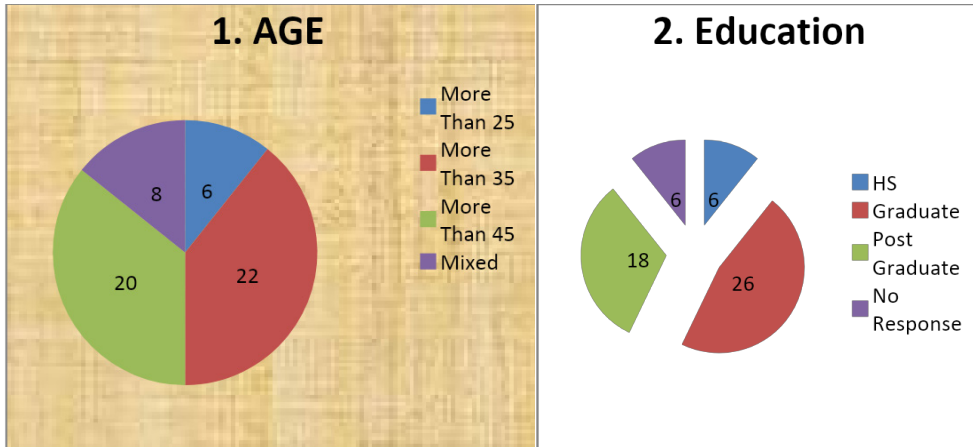
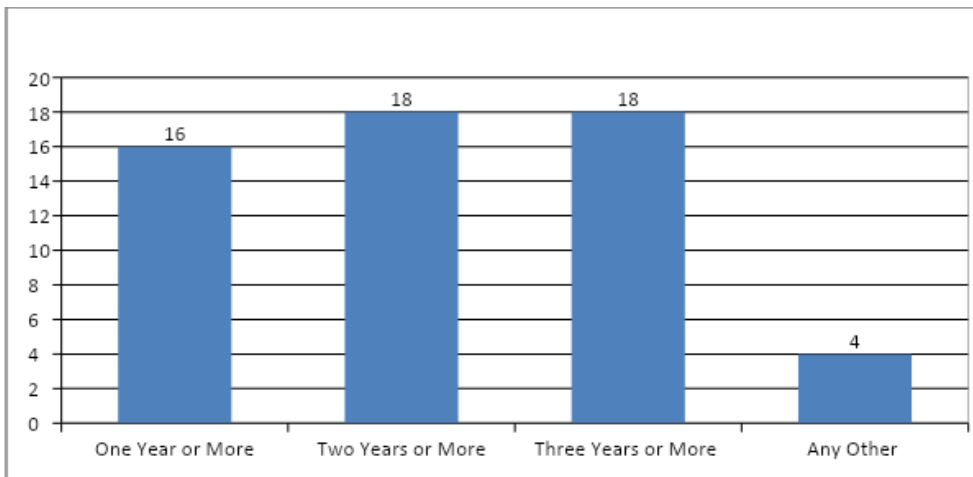


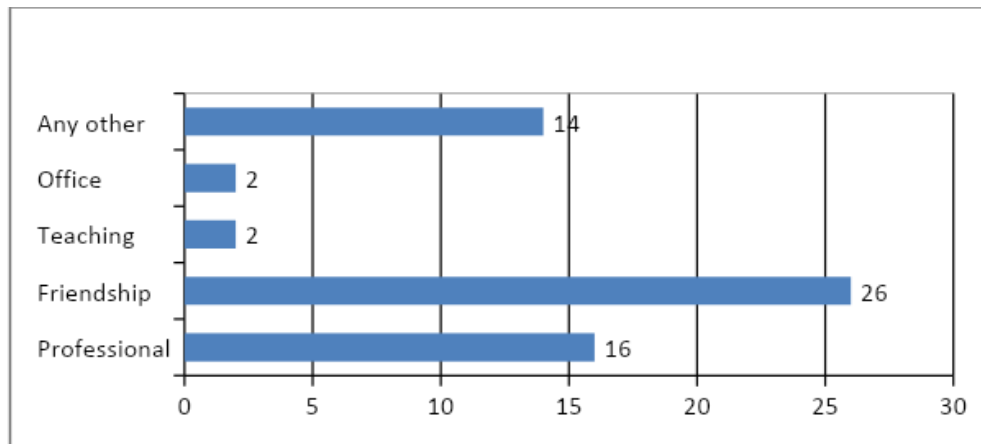
Chart 1 indicates that the number of participants whose age groups are “more than 35” and “more than 45” are higher compared to “more than 25”. However, there are few mixed age group participants as well. Regarding the education profile per chart 2, the graduate respondent numbers are more than the postgraduate as well as the higher secondary (10+ 2). The inference could be made that the survey participants are middle age and educated.



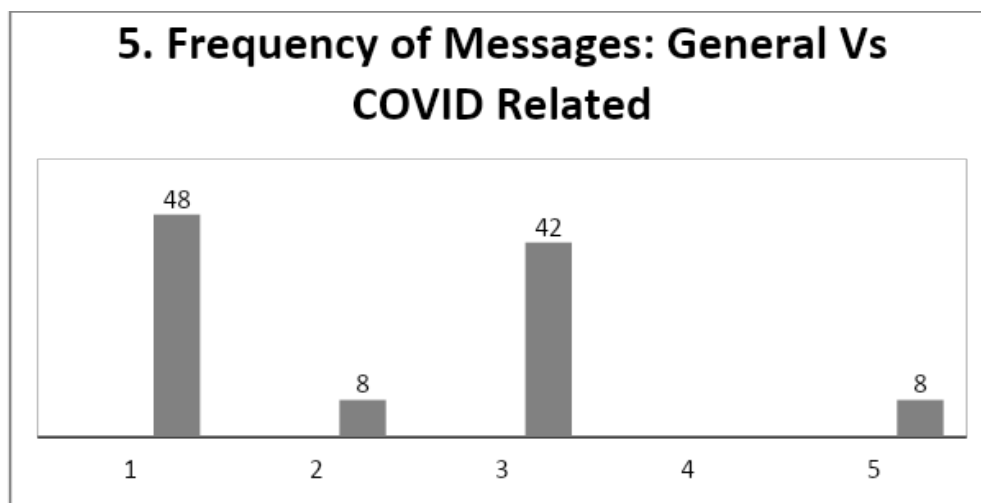
The affiliation with the group is an important factor to understand the nature of the WhatsApp group, which will also impact the accuracy of the responses of a participant. It is interesting to know how long a participant has been associated with a particular group. Here, the findings show participants belonging to groups are the same with regard to different categories. There are



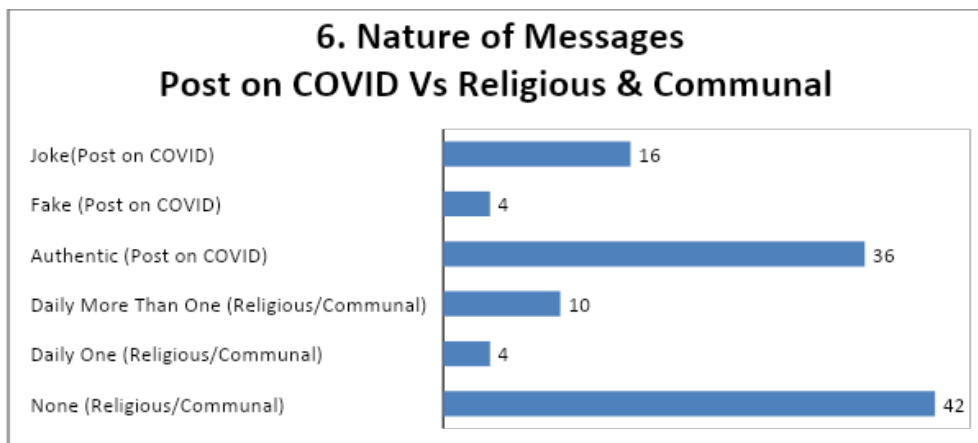
very few participants who are new members of groups. Perhaps, this indicates the participants are well versed with the group's culture and communicative action.



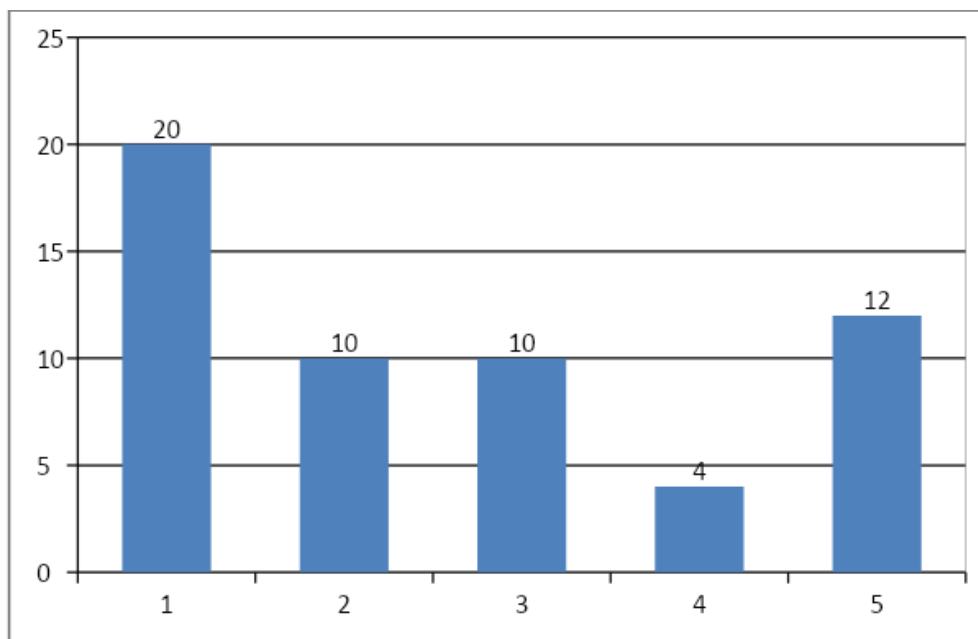
The results show that most of the participants selected their friendship group and/or professional group. It also needs to be mentioned that any other category is also notable in numbers where 14 participants belong to this category, selected either their family or news portal group.



This chart is indeed the core finding of the study. This shows that 48 participants admitted that messages have increased during the initial phase of the lockdown period. On the other hand, 42 participants observed that more than one Covid-19 related post shared daily in the group.



The results show that 42 participants confirm that there are no religious posts in the group and 36 participants informed that the posts are authentic in regard to Covid-19. The finding revealed that communication actions referring to the exchange of posts in most groups are not religious, and rather used to channelize authentic information related to Covid-19.



20 participants said that the group used the member/administrator to delete posts to control fake or religious posts. The next highest responses (12) were made for any other category where the group assigned administrators to approve the post before sharing during the emergency period. However, the group adopted this mechanism after the government, and a WhatsApp appeal could not be clarified in the study. This made it clear that the groups have set up mechanisms to increase the reliability and authenticity of information.

## CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to analyze religious ambience on social media during a pandemic. The findings show that the flow of messages has increased on social media during the pandemic. Interestingly, the study indicated that Covid-19 related authentic information communicated on social media. The data collected gives a picture that Covid-19 information circulated on WhatsApp looks authentic for its members. However, the mechanism through which the users feel the information authentic is not known in the study. In addition, the constant push from WhatsApp and the Government of India to stop the spreading of rumours through social media may also alert the groups to avoid fake news or jokes related to Covid-19. Secondly, the communicative action of social media is not targeted towards religious ambience. Most of the participants in the survey were graduates or postgraduates and their higher education background may result in less provocative religious posts in their groups. This is an indication that the role of social media in an emergency situation may depend on the specific user's profile. Rather than generalizing comments, we may predict users' profiles determine the course of religious ambience of social media.

Thus, this study suggests important recommendations including the following points. First, the communicative action of social media is dependent on its users' profiles. Second, government and Social media joint awareness efforts may help reduce the circulation of fake news or rumours to a tremendous extent. Third, a further study is needed to understand the relationship between user profiles and the communicative action of social media in different situations.

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