
THE RISE OF DIGITAL CULTS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the human history, our inquisitive behaviour to discover another truer Truth, and a different, better way of life have resulted in formation of various social groups with socially deviant or novel beliefs and practices, and are collectively known as ‘cults’. In this work we investigate the role played by digital platforms in sustenance, emergence of these cults in our society. We do so by segregating the cults on the basis of their fundamental ideology which reflects their target audience and then analyze their performance on the popular digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp. This helped us in concluding their preferred medium of communication, and their preferred form of engagement with their cult members and even understand their dependence on social media.

Keywords Digital Platforms · Human Computer Interaction · Cults · Social Media

1 Introduction

Our understanding of cults is based on the assumption about them being a social menace. The exact kind of problems they are thought to pose may vary, but these can include imputations of heretical beliefs, political intrigue, child abuse, criminal activity, financial irregularity, the breaking up of families, sexual perversion, medical quackery, and/or the employment of mind control or brainwashing techniques. In fact, these are not new concepts for our societies. They have been able to sustain their existence for centuries, while inflicting a serious damage on our societal fabric. They have been the topic for many research studies, however, a central problem involved with studying still remains. Philosophical in itself, it finds its origin in the statement that one person’s cult is another person’s inarguable truth, a supreme belief. Hence, one need to construct sturdy boundaries to keep the two unambiguously differentiated, and these distinctions have had to be defended against anyone who constructs a different boundary, with a variety of methods being brought into play to clarify and justify the antagonists’ distinctions between a cult and a ‘genuine belief system’.

In our work instead of attempting this difficult and in some sense insoluble problem, we attempt at studying cults from a social HCI perspective. We focus on discovering do how these cults continue to thrive in the current digital age? How are they able to manipulate today’s day technologies to ensure some necessary traits required like isolation for their sustenance and emergence. Rest of the work has been divided into the following parts: In Section II we describe about the types of cults we will be focusing on, in Section III we introduce the popular digital social platforms, in section IV we first do a per-cult analysis, and then in Section V, a per-platform analysis. Finally, in Section VI we mention the main inferences of our work.

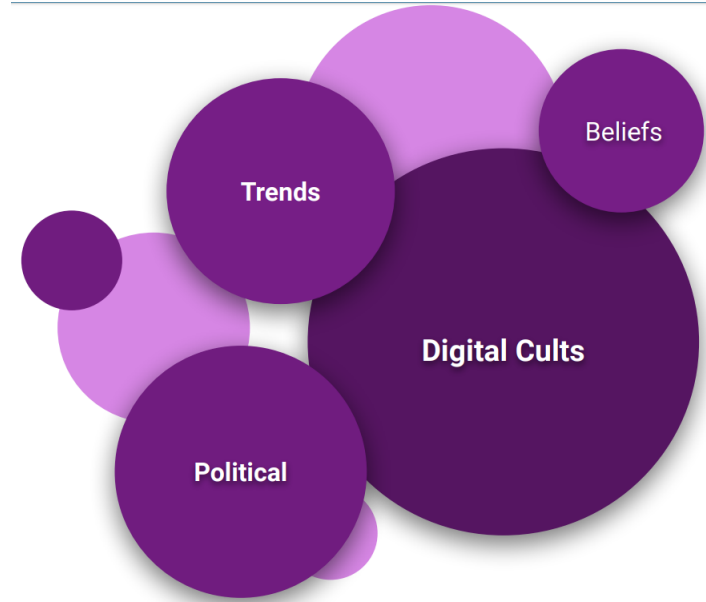


Figure 1: Types of Digital Cults

2 Cults

Based on the available literature [1, 2], and the data [3, 4, 5], we decided to focus on the following three primary sub-types of cults based on their ideologies [Fig 1].

1. Spiritual Cult

- These are based on a fundamental ideology which represents strong spiritual belief imparted by a single person who recognizes himself as a Godman, and claims to have revelations to be made regarding a higher truth.
- Here, we study two such cults – Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Art of Living) and His Divine Holiness Nithyananda Paramashivam, where the former one is well established on these platforms and the latter may be considered a novice on these platforms.

2. Political Cult

- These carry a primary interest in political action and ideology.
- Here, we study one such cult – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as it is one of the largest cult relevant in India, and has seen a massive popularity under the current leading political party's regime.

3. Trend Cult

- These are a new form of cult whose existence is due to an entire short-lived online fan base. These include the film stars, Instagram celebrities, famous YouTubers etc.
- Here, we study three of the five Kardashian-Jenner sisters: Kim Kardashian, Kendall Jenner, and Kylie Jenner, as they cover a time-wise spectrum in which Kim is the oldest and Kylie is the youngest.

3 Platforms

Each digital platform caters to the need of a specific demographic. This means that they are usually relevant to either a region-based, or age-based distribution of the human population. In this work, we have kept ourselves restricted to analyze the age-based demographics of the platforms. Therefore, the following chosen platforms represent a wide spectrum of age-based demographic representation [6], [Fig 2] in the sense that either they are used by a specific age-group (like Instagram) or by the majority of age-groups (like Facebook). These platforms support visual media, like pictures and short videos, so they are extremely popular amongst social media influencers.

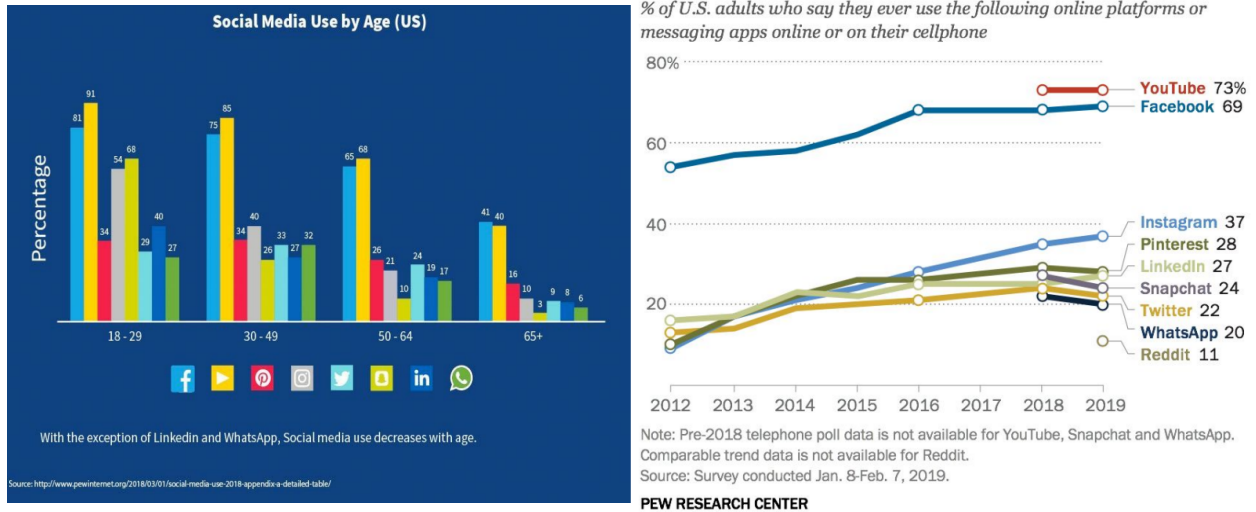


Figure 2: Age demographics of social platform

1. Facebook

- It is an American online social media and social networking service company based in Menlo Park, California.
- It allows its user to post text, photos and multimedia which is shared with any other users that have agreed to be their "friend", or, with a different privacy setting, with any reader. Pages can be made dedicated to a particular cause and thus have a wider outreach. They can also use various embedded apps, join common-interest groups, and receive notifications of their friends' activities.

2. Twitter

- It is an American microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as "tweets".
- It allows the registered users to post, like, and retweet tweets, but unregistered users can only read them.

3. Instagram

- It is an American photo and video-sharing social networking service owned by Facebook, Inc.
- It allows users to upload photos and videos to the service, which can be edited with various filters, and organized with tags and location information.

4. YouTube

- It is an American video-sharing platform headquartered in San Bruno, California.
- It allows users to upload, view, rate, share, add to playlists, report, comment on videos, and subscribe to other users.

5. WhatsApp

- It is a freeware, cross-platform messaging and Voice over IP service owned by Facebook, Inc.
- It allows users to send text messages and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, documents, user locations, and other media.

4 Per Cult Analysis

4.1 Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

- He is a self-styled godman and is founder of an organization called "Art of Living".
- Facebook: From [Fig 3] we can see that his organization's page has 224k likes, and his personal page has 454k likes. He owns multiple pages for global engagement which consist of real people.
- Twitter: It has 4.5M followers on this platform and engagement here consist of both normal public along with celebrities.

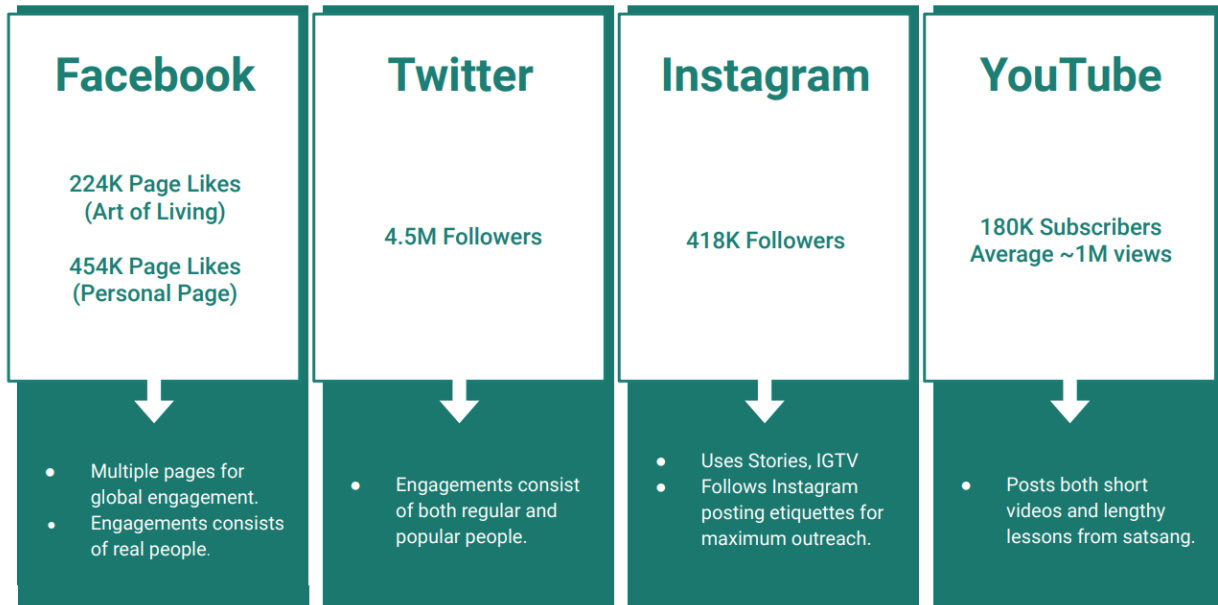


Figure 3: Social Media statistics of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

- Instagram: Here, his account has 418k followers. He uses Instagram features such as stories, IGTV. He follows a posting etiquette for maximum outreach.
- YouTube: He has 578k subscribers with on an average 1M views on his popular videos. His posts are regular, and include both short and lengthy lessons from his satsang.

4.2 His Divine Holiness Nithyananda Paramashivam

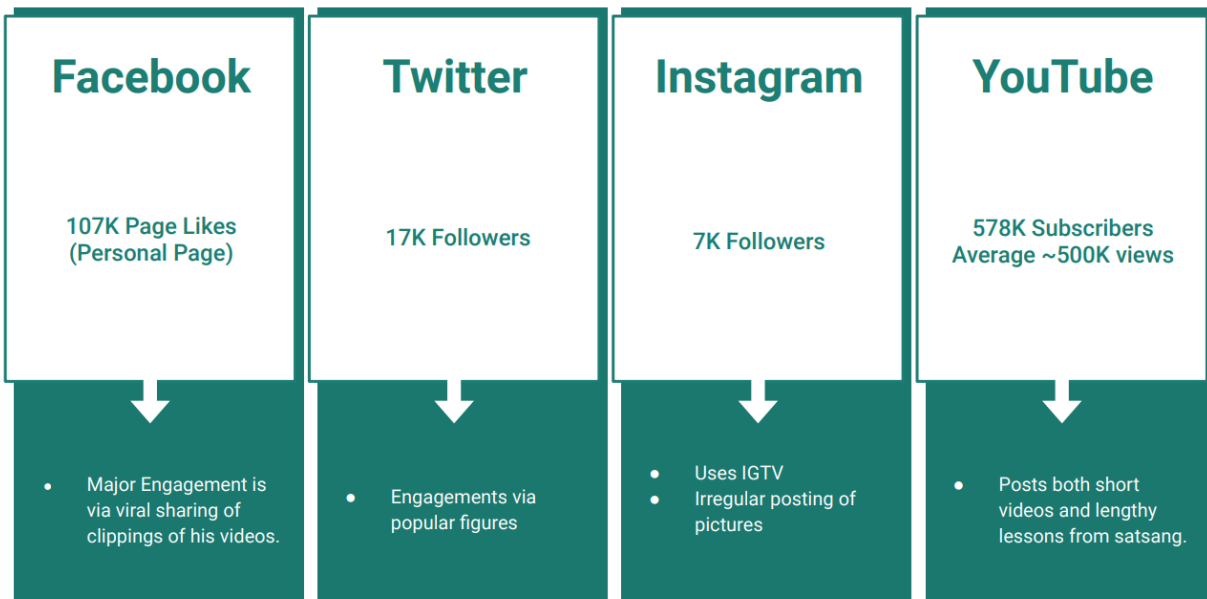


Figure 4: Social Media statistics of Nithyananda

- He is another self-styled godman, residing in a place named after him. He's the founder of his organization called "Nithyananda Dhyanapectam".

- Facebook: From [Fig 4] we can see that his page has 107k likes. This is much lesser than Ravi Shankar. His major engagement on this platform is due to viral sharing of the clippings of his videos.
- Twitter: It has 17k followers on this platform and engagement here consist mostly due to certain celebrities.
- Instagram: Here, his account has 7k followers. He recently started using Instagram features such as IGTV. He doesn't follow a posting etiquette, often posting a huge amount of pictures, videos all at once.
- YouTube: He has 180k subscribers with on an average 500k views on his popular videos. His posts are regular, and mostly include lengthy lessons from his satsang.

4.3 Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

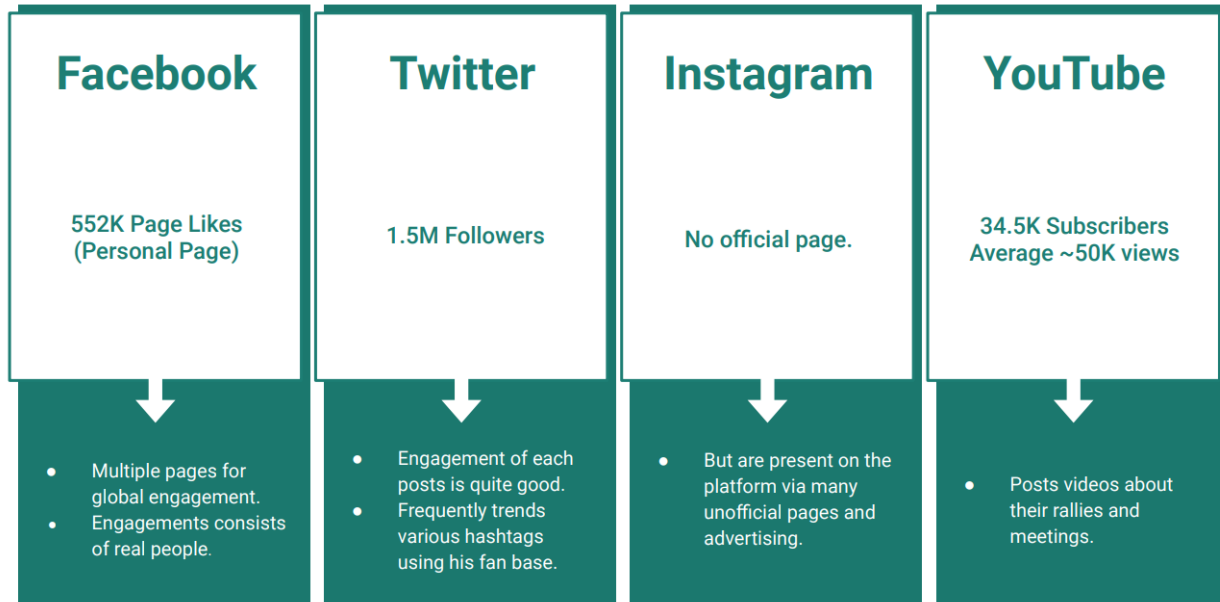


Figure 5: Social Media statistics of RSS

- It is an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organisation that is widely regarded as the parent organisation of the ruling party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
- Facebook: From [Fig 5] we can see that his page has 552k likes. It also owns multiple pages for global engagement which consist of real people.
- Twitter: It has 1.5M followers on this platform. Engagement of each posts is quite good. It frequently trends various hashtags using his fan base.
- Instagram: It doesn't have an official page. However, it is still widely present on the platform via many unofficial pages and advertising.
- YouTube: Its account has 34.5k subscribers with on an average 50k views on its popular videos. His posts are occasional, and mostly centred around its rallies and important meetings.

4.4 Kardashian-Jenner sisters

- These three sisters belong to the one of America's most famous families. Baby arrivals, relationship dramas and endless stream of family drama have helped these families in hogging the headlines and stealing the spotlight.
- Facebook: From [Fig 6] we can see that their global engagement has lead to an average of 23 M likes on their Facebook pages which is much greater than those of cults discussed previously.
- Twitter: The old veteran Kim has the highest number of followers here (62.2M), whereas the other two which are relatively younger have almost the same amount followers.

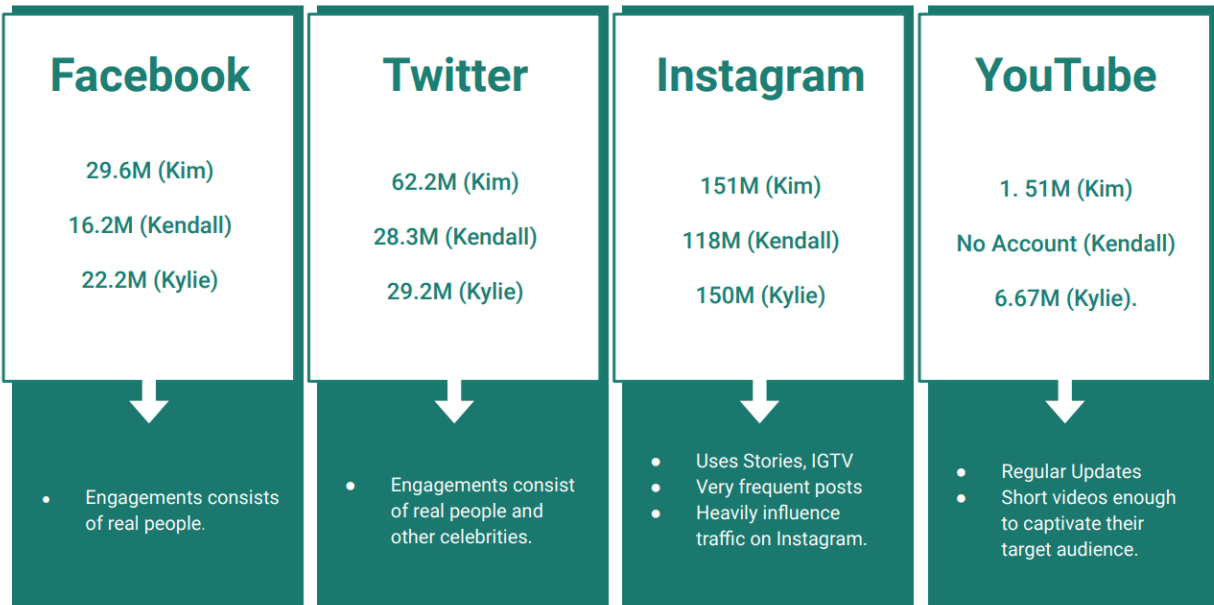


Figure 6: Social Media statistics of Kardashian-Jenner sisters

- Instagram: Here, the old and the new, Kim and Kylie have almost same amount of users signifying that these two are much more relevant to millennials. All of them uses features like IGTV, stories. Along with posting frequently, they even influence high traffic on the platform.
- YouTube: At this platform Kendall doesn't own an account but does come up in their sister's videos. Also, the other two post regular updates to captivate a target audience and other YouTubers also post about them.

5 Per Platform Analysis

5.1 Facebook

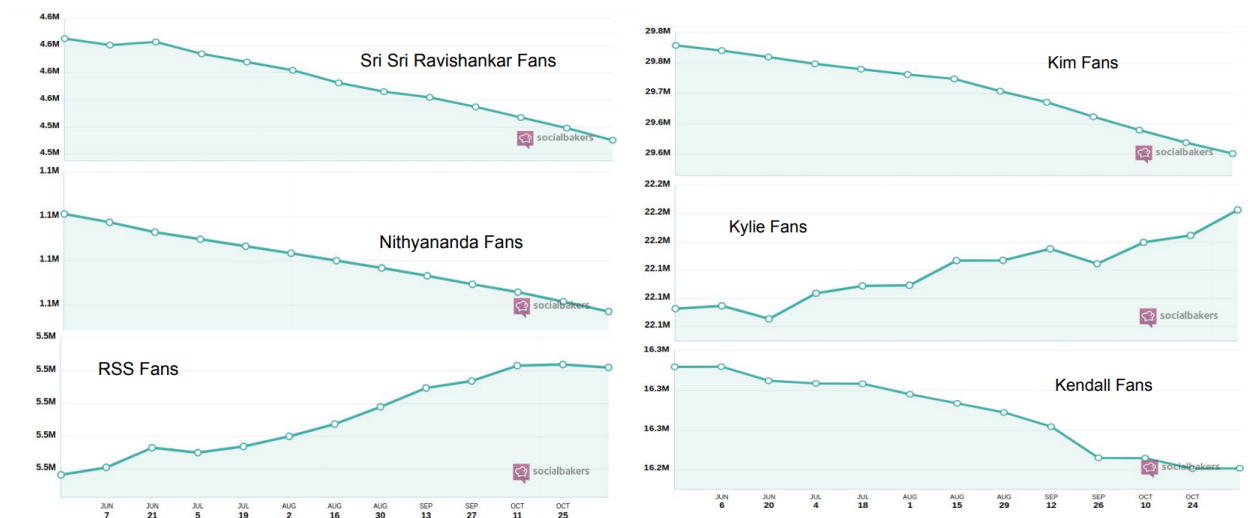


Figure 7: Trend of Facebook page likes: (a) Sri Sri Ravishankar, (b) Nithyananda, (c) RSS, (d) Kim Kardashian, (e) Kylie Jenner, (f) Kendall Jenner

- From [Fig 7] we can see that Facebook's popularity is decreasing amongst the millennials.

- Political cults like RSS have a steady and increasing presence on Facebook and is using social media to attract more followers towards its propaganda.
- Kylie Jenner is the only one amongst the Kardashian-Jenner sisters to have an increase in followers on Facebook, mainly due to recent controversies in her personal life.

5.2 Twitter

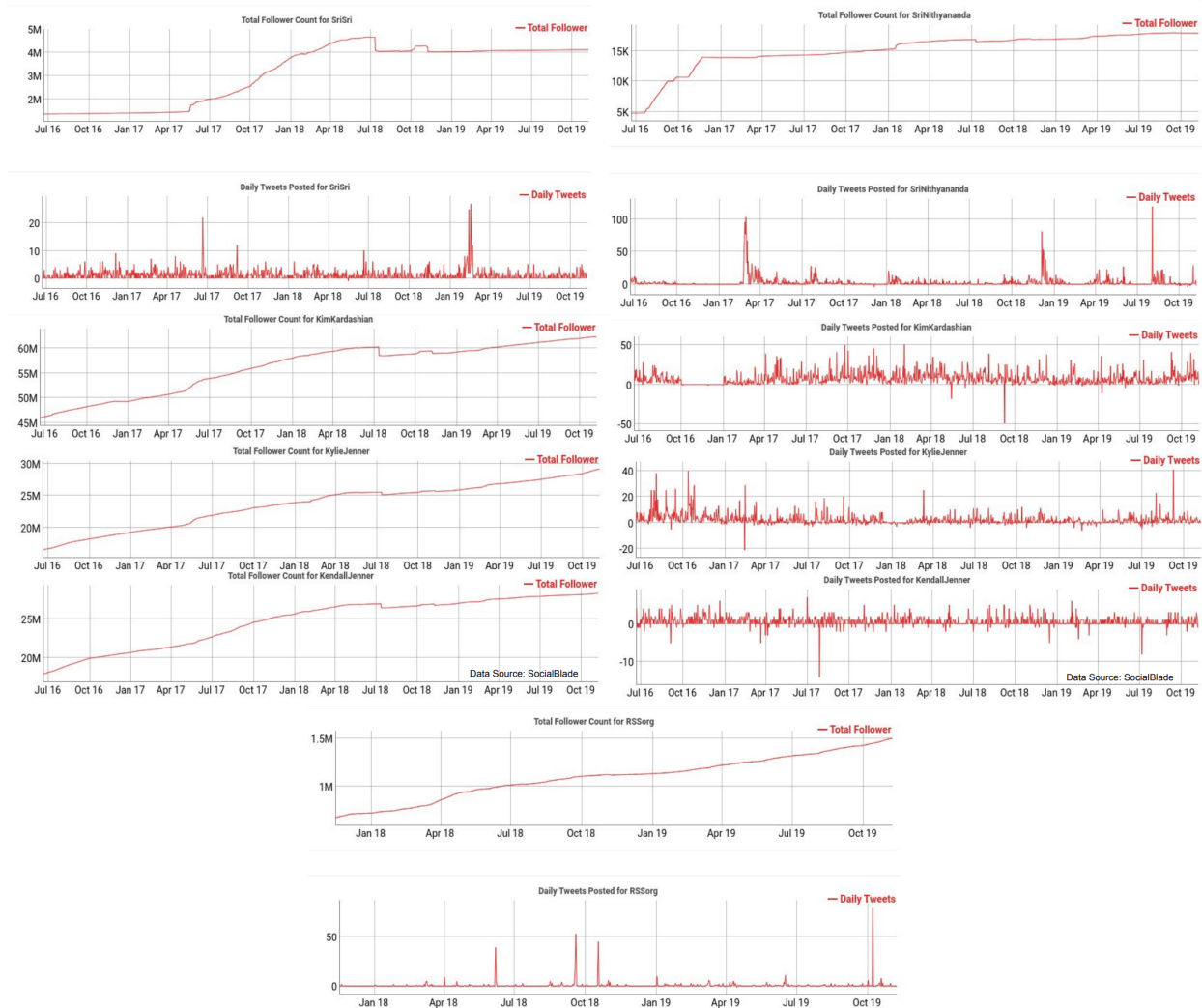


Figure 8: Trend of Twitter followers and tweets: (a) Sri Sri Ravishakar, (b) Nithyananda, (c) RSS, (d) Kim Kardashian, (e) Kylie Jenner, (f) Kendall Jenner

- From [Fig 8] we can see that the activity of spiritual leaders on Twitter is constantly increasing.
- Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s number of followers have reached a point saturation, even though he aims at a global audience.
- Swami Nithyananda’s followers are on a rise but his number of followers is significantly lower because he targets a much more local audience.
- The followers of the Kardashian-Jenner sisters is on a steady rise, showing that the popular leaders of trend based cults have significant popularity on social media.
- All over, the routine posts for trend based cult leaders are much more than any other.

5.3 Instagram



Figure 9: Trend of Instagram followers: (a) Sri Sri Ravishakar, (b) Nithyananda, (c) Kim Kardashian, (d) Kylie Jenner, (e) Kendall Jenner

- From [Fig 9] we can see that in comparison to Facebook we can see steady rise for most of them. This clearly shows that a majority of the millenials have migrated from Facebook to Instagram.
- When comparing between the Trend based and Belief based cults, we can see the fan following of the former to be much more than latter. One major reason for this is the younger age group present on Instagram.
- Moreover, all of them have started to make use of new Instagram features like IGTV, stories. Correct and relevant use of these features also play an important part in sustaining your popularity.

5.4 YouTube Search and Google Search

- From [Fig 10] we can see that influencers like Kim Kardashian have managed to sustain their popularity throughout these years by engaging with followers very actively. These social media influencers have to be extremely invested, not only physically, but emotionally as well. They have to expose their personal lives to the public and then only can they sustain their popularity over the years. Controversy goes hand in hand with these public figures.
- There is a huge surge in activity of political cults before elections. Otherwise, there is not a very regular search for these cults on YouTube or Google.
- For Google and YouTube searches, the religious cults too depend on some kind of controversy for a spike in their popularity.

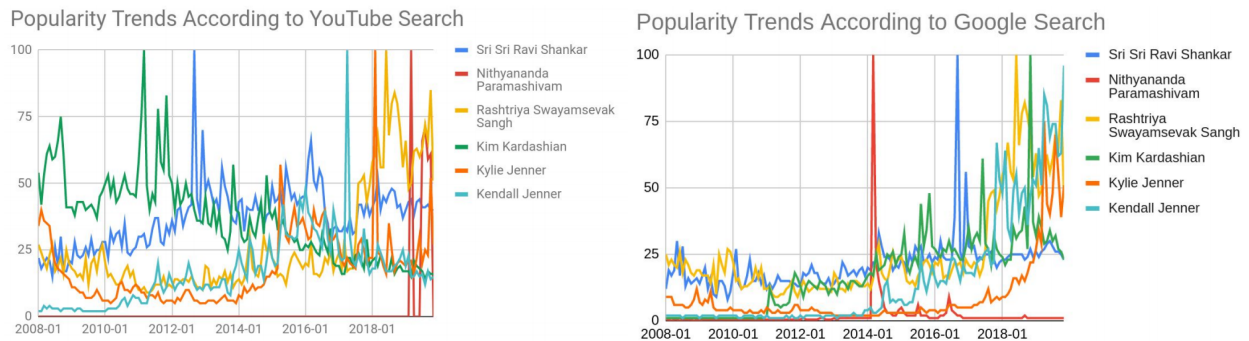


Figure 10: Trend of YouTube and Google search polpularity: (a) Sri Sri Ravishakar, (b) Nithyananda, (c) RSS, (d) Kim Kardashian, (e) Kylie Jenner, (f) Kendall Jenner

5.5 WhatsApp

- Platforms like WhatsApp help to lend a personal touch to propaganda messages.

- Major use of this platform is intended for the core member of the political and belief based cults to organize events. For example: Even our college students have a YES+ group meant to coordinate satsang events for Art of Living.
- Group features are widely being used to spread the propaganda and interacts within the community. For example: RSS uses it to control their army of troll to spread information over other platforms.
- Usage of such personal platforms is usually absent in case of Trend based cult members. However, in recent years this is also changing as WhatsApp and Telegram groups are emerging for these cults too.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Target Age Groups

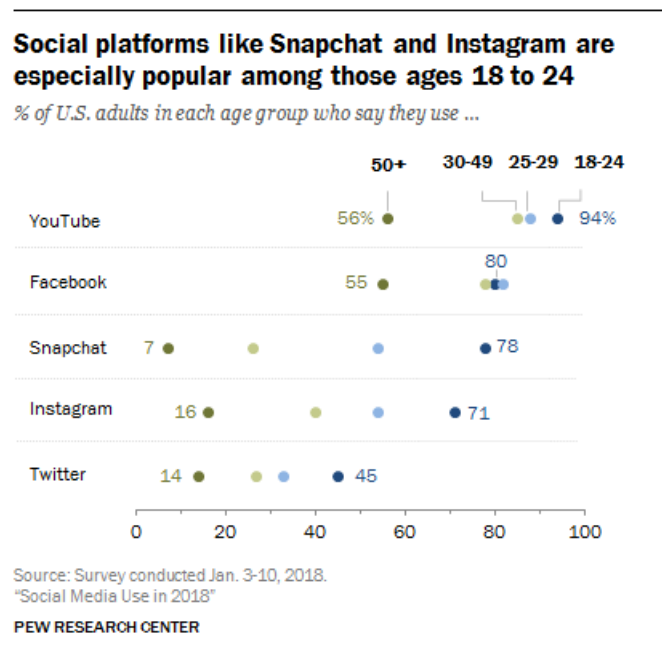


Figure 11: Age demographics of social media platforms

- It plays an important factor in the choosing a particular platform. For example, from [6], [Fig 11] we can clearly see that Instagram should be preferred when targeting millennials, and Facebook when targeting a widespread of audience over all age-spectrum.
- This is a major reason for seeing a decrease in trend-based celebrities' fan following on Facebook in last year but still saw an increase in Instagram.
- Professional networking platforms like LinkedIn do not lose their relevance even with the increase in age of users.

6.2 Nature of Content

- From [7], [Fig 12] we can see that the nature of content also is an influencing factor to choose a particular social media platform.
- Visual media is always more engaging than any kind of print media. The interaction features provided by the platform largely limits its usage. For example RSS widely uses its Cult base to trend political topics. They use hashtags very widely to keep their cause trending on platforms like Twitter [8], [Fig 13]. Making use of appropriate features of these platforms is very important for the cults to sustain themselves.
- Moreover the anonymity the platform offers while sharing the content also plays an important role.

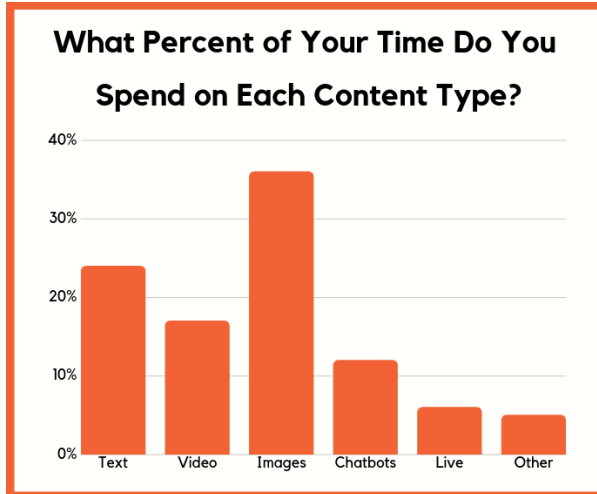


Figure 12: Types of content and their average engagement

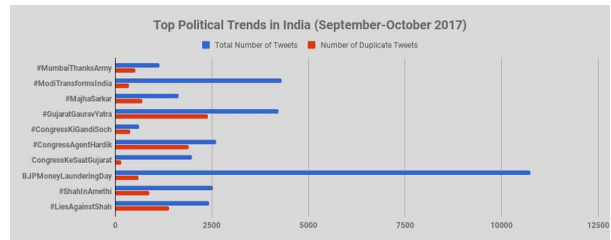


Figure 13: Political hashtag trends in India (Sept-Oct 2017)

6.3 Digital Currency

- Digital currency, namely likes, shares, subscribes, followers, are a very recent concept and are not really applicable for traditional cults.
- Digital currencies like the ones mentioned above are extremely valuable to these digital cult leaders.
- Digital currency helps to quantify the popularity of these cults. The number of people engaging with these cult leaders on a daily basis is extremely important to understand their outreach.
- These digital currency are used to profile us too. These likes, shares, follows determine the kind of content we are shown further by these social media platforms in the form of recommendations.
- Furthermore, the presence of these cults on any social media platform is not just dependent on its leaders. Their followers also play an important role in sustaining them. This self-organization feature of community masses under a common belief/ideology has been enhanced due to current-day technology.

6.4 Relationship with Society

- In the age of social media every user undergoes rigorous profiling through their social media usage. Their political stance, religious beliefs and their emotional mindsets are thoroughly analyzed
- An emotionally vulnerable section is be prime target which is captivated through a sequence of positive feedback loops due to a formidable combination of our addiction to social media platforms and our pavlovian conditioning done by them.
- Your music taste, to food preferences, to major life decisions are directly influenced by the digital media. Even if there's no free will, there's always an algorithm deciding something for you. Though, the ethic related to this is beyond the scope of this work, but we would surely love to take this in the future.
- This classic Leader-follower relationship has a much larger impact on the society. Few of them include:
 - Large recruitment of youth into these digital cults.
 - The outcome of the USA 2016 presidential elections were heavily influenced by Russian Government and Cambridge Analytica. This was done through extensive profiling of about 70 million Facebook users and targeted advertising [9, 10].
 - Mob lynchings, Anti-vaxxer campaigns, Brand Endorsement are all made possible due to this wide on single-touch connectivity provided to us by these digital platforms.
- All social media networks and platforms are interlinked, and we would go to the extent of making the claim that privacy in this digital age is a myth.

6.5 Dependency on Social Media

- Leaders of influencer cults are heavily dependent on different social media platforms. They require social media to continue being relevant to their followers. Their popularity is majorly dependent on it. They need to post content, in the form of posts, videos, tweets, stories to be constantly in touch with their followers.
- Spiritual cults need to turn to social media to ensure that they have a steady stream of followers else they will be stuck with just their core members. They are in need of social media as much as the leaders of influencer cults if not more. In order to reach out to a wider audience, they need to make use of social media.
- Political cults have the backing of political machinery so social media is an added benefit for them but not a necessity. They will continue to sustain themselves even without them but it serves a great advantage to their mission, to the extent of radicalizing the youth, who will be the next generation of voters.

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