

Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults

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Abstract

The rapid adoption of social networking sites (SNS) has prompted educators, parents, and researchers to consider the role SNS play in social life. Few scholars, however, have examined the effects of SNS on the religious beliefs of emerging adults. Drawing from Peter Berger's concept of "plausibility structures" and his theory of pluralism, I explore whether young adults who use SNS are more likely to condone religious pluralism and syncretism. Using panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, I find that emerging adults who use SNS are more likely to think it is acceptable to pick and choose their religious beliefs, and practice multiple religions independent of what their religious tradition teaches, but they are not more likely to believe all religions are true. These findings suggest that exposure to broader networks through social media leads to increased acceptance of syncretistic beliefs and practices.

Keywords

social networking sites, Facebook, religion, pluralism, syncretism, emerging adults, social media

Introduction

With the meteoric rise of social networking sites (SNS), people now have unprecedented access to new ideas, beliefs, and practices. SNS such as Facebook and Twitter create a marketplace of ideas that encourage and facilitate the sharing and exchanging of information. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that 72 percent of adults who use the Internet also use SNS (Brenner and Smith 2013). SNS are most popular among young adults aged 18 to 29, many of whom grew up using them.¹ In fact, 89 percent of young adults report using SNS with some frequency (Brenner and Smith 2013).

Despite their usefulness and popularity, these new technologies can produce unintended consequences. As Quentin J. Schultze (2004) and Mark Warschauer (2003) have independently observed, recent changes in technology have accelerated the growth of the pornography and gambling industries. Other studies have shown that Internet use may underwrite antisocial behaviors for adolescents (Wang et al. 2012) and that SNS are cited as contributing factors in divorce

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proceedings (Valenzuela, Halpern, and Katz 2014). Parents especially fret about the latent effects of modern technologies (Dill 2012). According to these concerned parents, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter not only expose adolescents to a plurality of worldviews that may be at odds with what they have learned at home, but they may also distract them from their schoolwork, inhibit outdoor recreation, and increase nefarious behaviors like “cyberbullying” and “sexting.” As a result, new social technologies often pose a threat to parents who wish to impart specific moral or religious teachings to their children.

What these concerns suggest is that SNS may undermine “plausibility structures” (Berger and Luckmann 1967), which Peter L. Berger (2014:31) defines as “the social context in which any cognitive or normative definition of reality is plausible.” This paper contends that new social technologies such as SNS, when in the hands of emerging adults, could challenge preexisting plausibility structures and have a syncretizing effect on one’s construal of religious truth claims. Put differently, emerging religious adults who are frequent users of social media technology may see value in multiple religious perspectives.

Although previous researchers have explored the effects of social networking on our well-being (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Hampton et al. 2011; Kross et al. 2013; Nie and Erbring 2002; Wellman 2001), no one has yet examined whether SNS are associated with religious pluralism or syncretism. In this paper, I ask and answer two research questions.

Research Question 1: Does using SNS affect young adults’ propensity to believe that many religions may be true simultaneously?

Research Question 2: Does using SNS make emerging adults more likely to accept religious syncretism, measured by the respondent’s approval of (1) picking and choosing religious beliefs that run contrary to what their or someone else’s religious tradition dictates and (2) practicing multiple religions?

For analytical purposes, the first research question asks whether SNS users are more likely to be religious pluralists and see all religions as fundamentally equal,² whereas the latter question measures different degrees of respondents’ openness to religious syncretism—the idea that it is acceptable to pick and choose among a wide variety of beliefs and practice multiple religions.

Trends and Theories at the Intersection of Religion and Technology

The continued decline of religiosity among American adolescents in recent years has sparked a conversation about the causes of such changes (Twenge et al. 2015). Even though religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of many emerging adults, researchers have noted significant changes in their beliefs and affiliation patterns compared with previous generations (Smith and Denton 2005; Smith and Snell 2009). Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell (2012), for example, have found that 35 to 40 percent of the American population switches religious traditions, suggesting that emerging adults feel quite free to abandon the religious tradition of their parents.

A substantial aspect of these changing patterns involves the tendency to support religious pluralism and syncretism. In particular, Robert Wuthnow (1998, 2007, 2009, 2010) argues that American spirituality since the 1950s has changed. Brought on by political developments such as the Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished national quotas and contributed to the influx of Eastern religions, as well as recent changes in mass communications, America is now a more religiously diverse country than ever. As a result, Wuthnow (2010:13) argues, young adults are not only exposed to greater religious diversity than their parents were but today they are also much more inclined to be “spiritual tinkerers,” cutting and pasting from the panoply of religions

to customize their own tailor-made spirituality. Likewise, Lisa Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2011) explore the concept of religious pluralism, and find that emerging adults constantly readjust their religious and spiritual preferences. Similarly, Jenny Trinitapoli's (2007) work on the religious exclusivism of U.S. adolescents highlights the tensions between professing beliefs in a particular religious tradition and accepting multiple, diverse traditions. Fearful of being perceived as intolerant or narrow-minded, many adolescents soften their exclusivist claims by acknowledging the limitations of what they know about other religions.

In light of the changing religious and technological landscapes, the previous observations can be helpfully explained by applying the theoretical work of Berger (1969, 1980, 2014; Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974; Berger and Luckmann 1967). Not only do American youth maintain different religious beliefs in comparison with previous generations but they are also generally the quickest adopters of new technologies (Brenner and Smith 2013). In his more recent theory of pluralism, Berger (2014) argues that modernity is the seedbed for multiple ways of thinking about religion. Drawing from Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (2000), Berger argues that pluralistic societies require strategies that defend, dismiss, or attempt to reconcile potentially opposing truth claims. Thus, for some, this means religious exclusivism, or the idea that only one religion is true. For others, however, the awareness of so many different ways to perceive ultimate reality suggests that there is very little truth to any religion. For others still, pluralism means that all religions have some truth to them and the major world religions each give partial expression to that divine truth. These responses—exclusivism, secularism, and pluralism—make up three of the dominant religious strategies in the modern world.

A fourth religious strategy adopted by many is a syncretistic one. Here, according to Berger (2014), the crucial underlying theme of modernity is the steady increase and proliferation of human choices that in turn alter the way we perceive reality. In his own words, "Modernization leads to a huge transformation in the human condition *from fate to choice*" (Berger 2014:5; emphasis added). From this perspective, the existence of many religions leads neither to an inevitable secular world order nor a stronger and more competitive religious marketplace (Stark and Finke 2000). Rather, an increasingly pluralistic environment makes for a world in which we expect and tolerate one's freedom to choose. This modern expectation permits a religious mentality that can be rightfully called syncretistic because, although not denying the importance of one particular religious tradition, it encourages people to pick and choose which religious beliefs and practices they adopt. In other words, the idea that a singular religious tradition should dictate what its adherents believe or practice becomes anathema. Instead, the modern ethos nurtures the consumer's right to tinker with numerous religious beliefs and practices to see which, if any, work for a given period of time.

Berger's assertion that the modernist enterprise facilitates human autonomy and choice is one with which few would disagree. But what role does technology play in producing the modern mind-set? As technological shifts are inherently social processes that act as catalysts and carriers of modernization (Berger et al. 1974), the values embedded in the technologies we use get internalized subjectively. Thus, as Berger and his coauthors (Berger et al. 1974:30) contend, humans develop "a problem-solving and deeply technological attitude [which] may carry over into the manner in which the individual looks at politics, the education of his children or the management of whatever psychological difficulties he may be afflicted with." Of course, however, human participation is required for technology to have these hypothetical effects. In and of itself, technology is not an independent actor capable of underwriting religious or social changes. Thus, a dialectical relationship between technology and its users exists.

Although the potential for applying these theories has existed for some time, social scientists have only just begun to explore the possible connections between religion and technology. As Heidi Campbell (2005, 2010) has observed, until recently, few researchers have examined the connections between religion and the Internet despite the fact that many people interact with both

on a daily basis. The research that does exist, however, suggests ambiguous connections between technology and religion. For example, Piotr S. Bobkowski (2008) found that Facebook users were hesitant to disclose their religious affiliation, beliefs, or behaviors online and preferred instead offline contexts in which to reveal their religious identity. In a follow-up study, Piotr S. Bobkowski and Lisa D. Pearce (2011) showed that 62 percent of MySpace users disclosed their religious affiliation online, but only 30 percent spoke about religious matters elsewhere on their profile page. Bernard J. Jansen, Andrea Tapia, and Amanda Spink (2010) collected data on more than five million Web searches from 1997 to 2005 and found that Internet users regularly searched for information on established religions online. Arguing that increases in Internet use negatively affect religiosity, Allen B. Downey (2014) has provocatively argued that increased Internet use accounts for about 20 percent of the observed decrease in religious affiliation since 1990. Although these studies are profitable in their own right, they do not address how SNS may affect the religious beliefs of emerging adults.

At issue here is whether SNS actually expose users to new ideas and perspectives or whether they isolate users and reinforce preexisting perspectives. Barry Wellman (2001) argues that the Internet is the ideal medium to help extend people's existing networks and strengthen social ties. From Wellman's perspective, the exponential growth of Facebook and other SNS opens up lines of communication and social capital in previously unimaginable ways. Unlike television, which may weaken civic engagement (Putnam 1995, 2000), the Internet is an interactive mass medium that catalyzes social interaction and helps otherwise isolated individuals communicate over long distances (Bargh and McKenna 2004). As evidence for the role of the Internet in expanding social networks, Michael J. Rosenfeld and Reuben J. Thomas (2012) found in one study that 74 percent of people who met a romantic partner online had no prior connection to them.

Not all researchers believe that the Internet is helpful in expanding social networks, however. As screen time demands individual attention and can be highly addictive for some, some scholars argue that new media technologies may have the unintended effect of isolating us rather than bringing us together (Kross et al. 2013; Roberts, Yaya, and Manolis 2014; Song 2009; Sunstein 2009; Turkle 2011a, 2011b). Norman H. Nie and Lutz Erbring (2002) showed with a national random sample of more than 4,000 adults that a modest two to five hours of Internet activity per week displaced time ordinarily spent with friends and family, thus leading to decreased contact with one's social environment. Sherry Turkle's (2011a, 2011b) qualitative work details how technological advances have resulted in many American teenagers and emerging adults experiencing difficulty sustaining meaningful relationships in a technologically wired age that encourages expansive (but not deep) connections with friends and voracious (but not focused) consumption of information. Alternatively, Cass R. Sunstein (2009:xi) worries that the Internet creates "information cocoons" and "echo chambers" that only serve to intensify prior beliefs by encouraging users to seek out likeminded people online.

What impact technology has on individual social networks and capital may also be contingent on the individual's preexisting characteristics. Paul DiMaggio et al. (2001) suggest that what users do online depends in part on their established patterns of behavior. Put differently, the Internet exacerbates social isolation for some and enhances social capital for others. Although their research focuses neither on SNS nor religion, it has implications for scholars wishing to understand the possible connections between SNS and religion. If SNS expand social networks and increase social capital, then they can potentially pluralize or syncretize religious beliefs. On the contrary, if SNS isolate individuals or reinforce previously held beliefs, then they likely have no pluralizing effects on religious beliefs. Given the tenor and implications of the literature, however, it seems more likely that modern social technologies underwrite pluralizing or syncretizing effects. From the foregoing discussion, I formulate and test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to believe that many religions are true rather than believe either (a) only one religion is true or (b) there is very little truth in any religion.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for someone of a different religion to pick and choose which religious beliefs they adopt regardless of what their religious tradition teaches.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for a member of their own religious tradition to practice other religions.

Data and Method

This project uses panel data from Waves 1, 3, and 4 of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR is a nationally representative sample that includes both telephone surveys and in-depth interviews. Wave 1 surveyed 3,290 English- and Spanish-speaking teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 as well as their parents. In the third wave, respondents were between the ages of 17 and 24, and researchers attempted to interview every respondent from the first two waves of the study. Data from Wave 4 of the survey were obtained between February 2013 and December 2013. Respondents at Wave 4 were aged 22 to 29. There were 2,144 complete responses with a 66 percent retention rate from Wave 1 (2002) and 81 percent participating in the previous three waves. Whereas the first three waves were conducted over the telephone, Wave 4 used a combination of phone (15 percent) and online (85 percent) data collection. As for attrition, some respondents were overseas actively serving in the military or on mission trips during the most recent wave, making it difficult for researchers to locate every first-wave respondent. Nonetheless, the research design of the NSYR is unique insofar as the survey questions ask a wide variety of religious and spiritual questions over a number of years.

Dependent Variables

As a deductive study, this analysis uses three particular variables that each ask respondents about their relative openness to other religions. The first variable investigates whether SNS respondents are more likely to be exclusivists, pluralists, or secularists, whereas the next two hypotheses measure religious syncretism (i.e., that one's religious beliefs and practices do not necessarily fall under the purview of a singular religious tradition). If Berger et al. (1974) are correct that technology is a pluralizing mechanism, SNS users should be more open to other religions than non-SNS users. Furthermore, as Wuthnow (2010:13) explains, the primary religious outlook shared by America's young adults is that of "spiritual tinkering," or the belief that it is acceptable to pick, choose, and practice disparate and potentially contradictory belief systems. By combining these insights about technology and religion, this paper therefore examines whether SNS users are more inclined to adopt the kinds of pluralistic and syncretistic approaches to religion witnessed as of late (Roof 1993, 2001; Wuthnow 2010).

The binary and multinomial logistic regressions that follow test whether involvement and time spent on SNS at Wave 3 affect Wave 4 outcomes. The first dependent variable used in this analysis asks respondents to select a statement that best approximates their position regarding religious truth. The question states, "Which of the following statements comes closest to your own views about religion?" On the survey, respondents could choose from the following answers: *Only one religion is true* (= 1), *Many religions may be true* (= 2), or *There is very little truth in any religion* (= 3). Given the three answer choices, I have used multinomial logistic regressions to compare whether SNS users are more likely than non-SNS users to be exclusivists ("Only one religion is true"), pluralists ("Many religions may be true"), or secularists ("There is very little truth in any religion").

The second question that serves as a dependent variable states, “Some people think that it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole. Do you agree or disagree that this is okay?” Respondents were asked to either *disagree* (= 0) or *agree* (= 1) with this question. Notably, this question does not ask whether the respondent actually approaches religion with a syncretistic framework, but the normative responses that follow provide an important measure of one’s openness to syncretism. In other words, those who agree with the permissibility of picking and choosing their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their faith as a whole are naturally more likely to extend this right to themselves and other would-be syncretists.

The third question measures a related yet intensified aspect to the respondents’ willingness to practice multiple religions. As another measure of syncretism, the question states, “Do you think it is okay for someone of your religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one religion?” The answer choices for this question are specified along binary lines where 0 = *should only practice one religion* and 1 = *okay to practice other religions*. Although the second and third questions are obviously similar, the second asks about condoning syncretistic *beliefs*, whereas the third asks about syncretistic *practices* and also pertains to those who are self-identified members of the same religious tradition.

Independent Variables

My primary independent variables come from questions in Wave 3 of the NSYR. Two variables in particular capture aspects of the respondent’s SNS use that can then be analyzed to determine their effects on religious outcomes. The first of these variables asks, “Are you a member of any of the social networking Web sites that allow you to communicate with others, such as Facebook or Myspace?” Stated in binary form, respondents could answer *no* (= 0) or *yes* (= 1). The next question on the survey asks respondents to gauge how much time they spend on SNS if they answered the previous question affirmatively. Answers ranged from *several times a day* (= 1) to *less than every few weeks* (= 6). These responses were then reverse coded in the following way: 1 = *less than every few weeks*, 2 = *every few weeks*, 3 = *one to two days a week*, 4 = *three to five days a week*, 5 = *about once a day*, and 6 = *several times a day*. To include non-SNS individuals in this recoded variable, those who answered “No” to the previous question were included and assumed to have answered “Never” (= 0). Thus, the newly constructed, continuous variable, which is labeled in this paper as “SNS time,” ranges from *never* (= 0) to *several times a day* (= 6).

Other key independent variables used in this analysis help determine what effects, if any, parental religious attendance (only asked on Wave 1) and the religious attendance of the respondent have on one’s acceptance of religious pluralism and syncretism. As Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris (2013) explain in their theory of intergenerational religious momentum, parental religious attendance is a consistent predictor of the religiosity of adolescents, so I have included parental religious attendance as a control variable throughout my models. The pertinent question asks parents the following: “In the last 12 months, how often have you been attending religious services, not including weddings, baptisms, and funerals?” Responses were coded so that 0 = *never*, 1 = *few times a year*, 2 = *many times a year*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = *two to three times a month*, 5 = *once a week*, and 6 = *more than once a week*. For teenagers’ religious attendance at Wave 1, researchers asked them to report their attendance at the first church they named, and answers ranged similarly from *never* (= 0) to *more than once a week* (= 6). In Wave 4, two variables had to be used to construct the measure needed for analysis. First, the variable asks, “Do you attend religious services more than once or twice a year, not counting weddings, baptisms, or funerals?” Answers for this question were *no* (= 0) and *yes* (= 1). Those who answered negatively were then assumed to have answered *never* (= 0) on the question that asked, “About how often do you usually attend religious services there?” Answers ranged again from

more than once a week (= 1) to a few times a year (= 6). These survey responses were then recoded as a continuous variable ranging from *never* (= 0) to *more than once a week* (= 6).

Regressions analyses in this study control for essential demographic variables at Wave 4 of the NSYR. The first of these variables includes age (now years 22 to 29 years old) coded continuously in years. For the respondent's sex, a binary variable labeled *female* has the response values of 0 = *male* and 1 = *female*. The race of the respondent was also made into a binary variable using Wave 1 of the NSYR, assuming the race of the respondent remains constant over time. Furthermore, though respondents were given up to 15 different answer choices including the option to write in their race, nearly half the sample at Wave 1 (47.3 percent) identified as white. As such, for these analyses, I coded race as a binary where 0 = *nonwhite* and 1 = *white*. Another standard control variable used in regression analyses is the region of the country in which one lives. Given the historical, religious, and political uniqueness of the American South, a binary variable is used where 0 = *other parts of the United States* and 1 = *the South*. The income of the respondent at Wave 4 is also taken into consideration. The Wave 4 survey question asked respondents, "How much did you personally earn during the past 12 months, including wages from all jobs, salary, tips, bonuses, overtime, and income from self-employment, before taxes and other deductions?" Respondents could answer from *I did not earn any money* (= 1) to *\$200,000 or more* (= 16), with the range within each response category being \$9,999. As 3.2 percent of respondents from Wave 4 refused to answer this question, I imputed the mean income (4.29) for these respondents. I have also included a second binary income variable labeled "Reported income" to detect whether nonresponses are statistically significant. In this variable, all respondents who reported their income = 0 and nonresponses = 1. Education is another control variable used in my analyses, and respondents were asked on the survey to report their highest level of educational attainment where 1 = *no degrees*, 2 = *high school diploma or general educational development (GED)*, 3 = *associate's degree or vocational/technical certificate*, 4 = *bachelor's degree*, and 5 = *graduate school*. The last control variable used in this study is marital status, which I coded as a binary so that 1 = *married* and 0 = *all other options*. With the exception of the income variables as explained above, I omitted all responses that were skipped, unknown, or refused using listwise deletion.

Finally, in keeping with the religious considerations present in this study, I control for religious affiliation. Following Brian Steensland et al. (2000), I have used a religious tradition configuration that groups respondents into seven possible binary categories. These categories are listed as follows: Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Other Religions, and the Not Religious (or Nones). When included in my models, these variables are transformed into a system of binaries, with Nones serving as the comparison group for Tables 2 to 4. For Table 5, Evangelicals are the comparison group because Nones were not asked to answer that particular question on the NSYR.

Analytic Approach

This study looks at the propensity of SNS users to hold different beliefs regarding the acceptability of thinking that many religions may be true, picking and choosing their beliefs, and condoning the practice of multiple religions. The first of these, therefore, measures religious pluralism, whereas the latter two measure religious syncretism. The demographic and religious breakdown of SNS users and nonusers follows.

The first models in this paper present the outcomes of multinomial logistic regressions that test the likelihood of believing many religions to be true. Conceptually, although this outcome variable bears a similarity to those that analyze syncretism, this question aims to detect whether SNS users are more likely to be exclusivists ("Only one religion is true"), pluralists ("Many religions may be true"), or secularists ("There is very little truth to any religion").

To test whether SNS participation at Wave 3 can be predicted to affect the respondent's disposition toward picking and choosing their religious beliefs (independent of what their religious tradition instructs), I ran a series of binary logistic regressions. In Table 4, SNS involvement is a binary variable where 1 = *SNS users* and 0 = *non-SNS users*. Models 3 and 4 in this table use time spent on SNS as the chief independent variable. To avoid problems with multicollinearity for these independent variables, being on SNS (Models 1 and 2) and spending time on SNS (Models 3 and 4) are treated separately. Table 4 also includes parental attendance from Wave 1 and the religious attendance of the respondent at Waves 1 and 4. The aim of including these variables is to assess whether and when religious attendance—both of the parent and the respondent—affects the outcome of thinking that it is acceptable to pick and choose whichever religious beliefs one wants without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole.

Table 5 tests a related outcome involving religious syncretism. Although previous models investigate the odds of picking and choosing among different (and possibly contradictory) religious *beliefs*, these binary logistic regressions predict the effects of SNS involvement and SNS time on believing that it is acceptable to *practice* other religions. These tests are therefore an extension and intensification of earlier models measuring religious syncretism. Hypothetically, one could hold whatever beliefs they want privately, even if those beliefs run counter to their religious tradition, but think that actively practicing other religions is taboo or idolatrous. Thus, the models presented here aim to capture whether respondents think that members of their own religious tradition should depart from their tradition's practices and assess whether and to what extent SNS play a role in that decision.

Results

In comparing those who use SNS and those who do not, some similarities and differences deserve recognition. As Table 1 illustrates, SNS users and nonusers have nearly identical ages in this sample and closely parallel one another in terms of their race and marital status. At Wave 4 of the survey, however, SNS users are slightly more likely to be female, more educated, and have higher average incomes than nonusers.

When examining religious attendance, those who abstain from using SNS generally attend religious services with some regularity across all waves. For SNS users, however, the average religious attendance rates drop more severely over time from 3.306 and 2.019 (measured at Waves 1 and Wave 3, not shown) to 1.637 (at Wave 4). This finding, although possibly correlated with other variables (Twenge et al. 2015), dovetails with earlier research that locates a drop in religious affiliation with increases in Internet use (Downey 2014).

In turning to the regression models, a number of significant findings are evident. As the results show, age, race, and income are not consistently statistically significant across models. In Tables 2 and 3, women are reportedly more inclined to believe that all religions are true as opposed to believing that either only one religion is true (Table 2) or there is very little truth to religion (Table 3). Furthermore, those who reside in the Southern United States are more likely to be pluralists than secularists, but they are not more likely to be pluralists when compared with being exclusivists. Marital status also has a significant effect on one's understanding of religious truth claims, as married persons are less likely to report an acceptance of pluralism when compared with exclusivism.

Among those who are religiously affiliated, Catholics stand out as having a positive predictive effect on one's stance toward pluralism across most models.³ Conversely, Evangelicals are less likely to favor pluralism when compared with exclusivism, but they are more likely to condone pluralism as opposed to secularism. Given the options, Evangelicals are more likely to think that all religions are true rather than none at all. Furthermore, both religious attendance and the religious attendance of one's parents are associated with lower odds of accepting pluralism versus

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of SNS Nonusers and Users, NSYR (2003–2014).

	SNS nonusers				SNS users			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Independent variables								
Age	358	25.539	1.526	23–28	1,540	25.412	1.447	22–29
Female (Wave 1)	554	0.449	0.498	0–1	1,974	0.531	0.499	0–1
White (Wave 1)	554	0.480	0.500	0–1	1,974	0.496	0.500	0–1
Education	361	2.507	0.969	1–5	1,538	3.182	1.095	1–5
Income	356	3.877	2.207	1–16	1,536	4.432	2.307	1–16
Reported income	356	0.062	0.241	0–1	1,536	0.023	0.149	0–1
South	361	0.363	0.481	0–1	1,545	0.406	0.491	0–1
Married	360	0.267	0.443	0–1	1,542	0.248	0.432	0–1
Evangelical	361	0.188	0.392	0–1	1,545	0.194	0.396	0–1
Mainline	361	0.039	0.193	0–1	1,545	0.065	0.246	0–1
Black Protestant	361	0.083	0.276	0–1	1,545	0.044	0.205	0–1
Catholic	361	0.102	0.304	0–1	1,545	0.146	0.353	0–1
Jewish	361	0.022	0.147	0–1	1,545	0.043	0.204	0–1
Other religion	361	0.036	0.187	0–1	1,545	0.019	0.136	0–1
None	361	0.366	0.482	0–1	1,545	0.344	0.475	0–1
Parental attendance (Wave 1)	553	3.376	2.242	0–6	1,972	3.367	2.172	0–6
Attendance (Wave 1)	553	2.980	2.219	0–6	1,973	3.306	2.165	0–6
Attendance (Wave 4)	359	1.891	2.287	0–6	1,540	1.637	2.095	0–6
SNS time (Wave 3)	554	0	0	0	1,974	4.229	1.533	1–6
Dependent variables								
H1: Pluralism	358	1.891	0.692	1–3	1,537	1.934	0.669	1–3
Are you an exclusivist, pluralist, or secularist?								
H2: Syncretism	359	0.440	0.497	0–1	1,529	0.568	0.495	0–1
Is it okay to pick and choose your beliefs?								
H3: Syncretism	198	0.348	0.478	0–1	900	0.500	0.500	0–1
Is it okay to practice other religions?								

Note. All variables come from Wave 4 unless noted otherwise. SNS = social networking sites; NSYR = National Study of Youth and Religion.

exclusivism, though respondents who regularly attend a religious service are more likely to accept pluralism than secularism. Similarly, for respondents whose parents attended church regularly at Wave 1 of the survey, increased parental attendance translates into increased odds of accepting exclusivism over pluralism. Notably, no models in Tables 2 or 3 predict a significant relationship between SNS membership or SNS time and openness to pluralism. These models therefore provide conclusive evidence to reject my hypothesis (H1) that SNS users will more likely favor pluralism over either exclusivism or secularism.

The results in Tables 4 and 5 cast an entirely different picture of the effects of SNS use on religious syncretism. In Table 4, SNS users have higher odds of picking and choosing their religious beliefs irrespective of their tradition. In particular, SNS users are 49 percent more likely to find picking and choosing religious beliefs acceptable, even when controlling for essential demographic variables at Wave 4 and religious attendance at Wave 1. When controlling for religious attendance at Wave 4, SNS users are still 35 percent more likely to accept syncretism of religious

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement and SNS Time on Believing Many Religions May Be True (Pluralism) as Opposed to Believing Only One Religion Is True (Exclusivism), NSYR (2003–2014).

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.989	0.993	0.988	0.990
Female (Wave 1)	1.489**	1.482**	1.505**	1.490**
White (Wave 1)	1.065	1.062	1.059	1.058
Education	0.921	0.951	0.928	0.964
Income	1.006	0.986	1.009	0.988
Reported income	1.026	0.964	0.660	0.932
South	0.816	0.815	0.894	0.854
Married	0.424***	0.593***	0.425***	0.592***
Evangelical	0.227***	0.557**	0.226***	0.559**
Mainline	0.545*	0.973	0.548*	0.978
Black Protestant	0.287***	0.927	0.278***	0.911
Catholic	1.446	2.669***	1.465	2.685***
Jewish	1.158	1.607	1.165	1.605
Other religion	0.945	2.758*	0.934	2.753*
Attendance (Wave 1)	0.765***	—	0.767***	—
Attendance (Wave 4)	—	0.639***	—	0.637***
Parental attendance (Wave 1)	0.915*	0.853***	0.913*	0.853***
SNS involvement (Wave 3)	1.408*	1.144	—	—
SNS time (Wave 3)	—	—	1.026	0.996
N	1,860	1,856	1,860	1,856
Pseudo max-rescaled R ²	.33	.39	.33	.39

Note. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted. Nones are the comparison group for each of the religious traditions. SNS = social networking sites; NSYR = National Study of Youth and Religion; OR = odds ratio. **p* ≤ .05. ***p* ≤ .01. ****p* ≤ .001. (two-tailed tests).

beliefs. Likewise, in Models 3 and 4, increases in time spent on SNS have a statistically significant effect on one’s likelihood of endorsing syncretistic religious beliefs. Taken together, these models suggest that SNS use is linked with the propensity to approach religion with a syncretistic mentality.

Unsurprisingly, Table 4 also shows that religious attendance is negatively correlated with picking and choosing religious beliefs that are independent of one’s tradition. For example, at Wave 1, for every unit of increase in religious attendance, individuals can be predicted to have 12 percent lower odds of believing that picking and choosing beliefs is acceptable. At Wave 4, the odds are 30 percent lower. Thus, although religious attendance dampens the likelihood that one will condone syncretistic beliefs, those who spend time on SNS are more likely to support syncretism of beliefs.

In Table 5, the patterns are similar. Attending a religious service with regularity is negatively associated with thinking that practicing other religions is appropriate, and for every unit of increase in religious attendance, respondents have lower odds of thinking that a syncretistic approach is acceptable (15 percent lower at Wave 1 and 31 percent lower at Wave 4). On the contrary, SNS users are more likely to believe that it is acceptable to practice other religions. In fact, when controlling for demographic and religious variables, respondents are 80 percent more likely to accept syncretistic religious practices (Table 5, Model 1) and 53 percent more likely when controlling for attendance at Wave 4.

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement and SNS Time on Believing Many Religions May Be True (Pluralism) as Opposed to Believing That There Is Very Little Truth to Religion (Secularism), NSYR (2003–2014).

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	1.045	1.036	1.045	1.036
Female (Wave 1)	2.359***	2.412***	2.351***	2.404***
White (Wave 1)	0.980	1.027	0.985	1.031
Education	0.865*	0.855*	0.863*	0.853*
Income	1.006	1.008	1.006	1.008
Reported income	1.447	1.542	1.468	1.567
South	1.503**	1.542**	1.504**	1.543**
Married	0.937	0.857	0.933	0.854
Evangelical	3.501***	1.992*	3.512***	1.991*
Mainline	7.241***	5.015***	7.209***	4.999***
Black Protestant	3.320**	1.751	3.319**	1.756
Catholic	7.372***	5.653***	7.379***	5.649***
Jewish	1.961*	1.800	1.965*	1.796
Other religion	17.190**	12.535*	17.292**	12.540*
Attendance (Wave 1)	1.102*	—	1.101*	—
Attendance (Wave 4)	—	1.329***	—	1.330***
Parental attendance (Wave 1)	1.071	1.120***	1.072	1.120***
SNS involvement (Wave 3)	0.910	0.931	—	—
SNS time (Wave 3)	—	—	0.991	0.995
N	1,860	1,856	1,860	1,856
Pseudo R ²	.33	.39	.33	.39

Note. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted. Nones are the comparison group for each of the religious traditions. SNS = social networking sites; NSYR = National Study of Youth and Religion; OR = odds ratio. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$. (two-tailed tests).

A second important finding from Table 5 shows that parental religiosity matters. Across all models in Table 5, for every unit of increase in parental religious attendance, the odds of thinking that it is legitimate to practice other religions decrease about 11 percent. Thus, consistent with previous research (Bengtson et al. 2013), regular parental religious attendance lessens one's acceptance of religious syncretism. The religious attendance of the respondent works the same way. Across all models in Table 5, increases in religious attendance translate to decreases in legitimating syncretism. This should not be all that surprising, for increases in attendance can be properly understood to strengthen the plausibility structures that make practicing only one religion more desirable. Thus, individuals who regularly attend religious services and whose parents regularly attend are much less likely to think that practicing other religions is acceptable. The situation seems to change, however, for those who spend more time on SNS. For these individuals, each unit of increase in time spent on SNS can be shown to predict an 8 percent increase in believing that practicing different religions is appropriate when controlling for religious attendance at Wave 1 and all other variables at Wave 4.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is difficult to deny the fact that the adoption of social technology has greatly altered our world. Even so, few scholars have attempted to explain how SNS use disrupts, promotes, or interacts

Table 4. Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement and SNS Time on Picking and Choosing Religious Beliefs Independent of One’s Religious Tradition, NSYR (2003–2014).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.990	0.994	0.995	0.998
Female (Wave 1)	1.054	1.055	1.055	1.054
White (Wave 1)	0.990	0.969	0.979	0.959
Education	1.206***	1.263***	1.190***	1.249***
Income	1.023	1.013	1.023	1.013
Reported income	1.004	0.958	1.010	0.963
South	0.778*	0.784*	0.780*	0.786*
Married	0.653***	0.864	0.659***	0.872
Evangelical	0.357***	0.801	0.360***	0.809
Mainline	0.685	1.161	0.694	1.174
Black Protestant	0.302***	0.772	0.305***	0.779
Catholic	1.350	2.207***	1.351	2.209***
Jewish	1.293	1.542	1.261	1.513
Other religion	0.678	1.355	0.670	1.348
Attendance (Wave 1)	0.880***	—	0.881***	—
Attendance (Wave 4)	—	0.698***	—	0.697***
Parental attendance (Wave 1)	0.992	0.977	0.991	0.977
SNS involvement (Wave 3)	1.492**	1.350*	—	—
SNS time (Wave 3)	—	—	1.075**	1.060*
N	1,853	1,850	1,853	1,850
Max-rescaled R ²	.17	.24	.17	.24

Note. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted. Nones are the comparison group for each of the religious traditions. SNS = social networking sites; NSYR = National Study of Youth and Religion; OR = odds ratio. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$. (two-tailed tests).

with religious beliefs or practices. For emerging adults in particular, this topic is crucial, for as Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton (2005) have argued, “Of all Americans, youth are often said to be most intensely exposed to and engaged with the digital and interactive communication technologies that are thought to be transforming American culture.” The latent effects of technology often go unnoticed despite their very real consequences, and these consequences can be detected by measuring differences among SNS users and nonusers.⁴ Thus, with the advent of new social technologies, it is crucial for researchers to study how and why SNS may affect designated areas of our lives.

The findings presented in this paper reveal that SNS users are more inclined to condone religious syncretism but are not any more likely to be religious pluralists. The empirical evidence I have amassed can be used to support my next two hypotheses but not the first one pertaining to pluralism. Thus, the results reveal the following:

H1 (Unsupported): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to believe that many religions are true rather than believe either (a) only one religion is true or (b) there is very little truth in any religion.

H2 (Supported): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for someone to pick and choose which religious beliefs they adopt regardless of what their religious tradition teaches.

Table 5. Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement on Believing It Acceptable to Practice Other Religions, NSYR (2003–2014).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.976	0.967	0.979	0.968
Female (Wave 1)	1.205	1.174	1.221	1.184
White (Wave 1)	0.819	0.811	0.809	0.802
Education	0.982	1.059	0.977	1.059
Income	0.996	0.975	0.998	0.977
Reported income	0.649	0.653	0.662	0.654
South	0.694*	0.726*	0.707*	0.737*
Married	0.455***	0.660*	0.459***	0.667*
Mainline	1.981**	1.961**	2.022**	1.987**
Black Protestant	0.577	0.928	0.562	0.908
Catholic	3.090***	3.034***	3.088***	3.033***
Jewish	2.751***	1.995*	2.686**	1.958*
Other religion	4.151***	6.401***	4.007***	6.202***
Attendance (Wave 1)	0.846***	—	0.850***	—
Attendance (Wave 4)	—	0.685***	—	0.684***
Parental attendance (Wave 1)	0.913*	0.905**	0.910*	0.905**
SNS involvement (Wave 3)	1.796**	1.526*	—	—
SNS time (Wave 3)	—	—	1.082*	1.056
N	1,075	1,075	1,075	1,075
Max-rescaled R ²	.25	.35	.25	.34

Note. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted. Religious Nones were excluded from the dependent variable in this survey question. Evangelicals are the comparison group for all other religious traditions. SNS = social networking sites; NSYR = National Study of Youth and Religion; OR = odds ratio.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$. (two-tailed tests).

H3 (Supported): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for a member of their own religious tradition to practice other religions.

In light of the empirical evidence, some obvious questions persist. Why might SNS users be more likely to condone syncretism of beliefs and practices when their religion forbids it? Put more strongly, how could using Facebook or other SNS affect how people approach religion and spirituality? As I have shown, there is a consistent positive association between SNS use and the acceptance of syncretism. These findings suggest that far from being a neutral technology, SNS have embedded within them certain values that urge users to think differently about reality. Consider, for example, the “*problem solving inventiveness*” and “*tinkering attitude*” that Berger and company argue are mainstays of the modernist, technological enterprise (Berger et al. 1974:30). Carried forward to the present day, Wuthnow (2010) has found evidence of “spiritual tinkering” among America’s younger birth cohorts, particularly Gen Xers and Millennials. Is it a coincidence, then, that that these same cohorts are more likely to be heavy users of SNS (Brenner and Smith 2013)?

Although my argument asserts that social technology has syncretizing effects, an important qualification to this assertion is needed. Namely, the technological platforms that support SNS are in and of themselves powerless to produce syncretism *without human users*. Digital technologies require users to “buy in” and participate before any social or religious change may occur. As Wilbert Ellis Moore (1972:13) explains in his analysis of technology and capitalism, “Without a [human] market, the machine remains useless—it is no more than a bizarre sculpture.” Thus,

although changes in our collective religious thinking may occur because of the technological innovations that nurture “spiritual tinkering,” technology always exists in a dialectical relationship with those who use it.

With this important caveat in mind, this paper argues that the connections between SNS use and religious syncretism are more likely real than spurious. The basic architecture of SNS and its uses are such that they promote autonomy, control, and the fluidity of (religious) commitments (Dreyfus 2008; Turkle 1997). On Facebook, there is no expectation that one’s “likes” and preferences be logically consistent and hidebound by tradition. Religion, as a result, does not consist of timeless truths that communities submit to in faith. Instead, the Facebook effect on religion is that all spiritual options become commodities and resources for which individuals can tailor to meet their individual needs.

Turning to the empirical evidence once more, one may wonder why using SNS statistically predicts religious syncretism but not pluralism. Although the two may appear to go hand in hand, syncretism and pluralism are not interchangeable concepts. In general, syncretism entails the freedom to choose one’s beliefs (H2) and practices (H3), whereas pluralism (H1) is a theological strategy that attempts to minimize religious differences. For the syncretist, however, minimizing differences is unnecessary. The judicious syncretist must discern *which* beliefs and practices to borrow, whereas the pluralist believes that all religions are the same anyway. Accordingly, for the variables used in this paper, H2 and H3 tap into a general disposition that SNS users exhibit more often than nonusers, which is the belief that one has the right to choose and exercise their beliefs and practices, regardless of what their religious tradition dictates. As for thinking that many religious traditions are the same, SNS use does not predict pluralism any more than it predicts exclusivism or secularism. Berger (2014:53) once again helps explain why this might be: “In the experience of most individuals, secularity and religion are not mutually contradictory. Rather, they coexist, each pertaining to a specific form of attention to reality.”

This recognition means that the assumption contained in my first hypothesis—that the adoption of social technology guides individuals toward the acceptance of religious pluralism—is based on a false trichotomy. Yes, the modern world is more pluralistic than ever thanks in part to the widespread sharing and exchanging of information made possible by social technology. Like the Silk Road on steroids, SNS give individuals today unprecedented access to new ideas, beliefs, and practices. But faced with a growing number of religious and spiritual options, individuals do not have to decide between exclusivism, pluralism, and secularism. Instead, they can be syncretists, and as Berger explains above, the structures of modern consciousness are such that individuals can be both religious and secular, exclusivist and pluralistic in their thinking from one moment to the next so long as they have the right to pick and choose what they practice.⁵

Customary with any research project are certain limitations that deserve mention and point toward avenues for future research. First, the independent variables used in this analysis tracked whether individuals belonged to SNS and asked them how much time they spent on these sites. Ideally, there would have been accompanying questions about how individuals actually spend their time on SNS, which SNS they use, and what media content they consume while online. Survey questions about not only media content but also Web searches, the presentation of religious messages on SNS, and how members of different religious traditions negotiate messages of exclusivity and pluralism would further this study. Second, given the importance of religiosity in these models, it would be helpful to know why parental attendance matters greatly when it comes to considering many religions to be true (Tables 2 and 3) or practicing other religions (Table 5) but not when picking and choosing certain religious beliefs over others (Table 4). Third, the primary independent variables used for analysis asked about SNS participation when these individuals were already 17 to 24 years old. It would be worthwhile, however, to measure the long-term effects of SNS beginning in early childhood. Future researchers might also consider testing whether a distinction exists between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” in terms of other religious measures such as biblical literalism, prayer, and the reading of sacred texts (Prensky 2001).

What the previous work amounts to is an assessment of the role SNS play in the religious and spiritual lives of young Americans. Surprisingly, despite the wealth of research on religion as well as the effects of Internet use, virtually no one has examined the role that SNS play in the religious formation of emerging adults. I have shown that users of SNS are more likely to condone religious syncretism. At the same time, religious attendance lessens the likelihood that one will accept syncretism, and young Americans whose parents regularly attended religious services while they were growing up also have much lower odds of condoning the syncretistic practices of individuals who share their same faith. These processes are pivotal mechanisms that both reinforce existing plausibility structures and generate confidence in one's own religious tradition. For young adults on SNS, however, the effects of SNS weaken religious plausibility structures and encourage a modern mentality that condones the syncretism of beliefs and practices regardless of what their religious tradition teaches.

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Notes

1. Following danah m. boyd and Nicole Ellison's (2007:211) definition, I understand social networking sites to be "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system."
2. In the philosophy of religion, this position is also sometimes referred to as *perennialism* (Mercadante 2014). Although religious pluralism is recognized to have many meanings (Berger 2014), I make use of it in this paper because it is a more recognizable expression than perennialism. Thus, in this paper, pluralism means believing that all religions are functionally the same.
3. This finding, which is consistent across most models, deserves more time and attention than is allotted for this paper. Although there is Catholic precedence after Vatican II to accept other religious believers as "Anonymous Christians" (Rahner 1982), it is uncertain how extensive this theological position is among American Catholics. See also Trinitapoli (2007) for similar findings.
4. As Hubert L. Dreyfus (2008:1) has provocatively mused, "Henry Ford thought of the automobile as giving people cheap reliable, individualized transportation, but he did not imagine it would destroy inner cities and liberate adolescent sex."
5. See also Nancy Ammerman's response in Berger (2014) where she discusses sacred and secular "code switching" as a unique modern religious phenomenon.

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