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The Internet and Religion in Singapore: A National Survey

Report 002

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Executive Summary

Singapore has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in the world (60.2%) and 85% of Singaporeans claim to have a religious affiliation to one of the main religious traditions within the country, including Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or traditional Chinese religions. International surveys have shown the use of the Internet for religious purposes is growing significantly, and that in the future, the Internet could be a primary source for religious information for users around the world. The main aim of this project was to investigate and better understand how Singaporeans used the Internet for religious purposes. A national survey with 711 respondents was conducted from 21st to 26th of November 2004 to measure the extent to which Singaporeans used the Internet in a religious context, their perceptions of the religious impact of the Internet and the most common online religiously oriented online activities among Singaporeans.

Key Findings

Singaporeans use the Internet for a variety of religious purposes, although not as extensively as users in the United States. Furthermore, Internet use for religious purposes was found to be significantly and positively correlated with Internet efficacy, that is, the extent to which people had confidence in their own ability to use the Internet.

- Singaporeans who used the Internet for religious purposes are fairly evenly distributed across gender, income levels and various age groups.

- Christians were most likely to use the Internet, and not surprisingly, free thinkers were least likely to use the Internet for religious purposes.

- In terms of ethnicity:

    - Chinese compose the majority of both the Christian and the free thinker populations, and therefore are among both the most likely and the least likely to use the Internet for religious purposes.
    - As an ethnic group, Malays were most likely to use the Internet for religious purposes. However, they are less likely to use the Internet for religious purposes than the Chinese Christians.

- The more religious a person is, the more likely they are to use the Internet for religious purposes. Likewise, more highly educated Singaporeans are most likely to use the Internet for religious purposes, while the less educated are least likely to do so.

- The most popular online activities among Singaporeans are downloading or listening to religious music online, or recommending religious sites to friends and relatives.

- Singaporeans were much more likely to use the Internet to engage in activities related to their own religion than to other religions, suggesting that the Internet does not necessarily lead to an understanding of other faiths.

- The majority of Singaporeans feel that the Internet can be easily used to insult the religion of others, and that there is too much material on the Internet that can be potentially sacrilegious and harmful to religion.

- At the same time, they also feel that the availability of religious material online is not disruptive to religious harmony nor does it encourage religious tolerance.

Introduction

Singapore has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in the world, where in 2002, 60.2% of Singaporeans were Internet users, and from 2000-2005, the number of Internet users climbed even higher, to 77.9% (Internet World Stats). According to these figures, Singapore has the second highest Internet penetration rate in Asia, after Hong Kong. These are outstanding figures, even when compared to many developed nations in the world such as the United States (68.8%) and Sweden (74.3%). As a developed society, Singapore is characterized by a multi-ethnic, multi-religious population, a strong GDP, and high literacy rates. Singapore is also one of the most globalized nations on the earth, along economic and political dimensions, and in cultural globalization.

Online religious activity has been identified as a popular and important online activity in some Western countries, including the United States. According to the results of the Pew Internet and American Life Project study on "cyberfaith", more than 64% of American Internet users have used the Internet for religious purposes (Hoover, Clark & Rainie, 2004). Religiously oriented online activities that are gaining popularity include activities such as seeking and giving religious information/advice online, downloading religious paraphernalia, and purchasing religious items. Furthermore, Pew's most recent analysis of Internet use by Americans show that the number of people seeking religious information online has nearly doubled in the past three years (Madden, 2003).

An earlier report from the Singapore Internet Project (SIP) suggests that the Internet may be similarly important for the religious and social lives of Singaporeans. While most adult users indicated that the Internet did not alter their interaction with those of a common faith belief, almost a quarter reported that connections to the Internet had increased their religious contacts (Kuo, Choi, Mahiznan, Lee & Soh, 2002).

The increase in religious interest after recent world events has brought religion back into public discussion, and attests to the importance of religion, even in an electronically mediated, globalized society. Furthermore, within Singapore, religion is still considered to be an important part of every day life. According to the a recent government census, 85 percent of Singaporeans stated that they had a religious affiliation to either Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or other religions (Yearbook of Statistics Singapore, 2000).

The Singapore government's emphasis on creating an "e-society" has helped tremendously in increasing Internet use among Singaporeans for many different activities. Within a multi-cultural, multi-religious, "wired" society such as Singapore, the use of the Internet for religious purposes has potentially important implications for inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, policy making and education. Surprisingly, this study is the first study of its kind in examining the use of the Internet for religious purposes in any Asian country.

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Methodology

This report is based on a random, national level survey aimed at understanding how Singaporeans use the Internet for religious purposes and is based on the results of a survey of 711 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents (aged 18 years and over). The survey was conducted from the 21st to 26th of November 2004 using a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system with a response rate of 56.82 %. Respondents were screened for citizenship and Internet use. A randomized sample was obtained by generating random numbers, and then randomizing respondents within each household. At least 8 attempts were made to complete an interview at every household that was included in the sample. Respondents who refused to participate were re-contacted a maximum of two more times to persuade them to complete the interview. Calls were made from 4-10 pm over 6 days by trained interviewers.

The survey instrument was developed using existing scales and questions from various sources including the Internet and American Life Project on Internet use for religious purposes (Larsen & Rainie, 2001), and other various established scales. These questions were adapted to suit the multi-religious Singaporean society. Additional questions that were related to online religious activity within the Singaporean context were also developed and included in the survey instrument.

Sample

The largest religious group in our sample was the Buddhists (29.4%), followed by Christians (25%) and free thinkers (22.8%). Eleven percent of our sample comprised of Muslims, 5.6% identified themselves as Hindus, and 2.7% of our respondents were Taoists or identified themselves with other traditional Chinese beliefs. The remaining 3.4% of respondents identified with other religions.

A large number of the Chinese respondents in our sample identified themselves as Buddhists (36.9%), followed by Christians (29%) and free thinkers (28%). The large majority of Malay Singaporeans were Muslim (96.4%), and Indians were Hindus (61.6%). These results are similar to that of the overall Singapore Population Census (2000).

Because of the small sample sizes of Taoists, Hindus, and others, we are including only the four main religious groups - Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Free thinkers in the following analysis.

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Religious, demographic and other differences among Singaporeans' religious Internet use

Overall, the use of the Internet for religious purposes was fairly evenly distributed across age, gender and income levels. There were, however, some significant different across educational levels, religious affiliations and ethnicity.

Among Singaporeans who engage in religious activity online, there are differences in terms of education levels and ethnicity. On the whole, Singaporeans with undergraduate university qualifications are most likely use the internet for religious purposes, while those had not completed primary education are least likely to do so. These differences are not surprising, as similar results have been with regards to education and Internet use in other research focusing on the digital divide.

Some important demographic and religious differences existed among Singaporeans when it came to the use of the Internet for religious activities. For example, Buddhist Singaporeans were least likely to search for religious places of worship online (7.7%) and Muslim Singaporeans were most likely to do so (29.11%). Moreover, respondents in our sample who had completed some secondary education were least likely to use email to make prayer requests. On the other hand, 17.04% of Singaporeans within our sample who had A-level qualifications had used email to make prayer requests.

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Singaporeans' use of the Internet for religious purposes

Internet related activities

In general, most Singaporeans did not agree that the Internet had greatly improved their religious lives (50.2%), and only 8.1% of Singaporeans felt that the Internet had made them more committed to their religion or faith, with the overwhelming majority (88.6%) stating that the Internet had not made a difference in their religious lives. However, we also found that Singaporeans who were more religiously committed were more likely to use the Internet for religious purposes (r=.34, p<.01).

Generally speaking, Singaporeans' use the Internet for religious purposes less than Americans do (Hoover, Clark & Rainie, 2004). For example, 17% of Americans had used the Internet to search for places where they could attend religious services as compared to 10.5% of Singaporeans. There were, however, other activities where Singaporeans were more likely to use the Internet for religious purposes, such as downloading or listening to religious and spiritual music (20%), compared to only 11% of Americans. We also noted that if only Singaporean Christians were included in our analysis, they are more likely to use the Internet for religious purposes than Americans are, who are primarily Christian.

Table 1 shows the percentage of online religious activities Singaporeans have engaged in.

Table 1: Religious Internet use by Singaporeans (%)

Activity	%
Participated in faith oriented chat rooms.	7.4
Used the Internet to find a new church/ temple/ mosque or worship group.	10.5
Participated in online worship services.	3.7
Subscribed to a faith-oriented listserv or email service.	15.0
Given or received faith oriented guidance or support online.	13.4
Enrolled in an online religious course.	3.2
Downloaded or played religious computer games online.	2.4
Participated in religious matchmaking or dating services online.	1.3
Downloaded or listen to religious music online.	20.2
Bought religious items online	9.7
Recommended a religious website to a friend or relative	5.3
	18.2

The most popular online religious activity was downloading or listening to religious music online, followed by recommending religious websites that they may have found helpful to friends and relatives. Among the various online religious activities that we examined, Singaporeans were least likely to participate in religious match making or online dating services. Generally speaking, Singaporean Christians were most likely to engage in these different activities and free thinkers the least likely to do so.

One explanation for the popularity of downloading religious music could be explained by the general popularity of downloading songs online, especially among the younger generation, and the rise of MP3 players in the secular domain. Similarly, the lower frequency of use of other online activities could be due to their limited availability, the lack of knowledge among Singaporeans of their availability or their unsuitability within the Singaporean context.

Email related activities

Table 2 shows the percentage of use of email (specifically, personal email and not list serves) for religious purposes by Singaporeans.

Table 2: Email use for religious purposes by Singaporeans (%)

Activity	%
Have you ever used email to GIVE religious guidance?	10.1
Have you ever used email to SEEK religious guidance?	9.1
Have you ever used email to plan religious activities?	11.8
Have you ever used email to make a prayer request?	10.1

Table 2 illustrates that Singaporeans were most likely to use the Internet to plan religious activities. There was not much difference in their use of email to seek or give religious guidance or to make a prayer request.

As email is widely used among Singaporeans, for a number of activities in their secular lives, it is not surprising that it can be easily adapted for religious purposes.

There were also significant differences between the four main religious groups analyzed (F=46.12, p<.00). For example, Christians were most likely to use email for religiously oriented activities (mean =1.25, s.d.=.33), followed by Muslims (mean=1.11, s.d.=.21). Free thinkers were the group that was least likely to do so (mean= 1.01, s.d.= .08). Figure 1 below illustrates the use of email for different religious activities by religious affiliation.
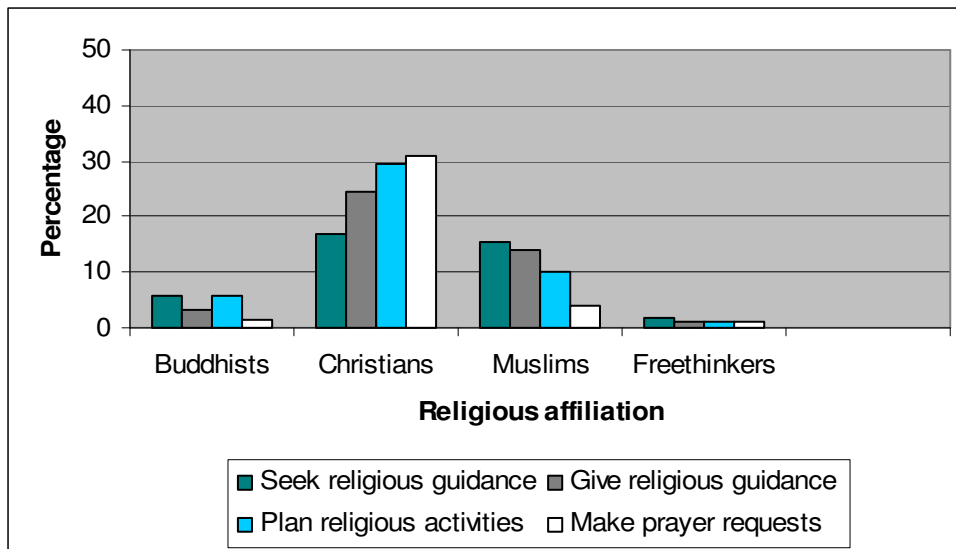

Figure 1: Singaporeans' email use for religious activities by religion.

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Singaporeans use of the Internet to learn about their own versus other religions

On the whole, Singaporeans used the Internet more to find out about their own religion than to learn about other religions. As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, Singaporean Muslims and Christians were the most likely to engage in online activities (information seeking, communicating with others and making online purchases) related to both their own and others' religions
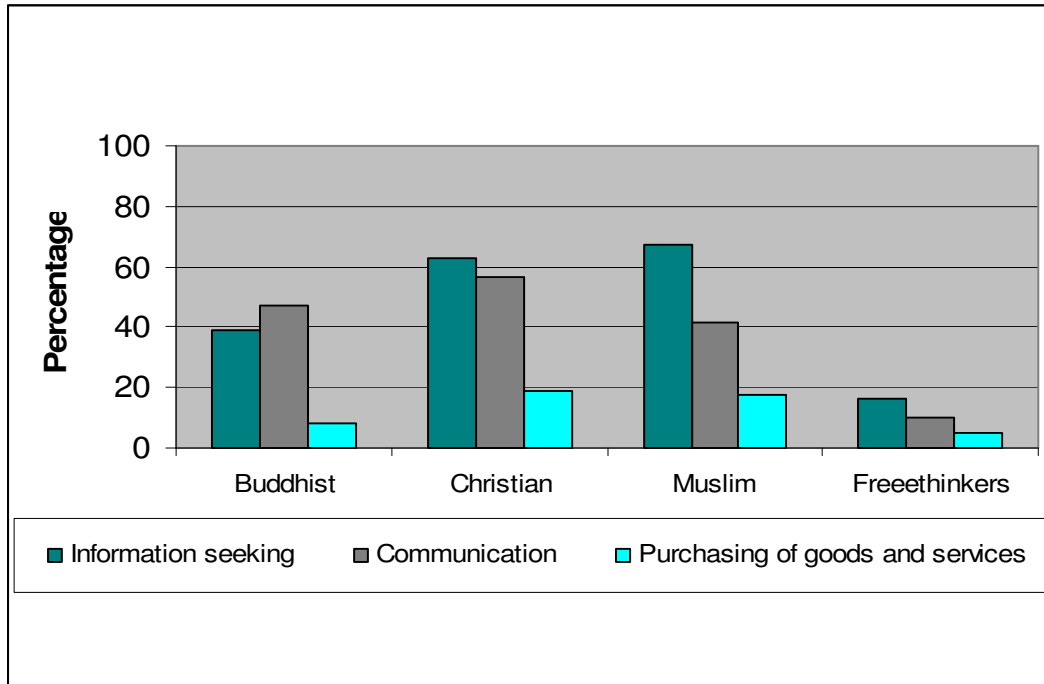

Figure 2: Singaporeans' online activities related to their own religion

Although Christians were more likely to use the Internet to communicate with other Christians, and to purchase goods and services related to Christianity online, Muslims were slightly more likely to search for information related to Islam online (see Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, freethinkers were the least likely group to engage in religious online activities.
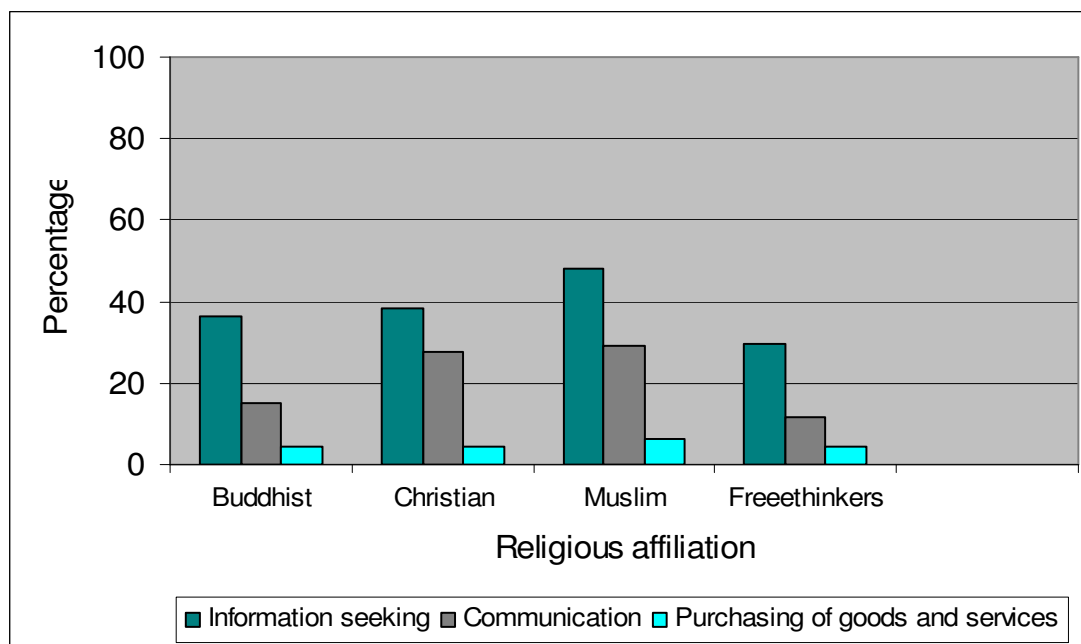
Figure 3: Singaporeans Internet use for activities related to others' religion

Similarly, Muslims and Christians were most likely to use the Internet for online activities related to other religions. However, the pattern differs slightly here as Singaporean Muslims are slightly more likely to engage in all three activities (searching for information on another religion, communicating with someone of another faith, and purchasing goods and services related to another faith online) than Christian (please refer to Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, freethinkers were the least likely group to engage in religious online activities – except for purchasing goods and services online as both 4.33% of Freethinkers and Buddhists had purchased goods and services related to another religion online.

Based on these two figures, it can also be seen that on the whole, Singaporeans were more likely to engage in online activities related to their own religion than they were to engage in activities related to other religions, suggesting that Singaporeans were more likely to communicate with people who share their religion and to purchase products related to their own religion online. These results suggest that Internet use for religious purposes need not necessarily lead to a better understanding of other faiths.

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Perception of the Internet's impact on religion

There were no significant differences among followers of the four main religious groups in Singapore in terms of positive perceptions of the religious impact of the Internet. There was however a significant difference among Singaporeans in terms of negative perceptions of the Internet's impact on religion ($F=2.78$, $p<.05$). Among Singaporeans, Buddhists had the weakest negative perceptions of the Internet's impact on religion (mean=4.03, s.d.=1.08), and Muslims the strongest negative perceptions of the Internet's impact on religion (mean=3.63, s.d.=1.14).

(Higher mean values indicate weaker perceptions of the Internet's impact on religion).

On the whole, most Singaporeans agreed that the Internet makes it easy for people to insult the religions of others (71.1%) and 40.8% of Singaporeans also believe that there is too much material on the Internet that is sacrilegious or harmful to religion. However, 41.7% of Singaporeans agreed that the availability of religious material on the Internet encourages religious tolerance, and 47.9% agreed that the Internet promotes religious understanding.

Taken together, these results suggest that Singaporeans have mixed perceptions of the Internet's effects on religion. On the one hand, they feel that the Internet does make it easy to insult another religion, and that there is a significant amount of harmful material online. On the other hand, more Singaporeans felt that the Internet promotes religious understanding, and think that the Internet can encourage religious tolerance.

Government regulation of online religious content

Within a multi-cultural, multi-religious country like Singapore, religious content is a potentially a sensitive issue. Although there have been many discussions on whether the Internet should be regulated or controlled by a central authority, in most parts of the world there is little regulation governing Internet use, especially for religious purposes. In Singapore for example, there is no specific body governing religious content online.

Within the Singaporean context, the majority of Singaporeans (74.5%) felt that the government should regulate online religious content (ranging from a little regulation to regulating it to some extent), 19.9 % felt that it should not be regulated at all, and only 5.3% felt that it should be regulated completely.

The majority of Singaporeans across the four main religious groups felt that religious content on the Internet should be regulated to some extent only (53.96% to 67.1%). This suggests that although most Singaporeans supported the idea of government regulation, they did not feel that it should be completely regulated.

Singaporeans use of local and foreign sites

Another aspect of online religious seeking behavior that we were interested in was to get a better understanding of whether Singaporeans were more likely to visit local or overseas sites when seeking religious information. On the whole, there were no significant differences among the four main religious groups in Singapore's use of local or foreign sites. More Singaporeans (33.5%) used more local sites for religious purposes than foreign sites (29.7%). A smaller percentage (17%) of Singaporeans used an equal number of local and foreign sites, and the others did not visit any religious sites -- either local or foreign sites.

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Conclusion

At present, use of the Internet for religious activities has not yet gained high levels of popularity among Singaporeans. One explanation for this could be that religious Internet use is an element of Internet use that develops later, as people integrate the Internet more fully into their lives, or that there is a lack of content for non-Christian religious groups. If this is the case, we can expect that religious use of the Internet will develop more fully as the Internet matures, more content

accumulates, and as the Internet increasingly plays a more important role in their daily lives and as the Singapore government continues to encourage the wide spread use of the Internet in all aspects of everyday life.

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