

CONNECTED FAITH SURVEY

THE PEOPLE'S REPORT 20
24

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SPECIAL RECOGNITION

A Special Thank You to the 2023 Digital Black Religion Conference Thinking Partners

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INTRODUCTION



Technology: /def/ the application of scientific knowledge to the practical aims of human life or, as it is sometimes phrased, to the change and manipulation of the human environment.

- *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 13, 2024

"This church was not by any means Christian nor definitely organized; rather it was an adaptation and mingling."

- *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois, 1903

Black religion is an ever-evolving technology. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the wake of the 2020 pandemic. I remember quite clearly Black digital users searching for content and spaces of belonging and hope in those difficult moments. Concurrently, religion scholars, researchers, and practitioners sought to interpret, document, and craft some response to the pandemic and the social upheaval experienced by all. For many of us studying and inhabiting digital religious spaces for quite some time prior to 2020, a noticeable shift was occurring in and through digital Black religions.

Black church leaders, once scornful or dismissive of online religious expression, were now adding Zoom to their weekly service offerings. Interest in African traditional religions and its influencers soared on Twitter and protests included an Ifá presence and practices. Black Muslim leaders held virtual live events to address their multiple marginalized social location and thus heightened risk of acquiring COVID-19. Black religion, while existing in the digital for some time, was made visible during this time.

Dr. Darlene Hutto and I arranged a virtual discussion titled "Gathering in the Moment: Mobilizing the Digital Black Church's Prophetic Witness." The Facebook Live event received engagement from over 16,000 viewers. We were not ready for such a large response. It was clear something was shifting in Black religion, and we all required new language and new approaches with which to understand the moment. While we focused our discussion on what we called "the Digital Black Church," it really was something much larger than church that garnered viewers' interests. It was the advent of digital Black religions: the digital pathways to healing and wholeness established by content creators online, through podcast, blogs, and a host of other digitally located spaces.

They were at once Muslim, Christian, Atheist, Vodun, Santería, spiritual, everything in between, nothing at all, and much more. It was the same technologies that the Black Church employed during enslavement as described by DuBois, full of "adaptation and mingling."

For pre-pandemic Black content creators who made space for themselves and others online, its underground nature had been a core feature of the digital space where, as Dr. Melva Sampson remarked in our Facebook Live event, "the liberators and the underground freedom fighters" existed.

For much of the first thirty years of digital Black religions' existence, like past hush harbors, it operated furtively, often only studied as an addendum to physically located Black religious practices. Yet, the pandemic facilitated its move out into the open. While some religious leaders continue to approach digital Black religions as supplementary to physically located houses of worship, since the pandemic, digital Black religious experience has become central to the lives of many, impacting how religion is lived in America. As such, it is high time we give it the attention it merits through a study of those who make use of digital tools for religious and spiritual purposes.

The Connected Faith Survey, through an online questionnaire, long form interviews, and participant observations of over 400 participants is the first study to explicitly explore the association between digital technology use and Black religious life. As an ethnographer working alongside social scientists, I hope we have married rich quantitative data with compelling storytelling.

Multi-genre theologian Candice Benbow notes, "We haven't come to the end of the Internet." The same can be said of Black religion. We (Black scholars) see the present as a time of considerable religious innovation. Black Americans hold the technologies of our ancestors and with it they continue to create new worlds out of the rich imagination of Black religion. This work calls us to ask, "What patterns and possibilities may we know if we peer closely at this data of present Black life?"

It is my hope that this data will stimulate further inquiries regarding the future of digital Black life. This study provides a loose framework for considering what comes next in our technology and what we, through our technology, are becoming. For instance, what role will A.I. play in the religious life of Black Americans and the preservation of Black religious traditions? How can houses of worship and religious institutions prepare for what may lay beyond the digital and even A.I. for Black religious adherents? Will digital spaces be co-opted or commercialized or both as religious and spiritual influencers reach wider audiences and greater acceptance in traditional religious spaces and in popular media? As emerging adults (25-29 years old) continue to age alongside the digital platforms they inhabit, will they migrate or stay and how will their data be preserved or ethically discarded?

As you delve into the findings of this study, you will undoubtedly find other questions that can facilitate conversations with religious communities, cultural heritage institutions, and individuals who see all the possibilities, challenges, and unceasing beauty we have found in studying the digital religious lives of Black Americans at this critical juncture.

Stay Connected,

Erika Gault

Erika Gault, Ph.D.
Washington, D.C.
June 2024



ABOUT THE STUDY

The Connected Faith Survey is the first study of digital Black religious experience through an expanded view of gender, relationship status, education, income, and life satisfaction.

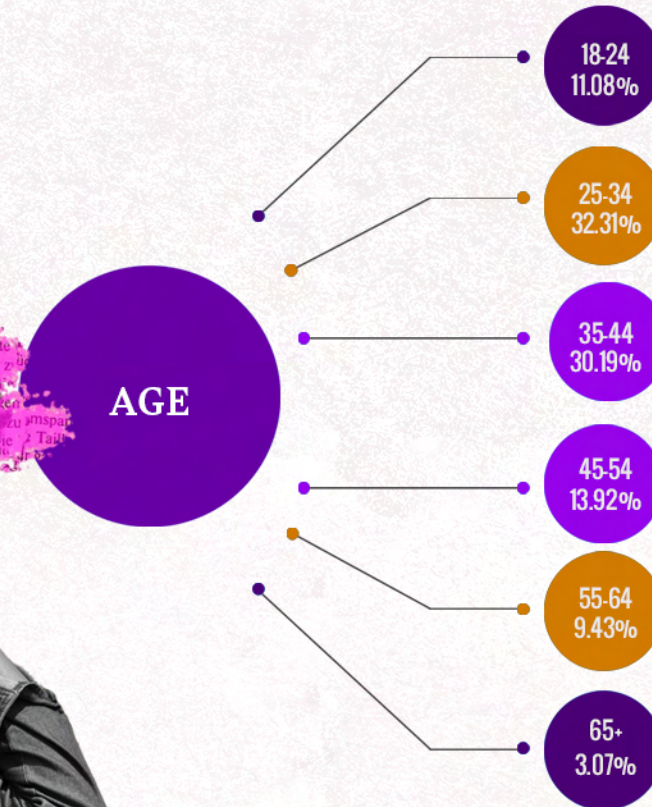
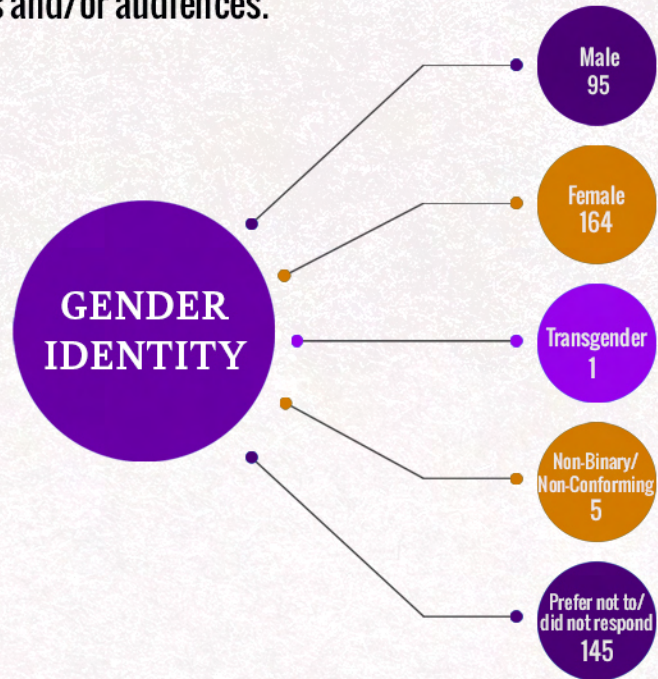
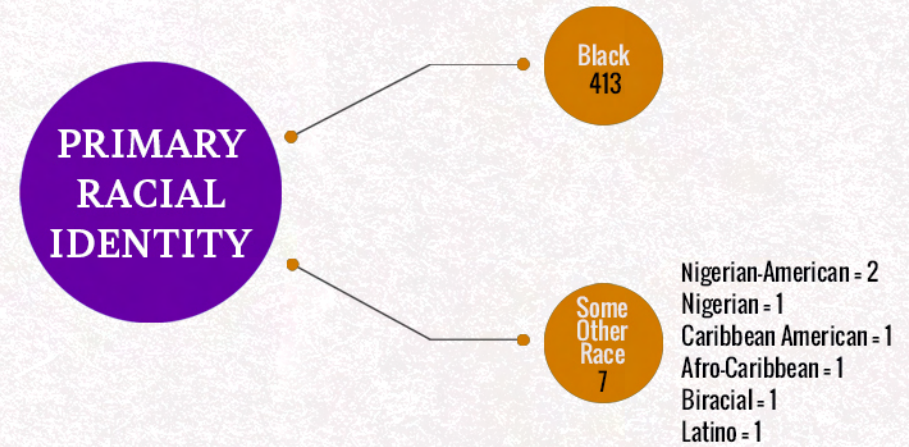
From November 1, 2022 - March 21, 2023 over 400 participants provided responses to 48 questions regarding their religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices around digital technology.¹

Significance or Who Should Care?

Religious Leaders seeking data that articulates the changes they are witnessing in the communities they serve

Researchers, Scholars, & Media persons seeking new approaches and data for understanding religion and spirituality at the intersections of new technology

Digital Users and Content Creators seeking articulation and visibility for their own religious experiences and/or audiences.



RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

KEY POINT:

409 participants identified their current religious affiliation²



Definitions of traditional African religions varied:

Hoodoo Practitioners = 10

Ifá = 4

Ifá and Candomblé = 1

Ife/Orisha Tradition = 1

Ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀ = 1



INTERVIEWS



Biko Mandela Gray

Scholar & Professor

Age: 38, Syracuse, NY
Digital Use: Highly Active
for R/S Purposes

**“Your dead are with You.
You carry your dead with you.”**

“...I can't go so far as to call myself totally Christian, because the resurrection is actually immaterial to me now. I'm not really interested in whether or not Jesus got back up. I'm interested in the life that he led when he was here. And so it's changed the way that I move through the world...I am committed to justice. I have committed to prophetic practice. I'm committed to prophetic speech, because this is what Jesus was committed to. I'm committed to a contemplative lifestyle, because this is the way that I ground myself. But I am also committed to my ancestors, because I found out very recently that they have never left me.”

“...She said, “Your dead are with you. You carry your dead with you.”



**Bishop Harry Haygood
& Rayvonnia Haygood**

**Both retired and in
full-time ministry**

Age: 73 & 74, Rochester, NY
Digital Use: Minimal

**“I don't participate in
the Facebook.”**

“I think I'm more connected (through Zoom), because I'm meeting more people than just those within my small group... I don't participate in the Facebook. But ...it has been very helpful and very important. [Before the pandemic] We were literally...in the building preaching to each other. We're in a preaching and teaching ministry. [We] should be on the outside. We should be in the streets talking to the people. So the pandemic, some look at it as a curse. I see it as a blessing.”



RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

When it comes to religious affiliation, more and more self-identified Blacks are “something else.”³

CULTURAL TRADITIONS

African spirituality and hoodoo;
Pagan; Hoodoo;
Ancestor Veneration

01

NON-DENOMINATIONAL

Non-denominational

02

SYNCRETIC;
NOT SPECIFIED
Mixed-faith belief

03

OTHER

Religious pluralism;
Unitarian; Prophetic
ministries; Ominist; Hebraic
Study of Yeshua

04

TEXT RESPONSES TO
THE “SOMETHING ELSE”
OPTION FOR THE MULTIPLE
CHOICE QUESTION: WHAT
IS YOUR RELIGIOUS
AFFILIATION?

07 SPIRITUAL

Spiritual through tarot, etc.; Spiritual, I consider several different perspectives; Nature-based spirituality/ecospirituality; Spiritual person (infusing Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and African Traditional practice); Spiritual

06 CHRISTIAN

Baptist; Christian contemplative; Full Gospel is considered Baptistcostal; United Methodist; Slightly Christian but non-denominational; Christian not associated with denomination

05 CHRISTIAN +

Agnostic Christian; A combination of Christianity, African traditional, and African American New Thought spiritual culture; Christian adjacent; Christianity is/was my base. I’m exploring and learning of hoodoo and atr.; Mix of bapt-ish, hoodoo, my own thing; Muslim and Christian



INTERVIEWS



Shi-Queeta-Lee

**Digital Creator &
Drag Performer**

Age: 58, Washington, DC
Digital Use: Highly Active
for non R/S purposes,
Minimal for R/S purposes

Kevin Betton, Jr.

Army Chaplain

Age: 45, Georgia
Digital Use: Highly Active
for R/S purposes



**“ He always wanted to do a
gospel [drag] brunch. ”**

“...the owner of Crazy Aunt Helens is the son of a Pentecostal holiness man...He always wanted to do a gospel [drag] brunch at his restaurant for people who...don't feel comfortable with going into a church home. So, he wanted to invite people to his restaurant and give them that feeling, that church experience with not being in the church...when he found out that I was a singer, and that I was a Christian, and in the Baptist Church, he said 'Oh, we got to work together.' ”

“The first one was sold out...now in my mind I was like, “Oh, my God! Who is coming?” It's a whole new set of fans that's Christians and want to come to the brunch.”

“I find my spirituality through singing, the love of music.”

**“ If I go to church and the
preaching ain't about nothing, sorry. ”**

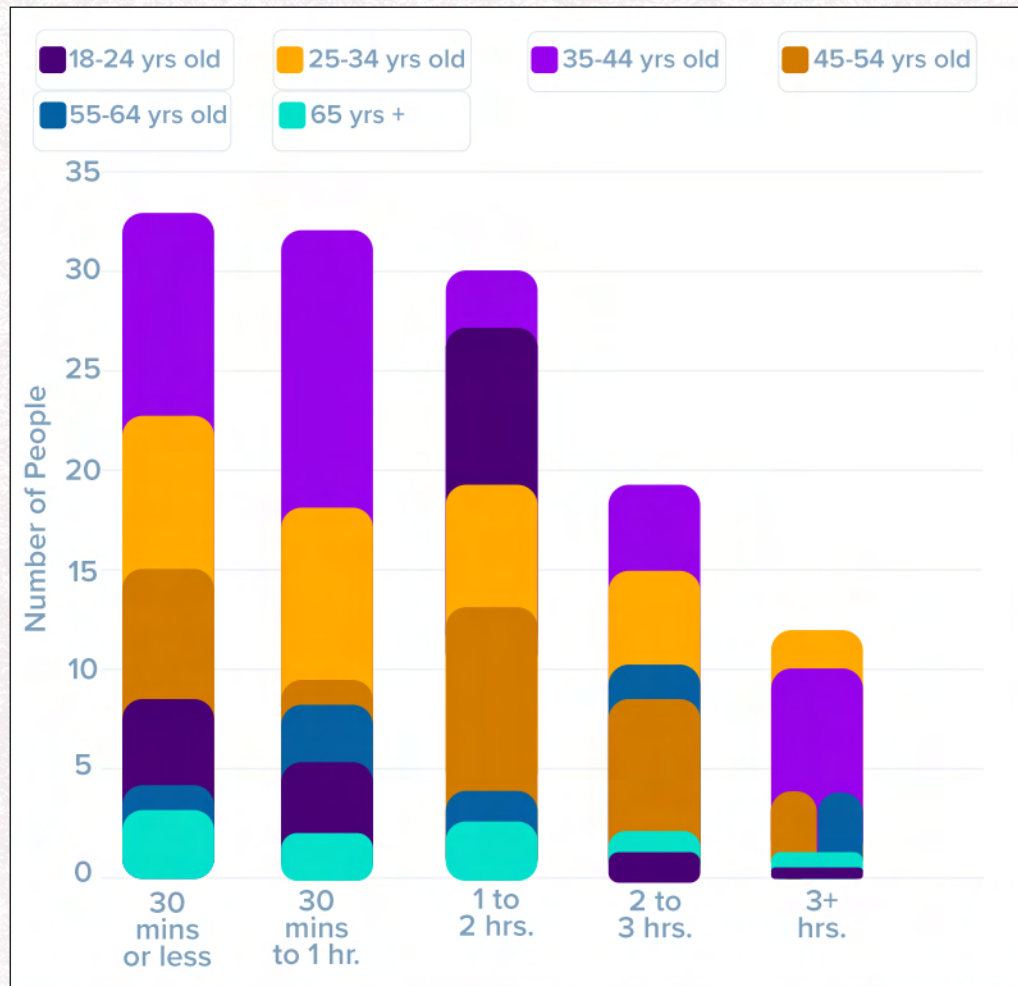
“Digital stuff really is where it's at. So, even if it's just taking stuff that we do on Sundays ...I'm watching two or three services every Sunday before I go to church...”

Why do you watch more than one service before your service?

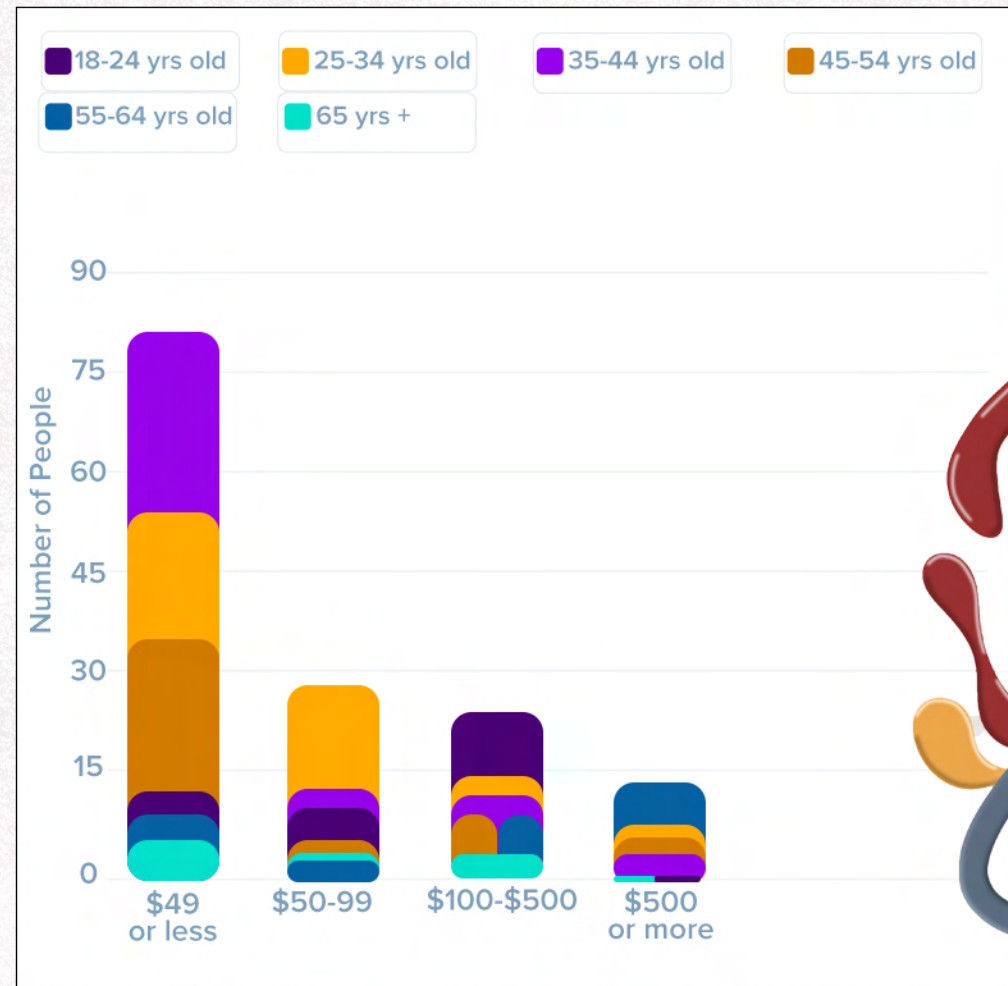
“Right now, because I'm in school. I'm not a member of any church, so I'll listen to Forward City. They have the best praise team I've ever seen. Their music is always diverse, but it's always on point. So I always listen to them for praise and worship. I would go and listen to Bronner for the word. H. B. Charles... for the word...and then Dr. Eric Mason in Philly. So, if one of them has like a guest preacher...I switch over and listen to the other person, but it just helps feed me that way. If I go to church and the preaching ain't about nothing, sorry. I already got my word in, so I'm good.”

SOCIAL V. SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

Younger participants are more likely to emphasize the use of technology as important for spiritual encounters, while older participants prioritize the use of technology for social connection and cohesion.⁴



Important Digitally Mediated Religious/Spiritual Exchange or Experiences



Who Gives the Most Online?

KEY POINT:

Among all religious affiliation groups, those who identified as Protestant Christians were most likely to spend time online participating in religious or spiritual exchanges.



INTERVIEW



Kevin E. Johnson

**Law Enforcement
Officer**

Age: 51, Washington, DC
**Digital Use: Highly active
for R/S Purposes**

“**So, I just never liked the fact that in [my earlier Christian] community we were dying early in the Christian community and that we weren't physically active at certain points.**”

Have you had an important religious/spiritual exchange or experience through digital technology over the last year?

“...last year I made the pilgrimage to Mecca, our hajj. So, I was able to capture pictures and show people I was there and that was a good interaction for other people to not only see what I'm doing as far as my religious commitments. Also, it motivated other people to make that commitment, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.”

Can you say more regarding how you used digital technology to document or broadcast that experience?

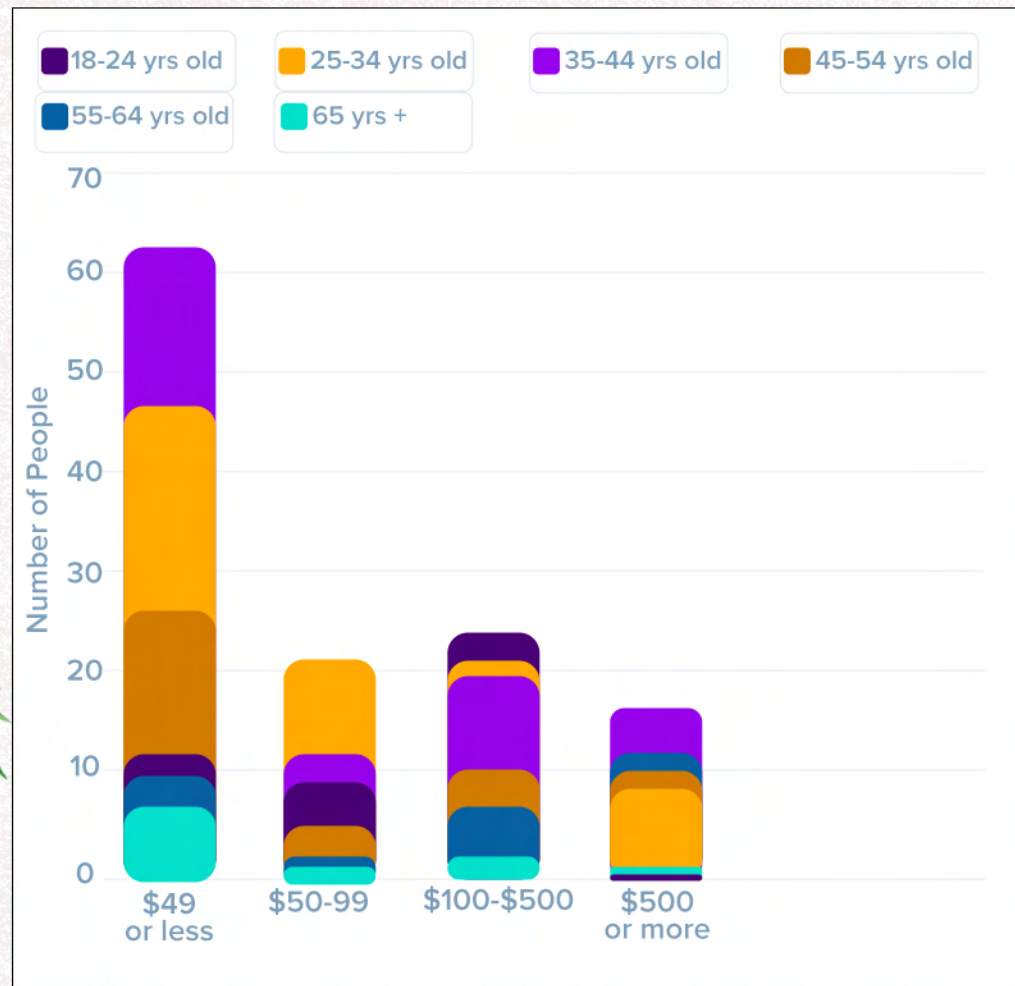
“Basically, you know, you want to give people the experience as if they were there. So I would constantly do stuff on my Whatsapp... give people daily pictures or groups of pictures so they can see the environment and what might be motivation for them to do the same thing.”

It seems in your discussion you found a way through Islam to connect the mind, body, and spirit in a way that Christianity didn't offer you.

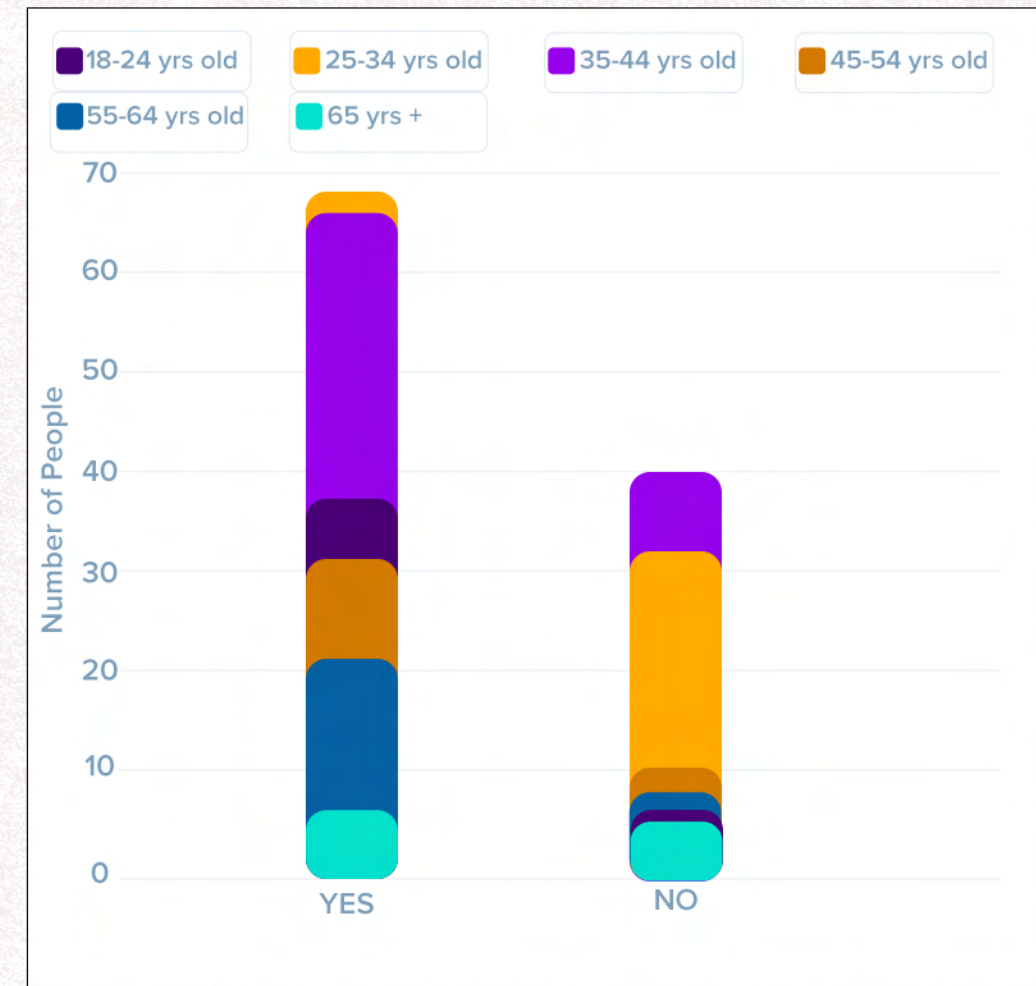
“... a lot of these guys in Islam are Muslims in their fifties, sixties. They're still having kids. They're still active... Because, you know, we have Ramadan, so we fast. Our prayers are a physical prayer. So, I just never liked the fact that in my [earlier Christian] community we were dying early in the Christian community and that we weren't physically active at certain points.”

“If you look through my Instagram, you'll see fitness and family for the most part.”

SOCIAL V. SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS



Donations to Physically-Located Ministries, Groups, or Causes in the Last Month



Frequency of Online Religious or Spiritual Exchanges

Key Point:

Older users mostly livestream services or use YouTube and Facebook for religious and spiritual purposes that are localized (i.e. viewing a local service). Younger participants wish to connect with communities located further from their local community and expect a meaningful spiritual encounter.

GENDER & RELATIONSHIPS: MORE OR LESS ... SATISFIED



A few fast facts on men and women and relationships and life satisfaction

Men:

- Men who reported donating more money to online religious ministries, groups, or causes in the last month tended to report higher levels of life satisfaction.

Women:

- Women who accessed podcasts to listen to and engage with R/S content tended to report higher levels of life satisfaction.
- Women who spent more time online per day tended to report lower levels of life satisfaction.⁵

Single adults (single, widowed, divorced, separated):

- Those who tended to report higher levels of digital religious centrality tended to report lower levels of life satisfaction.
- Donating more money to physically located religious ministries, groups, or causes in the last month was significantly associated with greater life satisfaction.

Adults in long term relationships (12+ months dating, engaged, married):

- Greater importance of religion and spirituality in life is significantly associated with greater life satisfaction.
- More time spent online each day is significantly associated with less life satisfaction.
- Donating money to online religious ministries is significantly associated with greater life satisfaction.

INTERVIEW



India Walton

First woman to win
Buffalo Mayoral Primary

Age: 41. Buffalo, NY
Digital Use: Moderately
active for R/S Purposes

“ I also believe in the energy of the moon and stars, and I also believe in grace and mercy and loving my neighbor. ”

“I’m a student of faith and I take what I believe applies to my life. I fast during Ramadan. I also believe in the energy of the moon and stars, and also I believe in grace and mercy and loving my neighbor. So it’s sort of a cobbling together of things... for the most part my faith tradition is to just try and be a decent human being.”

“In 2014 or 2015 I was in an abusive marriage and I went to my pastor. He basically put the onus on me. So at that point it was no longer healthy for me to be in church. But still having a deep love of God and of Christ and searching for some other way to fill the space without having to physically go to church meant I had to... broaden my horizon about what it means to be a spiritual person.”

“My major focus is on what I do in this life and most of what I think about after I pass on is, what legacy I will leave... whether there is a heaven or reincarnation, or hell, or whatever, I might have to deal with that when I get there. I prefer to try to live in the here and now. Live into my values and convictions and hope that’s good enough to get the best outcome.”

What do you consider divine?

“I consider water, air, and atmosphere divine. I consider the sun, the stars, and the moon divine. I consider Black women divine.”

How did you arrive at that?

“We are the source of all things. These are the things we cannot live without.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Connected Faith Survey findings have important implications for religious institutions, houses of worship, researchers, and most importantly, all of those who use digital technology for religious and spiritual purposes. Our findings suggest four essential next steps for each of these groups.

“Embrace diversity or be destroyed.”

Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Embracing Diversity

Digital technology has facilitated the emergence of those best described as *Faith Fluid* and *Christian+*: those who identify as Christian while openly embracing other religions and religious practices. This is largely a shift led by millennials whose experiences with African traditional religions and/or disillusionment or separation from the Black Church have led their exploration into other faith expressions. This multi-faith movement or revival (since it reflects earlier historical patterns in religious/spiritual renewal), signals growth opportunities for religious groups willing to embrace diversity.

Zeroing in on Digital Outreach

That the internet can be a site of injustice for marginalized groups is well-documented.⁴ However, the way digital religious groups and digital religious leadership mirrors physically based violence against women and LGBTQIA+ groups must be considered both in outreach to these groups and in supporting digital ministries. Religious institutions and houses of worship can play a key role in abating the digital harms experienced by Black women and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ online and in increasing opportunities for more diversity in religious leadership through their economic and mental health support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Beyond Boxes

As researchers of religion, we are disinclined to throw out all of the instruments used to quantify religion. Yet, the study findings show both the sheer breadth of religious affiliations and the limits of our tools in fully capturing this breadth. While doing away with religious affiliation boxes may be difficult to maintain simply providing more boxes may not be the answer either. Current Black religions necessitate a reimagining of the overall design of the affiliation question beyond boxes.

Digital Religious Literacy

The average digital user should consider who the data represents and who may be excluded from the data when categories are applied. The digital itself is guided by the same boxed logic which limits output: the information we receive from search engines for instance, by input: how much and which information designers make available to us or even code as relevant. Democratizing data online and in surveys then, must be viewed as a joint advocacy issue.



CONCLUSION

If we hope to embrace religious diversity, survey design, collection, analysis, and dissemination must be as much of a community project with as many voices as possible. The diverse community of Black researchers, scholars, curators, and digital creators used to create this survey along with its digital dissemination is one possible model. The Connected Faith Survey's qualitative approach to question design allowed for a more nuanced read of Black religious practices and thus a fuller portrait of how Black people in America truly engage religion in digital spaces.

We hope this study will serve as one possible guide in achieving a more just approach to documenting Black religious life.

ENDNOTES

1. This study required the submission of an IRB Protocol for Human Subjects Research and all associated materials for review by the University of Arizona IRB. The University of Arizona maintains a Federalwide Assurance (FWA) with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) (FWA #00004218). The study titled *Connected Faith: Survey of Black Digital Religious Practices and Beliefs* received exempt approval on April 21, 2022. Study participants were drawn from digital religious groups (podcast, social media forums, email invites, etc.), invitations to religious and spiritual leaders, and social media advertisements. The 48-question survey was collaboratively designed. During the survey design phase which lasted two months, the Principal Investigator lead a team of five experts in the development and feedback of the questionnaire using the virtual platform Loom. The team consisted of a religious scholar, digital content creator, theologian, and two social scientists.”
2. Indicated in Variables: Race (I), Current Religion (D), Race (I), Child Faith (D).
3. 391 participants described their religious and spiritual experience. Often, this was in addition to their answers regarding current religious affiliation.
4. Data was used from the *Virtual Experiences to Reduce Loneliness and Psychosocial Distress Among Older Black Church Members* study conducted in Tucson, Arizona, by Principal Investigator Dr. Kelly Palmer. Study participants provided responses to a shortened version of the *Connected Faith Survey*. Survey responses were then triangulated with interview and questionnaire responses to the *Connected Faith Survey*.
5. See also Jouët, Josiane (2018). *Digital Feminism: Questioning the Renewal of Activism*, *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 8(1): 133-157. Steele, Catherine

For More Information and Resources:

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Also check out the survey website at
www.digitalblacksurvey.com

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