

Talking Circles: Spiritual Aid for Teenagers Through Social Media

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Abstract. Social media has covered, conquered and affected almost all the aspects of our lives especially those of the teenagers and youngsters. There is still a space, which has not been affected by social media to a great extent and is yet to be explored. This paper reflects the deep study of integration of two entirely different worlds; social media of the 21st century and the evergreen and serene world of spirituality. It attempts to address the problems faced by teenagers and how they can be solved with the science, logic and approachability of spirituality with the help of social media acting as a mediator and catalyst to bridge the gap. At a conceptual level this paper defines, characterises and elaborates on a concept called “Talking Circles” where social media, spirituality and teenagers stand on a common stage and how each one can be modified, transformed and made adaptive to the current situation.

Keywords: Social media · Spirituality · Teenagers · Collaboration · Co-creation · Therapy · Guidance · Express · Journey · Problem solving

1 Introduction

Social media has knitted the whole world. We are all connected through this invisible thread of the web where we can reach to anyone anywhere. Chatting, video calling, sharing stuff online etc. Social media provides a platform that looks beyond the basic World Wide Web. Spirituality as a concept of being spiritual is contrary to the social media as it deals with the individual itself and its connection with the higher power. It is intended to bring together these two extremes to meet at a mean point where the amalgamation of both social media and spirituality starts a new chapter of how social media can effect and spread the concept of spirituality.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Spirituality

Spirituality is the process of personal transformation. As stated by the British author, physicist and meditation teacher Peter Russell the core of spirituality is the journey to

discover our real self and be aware of our conscience. What we know about ourselves is a very meager part of who we actually are and spirituality brings us closer to our true self. It makes us realize that even though things around us are changing with the course of life, the 'I' in us is all pervasive and everlasting. Once we realize and know who we are, we are free from the burden of all the bondages of our life and the peace which transcends within us, fulfills our inner self. It's like when a boat lost on the trials and tribulations of the storms finally sees the shore and is able to reach there [1, 5]. Spiritual Healing has the potential to access disturbances on all levels of our being - emotional, mental, spiritual and physical.

2.2 Social Media

Social media is a group of communication channels which help people to create, share and exchange ideas and information. These channels can be virtual communities and networks. They introduce significant and widespread changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals facilitating interaction and collaboration. Social media helps us in sharing, co-creating, discussing, and modify user-generated content [2]. The different types of social media are Social Networks, Social News, Media Sharing, Micro blogging, Blog Comments and Forums.

2.3 Life of Teenagers

Adolescence is a time for rapid cognitive development. As stated by the developmental psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget it is that stage of life when an individual's thoughts start transforming from being self centered to more intellectual which inculcates the ability of reasoning in them. Also at this age, innumerable and uncontrollable thoughts of confusion and curiosity are constantly hammering a teenager's mind, which leads to anger, exasperation and puzzlement [3, 6, 8]. Teenage as a midway between childhood and adulthood is a strange land of paradoxes and bewildering eloquence. It is hard to cope up with the do's and don'ts of the family and society without understanding the why's and how's around things. And this pressure arises the feelings of incompetence, inferiority and lack of acceptance in teenagers.

3 Theoretical Considerations

Literature review on different entities revealed that the subject needed a foundation for the concept to stand on. The theories considered for the forth coming practical study were ought to be human centric rather than data driven. The research methodology is based on the theories mentioned below which were taken in to consideration.

3.1 Behaviorism

Behaviorism is a concept of studying human reactions or arresting the stimuli of the humans to the given environment, conditions, and actions. As the theory evolved it captured the physical and emotional aspects of the reaction.

This paper ascertains to capture both these aspects as the research is taken place in the natural environment of all stakeholders. The viable features of behaviorism, which make it all but supportive of the subject is naturalistic, manipulative and reactive.

3.2 Qualitative Research

Most important features of the concept based on the literature review were qualitative and the sample size was predominantly random.

The persuasive emotions and psyche of the stakeholders (teenagers, spiritual gurus, psychologists, etc.) were important aspects in shaping the concept. The qualitative research approach is relevant than the empirical data keeping in mind the number of stakeholders. Qualitative research gives better portrayal of stakeholder behavior.

4 Research Methodology

Drawing an analogy between literature review and theoretical considerations, the research methodology was designed to meet the expectation and comfort of all stakeholders involved. All the field research was conducted at stakeholder's natural environment and no artificial set up was created during the research process.

The methods employed to capture qualitative data and behavior of stakeholders were:

- Questionnaire
- Interview
- Observation

4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed keeping in mind the persona of the stakeholders (Psychologists, Teenagers, Spiritual Gurus). All the questions were directed to understand life of teenagers in today's world, effects of social media on teenagers, counseling and spiritual aid methods. Some parts of the questionnaires were purposely designed to capture a little amount of quantitative data regarding various aspects like common problems and their frequency, total time spend on social media, etc.

4.2 Interview

Most of the research was on the field and around the natural environment of the stakeholders. The interview was more personal and most of questions and answers were accumulation of the personal journey around the three spheres of social media, spirituality and life of teenagers. The interview was directed to get a solution from the stakeholder hence capturing their mental models.

4.3 Observation

Behavior is one of the major entities that needed to be captured for better understanding of the entire scenario. Observation research methodology was employed because that would interfere the least with the actions and reaction of the stakeholders in their natural environment. All the interaction patterns of stakeholders with each other, their response to stimuli and reaction were carefully observed and noted.

5 Findings

According to the psychologists: It is important to listen to the teenagers and encourage them to share their daily activities including their problems. When they know someone is there to listen to them, it instills confidence and helps them see the positive side of life. Regarding teenagers who are addicted to substances, Psychologist suggest that it is important to build the level of trust with them so that one can reach to the root cause of their problems and then make suggestions. Sometimes psychologists even take group sessions with teenagers having similar kinds of problems. Usually when teenagers see that they are not the only ones with those kinds of problems and there are other people who are like them, they get a little consolation. Group sessions help them learn and understand things through each other's situation. Some forms of physical exercises are also found to be effective.

According to spiritual institutions: A lot of teenagers are seeking guidance through spirituality remotely or directly at the spiritual institutions. The teachers at these spiritual institutions pointed out that teenagers are usually brought to these institutions by their parents seeking help for their wards to improve or develop concentration which will directly effect their decision making ability towards career choosing path. Meditation sessions are common activity in the spiritual institutions, which they conduct with teenagers as well. Meditation is nothing but an exercise to relax the mind, body and soul and induces a mode of consciousness in an individual. It helps develop positivity in teenagers, which fosters their general mental well-being and development of specific capacities such as calmness, clarity and concentration.

6 Talking Circles – Concept

The ubiquitous level of social media integration into the lives of teenagers speaks volumes about the paradigm shift in communication and community. On similar lines, Talking Circles is a structured concept used to bring teenagers together to better understand one another, build and strengthen bonds and solve their problems [7, 9]. The talking circle concept is a way of getting the complete picture of whatever issue is at hand to enable participants to move together in a good way and to build and maintain a healthy community and life. Through this process, they can share stories, learn about themselves and each other and gain a better understanding of their situation. The talking circle concept can be employed to achieve better solution for teenage related problems, community development, increasing social interaction and social conduct.etc. To be

precise talking circles is a concept for helping teenagers by giving them a stage on which they can share and communicate their problems via proper and appropriate social media, and the problems are addressed and resolved through spiritual techniques.

In this concept, teenagers who are connected to any existing social media come, share and listen to a problem that they face and find a solution through spirituality. The various types of social media can be anything from social networking, social news, media sharing, micro blogging, blog comments and forums. The talking circle concept will be introduced and promoted through various social media activities only.

The talking circle concept will be a combination of social networking site, a micro blogging site and media sharing. There will be a spiritual Guru who will be connected to his students online. The teenager and no one else can make the choice of his/her Guru, but a teenager can seek advice in the forum for suggesting a Guru for his/her specific problem from peers. Each guru might form a group of teenagers with similar problem for group counseling and joining a group counseling session is solely teenager's choice. The sessions can be held via video calling, online chats, and virtual rooms. Students can share their problems and in return can get suggestions from the Gurus as well as the co-users (Figs. 1 and 2).

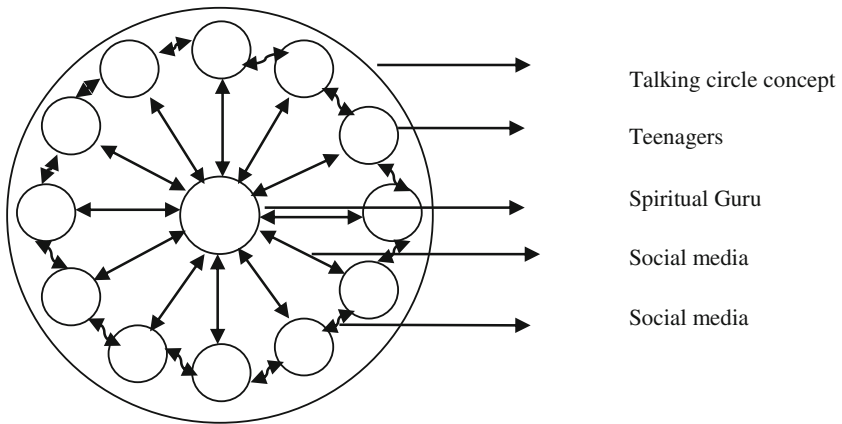


Fig. 1. Talking circle descriptive diagram

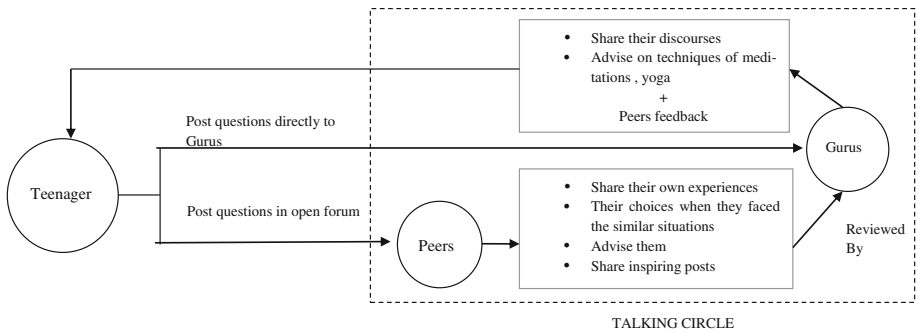


Fig. 2. How a problem is addressed in talking circle?

Features of talking circles:

- Real time and easy connect to spiritual masters and like-minded people
- Real time conferencing in such a way that people can share their problems with the masters and other people.
- Real time meditation classes
- Online discourses for various masters
- Students can download music, videos and discourses and also share them
- Self-realization workshops
- Music Therapy sessions

6.1 Scenario for Talking Circles

The talking circle concept can be explained with the help of an example.

For e.g.: One of the major problems teenagers face is while choosing their careers. Lack of direction and sense of purpose affects their ability of decision making especially in this case. A spiritual platform can encourage teens to reveal their passion, beauty and dreams, their fears, problems and insecurities that might hinder their ability of decision making. The concept of talking circles allows the teenagers to put forth their problems in a social space in the presence of their Guru and other likeminded people and seek help.

A model can be created where once when the teenagers put forth their problems; the Gurus have a technique of suggesting them solutions. It draws inference from the concept of Monomyth or the Heroes Journey by Joseph Campbell [4, 10, 11]. The hero in the monomyth lives his life in the ordinary world until he receives a call to venture into the unknown world of eccentric powers and events. As the hero accepts the call to seek for the unknown world, he undergoes several trials alone or with assistance. The hero must survive this challenge and on survival he may achieve a ‘boon’. The hero must then decide to return to the ordinary world with this boon and on successful return this boon may be used to improve the world. This structure is closely followed by the stories of Prometheus, Moses, Gautama Buddha and Osiris. This ancient wisdom can be applied to the current situation of the teenagers.

Campbell puts forth this concept in various stages:

Separation (or Departure): It deals with the hero’s adventure prior to the quest.

Initiation: It deals with the hero’s quests along the way.

Return: It deals with the hero’s return home with knowledge and powers acquired on the journey.

On similar lines, the Gurus suggestions for the teenagers can fall under 3 stages.

Expression

The first and foremost thing to do when dealing with any problem or symptoms of a problem is to say it or express it loud and clear. Most of the teenagers don’t even know if they have a problem, they might observe some symptoms but neglect. Talking circles platform gives them this opportunity to express themselves, even on the slightest of the symptoms of their problems in life. Many psychologist and spiritual Gurus believe that

most of the teenagers have no clue if there is something wrong in their life and to make it worse they don't discuss the symptoms with anyone. In recent years the developments in the social media and affinity of teenagers towards it is quite apparent. Leveraging on this, talking circles deal with employing different social media to give teenagers the opportunity to express themselves freely.

Expression Techniques: Some of the expression techniques through which one can express their problems in talking circles are:

Writing: Most of the psychologists advice their patients to maintain a dairy or express through words. Looking at the current lifestyle of teenagers and their engagement with texting, chatting, micro blogging, etc. It becomes very natural to them to express themselves through various social media in Talking Circle platform. Various technologies like text to voice and voice to text can come handy in helping them express freely and share it in the platform.

Voice Recording: There may be times when the teenagers might become too conscious about words and grammar during expressing through writing which might hamper the freedom of expressing oneself. Recording their voice and sharing is very helpful as user is less conscious about worrying about the technicality of his speech.

Video Sharing: With a mobile in every hand and a camera in every mobile, video recording has never been so easy. Teenagers can make a video expressing themselves and their problem and putting in talking circles. Using these technique teenagers can post their problems in talking circles, and these problems in different formats reach the spiritual Guru and other people in the group. Now looking at the problem, teenagers with similar problems can form groups and a Guru can then direct according to the problem either individually or in-group.

Initiation

After the initial expression of feelings and problem, the part, which is very important, is making the people associated with talking circle platform do something, which they never did before or were apprehensive in doing. Like the hero in monomyth the spiritual Guru takes teens to embark on some new activities, which are relevant to their problems.

As found out from research and insights from psychologists and spiritual Gurus, they always engage their clients in some sort of activity to take the mind off. This is where social media can play a big role with improvement in virtual world creation, gamification technique to every social media activity and apps development for every possible scenario and need. Teenagers can associate themselves to individual and group activities as directed by Guru with both in person and virtual presence. There can be certain self-esteem activities, which the Gurus can perform with the teenager's in-group or individually with each teenager, which are as follows:

Online Positive Focus Groups: Group exercises for building up self-confidence through affirmation can be performed. Teenagers are present online in the group along with the Guru. Each one has to say positive words about themselves and their family members one by one. Saying positive words out loud in a group has a positive effect on

teenagers. Along with speaking, they can also share sketches or paintings related to the positive characteristic they are talking about. The activity challenges the participants in the following way.

Online Games: In the presence of the Guru, each member of the teenager's family is present along with the teenagers. There can be role-playing games online where each family member will be involved such that they have to together complete a particular task. When the family will work towards achieving a common goal together, this gives the teenagers the assurance that their family will be there always for them and this increases their trust on their family.

Online Meditation Groups: Meditation is one of the most important technique which helps teenagers to attain that state of thoughtlessness and freeness from their daily routine to look out for newer adventures in life which would help them have a broader perspective towards life. The Gurus can teach teenagers individually through video call, chat and also by sharing videos about the meditation technique. When seeing the Guru performing meditation right in front of them and the effect of the same, this might help the teenagers to learn the technique.

Illumination

Once the teenager has gone through the exercise for initiation, the teenager will have a much better sense of self-awareness which would provide him the zeal to live life to the fullest. We can call this stage as the stage of illumination. The teenagers now can share their stories and their struggles in their online meet up groups. There can be times when one individual is able to learn from the experiences of the other. One can also write something, record songs or movies retelling their stories and share them online.

7 Social Implications

The talking circles platform will play a major role in defining how teenagers cope with their problems through spirituality while being socially active and connected. The concept of sharing and solving will catch up and the major problem of teenagers of 'not sharing' can be solved. Since the platform does not use any new complicated system, concept or technology so it will be very easy for teenager through social media to learn and understand the technique of spirituality.

This could be a major step in community building where each one helps other to solve his/her problem without expecting anything. A building block for creating social awareness and social responsibility. A major step in making teenagers self reliable and mentally strong.

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